



From freshers to graduates: Building a holistic, inclusive onboarding framework across study phases at KU Leuven

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ABSTRACT

Over the past eight years, KU Leuven has developed a university-wide onboarding programme supporting starting students across all study phases – from bachelor's to bridging and master's levels. Rooted in the university's strategic commitment to holistic, inclusive, and student-centred education and support, the programme is oriented towards fostering a strong sense of belonging, academic success, and personal development from day one.

The onboarding concept is built around five key components: academic and social integration, value affirmation, practical and administrative guidance, and engagement with global challenges. These components are underpinned by a set of design principles and an intentionally flexible framework that allows for local adaptation across KU Leuven's twelve campuses.

A defining feature of the programme's development has been its co-creative approach: central services, faculties, and student organisations collaborate to establish a shared institutional vision and strong common baseline while preserving disciplinary and contextual autonomy.

This paper presents the onboarding framework as an institutional use case, examining how it is designed, coordinated, and maintained in a complex, multicampus context. Focusing on institutional learning rather than evaluative outcomes, the article discusses key design tensions, organisational challenges, and conditions for sustainability, and distils a set of transferable insights relevant to other higher education institutions working to align widening access with belonging and meaningful student engagement.

Keywords: student onboarding, sense of belonging, academic integration, inclusive education, co-creation

Introduction

Transitions into higher education are critical junctures that shape students' academic trajectories. The EFYE movement and related research have consistently shown that structured onboarding for students is not merely an administrative or social introduction, but a pedagogical and developmental intervention that actively cultivates students' sense of belonging within their new academic community (Briggs et al., 2012; Kift, 2025; Nelson et al., 2009; Tinto, 2016). Belonging, in this context, is more than feeling welcome: it refers to acceptance of, and connectedness and engagement with, individuals and the institution. It involves a dynamic and evolving alignment between the students' identities, values, and aspirations, and those of the institution. When thoughtfully designed, onboarding thus serves as an early catalyst for academic engagement, well-being, and persistence (e.g. Allen et al., 2024a; Allen et al., 2024b; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Mtshweni, 2024; Thomas, 2012; van Herpen et al., 2020).

At KU Leuven, these insights have, over the past eight years, informed our institutional approach to new student onboarding. Against a backdrop of near-unrestricted access to the first year of higher education for holders of a Flemish secondary education certificate – while all other incoming students must complete an admission procedure, which, though relatively straightforward, remains a necessary step – combined with increasing student diversity, lower pass rates and growing attrition rates, they have translated into strategic objectives that foreground inclusion, diversity, and belonging from day one of every new student's academic journey, regardless of their point of entry. A key action in this regard is the ongoing development and refinement of a university-wide onboarding programme – Startersdagen / Freshers' Days + Orientation Days – that supports students across all study phases, from bachelor's to bridging and master's levels. Central to the programme is the understanding that a sense of belonging forms the foundation for academic engagement for all students, with particular significance for those from minority and underrepresented backgrounds. At KU Leuven, this understanding is operationalised through a pro-diversity orientation that actively fosters inclusion and values the unique contributions of every student (see e.g. Cannaerts et al., 2024 and also Ward et al., 2025). Within this approach, students are positioned from the outset as active partners in their educational journey, and onboarding is conceived not as a discrete moment but as an ongoing, shared responsibility woven into the very fabric of the first semester and year at curriculum level.

Starting from a brief discussion of KU Leuven's context and approach, this paper presents the onboarding framework as an institutional use case, focusing on how it is designed, coordinated, and sustained over time. It particularly examines the practical implications, design choices, and governance processes that underpin its realisation and continuous evolution.

Context and approach

KU Leuven's context is *complex* in three regards. First, it is a comprehensive university organised in 15 faculties across 12 campuses situated in nine cities in Flanders and Brussels, each with their own historical background and unique characteristics. This *multicampus environment* makes the delivery of consistent support and resources to all students challenging. As such, any welcoming programme needs to have a strong common baseline while being adaptable to address the specific needs of students at each location.

Second, KU Leuven annually welcomes over *60,000 students originating from varied academic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds*. Incoming students have diverse prior educational experiences: some are familiar with the Flemish secondary school system and KU Leuven's teaching and assessment culture, while others arrive from different national or international institutions, including professional bachelor's programmes. The student body includes domestic students as well as international ones from Europe and around the globe, with many individuals stemming from multilingual or multicultural households. Living situations vary from local residency to domestic relocation or international adjustment. Socioeconomic differences are also significant, with some students being well-resourced and others facing financial challenges or being first-generation university attendees. Given this tapestry of experiences and perspectives, the onboarding programme must be both inclusive and responsive, offering broad support for all students alongside targeted interventions for specific groups to ensure every individual feels welcomed, supported, and equipped for success.

Third, the university's *organisational framework* consists of central offices and services that offer general orientation and support, as well as autonomous faculties that serve as students' primary academic home, offering discipline-specific guidance and resources in addition to moral and practical assistance. Effective coordination between these entities is crucial to provide a cohesive and supportive welcoming experience. Furthermore, KU Leuven boasts a bustling student community with lively representative bodies, unions, and associations. Student representatives have a fixed seat on the university's governing and advisory boards, but it is an ongoing endeavour for central offices and faculties to collaborate closely with them in designing and delivering welcome activities.

This combination of complicating factors called for a flexible yet coherent onboarding approach, balancing a shared institutional vision and baseline with local adaptation. To address this challenge, a dedicated working group was set up, bringing together all relevant stakeholders (a strategy that aligns with the 'whole-of-institution' approach advocated in transition pedagogy: see e.g. Kift, 2025): central services – in particular, educational policy, teaching and learning services, student services, and marketing and communication – alongside faculties and student organisations. This broad composition ensured that a university-wide welcoming programme was developed not only in alignment with strategic priorities but also in response to the diverse realities across campuses. The collaborative process resulted in clear arrangements for implementing the programme, establishing a strong common foundation while allowing each faculty and campus to tailor the approach to its particular needs and circumstances.

Following the initial start-up phase, the working group evolved into a smaller project team that maintains coordination with the executive board/policy team, on the one hand, and with faculty leads, student organisations, and other key actors, on the other. With the latter, notably, a conscious decision has been made to adopt a co-creative *modus operandi*: regular meetings, coworking sessions, and structured feedback loops facilitate the exchange of inspiring activities and foster shared ownership and continuous improvement. In addition, the project team distributes supporting materials, such as programme templates, guidelines, and best practice examples, via a dedicated website and newsletters. At the same time, each faculty retains the autonomy to adapt these resources to their specific context, ensuring that the onboarding experience remains relevant and effective for all students, regardless of their point of entry or background. And in doing so, they are encouraged to closely involve the students and student organisations themselves, which resonates with the wider shift toward *students-as-partners* approaches in the wider institutional sphere (Blackwell-Young & Millard, 2023; Healey et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Omland et al., 2025).

Conceptual framework and rationale

Five key components

Drawing on KU Leuven's strategic policy framework, as well as prevailing insights into the needs of students transitioning into higher education, the programme framework that is the result of our collaborative approach comprises five interrelated and interlocking components. These elements can be flexibly combined and integrated by faculties as appropriate to meet the diverse needs of their students:

- *Academic integration*: orienting students in their discipline and welcoming them into the academic community.
- *Social integration*: facilitating peer and staff connections and a taste of student life.

- *Value affirmation*: affirming important aspects of students' identities and encouraging reflection on personal values, dreams, and talents.
- *Practical and administrative guidance*: providing essential information for navigating university life.
- *Engagement with global challenges*: raising awareness of societal issues and the responsibilities of both the university and its students in addressing them.

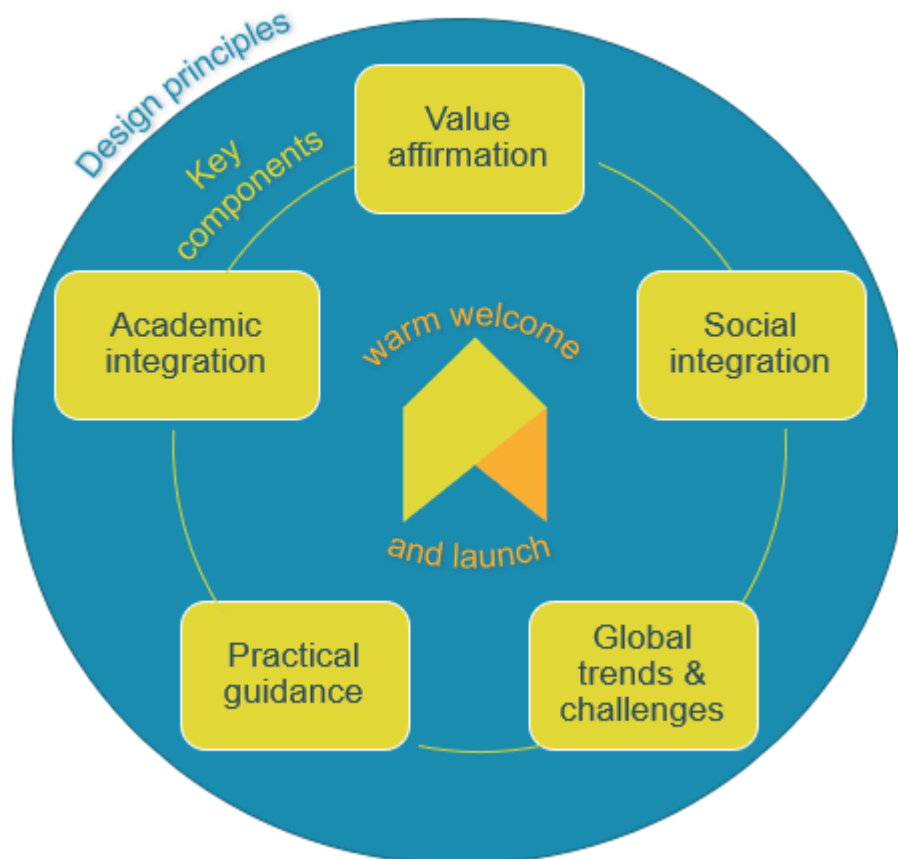


Figure 1 Circular diagram of the five key components of the KU Leuven onboarding programme

Academic integration is at the heart of our integrated orientation programme. Building on theories of student involvement and evidence on high-impact practices (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Bowden et al., 2021; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kuh et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2012; Schaeper, 2020; Tinto, 2017), our programme aims to introduce students to their discipline, encourage a mindset of inquisitiveness, and welcome them into the academic community through meaningful involvement in curricular practice from the start. During Freshers' Days, the opening words from programme directors or (vice-)deans offer a warm welcome and outline the educational vision of the programme, giving newcomers an immediate sense of the values and ambitions shaping their studies. Next, interactive experiences – such as mini-lectures, lab sessions, hands-on setups, or demonstrations – immerse students in the discipline's teaching approach, while exploratory assignments stimulate active learning and prompt self-reflection on their strengths and areas for growth. Where possible, those interventions bring together first-year students,

senior students, lecturers, and teaching assistants, so that new students get a sense of feeling welcomed and being part of the academic culture from day one.

As building academic integration is a sustained process, activities continue into the first year – including small-group sessions with dedicated course monitors, regular study counselling (supported by learning analytics dashboards), and Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) coaching (Dawson et al., 2014; Havens & Williams, 2019; Gehreke et al., 2024). Importantly, first-year teaching staff are invited to take active part in orientation activities and to reference those shared experiences in their courses, thus reinforcing key messages throughout the academic year and strengthening students' connection to their discipline and the broader university environment as they develop confidence and skills (a curriculum- and knowledge-oriented approach also advocated e.g. by Felby & Ashwin, 2026).

Already from the above, it follows that *social integration* is an equally vital component of the onboarding programme, designed to foster connections among peers, academic staff, and technical personnel, while offering newcomers a genuine taste of student life at KU Leuven. Research has long indicated that academic and social integration are mutually reinforcing determinants of student persistence (Thomas, 2012) and that social relatedness, interactions, and involvement can positively impact students' well-being, motivation, retention, and achievement, making adaptation to the new environment and the formation of new networks relevant aspects of the student experience (so, in addition to the afore-mentioned on sense of belonging, Bronkema & Bowman, 2019; Byl et al., 2022; Noyens et al., 2019). To that end, faculties and student unions are encouraged to coordinate activities. Thus, first-year monitors or PAL-coaches may host introductory games to help students meet in a relaxed, informal setting. Shared lunches led by student buddies and low-threshold 'whisper moments' during plenary sessions provide further opportunities for friendly interaction and brief exchanges, helping to break the ice even within larger groups. Campus tours introduce students to dedicated spaces for relaxation and socialising, helping them quickly locate places to unwind and connect. Informal presentations and activities organised by student unions offer insight into the vibrant student life on offer. Activities such as campus treasure hunts and orientation walks promote teamwork and informal sharing of experiences and advice. Students are also introduced to KU Leuven's extensive network of over sixty independent associations, enabling them to find communities aligned with their interests or backgrounds. By making these opportunities visible from the start, the onboarding programme ensures every student can discover groups that resonate with their passions and aspirations. Collectively, these activities support students' transition and cultivate a strong sense of belonging and engagement from day one.

The *value affirmation* element, underpinning both academic and social integration, reflects the university's commitment to creating an inclusive, respectful, and safe environment for learning, working, and living, as a prerequisite for quality research and education in the service of society (as laid down in the [Charter for Inclusion](#)). Recognising that worries and doubts about belonging are a common experience for all first-year students, the onboarding programme draws on principles of wise interventions (Walton, 2014) to help students reflect on their values, goals, and talents. Small activities such as polls, speed dating, and storytelling with role models (students, staff, or alumni) who share experiences of personal growth and resilience, are designed to allow students to self-affirm important aspects of their identities (McQueen & Klein, 2006); this signals to them that we value diversity and that each individual's perspective matters. Throughout, feedback is actively solicited via digital and written channels to ensure that every voice is heard and to enhance the community's welcoming and supportive culture. This approach aligns with the finding that social-belonging interventions in postsecondary education have shown promising potential to

narrow gaps in performance, wellbeing, and student satisfaction, offering important foundational support for first-year students (Chrobak, 2024; Walton et al., 2015). They may best be viewed as supplementary to addressing structural barriers, so Chrobak argues, but they nevertheless offer significant support, helping students gradually build confidence and a sense of belonging as they settle into university life.

Practical and administrative guidance is a vital component in providing reassurance to students and helping them settle in as they embark on their university journey. It encompasses introductions to key faculty staff members, including study counsellors, ombudspersons, and PAL-coaches, and also to central student services providing information and advice on matters such as accommodation, finances, and wellbeing. Common queries are addressed directly, with clear information on affordable study materials, language options, access to reading software, and avenues for discussing personal challenges. Dedicated sessions offer explanations of the online learning platform and guidance for completing the Individual Study Programme (ISP) in computer labs, enabling students to manage essential administrative tasks efficiently. The afore-mentioned campus tours highlight important spaces – including accessible entrances for those with mobility needs, quiet rooms for relaxation, intercultural spaces, a student mosque, and special dietary dining options – ensuring everyone knows where to find amenities that suit their preferences or needs. Through these practical measures and supportive resources, the onboarding programme seeks to equip students with the tools and knowledge necessary to make it through the opening weeks of the academic year and navigate university life with assurance and ease.

Lastly, the onboarding programme aims to promote awareness of contemporary societal issues and demonstrate the university's commitment to addressing *global challenges*, helping students feel connected to the wider world (in line with KU Leuven Working Group Lab's [Sustainable Education vision](#)). To deepen this connection, students may be introduced to recent developments and insights in their chosen discipline, with professors sharing highlights of current research topics – such as innovative approaches to sustainability, digital transformation, or responses to recent global events. Current events that relate to the faculty's work may also be referenced in the programme, making the relevance of university research immediately clear. Opportunities to engage further include guest lectures, discussions, or panels with alumni who share their experiences of tackling societal challenges both at university and beyond. Again, the elements presented help build a welcoming and inspiring environment, empowering students to see themselves as active and responsible contributors to both their discipline and the wider community from the start – an idea aligned with Bovill and Woolmer's (2019) view of students as co-creators in and of the curriculum.

Design principles

The framework is underpinned by seven design principles (A-G) that emphasise inclusivity, timely and relevant information, a variety of engaging methods, and ample opportunities for meaningful personal contact. These design principles guide faculties in designing their activities on the basis of the five key components. It is worth noting that the principles are largely rooted in common sense and informed by extensive practical experience accumulated over years of onboarding practice. Additionally, they reflect established best practices in educational programme design and student support, aiming to address the diverse needs of new entrants in a systematic and evidence-informed manner.

Thus, to ensure a positive student experience, care should be taken to avoid information overload by delivering essential content in digestible amounts and at moments of immediate relevance (A). This

just-in-time approach prevents overwhelm and enables students to process and act on guidance as and when they need it. Information is preferably presented first-hand by relevant staff, faculty, or student representatives, ensuring both accuracy and authenticity (B). Trust, authenticity, and belonging in higher education rely not only on clear messaging but also on the legitimacy of the sender. These qualities are best nurtured through direct, relational communication, rather than through impersonal or fully mediated channels (e.g. McConnell et al., 2025; Jones & Nangah, 2021; Jones & Bell, 2025; Shaw & Gilani, 2025). The program's structure should be logical and thoughtfully sequenced, with topics introduced in an order that supports progressive learning and adjustment (C). That resonates with views on effective onboarding as a scaffolded transition, with intentionally sequenced design and the progressive introduction of support in order to facilitate gradual understanding, adjustment, and autonomy (e.g. Bowden et al., 2021; Gehreke et al., 2024; Schaeper, 2020). A diverse range of working methods – such as interactive sessions, group discussions, and hands-on tasks – caters to different learning preferences and aims to keep engagement high (D), echoing findings that student engagement is multi-dimensional and can be increased, among other strategies, by providing various opportunities for active participation. These include high-taxonomic learning activities and interactive learning approaches, collaboratively or plenary, whether face-to-face or via technology (e.g. Beimel et al., 2024; Godsk & Møller, 2025; Costa & Reis, 2025; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Representation of multiple perspectives, by drawing on the voices of students, faculty, and support staff, ensures that a broad spectrum of experiences and needs is addressed (E), a practice recommended for fostering inclusivity and belonging (e.g. Jones & Bell, 2025; Johnson, 2026; Taff & Clifton, 2022). The programme is designed to enable personal connections between students and between students and staff through small group interactions, informal gatherings, and accessible support sessions (F). Such approaches are widely associated with trust-building, peer network formation, and low-threshold help-seeking during the critical early transition phase (e.g. van Lamoen et al., 2025; Geister et al., 2025; Gehreke et al., 2024). Student input and participation are actively encouraged, allowing newcomers to share their views and contribute to the community from the outset (G), a principle recognised as fundamental for empowering students and strengthening community ties (in the spirit of the afore-mentioned wise interventions). Altogether, these principles aim to create a welcoming, supportive, and effective onboarding experience that helps every student feel informed, connected and valued from day one.

Gradual and phased roll-out: Putting the concept into practice

Target audience

The choice was made for a gradual roll-out of the onboarding programme. Initially, the onboarding efforts primarily targeted newly entering first-year bachelor's students – the so-called *generation students* in the Flemish education context – based on the widely acknowledged insight that early experiences in higher education profoundly shape students' trajectories in terms of motivation, achievement, and retention. The emphasis lay on supporting students in finding their footing – academically, socially, and personally – within the university environment.

In a subsequent phase, the programme's scope was expanded to include the students entering through bridging programmes and other lateral entry pathways. Although these students already hold a professional bachelor's degree, many are new to the academic university environment: that entails not only a change in learning expectations, but also in identity and belonging. Extending onboarding to these groups meant a more expansive definition of "new student," moving beyond just first-year bachelor's students and

broadening its use to those who are new to the university environment, regardless of their prior qualifications.

A further step in this direction, and the most recent development in KU Leuven's multi-year plan, has been the inclusion of incoming master's students as a distinct target group. This expansion again reflects the understanding that the "first-year experience" is not confined to undergraduate education. Commencing a master's programme constitutes a significant milestone that involves new academic, personal, and social adjustments. While master's students are often more mature and experienced, they still encounter a range of challenges: adapting to a higher level of analytical rigour and interdisciplinary inquiry; managing greater autonomy and workload; adjusting to new faculties or universities with different teaching and assessment cultures; and, for many, integrating into new living environments and social networks (e.g. Allen et al., 2024a; Edwards et al., 2024; Hacker, 2024; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nelson & Lovitts, 2001; Pascale, 2018; Rodgers et al., 2023; Seay et al., 2008; Sheehy, 2016).

In all of this, international entrants, spanning both bachelor's and master's levels, form a distinct group. Their challenges are intensified by the need to develop strong intercultural communication competence (on which, see Xiaoyan et al., 2024) as well as by the particular practical or administrative requirements of studying abroad. Addressing these complex needs through a comprehensive, inclusive onboarding approach (covered by Freshers' Days as well as Orientation Days) contributes not only to student well-being and retention but also to the university's broader commitment to internationalisation, diversity, and equitable access to success.

The actual onboarding journey

The onboarding journey for new students begins with *pre-arrival communication and guidance*, providing detailed information about the university, faculty, available resources and local and educational culture through events, brochures, emails, webinars, and online portals. This is taken care of by the central communication services, in close coordination with the student services and the faculties. As part of this targeted information campaign, with customised tracks for each target group, we believe in the power of peer mentoring, connecting newcomers with current students or alumni for valuable insights and advice. New and innovative approaches are being explored to give incoming international students immediate opportunities to connect with peers from their own country or from other international backgrounds. Both face-to-face and digital peer mentoring play a vital role in promoting early engagement, which in turn is instrumental in shoring up belonging and academic confidence (see e.g. Collings et al., 2014; Gehreke et al., 2024; Schilling et al., 2022; van der Velden et al., 2023).

Upon the students' *arrival on campus and in their city of residence*, immediately following the academic year's opening ceremony, KU Leuven schedules 2,5 days for Startersdagen/Freshers' Days. Each faculty then conducts its own welcome, orientation, and introduction programme. This includes the above-mentioned mix of inclusive and targeted activities, to help students familiarise with their new academic and residential settings and support their integration into the university and local communities. For incoming international students, additional sessions are coordinated by both central student services and the faculties, called Orientation Days.

Beyond the dedicated onboarding days, a comprehensive support system is in place for all new students throughout the opening phase of the academic year and continuing for the entire semester and year. This ongoing approach is designed to ensure that every student has access to guidance, resources, and

opportunities for connection as they adjust academically, socially, and personally to university life. To maintain effectiveness, the holistic support programme carefully balances inclusivity for all with targeted interventions for specific groups, such as international students, commuters, first-generation students, and others who may require additional assistance.

Institutional learning from the ongoing design and coordination of a university-wide onboarding framework

Building on the preceding analysis, this section reflects on what the ongoing design and coordination of KU Leuven's onboarding framework has revealed at the institutional level. Particular attention is paid to organisational learning processes, design tensions, and governance challenges arising in the context of a large, multicampus university.

A shared framework as an enabling constraint

One of the most salient institutional insights concerns the role of the onboarding framework as a **shared reference structure** rather than a prescriptive model. While the framework was initially articulated to bring coherence to onboarding practices, its longer-term significance lies in how it functions as an *enabling constraint* across diverse contexts.

In practice, the framework provides a common vocabulary through which faculties, central services, and student organisations discuss priorities, identify gaps, and articulate local choices. Its level of abstraction proves critical: sufficiently specific to orient decision-making, yet open enough to accommodate disciplinary cultures, programme sizes, and campus-specific realities. This balance helps avoid two recurrent risks in institution-wide initiatives: fragmentation through excessive localisation, and resistance caused by over-standardisation (see e.g. McNaughton, 2025, on the three pillars of effective change management in higher education).

Importantly, the framework does not eliminate variation. Instead, it legitimises difference within a shared structure, allowing faculties and campuses to situate their onboarding practices within a recognisable institutional narrative while retaining ownership over implementation. From an institutional perspective, this shared language supports alignment without imposing uniformity – a recurring challenge in multicampus settings. In this way, the framework also mediates the ongoing tension between central coordination and faculty autonomy: it supports institutional alignment while explicitly preserving space for disciplinary interpretation and local agency, rather than attempting to resolve that tension through standardisation.

Co-creation as a sustained governance practice

A second area of institutional learning concerns **co-creation**, not merely as a design methodology but as an ongoing governance practice. What begins as a collaborative design effort gradually evolves into a durable mode of coordination through which expectations, responsibilities, and boundaries are continually negotiated.

The initial broad working group brought together central services, faculties, and student organisations to establish a shared vision. Over time, this has evolved into a smaller project team that maintains strategic alignment with university leadership while supporting local actors. Regular meetings, coworking sessions,

shared templates, and curated examples form the infrastructure that keeps collaboration active rather than symbolic.

From a case study perspective, a key insight is that co-creation requires *active maintenance*. Without structured moments of exchange and facilitation, collaboration risks devolving into parallel initiatives or ad hoc coordination. Conversely, sustained co-creation strengthens legitimacy: faculties remain engaged because their perspectives are recognised, student organisations participate more constructively when positioned as partners (Blackwell Young & Millard, 2023), and central services can steer strategically without resorting to top-down control. At the same time, sustaining this mode of co-creation places continuous demands on institutional capacity, as coordination, facilitation, and alignment require ongoing investment from both central teams and faculty actors.

This distributed ownership proves particularly valuable in navigating change. Adjustments to timing, scope, or target groups are more readily accepted when they are the result of collective refinements rather than unilateral decisions.

Onboarding as a continuum reshaping institutional responsibility

Designing onboarding as a **continuum rather than a bounded event** has significant organisational consequences. While conceptually aligned with contemporary transition pedagogy, operationalising this idea challenges established divisions of labour within the institution.

Traditionally, onboarding activities are concentrated in a short temporal window and primarily associated with student services. In contrast, the continuum approach extends the scope of onboarding across the opening phase of the academic year and into the curriculum. As onboarding becomes distributed over time and embedded within educational practice, responsibility for onboarding also becomes more widely shared, involving programme directors, teaching staff, and peer actors alongside support services. This redistribution prompts institutional reflection on where onboarding ends and regular teaching and student guidance begins — and whether such a distinction remains meaningful.

From an institutional learning perspective, this reframing exposes tensions around workload, recognition, and incentives. Although academic staff involvement in onboarding is widely recognised as valuable, such responsibility is not always structurally recognised or supported. At the same time, positioning onboarding as the start of academic engagement rather than a preparatory add-on clarifies its pedagogical legitimacy and encourages closer alignment between early onboarding activities and broader curricular practices.

Inclusivity and differentiation as a design tension

A recurring design challenge concerns the balance between inclusive provision for all students and differentiated support for specific groups. The framework's flexibility enables faculties to layer activities: shared moments that foster common identity are complemented by targeted interventions addressing particular needs, such as those of international students or students entering through non-traditional pathways.

At KU Leuven, the onboarding approach for international students has traditionally consisted of a distinct set of activities, developed over several years in response to the specific academic, administrative and cultural challenges these students face. More recently, there has been an explicit effort to embed these longstanding initiatives more visibly within the wider institutional onboarding framework. This shift reflects

a commitment to ensuring that international students are recognised as an integral part of the university's student population from the outset, rather than as a parallel or peripheral group.

At the same time, institutional discussions have highlighted that integration does not necessarily imply full convergence of onboarding experiences. Particularly at bachelor level, where international and local students often enrol in structurally separate programmes and do not share teaching contexts, bringing all of them together in joint activities is not always pedagogically meaningful or desirable. Instead, belonging is increasingly understood as something that can be fostered through parallel but equally legitimate onboarding pathways, situated within a shared institutional space and underpinned by common values, messages and points of visibility on campus.

At institutional level, this insight has sharpened reflection on coherence, visibility, and coordination across a diversified onboarding landscape. One learning emerging from this process is that inclusivity can be supported through differentiated, rather than uniform, onboarding approaches. The framework functions as a connective infrastructure ensuring that all students encounter a recognisable institutional welcome while acknowledging that support needs differ across profiles and moments in the student journey. This approach resonates with KU Leuven's strategic policy motto on diversity, "inclusive where possible, target-group orientated where necessary." By articulating this logic explicitly at framework level, the university is able to avoid framing differentiation as fragmentation. Instead, differentiation is positioned as an institutional design choice that supports inclusion at scale, allowing diverse forms of onboarding to coexist while contributing to a coherent and credible narrative around student belonging.

Ongoing challenges in institutional embedding

Despite the institutional learning outlined above, embedding a holistic, dynamic, and responsive onboarding framework across a large and diverse institution continues to involve a number of structural and cultural challenges. These challenges do not signal shortcomings of the framework itself, but rather reflect the complexity of sustaining a dynamic, relational, and values-driven approach at scale.

A first ongoing challenge concerns sustaining **engagement among academic staff, student associations, and senior students**. While their involvement is widely recognised as critical for strengthening academic integration and credibility, such engagement cannot be taken for granted. Competing demands on time, uneven recognition of onboarding-related contributions, and differences in local cultures mean that participation fluctuates. This fluctuation has practical and pedagogical consequences. Limited involvement from academic staff and senior students tends to shift a substantial share of onboarding responsibilities towards study counsellors and support services, raising questions about workload distribution and long-term sustainability. Beyond organisational implications, there is also a possible risk that the academic dimension of onboarding receives less emphasis when involvement from academic staff and senior students is limited. This suggests the importance of monitoring how different actor configurations may shape the orientation of onboarding practices over time. From an institutional perspective, it is therefore crucial to explore forms of recognition and support – such as formal acknowledgement, workload adjustments, or professional development opportunities – that help to sustain not only participation over time, but also a shared understanding of onboarding as an academically grounded and pedagogically intentional practice.

A second challenge relates to **temporal continuity**. Positioning onboarding as the start of academic engagement rather than a discrete moment requires that early experiences connect meaningfully with

teaching, assessment, and guidance practices later in the first semester and beyond. Ensuring such continuity remains an ongoing endeavour, particularly in large programmes where responsibility is distributed across many actors who engage with the onboarding framework to varying degrees. Among teaching staff who are less closely connected to the onboarding narrative, the potential follow-up role of regular educational practices in sustaining early engagement is not always fully recognised or taken up.

A third area of attention concerns **communication formats and modes of engagement**. While digital and hybrid initiatives have become indispensable for reaching diverse student populations, both pre- and post-arrival, they also pose challenges in terms of sustaining genuine engagement, meaningful interaction, and a shared sense of community. Designing online elements that complement face-to-face encounters, rather than replacing them, continues to require careful calibration and iterative refinement, so that all students, regardless of format, feel equally welcomed and supported within the university environment.

Finally, these challenges underscore the importance of **ongoing institutional learning** about how early onboarding experiences relate to students' longer educational trajectories. It is clear that evidence on student retention, academic success – both immediate and sustained – and personal development forms an essential backdrop to the framework's continued evolution. Developing ways of monitoring these longer-term dynamics, in combination with short-term insights into students' early experiences, remains a key developmental task for the institution (which reflects calls for evidence-informed enhancement in higher education; see Ferreira et al., 2025; Vanlommel & van den Boom-Muilenburg, 2024).

Transferable design insights from an institutional use case

Taken together, the institutional learning processes and ongoing challenges outlined above point to a set of **transferable design insights** for higher education institutions seeking to develop or refine holistic onboarding approaches. These insights are not intended as a blueprint, but as points of orientation for others navigating similar design and governance tensions in their own contexts.

1. **Use a small number of shared components as a common language, not a checklist.** Frameworks are more likely to support dialogue and interpretation when they function as a shared reference structure rather than as a compliance mechanism, enabling alignment without prescribing uniform implementation.
2. **Treat co-creation as a governance strategy, not a project phase.** Sustained co-creation requires more than ad hoc collaboration: it places ongoing demands on institutional governance, including clarity of roles, coordination structures, and recognition of shared ownership over time.
3. **Position onboarding as the opening phase of academic life and engagement.** This has the potential to strengthen curricular alignment and clarify responsibility beyond student services, but requires sustained attention to continuity across the first semester and beyond in order to connect early experiences meaningfully to teaching, assessment, and guidance practices.
4. **Pursue inclusivity by balancing shared onboarding experiences with targeted support where needed.** Creating common points of entry can strengthen belonging, while differentiated initiatives help ensure that specific student needs are recognised and supported within a diverse student population.

These findings underline that holistic onboarding is not primarily a set of activities, but a **relational and organisational endeavour**. Its strength lies in an institution's capacity to keep values, structures, and actors

in dialogue, allowing onboarding to evolve through practice, reflection, and collaboration rather than through fixed designs.

Final reflections and recommendations

This case illustrates how a holistic onboarding framework can be developed and sustained as an institutional practice rather than as a discrete intervention. At KU Leuven, onboarding is increasingly understood as a shared, ongoing responsibility that spans central services, faculties, student organisations, and academic staff, and that evolves in response to changing student profiles and organisational contexts.

At an institutional level, sustaining this way of working involves ongoing attention to a number of practical conditions. Meaningful faculty-student partnerships play a central role in ensuring that onboarding activities remain relevant and authentic, both in their design and in their delivery, while continued investment in professional learning supports staff in engaging with inclusive and diversity-responsive pedagogy and transition support. Alongside this, peer mentoring and role-model initiatives provide accessible points of connection that help translate institutional intentions into everyday student experience, in particular for students from underrepresented or international backgrounds. The framework further depends on structured opportunities for cross-faculty exchange and co-creation, enabling practices to circulate, be adapted, and scaled without undermining local agency. Finally, maintaining onboarding as a living practice calls for forms of evaluation that support adaptation rather than closure, drawing on multiple sources of insight to inform ongoing refinement and institutional learning.

In this sense, holistic onboarding can be understood as a way of translating institutional values into lived student experience. In an increasingly diverse and complex higher education environment, it offers a strategic means of aligning widened access with a sense of belonging, and of connecting institutional goals with meaningful forms of student engagement. At KU Leuven, the onboarding framework articulates this ambition not through a fixed set of interventions, but through a shared orientation towards inclusion, partnership, and academic participation from the outset of each student's journey. Its significance lies precisely in this capacity to keep values, practices, and relationships in dialogue – ensuring that welcoming students into higher education is not only an act of entry, but an invitation into an academic community in which they can belong, contribute, and grow.

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Biographies

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