



Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

Amy Kyte, Nottingham Trent University, England

Sarah Hadlow, Nottingham Trent University, England

ABSTRACT

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Welcome Workshops are a core component of induction for all first-year undergraduate students. These participatory co-created sessions support new students to form social connections, providing an opportunity for them to share their diverse experiences, interests, and perspectives with peers. The workshops are co-delivered with Student Mentors, who are from the same course as workshop participants. They connect first-year students with opportunities, normalise concerns, provide guidance, and work inclusively to encourage the involvement of all students in the room. In addition to supporting social integration, Welcome Workshops contribute to the development of student self-efficacy, which is associated with student persistence in higher education.

This case study describes how Welcome Workshops are structured to support the development of social networks within course cohorts, offering an example of best practice in first-year induction. To evaluate the workshops, a theory of change was developed, and surveys were used to gather data from first-year participants and Student Mentors. The following themes emerged from the data, evidencing the positive outcomes of these workshops: the creation of new connections, increased self-efficacy and the shared experience of feeling outside of the comfort zone, increased navigational capital, and the feeling of inclusion and affirmation.

Keywords: transition, student induction, peer mentoring, student experience, higher education

Introduction

Globally, it is recognised that first-year students have the highest attrition rates at university (Pedler et al., 2021), resulting in negative consequences for institutions and students themselves (Shcheglova et al., 2020). With an increased sector focus on diversification, the challenge for universities lies in supporting students to be successful as they transition into university and through their student journey (Thomas, 2012). In the UK, universities commit to addressing inequalities through Access and Participation Plans for students from underrepresented groups (Kerrigan & Manktelow, 2021). Underrepresented groups are defined by the Office for Students (2024) as groups of students who share characteristics where data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success, or progression at university. Whilst the transition to university can pose challenges for all students regardless of background and experience, these challenges can be exacerbated for students from underrepresented groups (Coertjens et al., 2017; Hayman et al., 2024; Onikoyi & Nnamoko, 2024). Furthermore, withdrawal rates for these students from university are higher during the first year of transition than any other time (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) which scholars have

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

suggested is associated with the challenges in navigating academic and non-academic barriers (Webb & Cotton, 2018).

Supporting retention and transition – belonging, mattering, and self-efficacy

Evidence suggests that socio-cultural elements such as a sense of belonging and community are strongly associated with retention at university, and that a focus on this is imperative as part of the transition into first year and beyond (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Morgan, 2024; Pedler et al., 2021). Belonging, as a term, is complex and multifaceted, but there is consensus that it refers to the feeling of being accepted, included by, and connected to the institution (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Belonging has been highlighted as an important component of integration into university, especially for underrepresented groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). There is a growing body of evidence that serves as a reminder to acknowledge the multiplicities of student experiences in relation to transition into university, and that belonging may look and feel different for each student as a non-linear concept (Gravett & Winstone, 2019; Hadlow, 2025).

Scholars have highlighted the importance of mattering in enhancing a sense of belonging and ultimately student retention (Hallam, 2023; Jones & Bell, 2025a). Mattering is described as the feeling of being significant or valued and important or adding value to other people (Prilleltensky et al., 2020). McCormack (2024) proposes the importance of embedding spaces within the university where students are encouraged to interact with each other, university staff, and with the institution to enhance a sense of mattering.

An additional factor influencing persistence in higher education is self-efficacy (Tinto, 2017). Self-efficacy can be defined as ‘someone’s belief in their ability to perform a specific task’ (Hughes et al., 2022, p.119) and has been linked not only to retention but to student mental health more broadly (Hughes et al. 2022). Initiatives that support the development of self-efficacy and self-confidence have been shown to positively impact engagement and progression, especially for students from underrepresented groups (Woolley & Ebdon, 2020).

Developing belonging, mattering, and self-efficacy

Feeling socially integrated within university contributes to sense of belonging (Blake et al., 2022), mattering (Zawada, 2024), and wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2022) and is a key element of student decision-making when considering whether to remain in higher education (Foster et al., 2012; Tinto, 1975). Projects conducted as part of the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme (Thomas, 2012) highlight the role of social integration within the first-year experience: the development of student networks can assist integration into academic communities and build academic confidence, as well as positively impacting motivation and providing an ongoing source of support. These student interactions are particularly important within course communities (Blake et al., 2022; Fung, 2017); developing friendships within course cohorts supports academic engagement throughout the first year (Picton et al., 2017), and participation in discussions about course content with peers outside of taught sessions may make students more likely to progress beyond their first year (DeAngelo, 2014). Providing opportunities for course-based social interaction is likely to be of particular benefit for some underrepresented groups, who are more likely to seek connections within their course than the wider university community (Hayman et al. 2024; Thomas & Jones, 2017).

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

Researchers have highlighted the importance of creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere that prioritises student-student and student-staff interactions (Astin, 1984; Hang & Zhang, 2024; Scanlon et al., 2007; Yorke, 2000). Facilitated course induction activity can contribute to this by enhancing belonging and social integration through focusing on connecting new students with their peers, staff networks, university services, and opportunities (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Thomas, 2012; UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2022; Wakefield & Grabowski, 2024; Williams & Roberts, 2023). This is a time when students are likely to be concerned about making friends (Wilcox et al., 2005) and may be finding the transition into higher education discomfiting and unsettling (Williams & Roberts, 2023) as they begin to attempt to navigate the 'hidden curriculum' at university (Pownall et al., 2021). Universities are recommended to embed informal opportunities for course communities to begin to get to know each other, and course tutors, during induction (Blake et al., 2022; Thomas, 2012). Research suggests that institutions should focus on induction as an extended concept, prioritised throughout the first year of study and utilised to build spaces, opportunities and networks that can enhance retention rates (Hughes et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2005; Williams & Roberts, 2023). Tutors can contribute to this through effective programme design that prioritises belonging and mattering, using techniques such as team building and using student names (Woolley and Ebdon, 2020; Zawada, 2024).

A method that the sector is increasingly adopting to support sense of belonging and social integration is peer mentoring. Studies have found that first-year students who have been mentored are less likely to consider dropping out (Collings et al., 2014) due to feeling more integrated and connected to the university community through increased feelings of engagement, an important determinant of academic persistence and success (Yomtov et al., 2015). Provision of peer support improves first-year student sense of belonging (Hall et al., 2020) and confidence in social and academic spheres (Keenan, 2014). The alignment of mentoring within course communities enables them to contribute to the development of peer networks (Keenan, 2014) and support the navigation of the 'hidden curriculum' - students are likely to turn to other students to gain an understanding of the structures and norms of higher education (Pownall et al., 2021), and gaining access to vicarious experiences may increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This may be of particular benefit to students from underrepresented groups who are less likely to know about and access relevant resources (Covarrubias et al., 2022) or have existing knowledge of how university works (Heagney & Benson, 2017).

Case study aims and context

This case study aims to share an example of best practice in effective student induction, describing an institutional approach to the development of sense of belonging, mattering, and self-efficacy for first-year students and highlighting the benefits of semi-structured course-based social activity to support student transition into higher education.

Organisational context

Based in the UK, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) has a strong focus on social mobility, recruiting students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, including those associated with lower rates of academic success. Through its Access and Participation Plan, NTU aims to increase the continuation and completion rates for these students, focusing on a commitment to support every student to achieve their potential (NTU, 2024).

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

NTU has delivered an institution-wide student mentoring scheme since 2017. This is embedded in every undergraduate course, aiming to support students to transition successfully into the university. Student Mentors have already completed their first year of study at NTU and are matched to incoming students studying the same course as themselves, increasing relatability and relevance of the support they can offer. To further ensure relatability and relevance, NTU aim to recruit a mentor cohort that is as diverse as the first-year student body they are supporting (Kyte, 2024). Mentors offer 1:1, group, and in-class guidance for mentees, tailored to the discipline within which they are working, and are paid for an average of 22 hours of work across the year, beginning during course induction. Mentors undertake mandatory training that helps them to understand the principles and boundaries of their role, provides skill development in communication, active listening, and facilitation, and gives them practical knowledge of inclusivity, safeguarding, and signposting. The scheme is explicitly intended to benefit students who are from traditionally underrepresented groups: it is structured as an opt-out scheme, recognising that many students who would most benefit from the support may be unlikely to proactively come forward and access it as an opt-in initiative (Reeves et al., 2018).

Welcome Workshops

Since 2018, NTU has embedded a course-based 'Welcome Workshop', focused on the creation of social connections, into the first week of first-year induction to support the transition and eventual continuation of these students. Welcome Workshops are timetabled during the first week of induction as standard to enhance accessibility for students who have limitations on their time outside of the classroom (Blake et al., 2022; Hayman et al., 2024; Thomas & Jones, 2017; UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2022), and to underscore their importance within the induction period (rather than making them an optional add-on). Studies have highlighted the importance of cross-institution buy-in and involvement to secure the success of induction programmes (Thomas, 2012) and to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Hang & Zhang, 2024). NTU addresses this through clear induction guidance and reporting and monitoring structures, securing buy-in across all levels and ensuring a coordinated and collaborative approach. The workshops are coordinated by The Centre for Student and Community Engagement and are delivered by colleagues from across the university – 300 colleagues from academic schools and professional services departments were trained to deliver the workshops in 2025, supported by 500 Student Mentors.

Each 90-minute Welcome Workshop is delivered by two trained staff facilitators and a team of Student Mentors to around 50-70 first-year students. They offer a semi-structured environment for the development of both student-student and student-staff connections within a course cohort, recommended as an effective way to develop sense of belonging and help students to feel comfortable within course spaces (Blake et al., 2022; Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Thomas, 2012; Williams & Roberts, 2023). The workshops include a range of questions and statements that aim to be broad and inclusive, forming a springboard for students to share experiences, interests, and perspectives. This provides opportunity for them to meet students from similar backgrounds, recognised as beneficial for developing belonging (Jones et al., 2025). Even when students don't meet others from similar backgrounds, research demonstrates the benefits of developing understanding between students (Hang & Zhang, 2024) and cross-cultural interaction (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). Furthermore, staff leading the facilitation of workshops enhances opportunities to develop relational pedagogy, through creating early authentic and trustworthy interactions (Devis-Rozental & Clarke, 2021; Jones & Bell, 2025b). Challenges with this model include ensuring the

availability of both Student Mentors and staff to facilitate and responding to changes in availability at short notice.

Workshop structure

In the workshop, discussions initially take place in small groups to increase confidence to participate (Heagney & Benson, 2017). These discussions focus on the sharing of interests and experiences, using questions and statements to support conversation. The workshop then utilises full-group discussion to maximise opportunities for students to share and hear about experiences within the room – increasing the likelihood of them meeting a familiar face and thus feeling more comfortable in future sessions (Williams & Roberts, 2023). Some statements used as a discussion point are intended to enable students to meet students from a similar background or consider the differing experiences of others in the cohort, for example “I commute to university”. Others are intended to normalise the feelings that can come with entering a new environment (“I sometimes experience doubt about my own academic ability.”) - drawing on the academic awkwardness that some may feel when entering higher education (Williams & Roberts, 2023). Students can indicate that they agree with a statement but are not obligated to contribute to discussion. Finally, students re-join their small groups with an explicit invitation to use the time to share contact details or arrange a time to meet up, giving them a chance to build on or form connections based on their experience of the workshop.

Student Mentors

Student Mentors play a critical role in the space. Scholars have suggested the importance of early connection between mentors and mentees (Hill et al., 2022; Warren & Luebsen, 2017) and providing structured opportunities to do this could support in enhancing community and belonging (de Main et al., 2022). As previously highlighted, mentors can help mentees to navigate the ‘hidden curriculum’ and expectations of higher education through sharing their own experiences and knowledge (Thomas, 2012) - Welcome Workshops offer a platform for this. The role of mentors in the development of course-based peer networks is recognised within the sector (Keenan, 2014) and in this instance is done through helping to draw out connections between students as well as encouraging all group members to contribute. Additionally, they play an important role in the development of self-efficacy, which is an intended outcome of the workshop. Looking through the lens of social cognitive theory, Student Mentors create a safe space for students to experience speaking about themselves in a group, thus developing performance accomplishment – experiential learning that is beneficial in the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; van Dinther et al., 2011). When moving into the full-group activity, they are therefore more likely to feel confident having already responded to similar statements in a smaller group. Through observing mentors’ active engagement in the session first-year students can also gain vicarious experience and, in turn, confidence (Bandura, 1977).

Staff facilitators

Staff facilitators also have an important role to play - they must ensure that they effectively introduce and support peer-to-peer activities to maximise their success (Topping et al., 2017). As Student Mentors are new to their role at this stage of the year (Welcome Workshops are often the first work they complete), staff facilitators not only support the first-years, but also help to build mentor confidence and support their participation in the space. The responsibility for creating an environment for student-student connection is significant: research demonstrates that staff can feel they “lack the resources and skills to do this

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

effectively” (Blake et al., 2022, p.10) and therefore NTU provides training to support colleagues to utilise inclusive techniques to develop belonging and mattering within Welcome Workshops and beyond.

Staff facilitators are instrumental in developing mattering and are therefore encouraged to use student names and respond to each student so that they feel seen and heard (Woolley and Ebdon, 2020; Zawada, 2024). There is an encouraging invitation in the workshop for students to share experiences and beliefs, so creating an inclusive and accessible environment in which students feel their diversity is respected and valued is important (Hang & Zhang, 2024; Onikoyi & Nnamoko, 2024) and avoiding assumptions about the student journey that could have a negative impact such as assuming all students have moved into university accommodation (Jones et al., 2025) is imperative. Their presence in this space can form a foundation for strong staff-student relationships, which support student success where students feel accepted and valued (Thomas, 2002).

The importance of co-creation

The workshops were initially designed in collaboration with the charity Grit Breakthrough Programmes (Hadlow, 2025) and are now reviewed and updated annually with current students. Working with students in this way is crucial to ensure the ongoing relevance and relatability of the workshops, as well as ensuring statements and questions used are universally accessible to the student body which is key in supporting student success (Onikoyi & Nnamoko, 2024). Whilst a core session plan is provided, staff facilitators are encouraged to work with Student Mentors to tailor content to their own academic communities.

The impact and outcomes of Welcome Workshops

To understand the outcomes of Welcome Workshops, inform evaluation approaches, and contribute to ongoing development, a theory of change was co-created with first-year students in 2025. A theory of change “describes the underlying assumptions about how planned activities will lead to intended outcomes” (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, n.d.). Completing a theory of change in partnership with students enables institutions to understand “their lived experiences of motivations, barriers and resources available” (Schulte & Donnelly, 2024) and in this instance helped to test assumptions and understand outcomes of an intervention that had already been implemented for a number of years, shaping what an effective evaluation would seek to capture.

The outcomes that were generated and agreed by a team of staff and students were:

- Creating new connections
- Increased self-efficacy
- Shared experience of feeling outside of comfort zone
- Increased navigational capital at NTU
- Feeling of inclusion or affirmation.

It was agreed that contributions to sense of belonging and retention form a longer-term impact of the workshop.

Evaluating the outcomes of Welcome Workshops: approach

To test and measure the outcomes of Welcome Workshops, two surveys were designed, and the project was given a favourable ethics opinion by Nottingham Trent University's Schools of Art, Architecture, Design and Humanities Research Ethics Committee. First-year students were given the option to complete the survey within their Welcome Workshop; of those who visited the survey, 201 students were eligible to complete (under 18s were excluded) and went on to do so. The anonymous survey contained a list of six statements with a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, together with an open question inviting them to share their thoughts about the workshop.

Student Mentors were invited to complete an anonymous survey after all Welcome Workshops were completed; 16 responded. This survey had four statements with the same Likert scale, and three open questions drawing on their perceptions of the workshop and any impact their participation had on themselves.

Evaluating the outcomes of Welcome Workshops: findings

Creating new connections

The most immediate outcome from Welcome Workshops that students working on the theory of change identified was the creation of new connections, which they felt was integral to the development of sense of belonging and a supportive transition, as reflected in sector research (Blake et al., 2022; Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Wilcox et al., 2005). This outcome of forming new connections is not only with first-year peers but also with mentors and staff facilitators.

Survey data indicates that the workshops enabled students to form connections with their peers: 96.5% of first-year respondents agreed that they spoke to someone they hadn't spoken to before during their Welcome Workshop, and 85.6% of respondents agreed that the workshop helped them to make connections with students on their course. Students welcomed the opportunity to get to know other students with similar backgrounds or interests: "Nice to get to know people and begin to find common ground" (participant 69); "I enjoy to meet other people and to know what we have in common, what are their hobbies and what their background is." (participant 63), as well as simply enjoying the experience of learning about other people "I enjoyed speaking to people I had never met before and enjoyed hearing their perspectives" (participant 52). Students referred to the structure of the workshop as a mechanism for creating these connections: "I enjoyed the questions as it helped speak to others and make friends" (participant 128); "being split in groups is great because it gave me an opportunity to start the conversation first." (participant 97).

First-year students reflected positively on the presence of Student Mentors within the space: "I enjoyed being able to meet with the people on my course and the student mentors" (participant 182); "Really good mentors and teachers/professors. Welcoming environment!!!" (participant 217). 82.1% of respondents to the in-session survey agreed that they had a better understanding of the Student Mentor role after attending their Welcome Workshop, and 81.3% of respondents to the Student Mentor survey agreed that the workshop helped them to get to know their mentees. Mentors also referred to this in their qualitative comments: "I got to know a few of the first years slightly better." (Mentor 16); "I was able to interact with first years which made me reflect on my past moments in the uni" (Mentor 5).

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

The opportunity to connect with staff facilitators was also valued by first-year students: “I enjoyed the workshop as it helped build connections and broke the original ice. I also loved how our lecturers got involved too and encourage conversations” (participant 212); “Was great to meet people on my course. Good to meet lecturers in a relaxed and calm environment.” (participant 15).

Increased self-efficacy and the shared experience of feeling outside of the comfort zone

These outcomes were linked by students when co-creating the theory of change: they described the experience of going outside of their comfort zone leading to the feeling of increased self-efficacy. The self-efficacy they spoke about was in relation to two areas: having conversations with other students and speaking in taught sessions. They reflected that this was the case whether they spoke during the Welcome Workshop or not – even those who felt too nervous to speak openly in the workshop felt that seeing others do so with no negative consequences gave them vicarious experience (Bandura, 1977) thus developing self-efficacy. Students felt that going through this experience as a course cohort was important – that it created a feeling of empowerment and community as they had all been outside of their comfort zone together.

It is difficult to test this outcome with an in-session evaluation as the timing wouldn't enable students to have a clear understanding of how their behaviour and confidence might be influenced moving forward. However, evaluation data from the first-year student survey indicates that 83.6% of respondents felt more confident about starting at NTU after attending their Welcome Workshop, so it seems that there is an impact on confidence at least in the short-term. In the qualitative comments, some students drew on the structure as a factor that helped them to go outside of their comfort zone: “It helped me connect with people when I was scared to do so.” (participant 95); “I think it was useful getting forced into conversations” (participant 125). Some students hinted at how this might have a future positive impact on their self-efficacy: “I enjoyed the emphasis on engagement so we could get to know our classmates better and be more comfortable.” (participant 170); “... helped me be more confident in an unfamiliar place” (participant 108); “It was a nice workshop that helped me socialise more” (participant 213).

Whilst not an intended core outcome of the workshop, survey responses from mentors also highlighted the impact that Welcome Workshops have on their confidence: “Helped me gain confidence within myself and my role as a student mentor” (Mentor 3); “The role made me feel more confident in public speaking and speaking to students in general, I felt an improvement in my presentation skills and I felt very confident in my knowledge of the course.” (Mentor 8).

Increased navigational capital at NTU

Navigational capital is an individual's use of skills and knowledge to navigate through a social institution that has not been designed with them in mind (Yosso, 2005). Universities are an example of one such institution that can provide structural barriers to students who are from underrepresented groups. To address this, scholars such as Andrew et al. (2020) and Covarrubias et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of proactive effort to support students in their navigation of their first year and beyond, such as sharing resources that are relevant and accessible. When undertaking the co-creation of the theory of change for Welcome Workshops, students emphasised that Welcome Workshops increased their understanding of NTU, giving them the tools to navigate the student journey more confidently. This is done through the facilitation of activities by Student Mentors and staff facilitators, who are trained to draw connections not only within the cohort but also between students and the university and local area. In the evaluation, 76.6% of students agreed that they felt more confident accessing opportunities at NTU after attending their workshop, with

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

students saying things like “Was a great start to see and meet other students and cross reference the things to do outside of the study room” (participant 98), and “I got to speak to new people and learn more about NTU resources” (participant 50). One mentor reflected “I enjoyed guiding students, answering their questions, and seeing them feel more comfortable on campus” (Mentor 8) highlighting the influential role of the Student Mentor - they are in a relatable position where they can answer questions and provide relevant navigational guidance, having been in the same position recently (Keenan, 2014). Another mentor gave an indication of how this guidance benefits students: “It allowed them to better understand their course, and I could guide them to resources so they could get a jump start.” (Mentor 6).

Feeling of inclusion and affirmation

Input from students involved in co-creating the theory of change highlighted the importance of creating an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere when supporting student transition, reflecting sector research (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Hang & Zhang, 2024). Welcome Workshops are integral within the induction programme as they provide the only guaranteed timetabled non-academic space for students to discuss themselves rather than the course. The aspect of timetabling these semi-structured sessions is the first step towards inclusivity, as it does not rely on any extra effort from students in terms of needing to attend an extra-curricular session outside of their core induction, or even any effort in terms of how to begin a conversation, which can feel difficult or awkward (Williams & Roberts, 2023). Students believed feeling included and affirmed were core outcomes of the Welcome Workshop that in turn contribute to sense of belonging and retention.

First-year students highlighted the roles of those managing the space in creating this feeling: “The teachers really made me feel welcome and created a good group atmosphere” (participant 228); “I enjoyed how relaxed it was and how they made everyone feel comfortable” (participant 32); “It was inclusive and I didn’t feel under too much pressure to answer questions” (participant 51). Others highlighted how the inclusive environment was linked to another Welcome Workshop outcome, creating new connections: “I liked how I was able to talk to people I haven’t met yet and make myself heard.” (participant 60); “I found it very welcoming, and a relaxing atmosphere which made it very easy to talk and share my thoughts throughout” (participant 106).

Recommendations and lessons learned

This case study demonstrates the value of embedding a course-based opportunity for social interaction within induction as a mechanism to enhance belonging and self-efficacy for first-year students. It is recommended that such workshops are timetabled and embedded across the whole institution as a core element of course induction to ensure there are limited structural barriers for groups who may struggle to attend or prioritise extra-curricular activity (Hayman et al., 2024; Thomas & Jones, 2017). NTU have not thus far explored how the timing of workshops within induction may impact outcomes: research conducted by Jones et al. (2025) suggests that there is a risk that attendance in induction sessions decreases towards the end of the week, which may negatively impact those who do attend if there are fewer people to connect with; further investigation of this may provide additional insight and enhance Welcome Workshops further.

Evaluation data demonstrates that the workshops lead to an increased sense of navigational capital, self-efficacy and the formation of new connections, and identified some key elements that institutions should seek to adopt if introducing a similar workshop. Firstly, the role of staff facilitators in the space is

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

crucial – they set the tone and provide an inclusive atmosphere, as well as beginning to form connections with students in the space themselves thus contributing to a sense of belonging (Gilani & Thomas, 2025). Gaining institution-wide buy-in is therefore of great importance to ensure that there are adequate numbers of colleagues available to deliver workshops in every undergraduate course.

The role of Student Mentors in the session is also important - they create safe group spaces, signpost to support and opportunities, and share their own experiences. However, recruitment and allocation of mentors across all courses and workshops presents challenges, for example ensuring there is diversity in the mentor cohort (Kyte, 2024) and that mentors are available to attend all Welcome Workshops during the first week of induction. This logistical challenge that NTU are still exploring means that some first-year students may not be able to connect with a mentor that has similar characteristics to themselves or may not have a mentor present at all. It is not known how this might impact their experience in the session. Whilst staff facilitators receive training on adapting delivery for workshops that have few mentors in (for example ensuring Mentors rotate around groups), or even none at all, this does alter the format of the workshop and may reduce its impact.

Although the evaluation evidence within this study is overwhelmingly positive, there were respondents that did not get as much from the workshop: “It can be difficult to create moments for genuine connections when it’s clear most of these are done because we are forced to, not because we want to” (participant 214), and had constructive suggestions on how to enhance the activities: “I liked how interactive it was but would like smaller groups in the sessions so not too intimidating to speak” (participant 211). The structure of the session is therefore critical to its success: sessions need to feel supportive and safe. At NTU, these workshops are continually developed and facilitated through co-creation with staff facilitators, Student Mentors, and workshop participants. NTU’s experience suggests this as a fundamental component in ensuring workshop content is relevant and inclusive to a diverse cohort of students. The workshops are intended to be accessible and of benefit to students from all backgrounds, however due to the anonymous nature of the evaluation survey it has not been possible to establish whether this workshop has equal impact for all students.

Providing training for staff facilitators and Student Mentors is vital in working towards the outcomes identified and in enhancing the long-term impact. Whilst these workshops may appear to be a standalone intervention, the intention is for them to provide a cornerstone of wider practice in building belonging and self-efficacy. As such, the NTU training model offers a space to consider techniques to develop sense of belonging, mattering, and self-efficacy beyond Welcome Workshops, recognising the value of an ongoing approach to induction (Hughes et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2005; Williams & Roberts, 2023).

Scholars have highlighted limitations around the use of surveys as a method of data collection, such as low response rates and the need for a supplementation of qualitative activity to capture the complexity of experiences (Brown & Chartier, 2025; Lowe et al., 2019). This is evidenced within this evaluation: Mentor response rate in particular was very low. Future research could focus on using a mixed-methods approach to enhance the richness of findings of the experience of mentors and workshop participants (Lowe et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Delivered as a core element of NTU’s commitment to increase continuation rates through its Access and Participation Plan, Welcome Workshops have become an established and embedded component of course

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

induction for first-year students. Through focusing on active participation and creating spaces for social connections to form, these co-created workshops were found to have a positive impact in enhancing self-efficacy and navigational capital. Participants were empowered to create and build on connections with each other, Student Mentors, university staff and services. The intention and ambition of these workshops is that they provide an embedded springboard for all involved (first-year students, mentors and staff facilitators) to further enhance belonging and ultimately retention.

Biographies

Amy Kyte is based in the Centre for Student and Community Engagement at Nottingham Trent University, where she leads projects related to peer support and student engagement, particularly aimed at supporting students traditionally underrepresented in UK higher education.

Sarah Hadlow is based at Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Student and Community Engagement, where she leads the Collaborative Engagement and Retention Team. She holds an MA in Student Engagement in Higher Education, with specific interest in student voice, peer support, and the role of sport in student success.

References

- Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. H. (2020). Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(3), 622-634. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902>
- Andrew, L., Robinson, K., Dare, J., & Costello, L. (2020). Widening the lens on capital: conceptualising the university experiences of non-traditional women nurse students. *Higher Education Research & Development, 40*(7), 1359–1374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1815663>
- Astin, A.W. (1984) Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Development, 5*, 518-529.
- Bandura, A. (1977) Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological review. 84*(2), 191-215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Blake, S., Capper, G., & Jackson, A. (2022). *Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach*. Wonkhe and Pearson. <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>
- Brown, M., & Chartier, N. (2025). A Mixed Methods Evaluation of a Peer Mentoring Programme (PASS) for International Postgraduate Students: Mentee and Mentor Perspectives. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, 36*. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi36.1486>
- Coertjens, L., Brahm, T., Trautwein, C., & Lindblom-Ylance, S. (2017). Students' transition into higher education from an international perspective: Editorial. *Higher Education, 73*(3), 357-369. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0092-y>
- Collings, R., Swanson, V., & Watkins, R. (2014). The impact of peer mentoring on levels of student wellbeing, integration, and retention: a controlled comparative evaluation of residential students in UK higher education. *Higher Education, 68*(6), 927-942. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9752-y>
- Covarrubias, R., Laiduc, G., & Valle, I. (2022). What Institutions Can Learn From the Navigational Capital of Minoritized Students. *Journal of First-Generation Student Success, 2*(1), 36–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26906015.2022.2065109>
- de Main, L., Holmes, H., & Wakefield, L. (2022). *Why won't they engage in extra curricular opportunities?* Advance HE. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/why-wont-they-engage-extra-curricular-opportunities>
- DeAngelo, L. (2014). 'Programs and Practices That Retain Students From the First to Second Year: Results From a National Study.' *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2013*(160), 53–75. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20061>

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

- Devis-Rozental, C., & Clarke, S. (2021). HE staff's attitudes and expectations about their role in induction activities. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi21.659>
- Foster, E., Lawther, S., Keenan, C., Bates, N., Colley, B., & Lefever, R. (2012). *The Higher Education: Retention & Engagement (HERE) Project Toolkit: A Resource for Programme Teams Interested in Improving Student Engagement and Retention*. https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/11856/1/206751_HERE%20Project%20toolkit.pdf
- Fung, D. (2017). *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*. London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781911576358>
- Gilani, D., & Thomas, L. (2025). Understanding the factors and consequences of student belonging in higher education: a critical literature review. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 34. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi34.1385>
- Gravett, K., & Winstone, N. E. (2019). Storying students' becomings into and through higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8), 1578–1589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1695112>
- Hadlow, S. (2025). *Use welcome workshops to build student belonging*. Times Higher Education. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/use-welcome-workshops-build-student-belonging#comments>
- Hall, B., Serafin, J., & Lundgren, D. (2020) The Benefits of Academically Oriented Peer Mentoring for At-Risk Student Populations. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 8 (2), 184-199. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.8.2.12>
- Hallam, I. (2023). College higher education commuter students' experiences of belonging, mattering and persisting with their studies. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 28(3), 373–389. <https://doi-org.ntu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2221116>
- Hang, Y., & Zhang, X. (2024). A systematic review of students' habitus in the higher education field: challenge and resilience. *Studies in Higher Education*, 50(4), 790–807. <https://doi-org.ntu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2357145>
- Hayman, R., Wharton, K., Bell, L., & Bird, L. (2024). Navigating the first year at an English university: exploring the experiences of mature students through the lens of transition theory. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 43(1), 39–51. <https://doi-org.ntu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02601370.2023.2297671>
- Heagney, M., & Benson, R. (2017). How mature-age students succeed in higher education: implications for institutional support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(3), 216–234. <https://doi-org.ntu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1300986>
- Hill, S. E., Ward, W. L., Seay, A., & Buzenski, J. (2022), The nature and evolution of the mentoring relationship in academic health centers. *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings*, 29(1), 557-569. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10880-022-09893-6>
- Hughes, G., Upsher, R., Nobili, A., Kirkman, A., Wilson, C., Bowers-Brown, T., Foster, J., Bradley, S., & Byrom, N. (2022). *Education for Mental Health: Enhancing Student Mental Health through Curriculum and Pedagogy*. Advance HE. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/education-mental-health-toolkit>
- Hughes, J., Cureton, D., & Jones, J. (2021). 'I'll play the game, but I cannot stay' : The role of *third space professionals in encouraging the retention, success and sense of belonging of undergraduate students*. *Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(3). <https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v14i3.1202>
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324–345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2673270>
- Jones, C.S., & Bell, H. (2025)a. The Intricacies of Student Engagement in Higher Education after the pandemic: Academic and Central Services staff views and experiences. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 6(1), 111-147. <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1370>
- Jones, C.S., & Bell, H. (2025)b. Unravelling sense of belonging in higher education: Staff and student perspectives at an English university. *Trends in Higher Education*, 28(3), 141-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2024.2317316>
- Jones, J., MacDonnell, J., & Aamir, A. (2025). Mature undergraduates' experiences of a UK university induction programme: Accruing social capital, evolving habitus and developing a sense of belonging. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1–15. <https://doi-org.ntu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14703297.2025.2555959>

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Keenan, C. (2014). *Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK*. Higher Education Academy.
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/mapping-student-led-peer-learning-uk>
- Kerrigan, M., & Manktelow, A. (2021). Extra-curricular activities in higher education: Enhancing the student experience. *Widening Participation in Lifelong Learning*, 23(1), 123-147. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.23.1.123>
- Kyte, A. (2024). Diversifying peer mentors: working collaboratively with students to enhance engagement of under-represented groups. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 5(3), 25–34.
<https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1180>
- Lowe, C., Sims, S., & Winter, J. (2019). Going beyond metric-driven responses to surveys: evaluation uses of UKES to support students' critical reflection on their learning gain. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4(1), 448-461.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1672359>
- McCormack, K. (2024). *Giving Students a Sense of Mattering: A Key to Deepening Engagement*. Staffordshire University.
<https://blogs.staffs.ac.uk/business/2025/03/03/giving-students-a-sense-of-mattering-a-key-to-deepening-engagement/>
- Morgan, J. (2024). *Fostering belonging in higher education: Implications for student retention and wellbeing*. Advance HE.
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/fostering-belonging-higher-education-implications-student-retention-and-wellbeing>
- Nottingham Trent University (2024). *Access and participation plan 2025–26 to 2028–29*. Retrieved October 23, 2025, from https://www.ntu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/892651/ntu-access-participation-plan.pdf
- Office for Students (2024) *Access and participation glossary*. Retrieved October 23, 2025, from <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/access-and-participation-glossary/>
- Onikoyi, B., & Nnamoko, N. (2024) *University Induction and 1st Year Students' Integration into Higher Education: An Exploration of Experiences*. SSRN. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4724564>
- Owusu-Agyeman, Y. (2021). Student transition experiences and the agency of supportive campus environment in higher education. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 4(1), 128–155.
<https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1052>
- Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2021). A sense of belonging at university: student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 397–408.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>
- Picton, C., Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2017). *Friendship supported learning - the role of friendships in first-year students' university experiences*. Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success Conference.
<https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2017/08A.pdf>
- Pownall, M., Harris, R., & Blundell-Birtill, P. (2021). Supporting students during the transition to university in COVID-19: Five key considerations and recommendations for educators. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 21(1), 3-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14757257211032486>
- Prilleltensky, I., Dietz, S., Zopluoglu, C., Clarke, A., Lipsky, M. & Hartnett, C.M. (2020). Assessing a culture of mattering in a higher education context. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 5(1), 85-104.
<https://doi.org/10.28945/4539>
- Reeves, C., Kiteley, R., Spall, K., & Flint, L. (2018). Working with Students as Partners: Developing Peer Mentoring to Enhance the Undergraduate Student Experience. In M. Snowden & J. P. Halsall (Eds.), *Mentorship, Leadership and Research: Their Place within the Social Science Curriculum* (pp. 27-45). Springer Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95447-9_3
- Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have like an identity ... you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a Student Identity in the First-year Transition to University. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 223–241.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600983684>

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

- Schulte, J., & Donnelly, A. (2024, July 18) *Co-Creating Theories of Change with Students: The Why*. Evaluation Collective.
<https://evaluationcollective.wordpress.com/2024/07/18/evaluation-collective-blog-post-co-creating-theories-of-change-with-students-the-why/>
- Shcheglova, I., Gorbunova, E., & Chirikov, I. (2020). The role of the first-year experience in student attrition. *Quality in Higher Education*, 26(3), 307–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1815285>
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930210140257>
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-final-report>
- Thomas, L., & Jones, R. (2017). *Student Engagement in the context of Commuter Students*. The Student Engagement Partnership. <https://www.lizthomasassociates.co.uk/projects/2018/Commuter%20student%20engagement.pdf>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on Student Persistence. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376>
- Topping, K., Buchs, C., Duran, D., & Van Keer, H. (2017). *Effective Peer Learning: From Principles to Practical Implementation*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315695471>
- Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education. (n.d.). *Theory of change*. Retrieved October 31, 2025, from <https://taso.org.uk/insights-and-evaluation/theory-of-change/>
- UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission. (2022). *A Student Futures Manifesto*.
<https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf>
- van Dinther, M., Dochy, F., & Segers, M. (2011). Factors affecting students' self-efficacy in higher education. *Educational Research Review*, 6(2), 95-108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2010.10.003>
- Wakefield, J., & Grabowski, S. (2025). I'll be there for you: Generating sustained student connectedness from the beginning. *Student Success*, 16(1), 82-90. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3527>
- Warren, D., & Luebsen, W. (2017) 'Getting into the flow of university': a coaching approach to student peer support. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 262-269.
<https://www.journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/599>
- Webb, O. J., & Cotton, D. R. E. (2018). Early withdrawal from higher education: a focus on academic experiences. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(7), 835–852. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1437130>
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707–722.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500340036>
- Williams, H., & Roberts, N. (2023). 'I just think it's really awkward': Transitioning to higher education and the implications for student retention. *Higher Education*, 85(5), 1125–1141.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00881-1>
- Woolley, D., & Ebdon, L. (2020). *Saturday Reading: Promoting belonging during challenging times - "I felt heard"*. Higher Education Policy Institute.
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/07/25/saturday-reading-promoting-belonging-during-challenging-times-i-felt-heard/>
- Yomtov, D., Plunkett, S. W., Efrat, R., and Marin, A. G. (2015) Can Peer Mentors Improve First-Year Experiences of University Students?. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*. 19(1), 25–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115611398>
- Yorke, M. (2000). Smoothing the transition into higher education: What can be learned from student non-completion. *Journal of Institutional research*, 9(1), 35-47.
<http://www.aair.org.au/app/webroot/media/pdf/JIR/Journal%20of%20Institutional%20Research%20in%20Australia%20and%20JIR/Volume%209,%20No.%201%20May%202000/Yorke.pdf>

Promoting social integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging: Embedding connection-building within course induction to support transition into higher education

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

Zawada, C. (2024). Student drop out and feelings of belonging and mattering in UK undergraduate allied health students. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 31. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi31.1172>