

Developing Transitional Activities to Support Student Transition to University: Findings From a Qualitative Co-design Study With University Stakeholders

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Abstract

This study utilised a co-design approach to actively engage university stakeholders to explore the challenges of students through the transition to university. The feedback gathered from participants revealed that key transitional issues for students included managing their finances, understanding support services available, and familiarisation with campus navigation. Participants created activities to support these challenges, which, in a future stage, will be added to the Lincoln Island Project, a game being used to determine whether a video game can be used to support students during the transition to university.

Motivation

Transitioning to university can be a pivotal moment in a student's life. The transition is generally regarded as positive (new opportunities for growth and discovery); however, it does entail an adjustment period. Students are expected to gain independence in their learning and extend themselves outside their comfort zone while adapting to new social challenges. Academics have continuously voiced concerns about the impacts of the student transition, criticising the strain placed on students and how it leads to added pressure, creating greater levels of stress and anxiety [AW04, FH88]. To support our students through the transition, we developed the University of Lincoln Island (TULI) project, which aimed to digitally introduce prospective students and the public to the Lincoln campus (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The top image is of the Lincoln Delph Pond and Isaac Newton building. The bottom image is taken from TULI, the virtual counterpart.

Methodology

From the initial creation of the TULI project, our subsequent aims have been to continuously update the video game so that it is adapted to the next cohort of students. This study followed us utilising a co-design approach to gather activities, which will be added to the TULI project in future development.

The concept of co-design emerged from the participatory design method, which involves active collaboration among researchers, designers, developers, and users who serve as experts of their experiences [SMDK11]. Within our co-design workshop, eight stakeholders were invited. These participants fell under four identified stakeholder categories – those directly interested in, work closely with or are the end-users (students) of the TULI project. We have chosen the stakeholder groups at the University of Lincoln based on the previous criteria: The Well-being Team, the Leaders and Officers of the Student Union (SU), the Student SU Representatives, and the general student cohort. These stakeholders can determine the challenges students face during the university transition period and design relevant activities that can be added to the TULI project to support the next cohort of university applicants.

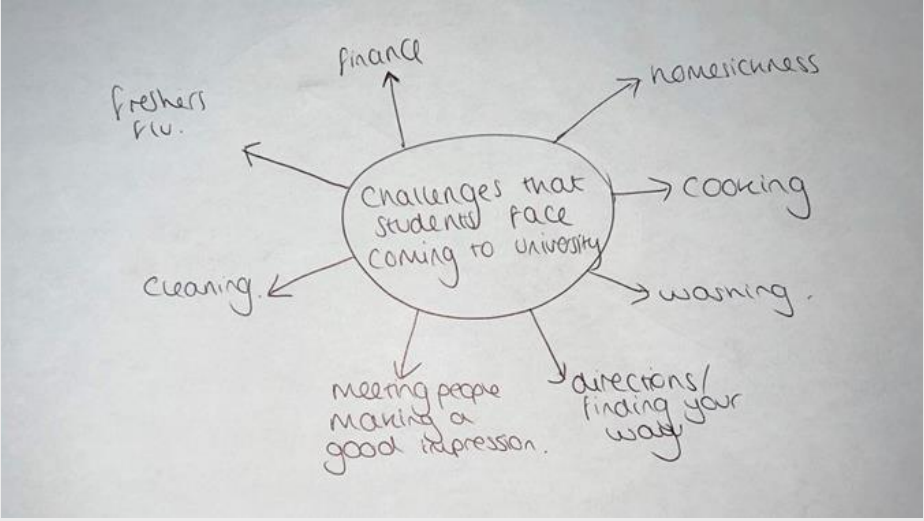


Figure 2: A mind map that a stakeholder group created in response to the prompt questions.

Stakeholders were divided into break-out groups and instructed to create mind maps on these three questions: What facilities do new students typically utilise during their transition to university? What activities have previously been used to engage new students during the transition to university? What challenges do students face during the transition to university? These questions prompted stakeholders to consider students' needs and challenges throughout the transition period. Stakeholders were then tasked with creating activities that addressed the needs and challenges of students – discussed in the previous workshop activities. The activities will then be added to the TULI project by future development. Both the results from the questions and the proposed activities are summarised in Sections 3 and 4.

Results

- **Directional Elements** - Incorporate a map element in either the corner of the screen or a physical map within the virtual campus. The map should show where all the buildings are located. Another feature could show a highlighted path to selected buildings or a compass-like feature. This feature will help students get to know the campus and help those who worry about getting lost.
- **Frequently Asked Questions** – An area within the game where NPCs or boards tell the users answers to students' FAQs about coming to the university. This feature would help inform students of general things about university life, such as tuition or whom to ask for career advice.
- **Cooking or Cleaning Mini-Game** – A small, simple mini-games which teaches users basic life skills needed for university. Such as a simple game on the process of how to do washing within a university laundromat. Alternatively, how to cook a simple nutritional meal and remember to clean up after themselves.
- **Finance and Budgeting Information Zone** – This area could be within the Student Support Centre within the game and will provide information on how students can budget and manage their finances. Another idea would be having a small zone with the FAQ do with funding hardships – for example, if you are x then you can get this funding.
- **Budgeting Mini-Game** - A budgeting mini-game might be another way of helping students with money management.
- **Tips and Tricks** – An area within the game where current students could share their own short and sweet tips and tricks for new students attending the university. Such as freezing food to make it last longer and buying supermarket private label brands to try and stretch their money.
- **Video Showcase** – There is already a video area within the TULI project; however, this could be amended by including videos from the Well-being and Support services, such as the Fresh Start Workshop, which helps students with managing their homesickness away from their parental support network.
- **Quest 1** – A conflict resolution quest which gets the user to contact or find their residential warden (via pigeons to fit in within the theme) in order to exercise basic life skills which can then be applied to the real world.
- **Quest 2** – Navigational quests, which get the users to find specific facilities around the campus so that they are aware of the services and their location. Such as finding the support services centre for guidance on how to get support for learning difficulties or finding the well-being services for mental health guidance.

Discussion

From the co-design exercise, we identified three key challenges for students transitioning to university. Firstly, we learnt that students have difficulties navigating the campus, especially those introduced to the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for international students attending the university, this is potentially the first time they are within the country. Therefore, the stakeholders suggested incorporating a map feature into the game; this will help students get to know the virtual campus, which can help those who worry about getting lost within the physical campus.

Secondly, Stakeholders from the SU revealed that financing and budgeting were common challenges faced by the student cohort. The group suggested an information zone for finance and budgeting that would represent the Student Support Centre at the university. The area could provide information on how students can manage their finances. This area may help students set a weekly budget and manage their lifestyle.

Thirdly, The Well-being team suggested a video showcase area that displays Well-Being and Support service workshops, which help students manage their homesickness away from their parental support network. From the stakeholder discussions, homesickness is a common challenge students face during the transition to university. Therefore, by utilising the readily available student support videos, students can understand the university's services from a reliable and knowledgeable source.

Using a virtual world, such as the TULI project, provides us with a unique opportunity to address the challenges students face during the transition. Video games effectively engage students in beneficial activities that aim to support them through the university transition. In addition, the activities within the game aim to encourage a better mindset throughout the transition process and help students into the subsequent academic years.

Conclusion

This study utilised a co-design approach to actively engage university stakeholders within future states of the TULI project. The feedback gathered from stakeholders revealed that activities that educate students about managing their finances, inform students of different support services around the university, and incorporate navigational elements to support students with traversing the campus would further support students through the transition to university and encourage a better mindset through this process. We believe that by gathering activities that target specific challenges that students face during the transition from those who are directly interested in, work closely with or are the end-users (students) of the TULI project; then the game should be able to support the needs of students and help them through their transitional journey. This hypothesis will be tested in a future study.

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