

cutline

FREE GUIDE

FOR OTAGO HEALTH SCIENCES FIRST YEAR

starting HSFY 2027

what i wish someone told me in year 13

written by Otago **med students** who sat HSFY

the papers, the numbers, the study system, the stuff nobody says out loud

an independent student guide · not affiliated with the University of Otago

do i need L3 physics?

should i study over summer?

how hard is CHEM191?

do i need an ipad?

is it toxic?

am i smart enough?

read this first

Every year I see year 13s asking the same questions about HSFY. Do I need level 3 physics? Am I cooked if I didn't take bio? Should I study over summer? How hard is CHEM191? Do I need an iPad? So this is basically everything I wish someone had told me before I started, tidied up and filled in with what we've learned tutoring hundreds of HSFY students since.

who's writing this

I did HSFY in 2025 and I'm in med now. The rest of the Cutline crew are Otago med and dent students who went through the same year, and between us we've written a few thousand original practice questions to the published learning objectives for each paper, and talked to a lot of stressed first-years. This guide is our experience plus the stuff we've verified from Otago's own published figures.

how to use it

It's in five parts and you don't have to read it in order. If you're worried about NCEA subjects, start with part 1. If you want to know what the papers are actually like, part 2. If you want the study system (honestly the most important bit), part 3. Skim the bold lines and the yellow boxes if you're short on time.

the one-sentence version

HSFY is a year of boring decisions compounding: do today's lecture, do today's reviews, fix what you got wrong, sleep, repeat. Nothing revolutionary. It just works.

the honest disclaimer

This is our experience plus Otago's published numbers as at 2026. Papers, weightings, dates and plussage rules can change every year and are set by each department.

Anything official: listen to Otago, not to some random med student.

Check your 2027 course outlines when they come out.

Cutline is an independent student project. We are not affiliated with, employed by, or endorsed by the University of Otago.

how to read the boxes

blue rule a system or a mechanic worth copying

amber rule a trap, a caveat or a thing that costs people marks

yellow a real thing that happened to a real student

questions after reading?

Genuinely anything: NCEA subjects, halls, papers, routines, med vs dent, what uni is like. Message us on Instagram @cutline.nz or through **cutline.nz**. If we know, we'll answer. If we don't, we'll find someone who does.

what's inside

41 pages. Five parts. Read the part you're worried about first.

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if you only read three pages

- **page 5:** you probably know enough already
- **page 23:** rereading doesn't work, and what to do instead
- **page 38:** the would and wouldn't list





01

before you start

in this part

- you probably know enough already
- subject by subject: took it or not
- should you study over summer?
- the year at a glance
- the words nobody explains
- the numbers: what the year is for

the point of it

Most year 13 stress is about the wrong thing. You're worried you're missing a subject. The actual risk is turning up in February without any idea how you're going to study consistently for nine months.

You do not need to know HSFY before you start HSFY. Sounds obvious, but every year I watch people stress because they didn't take one particular subject, or decide they need to spend the whole summer pre-learning anatomy.

For reference, in year 13 I did calculus, physics, chemistry, biology, English and a language. Looking back, level 3 biology, calculus and physics specifically were nowhere near as necessary as I thought. HSFY teaches a lot of the foundations from a pretty basic level, sometimes genuinely closer to level 2 before it builds up. Calculus especially is not some massive prerequisite: if you can rearrange an equation and do basic maths you're already in a decent place.

Chemistry is the high school subject I'd value most going in. Aqueous chemistry and thermochemistry helped me in CHEM191. But CHEM191 is not NCEA chemistry 2.0 either. A lot of the organic stuff, mechanisms and stereochemistry felt new to everyone anyway.

the bigger danger

Missing an NCEA subject is a small, closable gap. Going into HSFY without a study system is the gap that actually costs people the year, because HSFY doesn't demand a serious method the way NCEA never did. You could read things in year 13, more or less remember them, and do fine. Then you get launched into a cohort of over two thousand people competing for a few hundred places, where method matters enormously, and nobody ever taught you one.

The trap is what happens next: people work harder with the same passive method, hit a ceiling, and conclude they're not clever enough. Usually they are. They're stuck in a rut and nobody told them the rut was the problem. **Fix your method in the first few weeks, not the last few.** That's most of part 3.

the quick answer, by subject

didn't
take

verdict

biology

you're fine. HUBS and CELS start from the ground up.

calculus

you're fine. HSFY maths is rearranging equations, units and graphs.

physics

PHSI191 needs a bit more work at the start. You're not doomed.

chemistry

the one I'd actually look over before the year starts. They still teach it from the beginning.

Level 3 gets you in the door. It does not predict your HSFY rank.

a real one

One of the people who did best in my year hadn't touched physics since year 11, and some people with excellence in all three sciences had a much harder year than they expected. The difference was who did their reviews every day, and who didn't.



1.2

subject by subject: took it or not

what each NCEA subject actually gives you, and what to do if you skipped it

subject	what it helps with	if you didn't take it
chemistry	Moles, concentration, acids and bases, equilibrium, energetics and bonding all reappear in CHEM191, and being comfortable reading structures saves time in organics.	Spend a couple of relaxed weeks over summer on moles, pH, aqueous chemistry and interpreting structures. Don't try to pre-learn organic mechanisms. CHEM191 introduces them properly.
physics	Rearranging equations, units, vectors and basic mechanics make the first weeks of PHSI191 feel familiar instead of foreign.	Get comfortable with algebra, units, graphs, forces and energy. PHSI191 is physics for health science students, not engineers. It builds up from there.
biology	Cells, DNA and a bit of genetics give you vocabulary for CELS191, and body systems give you a head start on HUBS.	Honestly fine. HUBS191 and CELS191 both start at a level anyone can follow. The problem in these papers is volume, not entry difficulty.
calculus	Confidence rearranging and substituting. That's about it.	You're fine. There's no calculus in HSFY worth naming. Practise rearranging formulas and working with powers of ten.
statistics	Helps a little with the biostatistics block in HUBS191 and a lot with STAT115 if you pick it as your 8th paper.	STAT115 starts from scratch with no maths prerequisite. Nothing to do now.
english / writing	HUBS finals have mini-essays, POPH192 has an essay progress test, MAOR102 is half written work. Being able to write clearly under time is quietly valuable.	Practise writing a clear paragraph in ten minutes. It's a skill you can build during the year, not before it.

watch out: the "I did bio so HUBS will be easy" trap

Taking a subject at NCEA makes the first two weeks feel comfortable, which is exactly when people stop doing reviews. Then week six arrives with two hundred new terms and the comfortable people are further behind than the nervous ones who built a routine on day one. Prior knowledge buys you a head start, not a free pass.

what actually predicts a good HSFY year

- ✓ you have a place and a time you can reliably study, most days
- ✓ you know how you're going to organise twelve lectures a week
- ✓ you know what you'll do on the days motivation disappears
- ✓ you can say, in a sentence, why you're doing HSFY at all

1.3 should you study over summer?

sure. but please also have a summer

Yes, a bit. But please do not spend your last summer before university sitting inside doing six hours of HUBS a day. Go see your friends. Sleep. Have a life. **The most useful summer prep is learning how to study, not what to study.**

for PHSI191, be comfortable with

- ☐ basic algebra and rearranging equations
- ☐ units, unit conversions and powers of ten
- ☐ reading and sketching graphs
- ☐ vectors, forces, basic mechanics
- ☐ energy: kinetic, potential, work, power

Only if you're keen after that: fluids, thermodynamics, optics, radiation. You do NOT need to teach yourself an engineering physics course.

for CHEM191, be comfortable with

- ☐ moles, concentration, dilutions
- ☐ acids, bases, pH, buffers at a basic level
- ☐ aqueous chemistry and equilibrium
- ☐ thermochemistry and energetics
- ☐ basic bonding and reading a structure

Organic chemistry: optional. CHEM191 organics will be new material for nearly everyone regardless.

what I'd actually do with december and january

1. **Learn Anki properly** before semester starts (page 25).
Not "download it". Cloze cards, image occlusion, tags, suspending, what a good card looks like. Don't wait until you're drowning in lectures to find out what FSRS means.
2. **Try active recall on something**, anything. Read a page, close it, write what you remember, check. Notice how different it feels from rereading. That feeling is the whole year.
3. **Brush up chem or physics** if either was weak, using the lists above. A couple of hours a week is plenty.
4. **Sort logistics**. Laptop, calculator, lab coat, timetable, where you'll study in your hall.
5. **Then enjoy your summer**. Seriously.

what I would not do

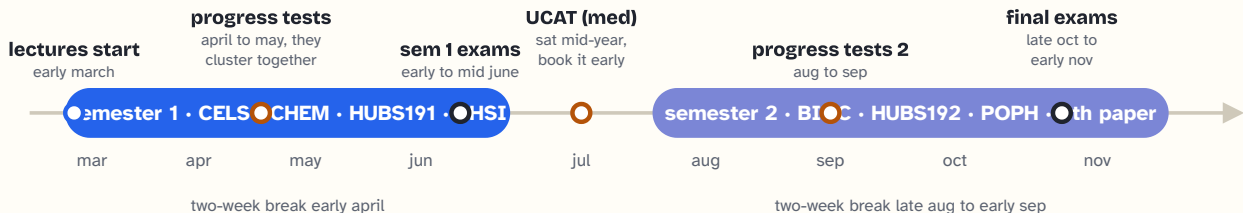
Memorise HUBS or CELS lectures in December. There's so much specific content once the course starts, and the slides you'd learn from won't be the 2027 slides. Learn how to study first.

a real one

A guy in my hall spent his whole summer making a full set of HUBS191 notes from a friend's old slides. Week three, the course was reordered, half of it wasn't examinable any more, and he was still rereading his beautiful notes instead of doing questions. One of the smartest people in the year, and it took him until May to catch up.

1.4 the year at a glance

twelve months, seven compulsory papers, one ranking



then over summer: med and dent rank the whole cohort and offers go out

2026 shape for reference (sem 1 lectures 1 March, exams 3 to 17 June; sem 2 from 13 July, exams 19 October to 7 November). 2027 dates will shift a little. The shape won't.

12

lectures a week: three per paper, 50 minutes each

2

lecture streams, all recorded. attendance is not tracked

70%

of most papers is the final exam. progress tests are usually 15 to 20%

7+1

compulsory papers plus an optional 8th. med counts your best 7

what a normal week looks like

Slides and learning objectives usually drop on the Sunday or Monday of the week (HUBS192 the day before each lecture). Every paper runs three lectures a week, so you're absorbing twelve fifty-minute lectures, plus a lab or tutorial for one or two papers, plus whatever reviews and questions you owe yourself from last week. Nobody checks you're there. Nobody chases you. That freedom is the best and worst part of HSFY, and it's the subject of part 3.

Labs and POPH tutorials are compulsory terms

requirements: miss them without going through the proper process and you can fail the paper regardless of your marks. Lab content and things said out loud in lectures are examinable.

the collision nobody warns you about

Progress tests cluster. The PHSI191 test tends to land near a HUBS191 test and you won't prepare fully for both. When that happens, protect the mark you can't get back: prioritise the paper WITHOUT plussage (page 16). A bad PHSI test can be overwritten by a strong final. A bad HUBS test is locked in.

1.5 the words nobody explains

you'll hear all of these in week one. here's what they mean

HSFY

Health Sciences First Year. The one Otago year that decides entry into med, dent, physio, pharmacy and more. Everyone sits the same seven papers.

GPA

Your average mark across your HSFY papers, out of 100, as Otago calculates it for admissions. Med counts your best seven papers including the 8th if you took one. Every paper is load-bearing.

LAT

Lab assessment test. Small online tests attached to labs, usually open book, sometimes with multiple attempts. Worth a couple of percent each. The cheapest marks of the year, and people forget them.

terms requirement

A condition of passing the paper at all, separate from marks. Lab attendance and POPH tutorials are terms requirements. Missing them silently is one of the few unrecoverable mistakes available to you.

general category

The main med and dent admissions pathway for first-years, ranked on GPA, plus a UCAT threshold for med. Other categories (Māori, Pacific, rural, and so on) sit alongside it within the same total intake.

8th paper

An optional extra paper in semester 2. Popular picks are MAOR102, STAT115 and MATH130. It counts toward the same GPA, so pick one you can score highly in (page 19).

MCQ / SAQ

Multiple-choice question, short-answer question. Most HSFY marks are MCQ. The MCQ sections of HUBS, CELS and BIOC past papers are never released (page 26).

the cutline

The GPA below which you don't get an offer. Not published in advance, and it moves every year with the cohort. Our name, and the point of the year.

progress test (PT)

The mid-semester test in each paper, usually worth 15 to 20 percent. Mostly MCQ. CELS191's is on a Saturday morning. They tend to cluster in the same fortnight.

plussage

If your final exam percentage beats your progress test percentage, the final replaces it. In 2026 this applied to the PHSI191 progress test. It turns that test into an attempt you can only gain from. Confirm in your own course outline.

learning objectives (LOs)

The list at the front of each lecture saying what you should be able to do afterwards. The examiners write questions from these. Use them to decide what matters instead of guessing.

UCAT

The aptitude test for med applicants, sat mid-year. Dent no longer requires it. In 2026 Otago required the 20th percentile in verbal reasoning and the 10th in situational judgement. A threshold, not a ranking tool, for Otago.

streams

Each lecture runs twice, to two halves of the cohort. Both are recorded. Which stream you're in decides when your day starts, and nothing else.

Anki, FSRS, cloze

Anki is the free spaced-repetition flashcard app most of HSFY lives on. FSRS is its modern scheduling algorithm. A cloze card hides one word in a sentence. Learn these before February (page 25).

a real one

Someone in my lab group didn't know what plussage was until the second PHSI test. They'd split the collision fortnight evenly between PHSI and HUBS "to be fair to both", and locked in a mediocre HUBS mark to protect a PHSI mark a good final would have overwritten anyway. Read your course outlines. All of them. Week one.

1.6 the numbers: what the year is for

Otago publishes these. almost nobody shows them to year 13s

1,141

applied to Otago medicine for 2026
(all categories)

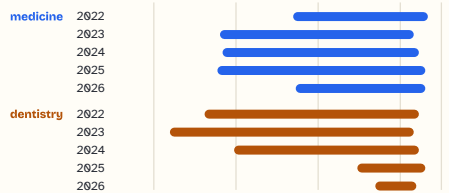
347

were admitted. 118 of them through
the general category

93.1 to 99

GPA range of successful general-
category med applicants, 2026

GPA range of successful applicants



Lowest to highest successful GPA each year.
Medicine: general category. Dentistry: as published.
Source: University of Otago admission statistics,
Medicine and Dentistry, 2022 to 2026 intakes.

year	med applied	admitted	general	general GPA range
2022	1,003	293	104	93.00 to 99.14
2023	928	289	132	89.43 to 98.43
2024	960	322	138	89.57 to 98.71
2025	943	338	132	89.29 to 99.00
2026	1,141	347	118	93.14 to 99.00

year	dent applied	admitted	GPA range
2022	530	66	88.71 to 98.71
2023	596	86	87.00 to 98.43
2024	674	90	90.14 to 98.71
2025	889	93	96.14 to 99.00*
2026	1,032	101	97.00 to 98.57*

Historical figures, not indicative of future years (Otago's words), ranked out of a cohort of roughly two thousand. * Otago prints a second figure beside these two ranges (97.00, 97.43) without saying what it is. Check the source before planning around the margin.

don't aim for the bottom

The lowest successful GPA in a year is an outlier in a softer year. Aim well clear of it.

the threshold moves

The med floor swung nearly four points between 2023 and 2026. Don't plan around last year's lowest number.

every paper counts

At a 97-plus dentistry floor there's no room for a weak paper. The one you like least usually decides it.



02

the papers

in this part

- the paper map and how each is marked
- HUBS191, CELS191, CHEM191, PHSI191
- semester 2: HUBS192, BIOC192, POPH192
- the 8th paper

the point of it

CHEM and PHSI are the papers people worry about because prior knowledge changes how the start feels. CELS and HUBS are different: less "I don't understand anything" and more "why is there this much to remember".

2.1 the paper map

how each paper was marked in 2026. confirm yours in the 2027 course outlines

lab and internal work progress tests final exam

HUBS191

sem 1

human body systems 1: musculoskeletal, nervous, endocrine, immune, biostatistics



10 · 20 · 70. Lab mark is attendance. Two PTs (MCQ plus a practice essay). Final: 80 MCQ plus about four mini-essays in 3 hours.

CELS191

sem 1

cell and molecular biology, genetics, microbiology

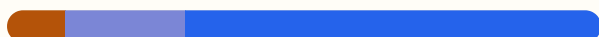


10 · 20 · 70. PT is on a Saturday morning. Final mixes MCQ with short-answer questions.

CHEM191

sem 1

chemistry for health sciences: aqueous, energetics, organic, a lot of it

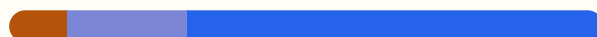


10 · 20 · 70. Everything is MCQ. Past papers repeat their structure heavily.

PHSI191

sem 1

physics for health sciences: mechanics, fluids, thermo, electricity, optics, radiation



10 · 20 · 70. Final: 55 MCQ in 3 hours with an A4 cheat sheet. **Plussage on the PT.**

HUBS192

sem 2

human body systems 2: cardiovascular, respiratory, GI, renal, reproductive



Same shape as HUBS191. Diagram-heavy. Slides drop the day before each lecture.

BIOC192

sem 2

biochemistry: proteins, enzymes, molecular biology, metabolism

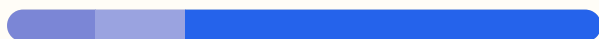


30 internal · 70 final. Final: 40 MCQ plus 60 marks of SAQ in 3 hours. The department tells you what's assessed.

POPH192

sem 2

population health: epidemiology, study design, evidence, health in Aotearoa



PT1 essay 15 · PT2 MCQ 15 · final 70 (MCQ plus SAQ). Tutorials are compulsory.

8th paper

sem 2 · optional

STAT115, MAOR102 or MATH130 (usually)



Varies. STAT115: 7 open-book assignments, 3 short tests, ~89 MCQ final with formula sheet. MAOR102: 50 · 50. MATH130: working is marked.

my semester 1 ranking, hardest to easiest

CHEM > CELS > HUBS > PHSI. This is very biased, because I've always been decent at maths and physics-type things. Someone who hates maths could easily put PHSI first. The honest read: CHEM and PHSI are where prior knowledge decides how the first month feels, and CELS and HUBS are where volume decides how the last month feels.

the free marks in every paper

Go to your labs. Do the LATs the day they open. They're a couple of percent each, open book, and forgetting one is a painful way to lose ground in a year decided by fractions of a GPA point.

2.2 HUBS191

the concepts aren't outrageous. the volume is

HUBS is anatomy and physiology foundations, and honestly the ideas usually aren't that hard. The problem is the volume: structures, functions, terminology, processes, relationships, then suddenly there's another lecture while you're still trying to remember yesterday's.

This is where spaced repetition becomes massive. You cannot understand something once on Monday and assume your brain will kindly hold it until June. You need to keep retrieving it. That's why half of HSFY turns into waking up and doing Anki: you're constantly retaining previous content while learning new content.

it's a knowledge-gap paper

HUBS is not an intelligence test. Most people who struggle know most of the content. They get caught by small details they didn't realise they were missing, and by MCQs written specifically to make them second-guess. Two options will look defensible. That's not the department being cruel: a paper that two thousand capable students all ace can't rank anyone.

Trust the answer you know is right. The most common way people lose marks in HUBS is talking themselves out of a correct first instinct. If you knew it when you read the stem, changing it under pressure is usually a downgrade.

understanding vs memorising

Understanding beats blind memorising, especially when you can link ideas. But people give unrealistic advice here. Sometimes you don't have time to build a beautiful deep understanding of every detail. Sometimes the lecturer wants you to know five facts. Learn the five facts and move on.



my HUBS system

lecture → understand → turn the important stuff into recall material → daily spaced repetition → lots of practice questions

- ✓ cover the summary table (hormones, immune cells, reflex stages) and rebuild it from blank
- ✓ label diagrams cold, then say what each structure does. name plus function is how HUBS asks it
- ✓ trace mechanisms: narrate every step of a feedback loop, then predict what happens if one step fails
- ✓ practise MCQs weekly. recognition is not recall and your brain lies about how much you know

the final has writing in it

During the semester HUBS is MCQ. The final adds about four mini-essays. Another reason to practise producing information rather than recognising it.

2.3 CELS191

same volume problem as HUBS, now with cells, genes and microbes

CELS was my second-hardest semester 1 paper. It's cell biology, genetics, molecular biology and microbiology, and it has the HUBS problem: heaps of content, processes stacked on processes.

Understanding first, then active recall and questions. There are processes where actually getting what's happening saves you a ridiculous amount of memorisation (the central dogma, mitosis and meiosis, respiration), but you still need to retain a lot of specifics.

the progress test is the most scopeable thing in the paper

The CELS191 PT covers a defined early slice of lectures and is worth about 20 percent, on a Saturday morning. Unlike the final, you know almost exactly what's in play. Confirm the lecture range with the coordinator, write it down, and revise that. Students routinely revise the whole paper, run out of time on the material that's actually tested, and go in thin on exactly the content carrying the marks.

reconstruct, don't review

Most of the early material is processes, which makes it perfect for retrieval. Close everything and produce the sequence from blank: transcription and translation, the stages of mitosis in order, where errors arise in meiosis. Reproducing it cold and fixing what you missed beats redrawing a beautiful diagram of it.

mix the genetics problems

Don't practise crosses, linkage and population genetics in separate blocks. They blur together under pressure and the test won't label them. Mixed practice trains the identification step, which is where the marks go.



genetics: which problem is this?

you see	it's probably
two traits, a 9:3:3:1 vibe	dihybrid cross
recombinants, map units	linkage
allele frequencies, p and q	Hardy-Weinberg
a family tree	pedigree: work out the mode first

a real one

The CELS practicals move fast and pair you up. If you haven't done the pre-lab, your partner carries you and does the thinking for both of you. Everyone remembers who that person was.

CHEM gets weird because everyone enters with a completely different background. Someone who loves chemistry and got excellence all through NCEA feels very differently from someone who hasn't touched it in two years.

Some of the aqueous and energetics material felt familiar from school. Later content felt much newer, and there's more memorisation than people expect from a chemistry paper.

understand first, then do an unreasonable number of questions

Chem is one of those subjects where looking at someone else's worked answer makes you feel like a genius. Then one small thing changes in the next question and you have no idea what's going on. **Actually attempt questions. Get them wrong. Figure out WHY. Repeat.**

work backwards from the exam

Thirty-six lectures, dense slides, a textbook on top. It looks enormous. But the exams have historically assessed the same core ideas, reworded each year, and only a handful of concepts per lecture are examinable in MCQ form. Once you've worked a few past papers the skeleton reappears: an equilibrium calculation, a buffer or pH problem, a mechanism, a thermodynamics or redox question. Studying every slide equally is the most common way to waste the semester.

That doesn't mean skip lectures. Lectures are the input. Past papers tell you what the output looks like. Get them early (week three, not week thirteen), attempt them cold, and tally which concepts recur across years. That tally is your priority list.



where students lose easy marks

- **Forgetting the LATs.** Open book, a couple of percent each, the cheapest marks in the paper.
- **Practising one type at a time.** A page of equilibrium problems teaches you to solve equilibrium problems when you already know that's what they are. The exam doesn't tell you.
- **Leaving organic mechanisms until last.** They reward practice more than anything else in the paper and they're hard to cram.

both exams are MCQ

You're not writing a derivation. You're recognising which of the options is right, quickly, under time. That's a trained skill separate from knowing chemistry, and the only way to build it is volume.

2.5 PHSI191 and plussage

my easiest of the four. very biased. also the paper with the rule everyone should know

The big thing with PHSI: knowing the formula does NOT mean you know how to answer the question. You look at a situation, understand what's happening, work out which relationship applies, then use it correctly.

Mechanics, fluids, thermo, electricity, optics and radiation can sound terrifying if you haven't done physics. Remember this is physics designed for health science students, not engineers. Build the fundamentals, then do questions. Lots of them.

the final

55 MCQ in three hours with an A4 cheat sheet, and past papers repeat their structure: a kinematics or energy problem, something on fluids, a thermodynamics question, a circuit, an optics question, a radiation calculation. Use them as a map of what matters.

Practise closed-book on purpose. Working problems with the sheet in front of you feels efficient and robs you of the retrieval that builds skill. Attempt fully closed-book, then use the sheet to confirm. Build a rolling deck of "formula plus its conditions" rather than cramming the sheet the night before, because confidently applying the wrong equation is the classic MCQ trap.

Mix the modules. Alternate a mechanics, a fluids and an optics problem instead of finishing one module at a time. You're rehearsing identifying which physics a question needs when nothing tells you.



plussage, explained once

If your final exam percentage is higher than your progress test percentage, the final replaces the PT mark. The PT becomes an attempt you can only gain from.

Strategy: when the PHSI PT collides with a HUBS PT (it does), prioritise the paper without plussage. Protect the mark you can't get back.

a real one (mine)

In 2025 I completely failed the PHSI191 progress test. Not a near miss, a fail. I focused hard on the final, got 100, and because plussage applied the overall result came out at 100. A genuine failure became invisible.

caveats

Which papers carry plussage and on what terms is set by each department and can change. Confirm it in your 2027 course outline. It only rescues the PT: not LATs, not terms, not the final. And sit the PT properly anyway. It's free feedback.

2.6 semester 2: HUBS192

by semester 2 you know what the game is

Semester 2 is HUBS192, BIOC192 and POPH192, plus your 8th paper if you take one. It starts about a month after semester 1 exams, in mid July, with UCAT (for med) sat in between.

HUBS192 continues human systems: cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, renal and urinary, reproductive. Most students find it easier than HUBS191, and it isn't because the content is lighter. HUBS191 is groundwork that can feel like several unrelated mini-courses stapled together. HUBS192 goes system by system, and each one is a coherent story: a job to do, structures that do it, consequences when it fails. New facts have somewhere obvious to attach.

You also arrive with HUBS191 behind you. Homeostasis, feedback loops and the vocabulary are already in place, so you're building rather than starting.

still a knowledge-gap paper

Easier doesn't mean easy. HUBS192 is examined exactly like HUBS191: fine-grained MCQs written to make you second-guess, plus mini-essays in the final. Same failure mode, same fix. Trust the answer you know is right.

study it as systems, not facts

- ✓ **learn each system as a story.** what it's for, what does it, what happens at each step, what fails and what follows
- ✓ **do the what-if version.** change one variable and reason out the consequences. if a pressure changes, what happens to filtration?
- ✓ **work the diagrams properly.** HUBS192 is diagram-heavy. label cold from unlabelled figures, then say what each structure does
- ✓ **trace the flow.** where does this blood, air or filtrate go next. sequences are far more robust than isolated labels



diagram questions, in the room

- **orient first.** which way round is the figure? most panicked mistakes are misreading the view (the body's left, not yours)
- **find the labelled structure, then read what's actually asked.** it's often "what does this do", not "what is this"
- **use the neighbours.** anatomy is relational. if a label is ambiguous, identify what's around it
- **answer the actual question.** identifying the structure correctly and then answering a different question about it is a classic way to lose a mark

slides come late

HUBS192 releases slides the day before each lecture, not at the start of the week. Plan your pre-reading around that instead of waiting for a Sunday drop that isn't coming.

2.7 BIOC192 and POPH192

the paper people underestimate, and the paper people fear for no reason

BIOC192

Builds off CELS: proteins, enzymes, molecular biology, metabolism. Lots of processes, lots of understanding plus recall. It has famously dense slides, and yet students routinely come out of it with high marks. Part of the reason is worth knowing early: **BIOC runs sessions on what's in scope. Go to them.** Students who do arrive at the exam knowing which parts of those dense slides they actually need and which parts are there for reference.

The students who struggle are usually the ones who skipped those sessions, tried to learn every line of every slide with equal weight, ran out of time, and retained a thin layer of everything.

how to study it

- **get the assessed-content guidance first.** before you make a single flashcard, know what's in scope
- **work top-down.** get the concept clear, then layer detail onto it
- **redraw pathways from blank.** reproduce glycolysis or the TCA cycle, then fill in only what you dropped
- **explain the regulation.** for any control point, say why the cell would switch it on or off. the harder questions reward that

30 percent is internal

More of your BIOC mark is decided before the final than in any other paper, and the final is 40 MCQ plus 60 marks of short answer, so recognition alone won't carry you. Lab maths (dilutions, Beer-Lambert, reading a pipette) is examinable and cheap to get right.

POPH192

Population health: epidemiology, study design, evidence, critical thinking, health in Aotearoa. It gets a ridiculous amount of propaganda attached to it. Every cohort tells the next one that pop health is the killer, before anyone has sat a lecture. **It isn't. It's probably the most overestimated paper in HSFY.**

Two reasons for the reputation, neither about difficulty. It's the one non-science paper in a science-heavy year, so people assume unfamiliar means dangerous. And the fear is handed down. Speaking as someone who believed the hype: the regret isn't that POPH was hard. It's spending a semester scared of a paper that turned out to be genuinely enjoyable and, if you're heading into health, the one that actually talks about the society you'll practise in.

why people actually do badly in it

They study it like a science paper, memorising definitions, when the exam asks them to reason: which study design fits, what could confound this, how strong is this evidence. You can't memorise your way to that.

- **do a bit most days.** the concepts build, it rewards steady contact over heroic cramming
- **argue with the material.** for any study described, say what design it is, its main weakness, and how you'd improve it
- **go to the tutorials.** they're a terms requirement anyway, and the essay PT is where writing practice pays

2.8 the 8th paper

it counts toward the same GPA as everything else, so pick one you can score highly in

Students agonise over their seven core papers and then choose the eighth almost at random. At the GPA levels med and dent now require, every paper is load-bearing. One mediocre result in a paper you picked casually can cost more than the gap between a good and a great core result.

Nobody is comparing your 8th paper choice. The question isn't "which is most interesting" or "which looks best". It's which one you can reliably do well in.



paper	what it is	pick it if
MAOR102	Māori society: worldview, history, contemporary Aotearoa. Half internal, half final. Conversational and concept-based.	you're stronger at writing and ideas than numbers. Also genuinely relevant if you're going into health here.
STAT115	Intro biostatistics. No maths prerequisite, starts from data and probability, uses R throughout. Seven open-book assignments, three short tests, MCQ final with a formula sheet.	you want the lightest computational load with no maths background. The one thing that hurts people is falling behind early: concepts stack.
MATH130	Fundamentals of modern mathematics. Introductory and approachable. Not all MCQ: working is marked.	you're comfortable with maths and happy to show a full method, not just land on the number.

do you even need one?

Med counts your best seven papers, including the 8th if you took it. So an 8th paper can only help your GPA if it beats your weakest core result, and it costs you time in the semester with HUBS192, BIOC and POPH in it. Most people take one. Decide based on whether you can realistically score above your likely weakest core paper.

Check the current admissions rules for your programme. Physio, pharmacy and the others have their own requirements.

one thing not to do

Don't pick a paper because you heard it's a bludge and then ignore it all semester. Every one of these is easy to score well in if you do the work and easy to score badly in if you treat it as free marks. The paper doesn't care that it was your eighth choice.



03

how to actually study

in this part

- nobody is going to chase you
- build the system before february
- rereading doesn't work
- the weekly loop
- anki, done properly
- practice questions and the missing MCQs
- mix it up and diagnose it
- hours are the wrong measure
- don't fall behind
- exam-room rules

the point of it

I knew ridiculously smart people who struggled in HSFY, and it was almost never because they couldn't understand the content. They couldn't apply themselves consistently for long enough. Motivation comes and goes. Systems survive the days you can't be bothered.

3.1 nobody is going to chase you

HSFY is honestly way more chill than I expected. that's the problem

Before starting I thought HSFY was going to be insanely serious and competitive 24/7. Then you get there and realise it's uni. Nobody really cares what you're doing.

High school was stricter. Teachers checked whether you'd done the homework, where you were, whether you'd submitted. At uni you suddenly have a huge amount of freedom. You can sleep in, watch a lecture later, tell yourself you'll catch up tomorrow, skip reviews, go out, whatever. And THAT is both the best and worst part of HSFY.

Because nobody chases you when you fall behind. Monday's lectures arrive. Then Tuesday's. Then Wednesday's. Then your old Anki cards. Then you have a lab, and another paper has a progress test. Suddenly your "I'll catch up this weekend" plan requires a 73-hour Saturday.

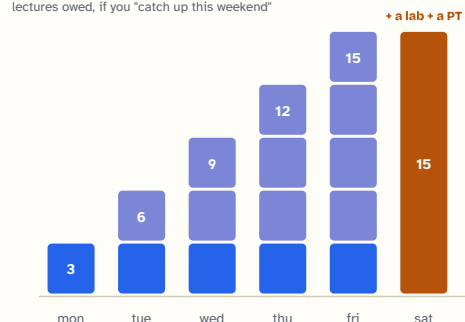
That's what makes HSFY hard. Most individual concepts are not insanely difficult. It's a massive amount of relatively manageable information thrown at you continuously, and you have to manage it yourself.

the three-days-on, four-days-off cycle

HSFY really punishes "study insanely hard for three days, burn out, do basically nothing for four days, panic, repeat". You can get away with that in NCEA. Here, the person doing a sustainable amount every single day very often outperforms someone technically smarter but wildly inconsistent.

how a week gets away from you

lectures owed, if you "catch up this weekend"



■ today's three lectures ■ ones you're carrying
■ the 73-hour saturday

a real one

A friend in my hall built a spreadsheet to track his study hours. It was beautiful. Colour-coded, weekly totals, a running average. He logged over forty hours one week in April and his practice scores didn't move, because most of those hours were rereading slides he'd already read. He binned the spreadsheet and started doing questions. That worked.

3.2 build the system before february

the most important thing to figure out is not a subject

If you're in year 13 right now, I'd honestly care more about answering these than about any NCEA subject. Write your answers down. Genuinely. **Motivation comes and goes. Systems survive the days you can't be bothered.**

1. where do I study best?

Your room, a hall study space, Central library, a cafe. Somewhere you can go to every day without deciding to. Deciding is where the day leaks.

5. how am I going to use active recall?

Blank-page recall, questions, teaching it out loud, drawing from memory. Pick two you'll actually do. Page 23 is why this matters more than anything else in the guide.

2. when do I actually think clearly?

Not when you think you should. Cognitive performance peaks at different times for different people. Put your hardest active work at your peak and admin in your trough.

6. what do I do when motivation disappears?

It will. Usually in May and again in September. The answer is a minimum day: reviews cleared, one lecture watched, ten questions. Small enough to do when you hate everything.

3. how am I going to organise twelve lectures a week?

A folder per paper, one running document per lecture, the learning objectives at the top. Whatever it is, decide it now so you're not designing a filing system in week three.

7. what does "caught up" mean for me?

Define it: lectures watched the day they're released, reviews cleared daily, this week's questions done by Sunday. If you can't say whether you're caught up, you're not.

4. does Anki work for me?

Find out over summer, on something low-stakes. If it doesn't, decide what your spaced repetition will be instead. You need one. See page 25.

8. why am I doing HSFY at all?

Probably the most important one. "Because my parents" and "because I got good marks" run out around week eight. Find the version of the answer that's yours.

the minimum day

Decide it now and write it somewhere you'll see it: what is the smallest amount of work that still counts as "I showed up"? On the worst days, do that and go to bed without guilt. The people who make the cutline rarely have the cleverest system. They have one simple enough to run on a bad day.

3.3 rereading doesn't work

notes aren't automatically studying either

Rereading makes information feel familiar, and your brain mistakes familiarity for knowing it. That's why you can read a page four times, feel confident, and blank in the exam. **Recognition is not recall.**

When you reread, each pass is easier than the last. That growing fluency feels exactly like learning. It's your brain recognising the shape of something it saw recently, which is a much weaker state than being able to produce it from nothing. The comparison has been tested over and over: students who test themselves remember substantially more days later than students who spend the same time restudying. Rereading and highlighting rate among the weakest techniques available. Practice testing rates among the strongest.

why students keep doing it anyway

Because retrieval feels bad. Closing the notes and reconstructing a pathway is uncomfortable, slow, and full of gaps. Rereading feels smooth. Given a choice between a method that feels productive and one that feels like failing, most people pick the comfortable one. That discomfort is the learning happening. Researchers call it desirable difficulty.

making notes is not automatically studying

Making notes can be part of studying. Making beautiful notes for four hours and never testing yourself on them is not studying particularly effectively. If you love taking notes then take notes, but ask yourself what you're actually going to do with them afterwards. Don't rewrite every lecture into a colour-coded masterpiece. Triage: watch the lecture, get the learning objectives, identify what matters, turn it into concise recall material, move.

what you can still recall a week later
same material, same total time

feels great while doing it



reread the notes

feels bad while doing it



test yourself

Illustrative, but the effect itself is one of the most replicated findings in learning research (Roediger and Karpicke 2006; Dunlosky and colleagues 2013; Carpenter and colleagues 2022).

what to do instead

- ✓ **close the notes and write it out.** the table, the pathway, the mechanism, from blank. the gaps are your real study plan
- ✓ **answer before you read the answer.** reading a worked solution first is the reading trap in a different costume
- ✓ **explain it out loud.** if you can't say why in your own words, you recognise it rather than understand it
- ✓ **use questions as study, not as testing.** they're not the thing you do at the end. they are the studying

the rule of thumb

If your study session felt smooth and pleasant, you probably didn't learn much. If it felt effortful and you kept finding things you couldn't remember, that was the learning.

3.4 the weekly loop

the exact loop the students who built cutline used. if we did HSFY again, this is how we'd run it



1. Attend the lecture, or watch it the same day. Don't try to take perfect notes. Your only job here is exposure and a rough first understanding. The real learning happens in the loop that follows, so don't burn your energy here.

2. Make a first pass of flashcards. Pull the handful of core facts from the slides into quick cards. Keep them ugly. This is raw material, not your final deck.

3. Drill questions for that lecture, the same week. This is the step most people skip and it's where they quietly lose marks. Recognition turns into production. You find out immediately what you understood versus what only felt familiar.

4. Let your mistakes find the weak spots. Every wrong answer is a gift. The progress test should not be the first place you learn a topic is shaky.

5. Rewrite your mistakes as your own cards. Don't copy the question. Reword it into a concept card. Instead of "which plane divides the body into left and right halves?", write "define the sagittal plane". That forces you to encode the concept, not the wording of one MCQ. Single highest-leverage habit in the loop.

6. Simplify what won't stick. Rewrite it in the plainest language you can. If you can explain it to a first-year who hasn't done the lecture, you own it.

7. Review daily. Consistency beats intensity. Clear what's due: your practice set plus your flashcards. Spaced repetition brings each item back right before you'd forget it, so knowledge compounds instead of leaking.

why two engines

Cards build the memory layer: raw facts you shouldn't have to think about. Questions build the application layer: using those facts under exam conditions. Neither replaces the other, and students who only do one usually plateau.

3.5 anki, done properly

no, you don't NEED it. people got into med before Anki existed

But spaced repetition is incredibly useful for HUBS, CELS and BIO, because the problem isn't just learning information. It's retaining hundreds or thousands of pieces of it simultaneously. **If you're going to use Anki, learn it before HSFY starts.**

The spacing effect is one of the most robust findings in learning research: the same study time produces far more durable memory spread across sessions than crammed. Anki automates that, showing each card roughly when you're about to forget it. That's the whole trick.

learn over summer

- ☐ basic and cloze cards, and when each is the right shape
- ☐ image occlusion (huge for anatomy diagrams)
- ☐ tags, decks, suspending cards, how reviews actually schedule
- ☐ FSR, the modern scheduler. turn it on
- ☐ most importantly: what a decent card looks like

what to card, and what not to

Good: anatomy terms, hormone functions, enzyme roles, pathway steps, POPH definitions, PHSI formulas with their conditions.

Bad: whole mechanisms, anything needing multi-step reasoning, "which statistical test fits this scenario". If a card has three sentences on the back, it should have been a practice question.



the four ways students break it

- **making the deck instead of using it.** beautiful cards feel like studying. they're not. one fact, one card, move on. the value is in the reviews
- **letting the queue explode.** miss a week, come back to 800 due cards, quit. 1,300 overdue cards isn't spaced repetition. it's a depressing number on your laptop
- **carding the wrong things.** Anki is for atomic recall. it can't teach you to apply a concept to a scenario, which is what the harder questions want
- **downloading a huge shared deck.** built for someone else's course. you inherit thousands of cards on things Otago doesn't assess and skip the learning step of making your own

the rule

Small, specific, testable. Never a card that asks you to reproduce half a lecture. Ten minutes every day beats a three-hour catch-up on Sunday.

3.6

practice questions and the missing MCQs

probably the highest-return thing you can do. also the thing with the least official practice material

Questions tell you what you actually know, where you're weak, which concepts you keep confusing, and what level of detail is expected. Rereading and thinking "yeah I know this" is not the same as answering a question about it without looking.

the catch: only the written sections are released

HUBS, CELS and BIOC are assessed heavily by multiple choice, but the past papers that get released contain only the short-answer and mini-essay sections. The MCQ sections aren't released. That's normal for exams that draw on a question bank: the examinable core of each lecture is small, and a public bank would soon stop telling students apart.

So you're assessed in one format and given practice material in another. The skill the exam actually tests, reading a stem under time and picking between plausible options written to look right, is trained by volume, and volume is exactly what students can't get from official sources. That's the biggest gap in HSFY prep, and it's nobody's fault. Whatever you practise on, it should be original questions written to the published learning objectives. Cutline's are, and nothing in them comes from a University exam.

CHEM and PHSI are the opposite

Their past papers are released and remarkably consistent year to year. Use them from week three as a map of what gets examined, not as a final rehearsal.

how to work a question set

- ✓ **attempt before you check.** reading a solved question is a far weaker exercise than getting it wrong yourself first
- ✓ **closed book, timed, honest marking.** half marks for "I would have got that" is how people walk in overconfident
- ✓ **mix the topics.** thirty questions on one topic teaches less than thirty mixed, because the exam doesn't tell you which topic you're in
- ✓ **one sentence per wrong answer.** not the right answer. what went wrong in your head (next page)
- ✓ **re-attempt the misses cold** a week later, or a different question on the same concept

Use everything the university gives you: released papers, practice questions, Q&A sessions, your lecturers. You're literally paying to attend the university. Use the university.

don't memorise past answers

The wording changes every year, so a memorised answer doesn't transfer, and it produces a nasty kind of false confidence. Understand why the answer is right and you'll handle the reworded version.

3.7 mix it up and diagnose it

the two habits that turn a score into a study plan

the one-sentence rule

Reading the correct answer and thinking "ah yes, of course" teaches you almost nothing. The learning happens when you work out why the wrong option looked right to you, because that's the actual misconception, and it'll come back in the exam wearing different clothes.

For every question you get wrong, write a single sentence explaining your error. Fifteen seconds each.

"I picked B because I confused the ureter with the urethra."

"I used the equilibrium method when it was a buffer question."

"I knew this and changed my answer at the last second."

"I didn't read that it said least likely."

After two or three weeks you'll have a list, and the pattern in it is your real study plan. It's almost never "I need to know more content". It's one or two recurring failure modes, and each has a targeted fix that's far faster than "study everything again".

interleaving: don't do a whole chapter

Doing a page of one problem type feels efficient and teaches you less than mixing types, because the chapter heading already told you which method to use. Exams are interleaved by design. Nothing in a HSFY paper announces which lecture a question came from. Learn a topic in a block first, then once you've covered two or three, stop practising them separately. It feels worse while you do it. It works better on the day.

the four buckets

Every wrong answer belongs to one of these. Lumping them together as "I need to study more" is why people repeat the same result.

didn't know it

a genuine content gap

fix: learn it, card it, re-attempt cold in a week

misread it

usually a qualifier: always, only, best, least

fix: underline qualifiers before you read options

talked myself out of it

knew it, changed it, lost it. very common in HUBS and CELS

fix: exam-room discipline, not more content

ran out of time

a fluency problem

fix: question volume, timed, not more reading

what it looks like per paper

- **CHEM191:** a K_a calculation, then a Gibbs energy question, then an equilibrium-position problem
- **PHSI191:** a kinematics problem, a fluids problem, a lens problem, alternating
- **CELS191:** a dihybrid cross, a recombination frequency, a Hardy-Weinberg calculation, shuffled
- **STAT115:** the most valuable version. mix scenarios so you have to decide which test applies before computing anything

3.8 hours are the wrong measure

"how many hours do you need to study?" is impossible to answer

Someone can sit in Central library for ten hours and achieve ninety minutes of actual work. Don't measure HSFY in hours. Ask: am I caught up? did I understand today's lectures? did I do my reviews? did I practise? do I actually know the learning objectives? **If yes, go home.**

	mon	tue	wed	thu	fri	sat	sun
morning	reviews 10 min lectures	reviews lectures	reviews lectures	reviews lectures	reviews lectures	sleep in gym	reviews only
midday	lecture lecture	lecture lecture	lab (3 h)	lecture lecture	lecture lecture	mixed question set, timed	off
afternoon	recall 30 min lecture qs	recall 30 min lecture qs	recall 30 min lecture qs	recall 30 min lecture qs	recall 30 min weekly qs	friends outside	older material revisit
evening	gym / walk dinner, people	gym / walk dinner, people	walk dinner, people	gym / walk dinner, people	go out	go out	plan the week early night

 lectures (input only, nothing is learned yet)
 reviews, ten minutes so the queue never becomes a monster
 active recall and questions, the highest-value blocks
 the stuff that makes the study blocks work

There's no magic equation where 8.5 study hours a day guarantees medicine. Yes, you can still go to the gym, have friends, go out sometimes, date people, play games. HSFY isn't supposed to erase your personality. Just understand that if you continually use your freedom to postpone everything, your future self is going to hate you.

The metric to use instead of hours: at the end of a session, what can I now produce from blank that I couldn't this morning? If the answer is nothing, the session was rereading in disguise, however long it lasted.

the most common regret

Not studying too little. Measuring study in hours, cutting the gym, the walks and your friends, ending up isolated and exhausted, and not getting better marks for it. Eight hours of passive review is worse than two hours of active recall, and it costs you your whole day.

3.9 don't fall behind

everyone says this because it's unfortunately true

The worst thing you can do in HSFY is let lectures accumulate. One missed lecture isn't a disaster. Then another comes. Then another. And the biggest trap is trying to "perfectly catch up".

You'll see someone six lectures behind deciding they need perfect colour-coded notes for every lecture before they can continue. No. **Triage.** Watch the lecture. Get the learning objectives. Identify what matters. Turn it into concise recall material. Move. **Perfectionism can absolutely destroy you in HSFY.**

if you're already behind

1. **Stop making resources.** A summary doc, a fresh deck, a colour-coded plan: it feels like progress and it's almost entirely wasted. Whatever you have is what you're working with.
2. **Rank every topic on two axes.** How likely is it to be examined (learning objectives and past papers tell you)? Can I produce it right now, from blank? Your priority is the overlap: likely, and can't produce. That list is short and it's where nearly all your available marks are.
3. **Do questions, not notes.** They train the format, surface gaps you didn't know about, and force retrieval, all at once.
4. **Catch up on the newest lectures first,** then work backwards. Staying current stops the pile growing while you dig.
5. **Protect sleep anyway.** This is the fortnight people sacrifice it, and it's the worst possible time. Studying to 2am and sitting a test depleted is a bad trade in both directions.



the last two weeks before finals

- almost all of your time on questions and fixing what they expose
- mixed sets, not one paper's topics in neat blocks
- your error-diagnosis sentences are the most personalised revision material you own. reread those, not your notes
- the last 48 hours: nothing new. a few questions to stay warm, not a full mock the night before. sort venue, time, ID, what you can bring
- afterwards: don't post-mortem the exam with other people between papers. it's reliably destabilising and you can't act on it. move to the next one

a real one

Someone in my hall laminated a binder. A full, tabbed, laminated set of CELS notes, finished the week before the progress test. It looked incredible. It had never been tested against a single question. The test did not go well. The binder is probably still in a garage somewhere.

3.10 exam-room rules

multi-choice is its own skill. most HSFY marks are multi-choice

Multi-choice tests three things at once: recognition under time (roughly a minute or two a question), discrimination between close options (the wrong answers are written to be attractive to someone with partial understanding), and type identification (the stem doesn't tell you which concept it's testing).

rules that save marks

- ✓ **don't change an answer you were confident about** unless you've found a concrete reason. second-guessing under pressure costs more marks than it saves
- ✓ **answer everything.** there's no negative marking. a blank is a guaranteed zero and a guess isn't
- ✓ **eliminate first.** ruling out two options turns a one-in-five into a one-in-three even when you're unsure
- ✓ **watch the qualifiers.** always, never, only, best, least are doing work in the sentence. misreading one is the single most common avoidable error
- ✓ **don't camp on a question.** flag and move. the last easy question you never reached is worth the same as the hard one you agonised over
- ✓ **orient diagrams before you read the options.** the body's left, not yours

for the written bits

HUBS finals have mini-essays, CELS and BIOC have short answers, POPH has an essay progress test. Practise producing a clear answer in the time available. Answer the question asked, use the terms from the learning objectives, and don't write an introduction. Marks are for content.



why the questions feel like they're out to get you

The MCQ papers, HUBS and CELS especially, nitpick small details and phrase options so you second-guess an answer you knew. A test everyone aces is useless for selection. When a question is designed to make you overthink, the correct response is usually to trust the answer you knew and move on.

a real one

I went back through my own PT paper once and counted. Eleven questions where my first answer was right and I changed it. Four the other way. That's seven marks, and seven marks in HSFY is a different programme.



04

the rest of your life

in this part

- is HSFY toxic? does the smartest person win?
- sleep, movement, people
- if you bomb a progress test
- labs: what to bring, what not to lose
- gear: textbooks, ipad vs laptop, halls

the point of it

Almost nobody who got in regrets not memorising more. The regrets are about how they spent the year: fearing the wrong paper, confusing hours with progress, and cutting out everything that kept them functioning.

is HSFY toxic? does the smartest person win?

4.1 no, and no

is it actually toxic and competitive?

Not nearly as much as people make it sound. Yes, people care about their grades. Yes, you'll meet people who turn every conversation into "what did you get?". Yes, some people announce their marks loudly enough that students in Auckland can hear them.

But the idea that everyone is secretly sabotaging each other is heavily exaggerated. Most HSFY students are normal 18-year-olds trying to fix their sleep schedules.

- someone else getting 96% does not lower your grade
- someone claiming they study 14 hours a day doesn't mean you need to
- someone using fifteen resources doesn't mean you need fifteen resources

Surround yourself with good people and stop comparing every little thing. Study with friends, or at least eat with them. Isolation makes a hard year harder and doesn't pay you back in marks.

the starting line isn't even, though

Worth knowing early because it explains something that otherwise feels personal. In a cohort of over two thousand you're competing with people who've already done a year at uni, people partway through a science degree who already know a chunk of the content, and people from schools that actually taught them how to study. If you feel behind in week three, you may literally be behind, and that's a gap in preparation rather than ability. It's closable. It's just not closed by default.

the smartest person doesn't automatically win

This was one of the biggest things I learnt. Intelligence helps, obviously. Consistency matters an insane amount.

Someone who understands lectures instantly but only studies when they feel motivated can absolutely lose to someone who takes slightly longer to understand things but shows up every day, does their reviews, asks questions, practises, and stays caught up.

a real one

A guy in my lab group was open about aiming for "just above the cutoff". Smart enough to do it, too. He worked out roughly what last year's floor was and studied to that. The floor moved up nearly four points that year. He'd tell you himself: don't aim for the bottom of the range.



the one comparison that's worth making

Not your mark against theirs. Your consistency this week against your consistency last week. That's the only number on the board that you control.

4.2 sleep, movement, people

burning out is not the price of entry

The trap goes like this. You decide HSFY is serious, so you study every day without real breaks. The gym goes first, because an hour there is an hour not studying. Then walks. Then seeing people, because everyone else seems to be working too. You end up isolated, permanently tired, putting in genuinely long hours, and the marks don't reflect it.

That's the regret in one paragraph. Not laziness. The opposite: a lot of effort, spent badly, at real personal cost.

the things to protect

Sleep. Not the flexible resource. Sleep is when what you learned gets consolidated, and cutting it measurably damages your ability to encode new material the next day. The 2am session borrows from the process that makes today's work permanent. Aim for a consistent seven to nine hours.

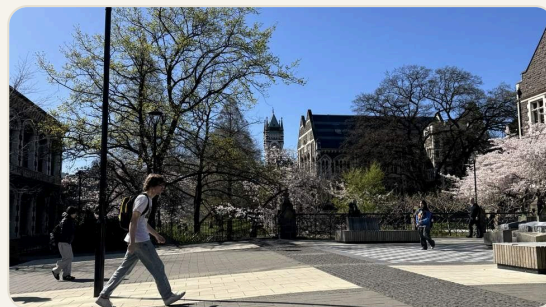
Daily movement. A walk or a gym session isn't stolen study time. Regular physical activity is associated with better cognitive function, not just better mood. It's part of what makes the study hours work.

People. Eat with them. Study near them. Tell someone when you're struggling. Otago has student health and counselling, and your hall has staff whose actual job is this.

Rasch and Born 2013; Yoo and colleagues 2007; Hillman, Erickson and Kramer 2008; Schmidt and colleagues 2007 on chronotype.

a real one

Two people in my hall, same semester. One did about four focused hours a day, went to the gym, ate dinner with us. The other did eight to ten, skipped meals, stopped coming down. Their semester 1 results were close. Only one of them enjoyed the year, and it wasn't the one doing ten hours.



signs you're heading for it

- you feel guilty whenever you're not studying, including while eating or sleeping
- your study hours went up and your results didn't
- you can't remember the last time you did something that wasn't HSFY
- you're reading the same page repeatedly without anything going in

that last one

It's the clearest signal. It usually means you're too depleted to learn, and the correct response is to stop for the night, not to push for another hour. Fix the method first (part 3), because that's what makes a sustainable schedule possible. Then use the reclaimed time deliberately: train, walk, see people, sleep properly.

4.3 if you bomb a progress test

you're going to have at least one bad test. here's what actually happens

It's usually recoverable, and in a paper with plussage it can be wiped out entirely by a strong final. Before you spiral, work out which situation you're in, because the correct response is completely different.

step one: does the paper have plussage?

If yes (PHSI191 in 2026), a bad PT is a number waiting to be overwritten by your final. Confirm it in your course outline, not from a friend.

step two: do the arithmetic

Progress tests are typically 15 to 20 percent. If the test is worth 20 and the final is worth 70, your final has more than three times the weight. A bad PT is a data point, early, with most of the marks still unclaimed. It is not a verdict on whether you belong in HSFY.

step three: sort every error into a bucket

Didn't know it. Misread it. Talked myself out of it. Ran out of time. Four different problems, four different fixes (page 27). This is the cheapest diagnostic you'll get before the final. People skip it because the mark stings.

step four: change the method, not just the hours

If you failed after genuinely studying hard, more hours of the same method won't fix it. The most common cause is passive study. Switch to producing answers: closed notes, attempt, check.



what not to do

- **don't drop the paper on impulse.** check the real weighting and plussage first
- **don't conclude you're not smart enough.** most people who fail a PT were studying in a way that doesn't work. that's a method problem, and a common one
- **don't ignore it either.** the information in that paper is the cheapest guidance you'll get all semester
- **don't let one bad progress test convince you your life is over.** it isn't. mine wasn't

a real one

Mine. Failed PHSI191 PT outright in 2025. Sorted my errors: almost all "ran out of time" and "used the wrong equation confidently". Did closed-book mixed sets every second day until June. Final: 100. Overall: 100.

4.4

labs: what to bring, what not to lose

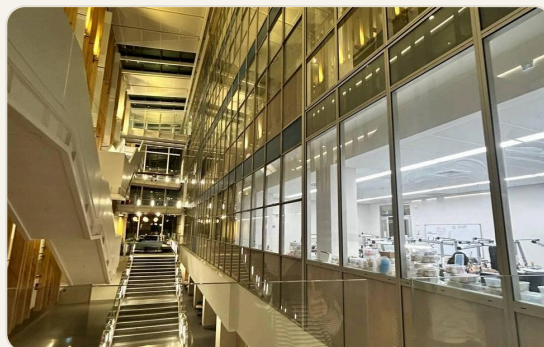
rarely where you win the year. occasionally where people lose it

bring

- ✓ **closed-toe shoes.** the most common reason people get turned away at the door
- ✓ **hair tied back** if it's long. demonstrators will pull you up
- ✓ **a lab coat.** you buy your own. get one in week one
- ✓ **the manual, read in advance**
- ✓ **a pen and a real calculator.** phones often aren't allowed for assessed work

don't bring

- ✗ **safety glasses.** the lab provides them. don't buy a pair
- ✗ **an empty stomach.** HUBS labs are a long block and you stay the full slot regardless of how fast you work
- ✗ **anything scheduled tight afterwards**



the part that affects your grade

Attendance is a terms requirement in several papers. That's not participation credit, it's a condition of passing the paper at all. Missing labs without going through the proper process is one of the few genuinely unrecoverable mistakes in first year. If you're sick, contact the course administrator early. Departments are reasonable about real problems and much less reasonable about silence.

Don't donate the LATs. A couple of percent each, open book, often multiple attempts with your best counting. People lose them by forgetting the deadline. Put every one in your calendar the moment it's announced.

read the manual before you turn up

The difference between a useful three hours and a wasted three hours. Arrive having read the pre-lab and you know what the experiment is for and can think about what you're seeing. Arrive cold and you follow instructions like a recipe and learn very little. In most labs other than HUBS, once you've finished and been checked off you can leave, so preparation is also time back in your evening.

Ask the demonstrators things. They're senior students and postgrads, they're there to help, and it's the cheapest one-to-one explanation you'll get all semester. Write down what you actually did, including what went wrong.

lab content is examinable

Especially in BIOC192, where lab maths (dilutions, Beer-Lambert, reading a pipette) shows up in the assessments as pure arithmetic. Cheap marks if you did the lab properly.

4.5

gear: textbooks, ipad vs laptop, halls

please don't buy every textbook before arriving

textbooks

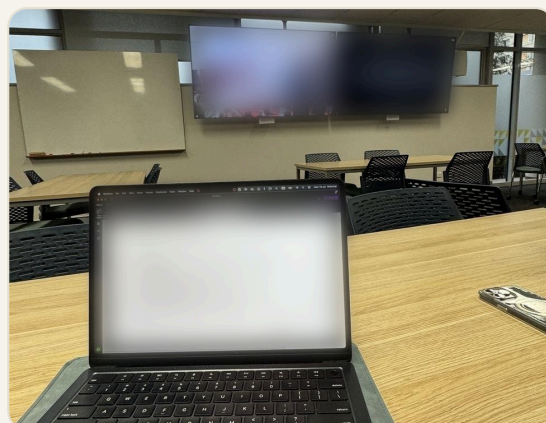
Wait until you're actually in the course and know whether you'll use them. Chances are you won't need most of them. The lectures, learning objectives and questions are the course. Textbook end-of-chapter questions are written for a different course and often assess things Otago doesn't. If a paper genuinely leans on a text, you'll know by week two and the library has copies.

ipad vs laptop

An iPad is nice, especially for annotating slides and drawing diagrams from memory, which is a genuinely good study habit for HUBS. It's absolutely not essential. **If you can only have one: laptop > iPad.** You need Anki on a real keyboard, a browser that handles the university's systems, and something to write assignments on. Plenty of people did the whole year with a laptop and paper.

the actual shopping list

- ☐ a laptop that works and a charger you don't lose
- ☐ a lab coat and closed-toe shoes
- ☐ a basic scientific calculator that's allowed in tests
- ☐ Anki installed and learned (it's free on desktop)
- ☐ a wall calendar or app with every LAT and PT date in it
- ☐ a water bottle, a decent pair of walking shoes, and a lamp for your hall room



halls

Most HSFY students live in a hall in first year, and honestly it's the best part of the year. You're surrounded by people doing the same papers, which is great for study and terrible for comparing marks. A few things that helped:

- find your study spot in the first week, and a backup for when the common room is loud
- hall tutorials and study groups are genuinely useful. the person explaining is learning the most
- eat the meals. skipping dinner to study is the burnout loop in miniature
- the walk from your hall to campus is the daily movement. don't optimise it away

a real one

I bought four textbooks before I arrived. I opened one of them, once, to look up a diagram that turned out to be in the lecture slides anyway. Sold three of them in October for less than half price to a year 13 who's presumably now doing the same thing.



05

if i started again tomorrow

in this part

- would and wouldn't
- the questions year 13s actually ask
- am i smart enough?
- about cutline and the summer programme

the point of it

I'd learn Anki properly before semester, brush up on chem and physics if they were weak, then enjoy my summer. Once semester started, I'd run the loop from day one and refuse to rewrite a single lecture into beautiful notes.

5.1 would and wouldn't

the whole guide on one page

i would

- ✓ learn Anki properly before semester starts
- ✓ brush up basic chem and physics if they were weak, then enjoy my summer
- ✓ read every course outline in week one and note which papers have plussage
- ✓ go to or watch lectures the day they're released
- ✓ use the learning objectives to decide what actually matters
- ✓ turn examinable info into small, specific, testable recall material
- ✓ review every single day, even a minimum day
- ✓ start practice questions early, the same week as the lecture
- ✓ write one sentence for every question I got wrong and keep the list
- ✓ mix question types once I'd learned two or three topics
- ✓ put every LAT and PT deadline in a calendar the day it's announced
- ✓ ask questions immediately instead of sitting confused for a week
- ✓ go to the gym, walk, eat with people, sleep seven to nine hours
- ✓ trust the answer I knew in the exam room

i would not

- ✗ rewrite every lecture into beautiful notes
- ✗ use seventeen different resources
- ✗ compare my card count, my hours or my marks with other people
- ✗ study twelve hours just to say I studied twelve hours
- ✗ pre-learn the entirety of HUBS over summer
- ✗ download a giant shared Anki deck built for a different course
- ✗ let the review queue explode and then try to clear 1,300 cards on a Sunday
- ✗ practise one problem type at a time with the chapter heading telling me the method
- ✗ memorise past-paper answers instead of understanding them
- ✗ split my time evenly between two colliding PTs when one has plussage
- ✗ buy every textbook before arriving
- ✗ convince myself one bad progress test means my life is over
- ✗ aim for the bottom of last year's GPA range
- ✗ post-mortem exams with other people between papers

the shortest version

do today's lecture. do today's reviews. go over what you got wrong. sleep. repeat.

5.2 the questions year 13s actually ask

the ones I see every year, answered straight

q do I need level 3 physics?

No. PHSI191 needs more work at the start without it, and you're not doomed. Be comfortable with algebra, units, forces and energy over summer.

q am I cooked if I didn't take bio?

No. HUBS and CELS start from the ground up. The problem in those papers is volume, and a study system beats a year 13 bio grade every time.

q should I study over summer?

A bit. Learn Anki, try active recall, brush up chem or physics if weak. Don't pre-learn HUBS lectures. Have a summer.

q how hard is CHEM191?

It was my hardest paper, and it depends heavily on your background. Understand first, then do an unreasonable number of questions, and use past papers as a map of what's actually examined.

q do I need an iPad?

No. Nice for annotating and drawing from memory. If you can only have one device, a laptop.

q is POPH192 the paper that ends people?

No. It's the most overestimated paper in HSFY. It needs steady work and reasoning rather than memorising, and the fear costs more marks than the content.

q how many hours a day?

Wrong question. Ask whether you're caught up, understood today's lectures, did your reviews, and practised. If yes, go home.

q what GPA do I need for med?

There's no published cut-off. Successful general-category applicants ranged 93.1 to 99 in 2026 and the floor moves every year. Don't aim for the bottom.

q is dent easier to get into than med?

Not on recent numbers. The dentistry floor climbed from 87 in 2023 to 97 in 2026. Every paper is load-bearing at that level.

q do I need to take an 8th paper?

It's optional and counts in your best seven. Take one if you can realistically score above your likely weakest core paper. Popular picks: MAOR102, STAT115, MATH130.

q is HSFY toxic?

Much less than people say. Some people are loud about marks. Most are normal 18-year-olds. Pick good people and stop comparing.

q what if I fail a progress test?

Check plussage, do the arithmetic (the final is usually worth three times more), sort your errors into buckets, and fix the method rather than the hours. I failed one and finished on 100.

q can I still have a life?

Yes, and you should. Gym, friends, going out sometimes. The people who cut all of it out are the ones with the biggest regrets, and they didn't get better marks for it.

q do I need a textbook?

Probably not. Wait until you're in the course. The library has copies if one turns out to matter.

q where do I get past MCQs?

Otago doesn't release them for HUBS, CELS and BIOC; only the written sections come out. CHEM and PHSI papers are released. For the rest you need original exam-style questions written to the learning objectives, which is what we built cutline for.

q what's the one thing to do before february?

Answer the eight questions on page 22 and write down your minimum day.

5.3 am i smart enough?

last thing, because I see people asking this all the time

You're going from being surrounded by normal high school students to being surrounded by hundreds of people who were also among the top students at their schools. There will ALWAYS be someone who remembers things faster, answers quicker, or gets a higher mark.

That doesn't mean you're stupid, and it doesn't mean you can't get into med or dent.

HSFY isn't a knowledge test. It's a performance test, ranked against a cohort you can't see. A lot of the people who miss the cutline knew most of the content. They couldn't produce it fast enough, accurately enough, under pressure, often because they spent the year studying as though it were a knowledge test. That part is a method problem. Method is fixable, and it's fixable in week three rather than week thirteen if you know to look for it.

So worry much less about "am I smart enough?" and much more about:

am I consistently doing the things I know I need to do?

That's something you can actually control. It's also, in my experience, the thing that actually decides it.

Anyway, this became way longer than intended. If you're starting HSFY next year and you're confused or worried about anything, genuinely anything: NCEA subjects, papers, routines, chem, physics, halls, med versus dent, what uni is like. Message us. If we know, we'll answer. If we don't, we'll find someone who does.

good luck. see you in dunedin.

the cutline crew · otago med and dent students who made the cutline



one more real one

The person I sat next to in my first HUBS lecture asked me, in week one, whether it was too late to drop to a different degree because everyone around her seemed to already know everything. She was fine. Nobody around her knew everything. They were just louder about the bits they did.

5.4 about cutline, and the summer programme

the bit at the end where we tell you what we do

Cutline is a practice bank built by Otago med and dent students. Every question is original, written to the published learning objectives for each paper, with none of the University's exam material in it. It exists because HSFY is examined mostly by multiple choice and there is very little practice in that format, so we wrote it.

Every question comes with a worked solution so a wrong attempt teaches you something. Sets mix question types by default. You can export to Anki so the memory layer and the practice layer live in one loop. In 2026 more than 800 HSFY students used it. It's free to start, with no card.

7

HSFY papers
plus the popular
8th papers

800+

HSFY students
on cutline in
2026

free

to start. no card
needed

Cutline Summer 2027, for year 13s

Cutline Summer is an online platform for year 13s starting HSFY in 2027. You work through it at your own pace between November 2026 and February 2027, wherever you are, starting after your school exams: the foundations for the four semester 1 papers, short lessons then practice, with med and dent tutors to ask when something doesn't land. The study system in this guide is built into it, so the first progress test is a check rather than a shock.

It opens in November with no weekly quotas: most people aim to have the core done by mid-February so revision and support carry them through the move down. The price, exact dates and what's included are published before enrolment opens, and there's an option with a named mentor and small-group sessions for people who want more structure.

how to hear first

Go to **cutline.nz** and open the **"I'm in year 13"** door on the home page. It walks you through what HSFY actually looks like, lets you try an original practice question, and ends on a short form so we can tell you when Summer opens.

part 5 · if i started again tomorrow



where to find us

cutline.nz

instagram @**cutline.nz**

tiktok @**cutline.nz**

小红书: search cutline

This guide is free. Send it to anyone in year 13 aiming for Otago med or dent. You don't need permission.

the disclaimer, again, because it matters

Cutline is an independent student project. We are not affiliated with, employed by, or endorsed by the University of Otago. Paper structures, weightings, plussage and dates in this guide are as at 2026 and are set by each department; confirm them in your 2027 course outlines. Admissions figures are from the University of Otago's published admissions statistics, which the university says are historical and not indicative of future years. Stories marked "a real one" are real, with details changed so nobody is identifiable. Nothing here is official advice.

starting HSFY 2027: what i wish someone told me in year 13

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