

Mind the gap - surviving your first few weeks at college!

The transition from being successful at GCSE to coping with the challenging demands of A Level and Level 3 vocational courses is a challenge that all sixth formers face at this time of the year.

Unfortunately, across the country only around 50% of Year 11 students gain the necessary grades at GCSE to be able to study at advanced level, so this already suggests **it is a more challenging level of study**. The academic profile of your peers, or to put it another way your 'competitors', is therefore higher. Correspondingly, the level of knowledge, understanding and level of application required to not only 'pass', but also to gain high grades, increases significantly.

The fact that you study a fewer number of subjects at Sixth Form gives another clue as to the increased demands on your learning. Most Sixth Form teachers talk about a 50:50 approach; they teach and lead your learning in lessons for 4 hours and 40 minutes each week and **it is expected that you will match this with up to five hours of independent study for each subject each week**.

Remember this is an expected commitment that is shared with students across the whole country not just at this particular college! The questions that you will be faced with in your A Level and Level 3 BTEC exams require a deep understanding of your subject that can only be developed through serious amounts of independent study and reflection. Developing your own set of examples to which you can apply the key theories and concepts, alongside time spent putting teachers' notes and text book notes into a language and context that make sense to you, would be top of my list of the kind of work you need to do in your own time.

It would be useful at this point to share with you some research I came across and something I have shared with many of my own classes. A study by Cambridge University into the learning styles and memory of students aged 16-19, found that most had forgotten 80% of the information/content taught in a lesson after only 1 week! However, the same study found that **if students revisited the lesson content within the first 48 hours (this could simply be reading back through your revision notes and hand-outs) then over 70% of the information was retained**; so this is a really useful tip and again something to build into your own independent study time each week.

As you can see, **being well organised is one of the key skills needed** for a successful start to your Sixth Form journey and using some form of diary/calendar, either paper or electronic, is a really useful start. You will be bombarded with information and deadlines over the first few months and you must **get into the habit of logging these in your diary/calendar and reviewing them each day** – what needs doing next? what can wait? what tasks need to be prioritised?

One of the big differences in Sixth Form lessons compared with lessons in Year 11, is probably the amount of notes you will be expected to make. This will come not only from the teacher introducing and explaining topics, but also from class and groups discussions, reading comprehensions and also from practical lessons and the results of experiments. Spend some time really thinking about how best to manage the volume of notes you will take. Do you need to spend time each week re-writing some of them outside of the lesson? Should your notes just be a summary or should they be more detailed? Most of us write fairly illegible notes when we have to write at speed! There is no 'one size fits all' solution to managing notes; everyone is different and you may need to try a few different methods before you find the best one for you. **What you will need is a set of comprehensive notes from which you can revise and use to complete your final assignments**. The breadth and scope of Advanced Level qualifications means that you cannot just rely on revision guides or hand-outs. You

will need to revise from the comprehensive notes you have developed throughout the whole length of your course. Personally, I found that best way of managing subject notes was to **spend some time each week just putting the key points, quotes and facts into a notebook for each subject.**

On your timetable you will see there are some 'blanks'. Students call these 'free periods' whereas staff refer to them as 'study periods' – note the subtle difference in interpretation! Again, this is an example of the change in approach to learning that you will need to take. At school you will have been directed and led in most, if not all of your timetabled slots each week. At Sixth Form, YOU are in charge! At the start of the new term, it is important for you to make new friends and broaden your horizons; study periods are a great opportunity to meet with friends in the Forum and Café, but try and limit this 'social' study to the natural breaks in the day e.g. lunchtime and break. **Use your study periods to tackle that independent study target.** You will also get the full value from the college facilities by using the Library or Study Areas. Perhaps this is about having the mind-set that when you come to college you are coming to work. **If you use your 'frees' in this positive way, you should be able to complete most of your work at college.** You could also stay late a couple of times a week or come into college a little earlier one day to pick up some more study time in college.

My final tip is simply read, read, read! After 26 years of teaching and examining at Advanced Level, I would say **reading is the one key factor that distinguishes between those students that get the high grades and those that just scrape the pass.** Reading relevant material (such as in a magazine, blog or even a twitter post) is the best way to gain that wider understanding of a subject and enable you to apply the key subject theories and topics to a range of examples and possible exam question scenarios. Again it is impossible to coach students as to what all the question examples and scenarios could be. You need to be confident in interpreting the questions and then use the knowledge you have learnt and developed and apply this in your answers. I quite like the following two quotes which, although American, are very relevant to all students:

***"Today a reader, tomorrow a leader."* W. Fusselman**

***"Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers."* President Harry S. Truman**

Try and schedule in some time to read. Reading is an easy thing to put off because there is often no exact due date. **By scheduling a time each week to do your reading for each of your subjects, you are more likely to complete the reading as if it were an assignment.** Make notes as you read, try and engage with the reading through your notes – ask questions, answer questions, make connections, and think about how these ideas integrate with other information sources.

I really hope you enjoy the start of your journey at Sixth Form. Remember, millions have been on this same first step - nervous, apprehensive but prepared to give it their best shot! Remember also that there is a whole support team at college ready to help, motivate and guide you as soon as you wobble!

The next Principal's blog will discuss University applications.