



Fostering belonging: Challenging imposter syndrome and celebrating the dual identities of articulation students.

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ABSTRACT

Step-Up is a 20-credit, level 1 undergraduate module developed and delivered by Academic Skills at University of Dundee. The module introduces relevant academic skills to prepare articulation students studying towards the academic equivalent HNC Social Sciences at Dundee and Angus College to help prepare them for more independent university study. Successful outcomes for both the college programme and university module lead to direct entry to level 2 of the Humanities MA at the University.

Step-Up's theme is 'being, belonging, and becoming', but end-of-module student feedback revealed they felt isolated from the University community perceiving progression via college as inferior. The concept of articulation students having dual identities evolved through closer collaboration with the college and my succession as Step Up Module Lead at the university. Articulation students need to have a working knowledge of two institutions and the respective systems, procedures and terminologies to manage their learning and progression successfully.

Building on Rachel Horrocks Birss' earlier work (2024) which identified gaps in the support offered, I have introduced an enhanced induction to the university, the Humanities degree subject pathways, and the Step-Up module. Enhanced provision creates a staggered, slow induction to avoid overwhelm and a safe place to introduce relevant university staff, unfamiliar systems and build student confidence that they have a right to study at the university.

In the module I have started to revise content to acknowledge the students' academic workload at college, whilst introducing university academic skills strategies. Module content is being reviewed to contextualise academic skills with Humanities topics and model university style delivery and expectations. This will introduce strategies to support retention and improve learner autonomy, whilst assuring students have a legitimate sense of belonging in the university community.

Keywords: articulation, transition, belonging, dual identity, imposter syndrome

Introduction

While articulation pathways are not unique to Scotland, the Scottish system is distinctive in the extent to which they are embedded, coordinated and have been progressively normalised across the tertiary sector. Articulation is currently defined as "a student gaining entry into the second year of a degree with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) gained at college, or into the third year with a Higher National Diploma (HND) gained at college" (Universities Scotland 2020), reflected through alignment with the Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework (SCQF). These pathways are typically shaped by institutional partnerships between colleges and universities, and although it has demonstrated considerable success in enabling entry, this does not necessarily translate to a perceived and equivalent sense of belonging for articulation students once they arrive within the university environment (Thomas, 2012).

At the University of Dundee, articulation students apply via Universities and Colleges Admission Services (UCAS) to study a full-time, one-year HNC Social Sciences (SCQF Level 7) programme at Dundee and Angus College alongside a tailored academic skills module – Step-Up – on campus, at the university. Students are required to pass both the HNC and Step Up to progress to the second year of the university’s Humanities MA, but the lower entry requirements make it an attractive reserve option for many students.

On initial application to UCAS, students may have included the articulation option as a fallback to their other choices, but academic expectations become academic realities when they fail to meet other conditional university entry requirements (Cheng et al., 2023). ‘Rerouting’ university experience via the articulation route - attending both college and university - may exacerbate imposter syndrome, where individuals doubt their capabilities and elevate others’ achievements resulting in feelings of academic inadequacy (Clance & Imes, 1978). Their fallback articulation option, their perceived academic failure, and the prospect of college study, could be self-perceived as a remedial step.

A unique complication for articulation students, which exacerbates this sense of imposter syndrome, is the dual identity they are assumed to espouse. They are expected to engage with two distinct institutions; concomitantly they are full time college students and articulated university students. This creates an academic and environmental disequilibrium; like Janus, their articulation year simultaneously looks backwards, to what might have been, and forwards, to what may be, intensifying dual identities. Both institutions must recognise the dual identities that articulation students navigate and create conditions that support belonging across their first-year-equivalent studies.

Step Up is a well-established module and has already been the subject of focus in an earlier issue, where my predecessor, Rachel Horrocks-Birss (2024), detailed her work creating module assessments to better prepare articulation students for university study. Step Up introduces students to academic and study skills to prepare them to transition from supported college learning to greater autonomy at university. Now in my second year as Step Up Module Lead, I have been exploring articulation students’ dual identity and how the module can more sympathetically align with their HNC programme to blur the disconnect between college and university approaches.

Fostering belonging through enhanced provision

Early engagement is well documented as being a pivotal factor to encourage a sense of belonging for students (Thomas, 2012; Kahu et al., 2022; Morgan, 2025). As Morgan’s model (2025) illustrates (Figure 1), the traditional student’s university journey is complex with multiple shifting variables. It is easy to see how students can become overwhelmed by newness, uncertainty and retain little information at induction events. The Step Up articulation students’ journey is duplicated across membership of two separate institutions: they need to operate within, belong to, and succeed at both college and university. Pragmatically, they have complex parameters in which to flourish from the outset as the respective organisation’s systems are different. This may easily lead to overwhelm (Greenhorn & Wilson, 2023), but as the college and university academic calendars are structured differently, the articulation students have several weeks familiarising themselves with the college, ahead of contact with the university.

Traditionally, Step Up was delivered in semester 2 and students were largely left outside the sphere of university involvement before then, exacerbating feelings of detachment. This was reinforced through end-of-module feedback, and the necessity for “cohesive support” for articulation students across the

academic year was recognised (Horrocks-Birss, 2024). There is already a university matriculation session, which helps validate students’ sense of being part of a wider remit (Kahu et al., 2022), as its invite extends to all articulation students from a number of regional colleges, rather than just Step Up. Complimenting this, a series of enhanced provision sessions were introduced at regular intervals in the first semester.

Figure 1 A visual example of the university student transitions and learning journey

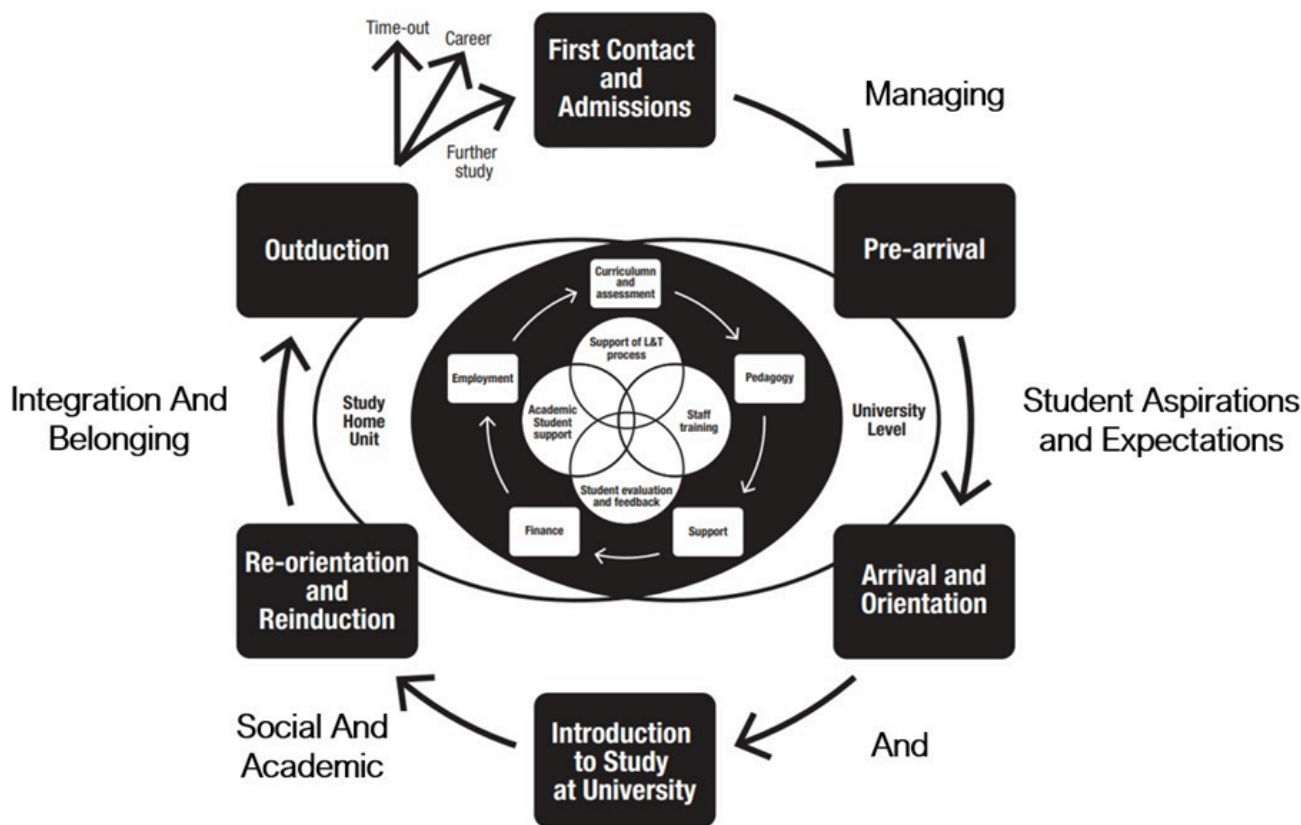


Figure 1 The Student Experience Transitions Model (Morgan, 2025).

Building belonging is not a one-off intervention but an ongoing commitment and agreement between the institutions, lecturers and students. Enhanced provision sessions create a ‘slow-induction’ which gives students time to become fully coherent of both college and university systems, without becoming overwhelmed by the rhizomatic (Gale & Parker, 2014) affiliation to two institutions and promptly accepts their dual identity. The sessions progressively introduce students to various university systems, expectations and terminology, particularly where college and university differ to minimise possible confusion and stress (Mearman & Payne, 2023). For example, one enhanced session is an early university library induction contextualised towards a college assessment. This promotes greater confidence in using the university systems and encourages learner autonomy (Kahu et al., 2022) because students have a specific reason to use the university library database and apply new knowledge to research their assignment.

Greenhorn and Wilson (2023) identify that university staff can be perceived as distant counterparts to their more supportive college colleagues, and this is positively addressed at the library induction, where contextualised activities help students recognise support in a university setting. On module, guest Humanities lecturers lead some sessions, which establish lecturer approachability, as well as allowing articulation students to 'feel known' (Briggs et al., 2012; Advance HE, 2023). Humanities subject content dovetails with academic skills, such as Literature with critical analysis. Moreover, the accessible subject content, for example, using an excerpt from Lemony Snicket's, 'A Series of Unfortunate Events' (Snicket, 1999) to introduce critical literary analysis, debunks anxieties around feeling 'clever enough' to study at university (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

The perceived kudos of a humanities topic advocating academic skills, positions Step Up as meaningful, rather than through a deficit model lens because Step Up prioritises academic skills (Blake et al., 2022), instead of a subject specialism. This goldilocks zone which subject topic and academic skills inhabit challenges students' pre-conceptions and introduces academic skills as process orientated. This has been further developed by adopting active essay strategies (Taylor, n.d.) to promote academic writing through discussion, structure and refinement. Modelling these strategies in participatory classes (Man-Ho Lam, 2026) are invaluable to students to bolster confidence thereby easing imposter syndrome, building learner autonomy and setting expectations of good practice at university.

Navigating institutional systems barriers

Dual identities persist at system level across both institutions, by an assumption that articulation students are digitally literate. They are expected to be cognisant of systems such as attendance recording and submission software, which are different at each institution. Typically, students gain agency and a wider sense of 'belonging' by increased confidence using these systems and, by default, understanding associated institutional terminologies (Briggs et al., 2012; Advance HE, 2023). For example, the virtual learning environments (VLE) for college and university are different. On Step Up, students are encouraged to engage with the VLE weekly which mirrors full-time university study and is monitored through short, online activities. The VLE was introduced as part of the enhanced sessions, to familiarise students with a new software, yet students remain reluctant to engage online, perhaps a consequence of only seeing value in summative assessments.

The disparity in assessment expectations between the HNC and Level 1 Humanities programmes perpetuates articulation students' dual identities and may heighten imposter syndrome. Although the HNC has academic parity with first-year undergraduate study (both SCQF Level 7), its volume of content and summative assessment differs markedly. Students on the HNC Social Sciences typically complete up to 15 prescribed units, often with two summative assessments per unit (Dundee and Angus College, 2025; SQA, n.d.), whereas first-year Humanities students generally self-select and study six modules (University of Dundee, n.d.) with less assessment burden. This imbalance has practical implications for articulation students' workload and raises wider questions about whether the HNC provides sufficient preparation for the independence required at university.

The concentration of HNC modules allies with the strong levels of support college offers, but recurrent college assessments intensify the gap between supported college study and independent university study

(Kahu et al., 2022), because students have seemingly unending deadlines. Constructively, Step Up uses college assessment deadlines to promote ‘good practice’ habit-forming study skills – for example, using Pomodoro and Interleaving strategies (McMillan & Weyers, 2011) - to prepare for HNC assessments. It introduces the challenge of independent learning (Mearman & Payne, 2023), but without the benefit of ‘hindsight’ many students fail to appreciate the study stepping stones this offers.

Despite strong engagement in class, the quality of some Step Up assessments have been disappointing. Students admitted leaving research, writing, and proofreading until the last minute, creating a backlog of assessments and unnecessary stress. Although module planning was mindful of college deadlines, it did not anticipate the frequent extensions and remediation inherent in the college’s supportive model, resulting in assessment bottlenecks. Consequently, students reacted by prioritising either college or university assessments, knowingly compromising the quality of one to complete the other. This pattern does not reflect effective academic skills development nor support learner autonomy. While we cannot control students’ time management, streamlining VLE content to better mirror the practical work undertaken in class may help strengthen students’ independence.

Fostering belonging: The wider picture

Fostering belonging is a deceptively simple title. Recent end-of-module feedback shows that students have responded overwhelmingly positively to their university experience; they particularly value the ‘slow induction’, the consistent opportunities for connection, and the encouragement to engage more fully with the wider university community. Yet, as articulation students, many continue to compare themselves to their full-time peers, reinforcing a sense of difference that aligns with Gale and Parker’s (2012) observations about transitional identities. As a result of this disconnect, their dual identities as both college and university students persist. Belonging, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an individual endeavour: it must be actively fostered across the wider university community.

This year, the college’s adjusted academic year dates did not align with the universities. As there were potential implications for student funding, childcare and travel, the Step-Up module has been modified to bridge semesters one and two. This enables students to feel greater affiliation with the University and reduces the sense of disconnect, because their university engagement better aligns with that of their peers, and wider university initiatives. However, student attitude to academic skills still prevails as a deficit model (Blake et al., 2022), and next steps are to progress co-creative strategies alongside thematic topics, rather than an overt reliance on their HNC studies. It is anticipated co-creation will allow them to inhabit their articulation experience, and they can be present in their studies rather than static at Janus’ crossroads.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has now concluded a decade-long strategic commitment to supporting the development and maintenance of articulation pathways across colleges and universities (Universities Scotland, 2020). In the short term, the SFC will continue to fund articulation places (SFC, 2025), yet change feels imminent—particularly as new widening access benchmarks have recently been introduced by the Scottish Government (Advance HE, 2026). Step Up is a robust preparatory module, well suited to learners who take a ‘non-traditional’ route into university study. There is abundant opportunity to develop this module further to reflect the increasingly diverse pathways that students navigate—either as a standalone offering or reconceived as micro-credentials (Hogan & Blackwell-Young, 2024) to support university study across Levels 1 and 2. Ultimately, the focus remains to champion students’ sense of belonging and reduce the complexities associated with managing dual identities.

Biographies

Sue Liddon is an Academic Literacies Developer at the University of Dundee and Step-Up Module Lead. Her dual role supports student academic success across the university, alongside delivering the taught PGCAPHE and experiential PLF to staff. She has much experience lecturing and leading learning in HE and FE across the UK. Research interests include playful learning and widening access.

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