

# THE BIG SU WELCOME REPORT 2025

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# **CONTENTS PAGE**

- About (page 3)
- Who completed the survey (page 4)
- Executive Summary (page 5)
- Welcoming & belonging (page 6)
- SU impact (page 9)
- Pre-arrival preparedness (pages 10–11)
- Departmental induction (page 12)
- Social connection (pages 14–15)
- Navigation (page 16)
- Support & opportunities (page 17)
- Best things (page 18)
- Worst things (page 19)
- Improving one thing (page 20)
- Marmite Moments (page 21)
- Summary & actions (page 22)
- Wider Reflections (pages 23-24)



# ABOUT THE BIG SU WELCOME SURVEY

The SU Welcome Survey began in 2022 to capture first-year students' early experiences across all three campuses. Here's how it has grown since launch:

Response	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Number of students	882	640	693	690
Total Student population	18,703	16,591	14,448	12,218
UG 1st year student population	3,778	3,170	3,555	2,969
1st year student population	5,869	7,732	6,876	5,032
% of 1st years	15%	8%	10%	14%

With a **14% response rate** and responses from almost **700 students**, the Welcome Survey provides a sufficiently large and diverse sample to draw meaningful insights about the first-year experience. The consistency of results across multiple years and question types gives us confidence in the reliability of the themes identified.

While the SU leads on collecting and analysing the data, we'd like to thank Stephen Bland and Megan Beck from the Planning and Data Insight team for their ongoing support, especially in making the data so easy to explore in Tableau.

### How This Report Connects to the SU Membership

This report doesn't just share what students told us in the Welcome Survey, it shows how those insights connect to what we, as your Students' Union, are here to do. Each section of the report is marked with an icon that links it to one of our core membership aims:

- Get a great degree + dream job.
- Grow Your Own Way. No pressure.
- Find Your People. Feel at home.
- Use your voice. Make change happen.
- Get support when you need it.

These icons highlight where the data relates to the support, opportunities and experiences we're committed to providing. By linking each insight to a key aim, we can clearly show how student feedback guides our work, shapes our priorities, and helps us make the university experience better for every student.

It also means you can see at a glance how students' early experiences connect to the things the SU exists to champion – from academic success, community and personal development, to wellbeing and student voice.







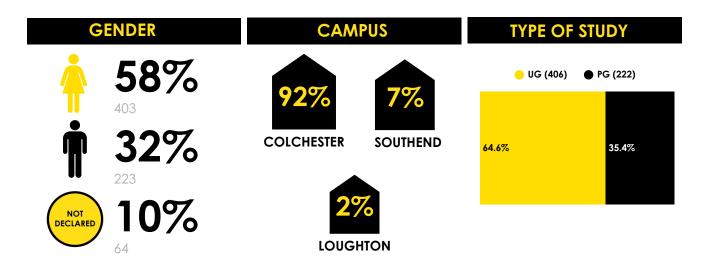




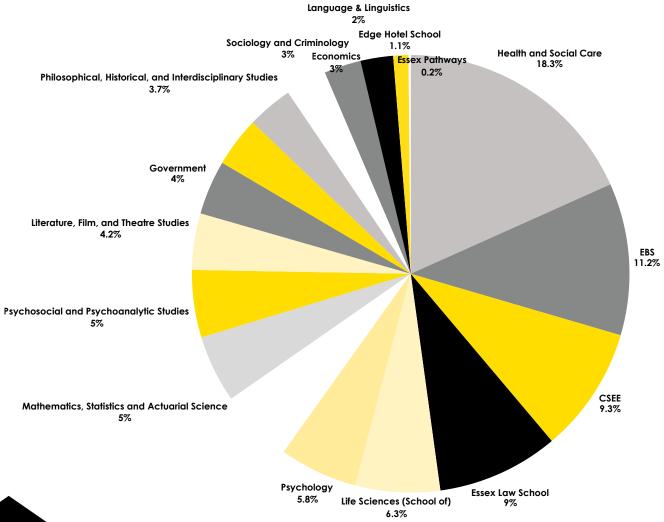


# Who completed the survey:

- First years only
- UG & PG Students



### **COURSE**





# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Students report a warm, socially vibrant and well-supported welcome, with exceptionally strong SU impact and consistently high settling-in scores. Academic confidence is rising, driven by sharper departmental induction and strong course fit.

However, cracks are emerging: a growing gap between settling-in and belonging, falling academic preparedness linked to unclear pre-arrival information, and navigation challenges concentrated on Colchester. The social experience varies widely - students who hit the key induction/SU touchpoints thrive; those who miss them struggle with isolation or homesickness.

Students praised social opportunities, SU events, academic staff and the campus environment, but highlighted recurring frustrations around navigation, pressure, accommodation costs, admin clarity and travel difficulties.

- 98% felt welcomed in their first month
- 90% rated departmental induction positively (↑10%)
- 96.7% say they're on the right course
- 89.7% say the SU had a positive impact (↑8.7%)
- 85% feel settled in
- 75% feel they belong
- 50.3% felt academically prepared (↓6%)
- 21% of Colchester students struggled to navigate campus

# Key actions for 26/27

### 1. Strengthen pre-arrival foundations

- a. Earlier, clearer information
- b. Better systems support
- c. More consistency on arrival days

### 2. Make belonging a university-wide priority

- a. Structured, inclusive opportunities in the first six weeks
- b.A focus on relational, community-building interventions

### 3. Improve and standardise departmental induction

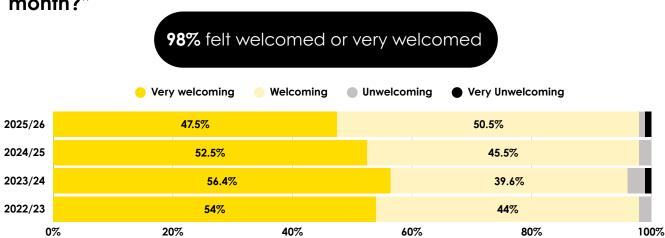
- a. Minimum standards across all departments
- b. Stronger social connection opportunities baked into induction



# UNIVERSITY LIFE: HOW STUDENTS FELT DURING THEIR FIRST MONTH AT ESSEX

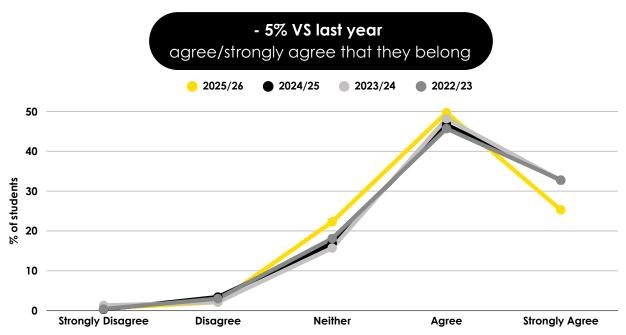
This section covers three big questions: Did Essex feel welcoming? Do students feel they belong? And do they feel settled into life at university?

"How welcoming did you find the University of Essex in your first month?"



**98.1% is an amazing statistic**, representing a real endorsement for the collaborative welcome efforts of the University and Students' Union, as well as the role played by existing students in helping welcome new entrants.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: "I feel like I belong at the University of Essex"



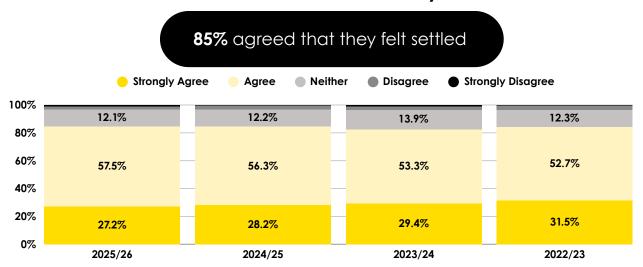
Our "sense of belonging" score has fallen to **75%**, **down from 79.4% last year** and 80.9% the year before. While still broadly positive, this decline reflects several wider shifts in the student experience over the last 12 months.







# To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: "I feel like I have settled into life at university"



Feelings of being settled into university life remain consistently high, with **84.7%** of students agreeing or strongly agreeing this year. **This score has stayed remarkably stable over four years.** This stability shows that students are reliably finding their rhythm, adapting well and feeling comfortable at Essex.

# But, what's the difference between belonging and settling in?

Although **both "settling in" and "belonging" describe how students feel during their first month**, they measure two very different parts of the transition to university. The data in this report shows this clearly.

**Settling in** is about rhythm, routine and familiarity. It reflects whether students know where to be, understand their timetable, feel comfortable navigating daily life and have adjusted to the practical demands of university. This score is consistently high, with 84.7% agreeing they have settled into life at Essex, and it has remained stable for four years. Students reliably find their footing and adapt well to day-to-day university life.

**Belonging**, however, is emotional and relational. It describes whether students feel connected, accepted and "at home" within the wider community. Advance HE defines belonging as "the feeling of being connected to and valued by a community – whether that's a course, an institution or academia as a whole".

This year, **75% agreed** that they feel they belong at Essex, a **5% fall** from previous years. Belonging takes longer to build and depends on relationships, confidence and a sense of identity within the university environment.

The **difference** becomes clearer when the two scores are read together. The data shows that students are **settling into routines quickly** but **not forming deeper emotional connections** at the same pace. In other words, students may feel organised before they feel like they truly belong.

This distinction matters. National research from Wonkhe and Pearson indicates that students who settle in well are three times more likely to feel they belong than those who do not. Our data mirrors this pattern. Essex students are adapting well to the practical aspects of university life, but gaps in belonging suggest that social connection, confidence and community-building remain essential areas of focus.







### **Welcome Events**

To help welcome new and returning students back to Essex, the SU (Students' Union) ran a vibrant and inclusive programme of welcome events and activities, including:

84
engagement
events

1,941
students
engaged with

4,581
overall attendances

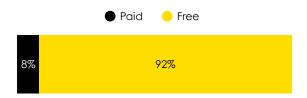
mass participation events

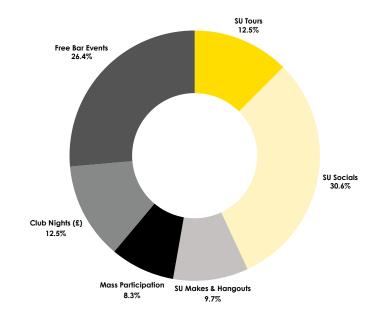
# The Full Programme of Events

The full programme of Welcome Events comprised of **119 events**.

All designed to help new and returning students connect, grow and feel at home.

The programme offered a variety of events, activities, mass participation opportunities, socials, crafting events, board games and club and bar nights, ensuring there was something for everyone. With **92% being free** to attend.





### The Welcome Hub

Now in its third year, the SU Welcome Hub on Square 3 delivered:

- **491 free postcards** to 56 countries
- Giant SU letters and social seating for a fun, relaxed drop-in space
- On-the-spot advice, directions, and wayfinding support
- SU info and event promotion, including Welcome Fortnight foldouts, Freshers flyers, and free A2 wall planners
- An inclusive welcome point with free pronoun badges and a pop-up "Tea & Talk" mental-health event
- New for this year: DJ booth, mic, and music to boost atmosphere and SU Bar night events.











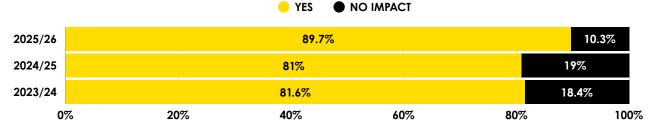
# So now, the big question... Did the SU have a positive impact on your welcome experience?

# **89.7%** said the SU had a positive impact

This year, **89.7%** of students said the SU had a positive impact on their welcome experience - an increase of 8.7% from last year.

That's not just a strong result, it's direct evidence that the core benefits of SU membership are landing exactly where they matter most: right at the start.





# What they said...

# Making friends & Social Connection

"Went to the mini golf and darts, both were good icebreakers."

"Went to many SU events: made friends and had a good time – good memories."

"There were a lot of opportunities to meet people and to get used to campus life."

"The welcome events made it really easy to speak to random people... especially when you arrive and don't know anyone."

### Feeling Welcomed, Comfortable & Supported

"The SU created a welcoming and engaging environment for all students."

"When I arrived on campus and saw people around it felt more socially welcoming."

"These events bring together people and help them settle in."

"It significantly eased the transition into university life."

### **Inclusion & Cultural Comfort**

"When I was able to meet people from my country and speak comfortably." "They are very inclusive and try their best to entertain us."

### Useful Information & Communication

"There was always an email about what was going on."

"They made it clear about what support is available..."







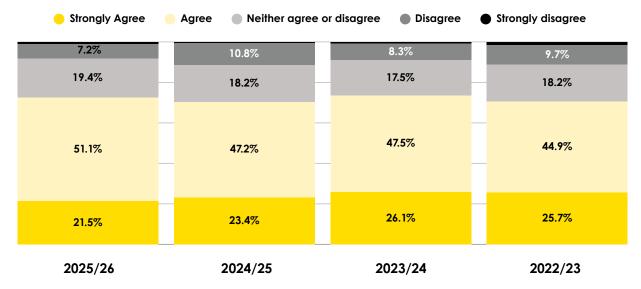


# PREPARING STUDENTS BEFORE THEY ARRIVE

This section explores how effectively students accessed essential pre-arrival information and how prepared they felt to begin their academic journey at Essex.

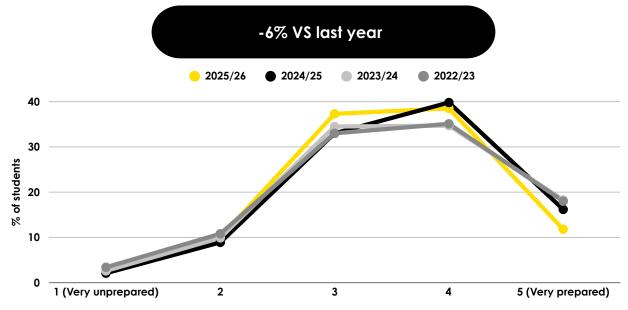
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?:

# "Before starting at Essex it was easy to find the information I needed online"



The 2025/26 results are in line with previous years, with those saying information was easy to find online at **72.6%**.

# How prepared did you feel when you started your studies?



Positive responses to "How prepared did you feel when you started your studies?" have **fallen to 50.3%**, **down from 56% last year**. This year's drop reflects a combination of national trends and local factors shaping students' confidence before arriving which we touch on again later.

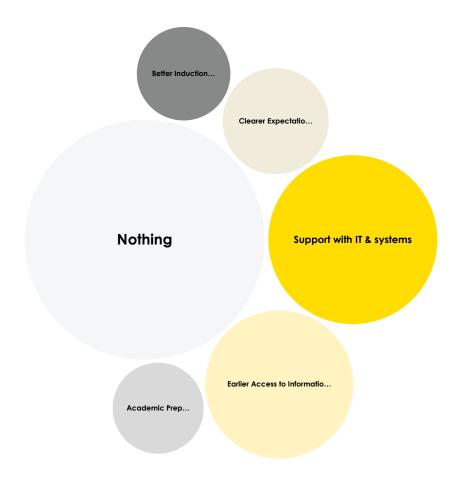








# Is there anything that would have helped you to be more prepared for starting your studies?



- Most students (around 60%) said nothing more was needed to help them prepare.
- Many felt any challenges were due to personal factors such as anxiety, uncertainty, or returning to study after a long break.
- The biggest actionable area (26%) was support with systems, IT and practical setup.
- Students frequently mentioned difficulties with **Moodle/Faser access**, confusing university systems, **WiFi issues**, and delays with essentials like DBS checks or placement clearance.
- A significant number (19%) wanted earlier access to key information, including timetables, reading lists, module details and induction materials.
- Last-minute information was a recurring frustration.
- Some students (8%) wanted clearer expectations of the course, such as assessment formats, exam structures, workload, and required prior knowledge.
- A smaller group (5%) highlighted issues with induction and onboarding, such as unclear department introductions, difficulty navigating campus, and late library or lab tours.
- Another **5% wanted more academic preparation before arrival**, including prereading, sample lectures, essay-writing guidance or maths/skills refreshers.





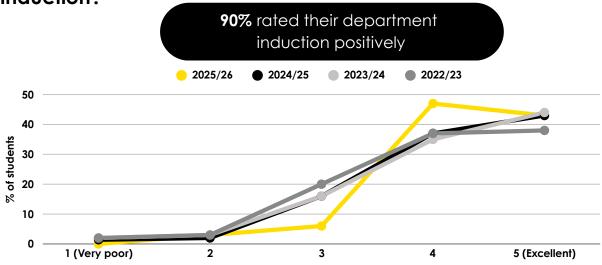




# SETTING STUDENTS UP FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

This section looks specifically at the elements of welcome that are delivered within academic departments and whether students feel that they are on the right course.

How would you rate your departmental welcome and induction?



Positive ratings ("excellent" or "good") for departmental welcome and induction have risen dramatically to **90.3%**, **up from 80% last yea**r. This is one of the strongest improvements across the whole survey and reflects several key changes in how departments are supporting new students.

# Is there anything that could have been improved about the welcome and induction to your Department?

# Organisation, Communication & Clarity

"The uni website completely changed mere days before the events... no info on where to go."

"Lots of the pre-information came late or didn't arrive without me chasing."

# Lack of Social Connection & Interactive Activities

"The social induction was quite awkward as no one knew what was going on."

"Maybe more activities where you actually get to meet new people."

# Too Much Information at Once / Overly Long Sessions

"It was very long (7 hours)... by that time I was tired and bored."
"Probably just breaking up the info a bit more – way too much at once."

"Make it shorter. We do not need weeks of introductory courses."

# Missing or Insufficient Campus / Department Tours

"We sadly didn't get a campus tour which would have been helpful."

"On the tour they showed us the campus as a whole but not the buildings where our department



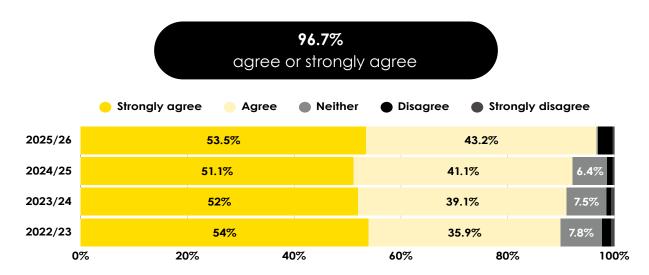




actually teaches."



# To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I am on the right course"



Agreement with "I feel like I'm on the right course" has reached **96.7%**, up from 92.2% last year and climbing steadily over four years. This is an exceptional result and it is especially important given that uncertainty about course fit is a key predictor of early drop-out. It reflects several reinforcing trends in student decision-making and early course experience.

### An SU backed Welcome induction

With departments delivering their strongest induction ratings to date, the Students' Union played a key supporting role in reinforcing that early success.

Working in partnership with academic teams, the SU Education Team provided additional touchpoints, visibility and training to help students feel informed, supported and connected from the very start of their academic journey.

As part of this shared effort, the SU:

presented
70
induction talks

spoke to
500+
students at SU
Freshers Fair

trained
270
reps across
18 depts

reps completed Advanced Training





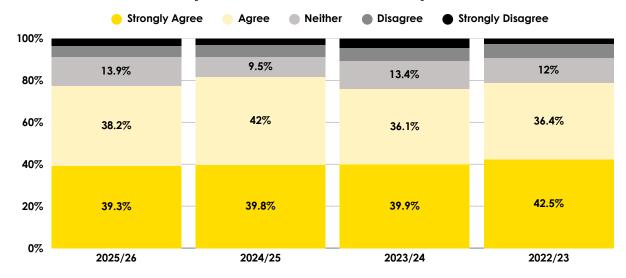




# HOW STUDENTS FORMED CONNECTIONS

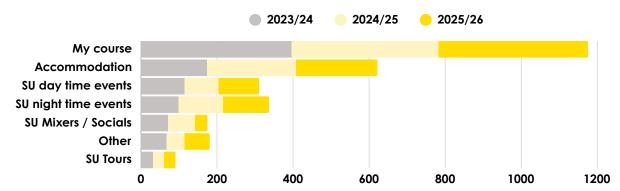
This section seeks to explore a key aspect of welcome, the extent to which first year Essex students have been given the opportunity to meet other students and whether they have made friends in their first month.

# "I made friends in my first month at University"



Positive responses dipped to **77.5%**, down from 81.8% last year. While it's a small drop, it's not a worrying one. This year's result is still higher than 2023/24 (76%), showing a generally stable pattern over time rather than a decline in social connection.

# Where did you make friends?



In this question respondents were able to choose more than one option, as applicable to their experience.

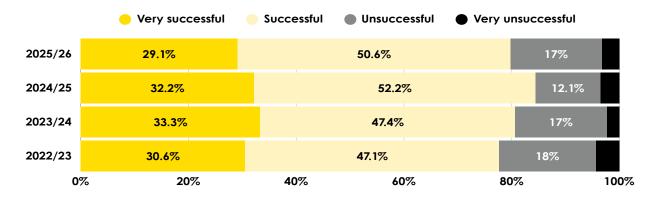
Perhaps expectedly, most students made friends on their course (393), followed by in accommodation (213), reflecting the two areas where they spend the most time. Of significant interest is the total number of respondents who made friends through Students' Union led activities (287). When combined, these activities exceed accommodation and come close to the number of friendships formed through courses. This pattern helps explain why social experience appears both as one of the "best" and "worst" aspects of students' first month. Students who engaged early with course-based induction or SU led activities were far more likely to make connections. Those who missed these touchpoints were more likely to report homesickness or loneliness.





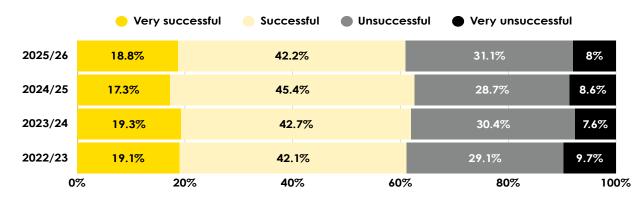


# How successful has your Department been in helping you meet other students on your course?



This year, **79.7%** of students said their department was "successful" or "very successful" at helping them meet other students on their course. That's a dip from last year's 84.4%, but it's similar to both 2023/24 (80.7%) and 2022/23 (77.8%), showing this year's figure sits comfortably within the normal range.

# How successful was your first month at Essex in helping you meet other students that \*are not\* on your course?



This year 61% of students said their first month at Essex was successful in helping them meet students not on their course. This is slightly lower than last year but almost identical to the longer-term pattern:

- 2025/26: 61%
- 2024/25: 62.8%
- 2023/24: 62%
- 2022/23: 61.2%

This shows the score is extremely stable from year to year, and the slight dip is not a concern.

Across the sector, course-based connections form more naturally through timetable structure, group work and departmental inductions. Cross-course connections depend on social spaces and optional activities, which always attract fewer students.

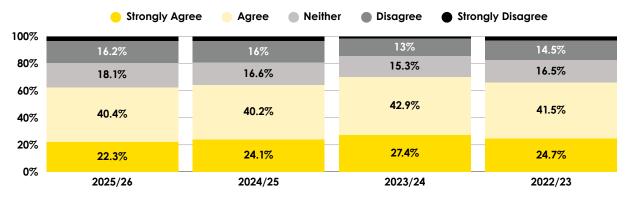




# HELPING STUDENTS NAVIGATE CAMPUS

This section looks at how successfully first year students feel they have been able to navigate their way around campus.

# "It has been easy to find my way around the university campus"

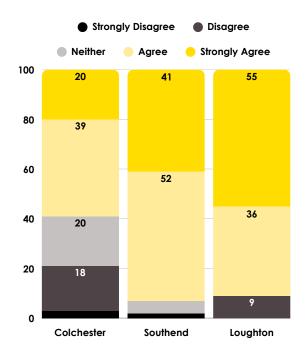


Although over **60% of students agree it has been easy to find their way around campus**, this metric has consistently remained lower than other Welcome experience indicators. When we break the data down by campus, it becomes clear that this is almost entirely a Colchester issue rather than a university-wide pattern.

- 21% Colchester students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.
- This compares with 7% in Southend and 9% in Loughton.

This shows that difficulties with wayfinding are strongly concentrated on the Colchester campus and relate directly to its scale, layout and complexity.

The qualitative feedback reinforces this. A total of 168 students described navigation or finding teaching rooms as the worst part of their first month, with comments such as "Trying to navigate my way around campus" and "Trying to find the different teaching rooms." These comments overwhelmingly reference the Colchester campus and highlight how common and frustrating the experience can be for new students.



Taken together, this shows that wayfinding remains a meaningful barrier for a significant number of students on the Colchester campus each year. There is a clear need for stronger navigation support through both physical signage and digital tools, especially during the first few weeks of term when students are still learning the layout. This challenge is also linked to issues raised earlier in the report, where many students highlighted late or unclear pre-arrival information, particularly around timetables, induction details and system access. These gaps make it harder for students to prepare for navigating campus before they arrive and add pressure during their first days on site.

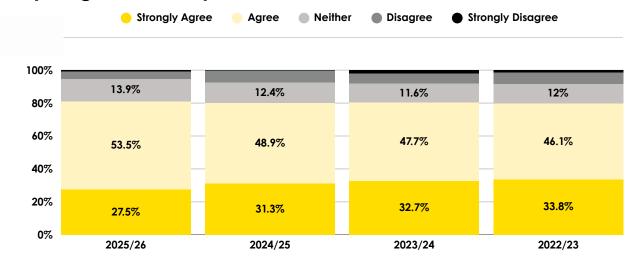




# **HOW WE SUPPORTED STUDENTS**

This section explores how supported students feel.

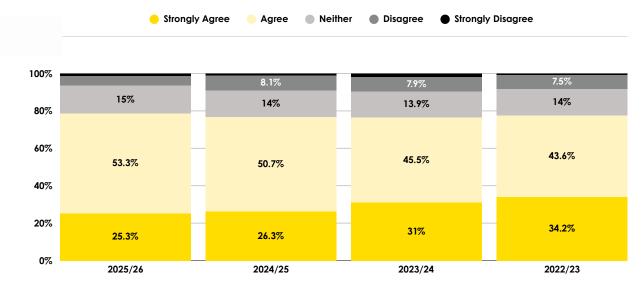
# "I am aware of the support available to me if I am struggling with anything at university"



Agreement remains very strong and stable, with this year's result at **81%**. Over four years, the score has barely moved. This consistency shows that **students continuously feel well-informed about where to go for help**, regardless of year-to-year changes in other aspects of the welcome experience.

However, this consistently high awareness contrasts with the qualitative feedback later in the report, where some students cite support or administrative issues as part of their "worst" experiences. This suggests that while students know where support is, their experience of accessing it is not always consistent.

# "I am aware of different opportunities (through the university and SU) to help me enjoy life outside of my studies"



Similarly, agreement with this statement has been **consistent** with the 2025/26 score being slightly higher than the previous years at **78.6%**, compared to 77% the previous year, 76.5% in 2023/24 and 77.8% in 2022/23.

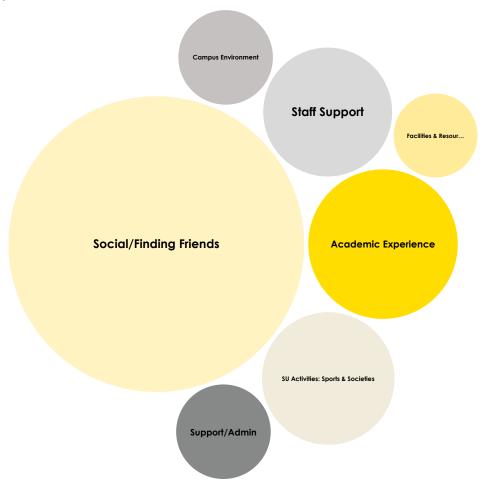






# THE GOOD. THE BAD. THE UGLY.

What was the \*best thing\* about your first month at the University of Essex?



The most common positive theme by a significant margin is the **social environment**, with 274 students saying that interactions with peers, staff, and the overall welcoming atmosphere were the best part of their first month. This indicates that **Essex excels at helping students feel connected, particularly during early transition weeks.** 

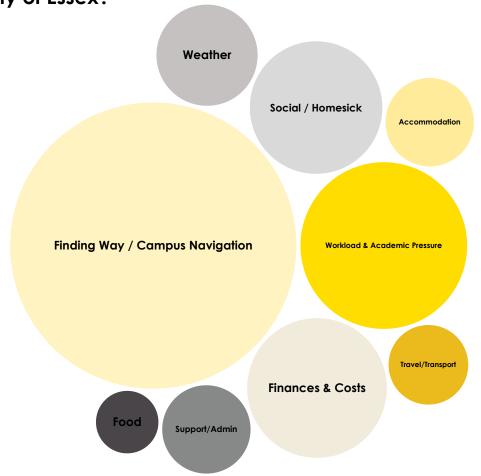
**Academic experiences** and **staff support** also feature prominently. Many students praised their lecturers, the structure of their courses, and the helpfulness of wellbeing and support teams. This suggests that academic integration and staff approachability play a strong role in shaping early student satisfaction.

Clubs, societies, and events make up another major highlight, showing that extracurricular opportunities significantly enrich the student experience. Many appreciated the range of activities and the chance to try something new. Students also valued the campus environment and facilities, particularly the library, study spaces, and scenic areas around the lake. These spaces seem to enhance day-to-day wellbeing and provide a positive learning atmosphere.

Overall, the findings show that students **feel welcomed**, **supported**, **and socially connected**.



And what was the \*worst thing\* about your first month at the University of Essex?



Students' worst experiences in their first month mostly relate to navigating campus, with many feeling lost, confused by building layouts, or unsure of where to go for classes. The second major issue is academic pressure, especially workload and a perceived lack of support from academic staff. This aligns with the fall in academic preparedness highlighted earlier in the report, suggesting that lower confidence at the point of arrival may be feeding directly into early stress around workload and course expectations.

**Money worries** also feature strongly, including concerns about fees and the cost of items on campus.

A significant number of students struggled with **social adjustment**, **homesickness**, **and finding opportunities to meet people. Weather** was a surprisingly common complaint, with many mentioning the constant rain or gloomy conditions. Issues with **accommodation**, such as maintenance problems and cleanliness, also appear frequently. **Travel difficulties**, **long commutes**, and **parking challenges** were also mentioned. Some students felt that administrative processes lacked clarity or were hard to navigate.

Overall, the themes describe a transition period where students feel overloaded, disoriented, financially pressured, and still adjusting to new routines. Despite this, a few comments show that some experiences were minor or situational, such as someone simply noting that their milk went bad, which added a bit of humor to the dataset.



# If you could change or improve ONE thing about your first month what would it be?

The results strongly reinforce earlier findings in this report:

- Students consistently call for clearer and earlier information
- More structured opportunities to meet people
- Better navigation support
- Better accommodation basics

These themes directly align with the preparedness data, social connection patterns, wayfinding issues and the worst experience themes.

And confirms that the key friction points in Welcome are consistent across multiple touchpoints and are experienced by students in predictable ways.

# Academic Indu... Communication &... Support for Settling In Accommodation & F...

# What they said...

# Attend More Events & Social Opportunities

66

To have more events on campus on first week."

"Students studying same course must have a social event in first week in order to gel in."

"Would spend more time socialising."

"Probably try to attend more events to get to know more people."

# Better Communication & Clearer Information



"Sometimes it felt overwhelming from the volume of information." "More information pre course regarding induction etc." "Only the email communication

regarding inductions and other information."

"More online information."

# Academic/Admin Induction Improvements



"The department should do an orientation for new students... I was totally lost in the first month."

"More help with how to write essays earlier on in the course."

"More clarity on induction days and what was happening."

# Accommodation & Facilities Issues



"Unable to settle due to accommodation issue." "The cleaning of my accommodation... it was extremely dusty when I first arrived."

"South Courts kitchen — there is no social areas."

"The accommodations team could've been more helpful."



# **MARMITE MOMENTS**

### Why students love or loathe the same parts of their first month

There are some themes in the feedback from both the "best" and "worst" responses that overlap. The same areas can be a source of joy or frustration, depending on a student's specific situation, a bit like Marmite. Some students absolutely love certain aspects of their first month, while others have the opposite reaction to the very same things. Many of these Marmite contrasts can be traced back to earlier themes in the report, including preparedness, induction, support experiences and event engagement. Together, these connections show how closely linked different parts of the welcome journey really are.

These contrasts reveal four key insights:

- **Social experience** varies significantly. Some students feel at home immediately, while others struggle with loneliness.
- **Academic life** is both a highlight and a stressor. Students appreciate their lecturers but may feel overwhelmed by workload.
- **Support** is valued but inconsistent. Many praise staff, but a noticeable minority feel let down.
- The campus is loved aesthetically but not intuitively designed. It is beautiful to be in, but difficult to navigate.

These overlaps show that some parts of the Essex experience can be Marmite moments. Students either love them or find them challenging.

Strengthening consistency, offering clearer support and providing better early guidance could help ensure more students end up on the "love it" side of the experience.





# **SUMMARY + ACTIONS**

The 2025 Big SU Welcome Survey paints a clear picture of the early student experience at Essex. Overall, **students arrive to a warm, supportive and socially vibrant environment,** reflected in high welcome scores, strong praise for staff and SU activity, and consistently high levels of students feeling settled into life at university.

The Students' Union continues to play a central role in this, with almost 90% of students saying the SU had a positive impact on their welcome.

# Key Actions for 2026/27

### 1. Strengthen the Foundations of the Welcome Experience

Survey results show that students continue to encounter preventable barriers in their early weeks, particularly due to **late or unclear pre-arrival information**, difficulties **navigating** the Colchester campus and issues with **accommodation** readiness. The SU recommends a joint focus on improving pre-arrival communications, enhancing wayfinding support and ensuring consistent arrival-day standards in accommodation.

### 2. Make Belonging a University-Wide Priority

While most students settle into daily routines quickly, fewer report feeling that they truly belong. This gap has widened this year and has implications for student confidence, wellbeing and longer-term engagement. The SU proposes that the University and SU work together to increase structured, inclusive opportunities for students to build community across their first six weeks.

### 3. Improve Consistency and Clarity in Departmental Induction

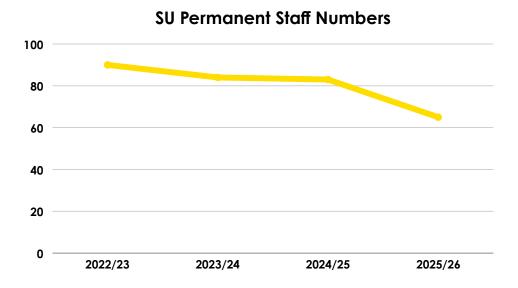
The quality of induction varies considerably between departments. Students highlighted unclear expectations, long or overly dense sessions and limited opportunities to connect with peers and navigate their academic environment. Establishing clear minimum standards for induction would help ensure every student receives a supportive, well-paced and socially connected start, regardless of their course.



# LASTLY. WHAT THE DATA DOESN'T TELL US.

The Welcome Survey provides a rich picture of how students experienced their first month at Essex. It highlights what worked well, where the sticking points were, and how the first few weeks shaped students' sense of belonging and confidence. However, there are also important parts of the story that the data alone cannot show.

One of the biggest unseen factors is the level of resource behind this year's welcome activity. The scale and quality of the welcome experience was delivered during a period of significant staffing reduction and ongoing financial constraint. Permanent staffing levels have fallen sharply over four years:



This means the 2025 welcome was delivered with the smallest team the SU has had in recent memory, alongside a decreasing block grant and tightening budgets across all areas. The report shows impressive results, but it does not reveal the level of effort, flexibility and determination that staff demonstrated to keep the student experience at the heart of everything.

### **Student Stories**

The other thing numbers cannot capture is the human side of welcome. During the first few weeks, SU staff stepped in again and again to make sure students felt supported, understood and safe. A few examples include:

An international student reached the North carpark with all their suitcases, only to discover their key collection was actually in the Silberrad building at the opposite end of campus. Tired and unsure what to do, they went to the Welcome Hub. Lisa kept their bags safe while they collected their key and then helped them move into their room. With no university presence around at the time, that kindness transformed what could have been a really difficult arrival into one of relief.



Two new Life Science PGT reps arrived expecting another typical and disconnected postgraduate experience. Instead, they were surprised by how quickly they became part of the Essex community. Within days they had joined societies, signed up as department reps and started enjoying SU Bars and Sub Zero. They told the team they already felt more involved and included than they had throughout their entire undergraduate studies at other universities.

A postgraduate international student came to the SU Advice team distressed after being mis-sold private accommodation. Their mental health was declining and they were considering leaving university entirely. The team listened, helped them understand their options, created a plan and connected them with mental health support. After receiving that help, the student said they decided to stay at Essex because they finally felt supported and not alone.

A student with disabilities first visited SU Freshers Fair last year with their mum, feeling nervous and unsure. Over the year, the Education and Societies teams saw their confidence steadily grow through involvement in SU activities. This year, they returned to SU Freshers Fair not as a hesitant attendee, but as someone running their own society stall and welcoming new students.

A student arrived during Welcome Week stressed because they could not get their laptop to connect to the internet. Patrick helped them get set up, and in conversation learned they were also hoping to meet other Sri Lankan students. With help from Marketing, the student was linked into international social events and found their community. They returned later that day smiling and grateful for the support.

A student dropped into SU Advice worried about a conduct issue, but it became clear that the bigger problem was that they had not eaten for several days because their loan had not arrived. The team immediately provided SU Store vouchers so the student could buy food and connected them with the Funding Team for a longer-term solution. The student left with practical help, financial support and a sense that someone genuinely cared about their wellbeing.



THANKS FOR READING!