WHAT GOES ON IN ‘GUIDED INDEPENDENT STUDY’?

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Just what goes on in guided independent study? A study by colleagues in the then Colleges of Arts, Humanities and Law, and the College of Social Sciences, and the Leicester Learning Institute’ sought to address this question. All Module Specification forms record the quantity of ‘guided independent study’ (the largest proportion of study time in all modules in the two Colleges involved) and being an independent learner (‘learning agility’) is a key graduate attribute.[1] Little, however, is known about how students study outside of the classroom, what their expectations are in this respect, whether these expectations are realistic and whether they match the goals set by their teachers. This research intends to increase our understanding of student achievement by investigating when students study, where they study, what they study, how they study and why they study. This research will help colleagues in the university understand more about our students and enable us all to enhance the support we provide them.

The original intended research outcomes included:
● Data on student learning behaviour across the university
● Detailed case-studies of strategic aspects of student use of learning opportunities
● A briefing document containing an analysis of the data together with recommendations concerning future enhancement themes
● A handbook for the design of guided independent learning opportunities
● Specific resources to support students in making effective use of guided independent study time

1. BACKGROUND
The initial prompt for this study was I.T. Services data about increased student logins via personal devices, but the question was brought into focus by an unheralded change to University of Leicester standards documentation, the addition of the word ‘guided’ to ‘independent study’ in the section of the Module Specification pro forma which records the number of hours students are expected to study beyond their timetabled teaching. These prompts drew attention to how little we knew about what learners were doing beyond the classroom. That this was an important question was confirmed towards the end of the project by the Higher Education Academy’s December 2014 invitation to tender (RT06) for an investigation into ‘Independent Learning: Perspectives and Experiences’.

Since the project bid was written in September 2013, developments in the University of Leicester have made the question even more significant. The new terminology of ‘guided independent study’ was itself informed by analysis of programme structure in the light of the categories of study recognised in the Key Information Set (published from September 2012). The revision of the value of the credit hour to ten hours of study (ratified by Senate in December 2014) confronts the University with a more thorough-going review of its modules and programmes, as in principle every module will require decisions to be made as to how an additional 33% of study time will be apportioned between classroom teaching and guided independent study to support student attainment of the specified learning outcomes. But there is much more to this question than standards and quality assurance, and information to students. A flavour of this is given by one common synonym for independent study, ‘private study’: what goes on in private is obviously not captured by the regime of transparency designated by learning outcomes, assessment criteria, levels and standards. Dave White has coined the term ‘learning black market’ (White, 2011) to identify ways in which students negotiate the use of resources and strategies which are discouraged by their instructors. But even where they employ recommended resources, it is possible that students are not using optimal learning strategies. Illusions about learning efficacy are a factor in limiting student achievement (Brown, Roediger & McDaniel, 2014).

‘Independent Study’: a complex and contested concept

The very concept of independent learning raises the question of independent from what? For instance independent learning is routinely identified with programmes of study where the student is presumed to be remote from the instructor (distance education), but it is also strongly associated with the emancipation of the student, for instance in definitions of liberal education. Newman contended that the ideal of the independent learner was incompatible with nineteenth-century institutional education:

‘How much better, I say, is it for the active and thoughtful intellect, where such is to be found, to eschew the College and the University altogether, than to submit to a drudgery so ignoble, a mockery so contumelious! How much more profitable for the independent mind, after the mere rudiments of education, to range through a library at random, taking down books as they meet him, and pursuing the trains of thought which his mother wit suggests!’ (Newman, 1976: 132)

When Karl Jaspers foregrounded independent study a hundred years later it was not just to differentiate tertiary from secondary education, but to make the ideal of student autonomy part of the foundation on which German universities might be reconstructed after their subjugation to state ideology in the Nazi era:

‘Artificial guides such as the syllabi, curricular and other technical devices which convert the university into a school, are in conflict with the ideal of the university […]’ Independent
reading and study in laboratories, collections and travelling must complement formal classroom work from the very start’ (Jaspers, 1960: 73).

In the neo-liberal era, the independent learner is she who possesses the learning agility and the capacity for self-audit or self-quantification in order to update her competencies to meet the changing demands of the labour-market of a knowledge economy (Ball, 2003; Southwood, 2011; Cederström & Spicer, 2015). As Hative and Goodyear observe:

‘the 21st century workplace is characterized by rapidly changing conditions and work tasks [...]. To prepare students [...] university should [...] encourage the development of thinking skills and the capacity to engage in self-directed, independent learning.’ (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002: 337).

Leathwood (2006) meanwhile, has challenged prevailing notions and definitions of ‘learner independence’ as valorising ‘masculinist’, self-reliant, and individualistic subjectivities among students:

‘The new subject of neo-liberalism is expected to take full responsibility for their own lives and future lives as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals, engaging in the ‘choice’ practices of the market economy and providing for themselves free from any dependence on the state.’ (2006: 614-615).

**Supporting students’ ‘independence’**

That learner independence has been attributed profound cultural, political and economic significance, does not in itself guarantee that learners in higher education do in fact achieve independence, however we might choose to define it. Independence is seen as conditional on opportunity provided by institutions: ‘[s]tudents will only learn independently when they are given the opportunity to learn independently’ (Meeusa et al., 2008: 469). This opportunity has often equated with the apparent withdrawal of the institution:

‘You are now given much more responsibility for your learning. You spend far less time in class, and the college timetable is unlikely to suggest when you should be doing your private studying.’ (Rowntree, 1970: 3).

But this negative definition of opportunity may not be sufficient, and it overlooks the coercive impact of the assessment regime and even the ideology of student-centred learning itself (Macfarlane, 2014). Students ‘strongly believed the environment which promotes self-directed learning (or not) is largely the product of the actions of faculty and administration’ (Douglass & Morris, 2014).

Graham Gibbs is more explicit: ‘Helping students to judge their studying for themselves is a crucial aspect of helping them to develop as learners’ (Gibbs, 1981: 88). Yet the possibility of such help may be vitiated by social and cultural fault-lines revealed by the absence of a shared terminology and a shared ethic of study: ‘many students themselves struggle to answer the question “how do you do the research you need for your assignments” because for most it’s difficult to imagine the answer could be anything other than “Google”’ (White, 2015).

Research into UK students’ expectations and subsequent experiences of higher education suggests, strongly, that the realities of so-called ‘independent learning’ can prove challenging for many (Foster, Lawther & McNeil, 2011; Gourlay, 2009; Hardy & Boulton, 2012; Hardy & Clughen, 2012; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Acknowledgement of such challenges has led, in turn, to the emergence
across the sector of specialist services designed to support students’ transition and progress (Cottrell, 2013; Hilsdon, 2011). However, the so-called ‘student-deficit’ model (Hilsdon, 2011; Sinfield et al., 2011) that often frames how institutions view such services, has met with much justified critique, pointing both to its severe pedagogical limitations and the inherently disempowering assumptions it makes about students themselves (Gibbs, 2009; Wingate, 2006). Such critiques are far from new. As long ago as 1998, Lea and Street, in what proved to be seminal paper on ‘academic literacies’, observed:

‘The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to ‘fix’ problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology.’ (Lea & Street, 1998: 158-159)

Since the publication of this paper, a substantial body of research and practice has emerged, based on the development of more pedagogically credible, discipline-rooted and dialogical approaches to supporting students’ learning development (see, for example: Dean & O’Neill, 2011; Gibbs, 2009; Gourlay, 2009; Harrington, 2011; Lillis, 2001; Sinfield et al., 2011; Sommers, 2008; Wingate and London, 2007)

In order to help challenge disempowering and self-defeating approaches to supporting students’ learning, and to support the development of more credible approaches in their stead, it is necessary to explore further precisely how students themselves currently define, make sense of and practice learning in higher education. Similarly, in order to help us build better shared understandings of expectations and experiences, it is equally necessary to explore these questions with staff, also.

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

To explore what really goes on in ‘Guided Independent Study’ in order to inform learning design and the design of learning spaces (physical and virtual).

Objectives

- To gather data on what students do in ‘guided independent study’: when they study, where they study, what they study, how they study and why they study.
- To gather data on staff expectations and perceptions, and to compare this with student study behaviour
- To explore in further detail how students use formal and informal learning spaces
- To gather data on how students study within the virtual landscape
- To analyse and present the data gathered for use across the university

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The research sought to address the following objectives stated in the University’s Learning and Teaching strategy to 2015:

- To enhance the University’s national and international reputation for excellence in teaching
- To be recognised nationally and internationally for providing a student learning experience of the highest quality
To develop the University’s international reputation for research and innovation in learning and teaching.

The project also addressed two stream A TEP themes ‘Sustaining quality of teaching when resources per student are under pressure’ and ‘Learning spaces’.

**Changes to the Module Specification Template**

One of the key drivers for the research was the unheralded revision of the module specification form (from ‘Independent Study’ to ‘Guided Independent Study’) which appeared to reframe the relationship and mutual expectations between staff and students.

Interview data revealed that staff, like their student counterparts, felt that independent study was the route to autonomous learning and the ownership of knowledge. They tended to believe that independent study facilitated a shift in responsibility for learning from the lecturer to the student.

Guided independent study indicates a staff intervention or presence. As part of the Learning and Teaching Week 2015 the TEP project team ran an activity that simulated a ‘traditional’ independent study activity and a guided independent study activity. In the latter, attendees were observed working in groups and working towards a tangible outcome in accordance with the verbal and written ‘guidance’. Others worked as a group using the written guidance as a framework for discussion that would have led to independent activity.

Some of the students interviewed stated that group work and talking to classmates formed part of their independent study. This however was not a common feature of the qualitative data as a whole as many referred to solitary activities and showed a clear preference for working alone. This was echoed in the questionnaire data where 78% of students who responded to this questionnaire item felt that studying on their own was the most effective way to study.

The Student Learning workload element of the University’s module specification form was reviewed and revised during the academic session 2014/15, to enable staff to better plan their modules and to enable students to better understand the different types and modes of study they can expect to engage in.

There seemed to be broad agreement that the guided independent study element, as it is currently presented, was too general and for many modules (especially, perhaps, arts, humanities and social sciences) communicates little beyond the fact that it is anticipated that most learning will take place outside of the classroom.

The primary and secondary research that came to light during the course of the TEP project indicated that further categories could be added to this section of the form, for example:

- Guidance on revisions and exams
- Guidance on preparing and writing coursework
- Guidance on lab work
- Guidance on study skills (including information retrieval, data analysis, plagiarism)
- Guided group study
- Guided independent study
• Online learning activities to provide feedback/forward
• Peer assessment
• Reflective exercises
• Self-directed Study
• Revision
• Coursework assignment preparation

The ‘guided’ elements could be supported, where appropriate, by academic and/or other staff (e.g. Student Learning Development, the Library, IT Services, GTAs, Technicians and Employers) or combination of the two. The latter three examples would be non-contact, self-directed study. Depending on the nature of the guidance, this may include contact hours. It may well be helpful to those writing module specifications to have direct access (at the stage of writing the specification) to advice as to the different ways in which they can support students with various aspects of independent study.

All of this information was shared with the Academic Registrar in an executive summary of the TEP project to help to inform the development of the module specification form.

**Changes to Credit Weighting and Harmonisation of Module Sizes**

The university is in the process of increasing the number of study hours per credit to align itself with the Bologna Framework. Notwithstanding harmonization around the norm of the 15 credit module, the net impact of the changes will be to increase the proportion of ‘guided independent study’ undertaken in a programme. This in itself is reason to enhance the attention we give to the design of sequences of study in modules, and to the induction and support of our independent learners.

Our findings and commentary on this issue was shared with the PVC Student Experience in an executive summary of the project, which also included commentary on the implementation of Flexible Pathways and The Fabulous First Year, which is aimed at enhancing student transition to university study.

**Flexible Pathways**

Joint degrees may already be relatively common with the university, but the introduction of the Pathways project promises to provide many more students with opportunities to undertake modules from more than one Department/College.

There will always be disciplinary differences in the form of teaching, contact hours and study time, etc. Where possible, though, it might be advantageous to avoid confusion and any potential perceptions of disparity if there is a more general agreement on terminology and levels of support and guidance that would be available to students. The likelihood of more students studying across disciplines increases the importance of clear communication between staff and students around expectations, and should be a further stimulus to providing guidance where independent study is concerned.

There are a number of ways in which institutions might support course teams and module leaders in thinking about guided independent study in the planning and review stages. The University of
Westminster, for example, ask course teams to agree a strategy for what is termed GIS by considering the following questions:

‘a. Has the team agreed the principles and purpose of GIS in the learning and teaching strategy?

b. Have cognate groups of courses (or Department or School) developed a set of principles or policy on GIS?

c. Have teams (or Departments or Schools) identified good current practice that may be used as the basis of a whole course strategy?

d. What learning outcomes of the course or module are you trying to develop through GIS?

e. What are the benefits of these activities in enhancing your students’ learning experiences?

f. Have you explained to the students how these activities will support their learning?

g. Have you considered the loading on students during the designated GIS periods?

h. What are the consequences for students who do not engage in these activities?

i. Do the GIS activities develop a greater degree of autonomy of learning as student progress through the course?

j. Are the instructions to the students clear, and easily available?

k. Have you made these instructions available in plenty of time for students to ask any questions they might have?

l. Are the resources the students might need readily accessible?

m. Have you built into the GIS activity sufficient reflection or feedback such that the student can learn?

n. Have you linked GIS to PDP and Career Management Skills?

o. How does GIS support the delivery of work-integrated learning, entrepreneurialism and employability within the curriculum?

p. Are the efforts of staff in producing these activities and maintaining the resources worthwhile in terms of the learning support they will deliver?’ (Whitlock and Rumpus 2010: 3-4).

As a wealth of research literature testifies, students’ learning is firmly rooted in the disciplinary contexts in which they study. The exciting prospect of offering greater opportunities for cross- and inter-disciplinary study brings with it also certain challenges for students negotiating a more varied learning landscape.

Students who are supported to achieve metacognition of the differences in learning approaches required by different disciplines or inter-disciplinary topics will have acquired the ‘learning agility’ which is so attractive to graduate recruiters. To support this, we need to imagine a scenario in which positive, self-aware dispositions to learning are supported by the design of the whole curriculum
(formal and informal), rather than one in which departments have a *de facto* but also hidden sovereignty over study skills through local regimes of instruction and assessment.

The TEP project members from the Leicester Learning Institute (LLI) will be using the literature, annotated bibliography and data-sets to inform not only the support model and associated resources for those developing flexible pathways, but all curriculum redesign and new programme development. The annotated bibliography will be made available on the LLI website. LLI staff will explore the possibility of creating a usable interface for the data-sets so that UoL staff can interrogate the data to inform their academic practice and associated institutional initiatives.

**Fabulous First Year**

The findings from our own research, in line with the findings from a broad body of international research literature on transition, point to the challenges many students face in negotiating the expectations, norms and conventions of study in HE. Questions arise over what, and how much work, reading, group and individual study they should undertake for their respective disciplines. The research we have undertaken points to a perceived need for additional guidance in this regard.

The challenge, though, is in providing engaging and interesting ways for students to gain clearer understandings of what learning in HE entails, including how much guided independent study students should expect to undertake. Our research can inform current discussions about how we work with students, during that crucial first year of study, to ‘unpack’ what is meant by independent study in particular, and HE-learning more generally. The Fabulous First Year project provides an ideal forum in which to discuss how the data we have obtained might help shape the development of experiential learning activities that students undertake in their first year of undergraduate study.

**Research-informed learning and teaching resources to support staff and student development**

As the examples below illustrate, the data gathered during the project (in particular the qualitative data) has informed the development of a range of learning and teaching resources for use with both staff and students.

**Resources to support student transitions to HE**

1) **Leicester Enhanced Access Programme (LEAP):** This year, the University of Leicester launched its own Widening Participation access programme for students in years 12 and 13 of High School. Part of that programme is comprised of a unit on study practices, designed to prepare prospective students for the transition to study in HE. The qualitative data provided by student interviewees formed the basis of an online tutorial, and follow-up reflective activities, for students on the LEAP Programme. The outcomes of the research also informed a series of further interview questions which, in turn, were used to produce short videos in which current students, from across a range of disciplines, provide accounts of their experiences of study. Both the online tutorial and student videos are currently being re-purposed for use in student- and staff development activities.

2) **Modern Languages Core Skills Module:** All Modern Languages students study an ‘academic transition’ module across both semesters in year one. For the second semester cohort (2014-15), student interview data was used to facilitate student discussions around their own
experiences of transition. For 2015-16, this model will be expanded to also include cohorts in History, Politics and Geography.

**Resources to support teaching and curriculum development**

1) **Department of Criminology assessment and feedback review:** Criminology is reviewing and re-designing its assessment and feedback practices with a particular focus on the role of assessment in ‘scaffolding’ students’ transitions. As part of the LLI’s support for this process, data gathered from this project has been used to stimulate debate, discussion and decision-making. In a workshop conducted in June, 2015, lecturers discussed the implications of the research findings for assessment and feedback design. In particular, with direct reference to the data gathered for this project, discussions focussed on the role of formative and summative assessment and feedback in better enabling students to exercise ‘ownership’ over their own learning. At present the department is considering which changes to implement and will continue to work with LLI on implementing these.

2) **School of Law curriculum review:** In preparation for module credit-weighting changes, Flexible Pathways and the Fabulous First Year, the School of Law is re-designing its curriculum to embed support for the development of skills across curricula. In an LLI-supported School workshop (held in September, 2015) data gathered for this project has been used as a basis for discussions about how the School could better support students’ transitions to HE study. This project will continue into 2015-16 in preparation for the launch of the new curriculum on 2016-17.

3) **Teaching Development materials:** As part of the University of Leicester’s new CPD Framework, a newly designed Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in Higher Education has been launched for 2015-16. The ‘How Students Learn’ component of this new programme has been enhanced significantly by the data gathered for this project. Both online and face-to-face materials have been developed and/or are in development to inform course participants’ understandings of student study practices and to reflect on how such understandings can inform their own teaching.

**Internal and External Dissemination**

Internal and external networks and events were used to inform and disseminate the research.

In the first year of the project the University’s Learning and Teaching conference was used to trial a learning spaces research instrument and add further data to the ‘Where’ and ‘How’ elements of the research, alongside raising awareness of the project and disseminating initial findings.

At the end of the first year of the TEP project a paper was accepted by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) and presented at their 2014 conference. Extracts of the research were shared with 30+ attendees as a series of cases studies, accompanied by a set of discussion questions.

The cases studies explored the key themes the research had highlighted,

- Defining and supporting the development of independent learning
- Student and staff expectations and experiences
Activities associated with Independent Study – Roles and Responsibilities

This in turn created further data for analysis and highlighted collaborators for further research into Guided Independent Study.

The University’s Higher Education Review is scheduled for Spring 2016; an outline of the research and institutional impact was requested by the Academic Registrar for inclusion in the SED. The University is in the process of developing a digital campus policy, which will provide another opportunity for the project data-sets to be used to inform the University’s approach to aligning student requirements and an enhanced learning experience.

The HEA have been conducting research into what goes on in guided independent study. The call was a year after the University’s TEP project commenced and echoed its project proposal. Linking the two projects is planned for later in the year with the hope that the HEA team will co-facilitate a symposium on guided independent study in December 2015.

4. EVALUATION

Methods

A mixed methods approach was utilised. As Biesta (2012: 147) points out, this approach has become ‘popular and increasingly influential’ in educational and other forms of social research as it allows researchers to acknowledge that “‘qualitative’ and “quantitative” approaches both have their strengths and weaknesses’. Data derived from an online questionnaire, a series of semi-structured interviews as well as a group task were used to help members of staff at the University of Leicester understand more about students’ perceptions, experiences and practices of independent study. The discussion which follows is structured thematically so as to integrate, and ‘triangulate’ from, data from a variety of sources as appropriate (Ashley, 2012). Collecting data via observational study was considered at the design phase of this project. It was anticipated that this would give a broad indication of how students are conducting guided independent study within University of Leicester learning spaces, including their use of technology. After receiving permission and ethical clearance, pilot observations were conducted in both the Student Union’s ‘The Square’ and David Wilson Library Café. It was however decided after conducting the pilot observations that other methods were more suited to the project and its aims.

Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was distributed via departmental secretaries to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. A structured questionnaire style was selected so as to allow for ‘patterns to be observed and comparisons to be made’ across subjects, levels and modes of study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 321). 368 responses were received. 61% of all respondents were undergraduates, 72% were full-time and 68% were home students. 72% were based on the University of Leicester campus. Responses were received from all four colleges across the university. The majority of responses came from The College of Arts, Humanities and Law (27%) and The College of Social Science (40%). The bulk of respondents were female (65%), and in their first, second and third years of study (90%).
In order to elaborate on themes arising from the questionnaire data, and to achieve a balance between thematic focus and participant-responsive exploration of attitudes, perceptions, experiences etc. semi-structured interviews were conducted (Mattson & Pettersson, 2007). Seven students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and 15 members of staff from departments across the university were interviewed. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo.

Group Task

One student group and two staff groups of approximately five participants were tasked with designing an ideal space for independent learning. Each group activity lasted approximately 20 minutes.

Findings and Discussion

1) Defining Independent Study

Students

When asked what is meant by the term 'independent study', students typically defined the practice as occurring outside of lectures, seminars and other formal learning environments. Student participants stated that independent study is individual, i.e. “stuff that isn’t led by University staff, it is self-generated” (Third Year Geography Student).

Students also acknowledged that the practice involves a large degree of self-motivation and problem solving:

Figuring out the best way to go about learning it by yourself, what resources to use and things like that (Second Year History Student).

Most student participants stated that learning independently involves utilising resources or advice supplied by staff during lectures or seminars. They perceived independent study as “backing up” or supplementing “what [lecturers] have already given you” (Second Year Biological Sciences Student).

One of the most interesting definitions of independent study involved the concept of ownership. The student below argued that independent study is the process by which we gain knowledge on our “own terms”:

I guess independent study is to gain a deeper understanding of the subject on your own terms because History is all about theory and arguments and opinions and independent study is a way of developing your own theories on a subject. The lecturer presents their theories, or other historian’s theories on a subject and their reasons for it and independent study is going and looking at more of them in order to find your own (Second Year History Student).

Staff

Staff participants defined independent study in a number of ways. Firstly, they saw ‘independent study’ as a way of learning and developing the habits associated with being a successful life-long learner. A Physics member of staff stated: “I think that's what independent study is; it's teaching the
students to learn how to learn”. It was also viewed as the process which ignites creative and logical thinking. This member of staff explains:

I would say independent studying is you give a student a trigger or a hook, something to think about, but it’s not necessarily completely well defined... And it’s up to the student to go away, identify, basically break that question down think what’s pertinent to this  (Physics Member of Staff).

Like the student interviewees, staff members stated that independent study occurs “outside of a class” (Psychology Member of Staff) and doesn’t “need excessive interaction or support from the lecturer or academic responsible” (Media and Communications Member of Staff).

Interview data revealed that staff, like their student counterparts, felt that independent study was the route to autonomous learning and the ownership of knowledge. They tended to believe that independent study facilitated a shift in responsibility for learning from the lecturer to the student.

Staff members also felt that independent study involved going above and beyond basic or core requirements:

From an academic perspective I suppose what we’re aiming to do is to get students to do is think about autonomy, to think about taking ownership of their work as much as possible; to be able to look at a reading list and take the main points from that but also go beyond it (Media and Communications Member of Staff).

Both within this extract and the other staff responses there is a clear sense that independent study is believed to involve students making “an effort to fill in the gaps in their understanding” (Biological Sciences Member of Staff).

Staff interviewees also suggested that independent study is characterised by the use of a number of academic and practical skills that “they've had to develop for themselves” (Sociology Member of Staff).

Despite the merits of independent study, there was an acknowledgement within the staff interviews that students can find independent study difficult. This may be because students are not always equipped with or able to develop on their own the skills to learn independently. This difficulty perhaps implies that some students need to be explicitly taught the skills associated with independent study before embarking upon the process.

2) Activities associated with Independent Study

Students

The students who were interviewed reported engaging in a variety of activities when studying independently. Most students reported using online resources and well known websites when studying outside of timetabled lectures and seminars. The response below is typical of the sample as a whole and point to a reliance on web-based information:
Research I guess, computer. If ever I want to learn something the first thing you do is, right, where's the computer and you go and look it up. The internet is the first thing I think of if someone says, right, go away and learn about something (Second Year History Student).

Unsurprisingly, all students stated that reading is a common activity engaged in when studying independently. Hand-outs, lecture notes and recommended reading materials were referred to. The act of reading around a subject was typically done with a purpose in mind i.e. an assignment or an examination. Very few students reported reading around their subject for enjoyment or interest. There was a sense in the data that independent study not only involves reading but searching for relevant reading materials. Some felt that the key to successful independent study is knowing where to look for information that will be fit for their purposes:

A large part of [independent study] from my experience has been actually coming across the materials as well, to try and find out where the material is (Second Year Biological Sciences Student).

Some of the students interviewed stated that group work and talking to classmates formed part of their independent study. For instance, a second year Biological Sciences student reported:

I discuss things with other people […] for example, if I come up with a physics-related subject, I have some friends that do Physics so I might ask somebody […] asking other people, sharing our knowledge […] It's much quicker to use the Web, I think, and more accessible (Second Year Biological Science Student).

This however was not a common feature of the qualitative data as a whole as many referred to solitary activities and showed a clear preference for working alone. This was echoed in the questionnaire data where 78% of students who responded to this questionnaire item felt that studying on their own was the most effective way to study. Only 16% felt that studying with others was most effective, whilst 6% were not sure.

**Staff**

When asked about the activities students should be engaging in when studying independently, some staff recommended targeted reading. An English member of staff explained that this process involves:

Assessing what reading is needed, by going to the library or using on-line databases and so on to get hold of the reading that's needed [...] reading in a productive way so that they're not merely reading passively and forgetting but that they are reading in a targeted way and retaining ideas and questions that they can come to the seminar and supervision with to elaborate on, to build on, to ask the right questions (English Member of Staff).

Other staff members advocated group working as a good means of studying independently. For instance:

We, in language and in content module we tend to give them group activities always, so they always have presentations to prepare in groups (Languages Member of Staff).
A minority of staff interviewees referred to the utility of online programs and websites when studying independently. This member of staff for instance stated:

Some of them are using ANKI, which is a free program where you can make your own flash cards / answers - they really go with it - and some of them share them as well. The advantage of ANKI is you can do it on your smart phone […] A lot of them go on YouTube and try and find a good video and watch that; again, it’s a bit passive but it’s not bad (Medical School Member of Staff).

Despite comments like the one above, the staff interview data as a whole revealed a clear preference for the more traditional activities that students engage in when studying independently. Unlike the student participants, some staff members expressed a dislike for web-based resources. A Physics member of staff stated “I might sound old-fashioned but I’m not keen on podcasts or heavily leaning on e-learning”. Some participants saw the advantages of sites such as Facebook as independent study aids. The responses below were typical:

I’ve seen them use Facebook in sessions because we allow them to have their laptops out so they can do on-line research or look at their notes. And I were like “why are you on Facebook?” “I’m posting something to my group” … we find that good because they’re sharing (Physics Member of Staff).

The comments above suggest that some staff members see the potential that social networking sites have both within and outside of the seminar room or lecture theatre. Yet both comments suggest a lack of awareness about how this tool can be introduced and used effectively by students at the University of Leicester. This perhaps suggests that introductory or further staff training on this issue may be beneficial.

While some members of staff saw the potential of sites like Facebook and websites more generally, others were concerned that students may become distracted by them or use them to cheat or plagiarise material. Indeed, this issue of e-learning and the use of sites such as Facebook as a means of independent study was the clearest divergence of opinion between the student and staff participants in this study.

It is also worth noting that, despite the variety of independent learning activities suggested by staff interviewees and their variable impressions of them, there was a perception amongst some respondents that the exact nature of the independent study activities students would be engaged in at any given time would vary depending on the stage at which students were in their courses. Activities associated with independent learning were therefore perceived to be variable and contingent on students’ needs and course requirements.

3) Staff Members’ Expectations vs. Reality

Expectations

Interviews revealed that staff members expect students to come to university with some independent learning skills and a “natural curiosity”:
You would expect them to have a natural curiosity and also some skills to back it up ... we’d expect them to have at least some idea of I don’t know this, I can look for it here even if they are not utilising the full range of resources they could potentially have (Physics Member of Staff).

The data however reveals that the independent study skills that staff expect their students to have at the start of their course varies from department to department. While some members of staff expected students to have engaged in independent study prior to starting university, others argued that there is a need for more realistic expectations regarding students’ skills. Other staff members reported having rather low expectations of students’ abilities to study independently. These interviewees saw enhancing students’ independent study skills to be part of their role as educators.

Realities

Staff reported a perception that students arrive with very few independent learning skills. One member of staff remarked “sometimes I am surprised at how incurious some of our intake are”, while another stated “they always have less than you expect, in terms of independent learning skills”. Most staff members argued that students’ independent study skills are dependent on the individual, their aptitude and the school or college he/she attended. The quotation below is typical:

Depending on what school they’ve come from, you never know what they’ve been trained to do, whether they’ve just been trained to fill in worksheets, you know, or whether they’ve actually been told “go away and research this” (Physics Member of Staff).

In a similar vein, some staff members commented on the varied abilities of their students, and the ways in which students who have the same A-Level results can demonstrate entirely dissimilar levels of independent learning. For example:

the difference in performance between two students who have notionally the same 'A' levels is extraordinary; you’ll get one student that you think ‘you’re great, a pleasure to teach’ ... and another student and you think ’B, B, A - how did you get that? You’re diabolical!’ (Sociology Member of Staff).

Despite these comments, there were members of staff whose impressions were more favourable. These interviewees tended to be based in the School of Medicine:

You’d expect a student who’s got into Medicine, in other words a student who’s got about three or four A's at 'A' level, to be capable of sitting down on their own and learning. And that’s often true (Medical School Member of Staff).

The data also pointed towards a perceived mismatch between A–Level and university teaching. It was suggested during the staff interviews that schools and sixth form colleges aren’t typically teaching the research skills needed to be successful independent learners at the university level. The following quotation highlights this commonly raised concern:

A lot of the skills of independent study have been taken away by schools nervous about results - spoon-feeding the students, re-writing their essays for them - all sorts (Biological Sciences Member of Staff).
It was apparent from the interviews that some members of staff believe that some A-Level teachers “spoon-feed” their pupils or “dumb down” and “chunk” subject content. Some participants linked these practices to exam and accountability pressures in the FE sector. Others suggested that this has something to do with the nature of A-Level courses. Staff indicated that A-Level teachers tend to take a more ‘hands on’ approach to teaching than a university education typically offers:

They are quite used to talking about material. You have the impression that a lot of the stuff that goes on in colleges is a lot more hands on, that they will be doing activities and small group work (Psychology Member of Staff).

These findings suggest that, among some staff at least, there is a strong belief that A-Level teaching and learning does not prepare students for the ‘step up’ to university, where independent study is concerned. Many staff members pointed to the negative consequences of this:

Some things come as a shock, like not being able to resubmit their assignments lots of times. They expect that they can submit an assignment and if they don't like their mark then they can resubmit and we're like, no it doesn't work like that (Psychology Member of Staff).

These reported difficulties seem to imply that greater links between university departments and A-Level teachers as well as shared pedagogical approaches or transition programmes may, as Thomas (2012) has argued, be beneficial to students, academics and universities alike.

4) Students’ Expectations vs. Reality

In line with the findings from the aforementioned literature (see Background and institutional context for the study) on students’ experiences of transition in general, and independent study in particular, students reported a large ‘step up’ from college to university and that for some students, this was a transition they felt ill-prepared for. As one history student recalled “if anything I expected it to be something similar to A Levels at college. [However] you arrived, had an introductory lecture and then left to your own devices”.

The time and space students were allowed to study independently was perceived to be quite daunting for student participants. The data revealed that students were expecting a greater degree of staff input, support and intervention. The following quotation illustrates this expectation:

I struggled in my first year, so I felt I needed more guidance, to say ‘You must look at textbooks’. I didn’t, I mean I thought it was extra reading for extra credit, relying on the lecture slides alone would be enough (Second Year Biological Sciences Student).

Once again, this comment echoes strongly the findings of recent research into students’ experiences of studying at University (see, for example, Hardy and Boulton, 2012). One student interviewee, however, recalled being pleasantly surprised by their university experience and the approachability of the staff who were there to offer support. He remarked:

I think it was a lot less scary than I thought it would be. I think I just assumed I would be running around collecting information and just learning all the time and looking at sources all of the time, and just doing lots of research. And it wasn’t like that at all, it was quite enjoyable
and the lecturers were really friendly and made jokes; they're not scary, they're just people (Second Year Biological Sciences Student).

The level of support the student participants received to bridge the gap between A level studies to a more independent style of learning was reported to vary from department to department. Some recalled being ‘left to their own devices’, while others spoke positively about sessions they had attended that were designed to support independent study.

5) Time Spent Studying Independently

The amount of time students reported spending studying independently “not including revision periods” varied considerably. The table below details the responses of those who answered this particular questionnaire item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Spent</th>
<th>% of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 5 hours</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 hours but not exceeding 10 hours</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 hours but not exceeding 20 hours</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 hours but not exceeding 30 hours</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 30 hours</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, students reported spending more hours independently preparing or revising for exams. The table below details the responses of those who answered this particular questionnaire item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Spent</th>
<th>% of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 5 hours</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 hours but not exceeding 10 hours</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 hours but not exceeding 20 hours</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 hours but not exceeding 30 hours</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 30 hours</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81% of student respondents to the questionnaire felt they had learned what was required about the subjects covered in their courses. Of this 81%, 57% of respondents reported that they are usually happy with their marks whilst 24% stated they were usually disappointed with their marks. The majority of students reported putting in a large amount of effort (83%).

6) Assessing Independent Study

When asked about their perceived efficacy, 58% of students who responded to this particular questionnaire item felt they were “quite effective” at studying in their own time. 24% felt they were
not very or not at all effective. Only 15% reported they were “very effective”. Most of the students interviewed believed that exam and assessment results are a good indicator of effective independent study. Participants tended to associate good grades with highly effective independent learning:

Isn’t that what the exams are for? But it could be down to how you learn best. Some lecturers are really good, some aren’t so it just depends. It depends on what the person themselves want out of their experience. Some people train themselves to know how to get the grades and how the marking system works and how to please that certain lecturer as they look for different things […] It’s whether you’ve actually taken that information in” (Third Year Geography Student)

Staff participants likewise felt that students’ assessed work and examination results were good indicators of effective independent study. This is illustrated in the following quotations below:

The dissertation in English is a module where student have to plan their project and choose their topic and research it independently so independent skills are key for that, so they are much more exposed than in a taught module […] All the independent study is exposed every time you see a student […] I see drafts and then the final dissertation, so I can see from that they are absolutely records of independent learning (English Member of Staff).

In exam answers if you see them bringing in material that wasn’t in a lecture, because often you get your lecture back at you, but also making links between material in different modules or that they have learnt in first or second year (Psychology Member of Staff).

These staff members tended to look for “evidence of ideas that go beyond” what was taught in lectures when looking for evidence of independent study (Genetics Member of Staff). Many staff members felt that activities which ask students to apply what they’ve learnt, seminar performance, group work opportunities as well as more informal conversations were also good indicators of the amount and quality of independent study being undertaken. The idea of talk as an indicator of independent study emerges from the following quotation:

When you’re talking and the students bring in something that you clearly haven’t mentioned. The second is by structuring the seminars around things that they have to do when they get there, it becomes clear whether they have been doing independent study or not (Management Member of Staff).

Despite these comments, there was a general feeling amongst the interview participants that it is difficult to judge a) how much independent study students actually do and b) its effectiveness:

I suppose one of the problems is that it is quite difficult to tell. There are signs that you can use to judge, but one is never quite sure. Obviously it varies as well from student to student (English Member of Staff).

7) Motivators

Both staff and student participants were asked what motivates students to engage in independent study. Staff stated that students are driven to study independently if they are interested in the subject and want to know more:
People tend not to do a Physics degree unless they’re pretty interested in the subject because they know that it’s a laboratory-based subject with a lot of contact hours and a lot of handing in and hard graft; we do require a lot of their time. So they tend to want to do it (Physics Member of Staff).

Most staff believed that students are likely to be inspired to study independently if they perceive it will have a positive impact on their assessment results or final degree mark. Successful completion of courses and modules were cited by almost every interviewee as a key motivator. Indeed, one member of staff observed “there is an increasing number of students who, for very good reasons, are very exam-focussed” (Engineering Member of Staff).

Staff pointed out that anxieties about performance and a willingness to avoid being ‘told off’ also served as ‘effective’ drivers. One member of staff spoke about students’ “sense of slight insecurity”. While another stated, “it’s carrot and stick isn’t it! The stick being if you turn up to the seminars and you haven’t done the reading you’re going to get an earful!” (Management Member of Staff).

It was suggested that it is not only staff disapproval that students may be motivated to avoid; one member of staff suggested that some students may be motivated by “parental pressure” (Sociology Member of Staff). The possibility of failure was identified by some members of staff as a key motivator to study independently. For instance, one remarked “assessment drives learning: there’s a truth in that. They want to pass their exams, they don’t want to repeat a year” (Medical School Member of Staff). While another member of staff stated that the possibility of “termination from the course is always a good motivator” (ODP Member of Staff).

Likewise, the student interview data also suggested that fear of failure motivates students to engage in independent study. This theme presented itself in the form of talk around deadlines and assessed pieces of work. It became clear that for some of the student participants looming deadlines were the strongest motivator to study independently:

Usually it’s a deadline or something, that’s the only reason. If there’s an essay due in, or a seminar I’ve got reading to do for (Second Year History Student).

Some staff appeared to believe that most students are no longer intrinsically motivated to learn. They felt that students were more concerned with the outcomes of their education as opposed to the learning process itself. There was a sense in the data that this is perceived to be quite a recent phenomenon:

What you don’t tend to get any more is people who are genuinely interested in learning. You know just picking books of shelves and looking at them, and that’s a bit sad. My guess is that, that’s because of the GCSE and A Level testing, people are just focused on one thing (Management Member of Staff).

Both staff and students stated that students’ future plans, career aspirations and general employment prospects were further ‘effective’ motivators to study independently. A member of staff stated that “students across the board are increasingly motivated by career because of the cost of the education they’re getting, and not wanting to appear to waste opportunity [....] I think its motivation about what
happens after their degree” (Media and Communications Member of Staff). These feelings were echoed by some student participants. One postgraduate student remarked:

I need a job at the end of this course, big time. I've got financial pressures now as well as I've spent 9 grand or whatever to do my course, I've got to start earning money (Postgraduate Student).

Other students however were more motivated by their subject and a desire to achieve the best grade possible:

I want to get a good degree first of all but I enjoy my subject, that motivates me and sometimes you can get really interested in something and you think I might look at a TV programme about that, documentaries for example (Third Year Geography Student).

8) Deciding ‘What’ to Study

Student and staff interview data revealed that deciding what to study at any given time is dependent on a variety of factors. Decisions regarding what to study were typically made according to:

- Course content
- The focus of written assignments and exams
- The difficulty of a particular topic or concept
- How interesting students find the topic and its associated materials

The data reveals that students’ decision making regarding what to study is considered and dependent on the way particular modules are assessed: “Most students who are strategic, their independent study will be directed towards the assessments” (Biological Sciences Staff Member).

9) Distractions, Challenges and Barriers

A variety of distractions, challenges and barriers to independent study were identified by staff and students. One of themes that emerged from the data concerned the difficulties students encounter when trying to balance their study commitments and life outside of university. The following quotations highlight this tension:

There are obvious things about my life, in that I have 2 children and they're off next week and I'm looking at my diary and thinking how am I going to get my work done (Postgraduate Student).

Students with children who have to drop their kids off at nursery are coming in; these sorts of responsibilities are a difficulty (Physics Member of Staff).

The potential that family and friends have to distract individuals from studying was addressed by many in the sample:

I wouldn’t be able to work in the library because I just get too distracted by other people, people watching fascinates me! (Third Year Geography Student)
I mean we've just had the Easter holidays and the only thing that prevented me from studying was doing things with my family. If it was a choice of sitting at home and studying or going to see my nephews it was, I'll go and see my nephews! (Second Year History Student)

I think I find it quite hard to study at home because it's your home and familiarity and how comfortable it is; and the people around you, they're family so…” (Second Year Biological Sciences Student)

Some students noted that they had difficulty accessing the right resources, and this can act as a barrier to successful independent study. One student also noted that the search for resources and reading materials can be a form of procrastination and therefore present a learning challenge. Others observed that conflicting or too many deadlines can also present various challenges. Time management and the pressure to juggle often conflicting deadlines was also mentioned by a member of staff who acknowledged that projects and assessed assignments can “take up a large amount of their time” (Genetics Member of Staff).

A number of the challenges and barriers to independent study concerned location – i.e. where students live or the environment in which they choose to study. Having to commute into Leicester in order to attend lectures and study was identified as a particular challenge for some students. One member of staff pointed out that students working alongside their studies may encounter difficulties. This concern focused on the tension students may experience between having to work to afford to be at university, and not having the time to do all of the work they need to do in order to stay at university.

Some participants felt that choosing a suitable location in which to study was difficult. They noted that it was important to free themselves of distractions, but recognised this was not always possible. The distractions discussed included technology or social media, the presence of friends or too much background noise. The following quotations capture this dilemma:

I do ask students where they work when I get the opportunity, the location and how they take notes [...] Do you work in the library or halls, do you live in a shared house, are these good places to work etc. and students will sometimes talk about the difficulties of finding a space where they’re not interrupted all the time by social activity (English Member of Staff)

When there's a lot of noise around me I can't concentrate - even in the library sometimes with people moving about. Obviously they can't help that but it is very distracting, especially when you've got revision [...] Yeah. I avoid the computer rooms as much as possible because I think 'I'll click on this [...] Oh wait, it's been an hour’ (Third Year Geology Student).

Various staff members stated that a lack of confidence and resilience on the part of students can present a significant barrier to independent learning. They observed that this was most common in students who had come straight from school into H.E. These students were perceived to become anxious when they do not ‘know the answers’ and lack the confidence to seek them out for themselves.

The extract above highlights a fear of failure on the part of some students. It implies that those lacking confidence in their independent study skills may be unwilling to take risks, explore their subject for
themselves and persevere until they find something out. One staff member remarked “I often find that, in a way, you’re trying to counsel students on the fact that research isn’t a clean process and that these assignments are not straight-forward tick box exercises to get a good mark” (Media and Communications Staff Member).

The data implies that some students are anxious to know “the answers” and that this can create a significant barrier to independent study. This anxiety was expressed in almost all of the student interviews. The following student comment is a prime example:

I think fear sometimes. I’ve thought at different times in the course, I just can’t do this, I’m just not up to it and so just the look of the books, the look of the papers, and the smell of the library is frightening to me! There have been times when I have thought, I just can’t do this anymore. I’ve sat there with the books and nothing is going in because of the high anxiety level and there’s no point in studying anymore at that point (Postgraduate Student).

10) Guidance Received or Given

Only 51% of student respondents reported that they had received advice on how to study from their lecturers and seminar tutors. Of those who had received guidance, 85% stated that this advice had been very helpful or somewhat helpful. Those who had received study skills advice or guidance had received it predominantly in the following areas:

- Revision strategies (17%)
- Effective writing/ essay construction (16%)
- Time management (14%)
- Effective note taking (11%)

The interview data revealed that guidance about independent study is predominantly given via induction programmes, library workshops and first year modules in some departments.

Interviews with two members of staff from the Physics department revealed that this particular department have given the transition from school to university a large degree of consideration and have a number of practices in place to enhance students’ independent study skills. These practices include:

- The use of a ‘research portfolio’
- An induction programme which introduces students to a methodology for research
- An annual transferrable skills module
- Directed reading and tasks: “In the beginning we give them a lot of guidance so we tell them exactly what to read, then we give them their workshop problems”
- Clear guidelines: Staff members report giving students “very simple, clear guidelines about what they’re meant to be doing in their timetabled independent study periods throughout the week, in their first year particularly”
- The inclusion of transferable skills sessions: “We have a whole set of workshops that are compulsory but not credit-bearing; we call them 'Physics at work' because the underlying theme to this is employability”
Staff from other departments also spoke about the independent study skills modules that they have integrated into their courses. There was however an element of doubt amongst some members of staff in relation to how useful or engaging these modules had been. The following quotations highlight these concerns:

In semester one there is a weekly module that does teach quite a lot about note-taking and mind-mapping - and makes the experiments with mind-mapping possibly too much. Unfortunately they're in a group setting and mind-mapping is all about the individual [...] Other than that I don't think we really have any time dedicated to teaching them how to study (Medical School Member of Staff).

The view from somewhere - you're never quite sure where - up in the university is that students don't like pure study skills courses and it's much better to try and incorporate study skills into substantive teaching. I rather regret that, I think we could find ways of making a study skills course interesting and entertaining (Sociology Member of Staff).

The data revealed that students perceive the guidance they have received regarding independent learning to vary in quality and usefulness. The student comments below highlight this variety:

We had study skills sessions at the beginning of the first year and they were very basic [...] it was very general” (Second Year History Student)

There is stuff available, they do study skills sessions. We're just never told about them. They're kind of like, you know, on the library website somewhere and if at the beginning of each lecture, if it just had Tuesday there's an essays skills lecture on a slide (Second Year History Student)

These comments support a move (widely advocated in the research literature) away from teaching abstracted ‘study skills’, and towards embedding and integrating support for relevant academic practices firmly within the discipline contexts for which these practices form the means by which students construct knowledge (see, for example: Gibbs, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate and London, 2007).

The majority of the guidance staff referred to tended to centre around two key points in students’ university careers: the induction period and dissertation writing. Some staff members reported that guidance related to independent study tends to wane in the middle of degree courses. The quotation below highlights an acknowledgement of the need for specific, individual support but also the difficulties of creating a programme that meets all individual needs:

I mean, of course, what students want is things that are specific to their own needs, so generic skills courses are often a turn off and maybe students tend not to concentrate. Maybe they tend not to turn up. As someone who has been involved in various years with kind of skills based lectures and workshops, I know it is really hard to do them in a way that is interesting and engaging because people always sniff out generic and they think I can't be bothered. So the more specific you can make it the better, but it is very difficult to do this with 150 different dissertations all on different subjects (English Member of Staff).

11) Where Help is Available or Sought
Students and staff data revealed that there are numerous people that students can approach for help and support. Most members of staff agreed that if students are finding a particular topic difficult then the lecturer or academic teaching the course should be the first port of call. A member of staff stated:

If students don’t understand then it is about being available during office hours, it’s about staff being approachable and knowing they can come in and say, “look I’ve been reading this, I don’t get it, can you help me out with it?” (Management Member of Staff).

Interestingly, however, one member of staff observed:

They don’t seem to come to us. In common with all other departments we run surgery - or 'office' - hours: I run discussion boards as well through Blackboard for all of my modules and I think I am fairly unusual in the department for doing that. But just as an example, this year I haven’t had a single student come to see me during my office hours (Engineering Member of Staff).

In two of the staff interviews it was acknowledged that confidence and background have a lot to do with whether students come to ask for help. It was notable that those students who reported asking for help found staff availability useful:

One of our lecturers invited us to go and ask him some questions about the upcoming exam and we did that and asked questions and that was really good, there were some insights about things. That was less about struggling, but more about them, he offered us just context, asked questions really, sort of an hour, quite informal and that was really good (Second Year Biological Sciences Student).

Personal Tutors were also referred to as people from whom help is available. They were reported to be particularly useful for “students who feel really lost in their learning or feel that they go to lectures or classes and are completely out of depth” (Languages Member of Staff). Students were aware of the system and knew they could turn to them for help. Amongst some of the students however there was a degree of scepticism regarding their usefulness and availability. One student remarked:

I’ve been here three years and I’ve seen my person tutor 3 times! I’m sure he’s a very busy person. Maybe I expected too much. My personal tutor in college knew the modules I was doing, the assignments I had and when they were due in. She knew what my grades were and if I was slipping she would kind of push me or even just ask me what’s going on. I kind of expected the same here. My personal tutor is now in Australia! (History Second Year Undergraduate).

Some staff agreed, also, that this system does not always work as well as it could. Meanwhile, helpdesks, information available on Blackboard, university webpages and the library were cited as places where help is available. One student for instance referred to reading lists on Blackboard on numerous occasions as a helpful way “to direct our reading” (Third Year Geology Student).

12) Study Spaces and Resources

When asked to list three locations where they prefer to study, students showed a marked preference for home (79%). One student remarked “I study at home because it is comfortable, I have my own
laptop and I can have my own music on” (Second Year History Student). The second most popular location was the University Library (61%). One member of staff stated “they use the library a lot. They’ll either go to quiet study areas, or they will book study rooms in the library” (Physics Member of Staff). Interview data revealed that some students also work within their departments.

Roughly a third of those who study at the University Library prefer to work in group working spaces, whilst 56% stated that they prefer the silent study spaces that the library has to offer. The main reason given for selecting these study locations was that they are quiet and free of distractions (67% of respondents to this question indicated this). Other common reasons included the pleasant atmosphere of the work space (29%) and its access to suitable learning resources and facilities.

Student interview data pointed to a number of characteristics of the ideal study space. These characteristics are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The ideal workspace should:</th>
<th>Supporting quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be quiet</td>
<td>“Quiet is a key thing. I wouldn’t choose to study in a library full of people” (Postgraduate Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be organised</td>
<td>“Tidiness too, when my study was getting out of hand, my room was getting out of hand, it was quite messy, when I feel on top of it the room reflects that really” (Postgraduate Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make good use of technology</td>
<td>“Maybe little pods that people could go in to, light, able to plug in an iPod and have music filtered in so you could only hear it. A screen on the wall to link your laptop into where you can work, like in the library group study rooms” (Third Year Geography Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Well I use the library all the time, I’m in the top floor computer room a lot of the time or in the second floor silent one and I normally log on and just work from there and that’s great for me” (Second Year Biological Sciences Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have spaces dedicated to group working</td>
<td>“Group spaces, like a common room type thing. With tables and a sofa area. It’s not so quiet. You can have conversations. I think often in the library, you can’t have good conversations. Sometimes you can get really good ideas discussing things. I think that’s a good idea” (Third Year Geography Student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think they’re a good place to seat people in groups so they can talk and discuss a bit what they’re learning or help each other out” (Second Year Biological Sciences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have access to refreshments</td>
<td>“I can't work without having nibbles and drinks and things. I think the library has too many rules. I know it has to have rules for the books to be kept nice and things to keep a nice environment for people but I do think it is a bit oppressive” (Third Year Geography Student)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Be comfortable              | “I can't work if it is silent. I don’t know why but I end up daydreaming. I need the TV on or music. The University is full of silent study rooms, for people who do like that. Maybe somewhere that is a bit more general and comfy. Beanbags, not too noisy, it is clear it is for study and not for socialising but it is comfortable and convenient and you can have music
When asked to design an ideal space for independent study, both staff and student groups created similar spaces. The results of this activity reflect the priorities listed above. As can be seen in the diagrams below, all groups emphasised the need for a space designed for both individual and group working. All spaces have lots of windows and power sockets. It is interesting that the student group designed a space that allowed for more flexibility than the staff spaces. Outside working and spaces to make tea and coffee were included in the student designs.

**Figure 1:** The learning space designed by staff group 1
13) Suggested Improvements

When respondents were asked what study advice they would like to receive in the future, their most common responses centred on:
• Effective writing/ essay construction (15%)
• Revision strategies (13%)
• Time management (12%)
• Directed advice tailored to a specific subject area/task/group or individual (10%)

Interestingly, 14% of those who answered stated they did not need advice or that this item was applicable to them.

The student interview participants had a number of suggestions for improvement. The need for more focused and frequent study skills sessions was expressed by some of the participants:

I think we need more study skills lectures like, shorter and individual subjects. Like they covered revision and it said, oh, mind mapping is a good way to revise; here's a mind map, next slide! Well, what's the best way to use a mind map? You don't just put down everything you know down on a mind map, what's the point? (Second Year History Student)

My brother started a foundation degree last year and they have modules on essay writing. I had 3 modules in the first year which don't count towards my degree at all and I'm only doing 6 hours per week. Would it not be better to add an actual module on studying, essay writing, that kind of thing (Second Year History Student).

There was also some call for having more information available to students when they are attempting to study independently. The quotation below illustrates this:

You know the most that's ever been done for most modules is recommended reading, then a list of the book titles, so the names of the chapters at least would be more useful, websites, videos online (Second Year Biological Sciences Student)

Interestingly, staff also felt that more information was needed. One of the staff interviewees observed a need for all the information to be in one place:

What would be really great would be if you could have two PowerPoint slides that say, with this click this link and so you could say to students in the lectures, if you want some help with this then these are the people to go and see etc. Tell them what they are and put those slides up for them to see on Blackboard so they can click the links and find them. Otherwise you can get a bit of information overload. Especially with emails flying around. You get to the point where you just end up ignoring them, even the staff (Management Member of Staff).

Another member of staff suggested that independent study skills training needs to be more practical:

I do ask the dissertation students, have you ever used specific databases, have you ever used document supply, and the answer is often no, which surprises me in the third year. So there's a kind of feeling that maybe telling students again and again isn't working, it's hands on that they need (English Member of Staff).

Interestingly, a member of staff argued that more could be done when students arrive at the university:
I’d like to do more diagnostic testing, I’d like online quizzes when people arrive so we know what they really know; and I have been dishing out this informal general knowledge test and getting some very interesting results (Sociology Member of Staff)

Finally, other members of staff suggested that more staff training might be beneficial. Some believed this could focus on what and how students learn at A-Level, and the best ways to facilitate student learning:

    Staff need to be taught not just how to teach well but how to help their students to learn; and I don’t think that’s been traditional at university (Biological Sciences Member of Staff).

Conclusion

The lack of agreed shared definition and practice relating to guided independent study renders the concept somewhat nebulous to say the least. We would suggest that consideration must be given to whether the term Guided Independent Study is appropriate and suitable for the type(s) of study that students should/do engage in. If the term is to remain, a university-wide definition should be agreed to provide greater clarity for staff and students. It might be considered that the term should be replaced with a number/range of activities. Our research has shown that student study activity can be broken down into at least the following elements:

- Independent Study - this element of study time relates to students accessing and undertaking their own reading of their own choice
- Academic Guided/Directed Study – this element of study time is guided by academic staff
- Study to support the development of academic skills and literacies – this element may be delivered by academic staff with the help of others where appropriate (ideally integrated within the curriculum).
- Assignment Preparation - much of this will be independent; some guided, but students would benefit from explicit information and separation regarding how much general study they should aim for and how much assessment related study they should aim for.
- Revision

5. Continuation of the Project

The LLI members of the project team will be writing short reports on the original questions that were posed in investigation – What goes on in Guided Independent Study: How? When? Where? and Why? Each report will include the primary and secondary data, ideas on how this data can be applied and departmental case studies on its application to help inform institutional, departmental and individual development.

The observation and photo diary research instruments that were piloted during the TEP project have been offered to the ‘Future of the Learning and Teaching Estate’ working group, of which one of the TEP project team is a member. Associated research findings have also been disseminated to the Director of the Estates and Facilities Management Division who is leading on this initiative.
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[2] Annual Higher Education Policy Institute reports on the Student Academic Experience disaggregate contact hours from total study hours but provide no qualitative insights into independent guided study http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-2154/2013-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-produced-jointly-by-HEPI-and-Which.html

[3] ‘Learning Spaces’ has become a common aspiration, with eponymous projects at La Trobe University, Australia, Lincoln University UK, and JISC, but our focus is on how such spaces are inhabited and adapted.


[Accessed: 26 September 2013]