



Developing pre-arrival resources to support student transition into higher education

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Presentation abstract

This presentation explores the ongoing challenge of helping students make a successful transition into higher education, a period widely acknowledged to shape retention, academic success, and well-being. Reflecting current practice in the sector, the work examines a pre-arrival induction booklet created for new undergraduate students in Psychology and Speech and Language Therapy at the University of Reading. The booklet was emailed a month before enrolment, offering clear guidance on course structure, assessment formats, key staff contacts, support services, and practical advice for starting the first year.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a sizeable questionnaire (n=162; 41% response rate) with focus group discussions. The findings show that 59% of students read the booklet, and 72% found it highly useful. However, only 48% felt it made them much better prepared for university life. There were no marked differences in how first-generation students or those experiencing greater pre-arrival anxiety engaged with or benefitted from the resource, suggesting that different groups of students may have benefitted from the booklet to a similar extent. Notably, students who read the booklet continued to attend in-person Welcome Week activities, which suggests that early information can complement, rather than replace, face-to-face support.

Students in the focus group discussion commented on the benefits of having early access to essential information, being able to recognise staff, and gaining a clear overview of their course. At the same time, they recommended that the booklet could be more informal,

visually appealing, and provide greater detail about later years and wider aspects of university life. The approach taken was responsive, with student feedback informing ongoing revisions and improvements to the resource.

This presentation demonstrates how a phased and responsive approach to induction, which combines early digital engagement with opportunities for in-person connection, can support a sense of belonging and preparedness among new students. The findings highlight the importance of listening to student voices and adapting resources to meet evolving needs, contributing to a more supportive and inclusive transition into higher education.

Keywords: student transition; student engagement; retention; student voice; student anxiety; inclusivity; belonging.

Community response

The discussion sparked by this presentation brought together a wealth of lived experience, professional insight, and genuine empathy for students navigating the threshold of university life. As the presenters set out the rationale and outcomes of their pre-arrival induction booklet distributed to new Psychology and Speech and Language Therapy students at the University of Reading, the audience responded with both gratitude and critical curiosity, eager to explore how transition support might evolve to meet the real needs of diverse learners.

Lenia's response gave voice to a feeling shared by many. Reflecting on her own journey as an international student, she described the comfort that a well-crafted guide can offer during those anxious first days. For Lenia, having key information readily available was not merely a convenience; it was a source of reassurance, helping to demystify unfamiliar expectations and environments. Yet, her remarks moved beyond appreciation to gentle challenge. She wondered whether the induction booklet, for all its clarity and detail, might be enhanced through more interactive or creative means, and whether students themselves could be invited to shape its future form. In her words, the transition to higher education should be an ongoing process, not confined to a single week or one-way communication.

Vic Boyd, from City of Glasgow College, provided a further layer of reflection, highlighting how the session placed practical transition support at the centre of the student journey. Vic was particularly struck by the presenters' commitment to gathering iterative feedback from students and maintaining a 'live' approach to continuous improvement. She noted the distinctive disciplinary focus of the resource, which was carefully crafted to complement and extend other forms of induction and guidance. Vic's comments reinforced the value of a dynamic, responsive process, where student voices actively inform both content and design.

Several community members echoed these sentiments, emphasising the importance of extending induction across the early months, rather than concentrating support in the traditional, often overwhelming, 'Welcome Week'. There was praise for the presenters' phased approach, which offered practical advice, an introduction to staff, and a clear overview of course structure well before students set foot on campus. Such measures were recognised as crucial for building confidence, especially for those juggling academic preparation with other life responsibilities.

Yet, as the session unfolded, a spirit of critical partnership emerged. Contributors were keen to interrogate not only what the booklet provided, but also what might yet be improved, developing ideas from student suggestions; for example, broadening its scope, making it less formal, more visually appealing, and extending its focus to cover later years of study and the practicalities of student life such as managing finances, joining societies, or simply finding a dentist in a new city. This breadth of perspective reflected a sector-wide awareness that academic induction must sit alongside support for living independently and forging a sense of belonging in the wider university community.

Underlying these reflections was a curiosity about the impact and reach of the resource. Drawing on the presenters' research, it was noted that 59% of surveyed students had read the booklet. However, contrary to expectation, first-generation students and those with heightened pre-arrival anxiety were not significantly more likely to have engaged with it, despite being groups who often stand to gain most from early guidance. The findings prompted a renewed conversation about how best to tailor resources and outreach, ensuring no student feels invisible or unsupported at the start of their journey.

The question of impact ran deeper still. The community was intrigued to learn that, whilst 72% of respondents rated the booklet highly for usefulness, only 48% felt it had made them much better prepared for university life. Importantly, students who accessed the booklet continued to attend in-person Welcome Week activities, reinforcing the idea that digital and face-to-face supports are complementary rather than competing. This insight supported the sector's move towards blended induction models, where different modes of engagement can address a spectrum of student needs.

Throughout the discussion, the presenters' openness to feedback stood out as exemplary. Their willingness to revise and improve the booklet in response to student voices treating induction not as a static product but as a living process was warmly received. Vic Boyd, in particular, commended this collaborative ethos, recognising its role in helping learners develop a sense of identity and agency within their academic community.

The community's reflections created a dialogue that was as supportive as it was searching. There was gratitude for the progress already made, tempered by an eagerness for further innovation and partnership. Whether advocating for co-designed formats, more holistic content, or closer attention to the realities of student life, contributors made clear that effective induction is both a shared responsibility and an ongoing commitment.

Next steps and additional questions

The evaluation of the pre-arrival induction booklet provided valuable insights into student transition at university, as well as a clear set of priorities for future practice. Drawing on feedback from student questionnaires, focus groups, and analysis of engagement, the presentation sets out concrete next steps and raises important questions for further development.

The immediate focus is on improving the booklet's presentation and style. Students expressed a preference for a more colourful, concise, and less formal format, with clearer visual structure and language that is accessible from the outset. There is also a strong desire for richer content, including practical advice for study skills, detailed timetables, and greater clarity on what to expect in later years of the degree. These adjustments are designed to make the resource not only more appealing, but also more useful throughout the student journey.

Students also indicated the benefit of producing separate materials for different aspects of student life. Alongside programme-specific information, students would welcome standalone guidance on managing finances, accessing health and wellbeing services, and navigating life in the local area. This recognition that the transition to university is as much about settling into a new environment as it is about academic orientation is a key development in the presenters' approach.

In addition, the presenters have identified the importance of gathering more immediate feedback from new students. Plans are in place to hold further focus groups shortly after Welcome Week, enabling a timely understanding of how well the pre-arrival resources meet student needs and where further gaps might persist.

From their findings, several additional important questions emerge. The research explored whether first-generation students and those experiencing higher pre-arrival anxiety were more likely to read or benefit from the booklet, yet no significant differences were found across these groups. This raises the issue of how induction resources might be adapted or promoted to ensure greater inclusivity and to reach those most at risk of feeling unprepared.

Another key question concerns the overall impact of early information. While most students rated the booklet as useful, fewer than half reported that it made them feel much better prepared for university life. This prompts further reflection on the type and timing of information that is most effective, and whether additional or alternative support is required to foster confidence and readiness.

Finally, the findings suggest that providing a pre-arrival resource does not diminish students' participation in Welcome Week events. This points to the potential for a blended approach, combining digital and face-to-face induction activities to offer ongoing support. Understanding how best to balance these different modes of engagement remains a priority for future work.

Authors' reflection

We would like to thank everyone who attended our talk for their engagement and helpful feedback, as well as those who contributed their reflections in the collaborative writing space. The ideas that were shared with us have inspired us to reflect further on our findings and how we will proceed with the next stages of the project.

We have further reflected on why we had lower ratings for the extent to which the booklet helped students to feel more prepared, compared to how useful they found it. We think this might be because the booklet provided practical information about the programme, but did not necessarily address some of the key things that students might be most concerned about, i.e., living independently, making friends, settling in, etc. Hence, we had requests from students in the focus group discussions for a separate booklet covering life as a student.

Following the discussion with the community, we have also reflected on whether to include additional content to provide practical advice for study skills, e.g., making notes in lectures. For more general advice, such as study advice, etc., we plan to provide links within the booklet to resources that students can access on the university library website. We have also considered creating an interactive resource that would contain these links, as we would not want to duplicate this advice since it is already available and easily accessed online. The other reason is that we hope that having a booklet which is primarily focused on programme-specific information will help to enhance students' sense of belonging to the school and help strengthen their identity as Psychology or Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) students at the University of Reading.

One contributor reflected on how they use videos of existing students at their institution to provide advice and tips to new students. We do not currently provide programme-specific pre-arrival support from current students (although there is an opportunity for all candidates to speak online to current students through the Unibuddy platform organised by the central admissions team). However, on arrival, every new student is assigned a STaR (Student Transitions at Reading) mentor, who is another student from the University of Reading. Their role is to support the new student during the first semester with all aspects of university life. SLT students are also paired with a buddy from the year above on the same programme, who provides programme-specific support in year one and beyond. We

will explore the option of providing some programme-specific tips, reflections, and advice from current students in our booklet to bridge this gap. A good starting point would be to ask focus group participants what information from the current students would be the most valuable to have before they arrive at Reading and then include a section with relevant quotes from existing students.

One of the community reflections resonated with something that we had previously considered, which was to provide more engaging formats. Moving forward, we plan to gather views on how to enhance student engagement with the booklet in further focus groups with students at the start of the next academic year. One approach might be to provide the information on a webpage, e.g., using the Xerte platform. This would allow us to make the information more interactive, e.g., by including prompts to encourage students to reflect on their preparedness for starting university and on the concerns they might have. Based on their reflection, we could then signpost them by providing links to resources that students might find helpful (e.g., links to Study Advice, resources to support with settling in, etc.). This is something that was also suggested by students in focus group discussions.

Another contribution from the community has prompted us to reflect further on why students requested information about the later parts of the degree. This could partly be because a high number of our students undertake paid work alongside their studies. We have had many requests to provide information about the timetable and assessment deadlines in advance, so that students can plan their time in order to be able to balance academic and work commitments. For some students (e.g., those with low tolerance of uncertainty), it might be helpful to have advance information about what the course will look like to reduce potential anxiety about what might be coming up. It is also possible that providing clarity about what the student will be doing in the later stages of the degree might help them conceptualise and strengthen their new identity as a university student. We are grateful to the contributor for their interesting suggestion that this request may be linked to identity clarity. It is something that we had not considered but could explore further.

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Jayne Freeman is a Programme Director and Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Reading. She has a PhD in Psychology and has published research on memory for actions and intentions in young and older adults. She is interested in exploring students' experiences of starting university and developing resources to support student transition. She has also conducted research in the areas of assessment literacy and personal tutoring.

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