Contents

[DIRECTED INDEPENDENT LEARNING: Identifying and sharing good practice 1](#_Toc21439911)

[A resource for structured sharing of practice in a workshop or networking event 1](#_Toc21439912)

[Suggestions for use at a networking event: 2](#_Toc21439913)

[As a course or department audit tool: 2](#_Toc21439914)

[Aspects of successful directed independent learning (DIL): some explanatory notes 2](#_Toc21439915)

[1. Shared understanding of the nature and benefits of DIL 3](#_Toc21439916)

[2. Communication and expectation setting 3](#_Toc21439917)

[3. Induction and Transition 3](#_Toc21439918)

[4. Curriculum design 3](#_Toc21439919)

[5. Learning design 4](#_Toc21439920)

[6. Learning environment and support 4](#_Toc21439921)

[7. Learning literacies 4](#_Toc21439922)

[8. Assessment and feedback 5](#_Toc21439923)

[9. Inclusive curriculum 5](#_Toc21439924)

[10. Staff engagement and support 5](#_Toc21439925)

[Prompt sheets 6](#_Toc21439926)

# DIRECTED INDEPENDENT LEARNING: Identifying and sharing good practice

## A resource for structured sharing of practice in a workshop or networking event

The set of ten prompt sheets that comprise this resource each covers an aspect of DIL, based on those explored by Thomas et al when they undertook research into effective practice in DIL in 2015. They are presented in this way so that participants at a networking event can note down examples of how they are already addressing each of these aspects, for others to see and consider for adoption in their own contexts.

The completed sheets will serve as a practice-sharing tool both during and after the event. Using the sheets in this way would serve as an excellent preparation and ideas-gathering activity prior to action planning, especially if done as a multi-programme or multi-School event before programme teams meet separately to plan more local actions.

Alternatively, use the prompts as an audit checklist of current practice within a specific course or department, to identify approaches that should be retained, adapted, used more widely, or dropped, as well as finding out where there are gaps that need to be addressed.

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

## Suggestions for use at a networking event:

* Print one set of pages 4 to 13 onto A3 paper (or if the event is to be for a large number of people, prepare ten, A1 or A0 flipchart sheets with an aspect of DIL copied as a heading onto each sheet). If you want to do this using technology, prepare Padlet screens, Smart boards etc. to provide space for people to type, touchscreen-write or post electronic notes under each heading.
* Print out pages 2 and 3, back to back on A4, one per person attending. You could just include the information as a caption under each heading, but people will probably want reference copies to take away with them.
* Place the ten, headed sheets onto different tables, up to two or three per table, or stick them around the walls of the room, with flipchart marker pens near each, or post-its and pens, keyboards, touch-screen styli etc.
* Give each participant a sheet with the notes about the aspects of DIL, so they can read about them as they visit each sheet.
* Ask participants to note briefly what they already do under each heading. Ask them to add their names, so others know who to ask if they want more details. Encourage people to circulate round the sheets two or three times. This will enable them to see what colleagues have added after they moved on.
* Photograph, collect in or save the sheets for distribution to all participants after the event, so everyone has a record of all the examples of practice.

## As a course or department audit tool:

Use the ten sets of prompts to undertake an audit of current practice within your course team or department.

## Aspects of successful directed independent learning (DIL): some explanatory notes

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

Use these explanatory notes as you visit each sheet to add your good practice examples of the different aspects of successful DIL, and to read examples contributed by others.

| **Aspects of Directed Independent Learning with explanatory notes** |
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| Shared understanding of the nature and benefits of DIL 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 can impact negatively on students’ ability to become 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 a clear and shared understanding of what DIL means for a particular course or department. |
| Communication and expectation setting 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, and reinforced after students first arrive at university through induction activities and interactions with staff. Staff across the department need to convey a consistent message about DIL (see ‘shared understanding’ above). |
| Induction and Transition 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. Transition into higher education is challenging for students, so there is a need to support and prepare students for directed independent learning. Independent learning should also be monitored to identify students who are struggling and need extra support. |
| Curriculum design 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 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. 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) |
| Learning design 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. 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 |
| Learning environment and support 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. |
| Learning literacies 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. |
| Assessment and feedback 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 to stage progression in terms of 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’. |
| Inclusive curriculum DIL can offer more flexibility and thus be more inclusive than some other forms of learning. 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) |
| Staff engagement and support Developing and supporting directed independent learning modules is time consuming and often unrecognised. ‘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 staff needs to be reinforced by staff development for new and existing colleagues, including sharing practices. Staff also need practical support, especially in relation to the use of new technology. (Thomas et al 2015c: 4 - 5) |



**Directed Independent Learning Toolkit**

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# Prompt sheets

1. **Shared understanding of the nature and benefits of DIL**

What do you do to develop among colleagues a clear and shared understanding of what DIL means in the context of your course or department?

1. **Communication and expectation setting**

What do you do to explain what directed independent learning means in your marketing and open days?

How do you set prospective and new students’ (and their parents’) expectations about university study, so that they understand the nature and benefits of developing independent learning?

1. **Induction and Transition**

How do your induction and transition materials and activities make clear the differences between higher education learning and school/college?

What transition activities do you provide for new students to practise as they start on the route to independent learning?

How do you monitor for students who may be struggling with the greater degree of independence required in HE, and what additional support do you provide, especially at critical times such as the first few weeks of year 1, and as students prepare for their first assessment?

1. **Curriculum design**

Can you give examples of independent learning attributes that are part of your programme or module learning outcomes?

Describe any other ways that DIL you embed within your subject modules.

How does your curriculum deliberately and explicitly increase the level of independence as students progress through their course?

1. **Learning design**

Do you have examples of learning tasks or activities that support the development of independent learning?

What is the nature of the guidance provided, who provides it, and when do students receive it?

How do you explain the rationale for these activities to students?

1. **Learning environment and support**

What do you do to make sure that the resources students need to undertake independent learning are accessible and clearly ‘signposted’?

Do you have any peer or academic mentoring schemes operating, to guide less experienced students in finding and using the resources they need?

Is there anything of note about your timetable, VLE, physical study space etc that supports independent learning?

1. **Learning literacies**

How do you support students to be ‘academically literate’ within the discipline? (Consider both generic and discipline-specific skills and literacies)

How do you ensure that all students practise and develop their academic literacy skills, even when some do not take up optional opportunities to do so?

1. **Assessment and feedback**

Does your assessment regime include aspects that are designed both to foster and reward (give marks for) the skills and approaches that are needed for independent learning?

Can you give any examples of independent learning attributes that are included among your assessment criteria?

Can you give examples of formative assessment tasks that support independent learning?

Do you have a programme-level assessment plan or strategy that deliberately builds in greater levels of learner independence as students progress?

1. **Inclusive curriculum**

Can you describe the ways in which your curriculum offers variety, choice and flexibility of learning activities, study times, locations, media, and assessment tasks?

Do your learning and assessment activities include group work that is deliberately designed with DIL in mind?

1. **Staff engagement and support**

What events, resources, and collegial support (such as mentoring) is available for colleagues in your department to develop their courses to include DIL?

How are ideas about DIL shared and recognised?