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PALGRAVE STUDY SKILLS

STUDYING A MOOC: A GUIDE

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This guide is free to download at **www.palgravestudyskills.com/studyingamooc**

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What is a MOOC?

"The opportunity to learn about a subject from an expert, in the company of other interested learners."

Introduction

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have allowed people around the world to access free online education provided by some of the world's leading universities, and join learning communities of individuals interested in similar subjects. They are a new concept in online education and offer many opportunities. However, MOOCs are rapidly evolving and have some limitations that are important to understand. In this section, MOOCs will be introduced and all of the basic issues surrounding MOOCs will be described.

Types of online courses

Education has been available online for many years. A large number of universities provide educational courses to learners. However, traditionally these courses have been limited to relatively small numbers of learners (tens to hundreds), commonly involve tuition fees and often contribute towards university credit. These types of courses – commonly referred to as 'distance learning courses' – offer flexibility for learners who can't attend a campus-based degree programme.

The revolution in online courses came in 2011, when academics at Stanford University created Massive Open Online Courses. These online courses were available to anyone with access to the internet and an interest in the subject. Available within an easy to use platform, they provided the opportunity to learn about a subject from an expert, in the company of other interested learners.

This guide will focus mainly on learning online within Massive Open Online Courses, but many of the principles, advice and guidance are highly relevant to any kind of online course you are studying.

What is a MOOC?

'MOOC' stands for 'Massive Open Online Course'. Educationalists have defined two main categories of MOOC, the xMOOC and the cMOOC. There are major differences in the structure and outcomes of these two types of courses, so it is worth understanding the major differences at this early stage:

> **xMOOCs** – These are organised courses, focused around <u>educator</u> generated content (often in the form of video) with automated testing; they offer a linear journey for the learner and will provide structured opportunities for discussion.
>
> **cMOOCs** – These are more organic courses, focused around <u>learner</u> generated content, and provide a personal and very subjective learning experience; these courses use the collective intelligence of the learning community to generate knowledge and are participant led.

The major MOOC providers generally offer xMOOCs, but they are increasingly trying to incorporate some of the features of a cMOOC experience, to offer additional, and more personal and social learning opportunities for learners.

It is worth considering the meaning of each of the words in the acronym 'MOOC'. Most of the material in this guide will be tailored to xMOOCs, as these are the most common form of MOOC currently available.

> **Massive**: Access to unlimited learners from around the world. In practice this can mean anywhere between 1,000 and 250,000 learners enrolled on a single course.
>
> **Open**: This generally means free access to the course and the learning resources. However, increasingly learners may be offered the opportunity to purchase premium services to support the course or be required to pay for examinations and / or certificates.
>
> **Online**: MOOCs are conducted entirely online; there are no face-to-face learning opportunities. Learning resources are provided in a variety of formats, including video lectures, multimedia resources, learning communities and online assignments.
>
> **Course**: MOOCs provide a structured unit of learning, with a defined start and end date, and learning outcomes.

Level of MOOCs

On any single course there may be learners who are completely new to a subject through to experienced professionals in the area. Whilst this breadth of experience can enrich a MOOC, you will need to ensure that you are appropriately qualified to study your chosen course. The description of a MOOC will inform you of any necessary background you need to understand the course material.

There are MOOCs available within all of the following categories:

Pre-university

Undergraduate level

Masters level

Continuing professional development

Vocational

Technical

Length of MOOCs

MOOCs generally last at least two weeks but there is no fixed maximum duration. MOOCs that are around 2-4 weeks are sometimes called mini MOOCs or taster courses; they will give you an introduction to a subject and offer the opportunity to explore some aspects in detail. Most MOOCs are between 6-10 weeks, mirroring a traditional university course or module, and will offer a detailed and intensive study of a subject, with regular testing opportunities.

Outline of a typical MOOC

The following example is from a typical course on the Coursera platform and gives you an insight to what you might expect to see when you enrol on an online course. Of course, details of functionality vary between the online course providers and not all courses on the Coursera platform follow this format.

User profile, account settings		
Course title, university provider		
Syllabus (course map, schedule, learning outcomes)	At login this area may display course announcements from the course educator or teaching assistants When menu items are selected this area will display the main course content	Course deadlines
Course materials (e.g. video lectures, quizzes, interactive activities)		Recent quizzes
Learning community (e.g. discussion forum, blog, wiki)		Recent discussions
Help, technical support, user feedback		Supporting content

Most courses follow a linear journey and will provide a timetable of activities for learners to follow. This can be useful, but can also prove too difficult to manage if you are studying around other commitments. A typical journey through the first two weeks of a MOOC is illustrated overleaf:

Week 1				
Introduction	Video lecture, suggested reading etc.	Discussion (e.g. chat, discussion forum)	Quiz	Summary

Week 2			
Review of week 1	Reading or other learning content	Activity (e.g. discussion, interaction, production of content etc.)	Quiz

It is worth noting that some MOOC providers offer structured courses without deadlines – these can be completed at your own pace.

The value and outcomes of MOOCs

In a digital age, information is everywhere and the internet allows individuals from around the world to communicate easily. MOOCs exploit this access to information and the ability to communicate by aggregating learning content and allowing sharing, collaboration and discussion between learners and with academic experts.

"Everyone's motivations for learning are different, and MOOCs can cater for many different types of learners."

Everyone's motivations for learning are different, and MOOCs can cater for many different types of learners. Some learners simply want to expand their understanding in a specific subject area, whilst at the other end of the scale, learners who wish to gain a qualification or evidence a new skill can use MOOCs to build up their professional profile.

Despite having only been available for a short time, MOOCs are rapidly evolving. The most significant changes are in the area of assessments, examinations and opportunities for gaining accreditation. A number of MOOC providers are exploring partnerships with universities and private companies to provide online courses with validated examinations. These may be suitable for professional recognition and offering training for corporate organisations.

In summary, MOOCs offer many opportunities for learners to gain new knowledge and skills, and enrich their on-going professional development, through open access to resources, learning communities and certification.

Limitations of MOOCs

As online-only courses, MOOCs do have some limitations. For many educators, the idea of only delivering education online is counter-intuitive to the well-known value of face-to-face interaction for facilitating learning. Whilst online courses provide excellent learning resources – including opportunities for discussion and collaboration – they cannot replicate the uniquely human experience of face-to-face interaction. This is illustrated by the fact that face-to-face study groups have been formed by MOOC learners around the world, in order to meet and discuss their online learning.

"face-to-face study groups have been formed by MOOC learners around the world."

Additionally, most educators believe that MOOCs cannot offer a suitable replacement for a university education. A campus-based

education offers enrichment in many ways beyond knowledge-based learning; university offers individuals opportunities to enrich themselves both socially and professionally, through joining groups, undertaking co- and extra-curricular activities, meeting people from diverse backgrounds and interacting with academics. A university education also offers a very hands-on approach to learning, both through face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers and through access to physical learning resources and tools (e.g. laboratories, workshops, computing facilities, libraries etc.). Furthermore, many universities offer a research-based education, through integrating on-going research into the curriculum, and offering students opportunities to participate in knowledge creation, and the critical review of research.

Some disciplines have particular requirements for hands-on or physical training (e.g. life and physical sciences, medicine and health, engineering, arts and design) as part of professional development and accreditation. Therefore, whilst a MOOC may well be a useful way to enhance and enrich a face-to-face course, it may not be a satisfactory replacement.

Summary of advantages and limitations of MOOCs

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Courses open to anyone with an internet connection. • Non-certified courses completely free. • Option to gain certification and accreditation for course completion. • Single-unit study allows personalisation of learning to suit individual requirements. • Option to work completely at own pace. • Peer-collaboration promotes new ideas and ways of thinking. • Discussion forums allow learners to organise and put-forward own thoughts. • Individual study develops self-discipline and motivation.	• Courses are currently not as reputable as University-accredited courses. • Self-motivation required often leads to non-completion of courses. • Lack of real-world access to specialised equipment – e.g. laboratory equipment. • Lack of real-world interaction with other people. • Without qualified instruction over a whole course, students may not realise they need to study additional modules for a complete understanding of a subject area. • Peer-review not as accurate as teacher-review – especially for assignments involving critical thinking skills.

MOOC providers

There are a number of major MOOC platforms offering structured online courses (xMOOCs); these are described below. There are also a number of other platforms offering opportunities for connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs).

Alison (www.alison.com)	Alison is a global social enterprise that offers over 500 online courses from individuals, universities and organisations.
Coursera (www.coursera.org)	Coursera is currently the largest online course provider. They have over 6.5 million registered users and over 550 courses available, from over 100 university partners around the world. They offer courses in all major disciplines and offer certificates, examinations and college credit on some courses.
EdX (www.edx.org)	EdX has over 1.2 million users offering courses in law, history, science, engineering, business, social sciences, computer science, public health, and artificial intelligence from 29 universities worldwide.
FutureLearn (www.futurelearn.com)	Launched in September 2013, FutureLearn is a new platform from the UK, with 29 worldwide universities and leading organisations as partners.
Udacity (www.udacity.com)	Udacity currently offers around 30 courses in business, computing, mathematics and science by working with individual academics and technology firms. Udacity is in the process of change and will offer training courses for corporate organisations in the future.

There are also a number of MOOC providers in Asia (e.g. EduKart, UCEO) and Europe (Eliademy, Iversity, OpenupEd, Miriada X); these providers offer courses in the native language of the country, which makes online learning a lot easier for individuals whose first language is not English. Other online course platforms that allow learners to take cMOOCs, include: Khan Academy, Peer-to-Peer University (P2PU), Udemy and Course Hero.

Types of MOOC learner

Whilst every individual's motivations for learning online will be personal to them, it is possible to consider general categories of learners. The following may help you decide your learning goals and motivations, and offers suggestions about possible routes through online courses.

Pre-university learner
Motivation
- Increase understanding of a current subject.
- 'Tasters' of possible subjects to study at degree level.
- Improving knowledge of university level study for use in UCAS applications.
- Gain accreditation for University applications.

Possible MOOC journey
Complete courses linked to current study to enhance understanding and evidence your commitment to university study.

When using online courses to explore possible university subjects, identify suitable courses and use the course to determine your level of interest. Dip in and out of the course, as necessary.
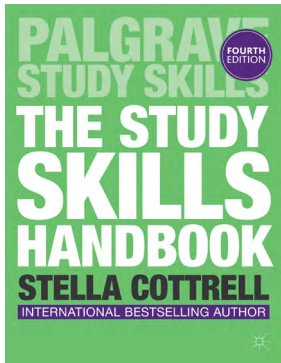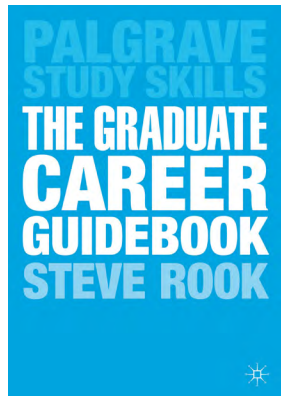
University learner

Motivation

- Increase understanding of a current subject.
- Gain different perspectives on subjects being learnt from a variety of subject experts.
- Explore potential areas for further study.
- Gain competencies and skills for professional development purposes.

Possible MOOC journey

Find courses linked to your current area of study, checking level of course is appropriate. Select courses led by experts in their field.
Use online courses to enrich and broaden your on-going study.

Complete (and gain validated certification) from courses outside of your area of study, if they will assist you with enhancing your career prospects.

Professional learner

Motivation

- Employer requirement for continuing professional development purposes.
- Gain competencies and skills to improve career prospects.
- Gain experience and/or competencies in new subject areas to facilitate a change in career direction.

Possible MOOC journey

Complete (and gain validated certification) from courses required for your professional development.

Complete (and gain validated certification) from courses used to facilitate a career change.

Self-directed learner

Motivation

- Gain competencies and skills to achieve a defined goal.
- Gain increased knowledge and understanding of new subject areas.
- Gain accreditation to increase credibility.
- Building a professional network.

Possible MOOC journey

Complete (and gain certification) from relevant courses to evidence your skills and competencies.

Use other courses to build your knowledge and understanding; dip in and out as necessary.

Link your online course with social networking tools (e.g. LinkedIn) to build professional networks.

Leisure learner

Motivation

- Learning for general interest.
- Providing experiences and wisdom to the learning community.
- Supporting professional, community or voluntary commitments.

Possible MOOC journey

Select courses based on interest; complete as necessary. Take care when selecting courses that require payment for premium services or certification.

Contribute experience to learning community, evidencing professional credibility as relevant.

What we've learnt from MOOCs

As MOOCs are new there is still a lot of uncertainty about their place in the higher education sector. MOOC providers are constantly innovating and improving their facilities, and trying to establish themselves as reputable organisations with secure business models. Over the last few years, a number of themes have arisen from MOOCs, summarised below:

- MOOCs have become a global phenomenon, with individuals in almost all countries of the world enrolling for courses on major platforms.
- Online interaction with educators is often lower than many learners would like, and provides a challenge.
- Dealing with large numbers of learners on a single course can present technical challenges, particularly when using tools outside of the MOOC platform.
- MOOCs attract individuals with differing learning goals and motivations, but courses are sometimes designed with only one learning route available.
- The number of learners enrolling on MOOCs, whilst initially very high, is starting to stabilise, and is even falling in some instances.
- Completion rates for MOOCs are very low. The average completion rate is around 10%, which is much lower than traditional fee-paying courses.
- Employers are guardedly interested in the accreditation opportunities provided by MOOCs, but the system has not been well tested or validated.
- Universities are generally enthusiastic about the opportunities provided by MOOCs and are encouraging students to supplement their learning by studying online.

- MOOC providers are increasingly working with corporate organisations and other partners to secure funding in order to continue to provide free online education. Examples include corporate training courses commissioned by corporate organisations and delivered by universities.

Summary

In this section, we have covered the basic details of what a MOOC is, where to find online courses and how they will assist you as a learner. The main points covered are as follows:

- Most MOOCs are structured online courses offering free access to learning materials, learning communities and quizzes to test your knowledge.
- By enrolling on some MOOCs you can gain a certificate or college credit, which may be useful for professional development purposes.
- There are a number of major MOOC providers offering structured online courses.
- Most major MOOC providers offer common features: video-based learning materials, interactive activities, opportunities for discussion and quizzes or tests.

Section 2:

Preparing to study a MOOC

"It is worth considering your goals and motivations before you embark on any online course."

Introduction

In this section, you can think in more detail about your motivations for online study and consider the skills you might need to develop to maximise your learning. You can also use the resources in this section to select the most appropriate online course for your needs, and think about how to fit it in around your existing commitments.

Deciding if a MOOC is right for you

There are lots of online courses available. Whilst the majority are free for you to enrol on, they will require a lot of commitment if you decide to engage with them fully. Therefore, it is worth considering your goals and motivations before you embark on any online course.

Understanding the learning goals

Before you enrol on an online course, there should be a description available to help you decide if the content is appropriate and relevant for your needs. Once enrolled on the course, you should get access to more detailed information about the course structure, objectives and learning activities. This will be your first opportunity to assess if the course is likely to match your learning goals. You should spend as much time as possible assessing your suitability for the course at this stage – particularly with regard to the level of material the course offers and any pre-requisite learning needed.

A well-designed online course will provide you with a series of learning outcomes (also called learning objectives); these should describe in detail what you would gain from completing the

course. Well written learning outcomes should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Focused and Time-Focused. You should be able to use these to assess if the course is suitable for you and which parts of the course you want to (or need to) spend most time on. This should help you to plan your learning journey through the course.

Therefore, if at this stage, you decide the course isn't what you are looking for, don't be afraid to leave and look for a more suitable one. Also, if you think that only part of the course is appropriate for your learning needs, then don't be afraid to simply engage with just that part; however remember that any certification will require completion of the full course.

You can use the following checklist to further help you decide if a MOOC is likely to be right for you.

"If you decide the course isn't what you are looking for, don't be afraid to look for a more suitable one."

Learning goals	Do you have a particular learning goal in mind?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Do you need to acquire new knowledge, competencies or skills?	Yes ☐ No ☐
Motivation	Are you able to motivate yourself to study?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Are you prepared to overcome learning challenges?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Do you have the perseverance to complete a six-week course?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Can you study alone?	Yes ☐ No ☐

Learning preferences	Do you like to study using videos containing learning content?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Do you like to read online?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Do you learn best through watching, listening and reading about topics?	Yes ☐ No ☐
Social learning	Do you like to learn by discussing topics with other learners online?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Are you willing to aggregate learning materials from a variety of sources to enrich your experience?	Yes ☐ No ☐
	Do you like to help other learners by answering their questions?	Yes ☐ No ☐

If you have answered 'Yes' to the majority of the questions in the checklist above, you may be suited to studying a MOOC online. If you have answered 'No' to the majority of the questions, you may be more suited to a traditional face-to-face learning experience. However, this doesn't mean you couldn't benefit from supplementing your educational opportunities with online learning materials.

Certificates and college credits

Most online course platforms will offer you the opportunity to gain an informal statement or certificate of completion. However, there may also be the option to purchase a verified certificate or obtain college credit for your achievements, which will give you formal recognition of course completion. In this case, your identity will be verified by the course provider to prove it was you who took the course. Certification and college credit are

useful if you are planning on studying a MOOC in order to use for your career development, or if you are trying to enhance an application to university. Courses offering 'college credit' can be used at participating universities (currently only in the USA), as a substitute for taking actual classes there. This can be useful to both prove you are capable of taking a particular university level class, or if you wish to gain credits whilst at university by taking an online course.

You can find a list of college and universities who accept 'ACE college credit' at the address below:
www2.acenet.edu/CREDITCollegeNetwork/

Usually, course providers will inform you if these options exist on the course you are studying. If this is the case, you have around 2 weeks from the start of the course to decide whether you wish to sign up for certification or college credit. It is a good idea to thoroughly consider whether you need to gain either – get in touch with your prospective employer or university first to find out whether they require it or will acknowledge it. Additionally, you should spend the first 2 weeks of the course assessing whether you think you can perform well and stick to deadlines – there is no point paying for a course you will do badly in or give up on. However, bear in mind that completion rates for those who opt to pay for certification services increase to around 70%.

Do you have the skills necessary to study online?

Effective online study requires you to have a few basic digital skills. Use the following checklist to assess your current digital literacy skills, and use the advice provided to fill any skills gaps.

			Advice if you have answered 'No'
Access to, and familiarity with, equipment	Do you have access to a PC, laptop, tablet device or smartphone suitable for learning?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*You will need access to at least one internet enabled device to participate in a MOOC. Most learners access courses using a desktop PC or laptop.*
	Do you have good working knowledge of the functionality available on your PC, laptop, tablet device or smartphone?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you have a broadband internet connection from your chosen device?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
Handling online content	Do you know how to play audio and video on your chosen device?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*See* Study Skills Connected *for advice on using your device to access content.*
	Can you download audio files to play them as podcasts?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Can you access PDF documents on your chosen device?	Yes ☐ No ☐	

			Advice if you have answered 'No'
Finding and storing information online	Can you use search engines effectively to find information?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*See* Study Skills Connected *for advice on finding and storing information online.*
	Do you know how to filter search results?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you have effective mechanisms for saving digital information?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
Sharing online content	Do you know how to send links and webpages to other individuals?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*See* Study Skills Connected *for advice on sharing online content.*
	Can you share content via social networking sites?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you know how to share large files?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
Online profile	Do you have an email account?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*You will need to have an email address to register on the major MOOC providers' websites. If you wish to purchase certificates you will need to be able to provide payment information. It is not necessary to have a website/blog to study a MOOC.*
	Can you make payments online?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you have a biography to include on a profile page?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you have a website or a blog?	Yes ☐ No ☐	

			Advice if you have answered 'No'
Social profile	Do you have a Facebook account and appropriate privacy settings?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*See* Study Skills Connected *for advice on using social networking sites for enhancing studying.*
	Do you have a Twitter account?	Yes ☐ No ☐	
	Do you have a professional profile on LinkedIn?	Yes ☐ No ☐	

PALGRAVE STUDY SKILLS

STUDY SKILLS CONNECTED
USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT YOUR STUDIES
STELLA COTTRELL & NEIL MORRIS
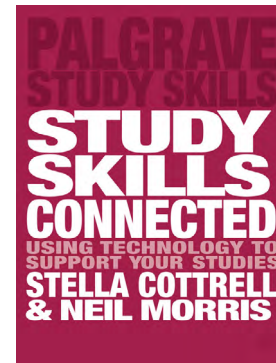
Study Skills Connected
By Stella Cottrell & Neil Morris
9781137019455

Become more effective at using technology to engage with your studies and improve your study skills. Palgrave.com

If you have answered 'Yes' to the majority of these questions, you probably have the basic digital literacy skills necessary to make the most of an online learning experience. If you have answered 'No' to most of the questions, you may find it beneficial to get some basic online study skills advice before starting an online course. However, MOOCs are designed to be easy to use. Besides understanding how to use a computer, play videos, save and organise your learning resources, most of the above skills are not completely essential – but they will fundamentally enhance your learning experience.

Choosing a MOOC to study

"You may have to be selective about which courses to engage with."

There are a wide variety of online courses available for all types of learners. When you browse courses by title and description you may find many that you are interested in, but with limited time you may have to be selective about which courses to engage with. Use the following checklist to decide which type of MOOC(s) you might want to enrol on:

Subject area	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics	☐	All of the major MOOC providers offer courses in these subject areas, so you should have a look at the courses they are offering.
	Arts & Humanities	☐	
	Language	☐	
	Medicine and health	☐	
	Social sciences	☐	
	Business	☐	
Level	Foundation	☐	Check course pre-requisites and suggested level carefully in the course description.
	Undergraduate	☐	
	Masters	☐	
	Professional development	☐	
	Vocational	☐	
	Training	☐	

Outcome	General interest (no specific outcome)	☐	Check carefully what outcomes the course offers. Certificates may be available for many online courses, but you will have to pay (and undertake formal examinations) to get certificates that have professional validity.
	Certificate for personal use	☐	
	Certificate for professional purposes	☐	
	Certificate for university entry	☐	
Preferred length	1-3 weeks	☐	Most MOOCs are between 6-10 weeks, but shorter (mini MOOCs / tasters) are available.
	4-6 weeks	☐	
	7-10 weeks	☐	
	11-15 weeks	☐	
Accessibility features	Subtitles	☐	Check the individual MOOC providers websites for individual features. Not all of these features are available as standard for all online courses.
	Transcripts	☐	
	Audio only files	☐	
	Screen reading	☐	
	Web accessibility	☐	
	Multiple languages	☐	
Timeframe	Immediate start	☐	Try to think about whether you need to complete the MOOC within a certain timeframe. If it is necessary for a job or course, you will need to receive accreditation before submitting the application.
	Flexible start	☐	
	Flexible completion date	☐	
	Set completion date	☐	

There are a number of websites that aggregate MOOCs available on the major MOOC platforms and other sites. You may find the following useful:

www.mooc-list.com/: "A complete list of MOOCs offered by the best universities and entities'.

www.openculture.com/free_certificate_courses: 'Open culture: the best free cultural and educational media on the web'.

These websites will also explain the pre-requisites for all online courses, as well as their duration.

Establishing your online presence

When you enrol on online courses you will be invited to establish a portfolio within the platform, so that other learners can get to know you. You can normally use this profile to write a short biography, but also to provide links to further information (e.g. website or blog), and you may be able to provide your Twitter username. If you don't have any of this information, you might find this section useful:

Biography	This is likely to be a short text based description where you describe yourself. You might want to include information such as your current situation and your aspirations. You may be able to upload a photograph of yourself in your biography – some people choose to use an image or an avatar instead of their face. Remember that lots of people will view this profile and will form an opinion about you from the information you provide.

Website	If you are associated with an organisation, you may already have a student or staff website that you can link to from your online profile. Of course, you may not want to associate your online learning with your professional portfolio, so you should think carefully about what information you provide. If you don't have an online web presence but want one, you might consider setting up a blog.
Blog	Blogs (web logs) are easy and free to set up and you can update them regularly. Blogs are a great way to provide more information about yourself, and to present yourself in the way that you feel most comfortable. Blogs are commonly used by online learners to provide detailed reflections on their experiences, which they share with other learners through a link in a discussion forum or via social networking sites.
Twitter handle	When you register with the social networking site Twitter, you will be asked to choose a username (often called 'handle'). This will be associated with all your future messages ('tweets'), so choose carefully. You can let people know you are on Twitter by sharing your twitter handle on your online profile.
LinkedIn	LinkedIn is a professional networking site, and is an ideal place to present yourself to potential employers. LinkedIn allows you to post updates, stories and links in similar ways to other social networking sites.

As you become more skilled with these sites, you will find ways to link information together and to provide a more sophisticated online presence. For more information on using social media to help enhance your studies, see *Study Skills Connected*.

Preparing to study a MOOC

If you are using online courses to improve your chances of gaining entry to university or for professional development purposes, you should spend some time planning how to make the most of the experience, before the course starts. Use the following checklist to help you prepare before your course starts.

Have you checked the course is appropriate for your level and learning goals?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*You are more likely to participate in a course that you feel able to complete, so ensuring the level is appropriate is important.*
Do you know how much time you are expected to commit to the course per week?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*You should try to find out how much commitment is needed, so you can plan your schedule accordingly.*
Will you be able to join the course when it starts?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*If you will be joining the course late, you may want to devote some time to catching up.*
Can you set aside enough time per day for studying the course?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Most people study online courses in the evening; think through the implications this will have on your lifestyle.*
Will you need any particular software or equipment to participate fully in the course?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*If the course relies on you producing something, make sure you have the necessary skills and equipment.*
Have you encouraged friends or colleagues to enrol on the course?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Studying with a friend or colleague can help to increase your motivation and likelihood of success.*

Summary

POCKET STUDY SKILLS
Kate Williams and Michelle Reid

TIME MANAGEMENT

Time Management
By Kate Williams and Michelle Reid
9780230299603

Pocket-sized book with plenty of great tips for seizing the day and getting more out of your studies. Palgrave.com

In this section, we have covered the process of selecting and preparing to study an online course. The checklists will have hopefully helped you in your decision making process, and helped you to identify any skills gaps. The main points covered are as follows:

- If you are going to be a successful online learner, you need to understand your learning goals and motivation, and match this to a course available online.
- Studying online requires some basic digital literacy skills.
- Establishing an online presence will help you to make best use of the learning community.
- Preparing for your online course in advance will help improve your chances of success.

Section 3:

Studying an online course: maximising your learning

"You need to be clear about your learning goals and confident in your time management skills."

Introduction

Studying entirely online requires different skills to studying in a classroom or lecture theatre. Online learners need to be clear about their motivation and learning goals and confident in their time management skills and use of the tools and resources available to support their learning. In this section, all of these elements will be outlined and you will gain some valuable tips and advice about how to engage most productively with both the course materials and the online learning community.

The Palgrave Student Planner
By Stella Cottrell
9781137399991

Organise your life and studies with this planner/ diary designed especially for students.
Palgrave.com

Before starting your online course

Logging in and enrolling on an online course

Having signed up to the course provider using your email, simply select to enrol in the course – whether it is free or you require a verified certificate. The course will then be added to your list of courses and you can start learning when the course is made available.

Planning your time whilst taking an online course

Having enrolled on an online course you will get a better sense of the course requirements and will be better able to plan your time. In this section, you can think about strategies for making the most effective use of your time.

- When the course materials are available spend some time looking through them to assess how long you will need to spend on each section.
- The course instructors may have helped you to plan your time by indicating how much time you should spend on the course per week, and when activities should be completed. Note these events in your diary, so you are working through the course at the same pace as other learners.
- Consider how flexible with your time the course will allow you to be. If the course is

highly structured, you may have less time to re-visit certain sections before the next assignments begin.

- In these cases, you may want to work out which sections will be most useful to gain a solid understanding of, and which you can 'skim'.
- Remember that the suggested amount of time for activities may be lower than you yourself require; try to account for this as you get used to the requirements of the course.
- As online courses attract learners from all around the world, discussion will be going on all of the time. You will need to plan for this if you are involved in group activities, interactions with course instructors or if you have assignment deadlines. Often, this aspect of MOOCs is most useful to solidify your understanding of the course. If you wish to score highly, time spent on discussions is highly recommended.
- Many learners on online courses like to work at their own pace, according to their time and motivation. Whilst there are advantages to this approach, you may miss out on valuable discussion and interaction if you have completed the course in the first few days when the majority of learners are still on the first activity.
- Some learners join online courses after they have started and may feel they are behind the group. It may be worth putting in a little extra time if you are in this situation, so you can catch up and benefit from the community who are working on the same part of the course as you.

Navigating the course materials

Most of the major online course platforms (e.g. Coursera, EdX, FutureLearn, Udacity) have a number of common features, whilst all have unique elements. As an online learner, you may take courses on a number of learning platforms and will become familiar with the different layout and navigation features. However, if you are new to online learning, this section will help you to identify the main features of online learning platforms:

Feature	Description
Video player	An embedded media player for watching video content.
Audio player	An embedded media player for listening to audio content.
Text	Written material displayed directly on the course page.
Quizzes / tests	Multiple choice questions or other form of quizzes / tests to help you assess your knowledge and/or understanding.
Links to external content	Links to external websites or content for reference or further reading.
Discussion forum	Allows learners to write their own comments, ask questions or work in groups.
Profile	Provides information about learners and educators.
Syllabus	Overview of the course structure and content.
Calendar	Information about timing of course activities and assessment deadlines.
Social learning features	Tools to share content on social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs etc.).

Feature	Description
Examinations / certificates	Opportunities to take online or face-to-face examinations and gain a certificate with a mark or grade.
Notes	Ability to record private notes to support your learning.
Download	Tools to download course materials (e.g. audio, video, text, etc.).
Collaborative writing tool	Tool to allow multiple learners to contribute to a single document e.g. for an assignment.
Upload	Tool to allow learners to upload materials for assessment or sharing with other learners.
Peer assessment	Ability for learners to provide feedback to each other on assessments (e.g. discussions, written work or uploaded material).

You may want to investigate the different providers' 'styles' and see which you feel most comfortable learning with. This list of functionality will grow and change rapidly over the coming years.

Weekly course updates

Most online course providers will provide weekly updates which will appear prominently on your dashboard as soon as you log in or be sent by email. These are extremely useful for providing you with a clear understanding of what is going on in each week. These updates will explain which resources are being used, and whether you need to prepare for tests or group discussions. Make sure to read these carefully so you know exactly what is going on in the course each week.

Learning and content

Listening to and watching learning materials

Most modern online course platforms have a major emphasis on video content. This video content varies enormously in length, quality and purpose and you will come across lots of different styles when studying online. The following types of video content are commonly found within online courses:

- Introductory 'talking head' videos from course instructors.
- Recordings of lectures given to live student audiences.
- Documentary style video content.
- Interviews or conversations with instructors.
- Animations with audio narration.
- Video with built-in questions.

Some courses may use one single type of video content, or a combination of approaches within a single video or throughout the course. Therefore, you will need to review the video content in use for your online course and assess how best you can use it to enhance your learning.

Depending on your circumstances and learning preferences, you may only want to listen to learning materials (e.g. whilst out walking). It will be important to check that this facility exists

within your online course, as not all courses provide an audio version of video content. You will need to plan ahead if you are preparing to go on a long journey and want to listen to the learning materials; if you do not have mobile broadband access during your journey you should download resources to your mobile device before setting off.

It is really important that you think about your engagement and active learning whilst watching and listening to online learning materials. Use the questions in the following table to help you make the most of audio and video learning materials:

	Consider the following questions each time you start to watch or listen to online learning materials:
Learning environment	• Are you sitting comfortably? • Can you view the screen easily? • Are you able to type easily? • Can you hear the voices clearly? • Are there constant distractions? • Do you have time to engage with the learning content?
Active listening	• Are you listening carefully to the key messages in the learning materials? • Are you pausing regularly to reflect on what you have heard to ensure you understand the main points? • Are you actively questioning what is being said?
Critical thinking	• Have you considered alternative views or perspectives? • Have you checked the primary sources to verify the accuracy of the information provided? • Do you understand the central argument of the content?

Concentration	• Are you taking regular breaks (e.g. 10 minutes in every hour)? • Are you breaking longer learning activities into manageable chunks (e.g. 20 minutes)? • Are you regularly monitoring your attention to the task at hand?
Recording learning and taking notes	• Are you making notes to reinforce your learning? • Are you writing notes in your own words instead of simply transcribing the lecturer? • Are you colour-coding and coming up with your own ways to memorise content? • Are you posting comments to ask questions or clarify misunderstanding?
Watching videos	• Are you re-focusing attention on important parts of the video? • Do you slow down videos at difficult sections?

"Are you re-focusing attention on important parts of the video?"

Strategies for dealing with learning materials of differing style and length

Online audio and video learning materials can vary enormously in style and length, using a variety of content and lasting from less than a minute to a couple of hours. As an online learner, you will need to develop strategies to help maximise the benefit you gain from these resources, depending on their purpose. The following guide may help you to develop these strategies:

• Shorter videos (including introductory videos) lend themselves to continuous watching from start to end, whilst taking brief notes on key points.

• Medium length videos (between 10 to

30 minutes in length) lend themselves to watching through in full – in order to grasp the underlying message of the video, whilst taking brief notes – before going back over certain sections in more detail. Often, course providers will insert markers into videos, effectively splitting them up into sections.

- Whilst watching longer videos, it is important to identify the different areas of information, questioning yourself on your understanding of each before moving on.
- Longer videos (30 minutes or more) lend themselves to watching in segments. Make sure you understand each area of content before moving onto the next. Take notes as you go, making sure to pause regularly and create notes that you clearly understand, in your own words.

Features of video content

Most embedded video players have certain features which will aid your progression through the learning material. Videos can be paused and skipped through, and may allow you to play them in slow motion or at faster speeds. You should also be able to play videos' content in full-screen mode and adjust the quality (e.g. low / high-definition) according to your internet speed. Some course providers split videos into sections, which are labelled on the video progress bar; this can help you to skip to the most relevant one. Many video players also come equipped with optional captions, which may be downloadable as text files.

"Studying online can be very rewarding and enriching, but it can also be overwhelming if you are presented with a lot of information in a short amount of time."
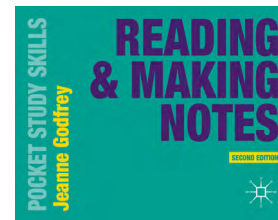
Reading and Making Notes
By Jeanne Godfrey
9781137402585

Takes you through university marking criteria, assignments, reading lists and texts to explode common myths about making notes. Palgrave.com

Making effective notes

Studying online can be very rewarding and enriching, but it can also be overwhelming if you are presented with a lot of information in a short amount of time. Effective note taking allows you to understand, assimilate and retain this information. There are a number of additional advantages to note taking:

- Personal interpretation of your understanding of a concept.
- Writing something down helps with memory retention.
- Notes can help to draw together information from a variety of sources and distil information into clear, definable points.
- Notes can be used to help you recall information previously learnt.
- Notes provide a permanent record of learning for later review.

There are a number of methods for note taking. You might already have a method that has worked in the past, or you might be looking for new ways to record and organise your thoughts. Here are a few suggestions of effective note taking methods:

- **Pen and paper** – for many people actually writing is the most effective mechanism for recording their thoughts. This often includes drawing pictures, writing lists, and using colours for emphasis. However, if you are studying an online course whilst commuting to work this might not be practical.
- **Note taking tool** (e.g. word processor or

note taking app) – this has the advantage of producing a digital record of your notes and will be available on the device you are using to study the online course (even your smartphone). Many tools have a wide range of functionality to allow you to produce notes just like you would when using pen and paper.

- **Audio note taking** – most devices now offer the opportunity to record audio so you can record your thoughts, ideas and reflections if your environment allows this. Some tools even allow direct transcription of audio into word-processor documents.
- **Mind-mapping tool** – there are many free mind-mapping tools which allow you to construct visual representations of your notes in a diagram that can help you with understanding and recall. These are most useful for organising complex ideas into a manageable, memorisable format.

Course activities and discussions

Effective online courses are designed to engage learners through a wide variety of activities and learning approaches. How you engage with these activities will dictate to a large extent how much you gain from the course. Obviously, we all learn differently from different approaches, but in general it is recommended that you try to engage with all the activities offered as part of the course.

There is a lot of research evidence that has informed the design of modern online courses, highlighting the most powerful approaches to improve learner engagement and learning. In general, this research indicates that interactivity, communication and regular testing of knowledge / understanding are all highly important, and are therefore core components of most online courses.

- **Interactive activities**: Online activities that involve the learner are generally engaging and help to focus learning. Interactive activities can be varied, but often involve learners completing online, course-relevant tasks.
- **Communication**: Conversation helps to reinforce learning, expose misunderstandings and build relationships. Whilst one-to-one conversation within online courses can be difficult to achieve, there are benefits from engaging with group or whole cohort discussions through leaving comments.
- **Quizzes and tests**: Most online courses will offer learners regular opportunities to test their knowledge and understanding. It is strongly recommended that you engage with these quizzes and use them to actually test your knowledge; this means taking time to read the question carefully and give a considered answer. Most providers allow you to take the 'homework' assignments at the end of each week more than once – this is a great opportunity for you to go over questions you found more difficult. At the end of the course there may be a scored test, which you

should treat as a real exam and prepare for appropriately.

Some online courses will require you to produce your own digital content to upload for sharing with other learners and for assessment by your peers or instructors. Where this is a requirement of completing the course, it is essential that you complete these activities. However, even if the activity is not compulsory, you are strongly encouraged to set aside time to complete the task as it will have been designed to enhance understanding of the topic.

Contributing to online discussions

"Communication helps you to organise your thoughts clearly."

A major component of successful online learning is conversation. Communication helps learners to organise their thoughts into a clearly expressible format. This has been a highly successful model of higher education for many years, and in universities is often formally referred to as a tutorial, where an academic and a small group of students sit down and discuss a topic. However, these invaluable conversations often also take place informally between learners in cafés, libraries and other settings.

Making effective use of online conversation

There are a few basic ways in which you can engage with online conversation, which may be used as separate strategies or in combination:

- Reading other people's comments and reflecting privately on their posts;
- Reading and commenting on (replying to) other people's posts;
- Posting your own comments and inviting feedback.

In some instances, you might be able to find out more about people who have contributed to discussion forums by reading their online profile. This may help you to assess their credibility. You may be able to filter discussions to only see contributions from people you have chosen to 'follow'. This can help you to manage the volume of online conversation and avoid inaccurate learning caused by using unreliable sources.

Building confidence to contribute to discussions

Many online learners only ever read other people's posts and don't contribute their own views or ideas to the discussion. This is often because they think their opinion or question is irrelevant or inaccurate, and they are worried about receiving negative feedback from other learners or facilitators. You can increase your confidence to engage with online discussion through practice. Often, you may find it hard to express your own individual thoughts on a subject. You may thoroughly understand a topic yourself, yet practicing contributing to discussion will be necessary in order to help your expression. Start by introducing yourself and your particular learning problem, and then

ask a straightforward question. It is important to check that the question hasn't already been asked before posting. Most seasoned online learners like to assist 'newbies' and will offer advice and support, as well as answering specific questions.

Practical tips for online discussion

- Avoid entire words in capital letters and remain polite.
- Check previous posts to see if your question has already been asked – ask yourself if you're contributing something new and useful if this is the case.
- Ask open ended questions that invite useful answers and feedback.
- Make single points and try to keep contributions relevant to a particular discussion.
- If you are contributing 'facts', make sure they are accurate. Try to include sources if possible and avoid conjecture.
- Although online discussion is a substitute for face-to-face conversation, without the subtleties of face-to-face communication, the message may be lost. Remember to try to communicate clearly and unambiguously.

Mechanisms for online discussion

Creating time and a place for conversation in an online environment is essential. These

conversations can take many differing forms online, but are often within the following categories:

- **Instant messenger (chat tool):** This is useful for private (one-to-one) conversations, and can involve text, audio and video. Note that a record of the conversation is not normally automatically saved. This tool is useful if you find a like-minded learner you would like to have further discussion with.
- **Open discussion forum:** There may be a number of open discussion forums in your course, where all participants can post comments, questions and suggestions. Depending on the course provider there may be tools to filter, like, follow, rate or otherwise organise discussion posts.
- **Closed (group) discussion forum:** These are normally private to a defined group of individuals to allow for more detailed and focused discussion.
- **Multimedia interactive learning spaces (e.g. Google Hangout):** These are very versatile tools that allow for private or public discussion using chat, audio, video and screen sharing. The session can also be recorded for broadcast or download. This is a great tool for real-time face-to-face interaction.
- **Facebook:** This social networking site allows users to establish private or public groups for discussion and includes chat, audio and video tools. You can also share your progress on your online courses with other users.
- **Twitter:** This social networking site allows users to establish private or public networks

to share information through short text-based updates. Twitter is a great tool for connecting with course providers and other course members.

Choosing your preferred online discussion medium

You may be required to use a particular mechanism (e.g. open discussion forum) to interact with your fellow learners as part of the requirements of the course. However, increasingly online courses encourage learners to participate via a wide range of routes. This has some advantages but also some drawbacks:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Allows learners to use their preferred communication channel.	Conversation is spread around multiple channels, making it hard to keep track of all comments.
Reduces the volume of communication via a single channel.	Use of multiple channels can be daunting for new online learners.
Increases functionality by utilising a wide range of tools.	Available technology may restrict learners from engaging on some channels.

You may find it useful to consider these issues before deciding how and when to engage with discussion during your online course. If you are on a course where you must be kept up to date with a wide range of problems and questions – such as a group project oriented course – then it would be wise to keep all channels open. However, if you only need an answer to a specific question, or are simply posting your own comments for others to read, then you

may wish to simply select the communication channel that is easiest for you.

Engaging in group discussion

Some online courses encourage or require participants to join small groups to discuss topics – for example business or philosophy courses. This process can be quite daunting for some learners if they are asked to join a group of individuals selected by the instructor. The advantages of these small group discussions (often called 'breakout sessions') are significant. They allow individuals to discuss a topic in detail, in private, exploring all angles of a problem, proposing a wide range of solutions or ideas.

Groups of this kind are often encouraged to report their findings back to the whole course, and this can be a useful mechanism for the group to assimilate a lot of information quickly and efficiently – creating a 'knowledge base'. If you are asked to join a small group discussion during an online course, consider the following:

- Remember the advice about imagining you are face-to-face. Ask everyone to introduce themselves and give a summary of their background, learning goals and skills.
- Consider appointing roles to each individual in the group: do you need a spokesperson, a scribe and a manager?
- Plan your activities around each individual's personal commitments and online time patterns (remember everyone might be

in a different time zone, so synchronous discussion may be impossible).

- Work as a team on the activity, trying to allocate a portion of the research to each individual; be flexible though as some people may have more time and / or commitment than others.

Using the course educators' presence effectively

One of the major challenges of Massive Open Online Courses is the ratio of teacher to student as there are commonly thousands of students per educator. Therefore, courses of this kind can feel rather impersonal, particularly if you are used to having the constant support of a learning mentor or teacher. With experience, you will get used to this new form of learning, but there are several strategies that can help you:

Use the learning community to support your learning: there will often be experts studying the course; try to identify them and follow their updates.	Be sure to follow the course educators updates and any updates from teaching assistants or course administrators.	Try to find time to join any 'live' events with the course educator e.g. live chats or Q&A sessions. Prepare your questions carefully in advance and find out when this is happening using weekly updates.	Always try to find the answer to difficult topics before asking the course educator directly; use the learning community to hone your question and then use an appropriate forum to ask your question.

On large online courses, course educators often take on the role of 'facilitator' whilst the course is running, rather than the role of teacher. They try to support and encourage online communication and stimulate discussion by posing challenging questions.

You should try to avoid contacting course educators directly when studying an online course, unless they specifically ask you to; they are unlikely to be able to reply to individual messages and may not appreciate telephone calls or messages to their personal email accounts. Use the resources in the online course and ask questions through established channels.

Using social learning effectively on online courses

The major benefit of online courses is the bringing together of a community of individuals all interested in a particular subject. Online courses often generate lots of conversation. However, one of the major issues with Massive Open Online Courses is the volume of conversation generated and working out how to assimilate this information productively. In this section, you will gain some tips about how to manage the learner content generated as part of an online course:

Type of content	Tips to help you assimilate information
Output from open discussion forums	• Some platforms will allow you to 'like' or rate posts so they rise to the top and / or can be linked to your profile; use this feature if available to keep a record of posts you have found useful. • Keep a private record (in your study notes) of interesting posts and your reflections on them. • Some platforms allow you to 'tag' interesting posts so you can quickly call up all posts you found useful.
Output from group activities	• Store the group's summary of their activity. • Record a summary of the group's outcomes in your private / shared notes.

Type of content	Tips to help you assimilate information
Updates on social networking sites	• Regularly review the course hashtag on Twitter to read people's views about the course. • Follow selected individuals on Twitter who are commenting about the course. • Use the course hashtag in any messages you post about the course. • Link to your shared notes on the course (e.g. blog posts) through Twitter updates so that other learners can benefit from your reflections. • Like the course page on Facebook (if there is one) to receive regular updates and to review learners' comments.
Posts on blogs about the course	• Share your blog posts through social networking sites so other learners can benefit from your reflections. • Pick a few bloggers to follow whilst taking the course, so you can benefit from their perspectives about the course. • Add your reflections on their views to your private / shared notes. • Consider posting your reflections in an open discussion forum so all course participants are aware of the blog postings.
Learner generated content uploaded to the course	• Select a representative sample of other learners' material to review and reflect on. • Use this content to add depth to your reflective notes and broaden your own perspectives. • Provide feedback to other learners about their content.
Informal update from course educators (e.g. notes or blog postings)	• Use these as core learning materials, but recognising the informal tone. • Reflect on these postings in relation to more formal content provided by the educator; they may be very insightful and add more context.

Doing extra reading and activities beyond the course

You will often find that course instructors will provide you with opportunities to delve deeper into the topic by providing links to external resources. These are often considered as additional to the course requirements, so you will have to make a judgement as to whether you think they will enrich your learning sufficiently to justify your time. Common types of additional learning resources are outlined below:

- **Links to research papers**: Online courses aimed at undergraduate or postgraduate students will almost certainly include reference to journal articles. These will prepare you well for intensive study of the subject, and are especially useful if you are seriously considering taking the subject further after the course has finished.
- **Links to external content**: Course instructors will often provide links to additional learning materials available on the internet. This is a major benefit of online courses, as it can save you from searching for resources yourself, and offers you materials that have been recommended by an academic expert. On some platforms, the main source of course content will be provided for free in PDF form as a learning resource.
- **Links to books**: Some online courses

may be based on a specific textbook or monograph, particularly one written by the course instructor. In these cases, you may be encouraged to purchase a book (either print or digital) to assist with your learning. You should consider carefully whether a book will be of value to your understanding of the course before purchasing.

Course assessments

Preparing for and taking online assessments

Depending on the type of online course you are taking, formal assessment may be available. Some 'taster' courses do not include a formal exam but offer regular quizzes to help you assess your understanding. However, most online courses do offer learners opportunities to take marked assessments and examinations and receive a certificate documenting their overall mark or grade.

In order to certify that you are not cheating, some course providers require you to sign up to their 'honour code'. However, for courses that carry college credits, some online course providers offer a service for you to complete invigilated examinations under timed conditions – observed through your webcam or even in person at a supervised test-centre.

Assessment within online courses falls into the following categories:

- In-course formative assessment (non-graded quizzes).
- In-course summative assessment (graded test).
- End of course examination (graded exam).

In this section, you can think about how to prepare for graded tests and exams on online courses and learn how examinations are conducted.

Types of graded tests in online courses

Assessment in online courses is becoming increasingly sophisticated as the technology and functionality within platforms improves. Currently, there are a limited number of ways through which graded tests are conducted. This is because the size of some online courses means that manual grading of work by instructors is impossible. Therefore, most graded tests are either:

- Marked automatically (e.g. multiple choice questions, MCQs).
- Peer assessed by other learners enrolled on the course.

Automatically marked tests (e.g. MCQs) will be provided by the course instructor and will normally come with some restrictions, such as a limited availability and deadline, limited time to complete once the test has started, number of attempts etc. You should carefully check

the instructions and rules before commencing any in-course graded test. These tests often only count a small proportion towards the final course mark, but can provide a welcome boost towards other forms of assessment if completed successfully. Additionally, they will highlight areas that you may need to review for the final assessment. Some quizzes can be re-taken at any time up until the final deadline for the course – meaning you have as much time as you wish to re-visit material you find difficult.

Peer assessment of learning is a more controversial area of assessment within online courses. It normally arises in subjects where MCQs are not an appropriate form of assessment, such as arts and humanities. Learners may be required to produce a digital artefact (e.g. an image, a document, a short film) and upload it to a video hosting service or directly to the course platform for assessment. Learners enrolled on the course will then be requested to assess each others' work, using marking criteria provided by course instructors. Commonly, a number of learners will independently assess each piece of work. Clearly, there are a number of potential pitfalls with this approach, including consistency and quality of marking, feedback and workload for learners. Some of these issues are overcome by random check marking by teaching assistants or course instructors and by incentivising accurate marking, but with large online courses this can become unwieldy. Therefore, the use of peer assessment for graded tests is currently quite

restricted within online courses. However, it is quite common to see peer assessment for non-graded (formative) tests. On some courses, it is possible to re-submit peer assessments as many times as you wish before the ultimate deadline.

If you are required to undertake peer assessment as part of an online course, you may find the following tips useful:
• Set aside sufficient time to undertake your marking load conscientiously.
• Follow the marking criteria provided carefully and try to be as objective as possible in your assessment of the work.
• When providing feedback to other learners, think about how you would react if given the feedback; try to provide positive feedback and areas for improvement in all feedback.
• Seek clarification from the course instructor if the marking criteria are unclear, ambiguous or open to interpretation.

"When providing feedback to other learners, think about how you would react if given the feedback."

Producing work for assessment in online courses

When considering MOOCs, as discussed above there are normally limited instances when learners are required to submit their own work for assessment, due to the volume of marking this would generate for instructors. However, for smaller online courses you may be required to produce written (or other digital forms) of work for assessment by teaching assistants, course instructors or peers. The following table will provide some advice about production of various forms of assessment for online courses:

Type of assessment	Tips for success
Individual written assessment (e.g. essay, story, summary, article, report etc.)	• Check the assessment criteria and guidelines carefully before starting (e.g. length, format, referencing, style, deadline). • Avoid plagiarism. • Write clearly, concisely and accurately. • Plan time for proof-reading and editing. • Organise references as you write the assessment.
Group written assessment	• Check the assessment criteria and guidelines carefully before starting (e.g. length, format, referencing, style, deadline). • Plan team roles and assign responsibilities to all individuals – if possible based on individual strengths. • Use online tools (e.g. Skype) to have regular virtual editorial meetings. • Avoid plagiarism. • Proof read and edit each others' contributions.
Audio-visual artefact (e.g. short film, song, reading, performance etc.)	• Check the assessment criteria and guidelines carefully before starting (e.g. format, style, deadline). • Check format requirements carefully (e.g. movie file type). • Adhere to copyright laws, intellectual property, data protection and performance rights when producing content and using other people's material.

Type of assessment	Tips for success
Completion of simulation, experiment etc.	• Check the assessment criteria and guidelines carefully before starting (e.g. requirements, output, deadline) • Ensure you have the appropriate hardware / software to access the assessment • Ensure appropriate risk assessments and Health and Safety requirements are in place when conducting real experiments

End of course examinations

Many online courses provide learners with the opportunity to take an end of course examination. Depending on your motivation and learning goals, you will decide whether or not to take this examination, which may have cost implications. End of course examinations usually take one of the following forms:

• Online examination (e.g. MCQ)
• Online invigilated (proctored) examination (often via a webcam observer)
• Face-to-face invigilated examination in an assessment centre

The type of end of course examination available will depend on the course you are taking and the online platform. Costs for taking examinations vary between online platforms and the method of assessment. It is worth finding out about the examination opportunities before you enrol on a course.

Summary

In this section, we have covered the major elements of an online course and provided advice about how to navigate and engage with the course materials and learning community most effectively to enhance your learning experience. The key elements for success are as follows:

• Prepare thoroughly to ensure you get the most out of the course.
• Use the learning materials effectively and record your learning.
• Engage with learning activities to assess your knowledge and understanding.
• Engage with the learning community through group activities and online discussion: conversation enriches learning.
• Be aware of the requirements for successful course completion if you want to get a certificate or other outcome from the course.

Section 4:

After the MOOC, what's next?

"Completing your first online course is a major achievement."

Introduction

Completing your first online course is a major achievement. In this section, you can consider the next steps, in terms of gaining certificates and / or college credits and how to use your online course to enhance your online portfolio and professional development.

Badges

Accreditation from online course providers is a great way to gain recognition for your new knowledge and skills, however the open software community 'Mozilla' have developed something similar known as 'Open Badges'. By signing up to their free service, you are issued with an online 'backpack', which you use to store any badges you have earned.

Each badge is a representation of a particular skill or knowledge-set you have learned, for example 'Collaborator' or 'Web Designer'. All badges are based on a shared technical standard which means you can earn them from many different places to build up a portfolio of your learning achievements. Currently, only a few organisations and businesses issue Open Badges, though the platform is still in its infancy. It is thought that course providers may eventually start to issue badges, however their purpose is mainly to showcase specific skills and achievements. With badges being awarded for both online and offline learning, you are able to showcase many more of your skills than you would be able to through online course accreditation alone.

If you have successfully completed an online course and decide you wish to continue your learning, you may want to showcase all of your achievements – including your online backpack, scanned transcripts and degrees from traditional universities and colleges – using an online portfolio.

Online portfolios

Online portfolios add yet another dimension to a learner's demonstration of their knowledge and skills. Through an online portfolio site such as Accredible, students are able to upload their test scores, coursework and notable projects, which can then be viewed by individuals such as potential employers and college admissions tutors. Many people also use LinkedIn, the professional networking site, to document their skills and achievements. You can include details of online courses that you have completed on your LinkedIn profile.

Just as accreditation and badges strengthen the validity of your completion of a course and its material, online portfolios are a great way to demonstrate your understanding of it, and what you actually used it for. For example, it is possible to showcase your certificates from MOOCs in different subject areas – computer science and electrical engineering for example – and then demonstrate how you creatively brought the two together in a project of your own design. You could then create a presentation about this project in order to show creative use of your newfound knowledge.

Creating an online portfolio

Accredible is a great tool for building an online portfolio. After signing up, your portfolio will consist of what are known as 'slates'. Each slate contains information about a specific qualification – such as a degree or online course transcript – or a description and evidence of a specific skill – such as Word or Excel skills.

Additionally, you can upload your current CV, verify your identity and connect your account to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and edit your profile and upload a profile photo. There are 4 stages of development for an Accredible profile – functional, developed, exemplary and master. Continually following the guidelines provided at each stage will advance you to the next one and further cement you as an individual with a diverse skill-set.

Once you have created your basic profile, you can begin to add slates to it in order to enhance your credibility. To provide evidence of your skills, you may want to use the upload files/URL option to add evidence such as degree papers, online course transcripts, project files in which you did well or relevant research and websites you have found/made which show off the depth of your understanding. If you have been taking particularly good notes it may also be a good idea to upload these in order to show your commitment to your learning. Additionally you could upload artwork or infographics related to your subject.

Choosing follow-up online courses

You may have already successfully completed an online course and be looking to further your understanding in the same subject area or gain additional skills. It is important that you reflect on what you have gained from a course already, as well as what you may need to add to this depending on your personal goals.

Upon completion of an online course you may find that:

- You have gained a satisfactory understanding of the subject and require no additional study.
- You have gained only a partial understanding and require revision of a few key areas.
- You enjoyed the course, and you want to expand your knowledge in the subject area for professional reasons or personal enjoyment.
- You have expanded your knowledge and skill set but require additional specific skills instead of completing a whole new course.

If you require no additional study in the subject, then you may want to find a related subject to study. You could also simply choose something completely unrelated – especially if you are simply learning for your own pleasure. If you require revision of a few key areas, it may be a good idea to simply go over notes you have made and re-watch key videos. This is especially true if you have downloaded the course videos as you will have them readily available. If you

have enrolled on a course with flexible start and end dates, you may even be able to re-do quizzes in order to test your understanding once more. If the course is part of your professional development, it may be a good idea to re-enrol in order to take the final assessment again – gaining a higher final score from your newfound understanding.

If you have successfully completed an online course and need to study further for any reason, most online course providers will detail a structured progression in the subject area, for example, Calculus 1 to Calculus 2. Alternatively, you may find it useful to consult the online course community to gain recommendations about where to progress to.

Using your new knowledge and skills to secure a university place

If you are a pre-university student or a graduate looking to take a Masters degree or other postgraduate qualification, online courses are an ideal way to enhance your CV and show your commitment to learning. It is important that you are able to talk about, and evidence the knowledge and skills you gained from your online course when applying for university places and in interviews. Use the

following checklist to help you make the most of your online course experience.

Could you describe what new knowledge you gained from taking the online course?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Try to identify three new things that you learnt from taking this course; you might be asked to give these as examples.*
Did the course improve your skills (e.g. critical thinking, writing, debating etc.)? If so, can you give an example?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Think about a skill you have gained or improved. How do you know it has improved?*
Did the course encourage you to see the topic from different angles, through educator or learner contributions? If so, can you give an example?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Taking on board other people's views is an important skill. Can you think of an example of how your views have been shaped by others?*
Could you include an example about your experiences of taking the course in a university application?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Try to summarise the knowledge and skills you have gained and how they apply to your learning goals.*
Would you be able to summarise the benefits of taking the course during an interview?	Yes ☐ No ☐	*Talk to other people about your experiences of taking the course; this will help you prepare for an interview question.*

Bear in mind that universities may not necessarily accept online courses as proof of your skills or competence. However, simply by being able to demonstrate self-directed learning, self-motivation, and a description of how these skills have informed other areas of your education, your application will definitely be strengthened.

Using MOOCs for your professional development

Online courses can be an effective way to enhance your professional development, both informally and formally. Informally, taking courses in your own time will increase your knowledge and skills and may prove crucial to securing your next job or offer of a university place. Formally, online courses can provide you with validated evidence of your knowledge and skills, which you can include on your CV or online portfolio. When you are using online courses for formal professional development, this may be a requirement of your employer or for your own purposes. If you are taking online courses for your own purposes, you should think carefully about your goals and requirements before signing up for a course; in particular check the outcomes and costs associated with the course, as you will need to ensure a validated certificate is available. Once you have completed the course, be sure to include it on your CV, and your online portfolio (e.g. LinkedIn).

Summary

In this section, we have covered some of the ways to use your online course to enhance your professional development. The key elements for success are as follows:

- Ensure you check the available outcomes from a course before enrolling. If you need a validated certificate, make sure that option is available.
- Share your success on an online course widely, through your online profile and in your CV.
- Demonstrate your new knowledge and skills in applications to enhance your chances of success.

Section 5:
Putting it all together: case studies

Consuela: an A-level student

Consuela is currently studying at college where she has just started Year 13. She is busy with university applications and increasingly difficult work in the subjects she is studying – biology, chemistry, psychology and maths. Consuela is planning on studying psychology at university, as this is her strongest subject. As part of her research into possible universities for her UCAS application, Consuela comes across a new online course (a MOOC) at one of the universities she is interested in applying to. Since she will be studying psychology within the next year, she decides to get a head start in her course and enrols on an Introduction to Psychology course, aimed at undergraduate students.

Through the course, Consuela starts to discover her natural aptitude for autonomous learning which she did not know she had the capacity for – due to being heavily led through her subjects at college. She finds that she is learning how to de-construct her own knowledge and identify areas which she is weakest in. Through the repeated use of online quizzes and discussion forums, Consuela is able to re-enforce her knowledge in these areas and overcome these weaknesses in knowledge. She is taking full control of her learning, instead of passively consuming information and finds that the material is an extension to the work she is doing in her A-level studies, and that her coursework

marks are increasing significantly. In addition to improvements in her understanding, she also learns to alter her online 'netiquette' – adapting her online presence from how she is used to acting through technology and social media in her day-to-day life.

However, although she is now excelling in psychology, she notices her other subjects – which she was naturally talented in – have taken a fall results-wise. Fortunately, Consuela now has the skills to embrace these deficiencies and enrols on a new MOOC, An Introduction to Biochemistry. This course covers elements from her biology and chemistry A-levels, and explains the subject in new ways that she can relate to, enabling her to identify what she has been struggling with. Her grades improve significantly and she gets better A-level results than she was predicted. Consuela applies to a more research-based university through clearing – she is accepted due to her demonstration of motivation, self-directed study and creativity.

"Consuela is able to directly transfer the skills learned through the MOOCs to her university education."

Consuela arrives at university fully prepared for her course, in which she is a consistently high-achiever. Her high achievement in part stems from her university's approach to education. She is taught in a 'blended-learning' environment where online resources and technology are used to enhance education. Consuela is able to directly transfer the skills learned through the MOOCs to her university education.

Viktor: an undergraduate student

Viktor is enrolled on an undergraduate engineering degree programme. Despite scoring fairly well on recent tests, he feels that he could achieve more but does not know how to gain a deeper understanding of his subject. Viktor attends all his seminars, tutorials and practical classes, however does not value lectures as much because of their lack of interaction and long length – especially when he considers that often he can learn the summarised key points in about 15 minutes from videos on similar topics readily available on the internet.

During a break between lectures where he is revising his notes, he happens to pick up a copy of his university's student magazine. In it, he sees an article which describes how one department has recently released a successful online course based on one of their modules. Viktor wonders whether other universities may offer something similar for his own subject.

He searches online and finds a number of free courses which sound like modules he is currently enrolled on. Unsure of which to choose, he enrols on several to investigate which suits his needs best. He finds that different course providers offer material in different styles and settles on a course given by

an instructor who explains the subject quickly with real-world examples. Satisfied, Viktor is able to use the MOOC to supplement the material in his lectures and as a source of extra reading.

As Viktor is new to online courses, he is nervous about exploring the discussion side of them. However, he finds that since he has done some wider reading, he is able to answer some peoples' questions on the discussion forums and also posts useful articles and journals which he believes will help his course-mates. Through contribution to group discussion, he solidifies his understanding of the subject and learns how to meaningfully express this to his peers online. As his understanding increases, he finds he is now able to pass it on in tutorials and seminars to his university course-mates.

"Viktor is better able to see how his subject relates to other fields."

Due to his greater understanding, Viktor is better able to see how his subject relates to other fields. Based on his successes with his first MOOC, he enrols on an Introduction to Computer Science course, which offers a validated certificate. Viktor later applies for a Master's programme in robotics, and provides the certificate from the computer science course as part of his application. Viktor is successful with his application, and towards the end of the course he is offered a graduate job at the university studying Robotics and Artificial Intelligence.

Damesh: an IT professional

Damesh is a middle-aged professional in an IT administration office. He is asked to take on more responsibility for the company and is thus required to gain some new understanding of specific topics. This understanding is recommended to come in the form of an accredited online MOOC – for which he is reimbursed and given access to. However, due to his already heavy workload he is unable to find spare time in his working day to study. Luckily, Damesh finds the course is flexible enough that he can fit in studying in between work and caring for his family. He studies in the evenings – enrolled on a Business Consultancy course which his superiors hope he will use to analyse the company's business strategy and implement a more streamlined IT solution.

Damesh – although initially frustrated by his increasing lack of free time – begins to enjoy the course due to the benefits it provides. The course he is enrolled on is structured and has assignments, deadlines and a final, proctored assessment. He is however, free to study how he wishes within the confines of these deadlines. He enjoys being able to stop and start studying whenever he wants, and likes the satisfaction of completing and doing well in assignments – which all count toward his final grade.

The knowledge Damesh is gaining helps him

to start making some small changes in his department – which are noticed and praised by his seniors. This decreases his workload and gives him more time to study for his final exam – for which there is an increasing amount of work as his foundation of knowledge grows day by day. Since Damesh must gain an accredited qualification he is signed up to take a proctored examination in real-life. Luckily, since he works in a large city he is able to find an assessment centre relatively close to his work. Damesh takes the exam, passes well and is therefore qualified to start implementing some new changes to the business – which he has been working on as practical examples alongside his course to aid his understanding. Seeing the effects of these changes motivates Damesh to study another course and work harder at improving his department's performance.

Damesh continues to receive increased responsibility and is given a pay rise. Due to the positive benefits he is seeing from MOOCs – of which he was initially sceptical and frustrated – he continues to study and eventually learns enough to write his own business strategy which is accepted for a start-up loan. Damesh is able to leave his job which he was finding de-motivating, and start work on his own company.

"Seeing the effects of these changes motivates Damesh to study another course and work harder at improving his department's performance."

Isla: an independent learner

Isla is an intelligent girl with a great drive for success. She loves learning and going to school, however the school she attends cannot teach her everything she needs to know as it lacks well-educated staff. Occasionally the school is visited by volunteers from charitable organisations who are impressed by Isla's curiosity and ability to grasp new subjects quickly. One volunteer – Nwana – is on her year abroad doing research, but regularly completes online courses and tells Isla that they helped her get into university. Isla does not have her own computer, yet she does know of an internet café in a nearby village, which she visits that very evening.

Isla knows vaguely how to use a computer, yet does not have an email account, let alone money to pay for any sort of accreditation. She sets up her email account, and uses the information provided by Nwana to search out things she wishes to learn about. Isla finds a lot of the good courses are in English and decides to enrol on a free English language course first to improve her language skills. She improves fast, and thoroughly enjoys the online webcam discussions – through which she is able to practice her English in actual speech. She practices her reading skills through taking additional courses, and her writing skills through discussion forums which teach her to convey her ideas clearly with the use of grammar.

Alongside her English, Isla learns about geography, ecology and zoology. As she is young, she has picked up English quickly and it is now approaching fluency. She is amazed at all she has learnt online and thinks back to Nwana. Isla decides to write a letter to a similar organisation – armed with her English skills and growing knowledge of the world – to try and secure a job or placement working in conservation. She uses her digital literacy skills to attach a video of herself, her life and her aspirations and links the organisation to her impressive online portfolio. The organisation – above all – values commitment to their cause and it is clear that Isla demonstrates this. Knowing of her situation, she is sponsored and flown to the UK where the operations are based. She is given a position as a conservation researcher and gets to travel round the world, occasionally approaching villages similar to her own and showing them the value of learning through technology. Isla even manages to secure a grant from the organisation to provide her own village with several computers – through which many children like herself are able to learn and develop their education.

Bill: a lifelong learner

Bill is an ex-professional research scientist, having retired in order to spend more time with his family. Having only recently developed his digital skills, Bill is keen to re-kindle his passion for learning, which he has re-discovered by reading articles on the internet. Bill reads the news online each day and from this, he has found several blogs which are of interest to him.

Bill uses an online search engine to find out if there is a more structured way to pursue his learning. He finds that universities have recently started to set up online versions of their existing courses and is surprised to find that his old university in America is one of the leading providers. Having had a few friends on English courses – which he always found interesting – he enrols on an introduction to poetry course to test it out. Bill enjoys the materials which are provided for him, however he feels that the strongest part of the course is the fact that other learners provide recommendations of other texts. He investigates some of these, and finds he is starting to develop a personal taste of the sort of poetry he enjoys.

Eventually Bill starts to participate in the analysis of some popular poetry himself and even makes some recommendations himself to other learners. This prompts him to try a 'hangout' – where he discusses the course texts

via webcam sessions with other like-minded people. Soon, Bill becomes confident in his knowledge of poetry. Having kept a journal for most of his adult life, he decides to try and write some poetry of the more interesting moments. He releases these via the discussion forum and is happy that they are well received. One user in particular very much likes the style of Bill's writing, and so he views their online profile to see their other interests. To Bill's surprise, the student is currently enrolled at university studying colour chemistry – the academic field Bill used to do research in. Through this discovery, Bill is able to explain what the life of a researcher is like and give the young student some advice with regard to deciding on his potential future career. In return, the young student is able to explain the new advances in colour chemistry which he has learned through his course and recommends some relevant MOOCs in the area. Bill has gained a newfound passion for poetry, which he practices as a hobby and is also able to comfortably keep up to date with his old career path.

Glossary

Online course provider
Any platform which provides online courses to learners. The major ones include Alison, EdX, Udacity, Coursera and FutureLearn.

College credit
Gained through completion of an online course which offers this option. Can be used at participating universities to count toward your actual degree. Available on a very limited number of courses.

Course materials
These are materials provided by the course provider which will give you the information you need to study effectively and complete assignments. They may be links to documents, e-books or journal articles.

cMOOC
These MOOCs are focused on learner-generated content and are less linear in structure than a typical online course. Numbers of learners are also usually smaller.

Digital literacy
This is a measure of how experienced you are with different aspects of digital technology such as: creating an online profile, accessing documents, setting up email accounts, making online payments etc.

Discussion forum
An area of an online course where members are able to discuss topics they are having trouble

with, or give help to other learners. These forums can also be used to arrange online or real-life study groups and enhance the social aspect of the course.

MOOC
A 'Massively Open Online Course'. These courses take place online, often with thousands of students and are open to anyone. MOOCs are usually free, though it is possible to pay for certification of course completion.

Online portfolio
This is an account you can set up in order to provide a representation of your skills, CV, academic history and any online courses you may have taken.

PDF document
A type of file which represents documents in the same format regardless of the software or hardware you are viewing it on. PDF documents are commonly used to share online files found in MOOCs' course resources.

Peer-assessment
This type of assessment is done by course learners themselves. If you are involved in peer-assessment, you will assess another learner's work according to a mark scheme, and have your own work assessed by another learner in return.

Social media
Includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google Plus. These websites can be used to connect with other individuals on the course and establish your own online presence as a learner.

Statement of accomplishment
A non-validated certificate which you will receive upon completion of an online course. This can be downloaded and printed at your own leisure.

Study group
A group of individuals all participating in the same course who have chosen to study together. These can be either online or offline – in which case the meeting of the group is usually determined online in discussion forums.

Transcript
This is a representation of all your module grades for a particular course. Transcripts are available for online courses, but also exist for traditional courses and can be displayed online in an online portfolio.

UCAS application
This is the UK's university application system. It typically involves detailing your financial requirements for a student loan, writing a personal statement and providing a transcript of your current grades and predicted final grades.

Validated certificate
Certificate which gives further credibility to your completion of an online course through identity verification. Final assessments are also done through webcam and monitored by a proctor. Only available in certain online courses.

xMOOC
These MOOCs are linear in structure and focus on educator-generated content. They are most similar to a typical University module.

About the authors

Neil Morris

Neil Morris is Chair of Educational Technology, Innovation and Change in the School of Education and the Director of Digital Learning at the University of Leeds, UK, reporting directly to the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Student Education. He is a National Teaching Fellow, and has won a number of national awards for teaching excellence. Neil has a research background in neuroscience and current research interests in educational technology, online learning and blended learning. He has conducted a number of published research studies on the impact of mobile technologies on student learning and engagement and he is the co-author of *Study Skills Connected*, a successful textbook on using technology effectively to enhance learning (Palgrave Macmillan). Neil has led a number of strategic technology projects at Leeds, including MOOCs for FutureLearn, lecture capture, Open Educational Resources, Virtual Learning Environment and student response handsets.

In his current role, Neil has strategic and operational responsibility for the Digital Learning Team, which is responsible for the university's iTunes U site and delivering MOOCs for the FutureLearn platform. Neil has authored a number of strategies and policies for the university, including the Digital Strategy for Taught Student Education, the Blended Learning Strategy, the MOOC vision and strategy and the Open Educational Resources policy. Neil has given a number of keynote talks at UK and international events, and is a regular speaker at conferences.

James Lambe

James Lambe works as a Research Officer in the Digital Learning Team at the University of Leeds, UK, having recently graduated with a BSc Neuroscience degree from Leeds. He is currently involved in a number of projects researching the impact of technology enhanced learning on students in Higher Education. One of James' interests is online learning – particularly MOOCs – which are an important new area in the expansion of education. James has enrolled on a number of online courses as part of the research for this guide. In addition to these projects, James creates e-books and other online learning resources for the Digital Learning Team, as well as talking to students in schools about the uses and benefits of technology in their curriculum. James' future aspiration is to work in the business sector supporting technological advancements in Higher Education.

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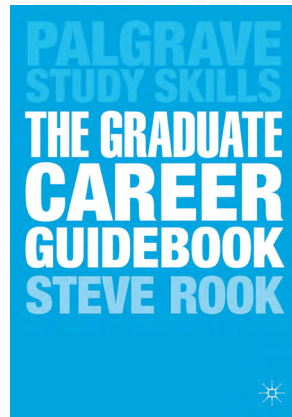# Wherever and however you study, these Palgrave Study Skills titles will help you get the most out of your subject.
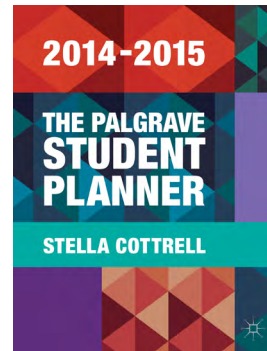
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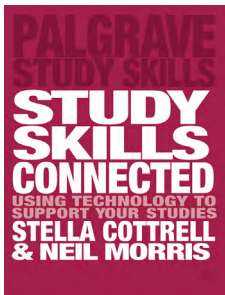
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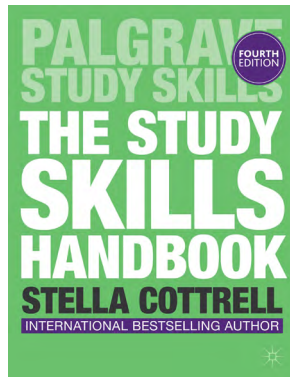
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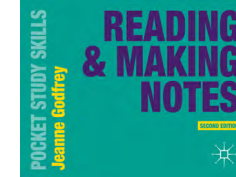 9780230391758

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