“A surreal experience between school and the real world”: student perceptions of their ‘learner journeys’

Kathryn Devine  BA (Hons), MA, MSc, PGCHE, FHEA
Academic Liaison Librarian
Today’s graduate requires a more complex and varied skillset than ever before.

“Graduates need to be more creative, more media literate, more skilled cross-culturally, and more capable of leadership” and have the ability to think “critically about an enormous amount of information” and solve “complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems” (Poole, 2013, p.348).

This means the learner journey becomes more complex, “starting from an earlier point and journeying to a more distant one” (Poole, 2013, p.348).
Research aims and objectives

- Sought increased understanding of student perceptions of their learner journeys by asking:
  - What are the issues, roadblocks, pressure points along the way?
  - When do these occur?
- Concurrently, asked students for their understanding and opinions on Library Services’ role within the journey
The participants

- 5 participants
- 2 female; 3 male
- 1 first year (level 4)
- 2 second year (level 5)
- 2 third year (level 6)
- 3 mature students (2 male, 1 female)
- 5 White British
- 1 declared disability (Autism Spectrum Disorder)
Five principal themes emerged:
- Transition to, and preparedness for, university
- Progression
- Personal responsibility and engagement
- Employability
- Communication
Transition

- Academic writing
- Critical thinking skills
- Disconnect between secondary/Further Education and Higher Education
- Library anxiety
- Finding appropriate sources and using them well
Some first years had “no idea” about what A levels meant and I was “referencing complete rubbish.” Transition from A-level to university is like moving from “a paintball game to the Falklands War.” I didn’t feel we were “treated like students” until second year. Tutors thought I had a “higher level” of academic writing skill than I really did. You just feel like you don’t know what it is you’re asking.
Progression

- Scaffolding of learning
- Students’ sense of clear progression (or otherwise) through modules to create a cohesive whole
- The perceived “jump” in difficulty/expectations of tutors at level 5 in comparison with level 4
At level 5, I’m expected to “go away and figure it out for myself”

Moving up to level 5 is a “sudden sharp drop”

I’m “scared stiff” of writing my dissertation

Modules seem to be “just slotting into any year … a complete mismatch”

Going from first to second year it’s just like 100% more workload

They didn’t prepare us, but they did warn us

It was “explicit that each assessment built on (to) the next one”
Personal responsibility/engagement

- The need for students to do things for themselves
- Seize opportunities
- Taking responsibility for seeking help when things go wrong
- University should encourage students to do this from the outset
At A-level you get factsheets for everything; at university you need to get out there and form your own opinion.

Staff can only do so much.

Tasks are set with a purpose but students don’t always do them.

You need to “go out there and actually ask for it”.

“A mature student … know what it’s like to work for deadlines … they know (how) to deal with stress”.

A baseline expectation of my course is a willingness to learn and listen, to try new things.
Employability

- Readiness for the “real world”
- Can the university environment replicate real world experience?
- The learner journey as a lifelong experience
“Are we just using the term ‘learner journeys’ as an academic phrase for ‘life’?”

I’m in third year but I don’t feel like I’m completely finished … there are options out there; there’s progression.

There is no sense of urgency at university.

University is “a surreal experience … between school and the real world”

Law is “all geared towards getting that job”

After the course I feel like the journey is just going to stop.
Impact of communication failure

Importance of clearly communicating what services are available to students and who is responsible for delivering them

Most dissatisfaction was in some way a product of a communication breakdown or failure
“It’s a very bureaucratic institution”

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

“The biggest thing for me … is talking to someone”

“There’s nothing worse than asking questions … and not getting the answers”

“Sometimes it feels like … the library and the university are separate entities”

“Just go out there and say ‘I need some help’”
Implications for engagement/satisfaction

- Need for clarity around extent and remit of service
- Taking services to students rather than waiting for them to come to us
- Meaningful partnerships with academic staff
- Need for timely, aligned teaching interventions
References
