AN INSIGHT INTO STUDY SKILLS FOR STUDENTS

Part 1

Introduction

Congratulations on gaining a university place to study midwifery. Through the preparation and attending for interviews you will be well aware of the high academic standards expected of midwifery students and of the limited places available. You may have been successful at the first attempt or may have applied on more than one occasion before finally becoming a student midwife. The path taken to arrive in this position may also have taken a circuitous route, straight from school or college after ‘A’ levels or Access courses for example. Some of you may already have a degree in another discipline and now wish to pursue a career in midwifery. Whichever way you have travelled, studying for a degree in midwifery requires building upon the important skills already acquired.

Having come this far you need to make the most of every opportunity to learn and developing effective study skills will help you achieve your goal. Everyone develops their own unique style of learning which will be adapted to cope with the rigours of midwifery training. Not only will you be undertaking coursework, attending lectures and assignments but you will also be working clinically. Clinical placements will involve working in different settings both in the community and the hospital; these are not regular hours and will include both day and night shifts often with weekend work.

The theoretical components of the course will be assimilated in practice, encouraging critical thinking and sometimes challenging contemporary midwifery.

Although excited by the prospect of this new career it is understandable that you may also be feeling a little anxious as to how you will manage all the demands placed upon you. The following sections will help support you in developing effective study skills to gain maximum benefit and enjoyment during your midwifery training.
Where to begin

Time is precious and some free time must be factored into your routine to keep the enthusiasm and energy levels sustained during this time. It is very easy to get caught up in study and work leaving very little time for relaxation and fun. Some of you will have developed strategies for incorporating this into your lives and for others it may be a little less organised. Your priorities will be pulled in all directions— not only balancing academic study with the clinical shifts but also home life, friends, relationships and families. They will all be vying for your attention. Think about how you will manage all these demands, consider how you planned your time with previous studies but this time with the added demands of clinical placement.

Be organised
A diary is the most organised way to plan your time; you may prefer to carry a paper diary with you while others would use an electronic/ online method of keeping track of important dates and events. A wall planner can be useful pinned on the wall in your study area. Here you can see at a glance when you should be in lectures, have exams or assignments to submit. Late submission of assignments is not acceptable and carries penalties; this could mean the difference between passing or failing a module.

Be clear of the module requirements
The module requirements are clearly stated within the course handbook and verbally at the start of each new module. Therefore it is imperative that you understand what you are expected to achieve. Ask the module leader to clarify and ask questions if uncertain. It is important that you start thinking about the assignment early into the module so that you allow sufficient time for researching the topic and the opportunity to access tutorial support. Leaving the assignment until the last minute will cause unnecessary stress and result in poor grades.

Be in a suitable environment
Some students may be lucky enough to have a study of their own, but the majority of you will not. As studying will take up a considerable amount of time over the next few years it is important to consider the study environment. If at all possible try to keep a room free from other uses i.e. a spare bedroom or dining room that can be used to study in. It is helpful if the space/room allocated will accommodate leaving books and papers out as it is easier to go back to them rather than having to put them away each time you finish a study session. If you do not have a dedicated room then keep all your books etc in a spare cupboard or storage box for easy retrieval. Some students prefer to study away from the house to avoid interruptions from domestic issues and may find studying easier in a library. Being in a University or NHS Trust library also gives easy access to journals and textbooks that you may not have access to at home.

Be comfortable
Wherever you do decide to study do ensure that there is suitable seating and desk space. The chair and desk should be of compatible height and dimensions to avoid back or wrist strain when working on the computer. Good lighting is also essential to avoid eye strain. Work does not always have to take place sitting at a computer, sometimes it is conducive to sit in a comfortable armchair when reading new literature.

Be organised
Before you embark on study collect all the equipment you will need with suitable storage facilities for everything. This will save a lot of time and avoid procrastination while looking for items such as pens, pencils, highlighter pens, erasers, paper clips etc. It is also important to devise a good filing system for all the research papers, lecture notes and journals collected. These can be stored in labelled box folders or ring binders for example. Advanced students may also use online storage and retrieval facilities such as endnote to archive relevant research papers. There is nothing more frustrating and stressful than being unable to find a certain paper of reference when time is against you, having everything stored and correctly labelled will alleviate avoidable stress.
Be a focused student

Some people prefer to study early in the morning while others do not reach peak performance until late at night. Decide which times work best for you when studying and stick to the routine. Try to ensure that time set aside for study does not impede into other demands on your time— you need to go into your own zone and switch off any other distractions. Think of studying as exercise for the brain. You would do an energetic gym routine or other sporting activity without warming up first and the same applies to study. Start the study session with a little recap of what you did last or read a research paper to activate your critical skills, then work on the more challenging aspects and then wind down with reading through what you have written or reference check. This method helps to keep focused, motivated and time limiting so that you will not become over tired or bored. Finishing on a good note encourages enthusiasm to start again the next time. Occasionally, you are really not in the right frame of mind to achieve in depth pieces of work, perhaps feeling unwell or over tired. At these times it is counterproductive to force yourself, so rather than waste this time leaving you frustrated and demotivated, use the time reading or searching for new pieces of research for next study session. However, if this feeling persists every time you sit down to study I would advise discussing the problem with your personal tutor and perhaps consider accessing academic support through the university.

Be motivated and focused

Again as people study in different ways, so motivation and focus can be dependent upon the style of study preferred, some alone some preferring group learning. Whichever style you prefer, sometimes you do feel a little isolated and lost and at times like this peer support is of great value. Meet with a friend or a group of friends on occasion to share ideas and debrief. These can be friends from your own cohort or you may find it beneficial to chat to a student from another cohort but may be working in the same clinical placement. Studying is like the sea with flows and ebbs along the way, not always plain sailing, but finding your support ropes early on will help to focus you again when feeling it is all too much.

Be enquiring

If there is something you do not understand—find out. If you are studying alone use the dictionary or thesaurus to look up unfamiliar words or the internet can be useful to for researching unfamiliar terms. Do not be afraid to ask questions in a group setting, when new to a subject it is usual to not grasp the meaning of certain concepts, you will not be the only one to lack understanding but may be the only one to enquire. It is better to clarify the things you do not understand early on in your studies rather than assume and misinterpret the pertinent points. There is no such thing as an invalid question. If you cannot find the answer to your question yourself ask the most relevant lecturer or personal teacher for help.

Be kind to yourself

Studying should not be all consuming, make time for yourself. When studying take short breaks, have a drink or a snack at regular intervals. Schedule into the day a walk to get fresh air, time for reflective thinking. Organise a little treat at the end of a module when an assignment is submitted, an evening out with friends or partner for example. Having something to look forward to helps keep the momentum going. Always keep things in perspective—do not try to do too many things at the same time or you will quickly become burn out.

Remember ‘You cannot get a quart into a pint pot!’
Essential study skills

**Listening** is one of the first and most important skills a midwife can have, not only in academia but also in the clinical placement areas. Make sure you have a good night’s sleep before a classroom study session. This will aid your attention in class and to remain focused on the topic. Try to gain a little background knowledge prior to the session so you have a basic understanding of what is being said.

Try to join in with the session by answering or asking questions, this again will help concentration and focus on the session.

**Taking notes** can be helpful in acting as prompts when reflecting upon the session at a later date. These will just be the key points of the lecture, some people write extensive notes while still paying attention to the speaker, whereas others find this too difficult and just bullet points will suffice. If you are a very slow note taker or have specific learning difficulties you may prefer to use a Dictaphone to record the lecture for future reference. However, it is protocol and good manners to ask the permission from the lecturer prior to doing this.

Although note taking is a good way of supporting learning, take care not to get distracted by doodling on the notepaper and consequently lose concentration, missing key points of the lecture.

**Reading** is as important as listening, but takes a while to get used to reading with the sole purpose of critiquing for use in your own work. Get used to scanning papers/articles for relevance before spending time reading in detail; this will avoid wasting time reading usually interesting but irrelevant literature. Find the key pieces of information by looking at subheadings, highlighted sections and key words. You can use a highlighter pen with caution as you could easily find the paper covered in highlighted areas making it difficult to extract the relevant points. Make sure that you read in a quiet and comfortable place with good lighting to avoid eye strain and headaches.

**Plan the essay** as again good organisation at the beginning saves so much time further down the line. Write a rough plan with headings to help organise the layout including introduction/background, main body with discussion of literature, implications for practice and conclusion. You may need other subheadings depending upon the topic area. Look at the word count and approximate how many words should be allocated to each area. This helps to break down the essay into manageable pieces and less daunting when first starting. Then make sure you have all your notes and relevant literature to hand, this will avoid wasting time looking for lost papers and thus diverting concentration.

As mentioned earlier, late submissions are penalised so part of the planning should be estimating the time needed to write the assignment. Take into consideration any unforeseen obstacles that may cause a delay. Even with the best intentions things do not always go to plan and so you should estimate longer than you think it will take to ensure the work will be completed on time. If for any reason you do have a major problem speak to your personal teacher/module lead as soon as possible. In certain circumstances it is possible to be granted an extension for submission, but this must be agreed at least a week prior to submission in most institutions.
Referencing your work may be a new skill for you. The majority of academic pieces of work need supporting references. So it is advisable to seek support in how to do this accurately and in the preferred style of your university. Keep a record of the references used as you write, as again this will save time searching for the elusive missing reference when you have finished writing.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and can lead to you being dismissed from the course. Plagiarism means the use of someone else’s work being used without acknowledgement in your own work. This could be done inadvertently by a student who lacks understanding on how to reference their work accurately or could be a weak student who has not sufficiently researched the topic and as such submits a fraudulent piece of work. The university may not make the distinction between the two and you may find yourself in serious trouble. This can be confusing to a student new to researching. It is imperative that you read the information pertaining to the university rules as this will contain guidelines on the use of referencing and guidelines. The rules also link to information on the social conduct of students. If in any doubt as to these aspects, you are advised to seek academic support through the university.