



# School's out for Christmas

The Christmas break can give students the opportunity they need to rest, relax and then get stuck into the books

## Elaine Larkin

THE late December/early January break from work and study is something most people welcome with travel, socialising and relaxing top of most people's lists once Christmas Day is out of the way.

This break for both part-time and full-time students, however is the ideal time to play catch-up on something else: study; recommended course reading; organising course notes; and maybe even a trip to the library.

According to Patricia Mannix McNamara, a lecturer in psychology and effective education at University of Limerick (UL), it is important people get their holiday first before throwing themselves into college work. "If they're really tired, they're not going to study well. We would say enjoy your Christmas break, enjoy Christmas Day, St Stephen's Day and your few days around that," she explains.

People should take their week off and really enjoy it, but not leave their decision as to when to start revising until the end of that week.

They should make that decision before they finish college. "If they have made that decision, it's much easier to get stuck into it," Mannix McNamara says.

Aisling O'Grady, a student advisor at University College Dublin (UCD), agrees. She suggests students sit down before the break and decide what they realistically want to achieve. "Strict timetables don't work. You need to have a little flexibility, but you also need to be very clear on what you want to achieve over the break," O'Grady advises.

UL students face into exams in January, so after New Year's Day, Mannix McNamara recommends focusing on being organised and beginning a study regime. Coming to the college for a study environment is much more productive, she says. As there are no lectures taking place, there is plenty of available study space. "Study groups can be a really productive way of learning," she adds.

In late January/early February, UL students have a three-week break between

semesters and that is a good time to organise notes from the first 14-week semester to set them up for the second semester. "Being organised is really the most important thing, even down to keeping lecture notes," says Mannix McNamara. In UL, these are available from a 'print room' or online. "All lecturers are expected to put up lecture notes and previous exam papers so students can see previous questions on these public folders. We would encourage students to access notes on these public folders as much as they can during those weeks as well," she explains.

In UCD, semester one examinations are held in December, so many students may be tempted to catch up on their DVD box sets over Christmas instead of going near anything education related. "It's a good time to review classes you've done in semester one and go over subjects you've had difficulties with and perhaps didn't understand," O'Grady says.

This can be done after students have had a bit of a break and time out, she adds.

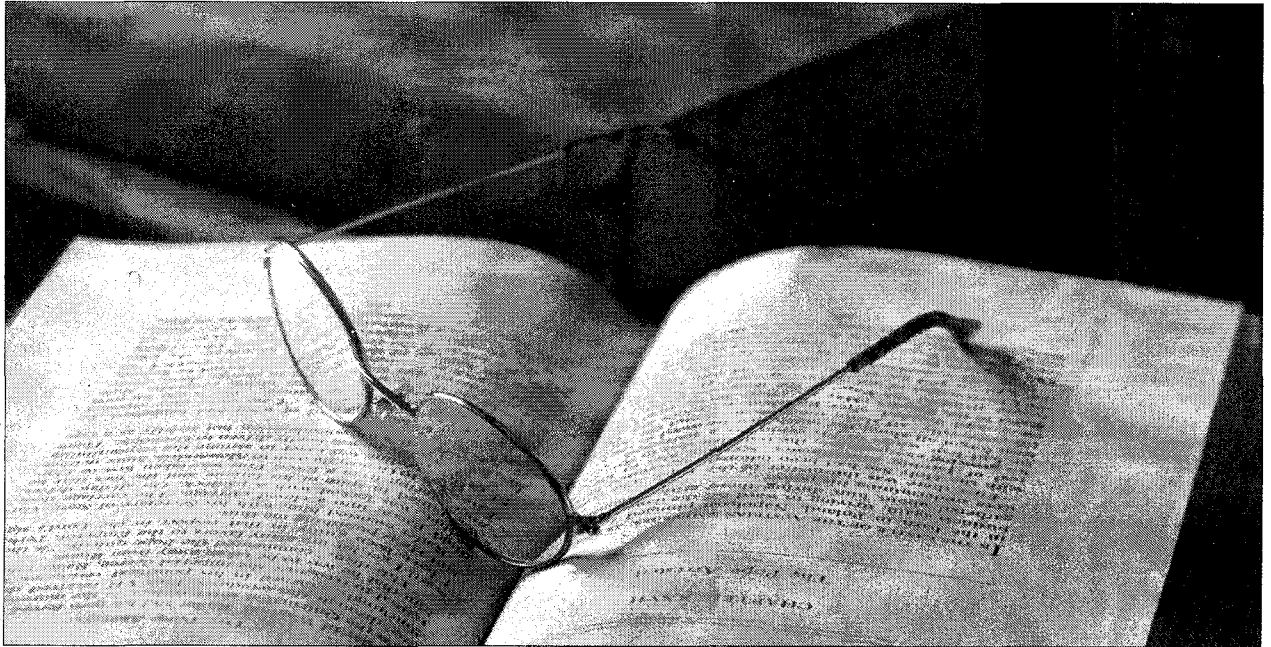
"If your notes are organised, you feel more in control of the situation, so it's easier to see where your gaps are," she explains. "Spend two or three hours arranging your notes by chronological order and by subject area and seeing where there are gaps in your knowledge."

Lecturers can be emailed for notes even over the Christmas break — though they may not reply. UCD uses a system called Blackboard where notes from lectures are available electronically. There are also chatboards where students can chat online about the subject and ask questions of other students and their lecturers.

Managing time is very important and students should make sure they get a good mix of exercise and free time. People have to have fun as well as study, says O'Grady.

Taking a break after a long term, she adds, is important. "We all need time out and relaxation over Christmas," O'Grady concludes.

**'It is important people get their holiday first before throwing themselves into college work'**



#### **TIPS FOR TIP-TOP STUDYING**

- The environment needs to be very productive. Ensure the room is not too hot and there is good circulation. The hotter you are, the less successfully you can study
- The study area should be relatively quiet. There is a debate as to whether people should study with music or without — whichever works for the individual is best as long as it does not cause disruption
- Access to the right materials is important. If you study at home rather than in college, you may not have access to the books you need
- Advance planning is required as regards having the right books and notes with you if you plan to study from home, which could be 200 miles away from the college library
- Time management is vital. Write down on a sheet of paper what you are spending your time on and you will see where you are losing your time
- Build relaxation and exercise into your day. When study becomes blocked get out for a walk
- Don't leave everything until May. Sort out your notes and study plans now and life will be much easier when the evenings get longer. It is better to sort out half a year's work now rather than trying to sort a full year's work at the end of the academic year.