



## Special Issue

### Guest Editorial – Students experiencing and shaping the first year: agency, belonging and participation

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It is perhaps not surprising that a key theme of this Special Issue is the role and agency of students in first-year experience across Europe. However, the articles in this part encourage us to conceptualise this in ways that are not singular, and not simple. We read of students as prospective entrants, first-year learners, peer leaders, ambassadors, mentors, student employees, co-designers, co-authors, users of digital systems, participants in evaluation, and narrators of their own experience.

Drawing on Felten et al.'s (2019) distinction between students as objects, consumers and actors, this section invites us to ask not only whether work is student-centred, but how students are positioned within it: as sources of evidence, recipients of provision, or contributors to the shaping of learning, belonging and transition.

Articles in this part also contribute to the research and practice on transition, persistence, belonging and participation. They invite us to consider the importance of supportive relationships between peers, and between staff and students; these varied relationships can contribute to developing confidence to become successful higher education learners (Thomas, 2012; Morgan, n.d.). It also reminds us that belonging is not a static outcome or a simple feeling of social connection, but is shaped in many ways (Thomas & Gilani, 2025). They encourage us to think of first-year experience as relational, developmental and situational.

#### Preparing the ground: pre-arrival, induction and staged transition

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Several articles challenge the idea that transition begins at enrolment or can be addressed through a single welcome week – transition and induction is a process, not an event (Lowe & Cook, 2003). It is not only a process to develop confidence and belonging (Thomas, 2012) but one of academic adjustment and interacting successfully with the demands of the university environment (Tinto, 1987; van Rooijet al., 2018).

Several papers approach this through pre-arrival and early induction activity. Jones and Coleman's Psychology pre-arrival module at the University of East Anglia seeks to "take away some of the fear" before students arrive, using staged online resources and student perspectives to help students feel prepared, Roche et al. use the image of higher education as a "dinner party" to explore what it means for students to find their voice in an unfamiliar academic context. Their *Bridging the Gaps* course shows how pre-arrival work, shaped and delivered with student ambassadors, can support confidence, belonging and empowerment. Harrington et al. similarly show transition beginning before formal enrolment, through the

lived experience of a student whose route into higher education was “anything but conventional”. Pre-arrival work is not simply informational but it helps students understand expectations and participation, supporting them to consider their contributions as legitimate members of academic and professional communities.

Viewing induction as an ongoing process, which is sustained and relational is central to Kyte and Hadlow’s Welcome Workshops at Nottingham Trent University, which embed “connection-building” within course induction, using Student Mentors and course teams to support social integration, self-efficacy, navigational capital and belonging. Costa et al.’s account of *Sou.UMinho* presents welcoming and onboarding as a peer-led, co-designed and distributed process, with students acting as guides, associates and partners in creating a supportive campus environment. Corr’s *My Maynooth on Moodle* extends this further into a year-long digital transition programme, using staged monthly releases, asynchronous content and student-led resources to recognise that students need to return to guidance at different points in the year. In these examples, induction becomes less about front-loading information and more about creating conditions through which students can begin, and continue, to participate.

These articles prepare the ground for the next cluster, where students are not only welcomed into first-year communities, but actively help create them.

#### **Students as relational agents: peer support, mentoring and partnership**

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Student-staff partnership practices and activities form another core group of articles, which resonate with Healey et al.’s (2014) engagement work and Bovill et al.’s (2011) argument for students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula – of which we read more in Part 2 of this Special Issue. Articles in this part extend partnership beyond formal curriculum design into roles including Peer Leaders, student employees, and student associates who help others make sense of university life.

Several articles focus on structured peer learning and mentoring. Morgan’s account of Nottingham Trent University’s Student Mentoring scheme focuses on “turning challenges into change” through student voice, considering both first-year students seeking reassurance and the mentors whose engagement, confidence and support needs shape the scheme’s effectiveness. McParland et al. evaluate PASS in first-year Psychology at Queen’s University Belfast, showing how peer learning can provide academic reassurance and peer connection, while giving students a more informal space in which to ask questions and feel that they “fit into the course”. Walsh’s article on the PASS Leadership module at Technological University of the Shannon pushes the important point that peer learning depends on the preparation, debriefing, practice, and recognition of student leaders. Together, these papers show that peer support is not simply a low-cost addition to student support, but a form of relational and educational work that requires design, training and ongoing care.

Carey and colleagues extend this discussion by tracing the development of SI-PASS across six European contexts. Their article shows how an established model of peer learning benefits from being “centrally-coordinated, discipline-owned and student-led” while adapting to local priorities to support transition, study strategies, leader development and institutional strategy. Nilstad and Vikestad Kalvik broaden the peer support discussion beyond structured study sessions through their account of Campus Hosts at NTNU, Norway. Beginning from the challenge of getting students back on campus and helping them see campus as “more than just a classroom”, their student employees create low-threshold activities, informal networks, “space and snacks”, and the everyday conditions for a more “sticky campus”.

In these examples we can see how those students who have experienced transition help to make transition more navigable for others. This emphasis on the potential for students as actors poses a further question: which students are able to participate, belong and be recognised within first-year experience work?

### **Belonging across difference: identity, inequality and non-linear transition journeys**

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Belonging is a recurring concern across the whole part, but several articles ask us to think more carefully about whose belonging is being discussed and under what conditions it becomes possible. Gilani and Thomas's (2025) review is useful here because it frames belonging as shaped by multiple and interacting factors rather than as a simple individual feeling. Holmegaard et al.'s (2014) account of transition as a "journey of negotiation and belonging" is also important, because students in this cluster are shown negotiating identities, institutional cultures, disciplinary expectations and unequal routes into higher education.

Speirs examines working-class students' transition into undergraduate study and challenges the tendency to frame their experience through deficit. Drawing on institutional habitus, habitus clivé, mentoring and Freirean ideas of hope and love, the article asks how institutions and staff might better recognise the classed dimensions of belonging, confidence and academic legitimacy. Liddon's article on articulation students at the University of Dundee challenges the idea of a 'straightforward' transition. Through their Step-Up module, "dual identities" and the idea of a "slow induction", Liddon shows how students moving between college and university must navigate different systems, calendars, expectations, terminologies and assessment cultures. Students are both looking back to what might have been and forward to what may be – a 'Janus crossroads' – trying to inhabit a present shaped by two educational contexts.

Post-graduate FYE has been a growing discussion topic at previous EFYE conferences; Sydney and Edmunds focus on one-year Master's students positioned "between arrival and departure". Their vignette challenges the assumption that postgraduate taught students are already sufficiently independent, arguing that their compressed first-and-final-year experience requires tailored academic guidance, community-building and institutional attention. Stummerné Nagy's article begins with the phrase "ChatGPT is my friend"; this is not used primarily as a technology story, but to explore loneliness, care and academic community. Through *cura personalis*, peer helpers and value-based mental health work, the article considers how students can move from solitude towards a more supported sense of belonging.

Beaumont's reflection on "transitions within transitions" connects these student experiences with the transitions experienced by staff, services and institutions in a changing higher education sector. Her vignette argues that transition support cannot be static or universal, because the contexts in which students and staff work are themselves shifting.

These articles push against a generic first-year student experience, showing FYE is shaped by class, route, level, institutional systems, and staff experiences.

### **Learning to navigate contemporary university life**

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A final cluster of articles focuses on how students find their way in a broader societal context and in a world of rapid social change. Heikkilä and Lonka's (2006) work on students' approaches to learning, self-regulation and cognitive strategies, and van Rooij et al.'s (2018) focus on academic adjustment can help frame this cluster not simply as a set of technology or skills papers, but as a discussion of how students learn to

interpret expectations, regulate their study, engage with feedback and act within complex university environments.

Hodkin's "A Cup of Tea and a Chat" uses the ordinary language of conversation to explore the more complex pedagogic work of dialogic formative feedback. Her vignette shows how a short one-to-one discussion can help first-year Social Work degree apprenticeship students begin to decode academic writing, reduce anxiety around "letting go" of a first assignment and build confidence through relationships. Shields' article on digital feedback histories extends this concern with feedback into the digital university, asking how students' previous feedback experiences shape what they expect feedback to feel like at university. Stepping into one of our cross-cutting themes - 'pedagogy of care' - Shields shows how digital feedback systems can be experienced as detached unless educators effectively consider how feedback becomes meaningful. The image of a student alone, refreshing the grades tab, highlights the limitations of our systems – delivering information without necessarily creating understanding, confidence or connection.

Casey and Hurley examine first-year students' beliefs about time, attendance and study in what they frame as an "age of acceleration". Their article raises questions about the emerging "occupation" of being a university student, including how students balance timetabled attendance, independent study, rest, work, commuting and the pressure to make efficient decisions. Fonteyne and Acke approach the question of academic navigation through SIMON, a platform organised around three student-facing questions: "What am I capable of?", "What can I do to succeed?" and "Am I making progress?". Their article shows how predictive analytics, personalised actions and study progress monitoring can support first-year decision-making when data-informed feedback is embedded within human guidance, ethical care and student agency. Nele Van de Mosselaer's opinion piece on the "AI-extended student mind" brings these questions into the age of ChatGPT. By comparing education to gameplay and the "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles", the article argues that students need help to value difficulty, failure and deliberate inefficiency as part of meaningful learning.

We see that contemporary first-year experience is not only about access to support or information, but about how students learn to interpret feedback, manage time, use data, engage with AI, understand expectations, and how they deal with challenges and changes.

An article that crosses various cluster themes in this part is Cunningham's review of Healey's 'The Research-Education Nexus'. This contributes to our perspective on student agency, arguing that the nexus should be embedded from the first year so that students can begin to also see themselves as researchers from the outset of their degrees, and so contributors (as well as recipients) of what university life has to offer.

Overall, the articles in this cluster show that the student first-year experience cannot be reduced to arrival, orientation or support. It is shaped by preparation, relationships, identities, peer communities, digital systems, feedback practices, time pressures, care, uncertainty and student agency.

We hope this part encourages you to think carefully about the multiple (and overlapping) roles students occupy in first-year experience work. They are sometimes recipients of support, sometimes sources of evidence, and increasingly actors who help create the conditions through which they and others can belong, participate and learn.

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