



## “Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

Dr Megan Jones, University of East Anglia

Dr Jen Coleman, University of East Anglia

---

### ABSTRACT

The transition to higher education can be challenging, particularly for students with limited social or cultural capital. Early difficulties are associated with lower continuation rates, highlighting the need for pre-arrival support. To address this, the School of Psychology at the University of East Anglia developed a four week online pre-arrival module for incoming undergraduates, aiming to demystify university life and reduce pre-arrival anxiety. This work draws on survey and focus group data to evaluate the modules' impact and contributes to sector discussions about how pre-arrival initiatives can bridge the gap between offer and orientation, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Findings highlighted the value of accessible, welcoming resources prior to enrolment, with many students reporting reduced anxiety and an increased sense of belonging and preparedness. Insights from the evaluation informed the redevelopment of the module for the following academic year, incorporating student perspectives. This work encourages a wider commitment in higher education to shape transition support with students, ensuring initiatives are relevant, inclusive, and responsive to diverse needs.

**Keywords:** pre-arrival, student transition, student belonging, student partnership, widening participation

### Introduction

The transition to higher education involves a “mega-scale, high-stakes period of adjustment” (Edmunds et al., 2025, p.132) making it a difficult time for all individuals, but especially those from underrepresented backgrounds who may not have the cultural capital or support from family members that traditional students have. In their equality of opportunity risk register (EOOR), the Office for Students highlights groups of students who are most likely to experience risks that may affect their success in higher education (Office for Students, 2023). Such groups include but are not limited to students from low-income households, first-generation students, disabled, mature and commuter students, and those with parental responsibilities. As in many universities, at our institution, these risks are being addressed through provision outlined in our access and participation plan (University of East Anglia, 2025), specifically objective 4:

Through increased consistency of inclusive practice and tailored removal of barriers to engagement, opportunities and support, UEA will ensure equality of continuation and completion for all students including students declaring a disability, eligible for free school meals, those with vocational qualifications, black students and mature students.

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

Students with the above-mentioned characteristics may experience barriers to developing a sense of belonging at university, they may not feel that they belong in higher education, and they may experience barriers to developing a sense of belonging to their School which may impact their experience and academic potential. Many students with varying characteristics may require extra support to enable them to achieve good outcomes and as such it is important to consider how this support can best be delivered, and at which timepoints it can be most effective. It is important that all students experience an equal opportunity to receive support that is relevant to their specific circumstances, enabling them to engage fully with their university experience. One such timepoint for this support is during the initial transition into higher education to allow students to feel prepared for what is to come. The belief that early academic success determines future opportunities creates intense pressure for many students, making any sense of being unprepared highly distressing for students (Thompson et al., 2021). Given that positive transition experiences are linked to success and wellbeing (Thompson et al., 2021), universities must prioritise effective strategies to support students through this critical phase.

A key component of successful transition is the development of a sense of belonging, which evolves throughout the student experience (Meehan & Howells, 2017). Belonging is associated with positive outcomes, including enhanced wellbeing (Garden et al., 2024). Consequently, resources that begin helping students to build their student identity should also aim to increase their connection to the school and university, aiding positive transition. The What Works? programme (2008-11) sought to build a robust evidence base to identify best practice within the sector for supporting students from widening participation backgrounds to succeed in higher education. The programme identified that the specifics of an intervention were less important than the way they were offered and the intended outcomes:

All interventions or activities should aim to nurture a culture of belonging, through: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing the knowledge, expectations and confidence to be successful HE learners; and providing an HE experience which is relevant to interests and future goals. (Thomas, 2012a, p.9)

Transitional support initiatives are therefore especially important considering research shows student expectations often differ from the reality of university life (Worsley et al., 2021). As such, resources should include insights from current students to help all prospective students imagine themselves realistically as a university student (Briggs, 2012). Moreover, pre-entry access to university staff and students, and induction activities that combine social and academic purposes are critical for effective integration (Briggs, 2012).

The timing of information delivery is also crucial. During Welcome Week, students are often overwhelmed with information while prioritising social connections, and late arrivals risk missing essential details. This highlights the need to provide key information prior to and beyond arrival (Garrad-Cole, 2024). Introducing students to terminology, structures, systems and timetables prior to arrival could build their confidence and awareness allowing them to engage more effectively with information once they arrive. Presenting information in manageable chunks also enables universities to capitalise on student enthusiasm, facilitating early success and positively impacting retention (Garrad-Cole, 2024). With all of this in mind, a targeted pre-arrival module was created for students entering our School as described below, with the aim of supporting students to feel more prepared, more confident and a sense of belonging from the outset.

### Module design

An important element of the design of the module was to recognise that effective practice for one group of students, can and should, be effective practice for all (Morgan & Houghton, 2011). In line with findings from the What Works? programme (Thomas, 2012b), which emphasises support for student success should be embedded into the mainstream and proactively seek to engage students, this pre-arrival module was made available to all students once they had confirmed attendance after results day. Through making the module relevant and universally accessible, we sought to avoid the deficit model that can often come with talking about 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students, whereby 'non-traditional' students are posited as lacking the skills and cultural capital to do well at university (Hockings, 2010). Students were able to access information from all sections, recognising that multiple and intersecting barriers are faced by students. This approach avoids categorising students in ways that risk missing the additional barriers which may exist when students have multiple overlapping characteristics (Rossi, 2023).

The pre-arrival module was based on an already successful version run in the School of Biology at our university (Edmunds & Lewis, 2024). Psychology subject specific content was created and other content adapted to create a module specific to the needs of our students. Module content outlined in table 1 below was released across four weeks, with the fourth week coinciding with welcome week.

**Table 1** Week by week module content

Week 1: Welcome	Welcome message from Head of School Introduction Padlet – bios from staff, students asked to post a mini-introduction Pre-arrival survey – demographics, prior education, skills to improve, thoughts & feelings about university What interests you about psychology
Week 2: Settling In	Finding your tribe: Societies & clubs, Learner community information e.g. commuter, international, mature Looking after your wellbeing: stress & time management, where to go for advice & support
Week 3: Preparing to study	Timetables Terminology Library What to expect from lecturers & seminars Understanding assignments Academic writing Preparing for research and statistics
Week 4: Welcome Week	Information about welcome week activities at School and university level Finding your way around Tips for making friends Settling into accommodation

## Method of Evaluation

To assess the perceived value and experience of the module from first year student perspectives, we conducted a mixed methods evaluation including three semi-structured focus groups (N=15) and an online survey (N=60) involving 5-point Likert and short answer questions.

## Participants and recruitment

First-year undergraduate psychology students at the University of East Anglia were recruited via the School of Psychology research participation system and received course credit for participation. Eligibility criteria included being over 18 and having interacted with the pre-arrival module prior to and/or during their first semester. Of the 263 students enrolled onto the module, 75 participated in the overall study.

For the survey, 82 students signed up to participate, of whom 60 completed the survey (73.2%) and were included in the analysis. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56 years ( $M = 19.94$ ,  $SD = 6.57$ ,  $n = 53$ ). Age was not reported for seven participants however all confirmed they were over the age of 18. Most respondents were 18–19 years old ( $n = 46$ ), identified as female ( $n = 51$ ), and were White British ( $n = 43$ ). Additionally, 22 participants identified as commuters, and 18 identified as first-generation students. Other demographics included a range of genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and disability statuses. A full demographic breakdown is provided in Appendix I.

Fifteen participants took part in the focus groups, ranging in age from 19 to 51 years ( $M = 23.23$ ,  $SD = 8.38$ ,  $n = 13$ ). Age was not disclosed by two participants however it was confirmed all were above 18 years of age. Most participants were between 19 and 21 years ( $n = 9$ ), female ( $n = 9$ ) and White British ( $n = 12$ ). Seven participants were commuters, eight were first-generation students and two had caring responsibilities. Participants reported a variety of sexual orientations, disability statuses, and backgrounds. A full demographic breakdown is provided in Appendix II.

## Procedure and Ethics

The survey and focus group evaluations were approved by the UEA Psychology Ethics Committee (Approval codes: ETH2425-0567 and ETH2425-0200).

After enrolling in the survey study, students accessed an anonymous online questionnaire that included participant information and consent, survey and demographic items, and a debrief. The survey examined students' engagement with the module, their perceptions of its content, tone, and timing, and the extent to which it prepared them for university. It also explored whether the module helped them feel connected to their peers and the School of Psychology. Participants who registered for the survey study were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point prior to or during completion of the survey. Participants were also able to withdraw their data up to seven days after participation by providing their anonymous ID code or by choosing not to submit the completed survey. Those who withdrew or did not complete the survey were not included in the final analysis.

After enrolling in the focus groups, participants were emailed the information and consent form and asked to return consent prior to participation. Focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and were audio and video recorded. A semi-structured question schedule explored students' engagement with and

## “Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

experiences of the module, alongside their perceived preparedness for university and feelings of connection to peers and the School of Psychology. Focus group participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time prior to the start of the session. However, due to the nature of group discussions, participants were informed that once the focus group had taken place individual contributions could not be removed from the dataset. Participants received both verbal and written debriefs and the focus groups were transcribed and fully anonymised within seven days of completion. Any identifying information such as names and places were removed or replaced with non-identifiable alternatives. To further protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms have been assigned to focus group participants. No identifiable information was included in the reporting of the survey or focus group data.

### Focus group analysis

As part of an in-school volunteer scheme, a student volunteer was recruited to conduct an initial exploration of the survey and focus group data to give an overview of responses and provide their student perspective on the dataset. This phase focused on what was helpful, unhelpful and suggestions for what to include. Furthering this, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022) was conducted by one of the lead researchers, using the volunteer student exploration as part of the familiarisation process. Initial coding then involved checking for depth of coverage of the student volunteer coding, with relevant ideas being adopted and carried forward by the researcher where appropriate. During this stage codes were re-labelled to better reflect participant meanings, and depth and breadth of coding was expanded to ensure attention was paid to all important and relevant aspects of the data. Coding took an iterative process, moving between raw data and codes, focusing on the semantic meanings. Following this, generation of initial themes involved constructing patterns of meaning both within and across focus group coding. Similar ideas and experiences were grouped into overarching concepts and patterns of meaning through a continued iterative exploration between raw data and codes. To further refine this, divergences in the data were explored to develop meaningful themes that directly answered the research question. Final themes were redefined and named to reflect the core concept that represented key areas of insight and students' lived experiences of using the module.

### Survey Findings

Sixty participants completed the survey and were included in the analyses. Some participants did not respond to all items; therefore, sample sizes vary across analyses and findings are reported according to their response rates for the question. Most participants reported engaging with the module site prior to arrival ( $n = 50$ ), during welcome week ( $n = 39$ ), and during week 1 ( $n = 25$ ). Fewer participants reported engagement during Weeks 2–4 ( $n = 10$ ).

### Overall experience

All 60 participants rated their overall experience with the module on a 5-point Likert scale (1= extremely dissatisfied, 5 = extremely satisfied). Most participants reported being at least somewhat satisfied with the module ( $n = 45$ , 75.0%). Similarly, most students indicated that the amount of content was appropriate (neither too much nor too little;  $n = 41$ , 68.3%). However, 12 participants (20%) reported the amount was slightly or way too much and seven (11.7%) slightly too little. Overall, these results suggest that the

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

module was well-received, with most students expressing satisfaction and perceiving the content as appropriately balanced. Nevertheless, some variability in preferences regarding pacing and content volume was evident.

### Usefulness of each section

---

Regarding engagement with specific sections, the highest rate of usage was reported for Week 1: Welcome to UEA (n = 57, 95.0%) and Week 3: Preparing to Study (n = 56, 93.3%). Engagement was also high for Week 2: Settling In (n = 46, 76.7%) and Week 4: Welcome Week (n = 41, 68.3%), while considerably fewer reported engaging with What You Said During Welcome Week (n = 10, 16.7%).

Participants rated the usefulness of each section on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all useful, 5 = very useful). For Week 1, 39 of 57 participants (78.9%) rated the thread at least moderately useful. For Week 2, 33 of 45 participants (73.3%) rated the thread at least moderately useful. For Week 3, 47 of 56 participants (83.9%) rated the thread at least moderately useful, and for Week 4, 31 of 41 participants (75.6%) rated the thread at least moderately useful. Overall, while a minority of students rated threads as slightly or not at all useful, findings indicate generally positive perceptions of the usefulness of the module content. Week 3 received the highest proportion of positive ratings, suggesting that content related to preparing to study was particularly valued.

### First few weeks

---

Fifty-nine participants responded to the item assessing how well the module prepared them for the first few weeks of semester on a 5-point Likert Scale (1= not well at all, 5 = extremely well). Most participants (n = 44, 74.6%) indicated that the module helped at least moderately well. Furthering this, on a scale of 1 = not helpful at all, to 5 being extremely helpful, 49 of 58 participants (84.5%) rated the module as at least somewhat helpful in understanding welcome week, and 46 out of 59 participants (78%) indicated that the module was at least somewhat helpful in them knowing where to go when they arrived. The high proportion of positive ratings indicates that most students felt the module was generally effective in providing guidance on navigating the first weeks and orienting themselves to campus.

### Learning and support

---

All 60 participants rated how helpful the module was in preparing them to learn and study (1 = not helpful at all, 5 = extremely helpful), with most indicating that the module was somewhat or extremely helpful (n = 55, 91.7%). Similarly, all 60 participants rated how much the module helped them know who to contact if they had questions, with the majority (n = 53, 88.3%) indicating that the module was somewhat or extremely helpful.

Additionally, 59 participants rated how much the module helped them know where to look for support with their wellbeing, with the majority (n = 54, 91.5%) indicating that the module was at least somewhat helpful for this. These findings therefore suggest that the module was generally effective in equipping students with the relevant knowledge and resources needed to navigate their learning and wellbeing whilst at university.

**Social integration**

Finally, participants rated the module’s support for social integration. All 60 participants rated how much the module helped them feel connected to their peers and the School of Psychology (1= not helpful at all, 5 = extremely helpful). For feeling connected to the School of Psychology, the majority found it somewhat or extremely helpful (n = 50, 83.3%). However, findings were mixed for peer connection. Whilst most participants reported the module was at least somewhat helpful (n = 25, 41.6%), 20 (33.3%) indicated it was neither helpful nor unhelpful, and 12 (20.0%) rated it not helpful at all. Together, these results suggest that the module was generally effective in fostering a sense of belonging, although peer connection was perceived as less strongly supported than connection to the school overall.

**Focus group findings**

To add nuance and context to the survey findings, a Thematic Analysis of focus group data led to the construction of five overarching themes exploring students’ experiences and perceptions of the module. The final themes and their sub-themes can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2** A summary table of Themes

Theme	Sub Theme
Feeling Ready and Reassured	Knowing what to expect reduces stress Feeling supported and cared for Familiarity reduces uncertainty Everyone is on the same page Need for peer perspectives
Value of Practical and Academic Guidance	Assessment examples and guidance on expectations Practical preparation for studying at university level: Notetaking, time-management, workload expectations. Bureaucratic systems support needed Practical life guidance needed Optional Synchronous Support Opportunities (Q&A, Lecture)
Module Structure and Content Organisation	Week by week structure helped reduce overwhelm Navigation of the site Content provided earlier Repetition across module and welcome week Too much content at once Certain weeks felt irrelevant
Building Belonging and Community	Padlet helped students meet others, feel included, and recognise staff.

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

---

Padlet initially overwhelming, impersonal, or intimidating.

Group chat replacement: Students gravitated toward student-run social spaces.

Less effective for peer community building

---

### Feeling ready and reassured

---

Feeling ready and reassured represents students’ experiences around the module reducing fear and anxiety during a time that was considered “a big anxiety window” (Carol). Students noted that it helped them to feel more prepared for what to expect, smoothing their transition:

I had quite a lot of anxiety going into the start of uni because obviously it's quite a big jump. So, in the lead up there was a lot of unfamiliarity, because it's obviously such a different thing. So, it helped me a lot to calm my nerves and feel like it was a much smoother transition in (William).

Regarding this ease of transition, a key benefit highlighted was that the module provided a sense of preparation and self-belief due to reduced uncertainty:

It made me feel more confident in myself that I was going into something that's so different from anything I've really experienced before and kind of just being like, OK, I'm actually feeling OK about doing this because I'm confident (Rhiannon).

Contextually, students referred to this newfound confidence when referring to welcome week and beyond, whereby the module supported engagement with academic activities such as lectures, “it was just sort of there in a step-by-step guide, which has helped me go into lectures, feeling a bit more confident” (Martha).

Confidence was a key pattern across the data, with participants raising that being on the same page as everyone else as both a prior concern and a supportive benefit of the module. Specifically, students described feeling reassured by knowing they had access to the same preparatory information as their peers. This sense of shared preparation reduced concerns about falling behind, particularly for students who did not have prior exposure to university through family members or other networks, “it sort of makes everyone in the same boat because if you haven't had experience of uni before, like other family members, it's nice to know that everyone gets given the same sort of information” (Ava). Together, this suggests that students valued the module not only for providing practical information about what to expect, but also for fostering confidence and levelling the playing field, helping them to feel prepared for engaging with both the social and academic aspects of university life.

Students also reported feeling reassured by the module’s signposting to advice and support services, which contributed to a greater sense of security and confidence in reaching out, “the disabled student support, the mental health support... the amount of support that there was, it made it feel really safe... it made it less daunting if that was something you needed” (Naomi). This sense of safety and support was further reflected by the module enabling them to arrange support before arriving on campus, “I was able to basically set myself up with the support I needed before I got there” (Carly). This indicates that the module not only raised awareness of available services but also allowed students to proactively prepare for their support needs ahead of time. Having clear information about who to contact and where to find support made students feel more supported and reassured that help would be available whenever they required it:

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

It was just the fact that it was going to be there throughout, so if we needed to go back, we could, it's very sectioned and very obvious where the things we need are... it's nice to feel that if something went horribly wrong, it can be fixed or there are places, your people, or sites that you can go to, to get a quick fix. So, nothing's ever as bad as it seems. It's just nice knowing that there is something there at all times, just in case (Louise).

This suggests that the module functions not only as an informational resource but also as a mechanism for fostering psychological safety, allowing them to approach potential challenges with reassurance, rather than apprehension. However, some students suggested that hearing directly from current students would have further enhanced their sense of reassurance:

having some second or third years just giving supportive words or advice on how they coped with it... it'd be nice having some people that had more recently gone through it tell you their top tips or how to cope (Layla).

This suggests that peer perspectives within the module may complement institutional information by providing relatable insights from those closest to their direct experience. Nevertheless, overall, this theme suggests that the pre-arrival module effectively helped students become aware of available support and increased their confidence in accessing it, both before arriving and during their time at university.

#### **Value of practical and academic guidance**

---

Supporting the survey findings that week 3 was the most engaged with and received the highest proportion of positive ratings, students in the focus groups mirrored this perceived value, “I found week 3 most helpful. Specifically, when it's talking about academic writing and like different terminology” (Sarah). Sections that explained university systems (e.g., Blackboard, timetabling, library resources) were also particularly valued because they helped students understand how the university operates “it really helps set everything of this is how the university does things” (George). Content about how to study at degree level was also consistently deemed useful for feeling prepared, with most students noting this helped them get back into studying or understanding the expectations of university learning “it was just to actually get myself back in the mindset of studying academically and just again to put know what I'm going to prepare myself for, for the coming years” (Martha). Specifically, students valued the guidance on lectures and seminars and surprisingly wanted more academic preparation, such as example essays, report writing guides, assignment brief guidance, and clearer explanations of assessments “I think I'd add a bit more academic stuff, maybe optional, but stuff that sort of prepares you more for the academic side... sort of assessments as well” (William). However, suggestions were made that this content should come in the first few weeks of the semester rather than prior to arrival “I feel like it's good to have that academic side of information. But that would definitely come like further along in that pre-arrival module, not early on” (Melissa). Namely this was to avoid overwhelm for students who are trying to figure out the basics of getting to university and doing things on their own for the first time. Together, these findings suggest that students want clear guidance on both how university works and how to study successfully, but that the timing of this content is critical to avoid overwhelm.

Furthermore, other aspects were noted to be missing in this section such as managing living alone and managing homesickness “I'd probably touch more on living alone and especially homesickness... because I know there's a lot of people that do struggle with that” (Layla). Students therefore desired more practical guidance for the social and independent living adjustment.

### Module structure and organisation

---

Students also shared their perspectives of the module’s usability. Overall, the format was perceived as easy to navigate, with features such as the drop-down menus making it “much easier to navigate” (Rhiannon). The week-by-week progression of content was particularly valued, as it helped students manage the amount of information they received. Melissa explained that “week by week gave you time to process, like, right, this is the key information for me, and this is what I need to do to prepare.” Many students felt that this gradual release of content was preferable to receiving everything at once, with Carol noting that “bite-size pieces are so much better to take in”. Students also described a readiness for later weeks of the module, as the earlier weeks allowed them to build familiarity and confidence before encountering more detailed information: “it was nice and chill and then as we got to like week four that’s when you got more information, but you’re kind of ready for it because you had the three weeks before” (Layla). Together, these reflections suggest that the staged release of information supported engagement and helped reduce cognitive overload during the pre-arrival period. Some students felt that attempting to complete the module all at once would have negatively shaped their experience, with William noting that he would likely have become overwhelmed and “started feeling negative towards it”.

Despite these positive aspects, some students suggested that certain content, particularly information provided in later weeks, would have been more helpful if released earlier. Layla explained that some guidance arrived after it was needed, such as information about key collection appearing once students had already moved in. She further notes that “to be honest most of it would be better to just have a bit more in advance so you’re a bit more prepared rather than receiving it the Monday when everything is starting to kick off”. Receiving important information slightly earlier was supported by others, suggesting this would have allowed them to feel more prepared before the start of term, rather than encountering large amounts of information at the same time as other welcome week communications.

Relatedly, discussions highlighted mixed perceptions regarding the overall volume of content with some students finding the amount of information overwhelming, “at first I did find the amount of information a little bit overwhelming” (Martha). However, students did not generally recommend removing content. Instead, they suggested that more clearly emphasising the “optional, and we can choose” (Melissa) nature of the module could reduce the pressure to engage with the entirety of the module content.

Finally, students noted some repetition between the pre-arrival module and welcome week lectures. Isabelle commented that it was “kind of just like repeated information, which might be nice for some people to check back on, but I don’t know if it’s necessary”. While this repetition may have been useful for some students, others felt it reduced the perceived value of induction sessions, as they encountered the same information again. As a result, some students suggested that the module could be made shorter and more concise to further reduce cognitive load.

### Belonging and community

---

Another key theme concerned the role of the module in fostering early social connection with peers and staff. Students described how posts from their peers on the Padlet activity made them realise that others shared similar feelings of nervousness, which normalised their experiences and reduced feelings of being alone; “made us feel less alone because we knew then we were going to make friends with people” (Melissa). This was further evidenced by students reporting that Padlet interactions led to friendships with

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

some even connecting with peers who would later be in their seminar groups “the Padlet meant that I was able to get into a group chat with people from my seminar group early and just meant that I got to know those people” (Elanor). Students felt that this helped them to build a sense of community and belonging from the outset “it just made you feel part of the community before you even arrived to uni” (Layla).

However, while many students valued this activity, others found this intimidating to engage with “I found the Padlet far too daunting. That was something that I found I couldn't do... because it was like putting yourself out there” (Carly). Introducing themselves publicly can therefore feel uncomfortable for some students, suggesting that less exposing ways of interacting would be welcomed. Suggestions for changes included breaking it down into seminar groups to foster connections with those they would be learning with

I would have rather it had been much smaller, maybe in our seminar group, so we could get to know our seminar a bit more; because I found that more daunting sort of walking through where there was maybe 20 people that you're gonna have to spend a whole year with (Martha).

The Padlet activity was therefore generally accepted to be assistive in developing an initial sense of belonging, but the practicality of this developing into connections on campus was a mixed experience.

More successfully, the teaching team biographies and organiser responses on Padlet contributions were particularly praised for making staff feel approachable and fostering confidence in attending lectures.

... seeing like [Head of school] and staff members, it's nice when you kind of walk into a lecture and you're like, 'Oh my God, I know that guy that's teaching us a lecture', you know, because even though you've never spoken to them before it feels like, because you've seen them, you know them, it makes you feel more comfortable being in their presence (Rhiannon).

Other students echoed this, describing its role in making them feel seen.

I really liked how one of you responded to like every single one, because then it felt like you were doing it for a reason, like you weren't just putting it there, and then no one would see it. It felt like you had already been seen and heard, which really made it a lot more inclusive (Layla).

Together, these suggest that visible staff presence and interaction in the pre-arrival module helped students to feel more comfortable, recognised, and included. Furthering this, they suggest that early, low-stakes exposure to staff can humanise lecturers, strengthen perceptions of approachability, and help to establish the foundations of positive student-staff relationships from the outset.

Interestingly, once students had managed to build their peer community the module was deemed less useful as they “were all each other's search engines. You know, if any of us had a question, we would all put something into the group chat, and somebody would answer it” (Elanor). Specifically, this approach was deemed easier than sifting through information on a formal module site, “sometimes it felt a lot easier just to put a question in those group chats and sort of get an answer rather than looking through documents and documents of answers” (Martha). Establishing friendships and a community therefore became a replacement for formal resources and suggests that informal discussions feel easier to access than formal channels of information. The module, therefore, may be more effective in building a sense of preparation and initial sense of belonging. Nevertheless, students also noted that the module was specifically helpful for things they needed to revisit later that were specific to their circumstances “there were parts that I did refer back to” (George), suggesting that despite their communities becoming their most accessible source of support, the information on the module continued to be useful beyond the first few weeks.

**Implications and looking forward**

These findings highlight the importance of pre-arrival modules in supporting students’ transition into university. Specifically, they help students develop a sense of knowing before arrival (Jones, 2024) and foster a sense of belonging. These outcomes align with key priorities in Higher Education student experience literature and quality frameworks, which consistently emphasise the importance of belonging and preparedness (Allen et al., 2021; Sanger, 2020; Hughes & Spanner, 2019). In this study, students felt guided by the module and equipped with the knowledge & resources needed to navigate the first weeks of the semester. An early sense of belonging was fostered by creating an atmosphere of approachability with staff, building the foundation for future relationships. There is more to be done however, in future iterations of the module to help to transfer this early sense of belonging into meaningful peer connections, and students will be consulted on how best they feel this could be achieved. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate the power of pre-arrival modules to reduce the impact of hidden curriculum elements prevalent in transition to university and gaps in social capital. Our findings therefore position pre-arrival modules as a key mechanism for improving student transition and retention.

Following this evaluation the module was revised for 2025/26 to incorporate the student’s perspectives and ideas. For example, more information was included to support study skills and how to access support when at university, including applying for extensions. In response to the request for more peer insights, more videos and podcast clips which convey the student experience from the students themselves were added. We also included additional elements that staff informally fed back that would be useful in preparing students, such as videos and quizzes covering some key foundational mathematical skills. Additionally, the student volunteer involved in this project created content that was related to her own student journey and experience which she felt would be valuable to others in the same situation. The revised module content can be seen in the table below, with new elements in bold.

**Table 2** Week by week module content (Academic Year 25/26)

<p>Week 1: <b>Welcome</b></p>	<p>Welcome message from Head of School                  Introduction Padlet – bios from staff, students asked to post a mini-introduction                  Pre-arrival survey – demographics, prior education, skills to improve, thoughts &amp; feelings about university                  What interests you about psychology                  Preparing for university online course  <b>Tips for prospective students – Podcast episode</b>  <b>Getting ready to arrive FAQ</b>  <b>Any questions?</b></p>
<p>Week 2:  <b>Finding your community</b></p>	<p><b>The importance of connection – series of videos from the university wellbeing team</b>                  Finding your tribe: Societies &amp; Learner community groups                  Staying active – Sports clubs</p>

<p><b>Advice &amp; Support</b></p>	<p>Learner community groups information e.g. commuter, international, mature</p> <p><b>Student services self-referral form</b>  <b>Introduction to Student Services video</b>  <b>How to arrange support prior to arrival</b>  <b>Emergency &amp; crisis support</b>  <b>Advice &amp; reporting problems</b>  <b>Support for all – academic advisors, wellbeing support, student life advisors &amp; learning enhancement team</b>  <b>Financial support</b>  <b>Looking after yourself – wellbeing podcast &amp; other resources</b>  <b>Students with disabilities/ SpLD – Screening, applying for DSA, assistive technologies, reasonable adjustments.</b>  <b>Neurodivergent Students</b>  International students  Mature &amp; Commuting Students  <b>Care Experienced and Estranged Students</b>  <b>Student Services Hub</b></p>
<p>Week 3:  <b>Managing your Studies</b></p>	<p><b>Preparing to Learn online course</b>  <b>IT Guidance</b>  <b>Study skills handbook</b>  <b>Tips for independent learning – student videos</b>  Timetables  Terminology  Library  What to expect from lecturers &amp; seminars  Understanding assignments <b>&amp; feedback</b>  Academic writing  <b>Dealing with setbacks</b>  Preparing for research and statistics – <b>mini quizzes &amp; videos</b>  <b>Student-staff partnership panel – how to be involved</b></p>
<p>Week 4:  <b>Welcome Week</b></p> <p><b>Independent Living</b></p>	<p>Information about welcome week activities at School and university level  Finding your way around  Tips for making friends  Settling into accommodation  How to deal with homesickness  Managing finances  How to get a part-time job</p>

Recognising that students appreciated the ability to revisit the module later, and that transition occurs throughout the degree journey and varies between students (Garrad-Cole, 2024; Timmis et al, 2024) the module was rebranded for 2025/26 as a guide for the year, and through consultation with students,

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

renamed First Year Survival Guide. This name has received some negative feedback from staff who feel it pre-empt a struggle in some way. However, students have told us they appreciate that the name reflects the reality that they may need additional support at times, as it helps to normalise the experience of challenges. Considering a key difficulty with transition can include a mismatch between student expectations and the reality of the situation (Jones, 2024), it is therefore important to us that we use this module as a way of drawing attention to the many different elements of the student experience to help reduce the impact of this mismatch.

A key challenge in providing additional support for students with characteristics which put them at risk of unequal access to opportunity for success at university, is that these students are often difficult to identify. Therefore, by embedding the module into the mainstream we hoped to provide support for as many students as possible. Whilst our evaluations did not target widening participation groups, our sample did include students with at risk characteristics such as mature and disabled students. It was therefore heartening to hear that the students in our sample thought that the information contained within the module levelled the playing field, normalised a range of experiences and gave reassurance that support is available when they might need it. Future evaluations could, however, aim to gain more perspectives from additional characteristic groups, to capture any potential divergences in their experiences of the module.

Our findings demonstrate the power of student voice in shaping practice and demystifying Higher Education, positioning students as experts of their own experience. Centring student perspectives and student involvement (Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Healey et al., 2014) in the development of transitional initiatives, enables dialogic, responsive pedagogy and fosters transparent and inclusive learning environments. Therefore, alongside future plans to continue evaluating the survival guide approach with our current students, we plan to work with local Level 3 students to further incorporate prospective students' needs and perspectives into the module. We are keen to uncover whether we should change anything in terms of the module content, but also whether the mode of conveying this information on our virtual learning platform is the most appropriate. By adopting these future directions, we can ensure that decisions made for adaptations to the module are reflective of a wide range of student experiences and are appropriate and inclusive for all students entering higher education.

Additionally, as transition is not limited to the first year of university and students can particularly struggle with the increased expectations and workload of the second year, we plan to run focus groups with both current first and second year students with the aim of exploring what support would be beneficial for them when transitioning to second year. We plan to ask current first year students about their perceptions of second year, what they are looking forward to and what they are concerned about, and what they would ask current second year students if they were able. For second year students, we plan to ask what would have helped them to feel more prepared when beginning the year, where they currently go for support, and what they would include in a Second Year Survival Guide. We will use these findings to inform the creation of a transition module to support students moving from first to second year.

Overall, through this evaluation we have learnt that student voices are critical to understanding the value and development of initiatives built to support them. Furthermore, dialogic and responsive pedagogy is not

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

a one-off task but requires continued openness and a commitment to transforming ourselves, our practices and initiatives to provide transparent and inclusive learning environments for all students.

### Acknowledgements

---

Thank you to all the students who took part in the focus group discussions and survey. A special thank you to Chloe German for contributing to the development of the module content and for her involvement in the initial data exploration.

### Disclosure statement

---

No potential competing interest was reported by the author.

### Biographies

*Dr Megan Jones* is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of East Anglia, specialising in qualitative research and the university student experience. She also serves as First-Year Student Partnership Officer and Deputy Senior Advisor for wellbeing, championing inclusive and collaborative approaches for student voice, transition and wellbeing.

*Dr Jen Coleman* is a Lecturer in Psychology and Widening Participation Academic Lead at the University of East Anglia. As an experienced qualitative researcher, Jen is committed to improving the student experience and possesses expertise relating to inclusive practice. Jen prioritises work which incorporates working with students as partners.

### References

- Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 73*(1), 87–102. <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. SAGE.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Briggs, A. R. J., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012) Building bridges: understanding student transition to university, *Quality in Higher Education, 18*(1), 3-21 <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13538322.2011.614468>
- Edmunds, K., & Lewis, B. (2024). Traversing Obstacles in developing pre-arrival platforms. In W. Garnham, & N. Walker (Eds.), *Supporting the Student Journey into Higher Education*, 24-32. Routledge. <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781003427575>
- Edmunds, K., Lewis, R., & Harrington, C. R. (2025) Stretching the Student Transition: Developing a Pre-Arrival Platform to Meet the Evolving Needs of the Student Population. *Student Success, 16*(3), 132–139. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3756>
- Edmunds, K., Lewis, R., & Harrington, C. (2025). Stretching the Student Transition: Developing a Pre-Arrival Platform to Meet the Evolving Needs of the Student Population. *Student Success, 16*(3), 132–139. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3756>

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

- Garden, C., Watchman Smith, N., Naughton, C., Skelton, F., Calabrese, P., Hunter, L., Haddow, C., & Azam, F. (2024, February 5). Student Belonging Good Practice Guide.  
[https://www.raise-network.com/\\_files/ugd/12e0cd\\_539f72c96f54437882abc7401fcd6794.pdf](https://www.raise-network.com/_files/ugd/12e0cd_539f72c96f54437882abc7401fcd6794.pdf)
- Garrad-Cole, F. (2024). Using a pre-arrival platform as an induction tool. In W. Garnham, & N. Walker (Eds.), *Supporting the Student Journey into Higher Education*, 42-47. Routledge.  
<https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781003427575>
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. Higher Education Academy.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher>
- Hinchcliffe, T. (2020). *The Hidden curriculum of higher education*. Advance HE.  
<https://www.advancehe.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hidden-curriculum-higher-education>
- Hockings, C. (2010). *Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research*. The Higher Education Academy.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-learning-and-teaching-higher-education-synthesis-research>
- Hughes, G., & Spanner, L. (2019). *The University Mental Health Charter*. Student Minds  
[https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/191208\\_umhc\\_artwork.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/191208_umhc_artwork.pdf)
- Jones, M. (2024) *‘Steering the Ship’: A Thematic Analysis exploring the psychological underpinnings of the Undergraduate student experience*. [Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia].
- Meehan, C., & Howells, K. (2017). ‘What really matters to freshers?’: evaluation of first year student experience of transition into university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(7), 893–907.  
<https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323194>
- Morgan, H., & Houghton, A. (2011). *Inclusive curriculum design in higher education Considerations for effective practice across and within subject areas*. The Higher Education Academy.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-curriculum-design-higher-education>
- Office for Students (2023). Equality of Opportunity Risk Register.  
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register-eor/>
- Rossi, V. (2023). *Inclusive Learning Design in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Creating Equitable Learning Experiences* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781003230144>
- Sanger, C.S. (2020). Inclusive Pedagogy and Universal Design Approaches for Diverse Learning Environments. In: C. Sanger, & N.Gleason (Eds.) *Diversity and Inclusion in Global Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.  
[https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1628-3\\_2](https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1628-3_2)
- Thomas L. (2012a). Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-summary>
- Thomas, L. (2012b). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* (14), 4-24. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.14.S.4>
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C., & Evans, B. (2021) Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1398-1410.  
<https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>
- Timmis, M. A., Humphrey, K., Strongman, C., Scruton, A., Winnard, Y., & Cavallerio, F. (2024). “You’ve already, kind of, got the wheels moving a little bit”; students’ value of pre-arrival support in transitioning into higher education. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 35, 100521.  
<https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2024.100521>

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

University of East Anglia (2025). Access and participation plan (APP) 2025/26 to 2028/29

<https://assets.uea.ac.uk/f/185167/x/a9b8a9ffc6/university-of-east-anglia-access-and-participation-plan-2025-26-2028-29.pdf>

Worsley, J. D., Harrison, P., & Corcoran, R. (2021). Bridging the Gap: Exploring the Unique Transition From Home, School or College Into University. *Frontiers in public health*, *9*, 634285. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285>

**Appendix I.** Demographic Table for Survey participants

Characteristic	N (total = 60)	%
Gender identity		
Female (cis/trans)	51	85.0
Male (cis/trans)	7	11.7
Non-binary	1	1.7
Agender	1	1.7
Transgender identity		
Yes	1	1.7
No	59	98.3
Sexual orientation		
Straight or heterosexual	41	68.3
Gay or lesbian	6	10.0
Bisexual	7	11.7
Sexual orientation not listed	4	6.7
Prefer not to say	2	3.3
Ethnicity		
White English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, or British	43	71.7
Indian or Indian British	3	5.0
Pakistani or Pakistani British	1	1.7
Other Asian background	5	8.3
White and Asian or Asian British	3	5.0
Other mixed/multiple ethnic background	1	1.7
Other White background	1	1.7
Other ethnic background	2	3.3
Prefer not to say	1	1.7
Religion		
Agnostic	22	37.9
Christian	12	20.7
Religion not listed	9	15.5
Buddhist	1	1.7
Hindu	1	1.7
Jain	1	1.7
Prefer not to say	12	20.7
Disability status		
Yes	9	15.5
No	49	84.5
Disability type		
Learning difference	5	45.5
Long-term illness/health or mental health condition	4	36.4
Physical impairment	1	9.1
Social/communication condition	1	9.1
Commuter student		

## "Take away some of the fear": An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

Yes	22	36.7
No	38	63.3
<b>First-generation university student</b>		
Yes	18	30.0
No	42	70.0
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18	30	50.0
19	16	26.7
20	3	5.0
21	1	1.7
29	1	1.7
47	1	1.7
56	1	1.7
Not reported	7	11.7

**Appendix II** Demographic Table for Focus Group participants

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age (years)</b>		
19	3	20.0
20	3	20.0
21	3	20.0
24	1	6.7
26	2	13.3
51	1	6.7
Not disclosed	2	13.3
<b>Gender identity</b>		
Female (cis/trans)	9	60.0
Male (cis/trans)	2	13.3
Non-binary	1	6.7
Not disclosed	3	20.0
<b>Sexual orientation</b>		
Straight/heterosexual	9	60.0
Bisexual	4	26.7
Not disclosed	2	13.3
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, or British	12	80.0
White and Asian or Asian British	1	6.7
Not disclosed	2	13.3
<b>Disability status</b>		
Yes	8	53.3
No	5	33.3
Not disclosed	2	13.3

“Take away some of the fear”: An evaluation of how a pre-arrival module helped to support student transition to first year psychology

---

<b>Disability type</b>		
Learning difference	1	12.5
Long-term illness/health or mental health condition	4	50.0
Social/communication condition	3	37.5
<hr/>		
<b>Commuter student</b>		
Yes	7	46.7
<hr/>		
<b>First-generation university student</b>		
Yes	8	53.3
<hr/>		
<b>Caring responsibilities</b>		
Yes	2	13.3
<hr/>		
<b>Previously attended university</b>		
Yes	3	20.0

---