

# Learner journeys

## 1. Overview & definition

The learner journeys project has run throughout the course of the 2016/17 academic year. The primary aim was to gather data to inform Library Services' teaching policy and menu of options, in support of priority 3.1 from our 2016/17 operating statement:

“Develop a clear policy and programme of scaleable teaching for on and off campus-based students, integrated in the curriculum and delivered face to face and online as appropriate”.

A secondary aim was to gather data which potentially has wider application at institute and institution level.

For this project, the learner journey was defined as the information and study skills a student brings to university with them and develops over the course of their degree programme.

## 2. Methodology

Academic Liaison Librarians conducted informal interviews with individual members of teaching staff, and with groups such as course leaders and institute Learning and Teaching committees. These took the form of open conversations rather than structured interviews, allowing staff to lead the conversation rather than the librarian. However, a number of prompts were used, where needed to stimulate discussion. These included:

- What skills do students have / are they expected to have upon entry?
- What are the stress points for students? E.g. times when they're more likely to drop out
- What skills are developed throughout the programme and when? Is there a framework that each department/institute tries to work to?
- What skills are taught by academic staff / professional staff / self-taught?
- Is there a difference for non-traditional students? E.g. at a distance, not here 9-5 etc?

The questions asked and the data gathered were intended to represent learner journeys and study skills in their broadest sense. However, some interviewees retained a library and information literacy focus in their answers. It is assumed the fact that they were interviewed by a librarian influenced their focus.

## 3. Data gathered

### 3.1 Coverage by institute

Institute	Course leader meeting attended?	Number of people (individual interviews)	Subjects covered in individual interviews
IHCA	No	13	English Literature; Drama; Film Studies; Journalism; Creative Writing; Drama; Media & Culture; History; CDME/Graphic Design; Law
IHS	Yes**	8	Social Work; Pre-registration Nursing (Mental Health branch); Applied Criminology; Midwifery; Nutritional Therapy; PG Cert Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA); Psychology

IOE	Yes	3	Primary ITE; Early Childhood Professional Practice
ISE	No	12	Geography; Environmental Science; Biochemistry; Forensic & Applied Biology; Human Nutrition; River Science (MRes); Maths; Biology
ISES	Attended SLEC meeting	7	Sports Coaching; PE/OE; HND Sport, Coaching, and Physical Education; Dance and Community Practice, PE and Dance; Outdoor Adventure Leadership & Management (Partner); Cricket Coaching & Management
WBS	No	8	Computing; Marketing & Enterprise; Leadership Management & Human Resources; Economics, Finance & Law; Business; Accounting

### 3.2 Literature review

Although there is other work which has a bearing on this project, there is little in the sector that takes the same approach to tracking and charting the learner journey. Useful documents, frameworks and projects include:

- Frameworks for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2008) which sets out generic outcomes and descriptors for each level of academic study (levels 4-8).<sup>1</sup>
- SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy (1999)<sup>2</sup> and A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (2011)<sup>3</sup> both seek to set out frameworks which describe and map out the development of information and wider academic skills respectively.
- The HEFCE learning gains project which attempts 'to measure the improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education'.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3 Student data

An application for a SAP project was unsuccessful, but we intend to work with students to replicate work with staff on learner journeys and expectations of skills development. This will be conducted in the 2017/18 academic year and will be undertaken as a research project by Kathryn Devine, Academic Liaison Librarian for Law, Psychology & Criminology as part of her MSc Library and Information Studies.

## 4. Data analysis

The data has been analysed thematically, in terms of trends that arise across the whole dataset, and also by considering commonalities and differences across levels of study.

As above, frequencies/percentages are calculated on the basis of how many lines of data a theme is found in, not how many individuals referred to it.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/tags/7-pillars>

<sup>3</sup> <https://newcurriculum.wordpress.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lg/>

## 4.1 Trends across levels of study

### 4.1.1 Pre-entry/starting level 4

Staff across all 6 institutes were broadly in agreement with the level of skills they anticipate upon entry:

Common theme	Contradictions to theme
Students lack research skills, including searching for material and understanding the importance of evaluating source quality	Some staff expect students to be reasonably internet savvy and able to search. See <a href="#">Technology</a>
Students lack basic academic writing skills / writing experience, especially those coming in from BTEC backgrounds	Students are expected to have a basic understanding of academic writing expected (1 comment, IOE)  Hope students arrive with basic 'how to tell a story' skills, i.e. structure an essay (1 comment, ISE)  Students should be able to respond appropriately to essay questions (1 comment, ISE)
No expectation that students can reference	-

Several additional comments were made which do not fall into any of the broad categories above:

Institute	Comment
IHS	Students have little [sic] or no reflective skills
ISE	Students have capability, not motivation/presentation/organisational skills
ISES	Students have no idea who they are or what they're doing; excited and enthusiastic though study not their main priority
ISES	We expect too much too soon of students

### 4.1.2 Development throughout level 4

The majority of comments around skills development were made in relation to level 4, with a need to provide students with an entire skillset they do not have upon entry. Staff talked about 'building' these skills

In some cases, this seems to be made explicit to students and discussed amongst course teams. In other areas, it is unclear whether this is being articulated. See [Transition, progression and developing skills in the curriculum](#) for good practice and further discussion.

- Start to develop reflective writing, essay construction skills, critical thinking and reading
- Development of variety of research skills, e.g. mind mapping for original research
- Develop good grasp of referencing
- Building student confidence

- Students need hand-holding

Expectations regarding students' use of sources varied significantly:

- Expect students to learn how to navigate the library 'proficiently'
- Staff challenging use of Wikipedia and discussing sources in class
- Use of Resource Lists to signpost quality material and scaffold learning
- Encouraging students' use of sources, by including it in the marking criteria, e.g. must use four types of source and give feedback on quality of sources (Media & Culture)
- Other staff encourage early use of journals, to encourage independence of learning (Biochemistry)
- Others expect that students will primarily use textbooks at this stage

Many staff articulate to students that these are core skills, for use in all modules throughout their degree programmes. However some staff also comment that these skills are not tested or that what is being taught does not match assessment requirements, e.g.

Institute	Subject	Comments
IHCA	History	Mismatch between what L4 students are asked to do and how they are taught in the first year mandatory [module]
ISES	Sports coaching	More skills work needed and to be tested, instead of assumed to be increasing. Do not have mechanisms to do this...Staff don't really know what skills students have on entry, and often the students themselves don't really know - they are not very self-aware.

#### 4.1.3 Development throughout Level 5

Comments on level 5 tended to focus on developing skills gained in level 4, or simply 'doing more of them'.

Common themes discussed throughout the institution are:

- Students should be developing independence and 'curiosity' in their study, becoming more critical in their reading and writing, able to synthesise information and develop a critical argument. Staff note that:
  - Quality of writing does improve, though often still too descriptive rather than discursive/critical
  - Better at synthesising information, though many still struggle
- Students should use a wider range of resources and critical materials, i.e. googling less and using a wider range of journals and databases. Some staff make this explicit and comment that the move from textbooks to journals 'scares' students
- Students should start to think about the resources required for their independent study

Differences lie in the expectations around referencing, from expecting students to understand the tenets but still make mistakes and ask questions, through to expecting 'perfect' referencing.

Some staff change their teaching style to enhance this independent approach. For example, archaeology and geography become less instructive and encourage discussion and exploration. Similarly, L5 Dance students are given much less guidance:

This is intended to motivate them to acknowledge the need to develop independent learning skills. Even though, students seem to perceive as being "left alone" at the time, they appreciate the effectiveness of the learning experience later on.

#### 4.1.4 Development throughout Level 6

The focus in level 6 is on having developed independent study skills to the extent that students can successfully complete their independent study. What staff expect here is:

- Ability to find and access a variety of source materials and critique/analyse them
- Refining and putting into practice the skills taught in levels 4 and 5
- High standard of writing, synthesis, transferable skills for workplace. And confidence in those skills
- Ability to formulate, articulate and answer a research question, critical awareness and application
- Ability to employ appropriate academic and technical language,
- Aptitude to identify and access relevant sources (books/journal articles, grey literature, digital resources etc) and evaluate their trustworthiness and 'value'.

Some staff note that the way they teach and the assessments they set need to better reflect these expectations.

One member of staff commented on expecting a 'publishable standard of writing from the most able students' though this was not a common thread.

However, this independence is not being fully realised by many students. Staff comment on students:

- Not embracing and using the skills taught elsewhere in the curriculum or not understanding that they are applicable. E.g. ISES students reporting they have never undertaken a literature review prior to their IS
- Not reading widely
- Sticking too rigidly to earlier messages, e.g. only use latest printed works without understanding that earlier texts can still have value
- Not having curiosity or tending towards surface learning
- Still being 'caught on cheating offences'
- Having referencing 'issues', which is a surprise to some staff

Top up students are reported to require more support and experience more anxiety than other students at level 6.

#### 4.1.5 Development throughout Level 7

Fewer comments were received regarding level 7 and more work could be carried out here.

The comments received varied significantly between institute:

Institute	Comment
IHS	Plenty of help still required with academic writing and referencing  Poor research skills  Poor IT skills
ISE	Postgraduates should already have all the basic skills and as long as they present drafts to supervisors on time they should be OK  Lack comprehensive information management skills (organising information effectively or read large amount of articles in short time)
WBS	International students do not have the standards staff expect to have been developed by L6 in home students. Reluctance to ask questions identified as a major barrier.

## 4.2 Common themes

Many of the themes identified are common across all institutes, though subject specific comments and issues have been identified where relevant.

Best practice examples have also been drawn out where possible, particularly in the section on [Transition, progression and developing skills in the curriculum](#).

### 4.2.1 Student independence and staff frustration

Staff across the institution are united in their expectation that students are at university to develop as independent learners. The words independent/independence are used 35 times in the responses.

Despite the desire to facilitate independent learning, staff frequently express frustration with students. Students are described as having a lack of curiosity, a lack of willingness to read, a lack of motivation. For example, at Level 4:

- Because information appears to be so easy to access now and is 'freely' available, it is devalued in students' minds...students should be encouraged to buy more books, partly so they understand their value – Film Studies
- Issues with progression most often come from basic lack of engagement and/or willingness to put in the work required to do well. Students at all levels seem to lack a "problem solving" mindset, and also struggle with different assignment formats, e.g. report, essay – Environmental Science
- Try to keep sessions to no more than 45 minutes as their attention wanes – Computing

At level 6, where independence is key for the independent study, students are reported as:

- Having 'done' the library session but not embraced and used the skills
- Having a lack of curiosity/tendency to surface learning
- Lack of skills, either searching or reading

One colleague reflected that:

Students generally breakdown into 75% strategic learners and 25% deep learners. Student disengagement can be hard to turnaround and is normally more to do with personal circumstances rather than the course. Students have to understand that they are there to learn and put the effort in.

#### 4.2.2 Assumptions and expectations

The [Trends across levels of study](#) section shows that staff have expectations about what skills students come in with and develop during their degree programmes. As per [4.1.2](#) though, there is some difference in amongst staff around how these skills are articulated. Some staff reflected on this in their answers and discussed the need for more discussion amongst course teams. For example:

- Academics need to standardise what they are looking for, giving marks for information use. Currently assignments and assessment do not focus on information use. Need to focus more of the process of researching and building an argument rather than finding the answer – English literature
- There is no skill development framework in place and skill development is described as “piecemeal”, “ad hoc” and “lack of strategic overview and planning as a team”... this results in a high risk of overlap
- The Creative Writing course has only one FT member of staff and is mainly taught by HPLs. As such it is difficult to get a cohesive framework for IL throughout the course, although Julie believes that all HPLs encourage the students to use the Hive – Creative Writing

#### 4.2.3 Confidence

Related to assumptions and expectations, staff also reflected on student confidence. This manifests in a number of ways:

Students do not have enough confidence and need to be supported to develop it:

- Students need the resources to cope when a search work the first time. Expects students' skills to be very limited at first, rather than frightening them with high expectations and setting them up for failure. Most new history students are unaware of the amount of reading required and the time this (should) take – History
- More confidence is needed in embracing academic debate rather than 'trying to find the right answer' – English Literature
- Other [students] have great ability but lack confidence – Law
- University comes as something of a shock to them and their expectations have to be re-adjusted. They will email the smallest (and silliest) questions to academic staff rather than finding out for themselves - usually the information is all on Blackboard, but they don't look - or don't check university email - PE

Students are expected to ask questions to develop their own confidence:

- Expects students to understand the importance of Resource Lists and be confident enough to ask questions when they are stuck. Appreciates that some students don't like to ask questions and would prefer to have things demonstrated to them but thinks students

shouldn't be 'bubble wrapped' too much. They are at university to do things for themselves and not be spoonfed – Film Studies

- Expects students to arrive knowing very little about libraries and to have lots of questions e.g. What's an ebook, do I have to buy books etc. First year students ask lecturers a lot of questions about library resources – Journalism
- Students should have confidence in their ability to seek information and synthesise it, building on what they have done at earlier level - Biochemistry

Students are over-confident in their own skills:

- Sometimes students have unrealistic ideas of their own abilities – Law
- Even at level 6 there is a gap between what students know and what they think they know – English Literature

Collaborative research conducted by IOE and Library Services has previously found a strong link between developing study skills in the curriculum and student confidence.<sup>5</sup> Where students' confidence in their skills is good, this is reflected in their academic writing. The integration described in the article has slipped over the course of the last year, and the module lead reports a reduction in student confidence levels which shows in their writing.

#### 4.2.4 Transition, progression and developing skills in the curriculum

Staff frequently reference two key transition points in the learner journey, from school/college to HE and from L4 to L5.<sup>6</sup> The former is largely a scaffolded and supported transition to the more independent style required at university and the latter is where students are expected to move forward independently on their own.

Staff spoke at length about progression with the curriculum and a lot of good practice was shared:

Institute	Subject	Good practice
ISE	Geography	Information skills and referencing as part of assignment criteria  Students are asked to self-assess their skills in four categories at the beginning of 1st semester (research and writing, ICT skills, verbal communication, employability). Personal tutors use the results to lay out students' personal development plan and show them where to find support to develop their skills.
I&HS	Psychology	Outlined a progression model across all 3 years: Level 4: BUILD skills – finding literature, learning how to paraphrase, ethics, APA style, stats Level 5: EXPAND skills – becoming more critical, refining APA, start systematic reviews Level 6: REFINE skills
I&HS	Nursing	Academic Writing Day in which course teams and librarians teach collaboratively to embed and build up range of independent study skills, over several sessions.

<sup>5</sup> <https://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/JIL/article/view/LLC-V8-I2-2014>

<sup>6</sup> This is a broader definition of transition than that being undertaken by the separate transition project, and is something experienced by most (all?) students.



IOE	Early Childhood	One example of changing the academic skills module approach by developing a weekly reading list and putting this at the core of their sessions, which are co-taught between academic staff and librarians. This is being pursued as part of a PGCert Action Research Project with the impact being assessed.
ISE	Biology	As part of the independent study, students have to do a progress report presentation (6 weeks in). Second years are invited to hear these presentations. This benefits both - third years want to impress peers and second years get an idea of what they need to be doing. A positive form of "peer pressure".
ISE	Sport, Coaching, and Physical Education	First years are mentored by second years (Student Academic Mentors, or "SAMs" each have a group of first years for whom they are responsible.)
WBS	Business Management	To help L4 students understand what's a 'good' assignment ... students are given two assignments to look at – one graded A, one C and asked to grade them themselves. Then they grade in groups. Tutor then goes through the grading matrix and gives them the graded assignments with annotations.

Another example of best practice that did not come out of this project was presented at the University of Worcester's Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Conference. Debbie Evans presented on 'Working In Partnership To Build Wellbeing Awareness Into The Curriculum' in which she discussed working with academic colleagues to build resilience and wellbeing into the midwifery curriculum. This ties in well with the need for students to develop independence and confidence.

Challenges were also recognised:

Institute	Subject	Challenges
ISE	Cell biology	Lack of engagement with study skills sessions, even where mandatory. Students see this as dull and dry.
ISES	Various	Effort is made to embed study skills, but often students don't see the point behind it.
ISES	Cricket/PE	Increasingly asked to deliver study skills, tricky to do this and fit in subject content.
I&HS	Psychology	Information overload in induction.
I&HS	Environmental Science	Students are "hit hard" with information in induction week, most of which they forget fairly rapidly.
ISES	Sports coaching	How to test that students are developing the various independent skills that we are expecting of them. "How do we do this? And who does it? Far more needs doing in first six months of course to raise student awareness of what we expect of them".

ISE	Geography	An individual might embed particular independent learning skills into their assignment criteria (e.g. searching/referencing), but every module has its own criteria.

Elsewhere staff made recommendations about improvements that could be taken forward. These are all elements that Library Services actively work on and will be seeking to improve.

Institute	Subject	Recommendations
WBS	Computing	Build progression into what students learn, e.g. library sessions should not be a one-stop shop for every level.  Librarian and module tutor should work together to prepare and present teaching in the session.
IHCA	History	Would like to see a framework for what it is reasonable to expect of students in terms of resource and library use for students across History.

Staff also used the opportunity to reflect on how skills were taught and articulated amongst course teams:

Institute	Subject	Reflections
IHCA	CDME/Graphic Design	Academic writing and research are no longer taught. There is no overarching message about referencing or academic standards. Feels Fine Art have a stronger culture of an academic approach. In the courses XX teaches on, no modules specifically mention research and referencing. Skills are picked up across the whole spectrum and assessment focuses on the end product not on the learning report.
IHCA	English Literature (2 respondents)	Feels there is broad consensus between English Lit lecturers as to what is expected of students and when.  XX assumes that all the English Lit lecturers probably agree on the basic needs of students with regards to information but they have never discussed it as a team.
IHCA	Film Studies	Sees information literacy very much of part of the critical thinking skills taught by the whole team throughout the course and doesn't see the need for separate library sessions.
IHCA	History	Agreement among History lecturers that History is an empirical subject, teach the students that their opinions must be informed. There is broad agreement across the team on referencing, the need for evidence and a lot of the skills needed to find this evidence are embedded in the course and taught by the course team. It is more important that students learn to research that that they learn about

		lecturers' research. The emphasis on the current UW history course doesn't always support this.
ISE	Environmental Science	Students often complain that every member of academic staff wants something different from them.
ISE	Geography	An individual might embed particular independent learning skills into their assignment criteria (e.g. searching/referencing), but every module has its own criteria.

#### 4.2.5 Demographics

When asked about different student demographics and the impact on the learner journey, staff focus on two main areas: A levels vs BTEC entry students, and mature students, although a number of other issues were also touched on.

##### *Mature students*

Mature students were singled out for a great number of comments surrounding their experience and learner journeys.

Positive skills that mature students were felt to have include:

- Recognition of their own skills gap and therefore asking more questions
- Better at time management/organisation and therefore more prepared for seminars
- Greater life experience meaning they understand the need for research more (2 comments, IHS, WBS)
- Greater engagement in seminars, and able to positively affect less engaged cohorts as a result
- More eager readers

Younger students are considered to be more demanding and more ready to disengage with any topic they are not interested in.

Conversely, mature students were felt to:

- Have an IT skills gap
- Be more anxious
- Struggle specifically with referencing

##### *Entry level: A-level, BTEC or professional*

Staff across the institution commented on the differences in skills between BTEC and A-level background students. BTEC were generally considered to have fewer academic skills than those with an A-level background. All students are expected to attain the same level by the end of level 4 regardless of entry point.

Health identified some of the biggest challenges here, with students who are studying for courses regulated by their professional bodies (usually the NHS) who are studying alongside full-time work. For these students, signposting online study skills support is vital.

### *Students with (learning) disabilities*

Students with disabilities were rarely mentioned in the responses. Is this because teaching practice is already inclusive or that staff do not perceive a particular challenge for students with disabilities?

### *BME students*

Similarly only one member of staff mentioned BME students and the attainment gap. This may well be due to staff feeling uncomfortable in singling out a particular group in this way.

BME: is this because of the nature of the questions? To raise would be felt to be singling these students out and feel uncomfortable? The one respondent who commented on this suggests so:

“How can we best support [BME students] without being accused of racism by other staff (when [we’re] actually just repeating back the concerns that BME students have shared with us because we want to help)?”

### *International students*

Comments about international students come primarily from WBS, and relate primarily to Chinese students. They are identified as being reluctant to ask questions and having very different cultural academic expectations. In particular, incoming L7 students have not had to develop the same skills as home L6 students.

## 4.2.6 Practitioner vs researcher

In some areas, there is a clear tension between the practitioner and the researcher. This impacts on the curriculum and the provision of study and research skills.

For example, in IHCA, in subjects like Drama, Graphic Design or Digital Media some of the staff are more focused on the creative process rather than the theory or background research. By contrast, other subjects like History or Media Studies are of the opinion that the whole point of their degree programme is to teach students to analyse and criticise information.

Examples provided show that particular study skills (e.g. information literacy) can be dropped from a module depending on the model lead, or students not seeing the applicability of skills beyond the module they are taught in.

## 4.2.7 Employability

Employability featured in relatively few discussions. This may be because of the nature of the questions asked with a study skills focus, rather than any reflection on how employability relates to the learner journey. In practice, the skills developed throughout a degree programme (independent learning, searching, critiquing and analysing information, writing and presenting) are all vital in the workforce.

IOE, ISE and ISES all specifically referred to development of employability skills in the curriculum as part of the overall learner journey:

<b>Institute</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Comments</b>
IOE	PGCE Primary	Employability strand at L7 (PGCE Primary)

ISES	PE	Optional placement module at L5 which includes teaching students to shake hands, make eye contact, and write emails in a professional manner (PE)  L6: semester one stressful due to PGCE applications. Some defer for a year whilst doing this and do not return as they get a job. Long term employability relevance of degree needs to be stressed?
ISE	Geography	L4 contains self-assessment of skills in four categories, one of which is employability  L4 and L5: external professionals attending as guest speakers to teach employability skills Career services staff also invited
ISE	Maths	Inclusion of a range of skills not normally taught in maths degrees (presentation and communication skills, team work skills, academic writing skills, computing skills and problem-solving skills) after consultation with employers.
ISE	Forensic/applied biology	L5: mandatory Project and Career Development module

#### 4.2.8 Technology

Perhaps surprisingly, only a few comments were made about students' digital skills. Comments that were made typically fell into one of the following categories:

- Students are fairly tech savvy on arrival / generally skilled at working online
- IT skills gap for mature students
- Staff think students are more technically competent than they actually are
- Students have rudimentary IT skills on entry, but cannot search effectively or effectively use basic software such as Microsoft Word or Powerpoint
- Students are sometimes frustrated by technology, including the variety of platforms in use and sudden changes
- Some staff may not have the best digital skills (e.g. searching for information)

When referred to, technology was typically discussed in relation to quite basic ICT skills rather than anything in terms of wider digital capabilities, which may be due to the questions asked. However, it is vital that we are aware of this agenda, with JISC recently reporting that nearly 20% of HE learners do not feel that digital skills will be relevant to their careers.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Next steps

Library Services will now be working on a support package that highlights and promotes the kinds of teaching we can integrate into curricula, aligned to and informed by the data gathered here. This is

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/higher-education-students-not-prepared-for-digital-workplace-20-jun-2017>

intended to take the form of a 'menu of options' that help staff select the best fit for their courses. It will also be supplemented by some best practice case studies.

This support package will be accompanied by a strategy or action plan, and both will be shared with institutes and via LTSEC.

During 2017/18, we will also be conducting a similar study to look at the student perspective of learner journeys. This is being undertaken as a dissertation topic by Kathryn Devine, who is studying for her MSc Information and Library Studies at Robert Gordon University.

Dr Sarah Pittaway  
12<sup>th</sup> July 2017