

Transition: Using NextLevel to develop a sense of belonging amongst University of Greenwich students

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Abstract

The Academic and Digital Skills Team (ADS) supports students throughout their time at the University of Greenwich and especially so at their arrival, by means of NextLevel, a Moodle-based course which aims to drive engagement and ease transition to higher education. This opinion piece demonstrates how NextLevel's relational pedagogy proves to be successful at this critical time.

Key words: transition, teaching and learning approaches, belonging, confidence, support, relational pedagogy.

NextLevel as a source of support for transition

We in the Academic and Digital Skills Team (ADS) at the University of Greenwich understand that transition into higher education (HE) may be challenging for some students, regardless of their background and educational context; the COVID pandemic certainly made matters worse. Burns et al (2020) highlighted significant issues in transition, whereby students' wellbeing is negatively affected (in Allen et al 2023). Social integration is a key worry for new students, not only those commuting whilst living at home, but also mature and part-time students. If we work closely with students when using NextLevel, a Moodle-based course which aims to drive engagement and ease transition to HE, they become familiar with university systems. They also learn what support is available and how to access it; at the same time, we promote the value of interpersonal interactions. By offering them the opportunity to experience NextLevel through a series of online live sessions, we aim from the start to deploy relational pedagogy to stimulate a sense of belonging, so enhancing relationality and encouraging mutual respect.

Student feedback

Our pre-induction NextLevel questionnaires reveal that students do worry about making friends and that they also frequently suffer varying degrees of anxiety. Our NextLevel Live sessions over ten weeks seek to match the students' continuing university experiences with timely information, tools, and skills to help them deal successfully with the uncertainties they face.

We also point out relevant parts of the University, encouraging students to join societies, to engage with others and to find their way around campus. Students tell us they feel comfortable in our sessions: they ask questions, find out answers and generally feel settled. The importance of a sense of belonging – related to improved retention and overall student success – is a much-researched discourse. NextLevel surveys indicate that 79% of students did not feel a sense of belonging in term one. Thomas *et al.* (2018) noted that *‘students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to persist in their studies, leading to improved retention rates’* (in AdvanceHE 2024a). NextLevel student feedback shows increased levels of confidence: *“My confidence level has certainly increased as a result of the settling into University NextLevel guide”* (feedback survey). Moodle NextLevel enables students to engage early in their studies and remains available to them throughout their courses, including access to NextLevel Live sessions.

NextLevel Community

Our approach for engaging students is an important part of creating that sense of belonging early in students’ studies. During the online live sessions, we ensure that students engage with our relaxed pre-session chat and, though this involvement does not always happen in the first few sessions, we aim to foster an informal atmosphere to nurture engagement. Creating an inclusive space where students can feel comfortable is an important part of our strategy, for we know that students can feel a sense of anxiety and a change in, or loss of, their identity when moving to HE. Tett *et al.* (2017) note that building positive relationships between staff and peers may, at this time, help students to manage and overcome their fears and concerns. Once we have that rapport in place, a sense of settling occurs.

By using NextLevel to support transition, we engage students as soon as we can and prior to programme induction, so providing a community in which students gain confidence in becoming resilient professionals and creating a bond that cultivates a true sense of belonging. Kenney (2023) recognises the importance of belongingness and its significant benefits, which lead to the establishing of a community in which students can flourish and, consequently, the likelihood of academic success and enhanced graduation rates. Informal interactions build and sustain rapport, enabling and empowering students to negotiate their way around their new learning environment: the frequent meetings allow them to acclimatise to what is unfamiliar, to build relationships and to gain the confidence to ask for help as they need it. Creating a comfortable community with an informal rapport does not compromise professionalism – a balance is created. Students are valued, as are their opinions and comments.

Our commitment to students, ensuring they belong

Within an ever-changing HE landscape, the ADS team is committed to supporting students throughout their university learning. Research-driven, NextLevel originally came into being to bridge an identified student skills’ gap with clear correlation to under-achievement. NextLevel Live sessions have proved to do very much more for students than foreseen. Our having supported students in our weekly live sessions has fostered a sense of belonging by

developing a positive community atmosphere, essential for constructive involvement. Students who feel they belong are more likely to stay on track and realise their potential (Thomas *et al.*, 2018, in AdvanceHE, 2024a).

As well as student/teacher interactions in an online setting, students also have opportunities to engage with one another (social learning) to create stronger connections to the university community (Wonke in Advance HE 2024b). Our NextLevel Live sessions include discussion, online forums and Teams chat, all of which shape our support, enabling students to acquire independent learning skills, build resilience and address academic confidence issues.

NextLevel Live practice

NextLevel Live supports peer-to-peer connections, enabling interactions with other students not studying on their courses. As well as focusing on study skills, students in NextLevel Live engage in informal conversations with one another and, when students open up about their learning experiences, we have found that other students begin supporting each other, sometimes with evident humour, too. Bye *et al.* (2019) suggest that peer-level social capital in term one results in a higher level of respect and trust and a satisfaction with university. Such interactions during our sessions help students to build social capital and, importantly, their being able to see concomitant improvements in their academic skills results in their increased confidence.

NextLevel has shown us that early intervention and early opportunities help to create a friendly environment in which students may begin to feel settled. Though their transition has created varying levels of anxiety, they may thrive in, gain confidence in and feel part of a purposefully created collegiate and non-judgemental atmosphere. They have certainly told us that they feel comfortable and able to ask questions:

“[NextLevel] is an excellent initiative, supporting [us] to a great extent”;

“... shows how to relate well with the other students, other organisations in the university, the lecturers and wellbeing and support resources”;

“... [students] feel very included, the available information is so much and so relevant”.

Such positive comments have reassured us that our strategy helps our students to feel that they belong. Taking a relational pedagogical approach has stimulated students' engagement, creating meaningful interactions soon after transition, and has helped the settling-in process.

Where to from here?

We shall follow up on initial surveys to assess how far belonging has changed for students. We also intend to hold a planned event for students to network face to face, so helping them to acquire meaningful affirmative relationships with others. Thirdly, we shall investigate other online connective tools to deploy in our online teaching environment as a means of improving practice.

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