

# Using an online multimedia group project to introduce students to economics and their learning community<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Building a learning community is key to education design in any year, but the widespread disruptions in 2020 made this even more crucial. In this paper, we show how we took our award-winning First Year Challenge (FYC) initiative online with a cohort of nearly 800 students spread around the world. The FYC was introduced in 2014 to introduce students to the university (and the city), our research-based learning model, the study of Economics at university and their peers. Because the FYC is an independent research project, it embeds the kind of active learning that students are expected to engage with in the rest of the programme – identifying research resources and querying them, getting advice from faculty members in other fields, and perhaps most importantly, learning how to take advantage of and deal with the challenges of collaborative work. In addition, past participants have always commented on how the FYC helped them in making friends, setting up study groups for the rest of the course and easing them into life at university.

Our challenge for the start of the 2020/21 academic year was how to retain all these benefits when activity on campus was severely curtailed and a high proportion of students were working online, across multiple time zones. We kept the project as similar as possible to what we had before in terms of the intended outcomes and overall structure, with adaptation for running online. In the paper, we detail the choice of technology and design to make the format possible, and present evidence of student feedback on the experience. We also explain the value of co-creating the materials with upper year students, ensuring we had a student eye view on all aspects of the experience. We provide an analysis of how harnessing the power of online technology for a location-based teaching and learning activity such as the FYC can make it a more inclusive and flexible exercise even with the return of more traditional on-campus education provision.

**Keywords:** community, learning, belonging, research-based, collaboration

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## Introduction

Having a sense of belonging is important for a successful learning experience (Yorke, 2014). In the context of higher education, we interpret belonging to mean feeling part of a peer learning community, faced with similar academic opportunities and challenges; being confident engaging with the staff that teach and support students; and, understanding the content and approach to learning in the programme. It can be difficult to establish this sense of belonging in an undergraduate Economics programme, online or on campus, because Economics programmes tend to involve large cohorts of heterogeneous learners. Some will have a passing interest, perhaps unsure what the subject is about, and others will be very passionate about the topics being studied. Some will have chosen to take the course and others will only be doing it because they are required to. There will also be learners with different academic backgrounds, some will have a stronger mathematics background than others in particular and a portion of the class will potentially have a background in economics from high school. This is in addition to diversity of life experiences before and during the programme. There are also a wide range of different approaches to teaching and learning in economics, for example in terms of the mode of delivery, mix of assessment types, the balance of directed learning and independent learning and the mix of individual work and group work (Allgood S. W., 2015). There is a lot for any student to get their head around, whether they are online or on campus.

Navigating the nature of learning and who you are learning with is a challenge for any student and it can take time to establish the sense of belonging. We see this as students move up to a higher level in education or they are moving across from another subject area to economics. It is relevant whether they are doing a short (e.g., one semester) course in economics, are embarking from (high) school to a degree programme in economics or are moving into postgraduate learning. As course designers and leaders, we have a role to play in helping create opportunities to belong to the learning community.

To achieve each student's potential, we need to establish mechanisms from the outset to help students get a secure starting point to their belonging journey. Induction at the start of the academic year or term is often seen as a time to bring people together physically, with a mix of talks from staff about what will happen during the programme and social events. The premise is that belonging will come naturally once the mechanisms to meet, speak with and hear from others are put in place. This form of induction has a place in any course, particularly those that are longer-term and on campus, but it is not enough to securely establish the process of belonging to a learning community (Tice, 2021). This is why in our large undergraduate programme at a large research-focused British university with highly competitive entry, we introduced an induction group project that requires students to get straight into thinking like an economist alongside peers and staff, even before they

arrive on campus. The project is designed to help students work out what economics is and what approach they will be taking to learning in their programme.

Prior to the Covid pandemic, we ran this project in person with great success, and this format has now been emulated by others and short-listed for an education award (Chaudhury P. a., 2016). Like others in the education sector across the world, we had to come up with a new approach for the start of the 2020/21 academic year when learning was online for a high proportion of our students and staff. We describe the approach we took to pivoting the existing project to an online format in this paper. We explain the details of this reformatting and why retaining the project online continues to be an appropriate move, even when students are back on campus. We also provide advice on how to effectively design and deliver an online induction project like ours to help students improve their sense of belonging. Our biggest take away from the experience is that the project works better online, even when students are on campus, and it can provide the basis for induction to both online and in-person courses. The pandemic shock forced our hands and showed us a better way of doing something that has broad application beyond the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

## What is the First Year Challenge?

The First Year Challenge (FYC) was introduced into the first year undergraduate Economics programme in 2014 as a way to introduce students to the university, to Economics as a field and to a “research-based” learning model. In the UK, students choose a specialisation or major when they apply. However, for a subject like Economics, which not many have studied at high school, there is a significant mismatch between what students think Economics is and what it really looks like at the university level (Reimann, 2004) (Allgood S. a., 2020). In addition, the programme's focus on research-based education means that students are taught cutting edge research from their first year (starting with VoxEU type articles on key issues like globalisation, inequality, climate change and the macroeconomy and progressing to more advanced journal articles) and are expected to produce a minimum level of research themselves in the form of essays, term papers and dissertations. This is also something that is new to many students who do not often encounter this kind of independent work in high school. The FYC was an attempt to give students a window into both these aspects of their university lives, starting before their arrival at university.

The final challenge that the FYC was introduced to address was the fact that as a very large university in a major metropolis, building a sense of community among students was quite difficult. This led to adverse outcomes for students who often felt lonely and unsupported, and low student satisfaction across the board. By establishing connections

with both first-year lecturers and peers, the FYC was designed to start developing a sense of belonging to a learning community before they embark on university life. Students are divided into small groups, assigned a carefully chosen location close to campus, and asked to produce a brief video or audio output linking the location to the topic “growth and inequality”, the overarching theme of the required first-year introductory Economics course. They receive detailed guidance before arriving and start on the project on their first day of induction week at university, completing it within the first two weeks of the academic year. Once the FYC ends, students continue to work in their assigned groups throughout the first year for tutorials in each of their required Economics courses. This connection leverages the peer-to-peer connections built during the FYC. The best FYC submissions receive a certificate and a small prize, but it is neither assessed formally nor a mandatory part of the curriculum. Despite this, the vast majority of students fully participate in this initiative.



[First Year Challenge](#)

The First Year Challenge (FYC) is a collaborative multimedia research project which you will work on during the first couple of weeks of term. You have each been assigned a tutorial group f...

[Go to this Sway](#)

Figure 1: The FYC guide sent to students before they arrive at university and start on the project

Over the past few years, several other universities have adopted the FYC and adapted it to their own contexts. These variations include a more formal assessment of the FYC process and output which then counts towards the final grade in the first year, expanding the remit of the FYC to include additional follow-on activities over the course of the entire first year, and changing the overall topic of the FYC to reflect current events and the local context such as the Black Lives Matter movement. In addition, a version of the FYC has been used as a widening participation initiative to make studying economics more attractive to a diverse student body including those who may not otherwise consider economics. All of these adaptations of the FYC share the same fundamental objectives of creating a learning community, introducing students new to the subject to the vast diversity within economics, and developing their research, teamworking and exposition skills. An

early evaluation of the original FYC initiative is discussed in Chaudhury and Spielmann (2016). In the next section, we provide an updated evaluation of the project since it was moved to an online format in 2020 and in the section that follows, we discuss how to design and deliver a project like this effectively, with ideas on how to address the challenges of running the FYC in different contexts.

### The value of running the First Year Challenge online

As explained above, the FYC has provided a successful start to the learning journey of our students since 2014. Moving to an online format in 2020/21 ensured that the value of the project was not lost when most of our students were learning online across the world. More importantly, adapting to an online format allowed us to enhance the experience by broadening our options for the design of the project and provided greater flexibility in how, when and where students met to work on the project. Going online also made the project set-up logistics easier from a staff and student perspective. Beginning the journey to belong to a learning community was, to our surprise, easier with the use of an online platform.

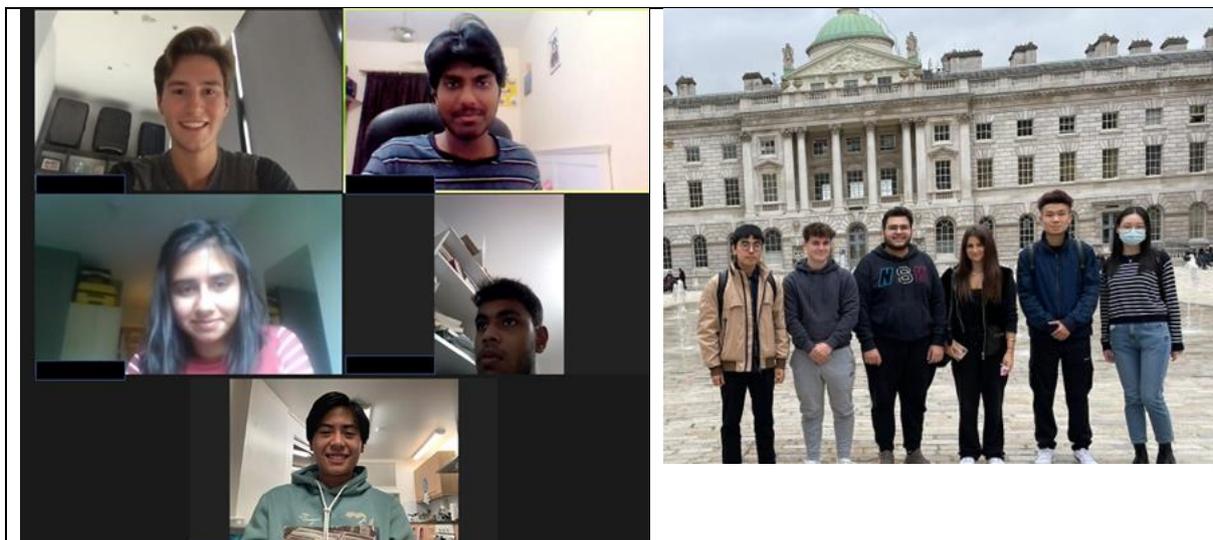


Figure 2: FYC group photos which are required as part of the project submission

In the original version of the project, and in its online format, students work in groups of 5-7, ensuring they immediately have a peer community that they know at the start of the course. The groups are allocated so that students are with peers that they continue to learn with in the same weekly tutorial groups in the first year introductory Economics programme. In 2020/21 we also connected the project groups to the same personal tutor (a staff member focusing on pastoral care and general academic advice) and upper year mentor, enhancing the connection with the wider support community. The

creation of small groups within a large cohort, whether on campus or online, is an important way to help students enter an unfamiliar situation before getting to know a wider group over time.

**Student feedback on the value of developing learning community for the year:**

*“Great experience, sped up the interaction between us”*  
*“the high point was that I got to know people in my tutorial group. We still text and discuss class material”*  
*“We have now made a study group to help each other on content we are unsure of and just to talk in general.”*

A related advantage of the online platform, relative to running the project solely on campus, is the flexibility that it offers students. When they are studying on campus, students can still choose to engage through the platform, particularly if they are not all physically on campus at the same time, or they can meet up in person if that is what works for them. The mode of group engagement is not imposed, so that students can figure out the best option themselves. At the start of the year, even with an on-campus degree, not everyone may be able to make it to the physical location for induction week due to immigration or other transportation issues. This blended approach makes the experience more inclusive, allowing those with caring, work, or other commitments or constraints on their ability to come to campus to devise a personalised approach with their group.

**Student feedback on the value of the project being online**

*“As someone who is studying remotely from home I found the challenge very helpful to make some friends, as I have found this the hardest to do this term.”*  
*“a good connection with my teammates through Teams, we discuss and post our thoughts on Teams, it helps a lot from the remote disconnection.”*

There was a potential concern that not all students would have access to the technology (Lai, 2020). In addition, there was a risk that the platform for the initial group connections, and where all the materials for the FYC were posted, or the mapping software to guide students to their assigned location would not work in all countries where our students were situated. In the summer of 2020, student interns helped to resolve this issue by piloting all the technology, making sure it worked by testing it with peers all around the world. It was a great relief to know that it was working at varying bandwidths in all countries

covered by our very global cohort. Ensuring the project was spread over a couple of weeks also meant that any temporary problems with connectivity could be worked around.

A related concern was that students would not know how to engage through online platforms, bearing in mind they had never met each other. At this point, instructors as well as students were also very new to working fully online. Staff and students were learning together, and the ingenuity of the students throughout the whole process of meeting each other and creating great outputs was quite impressive. Of course, there were challenges getting students familiar with the platform, but we were careful to select the same technology and platforms that were used throughout the programme. This also meant that students were able to continue to engage with each other and staff through the platform after the project was formally finished, and the FYC acted as a way to introduce them to the technologies they would be using throughout their programme. They remained on the same platform for all their courses over the year and had become comfortable with engaging through the chat and online meeting functionality. This approach made it worth investing time to get familiar with the platform through the FYC, for students and for the staff.

**Student feedback on getting used to online technologies**

*“Even though not everyone was on campus at the time, we were still able to work effectively using zoom calls..... However, wifi problems sometimes did slow progress”*

Since the FYC started in 2014, it has always been a challenge to manage the logistics of setting up project groups and ensuring they met each other in the assigned physical location. We selected Microsoft Teams as the online platform for the FYC, which allowed us to enrol groups into private channels ahead of the course starting and provided them with an easy way to meet for the first time, either through video call or discussion chat. In the past we had prepared detailed documents with information on who was in each group and where to meet, but students often struggled to follow the large volume of written information. Providing a structured platform for students to engage with interactive instructional materials, and to connect with their classmates took away much of the confusion and uncertainty about what to do, where and when (Dhillia, 2017).

We had struggled in the past to update the FYC groups, for example when new students enrolled on the course and others left. This often delayed the start of the project as we waited until we were confident that enrolment was relatively fixed. We were able to set up the platform, and groups, earlier because it was easier for staff to change things live online. We could move people onto or off the platform and move people around groups, right up until the project started, without the need to send lots of emails or updated

documents. This was a significant time saver for staff and also made it easier for students to see what groups they were in and if their group had changed. We were of course concerned that students were missing out by not being able to meet socially in person. Student feedback on the FYC in prior years often emphasised the value of being able to find a new coffee shop together, work out how to get from A to B on campus or simply get to know people informally on the walk to the project meeting location. This was not an option in the height of the pandemic restrictions in September 2020 but for September 2021 we considered this aspect in our decision about whether to move it back to an on-campus experience.

The feedback from the 2020/21 students taught us that being online for the project, wherever they were for the university induction week, allows a flexibility of approach that does not reduce the experience of those who want to meet in person but enhances the experience for those who cannot. Being online did not take away the value of being able to learn about places in London and to make connections between the real world and the economics they were learning or any other content-related aspect of the project. The benefits of starting the project, with the option of meeting on campus if feasible, outweighed the downsides. In our case that was in the context of expecting students to meet on campus after induction week. In other contexts, for example in a distance learning course, the advantages of harnessing the value of technology to enable collaboration and creation of community learning also come into their own. Thus, the use of the online platform facilitates peer interaction in different settings.

### ***Staff-student communication and engagement***



Figure 3: Screenshot of the FYC Teams site with student communications

As the FYC project is linked to the compulsory Introductory Economics course in our degree, it is an opportunity for the staff teaching that course, and those responsible for the pastoral care of first year students, to meet them early in the academic year. When the project was purely on-campus, lecturers gave a one-off briefing to the whole cohort but then had to answer many emails on project logistics. Teaching assistants, who run the tutorials for the first-year course, met the students about the project in the first week of term. Personal tutors were also encouraged to talk to students about the project in their first meeting with the students. Channels to communicate with the students existed but they were disparate and sporadic. Moreover, students who were delayed arriving to campus essentially missed the opportunities to engage early on with teaching staff.

The online platform changed the nature of our engagement and opened up additional, different ways for students to communicate with staff. It provided the structure that students always need when transitioning to a new course and particularly the jump from school to university (Briggs, 2012). It also allowed us to scaffold their learning by communicating with them in one space, that is a unified virtual classroom. We continued to host a briefing session, but it was held online, so students could attend even if they were not yet on campus and the recording was available so that groups could check back on what was said. The chat facility in the online platform was a game changer. Students, whether they were on campus or online, could post questions and staff could respond in a timely fashion so that initial teething problems were dealt with relatively quickly. This system was also relatively efficient as all students could see the answer to a question, and therefore multiple messages with the same queries were not required. All staff, including lecturers, teaching assistants, administrative assistants, and personal tutors, were also able to communicate through the platform, which meant that there was a common understanding of what was being asked and what the appropriate responses were. Communication between staff and students, and across students, was opened up in a safe environment in a way that was never feasible – given the scale of the cohort and the limited hours of face-to-face interaction – when we focused solely on campus-based methods.

An interesting, unexpected development was that we were able to observe how project groups were progressing over the course of the FYC. A quick glance through the Teams channel showed the chat within the group, when video meetings had occurred and so on. The objective of such an audit was not to monitor the specifics of the group's activity, but it enabled us to spot inactivity and provide a nudge where appropriate. Students of course did not always stay on the platform provided for all their interactions, moving to their preferred mode of communication very quickly. It was a lesson in what 'remote but not distant' could mean in terms of the future of higher education, with students spread

around the world meeting to discuss 40 landmarks in London and their connection to the theme of growth and inequality.

The real time nature of staff-student engagement on the platform also meant that staff were able to obtain and respond to student feedback quickly. For example, if there was an issue with a particular location then an adaptation could be made. In the past students may have visited a location and found that the building was covered in scaffolding and was not visible. They would likely have felt discouraged and maybe even disengaged with the project. Online when situations like this arose, the group could immediately ask for support in the chat and staff could encourage them to think through ways forward, highlighting for example, that the location was a prompt, and the lack of access should therefore not be an impediment but rather a spur to creative thinking. The immediacy and ease of communication helped both students and staff.

### ***Understanding what economics is and the nature of learning on the course***

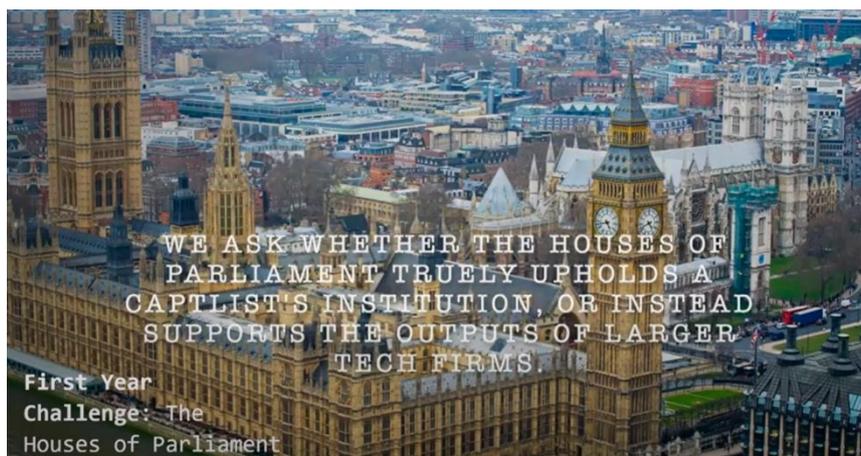


Figure 4: Screenshot of the top submission for the 2020/21 FYC project

In the FYC we ask students to connect the location in London which their group has been assigned to, to the theme of their Introductory Economics course, growth and inequality across the world over the last couple of centuries. They are immediately immersed in the content of their economics degree, and to the way that we use economics to analyse big questions relevant to society. The place-based nature of the project also requires them to think creatively about the city that they are studying in and its relevance to economics and economists. Using locations spread through the city identified on an interactive map, rather than just physical ones near campus, allowed us to broaden the scope of the project and be more adventurous with our choice of locations. This opened new lines of investigations for the students and more variety in approaches and outputs for a growing number of project groups.

The project provides students with a hands-on opportunity to work collaboratively and to undertake independent research, skills required throughout the research-based degree that they have enrolled in. Most of our students have little experience of independent research and will generally have worked on their own at school, often with more of a competitive than a collaborative mindset (Hibbert, 2012). Of course, they also learn to think creatively about how to approach their research and produce a multi-media output. Study skills of time management, meeting deadlines and submitting work online are also developed.

**Student feedback on learning to learn economics through the project**

*"The challenge was a great opportunity to work as a team with everyone and helped us learn about our chosen location's connection to economics."*

*"When I worked through this project, I had a good understanding of using Moodle, got used to the university life, the cooperation with my friends, and contributed the academic knowledge from unit 1 to build a connection with "Museum" topic"*

*"It is a good activity for the new entrants of University since we could learn the teamwork and knowing new friends of our course"*

*"It was nice being thrown straight into work within a group."*

*"Doing the project remotely meant that many of us were exposed to new challenges that we would not encounter if we could do it in-person. However, I think this made us more innovative in coming out with new methods for completing the task"*

The approach also got students used to the teaching model we designed for 2020/21 and continue to use, with a mix of asynchronous, online, learning and on campus lessons. They were immersed in this approach from the outset and hence were able to transition to it across all their economics courses with relative ease. This was also true for the teaching assistants and other staff engaging with students through technology for the first time. The project gave them a safe space to get used to the online side of teaching.

The evaluation of the students' projects and the dissemination of the top 3 entries also allows students to get a better sense of what good quality work looks like in our course. For example, they learn how accurate referencing of sources and evidencing of interesting ideas are more important than the quality of the video production. The students are also introduced to the idea that feedback comes in different ways in university, as they don't get individual comments on their own video but they are encouraged to reflect on how they did by comparing their work to the exemplars. This is a common approach to feedback across the economics programme as well, with reflection interspersed with more traditional forms

of feedback (Walstad, 2001). The winners of the FYC competition are awarded their prizes (and their video showcased) at the annual undergraduate conference, [Explore Econ](#) where upper-year students present their independent research. This throughline connection, from the start of their first year to the end of the degree, provides a reminder to students of the importance of research-based learning in their degree. For those enthused by economics, it also cements their interest and reminds them of opportunities to come within and outside the degree.

## How to run the FYC in the most effective and feasible way

These benefits of running an induction project, like the FYC, of course come with a large amount of work behind the scenes. We have learned a lot about how to design and implement the project from years of trial and error, including with the move to online. The benefits are higher, the more care is taken with set-up, instructions, support and connectivity to wider learning on the course before and during the project experience. Like with most things, choices about the specifics of the implementation of the project determine its value. We discuss what we have done to help ensure effective implementation and summarise our Top Tips on how to build on these lessons learned below.

### **Top Tips for running a project to facilitate belonging to a learning community**

1. Get input/insights from upper year students who have already participated in the project.
2. Don't be afraid to blend - having the online resource for organising a project and making first connections does not mean students can never meet on campus if that is what they prefer to do.
3. Connect the induction project to a course that goes beyond the project itself, enhancing the learning community impact.
4. Use an online platform you are comfortable with and that is part of the student learning environment for other purposes.
5. Be on the platform with students. Seeing staff engage through the platform encourages them to the same.
6. Make use of pre-existing open access resources rather than re-inventing the wheel - eg, Google Maps.
7. Make sure instructions to students give clear actionable advice in interactive formats, with specific tasks and mini-deadlines made clear - getting upper year students to write this helps.
8. Whilst this is a way for them to transition to more independent learning, do ensure transparent support structures are available to help students with any teething problems.
9. Connect project groups to wider learning community interactions, such as seminar groups, personal tutor groups or mentor schemes.
10. Celebrate what they achieve - even if for credit but especially if not.

As the FYC is designed for first year students in economics, a sizeable group in most universities, running it in an effective and feasible manner involves significant pre-planning and co-ordination with different parts of the programme or department. A large number of these challenges are irrespective of whether the FYC is run largely on campus, mostly online

or in a blended fashion. In our case, the smallest cohort we have run this initiative for was 350 students and the largest was 800 students, and it has become very clear that even when it is possible to run it entirely in-person, the use of technology can facilitate making the process much more feasible in the largest groups.

The structure and timeline of the FYC is a key part of what makes it effective. Students get all the information and guidance about the project before they arrive at university for induction and before classes start. The benefit of this is that even though the FYC is an academic initiative, it is integrated into the usual induction activities such as campus and library tours, and therefore feels less like an add-on to either the first-year induction or the course. In order to make this structure work however, a great deal of work involving administrative staff is required to set up the FYC groups, get in touch with students potentially before they have registered at university and have university email addresses and other accounts which limits their access to key online portals and resources. Originally, the FYC was set up entirely on campus with students receiving the FYC guide and group information via email and then connecting with their groups on the day they arrived. The use of a unique assigned location for each group allowed students to make this connection in a relatively easier way. Students were asked to be at this location (situated within a 10 to 15 minute walk from the main campus building) at a particular time in the early evening which meant that it was easier to find their group mates rather than in a big crowd on campus.

As university registration has largely moved online and often starts prior to the first day of induction, this initial connection with first year students is now made through the dedicated Microsoft Teams site where each FYC group has its own private channel and are asked as the first task of the FYC to introduce themselves to their groupmates online and set up their first in-person or online meeting. This can also be done on a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) e.g. Moodle, and in fact, most of the students choose to move their group interactions to a social media outlet such as WhatsApp or WeChat. It is clear that having a one-stop online area to save work files, ask the professors for help, and connect with their peers (rather than emailing) is appreciated by students who are otherwise flooded with emails and other missives at this time. Running the FYC through Microsoft Teams also means that students can upload their FYC submission to their Teams channel, so that the process from the setup and initial communications with students to the final downloading of submissions is also one-stop for lecturers and programme administrators.

The FYC guide which students are provided with before they arrive used to be a PDF file, but is now setup as a Sway, Microsoft's storytelling App. This makes the guide much more interesting and easier to interact with as there are embedded videos and other multimedia, links to an interactive map where students can find their assigned location and

where possible, a video of their location in case they are not able to be there in person, and an index which makes it easy for students to navigate through the guide (Chaudhury P. , 2023). As the guide is therefore an easily editable website, it is easy for those organising the FYC to make changes in real-time, rather than having to send out an edited PDF each time such changes are required. Again, a VLE's "pages" option is a way of doing something similar.

The final key element of running the FYC smoothly and efficiently is the guidance for and oversight of how students interact with the rest of their group. As these are first year students, they are likely to be nervous and shy and have a different group dynamic than more experienced students or ones who know each other already. As a main intended outcome of the FYC is building community, failure of the initiative to deliver on this front is a major issue (Arslan, 2021). Starting off on the right foot is important as it sets the tone for the rest of the interaction, and for this reason, designing a set of initial, well-defined tasks (introducing themselves, making an appointment to meet, posting one interesting thing they learned about their assigned location, e.g.) is important. In addition, having a setup where tutors and lecturers frequently ask the group to report on how their work is going in an informal chat makes the importance of the initiative and working together clear and inserts an element of accountability despite the FYC in its original format not being part of the overall grade (Qiu, 2013).

## Conclusion

Starting a new course, in person or online, is daunting whatever your background and experience. This is true for those transitioning to higher education from school, those embarking on short-term online courses without any connection to the cohort and those taking a course outside their main area of study or taking a course in an unfamiliar subject as a requirement. In these and other situations, feeling part of a learning community from the outset can make the experience more fruitful for individuals and improve outcomes. This was particularly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic when so many learners around the world who signed-up for a campus-based experience found themselves learning partially or wholly online. In a less constrained world, the need to provide structure and scaffolding from the start of a course to enable students to develop their sense of belonging to a learning community remains as strong as ever. What has changed is that we are more experienced harnessing the benefit of technology, whether the course is formally online or on campus.

We have highlighted the value of running an induction project, like the FYC, to provide the starting point. When care is taken to design the project to suit the context in which it is taking place, the online platform provides a flexible space for communicating and

meeting (Stone, 2017). Students in an online course connect through the platform and those in a campus-based course can choose to connect in person or online, adapting through the project. The platform provides a level online classroom environment whether students are all studying economics or come from a mix of specialisms, and it is less likely to exclude students with specific needs. In this way it can be one mechanism to make economics learning more engaging for those unsure about the subject, perhaps attracting students to continue with the subject in later courses where they are still deciding.

It is important to emphasise that no matter what you do, not all students will engage with a project like this or even when they do not all will value the experience. What we found was that where students expressed doubts about the value of the FYC when run online, they were very similar to what prior cohorts had said when the activity was on campus. The concerns raised related to not wanting to work with people they did not know, pressures of being asked to work on a project so early in the course and concerns about free-riding. These are common challenges of collaborative work, and ones that cannot be easily designed out of a group project. The challenges, and linked dissatisfaction amongst some students, was no worse when online and was offset to a large extent by many more students expressing satisfaction with the flexibility of the mode of delivery.

The value and success of our FYC initiative is demonstrated by the number of other universities who have adopted and adapted the idea, and the creation of a new Second Year Challenge (SYC). The project, at the start of the Second Year of a three-year degree, is an attempt to continue the community building at a time when many of the official first year support structures have expired. The idea of the SYC has at least in part, arisen from student feedback of how the learning community falls away after the first year and at a time when many students are feeling over-burdened by job and internship expectations. The re-connecting opportunity is particularly important for vulnerable students such as those from under-represented backgrounds. The SYC, building on the success of the FYC, is a reminder that belonging to a learning community does not come easily, particularly with large and diverse cohorts in economics. Embedding structures to provide support to students to help them belong to the learning community is important for the student experience and student outcomes. This can be done effectively by harnessing the value of technology and learning lessons from projects such as ours.

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