

# Transitions from School to Higher Education: Understanding the Needs of Undergraduates at LSE

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**Abstract.** This paper reports on initiatives at the London School of Economics (LSE) to better understand the needs of students entering higher education and throughout their undergraduate career. It draws on findings from the Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) project and also reflects on a new information literacy programme of workshops for 16 year old school students to help prepare them for higher education. The idea of student involvement in sharing their own digital literacy skills with peers through a network of student ambassadors is new to LSE and the challenges and successes will be discussed. Both initiatives provide valuable evidence to enhance the provision to all undergraduates.

**Keywords:** Digital literacy, information literacy, undergraduates, social sciences, peer mentoring, student support, collaboration, transition, higher education.

## 1 Introduction

This paper describes initiatives at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) to enhance the digital and information literacies of undergraduate students. It reports on findings from the Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) project [1] which ran from October 2013 to July 2014. The project was led by the Learning, Technology and Innovation team (LTi) (formerly the Centre for Learning and Technology) and the LSE Library and explored the role that student ambassadors can play in developing and integrating digital and information literacy into the curriculum.

The same team has been working with a London further education college to help prepare 16 year old students (Year 12) for university. A series of information literacy workshops were developed for twenty high achieving students studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at A-level. The interaction has proved enlightening and is informing LSE support for new undergraduates and improving the first year experience. This paper will reflect on both the SADL project and Year 12 workshop series, exploring the challenges and successes of these initiatives for students, teachers and librarians.

## 1.1 Undergraduate Teaching at LSE

LSE is a world class social sciences institution with approximately 9,000 students, of which around half are undergraduate students based at the central London campus. It teaches across the breadth of social sciences from economics, statistics, accounting and finance to anthropology, international relations, economic history and sociology.

Teaching at LSE is traditional and primarily delivered via lectures and small classes, with resources and support provided online in the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE), Moodle. Summative assessment is exam-based and many LSE undergraduate students are not required to write dissertations as part of their degree, which means that the opportunities to develop their research skills can be limited.

Notwithstanding the nature of the subject based teaching, LSE recognizes that both digital and information literacies are essential to success at undergraduate level. However, much of the digital and information literacy support is provided by central services, such as the Library and Teaching and Learning Centre. Meanwhile Learning, Technology and Innovation (LTi) supports staff in the use of new technologies to enhance learning, and has invested considerable effort in developing these competencies in staff and research students, but do not currently offer workshops for undergraduate or masters students.

## 2 Information Literacy Initiatives at LSE

The SADL project and workshop series for 16 year olds are part of ongoing initiatives aimed to enhance the skills support for students at LSE. The impetus began following research carried out by Jane Secker and Emma Coonan in 2011 and the development of *A New Curriculum for Information Literacy* (ANCIL) [2]. This new model of undergraduate support offers a holistic learner centered approach to information and related literacies (digital, academic, and media). Jane Secker, based at LSE, was keen to explore how ANCIL might be used in practice to review and inform developments in digital and information literacy. The work at LSE was also inspired by research by Katy Wrathall [3] which explored how ANCIL could be used as a tool to audit provision across either a department or an entire institution. In August 2012, a small team from the Library and LTi undertook a review of undergraduate support across LSE. The purpose was to investigate the reasons why few undergraduates engaged with the optional information literacy programmes provided and to explore where digital and information literacies might be supported in the undergraduate curriculum either by other support departments or embedded in the courses.

### 2.1 Review of Undergraduate Teaching at LSE

The 2012 review provided a picture of support across LSE. It did not intend to be comprehensive as it was not feasible to reach all academic staff in all departments within the timescale, but it provided evidence about whether the ten broad strands of information literacy set out in ANCIL were being supported. The review identified examples of good practice but also inconsistencies across departments and a lack of

co-ordination between central support services. It suggested that many undergraduate students had limited opportunities to develop digital and information literacies in the context of their discipline. It highlighted a number of assumptions about who should be supporting students in developing these abilities.

Additional findings that emerged from the study included:

- Information and digital literacies were rarely embedded in the subject discipline;
- There was a belief that information literacy was important, but it was defined narrowly as the ability to find, evaluate and manage information;
- A lack of time and space in the curriculum was cited as the main barrier for staff not embedding digital and information literacy in their teaching.
- There was a minority view that students “should” already have information literacy skills on arrival at LSE and that it was not the responsibility of academic staff to teach this.

The study demonstrated that students felt unprepared to find and evaluate quality information sources, and were often not required to carry out independent research until the third year of their degree.

## **2.2 Recommendations to LSE Teaching and Learning Committee**

The report [4] of the 2012 review was presented at LSE’s Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC) in February 2013. Eight recommendations were presented and received an endorsement by the committee including:

- LSE should develop an information and digital literacy strategy.
- A network of information and digital literacy champions across the staff and student body to be established across LSE to support the strategy.
- A study to be undertaken to understand the needs of students entering higher education.

The presentation at LSE’s TLAC was an opportunity to invite staff from across the institution to participate in small-scale pilots to embed digital and information literacies into their undergraduate courses. One project with the Department of Statistics in 2013 saw information literacy workshops embedded in a course where students were required to undertake a research project. This enabled the workshops to be tested to establish what might be successful, and what resources were required.

## **2.3 LSE Digital and Information Literacy Framework**

Following the 2012 review and its endorsement by TLAC, a framework for information and digital literacy was developed at LSE [5]. It was informed by existing strategies and frameworks, including ANCIL, the SCONUL 7 Pillars of Information Literacy [6] and the Open University Digital and Information Literacy Framework [7]. LSE’s framework identifies eight facets of information and digital literacy and each includes learning objectives and sample activities to provide examples of how each high level ability can be translated into practice. The current provision of information

and digital literacy workshops by the Library and Learning, Technology and Innovation (LTi) has recently been mapped to the new framework and it is used to discuss teaching between librarians and academic staff.

## 2.4 Embedding Information Literacy

A literature review, *Embedding digital and information literacy into undergraduate teaching* [8] was also carried out in 2013. The literature review supports the view that an embedded approach to information literacy is the ideal and it provides an overview of digital literacy initiatives in the UK funded by the Jisc Developing Digital Literacies programme [9]. Several of these projects engaged students directly, recognising that students arrive at university with a wealth of abilities and that staff can learn about digital literacy from them. The value of employing both ‘top down’, but also ‘bottom up’ approaches to changing academic practices was highlighted.

## 3 Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) Project

In August 2013, the authors participated in a workshop, ‘Changing Learning Landscapes’ with other universities about developing strategies for embedding digital literacies in institutions. The concept of students as partners was a key theme during the event and subsequently funding for small-scale projects was offered to those attending by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). LSE successfully bid for a small grant for a one year project to include students in developing digital and information literacies. The project, Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) aimed to explore the role of students acting as ambassadors for digital literacy. The approach had been used successfully in similar UK projects on developing digital literacies, for example, the Exeter CASCADE project [10]. Central to the SADL project has been that students could support both staff and their peers. The funding allowed LSE to explore the recommendation made to LSE’s TLAC, to establish a network of information and digital literacy champions across the student body.

The SADL project was launched in October 2013. It was a collaborative project involving central support services, LSE Library, Learning, Technology and Innovation, the Teaching and Learning Centre and the Students’ Union. Collaboration was important for the project as it enabled the team to support digital, information and academic literacies. The project explored the role that student ambassadors could play in developing and integrating digital and information literacy into the curriculum. SADL sought to address the following questions:

- Is there a value in establishing a Student Ambassadors Network for digital literacies and is there a role for students to act as peer mentors on their courses?
- What digital literacies students already have and what do they need?
- What are the best strategies to support students in developing digital and information literacies and how and when should support be delivered?

### 3.1 Methodology

In order to examine the project's aims, twenty students were recruited from two academic departments, one quantitative, the Department of Statistics and one qualitative, the Department of Social Policy. The students were LSE's first digital literacy ambassadors, although a few departments already had peer mentor schemes. This meant that the role was exploratory for the project team and for the students. The project was advertised widely to undergraduate students across the two departments via email, a notice on the VLE and announcements in core lectures. The LSE Students' Union played a crucial role in recruiting students and the Education Officer provided invaluable support as a key member of the project Steering Group. Students had to submit a written application stating why they wanted to be a student ambassador for digital literacy.

The project was an opportunity to gather rich, qualitative data about a small self-selecting student cohort. Therefore, the findings are not intended to generalise about the whole student body, but to provide a snapshot of experiences. In order to understand our ambassadors further, each student was asked to complete a survey on their research practices. The survey was based on the questions used by Purdy [11]. Additional questions were included in a post-project evaluation form to evaluate the impact of our work.

The ambassadors attended four workshops which aimed to develop their digital literacies over the course of the academic year 2013/14. The original project plan had specified that focus groups would be used but changed the format to workshops during the planning process. The project team realised that focus groups may be valuable for the team, seeking insights from the students about their digital literacy needs, but recognised that students might gain little from this approach and be less motivated to attend more than one session. The use of workshops would explore student needs, gather feedback, and develop students' digital literacy skills. The workshops were designed to facilitate a dialogue between staff and students, rather than a one way conversation.

The project website was set up as a blog and was used to disseminate the project's progress with contributions from the project team and the ambassadors. Students were encouraged to blog about their experiences and to share ideas with students on their course. The blog was also used to disseminate the resources from the workshops.

### 3.2 Working with the SADL Ambassadors

The project spanned an entire academic year providing an opportunity for the project team to develop a relationship with the twenty ambassadors. The workshops were each 90 minutes in length and designed to enable students to reflect on what they already knew, share their practices and learn from them. The following sessions were held:

- Introduction to SADL: finding and evaluating information
- This first workshop in December 2013 was a chance to meet the team, find out about student search practices and also explore students' expectations for the project. The project blog was introduced and students learnt about writing blog posts.

- Academic Practices: Reading and Research
- In January 2014, the students reflected on differences between their disciplines as they explored how they approach assignments. They were asked to share what they had learnt with their peers following this workshop.
- Managing and sharing information
- The workshop held in March 2014 explored how students currently manage and share information for their studies and introduced them to online tools which could help. The role of the student ambassador was discussed.
- Social media, your digital footprint and project round up
- The final workshop was held in May 2014 and introduced students to the concept of digital identity and digital footprint. Students made videos reflecting on their experiences in the project. They also provided feedback on information literacy resources currently available in the VLE.

Students received Amazon vouchers for their attendance at each workshop. They were also awarded online badges for attending workshops and participating in other activities such as sharing with their peers and writing blog posts. Finally, the ambassadors received a statement on their institutional personal development record, which is a record that assists with employability. Throughout the project, the LTi Research and Evaluation Officer was the main point of contact with students, regularly emailing them to remind them of the tasks that they had been set between workshops and encouraging them to remain engaged.

### 3.3 Why Digital Literacy?

A key question amongst librarians might be why SADL used the term digital literacy, rather than information literacy. At LSE, staff development workshops run by the Library and LTi have been termed Digital Literacy for over five years and this is well received. Meanwhile, student workshops run by the Library are called information skills training. The project was collaborative, and had a focus on technology and the team wanted to differentiate from the regular information skills programmes offered to students. The team thought that the term ‘digital literacy ambassador’ might appeal to LSE students following advice from the Students’ Union.

In the first workshop, the team also asked the students what they understood by the term and presented three definitions for Digital Literacy. Using personal response systems, the choices were anonymous and students were asked to select a definition of digital literacy that meant the most to them. The group overwhelmingly chose the Jisc definition, which is, “by digital literacy we mean those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society: for example, the skills to use digital tools to undertake academic research, writing and critical thinking; as part of personal development planning; and as a way of showcasing achievements.” [12]

## 4 Working with Year 12 School Students

In a related development, the authors have also been involved in an initiative with a London further education college in 2013/14 to help prepare 16 year old (Year 12)

A-Level students for university. Three information literacy workshops were run for a group of twenty-five students studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics. The programme was designed to help students to find and evaluate information, understand plagiarism and develop their academic writing skills. The workshop series has enabled the authors to understand the way that students study before arriving at university, and how LSE might best support them in their transition to higher education. The initiative was developed in consultation with LSE's Widening Participation department which has a number of programmes aimed at school age students. Many of LSE's existing schemes for school age students include a tour of the library. The one year programme, LSE CHOICE, which attracts Year 12 students from all over London includes a short induction session where students are introduced to the VLE and the Library through a set of short learning activities. However, this initiative was the first time that the Library and LTi had planned and delivered a series of workshops for school students.

The workshop series was provided for one of London's largest sixth form colleges, City and Islington College (CandI) which is based close to LSE. The college was keen for their students to develop their independent learning skills. In addition to the three workshops which ran in January, February and March 2014, the CandI students were given access to LSE Library for six months. The three workshops were planned in conjunction with the students' tutor. The students were asked to complete a survey to provide feedback at the end of the series.

It was useful that this project ran concurrently to the SADL project, as it was decided to invite several student ambassadors to attend the final workshop for CandI students. Two student ambassadors spoke to the students about 'what they wished they knew about university study before they came to LSE' and then stayed to answer questions from the group. Feedback suggested that the presentation by the student ambassadors was one of the most valuable parts of the programme. It was also helpful to use some of the activities developed as part of the SADL project with A Level students, as these resources were pitched at a similar level. The team also found a number of open educational resources, available in Jorum, the UK teaching and learning repository, which they were able to adapt for the session. In the interests of sharing good practice LSE's resources for the A level students were also converted into open educational resources and are now available in Jorum [13].

## **5 Issues and Challenges**

Reflecting on these initiatives in the past year, it is clear that both undergraduate and Year 12 students have varying levels of digital and information literacy and catering for a mixed ability group can be challenging. It is also evident that new students often have limited knowledge about tools and support available at LSE and this could continue if information and digital literacy is not embedded in their courses, given the low take up of the optional information literacy workshops. Many of the student ambassadors during the SADL project were enthusiastic to learn about technologies and practices to support their studies. However A-Level students were more challenging

to teach and the authors struggled with knowing at what level to pitch these sessions. Feedback from this group suggested that their abilities were also mixed with some students believing that the workshops were too basic.

The Library and LTi were interested in how students can act as peer mentors for developing digital and information literacies. Students were willing to share their knowledge with their peers, however the ambassadors commented on how this could be difficult to do in practice. It was clear that the SADL project team needed to provide the ambassadors with tools and structures to help them support their peers such as a forum within the VLE or assisting them to run workshops. Inviting student ambassadors to speak to Year 12 students was received extremely well, but in general this group was cautious about sharing their academic practices with others. For example, students were unwilling to admit in workshop 2 that they used Wikipedia.

Motivating student ambassadors to attend workshops was helped by the use of Amazon vouchers and recognition on their Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) statement which students perceive as helping with employability. We also experimented with awarding students with online badges for attendance at workshops and additional activities such as blogging and peer support. This meant that overall attendance at the SADL workshops was very good. Meanwhile attendance at the Year 12 workshops was not compulsory, but was strongly recommended and the workshops were scheduled at the same time as their tutor group classes. Students were awarded with a certificate for attendance of at least two out of three workshops.

Disciplinary differences between students in qualitative and quantitative social sciences were very distinct, due to the different expectations of the type of work and activities that they undertake on their courses. There was merit in bringing the students together to compare their practices. It was also beneficial to have first, second and third years involved in SADL to examine how their practices evolve over three years of study. During the Year 12 workshops there were students from Politics and Philosophy and indicative reading lists were prepared for both groups. The teachers supplied essay titles that students were working on to help tailor the sessions.

## **6 Evaluation and Impact**

In July 2014, the project team is considering how the impact of these projects is to be measured. Evaluation has been collected from students involved in both projects following their completion, and is currently being analysed. Discussions are continuing with the Students' Union about the possibilities of collecting quantitative data from LSE students about their digital and information literacy needs and abilities.

Valuable feedback was collected as part of the final workshop during the SADL project. Students were asked to record short videos in pairs to capture their experiences and eight students each recorded three videos sharing the key lessons that they learnt during the project, why they believed the role of ambassador was important and what they had learnt about their digital footprint. The videos suggest that students learnt to find, evaluate and manage information and found out about many existing resources and support for the first time. This suggests that the way that resources and



support are currently promoted to students is not effective. The students felt that there were clear benefits in establishing a peer support network, to allow them to meet others from different departments and other years. The peer support role was valued as a way of sharing their academic practices including useful tools and apps for study. The end of project questionnaire will reveal more about the value of specific workshops and any changes in academic practices since the start of the project. This will be presented at ECIL 2014.

Other issues currently being considered by the project team include:

- How is the success of embedded information and digital literacy support to be measured and demonstrated?
- Is the work of the SADL project sustainable and scalable across all undergraduates?
- Is the programme offered to Year 12 students sustainable and scalable? Is it feasible to offer this to other sixth form colleges?
- What might the staff development needs be for this programme of work? A workshop is planned for LSE academic staff in Autumn 2014 to share the project findings and discuss how to best support teaching staff to design courses with digital and information literacies embedded?

## 7 Conclusions

Workshops were time consuming to prepare and deliver so scalability is an issue for the project team to consider. One option might be to involve student ambassadors in running the workshops. Resources for four new 1.5 hour workshops are now available for future reuse. These will be shared widely as open educational resources in Jorum.

Disciplinary differences mean that workshops ideally need to be customized carefully for students. Workshop 2 was particularly challenging for Statistics students who are not required to read as much as social policy students.

Students were less prolific users of social media than was expected and hesitant about blogging on our public facing website. However, they wanted other students in their courses to know about their Ambassador role. Students wanted their participation and the project's progress to be more widely circulated to their departments once they had been recruited and the project was underway.

Overall the experiences of the past year have contributed to the understanding of both undergraduate students at LSE, and the needs of students before they arrive at university. The new workshops have provided rich qualitative data of the types of support that students need and demonstrated the value of peer support as a way of engaging students. Work will continue in the next academic year as the team aim to extend the SADL project to more academic departments and continue the workshops for Year 12 students. LSE is committed to sharing its ongoing teaching experiences with the wider community through conversion of the resources into open educational resources and dissemination of the outcomes of the work.

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