

## Defining the “Independent Learner” in UK Higher Education: Staff and Students’ Understanding of the Concept

Stephanie Mckendry and Vic Boyd  
*Glasgow Caledonian University*

The concept of the independent learner has become increasingly important within the higher education sector. However, there appears to be no consensus and rarely any clarification of what is meant by the term. As a result, students may fail to understand what is expected of them as independent learners, with implications for retention, progression and the student experience. This paper describes a research project that aimed to clarify what students and staff understood by the phrase. The results suggest that while most staff and students were familiar and comfortable with the concept, there remains potential for misunderstanding and confusion.

### **The Rise of the “Independent Learner”**

In recent years autonomous or independent lifelong learning has become a key concept within international higher education. However, while there is seeming consensus on the need to develop students as “independent learners,” there is no simple definition of what that means. There is also inconsistency in terminology, even at an institutional level. There appears to be a paucity of research on what is currently meant by independent learning within the UK university sector. Thus, students may struggle to understand the requirements of higher education since there is no explanation or list of attributes to clarify the meaning of the independent learner for them. This paper will report on the outcomes of a research project which attempted to clarify what students and staff at one university understood by the term. There were four key research questions:

- Were students aware of the concept?
- Was there consensus on what it meant?
- Did staff/faculty agree on terminology and definitions and how did this compare to student conceptions?
- Were there any misunderstandings and thus implications for progression and retention?

The research took place within the School of Health at a Scottish university and focused on staff and students in undergraduate nursing programs. The institution is an urban, modern establishment with a diverse student body and a large intake of non-traditional learners. In 2008/2009, for example, 39.7% of new, full-time entrants were 21-years-old or more, and 37% lived in areas classed within the bottom two quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD; Student Experience Project Report, 2009).

Within the institution, the notion of students as independent learners is prevalent. As well as comprising an explicit Learning, Teaching and

Assessment Strategy goal, the university has adopted the “Independent Learning” or “I-Learn” Framework (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2008). This document provides a list of key learning outcomes to promote the development of independent learning attributes and the promotion of independent lifelong learners. An institution-wide project to enhance student progression, also endorses the development of an “independent, self-regulated learner” (Whittaker, Benske, & Brown, 2008, p. 4) as part of its Transition and Progression Framework. These initiatives appear to evidence a policy and institutional agenda that emphasizes the importance of independent learning as a concept. However, there is no consistency in use of the phrase, with “self-regulated,” “independent,” and “lifelong learner” all seemingly interchangeable and synonymous. Indeed, there is no institutional definition of independent learning.

The School of Health also utilizes the phrase throughout program and module literature. Descriptors indicate to students how much time they are expected to spend on independent learning, and many detail “independent working” as one of the transferable skills to be gained on successful completion of a module. However, again, there is no explanation of exactly what is entailed.

### **From Andragogy to Heutagogy?**

The requirement for students in higher education to become independent learners appears all pervasive. From student study guides (Cottrell, 2008; Marshall & Rowland, 1998) to UK government publications (Department for Education & Skills, 2003), all extol the necessity of independent learning. Indeed, alongside the evolution of Personal Development Planning (PDP) and reflective learning as key principles within learning and teaching in the UK following the Dearing (1997) and Garrick (1997) reports, the notion of students as independent learners has become an accepted aim of higher education. For many, the concept is associated

with discourses of personal responsibility and personal empowerment within not only the educational sphere, but also current social and health paradigms (Goode, 2007; Leathwood, 2006). Notions of the independent learner have become for Green (2008) the “current cultural prescription” (p. 244), and for Goode (2007) a “normative paradigm” (p. 590) whose dominance excludes other ideas and findings that may challenge it.

In Scotland, in particular, the rise of the concept within higher and further education has been significant in various national policy and practice initiatives. Two prominent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Enhancement Themes, those centered on The First Year (Quality Assurance Agency, 2006b) and Research-Teaching Linkages (Quality Assurance Agency, 2006a) appear to assume the requirement and desirability of students becoming independent learners as self evident (e.g., see use of the term within the First Year overview document [QAA, 2006b]). Coordinated by the UK’s QAA since 2003, the enhancement themes are a series of specific areas identified by the sector as ripe for development, discussion, and the sharing of practice and innovation. The development of independent learners is obviously of prime concern. Yet, once again, no clear or agreed definition is apparent within any of the publications or outcomes.

As O’Doherty (2006) points out, “[a]cademic discourse abounds with synonyms to describe ‘independent learning’” (p. 1): student-centered learning, self-regulated learning, autonomous learning, self instruction, lifelong learning. There appears to be no agreement on what is understood by the term (Bolhuis, 2003; O’Shea, 2003). The differing permutations can cause confusion as they allow a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations (Broad, 2006). For Garrison (1997), independent learning concerns, “an approach where learners are motivated to assume personal responsibility and collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring) and contextual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes” (p. 18). For Chan (2001), the fundamental principle is that “the locus of control and responsibility lies in the hands of the individual learner” (p. 285), whereas Broad (2006) argues, “Independent learning aims to teach our students to learn for themselves and in turn empower them in their learning whatever the context” (p. 121). No matter the individual definition, the overall consensus appears to be responsibility or ownership of learning on the part of the learner.

A number of criticisms of the concept of independent learning exist. The first is that it may be misunderstood. It appears to interpret learning as a solitary activity, which is clearly in opposition to learning theories that stress the social or community nature of learning (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991) or take a

Vygotskian social constructivist approach (Carlile & Jordan, 2005). While it is unlikely that many theorists or institutions would promote the concept in this manner, there is a suggestion within the literature that students can misconstrue it as such (Green, 2008; O’Doherty, 2006). Another criticism is that by promoting independence, institutions pathologize those who require support (Leathwood, 2006). Goode (2007) argues that the dominant independent learner paradigm labels any student who does not fit the model as deficient: “They become subject to the negative moral discourse surrounding ‘dependency,’ via an infantilising discourse that characterises them as immature learners, rather than as agentic students acting rationally” (p. 592). This could discourage students from seeking support, increase anxiety, and even play a role in student withdrawal (Green, 2008; Harrison, 2006; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Furthermore, there are suggestions that current constructions of the independent learner are gendered, culturally specific, and often serve a neo-liberal managerialist agenda of resource and demand management (Goode, 2007; Leathwood, 2006).

However, the independent learner is not simply an empty, potentially divisive phrase. The concept emerged from philosophical approaches to learning, the most relevant discourse being that of adult education. Knowles (1990) formulated the principles of andragogy based on his belief that adults learn differently from children in a number of respects. For him, self-directed learning was a “process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1993, p. 24). Although Knowles (1993) preferred the phrase self-directed learning, this clearly goes some way to defining independent learning and has the advantage of explicitly recognizing the role of others; learning does not take place in isolation. Others in the field of adult education, such as Boud (1988), have looked to ways in which independent learning can be promoted within teaching practice. More recently, Hase and Kenyon (2000) have argued for the need to move beyond the andragogical paradigm towards heutagogy: “the study of self-determined learning” in which “it is the learner himself who determines what and how learning should take place” (para. 1). They take a holistic approach, focusing on capability as well as tacit and ecological learning. Such theory obviously coalesces with notions of the independent learner and chimes with current higher education priorities concerning flexible, distance, and workplace learning (Canning, 2010). However, the practical implications of such a learner-led approach may clash with competency based, structured curricula.

### **The Independent Learner and the Student Experience**

Some research on staff and student perceptions of independent learning within post-compulsory education has been conducted (Broad, 2006; Chan, 2001; Mistrano, 2008). To differing extents, all reported relatively positive results: students were open to, and could respond well to, independent learning concepts in education. However, there was also consensus regarding the problematic issues discussed above. Staff and students often struggled to articulate a meaningful definition or understanding. In addition, the development of independent learning required explicit clarification at the outset and was not always a smooth process. There also appears to be a link between the concept of the independent learner and student anxiety and progression issues (Leese, 2010), especially in their initial transition to the new learning environment (Pokorny & Pokorny, 2005)

Literature suggests that confusion surrounding key concepts such as the independent learner may be problematic for students. It is widely recognized that expectations play a significant role in regard to progression and retention (Carnell, 2007; Cook, 2003; Lowe, Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Ramsden, 2008). If students are unclear about what is expected from them in higher education, or there is a mismatch of expectations between the student and the institution, this can lead to withdrawal. Similarly, student transition is understood to be a key area with regard to retention (Leese, 2010; McInnis, 2001; Thomas, 2002). Pre-entry and induction activities are important in supporting students in their academic and social integration and could presently be ineffective given the lack of clarity.

### **The Independent Learner and Nursing**

Nurse education in the UK adopted the principles of adult education theory, and self-directed learning in particular, in the late 1980s (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). However, debate surrounding the meaning and benefits of andragogy and independent learning, the potential for misunderstanding, and the anxiety it may cause students continues (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; O’Shea, 2003). Research specifically examining student nurses’ experiences of independent learning suggests students can find the concept problematic (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Lunyk-Child et al., 2001).

Students in nursing programs are required to balance academic performance with learning in the clinical environment and, on placement, they must quickly learn to articulate theory and practical knowledge (Carr, 2005). The creation and maintenance of these multiple identities can be difficult for some

(Andrew, McGuiness, Reid, & Corcoran, 2009). Thus, timely and effective articulation of the requirements of learning in higher education assumes greater significance. Nursing cohorts, particularly at the institution involved in the present study (SEP, 2009), tend to include significant numbers of non-traditional students, especially adult returners. Many have no recent experience of formal education, and they may have no family tradition of a university, perhaps leaving them bereft of the cultural capital other students enjoy (Vryonides, 2007). There is evidence to suggest that these groups can often be particularly vulnerable in terms of progression and retention (Askham, 2008; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Packham, Jones, Miller, & Thomas, 2004). The need to clarify the nature of learning to these students is, therefore, particularly important.

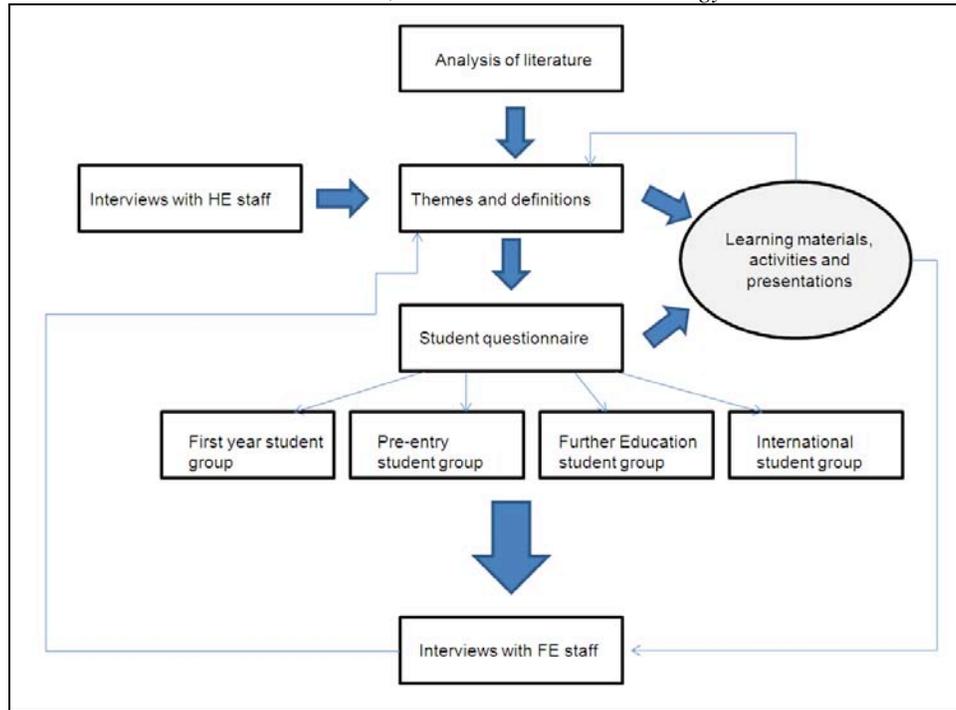
Several related themes emerge from a review of literature on the topic. It seems clear that use of the concept and language of independent learning is increasingly common. However, there appears to be no consensus or agreed definition for it. While there is evidence to suggest that students and staff can find the concept useful when applied to higher education, misunderstanding and confusion can arise given the lack of clarity. In addition, some argue that the concept itself infantilizes or problematizes learners. This has repercussions for students in terms of their transition to a new learning environment and, potentially, for success or otherwise on their programs. Nursing and non-traditional students in particular may be more vulnerable to the effects of this confusion. The research project thus aimed to explore and hopefully clarify students’ and staff understanding of the concept within one School.

### **Method**

The study utilized an action research methodology to allow for an iterative and responsive research strategy. As well as being methodologically eclectic, action research is reflective and applied, involving an ongoing cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). As a methodology it has been utilized effectively in researching and enhancing student support within higher education (Hodgson, May, & Marks-Maran, 2008) and nurse education in particular (Andrew et al., 2009). Ethical approval for all aspects of the project was sought and granted by a local ethics committee within the institution.

A mixed method approach was taken to investigate what staff and students understood by the term the independent learner in order to inform the development of learning activities and begin to define the concept. The methodology was cyclical in nature, with each stage of the process building on previous iterations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1  
*The Iterative, Action Research Methodology*



First, five members of academic staff with a key role in learning and teaching participated in semi-structured interviews in which they were asked for their views on the concept. Staff were invited to provide their own definitions of the independent learner and to list what attributes would be required. To elicit further discussion, the interviewer introduced definitions gleaned from the literature and from a documentary audit of the host institution. Although the same basic outline of open-ended questions was used in each interview, they were conducted in an informal manner to allow for the development of topics. Issues and themes raised in earlier interviews were incorporated into questions in later ones to enable a developing process of data generation, one of the prime benefits of an action research approach. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a grounded theory driven thematic analysis of the data was undertaken to generate categories and patterns (Edgeley, Timmons, & Crosbie, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This analysis, combined with a review of other research on students' understanding of the concept, informed the quantitative phase of the study, the development of a questionnaire utilizing a variety of question types (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). This was administered to different groups of students in either online or paper form. The questionnaire was piloted by inviting all first year students on both undergraduate

nursing programs ( $n = 601$ ) to participate in the short questionnaire. They were asked if they had heard of the phrase, whether they considered themselves to be independent learners and when students could be expected to become independent. Respondents were given six possible definitions of an independent learner and asked to state how many, if any, they agreed with. The statements were devised as a result of the earlier research stages, through the literature review and staff interview analysis. Four of the statements accorded with staff conceptions are: “takes responsibility for their learning,” “can set their own learning targets and work out what they need to do to get there,” “asks for support when they need it,” and “does their own research.” The other two incorporated statements that staff and the literature highlighted as possible misunderstandings or areas for concern: “can learn on their own” and “can complete their assessments without any help.” This was intended to provide students with a diverse scope of possible definitions and choices. Students were also given the option of providing their own definitions or statements of independent learning. Fewer than three students in each data group did so. In each case, it was possible to understand these self-generated definitions as already encapsulated within one of the existing categorical statements. Thus the data was not included in analysis but, equally, was deemed to have validated the original definitions provided on the questionnaire.

Forty-six students completed the pilot questionnaire, providing a sample of 8% of the overall first year population. This number is well below that needed to consider the sample purposive or representative of the first year cohort as a whole (Trochim, 2006), thus no strong claims or conclusions can be made. However, the data does provide a snapshot of student views and validated the usability and focus of the questions.

The remaining data was collected in paper form from three distinct cohorts of students who attended pre-entry or induction sessions delivered by the researchers. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the researchers were not involved in assessing the students. The response rate was 100% in all sessions. The groups consisted of students participating in a pre-entry to nursing summer program, students enrolled on an access to nursing program within a further education college, and a group of students from the Philippines who were joining a short program of study designed to integrate them into UK nursing practice. Taken together, these three groups plus the earlier pilot group of first year students represent a diverse spectrum of student experiences, thus allowing for the capture of rich and varied data.

Once all quantitative data had been collected, the researchers conducted a semi-structured focus group with staff teaching on nursing and nursing-related access programs within one further education college. Within the UK, post-compulsory education is broadly divided into two sectors: further education (FE), which is taught in colleges and involves a variety of qualifications below degree-level; and higher education (HE), which is usually taught within universities and at degree and postgraduate level. The FE or college group was asked the same questions as the initial staff interviews and was also invited to comment upon the themes drawn from that analysis and from the student results.

## Results

### Understanding the Concept – The Staff Perspective

**The concept.** All staff were aware of the increasing use of the phrase “independent learner” within higher education and felt that it was of value; with an agreed definition, it could be used to demonstrate to students the kind of skills they should acquire, the levels they should aim to attain, and the kind of responsibilities expected of them at the university. Strikingly, all staff provided similar definitions and attributes for the independent learner. These were incorporated into the student questionnaire and the eventual outcomes of the research, a definition of independent learning used with new students to the

school (see the Appendix). However, although comfortable with it, they also all believed the concept lacked clarity or any shared understanding and that this was potentially problematic: “It’s one of those things that is, constantly kind of, bandied around the university and among colleagues and nobody is entirely sure what they mean by it” (staff member 5). All HE staff interviewed pointed to the danger of misinterpretation among both staff and students. Most were concerned it might be understood from the perspective of entirely unsupported learning.

A key aspect of independent learning to emerge from discussions was its characteristic as a process: a journey, an aspiration, something to be achieved towards the end of a program rather than something students should arrive able to do: “An independent learner is something you arrive at. It’s not something you begin with. So, an independent learner is somebody who’s been on a journey. It’s the end point of that journey” (staff member 2). Staff within the FE focus group also referred to a framework of student support in this respect. As learners became more independent, support was gradually lessened: “It’s like you put the scaffolding up and then you put the scaffolding away and hope the structure doesn’t fall down” (staff member 9).

Staff also made explicit links between independent learning and specific aspects of nurse education. It was universally suggested that the inclusion of problem-based learning within the curriculum was significant in developing independent learners (Biggs, 2002). Similarly, the importance of reflective practice (Johns, 2000) and the promotion of the evidence-based practitioner (Ciliska, 2005) within the profession were seen as important since both require the individual to reflect on, and take responsibility for their current knowledge as well as any gaps in that knowledge.

**Barriers to the development of the independent learner.** A number of barriers to independent learning were identified. While several staff members believed that the first year should aim to develop students as critical learners, nurse education was moving more towards a competency-based approach:

There’s a tendency for their first year now to become more and more skills, and so on. And if it goes down that way then, it’s not going to be good. Because what’ll happen is you’ll get people to do technical skills. . . . I would rather the first year was totally learning to learn, the key concepts. (staff member 1)

This view of a dynamic nurse education in which competing and often conflicting priorities attempt to assert themselves is a familiar one (Darbyshire & Fleming, 2007; 2008). However, the current technical,

competency-oriented paradigm within the UK was understood to be detrimental to independent learning: more, perhaps, to do with muscle memory than learning. For some, developments such as the introduction of “essential skills clusters” (Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2010) were an impediment since they placed emphasis on specific skills acquisition, sometimes psychomotor oriented in nature, rather than on theory and academic development.

A further barrier was the impact of externally imposed codes, agendas and obligations. Many of the requirements of pre-registration nursing programs are determined by professional and governmental bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the National Health Service. This impacts upon the School’s autonomy in terms of learning and teaching, and some staff felt the need to comply with these external demands left little time in the curriculum for the development of independent learning skills or sent “mixed messages” to students about the balance between theory and practice.

**Differing HE and FE staff perspectives.** Key differences emerged between the views of staff teaching within a higher education environment and those who worked in the college setting. While both were familiar with the phrase, those at the university expressed more concern about its usage, felt it was ill-defined, even “woolly” as a concept, and held doubts about whether students had any understanding of it. In contrast, staff working in further education were much more confident in using the phrase with students: “I mean it’s certainly something we strive to, and encourage all our student in all our programs to develop. . . . I think that’s the purpose of FE really in a lot of ways” (staff member 6). They believed that their students were equally cognizant of the concept and were becoming independent learners while at college.

**Understanding the concept – The student perspective.** Tables 1 through 4 detail student responses to the questionnaires. A separate table is included for each question. Responses are divided into each category of student (i.e., first year, pre-entry, further education, and international). Analysis of totals for each question is also provided.

The majority of student respondents (72.1%) had heard the phrase “independent learner” (see Table 1). This was particularly true of the pre-entry (76.3%) and college (82.5%) groups, indicating, perhaps, that the phrase is used more in secondary schools and further education than in the university setting, an assertion seemingly borne out by staff data. Overall, students appeared to demonstrate a sound understanding of the concept, or at least one that tallied with what staff in the research project described. The attributes of personal responsibility and learner autonomy seem the most significant features (see Table 3). However,

importantly, a sizeable minority of students (25.3%) felt independent learning involved completing assessments without any support, particularly among the college (25%) and international student group (43.3%). This suggests that some students at least remain confused about the notion of independent learning and may well be reluctant to seek support, thus substantiating the concerns of staff and the literature.

The majority of students (70.8%) viewed independent learning as a process, mirroring the views of staff. However, in contrast to the other groups, almost half the FE respondents (44.7%) believed that students should arrive at the university as independent learners (see Table 4). This chimed with the group’s relative confidence in knowing what was to be expected from HE and with the 57.5% of the group who considered themselves to be independent learners already. Such confidence in their abilities and expectations may well provide evidence of the effectiveness of preparation programs. However, this assurance may also be misplaced. Within the FE focus group, staff suggested that college students remained unclear of what awaited them at the university, initially believing they would experience a similar environment to college:

I reckon, maybe a lot of the anxieties they’re not awful sure about until they get there . . . [a]nd they’ve been cosy here for a year or two. And, oh the tutors will just be the same at university. (staff member 10)

They argued that it was only on arrival that these students began to realize the very different demands placed upon them. Other research has found that FE students can demonstrate greater confidence in their abilities and understanding of assessment requirements than those in HE, but that these beliefs are more epistemologically naive and linked to surface approaches to learning (Jessen & Elander, 2009). This, again, demonstrates the value of pre-entry work by institutions and the importance of clarifying expectations.

### Discussion and Outcomes of the Research

Even a cursory investigation of institutional literature highlights the ubiquity of independent learning as a phrase and concept. However, it seems clear it is one that remains ill-defined and, perhaps, even misunderstood by a sizeable minority of students. The findings of this project certainly suggest that the concept remains potentially problematic and appear to validate other research in this area. While the notion of the independent learner is clearly useful in highlighting the nature of learning at a university, it requires explicit

Table 1  
*Student Questionnaire Responses:*  
 “Have You Heard the Term ‘Independent Learner’ Before (Yes, No, Unsure)?”

	1 <sup>st</sup> year		Pre entry		FE		International		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	29	63.0	29	76.3	33	82.5	21	70.0	112	72.7
No	11	23.9	8	21.1	6	15.0	6	20.0	31	20.1
Unsure	6	13.0	1	2.6	1	2.5	3	10.0	11	7.1
Total	46	100.0	38	100.0	40	100.0	30	100.0	154	100.0

Table 2  
*Student Questionnaire Responses:*  
 “Do You Consider Yourself to be an Independent Learner (Yes, No, Unsure)?”

	1 <sup>st</sup> year		Pre entry		FE		International		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	27	58.7	18	47.4	23	57.5	15	50.0	83	53.9
No	8	17.4	0	0.0	4	10.0	3	10.0	15	9.7
Unsure	11	23.9	20	52.6	13	32.5	12	40.0	56	36.4
Total	46	100.0	38	100.0	40	100.0	30	100.0	154	100.0

Table 3  
*Student Questionnaire Responses: “What is an Independent Learner?”*

Someone who:	1 <sup>st</sup> year		Pre entry		FE		International		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Takes responsibility for their learning	39	86.7	37	97.4	39	97.5	27	90.0	142	92.2
Can set their own learning targets and work out what they need to do to get there	32	71.1	36	94.7	36	90.0	27	90.0	131	85.1
Asks for support when they need it	25	55.6	34	89.5	34	85.0	18	60.0	111	72.1
Can learn on their own	23	51.1	30	78.9	35	87.5	23	76.7	111	72.1
Does their own research	23	51.1	31	81.6	34	85.0	23	76.7	111	72.1
Can complete their assessments without any help	7	15.6	9	23.7	10	25.0	13	43.3	39	25.3

*Note.* Respondents ticked as many statements as they agreed with.

clarification and negotiation between students and staff. While this particular research project focused upon an institution within the UK, its findings are relevant to the international field in general. Independent learning is discussed throughout the higher education sector, even if the specific terminology changes from country to country.

The project answered a number of the research questions asked of it. Both students and staff were

aware of the concept and were comfortable with its use to explain what was required of students within higher education. For staff certainly, there was a great deal of consensus on what was understood by the phrase. However, while students were also largely in agreement, there was a significant minority who appeared to misunderstand or be confused by it.

The present study focused on students applying for, or studying on, nursing programs in one distinct

Table 4  
*Student Questionnaire Responses: “When Should You Become an Independent Learner?”*

	1 <sup>st</sup> year		Pre entry		FE		International		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Before you arrive at university	7	15.2	1	2.6	17	44.7	9	30.0	34	22.1
By the end of first year	7	15.2	0	0.0	2	5.3	0	0.0	9	5.8
By the time you graduate	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
It is something you develop throughout the course	32	69.6	37	97.3	19	50.0	21	70.0	109	70.8
Not sure	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.3	0	0.0	2	1.3
Total	46	100.0	38	100.0	40	100.0	30	100.0	154	100.0

*Note.* Students ticked the single statement with which they agreed.

institution. The relevance of the findings may not, therefore, be transferrable or generalizable. Nursing students are often viewed as a unique cohort with particular characteristics and demands placed upon them. Further research on students’ understanding of the independent learner within other disciplines and other institutions would, therefore, be of great interest. A further limitation of the study is the lack of qualitative data from students. Future work on the topic will aim to fill this deficit. Further research on what impact students’ understanding of the concept has on retention and progression issues would also be of value and would begin to answer the final research question of the project.

Throughout the research process, and as an integral aspect of the action research methodology, findings were utilized to develop activities, materials, and definitions for use with students. As a result, a definition and description of the independent learner was produced by the researchers (see the Appendix). Blended learning materials were designed to clarify expectations among new students, define the School’s understanding of the independent learner, and discuss myths and misconceptions surrounding the concept. These materials were also made available online and students were directed to the resources site at pre-entry events (<http://www.gcu.ac.uk/nmch/studysmart/newstudents/>). Consequently, since academic session 2009/2010, all students entering nursing, midwifery, and community health programs in the institution undertake a “learning to learn at university” lecture or workshop. There are indications that these activities have met with success. Student feedback and evaluation of pre-entry activities

aimed at clarifying understanding of higher education has been overwhelmingly positive. For example, 98% of students who attended a pre-entry summer school reported that they had a better understanding of the types of skills required as a result of their attendance. The relevant programs have also enjoyed year on year increases in retention and progression statistics. In addition, student update of extra-curricular academic skills development opportunities has increased markedly (workshop attendance of 191 students in academic year 2008/2009 increased to 558 in 2010/2011). Further evaluation on the impact of these interventions is required. Nevertheless, this data suggests that students increasingly understand that they must develop into independent learners.

The need for, and desirability of, independent learning is likely to remain strong within higher education. This research project highlights the potential for confusion surrounding the concept and suggests institutional and curriculum-related barriers to the development of independent learners. However, with explicit clarification or negotiation, the phrase can begin discussions between staff and students and may even ease transition into the new learning environment.

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DR. STEPHANIE MCKENDRY and VIC BOYD are Academic Development Tutors in the School of Health

and Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University, UK. As well as providing academic development support to nursing students through the development of resources and the delivery of lectures, tutorials and individual support sessions, they have researched and disseminated widely on the themes of retention, the student experience and widening participation in higher education.

Appendix  
Definitions of the Independent Learner for Use With Students in the School of Health

### **The Independent Learner in the School Health**

At university it is expected that students become independent learners but it isn't always clear exactly what that means.

In the School, we believe an independent learner:

1. Takes **responsibility** for their learning.
2. **Manages** their time effectively.
3. **Organizes** and **plans** their learning, setting themselves targets and working out how to reach them.
4. Recognizes that they have to **learn how to learn** at university. Teaching and assessments are different from school/college and it can take a little while to adjust.
5. **Asks questions** and is curious about subjects.
6. **Solves problems**.
7. Is **motivated** and **enthusiastic** about their learning and makes an effort to understand why their program covers the material it does.

There can sometimes be misunderstandings about independent learning.

What it is **NOT**:

- Learning completely on your own. Learning is a social activity, you will learn at university with the help of staff and your fellow students.
- Managing without any help or support. There is lots of support around if you find you need it. One of the key things about becoming an independent learner is recognizing when you need to ask for guidance.
- Arriving at university with all the skills you need already in place. Becoming an independent learner is a journey. You will develop into an independent learner as you progress on your program.

Which of these skills do you have already? How can you develop them? Is there anything in your past experience that you can use or adapt?