

# Distance learning skills are learnable

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Credit: University of Eastern Finland

In the last 18 months, the coronavirus pandemic has made distance learning somewhat of a norm in almost all education levels. In the national surveys on students, the respondents often mention lack of motivation. During distance learning, staying motivated clearly has been challenging.

So how do you maintain your motivation for [distance](#) learning? And what does lack of motivation mean anyway?

"From an individual point of view, lack of motivation is actually lack of direction. For example, first-year students have so little knowledge of their field that they may have difficulty identifying where they should be heading in their studies," says Päivi Atjonen, Professor of Educational Science and Adult Education at the University of Eastern Finland.

Planning is important for finding the right direction. Studying in a goal-oriented manner requires the ability to manage your time and prioritize.

"You have to plan for longer periods at a time. Not just for tomorrow or the day after, but for the long term, as well. This is challenging when you are new to the university. In upper secondary school, you were so used to the teacher making the schedules that you did not feel the need to manage your time."

There are ways to practice planning and time management with the help of various online applications. Atjonen says that a traditional calendar is also a good tool for weekly or monthly planning. However, you should not try to fit everything in your calendar.

"You also have to learn to say no. Young people need [social contacts](#), but it probably isn't a good idea to go out with your friends on a Thursday night if you have an exam on Friday."

Using a calendar and planning ahead may sound like fairly simple ways of making your studies go smoothly, but it isn't always as easy as that.

"Learning how to study independently and self-manage is a big deal and, for some students, it takes all their time at the university to learn these skills. Only when they are close to completing their studies, they realize

how they should have been managing their time from the beginning."

## **Leisure time helps to recover**

In addition to planning how to use your time, goal setting will also affect your motivation level and choice of study path. Distance learning has made studying more independent and increased the need to find information independently, as well.

"It is good to consider what completing a bachelor's degree will require in practice. Which assignments to take and which books to read," says Atjonen.

In addition to not having a direction, low level of motivation is associated with lack of resources and faith in your skills. Recovery from studying can be difficult, or the student doesn't trust their ability to perform. One of the key skills that a distance learning student should learn is how to maintain study-life balance.

"You have to find time outside your studies, even though in a small student flat it can be challenging, as you make the transition from studies to leisure time by moving from one side of the table to the other. Conscientious students often make study time longer and leisure time shorter, taking on one more task after another. Young people may think they are coping just fine, but everyday life easily becomes less smooth."

Separating leisure time and study time is especially challenging for distance learning students. According to a survey carried out by Tampere University, only 23 percent of the respondents felt they were able to separate study time and leisure time.

## **Self-compassion and social contacts also support**

## learning

Lack of faith in yourself, on the other hand, can be addressed by dividing the work into smaller sections.

"By planning how you use your time, you can break up a big chunk of studies into smaller sections, so that you will not lose your faith in being able to handle the work load. And increased faith in yourself will also increase your motivation level."

Reacting too emotionally to your studies may also present challenges. There is in fact a rational way of controlling motivation, i.e., by looking at a less inspiring task at hand through goals and schedules. Sometimes inspiration will come as you start working on a task.

"The way to control your emotions is to increase self-knowledge and learn self-compassion. It is good to consider how you talk to yourself; do you tend to criticize yourself for not finishing or give thanks to yourself for finishing? Learning to speak to yourself with a positive tone of voice is especially important during these challenging times," says Atjonen.

The increase in distance learning has naturally decreased our social contacts and genuine interaction with other people. Students should get together during [leisure time](#) and discuss how their studies are going. Seeking other people's company and knowing when to ask for help are important skills.

"You need to actively establish social contacts and not think too much about being solely responsible for your own happiness and in control of your life. It is important to see past the loneliness and the end of your nose, and be aware that together we can get through it, and that the teachers, tutors and personal study plan supervisors are there for you, as well."

## **Life situation and learning experiences matter**

For some, distance learning is a monkey on their back, and it can even make them interrupt their studies. For others, it opens up new opportunities. The situation is most challenging for students who are new to the university and do not yet have a clear idea of what studying there is all about.

"I worry about them and what kind of generation of students they will become. Hopefully, we will be able provide a lot of contact teaching at least to first-year students so that they can build relationships with other students and get off to a good start in developing their learning techniques. Surveys have shown that being alone during the first year of studies poses a high risk for the rest of the studies and the ability to stay motivated, so there is more at stake here than one might think," says Atjonen.

Distance learning is also difficult for those who are unsure about the field of study they have chosen, or who are studying for jobs that involve interacting with people. When the internships and practical work experience included in the studies are limited, it increases the risk of students interrupting their studies.

Distance learning seems to be best suited for those already in working life and with families. Often the studies can be fitted around personal schedules, adapting them to the situation in life and at work. Lectures can be attended online, and there is no need to travel anywhere.

"When you have self-management skills, you know how to set goals and do scheduling, you have life experience, you have pushed through adversity, and you know by experience that things don't always work out the way you would like them to, it will also give you confidence in your studies and the ability to be flexible."

Atjonen finds that distance learning is well suited for high achievers or those who need professional development in order to cope in working life.

"As an educator, situations like these make you wonder whether students are just collecting study credits, or are they actually accumulating the skills needed in working life."

Life situation and learning habits play a significant role in how beneficial or difficult distance learning is for you."

## **Skills required for distance learning are also useful in working life**

Distance learning skills can be acquired through studying, and Atjonen emphasizes the students' responsibility to develop such skills themselves.

"Learning how to be goal-oriented and self-manage will be useful skills for the future. After all, these are skills that you are expected to have in working life. Your boss will not always be behind your back, telling you what and how much you should be doing. University graduates often find employment in expert positions for which the skills required include the ability to work independently."

With distance learning becoming permanent in one way or another, Atjonen considers it necessary for education providers—especially upper secondary schools—to take a stronger role in teaching [distance learning](#) skills to their students. In Atjonen's view, low skill levels may affect the type of students who will be applying to universities in the future.

"What will the university's [student](#) profile be like in the future if its

reputation as an online university is not attractive or meaningful? Will the university be full of self-isolating nerds?"

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

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