

Article

Stepping into Higher Education: Exploring Students' Pre-Arrival Nervousness Across an English University

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Abstract

The transition to university is a major life shift shaped by academic, social and personal change. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory, this study provides rare insight into pre-arrival nervousness among first-year undergraduates (UG) entering an English university. This paper reports findings from the qualitative component of a wider study exploring students' pre-arrival experiences and expectations. A total of 1578 incoming UG students across twelve academic schools at a UK university provided qualitative responses to an open-ended survey question designed to capture self-reflective accounts of nervousness prior to enrolment. Using an inductive content analysis approach, four key themes were identified: social integration and belonging, academic adjustment and workload, health and wellbeing, and financial and practical concerns. Findings highlight the multi-faceted and anticipatory nature of transition, demonstrating that students' perceptions of readiness are formed before direct engagement with the university environment. The study extends existing literature by positioning nervousness as an integral component of the transition process rather than a reaction to it. These insights offer evidence-based guidance for institutions to implement proactive, inclusive pre-arrival strategies that support early engagement, enhance student confidence and promote successful adjustment to higher education settings.

Keywords: higher education; nervousness; pre-arrival; transition; undergraduate

1. Introduction

The transition into higher education (HE) is widely recognised as a critical developmental period requiring substantial academic, social and personal adjustment (Hayman et al., 2025). In this study, HE refers specifically to post-secondary education provided by universities and HE institutions within the UK context. A substantial body of research demonstrates that students' expectations, emotions and psychological readiness are closely associated with engagement, wellbeing and persistence once enrolled (Araújo et al., 2019; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Students who begin university feeling prepared and supported tend to navigate the first year more successfully than those who experience uncertainty or heightened anxiety. As such, emotional experiences during the transition period play a key role in shaping early adjustment and longer-term academic outcomes (Timmis et al., 2024).

Despite this substantial body of work, far less is known about how students feel in the immediate pre-arrival period, before they physically enter university. Drawing on



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Schlossberg's Transition Theory, this study conceptualises transition as an ongoing process shaped by the interaction between students' personal characteristics, available support, perceived circumstances and coping strategies. This theoretical perspective provides a useful framework for understanding how nervousness emerges before students formally enter the university environment. The present study addresses this gap by examining students' nervousness in the weeks preceding enrolment, capturing concerns, anticipations and emotional responses before institutional experiences shape them. This provides insight into how nervousness develops before arrival and how these feelings relate to expectations about academic, social and personal aspects of university life. By focusing on this anticipatory phase, this study positions nervousness as part of the transition process itself rather than merely a reaction to university experiences.

Research on transition to HE consistently highlights that newly arrived undergraduate students experience a mix of excitement and anxiety as they prepare to enter university (Gale & Parker, 2014). Concerns often relate to academic workload, forming friendships, living independently and fitting into university culture (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Many struggle with the shift from structured and familiar learning environments to the more independent and less personalised nature of university study (Stokoe et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2021). Previous educational settings often feature smaller class sizes, fixed timetables and closer relationships with teachers (Fellingham et al., 2024), making the transition to self-directed university-level learning challenging (Hayman et al., 2025). Social integration is another key determinant of student success. Difficulties forming friendships or feelings of homesickness have long been associated with early withdrawal from university (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019; Worsley et al., 2021). These issues can be magnified by the increasing number of students who now live at home and commute, rather than living in halls of residence (Hayman et al., 2021).

The strength of a student's vocational identity, formed through school experiences, work or family influences, can significantly shape their confidence and expectations when starting university (Brown & Lent, 2019). Those entering vocationally oriented programmes such as healthcare, law or education often have more developed career-related confidence through prior work experiences, mentorship or exposure to professional role models (Brown & Lent, 2023). In contrast, students entering university with less clearly defined career pathways may feel more uncertain about their future employment prospects.

Students' emotional preparedness is strongly shaped by social background and structural context. Supportive peer and staff relationships protect against isolation and strengthen students' sense of belonging (Kelly et al., 2024; Ruihua et al., 2025). Friendships formed through shared accommodation and extracurricular activities, such as societies or sports clubs, further enhance connection and engagement (Hayman et al., 2022; Hudson & Rockenbach, 2025). However, access to these integrative experiences is not evenly distributed. Part-time, mature, working-class and commuting students often face structural barriers to participation and report higher non-completion rates (Hayman et al., 2024). Socioeconomic background also shapes confidence and preparedness for HE. First-generation students may experience uncertainty navigating unfamiliar academic systems or feel unsure about expectations (Wu et al., 2025; Lent & Brown, 2013). International students similarly bring strong motivations and family support, yet may encounter additional challenges such as language barriers, unfamiliar teaching practices and social isolation (Mulyadi et al., 2024).

However, most of this research examines students after arrival, when experiences of teaching, assessment, accommodation and peer networks have already begun to shape emotional responses. While valuable, this work captures adjustment rather than anticipatory emotion. Consequently, less is understood about how nervousness is experienced before

students encounter the university environment, when expectations, perceived challenges and emerging student identities are still developing. Understanding this stage is critical because pre-arrival emotions may influence how students interpret early experiences, shaping their sense of belonging and academic confidence.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981) provides a framework for understanding the uncertainties students face when preparing to start university. The theory defines a transition as any change that alters how individuals view themselves, their routines or their relationships, requiring adaptation and adjustment. In this study, transition refers specifically to the period when students prepare to begin university life. This stage often brings new pressures, responsibilities and uncertainties. Some changes can feel positive and exciting, while others may be stressful or unsettling, sometimes leading to shifts in confidence or identity.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was selected as the guiding framework for this study because it conceptualises transition as an individual and contextual process rather than simply a single event. This was particularly relevant to exploring pre-arrival nervousness, as students' concerns before university are shaped not only by the upcoming change itself, but also by their personal circumstances, previous experiences, available support networks and perceived ability to cope. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on stages of development or institutional adjustment, such as Bridges' (2004) Transition Model and Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model, Schlossberg's framework provides a holistic lens for examining the interaction between the individual and their environment during periods of change. Bridges' model emphasises the psychological process of moving through change, while Tinto's model focuses on students' academic and social integration within higher education. The theory has also been applied within education transition research, supporting its relevance for understanding students' experiences of entering HE. In previous research by Hayman et al. (2024), Schlossberg's framework was used to explore the transitional experiences of mature students entering university.

Schlossberg suggests that adjustment during transition depends on four key factors, known as the 4 S's: *Situation*; what the change involves, *Self*; personal qualities and resilience, *Support*; the help available from others and *Strategies*; how a person copes or problem-solves. In the present study, the 4 S's informed the analytical approach and interpretation of students' accounts. During coding, participants' descriptions of nervousness were considered in relation to the source of the concern (Situation), individual beliefs and expectations about starting university (Self), perceived availability or absence of support (Support), and the ways students planned to manage the transition (Strategies). This enabled the analysis to move beyond identifying common worries and towards understanding why students experienced and interpreted pre-arrival nervousness differently.

Coping with transition is seen as a process of moving in, moving through and moving out of change. Importantly, every individual experiences transition differently; the same situation may feel manageable for one person but overwhelming for another, depending on how they interpret it and the support they can access (Lazarus, 1999). Therefore, Schlossberg's theory provided a framework for interpreting pre-arrival nervousness as a common response to a significant life transition, influenced by personal and contextual factors rather than simply as an indicator of student readiness.

1.2. Study Rationale

A critical gap remains in understanding how students conceptualise transition before arrival at university. Much of the existing literature relies on retrospective accounts col-

lected after students have entered university (e.g., Hayman et al., 2021). As a result, these perceptions are shaped by lived experience, institutional exposure and early academic outcomes. The anticipatory phase of transition, when expectations, concerns and emerging student identities are still forming, remains comparatively underexplored. This study addresses that gap through one of the few large-scale, cross-disciplinary investigations of student nervousness captured during the pre-arrival stage. Drawing on qualitative responses from 1578 incoming undergraduates across 12 academic schools at an English university, the study offers a relatively rare institutional-wide perspective on how students appraise their Situation, Self, Support and Strategies prior to direct university experience. This includes experiences such as teaching and peer networks that would otherwise shape these perceptions. Importantly, the study was designed to include a self-reflective qualitative component within the pre-arrival survey, providing students with the opportunity to articulate their nervousness for undertaking UG study in their own words. By applying Transition Theory to examine how students feel *before* university begins, this cross-disciplinary study advances understanding of how belonging, confidence and identity begin developing prior to enrolment and provides practical insight to inform institutional approaches that strengthen early student support, connection and adjustment.

2. Method

2.1. Organisational Context

The study was conducted at a UK HE institution that gained university status in 1992 (hereafter referred to as ABC). Anonymisation was used to ensure participant confidentiality and comply with ethical research standards for anonymised reporting. The institution has a long history of delivering vocational and professionally focused education, a tradition that continues to shape its current academic portfolio. It is recognised as both research-active and socially inclusive, with a strong reputation for teaching excellence. The institution's Education Strategy and Access and Participation Plan emphasise fair access, student success and reducing educational inequality as key strategic priorities. ABC serves a diverse undergraduate student population, including a substantial proportion of students from widening participation backgrounds and communities with varied socio-economic circumstances. However, individual participants' economic backgrounds were not collected as part of this study. As with all UK undergraduate programmes, students are required to pay tuition fees, which may contribute to financial and practical concerns associated with the transition to HE. Organisationally, the institution comprises three faculties encompassing twelve academic schools that span health, humanities, social sciences, business and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. This structure supports a diverse range of programmes and has a strong record of delivering industry-relevant education across multiple subject disciplines, including psychology, law, nursing and sport.

2.2. Pre-Arrival Surveys

Of 5885 eligible participants, 3218 (55%) completed the pre-arrival survey representing 1280 males (40%), 1915 females (59%) and 23 self-reporting as 'other' (1%). All 164 level 3 and 4 undergraduate degree programmes at ABC were represented in the sample and grouped into twelve schools (see Table 1).

Table 1. Programmes of study per school.

School	Programme of Study
Business	34
Law	5
Architecture & Built Environment	8
Communities & Education	7
Computer Science	14
Design, Arts & Creative Industries	18
Engineering, Physics & Maths	16
Geography & Natural Sciences	17
Healthcare & Nursing Sciences	15
Humanities & Social Sciences	19
Psychology	3
Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation	8

2.3. Procedure

In late August 2025, newly enrolled and pre-enrolled first-year undergraduates at ABC were invited to take part in the study following institutional ethics approval. Student data (name, gender, programme and email) was obtained from the academic registry at ABC. Survey distribution was managed via the Explorance Blue platform, a dedicated institutional survey and feedback management system used to administer questionnaires, collect responses and support secure data management. Participants received personalised links to the 45-item Pre-Arrival Survey (PAS) via institutional email, along with study information and assurance of confidentiality. Participation was voluntary and students could withdraw at any time. Four survey rounds were distributed: an initial invitation followed by three weekly reminders to newly enrolled students. The survey remained open until the Friday preceding Welcome Week in mid-September 2025, spanning approximately three weeks. Alongside the closed survey items, the PAS included a qualitative component inviting students to provide self-reflective written accounts of their nervousness when entering undergraduate study. This component complemented the quantitative data by capturing the underlying expectations, perceptions and personal reflections shaping students' experiences.

2.4. Design and Analysis

An open-ended question was incorporated to elicit qualitative insight: *"To help us best support you, please tell us anything you are nervous about so that we can inform the relevant teams who are looking forward to meeting you?"* This approach enabled participants to provide more detailed perspectives than those afforded by standard Likert-scale items. A copy of the survey is available from the first author. Open-ended responses were analysed using an inductive content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first author engaged with the data through repeated readings, generating descriptive codes to capture key ideas and recurring concepts. These codes were grouped into broader categories and developed into overarching themes. Coding was conducted inductively to allow lower-order themes to emerge naturally from the data.

All responses were initially coded at a descriptive level, with codes applied systematically across the dataset and recorded to ensure transparency and consistency in the analytic process. A coding framework was iteratively developed as analysis progressed, allowing codes to be refined, merged, or separated as new patterns in the data were identified. To enhance rigour and reduce potential bias, the second author independently reviewed the coding and offered reflections and alternative interpretations. This involved reviewing a subset of coded responses alongside the developing thematic structure to assess the

consistency and credibility of interpretations rather than conducting formal statistical intercoder reliability testing. Discrepancies were discussed, some codes were relocated, and minor adjustments were made to categorisation until agreement was reached. Agreement was reached through an iterative process of discussion and refinement between authors. Throughout this process, reflexive discussion was used to consider how prior assumptions and expectations regarding student transition and nervousness might have shaped coding decisions, with attention given to ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, and written accounts were refined through multiple rounds of review to ensure clarity and coherence. Of the 3218 survey participants, 2037 (63%) responded to the question about their pre-arrival at university nervousness, indicating that the open-ended item was optional and could be left unanswered by participants. Of these, 459 responses (14% of all responses) were excluded because they were either irrelevant to nervousness (102 responses) or indicated no concerns (357 responses, e.g., “nothing at the moment”, “there is nothing”). This left 1578 responses (49% of all participants) for inclusion in the analysis. Most responses were relatively brief, typically ranging from 10 to 30 words. No demographic comparisons were undertaken between respondents and non-respondents to the qualitative item.

3. Results

This study explored the nervousness of incoming undergraduates prior to starting university. Responses revealed a range of pre-arrival concerns, which were organised into four overarching themes. Although participants frequently described themselves as “nervous”, these responses reflected a broad range of concerns relating to the transition to university rather than a narrowly defined or clinical form of anxiety. Concerns were often linked to fitting in socially and adjusting to unfamiliar personal and professional identities within HE. Findings are interpreted using Schlossberg's (1981) 4S framework (see Table 2).

Table 2. Schlossberg's 4S Framework Applied to Pre-Arrival Student Nervousness.

4S Factor	Key Elements in Pre-Arrival Context	Example Student Concerns/Nervousness
Situation	New academic, social, financial and logistical demands	Making friends, fitting in, workload, managing finances, commuting, navigating campus
Self	Personal characteristics, prior experiences, resilience, confidence, mental/physical health, neurodiversity	Social anxiety, fear of failure, academic self-doubt, chronic illness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, coping skills
Support	Anticipated or available help from peers, family, mentors, institutional resources	Uncertainty about academic help, mental health services, disability accommodations, peer networks
Strategies	Coping mechanisms and preparatory actions	Time management, study planning, help-seeking, pre-arrival research, building social connections online

3.1. Social Integration and Belonging

The most prominent source of nervousness centred on making friends, fitting in and developing a sense of belonging within the university community. Participants frequently expressed apprehension about “Meeting new people”, “Fitting in with other students” and

"Finding people with shared interests". As one student stated, *"Making new friends and fitting in"* while another wondered, *"Nervous if I will make new connections with people?"*

These concerns were especially pronounced for students whose circumstances limited opportunities for connection. Commuting students often expressed heightened anxiety: One said, *"Nervous about meeting people and making friends as I am commuting"* and another, *"I am nervous about meeting new people, especially from someone who has been in an all-girls school for the past 7 years and someone who only has a few close friends at best. I would love to make friends who are in other courses too but it is scary to walk up to someone and ask to be their friend"*. Mature students also voiced concern about age differences: *"I am a mature student at 34 so I am nervous of not having anybody close similar in age"* and *"I am nervous about making friends because I am not living in student accommodation and will be slightly older than other students when I start"*. International students described language and cultural challenges: *"I am a little nervous about adjusting to a new country and culture since this will be my first time living in the UK"*.

Shyness, introversion and social anxiety compounded these worries. One commuter noted, *"I am commuting from home and know no one yet! I am very introverted so have no idea how I am gonna put myself out there to make friends"*, while another said, *"I am not very good at making friends and I also think I do not seem very approachable due to my 'stoic' and 'deadpan' face"*. Others highlighted general social anxiety: *"Worried about meeting new people and being around a lot of people at once"* and *"I feel unorganised and I am usually organised about everything, so it is making me on edge"*.

Fears extended beyond making friends to anticipated loneliness and the impact of moving away from familiar support networks: *"Being on my own for the first time, meeting new people and being able to balance a schedule without procrastinating or being very stressed or anxious"* and *"Well, I am a bit nervous about making new friends. I have always been a bit shy so I think maybe I could have some difficulties when I arrive. I am also concerned about living alone, as I have always lived with my parents and have had someone to look after me, so I also believe I could have some problems adapting to the new situation"*. Distance from home also heightened concern: *"I am moving from Wales so the distance from my family is nerve-wracking"*.

These findings identified social integration and belonging as key areas of concern among incoming students. Within Schlossberg's framework, these responses were coded in relation to Situation (new, socially demanding environment), Self (age, personality, culture), Support and Strategies.

3.2. Academic Transition and Workload

Academic nervousness was widespread, with participants highlighting uncertainty about workload, expectations and independent learning. One student said, *"I am nervous about finding the structure of academic writing challenging and not being able to understand it,"* while others noted, *"Learning how the actual university side of writing works"* and *"The step up from A-levels to university"*. Concerns included understanding material and coping with perceived gaps in preparedness: *"Not being able to keep up in lectures"*, *"Not understanding the work and finding the subjects too difficult,"* and *"Nervous that everyone is going to be miles ahead from where I am going to be when starting this course"*. Previous experiences of academic stress intensified worries: *"I had a terrible time with my A levels due to crippling pre-exam anxiety"* and *"I am nervous that the course will be difficult and not knowing what to expect"*.

Participants commonly identified academic writing, referencing and independent learning as sources of nervousness: *"Writing the essays; I have always struggled getting thoughts on paper"* and *"I am most nervous about not being able to understand the contents and potentially falling behind. I would love help with my writing skills, e.g., structuring and understanding"*. Mature students returning after a break expressed particular apprehension:

"I am nervous for university. I am a more mature student so have been out of education for a while" and *"I have not been in education for 11 years. I am nervous about returning and writing essays"*.

Time management, workload and logistical challenges were recurring concerns, often linked to commuting or part-time work: *"The only thing that has me nervous is being able to manage the workload," "Making sure I am on time and ready for the day whilst commuting,"* and *"Managing my commitments while working"*. Students with learning differences highlighted the importance of accessible academic support: *"Getting extra time in exams as I did during A levels and GCSEs because I am dyslexic"* and *"I am nervous about not being provided the appropriate support for my disabilities"*. These accounts reflected concerns related to academic preparedness, expectations and coping approaches.

3.3. Health, Wellbeing and Support Needs

Health, wellbeing and accessibility were prominent sources of pre-arrival nervousness, encompassing mental health, neurodiverse conditions and chronic physical illnesses. Participants reported a wide range of experiences, including anxiety, depression, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and physical health conditions. Anxiety was particularly prevalent, with students stating, *"I am very socially anxious and prone to panic attacks when put on the spot or having a lot of attention on me"* and *"I have bad anxiety, so I am nervous about attending seminars in smaller groups"*. Neurodiverse participants highlighted sensory or social challenges: *"I do get a little nervous in new places; it can be a bit overstimulating for me"* and *"I have autism, so I am worried about my ability to make new friends"*. One student reflected on overlapping conditions: *"I have autism and dyslexia and need extra time, own room etc. I have contacted the uni but have not heard anything back yet"*, while another noted, *"I have anxiety and I am currently waiting to be assessed for autism/ADHD, so I am nervous about socialising and adjusting to university"*. Participants described health, wellbeing and accessibility concerns as factors contributing to pre-arrival nervousness.

Physical health concerns also contributed to nervousness, often mirroring the anticipatory anxieties reported for mental health. Participants described chronic conditions, accessibility needs and fatigue: *"I have type one diabetes and sometimes I get burnt out from it and find it hard to feel well and have motivation"*, *"I am physically disabled (Spina Bifida) and this has always impacted my studies in some regard. There are days where I experience chronic pain in my back or my legs, days I struggle to walk long distances, and I have always needed easy access to facilities like disabled parking and bathrooms"* and *"I have had a liver transplant and due to my medications sometimes I suffer from an upset stomach. At times I may need urgent access to the bathroom facilities"*. Sensory and neurological challenges, including migraines, eye-strain, hearing impairment and Tourette's syndrome, also heightened pre-arrival anxiety: *"I struggle a lot with eyestrain and migraines in busy environments and under a lot of artificial light"*, *"I am hearing impaired, currently waiting for a hearing aid, so I can often miss out on general conversation"* and *"I have Tourette's syndrome and I feel like it will be my biggest barrier in university"*.

Concerns about institutional support were frequently mentioned across mental, neurodiverse and physical health conditions. Participants expressed uncertainty about whether their needs would be adequately accommodated: *"I am nervous about not being provided the appropriate support for my disabilities"* and *"I struggle with asking for help and getting necessary feedback"*. Personal circumstances, such as bereavement or ongoing therapy, added further stress: *"I lost my dad at the end of May so it is an even bigger step coming to university for me"* and *"My living situation at home where my dad is having treatment for incurable cancer and so might be going home more often or feeling anxious"*.

These experiences were categorised within Schlossberg's (1981) framework in relation to *Situation* (new academic, social and physical demands), *Self* (mental, neurodiverse

and physical health conditions) and *Support* (family, institutional resources). Participants frequently raised concerns about access to early and tailored institutional support, including accessible facilities, clear communication and timely accommodations.

3.4. Financial and Practical Concerns

Financial nervousness was a common pre-arrival worry, particularly around budgeting, student funding and balancing part-time work with study. Participants highlighted the inadequacy of student funding and the rising cost of living: *“I received Student Finance England grant which is lower than I was expecting. I am extremely nervous about rent and bills”* and *“Managing finances and living comfortably so I can focus more on my studies than worrying about how I will afford to live and pay for my own necessities”*. Reliance on limited income streams also contributed to anxiety: *“I am nervous about managing my money. I will not be having help from family, so I am relying solely on my student finance and bursary”*. Some students noted additional pressures associated with dietary or health needs, for example: *“Nervous about being able to support my dietary requirements (gluten free) because I am a celiac whilst maintaining the budget”*. Part-time work was another source of stress: *“I am concerned about finances and money. I only have Student Finance England loan to support me. I have been looking for a part-time job for a while, applied around 200 applications and still have not found a job”*. Participants described financial concerns as relating to budgeting, employment and balancing study with other commitments.

Practical logistics also generated nervousness, including navigating campus and managing timetables. Participants said, *“Finding my way around campus and walking in the lecture and finding a seat”* and *“I am just not confident on where everything is and I have a feeling I am going to be late or get lost on my first day. I would really like it if someone showed me to my classes on the first day of my course as I do not want to make a fool out of myself”*. Commuting added further pressure: *“I am nervous about commuting to university every day, especially with managing travel times and making sure I arrive on time for lectures and activities”*. These concerns were coded within Schlossberg’s Situation dimension. Pre-arrival support, including guidance on budgeting, access to clear campus and virtual tours, support for part-time work and accessible timetables, could help reduce these concerns and improve students’ early transition experiences.

4. Discussion

This cross-disciplinary provides rare insight into students’ nervousness at a genuinely pre-arrival stage of transition into UG study, offering one of the most comprehensive institutional accounts to date. By capturing perceptions before institutional experiences reshape them, the findings highlight the anticipatory dimension of transition that is often absent from retrospective research. Using Schlossberg’s framework, the study shows how students perceived readiness is shaped by the interaction of situational demands, personal characteristics and anticipated support, indicating that processes of belonging, identity formation and adjustment begin before students arrive on campus. The findings therefore extend existing transition literature by demonstrating that adjustment processes begin before students formally enter HE, with expectations, perceived challenges and anticipated sources of support already influencing students’ transition experiences.

Beyond mapping themes of student nervousness, this study extends Schlossberg’s Transition Theory by foregrounding transition as an anticipatory process. Much prior work applies the 4S framework to experiences after students have entered university (e.g., [Hayman et al., 2024](#)), when *Support* structures and coping *Strategies* are already being enacted. In contrast, the present findings show that, at a pre-arrival stage, students’ appraisals are especially shaped by perceptions of *Situation* and *Self*, while *Support* and *Strategies* are

often uncertain or not yet activated. This suggests that transition begins not at the point of institutional contact, but during a preparatory phase in which expectations, identity and perceived readiness are already forming. Conceptualising transition as including this pre-arrival stage broadens the temporal scope of transition theory and highlights the importance of institutional action before students physically arrive. Findings highlight the anticipatory dimension of transition, extending existing literature which primarily relied on retrospective accounts (Hayman et al., 2021).

4.1. Additional Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending the temporal understanding of transition within Schlossberg's Transition Theory. While Schlossberg conceptualises transition as a process involving moving in, moving through and moving out of change, existing applications in HE have frequently focused on students' experiences once institutional transition has already begun. The present findings suggest that an important preparatory phase exists before students physically enter university, during which students actively anticipate, interpret and emotionally respond to the forthcoming transition.

This pre-arrival phase is characterised by uncertainty regarding Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. Students were already evaluating the demands of university life, imagining their future identities as university students, anticipating available support and considering how they would cope with new academic, social and practical expectations. Therefore, transition may not begin at the point of arrival or enrolment but through a period of anticipatory adjustment, where perceptions and expectations are formed before direct engagement with the institution. By identifying this anticipatory phase, the study extends the application of Schlossberg's framework by highlighting that transition processes are not only reactive responses to change but can also involve proactive sense-making before the change occurs. This provides a more nuanced understanding of student transition by recognising that readiness, belonging and coping strategies may begin developing before students formally enter HE.

4.2. Social Integration and Belonging

Social concerns were the most prominent source of nervousness, echoing prior research emphasising the importance of belonging for student engagement and confidence (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Li & Xue, 2023). Participants worried about making friends, fitting in and navigating new social contexts. For commuting, mature and international students, situational constraints heightened these anxieties, including physical separation from peer groups, age differences and cultural or linguistic barriers. These differences illustrate Schlossberg's emphasis on Situation and Self, where the same transition may be experienced differently depending on individual circumstances, identity, previous experiences and available resources. Students lacking confidence or social support often reported limited coping strategies, highlighting the importance of early, targeted interventions to foster connection and belonging prior to arrival.

4.3. Academic Transition and Workload

Academic concerns were widespread, including workload, independent learning and writing skills. Students' nervousness reflected both cognitive and emotional dimensions, incorporating self-doubt, fear of failure and uncertainty about preparedness. These findings align with previous research suggesting that students' expectations about academic demands and preparedness influence adjustment during the transition into higher education (Araújo et al., 2019; Timmis et al., 2024; Williams & Roberts, 2023). Importantly, the present findings show that these expectations are formed before students begin university, meaning that academic confidence and uncertainty may already influence transition experiences

prior to institutional engagement. Within Schlossberg's model, students' *Self* characteristics, including prior experiences, resilience and confidence, interacted with *Strategies* such as time management, help-seeking and study planning. Students who perceived gaps in preparation expressed heightened anxiety, highlighting the importance of pre-arrival guidance, early formative feedback and clear information about academic expectations.

4.4. Health, Wellbeing and Support Needs

Pre-existing mental health conditions, neurodiversity, chronic illness, disabilities and personal circumstances (e.g., bereavement) were salient sources of nervousness. Anxiety, social phobia and uncertainty about institutional support contributed to anticipatory stress. Participants described a wide range of experiences, including autism, ADHD, sensory difficulties and fatigue. These findings highlight the growing prevalence of psychological distress among students entering HE (Araújo et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2022; Timmis et al., 2024). Schlossberg's framework clarifies how *Self* (mental health, neurodiversity), *Support* (family, peer, institutional resources) and *Strategies* (coping mechanisms, help-seeking) jointly shape transition experiences. The findings emphasise the importance of proactive, inclusive approaches to support wellbeing and promote equitable access to academic and social engagement.

4.5. Financial and Practical Concerns

Financial stress, including budgeting and securing part-time employment, emerged alongside practical worries such as navigating campus, timetables and commuting. These situational factors amplified overall nervousness, particularly for students without family support or prior independent living experience. Financial and logistical concerns intersected with social and academic anxieties, illustrating the complex, multi-dimensional nature of pre-arrival nervousness. These findings highlight the diversity of student backgrounds and preparedness levels (Brown & Lent, 2019; Hayman et al., 2021) and reinforce the need for early, practical support to alleviate situational stressors.

Overall, the study demonstrates that pre-arrival nervousness is multi-faceted, combining social, academic, personal, financial, practical and health-related elements. Many students reported overlapping concerns, for example, navigating new social networks while managing workload and financial pressures, underscoring the interconnectedness of factors influencing transition. The findings confirm that students' anticipatory perceptions are influenced by prior experiences, realistic expectations and the perceived availability of support (Araújo et al., 2019; Timmis et al., 2024; Williams & Roberts, 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that pre-arrival nervousness is not a single emotional response but an interaction between anticipated demands, personal characteristics and available coping resources. This reinforces the suitability of Schlossberg's framework for examining transition as an ongoing process rather than a single point of entry into university.

Applying Schlossberg's (1981) 4S framework provides a nuanced understanding of student transition and how this applies to pre-arrival nervousness, illustrating how the interaction between *Situation* (new academic, social, financial and logistical challenges), *Self* (personal traits, prior experiences, resilience, health and confidence), *Support* (family, peers and institutional resources) and *Strategies* (coping mechanisms, help-seeking and practical preparations) shapes pre-arrival nervousness and lays the foundation for subsequent adjustment and engagement in university life.

4.6. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer clear and actionable strategies for universities to support students during the critical pre-arrival and early transition period. First, creating structured opportunities for early social connection, including small-group introductions,

peer mentoring and online engagement platforms, may help reduce social anxiety and foster a sense of belonging, particularly for commuter, mature and international students. As social concerns represented the dominant theme, such initiatives should begin from the point of study offer and continue through enrolment, rather than being introduced only after students arrive on campus.

Second, providing incoming students with accessible, transparent and timely academic guidance is essential. Clear information regarding course expectations, assessment processes and study skills, combined with pre-arrival modules and early formative activities, can enhance academic confidence, reduce uncertainty and support the transition to independent learning. Embedding preparatory resources within virtual learning environments and pre-arrival communications may further reduce perceived gaps in preparedness. Third, a visible, proactive and inclusive whole-university approach to wellbeing is critical. Early support for mental health, neurodiversity and physical needs, alongside accessible services, staff training and tailored communication, can ensure students feel supported before challenges emerge. Proactive outreach to students who identify support needs prior to arrival may reduce uncertainty and strengthen confidence in available support mechanisms.

Finally, universities should address practical and financial concerns by providing early guidance on budgeting, living costs, hardship support and practical aspects of campus life. Clear communication regarding financial support pathways, timetables, transport and accessibility may reduce uncertainty for students balancing study with employment or caring responsibilities. Collectively, these strategies can support the development of a confident, connected and resilient student community, enhancing engagement, retention and long-term success.

4.7. Limitations and Future Research

This study draws on responses to a single open-ended survey question collected at one time point prior to enrolment. While the large sample provides breadth, many responses were brief, limiting depth of interpretation compared with interview-based qualitative approaches. The findings therefore represent expressed anticipatory concerns rather than detailed accounts of how students make sense of transition. Data were collected at a single UK university, which may limit transferability to other institutional or national contexts. Although demographic information was available, comparative analysis across groups was not undertaken. Participation was voluntary, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias. From a reflexive standpoint, the research team had no prior relationships with the incoming students, and data were collected and analysed anonymously through institutional systems. This limited the potential for interpersonal influence on responses and reduced interpretive bias arising from researcher-participant interaction.

Future research could extend these findings in several ways. First, comparative institutional studies could examine pre-arrival nervousness across multiple higher education institutions, including both post-92¹ and Russell Group universities, to explore how institutional context shapes student experiences. Second, longitudinal designs following students from pre-arrival through the first year would allow identification of which early anxieties predict later engagement, social integration, mental health and academic outcomes. Third, intervention-focused research could evaluate the effectiveness of pre-arrival initiatives, such as online pre-arrival modules or mentoring programmes, in reducing nervousness and supporting smoother transitions into HE. Finally, future research could consider differences across fields or programmes of study, as disciplinary contexts and programme expectations may influence students' transition experiences and reveal variation in adaption pattern.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this study demonstrates that pre-arrival nervousness is a multi-faceted and anticipatory aspect of the transition into HE, shaped by the interplay of social, academic, health, financial and practical factors. By capturing student perspectives before institutional experiences reshape them, the findings highlight that processes of belonging, identity formation and perceived readiness begin well before enrolment.

Applying Schlossberg's 4S framework extends understanding of HE transition by demonstrating that students' adjustment processes begin before university entry, during a period of anticipatory sense-making where expectations, identity and perceived readiness are already being shaped. The study highlights the importance of proactive, inclusive and targeted pre-arrival interventions to support student wellbeing, confidence and engagement, ultimately laying the foundation for a successful and resilient start to university life. Future research should explore how students' pre-arrival experiences differ across subjects, universities and student groups. This will help institutions develop earlier, more personalised and inclusive approaches to support students before they begin university, rather than only responding to challenges after they occur.

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Note

- ¹ Post-92 refers to higher education institutions in the United Kingdom that were granted university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. These institutions include former polytechnic colleges and other higher education providers that became universities after 1992. Many post-92 universities have a strong focus on widening participation, applied and professionally relevant education, employability and engagement with local communities, often serving diverse student populations. Russell Group universities refer to a self-selected association of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK, established in 1994. These institutions are characterised by high levels of research activity, significant research income and a strong focus on research-led education.

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