

## **'Keeping us Warm': Trainee Teachers' Perspectives on School to University Transition Activities**

Jenny Fogarty and Dr Leanne Gray

Online First Publication, June 30, 2025

### **CITATION**

Fogarty, J., and Gray, L., (2025). 'Keeping us Warm': Trainee Teachers' Perspectives on School to University Transition Activities. *Future Review: International Journal of Transition, College, and Career Success*, 6(1).

# **'Keeping us Warm': Trainee Teachers' Perspectives on School to University Transition Activities**

*Jenny Fogarty and Dr Leanne Gray*  
*Anglia Ruskin University*

The aim of this study was to capture student perspectives on the range of activities they were invited to take part in as part of their transition to university for the first new teacher training degree written in England for 30 years. As part of the design of this new BEd, significant attention was paid to the design of a range of activities to ensure students were well prepared to begin their teacher training. These were designed from the point of offer following a face-to-face interview to the point of enrolment. This study explores the evidence base of the activities chosen (Ball et al., 2024) including in person events, online webinars, pre-arrival questionnaires and 1:1 support sessions as well as the specifics of their design and implementation for the cohort of prospective teachers. It uses student feedback to consider the following questions:

1. How did the pre-course activities (from interview to enrolment) affect student transition from school to university?
2. Which pre-course activities were most effective in supporting student transition from school to university?

Using a mixed method study, trainees provided feedback on the impact of these activities using a questionnaire and three focus groups (one per campus of delivery). The data collected was then synthesised and analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to elicit the findings. Results indicated that trainees valued opportunities for face-to-face interactions to establish the initial social bonds (for example following an on-campus applicant day a group engaged in social activities including sharing a meal together) and opportunities to engage with lecturers and key staff who would be supporting them on their journey as teachers. Less valued were central university activities that were not personalised to their course or prior experiences. As a result of the research the activities will be amended for the second cohort of students, reflecting the suggestion and feedback of the first group and the learning from their findings.

## ***Introduction and Objectives***

Higher education in the UK is experiencing a turbulent time. By a wide range of measures, the context for undergraduate recruitment is challenging, with the number of 18-year-olds applying to study in the UK declining sharply (UK Parliament, 2025). Managing the time during which students transition from secondary school provision to university study has increased in prominence with more attention and resource being allocated to enhance student conversion rates from application to successful enrolment with broad agreement in the sector that this transition is a complex and multifaceted process (Thompson et al, 2021). Traditionally these transition activities have fallen under broader student recruitment initiatives, being the domain of

professional staff working in admissions or marketing teams. The development of the first new undergraduate route to train to teach in England for 30 years, provided an opportunity to design these transition activities from inception, utilising the curriculum design principles to elicit transformation, embedded in the course design, from the point of application (Fogarty & Gray, 2024).

The aim of this study was to capture undergraduate student perspectives on the range of activities they were invited to take part in as part of their transition to university. The researchers and authors of this paper hold professional roles as senior leaders of Initial Teacher Training at the university where this study was undertaken. This institution is a modern UK university,

geographically located in the East of England with four campuses spread over a large region of approximately 6000 square miles. It attracts a diverse student body and has strong collaborations with local industry partners, providing a wide range of employment focused routes, including in education through teacher training and early years workforce provision. As part of the UK government’s Market Review of initial teacher training in 2022, it was the only new higher education institution to be accredited to deliver qualified teacher status awarding programmes (Department for Education, 2022).

In developing the transition activities, we considered the literature and evidence base of a mixed mode approach which will be discussed further in the literature review. However as reflective practitioners we are keen to incorporate student perspectives to understand their effectiveness which is the overall rationale for this study. Our research questions are:

1. How did the pre-course activities (from interview to enrolment) affect student transition from school to university?
2. Which pre-course activities were most effective in supporting student transition from school to university?

This paper discusses the findings in relation to these questions but also makes additional considerations to conclude in relation to the role of course delivery staff (academics) and the broad trend in UK higher education to a centralised model of student support.

The move to a centralised model of support, away from academic expertise is discussed by Wolf & Jenkins (2021a) in relation to the changing neoliberal landscape of UK higher education. The introduction of tuition fees in 1998 to their increased level from 2010, has significantly changed the

relationship between institution and student, towards one that is market led and where competition for students and their tuition fees drives decision making at strategic level. Currently over 70% of higher education institutions in England and Wales are undergoing their version of an efficiencies programme which involves radical overhaul of the way higher education is delivered, often starting with restructuring and staffing cuts (Queen Mary University and College Union, 2025). As academics as well as researchers this provides a challenging climate in which to operate, where decisions under the guise of efficiency, often result in inefficiencies – slow process, loss of institutional knowledge and expertise and promises of embracing technological revolution without the infrastructure to support its implementation. Our research on student transition in our teacher training context provides us with a further data point as to the value of academic and discipline expertise.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The research aims, objectives and questions have been developed using broad social constructivist principles, whereby the researchers understand new knowledge to be created through dialogue between humans. This position, developed by Vygotsky (1978), places human interaction, discussion, debate and sharing of perspectives as central to how we make sense of the world around us. For us as researchers and practitioners to better understand the impact of the decisions we have made related to transition activities, we have chosen research methods that promote the use of dialogue, most notably using focus groups and structured discussion prompts. We also align with a critical realist approach developed by Bhaskar (1975) which articulates a world

view bridging the gap between physical sciences and social sciences. As researchers, we understand the process of transition from school to university to be an empirical truth which all the trainees experienced. However, how they understood that transition and the activities designed to support it, can be interpreted through their personal experiences that will be different for each of them.

## **Literature Review**

The transition to higher education is a critical phase in students' academic and personal development. This stage involves various challenges and opportunities that can significantly impact students' success and well-being and Gravett and Winstone (2019) acknowledge the extent to which this period of transition is a time of multiple uncertainties. This literature review examines key themes and research findings related to transitions to higher education, focusing on the factors influencing these transitions, the role of institutional support, and strategies for improving student outcomes. It represents a sample of abundant literature that exists from the scholarship of teaching and learning research in higher education across the globe.

Research consistently highlights several factors that influence students' transitions to higher education including socioeconomic background, academic preparedness, and personal motivation as pivotal determinants. Ball et al. (2024) produced a detailed systematic review of the fragmented literature base for this area where key protective factors for a positive transition to higher education included prior academic achievement, mental and physical health, psychosocial factors (personality, social support, motivation), and academic skills and behaviours. According to Veldman et al. (2019) students from higher

socioeconomic backgrounds often have better access to resources and support systems, facilitating a smoother transition. Academic preparedness, as discussed in Tinto's seminal text (1975), is another critical factor, with students possessing strong foundational knowledge and study skills adapting more easily to the demands of higher education which was important to incorporate into the design of all the transition activities.

The design of our transition activities broadly ascribe to the areas identified in the systematic review outlined by Ball et al. (2024). By including a range of activities, this allowed for us to consider academic support, social support and wellbeing support as our trainees began their journey into higher education. As experienced educators, we are aware that the time between acceptance of a university place (typically during the Spring and Summer) and before enrolment on the course (typically during the Autumn) is a phase where students experience a range of transitions and are at risk of not converting their place and beginning their studies. With this knowledge, significant attention was paid to the design of activities to ensure students were well prepared to begin their course, the BEd (Hons) Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status (henceforth known in this paper as the BEd). This route into teacher training is intense and challenging, combining three years of academic study with three high quality assessed placements prior to the recommendation to the UK government for the award of Qualified Teacher Status. Preparing applicants to become trainee teachers and engaging them with the culture of the university was a priority for us in the design of the activities, which began from point of offer following a face-to-face interview to the point of enrolment during Welcome Week. These transition activities

we refer to in this study relate to the following:

**Face to face meetings** – known as applicant days where students, who had applied for the course and received an offer, spend up to six hours on their chosen campus. Joined by the course delivery team and other applicants, they engaged in a range of practical workshop style activities inspired by the pedagogical approach of the course they will be joining. Explicitly developing learning communities have become an increasingly popular strategy since the 1990s, for supporting students in their transition to higher education (Beil et al., 1999; Hultberg et al., 2008; Jensen & Jetten, 2015) These communities foster a sense of belonging and connection among students by grouping them based on shared interests or academic goals which was central to the design of the **face to face meetings**. By participating in learning communities, students can form supportive peer networks, engage in collaborative learning experiences, and benefit from close interactions with faculty members who provide mentorship and guidance. These were interpreted as part of the transition activities that were planned as part of the applicant days, whereby students from the same course had the opportunity for a ‘taster’ of life at university, some six months ahead of their course.

**Online webinars** – online information sessions hosted by the course delivery team where departments from across the university provided additional information related to key tasks required prior to enrolment including student finance, accommodation, occupational health checks or criminal record disclosure processes. This use of technology was identified by Marshall et al. (2024) as being important to facilitate access to academic

resources and foster a more engaging learning experience, reducing geographical barriers which was important in our context of the East of England.

**Phone calls** – individual conversations with the course delivery team to each applicant at various points in the academic year, for example, congratulating them on exam results success, following up individual queries or responding to emails sent to the main teacher training inbox. De Clerq et al. (2017) support this type of activity by highlighting the extent to which academics need to understand a cohort’s distinct characteristics to provide person-centred and personalised advice and guidance. Effective advising helps students navigate their educational paths, select appropriate courses, and understand graduation requirements, all vital for success in our teacher training programme. This literature supports the extent to which academics often play an essential role in identifying students who may be struggling and connecting them with additional resources to navigate the university systems and processes. The design of the phone calls at frequent intervals was central to this approach to ‘catch’ those at risk of non-transition.

**Welcome pack** – pre course tasks developed into an attractive booklet (Figure 1) with key tasks to be completed prior to registration and a range of low stakes tasks. These included those to be used as initial prompts for social interactions (such as chatterboxes Figure 2) and those used to develop core academic skills such as note taking and presentations in line with traditional transition concerns around academic preparedness that have been noted (Christie et al., 2016; Robertson & Cunningham, 2023).

**Figure 1:** Extract from Welcome Pack



**Figure 2:** Chatterbox examples



The design of our transition activities is also influenced by more well-established research which takes a holistic view of transition, offering multiple and varied activities to engage students arriving from various starting points. Busseri et al. (2011)

produced a detail review of Canadian transition activities in 65 universities where a variety of induction activities are described. These programmes often include campus tours, informational sessions about academic resources, and workshops that address time management and study skills, all of which are intended to equip students with the tools they need to succeed in higher education. Whilst this research took place in a different country, and therefore a different context, to the university where the present research took place, the description of activities has influenced the choices made, by offering variety to suit a range of student dispositions (online, on the telephone, and independent). Mullendore & Banahan (2005) emphasise the importance of orientation programmes and academic advising in helping students' transition to the new environment, highlighting the role of academic staff in this process which despite the age of this research we valued and as such incorporated through having academic staff lead the initiation of all the activities.

Unique to the experience of trainee teachers was the variety of tasks required of them to meet government requirements around suitability to train to teach. Support with navigating this complexity was incorporated into the design of the transition activities for this research as we were aware that key tasks such as successful occupational health and criminal records clearance can be challenging to navigate and could act as a barrier to successful enrolment on the course. The literature stated that in some institutions, proactive advising models have been adopted, where advisors regularly reach out to students to offer guidance and support before issues arise, thereby fostering a more supportive academic environment (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Scanlon et al., 2007). This was adopted as part of this research through

regular telephone check-ins from academic staff.

Additionally, the availability of mental health services, as noted by Cage et al. (2021) is essential in supporting students' emotional and psychological well-being during this period of transition. It is interesting to note that in typical higher education models, such as the one where this research was conducted, students' access to institutional support in the form of wellbeing provision would only be possible once they have successfully enrolled onto the course.

Overall, institutional support encompasses a diverse range of programmes and services that collectively contribute to a smoother and more successful transition to higher education. By addressing both academic and non-academic needs, universities are prioritising activities that support students' ability to move to a new physical and emotional environment. However, the persistence of achievement gaps between different demographic groups, as identified by Conley et al. (2014), underscores the need for targeted interventions, which may be more prevalent in our context with male students representing just 6% of students on the course. Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transitions to HE, as examined by Hodgkin & Packer (2023), has introduced new complexities that require further exploration. This research does not consider this impact despite this cohort having experienced significant disruption to their schooling through the pandemic.

## Method

A two-phase study was designed to address the research question. In phase one, an online questionnaire was used to collect trainee teachers views about each of the different pre-course activities. The questionnaire was designed to find out

whether trainees engaged in pre-course activities and, if they did, how they rated the pre-course activities in relation to how beneficial they found them in supporting their transition from school to university. A five-point scale was used, with five being *extremely beneficial* and one being *not at all beneficial*. Open questions were also included to give participants the opportunity to give more detail about why they found an activity beneficial or not. In phase two, it was important to explore participant's thoughts and experiences about the pre-placement activities. Although individual interviews were considered, focus groups were deemed more appropriate because they allowed participants the opportunity to respond and build upon comments made by others, a process of 'sharing and comparing' between participants (Morgan, 1998, p. 12). The design of the focus group prompts was carefully considered and was consistent with the objectives and purpose of the research (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Each of the focus group participants had first-hand experience of the pre-course activities which could be elicited during the discussion. A more in-depth understanding of the trainee's views about the pre-placement activities can be built through these responses and reactions in focus groups than could be achieved in individual interviews, potentially leading to richer data (Hollander, 2004). Practically, focus groups also allow for a large amount of data to be collected in a short period of time (Hollander, 2004), which was an important consideration for trainee teachers, who are busy with the demands of their teacher training course.

## The Participants

The online questionnaire was distributed to all trainee teachers studying towards the BEd at our institution ( $n=89$ ) via their

student email account with 56 responses were received (63% response rate). At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to participate in phase two of the study, by leaving their name and email address if they were happy to take part in a focus group. Five participants responded to this and took part in the focus group. This approach of opting in to the research can be interpreted as a form of opportunity sampling, where only willing and able participants took part. The focus group participants were all female, with the course population being 97% female, and represented participants from two out of the three campuses where the BEd trainees are situated.

Online focus groups were used to overcome the challenge of accessing trainees on three different campuses across the Eastern region of the UK. Although it can be more challenging to build rapport with participants online, the focus group facilitator had a positive relationship with the participants prior to the focus group and the participants were all familiar with online meetings. Therefore, the online nature of the focus group did not impact on the quality of the discussion and on the data collected.

### *Ethical considerations*

The research was designed in line with the British Educational Research Association (2024) ethical guidelines for educational research. Gatekeeper permission was given by the Head of the School of Education and ethical permission was granted by the School of Education Research Ethics Panel prior to any recruitment of participants which included all participants being provided with a participant information sheet and signing a participant consent form prior to the online questionnaire and focus group.

The power dynamic between the researchers and the participants was carefully considered as both researchers lead the teacher training course where the research was conducted. It was reinforced to all potential respondents that participation was not compulsory and would have no impact on their studies. Although this prior relationship did provide access to the trainee teachers, it was important that trainee teachers did not feel pressured to participate. Therefore, initial participation in the online questionnaire was anonymous so the researcher was not aware who had participated.

In phase one, due to the anonymous nature of the online questionnaire, participants were able to withdraw from the research up to the point of submitting the online questionnaire. In phase two, participants were able to withdraw up to the start of the focus group. Once the focus group had begun, participants could withdraw by remaining silent or by leaving the call. However, due to the nature of focus groups, any data they had contributed up to that point would remain in the study because it would be difficult to withdraw an individual's comment without it impacting on the points made by others. Participants were reminded about this right to withdraw at the start of the focus group.

The focus groups were conducted and recorded using MS Teams and were transcribed within a week of the focus group. At this point of transcription, the data was anonymised, and the recording was deleted. As the research took place where the researchers work, identification of participants is possible so this anonymisation process was important. To reduce the risk of identification further no identifying features (such as gender) have been included in the writing up of the research.



## Data analysis

Quantitative survey data from the questionnaires was analysed, with the five-point scales used to identify which pre-course activities participants found most beneficial in supporting their transition from school to university. Qualitative data from the questionnaires was used to inform and enhance the analysis of the quantitative data. The focus group was recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The qualitative data from the questionnaires and the focus group transcription was then uploaded to NVivo before one researcher began detailed analysis of the content. One researcher conducted the analysis to reduce the demand to come to a consensus about themes, as this can be complex to achieve as researchers have their own positionalities, and because this level of consensus is not compatible with interpretative qualitative research (Maher, 2025). Thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method of analysis of the qualitative data as it supported in the generation of meaning ("themes") from the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To develop these 'themes', the detailed six-step process, outlined in earlier seminal work by Braun & Clarke (2006), was followed. To begin with, the researchers became familiar with the data by rereading the transcriptions. Then, initial codes were identified when reading through the transcripts. After initial coding of all transcripts, the codes were reviewed and analysed, with some being combined or separated into sub-themes through discussion and analysis by both researchers to mitigate for any perceived biases. Each of the themes were similarly represented within the focus group transcript. Quotes

shown in the analysis and discussion section below were selected for illustrative purposes in-line with each theme. This analysis identified four themes from the data, which are discussed below:

- a) Emotional support
- b) Building relationships
- c) Personalisation
- d) Preparedness

## Analysis and discussion

1. How did the pre-course activities (from interview to enrolment) affect student transition from school to university?
2. Which pre-course activities were most effective in supporting student transition from school to university?

The online questionnaire was completed by 56 trainee teachers. 53 trainee teachers indicated that they had participated in the pre-course activities offered by the university and 70% agreed that the pre-course activities had helped their transition to university. Results from the questionnaire about each of the pre-course activities are presented in Table 1. This table indicates that the pre-course activity with the highest level of engagement (88% of participants) was the *welcome pack* and the activity with the lowest level of engagement was *online webinars* (13% of participants). The pre-course activity which was rated as the most beneficial by trainees was *face to face meetings* with 94% of participants stating that they found this activity beneficial or extremely beneficial. Less participants found *phone calls* and the *welcome pack* beneficial or extremely beneficial, with 78% and 71% respectively.

**Table 1: Online questionnaire results**

Transition activity	Percentage of trainee teachers who <b>engaged</b> in this pre-course activity.	Percentage who <b>agreed this activity supported their transition</b> from school to university (Of those who engaged in this pre-course activity).
Face to face meetings	55%	94%
Online webinars	13%	83%
Phone calls	64%	78%
Welcome pack	88%	71%

### *Building relationships*

Although only just above half of the participants took part in face-to-face activities (55%), 94% of those who did, found this to be *beneficial* or *extremely beneficial* in supporting their transition from school to university. Participants enjoyed meeting both their lecturers and their peer group face-to-face and highlighted how these activities were beneficial from a social perspective rather than from an academic one, with one participant noting:

*“It enabled me to meet lots of people on my course, which when I arrived on the first day in September, made me feel much more comfortable to see some familiar faces.”*

### **Questionnaire response.**

The inclusion of academic staff in this induction process was highlighted as important by participants, reinforcing previous research findings which emphasised the significance of the role of academic staff (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). This allowed participants to begin forming relationships with their future tutors, reducing their anxiety about starting the course.

The pre-course *welcome packs* had the highest level of engagement, with 88% of participants engaging in this activity. 71% of this group thought the welcome packs were *beneficial* or *extremely beneficial* in helping them to prepare for the transition from school to university. Participants noted that the tasks facilitated initial conversations with their peers during their first week at university. For example:

*“It gave us talking points for meeting new people. We made chatter boxes which we then used to talk to the new people in our class and started to form our bonds.”*

### **Questionnaire response.**

And:

*“I thought that they worked really well to like to start off the introductions because then at least you actually had something to talk about.”*

### **Focus group participant 3.**

This aligns with the findings of Busseri et al. (2011), who found that induction activities, such as the ones explored in this research, provide students with the necessary tools and knowledge to be successful in higher education.

Research also indicates that proactively offering support to students can allow potential issues to be addressed promptly and can contribute to the development of a more supportive environment (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Scanlon et al., 2007). In the present research, we were proactive in our contact with applicants using *phone calls*. 64% of respondents engaged in these phone calls and 78% of this group found these phone calls *beneficial* or *extremely beneficial* in supporting their transition from school to university. As discussed above, participants noted that they liked contact from their lecturers and course leaders and particularly enjoyed hearing that their lecturers were excited to meet them. The *phone calls* also helped them to feel welcomed onto the course, with one participant noting:

*"The phone call made me feel welcomed and it was nice to know I had someone to talk to if I had any queries before starting the course."*

### **Questionnaire response.**

#### *Emotional support*

Explicitly developing learning communities have become an increasingly popular strategy for supporting students in their transition to higher education (Beil et al., 1999; Hultberg et al., 2008; Jensen & Jetten, 2015). These learning communities foster a sense of belonging and connection among students by grouping them based on shared interests or academic goals. By participating in learning communities, students can form supportive peer networks, engage in collaborative learning experiences, and benefit from close interactions with faculty members who provide mentorship and guidance. These

were interpreted as part of the transition activities that were planned as part of the applicant days, whereby students from the

same course had the opportunity for a 'taster' of life at university, some six months ahead of their course. In line with these previous research findings, participants in the present research emphasised how the development of a learning community had supported them emotionally as they made the transition to higher education. For example, three focus group participants had found the *face-to-face activities* had helped them to feel more 'relaxed' about the transition to university:

*"I went to an applicant day and it gave me a chance to meet some of the people on our course as well, which sort of relaxed me before I actually went into the things into the lectures because it made it easier to sort of have familiar faces."*

### **Focus group participant 1.**

As previous research had noted the importance of making use of technology to engage students and reduce the impact of geographical barriers, online activities were offered to those accepted on the course (Marshall et al., 2024). These *online webinars* had the lowest level of engagement by participants (23%), however, 83% of those who did engage in an online webinar found them *beneficial* or *extremely beneficial* in supporting their transition from school to university. Those who did participate noted that the webinars addressed the outstanding questions, but also reduced their anxiety about the transition from school to university, with one participant noting:

*"It helped me become less anxious to start university."*

### **Questionnaire response.**

The *welcome packs* also helped to build a level of excitement about the transition from school to university:

*"I was excited to get into the course because it kind of showed a bit of what you were going to do."*

#### **Focus group participant 2.**

However, some participants reported that the *welcome pack* contained tasks which had made them feel anxious and stressed before the course had started. They also felt that the work they had put into completing these tasks was not acknowledged by the course team, for example:

*"There was one task surrounding an article that I had spent a significant amount of time on, and it hasn't been looked at or acknowledged."*

#### **Questionnaire response.**

##### *Personalisation*

Participants highlighted the importance of personalised contact and support throughout the transition process. In line with previous research by De Clercq et al. (2017), participants emphasised the importance of personalised contact, advice and support. For example, they liked the personalised nature of the *phone calls* they received from the course delivery team:

*"[The phone calls were] quite personal and stuff because it wasn't expected."*

#### **Focus group participant 4.**

However, some participants noted that calls from the wider university rather than from the course delivery team were not helpful. They reported that calls chasing them for forms or documents and calls without a personalised level of expertise were not always beneficial:

*"A lot of questions I had were not answerable by the ambassadors but if a member of the course staff contacted me my questions and queries were answered straight away"*

#### **Questionnaire response.**

And:

*"I also had a few phone calls from student ambassadors. I had quite a few and it was confusing because they would put me on to these different because I had questions about admissions and they would put me through to these different people, but I it was never the correct person who I needed to go to. I ended up just emailing and I think it was (course delivery team member) that responded. She got back to me really quickly and I sorted it within a day."*

#### **Focus group participant 4.**

##### *Preparedness*

There were two aspects of preparedness which emerged in the analysis of the data. Firstly, participants were not always prepared or forewarned about contact from the university. This created some anxiety in the participants, and they noted that they did not always respond to *phone calls*:

*"I got a phone call after I'd got my results and it was just like well done and stuff, but I think that it might have been better if they told us we were going to get a phone call because for the ones before, I didn't answer my phone because I didn't know who it was."*

#### **Focus group participant 3.**

Secondly, participants also noted how the pre-course activities helped them to feel prepared for the course. One participant noted how the *welcome pack* helped with this:

*"And I found that was useful for me to then prep before coming to university. I thought it was helpful."*

#### **Focus group participant 5.**

This second aspect of preparedness links to the seminal research by Tinto (1975),

whereby the pre-course activities supported participants to begin to understand the level of knowledge and study skills they would require for the course. The participants identified that this was a critical factor in helping them to adapt to the demands and differences between their school or college education and higher education.

### **Learning points**

The outcomes of this research will be used in two ways to improve further iterations of the course design for future cohorts. Valuing the contributions from our research participants for further improvements is crucial for developing trust around feedback culture within our cohorts and these findings will also be shared with them as a way of recognising their input into this research. For the next cohort of trainee teachers, arriving in Autumn 2025, we will:

*1. Provide an overview of transition activities ahead of time.*

By sharing with the applicants the expected transition activities ahead of time, the sequencing of activities and when to expect phone calls for example, we may increase up take and engagement with these activities. Whilst trainees did respond to phone calls, knowing they were coming, and the likely number may have increased the response rate and would provide preparation time for those interactions.

*2. Ensure pre-course activities are used/fed back on during welcome week.*

To maintain their status and value, pre-course activities must be recognised and acknowledged by the teaching team. This was missing for one of the pre-course tasks this year (a task which required the trainees to synthesise an academic text), a more challenging task within the pre-course tasks. Incorporating it into a specific welcome week task would also provide the

teaching team with a valuable baseline as to the trainees’ preparedness for study at university level and allow for any required early intervention to be identified.

*3. Reiterate the importance of nonspecialist university staff or related people contacting applicants.*

As part of preparing for the first group of trainees to transition to university, we had specifically requested that the company the university were using to make applicant phone calls did not include trainee teachers. It is only through doing this research that we have revealed that in some cases this did take place, resulting in wrong information being provided. We will maintain and reinforce our position that generalists employed by the university should not be making these phone calls as it is not appropriate for specialist course applicants such as trainee teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The transition to higher education is a multifaceted process influenced by a variety of factors, including socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, and institutional support. This research outlines key learning points in relation to the transition activities designed for the specific context of trainee teachers in one UK university. It is important for us to recognise that as researchers we inhabit an insider positionality (Hammersley, 1993) which gives us extensive prior knowledge of the cohort and their characteristics from our professional experiences. This enhances our position as pedagogic researchers, rather than detracts from it.

The UK's higher education sector is currently grappling with significant financial and structural challenges. A primary concern is the deteriorating financial health of universities, with the Office for Students warning of an increased

risk of insolvency among major institutions (Office for Students, 2024). Factors contributing to this crisis include declining international student enrolments and escalating operational costs, leading to widespread staff redundancies and course closures. Compounding these financial issues are concerns about the student experience. Some media reporting indicates particularly that students often have minimal contact with academic teaching staff, and this research confirms that interaction from academic staff supported the trainee teachers transition in all four areas: emotional support, building relationships; personalisation of their experience and their preparedness for their academic studies. The diversification of the academic role is an area that teaching intensive universities grapple with as they attempt to manage the teaching research nexus (Gibbs, 2002; Jones, 2018).

A proposed solution to the challenges within the sector is the push to centralise non-academic services, whereby professional services colleagues are required to hold knowledge and expertise for the student journey in a wide range of disciplines (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021a; 2021b). This research contributes to a counter argument that instead of moving to a more centralised approach, our students respond better to more personalisation and the building of authentic relationships with people that will have a long-term engagement in them, their studies and their outcomes. Participants in this study wanted more contact points with academic staff, which raises questions about the use of AI and ‘chat box’ models, which reduce the human contact points between the student and the university. Whilst conducting our research, we encountered many colleagues who would state freely that phone calls would not be effective as ‘this generation

don’t answer their phone’. Our research in our specific trainee teacher context does not bear this out: participants were happy to engage, speak and follow up on the telephone but understandably demonstrated emotions linked to frustration when they were speaking to university staff members who did not understand the specific challenges of their transition period. Having a detailed understanding of student journeys at a discipline specific level can contribute to a culture that values individual students and their concerns and worries about starting university. A continued move towards less resource, more automation and embrace of AI without a clear rationale of how and why, does not reflect the feedback our participants shared with us about what they value most. Reducing human connection to speed up process may inadvertently do more harm than good in an already challenged sector.

Addressing the current crisis requires comprehensive reforms focused on financial sustainability, teaching quality, and student well-being to ensure that UK higher education maintains its esteemed global reputation. Instead of centralising university systems, embracing the ‘chat box’ to answer queries and automating previously human responses, a return to human interaction should be prioritised. Students have shown us that they value the human connection, they will answer the telephone and share their concerns and excitement. Building this initial interaction with a member of the university who will be with them on their journey is a use of resources that should be prioritised as we continue to remind people of the transformational nature of higher education. Academics are advocates for their profession, for both teaching and research and prioritising early connections with new students should be a part of a well-rounded and fulfilling career.

## References

- Advance HE. (2023). *Equality in higher education: statistical reports 2023*.  
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-reports-2023>
- Ball, I., Banerjee, M., Holliman, A. & Tyndall, I. (2024). Investigating Success in the Transition to University: A Systematic Review of Personal Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Academic Achievement. *Educational Psychology Review*, 36(52).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-024-09891-0>
- Beil, C., Reisen, C., Zea, M. & Caplan, R. (1999). A longitudinal study of the effects of academic and social integration and commitment on retention. *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal*, 37(1), 376–85.  
<https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.1094>
- British Educational Research Association. (2024). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 5th edition.  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-fifth-edition-2024>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Busseri, M. A., Rose-Krasnor, L., Mark Pancer, S., Pratt, M. W., Adams, G. R., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S., Polivy, J., & Gallander Wintre, M. (2011). A Longitudinal Study of Breadth and Intensity of Activity Involvement and the Transition to University. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(2), 512–518.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1532-7795.2010.00691>
- Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Cage, E., Jones, E., Ryan, G., Hughes, G., & Spanner, L. (2021). Student mental health and transitions into, through and out of university: student and staff perspectives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(8), 1076–1089.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875203>
- Clarke, V. & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., & McCune, V. (2016) ‘It all just clicked’: a longitudinal perspective on transitions within university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (4), 623-490.  
<https://doi.org/10.1098/03075079.2014.942271>
- Conley, C. S., Kirsch, A. C., Dickson, D. A., & Bryant, F. B. (2014). Negotiating the Transition to College: Developmental Trajectories and Gender Differences in Psychological Functioning, Cognitive-Affective Strategies, and Social Well-Being. *Emerging Adulthood*, 2(3), 195-210.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696814521808>
- Department for Education. (2022). *Initial Teacher Training ITT Market Review*.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review-overview>

- De Clercq, M., Galand, B. & Frenay, M. (2017). Transition from high school to university: a person-centred approach to academic achievement. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 32, 39–59.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-016-0298-5>
- Fogarty, J. & Gray, L. (2024, June 10-12). A modern twist on an old classic: innovative and transformative pedagogy for new trainee teachers. In *AMPS Proceedings Series 38*, San Francisco (California).  
<https://amps-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Amps-Proceedings-Series-38.1.pdf>
- Gibbs, G. (2002) Institutional strategies for linking research and teaching, *Exchange* 3, 8-11. Gravett, K. & Winstone, N. E. (2019). Storying Students' Becoming into and through higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 1-12  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1695112>
- Hammersley, M. (1993). On the Teacher as Researcher. *Educational Action Research*, 1(3), 425–445.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010308>
- Hodgkin, K., & Packer, R. (2023). 'I Feel Like I Identify as a University Student, I Just Don't Identify with My University' – how First-Year Students Developed their Identities during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 10, 1–13.
- Hollander, J.A. (2004). The Social Contexts of Focus Groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(5), 499–644,  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604266988>
- Hultberg, C., Plos, K., Hendry, G., & Kjellgren, K. (2008). Scaffolding students' transition to higher education: parallel introductory courses for students and teachers. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(1), 47–57,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770701781440>
- Jensen, D. H., & Jetten, J. (2015). Bridging and bonding interactions in higher education: social capital and students' academic and professional identity formation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (126), 1–11.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00126>
- Jones, P. (2018). Reasons to be different: a 'post-1992' perspective. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v11i2.852>
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2017). Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Maher, A.J. (2025). Rigour in interpretive qualitative research in education: Ideas to think with. *British Educational Research Journal*,  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4156>
- Marshall, S., Blaj-Ward, L., Dreamson, N., Nyanjom, J., & Bertuol, M. T. (2024). The reshaping of higher education: technological impacts, pedagogical change, and future projections. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(3), 521–541  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2329393>



- Morgan, D.L. (1998). *The focus group guidebook*. London: Sage. Mullendore, R. H., & Banahan, L. A. (2005). *Designing orientation programs as found in Challenging and supporting the first-year student*, by Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., and Barefoot, B. O. National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Student in Transition (2005).
- Office for Students (2024) *Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2024* <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-2024/>
- Queen Mary University and College Union (2025). *UK Higher Education Shrinking* <https://qmucu.org/qmul-transformation/uk-he-shrinking/>
- Robertson, D. J. & Cunningham, T. (2023) The lived experiences of transition from college to university in Scotland: A qualitative research synthesis *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions* 2 (1) 1-14 <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.52>
- Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). 'You don't have like an identity ... you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a Student Identity in the First-year Transition to University. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10 (2), 223–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600983684>
- Stewart, D.W. & Shamdasani, P.N. (2015). *Focus Groups: theory and practice*. 3rd edition, London: Sage.
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C. and Evans, B. (2021) Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 45 (10) 1398-1410 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from Higher Education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- UK Parliament. (2025). *Higher education student numbers* <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/>
- Veldman, J., Meeussen, L., & van Laar, C. (2019). A social identity perspective on the social-class achievement gap: Academic and social adjustment in the transition to university. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 22(3), 403-418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218813442>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wolf, A., & Jenkins, A. (2021a). *Managers and academics in a centralising sector: The new staffing patterns of UK higher education*. King's College London and University College London. Published by The Policy Institute at King's College London. <https://kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute>
- Wolf, A. and Jenkins, A. (2021b) *Why have universities transformed their staffing practices? An investigation of changing resource allocation and priorities in higher education*. London: the Nuffield Foundation.