

# Redesigning Welcome, Induction and Transition: A Strategic Approach and Partnership

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## Introduction

Our case study aims to highlight the centrality of student voice in co-designing and addressing students' needs throughout their time at university. We will explore how through collaboration and partnership with Leeds University Union, student advisory boards (e.g. mature learners, international students) and student societies, students are able to shape, influence and enact change for themselves and others enabling them to feel more connected to their school<sup>1</sup>, university and community.

Our approach began with mapping what diverse groups of students are thinking, feeling and doing throughout the academic year which enabled us to design welcome, induction and transition resources and opportunities. Over three years, this has developed into an umbrella framework of communications, tools and resources for schools to adopt and help foster a sense of belonging within and between their student communities.

Whatever students' individual journeys or situations might be, they each need access to resources, information, and support throughout their time at university. Meeting this need is crucial to enhancing wellbeing, creating belonging, and ensuring each student knows they are valued members of their community. University welcome should no longer be seen as a set of activities delivered at the start of the academic year, somehow disconnected from the rest of students' time at university (Kift et al, 2010). Most importantly, it was clear that

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Leeds is organised into seven faculties, that have between four and nine schools, plus other teaching units or institutes and one faculty which is a single, large school (Leeds University Business School).

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activities that support students and make them feel they are part of the university community are best designed and delivered in partnership with students (Advance HE, 2013). All students, be they undergraduate, taught postgraduate or postgraduate researchers, influence current and future provision. We have active dialogues with students across all areas of background, underrepresentation and protected characteristics such as mature and commuter students, international students, those with caring responsibilities, and those with disabilities.

Ongoing research, evaluation and employment of student interns has enabled us to engage meaningfully and deeply with students. These have shown that students' needs are extremely varied, and that the social aspects of university are their primary focus during their first few weeks at university. This social focus suggests that the timing of support and opportunities should be placed more strategically throughout the year and that initial discussions should start with emotional journey mapping, based on the work of Mearman and Payne – 'ELIXIR' (2021). Student interviews and workshops, and the involvement of students in devising and running peer-to-peer activities over the last three years has contributed to an increased understanding of student experience. This continues to shape the support and resources students indicate are needed for them to settle, find their place and connect with others. Our work on welcome has also been complemented by key elements of the university's Access and Student Success strategy, supported by investment in student opportunities. Enhanced thinking and practice relating to academic personal tutoring, a sense of belonging, academic literacies, inclusive learning and teaching, and intercultural engagement have all run alongside the development of our approach to year-round welcome.

Our model is based on a holistic, overarching framework that aims to embed welcome activities and bring together a central repository of resources and toolkits that support academic schools in designing their provision to complement university-wide activity. These events are designed and led by students. By way of example, the University Buddy Scheme, conceived by students and implemented in partnership, enabled over 2,500 students in 2022/2023 to interact and meet with a matched buddy as well as a trained student host running group welcome activities. In addition, schools are supported by an online TEAMS

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network of over 400 colleagues. This network is a vehicle for communicating the framework and signposting the central activities and resources, as well as being a forum for peer-to-peer support, highlighting new student-led initiatives and a route for sharing best practice.

The creation of a university Student Welcome Team (including a student welcome intern) that works closely with students and colleagues, has enabled a greater network of collaboration and partnerships to deliver an all-year-round welcome. The role of student voice is central to student advisory boards, workshops, and feedback surveys; students as co-designers of welcome activities have become more integral and this has facilitated a peer-to-peer approach to which students respond well. The development of collaborative partnerships with all teams across the institution, including Residences, Catering and Events, Facilities and Estates, Sport and Physical Activity and Sustainability, has been a positive shift in understanding the importance of everyone's role in welcome (Kift et al, 2010). This institution-wide approach continues to evolve, facilitate, and enact change dynamically in response to the needs of our students.

### **Informing Welcome Induction and Transition: Student Journey Mapping**

As part of the ELIXIR project in 2019-20, Mearman and Payne undertook an evaluation of the student journey, mapping out what students of diverse communities are doing, thinking, feeling, and needing at specific points. Perhaps reflecting how universities think about and structure student journeys, this mapping clearly identified that all students follow the same broad journey in preparing for university, arriving and joining, and developing and planning their preferred futures. However, 'recognising the diversity of student transitions is vital for allowing all students to flourish regardless of background' (Mearman et al, 2023) and the mapping showed that journeys for different students are distinct and 'rhizomatic' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p 738).

Student voice from underrepresented areas can often become lost or diminished amongst the volume of perceived 'traditional students'. Actively seeking input from underrepresented groups by providing the right space to access these voices, has been an important element of

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redesigning welcome, induction and transition. Since 2020, this has been achieved through designated sessions with students either in mixed or representative groups, such as a Mature Students' Advisory Board. The ability to devote specific resources to gather student voice during welcome has enabled students to benefit from direct, relevant interventions, ranging from tailoring activities that counter feelings of pre-arrival anxiety, to being able to develop opportunities to support students to attend events with others.

Mapping welcome onto specific student journeys has meant that a more strategic approach to supporting students has emerged. Our evaluation of the first year of all-year-round welcome revealed that students felt there were too many communications all at once, and they were overwhelmed with information and activities (Mearman et al, 2023). One key element of our emerging approach is therefore to deliver tailored communications, toolkits and events at the point in the year when a student most needs specific support. A welcome timeline has been developed which allows for the strategic planning and delivery of time-sensitive and pertinent content. This is a yearly calendar of welcome and transition events which links to the student communications plan and messaging at key points such as assessment periods or returning from placements.

As stated, our research and partnership working with students tells us that students experience and feel differently depending on their access and pathway routes into study. As a result of this greater understanding, the emergent welcome approach in 2019-20 started to evolve more around responding to these differences in a more inclusive and accessible way. One example of the early initiatives based around student engagement was the adoption of the term 'Welcome' more broadly, but also in reference to the first weeks of a new academic year. This change indicated a desire to move away from the traditional 'Freshers' Week' terminology and the accompanying negative connotations, particularly in relation to alcohol, that potentially create barriers and alienate some students, as well as the implication that only new students were being welcomed, rather than all students. Therefore, efforts have been made to consciously curate a welcome programme which includes a wider range of activities that do not include alcohol and are more family friendly, accessible and inclusive. Moreover, the attempt to 'shoehorn' everything that a student needs to know into just one

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week in September becomes overwhelming and less impactful, creating anxieties and alienation, which is contrary to the idea of creating an environment of belonging.

The importance of the timing of support has already been mentioned here, and the journey mapping exercise showed us again that during those crucial early weeks for new and returning students social interactions are most important; academic and study skills support is of greater value a little later, when teaching starts and students start to identify more with their courses. When finding ways to alleviate the anxieties some students face in terms of feeling the need to make 'friends for life' (Mearman and Payne, 2023), overcome language or access barriers, and navigate new systems, structures of support have shifted towards an elongated period of welcome that starts in late summer. By evolving the concept that welcome should be 'a process' (Kift et al, 2010 p 6), welcome, induction and transition have become firmly embedded throughout the year across the institution, allowing for an overarching timeline of welcome to emerge and run parallel to curricular and non-curricular activity.

### Student Voice and Partnership

Students and student voice have always been central to the redesigning of welcome, induction and transition and the role of partnership work that is so important to enable change. However, owing to the restrictions of Covid-19, there were initially limitations to engaging wider student involvement in the early plans. However, the earlier research via the ELIXIR Project, which informed the student journey mapping, brought in the student voice indirectly. In each subsequent year, the active involvement of students in welcome has become more integral, starting with engagement with Student Union representatives, followed by efforts to identify and engage with other groups of students.

The initial project approach to welcome in 2020 called upon existing students, primarily through Leeds University Union representatives, to assist the development of digital content and communications. Over successive years the creation of peer-to-peer social media platforms to promote welcome activities to students has seen a growth in engagement as well as new content increasingly being developed by the students themselves. Increasingly,

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student feedback has suggested greater use of videos and social media, such as TikTok, to get real time messages and promotion across to their peers, thereby complementing traditional methods of communication such as emails, newsletters, and website content. Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in access to blogs, which represent additional content written by students, student Instagram takeovers, student social media and student-developed peer-to-peer resources. Further evaluation in 2022 saw even more engagement and interaction with welcome messages and communications, further informing the approaches currently adopted. Examples of how student voice and partnership have grown over the last few years can be found in the increase of positively received initiatives, as well as support for the importance of getting welcome right from the start, however it is measured (Mearman and Payne, 2019).

A key turning point for co-creation with students was the student-led initiative of a Fresh Start Festival week in January 2022, following the examination period that was developed and supported by both the Leeds University Union and the university. This initially responded to a dwindling sense of community amongst students because of the pandemic and concerns that students had not settled into university life. The rationale of initiatives such as this was to recognise that students need support resettling into a university routine following the winter break and the stress of the January assessment period. This initiative supports students preparing for the upcoming teaching period, as well as allowing January starters and students who arrived late in September to access support, meet peers and take up opportunities. Planning and development of themes running through this initiative are decided in advance, following facilitated student workshops drawing upon ideas from a wide range of students. The review and analysis of impact and success, along with feedback from students, then feeds into planning for the following year. It has been important to the success of this approach to acknowledge that the Student Union is not necessarily reflective of the views of all students, and so work has been undertaken to reach out to communities whose diverse needs are not always met or fully recognised. For example, we tapped into networks and fora that were providing support for mature learners, and widening participation or international students, which in turn opened wider access to understanding specific needs and prompting ways to represent these needs across the institution.

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Seeking out underrepresented student voice through active and dynamic dialogue has enabled students to become part of the change process and to inform provision of resources and support for the student experience. Examples of this include recruiting students as welcome ambassadors who assist with events such as September Welcome and the Fresh Start Festival, supporting with international airport pickups for new arrivals, buddy support, as well as acting as student information advisors, providing peer support and guidance to other students. Not only do students respond positively to student-led activity and events, but those students leading the events also bond with others, benefitting from the opportunity to connect with other students – again fostering a sense of belonging. Similarly, appointing paid student interns to undertake evaluative research into the student experience of welcome, either for a time-limited period or for year-long work placements, has enabled a consistency of student presence at the core of welcome. Indeed, the outputs of those student-led research projects and internships continue to add to the bank of resources and literature that further evidences the benefits of developing an embedded approach to welcome.

## Conclusion

We have evolved our partnership approach, creating space for students to contribute to the design of welcome, and through engaging with staff beyond the student services, a coordinated approach to creating inclusive, student-centred opportunities for all students to access throughout the year has been developed. By understanding and responding to these needs, a year-round welcome delivers and supports students to feel more connected to their School, their programme and their peers. Evidence from evaluation with students has highlighted that the move to a more coherent, sustained and increasingly personalised approach to welcome (re-designed where necessary) has been positively received. We continue to build upon and sustain this approach to welcome through the development of new initiatives with our students, following feedback and engagement with belonging surveys and workshops; engagement and involvement with curricula design and review; regular focus groups and discussions with student advisory boards, student representatives and student panels and by working closely, and in partnership, with Leeds University Union.

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