



Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

Alana I. James, University of Reading, England

Alicia Peña Bizama, University of Reading, England

Denis Persichini, University of Reading, England

ABSTRACT

Self-regulated programmes have been found to support university students with academic performance and motivation. This case study presents one such programme developed at the University of Reading and how it has been evaluated and enhanced. Life Tools is a universal, learner-directed, psychoeducation programme that supports students' transition into university and personal development. Life Tools delivers evidence-based content through in-person and hybrid seminars and virtual resources, through a mix of standalone sessions, content embedded within curricula, and a certificate qualification. A collaborative staff-student research study evaluated the programme's approach during the pandemic, engaging students through an online survey, interviews and focus groups. Students perceived that Life Tools supported their transition into university and other personal development areas, felt that online seminars were effective and particularly appreciated the programme's scientific nature but wanted greater interactivity. This research led to the adoption of a hybrid delivery model and the introduction of Student Success Champions who support programme delivery, including helping with interactive sessions. Ongoing, routine monitoring of the Life Tools programme indicates sustained positive student experience. However, there are practical limitations to the extent of the evaluation methods that are possible. Lessons learned from the development and evaluation of Life Tools are discussed, with the recommendation that self-regulated programmes are adopted to support students' transition into university and wider experience.

Keywords: university transition, learner-directed support, psychoeducation, personal and professional development, student partners

Introduction

The transition into university life marks a period of significant change. Many new students move away from home and familiar sources of support, whilst others begin commuting to university and integrating studying into their existing lives. The nature of studying will likely differ from students' pre-tertiary environment, with students needing to acquire new knowledge, develop new academic skills and adapt to unfamiliar expectations. Students may also choose to enter higher education with employability in mind, viewing university as a means of improving their future career prospects (Neves & Hewitt, 2021). Yet this aspiration now unfolds in a labour market increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence (AI), where students may face heightened concerns about employment risk (Liang & Zhai, 2025), alongside growing pressure to develop new employability skills relevant to emerging forms of work (Segbenya et al., 2023).

However, the transition to university involves far more than career-oriented motivations alone. First year students must adapt to new academic, social and practical demands, and this process of adjustment can be both challenging and emotionally demanding. Students must navigate unfamiliar expectations, renegotiate sources of support, and begin to establish new relationships and routines. Post-pandemic research has highlighted the importance of peer interaction and belonging during transition (Peacock et al., 2020), while also showing that many students struggle to become effective self-directed learners in changing learning environments (Cameron & Rideout, 2022). As a result, students must learn to balance academic demands with the social challenges of building new relationships, with both peers and staff, in unfamiliar environments. It can take time to navigate the new learning and support structures and know what help and guidance is available. Although these challenges are widespread, some students may be especially vulnerable during this period. For example, across eight countries, one-third of first year students reported experiencing at least one mental health disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018).

Equipping first year students with strategies to face these challenges can support them during the transition to university. Developing further independence is a key aspect of the adjustment to university, requiring students to take greater responsibility for their learning and wellbeing (Cameron & Rideout, 2020). Difficulties adjusting to the new conditions have been linked to limited self-regulation and ineffective learning strategies (Hoffait & Schyns, 2017), meaning that development of these skills and strategies is an important part of university learning for many. This case study presents a programme that is designed to support students in developing their own toolkit of effective skills and strategies for university life.

Life Tools is a universal, learner-directed, psychoeducation programme at the University of Reading that supports students' transition into university and personal development. Engagement in such programmes has been found to promote academic development, motivation, and ability to cope with anxiety (Theobald, 2021). The Life Tools programme is described, including its key topics covered which support the first-year experience, evidence-based approach and theoretical underpinnings, and delivery modes. This paper then outlines research conducted in partnership with students to inform programme development, the development of ongoing evaluation practices to enable Life Tools to effectively support a wide range of students, and lessons learned.

The Life Tools Programme

Life Tools is part of the University of Reading Student Wellbeing Services' proactive strategy to support students into, during and beyond their studies. As a universal programme open to all learners, Life Tools offers both preventative support through personal development and intervention at the point of need. In brief, the programme consists of a series of talks which are largely delivered as hybrid seminars, with additional resources on a virtual learning environment and sent by email. Typically, approximately 85 university-wide 45 minutes and a few that are 30-minute sessions are delivered each academic year plus a range of additional sessions requested by academic departments or university services. Students across all undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study engage with Life Tools, but it especially supports the transition into higher education for first year undergraduate students and foundation year students.

The programme covers a wide range of topics relevant to students' university journey, including managing transitions, dealing with uncertainty, and adapting to change, getting a good night's sleep, understanding and managing procrastination, building confidence, and dealing with feedback.

Evidence-based approach

Life Tools is a psychoeducational, self-regulated programme that has been developed by, and is run by, a qualified Chartered Psychologist employed part-time within the Wellbeing Services. At the university level, a meta-analysis of self-regulated learning programmes found that they can effectively support students in a range of academic outcome areas (Theobald, 2021). Psychoeducational programmes have also been found to effectively support adolescents to manage common mental health concerns, notably depression, and promote resilience (e.g. Bevan Jones et al., 2017).

The content is evidence-based, with topics designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to support their transition to higher education, develop self-management skills, and support their wellbeing as part of their personal, academic and professional development. Examples of topics covered are managing transitions, preparing for university, managing stress, dealing with academic pressure, exam preparation, sleep, procrastination, perfectionism, confidence, managing uncertainty, and mindfulness. The topics vary from year to year in response to trends in student needs and requests. For example, a four-part mental health mini-series has recently been developed that covers understanding anxiety, low mood, loneliness, and managing boundaries to protect health and wellbeing.

The theory of change within the overall Life Tools approach is that, by self-selecting to engage with the programme, students learn to actively manage their own personal development and gain benefits from evidence-based content that is relevant to their individual needs. Through this self-regulated approach, students access the content and 'dosage' that best supports their development and can vary this as needed across their learning journey. Core to the programme's ethos is the belief that students are the agents of their own development. This person-centred approach is broadly rooted within humanistic psychology concepts, including that people have an inner drive for self-actualisation and the capacity for self-understanding and growth (e.g. Joseph, 2016), and applies ideas from self-determination theory that people are motivated to grow and can be supported to do so within educational and other environments (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

The programme content is designed to support students to develop this ability to self-manage their development. Within each session, students are supported to reflect upon the topic and how they can develop self-management skills, through presentation and discussion of content grounded in the scientific literature. The way that topics are discussed within the programme focuses on supporting students to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) and emotional agility using a solution-focused approach (David, 2016). The programme encourages further reflection on the learning after each talk/webinar, positioning the sessions as part of students' ongoing personal development journeys. The aim is to increase students' sense of self-efficacy to develop self-management skills, manage challenges effectively to achieve their goals, and support their wellbeing. Self-efficacy, the belief in your own power to take actions and attain goals (e.g. Bandura, 1997) has been found to be strongly related to academic performance and has been supported within educational practice (Artino, 2012).

It is important that Life Tools sessions offer a supportive space for students to reflect upon their own development. Whether a student attends in person or online, sessions offer a safe space to learn and to interact with other learners within the university. The learning environment created within the programme aims to support the three core psychological needs identified within self-determination theory; autonomy, competence, and relatedness (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2008). It seeks to support students' motivation and

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

learning by enabling them to have autonomy over how they engage with the programme both overall and within sessions, by helping them to build a sense of competence as learners who can continue to grow, and by creating opportunities to form connections with others and develop a sense of belonging within the university learning community. To increase accessibility and awareness of university services, these are signposted at the end of each talk.

Delivery modes

Students can engage with the programme in ways that suit them best. The primary delivery mode is the series of talks and seminars. These were initially delivered entirely in-person but, following the pandemic and the research described below, are now predominantly offered as hybrid webinars delivered via MS Teams. This mixed approach is more inclusive as it makes the programme more accessible for students who commute and have other responsibilities and commitments. Students who attend in-person can participate during class, and those who attend online can engage via the Teams chat. Active participation is encouraged, but students can contribute anonymously through Mentimeter, an online audience participation tool. The interactive nature of the hybrid sessions is appreciated within student feedback comments. Students self-select which sessions to attend and how many, making it learner directed.

A more recent delivery mode is through the embedding of Life Tools within multiple degree programmes. This has been disseminated as an approach within a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project on Embedding Mental Wellbeing (Peña Bizama, 2021). This includes one-off or occasional webinars being scheduled within the curriculum or programme engagement being embedded within modules. For example, departments such as Law and History have embedded bespoke talks/webinars which are timetabled for first year students as part of a core module or for students across the School. This approach puts in place relevant support at timely points within students' learning journeys. Within the Psychology department, undergraduate students can include self-selected Life Tools sessions as hours on their CPD logs within a module related to professional development. Across the university, Life Tools has been incorporated into the curriculum for foundation year programmes to support students' transition into higher education. Foundation year students, as part of their course, can attend any self-selected talk/webinar and write a reflective piece describing their learning and experience.

In addition, avenues to gain recognition of the professional development involved in engaging with the Life Tools programme have been developed. Across the university as a whole, students can attain the RED Award which is run by the Careers Service and recognizes a commitment to professional development through activities such as training and volunteering. Attendance at Life Tools sessions has been embedded within the RED Award as a recognized professional development activity. The 'Life Tools Certificate' has also been developed as a standalone recognition for students' participation in the programme and dedication to their personal, academic and professional development. To complete the Certificate, students attend six self-selected talks/webinars and two group discussions and write a brief reflection on each of these sessions. They then write a final, longer piece reflecting upon their experience, their learning, what they have applied during their studies and what they plan to continue doing beyond this year and beyond university. The Certificate is designed to support students' professional development by offering a 'qualification' to enhance their CV early in their university journey, as well as through the benefits of participation in the programme.

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

Programme delivery includes the provision of resources on the university's Blackboard virtual learning environment. Students in any year and any degree programme can self-enroll onto the Life Tools organisation on Blackboard to access recordings of Life Tools sessions and supporting handouts. Those who enrol receive a weekly email providing the details of talks/webinars planned for the following week, and can also self-enroll in the Learner's mailing list to receive a weekly email with tips to maintain motivation and prevent procrastination. In addition, they are informed about resources offered by other departments at the university, e.g. Careers, Study Advice, and International Student support. Once enrolled in the first undergraduate year or foundation year, students remain enrolled across their studies unless they choose to be removed.

Programme promotion

Awareness of the programme is raised via multiple channels. There is a dedicated section about Life Tools within the university student-facing webpages (University of Reading, n.d.), which provides key information and directs students to the Blackboard organization. There is a particular emphasis upon making first year students aware of the programme within the Welcome period. Life Tools is promoted within university-wide Welcome sessions and information, specific Life Tools sessions, and signposting to the programme within 'Study Smart', a pre-entry online module offered by the university. Throughout the year, key information is disseminated through a variety of mediums, such as leaflets and posters displayed around campus, bookmarks with personal development tips, and semi-regular information stands in locations such as the Library. Increasingly, posts within university social media are used to promote the programme and disseminate bite-sized tips. For example, student-created videos where they describe their experiences of transition into university and adjustment to studying independently.

Staff are also made aware of the programme so that they can promote it amongst their cohorts and to students in particular need of the support it offers. Regular emails are sent to Department Directors of Academic Tutoring, academic staff who coordinate support for students via academic tutors (also known as personal tutors or personal advisors within UK universities). These provide details of upcoming Life Tools sessions to be cascaded amongst other staff and students. Academic staff and professional services staff within university Support Centre and the Student Union, and Academic, Professional and Wellbeing Services also signpost individual students who are experiencing challenges to Life Tools, when programme content may appropriately support them.

Collaborative research to develop the programme

Collaborative research between the Life Tools manager, an academic within Psychology, and student researchers was conducted in the first half of the 2020-21 academic year, during the pandemic. Student researchers collaborated with staff in setting up the study and helped with the data collection and evaluation. This aimed to evaluate the programme and its transition to online delivery. The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining an online survey with interviews and focus groups to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights. Ethical approval was obtained through the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences.

Quantitative evaluation

A survey was conducted between the start of the Autumn term 2020 and the beginning of the Spring 2021 term, yielding 46 responses. The majority of respondents, 33, were undergraduate students, with 12 in their first year of study. There were 13 postgraduate students, with 6 in their first year of a master's course and 1 in their first year of a PhD. Students ranged in age between 18 and 51 years, and the mean participant age was 24.19 years. The majority, 80%, were female, 70% were White, and 62% were British. Over a third, 37%, of participants had a disability. Three-quarters were home students, and a quarter were international students. The University of Reading has a campus in Malaysia and 3 students were based at the University of Reading Malaysia.

During the 2020-21 academic year Life Tools switched from in-person delivery to webinars. Over half of the respondents, 59%, reported that they usually accessed the webinars from an off-campus location, such as elsewhere in the UK. On average student participants had attended 5.8 Life Tools sessions between March 2020, around the time when pandemic restrictions first affected programme delivery, and the time of the survey. This included an average of 1.5 sessions between March and September 2020, and an average of 4.3 webinars since the start of the 2020-21 academic year in October up to the survey. When asked about the webinar length, 82% felt that this was about right, 9% that they were too long and 9% that they were too short. Students were also asked whether they would recommend the webinars to a friend, with 89% answering yes and 11% maybe.

Participants completed self-report measures to assess their personal and academic development. To put the students' self-reported development into context given the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, the survey first asked about their ability to manage uncertainty. This was measured through the Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2012) that measures ability to adapt to change, novelty and uncertainty through nine statements rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The average score indicated that students in the survey had quite a high level of adaptability, with a mean score of 5.23.

Students then completed 12 items rated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) which were developed specifically for the study based upon key areas which Life Tools hoped to support students with: motivation, organisation, resilience, connectedness and transition to university or between years. Students first rated the extent to which the statements applied to them in general and then rated the extent to which they felt that the Life Tools webinars had supported them to develop with each of the areas. Table 1 summarises the mean responses.

Overall, students rated their academic and personal development on the outcome areas targeted by the programme fairly positively, with mean answers above the mid-point. Students also felt that attending the Life Tools webinars had benefited in these areas. Perhaps unsurprisingly during the pandemic, the lowest rating by students was for their level of connectedness to the university, and it was encouraging to see that they felt that Life Tools was beneficial in this regard. However, it is important to bear in mind that students self-selected to take part in the survey, and it is possible that they were more adaptable than the general student population - and thus more likely to positively perceive their development and the programme impact.

Table 1 Students' self-reported personal development and perceived impact of the Life Tools programme

Outcome Area	Mean self-reported level	Mean perceived impact Life Tools
Transition to university/ between years	3.39	3.67
Motivation	3.55	3.84
Organisation	3.64	3.79
Resilience	3.64	3.56
Connectedness to the university	2.86	3.56

Qualitative evaluation

Qualitative insights were obtained through two focus groups and three one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The focus groups and interviews were conducted by a student researcher using open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences of the programme in greater depth. Discussion topics included students' motivations for attending, their expectations and first impressions, experiences of online delivery, perceived benefits for personal and academic development and suggestions for improvement. In total, ten students took part in focus groups (n=4; n=6) and there were three interviewees. Just under half of the participants, 6, were first year undergraduate students. The mean age of participants was 24.38 years and 84.6% were female.

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four overarching themes were identified: 1) Motivation to attend the programme; 2) Safe environment; 3) Perceived benefits; 4) Challenges and suggestions for improvements. These themes are displayed in Figure 1 and briefly described below with participant quotations.

Motivation to attend the programme

Students discussed multiple motivations for engaging with the Life Tools programme. The numerous topics offered seemed to be one of the main reasons, and in particular students were motivated to attend the webinars on sleep. Additionally, students appeared more likely to join the webinars during the exam period.

Safe environment

One strength of the Life Tools programme identified within students' answers was the safe environment offered by the programme manager within the webinars. Particularly, students appreciated the coordinator's responsiveness and the scientific background behind the webinars.

Perceived benefits

Feedback is collected in the classroom, on Mentimeter and via MS forms. During the focus groups and interviews, many benefits were perceived to be appreciated by participants. For example, students appreciated that Life Tools was practical, research-based, well-structured and interactive. The programme

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

played a key role in helping students to settle during the start of term. Additionally, the online modalities initiated during the pandemic offered a flexibility that allowed more students to join the programme. Overall, students' discussions indicated that the programme exceeded the expectations that they had before attending the first sessions.

Challenges and improvements

Some potential improvements were identified within students' answers. Simplifying the Life Tools webpages on the university website, in terms of both content and design, could potentially make the information more understandable. Relatedly, the programme could be better advertised to increase reach. While the webinar modalities had some benefits, some participants highlighted the lack of an interactive component during the online sessions.

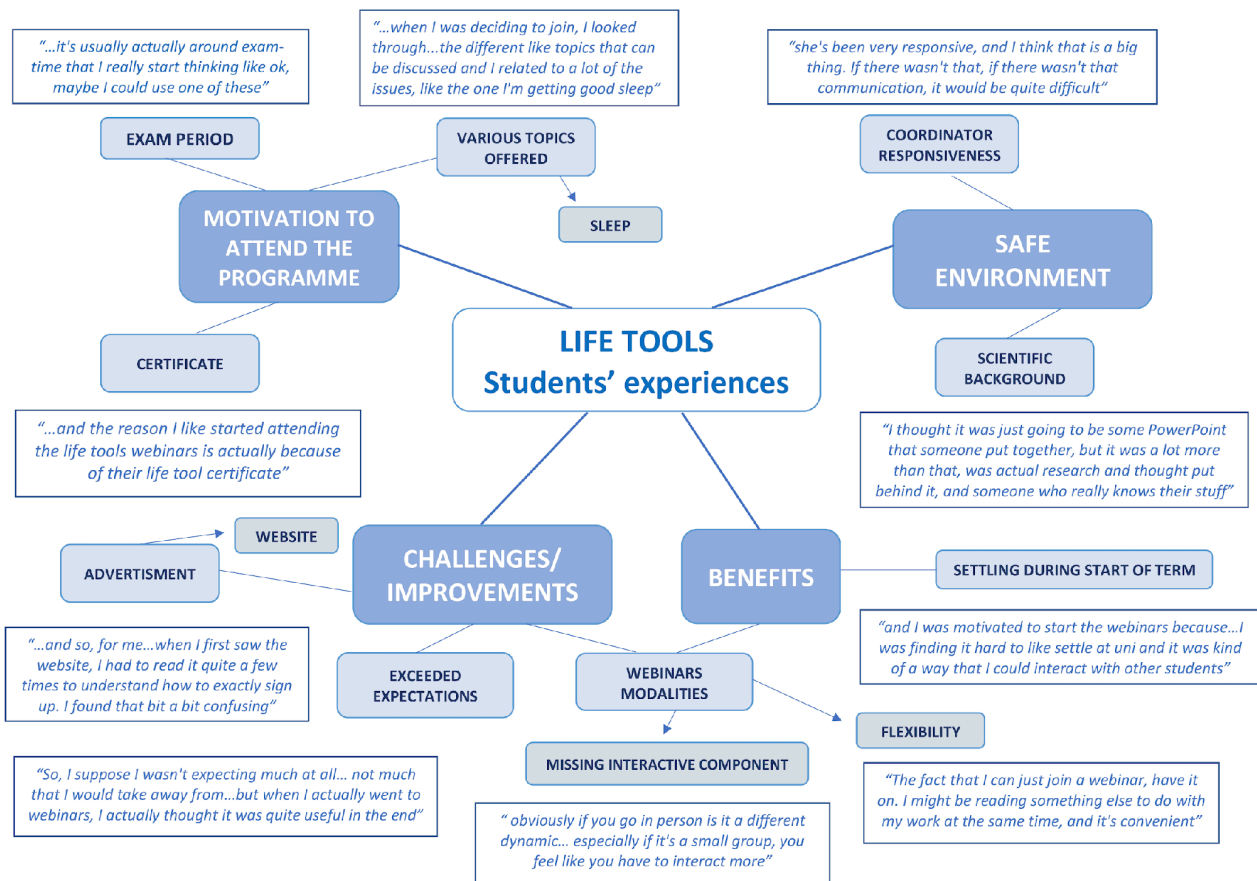


Figure 1 Thematic map of the themes and subthemes generated within the qualitative evaluation of students' experiences of Life Tools.

Impact of the research

Overall, the research suggested that students perceived that Life Tools positively impacted their development and that they had a positive programme experience. In important aspects for first year students, the programme was felt to support connectedness to the university and the transition to

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

university. Encouragingly students' free discussion within the qualitative evaluation suggested that the programme's diverse topics, evidence-based approach, and supportive facilitation are key strengths.

In response to the evaluation, the challenges and areas for potential improvements were addressed. The programme's webpages were revised to improve clarity and visibility for new students. Other advertising materials and social media posts were also revised in line with this feedback. The findings directly informed the Life Tools post-pandemic delivery mode, supporting the decision to move to a hybrid format. This approach combines the greater accessibility and flexibility offered by webinars with optional in-person attendance. Students have commented that having the option to join online is helpful when they are not on campus or do not have time in between lectures. This also makes the programme accessible to students who are away on a study abroad year or at the University of Reading Malaysia. There is now a greater focus upon interactivity for students attending online as well as in-person. Students can participate in discussions either in the room or in MS Teams chat, and an online response platform, Mentimeter, is used to enable in-person and remote students to participate anonymously.

Importantly, the research took a collaborative approach between students and staff.

Student-Staff partnership

The Life Tools programme has now adopted a student-staff partnership approach. Student Success Champions have been introduced, with around five students appointed each year, who are employed on a casual, part-time basis to support programme delivery. The Student Success Champions are especially important for supporting first year students within the programme. They play a crucial role in promoting the programme during the Welcome period, welcoming students as they arrive at Life Tools sessions, and taking a lead in making the sessions interactive. These student partners participate actively in the talks, in person and online, which encourages new students to participate as well. By sharing their experiences, the Student Success Champions show first year students, and others new to Life Tools, how the programme is relevant to their university journey.

Ongoing programme evaluation and enhancement

Ongoing monitoring of the programme is conducted with a view to continual enhancement. In addition to students' comments during the talks, the numbers of students attending each session are recorded and within each session students are asked for informal feedback via Mentimeter and MS forms. Students consistently provide positive feedback, stating that they find the talks informative, insightful, relevant, reassuring, and motivating. This informs the content within pre-planned upcoming sessions in that academic year, and which sessions are planned to run in the following year. Additionally, as the programme is situated within Wellbeing Services, the content can be informed by trends seen in the nature of difficulties experienced by students across the university. For example, in response to student feedback and needs identified during the pandemic, Life Tools sessions were run on managing uncertainty. In addition, following student feedback, a Mental Health mini-series was created, covering topics such as understanding anxiety, low mood, loneliness, and managing boundaries.

Example monitoring data

As an example of routine programme monitoring, in 2024-25 there were 2092 attendances at Life Tools sessions across the university. Students who attended were primarily first year undergraduates, 42.3%, and other students new to the university – foundation year students, 22.5%, and master's students, 7.3%. Over half of the attendances, 1510, were within the first semester teaching period, indicating the value of the programme in supporting transition into the academic year. Attendance was gradually less during the second semester, likely related to students' increased workload. Within the initial Welcome period, attendances were entirely in person, 183, and in the following teaching period, one-third of attendances were in person compared to two-thirds being online. In the remainder of the academic year, the majority of attendances were online. This suggests that at the start of the academic year students value the opportunity to connect with others in person.

Of those who completed anonymous feedback questions, 63.2% rated the session 'Excellent', 30.1% 'Good', and 6.1% 'Average/Neutral'. When asked to rate to what extent they found the session useful, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), the mean rating was 4.3. When asked to rate to what extent they felt more confident in the area covered in the session, the mean rating was 4.1 and when asked to rate to what extent they felt they understood the topic better as a result the mean rating was 4.3. Figure 2 shows the words that students selected to describe their experience of the sessions. Students were also asked whether they would recommend Life Tools to a friend, with 96% answering yes.

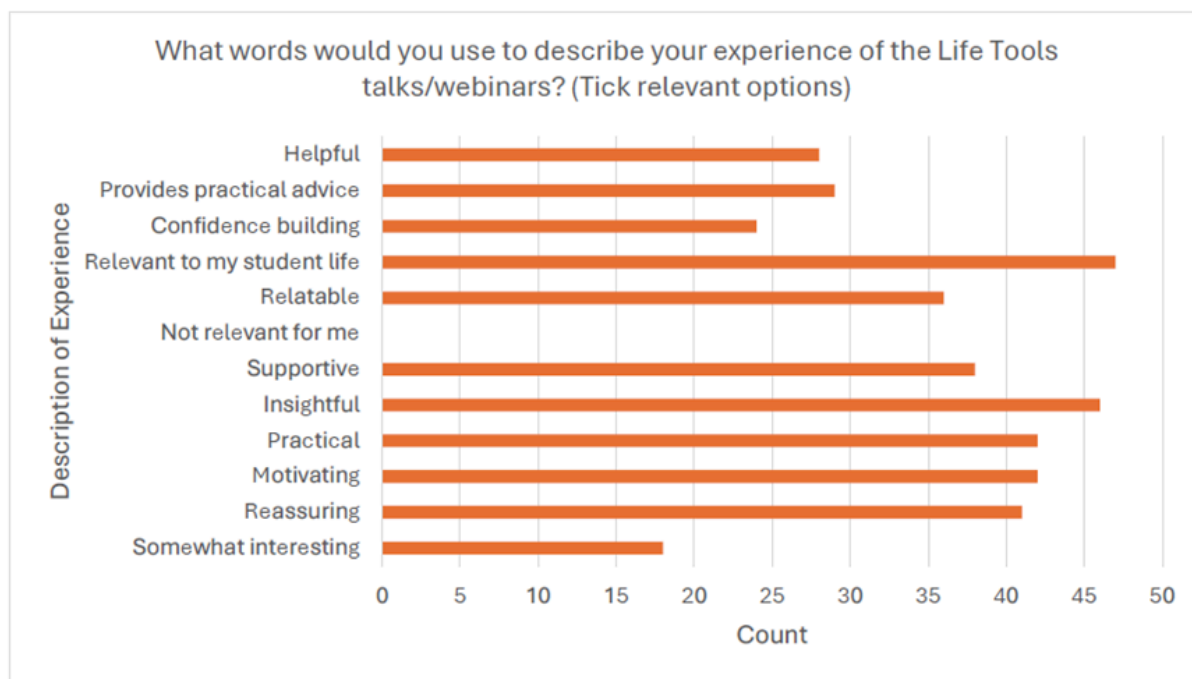


Figure 2 Words selected by students in 2024-25 to describe their experience of Life Tools.

Open comments affirmed students' appreciation of the increased interactivity adopted within the hybrid delivery e.g. "I like the session was interactive. I was able to vote and answer questions". However, they also showed how keeping the option to attend in-person supported connectedness e.g. "They're a really nice way to learn new skills and meet lovely people". A recurring theme was that the focus upon drawing

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

practical insights from the scientific literature helped students develop self-management skills e.g. "I find these webinars to be helpful and practical since I can relate to them, and I have tried out few techniques (not just this webinar) and I can see some changes in my performance!".

Quality assurance structures

Ongoing evaluation of the programme is built into the university's quality assurance structures. The data collected are considered within the Wellbeing Services as part of the overall monitoring of the services' work. The data forms part of regular reporting by Wellbeing Services to the university's Committee on Student Experience and Development, which ensures ongoing evaluation and enhancement of services and activities outside of direct teaching and learning. This committee reports to the overall University Board of Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience. Life Tools has also formed an integral part of the institution's submission to the University Student Mental Health Charter (UMHC) programme, an Award scheme in the UK run by the charity Student Minds that recognizes universities' commitment to effective support for student and staff mental health. The university attained the UMHC Award in 2025, with Life Tools highlighted as an example of good practice.

Evaluation challenges

There are challenges to the evaluation that can be accomplished on an ongoing basis. During times of financial uncertainty within the UK higher education section, resourcing of all activities must be carefully managed. The university does not presently have an institution-wide attendance monitoring system, and part-time staffing of the programme means that there are practical limitations to the time that can be spent on collecting and analysing data. Therefore, it has not been possible to systematically monitor individual students' attendance at different sessions in order to identify the number of unique learners within the programme each academic year.

An institutional attendance monitoring approach is currently under development, and it is anticipated that this will enhance the ongoing monitoring of the programme. The aim would be to progress to a point where individual learners' programme engagement can be monitored with links to wider learning analytics, to more rigorously evaluate how Life Tools engagement contributes to students' overall development and performance. Additionally, a student is now employed on a casual basis as an Administrator to support the collection and analysis of attendance and feedback data.

Evaluating the impact of embedding the programme within the curriculum

Evaluation had thus far focused upon Life Tools sessions outside of curricula. An initiative during the academic year 2025-2026 was created in the form of a collaboration with the History department. The project involved embedding Life Tools within a new first-year History skills module, which was co-created and delivered with students with wellbeing in mind. First year students gained 10% of their overall grade as recognition for their engagement on a pass-fail basis. Students attended a series of six talks and completed a bespoke guided worksheet that was stored on the module's Blackboard course. It included reflective responses alongside a 600-700-word piece on their experience during their first semester.

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

The aim was to offer students the opportunity to find out about Life Tools to support their academic learning, adopting a holistic approach by including a focus on their wellbeing. The integration of Life Tools had a positive impact on students' transition into university study. Of the 113 students enrolled, 60 completed the Life Tools component (achieving a pass mark). Student feedback was consistently strong, indicating that the programme helped them navigate the academic and personal demands of their first semester. Students reported increased confidence, a stronger sense of being able to deal with challenges, and a greater awareness of factors affecting their performance, including sleep, stress, concentration, and procrastination. The reflective structure encouraged deeper engagement with both their academic development and supported their transition to university. Importantly, many students expressed an intention to continue applying these strategies throughout their degree and beyond, suggesting that the impact extends beyond immediate outcomes to longer-term skill development, reflexivity, and wellbeing.

Lessons learned

Three key, interrelated lessons learned have emerged from the collaborative research and the ongoing running and evaluation of Life Tools, with a view to supporting the first-year experience. These are discussed below to support practitioners seeking to run such universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programmes within their own environments. An overarching theme within these lessons is the value of student involvement as partners in the delivery of such programmes.

Promotion and early engagement

High visibility and proactive promotion are essential during the first semester, particularly during the Welcome period. Early, face-to-face engagement supports continued programme participation. In-person talks and stands in the university Welcome area and in the library allows students to discover the programme early on in their journey. Involving students has made a big difference, through Student Success Champions representing Life Tools during Welcome Week events and supporting social media communications.

At the start of the academic year programme information must be easy for new students to understand, including clear webpage information and email communications. Targeted, well-advertised, content can support students' transition into university, such as sessions on "preparing for university", "managing on a student budget", and "settling in, getting to know others".

Hybrid delivery and student-led interactivity

The shift to hybrid delivery has become one of Life Tools' defining strengths, combining the flexibility of online access with the sense of community provided by the students actively participating both online and in-person. It needs to be simple for first year students to learn how to access the programme online. Using MS Teams for hybrid sessions has made participation straightforward, as there are automatic calendar reminders, and it is used throughout the university for other online meetings.

The hybrid approach does, however, require careful consideration. Technical setup issues (e.g., sound, screen sharing) and difficulties in perceiving online students' reactions require additional preparation and adaptive facilitation. For Life Tools, feedback from attendees has informed iterative improvement, including shorter setup times, better IT support, and clearer engagement prompts.

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

Again, the involvement of student partners can be an effective form of support. The Student Success Champions support chat moderation and help balance attention between in-person and online participants. Peer-led interactivity helps first year students to feel comfortable taking part and plays a key role in sustaining engagement, alongside the facilitation of anonymous contributions through tools like Mentimeter which has encouraged respectful and inclusive interaction (Mayhew et al., 2020).

Embedding within university structures

Embedding programmes such as Life Tools within wider university structures can facilitate first year students' involvement. For example, embedding sessions within first-year modules or the RED Award run by the Careers Service are ways to embed the programme as part of new students' broader professional and personal development journey rather than as a standalone Wellbeing Services initiative. However, thought needs to be given to ensure that involvement remains optional and self-directed, preserving the learner's driven interest.

Working in partnership with other departments in the university is also a way to ensure that psychoeducational programmes are responsive to the needs of new cohorts of first year students. Relatedly, ongoing evaluation that is embedded within the institution's quality assurance structures is essential for continual programme enhancement.

Final remarks

Overall, we recommend that self-regulated psychoeducation programmes are considered as a way to support students' transition into university and wider experience. One student attendee fed back that they "liked the motivational advice at the end e.g. 'To keep balance on a bike you must keep moving'" which captures our view that ongoing evaluation and a willingness to be adaptive are essential. Future development of the programme should continue to prioritise student-staff partnership, responsiveness to students' changing needs, and stronger approaches to evaluation, including efforts to capture the perspectives of less engaged students and to track outcomes over time.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Tziafou Eirini Vasiliki for her support with the collaborative research during a placement in her undergraduate studies.

Biographies

Alana James is Co-Chair of the Committee on Student Experience and Development at the University of Reading. Her research and practice focuses upon student wellbeing, including support for university transitions. You can contact her by email (a.i.james@reading.ac.uk), on LinkedIn, and through her research group (<https://research.reading.ac.uk/pedagogical-research-pcls/>).

Alicia Peña Bizama is a Chartered Counselling Psychologist, an Occupational Psychologist, and a Consultant working with schools, colleges and universities. She is the Manager of the Life Tools Programme (part-time) at the University of Reading. You can contact her by email: m.a.penabizama@reading.ac.uk, on LinkedIn, alicia@aliciapenabizama.com and website <https://aliciapenabizama.com>

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

Denis Persichini is a Psychology PhD researcher at the University of Reading, researching students' perceived employability. During his undergraduate degree he was a Research Assistant on studies related to the student experience, as well as a Wellbeing Champion with the Students' Union. You can contact him at: denis.persichini@pgr.reading.ac.uk or LinkedIn.

References

- Artino, A. R. (2012). Academic self-efficacy: from educational theory to instructional practice. *Perspectives on Medical Education, 1*(2), 76-85. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-012-0012-5>
- Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., ... & Kessler, R. C. (2018). WHO world mental health surveys international college student project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 127*(7), 623. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Bevan Jones, R., Thapar, A., Stone, Z., Thapar, A., Jones, I., Smith, D., & Simpson, S. (2017). Psychoeducational interventions in adolescent depression: A systematic review. *Patient Education and Counseling, 100*(6), 1043–1058. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738399117305918>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cameron, R. B., & Rideout, C. A. (2022). 'It's been a challenge finding new ways to learn': first-year students' perceptions of adapting to learning in a university environment. *Studies in Higher Education, 47*(3), 668-682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1783525>
- David, S. (2016). *Emotional agility: Get unstuck, embrace change, and thrive in work and life*. Penguin Life.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie canadienne, 49*(3), 182–185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012801>
- Dweck, C. (2017). *Mindset: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential* (Updated ed.). Ballantine Books.
- Hoffait, A. S., & Schyns, M. (2017). Early detection of university students with potential difficulties. *Decision Support Systems, 101*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2017.05.003>
- Joseph, S. (2016). *Authentic: How to be yourself and why it matters*. Piatkus.
- Kandiko Howson, C. B., & Mawer, M. (2013). *Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education*. King's Learning Institute. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/People/Research/DL/QAARReport.pdf>
- Liang, Y., & Zhai, Y. (2025). The impact of artificial intelligence impact awareness on college students' employment risk perception: A moderated mediation model. *Acta Psychologica, 261*, 105808. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105808>
- Martin, A.J., Nejad, H., Colmar, S., & Liem, G.A.D. (2012). Adaptability: Conceptual and empirical perspectives on responses to change, novelty and uncertainty. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 22*, 58-81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032794>
- Mayhew, E., Davies, M., Millmore, A., Thompson, L., & Peña Bizama, A. (2020). The impact of audience response platform Mentimeter on the student and staff learning experience. *Research in Learning Technology, 28*. <https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v28.2397>
- Neves, J., & Hewitt, R. (2021). *Student Academic Experience Survey 2021*. Advance HE and Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2021>
- Niemiec, C. P., & Ryan, R. M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education, 7*(2), 133-144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104318>
- Peacock, S., Cowan, J., Irvine, L., & Williams, J. (2020). An exploration into the importance of a sense of belonging for online learners. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 21*(2), 18-35.

Life Tools: A case study of a universal, learner-directed psychoeducation programme to support students' transition into university and broader personal development

Peña Bizama, A. (2021). Embedding mental wellbeing: Methods and benefits – Life Tools programme: A psycho-educational programme for all students to manage the transition into university, develop personal, academic and professional skills and resilience. In *Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021: Embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/embedding-mental-wellbeing-methods-and-benefits.pdf>

Segbenya, M., Bervell, B., Frimpong-Manso, E., Otoo, I. C., Andzie, T. A., & Achina, S. (2023). Artificial intelligence in higher education: Modelling the antecedents of artificial intelligence usage and effects on 21st century employability skills among postgraduate students in Ghana. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 5, 100188.

University of Reading (n.d.). *Life Tools*. University of Reading. Retrieved November 1, 2025 from

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/essentials/Support-And-Wellbeing/Life-Tools>

Theobald, M. (2021). Self-regulated learning training programs enhance university students' academic performance, self-regulated learning strategies, and motivation: A meta-analysis. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 66, 101976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2021.101976>

Worsley, J. D., Harrison, P., & Corcoran, R. (2021). Bridging the Gap: Exploring the unique transition from home, school or college into university. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9, 634285. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634285>