1. Introduction and rationale

Students on undergraduate and taught postgraduate are expected to spend more time on self-directed or independent learning than learning in class and other contact time. Despite its key importance, independent learning raises several significant issues:

- New students may not have clear expectations of the extent and importance of independent learning, to the extent that they may expect more rather than less contact time that they experienced at school (HEPI 2017);
- Independent learning is likely to conflict with students’ commitments outside the curriculum, such as paid employment, caring, travel, social and volunteering, and
- Several studies have shown that students do not understand what they are supposed to do as independent learning, and may view it in the same way as ‘homework’ or have difficulty linking it to the taught curriculum (Thomas et al. 2015).

Independent learning is a key element of students’ development as engaged and autonomous learners – part of the process of ‘learning to learn’ (Claxton and Lucas, 2015). This guide and associated resources has been written to help staff to support students to develop independent learning skills. It has been written alongside the Active Curriculum, Education and Employability Strategies, and the Curriculum Design Intensive programme.

A corresponding introduction for students is in preparation.

2. Previous work at Anglia Ruskin

Work has been carried out on independent learning as part of curriculum enhancement, especially in relation to the Active Curriculum. The first project proceeded along two ‘paths’:
A series of pilot initiatives within faculties, and associated workshops, evaluating different approaches to supporting IL at module and course level, with a view to broader implementation at faculty or institutional levels.

A one-day workshop involving a range of stakeholders that explored various aspects of IL, especially around differences in expectations/perceptions, how IL is communicated and how it is best supported.

Subsequent work has looked at the development of resources for staff and students. A number of recommendations from the first project form the core of this guide (reference numbers from the LTASC document of October 2017).

### 3. Defining independent learning and setting expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.6.1</th>
<th>We need a <strong>definition</strong> of independent learning that can be communicated to students (and families and employers) and university staff (both teaching and non-teaching).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.6.2</td>
<td>We need to set expectations that are <strong>realistic</strong>, <strong>fair</strong>, <strong>effective</strong> and <strong>clear</strong> and communicate these effectively. In particular, a description of IL simply in terms of time required is unhelpful and should instead be couched in terms of processes and desired outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.3</td>
<td>Independent learning needs to be an <strong>explicit part of the curriculum</strong>, in which students can understand the role of independent learning alongside the taught curriculum and integral part of the higher education learning experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.4</td>
<td>Students’ <strong>development as learners</strong> should be seen as being as important as their knowledge acquisition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The report developed this brief definition:

**Independent or self-directed learning is the component of students’ study that takes place outside the taught curriculum (lectures, seminars, labs etc). It is intended to form an integral part of learning at all levels of study at ARU. It not only interfaces with the taught...**

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1ARU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Subcommittee, replaced by the Education Committee
curriculum within the programme of study but also contributes to the development of autonomous learning skills.

The development of this definition and an elaboration of it forms Appendix 1 of this guide.

The definition needs to be communicated to students so that they have an understanding of their responsibility for their own learning and what this implies both in terms of workload and skills. Independent learning needs to be explicit in course and module documentation.

4. A staged model for independent learning

2.6.5 The way that independent learning is scaffolded will change as students progress, from directed activities at early stages to guided, more autonomous learning later in a course.

2.6.9 Independent learning is better managed and supported through course-level development to ensure common expectations and standards, rather than isolated efforts within modules and an inconsistent experience.

2.6.8 Diversity and inclusion need to be implicit in the way that independent learning is planned and facilitated.

Effective support for independent learning needs to be managed at a course level and to acknowledge that the nature of independent learning and the way it is supported will vary between different students and at different levels of study.

For undergraduates, we have developed a model based on earlier descriptions of changing level of autonomy as students progress. This model is illustrated in Fig. 1 overleaf and describes level-appropriate support for independent learning as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 4: DIRECTED</th>
<th>Independent learning consists mostly of defined tasks that articulate with in-class activities. Appropriate skills support is closely associated with activities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Level 5: GUIDED

Independent learning is an explicit part of the curriculum but students have a greater level of freedom in the nature of tasks and the ways that they address them.

Level 6: FACILITATED

Students have considerably more autonomy, and their independent learning is more personal and clearly research-related. Students develop professional skills.

**Figure 1.** Diagram to indicate how the nature of and support for independent learning changes over the course of an undergraduate degree as student autonomy of learning increases (based on ideas from Sally Brown and Graham Gibbs [lower panel] and the ARU stakeholder workshop [upper panel])
This model has been designed for undergraduate programmes of study. Different considerations apply to taught postgraduate courses, in particular:

- The condensed timespan of the course (one year to complete a full-time), and
- The common assumption that all postgraduate students will have the requisite independent learning skills and experience (they don’t).

5. Student skills and support for independent learning

2.6.6 **Support**, including study skills, needs to be in place and presented alongside the scaffolding, not as a remedial facility, but as necessary for success in higher education.

An independent learning ‘literacy’ forms part of the suite of eight literacies in the Active Curriculum. The descriptor for this literacy indicates the different elements of independent learning literacy and how staff can support this:

**Concept:** developing and using autonomous learning skills for self-direction of learning and to complement the taught curriculum (lectures, seminars, labs etc).

**Relationship to learning:** supports autonomous learning which is central to higher education and learning after graduation (‘lifelong learning’).

**Relationship to employability and Graduate Capitals:** enables self-development including take up of extra curricular activity, identifying opportunities and working towards career goals. It supports confidence in creating a professional profile and dealing with differing cultural contexts, challenges and pressure in fluid labour markets.

**Practice:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student knowledge and skills:</th>
<th>Staff support for literacy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- understand the role and nature of independent learning and how it relates to the taught curriculum</td>
<td>- explain and illustrate the nature and importance of independent learning in the HE and beyond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student knowledge and skills:</td>
<td>Staff support for literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- communicate expectations about the type and extent of independent learning in relation to the course.</td>
<td>- provide scaffolded tasks to ensure the relevance and value of independent learning is clear and embedded in student practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- signpost support for studying from professional services for</td>
<td>- employ a course team approach to ensure progressive development of independent learning literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- select and employ learning approaches appropriate to a learning activity/task, learning outcomes and the subject/discipline studied.</td>
<td>- create opportunities for students to practice, reflect on, and receive feedback on skills associated with independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- recognise the importance of and use a range of specific skills that support effective independent learning in the discipline and for future learning (including group work, speed reading, using feedback, structuring material, designing projects, testing ideas).</td>
<td>- signpost support for skills development within the University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- reflect on and share independent learning co-operation and experiences within learning communities</td>
<td>- provide space and stimulation for students to share experiences of independent learning, generate ideas, perspectives etc. and test them critically with others in learning communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- signpost spaces (‘third space’) that can facilitate independent learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have developed the staged model described in Section 4 to align resources for students and staff with a learning journey (Figure 2).
Figure 2. A student learning journey used to scaffold guidance and support for independent learning. The hexagons represent key transition points. An interactive version of the journey is online at: https://canvas.anglia.ac.uk/courses/2228/pages/learning-journey-interactive
Resources


Anglia Ruskin University (2016b) *Student Charter*, 18 pp (available at: http://online.fliphtml5.com/atgu/tqhm/#p=1)


https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/effective-practice-design-directed-independent-learning-opportunities
Appendix 1: Developing an ARU definition of independent learning

During a student-led workshop, it emerged that delegates did not necessarily share a single concept of independent learning and there was considerable discussion around a definition that would work in our context. The issue is not helped by:

- Anglia Ruskin’s use of the term ‘self-directed’ learning (for instance in Module Definition Forms). This was perceived to be similar to but not exactly congruent with ‘independent learning’ in the context of the workshop.
- The general use of the term ‘independent learner’ to mean ‘autonomous learner’, and hence that independent learning was something that occurs outside HE, but again is not necessarily equivalent to what was being discussed in the workshop.
- It is easier to define independent learning by what it is not – that is it is ‘the learning that students undertake in HE outside their contact hours’ – than to provide a simple definition of what it is.
- Independent learning will be very context-specific, especially with relation to subject area and level of study.

A review of independent learning (Thomas, Jones and Ottaway 2015) focused on the views of staff, students and other stakeholders and on the existing body of academic knowledge relating to independent learning. A literature review conducted for the study found great variety in definitions of independent learning but also agreement about its central features.

“Invariant features present in all understandings were:

- Independent learning is related to students’ essential nature as enquirers, or to their needs as learners within their academic programme of study.
- The need to provide structure and support to foster and enhance capacity for independent learning.
- The importance of metacognitive aspects of independent learning: ‘learning to learn’ is seen to be as important as learning about a specific subject.
- Responsibility for independent learning is generally shared between staff and students.

“Variant features included:

- Conceptual focus: independent learning is rarely discussed directly, but rather implicitly through a range of different concepts sharing a family resemblance, such as ‘self-directed learning’, ‘active learning’ and ‘student-centred learning’.
- The degree of structure and direction expected within independent learning varies from highly structured, directed independent learning (characterized e.g. by problem-based learning) to fully autonomous learning.
- The roles of staff and student are delimited differently. In some formulations, staff guide, facilitate or enable students through curriculum contents; in others staff are more like facilitators of knowledge acquisition than teachers. Likewise, students’ roles vary from autonomously setting their own goals in a partnership with staff to...
...being guided by curriculum contents, pedagogy and support from staff.” (Quotation from Thomas et al. 2015).

We subsequently developed the following definition:

**Independent or self-directed learning is the component of students’ study that takes place outside the taught curriculum (lectures, seminars, labs etc). It is intended to form an integral part of learning at all levels of study at ARU. It not only interfaces with the taught curriculum within the programme of study but also contributes to the development of autonomous learning skills.**

We amplify this statement with the following narrative:

*We recognise that students arrive at Anglia Ruskin with very different learning backgrounds and experiences, but we are committed to ensure that all our students realise their full potential and complete their studies as effective independent learners. Independent learning is necessary to achieve your academic goals; is required in your personal and professional life beyond higher education; and provides opportunities for a more personalised and fulfilling learning experience and career. Independent learning and is undertaken in addition to your timetabled contact hours. It does not necessarily mean learning on your own and you may receive significant guidance on your independent learning, especially early on in your degree. Independent learners have the skills and confidence to take greater responsibility for their learning in terms of clarifying the steps required to complete tasks; identifying relevant materials and resources; extending, applying and creating knowledge to solve problems and challenges; and managing their own time and meeting deadlines to achieve learning outcomes. In doing so, they are building skills that will support them after they graduate. At Anglia Ruskin each course explicitly teaches you the learning skills you need to prosper academically, professionally and personally. You will develop greater responsibility and confidence in your learning skills through participating in learning activities rather than only being given information to memorise. Much of the information required is readily...*
available, and the task of independent learners is to select and apply information. This process is facilitated by learning technologies – which are used to provide access to material and resources, facilitate discussion with others and to access additional skills and support as required, and active learning strategies such as team based learning which support you to collaboratively find solutions to questions and problems rather than being passively given information. Your progression as an independent learner is overseen and guided by your personal tutor. This facilitated approach will enable to develop within a learning community to achieve your potential at Anglia Ruskin, in graduate employment and in life.