



Education without boundaries: removing barriers to university transition through online pre-arrival activities

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Presentation abstract

Drawing on experiences of a pre-arrival online community launched in August 2024, this session provided insights and recommendations on how digital communities can support belonging, orientation and awareness of student services for new students. Taking an inclusive approach, the Academic and Digital Skills team at the University of Greenwich extended their pre-arrival activities online through the summer to help raise awareness of support available, curate the student community and forge connections.

The University of Greenwich has a highly diverse student population, many of whom come from deprived backgrounds, facing challenges and risks to equality of opportunity. With the focus on piloting a pre-arrival course for students with BTEC qualifications and students of BAME ethnicities, the aim of the project was to provide transition activities that could scaffold the development of academic and digital skills prior to starting the academic year. Reinforcing the importance of belonging, the four-day module enabled students to meet peers and staff, and discover useful services in a safe community space. With growing importance placed on increasing access and participation, this project delivers on our commitment to closing the awarding gap.

This session presented a selection of the activities used as part of this course, experiences of students pre-arrival, and the importance of considered design to promote online engagement. Presenters shared their findings and reflected on how this pilot might inform future iterations of the course. Attendees received take away tips on how online

pre-arrival interventions might apply to their own university settings and provide a space for thoughtful dialogue.

Keywords: pre-arrival; transition; BTEC; belonging; online.

Community response

Whilst there are widening participation schemes across the UK (Hubbard, O'Neill and Natrass, 2021), there may be gaps in how students from those schemes are inducted into the university community. This session introduced the programme at the University of Greenwich, which helps welcome new arrivals from a range of backgrounds. The session was received positively by delegates who praised the presenters for highlighting changing student demographics and how universities need to adapt in order to welcome learners from a wide variety of backgrounds. One delegate commented:

Thank you so much for this informative and thorough session! I was surprised to learn about the high number of students who felt they wouldn't be able to fit in socially at university.

And another stated:

This session was very valuable ... Sharon and Amy's workshop provided us with great insight and advice on how to proceed [with our institution's induction programme].

Delegates showed particular appreciation for the online aspects of induction as transition from asynchronous to synchronous activities in inductions may not match expectations:

The element that I am most concerned about is how to build a sense of community online. From the workshop, I have gathered that it is important to create synchronous activities that have very transparent and tangible learning objectives, even if it seems as trivial as 'you will have met at least two study buddies'. Designing a programme that flows well from one activity to another (synchronous and asynchronous), is easy to navigate, and focuses on pastoral rather than academic content are also instrumental in ensuring that student engagement is meaningful and hopefully leads to a greater sense of community.

Next steps and additional questions

This presentation demonstrated the success the programme has had with students from a variety of backgrounds. One delegate expressed the importance of the programme and potential benefits for all students: 'Would it be helpful to open it up to all learners regardless of their background?'

Authors' reflection

It was very useful to be able to present our work to an audience who share our commitment to removing barriers to studying at university. Presenting at the conference gave us an opportunity to find out more about other initiatives with similar goals, that is removing the awarding gap, and we followed up with conversations and sharing best practice with other institutions. The focus of these conversations has been around strategies for creating belonging in online spaces, and we continue to increase our knowledge base and research in this area.

The audience's reflections have helped us to further shape our intervention – thank you! This summer we are opening the pre-arrival module to all learners through our Welcome communications. So, while everyone can benefit from the course, we will specifically target and track the progress of our students from BAME ethnicities and with BTEC qualifications.

Acknowledgements

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Hubbard, K., O'Neill, M. and Nattrass, S. (2021) 'Levelling the playing field: the effect of including widening participation schemes in university league tables', *International review of education*, 67, pp.273-304. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09864-9>

Further reading

Garnham, W. and Walker, N. (eds.) (2024) *Supporting the student journey into higher education: how pre-arrival platforms can enhance widening participation*. London: Routledge.

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Sharon Perera is Head of Academic and Digital Skills at the University of Greenwich, helping students succeed through inclusive learning, innovative teaching and digital transformation. With nearly two decades of experience in higher education, she is passionate about making learning accessible and meaningful for everyone. Her work has earned national and international recognition, including awards for teaching excellence and academic integrity.

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