Student Learning Journey project – Executive Summary

The Student Learning Journey project (October 2017 to May 2018) was an in-depth qualitative research study examining the needs, behaviours, motivations and approaches of Cambridge undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. It provided an opportunity to conduct a proactive, exploratory piece of research with those students, with the aim of developing Cambridge library services that continue to be tailored to the needs of their users.

In the latter stages of the project there was a focus on exploring student perceptions, approaches and experiences related to academic skills and information literacy, to support work being undertaken by CILN (Cambridge Information Literacy Network). There was an emphasis on working with taught postgraduate students, students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine), as well as students who, for Cambridge, might sometimes be considered ‘non-traditional’, for example, distance learners, part-time students and students who had taken varied routes to higher education.

Methodology

- Short, ad hoc, contextual interviews
- In-depth interviews
- Digital diary study, conducted over three weeks with 36 student participants, followed by in-depth interviews with 11 of those participants
- Printed and online questionnaires
- Feedback walls and comment cards
- Card sorting exercise, investigating student approaches to seeking guidance and advice
- Student evaluation of library teaching session descriptions
- Workshops with student groups who may have otherwise been under-represented in our work, specifically Black and Minority Ethnic students and students who had identified as having a disability

Findings: The Student Journey

- Expectations prior to arriving at Cambridge inform the early stages of the student experience
- Students who have taken certain routes to higher education and students from different cultural and educational backgrounds can be surprised by aspects of the ways in which Cambridge works
- Most students immediately see the value of the close nature of Cambridge teaching
- Student perceptions of Cambridge libraries change positively over time spent at the University, some aspects can be confusing and frustrating for students in the early stages of their studies
- Students value opportunities to specialise within their subject

Findings: Goals and Motivations

- Students are looking to acquire skills and practices which can be applied outside of higher education
- Students who wish to pursue careers in academia are looking to develop the necessary skills, but this often conflicts with the need to study for and pass exams and other forms of assessment

Findings: Welfare and Wellbeing

- Students see libraries as safe and welcoming spaces, which should be aware of and continue to foster student welfare
- There is a strong perception of a ‘stress culture’ present amongst Cambridge students, who feel that students put each other under pressure, which has negative implications for student mental health
- Students emphasise the importance of a positive, reflective approach to learning at Cambridge
- There are distinct pinch points in the student learning journey

Findings: Inter-personal relationships

- Relationships are key to the Cambridge student experience
- The size of a student cohort can affect student experiences and approaches
- Cambridge colleges, departments and faculties play a key role in facilitating relationships between students and peers, students in other disciplines, research students and academic staff
- Inter-disciplinary contact is seen by students as a valuable aspect of the Cambridge experience
- Students study ‘alone-together’ i.e. not completing formal group work but having the opportunity to bounce ideas off one another and experiencing a positive pressure from working surrounded by others
- Students value opportunities to work with senior students and researchers
Findings: **Place and Space**
- Cambridge students are increasingly mobile, approaching various aspects of their studies when on the go and away from University infrastructure
- Factors influencing study space choices are nuanced and individual
- Students use digital platforms and environments to collaborate

Findings: **Approaches to learning**
- Cambridge students will often return to one individual for guidance and advice
- Students use, and enjoy using, a variety of media, as part of and to support their studies
- Extracurricular opportunities are seen by students as a core component of their learning experience

Findings: **Back to Basics**
- Students who have taken a variety of routes to higher education are not always used to having to study for exams and this can be a confusing and overwhelming experience
- Students use a variety of office and general-purpose software as part of their studies and often feel under-practiced in the use of these
- Approaches to information management on the part of students are sporadic and individual; students rarely make use of bespoke tools or take a systematic approach
- Time management and planning are essential for students to enjoy and succeed during their time at Cambridge

Findings: **Communication and terminology**
- Student receive a large amount of communication from the University and much of this is ignored
- Events and opportunities promoted at the start of lectures are often attended and pursued by students
- Students prefer, and are more likely to, respond to plain language and clear concise messages

**Opportunities**
A number of key opportunities for service design and delivery were arrived at based on the findings of the project research:

- **Workload manager**: A digital tool which allows students to plan and manage their time and sources of information
- **Cambridge Libraries Student Welfare Group**: Developing collaboration and increasing efforts across Cambridge libraries to support student welfare and wellbeing
- **Back to Basics**: Working with students to create selections of video tutorials, which can be used by students to develop skills and practices.
- **Cambridge Libraries Communication Framework**: Arriving at a consensus across Cambridge libraries in terms of key aspects of the ways in which those libraries communicate with students
- **LIBraries GLOSSary (LIBGLOSS)**: Working to introduce students to terminology they might encounter during their studies at Cambridge, through digital and physical information and instruction
- **Introducing Cambridge Libraries**: Infographics and concise information explaining key facts about Cambridge libraries to students, pre- and post-arrival.
- **Cambridge Mobile**: An app-based gateway for students, which would act as a route to the key digital tools they make use of during their studies
- **CamApps**: Curated lists of mobile apps, developed in collaboration with students, containing lists of apps to enhance study and productivity
- **Collab Cam**: A series of events and opportunities for Cambridge students, including student-led exhibitions and work-sharing seminars
- **Digital Detox**: Events and services allowing students to avoid distraction and work productively, including ‘Shut up and Write sessions’, and WiFi- and data-free Digital Detox Zones
- **Student Summer Bootcamps**: Digital, mobile-friendly teaching packages that would allow students to develop research skills and practices, particularly outside of Cambridge term time

[Access the full Student Learning Journey project report](#)

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