Head start to university: part 2 – Independent learning (transcript)

Hi, I'm Katie. I'm a Senior Teaching Fellow here at Royal Holloway, and welcome to the second in our series about getting a head start to university.

One of the most common things that students tell me they notice when they start university is that there's a step up in the level of independent learning that they're required to do here. Of course, you're probably very experienced at studying on your own already, but most people still do notice a bit of a shift in gear.

So that's what we're going to focus on in this video: understanding why universities put such high importance on independent learning and then we'll think about some of the active steps that you can take right now to develop these skills further – whatever your starting point.

But before we think about those questions, let's think of a few examples. These come from students who study here at Royal Holloway – about their experience of learning at university independently.

Many courses have multiple essay deadlines in December, and when you're not used to this, to be honest it can be really easy to underestimate just how long all that work takes, so lots of students end up leaving it too late. Learning to space out your work and give yourself enough time can really take a fair bit of practice for a lot of people.

Another example is from some students studying on science subjects here. Some of them have told me that they go to their lab classes, and perhaps they have a question to ask their lecturer or their lab technician and then, rather than receiving a straight answer, sometimes they just get directed back to the instruction sheet. And, students have told me this is quite different from their experience at school or perhaps college, where teachers have usually been pretty willing to give them a straight answer if they don't understand something.

And then the third example is students on many courses, in fact, but particularly arts and humanities courses; they're often given a really long reading list at the start of term, and they can be really overwhelming as there's probably no human way to actually digest that amount of reading in the time that's available to them. So, for these students, figuring out just how much they have to read and in how much depth is something, again, that takes quite a bit of time and practice.

So, I want to think about the reasons for these practices and different ways of learning at university because hopefully the reasons, and understanding the reasons, will help you to adapt to these new experiences and face any challenges that you have here.

Before we do that – before I tell you the reasons - can you just have a think about why it might be that a lecturer wouldn't give someone a straight answer? Or, perhaps, why you might you be given months to complete a piece of work and then expected to organise your own time? Can you think why you might be given such a long reading list – longer than you can actually get through?

Well, you can see from the title here that the answer is that independence is actually one of the goals of university courses, and your lecturers – your teaching staff – really want you to develop the skill of becoming independent and self-directed in the way that you learn. This is useful for your learning; it's also useful for work. It's a skill for experts in lots of different fields, and if you think about is, actually, university is where you're starting to become an expert in your subject. So, beyond being an expert, you'll also take those skills into the workplace where you'll be expected to be an expert as well.

There are a number of different aspects of independent learning when you start to think about what independent learning might look like in your subject, or indeed in an area of work that you might progress onto. We can categorise these broadly into three main areas: the first is working independently or learning independently – same thing, really; the second is thinking independently, independent thought; and the third is personal responsibility. Let's have a look at each of those one by one.

So firstly, working or learning independently. It involves things like managing your workload, setting goals, being organised, motivating yourself, and thinking – sorry - being able to adapt the way you work to different situations. It also involves being aware of whether or not what you're doing is actually working – is it really being effective? So, in a minute we'll think about how you can actually improve these skills, but for now, let's just think about why they are so important.

Well, if you think about it, in almost every field of work, you will need to be able to work independently. So, for example, if you're taking film or media courses, you might well go on to work in jobs that require you to do projects, and those projects will probably be self-directed. If you're studying law, for example, you might go on to work in a job in which you have to keep updated on the cases and any changes to the law. If you're studying classics, graduates from classics degrees may end up writing for a living in some capacity, and that will almost always require extensive independent research. Similarly, for computer scientists – picking another discipline which is quite different from the others I've mentioned – you might work for a client and have to adapt the way that you work depending on the constraints that that client sets.

The second area, independent thought, includes being able to make your own judgements and evaluations. This is not out of the blue, it's based on evidence and making strong arguments. It might involve being able to identify and solve problems. So, some examples of independent thought in the workplace might include, for example, if you're an economics graduate, you might have to evaluate the impact of a government policy on the economy. If you're a geography graduate, for example, you might need to judge how effective a particular sustainability project is based on the evidence that's in front of you.

And, on your degree programme, whatever your programme is, independent thought can look quite different depending on the different programmes. On many science courses, for example, independent thought might look more like thinking about real world applications of the things that you're studying and making sure that you understand the procedures that you are following, rather than just following them blindly. On other programmes, you might be encouraged quite early on to formulate arguments and to evaluate arguments that are made by people. The point is that, for everyone, you'll need to build enough knowledge and experience to be confident in your own independent thoughts.

And, this connects to the final area: **personal responsibility**. In any workplace, you'll likely need to make decisions for which you'll be held accountable. For example, let's pick another degree – management - a management graduate might need to make decisions about which areas of activity a company should grow or shrink, or for that matter anyone who goes on to work in a company. Students who are graduating from drama and theatre degrees might have to defend their creative and artistic decisions, which are often questioned or criticised. In other professions, personal responsibility is more about professional rigour. So, if you take biomedical scientists, for example, they might go on to work in jobs where they have to follow very rigourous lab procedures when researching a therapy or treatment, for example. And a final example, historians. The might need to comply with rigourous research ethics, for example around sharing or replicating documents.

So, from all those examples, you can see that taking responsibility, personal responsibility, you're your work is important. Any that's also reflected in your degree programme. In your degree programme, you might have to make many decisions about, for example, which topic of research you want to conduct, and you might need to make that without having extensive guidance. You'll be held accountable for what we call academic rigour, which is the way you refer to other academics and the way that you follow academic procedures, record information and make sure that what you report is accurate.

Now, that might sound all a bit scary at the moment! I don't want to overwhelm you, and it's important to point out that you will be given guidance on what's expected – academic conduct and academic protocol – once you arrive, so don't be put off or freaked out by this! My intention, really, is just to prepare you to expect what's coming, and also to explain why personal responsibility is given such importance at university. Because if you don't understand the reason behind it, when you arrive it can sometimes feel a bit frustrating or overwhelming.

So now onto the important part: if you're understood the sort of rationale behind it, how can you develop your own independent learning skills? Well, as with any skill, developing takes time and practice.

If you just take a moment to think about any skills you've developed like cooking, or driving, or writing, or speaking in public. Some of you will be amazing at those things already, and some of you will be complete beginners, and you might be good at some and less good at others. Learning to do any of those things takes time and practice. So, you might sort of think, 'oh well, nevermind, I'll just wait until I get there', well, you can if you want! But there *are* some things you can do to accelerate that process. The same thing if you were thinking about learning how to drive a car; you could just go along, but you could start to do some things in preparation for learning how to drive a car that might help once you start that process. So, let's have a look at some of the things that you could be doing in advance of arriving to help you get prepared.

Well, one of the first things that you can do to become better at independent learning and thinking is to start focusing on areas that you are interested in. It's quite interesting at university, you hear lecturers say, 'I'm interested in (whatever topic)', when they refer to their area of research, and quite often you might find that lecturers ask you, 'oh, what are you interested in?'. This use of the word 'interested' is really no coincidence because if you think about what research means, research is just investigating questions, trying to find answers to questions in your field that you're interested in and curious about. And, as a student, you'll find it much easier to develop this independent learning skill when you're studying topics that you're interested in. That makes sense, yeah? If you're doing something you find boring, it's quite hard to get motivated, whereas if you find things you're interested in, it's much more motivating. But quite often, people are not quite sure what they're interested in exactly, they've got this broad idea that they're interested in their field, but they might not have any specifics pinned down yet. And, you'll be pleased to know that that you can actually train this kind of intellectual curiosity.

One way that I find quite helpful to do this is to imagine like a fuel gauge. And, when you're reading or listening to things about your subject, start paying attention to how much that thing fuels you; how much does it motivate you? Or, when do you feel kind of drained by that topic? Is it something boring and draining your energy tank, or is it filling you up and making you feel excited and interested? And then start following those interests; start feeding those interests. If there's

something that you think, 'oh this is really cool; this is really interesting', follow it up, listen to podcasts or read books about it; look for websites about it. That can be really hard to do during the height of term-time when you've got a lot of deadlines and a lot of pressure, but during the holiday periods or the quieter periods of term-time, that's a great opportunity to feed those interests and develop them.

And, as you explore your interests, you will probably find that you become more proactive in the way that you learn, so you'll seek out understanding without always being told what to do by the lecturer. And, you'll also end up being thankful for this, I'm sure, later on in your degree because you'll be encouraged to choose areas of interest when it comes to choosing modules or topics for assignments, or later on project or a dissertation. So, if you start cultivating this interest in specific topics now, it'll make your life easier as you go through your degree.

Another way to prepare – something that you can actively do now – is what I've called 'getting curious'. So, we've already touched on this idea of intellectual curiosity, but I'm going to make curiosity, getting curious, a point in and of itself because it can be applied to all of the three areas of independence or autonomy that we talked about in the first half of the video.

Being curious means reflecting, asking questions and trying to find answers. Start to reflect on where your strengths lie. Which areas would you like to nurture and grow while you're at university? Start to think about questions like: Are you good at working alone already? Are you more effective working with friends and colleagues? How good are you at judging whether or now what you're studying is actually going in? How aware are you of your own interests? Other questions: How willing are you to really hear and understand different ways of thinking and doing things? How confident are you at making an evidenced argument or explaining your through process? How willing are you to make decisions yourself about your learning?

All of those questions, you know, by all means pause the video and go back and think about those questions, maybe write down an answer. No-one will be good at all of those. If you are already good at all of those things, it's either time to switch the video off or to start being honest with yourself! But, all of us will have some things that we can improve in. And by starting to give them importance – starting to become aware of them, give them importance, and actively nurture them, you can start to develop in those areas. So, as I said, one way is to write down your reflections and observations, and then really it's best to implement just small practices – little things that you do each day to help you make changes, rather than trying to change them all at once in one big to.

So, a third way to address independent learning is to be realistic about some of the barriers and start to, perhaps, try and address those. Independent learning can be quite hard sometimes. And, almost everyone struggles with procrastination or disorganisation on some level or from time to time. If that's true for you, like it is for a lot of people, it can be very helpful actually pay attention not to just the procrastinating and the disorganisation, but to what lies behind those things. So, perhaps, if you pay attention, you might notice that you avoid getting started on a task until you've planned absolutely everything out and you really understand absolutely everything. Maybe you spend hours and hours, and you're not willing to commit anything to the computer until you're really sure. Maybe you spend too many hours indoors just doing your work and then you never take a break, and maybe that's causing you to be ineffective. Maybe you have lots of worries and responsibilities outside of your study – a lot going on in your life that takes up your focus and your energy. So, it can be helpful to reflect on those things. It can also be helpful to think about what you gain from the behaviours of procrastination or disorganisation or whatever the thing that you're not very happy about. Think about questions like: do you actually give more time to things that you prefer doing?

You know, so maybe your avoiding work because you don't really enjoy it and you get more pleasure from doing other things. Do you – does doing those things give you a sense of freedom? Maybe you feel freer being able to work in a messy space than you would if you worked in a tidy space. The point is that, whatever your situation, rather than trying to stop the procrastination or the disorganisation or whatever other thing it is, sometimes it's helpful to look behind at the barriers that are stopping you from working effectively. So, if you realise that you procrastinate because you're worried about doing a bad job, then you might be better off trying to address perfectionism than trying to address procrastination.

The final thing step in trying to become a more effective as an independent learner is to be realistic. Acknowledge when you have just made a tiny step, even if it's just small or seems small to you. If, for example, asking a lecturer a question is a brave step for you, then acknowledge that that's a step that you've managed to do. For someone else, that might be the easiest thing in the world, but if it's an achievement for you, then that's great – and you can be proud of your achievement. The next is to expect failure and setbacks. It's a completely normal part of learning anything. Learning to work in new ways will be challenging, and the important thing is the way that you respond, perhaps by getting up and trying again. And, since this is often easier said than done, I'll acknowledge, then please do seek out help if you feel that you need it when you arrive. Be willing to give yourself a break or breather if that will help you.

Finally, know that change does take time. It's not because someone has told you how to be an independent learner effectively, that suddenly you're going to be amazing at studying and you'll be great in all areas. Developing independent study skills is a process like anything else – it takes time. But what you can do is nurture those skills. It's a bit like watering a plant and watching it grow, hence the image.

So, then, just to sum up what we've discussed in this video: independent learning is really a very important part of being at university and student often find that they need to become a bit more effective at it once they arrive. Independent learning consists of working independently, thinking independently and taking personal responsibility in your work and your study. But it really is worth putting the effort into developing these things. There are some very practical approaches you can take to doing this, including developing an area of interest, getting curious, and addressing the barriers to independent learning, and, of course, being realistic. There are some activities attached to this video, and they're designed to guide you through this process, so feel free to get started on that now.

Thanks for watching, and I hope to see you soon when your course starts!