

An exploration of inclusive teaching practices during transition to Higher Education

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Abstract

This study introduces and evaluates a pedagogic approach to supporting transition during an undergraduate (UG) first year, first semester accounting module delivered to 'non-accountants' with a focus on inclusion. The results show how the introduction of an assessed piece of groupwork, and pedagogic practices designed to enhance student's academic and social engagement can contribute to student belonging which is identified in the literature as important for successful transition to HE. The study evaluates this from the perspective of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and international students. The results show that these interventions can provide positive benefits to students, they also highlight the importance of instructional clarity and the importance of scaffolding students through the group work process if these benefits are to be realised.

Keywords: *Groupwork, Inclusive Education, Higher Education, Student engagement*

1. Introduction

Global enrolment figures for Higher Education (HE) have increased dramatically since 2000 from 19% to 43% (UNESCO, 2025). However, individual country statistics show significant inequalities in access, educational experiences and outcomes of students from under-represented groups. For example, a report published by The Pell Institute (2025) highlights that in the US, degree completion is strongly related to family income and parental education and that first generation students are far less likely to access and succeed in HE. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) data dashboard (ONS, 2025) shows a persistent gap in the attainment (as measured by the percentage of "good degrees") of the most and least privileged students (as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation). ONS (2025) statistics also show large and persistent gaps in the proportion of students who complete their first year and those who complete their programme of study. Whilst less data is available, there is also evidence in the UK that these differences extend to international students (Sliwa et al. 2025). The EACEA

(2022) reports that there are social inequalities in accessing and completing HE across Europe and advises that there should be a focus on inclusion in HE based on the concept of leaving no one behind. Student transition to HE is one of the highest risk points for student withdrawal (Wilson et al. 2016) and is a particular issue for ‘non-traditional’ students (Gill, 2021). Supporting students to make a successful transition to HE can have a significant impact on student retention and therefore continuation and completion (Thomas, 2012), where transition is conceptualised as a longitudinal process that develops over time and across multiple academic and social contexts. For example, Tinto emphasises that successful transition depends on sustained academic and social integration, fostered through ongoing engagement with learning, staff and peers rather than through one-off induction activities that occur in the first few weeks of programme of study (Tinto, 2012). This perspective highlights the importance of embedding inclusive transition support across the first year and beyond. This paper outlines and evaluates a pedagogic approach to supporting transition during an undergraduate (UG) first year, first semester accounting module delivered to ‘non-accountants’ with a focus on inclusion.

Prior to 2021-22 module evaluations suggested that satisfaction with the module was high, however data at institution and departmental level showed an award gap for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and also for international students and therefore we wanted to explore the issue within our own module.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education can be defined as “a process of removing barriers from existing institutional systems in order for all students to participate meaningfully and equally as valuable members of the learning community” (UNESCO, 2011). However inclusive pedagogies are contested and lack core meaning (Jones-Devitt and Donnelly, 2024; Stentiford and Loutsouris, 2020). Inclusion can also be considered to be contextual (Haug, 2010) and therefore the development of an inclusive approach is not a one size fits all but rather dependent on, for example the nature of the module, the student mix, the dominant institutional culture and the programme of study within which the module is situated.

Much of the research on transition draws on/originates from Tinto’s model of transition, and shows that students are more successful in their transition when they are both academically and socially engaged (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Tinto, 2012); social and academic interactions help foster a sense of belonging which is positively correlated to student success and wellbeing (Crawford et al. 2024). Relationships with peers and academic staff are both seen as important to building a sense of belonging (Gilani and Thomas, 2025) and it is important that students see academic staff as accessible and friendly. Students most often cite relationships with peers as the most important factor affecting belonging (Stephens and Morse, 2022) and Gilani and

Thomas, 2025 argue that fostering opportunities for students to build relationships with their peers on their course of study should be a priority for practitioners.

Academic factors are an area which are increasingly gaining attention and studies show the positive impact that teaching and general practice in the classroom, and talking to staff and peers outside of the classroom about academic matters can have on transition and student retention (Qvortrup and Lykkegaard, 2022; Thomas, 2012). For example, studies show how teaching can support social and academic integration through teaching practices such as the use of study groups or group tasks, and assessments which incorporate team working opportunities. Group work is highlighted in a number of studies as important to supporting transition by formalising social interactions (Spencer-Oatey; Dauber, 2017). Instructional clarity can also foster engagement in students' preparedness in terms of meeting academic requirements and understanding the subject (Morina, 2022; Braxton et al., 2000).

There is a large body of evidence suggesting that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely than others to experience issues with social and academic integration (Hindle et al., 2021). Hindle et al. (2021) and earlier work by Reay et al. (2010) suggests that this is attributable to dominant elitist cultures in some HE institutions and the promotion of values that feel exclusionary. There is also evidence that international students face issues of discrimination particularly where their programme of study has an over reliance on written or spoken English creating barriers to their social integration (Park et al., 2017). Fostering academic and social integration in an inclusive way that does not privilege dominant groups and feel exclusionary may therefore be important to reducing gaps in the continuation, completion and attainment for this group of students.

3. Context and pedagogic design for inclusion

The study and module delivery is situated in a UK Russell Group institution; in the UK the Russell Group comprises twenty-four research intensive, elite institutions. The Business Accounting module is delivered to a cohort of around 200 first year UG students who study accounting as part of a broader course focusing on business and management and is the only accounting module studied. Students enter the institution with a broad range of backgrounds and prior qualifications; an introductory module questionnaire suggests that 64% of students studied business studies in high school and therefore have experience in accounting and 36% have never encountered the subject. Anecdotally this has been a problem for students with limited prior knowledge, as module leaders we noted very different levels of confidence and in the classroom this manifested itself in a reluctance for some students to ask questions. The literature suggests this would disproportionately impact students from underrepresented backgrounds. Similarly, some students have not studied a quantitative subject for over two years and have very low confidence in this area and others have high levels of confidence and

competence. In the UK, a majority of students study A'levels prior to entering HE, these qualifications are assessed via terminal examination at the end of two years. However a significant minority study alternative qualifications in business which are assignment-based. In the case of Business Accounting 62% of students have studied at least one A'level, and 38% did not study A' levels.

Prior to 2021-22 the module was delivered without a focus on inclusion; the module was delivered across the full academic year and assessed via two assignments, one at the end of each semester. The pedagogic redesign of the module focused on two areas of inclusive practice with the overarching objective of enhancing student's sense of belonging; firstly improving social and academic engagement, and secondly developing a deeper understanding of students to support the contextualisation of interventions. In addition a group assessment was introduced 2023-24, with the aim of fostering greater social interaction and providing a space in which students were encouraged to learn collaboratively and offer mutual support based on their different experiences prior to joining HE. These were implemented over three years, 22/23-24/25. A summary of changes made shown in table 1 below. An introductory module questionnaire was also developed to gather information about the students. This is important to our pedagogic approach as it supports us to avoid making assumptions about backgrounds or prior study and supports us to contextualise learning.

Table 1: Summary of changes to assessment and pedagogic approach

<u>Feature of inclusive pedagogy</u>	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
Instructional clarity: reducing content and simplifying terminology	✓			
Instructional clarity: working with marking criteria and exemplars	✓	✓	✓	✓
Active learning in both lectures and seminars	✓	✓	✓	✓
Formative feedback	✓	✓	✓	
Learning and using student names	✓	✓	✓	
Time in the classroom for the social and active promotion of working together	✓	✓		
Small group introductory meeting with tutors			✓	

Being seen: introductory questionnaire	✓	✓	✓	
Workshop to support group work	✓	✓		
Explicit pedagogy of kindness and compassion	✓	✓		

4. Method, findings and discussion

We evaluated the approach using an end of module survey (average response rate 20%) and by comparing the attainment of students from advantaged (TUNDRA¹ 4 & 5) and disadvantaged socio economic (TUNDRA 1 & 2) backgrounds and that of international students when compared with their UK peers. The differences in means were tested for statistical significance.

The findings from the analysis of the student results and student questionnaire are shown in table 2. The results show a consistent but not significant reduction in the gap in student results for students from disadvantaged versus advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and a consistent and in some years significant reduction in the gap between international and home students.

Table 2: Differences in the attainment of students

Assessment Results	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21
Socioeconomically advantaged vs disadvantaged Gap in mean mark pp ² P value	2.2% 0.2020	0.6% 0.199	3.21% 0.1087	3.52% 0.1291	4.42% 0.067
Mean mark: UK vs Overseas Gap in mean mark pp P value	0.72% 0.3567	2.64% 0.042	8.11% 0.00001	2.21% 0.146	9.6% 0.0001

The survey focused mainly on the students' experiences of the group work element of the module and efforts made by teaching staff to get to know the students and in particular learn their names. The qualitative aspects of the questionnaire provide additional insight into how or

¹ TUNDRA is used by the Office for Students to measure HE participation for state-funded mainstream school pupils in different areas. Living in a low participation neighbourhood is therefore used as a proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage.

² Gap pp represents the percentage point difference in the average module mark for each group of students. In all cases a positive gap represents the more advantaged group mean mark exceeding that of the less advantaged group.

why particular interventions may have supported student learning and students' sense of belonging. Indicating for example that learning names made the classroom feel more welcoming and familiar, one student noted that it 'felt like an extension of school'. The students also noted that tutors knowing their names made them feel more comfortable asking questions. Perhaps a note of reassurance, the comments also indicated that it was the effort that tutors made to learn names rather than their actual success that was important. Students did not mind if tutors got their names wrong.

With respect to the group work element of the module, the results of the questionnaire show the positive impact that group work activities can have on student engagement and sense of belonging. Over 70% of students responded that the group work supported their engagement with and understanding of the module and helped them settle into university. 62% of the students reported that it helped them to make friends. Whilst the students did recognise the positive aspects of group work in supporting their transition to university and their learning on the module, 62% of students also responded that they did not enjoy the learning experience. Qualitative data shows the main reason for this was the impact of students who they perceived to be 'free riders' (47%), unfairness of a shared grade (17%) and challenges with organising the work and arrangements to meet (17%) were also frequently mentioned.

The literature (Qvortrup and Lykkegaard, 2022; Thomas, 2012) identifies the importance of classroom interactions in the development of student belonging, this is important if students are to be successful in their transition to university. The findings are consistent with the literature which identifies the significant role that tutors play in creating a classroom environment where students feel both academically and socially engaged and goes further by providing examples of these.

The findings from the group work resonate with the broader literature of the challenges of implementing assessed group work and the dissatisfaction that students voice around free riders (Hall and Buzwell, 2013). They also show the positive benefits of group work for social and academic inclusion which was a priority for the teaching team and identify the important role of teaching teams in providing in class, structured and continuous support to students whilst they are participating in group activities. As part of the module changes support was provided to students in seminars to establish group work protocols but it was clear from the feedback that further support is needed to address student anxiety around dealing with conflict and also the practical challenges of managing weekly tasks and the organisation of meetings.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to outline and evaluate a pedagogic approach to supporting transition during an UG first year, first semester accounting module delivered to 'non-accountants' with a focus on the inclusion. The results show how the introduction of an assessed

piece of groupwork, giving more classroom time to ensuring instructional clarity rather than subject content and a pedagogic approach designed to get to know our students, can contribute to developing student belonging and in this instance contribute to closing the awarding gap.

The results also provide insight into areas where more needs to be done, particularly with respect to the groupwork component if the potential benefits to student belonging are to be fully realised. It was clear from the study that students recognised these benefits however they needed much more support (instructional clarity) to undertake the work, particularly in organising their work and managing group conflict. This will be the focus for future iterations of the module.

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