# PART 2

## UNIVERSITY LIFE

# 2

# SETTLING INTO LIFE AT UNIVERSITY

### Gill Brown

## CHAPTER STRUCTURE

**AIMS OF THE CHAPTER**

This chapter aims to:

- Demystify the university environment by exploring more about how universities work and what they can offer to students.
- Alleviate concerns which students may have about their transition to university and provide advice as to how best to prepare for academic life, both prior to starting their course and throughout the duration of their studies.
- Set expectations for students to enhance their approach to and responsibility for studying and to grasp opportunities that university life affords them.
- Encourage reflection on the skills students currently possess and those which can be developed throughout their student life to enhance successful transition into further study or their chosen career.

## INTRODUCTION

Commencing a university degree and forging a new identity as a student may seem like a daunting prospect. Gathering as much information as possible about the university of study and understanding more about how universities operate will help students settle in and make a smooth transition into their new lives in the Higher Education environment.

## HOW DOES A UNIVERSITY WORK?

As you commence your university journey, the university itself may feel like a vast place both physically and in terms of opportunities that become available to you. When trying to get to grips with your new surroundings, please do familiarise yourself with the overall layout of your campus and which areas you may be studying in and through doing this it will likely feel less daunting. Many universities will have interactive maps which you can access through their website or a designated mobile application and you will soon hopefully begin to feel at home there. This chapter will provide an overview of the types of support that will be available through your university and always remember that there are many people to help you from a diverse range of areas, all of whom will have expertise in their specialised fields.

The structure of a university will likely be a new concept and you are advised to review key information on your university website, starting with the designated area for students, such as the example screenshot in Figure 2.1 from the University of Bolton website. This will give you the latest news that is relevant to you, reminders of support services available and quick links to the timetables and online classroom areas that you will be using on your course.

The amount of information on these websites may feel overwhelming, but think of it not as essential reading, more a repository to dip in and out of when you need to access key material. Information will be available around the structure of the university, the strategic plan, vision and priorities of that university, and while there may be similarities between institutions, each will likely have its own focus
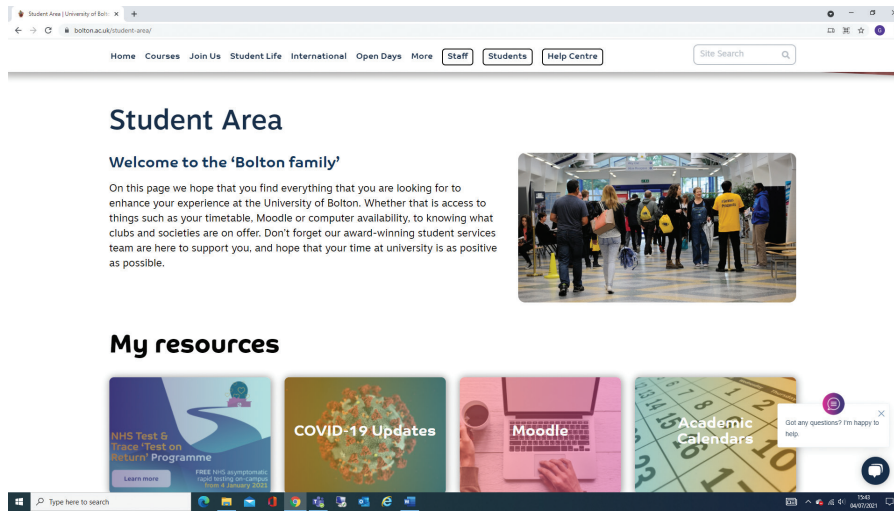
**Figure 2.1** The University of Bolton student area
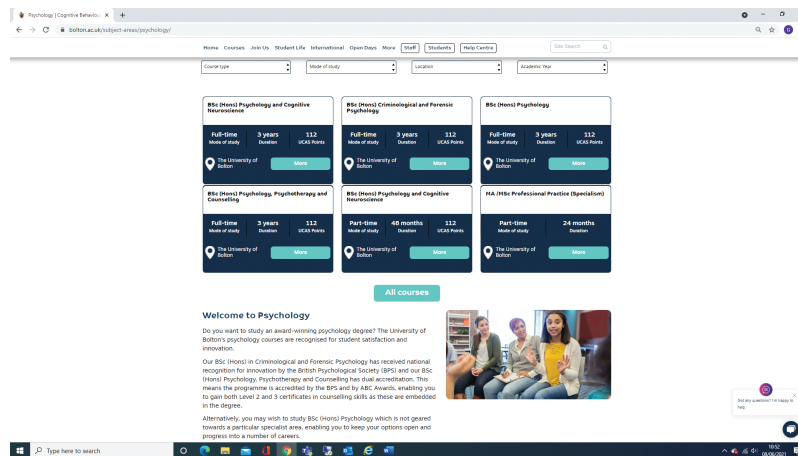
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**Figure 2.2** The University of Bolton Psychology page

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and agenda. It would also be useful for you to know who the key people are at the institution and then drill down to understand the structure in your own faculty and department, after all many of these people will be supporting you directly. When you look into your department's web page, you will be able to see information about the range of courses delivered and their accreditations, as well as learning more about the facilities and specialist equipment. The screenshots in Figure 2.2 show

examples of interactive tools where you can watch videos, chat directly with academic and support staff, and you can get to meet your team online before you meet in person.

The overall university governance information is available to you, but do not feel that you need to read or understand it all. Part of joining a university and developing your sense of belonging will help you understand the organisation and the context in which you are studying, and this can come with time as you settle in and progress your studies. There will be a range of policies available to all staff and students and these will range from academic policies to support policies. Academic regulations and procedures will provide you with information around a range of key academic processes, for example, exam procedures. There will be policies available to you on academic appeals, academic misconduct, student attendance and engagement and also clear guidance of the processes to follow should you not be able to complete assessment due to mitigating circumstances. Policies are also available to support students, for example, your university will have a mental health policy, maternity policy and processes to follow if you require specific financial support. These policies will be available to you through the website and will be signposted through your module and course handbooks. Therefore, it is important that students are aware how to access these and then they can retrieve as and when needed and ensure they are taking responsibility for their own progression and support needs.

## EXERCISE 2.1

**Using Your University Website**

Go the website for the university at which you are enrolled/thinking about applying to and see if you can find the following information:

- Details of academic staff who may be teaching you on your psychology course
- Details of support services which are available to you should you wish to access them
- A campus map so you can look at key areas that you may want to visit

Every university will have a set of policies, which detail regulations and procedures relating to a wide range of areas across the university, which may be centred on academic processes or ensuring there is sufficient support in place for students, such as counselling support for mental health problems, maternity policy, or financial support. On the university website, now try and locate:

- The area where policies are available to you so that you can see the range of policies that you can access as and when needed.

## What can your university offer you?

Studying at university allows you the privilege of accessing numerous services which you may not have previously considered. A summary of likely services is explored below, yet remember each

university is unique and roles and services available may have different names or be structured differently, so take the time to find out about what you can access and more importantly how you can do this. Key information will be given before you even start your course and then as you go through the induction process this should all become clearer.

## Academic support

As you enrol onto your degree course, there are some very important people that you will be introduced to from your academic team and these people will be key to supporting you in achieving your academic goals. Firstly, each course of study will have its designated *course leader/ director*. This is a senior academic who takes responsibility for your course of study and for your academic progression on your university journey, ensuring that course quality standards are maintained. Your course will also be broken down into modules, which take different psychological perspectives and link to those core areas previously introduced in Chapter 1. Each module will be assigned a *module leader* and this academic will take responsibility for individual modules so should be your first port of call if you have questions about delivery, content or module assessment. They will be delivering some of the taught content on your module and it is likely they will be supported by a small team of colleagues who will also teach across different weeks or be involved in workshops or seminars.

Studying at university can be a difficult time for many, not only in terms of the academic progression and expectations but also in the personal development and challenges that life can bring. You will have a named *personal tutor* and this academic will be there to support you when you need that little extra help. There are two things to consider here, the first being that your personal tutor may not be the most appropriate person to personally provide that help, but they are going to be well placed to getting you to the right place. They will signpost you to the services which seem best suited and have a good understanding of the range of university provisions and how they may be able to provide support tailored to your needs. Secondly, whilst your personal tutor will be an expert in psychology and may have even practised as a psychologist, this is not their role in the university. Therefore, they need to keep clear boundaries and if you have concerns about your emotional wellbeing, then they will once again signpost you to the best service. They want you to thrive in your academic journey and will endeavour to do all they can to help you achieve your goals.

It is possible that your academic developmental needs are more general, and you would like to develop skills and techniques which are not specific to studying psychology but can help any student flourish. Your university will also have services available which support these needs, and these may take numerous forms. For example, English may or may not be your first language and if you would like some assistance in developing an appropriate academic writing style, then there will be specific support for this tailored to your needs. Universities tend to deliver more generic study skills support sessions at a university level to help students get to grips with the basics and these can range from planning assignments, delivering presentations or perhaps mastering academic referencing.

**FOCUS BOX 2.1**

### How Student Life May Change During a Pandemic

The global pandemic of 2020–21 has necessitated change across the world in every element of our lives, so it is unsurprising that it has had a significant impact on the delivery of Higher Education provision. The challenges of lockdown restrictions, remote working and ensuring the safety of staff and students at universities have led to new ways of working and studying, and providing student support in alternative ways. There is much learning to be taken from the positive shifts in Higher Education, and whilst there have been obvious challenges such as being unable to provide students with the face-to-face lecture theatre experience and a range of physical social activities that they may have been expecting, there have been many positive new approaches to teaching and learning. Some of the alternative delivery and support mechanisms have been successful and are here to stay in the long term, giving student life the best of both worlds. This is known as a blended approach to teaching and learning, and rather than having all classes on campus, or all online, the blended approach takes the best that both have to offer (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of blended learning). This means that some of the larger lectures may be best delivered online and can be creative in delivery, such as being delivered in bitesize chunks of content or through a range of alternative methods. The on-campus class time can therefore be best used to consolidate that learning and develop more smaller seminar groups, with activities, discussions and critical debate.

It is important to review some of the benefits of learning during the pandemic and how new approaches and skills developed can have benefits for the future as students approach the job market. These include:

- A rise in the use of technology for lecture delivery has allowed greater flexibility for students who have been studying from home.
- Technology has provided innovative forms of student engagement via the use of breakout rooms in classes, discussions in the chat box, sharing of documents in live time, and an ability to contribute to key documents through a shared online version.
- During the pandemic, many students were key workers, and the use of technology promoted asynchronous learning (at a different time to the live lecture).
- Online forums could be used to enhance peer discussions to promote learning.
- Students were able to access support services online and make video calls with their academic team or wider university support services. This again promoted flexibility, and tutorials were often more effective with students being able to share work remotely and work collaboratively with their academic member of staff.
- Social events often moved online and many students shared experiences online such as watching films, comedy, music or simply offering each other support through what was a challenging time for all.

### Peer support

Peer support is crucial in helping you navigate through your psychology degree and many friends you make during this time in your lives will remain for a long time to come. Universities make strong use of the student voice throughout all elements of planning and delivery of courses and your course will have nominated *student representatives* so you may wish to consider putting yourself forward for such a position.

Through representing your student cohort, you can support peers, contribute ideas and really shape elements of your course. Any changes made through your voice and actions could not only be of benefit to you, but to future cohorts of students who are studying long after you have graduated.

You may establish your own informal social groups to gain that peer support, or alternatively set up more organised study support groups. Your academic team may encourage student led peer communities, where students in the later stages of their psychology course support newer students to help them with general queries and guidance. Student *ambassadors* will be available to help you and peer support can be gained through structured university support services if students require a little more help and guidance. For international students there are student ambassadors who can support you with the challenges of the transition from home and they will know how you feel and be able to point you to suitable support services and communities across the university.

Another way of connecting with a diverse range of students across the university is through engagement with *university societies*. These may be related to sports, hobbies, reading or any other shared interests you can think of. If there is a society that you wish existed, but it does not, you may even be able to set that one up. Perhaps you have an interest in crime dramas or films and could relate this to psychology, or maybe just a film club with no academic links. Each university has a Students Union (SU) to assist with this, who act as the voice of students and are there to support you. Their role will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

## Wellbeing support

All universities have designated services to support students with mental health problems and any wellbeing issues. In addition to being a student, people come to university with a number of other identities such as being a parent, a carer, an employee, a partner and life can throw unexpected challenges at us when we are least expecting it. The pressures to juggle so many roles, in addition to developing new academic skills and fitting into a new environment can be challenging to everyone and so regardless of what your troubles are, there will always be someone at the university who can help. Available services will likely include *counsellors*, *therapists* and *mental health advisors*, with other more specialist interventions being offered at some universities. You may speak to these professionals about any problems which are impacting on your life and these do not need to be academic related, so please remember to seek support if required. As explored later in this chapter, a key skill you will develop over your studies is that of self-awareness and having insight into your own wellbeing is important so that you can reach out for support if you need it. This is a strength, in fact many psychologists have compulsory counselling/therapy as part of their practice to check in with their own mental health and ensure they are supported given that their primary role is to support others.

Accessing support with your mental health at university can also help you with your academic studies as this can result in suitable adjustments to your own academic schedule. Do speak to your academic team and ensure you are aware of the academic policies and how to apply for any mitigation. This means that if your health or any personal circumstances have resulted in you not being able to complete your assessments by the deadlines, the university will support you, where possible, by, for example, giving a later submission date without penalty. This is further explored within this chapter.

## Practical support

Universities employ a range of professional support staff who are experts in specific areas where you may need some support. For example, some colleagues will be able to help you with any financial problems and this may include support with accessing your student loan or information about tuition fees. University can be a challenging time when finances can be strained, especially given the multiple roles a person may have and so there will be colleagues who may be able to provide information about additional forms of financial support such as *hardship funds*. Many students will move away from home as they embark on their university courses and so colleagues will be able to support you with accommodation related issues, ensuring that you are safe and comfortable in any university accommodation.

If you consider yourself to have a disability or feel you have a need where adaptations may be required to help you effectively study, then do declare this as soon as possible through the application/enrolment process. Universities will ask students to self-declare any potential needs from an early stage so that they can work to assess the needs and recommend adjustments to support the student. Student support services are there to help all students, regardless of their concerns and will work collaboratively with the student to consider what support they need to help them study effectively.

## Employment support

Employability skills will be embedded throughout any psychology degree and these skills will help you to work towards your future career aspirations (see Chapter 5). It is recognised that many students will come to university with a wealth of experience in the workplace, yet the type of role they may be applying for after graduation will likely be very different, with alternative challenges in the recruitment process. In order to support the academic teams, your university will have a range of experienced colleagues working as *careers advisors*, *employability champions*, *employer engagement consultants*, amongst others. These colleagues are there to help you maximise your university experience so that when you graduate, you leave with far more than just a degree certificate in your hand.

Later chapters will explore this in far more detail but remember from the day that you start your degree, there will be new opportunities opening up to you and without over-stretching yourself, you are advised to take on the challenge of developing new skills and gaining new experiences. You may have your heart set on becoming a clinical or forensic psychologist, but do not fall into the trap of thinking you must secure experience in a mental health ward or prison to get this experience, as this may be unrealistic. There are many organisations which have volunteer schemes in the community, which are often charities and rely heavily on support from committed motivated people wanting to support others. The employment team will be able to help you consider opportunities in your local area which match up with your goals and will help you gain experience appropriate to your skills in an area of interest. Beyond this, colleagues are well placed to support with job applications, CVs and interview preparation. They will be able to guide you to the online resources and show you how technology can be used to support you in this process and how employers may use this technology when recruiting. The support offered by a university to help you succeed on your psychology course is extensive.

# THE SOCIAL LIFE

University life goes far beyond the lecture theatres and seminar groups and it is important to consider what the identity of being a psychology student means to you and your role in the university outside of the classroom. There will be many people in your cohort on your psychology course who all have the same shared interests and a desire to learn more about psychology.

You may live in the locality of your selected university and be familiar with the area or you may find yourself living in a different town, city or even country to fulfil your psychology studies. This affords the opportunity to meet people that you may not have encountered before, to embrace different cultures and to understand the world from different perspectives, to ensure flexibility in thinking and encourage diversity in approaches. This links in well with critical thinking skills that you will acquire during your psychology degree.

Many students embark on their university degrees not knowing any other students on their course or even at their university and this is consistently one of the biggest fears that is reported by new students at their inductions. Universities are aware of this student concern and of the importance of developing connections through your academic journey, so are there to support all students and will help to facilitate student interactions from the first day. Remember that most students will have some anxiety about being in a new environment and not having social connections, but this can be rectified through taking advantage of opportunities that are made available to you. In the first instance, this may be about making connections with your course mates and engaging with them when in smaller seminar groups or break-out rooms if engaging in online content. It may be hard initially speaking and sharing ideas with people that you do not know and it may feel uncomfortable to start with, but this will help you develop transferable skills ready for your next opportunities in work-based learning or your future job. Those people that you speak with may become your future colleagues or even life-long friends.

─────────── REAL LIFE PERSPECTIVE 2.1 ───────────

**Psychology Student Reflections on Degree Support**

Here are some psychology students' reflections on the support they have received while studying for their degree.

'Never be afraid to ask for help from tutors or fellow students. Support and feedback has been so important for my progression through my degree. Lecturers aren't scary and are more than happy to offer amazing support'

'Keep talking about any issues you have with your personal tutor and programme leader as they can help and guide you all they can if they know what issues you are having'

'I found all staff very supportive. I have been using great services from the disability centre, liaison office and life lounge. The disability centre helped me to understand my specific needs, suggested the way I should work to reach my desirable goals and encouraged me not to give up on my academic

*(Continued)*

journey. The liaison officer spent time with me to practically show me how to do the referencing work. The life lounge helped me to make my days brighter thanks to engaging with the therapy. Also, it is great to know that I can reach out for support from my personal tutor, who is always here for me'

'The lecturers have offered consistent support throughout my studies and have always been available to offer advice on any issues that may arise'

Beyond the more formal university student services available, students recognised the essential nature of peer support over their academic journeys and particularly during a global pandemic, where studying was very different to normal:

'I didn't realise how beneficial socialising with other students was until I was not able to anymore because of the pandemic. Things as simple as asking about others' ideas and opinions on the work can boost your confidence and make you feel supported. Learning to adapt to conversing through a screen has been difficult but ultimately rewarding. Without my fellow students help and support I really don't think I would get through my degree'

'Although the pandemic has created barriers in relation to social interactions, it has also increased my motivation to make an effort to reach out to my peers and tutors in order to remain connected to my studies'

'Other students are more than likely going through the same things meaning support from them is very reassuring'

'Support from peers is important, whether you keep it a small group or wider network. When you have many assignments/exams due it is nice to have peers around who are experiencing the same feelings to help you keep going forward'

All reflections provided by psychology students at the University of Bolton.

## The Students' Union

The Students' Union (SU) (sometime called an association) is a student-run group and representatives are elected by students to give students a collective voice and foster an inclusive community across the university. They are there to represent students in various ways. This may be at university level or a wider national level to speak out on key issues. Within their remit, the SU will organise events and societies, or support you in developing ideas for new events, so these can be a great way of meeting new people with whom you share common interests. Events facilitated by the SU may include sporting events or competitions, perhaps you can join a team and compete against the staff. Other activities range from quizzes, debates, cultural trips/groups or musical performances. Your SU will ensure that that there is something for everyone and that opportunities span a range of interests, and are well aligned to the university in terms of student population, local area and areas of interest. Remember that the SU is there to represent all students so would welcome ideas, contributions and support from students if there are ideas for events that are currently not available. As a university student, ideas, innovation and vision are welcomed and you may want to propose an event to the SU which you could deliver with their support, such as a student-led conference or a social event.

**Figure 2.3** The University of Bolton Student's Union

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Student Unions will normally have their own facilities on campus, they will support student interests, and organise social events and other forms of student activities.

Engagement with *out of class activities* will provide you with additional opportunities to expand your social groups and meet a wide range of people, as a large part of the university journey is about being open to change and new experiences. Your academic team will also work hard to ensure that you have wide-ranging opportunities to interact with other students and to develop those connections, which are key to helping you succeed. There are many events and opportunities advertised which are free to students and allow you to hear from external speakers in many different areas – some of these may be held online, whereas there are some events that may be held in public social areas such as a pub. Do consider booking on to these events and if you find something you are interested in but are worried you will not know anyone there, you could always ask your course team to promote the event if you think other students may be interested. Through taking advantage of opportunities external to the university you can develop new skills and confidence and have experiences that you may never have encountered, developing stronger networks as you go. Remember, your networks will become increasingly important in the postgraduate world.

## SELF-DISCIPLINE: ATTENDING CLASSES AND BEING RESPONSIBLE

Students enrol on their psychology courses for many different reasons and at various stages of their lives and therefore bring with them a wealth of experience, both personally and professionally. Some will have an extensive employment history and be completing their degree for personal development

or to enhance their future career opportunities, and there may have been a significant time gap between this and their previous studies. Other students may be approaching their course straight from college and be used to studying and meeting academic deadlines. There will probably be significant differences between how you have studied previously and study at university. In particular, you will need to become independent and take responsibility for your own studies.

To put this into context, someone may sign up for a gym membership and pay the fees that provide them with access to top of the range equipment, instructors and a community of people with many shared goals and interests. Having access to the facilities will greatly maximise the chances of the member achieving their targets and making gains that may not be possible unaided. Yet membership alone will not be enough. This is where individual responsibility comes in and determination, motivation, self-management and perseverance are important. This can be compared to studying at university. For example, securing a place on a competitive degree course and paying tuition fees provides you with access to specialist equipment, technology and learning space in addition to experts in the field who will teach and guide you through your modules and courses. These academics will be active researchers and experienced educators, but you are the only person who can put the time and effort in to maximise these opportunities. The knowledge, learning materials and resources available to you are simply the starting point and it is here where your personal responsibility for learning and achievement is imperative.

When studying at further education college, students will be used to large amounts of contact teaching time in the classroom with clear directives about assessment content. This enables college students to demonstrate a range of knowledge across areas, and there are many similarities to this when studying at university but the need for self-discipline is far greater. Teaching contact time will be reduced and there is a need for increased independent study to accompany each lecture. At college, there may be one subject specialist who covers most of the material, yet at university there is a team of well-qualified academics who will lecture in their specialist areas and introduce you to the key debates, up-to-date research findings and contemporary applications of theories in the real world. In addition, lectures will not simply be about providing information that you need to remember. Instead the lectures will often present opposing views to you, they will likely raise more questions than you started with and will challenge you to start forming your own opinions through independent study.

## Attendance

As an adult learner, you are responsible for your academic journey and a basic part of your success in this is ensuring you attend lectures, seminars and workshops whenever possible. There is a growing wealth of evidence that there is a positive correlation between a student's attendance at university and their academic achievement, which is hardly surprising. Going back to the gym analogy, someone is unlikely to achieve their fitness goals if they pay for their membership but do not attend and access the facilities!

Your university will have a policy around student attendance and engagement, and it is important to understand this and what the expectations are of you and how you can uphold your responsibilities as a student. You may be asked to sign a *student contract* or make a pledge to show your commitment to life as a student, as remember, this is about supporting you in giving yourself the best chance to reach your

academic goals. A student contract will clarify the obligation of the university but also the requirements of being a student. It will include clear statements on acceptable behaviour and respect to others, the requirements to communicate through university communication systems such as the designated email address or online learning environment, and the responsibility as a learner through attendance and engagement. It is anticipated that there may be occasions when you are genuinely unable to engage with lectures and there will be systems in place to deal with this, so if absence is prolonged you should be aware of who to notify and of any evidence that may be required. Failure to comply with university attendance requirements may be considered as signifying nonengagement and could have a detrimental impact on any academic board decisions at the end of semesters. So again, it is the student's responsibility to make sure they are engaging with any support services offered and that they follow appropriate processes if they encounter any difficulties. This links back to all of the support options which students have available to them as highlighted earlier and if you are not sure who to contact, it is advisable to contact your personal tutor or course leader in the first instance.

If a student is unable to attend a scheduled assessment, then once again, it is important that they notify their module leader as the university will have a process in place for supporting those students who have a genuine reason for not being able to engage at that time. The process of applying for mitigation (as discussed previously in this chapter), usually entails the student completing a form and submitting some formal evidence detailing the circumstances that rendered them unable to complete the assessment. This process will usually be the same whether a student is unable to submit coursework, sit an exam, or deliver a presentation.

## Responsibility

The responsibilities you have as a university student are different from those you may have been expected to have at earlier levels of educational study. As you become an autonomous learner you have the choice about whether to attend lectures, whether to complete the pre-lecture activities or whether to complete the recommended independent study. The more time and effort you put into your studies, the more it will help you build solid foundations in terms of academic skills and psychological knowledge and the more it will set you up to achieve your goals in terms of your overall degree and beyond. The lectures and seminars will form the basis of your learning for each module and will allow you to interact with the academic team and your peers to contribute to effective learning practices. While lecture notes and resources may be available on electronic learning platforms, these are no substitute for attendance because they will not contain the complex debates, examples, questions and discussion which will be elaborated upon during the interactive sessions.

In most cases, lecture materials will be available to you in advance of the timetabled session through the online learning environment and you are encouraged to reflect on how you can prepare in advance of the session. Some students prefer to have a hard copy of key notes so they can write on them and make additional notes, documenting key questions that arise and specifying areas on which to focus their independent studies, whilst others prefer electronic versions. Through becoming familiar with the lecture content in advance, it provides time and space to reflect on the key topics, complete preparatory reading and to think about any questions you may have which you can raise within the live session. Some lecturers may recommend pre-lecture reading or ask for an activity to be completed. This is of

particular importance if requested before a seminar or workshop, as failure to complete the task may mean you disadvantage yourself by being unable to fully participate in the session.

Attendance at lectures is essential for success but note the additional word previously used was 'engagement'. Therefore, being present at the lecture will only get you so far, much like if you attend a gym but decide to stand around talking to a friend rather than committing to your workout! Many courses will take a blended approach to teaching and learning, and this means making the best of both worlds in terms of classroom and online learning. Continuing to deliver high quality provision in higher education through the 2020–21 pandemic has afforded new learning and even better ways of doing things, therefore some of this best remote practice will likely be retained in your course, alongside the necessity for face-to-face provision (the amount of physical contact time may vary if you are studying a distance learning course). Whether you are attending lectures in person or online, active engagement is important in getting the most out of this time, requiring you to go above and beyond simply being present. Lectures provide the chance to learn from experts in the field and to ask questions and raise challenges to positions being offered. They will also incorporate activities or tasks to consolidate some of the learning and get you interacting with your peers, which alongside developing your academic skills can help to foster positive relationships and build new friendships. During lectures, there is no need to make a note of what is on the slides or resources if they are provided to you via the virtual learning environment, so use your time efficiently. Rather than repeating what is available to you, try writing notes to yourself which show you have made sense of the content and begun to process the meaning behind the content. Consider what the key questions arising are and which areas of the literature you would like to focus on after the lecture. Perhaps key sources were referred to that you want to make a specific note of, or suggestions were made in the lecture of events that could be attended. Through actively engaging with the content and making meaningful notes it will give you the best chance of working with these after the lecture has ended.

Lecture time makes up a component of your modules and course yet needs to be supplemented with independent study to consolidate your understanding. Studying at degree level requires you to develop your independent thought and to make sense of the mass of evidence which you may encounter, ensuring you present it in a concise and logical way, supporting your work with academic sources throughout. Through keeping up with your study after each lecture, this will help you when it is time to work on your module assessments as you will have breadth and depth to your knowledge and a strong theoretical understanding from which to start framing your work. You can make use of study groups, and some assessments may even be completed in collaboration with others, for example, if they are part of a team presentation. In each case, the module leader will provide clear assessment briefs and guidance on how to approach the work in line with the module learning outcomes for that level of study.

It was seen in Chapter 1 that each year of your degree brings with it a new level of academic study and hence a new level of responsibility and self-discipline in relation to your academic study skills. With the transition to each new level of study there is the need to increase your independent study time and skills. It is therefore a good idea to stop and reflect at the end of each academic year and to look forward as you start your new level of study to recalibrate expectations and to re-visit your own goals for the future. The focus has been on your own academic responsibility, yet you should also consider your broader responsibilities as a psychology student. Here you are not only acting as an ambassador for your university but also as a representative for your discipline.

---- SELF-REFLECTION POINT 2.1 ----

**Developing Self-reflection**

Given the importance of developing reflection and self-awareness at this point, why not pause and ask yourself the following questions. Please take time to think about these as the answers may not be immediate but keep a note of your thoughts. You may want to revisit these questions at key transition points within your degree and see if there has been a shift in any of your responses.

- What are your goals at this time?
- How can you split your goals into personal goals and academic goals?
- What actions are you going to need to put in place to help you work towards your goals?
- How are you going to maximise the effectiveness of your independent study?
- How do you learn best?
- When do you best learn? Are there specific times of the day when you are most effective?
- Where are the times in the week when you can allocate sufficient independent study time?
- What techniques work well for you to help you learn and make sense of lecture materials?

Within your course, you are also likely to have some content delivered by experts in the field who have taken time out of their work to come and speak to you. This may also be evident in university events where networking opportunities are available to you. You may want to consider your responsibility in engaging with such professionals as they may be able to share some of their networks with you or may even be able to offer you placement or volunteering opportunities. You may even find that they are on the interview panel for your dream job one day, so creating a strong first impression through your academic and professional engagement is important.

## THE ROLE OF SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection is an important part of any student's life as this period of time may see the biggest shift in thinking and goals for the future, yet for psychology students this skill is of particular importance. In simple terms, reflection requires a person to analyse their thoughts, feelings and actions, so is concerned with behaviours, decisions and emotions. For some students, the ability to reflect comes more easily than others and in its basic form it is one that comes naturally. For others there may be more need for deliberate effort, and it may feel strange and even feel uncomfortable. Regardless of your ease with reflecting, the importance of working to develop this skill is paramount as you study psychology. You may find that you start self-reflecting through lectures as they spark interest in a particular subject, and you start to develop your understanding of human mind and behaviour. It is important to start applying some of the materials to yourself and your experiences and through this develop your self-reflection. This book has self-reflection points to challenge you to pause and take some time to really think about your thinking in

particular areas. By stopping to reflect on where you are currently at, what your current position is or where you want to be, you can start to recognise how you can put the outputs from your refection into action.

Your course of study will have reflective practice embedded through it and sometimes this may be assessed formally where you are asked to complete activities in class and receive informal feedback, or sometimes this may be part of your summative assessment where it contributes to your module grades. If you search your university library catalogue or indeed Google Scholar for resources around reflection in psychology, you will be able to retrieve a number of definitions of reflection and reflective practice. Your search outputs will consist of a vast range of research articles, theories and particular well-used models of reflection. A model of reflection is in essence a framework which you can pin your reflections on which has a number of stages and it helps guide you through the important consideration at each junction (see FAQ Box 2.1).

## Q ─── FAQ 2.1 ───

### What is a Reflective Model and How Can it Help Me?

- A model of reflection provides a theoretical approach to help you to reflect in an ordered and structured way.
- It is sometimes called a framework and uses a series of questions or prompts to guide you through the reflection process.
- This is particularly useful when you are less experienced or less confident with the reflective process as it can keep you on track and make sure you are reflecting on key aspects from a number of angles and are not just taking a narrow view of your studying.
- The traditional models of reflection that you will likely be introduced to in your degree are those by Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984) although just because these are widely used does not mean that these will be the best models for you to use in your own reflection.
- There are many different models so perhaps you can do your own research into some more and see which ones seem a natural fit for how you reflect on things and what type of experiences you are reflecting upon.
- Some models are highly structured with many stages and prompts, whereas others are more flexible and organic, so it may be that as you increase in confidence with reflecting that you utilise alternative models and see where your personal preference lies.

Reflection takes place regularly during our daily lives (perhaps when you are lying in bed at night thinking about your day or speaking with friends about an experience that happened earlier that day), but it can be a more formal process where we deliberately take time out and use some prompts or structure to help us with our reflection (see Self-reflection Point 2.1). It is also important to distinguish between two main types of reflection, depending on the time period in which we are reflecting. Reflection can be 'in action' or 'on action' (Schön, 1991) and it is important to recognise when this process is taking place as each process will have different

requirements and potentially different time frames to work within. If you are '*reflecting-in-action*' then you are experiencing the event there and then and you may be required to act in a very timely fashion necessitated by the scale of the event. Not only must you think about the situation but must decide how to act and then act very quickly, trying to assess the different options available and remaining logical, rather than letting emotions take over. For example, you may be in a lecture and the student next to you suddenly becomes very ill. You have a number of options but must quickly decide what is the best option to ensure help is requested. This may not give much time and so a clear thought process and consideration of available options is essential. Conversely, *'reflection-on-action'* requires thinking back on an event that has already occurred, which allows more time and opportunity to break the experiences down and more fully explore thoughts, emotions and behaviours, to consider the effectiveness of outcomes and future learning. In this case, you may reflect on the previous example later that evening and reflect on the situation, your emotions, decision making and the outcome, and consider how you may do things differently if that situation arose again.

## Why is reflection so important as a psychology student?

As you study your core modules, you will naturally start to apply this knowledge to yourselves, your friends and family, and society generally. The questions which lectures, seminars and assessments raise will all promote self-reflection and encourage time out to think about your own thinking, emotions and behaviour. Some modules may have a specific focus on reflective practice, as this is important to consider from your first year onwards. More applied psychology modules early in your degree will give you the opportunity to reflect on key skills that you will require over your studies and beyond. These may entail resilience, adaptability, confidence, communication and far more, so it is important to self-assess where you feel you are at an early stage and how you would like to plan for development over your university journey. As you progress in your studies, then reflection on both academic and personal skills is important and any volunteering or placement opportunities will allow you to reflect on the application of your theoretical knowledge and reflect on your skills in unfamiliar environments and when faced with new challenges. This provides an important chance to reflect on job roles, task completion, relationships with colleagues and your own personal development, and helps further shape your personal and professional ambitions post-graduation.

Some of you will aspire to take on a role within the psychological workforce and reflection is a key skill required as you go into practice. Within training stages there will be ongoing reflective components which will entail written reflections through accounts of experiences and learning as well as the need to show reflective practice throughout required supervision. Having a strong appreciation of the need for reflection and by embracing every opportunity to develop your skills throughout the time on your degree, will hold you in good stead as you approach the next stage of your training. Should you become a qualified practitioner (such as a clinical psychologist or an educational psychologist), then reflection becomes more crucial than ever and forms an essential part of your continued professional development (CPD).

# BEING A MEMBER OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

As a student, you will become an important part of a number of communities and working together with others will help you thrive and collaboratively achieve your goals. As explored earlier, you will forge a sense of community with your cohort and together as a group of psychology students can help to shape your course and the experiences in your university.

Remember that throughout your time as a student, you will be an ambassador for your university in the local community, promoting the values of your university and showing positive regard for others. If you have chosen to attend university near to home, then your community may be familiar and you may well already experience a sense of connectedness, pride and affiliation with the locality, having shared many positive experiences there and being highly familiar with key landmarks, social facilities and key industries which operate there. For many, the move away to university will find you re-positioned in a new area with unfamiliar surroundings and potentially different cultural norms. Take time to explore the new area and its geography, sampling the tourist areas, areas of interest and check out places which are well aligned to your interests such as music or sports venues.

## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 2.2

### Taking on Commitments in the Local Community

If you have taken time to consider your commitments and decide that you are in a position to volunteer, then it is advisable to consider the following questions:

- What type of roles do you think about going into at this stage?
- What kind of agencies will provide these roles?
- Where is the need for volunteers in services in your area?
- What type of skills do you want to develop during your experience?
- Where are your experience gaps? This may be in relation to client groups or types of organisation.
- Where can you go to find out about volunteering opportunities? This may be external websites or university support services.
- How much time can you allocate to volunteering without it being detrimental to your other commitments?
- What are the time commitments/length of voluntary service required by the organisations you would like to work with?
- What training will be offered?

While you are a student, you may need to take up employment to support yourself financially and if you are not familiar with the area, the careers service may have access to local vacancies which would be suitable. All student's personal situations and needs differ and some will be able to study full time with little competing outside responsibilities, yet for others they may have a host of other commitments and identities. For students who are willing and able to take time to develop their skills outside of the classroom, then a good way to ingratiate yourself within the community may be to volunteer time to support local agencies. These may be charities, organisations or businesses

where you have the skills required to assist in their provision (see Chapter 6 for more information on how to gain relevant experience if you have a particular professional psychology role in mind as a future career).

Self-reflection Point 2.2 provides you with questions that may be useful to address, and these should be revisited as you develop in knowledge, skills and confidence.

When thinking about the needs in your local area, it is a good idea to undertake some research and look into the type of organisations which exist. Some larger organisations may have a volunteer coordinator, yet others will just have one generic contact number and you may be able to find out more through making contact through that. During the 2020–21 pandemic, many students supported their local communities through volunteering for Covid-related activities such as vaccination centres or community engagement projects, whereas others found themselves supporting people through food banks, citizen's advice or homeless charities. In addition to developing a wide range of skills supporting others and making a positive impact, all such experiences ensure that students are a key part of their local communities and could give something back to those communities.

It is also important to note that during the pandemic, many students adapted the mode of their volunteering and many completed hours through online initiatives such as mentoring or befriending. During the lockdown restrictions, there was a need to support people suffering from loneliness in isolation and psychology students were well placed to work with local organisations to support such people where appropriate.

In summary, volunteering can be a valuable part of your university experiences both on a personal and societal level, yet it is your decision about whether this is something you can manage within your life. By gaining a range of transferable skills and an understanding of the wider context in which organisations operate, it provides students with more than just a degree certificate at the end of their academic career. The resources section at the end of this chapter suggests a useful website which holds a national database of volunteering opportunities where students can search for vacancies in their local areas and specify the areas of interest to them.

## WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?

- Settling into university life will be exciting and will also present new challenges which will mean I may need to adjust the way I approach both my academic learning and personal development.
- University will allow me to access a wide range of support options, not only in terms of my academic development, but across diverse areas of my life and I need to take responsibility for finding out about these and referring myself if I think they may help me.
- I will have opportunities to meet many new people through my university life through my degree programme and wider university and mutual peer support will be an important part of my university journey.
- The British Psychological Society (BPS) encourages reflection throughout the degree, and it is important that I consider the importance of this skill and develop my reflective practice so that I am well equipped to reflect as I progress my career.
- As a psychology student I will be an important ambassador for my chosen disciple of psychology and become an important part of internal and external communities beyond my degree programme.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter has aimed to introduced you to a range of factors associated with student life and highlighted the variety of opportunities that become available to you as you enrol on your university course. Student life is very much determined by you and what you put into it. This is likely to require hard work, commitment to supporting others, and not being afraid to test yourself outside of your comfort zone. This is where the best life-long learning happens. Through the years you will develop skills you did not anticipate, and these skills will be transferable to the world outside of your degree. Through self-reflection and keeping a check on your learning development, these experiences and skills will help you to become a well-rounded critical practitioner whatever you elect to do in the future.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BPS (2021): www.bps.org.uk/psychologists/professional-development/best-practice-cpd
Do-it.org (2021): https://do-it.org/about

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