



## From participant to partner in co-creating an extended first year induction

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### ABSTRACT

This vignette offers a personal reflection on enhancing the first-year experience at Nottingham Business School (NBS), shaped by three key experiences.

- My personal university experience and the value of having a community.
- Co-developing and evaluating a co-created extended induction programme at NBS.
- Attending EFYE 2025 as a first-time attendee and reflecting on my role as a placement student supporting the first year student experience.

Drawing on my own journey of building community as an undergraduate, I reflect on co-developing session content with academic colleagues, supporting Student Mentors, and facilitating feedback processes to refine the induction cycle. The project was driven in the belief that students should be active partners in their learning, with Student Mentors and Assistant Course Leaders collaborating to jointly deliver sessions designed to create a sense of belonging and academic confidence.

Attending EFYE for the first time further shaped my understanding of student engagement and the significance of early transition support. Overall, this vignette illustrates how collaborative, student and staff partnerships can strengthen the first-year experience.

Keywords: Induction, co-creation, belonging, collaboration, reflection

### Introduction

Casting back to my final days of upper secondary school, ecstatic whilst unsure about where the next chapter in my life would take me, one thing I knew for sure at the time... I did not have any intention of going to university, especially as I was not yet ready to leave home! Eventually I decided to take a gap year to discover my next steps and as time went on and I attended university open days, I made the decision that I wanted to study at Nottingham Trent.

For those who know me from a very young age, stepping out of my comfort zone and meeting new people was something that I often resisted, and if someone told me on my last day at Sixth Form that I'd be in the position I am in now, I would never have believed them! Therefore, having an active involvement in improving the first-year experience at Nottingham Business School and attending EFYE 2025 at KU Leuven has transformed my understanding of what meaningful student engagement can look like. Additionally, this experience has enabled me to input a fresh and recent perspective from being a current student myself.

### My personal journey

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As an undergraduate student shortly entering my final year of study, I now have an excellent community of friends who I met during a group activity at the beginning of first year. I often think to myself, if I didn't engage in that one conversation, how different would my whole university experience have been?

From my personal perspective, group work activity is the essence of co-creation, and the structure of the four sessions that were delivered during the academic year by Student Mentors and their Assistant Course Leader, provided an informal and friendly environment for new students to connect with each other. This especially benefitted those students who were quieter and found it more difficult to instigate a conversation. The power of building new relationships is crucial for students to experience a successful transition into life at university (Buote et al., 2007).

### Co-creation at Nottingham Business School

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The Co-Creation project at Nottingham Business School (NBS) began in May 2024, where the Assistant Course Leaders and Student Mentors *collaborated* to develop the content for four sessions, carefully chosen around specific dates in the calendar year. Student Mentors at Nottingham Trent University are second/final year students who are trained to provide personalised guidance and academic support to first year students. In Co-Creation, the Student Mentors created intriguing and scenario-based discussions in an informal environment, whilst maintaining an academic lens throughout.

As my role with NBS began in September 2024, supporting the delivery of Co-Creation gave me a strong sense of pride and recognition of how far I have come since the challenges faced at the beginning of my university journey just a couple of years ago. As the project evolved, Student Mentors became *ambassadors* for the induction process, bridging the gap between students and staff. Their involvement also enhanced their own professional development, aligning with the employability focus that underpins the NBS Student Experience.

In essence, my role focused on shaping the content of the four Co-Creation sessions alongside academic colleagues, ensuring that Student Mentors were active participants in the delivery (Bovill, 2019). This responsibility led me to hold briefing sessions for both the Assistant Course Leaders and the Student Mentors, drawing on the communication and leadership skills I had developed throughout my university experience. Following the final session in March 2025, I supported a focus group that created a space for open and honest discussion about what had worked well and what could be improved for future cycles. Feedback from students and staff showed that Student Mentors particularly benefitted from opportunities to further develop their teamwork, communication and presentation skills, all of which strengthened their transferable employability skills. Being a part of this collaborative process allowed me to see the wider impact of Co-Creation, and reinforced the importance of students and staff shaping the first-year experience together, especially during the early weeks of first term, a period crucial for social cohesion.

From liaising on this project, I saw how the students and mentors who embraced Co-Creation had improved the overall quality of education within the first-year cohort and had built a stronger, more collaborative community fostering a sense of belonging, wellness, and academic confidence (Keene et al., 2025).

## EFYE 2025

Attending the European First Year Experience Conference at KU Leuven was my first experience of attending and presenting at an international conference. These three days were both inspiring and eye-opening, as I learned about the different ways of how experienced academics and researchers contribute towards the first-year experience for students at university. I was grateful to have the opportunity to reach out and connect with a wide range of experienced academics from all across Europe and feel the *third space community* that this conference possesses (Carey et al., 2024).

Having the opportunity to present in a show and tell session is something I will always remember. From originally feeling quite nervous walking into the roundtable presentation, I soon felt the positive and collaborative atmosphere of the room knowing that everybody is here to share expertise, and work together as one to improve the first-year experience. It was inspiring to hear about the work that other institutions across Europe are working on, in particular the “Ask me program” from the University of Minho in Portugal. Costa (2025) identified the importance of *peer mentoring* and how the informal nature of learning from peers can increase overall student engagement, something I really resonate with based on my personal experiences.

## Conclusion

Looking back on my journey, where I was uncertain about even attending university, it has evolved into an incredibly rewarding experience. Through Co-Creation, I’ve learned that real impact happens when students and staff work together, share ideas openly, and value each other’s perspectives.

Attending and presenting at EFYE 2025 reinforced this understanding on an international level through the power of collaboration across institutions. The sense of belonging within the EFYE community mirrored exactly the supportive and inclusive environment that Nottingham Business School possesses as an institution.

As I approach the end of my undergraduate journey, I am proud to have contributed to a project that will continue to evolve and support future cohorts. My experience has taught me that co-creation is not just a practice, it’s a mindset that fosters *belonging, and lifelong learning*.

## Biography

*Ethan Keene* is a Business Management and Marketing student currently undertaking his placement year as the Projects, Events and Insights assistant for Nottingham Business School. He is involved within a wide range of school level projects focussing on enhancing students’ experience, with a particular emphasis on overseeing Student Mentor management.

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