Using independent learning to develop the higher education curriculum for the 21st Century
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Overview

- Context and research study

- Understanding the role of independent learning

- Students as independent learners

- Developing the independent learning curriculum
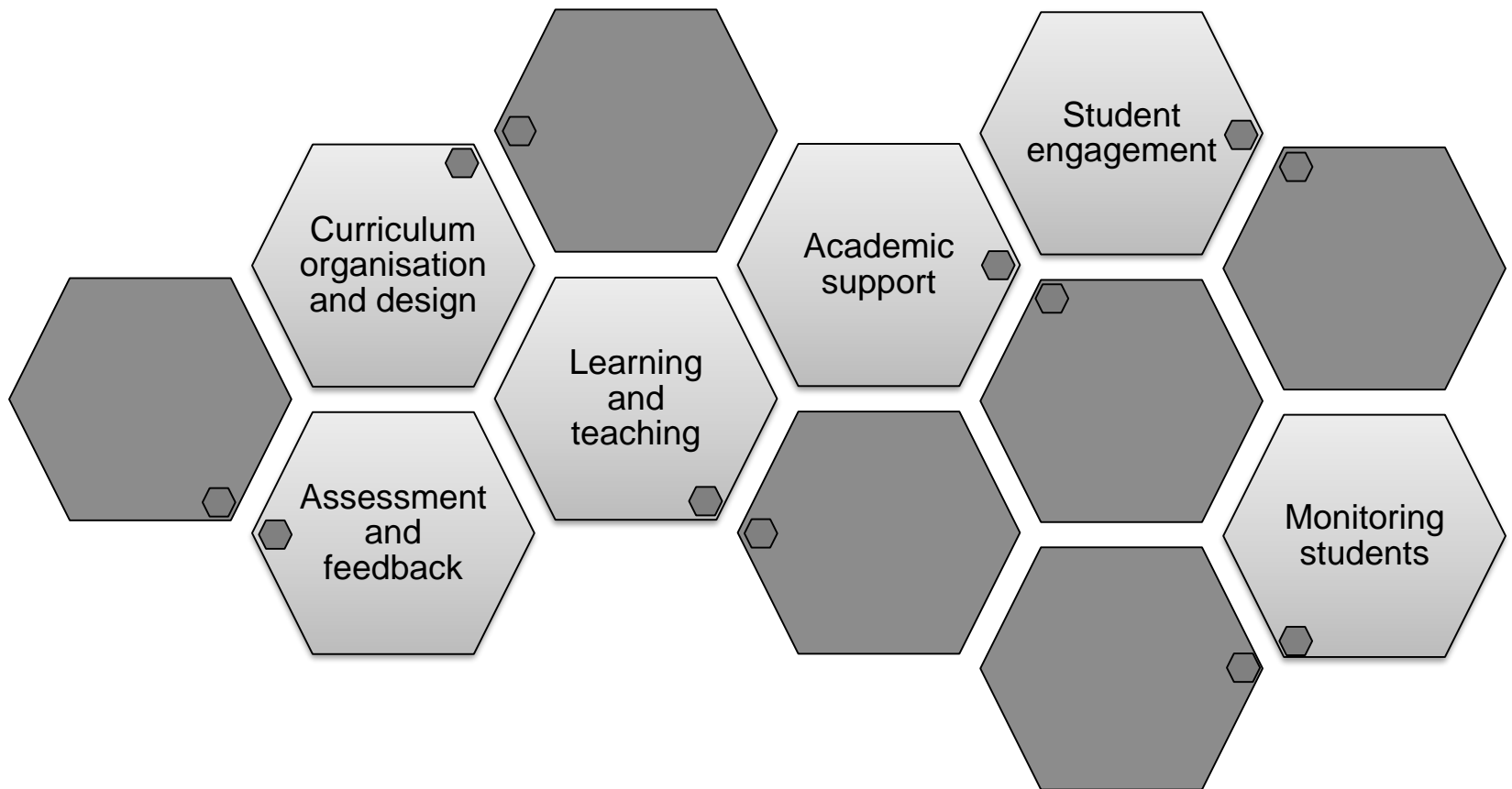
- Conclusions and implications

The changing HE curriculum

- Higher education experienced significant expansion and diversification at the end of 20th and beginning of 21st century.

- The curriculum has been expected to respond to a number of agendas: internationalisation, innovation, employability, citizenship, democracy, sustainability, social commitment, interdisciplinarity ... (VLOR discussion paper).

- This paper argues that 'independent learning' could be better used to meet these demands.

Questions to be addressed:

- How can a curriculum respond to the societal needs of today?

- How can a curriculum stimulate student involvement?

- What is the relationship between the learning outcomes and the curriculum and is it sufficiently clear?

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Understanding of curriculum

Curriculum organisation and design

Assessment and feedback

Learning and teaching

Academic support

Student engagement

Monitoring students

Research studies

Students' perspectives and experiences of independent learning

- 14 student-peer-researchers
- 100 completed diaries (3 weeks) and 93 interviews from 16 institutions.
- Mix of disciplines and institutional types.

Effective practice in the design of directed independent learning opportunities

- Staff experiences of developing and delivering independent learning.
- Examples of effective practice.

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Understanding the role of independent learning

- *Higher education is distinguished from general and secondary education by its focus on independent learning. (QAA, 2012, p7)*

- Teaching people how to think, rather than about transmitting knowledge is a fundamental principle underpinning HE.

- A quality higher education curriculum is a balance between contact hours and effective independent study (Soilemetzidis et al 2014), rather than correlation between number of contact hours and quality of learning (Gibbs 2010).

Students' understanding of the role of independent learning

Students however do not understand what independent learning is or how it contributes to their learning and development.

- **More of the same** (i.e. like homework), reinforcing not extending taught learning to contribute to attainment.

  It was more, 'You have to do this many hours of independent learning. We recommend this because this will help you achieve. People who have done this have achieved better'. (105, year 2, English)

- Extending the curriculum due to **insufficient contact hours**.

  I think it would be too expensive…to teach everyone because there are so many students and it's a very important skill to have as well, to work independently. (27, year 4, Mathematics)

Students' understanding of the role of independent learning

- **Preparation for the world of work**.

    I think that you, in a job, in a real-life situation, independent learning would probably be found quite frequently, as opposed to in school when it wasn't really found, so university's, sort of, the bridge between the two. To try and encourage people to start thinking independently so that they're then suited to these jobs they need to go to after. (83, year 3, Management)

- A few students see it as an **opportunity to pursue areas of interest**.

    I'll go read that book about some subject because I'm interested in it and learn about, and then maybe apply it to other stuff. (45, year 2, Geology)

Students as independent learners

Students struggle with motivation and lack skills to be effective independent learners, which results in lack of engagement and concentration on low level tasks.

- Students felt under-prepared for IL on entry to HE.
- The felt overwhelmed by the volume of work, and struggled to juggle their academic and other priorities.
- Students tended to rely on study skills from school, which were not always appropriate. Developing or using other techniques was viewed as risky.
- They developed their understanding of IL by trial and error, and some did not develop.
- Many focused on narrow or directed tasks: reviewing lecture notes, organising time, memorizing.
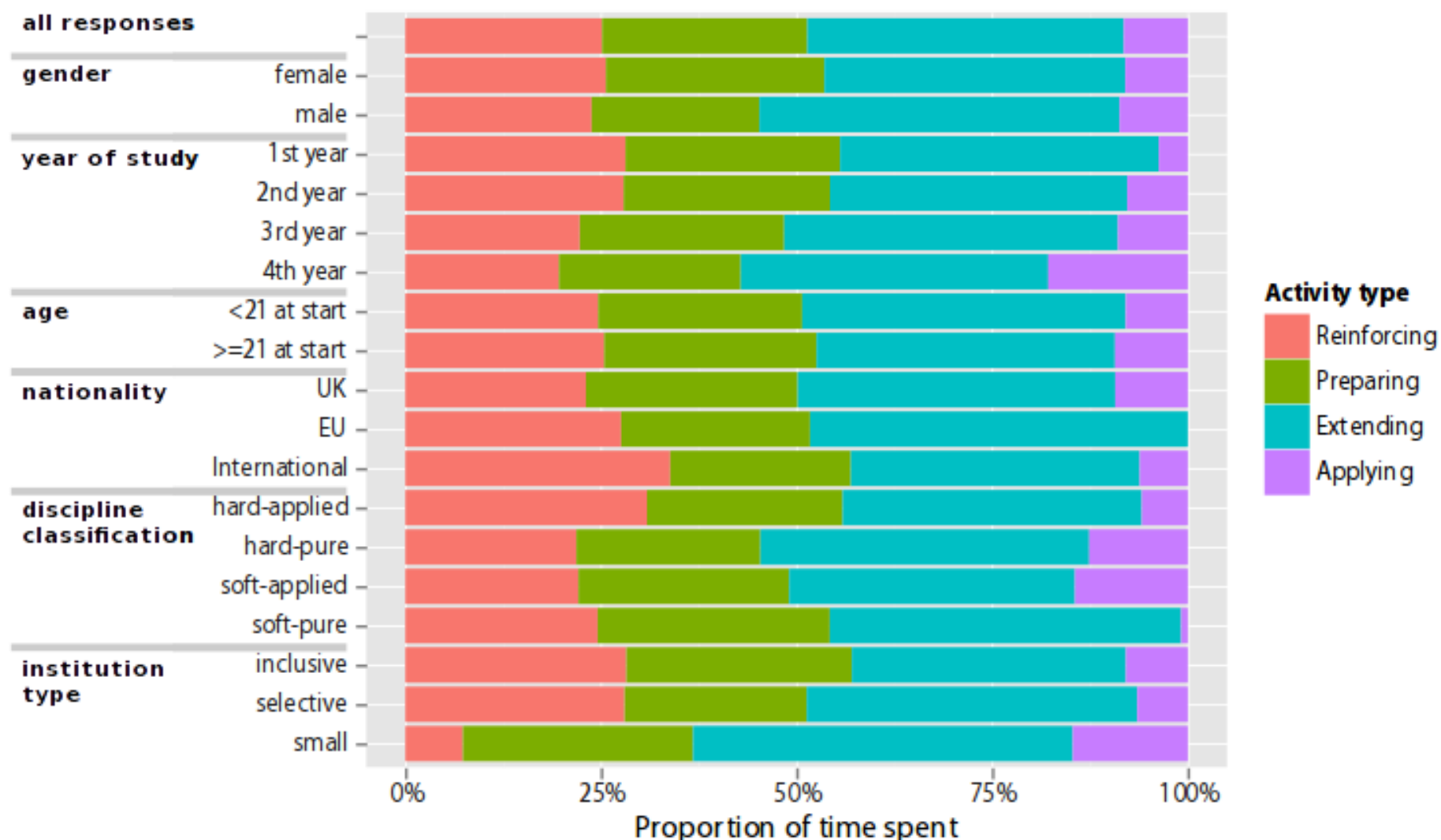
Narrow approach to IL

I have to-do lists that I do and then tick things off, because then it makes you feel like you're doing something, or in my diary I'll scribble things out every day after I've done them, because then it feels like you're achieving something. I've got a Gantt chart thing on my wall that I cross of each day. I tick it or cross it depending on if I've done my work, because then you can visually see if you've actually done your independent learning, and then you feel bad if you haven't. (137, year 3, Zoology)

Independent learning provides an opportunity for HEIs

- Much of the independent learning time is either not being used for learning, or it is spent on low level tasks.

- Prior to entry students expect to do more 'working on their own' – although they expect this to be more like homework and are surprised that they have more responsibility for the contents of the learning.

- Students lack understanding about the purpose of IL and the skills to undertake it effectively.

- With greater guidance students could achieve more in their independent learning time.

Directed independent learning (DIL)

DIL describes one of the processes by which HE students engage with the curriculum - and academic staff - to achieve learning goals. It may also include interacting with peers, other HE staff, employers, communities, families and stakeholders. DIL places increased responsibility on students when compared to the forms of learning they are most likely to have undertaken prior to entering HE. But students should be engaged, enabled, facilitated and supported by staff through relevant and guided opportunities, suitable pedagogies and an appropriate learning environment. Staff should ensure students have informal and formal opportunities for feedback, and monitor participation and understanding. **DIL is integral to students' development as autonomous learners and their graduate attributes**.

Developing autonomous learners through directed independent learning

A staged or 'scaffolded' process is needed to enable students to move from being dependent learners to be autonomous by the end of their undergraduate education. This includes:

- A clear structure of what to do and explicit guidance about what is required;
- A safe space for learning to learn;
- Support from staff and the opportunity for students to check that they are on the right lines, which can be enabled through technology as well as face-to-face;
- Opportunities for peer support;
- Guidance on how to be reflective and better understand the learning process; and
- Support with specific skills required (e.g. ICT).
- Underpinned by monitoring to identify students who are struggling.

Examples of using independent learning to extend the curriculum

- Examples from the compendium

Examples: Clarity and structure

Frequent repetition and reinforcement of the message is used to help students adjust to the expectation that they must be effective independent learners. All staff include aspects of independent learning into their modules so the message is being covered in six parallel modules at the same time. Moreover, a schedule of activities for the personal tutors includes discussion of this and related issues on a regular basis. (Systems Engineering, University of Sheffield)

Examples: Clarity, structure and a safe space

If there are certain passages that bewilder you in the reading, use the diary to analyse that sentence piece by piece, trying to get it into your own words. Use the diary to try out your ideas. It is a safe place, where we don't need to see perfection – what we want is to see the thought processes that you personally go through when you face that particular passage. We strongly recommend that you keep a reading diary for all your reading on this module. (Module Handbook, English and Critical Theory, Edinburgh Napier University)

Examples: A safe place

A core pedagogic ethos of the course is the formation of a close-knit, interactive and supportive learning environment, with strategies for community building embedded throughout the programme design. The asynchronous discussion forums are very much seen as a 'safe' environment where students can engage in debate centred on the study guide activities, make mistakes and identify areas of challenge or weakness, without fear of being judged. Frequently, students will support their peers, perhaps by suggesting additional reading which may provide clarification on a particular point, highlighting a topical news item or drawing on their own professional experience.. (Banking and Finance, IFS University College)

Examples: Staff guidance and support

Being available to students as they grappled with self-managed learning has been vital. Sometimes a word of re-assurance is all that is needed. At other times helping them reflect on their experience and handling the dynamics within learning sets is required. Offering reflective questions at the end of each class (summary responses will be included in submitted Learning Logs) alongside experimenting with class venues to challenge habitual ways of behaving in class have both contributed to a different experience. On one occasion we met in an art gallery and on another in the University Senate-the objective is to reflect on how environment impacts on the learning process. (Management, Southampton University)

Examples: Using technology to check-in

Giving students the opportunity to engage with the SAQs [self-assessment questions] as they work through their module materials, allows them to assess their own progress and attainment of the learning outcomes. The student is then able to identify areas of weakness where they need to review or undertake further study. Some students also use the SAQs at the start of a new topic to test how much they know before they begin. (Open University)

Examples: Online support from peers and staff

- *Discussing with everyone else online means I am challenged and challenge myself to think about how I use my time and how what I do when the tutor isn't there counts.*

- *I was scared I'd look stupid, but everyone supports each other and we all learn so much.*

- *I have got so much better at reflecting on what I write, because others respond to my posts. This has definitely improved my approach to assignments.*

- *I tend to think about my grades, but I got so stuck into this task I didn't think about them too much.*

- *The quick feedback from tutors was brilliant – really useful because you've not forgotten what've you said when you get your feedback!*

(English Literature, Sheffield Hallam University)

Examples: Peer support

Student Mentors undergo the NTU recruitment and selection process, are trained in mentoring to facilitate and enable independent learning, and use questioning techniques to encourage independent thought. The vision for this model is one whereby highly skilled students are recruited and trained to work with lower year students, to facilitate discussion and promote familiarity with the conventions of writing in that School. According to feedback, the majority of students access a Student Mentor as they perceive that they are having difficulty with their academic work and a high percentage of students cite increased understanding and confidence as being one of the main outcomes of a session. (Student Mentors, Nottingham Trent University)

Examples: Reflection on the learning process

… students were encouraged to reflect on the work undertaken by keeping a record of the intervention, developing plans and timelines and recording the learning that informed the activity as it progressed … The staff role as mentors is to guide, listen and ask questions to prompt reflection on higher critical levels … We recognised that students would benefit from sharing their experience in order to concretise the process of reflection so that learning becomes embedded and something that students can draw on and relate to future learning and activities. (Social Work, University of Salford)

Examples: Support with specific skills

A great deal of support is available to all students so that they can all produce an electronic portfolio whatever their IT skill level. The Technology Enhanced Learning team are very supportive of our aims and the Academic Technologies Trainer is available for tutorials. Illustrated guides have been created as well as the reflective log guidelines mentioned above. Lecturers provide feedback on the portfolio twice during the semester. (Languages, York St John University)

Summary of types of effective practice

- Setting high expectations about independent learning and how important it is.
- Building discipline-specific study skills into the core curriculum, including reflecting on the learning process through for example, learning diaries, or portfolios.
- Using applied approaches including problem-based and real-world learning, and research.
- Flipping the class-room to spend contact time working on using knowledge.
- Encouraging group learning and peer support, including across years through projects and by developing students skills to collaborate and teach each other.
- Providing feedback and support to students, e.g. through on-line questions of forums.

Conclusions

- Higher education is characterised, and differentiated from school-education, by independent learning.
- Students however do not understand the purpose of independent learning in HE, and frequently do not have the skills required, assuming learning skills developed in school are sufficient.
- Much independent learning is not undertaken, or time is spent on low level tasks.
- Thus, there is scope to develop the independent learning curriculum to meet many of the HE challenges in the 21st century.
- This will require transparency about the relevance of the curriculum to students, a directed learning approach to support students to develop the skills required, and engaging contents: students were more engaged by 'real-world' and employment-relevant learning.

Implications

Implications for the curriculum:

- Transparency of the purpose of independent learning.
- Explicit relevance of specific independent learning tasks to students, and engaging activities (real-world, employment-related, etc).
- Supported process to enable students to develop as independent learner moving to extending, applying and creating knowledge.

Implications for institutions:

- A strategic approach to independent learning.
- Providing staff time, support and resource to develop effective IL curricula.
- A communication strategy about the role and purpose of IL to students, staff, families, employers etc.

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References

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