1. **What is Independent Learning?**

One of the key skills expected in a university graduate is the ability to work independently. This is one of the big differences people often notice if they come straight to university from school or college: instead of being constantly ‘spoon fed’ by teachers telling them exactly what to do, university students are expected to work on their own a lot more, setting their own goals, tracking down resources and taking responsibility for producing the goods on time.

Research suggests that many people tend to think learning is about discovering the answer: teaching is about the transmission of ‘facts’ from the teacher to the student, who only needs a good memory to store all this information. In fact, a university education is about developing a ‘higher order’ understanding of your subject, recognising the complexity of ideas and the range of conflicting opinions that exist in any discipline. This takes time, and requires a readiness to explore new ideas and approaches on your own.

Not surprisingly, some people find this a little disconcerting at first. Many students experience a kind of shock initially as they discover that their relatively simplistic ideas seem to disintegrate into total confusion before they gradually reconfigure into a more sophisticated understanding of reality. Be ready for this: understanding in any subject is always provisional - there are no easy answers, ideas change, there is always more to learn.

Good time management and planning are thus non-negotiable. The temptation for new students can be to see gaps in the timetable as ‘free time’, but this is not true - it is study time, time for independent learning. In fact, a simple calculation makes this crystal clear: as a rule, most students are expected to put in around 10 hours work for each unit of credit earned, which means, say 300 hours for a module worth 30 credits. Yet only about 20% of this will actually be ‘contact time’ – time in classes, seminars or tutorials. The remaining 80% is set aside for independent learning: reading, class preparation, writing assignments and so on.
2. **Self-directed learning**

Many students really enjoy this greater freedom to develop their own interests and take on more responsibility. In time, independent learning becomes almost a habit which prepares the way not only for possible postgraduate work but for life-long learning generally. But no one is expected to become an ‘autonomous learner’ overnight: most programmes are carefully structured to allow students to build up their learning skills gradually. And there are always plenty of people around to help if it is needed.

Some students, however, find this autonomy more worrying. This can be for many reasons: perhaps because they worry that they could ‘get things wrong’ - misunderstand the instructions, for example, or fail to meet the lecturer's expectations. Others may be anxious that they could miss something important in the background reading (you might; but try to avoid the ‘perfectionist trap’ - you can’t read everything). But often this anxiety is simply down to personality type: some people just like everything to be spelt out neatly, clearly and precisely!

The bottom line is that there is always a risk involved in independent learning: things could end up a total mess! But life is rarely a simple choice between total success and total disaster: yes, you may get some things wrong some of the time; but learn from the experience. In fact, one of the skills needed for successful independent learning is the ability to self-monitor – to form a realistic view of your progress, learn from mistakes, listen to feedback, then adjust your approach.

Have a go - though be ready to ask for help if you need it (tutors, SLAS, etc.).

3. **The personal qualities required for self-directed learning**

In a nutshell, success in independent learning only requires three key qualities:

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<td>1.</td>
<td>A good level of motivation – that is, a basic interest in your subject mixed with a degree of curiosity, a desire to find out more</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>An ability to take the initiative – to work on your own within the constraints of the designated task without constantly waiting to be told what to do next</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Critical self-awareness – an ability to monitor and manage your progress honestly and effectively, avoiding the twin dangers of either ‘beating yourself up’ for failing to meet targets or coming up with excuses for not doing the work</td>
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All of these qualities feed into, and support, the self-discipline needed for good quality work. This self-discipline shows itself in terms of:

- Careful planning: Dividing the assignment into smaller units (reading, researching, note-taking, organising, etc.) and setting daily targets to complete the work
- A willingness to explore topics from several different directions in as much detail as possible, using a good range of different academic resources
- A readiness to be **flexible** and take **appropriate risk** in terms of following new leads and ideas, knowing that:
  - Some of these ideas will prove a complete waste of time!
  - BUT some will give your work a distinctive edge
All this can feel demanding at times: but working at these qualities will give:

- A growing sense of self-confidence
- The kind of evidence tutors (and later employers) need to show that you can work independently and achieve the required goals

4. **The process**

So what does this mean in practice? Like most things, independent learning can be broken down into smaller steps:

- Clarify the task – make sure you understand what you have been asked to do (remember: always ‘do what it says on the can’!)
- Sketch out a preliminary timeframe: how long is it likely to take not just to write up the project but to carry out the preliminary thinking and research
  - Be careful: most projects take far longer than you think!
  - Be realistic: set daily targets and plan ahead
- Gather the resources: books, journal articles, electronic resources – whatever you will need to complete the assignment
- Read the material carefully. Make sure you draw on a good range of resources and compare different angles.
- Start straight away with the process of critical thinking. Look out for different points of view from different scholars and ask ‘who is right, and why?’ Look for ‘ammunition’ - hard evidence to support your own ideas
- Take careful notes, for at least two reasons: firstly, to keep the information needed for later use; but secondly to check whether you really understand the material
- Understanding increases only gradually, so don’t expect to understand everything at once. Allow time for new learning!
- Check out the support available for extra information or advice: always start with your tutor, but don’t forget colleagues and friends on the same course and/or your departmental Student Support Officer. For generic advice, contact SLAS
- Organise your notes. Look for common patterns running through the material. Look out for obvious gaps that need to be filled, or bits and pieces which do not really add up. Constantly ask yourself: do I really understand this material
- Now start to plan the assignment
- Then complete the assignment – in good time to meet the deadline!
- Always aim to produce a professional piece of work

5. **Danger and opportunity**

There are two equal and opposite dangers with independent learning:

- Doing too little too late – leaving everything to the last minute, out of inertia, boredom or both….
- Being a ‘perfectionist’ – setting the standard at too high a level, often because of an unspoken anxiety: ‘oh my God, I am not clever enough….’

The bad news is that your work is unlikely to get 100%; the good news is that
it doesn’t have to; it only has to be the best work you can reasonably expect to produce in the time available and in the circumstances in which you find yourself. A key skill in independent learning is the setting of realistic and achievable goals. The great philosopher Aristotle argued long ago that true virtue is achieved through a proper balance: not too little, not too much..... This is probably still the best advice for all forms of independent learning: keep working steadily, bit-by-bit, little and often. And learn to let go when you have done enough!