

Staff guide to student independent learning

What is independent learning?

One of the aims of higher education is for students to move from a state of dependent learning, being reliant on others, to independent or autonomous learning, where the learner takes responsibility for their own progression (HEA, 2014).

Mckendry and Boyd (2012) and Thomas et al. (2015) highlight the use of multiple terms to describe independent learning, including student-centered learning, self-regulated learning, self-instruction, lifelong learning and directed independent learning. Terms used interchangeably may cause confusion for staff and students alike. Therefore, it requires academic staff to be clear regarding the process that students will undertake to be a successful independent learner (Mckendry and Boyd, 2012).

According to research by Thomas et al. (2015, pp. 7-8), and for the purpose of this guide, independent learning is defined as a process where:

“...students are guided by the curriculum contents, pedagogy and academic staff, but play an active role in their learning experience either on their own, or in collaboration with peers...”, in other words, students are directed by “...the core curriculum or through additional support services”.

How does independent learning relate to expected work hours in a course?

For independent learning to become a normalised and valued practice, it is essential that students understand the necessity of undertaking private study away from the classroom (Hockings et al., 2017). Expectations of student managed learning vary at institutional, course and subject level. It is not unknown for self-managed learning to total up to 80% of the time specified to complete a module. At LSBU, the ratio of student input vs teaching input (contact hours) in a module is roughly 2:1 on average. Across subject disciplines, HEFCE identified that learners undertaking non-science courses, such as mass communication and historical studies, were expected to fulfil a higher proportion of self-study than those in science who averaged more formal teaching time (Brennan et al., 2009).

Furthermore, HEA data (2014) highlights the correlation between expectations of self-directed study and independence in general. Students in the humanities and social sciences who had been scheduled fewer contact hours were found to have increased flexibility and levels of autonomy to direct their learning. In contrast, science-based learners who received more contact time were limited in relation to their choice of assignment or research topic.

Tips for encouraging autonomous learning

1. Elicit students' interest when starting a new module. This could be in the form of a word cloud, survey, multiple choice questionnaire. These can then be used as points of discussion at different stages of the module a platform for students to share their views.
2. Establish the expectation of student managed hours. Start your module by discussing the number of independent learning hours they need to be doing and what kind of activities they can be undertaking in their own time.
3. Encourage students to compile a schedule to maximise their learning. This can include pre-reading for lessons, post-lesson activities, group study, revision, industry related visits etc...
4. Ask students to write a success plan and refer to this at various stages to track progress. Whether in the classroom or online, higher levels of self-direction are achieved by learners who are guided to set specific and measurable goals.
5. Include a resource at the beginning and/or end of each lesson that allows students to measure their learning and development. To support this further, add group evaluation through discussion or online surveys. Think about whether it will be to be synchronous or asynchronous.
6. Prompt critical discussion in the classroom by asking probing questions or presenting controversial headline/blanket statement and ask students to make a note on their thoughts. Prompt students to justify their views using analysis.
7. Build in short formative exercises into classes focusing on the autonomous skills needed for the specific module. Keeping a log of this will support scaffolding of skills.
8. Supply students with a range of resources (such as: templates, exemplars, workbooks, reflective models, and literature) that provide students with an opportunity to refer to prior/current experiences and knowledge, so they feel more confident to work independently.
9. Implement short discipline specific writing tasks (such as: excerpts of reports, writing profiles, case notes, chronologies, specifications, and blog entries) so students can build on their transferable skills in preparation for employment.
10. Signpost students to support services available online and in-person. This will allow students to make optimal use of the provision and benefit from extra-curricular activities.

Conclusion

Learning is not restricted to the classroom, as much learning is undertaken outside of contact hours in various contexts (Thomas et al., 2015). Encouraging your students to find avenues to incorporate the learning that takes place outside of the classroom will further encourage learner autonomy and enrich the learning experience. Students need to be guided to develop their academic capacity and to take ownership of their progression.