Supporting ‘independent’ study practices

‘[We]… should not assume that students have all the necessary academic and practical skills to be effective independent learners, but rather that this is an anticipated outcome of undergraduate higher education. Appropriate support and capacity building should be provided for students, which gradually decreases over time.’

(Thomas, Jones and Ottaway, 2016)

Introduction

The term ‘independent’ is placed in inverted commas, here, to acknowledge that: a) all learning is, in fact, highly interdependent; and b) what we mean by, and how we valorise, ‘independence’ in HE is itself and interesting area of debate and contestation (see, for example: Leathwood, 2006). That said, given that terms like ‘independent learning’ and ‘independent study’ are so commonly used to define some of the key differences between studying in HE and studying at school/college, the questions of how we enable students to better understand what we mean by this term (and just as importantly, what we do not mean by it) and how we help them to develop their study practices accordingly, are important when thinking about student transitions.

What we need to do

Given many students who arrive at HE will have been primed to expect that studying will entail greater ‘independence’, we need to first find out what they actually understand by the term and what they expect it will involve. This will enable us to frame the conversations we have with them regarding the nature of HE study and the ways it differs from study at other levels. Following the advice of Thomas, Jones and Ottaway (2016) we need also to develop curricula that provide the ‘support and capacity building’ they refer to. More general resources (e.g. relating to effective time-management, prioritisation, reading and note-making) can be helpful but only as a complement to properly context-specific, and curricula-based, approaches to building students’ capacities.

References
