The curious case of Freddie Meowcury: Fostering creativity in students through a pre-arrival transition course

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ABSTRACT

"There's a cat loose in the Transition into Higher Education course and we've found his accomplices. Can you help us to solve the case of the DCAD cat?"

Durham University's Transition into Higher Education project has been a trailblazer, easing students' entry into university life for over a decade. Based in the Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD), it has reached over 80,000 students worldwide. This initiative offers an online course to newly accepted students. It is co-created annually by a team of students, academics, and support staff.

Working collaboratively with students has given us insight into the lived experience of transitioning into university and the related anxieties when making that first step. Setting students up for success is a key priority and has encouraged the team to prioritise developing students' curiosity and creative thinking. Over the past decade we have implemented and evaluated different iterations.

The DCAD cat, Freddie Meowcury has become an unexpected hero. Based on a departmental legend, Freddie has come to life in the minds of our students, welcoming them to Durham University. Encouraging activities such as 'spot-the-cat' and a course-wide game of Clawdo (like Cluedo but sharper), Freddie is a reminder to be curious, creative, and mischievous. He has become the original DCAD disruptor.

This case study will explore the work we do to support students transitioning and how as a project team we've adapted over the past decade to suit the interdisciplinarity of our students, contributors, and project team by using creative practices and encouraging creative thinking. We will explore some playful and creative interventions, and the lessons learned. Focusing on Freddie's case, we will use data from the five vignettes to demonstrate Freddie's impact on student experience and engagement.

Keywords: cats, creativity, escape rooms, playful, transition

Transition into higher education, a multi-faceted challenge

'Transition' from our perspective refers to an opportunity to provide a transformative experience and to give students a taste of what it's like to be a part of the Durham University community. A key aim in this is to support students in developing academic curiosity, creativity and critical thinking – as these are key components for resilient graduates of the future (Brown & Adler, 2008).

The transition into higher education is a multifaceted challenge met by every student (Thompson et al., 2021). The 'Freshers' week' model of face-to-face delivery, crammed into the first week is no longer sufficient. Walker argues that "traditional induction is perhaps no longer fit for purpose, when students are

now required to be conversant with an increasing volume of information." (Walker, 2024, p. 1). Faced with this multitude of voices, Winstone and Hulme (2019) recommend practitioners develop a deep understanding of students' lived experiences of the transition into university, to avoid the risk of adopting a scattergun approach to support. They assert that this is best achieved by asking those students who have recently completed their own transition into higher education to reflect on their experiences.

Incoming students will have very different knowledge and experience of university. Some (particularly students with a family history of attending university) may be able to glean this from friends and relatives, but others may have very little or no experience. This lack of expectation of what university life is like, may in fact prove advantageous. Winstone and Hulme (2019) have found that students with prior expectations, lived experience or who have already formulated personal beliefs about what university is, may experience unrealistic expectations. In the context of transition to university, Rowley et al. (2008) identify these unrealistic expectations as problematic, creating discrepancies between the lived and expected experience of university. Bayne et al. (2020) identify this incongruity as having a detrimental effect upon academic engagement.

For those students without contextualised knowledge 'of' university, there is a risk of discrepancy between what they expect versus what actually happens, creating an expectation-reality gap and a source of anxiety.

The Transition into Higher Education course

The Transition into Higher Education (HE) course supports students by exposing them to factual information 'about' university, to help develop understanding and reduce anxiety around what to expect when they start. This is supplemented with 'insider knowledge' from current students, available to them before they arrive, providing a contextualised introduction to being a Durham University student. This helps build a sense of community and confidence in what to expect when starting at university. To reflect the diversity of the student voice, this course considers the expectations of individuals and how their personal beliefs may relate to lived experiences of transition.

The transition course started as a pilot but has since grown to become a pan-university pre-arrival course, recognised as a cornerstone of the university's induction process and has reached over 80,000 students worldwide. It takes the form of an online course offered to newly accepted students. The course is co-created by a team of students, academics, support staff and a very mischievous cat.

It began in 2012 as a seed-corn project for foundation year students, in response to students' eagerness to connect with the university before arrival onto campus. This proved successful with over 90% of enrollees participating (Nolan et al., 2016). The project scope widened in 2014, to include all incoming undergraduates. The new course aimed to prepare students for academic study, promote independent learning and digital literacy, all priorities aligned to Durham's Education Strategy (Whitton et al., 2022). From the beginning, there was direct involvement of students in the development and review of content. Over the past ten years the course has continued to shift and change as we critically review and iterate. These changes are explored in the vignettes that follow.

The Transition into HE course aims to be appropriate, useful, usable and provide just-in-time information for incoming students, available from mid-August. A new course is created each year, developed by students and the project team. This effort is informed by previous feedback and in consultation with key stakeholders from across the University. We hope this provides relevant, current and contextual information to best prepare pre-arrival students.
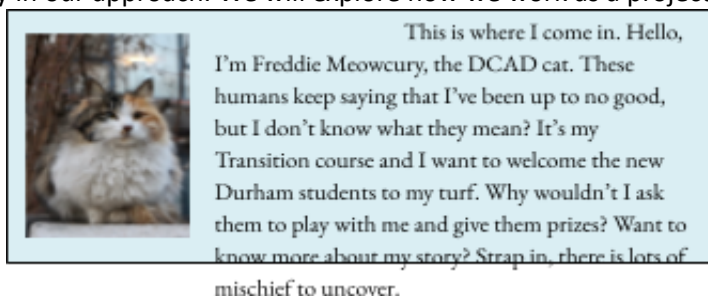
As it currently stands the aims of the Transition into HE course (Freddie's version) are as follows:

To prepare incoming students for study by building their awareness of:

- student life

- approaches to learning and teaching that you might experience at Durham

- the skills you need to succeed as a student, including digital skills

- how to look after yourself and the support available to help you do this

- how you might prepare yourself to make the transition

As a team, we have a further aim, to continually evaluate the impact of this course to improve it for future students.

This case study will explore the development of the Transition into HE course, focussing on five iterations which demonstrate the importance of creativity in our approach. We will explore how we work as a project team to empower employed students to use their lived experiences to shape our pre-arrival course. This fosters and develops our incoming students' creativity and creative thinking. Central to this success is our resident disruptor, the DCAD cat (Freddie) who exists as a reminder to be curious, daring, creative and mischievous.

This is where I come in. Hello, I'm Freddie Meowcury, the DCAD cat. These humans keep saying that I've been up to no good, but I don't know what they mean? It's my Transition course and I want to welcome the new Durham students to my turf. Why wouldn't I ask them to play with me and give them prizes? Want to know more about my story? Strap in, there is lots of mischief to uncover.

The importance of partnership

Over the past decade we have worked with key stakeholders from around Durham University, as well as recruiting students to work as subject matter experts, developers and reviewers. We have been conscious to ensure we critically evaluate decisions taken as we go, and we use these evaluations to inform how we progress. Through this partnership working, we have learned some very valuable lessons.

Working with diverse groups brings fantastic opportunities for critically reflecting on practice. Equally, at times it can prove challenging when trying to meet the needs of many. To counteract this, we have always worked with a core project team who ultimately set the vision and mission of the project in a way that is aligned to Durham's strategies. The focus is reviewed and adapted each year. This enables us to be specific and intentional in the way we work and to be clear with stakeholders what our priorities are, and importantly, what they are not. Initial models of working used two separate panels of staff and student reviewers, but this meant that comments and change requests came very late. Since 2021, the process has altered, empowering team members (staff and students) to review each other's work. Feedback from other stakeholders is provided in the form of reports to, and comments from, the University Induction Working Group after the course has been delivered.

Our four pillars

To be successful, over the past decade we have honed our approach using four conceptual pillars:

- Belonging

- Playful learning

- Creativity

- Student partnership

These pillars are underpinned by diversity and inclusivity which is a fundamental concept woven into the fabric of all the work we do, founded and reinforced by leadership in the team. We have tried to apply these pillars to our interactions with the student developers, as well as embodying them in the Transition into HE course.

Pillar 1: Belonging

Belonging is feeling valued, included and connected. Belonging is the bridge that supports individuals to connect to the university community by celebrating diversity and offering a sense of being home.

In relation to students, the concept of 'belonging' has been discussed by policy makers, educators and researchers over many decades (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). It is described by Webster (2022, para. 2) as a "multi-faceted concept, encompassing inclusion and diversity, community, academic confidence and feeling that you matter and are valued". Fostering a sense of belonging has long been described as key for academic success, wellbeing and retention (Morgan, 2024). Morgan (2024) reports that students who feel connected with their peers and institution report better wellbeing, demonstrating a correlation between belonging, mental health and a supportive social environment, which offers a buffer against stress and anxiety.

Building students' sense of belonging has always been key to our work. This priority has enabled us to look beyond our own experiences and recruit students to work with us as student developers who have diverse recent lived experience of transition.

Transition into higher education is described as a process, rather than an event (Araujo et al., 2014); it is ongoing and fluctuates. Belonging can act as a bridge between the formal and informal, with students engaging in a range of social and cultural activities (Thomas, 2012). Bridging this gap and building belonging helps support students to feel connected, that they matter and are connected to the university – building a sense of trust and respect.

This has been implemented in the Transition into HE course design. We do not enforce a particular navigation/path, instead we encourage students to 'pick and mix' content and choose their own route. Students can return to content in the course later in the year if the materials become more relevant to them, and we see a long tail of student access into the second and third terms of their first year.

Pillar 2: Playful learning

Playful learning is a pedagogic approach that uses playful tools (artefacts such as puzzles or games), tactics (such as surprise or storytelling) and techniques (such as quests or problem-solving) to engage students in deep learning (Whitton, 2018). To suspend disbelief and enter into an activity for the sake of play is to wonder, experiment, fail, risk take, construct and critically reflect. Playful learning offers a framework to support the creation of immersive and active learning opportunities.

Key to developing playful learning opportunities is the idea of developing a 'magic circle' which is a mutually constructed collaborative space where real world rules and consequences do not apply. Underpinning such playful approaches is a philosophy of playfulness and set of assumptions relating to

openness, democracy and 'suspending disbelief' (Suits, 1978) to enter the magic circle willingly, with an acceptance of risk-taking and possibility to learn from failure (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton 2018).

The Transition into HE course was prominently featured in Durham's 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submission, where it was lauded for its emphasis on progressive challenges and the cultivation of playful and creative, independent active learners.

> When I started talking to our student developers about playful approaches, I had to make clear the difference between play and fun. For example, I may *play* with a mouse, but this isn't *fun*, it is a deadly serious activity for both of us.

In a rapidly evolving global-landscape, education must be agile to support graduates of the future to become resilient and adaptable. Fostering these skills in students requires us to lead by example both as a development team as well as by incorporating playful and creative pedagogical approaches within students' learning.
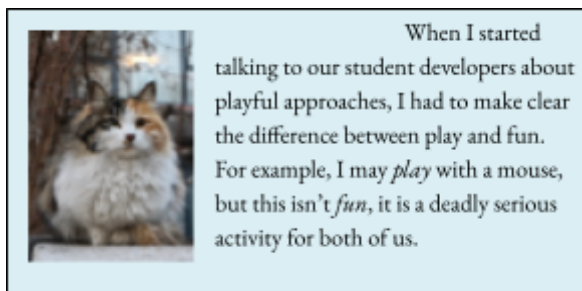
Pillar 3: Creativity

Creativity allows us to nurture sparks of innovation and celebrate divergence in perspectives. Creativity allows us to encourage curiosity, explore ideas and take risks.

For us, creativity comes hand in hand with playfulness, in a sense they are intertwined but distinct at the same time. Durham's graduate attributes call for students to be 'curious and creative'. To support this, the project team need to be curious and creative in our approaches to develop a culture of exploration, idea generation and solution finding. Creativity is key in developing resilience and divergence in thinking and building the ability to shift focus between different levels of analysis (Naiman, 2024).

Creativity has become a component of how we encourage students to begin the journey towards becoming critical thinkers. Critical thinking skills are prized within education as they can support self-reflection, self-empowerment and confidence and enabling students to produce logical solutions to problems (Dwyer, 2023). Combining this with creativity, we underpin our work with encouragement to be open to experiences, curious and have a willingness to explore the unknown, take risks and have an ability to work with ambiguity (Dawson et al., 2011).

Within the project team we create safe spaces and encourage team members to take risks and think divergently to explore different answers to problems. This supports the team to develop ideas that are novel, useful and appropriate (Acar et al., 2017). This might be by exploring an idea or crowdsourcing different ways of approaching a problem. We follow the creative problem-solving process using a method derived from the Thinking Skills Model of Puccio et al. (2007). Applying this, we work through the following stages:

- Evaluative thinking – what's the problem, how do you articulate what you need to solve?

- Divergent thinking – how many ideas or solutions can you come up with to solve the problem?

- Convergent thinking – what's the best solution in this context?

Taking this approach has led to many constructive conversations, it was this process that led to one of our vignettes. We gave students a problem, asked them to develop as many possible solutions as they could come up with and then collaboratively decided on the best solution for the context, which led ultimately to Meowcury's Mystery.

Pillar 4: Student partnership

Valuing students' contribution is not enough. We work collaboratively with students co-creating the course. To be effective in our partnership means empowering, demonstrating mutual respect, collaborating and recognising that often, the students know best.

We have always prioritised working in a students-as-partners model (Healey et al., 2014) and have retained the importance of this. To recognise the value of students' contributions and to try to diffuse any power differential, we formally employ students whilst they work as developers. Critically this is a collegial partnership between DCAD staff and student developers where students are active co-creators of, and are given significant agency in, the development process.

> Partnership is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement… It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. (Healey et al., 2014, p. 7)

This course has been going through an iterative review cycle over the ten years it has been developed. During this time, we have employed 40 students who have been involved in the development of content and artefacts as well as providing research and evaluative support. It is important to acknowledge that during the last decade we have come to realise that as much as fully flexible partnership working suits some, it is not always suitable for everybody. In previous years we prided ourselves on creating opportunities for student developers to be creative, explore creativity and have a role in choosing the direction of travel when it comes to course development. As outlined by Bovill (2020) the key to successful co-creation and partnership in this context is to create open and ongoing dialogue and relationships between staff and students as an integral part of the project.

Because of this, as a project team, we have had to learn to recognise when a student (or staff member) needs more support or direction, even if they are not asking us for help. These experiences have helped to understand the importance of being clear about our expectations from the outset, being consistently available to support, direct and shape a student's role so that it supports their development in the best way.

Underpinning with diversity and inclusivity

Diversity and inclusivity are interrelated concepts that underpin our pillars and support us in our priority to create equitable and welcoming learning opportunities for students, from pre arrival.

While diversity is about the 'what' – in this case valuing difference and prioritising representation, inclusivity refers to the 'how' – the actions that we take to ensure a diverse population feels valued and able to equitably achieve their potential. Like the four pillars, this work starts with the project team and is woven into the fabric of what we do.

As part of Durham's curriculum reform, we work with principles of learning, teaching and assessment (Whitton et al., 2022, p. 4). One principle asserts that "all learning opportunities will be designed to be inclusive, accessible, and representative of a diverse student body". Reflecting on the recent increase in diversity amongst higher education students (Carlsen et al., 2016), we recognise the importance of designing learning so that students from different cultures, backgrounds and abilities can achieve their full potential.

Case study: I want to break free!

This case study explores the evolution of the Transition into HE course, which for the past decade has been an evolving and active partnership between staff, students and more recently one mischievous cat. All data presented are with ethical approval granted from Durham Centre of Academic Development (see below for further details). The vignettes presented contain both quantitative and qualitative data gathered over a 10-year period. Analysis of the course engagement draws upon usage metrics (from Blackboard and Panopto), responses to in-course questionnaires and student focus groups. Reflections on the development process draw upon discussions with the student developers and responses to reports provided to the University Induction Working Group.

We present five vignettes taken from different instances of the course as follows:

- Gamification (2016/17)

- Count the cats (2021/22)

- WANTED: The DCAD Cat (2022/23)

- Clawdo (2023/24)

- Meowcury's Mystery (2024/25)

These have been selected to illustrate the way in which we have applied creativity using the four pillars of our approach to help lower barriers of access to students starting out at university. Using a case-based approach enables us to generate an in-depth and multi-faceted understanding from a mixed methods perspective (Crowe et al., 2011) of how, over a sustained period we have woven playfulness and creativity through our Transition into HE course with multiple specific and distinct groups. For further information about the playful activities we have developed you can view our blog on Transition into HE playfully.

Through vignettes and a helpful commentary from Freddie himself, we hope to demonstrate how the changes we have implemented, including students-as-partners, encouraging creativity and playfulness have improved not only the Transition into HE course but also our own approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Our commitment as a project team (yes, including Freddie) to always evaluate and evolve our practice has involved being continually open to feedback and accepting we do not know all the answers. Our responsiveness to student feedback is explored below and underscores the critical role in integrating students into academic life, demonstrating a collaborative and adaptive approach.

Table 1 below explores the Transition into HE enrolment and feedback from selected VLE and post-course questionnaires over the years.

Table 1 Transition into HE figures taken from selected VLE and post-course questionnaires

	2015/16	2017/18	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Total number of students enrolled	4,704	4,949	7,005	5,993	5,419	6,463
No. students accessing the course	3,292	3,860	6,285	5,418	4,271	4,570
% Students accessed	70%	78%	90%	92%	85%	* 71%
No. of survey responses	51		420	802	578	* 873
% that felt prepared before	51%		45%	44%	56%	52%
% that felt prepared after	76%		92%	93%	95%	96%
Increase in preparedness	+25%		+47%	+49%	+39%	+44%

* Note data for 2024/25 are only partial, as the course was still live at the time of writing

Since 2021/22, over 2,500 students have completed the feedback survey and when asked to rate ease of access, quality of information, range of information and relevance of content on a five-star scale, 90% have consistently rates it four or five stars.

This course impacts incoming students, the wider university, and the sector. The sustained success of the course has resulted in cross-institutional change as well as having an impact on the broader sector.

Vignette 1: Gamification (2016/17)

Although different to playful learning (Jensen et al., 2022), the first real attempt to try something creative began BC (before cats) in academic year 2016/17. To try to increase both the breadth of course visits and the amount of interaction, we developed a gamified 'skin' to the Blackboard course. This was an attempt to implement Kapp's definition of gamification:

> Using game-based mechanics and game-thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems. Kapp (2012, p. 10)

Students enrolled on a postgraduate version of the Transition into HE course were offered the choice to use the standard Blackboard interface (shown in Figure 1) or to try the gamified version (shown in Figure 2). In both cases students had access to the same content, the only difference was the way it was presented. 486 students chose the gamified interface, 521 the standard one.
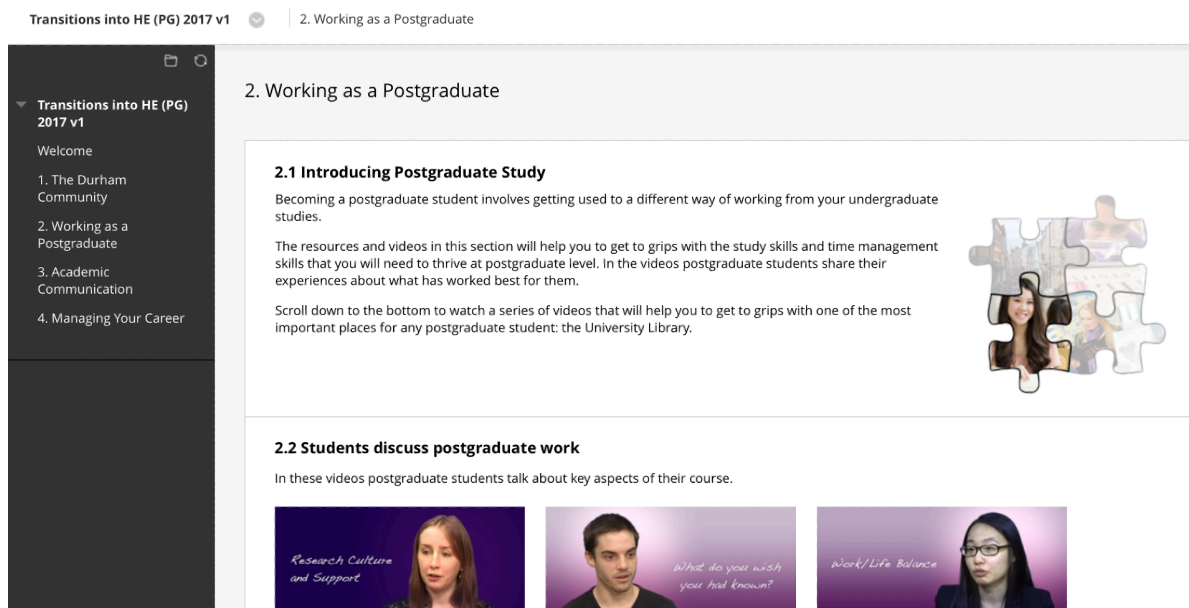
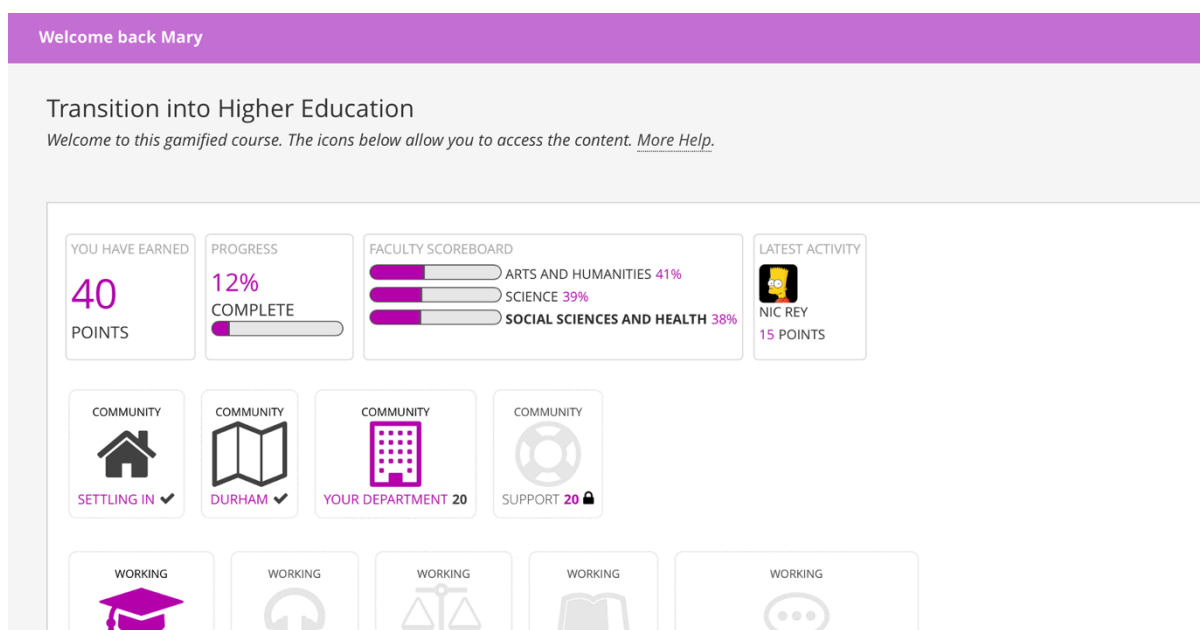**Figure 1 The standard view of the 2016/17 course**

Figure 2 The gamified view of the 2016/17 course

The gamified interface was designed to surface the full range of content (using a series of tiles). Students could quickly see their own progress to date, by the state and colour of each tile. Accessing content earned the student points and was used to help calculate their progress through the course. To add elements of competition, scores were aggregated across the three faculties, with the student's own faculty shown in bold. To convey a sense of activity, the name and avatar image of the most recent student to score points was displayed at the top right (names and images have been changed here).

This change had an impact, measured using Google analytics. Looking at the first 75 days of usage, it was clear that most students were working through the materials in one or two large sessions. The average

session length for students using the standard course layout (n = 521) was 21 minutes 14 seconds. Students using the gamified interface (n = 486) spent 28% more time – with an average session length of 27 minutes and 9 seconds.

This trend of greater interaction is also seen when we examine the number of videos played across the course. Figure 3 shows that students on the gamified course (although lesser in number) watched far more of the videos in each of the four content areas than those using the standard interface.
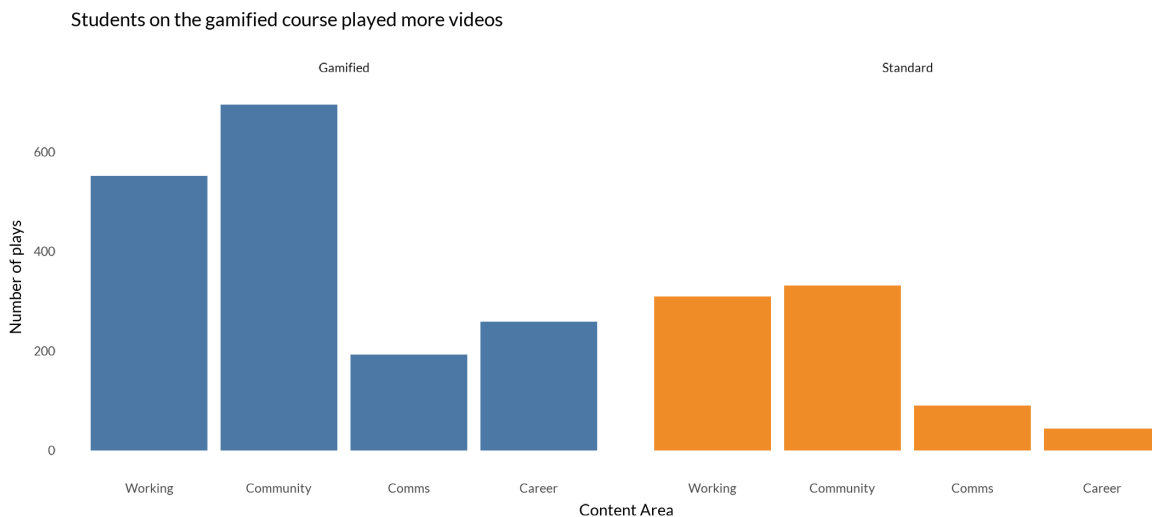
Figure 3 Comparison of video playing between the gamified and standard course

This experiment showed us that it was possible to alter the way students interacted with the content. Upon reflection, we decided not to continue this creative approach as some students found it impersonal. We also had concerns that although effective, we felt it was artificial. Effectively we were teaching students a different way to interact with the VLE, one that they would not use when later accessing their course sites during their studies. It was time for a rethink. For the next few years, the course was delivered in a more traditional format, whilst plans were hatched to find ways to increase student involvement in the design and co-creation process. That came to fruition in 2021.

Vignette 2: Count the cats (2021/22)

In this example from 2021/22 we have returned to working with a standard Blackboard course. Freddie started small, and at this point he did not even have a name: cats were a late addition to the course. Staff and students working on the content were aware of DCAD's mysterious visitor (some had commented on the empty cat bowl that could be found in our Digital Playground). Recognising the challenging times students were experiencing and wanting to offer some light relief. With their help, Freddie, or the DCAD cat as he was known at this point, cat-photo-bombed' this course and mischievously secreted images of himself and his accomplices between and sometimes inside content items (see for example Figure 4, which shows an added cat sitting innocuously in the room).

Figure 4 A cat hiding in plain sight in a lecture theatre

A week later the cats had become an integral part, with the team adding a quiz to the end of the course, asking students to enter the number of cats they had seen to win a prize. This was deliberately imagined as a non-academic and very solvable activity, one that should challenge students' preconceived ideas of what learning at university might be like (yes there is scope for play!). It was carefully designed to be inclusive – so anyone could enter this competition – information was hidden in alt tags and transcripts too.

The final question in the quiz gave students the option to suggest a name for DCAD's mysterious cat. This is how Freddie Meowcury got his name, and one lucky student's contribution lives on in each year's Transition into HE course.

Vignette 3: WANTED: The DCAD cat (2022/23)

With Freddie's unexpected popularity, the new student developers were keen to repeat this experience in 2022/23, so we did, but with a twist. Following on from the narrative of a mischievous cat tampering with things, we created a wanted poster and tasked incoming students with gathering evidence to help us to identify which cat was the infamous Freddie Meowcury.

To do this, we sprinkled in more cat pictures and turned the quiz into a multiple choice. A correct identification entered the students into the cat competition.

The presence of cat images in the course unexpectedly spilled over into discussion boards – students opted to share pictures of their own pets for inclusion in the course in coming years. Images of incoming students' pets were also shared on discussion boards adding colour to the normal exchange topics: the subject they are studying, their hometown and chosen college (see Figure 5, where student names have been anonymised here for publication).
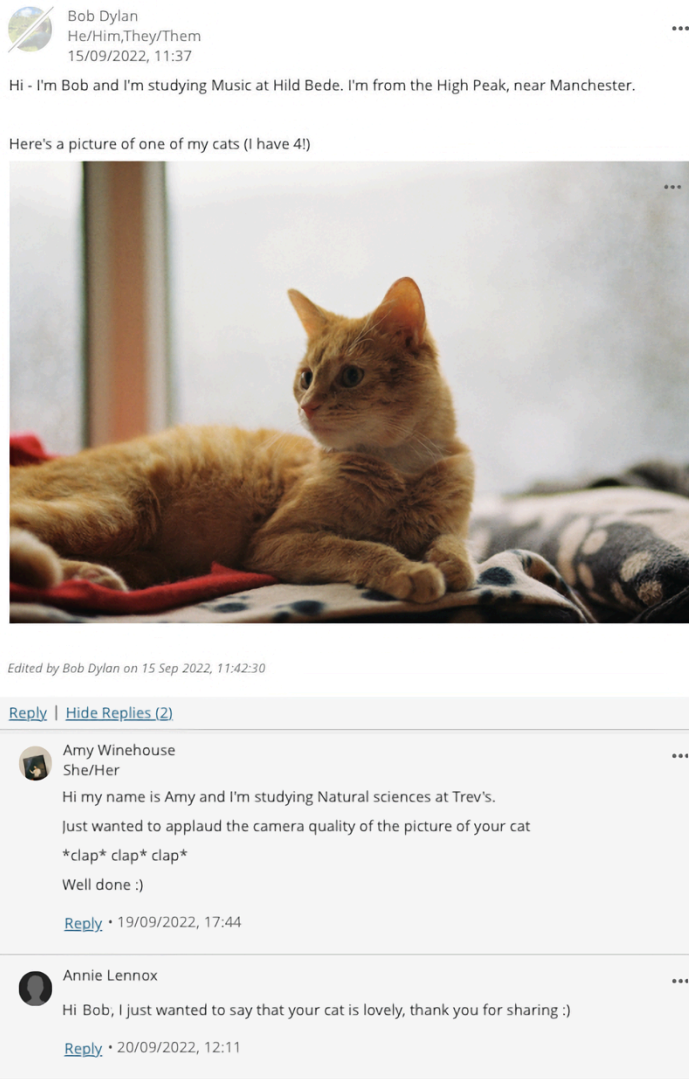
Figure 5 Cats adding to the online discussion

The addition of these cat pictures to the course seems to have legitimised them in this context, giving incoming students permission to be creative, share pictures and supportive comments online, providing a topic that is safe, personal and relatable. This contributed to an extremely vibrant and welcoming feel to the university, a fact that students highlighted in the feedback that year. Relevant entries are listed below in Table 2, that details the aspects of the course that the student particularly enjoyed.

An unexpected discovery during this year was the way in which students engaged with the images of cats and started sharing their own as discussion points. We recognised that by using a narrative and including images in this way we were creating a low-stakes way for students to engage with the course that helped them to feel a part of the Durham community. Looking for cats, without the pressure of being actively engaged in a discussion, or reading deeply into the history of colleges, was a valid activity. This insight is supported from the student feedback (see the selected entries listed in Table 3) where students reflect on the role the cat images played in their motivation. From this point onwards, low stakes gentle engagement has become the raison d'être of the cat competition.

Table 2 Selected student feedback comments mentioning the discussion boards (2022/23, n = 804)

The section where you can post your course and introduce yourself.
Discussion section, nice to know that the people are happy to chat and post pictures of pets. Welcoming and makes meeting new people less daunting.
there's a chance for us to interact with each other before meeting in real life
I liked the discussion part where people can introduce themselves. This make me feel like everyone's in the same boat and there are many people similar to me.
Enjoyed the communication with other students

These responses were provided by students in response to the questions: "What aspects of the course did you enjoy and think were successful?" or "Please add any other comments about the course".

Table 3 Selected student feedback comments mentioning the cats and relaxed approach (2022/23, n = 804)

The casual tone of the course which made it a lot less daunting
The pictures of the animals kept the course light hearted and were quite funny. The information provided coved a large array of subjects therefore it felt as if you were accessing all the information that you could possibly need and it put your mind at ease.
I liked the cats :)
find cat
'The Cat Treasure hunt was fun!
I liked the search for the cat as it gave me motivation to continue through. The promise of cat pictures is always a good motivator. I liked the transcripts as it gave me something to follow as I listened to the videos.
I enjoyed how simple it was to follow and the range of advice which was given alongside the various cats (I'm a massive cat lover so this was great!)
The videos, I thought the Freddie Meowcury bit helped to maintain interest and engagement as well
By putting cat pics, I can tell that this course director tried to make us feel more relaxed.

These responses were provided by students in response to the questions: "What aspects of the course did you enjoy, and think were successful?" or "Please add any other comments about the course".

Vignette 4: Clawdo (2023/24)

Figure 6 A sample Clawdo card

In 2023/24 the student developers suggested adapting the game mechanics to build complexity which resulted in creating a multi-stage quiz. Utilising playful tools, tactics and techniques and the idea of creating the 'magic circle' – a safe place to play (Whitton, 2018) together we created Clawdo – a cat-themed game based loosely on the Waddingtons board game Cleudo. In this context, our technique was to encourage students to learn more about the campus through a narrative and subsequent game. Students were challenged to solve a crime. Our tools were a series of Clawdo cards (each a horrible play on the name of buildings and activities key to Durham's culture – see Figure 6) which had been hidden in the course by Freddie. Finding them, students deduce what had happened, where and by whom (tactics). Clawdo encouraged students to work through the materials analytically, to think critically in a creative and playful way. It also provided a shared experience to discuss online, or later upon arrival. Students who found the cards and worked out that the crime involved stealing a piano were able to submit their answers via a course quiz and enter a prize draw.

Figure 7 below reveals the impact of the game. The bar chart shows the number of students who accessed each of the content items, with these items arranged in the order they would appear to students working through in a linear fashion, from start to end. The percentage values represent the number of students accessing each item at least once, as a proportion of the total number of students enrolled.

As could be expected, there is a general drop off in access numbers as students' progress through the course. The first item (Welcome) is visited by 46.3% of all enrolled students, the last (About this course) by only 14.2% There are two notable breaks in this pattern: the Introduce yourself discussion board activity (55.1%) in the Start Here module, and, almost at the end, the Clawdo game: who did it? item (57.3%) which was used by students to solve the puzzle.
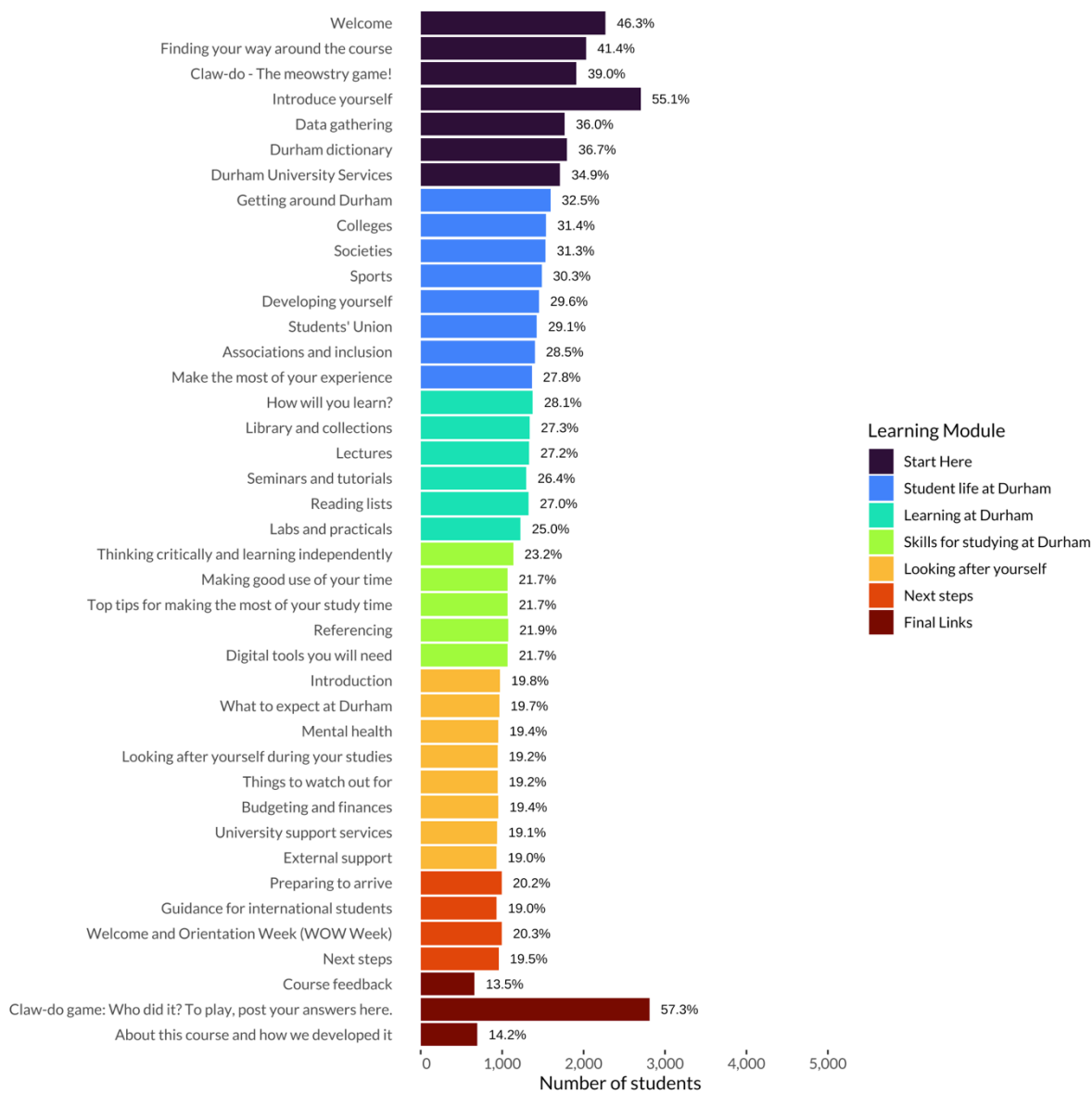
Figure 7 Student activity declines through the course, but for two items

Vignette 5: Meowcury's Mystery (2024/25)

In 2024/25 the student developers continued this arc of development. They kept the reference to Freddie and badged the activity as 'Meowcury's Mystery,' but decided to 'upgrade' the cat, adding a Sphinx 'boss-fight' at the end (shown in Figure 8).
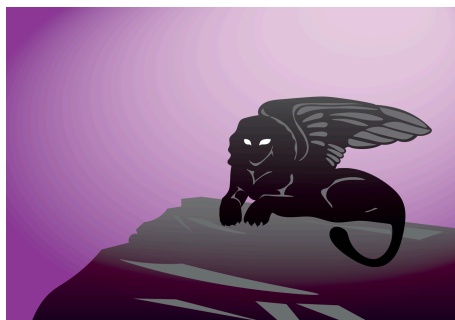
Figure 8 The Sphinx

A series of clues were scattered throughout the course (Figure 9 shows the first one). Students had to find all six. Each gave a number, which when arranged in the correct order, provided the password required to unlock a quiz, where the students met the Sphinx. If they could answer the Sphinx's questions, they were in with a chance of winning their own cuddly DCAD Cat soft toy.
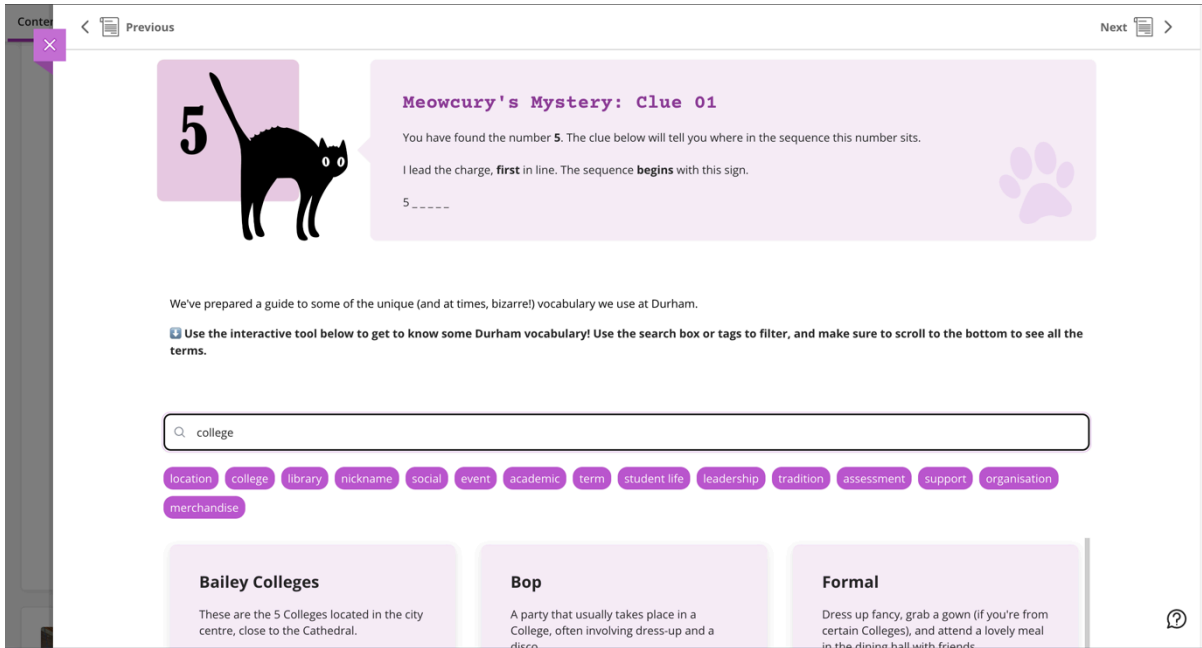
Figure 9 The initial clue

In case some people found the quiz too challenging or were otherwise unable or unwilling to compete, we hid an 'Easter Egg' amongst the content (see the bottom of Figure 10 – spoiler alert). This revealed (without explanation) the secret combination required to unlock the quiz.
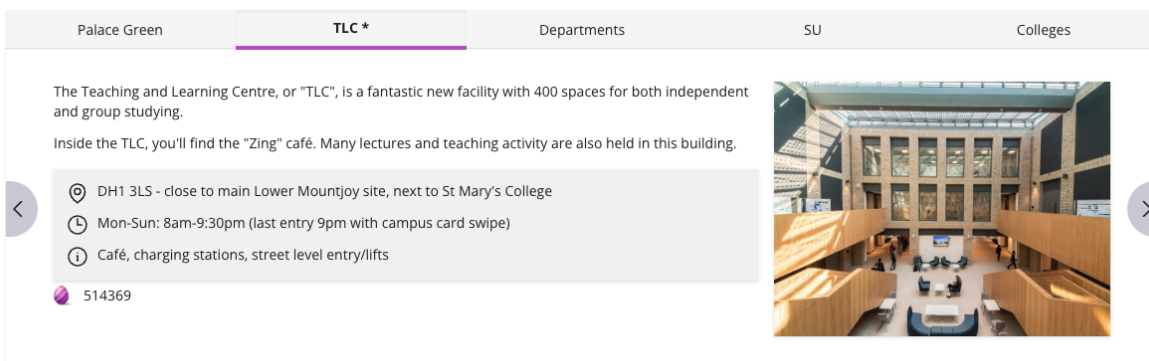

Figure 10 The course contained a hidden Easter Egg

This course is still live, but to date 826 students have submitted the quiz and a further 156 have started it (from a total of 6,488 enrolled students). Initial course feedback (n = 873) has generally been very positive (see Figure 11). Although 20% of the students who provided feedback chose not to engage with the quiz, over two-thirds did complete it, and a third of the respondents chose the option "I loved it!". Selected comments relating to student's perception of the playful elements are listed in Table 4.
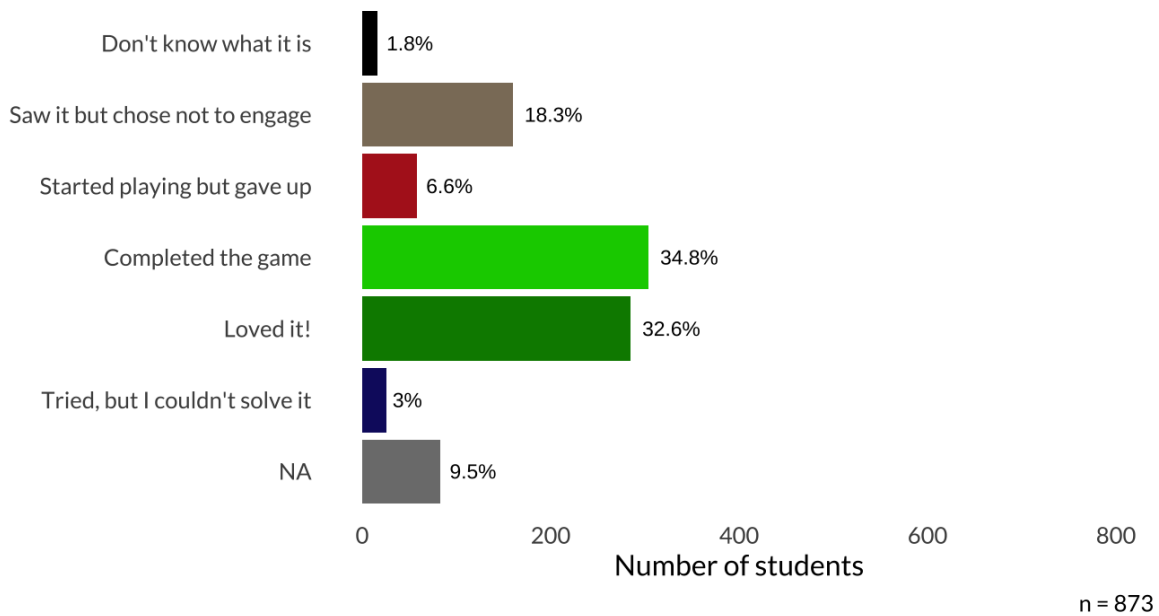

Figure 11 Students' impressions of the Cat quiz

Table 4 Selected student comments mentioning the cats and Meowcury's Mystery (2024/5, n = 873)

I haven't found the last cat yet oh no
I really liked the Meowcury Mystery as it encouraged me to read through and look for clues as well as engaging and getting more helpful information for getting ready for the study year. And the prize is also pretty cool.
I liked Meowcury's Mystery, however I thought the clues could be made a little more difficult to find (although I understand this may not be the point) - maybe embedding a clue in a video as well/instead?
Loved the Meowcury's Mystery game! Keeps you involved and on your toes
Meowcury's Mystery really gave me a chance to think through all the information that I have just read. It was nice to reflect on things in such a lighthearted way.
Meowcury's Mystery may be the greatest game known to Humanity
More universities should adopt such a course especially for new anxious international students
The use of the Meowcury's Mystery activity paired with the relatively informal but informative approach to settling in first year students were absolutely wonderful! It truly eases students into preparing for University before they have even started, as it breaks down the barrier between A Levels and higher education that depicts University as this adult institution far away from home.

These responses were provided by students in response to the question: "Finally, please add any other comments you have about this course"

Lessons learned: Free Freddie!

A chaotic cat-astrophe? It could have been. In all honesty, adding a meddling cat narrative with a main character who caused problems that required students to take a role in finding solutions and solve puzzles into the transition course, in what is the first opportunity students have to interact with us as a university, was a brave and risky move. It was also an act of care by the

Those pesky humans have been revealing all my secrets. What do you think, am I mischievous or am I actually an evil genius?

They challenged you to 'solve the case' have you? It's time I unmask and let you experience my magic.

project team (in the sense of Kolaríc & Taczyńska (2022); Noddings (1984)). Coming out of the pandemic, it felt like a very precarious and uncertain time. Freddie and the legend of the DCAD cat offered an opportunity for light relief during a time of discomfort. We put trust in ourselves, in our decades of collective experience supporting students, and in Freddie, as a good decision made in the best interests of our incoming students. At the time it felt like a risk. But reflecting on it, we were giving ourselves permission to empower others to play, innovate and create and to choose to engage in their own way. This shared sense of daring and the creation of a collective challenge to our pre-conceptions of what university courses could look like, fostered a strong sense of belonging. It helped break down early barriers between staff and student contributors. Risk-taking by one member encouraged the others to become more creative too, leading to content more aligned to the needs of incoming students.
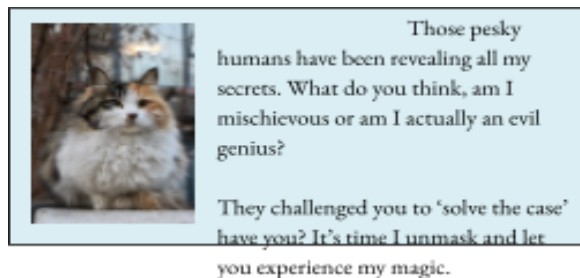
The resulting Transition into HE course has emerged as a cornerstone, welcoming new students into our academic community. It starts students on their journey as disciplinary student researchers at Durham. Sitting within our VLE, the course does not end with Freshers week; it continues to offer a pillar of support throughout their first year. The course has evolved to include a greater input from individual academic departments, providing discipline-specific content and a seamless transition for students from pre-arrival, to being on campus, becoming a part of the academic community.

Morgan (2024) identified partnership working as a fundamental aspect of preparing students to transition into and through higher education. We adopt this approach working with stakeholders from across the institution. Together we induct students into Durham's cultures, curating a sense of belonging hinged on sharing unique aspects, contributing to a holistic student experience. Key to fostering this sense of belonging is providing relevant just in time information, demonstrable peer support and cultural awareness. The Transition to HE course allows us to create pockets of playful and creative practice where students are supported to experiment with new ideas, explore their identity, to learn and contribute to our Durham cultures and practice in a low-risk environment.

Getting to this point has been over a decade in the making, continually critically evaluating and reflecting on our own practice and iterating. There has been a lot of trial and error. For example, we initially struggled to find a good balance of support for student developers. We tried approaches from fixed working patterns at a desk in our office, right through to giving no direction (this was chaotic). Over time and through feedback, we found a happy medium of giving just the right amount of support and structure. Key has been adding an induction to help students get to know the project and each other with clear indications of non-negotiables and milestones. There have been bad ideas we have discontinued – staff talking about their research was not a hit! Equally there have been unexpected wins, such as the discussion boards.

Meeting the needs of our students has always been a priority. In 2023/24 we seized an opportunity to access funding through the Disability Premium Fund to develop a new section focusing on mental health

and wellbeing, transforming student outcomes and building belonging, especially in underrepresented groups. This was achieved by incorporating authentic student narratives which offer insights into mental health challenges commonly encountered during transition. In true partnership style, we collaborated with students, the university's Disability Support Office and an external mental health expert on this initiative, ensuring sensitive and accurate representation of lived experiences.

Unexpected discoveries

We have worked with over 40 student developers in the last decade, from a diverse range of backgrounds and disciplines – from first year undergraduates through to PhD students. Working with such exceptional individuals has enabled the project team to continually iterate and learn from the people who know best - our students. Our methods for effective collaboration have evolved over time, as the project has shifted and transmogrified. In the early years, students were given strict project briefs to follow. The difficulty here was that the project team were in the driving seat, rather than the students, so we were not always hearing the student 'voice' in the right way, nor truly operating as partners (sensu Healey et al. (2014)). To correct this, we trialled ways to give our students creative freedom and autonomy.

Using creativity to underpin the work enables the students to approach their role as developers with imagination and curiosity, empowered to take risks and given a safe space to fail. This has resulted in very unexpected outcomes that are ultimately for the better. For example, in 2023/24, we ended up tearing up an established course layout, replacing it with a much-simplified structure, because this is what the student developers advised.

Over time it has become apparent that complete freedom is not always a guarantee of creative outcomes. Too much flexibility risks paralysis. In 2024, in an attempt to avoid this, all new student developers worked together through a two-week induction at the start of the project. We admit that we were concerned that this would constrain creativity, but it had an unexpected impact. The students formed bonds in a way we hadn't encountered previously and developed a support network 'back channel' which they used to test their ideas before presenting them to the wider project team. By removing us from the divergent thinking part of the creative thinking process, the student developers were embracing the emancipatory power of creativity and able to critically form and reflect on their ideas in a safe space.

Using this approach, we asked students to consider how the course could be more diverse and inclusive. We asked them to pay special attention to including underrepresented groups. As a result, the student developers devoted considerable time to course design and developed a new 'house style' and page language for the course. Each activity now starts with a custom-styled element which lists the key points and an estimate of how long it will take to work through. Tips scattered through the text have special styling to make them stand out. At the end of each page is a 'what next' section containing calls to action. For any video in the course there are transcripts, downloadable summaries and optional text descriptions which allow those using the course to 'choose their own adventure' when engaging with content. Academic colleagues who have seen the course have commented that it is better than their own module sites and the students' design work was showcased at an international e-learning conference (Murray (2023).

An escape 'bus stop'?

If Freddie is the puzzle, what's the solution? Let's unravel this playful cat-nip fiend a little. An escape room is an immersive themed live action game in which players uncover clues, solve puzzles to accomplish tasks, all

to achieve a time-bound goal – to escape (Nicholson, 2015; O'Brien & Farrow, 2020; Rawlinson & Whitton, 2024). So, what is an escape bus stop? This is how we have come to frame Freddie's puzzle-based competitions. If you remove all but one of the walls from an escape room, it ceases to exist in its traditional format, losing some key mechanics like immersion (key to create a sense of urgency), but it retains the essence of an interactive puzzle game and the key escape room mechanics of a narrative, surprise, problem-solving and failure. Our playful cat-based challenges invite students to play. We do not require participation, nor do we want to or create a sense of urgency. Instead, it is a simple invitation to take a step into the magic circle with us, one where you are free to walk away at any time.

To us, this escape bus stop is a creative twist that allows us to extend an invitation but not require participation. It is adaptable to different locations and diverse in execution. Instead of trapping students in the transition course, we offer them puzzles to solve, opportunities for collaboration and objectives to complete. The solution? Being welcomed into our community.

Discussion: Freddie has broken free!

Students often come to university with no idea of what to expect or where to start. The process of transitioning can be difficult from a multitude of perspectives: academic, social, emotional as well as logistical. This all occurs while the student is on the cusp of a new educational experience. Through this case study we have explored and shared our approach to developing the Transition into HE course and how our methods of team-working and supporting students have evolved. We have explored the four conceptual pillars which support our approach; belonging, playful learning, creativity and student partnership, all underpinned by diversity and inclusivity. These are the golden threads woven through the five vignettes and twisted into the fabric of all we do. This allows us to embody, foster and develop creativity and playfulness within the project team, with our student developers, and our incoming students.

We have demonstrated how using playfulness can encourage creativity and innovation, inserting opportunities for risk-taking and experimentation. For us as a project team, this requires losing some control and accepting the unexpected. Freddie is the embodiment of accepting the unexpected and can be viewed through multiple lenses:

- He is a source of chaos, granting students permission to think and act differently – challenging the stereotype that learning and studying cannot be playful.

- He provides us with continuity, threaded through the various course iterations, but is flexible enough as a concept that each generation of student developers can reshape him as they see fit.

- For incoming students, he is a surprise, a disruptor and a visible challenge to their pre-existing concepts of what being at university means and what being part of university is about.

- He provides an alternative, low friction, low stakes way to engage with the course; a route that may offer clarity and much needed completion during what is a very confusing time (that otherwise risks overwhelming students).

- His 'competitions', puzzles or solvable 'cases' (our 'escape bus stops') contain elements of an escape room, but without the time pressure, lock-in and possible anxiety.

- He is optional – you can take or leave Freddie. This reminds students that they are adult learners and that not to play is a valid choice (Rawlinson & Whitton, 2024; Whitton, 2018).
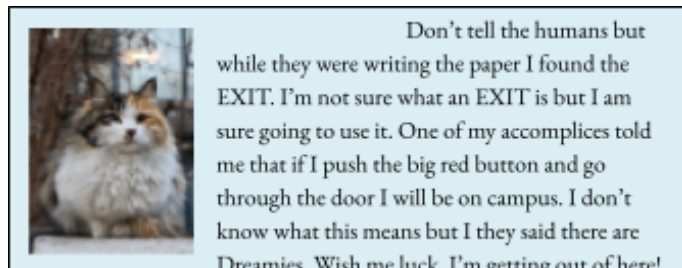
The crux of this work is how this simple idea – to add some light-hearted relief – has provided a common thread through development activities. It allowed us to give student developers a licence to play and be creative, whilst at the same time giving incoming students a friendly face to encourage exploration of something new, reframing their ideas of what a university experience might be like. That is the magic of Freddie.

Conclusion: Implications for practice

We hope that this article will inspire others to think creatively about their approach when partnering with students and we offer suggestions to support you in implementing such activities in your practice:

- Choice – playful learning is not a fix all and not everybody wants to play. Embedding learner choice empowers learners to choose their own path.

- Collaboration – developing a culture and space that encourages curiosity, lateral thinking and risk taking can encourage unexpected discoveries.

- Celebrating diversity – every student has a different 'why'. Accepting that those on the course have different motivations, concerns and levels of engagement with materials enables us to look beyond clicks and instead focus on meaningfully understanding the lived experiences of our students to best support their needs.

- Low stakes engagement – creativity can be a conduit to supporting 'belonging' in a low stakes way that recognises and celebrates everybody in their own way and in their own time.

Our unexpected hero Freddie is a demonstration of our commitment to giving students choice and different opportunities to engage. Creating flexibility in learning spaces and avenues to find their own path, engaging in a way that works for them, free of judgement and creating their own sense of belonging in a non-pressured environment. Now it's time for you to find your own "Freddie".

Don't tell the humans but while they were writing the paper I found the EXIT. I'm not sure what an EXIT is but I am sure going to use it. One of my accomplices told me that if I push the big red button and go through the door I will be on campus. I don't know what this means but I they said there are Dreamies. Wish me luck, I'm getting out of here!

What's next for Freddie?

It's time for Freddie to be free, to venture onto campus and to enter the real world.

Biographies

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Ethical approval

The research was approved in advance by Durham Centre for Academic Development's Ethics Committee – Ref DCAD-2021-06-29T15_16_49-kfqn12.

Use of generative AI

No generative AI tools were used in the writing of this article.

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