# DIRECTED INDEPENDENT LEARNING: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION PLANNING

This Agenda for Action Planning is intended for use by course teams, or whole departments, as an aid to systematically designing an end-to-end plan for embedding DIL into the student ‘journey’. You could take a whole-group approach and discuss each of the ten items in turn, or you could sub-divide into three or four groups, each of which would work on a cluster of items before reporting back and further plenary discussion. A recommended clustering of aspects of DIL for a group planning approach is:

Group A: Aspects 1, 2 and 3.

Group B: Aspects 4, 5, 8 and 9

Group C: Aspects 6, 7 and 10.

It is likely that you are already doing a number of things to include DIL in your curriculum, and you will need to identify and review these as preparation for your action planning. You may find it useful to complete the activity set out in sheet ‘Sharing good practice networking event prompts’, or just to use the ten sets of prompts to undertake an audit of current practice within your course team or department.

The document ‘Directed Independent Learning: an overview’ provides definitions and other information about DIL and its benefits.

This DIL toolkit also includes a selection of companion resources and tools, recommended for you to use when developing each aspect of DIL. These can be found in (or are linked from) the document DIL References & Resources.

| **Aspect of DIL** | **Rationale** | **Suggestions for action** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Shared understanding of the nature and benefits of DIL

Two silhouette heads with three dots across the top of them | There is not a single, preferred definition of directed independent learning, either in the literature or in the sector – or within most institutions. Lack of clarity can cause uncertainty and impact negatively on students’ ability to be independent learners. It also makes it more difficult for staff to create meaningful DIL opportunities for their students. This confusion is related, at least in part, to different views about the autonomy of students, the role of staff, the purpose and benefits of independent learning and the approach to be used (Thomas et al, 2015c: 4). To create a context where DIL can succeed, efforts need to be made to develop, and communicate, what DIL means for a particular course or department. | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Communication and expectation setting

Two speech bubbles of different colours one with three green dots in | Students – and their families – need to be better informed about directed independent learning – both before and after entry to higher education. Understanding and expectations of DIL should be integrated into marketing and recruitment materials and practices, including open days. Once in higher education, students’ understanding of DIL comes primarily from academic staff, through the induction process and early teaching. There is a need to clarify the difference between higher education and previous learning in school and college; individual responsibility for learning needs to be explained and practised; and links between independent learning and attainment, employment and professional bodies should be explored. Employers and professional bodies value independent learners, and so can be encouraged to collaborate in various ways to develop engaging individual learning opportunities which are beneficial to students, and other stakeholders, including employers. (Thomas et al, 2015c: 5 – 6) | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Induction and Transition

Squiggly arrow on a coloured background | Transition into higher education is challenging for students. Staff from all discipline areas and institutional types commented on the need to support and prepare students for directed independent learning in higher education. Independent learning needs to be monitored to identify students who are struggling and need support. Finally, it is widely agreed that a staged or ‘scaffolded’ process is needed to enable students to move from being dependent learners to autonomous ones by the end of their undergraduate education. (Thomas et al, 2015c: 4 - 5) | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Curriculum design

Three stationery folders in different colours stood up in a row | Independent learning seems to be more effective when it is fully integrated into the programme of study, is explicit in its purpose, and is structured to provide students with clarity about what is required. (Thomas et al, 2015c: 4). You can build independent learning attributes into your programme learning outcomes (the meta-knowledge dimension of Bloom’s taxonomy and the SEEC level descriptors are a good place to start), and then consider how these fit into module learning outcomes at each level of study. A constructive alignment approach to curriculum design implies that your learning activities and assessment tasks will be explicitly designed to prepare students for, and test them on, their development of these attributes, among other aspects of the curriculum. | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Learning design

Shaded out head with three different coloured cogs of varying sizes | Learning design is, of course, an element of curriculum design (see above) but it is worth considering separately, in terms of the types of learning activity that provide the opportunities and conditions needed for students to develop as independent learners, and also in terms of the degree of support or *scaffolding* needed by different learners at different stages of their course. This last aspect is, of course, the ‘directed’ aspect of DIL. Providing students with an explanation of what types of learning activity they will need to engage in, and the rationale for the activity design, can be an important part of their induction or transition. Some of the resources in the toolkit can be used to help students to understand what is expected of them and why. Learning approaches and modes frequently associated with the development and practice of DIL are:* Active learning
* Enquiry-based and problem-based learning
* Fieldwork and experimentation (depending on the discipline)
* Flipped learning
* Peer and group learning
* Technology enhanced learning to support DIL
 | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Learning environment and support

Two different coloured hands clasping each other | In the same way that subject learning activity design can be ‘scaffolded’ to support students’ development, the learning environment and resources can be signposted and made available in a guided and accessible way, to help students who are new to the ‘terrain’ to navigate their way through it, and find the information they need to undertake work independently. Think in terms of ‘maps’, ‘signposts’ and more experienced ‘guides’. Considerations of the learning environment and support for independent learning include: accessible resources, accessible and sufficient IT and library facilities, a user-friendly VLE, a timetable that works for all students, study spaces (some of them bookable), peer support schemes, and academic mentoring. | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Learning literacies

Light bulb | Literacies come in many forms: academic, information, digital, and study skills for example. To complement the embedded development of independent learning, tutorials and other, co-curricular learning events might include a focus on specific learning and academic literacies that will enable students to operate autonomously. Libraries have done a lot of work to facilitate the development of information literacies, for example. Often the self-access resources and workshops or tutorials targeting these literacies are optional, and it is often the case that the strongest students take up the opportunities, while the students most in need of support and direction do not. For this reason, it is advisable to build time into scheduled tutorials and classes to allow students to develop and practise the core academic skills they need. | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Assessment and feedback

Circle containing two pieces of paper folded on the bottom right hand corner.  One picture contains the capital letter F and the other A+.  There is an arrow link the two pieces of paper. | Assessment is integral to effective directed independent learning. Assessment can generate motivation for students to engage, provide a useful mechanism for interaction between students and academic staff, and offer students feedback to improve their study processes and outcomes in the future. A combination of formative and summative assessment in DIL appears to be particularly valuable. (Thomas et al 2015c: 5)Taking a programme focused approach to assessment can help you to design in coherence across a programme of study, increasing transparency for students, and also to carefully stage progression in terms of the complexity of content, tasks and degree of autonomy expected of students. A timely feedback strategy is a key element of this, as is built-in preparation for assessment – to produce an overall approach that is ‘assessing for success’. | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Inclusive curriculum

Three silhouettes of people in different colours | Directed independent learning can offer more flexibility and thus be more inclusive than some other forms of learning and teaching. The extensive use of technology and online learning allows material to be provided in different formats, to meet different learning preferences and entitlements, and to offer flexibility about when and where students engage. Group learning can create challenges to enable all students to participate. One solution is to build this into the module design, both in terms of limiting the amount of time students need to be together, and encouraging them to find solutions to meet the needs and circumstances of group members. (Thomas et al 2015c: 5) | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |
| 1. Staff engagement and support

Four people of different ages talking with each other standing in an inward facing circule | Developing and supporting directed independent learning modules is very time consuming and often unrecognised. (Thomas et al 2015c: 4)There is a need for … staff to be engaged and supported to deliver effective directed independent learning opportunities. This requires an … environment that encourages and legitimises staff developing new independent learning opportunities.Programme teams need to work together to develop consistency and shared approaches towards DIL. Engaging more staff needs to be reinforced by staff development for new and existing staff, including sharing practices. Staff also need practical support, especially in relation to the use of new technology. (Thomas et al 2015c: 5) | Action for academic staff / programme teamWho and when?Action for academic mentorsWho and when?Action for othersWho and when? |

**Directed Independent Learning Toolkit**

****

Swansea University, 2018, with grant funding from [Advance HE](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/) and development by Corony Edwards Consulting [coronyedwards.co.uk](http://www.coronyedwards.co.uk). Made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0) /