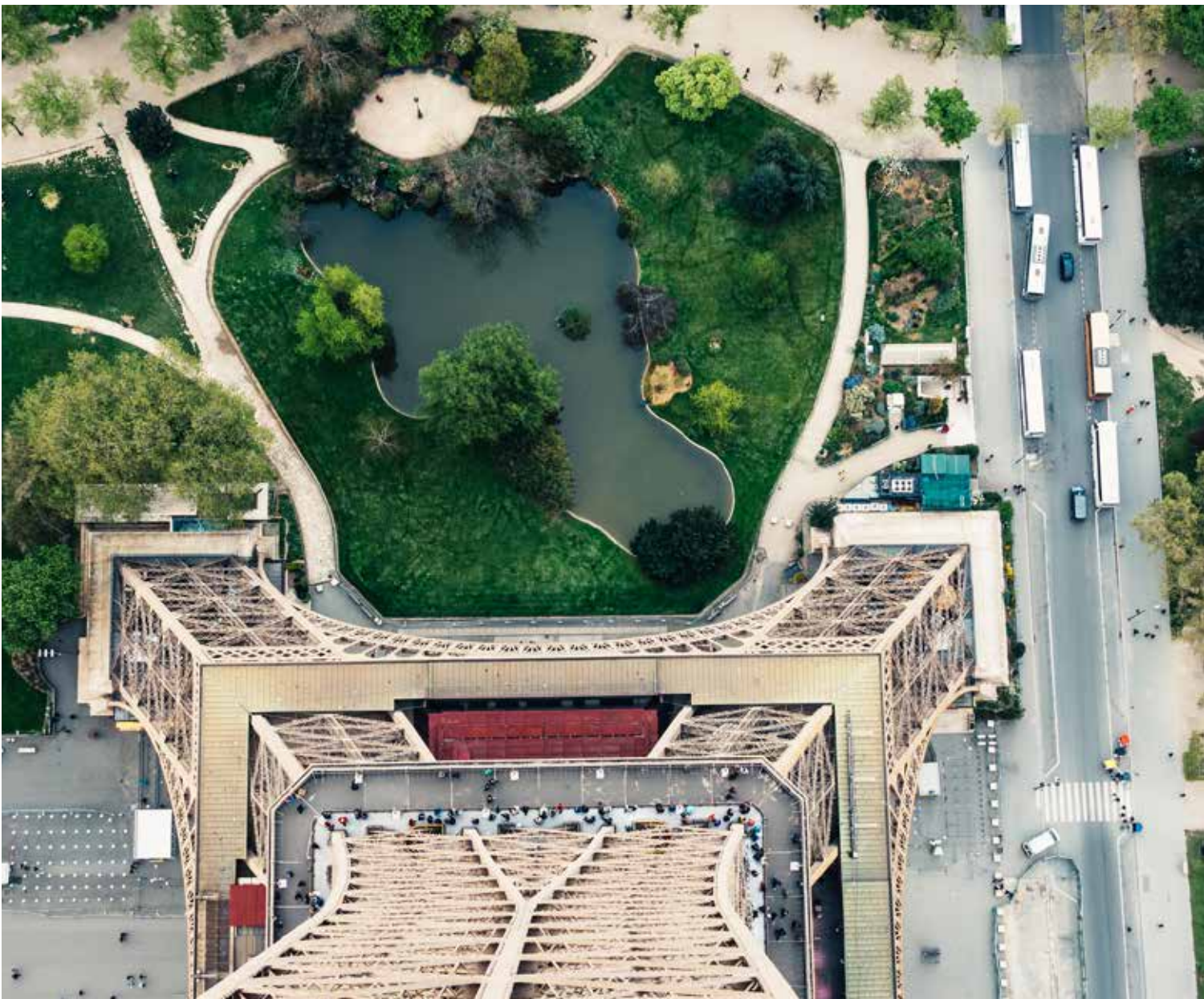


STUDYING WITH THE OU: UK LEARNING APPROACH

SKILLS FOR OU STUDY



If you speak English as an additional language you may find that your module subject is not the only thing you have to learn. This booklet aims to give you an understanding of how some cultural meanings go unstated in the English language and what's expected of you as a student in a distance-learning UK university setting.

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1 WHO THIS BOOKLET IS FOR

If you're a student who uses more than one language and your main language isn't English, this booklet is for you.

You're probably reading this booklet because you want to prepare for a new experience: studying at a UK university. You may want to find out what will be expected of you, and you may wonder how it might be different from your experience of education in the past.

The Open University (the OU) will almost certainly do some things differently from what you're used to. Being aware of these differences is important for multilingual students because misunderstandings may be created by cultural differences. If you're able to recognise what is unfamiliar in your new environment, you can begin to understand it faster and progress more easily.



You can explore some of the aspects introduced in this booklet in more detail by searching the [Help Centre](#).

Language

Perhaps your first concern about OU study is language: you may think you need to improve your English communication skills to succeed in your module. Or perhaps your tutor has suggested that if you improve these skills you're likely to get more out of your studies.

This applies to nearly all students, even students whose main language is English. There are resources at the OU to help you with language and study techniques, for example, if you have difficulties in using English effectively for reading or writing.

You might have found that cultural differences play an important role in how people communicate and how you understand spoken and written language. Section 2 discusses some of these issues.



2

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

When starting university-level study in English it's important that you reflect on how you're influenced by your own culture. This is because language is always used in a cultural context.

2.1 Language and culture are connected

Idioms

As a multilingual student, you'll already know that there's more to effective communication than simply being able to use the 'nuts and bolts' of a language. By 'nuts and bolts' we mean the basic elements, such as spelling words correctly and writing grammatically correct sentences. The basic elements of language are essential – but you need more.

For example, you need to understand idiomatic expressions such as 'nuts and bolts'. Idiomatic language consists of colloquial and often colourful phrases whose meaning isn't always immediately obvious. Good dictionaries explain the most common idioms.

English idioms often reflect UK culture and show how language and culture are connected. You may know many already and will need to learn more in your studies, so watch out for them.

To improve your understanding of idiomatic language, you could spend some time listening to the radio, watching TV or reading magazines in English.

Tip

Listen out for idiomatic language while you study. If your tutor or another student has said or written something you don't understand, don't be afraid of asking them what they meant.

You'll learn new phrases and new cultural associations much quicker if you ask them.

Cultural references and academic conventions

Effective communication at the level you need for university work assumes an awareness of both cultural references and academic conventions. Here are two comments made by multilingual students that are examples of this.

“When I read a page, I can understand every word in every sentence. But it doesn't make sense as a whole.”
Meiling

“In the feedback to my last assignment the tutor said I lost marks because some of my discussion was not relevant. But I thought it was all relevant.”
Fouad

Sometimes students whose main language is English also express these concerns, but when multilingual students don't understand what's going wrong in communication, it's worth looking at the 'hidden dimension' of language: cultural reference.

'Culture' and 'cultural' have many meanings in different contexts, but here we're concerned with culture in relation to language. For instance, have you noticed that in languages other than English it's usual to find several different ways of saying 'you' – depending on

what the relation is between 'I' and 'you' – a more formal relationship or a less formal one? How you indicate formality and politeness is a language matter that reflects culture.

Every language reflects culture: the culture of where the language originated and of where it's being used. English in Nigeria, for example, reflects the cultures of Britain and Nigeria.

You probably recognise this connection between language and culture, even if you've never consciously thought about it, because you are multilingual. In using your languages, you experience at least two different ways of viewing the world and relating to other people.

In addition to an awareness of unspoken cultural associations, you need to be aware of UK academic conventions (see Figure 1). Different countries often require different types of behaviour and writing from their students. You may encounter new academic conventions while you study with the OU. For example, you might contact your tutor and fellow students more often using email and online forums rather than in face-to-face tutorials. You might also need to become accustomed to being an independent learner (see Section 5).

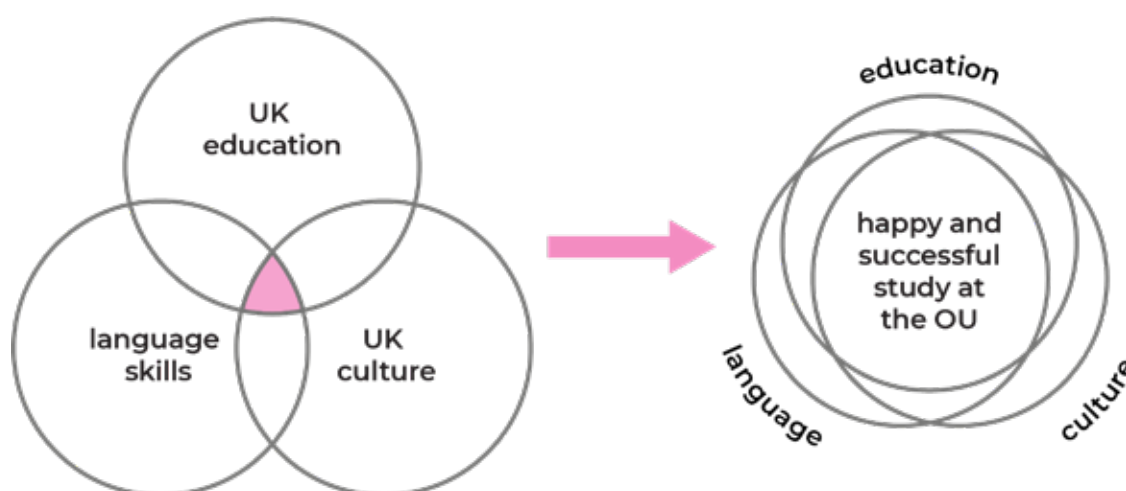


Figure 1 As a multilingual student you'll benefit from learning how UK culture and language interact. Knowing what is expected from you as a distance-learning student will also be useful. Your understanding of these issues will grow as you continue your studies.

2.2 Culture and context

Let's go back to Meiling, the multilingual student who understood each word in a page of module material but not the overall meaning. What might be the problem here? One explanation is that the writer used words with specific associations that are familiar to students whose main language is English, but unfamiliar to some multilingual students. These associations are often not directly written about, but are implicit in the words the author has used.

Cultural associations

Meiling says that she understands the meaning of the individual words. The problem is that she hasn't been able to capture the cultural associations intended by the writer. These associations are based on shared cultural knowledge and act as important links between ideas. When students whose main language is English read this material, their cultural knowledge automatically fills in the links. But for Meiling these important links are missing, so the text as a whole doesn't make sense to her.

Sometimes in a language which isn't your main one these associations are invisible to you, so you think you understand a text in detail, but you don't. (In fact, we often over-estimate what we understand in a language other than our main one.) Sometimes understanding in detail doesn't matter, but for university work it's often crucial and you'll have to spend more time working closely with written texts than you would in everyday life.

Academic conventions

Think back to Fouad, the other multilingual student, who couldn't understand why the tutor said that some of his assignment material was irrelevant. Perhaps he was using the conventions of good writing that were learnt in another context but that were not right for his OU work. For instance, he might have given a long factual introduction that he assumed was essential but was in fact unnecessary.

These are examples of how unfamiliarity with the cultural context (English in the case of OU study) can explain language difficulties that are more complicated than the 'nuts and bolts' type.

Meiling couldn't understand the text properly because her lack of knowledge of the UK cultural context didn't give her the necessary associations. Fouad was writing in a style that was suited to another culture, but that wasn't relevant for the culture of his OU module.

The key to progress for both Fouad and Meiling is for them to be aware of both the cultural associations of the English language and the academic conventions of studying in the UK. With increased awareness and practice over time Meiling's comprehension will improve, and Fouad will learn the relevant conventions for his essay writing at the OU.

If you're a multilingual student and have problems like these, you can try improving your use of English by looking at the 'hidden' cultural dimension of language.



Search the [Help Centre](#) for more information about developing academic English.

Remember that:

- if you find a phrase confusing or meaningless, it may be an idiomatic phrase
- some comprehension problems are caused by gaps in cultural knowledge
- academic conventions are shaped by culture, they aren't the same in all countries or in all institutions
- you may need to adapt what you've learnt previously to communicate effectively.



3

CULTURES AT THE OU

It's normal to think of culture as something unified. Japanese culture for example, is shared by people who speak Japanese, or European culture is shared by people who live in Europe. However, this may be an over-simplification because everyone belongs to several different groups, each with its own culture. In this sense, culture means that the people in the group share certain ideas and agree about the way certain things should be done.

The OU belongs in a set of groups, or contexts, each with its own culture. They are

- The UK context.
- The UK educational context.
- The UK higher education context.
- The distance-learning context.

All these cultures influence the OU's beliefs about teaching and learning (see Figure 2). They also shape the OU's expectations of you as a student.

Students' previous experience of education before they start a module at the OU is naturally very diverse. Here are four examples.

Sunday

Sunday is from Ghana and he'd recently moved to the south of England. Although all his previous education was in English, he had never studied outside his country. In fact, adapting his use of English to the OU's way of using English was one of the main difficulties at the beginning of his first module. He needed to be especially aware of UK conventions for communicating, and that sometimes he could understand other people in the University better than they could understand him. He found he had to check that he had made himself clear, and sometimes adjust his essay style so that it was distinguished from an everyday speaking style and suitable for written academic work.

Bettina

Bettina had studied to the end of secondary school in her native Austria. Although she'd lived and worked in the UK for many years, she had never studied here. The tutor on her first module said that her essays were well structured, but she should write in plainer and less formal language. She spent some of her study time each week working specifically on this with OU resources and was making good progress by the end of the module.

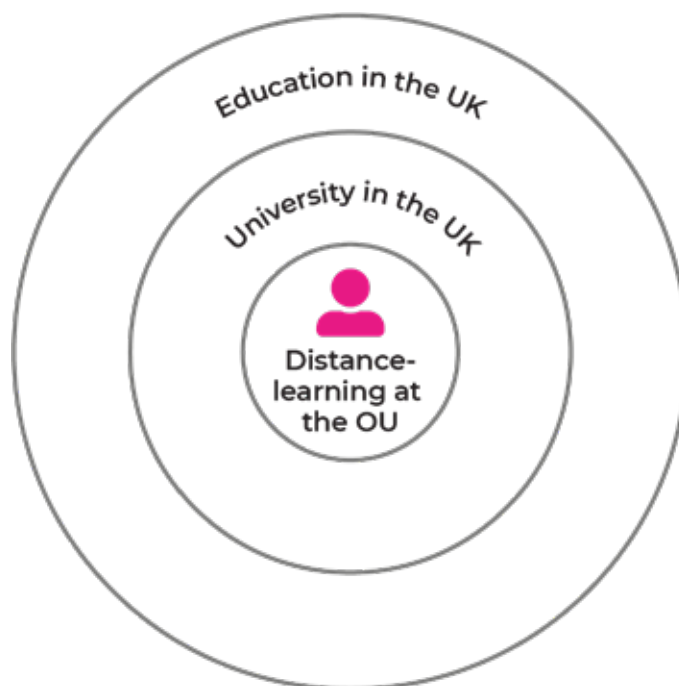


Figure 2 As you learn with the OU, you will become aware of the influence of many areas of UK life in your studies

Adela

Although she was born and educated in London, Adela's family was from Mali and everyone spoke French at home. She wanted to study modern languages at the OU to become a teacher while she worked to support herself. She didn't understand the importance of deadlines for the assignments and administration related to her module. She assumed that if she sent all her work in at some time, then somebody from the OU would 'sort it out' for her in the end. By the time she realised that she needed to meet deadlines and take the initiative in contacting the University when necessary, she was in danger of failing the module.

Miguel

Miguel was from Colombia and had begun a degree at a university in the USA. When he moved to Europe he aimed to complete his qualification with the OU. He found the work was taking him longer than he'd planned for and it seemed much more demanding than he'd expected. But he assumed he just had to persevere by himself because he lived a long way from his tutor and other students in his group. Several months passed before he fully explored the online resources available to him. When he did, he found useful advice to help with his learning strategies so that his study time was spent more productively.

Becoming aware of any differences between your expectations and assumptions, and those of the OU will help you to integrate and succeed faster.

The next sections look at inaccurate assumptions and how they can affect your study and give advice on how to approach aspects that may be new for you.



4

YOUR TUTOR

Your tutor is probably the person who represents the OU for you. An OU tutor gives you guidance as you study, helps you to engage with the module material and marks your assignments. If your module offers tutorials, a tutor will lead them.

4.1 Communicating with your tutor

You might be surprised at the informal way students address the tutor. Your tutor will probably sign her emails to you 'Gill', even if her title is Dr Smith and she's a specialist in her subject.

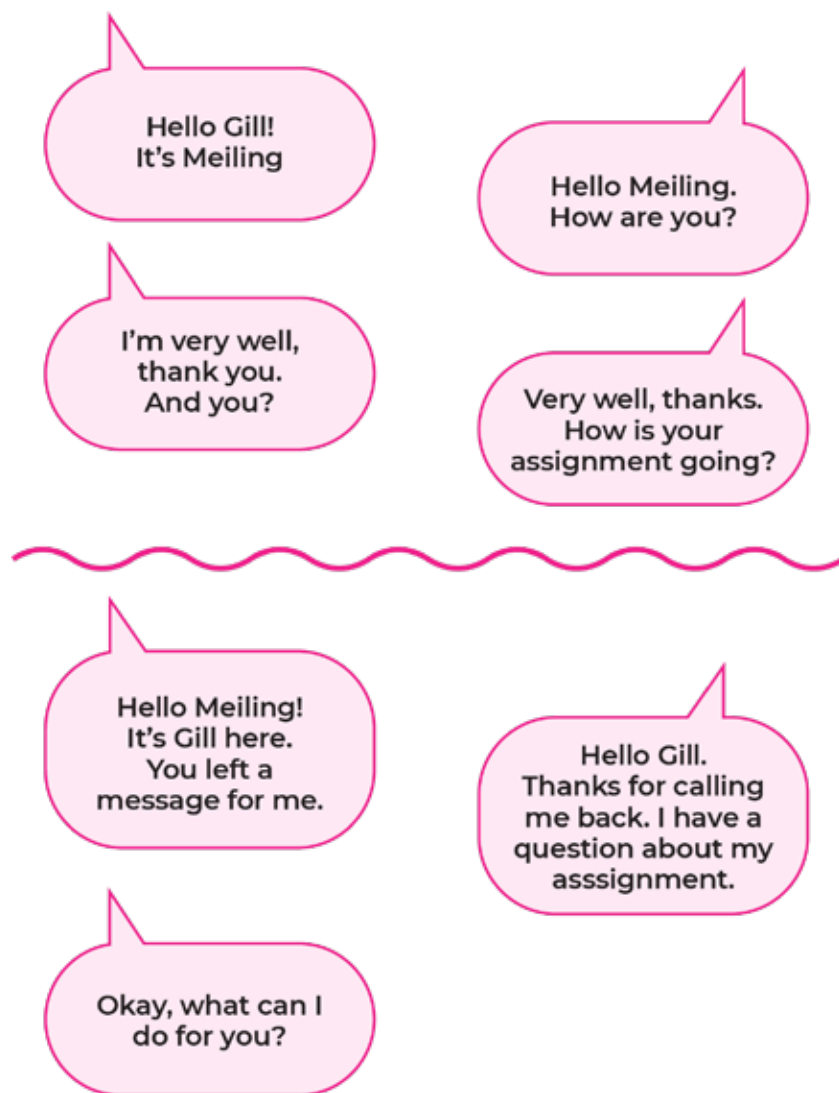


Figure 3 An example of a typical telephone conversation between a student and tutor

It is not disrespectful to call your tutor by their first name. This is part of an informal style of communication which helps learning. If you feel comfortable with your tutor, you are more likely to:

- ask questions
- admit to not knowing something
- ask for help when you need it.

... and your tutor will encourage you to do all these things.

You don't have to call your tutor by their first name if it makes you feel uncomfortable. You can use their title (Mr, Mrs, Dr, Miss, etc.) along with their family name instead.

You're probably already aware of the different conventions for indicating respect towards others in English. If you're uncertain, be observant of what your tutor and other students do.

In some cultures, it isn't important which name you use – a first name or a family name (or perhaps your culture has no exact equivalents anyway). In the UK it is considered disrespectful to call someone just by their family name ('Hello, Smith') so avoid this.

4.2 Respect and authority

Communicating with your tutor informally doesn't mean you disrespect their authority. The tutor knows their subject, your module and its assessment methods very well.

At the OU a tutor:

- can help you to engage with the academic content on your module
- has some flexibility in accepting assignments after the deadline but won't be able to accept them at any time
- marks your assignments in line with appropriate University standards and cannot negotiate grades.

The right answer – as you know, many academic questions don't have right or wrong answers. Some do, of course, and your tutor will correct mistakes where necessary. But many of the most interesting debates at university level develop because the issues do not have a single correct solution. Your tutor's academic authority doesn't imply that they know all the right answers and making progress in learning doesn't mean that you'll come to know all the right answers. Progress means that you'll develop a range of thinking skills and your tutor will help you to do that.

Flexibility with deadlines – the OU gives tutors some authority to accept students' work late, but they must follow University rules too. These include regulations on when they can authorise late submission, and when they can't. Think about any upcoming assignments early. Contact your tutor as early as you can to discuss

the possibility of an extension if you feel that you need more time to submit.

Assignment grades – the OU also provides your tutor with guidelines for grading assignments. Just as every student on your module is carrying out the same assignment task, every tutor on your module is following these guidelines for grading.

The OU provides information about how your work will be assessed. Your tutor will tell you how he or she will support your learning. Make sure you understand this information and make contact if you need clarification. In a distance-learning university you don't have the opportunity for spontaneous contact that you do at a conventional university, so you must be proactive. Your tutor will tell you the best times and ways to make contact.

Tip

If you feel you don't understand something crucial you should ask your tutor. Perhaps you need more clarification on a key aspect of your module, or how your assignment grade was reached. It is perfectly acceptable to ask about this.

If you find it difficult to communicate with your tutor, try to discuss the difficulties with him or her. If this doesn't help, contact your student support team and talk to someone there.

Building up clear and comfortable communication with your tutor prevents misunderstanding and helps your learning.



5

YOU AS A LEARNER

At the OU you'll be working on your own most of the time, and this may make you wonder whether you're on the right track. It's easy to feel you're not as good as the others on the module, and that perhaps you should give up.

In fact, as Miguel in the recent example found, there are many ways you can contact others in the OU for support and information, and this section outlines some of them. Like all university students your learning and progress depend on you. It is important to explore your resources and use them in the ways that suit you best.

5.1 Becoming an independent learner

Through your module, you'll be expected to develop as an independent learner. This aspect of university study might be very different from your previous experience of education, but it is central to progressing as a student in the OU.

Asking for help

One characteristic of an independent learner is that they know when to ask for help. Realising that you don't understand something, or can't find the right way forward by yourself, is a sign

of good judgement. Finding someone who can help you is the independent learner's technique for making faster progress.

If you get stuck, you could first ask other students – perhaps in your group or in an online forum. Or you could ask your tutor for help and clarification and he or she will be happy to answer you. In fact, your tutor will probably think that if you don't ask questions you are confident about your studies. If you don't let them know that you're struggling to understand something they'll assume you don't need them to contact you. In other words, you must be proactive in getting help when you need it to become an independent learner.

If you haven't understood something, you should ask. This is not an admission of failure or a sign of weakness. Often the best students ask the most questions!

An active approach to learning

Another characteristic of independent learners is that they have an active, not passive, approach to learning. This means they reflect and interact with what they study.

How are you encouraged to reflect and interact at the OU? Importantly, this is achieved through your module materials and the other people involved in the module.

Module materials: their function and how to use them

Your module belongs to an academic discipline that has its own culture, often shared across the world, although it may have local and contextual characteristics.

Your module introduces you to the culture of your discipline. For example, literature is an arts discipline and physics a science discipline, and their ways of studying and communicating are different. The module materials teach you some of these ways of studying and communicating.

A module team at the OU prepares the materials for your module. The module team is made up of academics who select and plan the content and write the materials so that distance learners find them manageable. So, in a fundamental sense, the module team members are your teachers, even though you'll probably never meet them. Use the materials as they advise.

Your tutor then guides you through the materials and acts as a personal teacher for you and the other students in your group.

You may be surprised that the module materials use an informal writing style – perhaps you'll notice that they seem to 'talk' to you, as if in a conversation. An informal style helps to make the academic content approachable for learners. It avoids non-essential language, so that the concepts stand out clearly.

An informal style also helps you to think about the ideas and arguments in the materials in a way that's relevant to you. Your teachers hope that you'll not only follow what the materials are explaining, but that you'll also agree or disagree with them, find examples from your own experience and discover questions of your own. In other words, you're learning actively. You're reflecting on the materials and interacting with them.

If activities are set for you to think about and work through, try to do them before looking for the answer or discussion. If you don't, it's like going to the gym and watching people exercise – you might learn something, but you won't build up your own strength.

Top tips

- Use the materials as the module timetable directs you.
- Learn from them actively – test out the ideas against your own experience and arguments.
- Try not to miss out any activities.
- Doing extra reading or internet searches may make you run out of time – concentrate on the module materials first.

5.2 Learning with others

Even though you're at a distance-learning university, you can learn with other students. In fact, in some modules there are times when you're expected to learn in a group – perhaps in an online activity, a face-to-face tutorial or at residential school.

You might be concerned about this. Many students whose main language is English are anxious too. But for some multilingual students there are extra worries, perhaps about your level of English or perhaps because you realise that learning with others at the OU might be different from what you've experienced before.

Tutorials

Tutorials might make you anxious about your spoken English. If so, here are some tips and things to remember:

- Talk to your tutor before the tutorial and ask for their advice
- Try to make just one point in the discussion at a first tutorial but aim to build up your confidence until you're comfortable with contributing more as the module goes on
- If you want to, you could start by saying something like: 'I'm afraid my English isn't as good as everyone else's'
- Often students watch the person talking, showing that they are listening carefully. Making eye contact is common in UK culture and isn't considered bad manners or challenging, it's a normal part of communication
- Show you're actively following the discussion by an occasional nod and smile, even if you don't say much.

Residential school

Residential school may intensify your worries about working in a group. If you're anxious about it, talk to your tutor or student support team before you go. Once you're there, there may be a learning adviser to talk to, or perhaps the module director or a tutor can reassure you. Other students are usually a good support. Many will probably feel like you do, even if they are students whose main language is English.

If you're worried about taking part in a residential school you could:

- find out in advance if someone you know is going at the same time and suggest meeting up. They could be from your tutor group or from an online forum
- talk to someone from the OU at the school as soon as possible after you arrive
- find another student when you arrive at the school who seems to be feeling the same – you can support each other.

At tutorials and residential school learning is organised through group work, which may be a new experience for you. Perhaps you agree with one or both of the following multilingual students.

“ If I'm the learner, my opinion doesn't count. What counts is what the tutor thinks. ”
Meiling

“ Questioning someone else's point of view is disrespectful. ”
Wentao

But what you think is important – it's your module and your learning. As a multilingual student, you have insights from at least one other culture that will enhance your understanding of the teaching. Sharing your insights with others will enrich them (see Figure 4). Tutors often comment on how much they appreciate hearing their students' views and the experience they bring to the module.



Figure 4 Being an independent learner is an important part of your experience as an OU student. This means actively engaging with your learning, and developing your own well-informed understanding of your subject. This involves listening to the views of your tutor and fellow students as well as formulating your own ideas.

Questioning someone else's point of view isn't disrespectful. To question is not to imply their views are worthless. Challenging the tutor, or another student, in an academic discussion means asking them why they hold that point of view.

In the same way, if another student or the tutor questions your point of view, it's because they are interested in your reasons and want to hear them.

You don't have to agree with what other people think. You do have to have reasons for disagreeing. This is what academic debate is like.

You learn through discussion by:

- defending your views and giving reasons for them
- listening to others defend their views
- being receptive to different points of view.

Online forums

These are another way of working with other students. Using online tools and communications can be particularly useful as you can see how other students use language in discussion and you learn both from what they say and how they say it. You might want to observe how others communicate informally when there are no other 'clues', such as a smile or tone of voice, to indicate meaning.

If most of your contact with other students and your tutor takes place in forums or by email, then nobody can see you looking puzzled if you don't understand something. It's very important in online communications to express yourself clearly.

If you're studying an online module there'll be forums that you need to become familiar with. There might be a group forum, where your tutor sets activities for discussion (as in a face-to-face tutorial). You might also find one that's open to all students in the University on the same module and can be used for discussion and support. You might find important resources within an online forum.

Reading these forums helps you focus on important topics in your module. You benefit from other students' and tutors' questions and thoughts. Contributing to the forums is even better because it means you're learning with others and not simply from others. By giving your views and asking questions you're learning through interaction.

Forums can also have a 'social' and informal side, just as in face-to-face contact at a café on a conventional university campus. Many students find this social networking supportive. Explore an online forum – perhaps an Open University Students Association (OUSA) forum, or one related to your module. If you choose not to take part in social forums, that's fine as you don't have to join in.

Remember that becoming an independent learner means you ask questions when you need to: email your tutor or post a message to other students on a forum.

The potential advantages of online communications include:

- your comment in a forum can be short (often the short ones are the best)
- you have time to choose your words
- the style is informal, and informal language can be easier to use
- you can learn and practise informal language in the right context.

5.3 Assignments

Every student will probably say preparing assignments demands the greatest effort on their module. Multilingual students often have specific concerns about assignments. Perhaps you're not sure of OU conventions and practices. Or you're aware that there could be big differences between the assignments you've done in the past and OU assignments. Perhaps you're wondering what you need to do and how the work is assessed.

Learning the rules: cut-off dates and word limits

In the UK university system the rules for assessment can seem inflexible or strange to multilingual students at first. But these rules are intended to ensure fairness. Every student's work is assessed in the same way, to the same standards.

One of the rules is that you must send in work by the cut-off date. This is a deadline that you must keep to. If you're ill (or can't meet the cut-off date for another good reason) you can usually ask your tutor for some extra time to complete the work. This is called an extension, but you should ask as early as possible. Extensions help ensure that you're not at a disadvantage through circumstances outside your control.

Perhaps the idea of word limits for assessed work isn't familiar from your previous education. Writing within a word limit is another OU rule that partly exists to ensure fairness. It's helpful to you, too. Many students agree that the discipline of keeping to a word limit improves their use of language and the quality of their argument.

In oral assignments on language modules, there are time limits instead of word limits for the same reasons.

Submitting assignments

- Be aware that sometimes you're not allowed to submit an assignment late.
- If you need an extension, contact your tutor before the cut-off date.
- Keep to the word limit.

Writing assignments: being an active learner

Assignments are set for assessment reasons, but even more importantly they help you to learn. Assignments test both understanding and skills.

There are many types of assessed written work, and you might expect the OU system of assessment to be like something you've worked with before. As this might not be the case, it's important to become aware of what an assignment means in the OU context.

The materials on your module promote your development as an independent learner through reflection and interaction. Assignments are a powerful tool for developing this. Assignments often check you have understood the module teaching by asking you to apply it in an argument. In academic terms, an 'argument' means a piece of reasoning, not a conflict.

Developing an argument involves skills such as critical thinking and logical reasoning. In your assignments you might have to show you understand the module concepts by applying them in a reasoned argument using evidence.

For example, suppose a history assignment asks you to 'Evaluate changing attitudes to the seaside in the mid-twentieth century'.

The module material has given you information and evidence about people visiting the seaside such as who visited the seaside, how they got there, why they went, etc. It has also given you practice in some skills that historians use to interpret and evaluate information. Your assignment doesn't require you to simply reproduce the information and evidence, you would also need to use skills in interpreting and evaluating it, as the module material has demonstrated. Depending on your discipline, the assignments on your module might test other types of understanding and skills too. Students whose main language is English need to practise all these skills as much as multilingual students do.

It's also vital that you show that you can think independently. Your ideas are important because they indicate clearly how you are absorbing the module materials.

“ I try to find out what the tutor thinks about the topic before sending in my assignment. ”

Laura

This comment by a multilingual student at the OU showed what she believed about authority and the unimportance of her own thinking. She began to make progress on her module when she moved away from these beliefs and accepted more responsibility to learn actively and think independently. This involved using her own words to express her own ideas more confidently.

Occasionally, an assignment task might not be suitable to a situation outside the UK: for example, the assignment asks you to measure rainfall, and it hasn't rained where you live for several months. If this happens, you need to discuss the problem with your tutor.

Using your own words in assignments

If you're writing an essay you should refer to points and information from your module material, and perhaps to other sources. Referring to sources when you create your argument is crucial to university study – but this isn't the same as copying them.

Students are often unsure about how to use sources and how to express ideas in their own words. Acknowledging each source is essential to avoid being accused of plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence. Using your own words in assignments is part of independent thinking and active learning. These two issues, acknowledging sources and using your own words, are separate but closely related.

Dimitri was a new student at the OU. He held similar beliefs about authority to Laura, quoted above. His first assignment was entirely made up of extracts copied from his module materials and the internet. He didn't state where he found any of the extracts in his work.

Dimitri's assignment was an example of plagiarism and was given a 0% mark for his assignment. He could have been penalised even more severely, because plagiarism is a serious matter.



You'll find more details about what the OU defines as plagiarism and what the penalties are in your module materials.

Information about penalties for plagiarising are given in the [Assessment Handbook](#).

Plagiarism

It's extremely important to understand the issues around plagiarism early in your OU study. The OU has software programs that can be run on students' written work to detect plagiarism. There are penalties for submitting an assignment that contains plagiarised material.

If your tutor comments on plagiarism in your assignment, there are several possible causes. Perhaps you've misunderstood how to:

- use printed sources in preparing your assignment
- use internet sources appropriately
- use conventions of referencing and bibliography correctly
- paraphrase from the module materials
- combine your own judgements with ideas you've found somewhere else
- ensure your assignment represents your own work and conclusions (even if you've discussed the assignment with others while preparing it).

You must be clear what you've done wrong and act on any feedback that mentions possible or actual plagiarism in your work. Your tutor will help you to check your understanding of what you should do to avoid plagiarism in future.



For more information on plagiarism and how to avoid it, take a look at the [Plagiarism Policy](#).

Your mark

Your tutor will mark your assignment and give you feedback. There are mechanisms in the OU to maintain objectivity in marking: if your work matches the standards for a certain mark, that is the mark the tutor will give you.

It might seem obvious, but hard work alone isn't necessarily rewarded by a high mark. By now you probably realise you must demonstrate both understanding and skills in your assignment. Focus your efforts on preparing the work so that you demonstrate what you understand and what you can do.

Learning from feedback

OU tutors work hard to push their students to reach better and better marks. Feedback is intended to help you achieve this. Your tutor's feedback teaches you by indicating what you did well and how you could improve your understanding or skills.

Multilingual students sometimes make wrong assumptions about feedback and marks. To interpret your mark and use the tutor's comments appropriately, you should not:

- take critical feedback personally – it's intended to help you fulfil your potential
- expect the tutor to teach you the English language – unless the aims of the module include this
- think that if your OU marks are lower than the ones you reached in your previous education they are 'bad' marks
- expect a model answer to be provided.

Instead, you should:

- remember that the feedback is personal to you and recognises qualities in your work
- read the comments on what you've written as if your tutor is talking to you directly and try to act on their advice next time
- be proactive in getting help, especially if your feedback indicates English language problems (ask your student support team)
- make sure you understand the marking system at the OU
- think about the different perspectives suggested by the tutor (you could discuss answers with other students after the assignment comes back).

Students whose main language is English often feel unsure or troubled when existing ways of thinking are challenged – multilingual students can experience this even more strongly. Why?

Your previous experience in education and another culture has shaped your identity to some degree. Feedback and advice are therefore sometimes experienced as a challenge, or even a threat, to that identity and a strong feeling of resistance results. This is completely understandable.

If this happens to you, it's helpful to recognise the reasons why you feel resistance to feedback. If possible, discuss the feedback as objectively as you can with your tutor.

Try to look at new ways of thinking and learning as an opportunity, not a threat – be receptive to them. A receptive attitude will help you to progress faster and more easily.

5.4 Exams

If your module has an exam it may be different from those you've taken before, and you should find out more about exams at the OU in good time. The OU provides many resources to help you prepare. Your module materials will contain some information about your exam and you can also visit the [Assessment and exams section](#) of the Help Centre.

Perhaps your module has an EMA (end-of-module assessment) instead of an exam. You can find out about how to prepare for this in your module materials.

Other students will have many of the same worries about exams as you. As a multilingual student, you may need to be aware of specific features that might be different from what you expect.

- The date and time of your exam are fixed. If you don't attend the exam, you'll almost certainly fail your module.
- Exams are nearly always written by hand.
- There are rarely speaking assessments.
- Check your Examination Arrangements booklet carefully – you may be allowed to bring a dictionary to your exam.
- The University takes disciplinary action if you break rules in the exam. The work must be your own.
- If you fail an exam, the University may offer you a chance to resit – check that you understand the conditions for this.



Make sure you've read and understood all the relevant information well before the exam. If you're not sure you've understood properly, ask your student support team for clarification.

Contact your student support team as soon as possible if you have a problem with the date or time of your exam. For example, inform them if you have an urgent business trip that coincides with your exam date, or if you break your arm a week before.

The OU provides mechanisms to ensure fairness in exams, just as in assignments, to make sure you're not disadvantaged for reasons outside your control. This means that:

- every student's exam script is assessed in the same way and to the same standard
- every script is marked anonymously
- you must keep to the OU's rules for exams.

If you have additional requirements caused by a medical condition or a learning difficulty you should contact your student support team at the beginning of your module. You'll be able to discuss what you need to help you succeed on your module, and especially in your exam. Make contact as soon as you can – the earlier you do this, the better for you.

Note that using English as an additional language isn't considered a valid reason for making special arrangements for exams. Any special arrangements would only be made based on medical conditions or physical or learning disabilities.

This means that your module results, and therefore, eventually, your diploma or degree, have been achieved on the same basis as a student whose main language is English. This enhances your achievement in passing your module and getting your OU qualifications.



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IN CONCLUSION

We hope that this booklet makes your entry into UK university-level distance learning as smooth as possible. If you have time to explore the Help Centre website you'll find activities that give you further help, as signalled throughout this booklet by the computer mouse symbol.

This booklet covers the main areas where multilingual students find significant differences at the OU from what they expect to find. But there may be others – so be alert to your own situation.

Give yourself time – learning and adapting to different ways of perceiving and acting won't happen overnight.

Be observant – check with your tutor or student support team if you suspect there's a key point of teaching or administration you haven't fully understood.

Our cultural backgrounds influence how we see the world. Many multilingual students comment on the sense of growth they experience when they break through to new ways of looking and understanding. Having more than one cultural background is a potential advantage. You can use your knowledge from other cultures to enrich your own experience of UK university study, and the experience of those around you.

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