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Overview

OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn to:

- Build on what you already know
- Recognise what your examiners require of you
- Use course work skills to profit in exams
- Complement your academic ability with personal qualities
- Plan your work around your assessments
- Prepare yourself to address exam-related problems

1.1 Something old, something new

If you have not yet commenced your course at university or college, you will no doubt already have faced a number of tests and exams, and their nature will not be totally new to you. Some of the features of exams that will be familiar, either from or before your third-level education, are:

- **A formal setting with strict rules**
- **A set time and place**
- **Invigilators to ensure rules are observed**
- **Rigidly observed times to start and finish**
- **An exam paper that you will see just before the test begins**
- **Quietness – except for pen on paper!**

These features will generally remain the same in third-level education, so that you are not going to have to navigate entirely new terrain. Indeed, some of the major differences may lie in your own perceptions rather than in objective criteria. However, some characteristics that might be different from your previous experience are:

- **An overall increase in the number of tests**
- **A shorter duration between the tests**
- **Shorter time frames in which to prepare for tests**
- **The length of the tests themselves**
- **A different emphases on what is required (more critical, less descriptive)**
- **Larger numbers of students in the test room**

These features may vary from one university to the next, and your overall impression may be different from your previous test experience. Nevertheless, it will help you if you can see the parallels and identify the common threads.

It is easier to step into the unknown if you can find some familiar ground to stand on.

In all of life you have to face things that are unfamiliar. However, on closer inspection you are likely to find common features between the old and the new. An example would be the use of the public transport system in another city or town. Some other examples are:

- **Going to a new restaurant**
- **Shopping at a new supermarket**
- **Operating a new system at your bank**
- **Driving a car with controls in different places**
- **Using a different currency in another country (e.g. on holiday)**

What you do in each of these cases is that you use the familiar to develop the unfamiliar.

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Exercise – See if you can write your own checklist that identifies some of the exam-related skills that you have used before and will need to use again.



- ✓ Making a quick decision about the questions to tackle
- ✓
- ✓
- ✓
- ✓

Some of the skills you may have thought of would probably include: working out the time to spend on each question and on each section of a question; writing out the outline points and arranging these into the preferred order; making note of any important names associated with the topic; strategies to handle anxious reactions.

1.2 Using the decision-making process

There are many aspects of academic life in which you will be forced to be decisive. Although no one is standing directly over you to threaten or accuse, it is always as if a gentle authority is spurring you on to be decisive. Part of your academic training is about learning to make decisions and to be decisive. You may not particularly like making decisions until you are on the brink of the expiry date for your time limit! By all means get all the information you can to help you make your choice, but remember the joke about ‘I used to be indecisive, but now I am not so sure!’

An aim of this book is to assist you in making informed choices, and to make decisions that will minimise your anxiety, maximise your motivation, confidence and planning, and facilitate the development of your skills and potential.

Decisions that you have already made may include:

- **To enter college or university**
- **Study full-time or part-time**

- **Choice of study programme**
- **Study away from or near home**
- **Movement towards a chosen career**
- **To find employment outside your studies (either full-time or part-time)**

Decisions that may have yet to be made:

- **Ratio of academic work to social life**
- **Choice of modules to study**
- **Choice of topics for revision**
- **Choice of study strategies**
- **Choice of note-taking methods**
- **Study at home or college (or mixed)**
- **Time allocation for each subject**
- **Time allocation to each learning activity**

1.3 Two different animals – course work and exams?

Checklist – the similarities between course work and exams

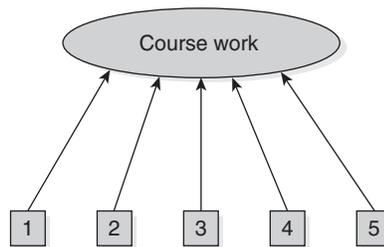
- ✓ Both require structure and planning
- ✓ Both must address the set question
- ✓ Supportive evidence must be presented in both

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Checklist – the differences between course work and exams

- ✓ In course work there is plenty of time to correct mistakes
- ✓ In exams you must stick to a very strict time limit
- ✓ In course work you can experiment before deciding on the final structure

Now you can think of the skills required to produce a competent piece of course work (the direction of the arrows indicate that the five factors contribute to the quality of the finished product).



The five points above could be identified (from left to right as):

1. Ability to focus on and address the question
2. Use of relevant background research
3. Working for balance and structure in arguments
4. Maintaining a clear and succinct style throughout
5. Providing a useful introduction and conclusion

Exercise – Now go back and put a tick on the dotted lines of the five points above if you are convinced that these points can also be applied to exams.



You may have concluded that all of the five points are useful for exams, and you would be right. The one additional skill that is unique to exams is time management under pressure — there is less time to complete your task and no luxury of experimenting with

ideas that can later be deleted or moved to another place on your script. So take your course work skills into the exam room and apply them effectively by good use of time.

1.4 The issue of IQ

Much debate has gone into the definition and usefulness of intelligence over many decades (Cooper, 1999). It has traditionally been seen to include factors such as verbal reasoning, mathematical and logical ability, and spatial/mechanical competence. Another important element is deemed to be the speed in which problems can be solved. Early theorists suggested that intelligence incorporates the capacity to adapt to one's environment and to survive within it (Sternberg, 1996). This accounts for the value placed on abilities within a given culture (such as spearing a fish or navigating a canoe around an island by the stars). It is argued that rigid, traditional concepts stifle the potential and gifts of young children who are 'short changed' by the educational system. It is said that exams are more of a test of ability than other forms of assessment because of the time/speed factor required. However, some individuals may produce high-quality work if the pressure of time is removed from them.

Howard Gardner (1983) came up with the model of multiple intelligences that include both traditional features such as verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, logical/mathematical skills, and additional features such as bodily/kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal (self-knowledge skills). You may wish to rate yourself on each of these seven intelligences (Gardner has more recently added a few other factors to these basic seven). The exercise in the Appendix will help you to do this and you may wish to tackle this or now when you have finished this chapter.

The emphasis throughout this book is on both the refinement of your abilities and on the development and deployment of your personal qualities.

1.5 Exams: a tug-of-war for their future

Some educationalists argue for the eventual removal of exams from the educational system. Some of these arguments are:

- **Exams encourage surface learning (cramming)**
- **What is learned is too quickly forgotten**

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- **Good students might underachieve because of recurrent problems with test anxiety**
- **Students may work hard only around exam times**
- **Sustained symptoms from anxiety are not beneficial to anyone**

On the other hand, arguments for course work are:

- **Course work encourages deeper learning**
- **It promotes learning that lasts in the memory**
- **It gives students time to organise structure and presentation**
- **Students have the opportunity to experiment with various formats**
- **Students receive feedback that can be diagnostic and formative**

However, many educationalists argue that the total removal of exams is impractical and counterproductive. Some of the advantages associated with exams are:

- **Plagiarism is reduced or eliminated**
- **Students get experience of testing situations for their future career**
- **Exams provide an opportunity to respond quickly to set problems**
- **Exams are an opportunity to demonstrate a range of unique skills**

There has been a move in many third-level institutions to reduce the number of exams in the study programmes and to develop a full range of assessment methods (documented later in the chapter). At the present it looks like exams are here to stay within third-level education, although they will be used alongside an increasing variety of complementary assessment methods. From the standpoint of staff, it is difficult to provide quality feedback for students at a personal level where there are large student numbers and staff/student ratios are high. The retention of exams helps to reduce this

problem, especially in environments where numbers in third-level education has dramatically increased over several decades. For you as a student, it is important that you are clear about the assessment criteria of your study programme, and if these are likely to be changed during the course of your academic career.

1.6 Handy hints on planning your assessment schedules

A simple and practical piece of advice to keep your assessment tasks always in view is to use a wall chart. You can then add information about course work deadlines, exam times and venues etc., and you can arrange this in order so that you can quickly see which assessment comes next, which ones are close together in time, and then you can make your plans without last-minute panic.

In addition, it will be useful for you to:

- **Make sure you receive and regularly consult a handbook where assessment methods are mapped out for the duration of the academic year**
- **Watch for any changes that are made at any stage of your programme and make careful note of these (i.e. not on scrap paper!)**
- **Check and update your revision plans as they may necessitate more detailed planning of revision stages**
- **Ensure that you plan to keep all your work up to date, especially where there are competing pressures from modules running in parallel**
- **Beware of using redundant old course handbooks after changes have been made**
- **Watch out for assessments that are scheduled for submission around the same time, and plan well for these**
- **Check if exams are balanced between semesters or are all at the end of one semester**

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- Check if modules last for one semester or are year-long
- Ascertain dates, times and venues for exams as soon as this is known
- Attach copies of your assessment programme to your study folders so that you can maintain a clear and accurate picture regularly
- Maintain awareness of course work deadlines and plan work accordingly

Illustration – A mind map for the city



If you move to live in a new city it will be important for you to get your bearings as soon as possible. Perhaps the initial strategy would be to obtain a one-page map of the city centre so that you can carry it around with you and quickly locate where you are at a glance. Alternatively, you can simply ask directions, although you cannot always be certain that these will be accurate, and this approach is only a short-term solution. Failure to acquire a mental map of the city will lead to time wasting, frustration, anxiety and walking in circles! When you acquire some familiarity with a few streets and landmarks, these small beginnings will make all the difference to your exercises in orienteering!

In the same way you should build up a picture in your mind of the number, nature and timing of your academic assessments so that you can carefully plan and pace your learning activities, revision strategy and your management of time and tasks.

A wise old gentleman used to say that a cheap article, such as a pair of cheap shoes, could be an expensive purchase in the long run. The idea was that if the item was of poor quality you would need to replace it a number of times over the same duration that a quality article would remain intact. Remember then to stop and pay the full price for learning about the facts of your assessments. If you only remember about these when you are about to be overtaken by them, the 'cheap option' will prove to be too expensive.

1.7 Outlining the advantages

It is always better to light a candle as curse the darkness.

If exams are a frequent element in your programme, then resolve to benefit from them as much as possible. In order to avoid the shallow learning that educationalists warn of, you can prepare for your exams by beginning to learn the material well in advance.

As a result of this planned approach to learning, you will deposit your learning in more permanent storage and may be able to carry it on for further use at later stages of your study programme.

Exam advantages — what exams will give you:

- **Revision strategies and exam techniques that you will be able to use again and again**
- **The ability to work economically under strict time limits**
- **The capacity to respond efficiently to an immediate challenge that is set before you**
- **A sharpened focus on a new task that is set before you**
- **The ability to filter your learning through set questions**
- **The competence to draft short, quick outline plans**
- **Control over your thoughts and emotions**
- **Confidence so that you can face fresh and demanding challenges**
- **Efficiency in combining time and task management**

In short, exams will help you to develop and refine the kinds of quality that are required in many vocations and that many employers value. It may be that in your chosen occupation you will need to work under time pressure and think clearly ‘on your feet’. You may at times be required to justify at short notice the stewardship of your responsibilities to your bosses. This may entail crystallising your major character strengths and abilities and presenting them in short, sharp, summary points. If you cultivate the strategies advocated throughout this book, you will acquire the capacity to maximise your efficiency in exams and develop your potential in the world of work.

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It will help your approach to exams if you see them as not merely occasions to 'regurgitate' what you have learned, but as opportunities to develop life-long skills that you will use repeatedly.

Checklist – In order to maintain a positive frame of mind about exams, it may be helpful to document some of the benefits (short-term and/or long-term) that exams will bring to you.

- ✓ An ability to respond quickly to a set task or problem
- ✓ An ability to work under pressure
- ✓ A capacity to focus intensely on a specific task
- ✓ An awareness of how to turn anxiety to your advantage
- ✓ The confidence to apply your skills to similar future tasks

1.8 Profiling some general exam-related problems

It may at first glance seem strange to profile the problems of exams immediately after a section that was designed to help you form a positive frame of mind. However, the way to achieve a positive and productive approach to exams is not by denying reality, but by facing up to the problems and by 'taking the bull by the horns'. As a result of a head-on approach, you can either bring exam-related problems under control or put them into proper perspective. These general points will give you an initial feel for problems that are addressed more thoroughly in subsequent chapters.

PROBLEM 1 – TEST ANXIETY

Test anxiety has been found to impair students' test or exam performance (see later discussion). On the positive side, though, test anxiety is not intractable and can be reduced, and when this happens performance improves (Hembree, 1988). Chapter 5 will alert you to strategies for controlling test anxiety and channelling the nervous energy into productive activity. For the present, you can prepare yourself by suggesting a few factors that you have already used to control exam anxiety.

1.
2.
3.

PROBLEM 2 – AFTER THE HORSE HAS BOLTED

When an exam is over, you do not get a chance to go back and correct the mistakes you have made. Neither can you solicit anyone to read over your script to correct the ‘howlers’ before you submit your exam paper. If you later become aware of a mistake you made in an exam, this can become a trigger for intense worry. Often the problems are not as big as they seem.

Illustration – Coins obscuring a mountain



Two small coins held immediately in front of your eyes are big enough at that point to block out the view of a large mountain that stands immediately in front of you. Students sometimes get so obsessed with the small mistakes they have made and fail to focus on the mountain of quality work that they have managed to produce.

PROBLEM 3 – FEEDBACK FROM EXAMS

The problem with feedback from exams is that there often is none! Or, if feedback is given, it may be to the whole group and is therefore general rather than specific. Students sometimes complain that they do not know where they are going wrong in exams, and do not always have the benefit of individual feedback. Some tutors may provide summaries of the exam performance of previous cohorts of students, and these will identify recurrent problems to be avoided. These are the kinds of problem that are identified in this book, and the purpose of the subsequent chapters will be to:

- **Identify the most common exam shortcomings**
- **Provide diagnostic tests for you to trace your own weaknesses**

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- **Highlight useful exam strategies to help you take pre-emptive action**
- **Set exercises that will help you stretch to work harder and smarter**

PROBLEM 4 – FEELING OF ISOLATION

In an exam you may feel alone and isolated and you may look around and feel that almost everyone else is cool, calm and collected. Do not be deceived by this as there is always a substantial percentage of students that suffer from exam nerves.

Illustration – Like ducks to water?



The host complemented a woman contestant on a television quiz show for her apparent calmness in tackling questions, as large sums of money were at stake. She replied that he should not be fooled by this calm appearance, as she felt like a duck – calm in appearance above the surface of the water, but a lot of vigorous paddling under the water! So if you imagine that all the other students have taken to their exam tasks ‘like ducks to the water’, then remember this woman’s words!

In order to help your confidence in an exam, you should remember that:

- **Others will feel exactly like you**
- **Your fellow students are doing the same test, at the same time, under the same conditions**
- **Others will be thinking similar task-related thoughts as you, for example, reflect on times of group learning when agreed conclusions were reached**
- **Tests are of very short duration and will quickly be over**
- **When in the exam room focus primarily on the test itself and do not let your thoughts stray**

The problems highlighted above are general and are primarily psychological in nature. The remainder of the book will focus on practice, habits, strategies and techniques for learning, thinking and exam performance. However, such issues as motivation, confidence and anxiety control are also addressed.

1.9 Role of tests in the educational system

Some educationalists have asserted that assessment should be designed to include both process and product. In other words, it is not just what you produce as an end result that matters (such as in an exam), but what you have gone through in the learning activities and processes that lead up to that point.

At this stage of the chapter you should now be clear that exams are more than a test of knowledge and memory. Quality control bodies encourage third-level academic institutions to produce a variety of assessment methods and to develop innovative approaches to assessing students. Exams themselves can take on various appearances, including:

- **Seen and unseen questions**
- **Multiple choice**
- **Computer-based tests**
- **A series of short answer questions**
- **An oral component (e.g. a viva)**

An exam may not always be presented to you in the more traditional form, but variety does not guarantee that your anxiety will be lessened.

In addition to the various types of exam referred to above, other forms of assessment may include:

- **Course work essays**
- **Lab reports**
- **Experiments**

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- **Surveys**
- **Presentations**
- **Field projects**
- **Work-based learning**
- **Portfolios**

Part of the rationale behind this is that students who have weaknesses in particular forms of assessment (such as exams) will not be severely disadvantaged in their potential to achieve. Although this ethos should help to take some of the pressure from exams, they are still a very important component of overall assessment. However, if you do well in your other forms of assessment this may help your exam confidence and will also equip you with skills that are useful in exams.

1.10 Play to your strengths

Illustration – The coach with the game plan



In the game of cricket it is normal practice to put in the best and strongest batsmen early in the batting order. The middle-order batsmen come next and then the weakest at the tail end follow these. In order to determine the rank order in batting, it is probable that previous batting average is taken into account. The weakest batsmen are in the team because they have other qualities, such as good skills at fielding, running, catching, fast bowling, spin bowling and wicket keeping. Some players may be good at playing for time to obtain a draw when a win is impossible. A good coach will know all the strengths and weaknesses of his or her team (in whatever the team sport) and will devise the game plan accordingly.

In terms of your academic performance, you can think of all your skills, knowledge and abilities as being the 'team' you have to play with. You are empowered as the team coach to devise the 'game plan', and to make use of your 'players' as and when you will. You will have to make selections, order priorities, etc.

Exercise – List any skills, abilities or resources needed as the 'team coach' in your ambition to achieve a good standard in your studies. It is okay if you can only think of a few but those working in groups may be able to fill in all the spaces.



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1.11 Address your weaknesses

Illustration – Further sports analogies



The encouragement to play to your strengths is not an exhortation to camouflage your weaknesses! If you play in a sports team, the opposition will quickly learn your weaknesses and will endeavour to exploit and capitalise on them. For example, if you were an attacking soccer or rugby player and could only kick with your right foot, the opposition would try to force you into a position where you could only kick with your left foot. The best long-term solution to this would be plenty of practice on your weak foot on the training ground until you feel it is strong

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enough to use in a competitive match. A tennis player who has aspirations to win a grand slam (Wimbledon, US Open, French and Australian Opens) will not achieve this if he or she only has a very good forehand. Tennis players will only dramatically improve their world-ranking position when they have learned to use their backhand also (as well as other qualities such as good first serve, second serve, return serve, ability to volley, etc.).

If you can clearly identify your weaknesses from the exercises in the chapters that follow, then these are the issues that you should seek to improve, while not allowing the strengths you have already developed to lapse. An important aim of the book is to help you identify your personal strengths and weaknesses by exercises based on objective criteria, and to use this information for your personal development.

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 summary points

- Use familiar ground and previous strengths to build on
- Previous exam experience can serve you well again
- Use course work skills to benefit exam performance
- Exam experience will equip you with transferable and lasting skills
- Identify and address exam-related problems one by one