Developing our Understanding of the Academic Skills Experiences of Students Navigating Level 4

Library Academic Support Team, August 2024

Introduction

This report summarises the Library Academic Support Team project investigating the academic skills experiences of Level 4 students at LBU, as well as the skills these students would like to develop to successfully progress to Level 5 study. It highlights key findings, areas for discussion and overarching themes. The aim is to stimulate discussion on successful transition into University and from Level 4 to Level 5 study, taking into account student perceptions.

Project aims

Specific project aims:

- To further develop our understanding of students' experiences of starting university and navigating Level 4.
- To find out students' struggles in relation to their study and learning, and their positive stories of what works well for them.
- To highlight existing and enhanced academic skills support to students, mainly through Library academic skills modules.
- To stimulate discussion on the Level 4 student experience and support needed to successfully transition to Level 5 study.

Project methodology

The project followed a mixed methods approach, based on:

- Surveying of Level 4 students to gather direct feedback about their academic skills needs. 68 responses received from students across seven Schools.
- Focus groups conducted throughout February 2024, using open and structured questions and card sorts. Eight focus groups, with a total of 39 students across all Schools

Survey findings

Students felt referencing and academic writing were the two areas they needed to develop to progress to Level 5 study. Only a third of students had, knowingly, engaged with the Library Study Smart academic skills module, which aims to develop new undergraduate students' academic skills.

Focus group activities

During the focus groups we asked students – using their own terminology/wording – what they thought the key academic skills were to succeed at Level 4, using card sorting activities. The most common group of skills was academic writing and structure, followed by referencing and then time management / planning / organisation.

We also asked them to rank the existing Skills for Learning topics in order of importance to success on their course. Time Management and Independent Learning were consistently ranked 'most important', followed by Referencing and Literature Searching. When asked which of the topics the

students would benefit from more support in to progress to Level 5, the most common topic was Essay Writing, followed by Literature Searching and Time Management.

See appendices 2 and 3 for a more detailed breakdown of the activity findings.

Discussion summaries

In a round-table format, students also discussed: successes and challenges experienced; things about Level 4 that had been surprising; and additional support that would have been useful in Semester 1. Two main themes emerged from these discussions. One theme was 'Time management and self-management'. Key points in this theme included the following:

- When students' contact hours are relatively low compared to school/college, they can find it difficult to prioritise tasks and structure their days effectively.
- Not being "[pushed]" or "chased up" about work/deadlines is challenging. This is both because they lack experience in having to manage their own work and because their motivation tends to decrease in the absence of such prompting.
- Deadlines are often close together, and students can find it difficult to work on multiple assignments concurrently.
- Guidance on time management, prioritising etc. would have been helpful.

The other theme was 'What is Level 4 for?'. Key points included:

- The fact that Level 4 "doesn't count" towards degree classification/grade is demotivating, despite messages from lecturers about Level 4 being the foundation for later success. One discussion conflated "doesn't count" and "doesn't matter".
- Some students suggested that greater "pressure" and "consequences" (e.g., regarding completing/not completing reading) at Level 4 would be beneficial for motivation and professional development.

Overarching project themes

The key skills that students need support with when transitioning from school/college to university are **time management/independent learning**, **academic writing**, **referencing** and **finding information**.

Prioritising and **structuring one's time** are challenges at Level 4, and students would value input on these skills in Semester 1.

The **perception that Level 4 "doesn't matter"** can negatively affect students' motivation.

The skills that students see as needing further support with to help with the transition to Level 5 are overwhelmingly **time management/independent learning** and **essay writing**.

Developments to the Library Academic Support Team (LAST) offer

On receiving a request via LAST's 2024-25 in-curriculum request form for Level 4 induction materials, we will provide access to a package of resources including the newly updated First Year Study Smart (FYSS) academic skills module and a short introductory video. The video will provide an overview for students of Library and IT support and set out the usefulness of FYSS for the specific module group/cohort. The LAST team will be very happy to liaise with academic staff regarding how best to utilise FYSS, which includes interactive elements addressing the major themes from the focus groups. N.B. While students can self-enrol, if you would like an entire module or course group to be enrolled on this or any other academic skills module, please contact us.

LAST is working on expanding our resources targeted at new Level 4 students, building on those available in FYSS and on the Skills for Learning website. These new materials will include advice from our focus group participants and address key points on time management, finding information, academic writing and referencing, as well as the value of the Level 4 year. We aim to provide these in various formats, including videos, podcasts and blogs (and we would welcome collaboration with academic and other staff in producing such resources).
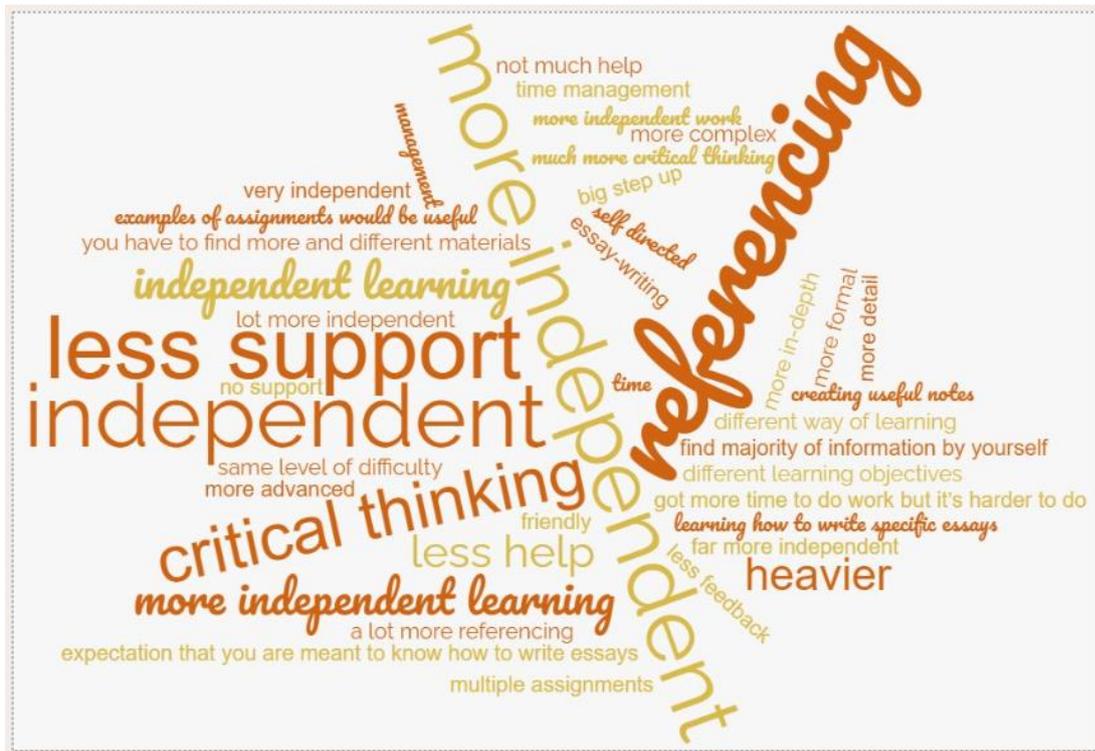
Authors

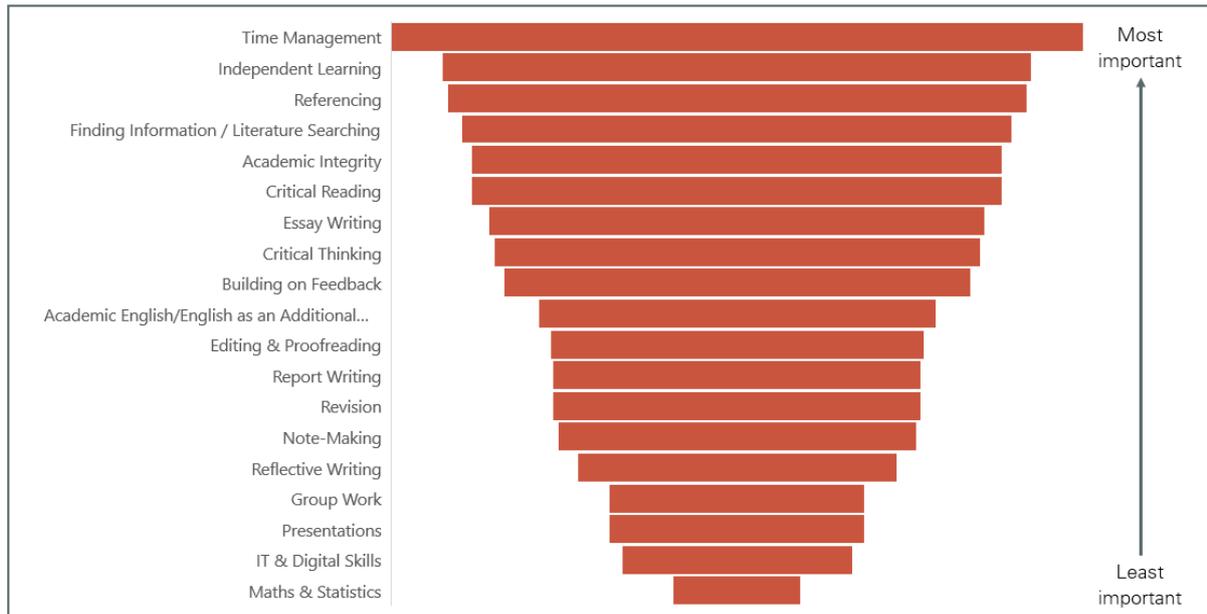Karen Fisher, Academic Librarian

Miles Mitchard, Academic Skills Tutor

Caroline Robinson, Academic Librarian

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey results – word cloud from survey answers regarding the differences in academic study at school compared to university

Appendix 2: Focus group activity – academic skills ranked in order of importance for success on your course

Skills ranked from Most important (top) to Least important (bottom):
- Time Management
- Independent Learning
- Referencing
- Finding Information / Literature Searching
- Academic Integrity
- Critical Reading
- Essay Writing
- Critical Thinking
- Building on Feedback
- Academic English/English as an Additional...
- Editing & Proofreading
- Report Writing
- Revision
- Note-Making
- Reflective Writing
- Group Work
- Presentations
- IT & Digital Skills
- Maths & Statistics

Appendix 3: Focus group activity – percentage of participants who identified they would need support with the topic to progress to Level 5

- Reflective Writing 2%
- Presentations 2%
- Academic Integrity 2%
- Academic English/English as an Additional Language (EAL) 1%
- Group Work 3%
- Maths & Statistics 3%
- IT & Digital Skills 4%
- Note-Making 4%
- Critical Thinking 4%
- Editing and Proofreading 5%
- Report Writing 5%
- Revision 6%
- Critical Reading 7%
- Building on Feedback 7%
- Independent Learning 7%
- Referencing 7%
- Time Management 8%
- Finding Information / Literature Searching 9%
- Essay Writing 14%

Combining **Time Management** & **Independent Learning** as on Skills for Learning website = **15%**