

## Project Report

# Lancaster University Library Schools Engagement

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## Abstract

This report discusses the findings of Lancaster University Library's Schools Engagement Project, delivered in partnership with the Widening Participation Advisory Group (WPAG). The project used information literacy (IL) as a vehicle to develop a programme of support for students studying the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). Researchers worked with three colleges in the northwest of England which were all located in Widening Participation neighbourhoods and employed university students as School Engagement Ambassadors. A mixture of qualitative research methods, surveys, interviews, focus groups and fieldwork observations were employed to collect data.

Researchers found that IL was a very effective concept for introducing sixth form college students to a range of academic skills including planning, searching for, managing and evaluating information as well as presenting it and treating it ethically. Evidence also points to the importance of understanding the link between IL and the learning process, independent learning and academic transition. Findings also suggest that focusing on Widening Participation can positively influence individuals' perception of university, sense of belonging and confidence. The report also foregrounds the importance of developing effective partnerships with sixth form colleges. The report concludes with key recommendations: to establish a full time Widening Participation post within the library, develop links with outreach teams, and expand the programme to include students studying a more diverse range of qualifications.

## Keywords

information literacy; outreach; student learning; transition; widening participation

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## 1. Introduction

This report presents and discusses the findings of Lancaster University Library's Schools Engagement Project – a project delivered in partnership with Lancaster University's Widening Participation Advisory Group (WPAG). This project sought to develop a programme of support relating to the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), engage with school and college students from Widening Participation neighbourhoods and enhance their information literacy (IL) knowledge and skills.

The report begins with a project overview which includes the main aims and objectives and a literature review which sets the research project in a wider context. It then reflects on the research methodology used to gather data for the project. Subsequently, it moves on to discuss and present principal findings from the research. These fall under four main headings: Information Literacy; The Learning Process, Independent Learning and Academic Transition; Widening Participation and Information Literacy; and Developing Effective Partnerships. The report concludes with a brief reflection on the main aims and objectives and a summary of conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Project overview and literature review

Lancaster University library has a well-established history of working with schools and colleges, welcoming an average of twenty schools per year onto campus for Library Research Days. These visits are primarily focused on resource provision to support EPQ and A-level projects. The Library Schools Engagement Project sought to research and develop an extended programme of support to offer to sixth form colleges in addition to the on-campus research day. A significant aspect of this extended programme was to work collaboratively with sixth form colleges to determine the best approach to outreach work and identify any potential barriers. This builds on the research of other outreach studies that have investigated links between IL, universities, and schools and colleges (Anderson and Bull, 2014; Benny and Smith, 2018; Wagg and McKinney, 2020).

AQA, one of the primary exam boards for the EPQ, state that the purpose of this qualification is “designed to extend and develop...students' abilities beyond the A-level syllabus and prepare for university or their future career” (AQA, 2024). The EPQ assessment criteria and the *Lancaster University Library and Learning Development Information Literacy Vision, Model and Framework* (Lancaster University Library, 2021) provided a structure through which: 1. students could engage with library research and learn IL skills; 2. researchers could observe their progress and understanding. It also enabled researchers to consider closely related ideas around independent learning, critical thinking, and transition to HE which are the focus of many papers (Anderson and Bell, 2014; Dann, Drabble and Martin, 2022; Thompson, Yuskaitis and Lueddeke, 2024).

The project also sought to explore IL in the context of Widening Participation which is a key focus of the Office for Students (Office for Students, 2023). This was achieved by focussing on students who attended a school which was in an area where young people had low participation in HE. This mirrors the work of other universities such as Southampton, which used the EPQ as a vehicle to engage with schools and colleges and made it an important aspect of their Access and Participation Plan (Thompson, Yuskaitis and Lueddeke, 2024). Similarly, Western Sydney

University also explored the link between IL, education and low economic status (Reading, 2016).

To achieve these goals the library secured funding, £44,583.50, from WPAG. This funded a pilot project for one year and included: a Faculty Librarian who was seconded for one day per week to lead the project, one Grade 5 full-time post – Library Schools Engagement Project Officer and Content Developer, and five university student roles – Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors. The student ambassador role received additional funding of £3,300 each year for two years following the pilot project. The library also formed partnerships with three sixth form colleges in the northwest of England.

The strands of *Lancaster University's Information Literacy Framework* – Identify and Plan, Search and Collect, Manage and Organise, Evaluate and Analyse, Present and Communicate, Ethics and Integrity – cover the broad range of IL skills and knowledge that sixth form college students need to learn as they move forward and transition into HE. Along with the EPQ assessment criteria the strands of the framework informed the design of interventions used with students. These interventions included students visiting the university campus for Library Research Days; researchers delivering workshops at sixth form colleges; developing lesson plans for use by teachers; and creating online tutorials. This ensured that the students' development of IL skills was central to the project and equipped them for the successful transition to University studies. Emerson, Kilpin and Lamond (2021) describe IL as key to this student transition process and Hicks (2022) also argues that transition is a central concept for IL. The interplay between, and interconnectedness of, IL and transition became an increasingly important dynamic of the Library Schools Engagement Project which further highlights its significance.

The three sixth form colleges involved in the project all met a key Widening Participation criterion: they were all in areas where young people (aged 18-19 years) had the lowest rate of participation in Higher Education (HE) POLAR4, Quintile 1 (Office for Students, 2022). In addition to this, Lancaster University Library employed five university students as Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors, who were selected on the basis of having one or more Widening Participation characteristic. The role of the Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors was to provide peer support for sixth form college students. The project also focused on improving the IL knowledge and skills, and employability skills, of the Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors.

The project aimed to support and encourage prospective students from Widening Participation backgrounds to apply to university and – by developing key IL skills – ease the academic transition when at university. Sixth form college student interactions with the Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors sought to promote a sense of belonging, helping them to imagine themselves as future university students. Additionally, the project sought to support Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors by providing another University community that they could identify with and help promote their self-confidence. This sense of belonging and how it affects a student's relationship to their educational community as well as how it can help retention and motivation and, importantly enjoyment, is the subject of Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt's (2016) paper.

Specifically identifying IL skills and connecting this with sixth form college students from a Widening Participation background, was a unique aspect of the Library Schools Engagement Project which deserves further research, reflection and investigation.

The project had several aims and objectives which fell into three broad themes: Information Literacy; Progression and transition to, and through, University; and Widening Participation.

### 3. Research Methodology

The project engaged three distinct participant groups: sixth form college students, sixth form college staff, and university students. All sixth form college students were aged 16-17 years old and were in the first year of their A-level studies. Sixth form college staff included EPQ leads, teachers and information professionals. University students were employed as Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors each from Widening Participation backgrounds, in different years and studying a range of subjects.

Participant groups were involved in interventions and activities run by researchers from Lancaster University Library. 28 students from two different sixth form colleges attended a Library Research Day; researchers delivered workshops in three different sixth form colleges; one lesson plan was created; three online tutorials were developed. Online tutorials were focused on *Academic resources for your project*; *Searching for academic resources*; *Introduction to referencing*, reflecting some of the key strands in the IL framework outlined above.

The interventions were evaluated using a mixture of qualitative research methods. Interviews were conducted with four members of staff, librarians and EPQ leads, from two different sixth form colleges. Focus groups were conducted with 14 sixth form college students. These interviews and focus groups explored four different themes: 1. the value of the EPQ in equipping students for the transition to University; 2. the development of students' IL skills – this was explored in relation to the aforementioned strands of the IL framework and included planning, searching, referencing managing, organising and evaluating information; 3. students' perceptions of and transition to university; 4. the role of Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors.

Focus groups were also carried out with four Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors. Themes covered included: 1. their experience of working as an ambassador; 2. transition through their university studies and the development of their IL skills; 3. the development of their employability skills. Two pre- and two post- project surveys were produced for sixth form college students and Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors to complete. The development of which used a list of student success indicators informed by the *Widening Participation Indicator Bank* (Lancaster University, 2022).

Researchers also undertook fieldwork and observed students on Library Research Days and during outreach visits in order to ascertain how and what IL skills they were using to conduct research. Researchers were interested in observing a range of activities including search practices, terminology used, engagement with library catalogues and academic databases, and responses to, and perceptions of, working in a university library. Sixth form students were also asked to evaluate their Library Research Day by plotting their level of confidence on a Likert scale at the beginning and end of the day. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and

transcribed. All data gathered from the project was then uploaded to ATLAS.ti – software used for qualitative data analysis – coded and analysed by researchers.

## 4. Discussion and findings

Discussion and findings relating to the two main themes of research, IL and Widening Participation, are explored below under relevant headings. The headings in 4.1 reflect the strands of *Lancaster University Library's Information Literacy Framework* (Lancaster University Library, 2021) which was used as a template to investigate, explore and understand the research practices amongst EPQ students.

### 4.1 Information Literacy

#### 4.1.1 Identify and plan

The identify and plan strand focuses on “a student’s need for information and how they plan effectively to fulfil that information need” (Lancaster University Library, 2021). To do this successfully students must be able to understand the complexity of their academic landscape in order to define their research questions, identify search terms and identify reliable and scholarly sources of information.

Early in the project researchers found that there were varying levels of knowledge and understanding about the academic landscape among sixth form college students. For example, when asked about the sources they had consulted to find information for their EPQ, one student referred to the homework site *BBC Bitesize* whereas a different student spoke about using academic papers sourced from the bibliography of Wikipedia entries. Students’ knowledge and understanding of the academic landscape noticeably developed over the life of the project. At the beginning teachers and information professionals identified a gap in knowledge amongst students concerning the academic landscape, for instance, one EPQ lead says “we look at Google Scholar, and they don’t know what that is” (Participant, Interview 1). After interventions sixth form college students were correctly using language such as ‘*primary sources*’, ‘*open access*’, ‘*paywalls*’, ‘*monograph*’ and ‘*textbook*’, which had been introduced to them during activities. This student, for example, reflected on how she found articles for her project, “It was very rare that I came across one [an article] that I had to pay for, and if so, there was another one very similar to it that was open access” (Participant, Focus Group 3).

Teachers and informational professionals from all sixth form colleges agree that deciding on an EPQ topic, refining it and developing a research question is something that students find difficult. The Library Manager from one college explained:

I would say, the biggest challenge, is them refining their question...one person in particular, has kept coming back and she wants various bits of help with resources. But it's because the question is not refined enough. It just wouldn't work, it was way too general (Participant, Interview 2).

The EPQ is one of the first pieces of schoolwork that require this kind of thought process and therefore it is a new learning experience. However, an activity introduced during a lesson delivered by the researchers proves that the library can have a positive influence on how students manage this process. Researchers encouraged students to plan out their research by identifying keywords, synonyms, sources and parameters, and prompted them to devise a



research question. Evidence from notes taken during fieldwork observations showed that many students did develop a research question, some of which were of a very high standard (Notes, Fieldwork 1).

#### **4.1.2 Search and collect**

The search and collect strand focuses on “where and how a student searches for and collects the information they require” (Lancaster University Library, 2021). Example themes in this strand include executing a search strategy using terminologies and techniques appropriate to chosen resources, managing time effectively to complete searches and using and understanding abstracts.

Whilst many sixth form college students were familiar with using natural language searching to find information on internet search engines, and some had graduated to the more academic-focused Google Scholar, none had experience of searching a library catalogue. The lessons and activities delivered by the researchers focused on searching Lancaster University Library’s catalogue, OneSearch. This had an overwhelmingly positive effect. One student noted that they retrieved information of much higher quality from OneSearch:

I just found that, OneSearch, it gave me more, like, professional articles and stuff, ‘cos otherwise I was just reading, like, newspaper articles and stuff, but I found that the information I found on OneSearch, it just felt more reliable to me. And also, like, more detailed (Participant, Focus Group 3).

The positive reaction to this lesson and activity was echoed by an EPQ teacher, who noted that following the session students “were researching a lot more effectively” (Participant, Interview 3). Introducing OneSearch to sixth form college students during an outreach visit prior to them coming into the library for a research day also proved advantageous: students were more prepared and made better use of their time. Fieldwork observations showed some students had a prepared list of references in advance (Notes, Fieldwork 2).

Promoting the open access filter on OneSearch was also positive, as it gave sixth form college students the opportunity to access a much wider range of academic material remotely. This suggests that, in the future, the motivation to come onto campus will be driven by the need to learn IL skills and experience the library and university environment, rather than simply accessing academic resources.

Encouraging sixth form college students to be more structured in the way they approach their search for information also had a positive impact. For example, there was evidence that an exercise designed to identify keywords and phrases, synonyms and related terms and search parameters enabled students to search more effectively. This was observed by researchers during fieldwork where they witnessed many students using keywords and phrase searching techniques to search for information (Notes, fieldwork 1 & 2). It was also evidenced by one student’s reflection that generating synonyms had helped them to “explore different areas associated with [their topic], bits of research that you probably wouldn’t have seen before” (Participant, Focus Group 3).

The Library Manager at one sixth form college also commented on the effectiveness of this exercise, particularly its structure, as otherwise “everybody just sets off with ‘I’ll just type a thing into Google’, and it’s so haphazard” (Participant, Interview 2).

Researchers also witnessed evidence of a range of other search strategies being employed. This sixth form college student, for example, referred to their citation pearl search strategy:

You helped me find one specific source. And, I haven't actually needed to use your, like, searching techniques, 'cos I've just been able to go through the sources and visit each of their bibliographies and go through those sources. So, it's just kind of, sent me down my own little rabbit hole (Participant, Focus Group 3).

There was evidence too of sixth form college students using filters to focus their search results, "I liked when you showed us...the Lancaster library website, [OneSearch] like filtering down for things, to find like, just ten books instead of a million" (Participant, Focus Group 1).

#### **4.1.3 Managing and organising information**

The manage and organise strand focuses on "how a student can manage and organise information efficiently and effectively" (Lancaster University Library, 2021). Of particular importance here is systems or tools to organise readings and references, and adopting appropriate data handling methods.

Data suggests that sixth form college students were using tools and strategies to manage and organise information. Some of this management and organisation had been prompted by tools provided by schools and colleges. This student, for example, referred to a reference table idea promoted by their college, "So I had like a reference table, and it was set out with, like, the title of the source, the author, the date, and then like quotes I found, and then like, evaluating it" (Participant, Focus Group 1).

Fieldwork observations also showed that other strategies for managing and organising information were encouraged by the researchers, information professionals and teachers during research days and were widely adopted by schools and college students. These included online tools like Google Drive and Cite This For Me to upload and save information, and naming and documenting files appropriately. Observations also revealed that students were keeping records of information by copying and pasting citations and abstracts into word documents (Notes, Fieldwork 1 & 2).

While researchers referred to management and organisation strategies throughout their interventions, this practice was uneven amongst students. Some sixth form colleges encouraged the use of specific models and frameworks such as reference tables and annotated bibliographies but there was a discrepancy between sixth form colleges with regards to the extent these were covered. There is an opportunity here for information professionals to fill this gap and encourage good practice in handling data in preparation for university study.

#### **4.1.4 Evaluate and analyse**

The evaluate and analyse strand focuses on "how a student reads, evaluates, judges and analyses academic information" (Lancaster University Library, 2021). Themes under this heading include assessing the quality, accuracy, relevance, bias, reputation and credibility of the information sources found and weighing the potential biases in searches retrieved and in information accessed.

Research found that sixth form college students used a number of evaluative tools and strategies to assess and analyse information. Some of these had been initiated by the sixth form

colleges and others were introduced through activities and discussion during the project. Researchers introduced students to a range of academic resources – such as books, articles reviews – and encouraged them to identify key pieces of bibliographic information and content that could be used to assess the quality and relevance of the work for inclusion in their research. It is clear from this student's response that this activity had a positive effect:

I remember the activity we did, where you gave us the source, and you got us to pick out things...And I know that personally, when I approached sources after that, it kind of just, I subconsciously looked at the key [information], like date, author, where it was published, things like that (Participant, Focus Group 1).

Using the opportunity of a campus research day to discuss and reflect on academic information with sixth form college students and their teachers also proved productive. A discussion of the responsible and critical use of Wikipedia changed this student's perspective. They were previously afraid of using it because "I didn't think it would be reliable" but now used:

Wikipedia to find definitions of words I didn't understand. And since the definitions fit the context, I figured it was pretty safe to take them (Participant, Focus Group 3).

#### **4.1.5 Presentation and communication**

The presentation and communication strand focuses on "how a student can confidently present and communicate information clearly and coherently" (Lancaster University Library, 2021). Themes under this heading include academic writing, communicating effectively and using a range of information sources to develop or support an argument. Sixth form college students found writing up their EPQ challenging, "it was initially really overwhelming. All, like months and months of research and work, and then it's getting it down" (Participant, Focus Group 1).

Some of the evidence suggests that using reference tables to critically analyse and organise arguments can help students structure their writing, as explained by an EPQ lead:

We...use that [reference] table, to start thinking about a structure of the assignment. So we'll then say, "well look at your sources table, look at your reference table, look at what your sources are about, start to group them. And say right, they're all about, defining the topic. They're all about, this, they're all about, you know. Either colour code them or put them into blocks or sections. So that you can then, start to think about what your essay might look like" (Participant, Interview 1).

Some students realise that writing up the EPQ is part of the iterative nature of research – that writing and rewriting, going back to the literature when new evidence is required – is part of the research process and one that they are willing to wrestle with:

I think that I prepared a lot to write it and I put a lot of referencing arguments in the structure together, and then when I got to actually writing it, I discovered new things that I wanted to include, and then, the things I planned, kind of, just disappeared and I had to replace them before. So a lot of writing as it goes (Participant, Focus Group 1).

This practice and approach to writing is excellent training for the academic transition to university and suggests that the EPQ is a worthwhile qualification. The experience above is not



that far away from the experience of a Library Schools Engagement Ambassador in their first year of study:

I try and [...] focus my style of writing a bit more for discussion, because the questions that we're given for essays are quite open ended [...] So I think it's just, sort of, learning to be patient with it, because I'll have done, like, three drafts before I'm happy with it. And, yeah, and I'll be halfway through writing something and realise, oh that doesn't actually, like, match what I've found and having to go back (Participant, Focus Group 2).

#### **4.1.6 Integrity and ethics**

The integrity and ethics strand of IL focuses "on a student's awareness of the integrity and ethical dimensions of information and academic literacy" (Lancaster University Library, 2021). Areas of interest under this strand include meeting standards of conduct for academic integrity and using conventional academic practices in quoting, citing and paraphrasing. It is clear from the data that sixth form colleges are introducing students to referencing academic material through a mixture of teaching sessions, guidance, and handouts. In interviews teachers and information professionals spoke about 'citations', 'due diligence' and 'academic honesty' demonstrating that they are teaching students *why* they need to reference as well as *how*. This information professional from one sixth form college details the limited knowledge sixth form students had about referencing before they study for an EPQ and what an important skill it is to learn:

In practice, it really does help them [develop] referencing skills, to prepare for university, that is a big one. I don't think...they know how to reference, so they just think that by dropping in the link is enough. But they don't really understand about giving people credit for their work. And what it is to paraphrase rather than copy. (Participant, Interview 3).

Despite this, however, some sixth form students still struggle with the concept and practice of referencing, as this student demonstrates, "I think referencing is one thing that I find hard. I know we had, like, lessons on it, but, it was still a thing that I was like, how do I actually, like, do this and do it right for every single one?" (Participant, Focus Group 3). As referencing is a new concept for students some find it overwhelming; it takes time and practice to get used to the intricacies of it. Nevertheless, introducing students to academic referencing in a contextual and meaningful way gives a useful grounding in preparation for university study.

#### **4.2 The learning process: independent learning and academic transition**

The range and complexity of skills which students are expected to develop over the course of the EPQ is significant. AQA state that students should become:

More critical, reflective and independent learners; develop and apply decision-making and problem-solving skills; increase their planning, research, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and presentation skills; learn to apply technologies confidently; demonstrate creativity, initiative and enterprise (AQA, 2024).

The independent nature of research and the management of time and resources is challenging. One student stated that, "I've struggled with the time management and I'm used to having, like,

a set of instructions, so I struggle when I don't have like the specifics of what to do" (Participant, Focus Group 3). Sixth form college students were aware that they were on a learning journey and were acquiring new skills. Multiple students commented on the challenges of the EPQ, which included: the independence required to complete the project, as well as the need to develop time management skills, and the challenge of developing a thesis throughout their writing. They also demonstrated how the EPQ could help them in other ways: "it just helps you with the other A-levels, like the skills, the organisation, time management" (Participant, Focus Group 1).

The Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors were aware of the transitional nature of learning. University students also had varying levels of self-awareness with regards to the learning process and independent study, with one Library Schools Engagement Ambassador acknowledging that studying their course at university is, "very different, especially since I've come straight from college, it is a massive step up" (Participant, Focus Group 2). These students were aware of the nature of self-directed study and the challenges of the research process, stating that, "they do, kind of, spoon feed you in college, because you need to know the content. It's more of a memory test in college, rather than here, it's sort of, what can you find out about this, as well" (Participant, Focus Group 2).

The peer-to-peer support provided by Schools Engagement Ambassadors helps to reassure sixth form students that the struggle they experience when studying is part of a normal learning process. The ambassadors' personal insights into studying at a higher level also shows that there is an iterative, transitional nature to learning where the onus is on the individual learner to identify where they have challenges and to reach out for help and support to overcome them.

### **4.3 Widening Participation and IL**

The project aimed to support and encourage prospective students from Widening Participation backgrounds to apply to university and – by developing key IL skills – ease the academic transition when at university. By using IL as a vehicle to support Widening Participation students, Librarians and information professionals can embed themselves more deeply into sector wide and institutional priorities. For example, Widening Participation is a core part of the Office for Students strategic vision, and they demand that institutions produce Access and Participation plans that explain how they are going to "improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education" (Office for Students, 2023).

The value of combining IL with widening participation outreach work is clear from the fact that evidence from Lancaster University Library's Schools Engagement Project was used to inform and shape the next University Access and Participation Plan. This shows that Librarians' teaching IL can have a wide and positive impact. The project also demonstrates that libraries can use IL to secure additional funding at an institutional level. To date Lancaster University Library has won an extra two years of funding based on the evaluation and impact of the first year of the Library Schools Engagement Project.

The effect of combining IL and widening participation can be measured by the impact on individual sixth form students. The students involved in the research project were high achievers but came from areas of low participation in higher education which was a barrier to access and one which was acknowledged by the students themselves. One stated that they had not always

had the confidence to apply for university “Cos like, you don’t come from a background where everyone’s going to uni” (Participant, Focus Group 3). While students in this group were keen to apply to top ranking universities, there was an awareness that this was not the norm for young people in this area.

The project found huge value in developing peer-to-peer support between sixth form students and Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors who themselves came from Widening Participation backgrounds. Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors discussed their unique pathways to studying at Lancaster University. For example, they all identified the importance of choosing a subject in which you have a genuine interest. One university student noted that:

I didn’t have to go straight into Medical School. And there’s loads of different paths, so that’s kind of, very much reassuring that, “just kind of like, follow your passion. At this moment, you’re like 16, 17, you don’t have to know what you’re going to do for the rest of your life (Participant, Focus Group 2).

This type of knowledge and detail, often hidden unless young people have access to the relevant social networks, can be incredibly valuable to sixth form college students considering their own pathways and is more authentic when shared by university students rather than a member of staff. Although not directly related, these peer-to-peer discussions occurred because of the IL interventions which were taking place.

The Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors also played a crucial role in demonstrating that universities will support students from a diverse range of backgrounds, enabling sixth form students to envisage themselves at university. This is especially important when considering the stigma attached to some of the Widening Participation criteria in society, for example, coming from a lower socio-economic background. Indeed, one of the Library School Engagement Ambassadors commented on this issue referring to how their hometown was described as having a “poverty postcode” (Participant, Focus Group 2).

Moreover, using IL as a mechanism to invite sixth form students on to the Lancaster University campus to study and research helped demystify the university library and expose them to the library space. Students commented on the university library, describing its scale, the realisation that they could work more flexibly than at school, as well as how the physical space challenged their expectations. One student commented that:

When you think of...uni libraries you think it’s kind of dark and... everyone’s going to be, like, studying. But it was quite...a nice atmosphere in there and the different levels of, like, noise, that did surprise me. If you think the whole place is just going to be silent (Participant, Focus Group 3).

Members of staff at different schools and colleges commented on the benefits of their students undertaking an EPQ as it built up student’s IL skills and gave them the opportunity to explore topics outside of their A-level subjects, enhancing knowledge and confidence. One staff member relayed a conversation they had had with a student, who said, “I didn’t think I could study Environment Science at university. Now I’ve done this EPQ, I think I can” (Participant, Interview 1). The process of undertaking an EPQ, whilst challenging, enhanced students’ confidence and empowered them to consider different pathways after their A-level studies.

#### 4.4 Developing effective partnerships

The library needed to build deep relationships with sixth form colleges to understand the individual culture and unique needs of each institution. At each college, for example, there was a difference concerning topic selection. Students at two sixth form colleges were given complete freedom to choose their EPQ topic which led them to select a diverse range of unique topics. These included tourism and animal exploitation, the advantages and disadvantages of constitutional monarchy and the emotional impacts of online gaming. At the other sixth form college students were directed to focus on topics that had an ethical or moral dimension. Some example research questions included: *Should euthanasia be legalised in the UK?* and *Should the age of criminal responsibility be different for different crimes?* Understanding the different circumstances of each institution enables Librarians to adapt their approach and tailor their support to the teaching of IL.

Moreover, developing positive partnerships with teachers, EPQ leads and information professionals proved crucial to establishing meaningful and trustworthy relationships. The connection that the researchers had established with the Library Manager and Study Adviser and Student Librarian Co-ordinator at one sixth form college proved fruitful as they in turn brokered a relationship with teachers on the BTEC Health and Social Care course which resulted in the opportunity to deliver further sessions to a different cohort of students. This enabled researchers to reach a wider group of sixth form students, who may not normally have had the opportunity to engage with the University library and learn about IL skills.

Reflecting further on relationships during the pilot project researchers felt that as well as at an institutional level they could also make deeper connections with sixth form students at an individual level. The possibility of meeting with students on multiple occasions means that better connections can be established. Personalising learning for students by building rapport will help to establish those connections and support the teaching and learning of IL.

### 5. Conclusions and summary of recommendations

The primary aim of the Library Schools Engagement Project was to provide a programme of support for sixth form college students conducting an EPQ qualification. The evidence in this report has demonstrated the value of this support and how it can enhance the skills, knowledge and experiences of both sixth form college students and Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors. It has also demonstrated how this has the potential to provide crucial support for students as they transition to university, particularly during their first year of undergraduate study.

Interactions between sixth form college students and Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors has proved particularly valuable, encouraging students to aspire towards university as a progression route. This increases when sixth form college students can attend a Library Research Day and experience the physical library space and university environment. By participating in a blended programme of support sixth form college students have been supported in their EPQ studies and learned valuable IL skills and knowledge. Moreover, by focusing this support on sixth form colleges which meet a key Widening Participation criterion, this programme aids the longer-term goal of improving fair access and participation.

## 5.1 Recommendations

Embedding a programme of support has significant value for both current sixth form college students, as well as Lancaster University students from a Widening Participation background. Consequently, the researchers propose the recommendations to inform future engagement. Below is a selection of those recommendations:

- Establish a full-time, permanent Widening Participation post within the library that has responsibility for coordinating engagement and delivering activities
- Establish a long-term funding model to employ Library Schools Engagement Ambassadors, from Widening Participation backgrounds, to provide peer support
- Develop a stronger partnership with Widening Participation and University Outreach Team so that the Library Schools Team are better informed regarding the support and access schemes available to students
- Expand the library programme of support to include students studying a more diverse range of qualifications.

## Declarations

### Ethical approval

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### AI-generated content

AI tools were used.

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