

Stretching the Student Transition: Developing a Pre-Arrival Platform to Meet the Evolving Needs of the Student Population. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

The transition into higher education (HE) is a “mega-scale” change in a student’s life. Many of the needs and priorities of incoming students change year-on-year, fuelled by local and global instability. Relying on the traditional “induction week” approach to student arrival is no longer sufficient. We addressed this issue by curating a pre-arrival toolkit, which “stretches-out” the student transition period to begin earlier. Through this non-credit bearing toolkit, prior to arrival, students can access online socials, lab simulations, 360° virtual tours and more. Three iterations of the toolkit have shown consistent high engagement levels during the initial transition period and beyond, with some students even returning to this resource in their final year. Despite challenges associated with adopting transition pedagogy for the pre-arrival period, we show that with the right resources, students may adopt transition pedagogy principles to support themselves throughout their individual HE journeys.

Keywords: Transition pedagogy; pre-arrival support; relational pedagogy; mega-scale transition; virtual learning environment.

Introduction

Students experience many periods of transition throughout their higher education (HE) journey. Some of these transition periods are on a micro-scale (e.g., receiving feedback on a first summative piece of work, submitting a first assignment), some are on a macro-scale (e.g., moving between years of study, joining a new seminar group) (Wilson et al., 2022) and some can even be on what we term a “mega-scale” (e.g., relocating from home to a new city to start a new course of study, returning from a placement year or year abroad). How students anticipate, experience and respond to these different transition periods is underpinned by their previous experiences and how these have shaped their education capital or academic self-efficacy (Richardson et al., 2012), support systems (Kralik et al., 2006) and their social capital through establishing a sense of belonging to their HE community (Hausmann et al., 2009; Neves et al., 2019).

The transition into university is a mega-scale, high-stakes period of adjustment. For many students, their university experience starts with relocating, leaving their families and support networks as they take up new living arrangements and begin integrating in new social environments (Kift, 2023; Ramler et al., 2016). Even for those remaining at home and commuting, the sudden change in surroundings and effort required to integrate into new social groups of peers having a shared but different experience, can be difficult and isolating (Pokorny et al, 2017). Transitioning into university can be particularly challenging for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more likely to have experienced difficulties and disruption during their education journey, and for whom the university environment may present a starker contrast to their home setting (Morosanu et al., 2010; Pokorny et al., 2017).



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The start of a new university course brings many new opportunities, both social and academic. For an increasing number of students, growing external demands on their time may lead to them needing to make hard choices about which opportunities to pursue. Students tend to arrive at university a mix of enthusiastic, excited, anxious, and overwhelmed (McMillan, 2013). They are typically keen to engage with what the university is offering and want to know what they need to know and what they need to do (Thomas, 2013). They want a roadmap to success. Several years ago, pre-pandemic, we recognised that our students were changing. Technology was rapidly transforming the landscape of teaching and learning within HE, the mental health and wellbeing of society was declining and consequently the needs of our students were shifting. Fast forward to today: the needs of our students continue to evolve, but even more rapidly and unpredictably than before.

As our student cohorts continually change and diversify, institutions need to keep pace by embedding proactive support throughout the student lifecycle and this is particularly important for students with intersecting characteristics (Morosanu et al., 2010; Pokorny et al., 2017; Walker, 2024). A student's HE journey begins before they arrive on campus to start their course. Prior to starting, students have received communications from their institution, they may have visited for open days, outreach events, or live locally and be familiar with the campus. All of these pre-arrival factors help students form connections to the people and spaces of an institution and how they envisage themselves spending their time—both social and academic—at university (Edmunds, 2025). There is an argument to be made that the traditional approach of a few on-campus days packed full of information immediately before the first day of teaching begins, is no longer suitable for inducting HE students (Walker, 2024), particularly given modern technological advances and how intertwined it has become within our daily lives. There are many ways in which institutions are using technology to revolutionise the transition period for new students, with pre-arrival platforms fast becoming a core element of the welcome package for incoming cohorts (Walker, 2024) and having positive impacts on a student's sense of belonging (Blake et al., 2022).

The early stages of the student lifecycle heavily influence student retention (Blake et al., 2022; Thomas, 2013) with evidence that an intense initial induction period can negatively impact on students and lead to overload (Richardson & Tate, 2012; Young et al., 2020) and isolation for some students (Blake et al., 2022). From the student perspective, induction begins in the weeks before the first formal induction week as students develop expectations and ideas about what their forthcoming HE experience will be like (Garra-Cole, 2024; Wilson, 2009). We lengthened the student initiation phase of the student lifecycle by “stretching the transition” period forward by ~3 weeks through delivering an online pre-arrival toolkit (PAT) in the weeks immediately before the formal university induction period starts. In this practice report, we present more than five years of evidence-driven development of this PAT. This PAT has been developed to support the transition into university for new undergraduate students at a dual-intensive university located in the East of England, United Kingdom.

The Pedagogical Foundations of the Toolkit

Students often have unrealistic expectations of the realities of university study, with the shift to independent study and understanding what they are expected to be doing being some of their key challenges (Blake et al., 2022; Thomas, 2013).

Using a PAT can support a more holistic and successful induction into university through:

1. helping connect students to their peers prior to arrival;
2. providing structured guidance to incoming students about what they can expect;
3. helping students understand what they can expect from the institution in terms of academic support, contact hours, wellbeing support etc.;
4. introducing students to key staff members from academic and student support teams.

The design, development, and delivery of the PAT draws on two central pedagogies; *transition pedagogy* and *relational pedagogy*.

Transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005) is underpinned by the idea of embracing a whole-of-student-life framework that respects and acknowledges the external factors that influence our students and their ability to engage with their studies (Kift, 2023). Transition pedagogy respects and gives value to the cultural capital that students bring into their studies (Kift, 2023). It acknowledges that the first year of a university course is turbulent with peaks and troughs (Kift, 2023) so the most we can ask of our students in any given session, is that they bring the current best version of themselves to the classroom. This ability to meet students where they are and to embed a respect and acceptance of the external pressures on our students, is central to our work on supporting the student transition from before students arrive at university.

Relational pedagogy is an educational approach that places emphasis on establishing and nurturing positive and meaningful connections or relationships between educators and students and between students and their peers. It recognises that encouraging the development of meaningful connections between students and between educators and students is central to effective learning and the wider student experience (Pearce & Down, 2011; Winstone, 2020). Establishing positive relationships prior to students beginning their studies combines aspects of transition pedagogy and relational pedagogy to form a hybrid pedagogy somewhat aligned to Gravett et al.'s pedagogy of mattering (Gravett et al., 2021). These pedagogical foundations have informed our work on providing support for students in the pre-arrival period through influencing PAT content and delivery as well as the membership of the team behind it.

Toolkit Development

The current version of the PAT is the culmination of five years of evolution in response to student engagement data and feedback. Prior to 2020, our students experienced a transition into university that largely began once they arrived on campus. During the summer of 2020, as part of the COVID-driven shift to online learning, our institution drove our first venture into pre-arrival platforms to support the student transition into university. In response to the rapidly changing and turbulent time, our institution developed a faculty-led online Student Zone to incorporate pre-arrival and arrival information. Developed as a page within the virtual learning environment (VLE) (in our case Blackboard), students were signposted to the site during their registration process. From this initial information-focused site, we have developed multiple iterations of an award-winning pre-arrival platform that supports the whole student lifecycle (winner: 2024 European First Year Experience team award, finalist: 2023 LearnSci Innovations in Teaching award). Details of the development of the PAT are in Edmunds and Lewis (2024).

The PAT consists of a suite of resources to support students throughout the student lifecycle; during the pre-arrival period as they prepare for university, whilst they navigate the initial arrival transition period, and at subsequent points in their academic journey. The PAT resources draw on elements of both transition pedagogy (adopting a holistic approach to support major academic transitions, i.e., the induction into university) and relational pedagogy (i.e., connecting students to the people, places and spaces of their institution) (Table 1).

Table 1

Examples of How the Content of a 3-Week Long Higher Education Pre-Arrival Toolkit (PAT) is Built Upon the Foundations of Both Transition and Relational Pedagogies.

PAT phase	Transition pedagogy elements	Relational pedagogy elements
Whole module	No assumptions made about a student's past education experiences	Continuity in which staff are developing content and sending announcements to students
	Available to students from pre-arrival through to graduation – stretching the transition	Staff are available and responsive to student engagement (e.g., adding comments to student posts)
Module intro	Covering aspects of the hidden curriculum i.e., the language of university	Students invited to introduce themselves to each other through a virtual noticeboard
	Pre-arrival survey of past experiences and study expectations	How to personalise your VLE profile
Week 1	Introducing how to access study and wellbeing support at university	Introductory videos from key academic staff e.g., staff leading first year modules, Senior Advisor
	“Top Tips” from current students on how to manage and make the most of your time	“Find your crowd” – introducing student clubs and societies
Week 2	Lab simulation videos help upskill students in some of the equipment and techniques used on their courses	Virtual student socials with staff presence
	Decoding assignments and preparing for lectures, tips from staff and students	360° video tours of key learning and study spaces
Week 3	Short introductory videos are used to support specific student groups (e.g., mature or commuting learners)	Connecting to spaces - exploring campus through the wildlife trails and the changing sounds of campus
	Guided introductions to decoding assessments, tracking deadlines and applying for extensions	Connecting to places - decoding the room numbering system and giving maps of campus facilities

Toolkit Team Membership

We recognise that our own undergraduate experiences do not reflect those of our students and that a resource for our students would be best informed and developed by students. We sought to ensure that students were partners in the creation of this toolkit, which has been acknowledged by others to be a positive step in the development of such resources (Healey & Healey 2019; Walker 2024). To ensure that the student voice was central to our PAT resources, we recruited three student interns for five weeks. Although not part of the selection process, the students self-identified as belonging to minoritised groups in HE and had very different educational journeys both prior to and during their degrees. Between them, the students had recent experience of Foundation Year and Level 4 study and represented a range of widening participation groups spanning different ethnicities, genders and age groups. While our team members share a passion for student success and supporting students on entry into university, their individual strengths and unique perspectives create a combined expertise that has proven fundamental to the success of this project. The student team members provided the student perspective through design, deployment and analysis of a survey and the creation of a suite of resources which formed the basis of the PAT. In total, the

project team have created more than 30 different resources ranging from those drawing on relational pedagogy (e.g., 3D video tours of the laboratories and podcasts/interviews with current and past students and staff), through to those drawing on transition pedagogy (e.g., posters signposting sources of support and short presentations to introduce students to the language and terms used within the institution).

Toolkit Delivery

The PAT is a bespoke module within Blackboard Ultra, our institutional VLE. Previous iterations of the PAT have been hosted on other platforms but using the institutional VLE, which all students are required to use during their studies, enables students to start increasing their academic capital before starting their course. Regardless of their background or past education experiences, superusers of the PAT begin their courses more familiar with the layout, functionality and language of the institutional VLE than non-engagers – a benefit that translates across all of their taught, credit-bearing modules.

All new undergraduate students in our School of Study, at both Levels 3 and 4, are automatically enrolled and have access to the PAT VLE site as soon as they register to enrol on their course. The PAT content consists of resources to provide students with information and several interactive activities, enabling peer-support to begin before the course starts. As soon as students access the PAT, through an email sent by the course leads, they can meet some of their lecturers, view an image of them and read a short biography which includes their research and personal interests. We invite each student to introduce themselves to their course peers too, an opportunity which many students engage with, and the PAT academic leads respond to each student post. This initiative aims to remove perceived barriers between staff and students, allowing students to feel comfortable to approach staff and to build connections with fellow students. Additionally, the PAT contains a pre-arrival survey (Leggett, 2022) which enables us to understand the needs of each cohort and adapt our content accordingly. The survey includes questions about student expectations, wellbeing, previous education etc., and is available to students throughout the first three weeks of the module. Embedded within the survey are signposts to support systems. For instance, a student who declares a specific learning difficulty in the anonymous survey will see a feedback box informing them of the support available to them, a question asking if they have informed the institution about their additional needs, and if not, an email link to student support services is displayed.

Beginning two weeks prior to our institutional induction week and finishing as the academic course content begins, PAT resources are released weekly for three weeks and remain available to students throughout their studies. The availability of the module in the weeks preceding arrival onto campus enables the students to begin their study preparations. The staged-release of the PAT content is to 1) avoid information overwhelm for the students and 2) to enable a more tailored experience, i.e., if student feedback on the first week highlights concerns about a topic, such as commuting to campus, we are able to respond to that with the content provided to the cohort in week 2 or 3 of the course.

As our new undergraduate students are unlikely to be familiar with (or even aware of the existence of) our VLE, we send out email announcements each Monday to coincide with the release of new content. Each email outlines the purpose of the PAT module and includes an access link along with an overview of that week's content. With the exception of the pre-arrival survey, all module content is available to students for the duration of their studies.

Toolkit Engagement

We saw high levels of module engagement, with several students spending well over 10 hours interacting with the content. Whilst the PAT was designed to provide support for the initial transition period into HE, analysis of our PAT student data shows engagement is sustained throughout the academic year and beyond. For some students, the knowledge that the module is there for them to access any time throughout their degree is reassuring. Our PAT is non-credit bearing and optional, therefore the usage and amount of time a student spends on it is entirely at the student's discretion.

Students joining Level 3 Foundation Year (FY) and Level 4 First Year are enrolled on the PAT just before beginning their studies. At the start of academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25, a combined total of 398/614 students (64%) spent at least six minutes on the PAT. Six minutes was chosen as a minimum level of engagement to include students who had spent enough time on the PAT to understand what it was, but to rule out students that may have entered the site, or clicked on a notification message but immediately disregarded the content. Students who were enrolled on the PAT as FY students were also enrolled to the subsequent PAT with their Level 4 cohort, providing a sense of community and access to updated content. These students are included in this data, even though understandably their engagement was generally lower the second time experiencing it. For students who spent at least six minutes in the PAT, the average time spent engaging with the resources between the opening of the PAT in their pre-arrival period (late August) and the start of their second semester (end of the following January) was

2.62 hours for the 2023 cohort and 2.65 hours for the 2024 cohort. We identified 27 “superusers” in the 2023 cohort, who spent at least five hours in this PAT, with a maximum time commitment of 41.3 hours. In 2024, there were 22 superusers, spending between five – 49 hours engaging with the resources.

Our student-led survey found that both pre-arrival and early in their university journey, students experienced anxiety about elements of laboratory practicals. In response to this, as well as offering a student-led virtual tour of the teaching laboratories, five LearnSci Lab Simulations (Lab Sims) were included for students to virtually learn and experience basic laboratory skills and techniques. These Lab Sims were consistently very popular, each engaging between 27– >50% of the cohort. Interestingly, one of the more popular simulations was dressing for the lab, which we believe supports the teachings of transition pedagogy: that students will have varying expectations and understanding about what their degree will entail.

We continued to monitor student engagement beyond the initial transition period for each cohort. During semester 1 of their second year, 20 students (7%) in the 2022 cohort used their PAT. By the end of that academic year (their second at the institution), almost 100 students accessed the PAT. Between the start of September 2024 and 20th January 2025 (semester 1 of their third year), more than two years after the last PAT content was released to this student cohort, 26 students accessed the PAT. Of these students, 14 had accessed the PAT in the January 2025 exam period.

For the 2023 cohort, 37 students (12% of those who had been enrolled on the module more than 12 months earlier) accessed the PAT between August 2024 and late January 2025. Four of these students had accessed the PAT during the institution’s exam period between 1st and 20th January 2025. It is interesting to note students across both cohorts are still referring back to the PAT, despite previously experiencing university exams. In these cohorts (2022 and 2023), the students received no new PAT content or announcements beyond the academic year in which the PAT was released to them. Therefore, students were accessing these resources entirely independently and without prompting, to revisit the information provided. This analysis of longer-term PAT usage indicates the value students place upon it, demonstrating not only short-term impact during the initial HE transition period, but extending long-term at least two years after PAT updates ended. This is evidence of students implementing transition pedagogy’s “whole-of-lifecycle” principles for themselves, through returning to content at their most appropriate time, rather than being limited to trying to engage with it when we provide it. Although we consciously stretched the student transition into HE forwards into the pre-arrival phase, the students themselves have stretched it beyond the traditional “transition period” and beyond what we had anticipated.

The Challenges of Transition Pedagogy for the Pre-Arrival Period

Transition pedagogy is a framework that embraces a whole-of-lifecycle approach and is underpinned by six curriculum principles: *Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring* (Kift, 2023). There are challenges to overcome in being able to fully embrace this pedagogy within the pre-arrival period, perhaps the greatest of which is applying this approach to the pre-arrival period – a period of unknowns. Due to numerous complications, i.e., study visa issues, student loan agreements and the acceptance of late round offers (e.g., Clearing in the UK), students may join their course after the initial induction period or in some cases, are unable to start their studies as expected. Therefore, until students arrive on campus, understanding the needs of the new student cohort is difficult, and hard to plan for. Additionally, delays to the start of a course compress the induction period. What began as our project to stretch that induction period forward into the pre-arrival space has led to a co-created PAT focused on filling in the knowledge gaps and unknown expectations of an unknown student cohort. We now have a resource that has been shown, across multiple cohorts, to support our students through their first HE-driven mega-scale change. But, perhaps more importantly, it is a resource that they return back to throughout their student lifecycle.

Conclusion

Pre-arrival programmes positively influence the student transition into higher education as well as improve students’ sense of belonging (Thomas 2013; van Lamoen, 2024). Here, we have reflected on the development of our PAT into a suite of resources that students utilise to meet their individual needs during different mega-, macro- and micro-transition and challenge points during their studies. Through embracing elements of both transition and relational pedagogies, we show how it is possible to create a resource that meets the changing needs of students as they progress throughout their academic journey and supports them to overcome the many transition and challenge points that they experience along the way.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the members of the wider PAT project team; Dr Helen Leggett, Jade Howard, Joey Hunt, Shania Varshani, Rebecca Anderson and Dr Steph Jong for their invaluable input and time in developing this resource.

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Please cite this practice report as:

Edmunds, K., Lewis, R., & Harrington, C. R. (2025). Stretching the student transition: Developing a pre-arrival platform to meet the evolving needs of the student population. A practice report. *Student Success*, 16(3), 132-139. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3756>

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