



Bridging the gap: PREPARE as a collaborative approach to first year transition in a widening participation context

David Howard, University of Greater Manchester, England

Nurun Nahar, University of Greater Manchester, England

ABSTRACT

Targeted transition activities before tertiary education are crucial for equipping students with the skills, knowledge and resilience to succeed. Research by Morgan (2024) and Wonkhe (2024) highlights how structured pre-arrival support reduces transition-related anxiety, improves retention, and shapes realistic expectations. Previously, pre-enrolment support was offered primarily through summer schools. This provision left many students feeling underprepared. Recognising the need for a holistic approach, we developed PREPARE - a collaborative initiative involving the library, Academic Skills Hub, Students' Union, Student Services, academic staff, Quality Transformation Unit, IT, and e-learning teams. It addresses academic, emotional, and social readiness. PREPARE was informed by focus groups with current students, academic staff, and professional services, alongside a review of literature and sector research. Ethical approval for the collection and use of participant feedback and evaluation data was granted by the University of Greater Manchester Research Ethics Committee (Ref: AUTOYHP00420). These inputs shaped a framework responsive to diverse student needs.

PREPARE comprises a seven-step framework: Pathway to Higher Education; Readiness for Academic Success; Emotional Wellbeing in Higher Education; Personal Growth and a Growth Mindset; Academic Writing and Communicating Ideas; Resilience and University Life; and Employability and Life Beyond University. It is delivered through self-paced e-learning tutorials, webinars, videos, and live workshops. PREPARE has been incorporated within our Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 26, for enhanced representation of underrepresented groups at the university over the next 5 years.

In order to ensure responsiveness and impact of PREPARE, this long-term collaborative project will incorporate student voice and staff feedback periodically taking a research informed approach, as part of ongoing evaluations. PREPARE has already enhanced pre-arrival engagement and is expected to improve first-year outcomes. By embedding academic skills, wellbeing, and employability into a cohesive framework, PREPARE enables a smoother transition and better retention for student success. We believe this Vignette would add valuable insights to institutions striving to empower diverse learners and close equity gaps in the tertiary landscape offering practical solutions.

Keywords: student transition, pre-enrolment, widening participation, retention and success, first year experience

Who I am and why this matters

As an Academic Skills Team Leader, I support students who arrive at university carrying hope, excitement, and an undercurrent of anxiety. From experience, those early weeks can either ignite confidence or quietly erode it. My background spans teaching, English tutoring in higher education, and now academic skills leadership, all of which have brought me close to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including many international students navigating the demands of learning in a new country.

Despite the range of support available, many students still did not engage early enough—not due to ability, but because they lacked preparation, familiarity, and a sense of belonging (Morgan, 2024). PREPARE was born to address this gap, prioritising belonging before information delivery and acting not as another orientation activity, but as a bridge to support students before overwhelm set in.

The moment of realisation

Like most meaningful ideas, PREPARE began with frustration.

One September, I met a group of first-year students who appeared visibly overwhelmed. One stated, “Where do I begin?” Another admitted, “I can’t do this.” Those voices echoed across conversations that followed. Our well-intentioned induction activities were informative, but they often arrived too late; by the time students stepped onto campus, many were already overwhelmed.

I found myself scribing one question that I could not shake: “What if we could reach them earlier - before the panic and confusion set in?”

Students did not need more information at that stage – it was reassurance, connection, and a chance to breathe before stepping into university life.

From idea to initiative

PREPARE, our pre-enrolment programme, emerged as both a philosophy and a framework. Its purpose was simple: to help offer-holders feel ready, confident, and connected *before* enrolment. It aimed to build belonging and readiness through structured support before lectures began.

I wanted PREPARE to be:

- Flexible enough to reach people wherever they are.
- Supportive without being overwhelming.
- Introductory—complementing, not replacing, induction.
- Driven by empathy and encouragement.

PREPARE became a seven-week story rather than a course – a narrative that carefully built confidence and belonging. Each week introduced a new theme, as shown in figure 1 below.



Figure 1 PREPARE Framework

Using Admissions data, offer holders were invited to join PREPARE via email before the programme launched. Built in Moodle by our eLearning team, PREPARE opened with a short orientation video and interactive timeline, guiding participants through the platform and the key dates ahead.

Once the programme began, participants accessed activities through weekly tiles, each unlocking only at the start of its designated week. The structure helped participants stay focused and prevented them feeling overwhelmed by the full programme all at once. Each week was conversational, with videos, tutorials, and the optional live session. It was not a course; it was more a conversation sketched across a summer. PREPARE started to become the quiet voice: “You can do this, and the university is with you.”

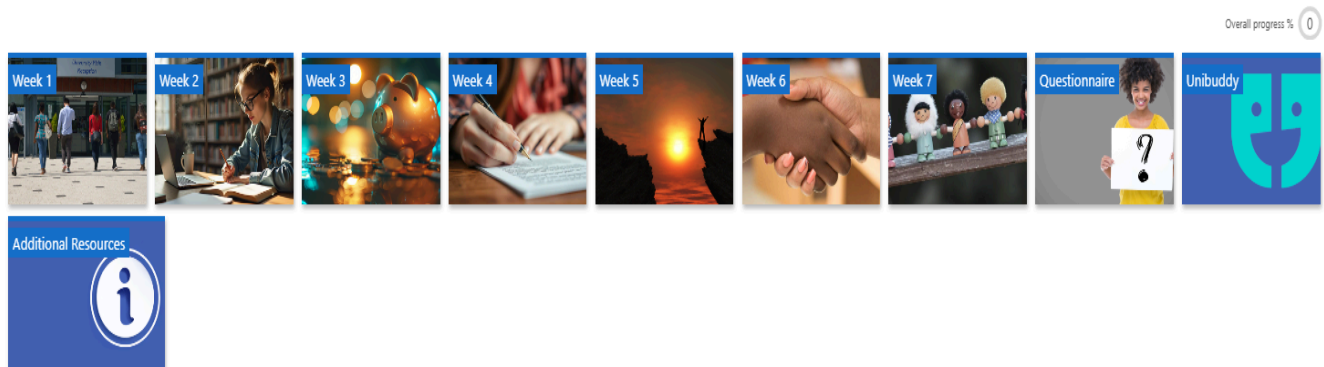


Figure 2 Weekly tiles containing activities

Why PREPARE matters

Preparedness is often misunderstood as a checklist - equipment bought, visa approved, accommodation sorted, timetable downloaded. For me, real preparedness is a feeling: a sense of readiness that grows from belonging and institutional knowledge (Van Lamoen et al., 2025; Strudwick, 2025) and the belief that the university recognises both the excitement and fear of this transition.

For many, university is a new world with unfamiliar expectations. PREPARE acted as a *handrail* between aspiration and reality. It sent a message: *no matter your starting point, you belong here and you will be supported*. One student captured this beautifully, “[it] is a very supportive university and they take care of their students.” This sentence reflects the essence of what PREPARE was designed to achieve - proof that support can be proactive, not just reactive.

The meaning behind PREPARE

At its heart, PREPARE reduces the academic and emotional distance between the moment an offer is made and their first lecture. Preparedness is not just academic; it is psychological, social, and cultural (Ball et al., 2024). Building on research (Ball et al., 2024; Van Lamoen et al., 2025; Strudwick, 2025) PREPARE translates these insights into practice by embedding reassurance, self-paced engagement, and opportunities for early connection before students arrive on campus. Students now have a *handrail* to hold onto as they cross the bridge into HE. Some need it for a single step; while others lean on it the whole way.

This meaning is personal for me. As a mature student, I battled imposter syndrome, often convinced that everyone else ‘belonged’ more than I did. Therefore, PREPARE is, in many ways, the ‘handrail’ I once needed, but never had.

Building in AI literacy

The rapid growth of AI is reshaping learning, requiring institutions to keep pace (Office for Students, 2025), and I did not want a student's first encounter with it to be a misconduct warning. They needed an honest, guided introduction.

AI already shapes how students search, write, and think; without guidance, it can become either a crutch or a problem. Rather than policing its use, my co-author and I partnered with current students to understand how they use AI for learning and research. This insight enabled us to develop a bespoke four-step AI literacy framework that aligns institutional expectations and learner needs. PREPARE framed AI not as a threat but as a tool for critical and responsible use, centred around key questions:

- What does Generative AI look like?
- What are the risks, responsibilities and best practices?
- How can AI tools be used effectively at university?

By embedding AI literacy pre-arrival, PREPARE encouraged participants to start their student journey with curiosity, confidence, and responsibility - setting the tone for a culture we want to foster.

The challenges along the way

Launching PREPARE was exciting, but far from simple. The shift from a one-week, on-campus model, to a seven-week online programme required rethinking sustainable processes. Gaining buy-in was the next hurdle. A colleague once remarked, "Offer holders won't engage in content over summer, especially if they haven't made up their mind where to study."

For me, PREPARE was never solely about engagement – it was about belonging. Even if participants were undecided where to study, reaching out early demonstrated we cared about their journey.

The logistical challenges were considerable: coordinating across departments, and creating accessible digital content, aligning time zones with graduation, clearing and enrolment. Some days felt like playing a game of academic Tetris, moving pieces around until everything aligned.

And then, the first feedback arrived:

"...the PREPARE Programme exceeded my expectations. It was well-structured, engaging, and provided practical skills and insights that I can apply both academically and personally...I feel more confident and prepared for the next steps in my journey."

Those words - simple but sincere – confirmed that PREPARE was making a real difference.

The power of stories and small wins

The impact soon became tangible through the voices of more participants. One international participant wrote:

“...It was a really a helpful experience as an introduction and initiation for studies abroad especially as a foreigner. Feeling motivated and excited to embark on a new journey for my career with confidence and resilience thanks to PREPARE...”

This message validated months of design, planning and collaboration. It reminded me that support does not always need to be grand or complicated. Sometimes, impact appears in subtle moments of reassurance. Another student shared, “[PREPARE] changed me a lot...is the best tool/site...thank you for helping me and make me who I am...”

These stories revealed a quiet, but powerful ripple effect. When participants feel supported and seen, they enter university not only with confidence, but a desire to succeed – and they carry that forward, shaping the culture for those who come next.

The data behind the dialogue

The stories were powerful, but the data gives them validity.

Of the n=5,142 offer holders invited to take part in the first phase of PREPARE, n=1,750 accessed the activities – a 34% engagement rate. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 86% (n=95) said they felt confident or very confident about starting university. Over three-quarters said PREPARE made them more confident in their choice of university. Numbers rarely capture emotion, but here they tell a clear story: early connection builds confidence.

Reflections on the journey

On reflection, PREPARE feels like a quiet revolution. We did not rely on grand budgets or complex platforms-just empathy, purpose, and a commitment to improve the student experience. There were moments of self-doubt, when deadlines loomed or my inbox filled faster than my confidence, but every piece of feedback reaffirmed why this work mattered.

Next steps

The journey continues. PREPARE is evolving through feedback, with new tutorials, video stories, and digital learning enhancements under development. Although it remains a pilot, it is now referenced in the university’s latest Access and Participation Plan, gradually becoming part of our institutional DNA.

Closing thoughts: The core message

PREPARE began with a simple question – “What if we could reach them earlier?” It has since grown into a philosophy shaping how we think about transitional support, belonging and readiness. It demonstrates that with the right support, students arrive prepared – and that, above all, is what matters most.

Biographies

David Howard is the Academic Skills Team Leader at the University of Greater Manchester, with experience in teaching and supporting learners with additional needs and English language. David works collaboratively with academic subject leads across all faculties to coordinate and support the development of content, learning resources, and student activities for LEAP Online, the University’s award-winning online skills portal. He is also a co-author of the UGM AI Literacy Framework (2025). Drawing upon his teaching experience, David is passionate about supporting students and helping to combat barriers to learning through inclusive, holistic, and student-centred approaches that promote confidence, academic readiness, and student success throughout the university journey.

Nurun Nahar is an Assistant Teaching Professor based at the Greater Manchester Business School, University of Greater Manchester. Nurun’s responsibilities include overseeing and advising on technology enhanced learning initiatives to enhance pedagogical practices within her department. Nurun is a published scholar and has presented her research work widely at several international conferences alongside invited guest talks on the topics of digital literacy, pedagogical partnerships, use of generative AI and technology enhanced learning in Higher Education. Nurun is also the founder of TIRIlogy, a web-based Higher Education CPD platform that has been recognised by JISC in 2025 for a Community Pioneer Award.

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