# SKILL SHEETS

***A Student's Guide to the International Bargaining Society***

## 1. Intro: Entering a calculating learning environment[1]

When starting any type of advanced study after high-school, you are faced with the challenge of a sizable attitude breach. The information load you are facing is often overwhelming; you are expected to study large amounts of material in a disciplined manner, gather information yourself, work together with other students that come from different places (and cultures sometimes) and create new information. Students are largely self-responsible for their own progress, their achievements, with relatively little external control or incentives from the educational institute. There are no laws forcing you to study and hardly any parents left (or able) to check whether you are doing your 'homework'. Tutors can enthuse and encourage students to study, but in the end it all comes down to your own *intrinsic motivation* and your ability to adapt to this new style of learning.

Moreover, academia is less and less a place where in splendid isolation from daily worries, scientists and students work together on searching 'the truth' and accumulating knowledge and skills. Academia has become part and parcel of the international bargaining society. Faculty staff member themselves are often engaged in a 'publish or perish' rat race and struggling with an increasing and diverse set of claims and activities. Students increasingly bargain over grades, contents and in particular the work load of courses - confronted as they are with an increasing and diverse set of claims and ambitions in a complex society with large choice possibilities. The public good nature of higher education gets increasingly mixed up with a private mode of organising and financing. Higher education in many countries around the world is becoming a *hybrid* form in between public and private – with all its opportunities, but also with all its drawbacks. In the book 'international business-society management' (Van Tulder, with Van der Zwart, 2006)[2] examples of this process – and of its often sub-optimal outcomes – have been discussed. By blending into the international bargaining society, academia also becomes susceptible to one of its dominant mechanisms – i.e. that participants search to maximise output with minimum efforts (ibid, chapters 6 and 7). Table 1 illustrates the various forms of calculating behaviour implemented by important stakeholders in academia and the possible sub-optimal consequences of this behaviour. Check whether and to what extent this 'realistic' image – some would call it a cynical image - represents your academic environment as well. It helps you identify to what extent you should also develop an appropriate strategy yourself to escape from the negative consequences of a calculating (academic) community.

[1] This text has been written by Rob van Tulder especially for the ib-sm website.

[2] Rob van Tulder with Alex van der Zwart (2006) *International Business-Society Management: linking corporate responsibility and globalization*, London and New York: Routledge

**Table 1 The modern academic community as a calculating society**

| Calculating… | Characteristics | Possible consequences |
|---|---|---|
| **Students** | Only doing what is required; trying to make maximum use of any ambiguities in a programme; engaging in free-rider behaviour; cv-building (extra-curricular activities are more important than actual study to be distinctive on the job market) | Lengthy appeal procedures; lack of time for effective studying; constant demand for lower intensity of classes and less frequent exams; plagiarism; increasing number of pseudo-intellectuals; grade-inflation |
| **Administrators** | Licking upwards, kicking downwards; not setting rules in order to be able to modify them when handy; not engaging in evaluation exercises; networkers | Lack of transparency; lengthy meetings; atmosphere of distrust; lower productivity; increased overhead expenditures; administrators become more important than faculty |
| **Scientists/teachers** | Abstain from small group tutoring (too much work); preference for mass lectures (highest returns per contact hour) and strict grading systems; multiple-choice exams; limited availability; scientist as a bureaucrat | Limited commitment to students; hierarchical; rule-oriented rather than contents oriented; stricter rules; lowered quality level of exams; gap between teaching and research grows |
| **Scientists/researchers** | Chose 'easy' research topics that lead to easier publications or easier funding for consulting research; use of junior researchers; free-rider on the efforts of colleagues; networkers in the academic community and funding associations | 'Publish or perish' race; Publishing as an act of 'prostitution' (Cf. Frey, 2003)[3]; 'old boys' network in research funding; (top) scientists become administrators; gap between academics (know a lot about little) and intellectuals (know something about a lot) increases |
| **Governments** | Face budgetary problems in funding universities not in the least because more people study – and they study longer; try to 'rationalise' education, lower funding of scholarships and involve private parties in its funding; specifies stricter criteria for performance to enable selection; privatisation of higher education | Race between universities to attract additional funding; in periods of rationalisation it is more difficult to cooperate; lack of funding through scholarships force students to work next to their studies, with often negative effects on their results |
| **Parents** | *Quid pro quo*: study financing support as retirement scheme and way to exert control over children | Parental affection channelled through scholarships and dependency relations; only interested in the grade not in the topic |

Academia as a calculating society creates a problematic - not well regulated - bargaining environment, which necessitates higher transaction costs and increases the propensity towards free-rider behaviour. But this leads to an overly gloomy picture of academia. In most countries, academia still offers a positive and highly challenging learning environment provided you master the basics of effective bargaining. This requires that try to limit bargaining over grades, content and study tempo to a minimum and only at the right time. For instance you discuss the latter only at the start of a course – provided the 'rules of the game' have not been adequately specified. When you do this at the end of a course, you probably will lose a lot of time, energy and in the majority of cases also the fight with a tutor that is least likely to give in at the end. Another example is provided by the often heard complaint by students that teachers have no time available for them. First, students should understand that university 'teachers' are in fact not teachers at all. They are researchers, consultants, writers and only part-time teachers/tutors. If you are not aware of this background you will have difficulty in addressing your tutors. Contacting teachers in a calculating environment requires

[3] Bruno Frey (2003) 'Publishing as prostitution. Choosing between one's own ideas and academic failur', *Working Paper Series*, no.117, Zurich: Institute for Empirical Research in Economics

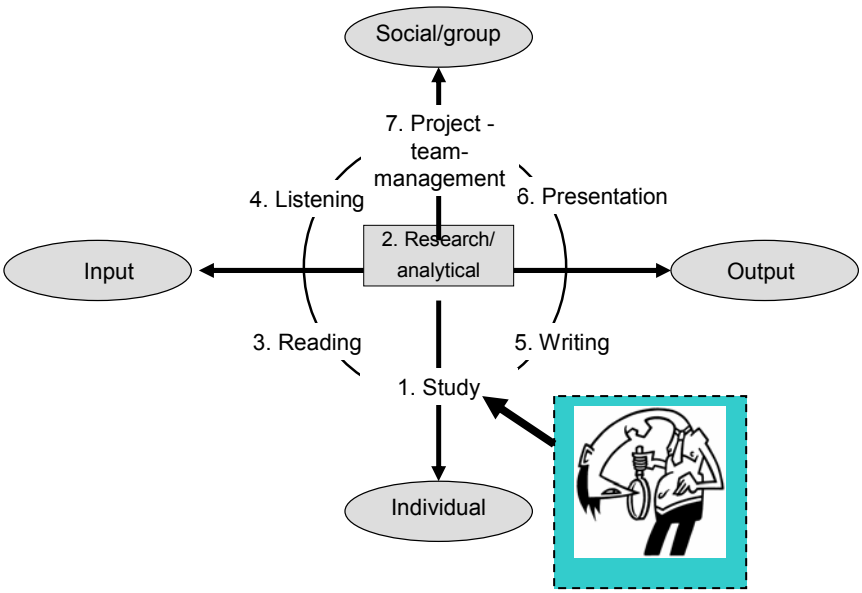
a minimum level of preparation and even barter trade. Research at a number of American universities has shown that students that approached professors unannounced and with only general questions, indeed had difficulty in getting even one minute of attention. Students, however, that prepared themselves, for instance by reading some of the publications of that particular professor, found out that they got all the consultation time they wanted. The logic of this example: from the perspective of the professor, it is much more interesting to talk to an informed, curious and (seemingly) professional person than to talk to a student that is (in the professor's perception) primarily interested in grades. The professor might even hope to find a future research assistant or inspire you to do research (M.A. Thesis) that could provide perhaps interesting input for his/her own research. The latter constitutes the professor's prime motivation to be in academia. If you take that into account, academic live can look completely different and becomes more rewarding.

Many students put the responsibility of their education with the institution and the teachers and primarily 'consume' what is offered – even if they don't like it very much. The problem with this attitude is that you only grasp what you have missed in your education, long after your graduation has passed. Whilst the bargaining society is also characterised by the continuous need for education and re-education, missed opportunities at the university level do not easily get compensated in your post-graduate career. The choices made at university often have a lasting impact on an individual. Not necessarily in terms of the academic discipline chosen – there are an abundance of examples of post-graduates that found a career in completely different areas than the ones they were trained for. But more in terms of the skills and attitude you have developed during these extremely important formation years – the years from approximately the age of 18 until the age of 25. Whatever attitude you develop here, including the social networks you get yourself involved in, shapes your future in a more profound manner than the exact study you choose. Effective learning in a calculating environment involves serious bargaining: with the research object, with fellow students, with the tutors, with the administrators, with your parents and other financiers and ultimately – and most importantly - with yourself over your priorities and the way you would like to implement them.

## 2. From survival to positive learning

To survive in a bargaining society you have to be a smart negotiator able to maximise your own short-term benefits (get good grades for your exams and assignments). But academia can be so much more as a learning environment. To move beyond a mere survival strategy you have to work on and master a set of basic skills at a sufficiently high level. These skills can be identified by a Skill circle that can be drawn over two scales. Figure 1 shows first a *social scale* in which skills can be developed purely individual or in a group. Skills, secondly, have a *process scale* that runs from input oriented to output oriented skills. This basic distinction results in seven relevant basic skills.

**Figure 1 The Skill Circle**

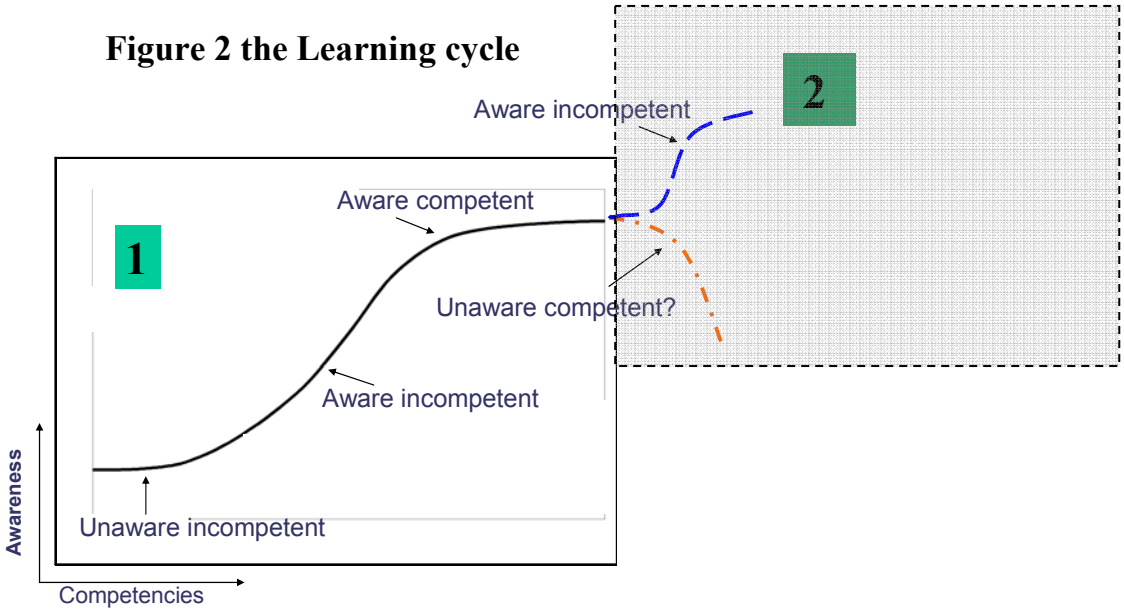



In a university you are often supported and challenged to develop all these skill *at the same time*. But the degree to which you develop and master these beyond the minimum (calculating) level largely depends on your own efforts. In most universities, for instance, presentation skills and project/team management skills are much less trained than listening skills (in big classes) or reading skills (large amounts of literature for a written multiple-choice exam). Project management in teams – even at universities that have adopted small learning groups - often boils down to a pre-set division of labour between study-friends that always form the same team. Experience shows that this type of labour division, does not help individuals to correct for deficiencies in the weak parts of their skill circle. Many a student only finds out during the Thesis writing period – when you cannot fall back on a team – what kind of skills have never been practised. It explains why a considerable number of students do not finish their studies even at the time they had only their Thesis to write – so with 95% of all the course work already done at a 'sufficient' level. It also explains why some tutors always complain that students are not 'ready' for their thesis.

### 3. Going through the skill circle time and again

It takes considerable time to develop all the basic skills at a sufficiently high level of sophistication. Every student goes through a number of learning phases (See Figure 1): from relatively incompetent (but blessed ignorant of that incompetence) via often agonising periods of aware incompetencies to a phase of aware competence.

**Figure 2 the Learning cycle**




Then you enter into a new phase [2] and start-up a new cycle of learning and increasing competencies. In any case, that is what you should hope to achieve. A phase of unaware competencies – distinguished in learning psychology and an important attitude in case you want to drive a car – is not that functional when you have to engage in a continuous learning process in a bargaining society. So in order to move into new directions that require new competencies, you first have to become aware of your deficiencies in these areas. This is also referred to as the '*discomfort zone*'. The idea does not only relate to individuals, but also applies to whole organisations and countries that want to reap competitive advantages: in order to progress you have re-ignite the learning cycle and go through a discomfort zone time and again. As soon as you are not prepared to enter this discomfort zone, you stop learning. So, you'd better start to like it as well. In fact, it can be great fun to enter in this zone – at the right time and under the right circumstances.

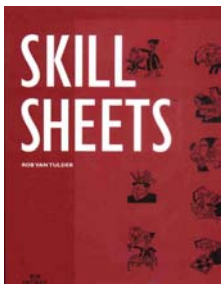
**Table 2 Learning cycle in progressive study skills**

| | From….. | To…. |
|---|---|---|
| **1. study** | *Learning to digest knowledge; teacher/tutor oriented; fragmented* | *Knowledge to generate further learning; assertive/self-oriented; integrated* |
| **2. research** | *The questions of others; own experience* | *Your own questions; other people's experience* |
| **3. reading** | *Reproducing; memorizing for exam* | *Gathering; input for research* |
| **4. listening** | *Passive;consumption; teacher oriented* | *Active and interactive; co-production; research oriented* |
| **5. writing** | *Simple; process oriented* | *Advanced/sophisticated; contents oriented* |
| **6. presentation** | *Based on your own experience; aimed at knowledge transfer* | *Based on your research; co-producing knowledge* |
| **7. team-management** | *Simple; directive; assignment and input oriented* | *Sophisticated; reflective; project output oriented* |

What does this imply for the phase in your life that you are living inside academia? Table 2 shows a number of generalisations on the learning path per separate skill. These characteristics account for the learning experience of an 'average' student. Firstly, the basic skill requirement of any student seems obvious: it is **study skills**. Study skills develop from a fragmented and teacher-oriented digestion of pre-arranged knowledge towards a more assertive orientation that is aimed at a live-long learning attitude and the generation of knowledge. But study skills remain rather instrumental skills and rarely develop in isolation. They have to be coupled to the core skill of the bargaining society, **research skills**. Any person with a higher education should be able to face complex problems. They almost always require a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore research and analytical skills are a mixture of product and process oriented skills. Research skills are the input for any other skill, including study skills. A research attitude implies that students are *aware* of their relative mastery of skills and are able to either practice more progressive skills themselves, or ask for appropriate support in training their skills with tutors and fellow students. Research topics develop from addressing questions of others on the basis of own experience, to addressing your own questions on the basis of other people's experience. Research skills consequently develop from subjective towards objective or inter-subjective knowledge accumulation.

The other skills more or less derive their learning path characteristics from these two basic skills. They all move from relatively simple, passive, and reproduction or consumption oriented skills into far more (inter)active, complex and production oriented skills. These processes are all linked. The more you become aware of these linkages, the more learning can become continuous. If you attend a lecture, for instance, and can analyse during the lecture why you like it (for instance because of the structure of the argument or the supportive communication contained in the body language of the speaker) it provides you with input for your own presentation skills. In preparing your own presentation you can think of these other lectures. Another example: the more you can diagnose why you like an argument in a written peace, the more you can also use these insights as an input for your own active argumentation and writing skills (and vice versa).

So skills can and have to be distinguished, but it is difficult – or even fool hearted – to separate them. Specialised skills trainings therefore often lack effectiveness when they are void of content, good feedback and lack awareness on how they are linked to other skills At the core of any skills trajectory ly research skills.




**The Skill Sheets**

The Skill Sheets collection is designed as a tool to guide a student through this process of continuous learning. It supports the student to link the most relevant skills at ever higher levels of mastery and sophistication. The philosophy is that only a **holistic approach** to skills learning and a high level of mastery of skills can help you to withstand the negative consequences of the bargaining society – including the pervasive pressure you will face to give in to calculating behaviour yourself. Once you have understood the basic logic of this approach, you will find it hard to stop learning and you can move from mere survival to co-producing your own environment.

Even the simplest of skills are relatively complex. None of them skills are solely "product" or "process" oriented. Sometimes the skills are easy to train and master, but more-often they require intensive training throughout longer time periods. To make the skills development process relevant, interesting and rewarding, skills always have to be **linked to real research topics** and content, otherwise you will only learn a number of 'tricks' without substance. So you will have to be able and willing to grasp and deal with complex problems already in a very early phase of your training. The Skill Sheets are designed to support tutors and students around the world in this training process. They identify the **basic skills** in each of the seven skill areas that everybody should/could master and give you very concrete pointers and minimum standards for each skill.

The Skill Sheet approach consists of a basic book and a website. The Skill Sheets book contains a formula that is developed by Rob van Tulder at the RSM Erasmus University. The formula exists since 1995 and is used by thousands of students throughout the whole curriculum of RSM and a number of other universities. In 2004-2006 the Skill Sheets have been upgraded in collaboration with a large number of students, managers and teachers. The loose-leaf system has given way for a book. In the course of 2006 the book will also be accompanied by a website that provides additional Skill Sheets, gives instruction material for tutors and provides links to other relevant skills. For the website and the broader skills approach a new organisation has been created: **Skill Solutions** (see below). This organisation supports the further development of skills and helps also non-university organisations to professionalize their own skill development.

- Table of contents of original Skill Sheets [pdf file]
- Website: www.skill-sheets.org (online end of April)
- Examples of Skill Sheets:
    - Research Skills – research as barter trade [pfd file]
    - Study Skills - Bad time management: [pdf file]
- For more information on the Skill Sheets project and on how to order: gdeth@rsm.nl and rtulder@rsm.nl