

**UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS
OF THEIR "LEARNER JOURNEY" AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF WORCESTER AND LIBRARY
SERVICES' ROLE IN THIS JOURNEY**

by

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Abstract

The research enquired into undergraduate students' perception of their "learner journey" through the course of their degree, and considers the role they believe Library Services has, will, or should play in this. As librarians become increasingly teaching focused, and information literacy becomes more crucial to employability, it is important to understand how students perceive their learner journey to ensure information literacy instruction aligns with their need for library input both in terms of content and timing.

The research is a qualitative study employing focus groups and a one-to-one interview. Five undergraduate students took part in the research, representing levels four to six of study, and five of the University's seven academic institutes. Drawing on the principles of grounded theory, the data was analysed thematically and by means of constant comparative analysis. Five principal themes were identified: transition to, and preparedness for, university, progression, personal responsibility and engagement, employability, and communication. A narrative interpretation of the research contextualises these responses with regards to the literature and the current higher education environment.

The literature suggests that whilst there is a body of research around librarians' support of students' information literacy development, little prior work has been done specifically on the learner journey. Additionally, what is available either relates primarily to Further Education or approaches the journey in terms of the route taken into study rather than the skills attained once at university. This research addresses this gap in existing research, and concludes that whilst further work remains, it is clear that students do see a role for librarians in their conceptualisation of their learner journeys, and that in the realisation of these journeys Library Services has generally played a positive and supportive role. It is recommended that further cycles of research be carried out, and that Library Services continues its programme of engagement, outreach, and support.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

The research was undertaken at the University of Worcester (UW), a post-1992 university in the Midlands of England with a roll of 10,747 students in the 2016-17 academic year, of which circa 84% are undergraduates (University of Worcester 2018). Of these, 12% have a disability, consistent with the national average reported by HESA for 2016/17 (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2018). For administration and teaching purposes, the University is organised into seven institutes, and there are four principal campuses: St Johns (the main campus), City (where the library is located), Severn, and Lakeside. The latter is noted since the student participants in the research commented on issues related to travel between campuses and the impact of this on their engagement with the library.

The University's Library Services operates from the Hive, Europe's first combined public and academic library which was opened in July 2012. This is the university's sole library, although through the partnership with Worcestershire County Council students are able to utilise all public libraries in the county by virtue of their University membership. The researcher is part of the Academic Services Team within Library Services, which provides liaison librarian support and information literacy teaching to students and includes Student Engagement, Reading Resources, and E-resources teams. Information literacy is defined here as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (Association of College & Research Libraries 1989).

Despite recent moves in the academic sector towards a functional model for librarian roles, (Eldridge et al. 2016; Hoodless and Pinfield 2016; Andrade and Zaghloul 2010) at the University of Worcester the subject model for liaison librarians is currently in operation. Team teaching and informal information

exchange allows, however, for liaisons to teach and answer enquiries beyond their own specialism (as advocated in Smith and Oliva 2010). The subject model finds support in the literature: Pinfield (2001 p.33) argues for this model, stating that “subject staff have a crucial role to play” (see also Rodwell and Fairbairn 2008). Rodwell (2001 p. 48) likewise speaks of their “bright and significant role”; the subject librarian, he argues, gives “client groups ... specialist attention and service” (p. 49).

1.2 The research project

The research examined undergraduate students’ perceptions of their learner journey through their degree courses, and gauged their opinion of the role Library Services has, will, or should play in this journey. Learner journey is defined here as not just the student’s pathway; that is, the modules they take and the assessments they have to pass to complete those modules, but the overarching skills they acquire along the way, and indeed beyond their undergraduate course into employment or further study. It encompasses the skillset they build as they navigate the course and the applicability (or otherwise) of this to the workplace or continued education at postgraduate level. Owusu-Ansah (2004 p. 4) argues that information literacy is a key part of this, and that academic librarians are suitably skilled to promote it. They are, as Pritchard (2010 p. 373) puts it, “uniquely qualified to help”.

Bury (2016 p. 239) notes that faculty staff describe students presenting with information literacy skills “below the level that they would like to see”; similar comments have been made by the university’s academic staff (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). Poole (2013 p. 348) notes that the graduate’s skillset must now include “thinking critically about an enormous amount of information, solving complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems ... Graduates need to be more creative, more media literate, more skilled cross-culturally, and more capable of leadership”. This, he argues, means the “potential lengthening of the learning journey ... starting from an

earlier point and journeying to a more distant one" (Poole 2013 p. 348). Moore et al. (2010 p. 818) note that longer journeys might be a result of students not being "college-ready" and thus "requir(ing) more semesters in which to graduate", with the additional financial burden that entails. In the context of increasing fees at most universities, this is a significant consideration.

In light, then, of this potential need to start earlier – and perhaps, given the ongoing widening participation agenda, to start from increasingly myriad places¹ - and travel further on their learner journeys, this research discusses the extent to which Library Services' current teaching and support aligns with the student conception of their learner journey, and considers potential improvements to this offer. The study adopts what Melia (1997 p. 35) terms a "pragmatic" grounded theory approach. As Barbour (1997 p. 120) comments, the researcher is like to have "quite a good idea ... of the themes likely to arise". Nonetheless, overall the study attempts to make no assumptions and suggests no initial hypotheses, instead allowing "generation of exploratory qualitative data rather than aiming to test pre-defined variables" (Bury 2016 p. 240; see also Sare and Bales 2014). The focus group approach permits the "quick and valuable" generation of rich qualitative information "that would otherwise be difficult or expensive (in terms of time and efforts) to obtain" (Chowdhury et al. 2008 p. 291; see also Holloway and Galvin 2017 p. 125; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990 p. 18). This methodology is not adopted solely from convenience, however; as cautioned against by Holloway and Galvin (2017 p. 125) it offers a number of advantages which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

1.3 Rationale for the research

In common with those at many other institutions, Academic Liaison Librarians at the University of Worcester have become increasingly teaching focused in

¹ Research participants commented on first year modules which were designed to bring everyone to the same level, resulting in the repetition of material for some students whilst for others everything was new.

recent years (Austin and Bhandol 2013; Julien and Genuis 2011; Goetsch 2008; Hardy and Corral 2007). Melling and Weaver (2017 p. 154) assert that responsive academic libraries that can “demonstrate their value ... in teaching and learning” have the potential to make a positive contribution to their institution’s Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) outcome. As institutions seek a Gold TEF rating, any positive contribution to the metrics will surely be welcomed (the University of Worcester currently has a Silver rating).

Pham and Tanner (2014; see also Blummer and Kenton 2018; Silver 2014; Rodwell and Fairbairn 2008) additionally note the importance of collaboration with academic staff to maximise the effectiveness of information literacy teaching; they must work together to “address the complexity of the current information environment” (Gibson and Jacobsen 2018 p. 183). The present team members are either current Fellows of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) or working towards this accreditation, highlighting what Harris (2017 p. 184) describes as the “important role of the librarian as a teacher and their place in higher education”. It is also illustrative of the commitment to professionalisation of the teaching role that librarians require in order to encourage academic staff to view them as genuine colleagues rather than bolt-on “support”. Appleton and Staddon (2017 p. 114) report that their research showed that librarians who had completed a formal teaching qualification were “far more likely to work with other librarians, tutors, or academics in co-developing and co-delivering sessions”. Rodwell and Fairbairn (2008 p. 118) likewise stress the “educative role” of academic librarians and the importance of this role being embedded within courses. In this focus on teaching and collaboration, the liaison team aligns to the University’s goal to “embed the development of information literacy and digital fluency within the curriculum” (University of Worcester 2016 p. 4).

The academic liaison team continually seeks to improve services and the alignment of teaching to the modules students are taking, so that library sessions are viewed as an integral part of student learning. As Bryant and

Hooper (2017 p. 389) point out, "a librarian has the opportunity to expand students' knowledge of library and information resources and improve students' IL when embedded within the course". Linstrom and Shonrock (2006 p. 19) likewise comment on the need for "programs that develop student communication and research skills" to be "integrated" into the curriculum.

Research by Bury (2016 p. 249) concluded that not all academics see a role for collaboration with librarians, nor are they all willing to team-teach with them. This can vary by subject and institute (Silver 2014 p. 12) meaning a 'one size fits all' approach to encouraging them to do so is unlikely to be effective. They may also engage in a form of ostensible collaboration which is not really collaboration at all; "perceiving a deficiency in their students, professors often approach librarians ... (having) already decided on how to address their students' apparent lack of research skills" (Muelemans and Carr 2013 p. 81).

Research by MacDonald, Hrynychak and Spafford (2014) found that librarians were more likely to discuss "teach strategies and assessment (p. 212) with colleagues than were academic staff, perhaps suggesting that the team approach is simply more familiar to librarians. They, then, are likely to be able to offer the proactive promotion and encouragement needed to make genuine collaboration happen, something vital to "achieve the goal of integrating information literacy into academic programs" (Lindstrom and Shonrock 2006 p. 20). Supporting the "work of the university" can no longer be a "passive mission" (Rodwell and Fairbairn 2008 p. 117). This may necessitate organisational change; Keselman and Watstein (2009 p. 390) suggest that true collaboration and embeddedness necessitates the librarian having "faculty status" and being "accepted as a colleague". During the research, student participants often referred to librarians "coming in" to classes, which connotes the librarian as a visiting outsider rather than integrated part of the module teaching team or subject staff. Pellegrino (2012 p. 276) notes the "influence" of academic staff compared with librarians. If librarians can encourage

academic staff to promote the library's services, this is "one effective way to increase the likelihood that students in need of assistance will ask for it" (Pellegrino 2012 pp. 276-77). This clearly demonstrates the need for genuine collaboration between academics and librarian in information literacy teaching.

These considerations underpin the necessity of this research; with improved understanding of the learner journey will come increased insight into support needs. If librarians can demonstrate clearly, based on empirical research within the academics' own institute, where the need lies, they can more confidently make the case for embedded information literacy. Student experience and satisfaction – which goes hand in hand with maximising attainment and minimising attrition - is an increasingly important metric; Douglas et al. (2015 p. 330) note that the "quality of the student experience" is "high on the national agenda"; there is "discontent with the current education landscape" (Youdell 2011 p. 7). Improved confidence with information is one way of improving that experience, and as Norton and Porter (2016, cited in Melling and Weaver 2017 p. 156) point out, the "level of use of the university library could ... predict likely student outcomes". For student retention, the sooner this happens the better (Haddow and Joseph 2010).

2.0 Aims and objectives

This section elucidates the aims and objectives of the research project.

2.1 Aims

The principal aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of undergraduate students' perceptions of their learner journey as they progress through their degree courses, with a view to revealing issues, roadblocks, and pressure points that arise along the way, and importantly, to identify *when* these occur. Concurrently, it sought student opinion of Library Services' role within this journey, with a view to consideration of how the library's teaching and support could be improved, realigned, or retimed.

2.2 Objectives

To achieve the stated research aims, the following objectives were identified:

- To examine undergraduate students' conception of their learner journey through their courses at the University of Worcester.
- To ascertain whether students see the course in terms of a continuous journey or whether they focus on each discrete module as a "silo".
- To ascertain if, and how, students feel Library Services can help them in their journey.
- To consider potential improvements to the service and support the Library offers students in light of the research findings.

3.0 Literature review

3.1 Introduction

The literature review focused initially on extant work on learner journey, and this informed the design of the prompt questions (see [Appendix 3](#)) that were used in the two focus groups and one focused interview. As themes emerged from transcription and coding of the data, the review was revisited and expanded to discuss the literature around the issues raised by participants. This is in keeping with the grounded theory approach, in which Glaser and Strauss (1967 p. 37) argue that "an effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature ... of the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated".

To synthesise literature on the learner journey itself, searches were carried out in University of Worcester Library Search (Summon) using keywords including "learner journey", "student expectation", "academic expectation", "academic journey", "learning gain", "learner development framework(s)", "learning commons", "learner experience design", and "learning career". The last of these is defined as "the development of dispositions to learning over time" (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000 p. 590), which has some resonance in participant comments around changing attitudes from the relatively easy-

going first year to the “ramped up” second year and beyond. This is discussed in more detail in [Section 3.5](#) on the “second year slump”. Additional material was located through citation tracking and chaining of the initial results.

The literature review considers the extensive research on the importance of information literacy skills and the contribution that academic libraries make to these. Mounce (2010), for example, assesses the body of this literature from 2000-2009 in his extensive review. This material is of relevance given the research aim to consider the library’s role in the learner journey. Additionally it was an issue clearly of concern to participants in the research; they may not use the term “information literacy”, but nonetheless express concerns about locating, selecting and critically appraising literature at a level suitable for Higher Education.

The review also considers literature around some of the main themes identified by research participants, including their preparedness for university, with its interrelated concerns around academic writing and library anxiety, and finally considerations surrounding progression, particularly the so-called “second year slump”, something which was recognisable in some form to most participants.

3.2 The learner journey

In this section, the literature pertaining specifically to the learner journey keyword searches detailed in the introduction to this review is considered. It will be seen that whilst there is some reference to learner journey in a number of sources, actual attempts to interrogate student opinions, and to map the journey based on these, are minimal. It is also the case that much of what *has* been produced has been written from a Further Education (FE), rather than Higher Education, perspective. Raven and Husbands (2012), Stanley and Goodlad (2010) and Harte (2003) for example, focus primarily on routes *into* HE rather than the journey once there. Some work has also been carried out (Snook 2012) around the transition from school to FE. Whilst in theory this

might contain parallels with first year undergraduates making the transition to Higher Education, in practice this literature tends to focus on the mechanics of getting through the course; such as navigating the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), students entry routes or modes of study (Brown et al. 2012) , or even the physical campus. One research participant (Paul) noted learner journey having been described in this way at school.

Greaves (2012) discusses a project at the University of West London, whereby students designed their own “interactive journey” to help them navigate the VLE, library resources, and technology such as presentation tools and mindmapping software. Students here are essentially mapping their *own* journey “while acquiring and developing their learning and literacy skills” (p. 2). This does of course raise questions around the idea of “not knowing what you don’t know”, which participants in this research mentioned several times in the focus groups in relation to framing questions to the library when uncertain what exactly you are trying to ask.

Whilst Lane and Law (2012 p. 368) acknowledge the learner journey can be “very varied”, they offer no evidence of having actually studied or mapped it. Sefton-Green (2017) details ways in which a learning journey could be visually mapped but offers no real insight into specific learner journey research itself. Poultney (2008 p.12) offers perhaps the most relevant mapping of the learner journey to this research, tracking the student from “novice” to “expert”, aiming for a “learning journey towards critical reflective thinking”. Although discussing a Masters-level course this certainly has some applicability to lower levels of university study and certainly fits with the idea of promoting a scaffolded approach to learning. In terms of the student voice in this journey, Poultney (2008 p. 10) states that the students had a perception of themselves as *being* on a journey, but “felt it hard to say *where* they were on the journey”.

Poole (2013), whose work has been discussed in [section 1.2](#) sees a pedagogical opportunity in the widening participation agenda if staff can “support the

implementation of a broader range of student-centred teaching/learning activities (p. 344). Gauging student views on this is of course essential to making teaching more student-centred, and this is as true of library instruction as it is of any other teaching.

An example of students themselves likening their progression to a journey is seen in Higdon and Stevens' research into the employability of dance students (2017 p. 305), where the researchers comment: "A key theme, explicit in all the undergraduate voices, was that of journeying. Students referred to metaphors that related to journeys ... routes ... and paths." The researchers were able to see a decreased reliance on teachers, and an increase in "self-learning and self-reliance" (Higdon and Steven 2017 p.310) as the students progressed through their journey. This is echoed in the findings of this research, and participants' discussions of the need for self-motivation and responsibility, which is considered in detail in [Section 5.3.4](#).

3.3 Academic libraries and information literacy

A search was carried out in the University of Worcester's Summon discovery tool for literature concerning academic librarians and their contribution to student information literacy, along with collaboration with academic staff. Some exemplars are discussed below.

In their review of 2015's information research output Reynolds et al. (2016 p. 437) highlight the "prominence" of work centred on student "engagement", collaboration with academics, and the significance of information literacy skills. Drewes and Hoffman (2010; see also Bryant and Hooper 2017) stress the importance of embeddedness of librarians. Arguably, possessing good quality information literacy skills are essential to engagement, and Knapp, Rowland and Charles (2014) certainly consider them crucial to reduce attrition, something which "needs to be a campus-wide concern" (Oliveira 2017 p. 314). Here, again, a better understanding of the learner journey, and the potential

stress points for students, will make the support librarians provide more effective and targeted. Cahoy and Schroeder (2012 p. 75) view informed and engaged students as central to improve learning outcomes: “students who appreciate the value of the research process will do better. Students who are more engaged will retain more material.” Church-Duran (2017) likewise stresses the importance of engagement and collaboration.

Mounce (2010 p.301; see also Blummer and Kenton 2018) notes the “shift from bibliographic to information literacy instruction” and the increased embedding of these skills into modules. His review of literature on library/faculty collaboration concludes that it is vital (p. 317; see also Cooney and Hiris 2003). This has also been discussed in the research rationale ([Section 1.3](#)). For Library Services at Worcester, increased understanding of the learner journey engendered by this research will enable the service to put forward a clear case to academic staff for collaboration designed to improve student attainment and experience.

3.4 Preparedness for Higher Education, academic writing, and library anxiety

Academic liaison librarian contact with students tends to begin during induction, and this interaction can set the tone for their ongoing relationship. In the present research students commented on their observations that habits – good and bad - established during the early days of university study can be difficult to change. Hence, the sooner students are made aware of the scope and resources of the library and its staff, and the support available, the more positive impact this should have on their learner journey. It can also impact on attrition, as Oliveira (2017 p. 312) points out: “The level of academic and non-academic support universities provide ... and how students perceive this interaction is a reliable predictor and contributor to students’ retention in college.” Research participant Jenny commented: “there’s nothing worse than ... asking questions of your lecturer and not getting the answers”. Furthermore,

Haddow and Joseph's research (2010 p. 233) showed that "library use in the early weeks of a student's first semester is associated with retention".

This is also important in light of the body of literature around students' lack of preparedness for university. Concerns are raised about "quality", "scholarly de-powering", and of "undergraduates incapable of independent critical thought" (Selwyn 2009 p. 368). Lillis and Turner (2001) discuss issues concerning the standard of students' academic writing. This is echoed in Keane: (2011 p. 708) "research suggests academics believe ...the 'calibre' of students ... has declined". This was commented on by students in the present research as well as by academics during an earlier Library Services project, where tutors noted "limited skills on entry", "lack of research understanding", overreliance on Google and Wikipedia, and a need for attention to spelling, grammar, and punctuation (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). Barnes, Slate and Rojas-LeBouef (2010) discuss lack of critical thinking and autonomy in such students, caused by a "spoonfeeding" approach in schools. Likewise Hanna, et al. (2014; see also Keane 2011) concluded that "students appear to be insufficiently prepared for the demands of higher education". Additionally, their study found that students would *prefer* the university "experience to be more akin to that of school", in stark contrast with Gaston's (2006 p. 12) assertion that the current generation of students are "not accustomed to being passive recipients". Unlike the respondents in Hanna et al. (2014 p. 19), participants in the present study did not "miss being spoonfed", but all commented to some degree on the leap required, and the expectation amongst some of their peers that they would be able to continue habits like recourse to Google and Wikipedia for information into their academic journey. Cook and Leckey's (1999 p. 157) research found that "many of the study habits developed in school persist ... into university"; this is echoed by Lowe and Cook (2003) although their research was more optimistic about the number of students who "managed the process of transition successfully" (p. 72). Walsh and Borkowski (2018 p. 202) refer to this "brand loyal" behaviour; students continue using the familiar even when they are not getting

“the most authentic or relevant information”. Graham and Metaxas (2003 p. 73) likewise reported that their research participants “remained faithful to one search engine” even if they did not obtain the desired information from it. Research participants commented on the need for the step change required in their behaviour to be clearly elucidated by staff. First year student Simon commented:

“if you’ve gone through a rote learning system, where you’re told “This is the answer, this is how you get it”, then to actually go from that ... (to) “Actually, we want you to go to a source, and use critical thinking to weigh up varying opinions”- I think if that was explained right at the beginning...”

Students may also suffer from library anxiety, a concept first expounded by Constance Mellon (1986). Her study found that the vast majority of students “described their initial response to library research in terms of fear” (Mellon 1986 p. 160). Two “related themes, how to begin and what to do” (p. 162) emerged from Mellon’s data. Jan, Anwar and Warraich (2016) also found what they term “user knowledge”; essentially Mellon’s “what to do” as a key cause of library anxiety. Students do not want to “bother” staff and are afraid of appearing “stupid” (Robinson and Reid 2007 p. 407).

3.5 The “second year slump”

Part of the necessity for this research is the awareness of Library Services that there does not appear to be a clear progression of information literacy tuition at Worcester. One notable aspect of this is dip in formal contact with students on many course during their second year (level 5)². Liaison librarians are invited into very few modules at this level, despite level 5 typically being the year students will take the research methodologies module relevant to their course. Tobolowsky (2008 p. 59) argues that this can be “the forgotten year”, because the focus tends to be on settling in first years and supporting third

² Although the reverse is true in Psychology, for which the researcher is librarian; see section 5.3.3.

years through dissertation. The final year is also “the last opportunity institutions have to ensure that students are adequately prepared” for employment or postgraduate study (Tobolowsky 2008 p. 59).

This is not unique to the University of Worcester, as the “second year slump” (or “sophomore slump” in US literature – see Freedman 1956 p. 22) is widely recognised. Weisbuch (2006 p. C1) describes this year as the period when “college is no longer so fresh ... puberty’s left town but adulthood is still a train stop away”. Second years report “high levels of need and appear less satisfied than other undergraduate cohorts” (Thompson et al. 2013 p. 5). Webb and Cotton (2018) concur that this year is a “focal point for declining performance, persistence, and satisfaction”. Although in an early use of the term Freedman (1956 p. 22) suggested cases of the sophomore slump were “rare”, his research in a college comprising an all-female, “upper-middle or middle class” (p. 13) student body is hardly comparable to current undergraduate cohorts. There is an increasing amount of literature being produced around this phenomenon, some of which is discussed here. The needs of second year students was also the subject of a recent (March 2018) full day Mercian Collaboration workshop held at De Montfort University, which the researcher attended, demonstrating the seriousness with which the issue is taken.

Thompson et al. carried out an “institution-wide exploration of the 2nd year experience” (2013 p. 7), including analysis of statistical data around grades, course satisfaction and attendance, as well as qualitative data from focus groups and surveys (p. 9). They found that many second years “experience motivational ... difficulties” which can lead to “underperformance and withdrawal” (Thompson et al. 2013 p. 4). Webb and Cotton (2018) found that students felt that during second year they had made little progress in confidence in terms of their “academic self-perception”, their willingness to ask questions and “join class discussions”. There was also a decline in their enjoyment of their courses and their “perceptions of atmosphere and teaching and learning”.

The authors conclude that students did not experience the slump in every area of their university experience, but where they did, it was linked with their perceptions of “quality of teaching and feedback, adequacy of contact hours, and access to personal tutoring” (Webb and Cotton 2018; see also Tobolowsky 2008). This is mirrored to some extent in the comments of participants in this research, particularly around the idea that tutors become less responsive to student questions. Vaughn and Parry (2013 p. 207) also note second year students’ impression that they receive decreased levels of assistance from academics and support services, contrasting it with their first year experience. Similarly, Tower et al. (2015 p. 1131) in their study of nurse education, discuss the failure of students’ “academic self-efficacy” to develop as “workload demands increase and content complexity becomes more rigorous” and students need to be “achieving competence at a higher intellectual and developmental level”. This links to the “ramping up” between first year and second year reported by participants in this research.

Perhaps key in terms of library support, the research found that many student “slumpers” are also “silent sufferers”, failing to ask for help until it is “too late” (Thompson et al, 2013 p. 16). Understanding the learner journey will help the service better prepare for these “key pressure points” (Snook 2012 p. 89) and anticipate student need. A core study in this area is that of Kuglitsch and Burge (2016). Noting that librarians have always provided tailored teaching, they argue that “targeting outreach to sophomores is a clear opportunity” (p. 79; Colding and Venecek 2015 p. 136 also touch on the need for “targeted outreach”) for academic libraries. Whilst their research is based on the four-year programme typical of universities in the United States, it nonetheless has applicability for those offering programmes over three years, particularly around the ideas of developing and deepening skills acquired in first year (p. 79), and introducing more sophisticated ways of managing data, such as citation management software (p. 80). The latter, particularly, is useful in preparation for the Independent Study (dissertation) which students at the

University of Worcester take in their final year. Experience at the reference desk shows that by third year, students feel under too much pressure from assessment workload to learn how to use a tool such as Mendeley, even when it would most likely benefit them in the long run. Introducing something of this nature in second year, therefore, perhaps when they can practice with it during research methodologies modules would likely be beneficial.

3.6 Value of the research

Currently, employability and transferrable skills are at the forefront of the University's "mission" (University of Worcester 2013 p. 17). Likewise, the cost of a degree means more students are likely to consider university to be "primarily a career tool" (Metcalf 2005 p. 106), although this assumption was not entirely borne out by the participants in the present study. Therefore, it is essential to ascertain to what extent academic staff and students envisage or understand the degree course as a continuous learning journey that enables the development of these skills. There is also wider concern about student progress, with University of Cambridge "developing a standard test to measure the 'learning gain' of students at English higher education institutions" (Havergal 2016), suggesting degree classification alone is no longer sufficient.

From this research, Library Services can map where information literacy instruction and other research support can best scaffold the journey. The team has completed preliminary research with academic staff, and this research replicates the process with students. By using empirical research to "generate good ideas that fit and work" (Glaser 1978 p. 9) Library Services will be enabled to justify interventions to academic staff, and ensure that resources are placed where they are likely to be of most benefit to students, thus contributing to the improvement of their outcomes and helping to reduce attrition.

3.7 Conclusion to literature review

Whilst it is clear that there is considerable literature around information literacy and the role of the academic library and librarian within it, there is far less on the concept of the learner journey and virtually no attempts to map it. It is clear that to promote the value of Library Services' information literacy teaching as part of a scaffolded approach to student development, rather than a bolt on session to be included *ad hoc*, this research into student perceptions is both timely and essential. This research complements the work already done by the Academic Services team to gauge the views of academic staff. The rich qualitative data generated by the focus groups and interview has begun the process of creating a picture of the learner journey as envisaged by students themselves. From this, Library Services to map its offer to reach students with appropriate interventions at the times those interventions are most needed.

4.0 Methodology and theoretical approaches

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines details of the research location, sample selection, and methods of data collection and analysis. It also discusses the underpinning use of grounded theory and justifies the use of the focus group as the principal means of data collection. It also considers ethical issues including the researcher-participant relationship. The term “participants” is preferred over “informants” and “subjects”, since this “indicates the most active role of the persons being studied, and is ... commonly used in qualitative inquiries” (Morse 1991 p. 404; see also Holloway and Galvin 2017; Van Den Hoonaard 2008). The term “students” is also used interchangeably with “participants”.

The researcher takes a pragmatic philosophical position and the research is intended to reflect this. In gaining insight into student perceptions of their learner journeys the aim is clear: to use this information to improve the library’s support services. There is no intent to explore sociological theories of education, or philosophies around the creation of meaning and identity within the educational setting. Rather it considers the tangible issues raised by the participants to give Library Services data to inform decisions related to the improvement of services, support, and pedagogy, as well as evidence for promoting to academic staff the value of well thought out collaborative teaching.

4.2 Research location

The research was carried out at University of Worcester, a post-1992 university in the English Midlands. According to the University’s *Facts and figures*, at the beginning of the 2016-17 academic year the University had 10,747 enrolled students, of whom 84% were undergraduates. Those students classed as “mature” (over 21) made up 60% of the student body, and female students are in the majority (67%) (University of Worcester 2018). Twelve percent of

the study body has a disability. The University has four main campus locations, St Johns, City, Severn, and Lakeside, with the majority of teaching taking place at the first two. The library (the Hive) is located close to the main City Campus building.

At the time this project was designed, the University's courses were grouped into six academic institutes: Science and the Environment, Health and Society, Humanities and Creative Arts, Sport and Exercise Science, Education, and the Worcester Business School. Subsequently, during the data collection period, the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts was split into two distinct units, although currently still managed by one joint Academic Support Unit. The new Institute of Humanities covers History, English, Sociology, Law, Media and Politics whilst the Institute of Arts offers Art, Animation, Journalism, Screenwriting and Film and Drama related courses. There is, additionally, a Graduate Research School, however this study is limited to undergraduate students and so no further detail about this is included.

4.3 Research design and method

4.3.1 Qualitative methodology

The methodology of the research is qualitative, concerning itself with "the experience and meaning people give to dimensions of their social worlds" (Hewitt 2007 p. 1149), and the "interpretation of subjective meaning, description of social context, the privileging of lay knowledge" (Fossey et al. 2002 p. 723). In other words, qualitative research should understand and utilise the value of the lived experience of the participants, and that is what this research seeks to do. This approach has already been employed in researching the views of the academic staff at Worcester about learner journeys (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). This approach is most suitable because the concept of the learner journey does not lend itself to quantifiable data, nor is the testing of a hypothesis desirable. Rather, the research sought to gather rich data around the perceptions of the student

participants, and to ground the theory in the data, “generating theories on the basis of what the data contains” (Denscombe 2007 p. 288). Grounded theory is “appropriate to exploring experience, gaining a holistic view and addressing complex phenomena” (Higdon and Stevens 2017 p. 304.) It allows what Corbin and Strauss (2015 p. 57) term “feels right” analysis; after “being immersed in the data for some time”, the researcher has a “degree of confidence that interpreted meanings reflect what participants are trying to convey”. This would not be possible with a quantitative methodology.

4.3.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory, developed initially by Glaser and Strauss, argues for “grounding theory in the social research itself – for generating it from the data” (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p. viii; see also Ezzy 2002 p. 7: “data gathering should not be influenced by preconceived theories”). It is “unique” in this respect (Corbin and Strauss 2015 p. 7). The theory generated, it is argued, should be considered “an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product” (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 32). Faggiolani (2011 p. 3) notes grounded theory’s general applicability to the library and information setting; it allows us to study “the gap between what is actually done in libraries ... with the intention of offering efficient services and ... (what) is perceived by the user”. This makes it an appropriate theoretical underpinning for learner journey research, which in the form taken here is a relatively new and under-researched area, and in the present study seeks to represent student experience in an open, inquisitive manner, without underlying hypothesis. Some examples of the grounded theory approach in action in LIS research can be seen in Koufogiannakis (2013) and in Sare, Bales, and Neville (2012).

The precise nature of grounded theory, and what constitutes *genuine* grounded theory, is contested, even between the two original proponents, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Melia 1997 p 27). Glaser considers his version of the methodology as allowing themes and concepts to “emerge”, whilst arguing that

Strauss's involves "forcing" (Glaser 1992, quoted in Melia 1997 p. 31). In *Theoretical Sensitivity* Glaser makes it clear that "data should not be forced ... to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories" (Glaser 1978 p. 4). This research does not seek to add to the methodological debate, and thus takes a "pragmatic approach" (Melia 1997 p. 35) to the grounded theory methodology. It draws on the broad tenets of grounded theory to "collect data with which to tell a plausible story" (Melia 1997 p. 35). Arguably, there is an element of "forcing" in structuring the focus groups and interview round a set of framing questions ([Appendix 3](#)). Nonetheless the aim throughout has been to allow categories and themes to emerge as organically as possible, without preconception.

4.4 Sample selection

4.4.1 Method of sample selection

The research aimed to recruit participants using purposive sampling. This is common in all qualitative research; including focus groups (Liamputtong 2011 pp. 50-51; see also Barbour 2007), and ensures that participants each bring new perspectives to the research (Pickard 2013 p. 14).

The key criteria for selection was that participants be undergraduate students at the University of Worcester. Since the research considers the learner journey across the three years of an undergraduate course, participants from each of the qualification levels 4-6 were required, and this requirement was fulfilled.

Representation from all seven academic institutes was sought; as noted, this number increased from six to seven at the outset of the project with the splitting of the Humanities and Creative Arts into two separate institutes. It was also envisaged that there would be representation from across a range of courses *within* these institutes; the Institute of Health and Society, for example, has such diverse courses Psychology, Nursing, and Social Work

(amongst others) under its management, and it can be surmised that the student experience is likely to be significantly different across these courses. It was therefore disappointing that response to participation requests was low, allowing for only one representative from each of five institutes, with no representation from Education or Humanities. Despite the diversity of courses within each institute, however, learning, teaching, and student experience is discussed and led by a single committee (LTSEC) for each institute, with representation from learning and teaching leads in each subject area. It is therefore not unreasonable, if not ideal, to consider a student representative of their institute as a whole.

A number of avenues to recruit participants were utilised. The researcher directly contacted Student Academic representatives. Academic staff were also asked to help recruit by making students aware that the research was taking place. Additionally, students who had been noted by the library's Student Engagement team as previously having assisted with library research, were contacted directly. Planned dates for focus groups were also advertised on Library Services' Twitter and Facebook accounts. It was also hoped that additional participants would be recruited by word of mouth from initial participants in a "snowball" effect (Pickard 2013 p. 65), although ultimately this was not successful. Recruitment was extremely challenging, with no response to generalised requests and very little to personalised ones. The spread across year groups and institutes was, ultimately, serendipitous.

4.4.2 The participants

Five students finally participated in the research. This was fewer than had been intended and indeed fewer than had been recruited, with students withdrawing due to workload and illness or simply failing to arrive on the day of the focus group. The sole focused *interview*, as opposed to group, was borne out of last minute withdrawals. Kitzinger (2005 p. 64), however, advises that researchers should not be unduly concerned if "the focus group composition is not quite

what you expect". Fossey et al. (2002 p. 726) comment that "small numbers of participants" can still yield "large" amounts of data and this was certainly the case in this project. The small group allowed all participants' voices to be heard whilst retaining the "unique advantage" (Carey and Smith 1994 p. 124) of participant interaction (see also Halkier 2010 cited in Holloway and Galvin 2017 p. 126; Kitzinger 1994 *passim*). Toner (2009 p. 181) reflects that her own focus group research of two groups each of two participants yielded data that was "incredibly rich, thick, and broad".

The participants (in the interests of confidentiality all names are pseudonyms) are as follows, listed in the order in which the data collection was carried out:

Focus Group 1:

- Imogen, female, third year Film Studies (Institute of Arts).
- Jenny, female, second year Counselling Psychology (Institute of Health and Society).

Interview:

- Paul, male, third year Physical Education (major) with Sports Studies (minor) (Institute of Sport and Exercise Science).

Focus Group 2:

- John, male, second year Archaeology (Institute of Science and the Environment).
- Simon, male, first year Business, Economics and Finance (Worcester Business School).

Jenny and Simon are both mature students over twenty-five, whilst Paul was "mature", or over twenty-one, on beginning his course. Mature students in total represent 58% of the student body at Worcester, whilst 38% fall into the over-25 group (University of Worcester 2018). Imogen, about to complete her studies, is twenty-two; however since she was not a "mature" student at

commencement of her course she has not been treated as a “mature” student for the purposes of this research.

All participants were White British. One had a declared disability (Autism Spectrum Disorder). They were not questioned about their socio-economic background, although it could be useful to gather this information if further research cycles were carried out.

4.5 Data collection

4.5.1 Focus groups and focused interviews

Data was collected by means of two focus groups each of two participants and one focused interview (Merton, Fiske and Kendall 1990) carried out on a one-to-one basis. The literature varies in its recommendations of group size, tending to recommend somewhere between six and twelve; Stewart and Shamdasani (1990 p. 10) suggest eight to twelve, Pickard (2013 p. 245) states between six and ten, whilst Barbour (2007 p. 65) mandates a maximum of eight. Since the researcher was both facilitating and moderating the group and taking notes, rather than the splitting of roles usually recommended (Liamputtong 2011 pp. 60-63), smaller groups, ideally of 3-5 participants, were considered more manageable (see Bloor et al. 2001 p. 26 who comment that “logistical issues” may determine group size).

However, the challenges of participant recruitment and failures to attend meant that the groups were even smaller than desired. Kitzinger (2005 p. 63) suggests the researcher should “over-recruit ... to allow for non-attendance”, but there simply was not enough take-up for this to be possible. In terms of the *number* of groups, again the literature is contradictory. Kitzinger (1994 p. 105) speaks somewhat critically of “‘focus group studies’ rely(ing) on no more than 4 or 5 groups”. Conversely Bloor et al. (2001 p. 28) advocate keeping the number of groups to “the bare minimum”. Toner’s (2009) research yielded extensive data from two groups each comprising two women. It is most likely

the case, as Patton (2002 p. 542) points out, that “quality and credibility” do depend largely on the intention of the research. In the case of the present study, the intent is an exploratory one and accepts that further research will be necessary to achieve saturation. Fossey et al. (2002 p.726) are clear: “no fixed minimum number of participants is necessary to conduct sound qualitative research”.

Ultimately, regardless of the number of groups, it is saturation that is sought (Morse 1995). There are no “published guidelines ... for estimating the sample size” necessary to achieve this (Morse 1995 p. 147); essentially it is considered to occur when “no new categories or relevant themes are emerging” (Corbin and Strauss 2015 p. 139; see also Liamputtong 2011). With only five participants in total (across two groups and one interview), saturation is very unlikely to have occurred in this research. The themes elicited in this study are, therefore, exploratory in nature and intended as the basis for further exploration and mapping.

The groups and the interview were audio recorded to allow for transcription and coding of the data. Transcription was carried out following Liamputtong’s (2011 pp. 167-168) guidelines.

Kitzinger (2005) discusses the composition of groups and the merits and demerits of “homogenous” versus “diverse” groups. In this study, there was homogeneity in that all participants were undergraduate students at the University of Worcester. However, they were on different courses and at different points in their journey through their courses; none had met before. By virtue of being students at the same institution there was sufficient ground for open and relaxed communication, even if the groups could not be described as “pre-existing” (Kitzinger 2005 p. 61).

Focus groups have advantages over one-to-one interviews in terms of time-efficiency (Chowdhury et al. 2008 p. 291), although expediency should not be

the only reason for their use (Kitzinger 1994). They also create a setting in which “people are prompted to say or suggest ideas which may not occur to them on their own” (Gorman and Clayton 1997 p. 142, quoted in Pickard 2011 p. 244.). As Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990 p. 135) state, “an interview with ten people” will not “yield ten times the amount of relevant data”, but “it will yield a more diversified array of responses”. Talking in a group, even when this is a pair of participants plus the researcher, generates data which “extends beyond the sum of the participant’s individual perspectives” (Middleton and Edwards 1990 p. 7). Participants “generate new questions and answers through verbal interaction” (Holloway and Galvin 2017 p. 127) and “shared lived experiences” (Liamputtong 2007 p. 105). This was important to the research, since this was the first time students had given any considered thought to their learner journey.

4.6 Data analysis

Since due to the lack of previous research in this specific area this research is “exploratory” in nature (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990 p. 102), the analysis of the data is largely narrative. Analysis of the data, as is usual in qualitative research, began during data collection (Ezzy 2002 p. 60) and transcription, with commonalities and emerging themes noted during the transcription process and informing the following data gathering. Following Strauss’s guidelines, (1987 p. 81) the transcripts were coded for “themes” and “concepts” by means of “constant comparative analysis” (Pickard 2013 p. 269; see also Barbour 2007 p. 78 who notes the need to “capitalize on unanticipated opportunities for comparison”) to ascertain if there are common issues across the responses, as set out by Denscombe (2007 p. 292).

Transcription is considered in the literature as “the most rigorous ... mode of analysing data” (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009 p. 4). Bloor et al. (2001 p. 59) consider that working without a transcript “cannot be suitable for academic research”, resulting as it does in “selective and superficial analysis”.

Constant comparison is the standard mode of analysis for studies informed by a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015 p. 7). It is also considered apt for focus group data analysis, particularly where “there are multiple focus groups within the same study” (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009 p. 6). Where these commonalities exist, some “transferability” (Denscombe 2007 p. 299) of the resulting data can be argued; that is, it can be extrapolated to some extent, and with caution, across the student body. Constant comparative analysis, however, makes no claims to “universality” or “proof of suggested causes” (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p. 104). This research certainly does not make any such claims.

4.7 Ethical considerations and the researcher-participant relationship

4.7.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations prevailed throughout the research design and data collection, informed by, and adherent to, BERA guidelines (British Educational Research Association 2011) as well as Library Services' *Ethical guidelines* (University of Worcester Library Services no date; reproduced in [Appendix 1](#)).

Informed consent was sought from participants by explaining initially by email the nature of their contribution and the uses to which the data would be put. This was formalised in the participation information sheet ([Appendix 1](#)) which included an ethical statement. Prior to beginning a focus group or interview participants were asked to read and sign a copy of the information sheet. No potential harm was anticipated to the participants or the researcher, but attention was paid to the need for anonymity, and all student names referred to are pseudonyms. Students are identified only by their course and year of study; none was taking a combination that would make it possible for university staff or students to identify them from this information alone.

The focus group recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure server at the University of Worcester and are accessible only to the researcher.

4.7.2 The researchers/participant relationship

Literature around methods, and the researcher/participant relationship has “strongly emphasized” the inherently “privileged position of the researcher *vis à vis* the researched” (Raheim et al. 2016 p. 1).

In addition to what Raheim et al. (2016 p. 1) refer to as the “inherent power imbalance” between researcher and researched, in this study there is an additional concern. As the researcher is one of the university’s academic liaison librarians, she is known at least by name or sight to many students within the university, and more closely by students from her subject disciplines (Law, Criminology, and Psychology), whom she teaches at least once a semester. Only one of the five participants was from the researcher’s subject grouping (Jenny, Focus Group 2 is a second year Counselling Psychology student). This information was made clear to the other participant in that group.

Although the focus groups and interview were carried out in an informal manner, they were run on university property in rooms also used for teaching. Holloway and Galvin (2017 p. 131) stress the importance of participant comfort, so the smallest, most informal rooms were selected and indeed the timing of one session changed to avoid conducting it in a 150-seat lecture theatre, the only room available at the originally allotted time. The researcher also sat with the participants in a “circular arrangement”, as recommended by Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990 p. 140).

The status of the researcher as university staff, and teacher/instructor, feeds in to what Youdell (2011 p. 38) describes as “hierarchical binaries” in which one half of the pair is given “meaning” through its “opposition” to the “other”. These, she, argues, are “products of and productive of relations of power” (Youdell 2011 p. 38). It is certainly the case that at one point in the first focus

group, a Psychology student making a point about lack of support in a module hesitated to name the module: "It was ... oh I know you're not going to, but for ... [names module]." Perhaps recalling that the researcher is the Psychology librarian, the student was hesitant to "name names". This point is not to be laboured, but it was borne in mind in the research design, since, as Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990 p.140) point out, "nothing will countersay the social fact that the interviewer has a special role in the group". They also have a "responsibility to provide accurate information" (Kitzinger 2005 p. 65) which can mean highlighting the differences in 'status' between researcher and participant when the researcher felt obliged to correct misconceptions about library or university services. The use of focus groups where possible was an attempt to counter this somewhat, since these "may reduce the imbalance in power relationships between the researcher and participants" (Liamputtong 2007 p. 105) and "empower" the participants (Kitzinger 2005 p. 60).

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The collected data was initially analysed during transcription to gauge persistent themes and issues referred to by the participants, whether by one or more of them. Ezzy (2002 p. 70) notes that transcription "encourages detailed reflection on the issues of the research". Once the data had been transcribed and coded, significant themes emerged, and these are discussed below. The literature review was revisited and expanded to take into account the position of current scholarship relating to the core issues raised, and to ascertain how this reflected the primary data collected in this research.

5.2 Overview of findings

Participants ranged widely in the topics discussed, even with an "interview guide" (Merton, Fiske and Kendall 1990; Merton and Kendall 1946). Nonetheless, a number of core themes emerged during the data analysis, and these are discussed in detail in this chapter.

Having been introduced to the topic and purpose of the research, students were asked to comment on whether they were aware of the term “learner journey” prior to the current meeting, and if so what they understood the term to mean. In the first focus group, third year Film Studies student Imogen had not heard the phrase at all. Jenny (second year Counselling Psychology), however, had, although she could not remember the context in which she had heard it. Her understanding was that it related to “from where you start, like, how you get from where you started to where you are now, and how ... you built up your skills”. She also highlighted that she believe the journey for her as a mature student would be quite different from that of a traditional student. Hers was about her “academic way of looking things”. For a young student, she felt that living away from home for the first time, making new friends and becoming self-reliant, would result in the journey being a far more *personally* transformative one. Jenny’s fellow mature student Simon echoed the idea of “testing” himself at “an academic level”, but equally saw it as a developmental journey not limited to younger students.

Physical Education finalist Paul recalled having “heard it once or twice in ... secondary school” in an “off-the-cuff” way, saying teachers had “sometimes talk(ed) about that it’s a journey”, but had assigned no real meaning to this, or at least none Paul had retained. His impression was of a journey explained in terms of how pupils “get *around* school and ... *through* the years” until they move on to university or employment. He had heard it again in the same context in Higher Education, but felt university staff presented it as a journey with more options and opportunities to its outcome: “they do talk more openly about the options that you can get to ... which is nice.”

The sense for Paul was of a journey *continuing* after university: “being in the third year, being at the end of it, that you don’t think that actually you’re completely finished, that you think, you know, that there are options out there ... there’s progression.” This is in stark contrast with Imogen’s perspective:

“For Film Studies ... no matter how hard the lecturers try to say ‘oh you can do this, you can do that’ it’s hard to get into those avenues, so, ... in terms of a journey that I would continue, it feel like it’s going to **stop**.” Possibly the fact that Paul had already secured a place on a PGCE course in Secondary PE influenced his positive sense of a continuing learning journey, whilst Imogen did not have this certainty.

In the second focus group, both John (second year Archaeology) and Simon (first year Business) both claimed to be aware of the concept, but gave quite vague explanations as to what they understood by it. John had heard it “loosely mentioned” pre-entry in terms of what “special skills” the university could help him acquire to enhance his employability. Although this was said in a slightly cynical manner he did acknowledge that it influenced his choice of institution in the University of Worcester’s favour. Simon, on the other hand, considered his journey a personal “journey of discovery”; as a mature student his choices seemed less bound in external factors and instead motivated by a desire to “see if I could do it”, echoing Swain and Hammond’s (2011 p. 605) findings that mature students had made a “positive decision to study”. Towards the end of the conversation, he commented: “And are we just using the term ‘learner journeys’ as an academic phrase for ‘life’?”, echoing Snook’s (2012 p. 113) assertion that “the Learner Journey is life”.

5.3 Emergent themes

5.3.1 Introduction to emerging themes

The remainder of this chapter discusses in detail the five core themes identified during the transcription and coding process. These five themes are:

- Transition to university and issues raised around preparedness, academic writing and critical thinking skills, the disconnect with secondary education, and library anxiety.

- Progression and progress: the idea of “scaffolded” learning was discussed, with students highlighting examples of both good and bad practice in terms of a clear (or otherwise) sense of progression through their modules.
- Personal responsibility: all participants referred to the need to do things for themselves and seize opportunities given, as well as taking responsibility for seeking help when things go wrong.
- Employability and “real world” readiness: in the second focus group particularly there was considerable discussion about students’ readiness to cope in the “real world”, and the extent to which the university environment is able to replicate real world experience. The difference in courses was highlighted, with a sense of division in some participants’ minds about those taken out of “passion” and those taken with an eye to employment/specific career path.
- The need for communication and the impact of communication failure: Participants generally had a positive impression of services and support. What came up repeatedly, however, was the need to *communicate* effectively what they were and who was responsible for them. Dissatisfaction was seen to be largely a product of communication breakdown or failure.

5.3.2 Transition to university: preparedness, academic writing and library anxiety

It was elucidated in the literature review that there is considerable research on the preparedness (or otherwise) of students for undergraduate study. Oliveira (2017 p. 312) also notes that “lack of academic preparation and quality” prior to coming to university has a negative impact on attrition, something that has already been shown to be of concern to universities themselves, as well as clearly damaging or curtailing the student’s learner journey.

All participants in the research spoke about preparedness for academic study and their transitions into Higher Education. This was partially shaped by the researcher in asking specific questions about any potential skills gaps, and probing into the “second year slump” identified by Thompson et al. (2013). Nonetheless, it was a theme returned to repeatedly by students, particularly in the second focus group with John and Simon.

Preparedness for university was envisaged as a state of mind, an attitude, as much as being in possession of a particular skillset. For Jenny, coming to university as mature student means she had the advantage of “experience” in terms of how to “react and behave”. This extended to assessment, which she said she viewed “from a slightly more mature angle”, willing to be open to accepting why a particular assessment mode, in this case a systematic literature review, would be of value in the learning journey. She contrasted herself with some first years who “had no idea.” John commented that coming in to university with “willingness to learn and listen ... a willingness to try new things” were a “baseline” expectation of his course. This echoes academic staff comments (in this case from Law) that they could teach “everything but enthusiasm”, and so this enthusiasm to make the most of the journey was primarily what they looked for in potential students (University of Worcester Library Services 2016).

In terms of formal academic skills, although John felt that his A-level grounding meant that he “knew how to write essays”, he later contradicted this by commenting that until the library session he received in his second year, he had been “referencing complete rubbish”. He also noted the prevalence in the Archaeology field of websites promoting the pet theories of celebrity “pseudo-archaeologists” and crank theories like “aliens built the pyramids”. Whilst the latter is an extreme example, John felt that these sites could ensnare the unwary student because “they present it academically and it all looks very neat”. Professional presentation leads to a false “sense of authenticity” (El Rayess et al. 2018 p. 149). This echoes concerns from academics and in the

literature about students' critical thinking and ability to identify "fake news". Graham and Metaxas (2003 p. 71) note the "substantial effort" required to "adequately evaluate" internet sources, and add that this requirement is "not always ... apparent to users". Their research found students "overwhelmingly susceptible" to "advertising claims, government misinformation and propaganda" (Graham and Metaxas 2003 p. 71).

Jenny, a mature second year Psychology student, likewise felt that her previous education had given her a good grounding for producing academic work. She was "a little bit resentful" of a module in Academic Writing taken in semester two of her first year, only to discover that it was "one of the most useful courses I did", and one which made clear to her why she had received poor grades in assignments submitted the previous semester. Lacking skill, students may also lack awareness of their deficiency (Kruger and Dunning 1999) and consequently may find it difficult to verbalise their lack of knowledge. As discussed in greater length below in findings on "Communication", "not knowing what you don't know" makes asking for help all the more problematic. As Jenny commented: "you just feel like you don't know what it is you're asking". This is resonant of the extensive literature around library anxiety; one of Mellon's (1987 p. 162) participants recalls: "I didn't know where anything was located or even who to ask to get some help. It was like being in a foreign country and unable to speak the language." Likewise McPherson (2015 p. 319) reported students' anxiety around "terminology", which engendered "feelings of confusion, uncertainty, anxiety and helplessness" (p. 322).

In terms of digital and information literacy, the literature suggests that it cannot be assumed that "digital natives" (Prensky 2001a; Prensky 2001b, *passim*) are by definition information literate. Indeed, the very term itself is contested, with Selwyn (2009 p. 364) describing such "technological and biological determinism" as "misplaced", and suggesting that the "picture", as "portray(ed)" by "empirical studies" (p. 362) is far more nuanced and complex

than simply considering when a student was born. This is echoed in the findings of Kennedy et al. (2008 p. 117) who found a “lack of homogeneity” in the experiences of their participants, and that their findings “run counter” to Prensky’s “key assumptions”. Jenny, though (a mature student) did compare herself as a “digital immigrant” (although she did not use that term) with “digital native” Imogen, suspecting that a younger student would be “much more *au fait*” with online materials from having grown up with them and used them in school. Imogen could not recall whether this was the case, perhaps because, she said, “it was always there and I never registered”. Nonetheless, Jenny later described learning to use SPSS as a “walk in the park”, suggesting that she had been underestimating her digital capabilities somewhat in her previous comments. It seems more likely that a whole range of “socio economic” factors is at play (Selwyn 2009 p. 372) in digital capabilities; learning is “an inescapably cultural act” (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000 p. 584) which cannot be reduced being a product of the technological milieu into which one was born.

Herring considers the “digital natives” theory as “a very debatable” one, suggesting that “while today’s students may be excellent finders of information, they are often found to be ineffective at finding *relevant* information” (2011 p. 62; see also Stucker 2005). Graham and Metaxas (2003 p. 75) also found that a student’s level of self-confidence in searching “does not significantly affect ... performance”. Students may not realise this until they have received grades that make their deficiencies clear. Jenny, for example, mentioned that she had not received a good grade for her first assignment. She then took an academic writing module, and commented: “within ... the first lecture, I realised why I didn’t get a very good grade!” They may also relish being “challenged to discover information on their own” (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005 cited in Gaston 2006 p. 13), but then continue with their pre-university practice of assuming that this discovery process need go no further than Google. This can be a time-management issue as well as a lack of

research skills; John commented that students quickly Google the assessment topic out of “desperation”, and simply use the first few sources to appear.

Business student Simon commented on his frustration that first year students are treated with “kid gloves” rather than being told: “you need to go and make your own way in the world ... and form your own opinions”. Arguably, this needs to be done in a scaffolded way, so that students are supported in developing the necessary academic skills. Participants believed this was undoubtedly something the library could and should help with. John’s experience was of the quality and relevance of his search results improving “dramatically” after a library intervention, and Simon repeatedly reiterated the need for clear instruction in this respect from the very outset of the learning journey.

Spence (2004 p. 488) however, takes an alternative approach. He comments on the propensity of students, convinced that they knew how to search, undervalue early librarian input; rather they “make a few clicks and see what turns up ... A few lucky hits hook them”. His response: “I learned to let them fail ... and then invite the librarian”. Only then, “clutching their D- papers”, did they appreciate the value of this instruction (Spence 2004 p. 487). This is echoed in Pellegrino (2012 p. 275) who found that students seem to need the “rite of passage” of completing assessments on their own before “discovering – whether intentionally or not – librarians’ ability to offer useful help”. Jenny echoed this in talking about her academic writing module, which was placed in the second semester of her first year. If placed earlier it would, perhaps, she said, have saved her from some of her first semester mistakes, but on the other hand she felt she possibly needed “a taster of what it was like” to appreciate what she “didn’t understand”.

This raises pertinent questions about the *timing* of library interventions; typically liaisons at Worcester try to time these so that students go into their first assignments having had some grounding in searching and referencing.

This is of course contingent on receiving an invitation or agreement from the module tutor, something that research participants perhaps did not fully appreciate. John, for example, spoke of fellow students asking him, as course representative, to request a library session, which he said his lecturer then had to “formally” request from the librarian. The researcher, on the other hand, knew that the library had made significant efforts to improve liaison with this course, with limited success. Whilst “letting them fail” might have the effect of giving students a new appreciation of what librarians can do for them, it could have a damaging effect on their motivation and trust in staff (both academic and library) to anticipate their learning needs and offer suitably timely support. One research participant commented positively on librarians’ willingness to “get ... stuck in and help people learn straight from the off”; this seemed to have left him with an overall positive impression of the service. As already noted, perceptions around support (or lack of it) can be critical in retaining students (Oliveira 2017).

Issues concerning critical evaluation skills might also suggest that library teaching needs increased focus on “ways to identify authoritative sources” (El Rayess et al. 2018 p. 150; see also Rose-Wiles 2018), and critically analyse what is found, rather than solely the practicalities of navigating library resources; what Simon described as “your presentations on where everything is”. Batchelor (2017 p. 145) suggests that “information literacy instruction sessions offer an excellent opportunity for teaching critical thinking skills”. Whilst this is already understood – and to some degree implemented - by the liaison team at Worcester, it relies on being allowed sufficient time with students to explore these issues in an interactive and comprehensive way. This is dependent on the engagement of academic staff, and it varies dramatically across subject disciplines. It also necessitates conversion of discussion into action, as one participant commented:

“...there’s obviously been a lot of dialogue between the library and my lecturers, but they don’t seem to have got anywhere; they

both seem to have gone “Yes we definitely need to do this” and then they’ve both gone away and not done it.”

There was also a perception that the transition to university, to what it means to be a student in Higher Education, does not happen quickly enough, making the step up to second year all the more difficult. One participant commented that they did not feel “treated like students” until second year. Simon felt that the academic work took time to get underway, commenting: “you don’t do anything for the first four months here”. Interestingly, when he expanded upon this comment later in the conversation, it was linked explicitly to assessment; “we didn’t have to hand *anything* in until the seventh of December ... and to me that was just painful ... it’s like you have to tread water for three weeks” (*sic* – actually three months). There is no sense, here, of learning for learning’s own sake, or building towards the assessment coming later on; rather the submission of the assessment itself is the singular goal. This contrasts with Snook’s (2012 p. 113) assertion that there should be “less focus on destination” and more “accumulating life skills”. Torrance (2007, *passim*) notes this increasing focus on assessment *as* learning in post-secondary education, rather than the overall experience as “an act of social and intellectual development” (p. 293). Jenny echoed this in her view that there was too *much* focus on assessment “and not on learning”. The different views expressed by Simon and Jenny may be partly due to variances in subject discipline: Psychology modules tend to focus on the assessment very early in the module since students may need considerable time for data collection, or for learning a new statistical analysis package such as SPSS.

Assessment *method* was also highlighted as something that influenced module choice and thus shaping the learner journey; assessment deadlines were also identified as the principal “stress” or “pinch point” for students. Paul (third year Physical Education and Sports Studies) noted that he would “look at what the assessments are” with a view to avoiding examinations if possible, whilst Imogen (third year Film Studies) was interested in whether the assessments were “easy”, although she did not elaborate upon what constituted an “easy”

assignment. John, in the same focus group as Simon, added that students are aware they only need to “pass first year with D-minuses in everything”; and that they can “get by with that for a whole year.” Simon repeated several times his “major issue” that there was no apparent “consequence” to first year and criticised student failure to engage fully with academic study; stating: “it’s ... about getting off your backside, isn’t it?”

Linked with the discovery and selection of appropriate sources were concerns around academic writing. This encompassed source selection, already extensively discussed, putting the assignment itself together, and the mechanics of style and referencing. For Jenny, despite already holding a Masters degree, returning to learning in a different discipline (Psychology) meant grasping the prescriptive and detailed APA style, which was outside her previous experience in Management Studies. Whilst there was some awareness of the services available to students, such as the Language Centre and the Royal Literary Fund Writers in Residence, there was some confusion about accessing those services and under whose remit they came. Paul expressed surprise that these staff were not part of Library Services, whilst Jenny felt that they *should* be. This is considered in more detail in the discussion of issues surrounding communication.

John felt that academic staff implicitly assumed competence with academic writing on entry to the course. He indeed considered that he *had* this competence, having entered HE directly from A-level, and he contrasted his position with that of mature students who were “completely baffled”. Simon (a mature student) believed this to be systemic; everything at university is, in his view, geared towards the traditional student transitioning to HE directly from A-level. However Paul, who had recently completed A-levels (although he had not come immediately to university), felt his tutors believed him to have entered university with a “higher level” of academic writing skills than he fact possessed. Since presumably this meant they then did not focus on these in teaching, his grades in first year “weren’t the best”. However, with librarian

input on sources and referencing they had got “better and better”. Of course the skills that come with practice cannot be overlooked, but it does suggest the importance of *timing* of librarian input, and the need to lay foundations early on the in journey upon which to build and refine information literacy. Paul is now in his third year, and subsequent cohorts in his institute (Sport and Exercise Science) have had more input from librarians both in terms of the frequency of input across the levels of their course, and the “constructive alignment” (Biggs and Tang 2011, *passim*) of sessions to module learning outcomes and assessment. Some first years, he said, felt they had heard the same message *too* frequently, but as a student who had received fewer library interventions, Paul disagreed: “you can never be told too much” he said. Repetition, he argued, helps the knowledge “stick”.

In the first focus group, Jenny talked extensively about an academic writing module she had taken as an elective on recommendation from a Student Services advisor. Selected initially to add some variety to her programme (to avoid becoming “Psycholog-ied out”) she was somewhat doubtful as to its value. She felt, perhaps, that in this aspect of her journey she had travelled as far as was possible. Instead, however, she found it “one of the most useful courses I did”. The proximity of the Language Centre to the Hive also increased her usage of the physical library. This was an issue touched upon by Jenny’s fellow participant Imogen, who believed the distance between the library’s location at the City campus and the locus of her course’s teaching (at least in first year) at St Johns created a barrier to visiting the library building. It was a barrier that seems to have become as much psychological as physical, given that an increased amount of classes at the City campus in subsequent years did not change her behaviour. Imogen was unaware of the existence of the academic writing module, even though it would have been available on her pathway. Jenny was surprised to hear that some courses were putting mandatory academic skills modules in place, but felt that this was a positive move.

5.3.3 Progression and progress

For the learner journey to be a journey at all, it seems reasonable that there must be some sense that progress is being made and the movement from one module to another, and from one level to another, has some kind of coherence. In the two focus groups and the interview, therefore, this was asked as a specific question to students (see [Appendix 3](#)), to gauge their sense of how, if at all, their modules had a sense of building on one another as they progressed. Since four out of the five participants were second year or above, the majority had experience of moving from one level of study to another. The sole first year student (Simon: Business, Finance and Economics, Focus Group 2) had experience only of moving to a new set of modules in the second semester of an academic year, rather than up to the next level of study.

There was a mixed response to this question, and indeed in the case of third year student Paul, taking a major in Physical Education (PE) with a minor in Sports Studies, a marked difference in his feeling about the differences in quality of structure between his two subject areas. Whilst the PE course was held up as paradigm of scaffolded learning, he considered the reverse was true of the Sports Studies element:

“From the Physical Education side massively, 100 percent, that it is real, sort of, you learn the foundation of things in year 1, and then year 2 you build on those foundation (sic), and then in the third year we seem to be sort of consolidating what we’ve learned, reviewing a lot of it, and then refining what we do with teaching. Um, with Sports Studies, I’d go the complete opposite and it and it just seems a complete mismatch of what we’ve done and what we’ve learned.”

At each level, PE goes through skills that the student would “need ... to move on”; the development and progression is scaffolded and is explicit to the student. In Sports Studies, modules appeared to Paul to “be just slotting in any year”, and a “complete sort of mismatch”. Although he felt that eventually

he would “learn it all”, the confusion the process engendered was sufficient for him to relegate Sports Studies to the minor element of his degree; “if I could’ve dropped it completely”, he said, “I would’ve done”.

In the first focus group, both students saw some element of progression in the way their modules were structured. For Film Studies student Imogen, this was particularly apparent in her mandatory modules, which at Level 4 aimed to “put everyone on the same level” and then build from this base. This was echoed by Jenny, though she pointed out that this did mean repetition for those students who were perhaps further advanced in their journey. Optional modules, however, Imogen considered “pockets of learning” about interesting parts of film, with no particular consideration for what had gone before, or what would come later. With some exploration, however, she did acknowledge the applicability of some of the skills learned in the mandatory modules to the electives, commenting: “I’m guessing that was on purpose”. It seemed clear from this comment that this was not something to which she had previously given active consideration, nor presumably was it made explicit by staff. She contrasted this with her experience as a student representative on the revalidation of the Nursing curriculum, where it was “explicit that each assessment built on the next one, so not just in terms of the module, but the assessment.” This engendered some discussion about courses governed by regulatory bodies compared with those that were not, and Imogen felt that whilst her own course, Film Studies, was entirely different from Nursing, that she would have benefitted from the scaffolded approach which NMC regulation imposed on the latter.

For Counselling Psychology second year Jenny, progression was considered evident in the increased depth of scholarship of topics as they were covered and revisited during the course. She understood, she said, that it was about “depth of knowledge”, some of her course colleagues, however, simply saw repetition: “Oh we did that last year”. The description of increased depth aligned with what Psychology academic staff had described as their “build,

expand, refine" approach across levels four, five, and six (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). This approach of "gradually increasing the complexity of tasks" is advocated by Hanna et al. (2014 p. 40). The student, however, said she did not "remember it being explained in that way". This links to the theme of communication, explored in more detail below; teaching staff may have a clear idea of how they are scaffolding their courses, but this is not necessarily communicated to students, or apparent to them without that explicit communication.

In the second focus group, both students were able to see an element of progression and framework in their course structure, although both were doubtful that any intentionality behind this was ever "explicitly stated" (John) by the course teams. Simon, a mature first year student within Worcester Business School considered his prior knowledge (from his previous business career) meant that he "could see what the end goal was", but again that implied the onus of discovery being on the student rather than on academic staff to elucidate their intentions in shaping their learners' journeys.

John felt that his Archaeology course had "taken what Archaeology is ... broken in down and spread it across the modules, because there's a lot of different aspects that all collate together". He suggested that this enabled him to make connections across lectures and modules. However, he was less certain that lecturers ever explicitly elucidated the links: "some lecturers kind of go: 'Oh and you'll have learned about this in theory', and they grin at you like anybody was paying attention". This comment perhaps highlights a barrier that tutors face in attempting to scaffold learning: if students are unable to or unwilling to comprehend that what they do in their early modules forms a foundation for what will follow, this makes building a skillset extremely challenging. An example from the researcher's practice follows.

In Psychology (one of the researcher's three subject areas) is a mandatory second year module for which the assessment is a systematic review. This

assessment is usually the first time students have undertaken a systematic review, and they find it extremely challenging. Jenny, who was on the module at the time of participating in this research, commented that it is “the tough one ... you’ve never worked in this way”. The researcher has spent 16% of her total teaching hours in the current academic year on appointments and teaching specifically pertaining to this single assessment. Partly in an attempt to mitigate the problems students experience with systematic database searching on this assessment (but also to improve standards generally), the researcher was given two workshops in the first year mandatory module rather than the single one previously offered. The first workshop presented the basics of library resources and searching, whilst the second was an “advanced” database searching session. The intention was to familiarise the students with the relevant databases earlier on in their journeys, so that they will hopefully feel more comfortable with them when they *have* to use them in summative assessment in second year. It was made clear to students in the first session what the second session would entail and why. Attendance was extremely low, and whilst there may be a number of reasons for this, it can certainly be hypothesised that students did not see the value of being introduced in first year to something that was not directly applicable to assessment until second year.

Research participant John commented, “I know there’s two or three students who ... sat through all of our lectures in first year with blank looks on their faces, staring out of the window.” John believed these students are able; the problem is not that “they can’t do it, but ... they just don’t want to do the work”. Nonetheless, he said, these students “disappeared at the end of first year, and didn’t come back”, once again raising questions around personal responsibility versus that of tutors, attrition, and student experience. Participants seemed to believe that the step up in complexity in second year is deliberately designed to “weed out” the less capable, whereas from the University point of view this would be the most undesirable outcome; rather tutors would seek to help students *reach* the required level. As Oliveira (2017

p. 315) notes “levels of student satisfaction and academic outcomes are linked to increased student engagement”. Which element comes first, and the responsibility for this, is a more complex matter. Nonetheless is it one in which the library must be involved, and research supports this notion: “libraries in higher education institutions have a role to play in student engagement and retention” (Haddow and Joseph 2010, p. 234).

In terms of progression from first year to second year and beyond, the researcher sought to address what the literature refers to as the “second year slump” (Thompson et al. 2013) or “sophomore slump” in US literature (Freedman 1956). The participants did generally acknowledge that there was a distinct “ramping up” in both the quantity and quality of work expected of them in second year. Simon spoke again of the absence of “consequence” in first year; he believed that this lack was a contributory factor to any slump that might occur in the second. This is echoed in the research of Keane (2011 p. 711) who notes her participants “perceived a ‘step up’ in what was expected of them and rising stakes with regard to their results”. This was exacerbated by the fact that they had had a relatively straightforward time in first year, where producing work “vaguely up to snuff” (John) had been sufficient, which made the difference more stark.

Imogen commented that the upcoming step change was elucidated to students, but she said it was in terms of *warning* rather than *preparation*, which seems somewhat unhelpful to learners, although Imogen believed the intent was to foster independence and critical thinking. John, who described the shift from level four to level five as a “sudden sharp drop”, commented “if we’d been treated similar to how we are now in first year ... about halfway through first year we’d ... have acclimatised”. Halfway through his second year, John still felt “scared stiff” at having to writing his dissertation the following year, whereas had he been treated, in his words “like a student” in first year, he believed he would have felt quite different about the prospect. Simon echoed this; for him the approach to first years by staff did not “give credit”

to young students. John stated that if the transition from A-level to first year at university was like moving from a “paintball game to the Falklands War”, then the step from first to second year was “probably more to the Iraq War”, a somewhat dramatic analogy.

Echoing the literature with regards to a reduction in staff input with students in their second year (Webb and Cotton 2018; Vaughn and Parry 2013; Tobolowsky 2008) participants noted that lecturers were less responsive to emails and had stopped “giving the answers”, rather expecting students to “go away and figure it out for myself” (John). Invoking the marketization of higher education and themselves as consumers (Bunce, Baird and Jones 2017; Woodall, Hiller and Resnick 2014), John noted that a number of his second year colleagues had joked that this was not what they had paid “nine grand a year” for. Simon added: “You don’t get value for money”. This has implications for student attainment; research by Bunce, Baird and Jones (2017 p. 1958) showed that “higher consumer orientation was associated with lower academic performance”. For Jenny, the expectation of a certain amount of self-sufficiency was not an unreasonable one, something she attributed to her “more mature” perspective. Having settled in to the course, Jenny realised that many of her questions could be answered without recourse to the lecturer, by virtue of the VLE, but said that many of her classmates still would not take this responsibility:

“But then there are still some that don’t actually read Blackboard properly, and in the lecture yesterday: “when’s the assignment due in?” you know, and the lecturer said “you can read that for yourself”, you know, some of them ... I do feel some of them are having a very odd learning journey.”

The possibility that habits formed in first year were then very difficult to amend was also raised. Simon highlighted that the Freshers’ Week events can set an expectation of university life as an endless party; coupled with first-time “freedom” the first year spends a lot of time on social events and then finds “all of a sudden you’re not actually studying”. John agreed, describing the

experience of a coursemate who attended as many social events as possible and then found himself “struggling” with work. Halfway through second year, he was “still struggling immensely”. John opined “I think it puts a lot of people into a rut that they never quite escape.” This suggests that if the learner journey does not get off to a good start, then depending on the nature of the individual it can be very difficult to rectify.

5.3.4 Personal responsibility and engagement

Participants returned frequently to the idea of engagement with one’s studies, engagement, motivation, and personal responsibility for the learning journey. Motivation can be defined as being the “underlying reasons” for studying at university, taking a particular course, or selecting particular modules; it can also refer to learners’ engagement (Swain and Hammond 2011 p. 593). Both concepts are discussed here. Academic staff commented on the latter in earlier Library Services research (University of Worcester Library Services 2016); it was suggested that although students had “capability”, some lacked “motivation, presentation, and organisational skills”. Given pressure on staff at all universities to ensure the best possible student experience, maximise attainment, and minimise attrition, it is interesting that participants in this research were clear that they believed staff could only do a certain amount to help. There had to be some onus on the individual to, as Paul put it, “go out there and actually ask for it”; he repeated words to this effect four times during his interview. Self-efficacy (or lack thereof) was linked to how employable students would be; the “real world readiness” which is discussed in the next section.

The issue of attitudinal differences mature students and their more traditional counterparts was raised. John, a “traditional” student, esteemed what he perceived as the resilience of mature students: “mature students I think are better at handling it; they know what it’s like to work for deadlines, they know what it’s like to deal with stress”. This is echoed in Swain and Hammond (2011

p. 605) whose research found that their mature participants were “proactive, highly motivated and committed” and that “because they had made sacrifices and invested their time in studying, they were determined to make the most of it.” They had “agency”, and had made a “positive decision to study”. Academic staff commented on their superior time management and work ethic, which they said gave them the opportunity to be more meticulous at tasks such as referencing (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). Despite sometimes feeling that they had additional barriers because of their status as mature students – Simon for example spoke of his lack of academic credentials – the impression from the focus groups was that they were perhaps more likely to ask for help to overcome these. This echoed comments by academic staff that mature students might have more anxieties on commencement of their courses, but attained better overall. (University of Worcester Library Services 2016).

The positive decision-making of mature students is in contrast with many students coming directly from A-level or BTEC courses, where university is simply an expected next step. Paul, for example, referred to being offered “two almost dead-end options”, “uni (or) work ... “you either do one or you do the other”. John said that that his journey was “straight from GCSE to A-levels, and straight from A-levels to university, probably because that was the path presented before me”. He was critical of the lack of information given about “alternatives”, and mentioned that he knew “a couple of people who’ve gone and done apprenticeships ... but they had to fight to get information about those.” It is as well to be cautionary about setting up a binary between “traditional” and “mature” students, however, given the range of factors involved, the fact that a student is classified as “mature” at the age of only twenty-one, and that the boundary between youth and maturity is “increasingly blurred and fragmented” (Crossan et al. 2003 p. 57).

5.3.5 Employability and “real world” readiness

The term “real world” has been included in the title of this section as it was the specific term repeatedly used by participants, particularly in the second focus group. John expressed his belief that the university experience “isn’t a real world experience ... it’s a surreal experience that comes between school and the real world”. With “employers bemoaning inadequately prepared employees” (Youdell 2011 p. 7), students’ comments on this aspect of their journey were of particular interest. Employability is also a core element of the University’s strategic plan (University of Worcester 2013 p. 17); “university league tables routinely include graduate career prospects as one of their ranking indicators” (Christie 2017 p. 403). It also has roots in the previous section, the need for self-sufficiency.

Motivation, effort, and willingness to take responsibility for one’s own progress were held by participants to be not only a feature of their current learner journey but a necessity for the life journey to follow. Simon felt that the university did not in any way prepare students for the “real world”, citing lack of “urgency” and the fact that “sixteen hours” of tuition was considered “full time as being indicative of this. This is interesting in that it suggests that the contact time with tutors was the full extent of the learning experience; this has contiguity with academic staff comments that students did not seem inclined to do additional reading outside classes (University of Worcester Library Services 2016). It was perhaps surprising, therefore, that this comment came from Simon, who was the participant who mentioned real-world readiness and motivation most. No participant really offered concrete ideas on how the university *could* replicate the “real world” in practice; none of them were on courses which included a significant placement element. It would be interesting to contrast their comments with the views of students who *do* have extensive placements.

When discussing the ability to sell one’s skills to potential employers, and the motivation for choosing particular modules, the responses seemed to depend

quite heavily on whether the student perceived the course as one being taken out of “passion” or “enjoyment” or whether it was aimed at a specific career. Imogen contrasted her Film Studies course, where there were no modules she felt were “supposed to be picked because, you know, it would get you down to a certain job title or anything like that”, with Law (“it’s all geared towards getting that job”) and Jenny’s Psychology course. Simon, who had worked extensively as a chef, contrasted the theoretical (at college) with the experiential (on the job) learning of commis chefs he had interviewed. He believed those that had completed the college training did not have appropriate skills to do the job. Whilst this is rather different to higher education, it highlights the perception that might prevail in the so-called “real world” if universities do not give employability issues sufficient attention. Librarians have a role to play in this since, as already stated, the information literacy and management skills they can teach are part of the skillset today’s graduate requires (Poole 2013 p. 348).

5 3.6 The need for communication and the impact of communication failure

Throughout the study participants highlighted, both directly and indirectly, the need for communication and the impact that communication failures can have on the student experience. Bound up with this were ideas regarding the *nature* of that communication, and the fear of feeling like a small and insignificant part of a large and perhaps increasingly faceless organisation as processes become automated. This creates a tension between the demands of increasing student numbers and the desire to offer students a rich individual experience. First year Simon commented: “I find the real ... limiting factor is it’s a very bureaucratic institution ... made up with a massive amount of processes that you have to go through”. John echoed this: “you’re very right in that it is a very bureaucratic system ... it’s very much disconnected from the *people* doing it.” If these processes, for example registration, module selection – even location of library resources – not all strictly “automated” but essentially self-service – work correctly, students may well not communicate in person with

university staff other than their academic tutors. This, however, can mean that if things *do* go wrong, there is no pre-existing relationship with support staff, potentially adding stress to an already stressful situation. In terms of the library, this is a clear indication that liaisons need to work on establishing relationships with students *before* things go wrong, whether in formal teaching settings or in offering drop ins. At UW, as well as the enquires desk within the Hive, staff regularly run an “askalibrarian on tour” event where the other campuses are visited (see Barnett, Bull and Cooper 2016 for an account of a similar initiative at the University of Birmingham). Jenny commented that she very much appreciated the researcher’s drop in sessions for Psychology students, which were timed and located to coincide with a gap in the timetable between a lecture and a seminar.

Students commented on the importance of personal communication: “the biggest thing, for me personally, is talking to someone”. This is “better face to face.” This is seen in the literature; Pellegrino (2012 p. 273) notes that “evidence from recent studies indicates that academic library users prefer face-to-face reference services”. Research by Granfield and Robertson (2008 p. 51) likewise concluded that “The reference desk continues to be the most popular method of getting help in the library”. They noted, though, that virtual services such as online chat had a “special appeal” to postgraduates (Granfield and Robertson 2008 p. 51; see also Robinson and Reid 2007). Perhaps, having progressed further through their learner journey, these students are more confident in accessing support by diverse means. It is also worth noting that Granfield and Robertson’s research is now a decade old. Nonetheless, “Chat” has only recently been recently introduced at the University of Worcester, where it has proved very popular. Usage statistics, however, do not capture whether the user is an undergraduate or a postgraduate, and no research has been carried out to establish student preferences and motivations for accessing one particular mode of communication over another. Perhaps, as Robinson and Reid (2007) suggest, the anonymity of the chat service helps students overcome library anxiety.

Communication problems can also have their root in the previously discussed need for personal responsibility. In the first focus group, Jenny commented on the need for students to “just ... go out there and say ‘I need some help’”. This raises the question of whether students know *who* to ask and whether they are actively encouraged to do so, although Pellegrino (2012) found that students who were so encouraged were not actually statistically significantly more likely to do so. That said, they were also not *less* likely, so, as she comments, “At the very least, then, encouraging students to ask for help doesn’t do any harm” (Pellegrino 2012 p. 276).

Bound up with communication and its potential to break down was some lack of understand about the extent of the library’s remit and responsibility, and likewise a tendency to talk about the librarians as outsiders “coming in”. Participants described how “they came in to one of our lectures”, or “you library guys come in”; suggesting a lack of embeddedness of the librarian within the module or the course; a guest rather than a member of the teaching team. In one example this extended to a sense of separation between the library and the University as a whole: “Sometimes it does feel like ... the library and the university are separate entities. I don’t know if that’s ... you know, on purpose” (Imogen, Focus Group 1). This is disappointing, given that the literature emphasises that “creating faculty-librarian partnerships to integrate research instruction is a solution that makes sense for all partners, but most important, for the students” (Hollister 2008 p. 25).

The separation of the University and its library was, however, a product of geography and purpose as much as the embeddedness (or otherwise) of the librarian in the academic department. Imogen noted its uniqueness as a public library as well as university library, commenting “I do all my work at home ... I don’t really go to public places and do it”. For students with a majority of their teaching at the main St Johns Campus, the trip over the river to City seems something of a psychological barrier: “the fact that it’s in City – in my

head – and I think in most other people’s – it feels like a separate thing” (Imogen, Focus Group 1). Interestingly, in contrast with Jenny, her attitude did not change when her classes were increasingly located in City campus teaching rooms in her second and third year. Fellow focus group participant Jenny commented on it as the formation of a habit in first year: “It might ... be how you started your journey ... when you first started you get your little routines and things ... in the first year you were over here [the focus group took place at St Johns] and Library Services was over there”. Imogen concurred: “it stuck”. This is a further illustration of how study practices and habits formed early in the learner journey can be difficult to change, even when there might be strong evidence that the change would be beneficial. Taking ‘the library’ to students, as already discussed (Barnett, Bull and Cooper 2016 p. 112) can mitigate this; likewise Drewes and Hoffman (2010 p. 80) assert that communication and relationship building is contingent on librarians becoming “part of the communities they serve”. Pellegrino (2012 p. 276) echoes this in her research: “students identified ... the need for a personal connection with at least one librarian”.

6.0 Conclusion and recommendations

This proposal has set out the rationale, value and method for carrying out a research project examining students' conception of their "learner journey" throughout a three year undergraduate degree at the University of Worcester. A literature review established that whilst there is considerable literature around the contribution of academic libraries to information literacy instruction, there is a little research specifically on the learner journey in the context of skills acquisition and progression. Additionally the literature review considered research around the main themes emerging from the research data. Research in this area is perceived to be valuable to allow the library to align its teaching offer in terms of content and timing to the needs of the student population; in that sense the research meets its "intended inquiry purposes" (Patton 2003 p. 542).

6.1 Findings

A number of core themes have emerged in the research findings, as discussed in Chapter 5. It is acknowledged that the sample size was very small and stressed that the research is of an exploratory nature. The project is intended to be a "source of new ideas" and "provisionally identified qualitative patterns of response" (Merton 1987 p. 558) rather than as attempting to prove any existing hypothesis. It is very unlikely that saturation of themes and categories has been achieved in this sample. The research is intended to inform and provide a grounding for further research cycles, one of the recommendations given below; it is contended the identification of five core themes will provide a solid base on which to carry out further research. Perhaps the data collection might be extended to surveys in an attempt to gain more coverage, although that would result in a reduction in richness of data.

6.2 Evaluation of aims and objectives

The aims of the research have been met within the context of a small sample size that is very unlikely to have resulted in saturation. The evaluation here is stated on the basis of the work done, and with the recommendation that the research is considered a springboard for future research cycles. Sufficient data was yielded to identify several persistent themes and give a solid foundation for this to take place

A greater understanding of undergraduate students' perceptions of their learner journeys was achieved through the research. The focus groups and interview elicited five principal themes which have been discussed in detail in [Chapter 5](#). Participants commented on the challenges of their transitions to university and their progression from first year into subsequent years of study. Personal responsibility and engagement were discussed as an essential part of a successful learner journey, whilst communication between students and staff was paramount to complement this. Employability and "real world readiness" was an overarching concern as the end of the learner journey as an undergraduate approached.

The second aim was to ascertain whether students see their courses in terms of continuous progression. In as much as students had given consideration to this during their learner journeys, it was potentially a course-dependent issue. More vocational courses, such as Nursing, Law, and Psychology were considered by participants to perhaps more naturally accommodate such a continuum than, for example, Film Studies. Nonetheless, regardless of course a scaffolded, clear approach was considered the ideal, whether that was within a single module or across the course as a whole.

The role of Library Services was probed; participants reported general satisfaction with the service although this was tempered by issues around communication, clarity over the extent and remit of the service, and in some cases insufficient class time in modules being given to information literacy

instruction. No significant changes to current practice were suggested by participants.

In light of the latter, the potential improvements to service that can be recommended by this research are limited. These are considered in more detail in [Section 6.5](#). Further research cycles, as recommended in [Section 6.4](#), may disclose concerns that as yet have not been considered. It would be helpful to target non-users of the library in order to more fully achieve this research aim, but it is a very difficult demographic to isolate, since by definition they are not engaged with the service and therefore an unknown.

6.3 Limitations of the research

The principal limitation of the research was the small sample size. The reasons for this have been elucidated in [Chapter 4](#), and the research yielded rich qualitative data despite the small sample. As Krueger and Casey (2009 p. 205) note, the “logic of sampling in qualitative research” does not rest on sample size as “an indicator of quality”. Additionally, the two focus groups, despite again their small size, demonstrate the usefulness of interaction between participants during the research and the “activating” of “forgotten details” (Merton, Fiske and Kendall 1991 p, 146). However, the small sample size makes it unwise to generalise any of the findings across the wider student population. Nonetheless, a number of themes clearly emerged across the two focus groups and one interview that would be worth exploring in more depth with additional participants, ideally in a larger focus group. It is likely, though, that the difficulties of recruitment will remain. Sampling may be purposive in the sense of recruiting across a range of courses and year groups, but will be self-selecting in that students who are *not* engaged with the library are, by definition, probably not going to attend a focus group to explain *why* – they simply are not engaged enough to do so.

Another, related limitation is the breadth of participation. Ideally, there would have been representation from each institute, whereas representation from

five of the seven only was achieved. Since Humanities and Arts have only recently split into two institutes, and combined represent only 11% of the student body (University of Worcester 2016), it was lack of representation from the Institute of Education (23% of students) that was mostly keenly felt. Likewise, participants from the sizeable Nursing and Midwifery courses (part of the Institute of Health and Society) would have been desirable, but their heavy workload away from the University (in terms of placement) makes their participation particularly difficult to secure. However, one of the participants had been involved in the revalidation of the Nursing degree and spoke of this in Focus Group 1, allowing at least some insight into this course.

Finally the researcher's position as a member of Library Services staff *may* have constrained participants from saying anything deeply critical of the library, or about academic staff or courses that they suspected the researcher might be familiar with. This is difficult to avoid, and could only be tempered by making it clear to participants that there was no right or wrong in the discussion and that all viewpoints were considered valid and valuable.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

It is recommended that the research should be repeated with further, and ideally larger, focus groups to achieve saturation, and to include all the university's academic institutes. A mixed methods approach including questionnaires might also generate a large quantity of basic data to combine with the more time-consuming focus group approach (Kitzinger 2005 p. 59). This could potentially draw out more themes which could then be explored in more detail in future focus groups, having first revisited the prompt questions to take account of these additional themes (Kitzinger 2005).

Ideally, sampling would include representation from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, since none took part in this research. Additionally, although one student with a declared additional learning need participated, greater representation should be sought from disabled students. However,

each learning journey is unique to the learner, and it should not be assumed that a student with a particular characteristic is somehow “representative” of everyone with that same characteristic. A larger body of data from “multiple comparison groups” would give “considerably greater” “credibility” to any theory generated from it (Glaser and Strauss 1967 p. 231).

6.5 Recommendations for Library Services’ practice

None of the comments made by students suggested that there are serious problems with the service offered, although this must be set into the context that the researcher is herself one of the Academic Liaison team. Also, the probability is that students who were willing to assist the library with research are those who are reasonably engaged with the service. Nonetheless, there were still a number of misconceptions on the part of students with regards to the extent of the service’s remit, and a feeling of the library being in some way separate from the university, indicating that awareness work must be ongoing. It is recommended that Library Services continues and expands its work to “take ‘the library’ to the students (Barnett, Bull and Cooper 2016 p. 112). The library should also continue to promote its services via as many channels as possible – social media, “askalibrarian on tour”, library mascot (“Reffie the Raptor”, who has “his” own Twitter handle), and in-class teaching. The “Teaching Menu” drawn up after research with academic staff should also be revisited and revised to take account of research participant feedback.

6.6 Final remarks

In considering the learner journey, we have to appreciate that they can be “volatile and contradictory” and that they “do not travel in one direction alone” (Crossan et al. 2003 p. 65). Each learner journey is unique, and the role of the librarian should be to work with learners to shape our services so that each is a rich, informative, and life-enhancing one.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Ethical statement/participant information and consent:

Purpose of Research

The research is being undertaken in part fulfilment of the requirements of the MSc Information and Library Studies at Robert Gordon University. However, it also fulfils an information need of the University of Worcester's Academic Services Team.

The research will be written up as part of an assessment for Robert Gordon University module BSM101 (Dissertation) currently being undertaken by the researcher. The research may be presented at appropriate conferences, and a written research report may be disseminated more widely through appropriate academic journals and publications, as well as being shared with colleagues at the University of Worcester.

About the Researcher

Kathryn Devine (k.devine@worc.ac.uk) is an Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Worcester and MSc student at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

Data Gathering

I intend to gather data through focus groups and/or interviews. I would like your agreement for your participation in this focus group/interview to be recorded and used as relevant research data.

Anonymity and confidentiality

In the final dissertation I will present analysis of the findings of this focus group. No individual's personal information will be made available and no individual will be identifiable when the research data is used in the dissertation, in subsequent publications or conferences, or dissemination within the University of Worcester. Participants are welcome to request information about the research findings and final dissertation (please contact Kathryn Devine).

Please read the following points before continuing. By participating in this focus group or interview you are giving consent for your responses to be used in the research.

Ethical Statement

This research adheres to BERA's *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, Library Services' ethical guidelines (below) in addition to having received ethical approval from Robert Gordon University:

- All research will operate within a framework of respect for the person regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, religion, political belief and lifestyle.
- Participants will be briefed as to why their participation is necessary, how the data will be used and how and to whom the research will be reported.
- Participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.
- No individuals will be identifiable in publication or dissemination of the research, within or outside the University. Any responses and data which include personal information about individuals will be kept confidential within the project.
- Any personal data will be kept within the legal requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- Findings will form part of a written assessment for BSM101 currently being undertaken by the researcher (Kathryn Devine), to be submitted to Robert Gordon University. There may be subsequent dissemination within the University of Worcester and through journals or conferences if appropriate.
- Please contact Kathryn Devine if you have any queries about the research.

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Please sign and date below to confirm you have read this information:

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 2: Introductory statement given verbally to participants:

The purpose of this project is to discover what students understand by a “learning journey” and to what extent this informs their progression through, and decisions during, their time at university. In this focus group/interview we will discuss this.

By “learner journey”, we do not just mean the course pathway in terms of modules and assessments but the overarching skills acquired along the way. When talking about the journey think about the skillset you are building and the applicability of this to the workplace or continued education at postgraduate level.

There are no “right” or “wrong” answers here; we want to hear about your experiences and perceptions. All responses will be anonymised and your personal information kept confidential (see participant information sheet).

Appendix 3: Prompt questions/guiding structure for interviews/focus groups:

- **Please share your:**
 - Institute
 - Course/pathway
 - Year of study
 - Route to HE (e.g. BTEC, A-levels)
 - Whether, as well as studying, you are employed; if so, what doing?
 - Anything else about yourself you would like to share (e.g. mature student; return to learning; parent).
- **Have you ever heard the term “learner journey” before in any context? If you have, but not in the context I outlined, explain a bit more about where you heard it and the meaning it was given.**
 - If so in what context?
 - What was it given to mean if it was used in a different way to how I explained it in the introduction?
 - For example, it is sometimes used in the context of learning to navigate a physical campus or a virtual learning environment such as Blackboard.
- **Were there any particular skills you were expected to have on entry to your course?**
 - This might be grades/UCAS points but for example were you interviewed or given any additional tests to complete pre-entry?
 - Were you asked about particular skills? Can you give me an example of this?
 - Are there any skills you feel tutors *assume* you have on entry (Explicitly stated or not?) If you were interviewed pre-entry are they the same skills you were asked about then? Or has anything come as a surprise?
 - Can you give me an example of any you now wish you *had* had on entry but did not? (For example library search skills, academic writing – *this might depend on the course* – but our feedback from the same exercise with academic staff highlighted lack of research and basic writing skills when students arrive at UW).

- **How do you think the library/academic liaison librarians are helping/ can help you on your learning journey?**
 - Have you already had input from librarians? If so what was this? – formal taught sessions, approached them at the desk?
 - What skills, if any, have you gained from this input?
 - Is there anything you would like from the library that we do not currently offer?
- **Do you feel comfortable describing and “selling” your skills to (for example) potential employers?**
 - If not, what problem(s) do you have with this?
- **Do you feel that the modules on your course link together and develop skills in a scaffolded, progressive way, or are they more “standalone”?**
 - If they link, how? Do tutors explicitly make these links? Are you receiving a consistent message?
 - If you feel that they are standalone, in what way does this seem to be the case? (For example, if you are a second or third year, can you remember earlier modules on your course where you have not revisited the knowledge/skills acquired?)
 - Has your department/institute ever made you explicitly aware of a skills framework that they are following? (For example, the Psychology department consider their course should build (level 4), expand (level 5) and refine (level 6) student skills.)
- **If you are on a course where you have module choice, what motivates that choice?**
 - Does it plug a gap in your skills?
 - Does it offer something that will enhance your employability?
 - Do you choose it purely because you think you will enjoy it/because of who is teaching it? - Or conversely, avoid a module on these grounds?
 - Do you choose it because you can see how it builds on what you have learned in previous modules or will go on to learn in future?
- **When, as a student on your particular course, do you feel most under pressure?**

- If during assessment time, are there skills you feel need development to help you manage this?
 - E.g. time management, reading strategies, and searching strategies – or is it something external such as “bunching” of deadlines?
- If due to a skills need, who do you think should/can help you develop these (e.g. academic staff, support staff: library, writers in residence)?
- If it is difficult to answer this question for yourself, can you think of a time when your coursemates/classmates/cohort were struggling/having difficulties more than usual? When was this? What was the cause and can you think of ways in which it could have been alleviated?
- **Based on what we have discussed do you feel that the learner journey is something which has relevance to you?**
 - That is, will you consider it in the choices you make and the help you seek?
 - Will you consider how you build on skills as you move on?
 - Will the journey continue after your current course? How?