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# University student settlement and wellbeing with dogs as transitional support

Diahann Gallard 

School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the topic of student wellbeing using the lens of a different type of support mechanism – ‘dog borrowing’ – which builds on prior research about emotion work and human-animal interactions but in the context of student transitions and pastoral care in higher education. This novel study was about the experiences of students settling into their university life and how, through a facilitated opportunity for students to connect to a dog and community partners, universities can meet mental health standards for wellbeing support. The findings outlined in this paper provide new insight into; how the university ethos and environment can be viewed as more personalised and emotionally supportive, how different kinds of relationships can support emotion state regulation conducive to wellbeing and effective learning and the ways that a human-animal bond can enhance connection with the community and provide social support for university students who have moved away from home.

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## Introduction

The subject of student wellbeing has been topical in higher education contexts in the United Kingdom since universities were called upon to ‘dramatically improve their mental health offering for students’ (Department for Education UK, 2018). Further, there has been a reiteration of the expectation placed on universities to ensure that the ‘right’ support is offered, particularly in the first-year transition of students (ibid). There have been various ways that universities attend to the mental health needs of students when they are transitioning to independent living in a new environment. In particular, there have been targeted induction programmes including buddy schemes and internal wellbeing and counselling service expansion (Williams et al., 2015). The development of initiatives that support students remains high on the agenda, with university leaders and health agencies and the wider community looking to explore new

**CONTACT** Diahann Gallard  [d.c.gallard@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:d.c.gallard@ljmu.ac.uk)

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ways to enhance provision. In addition, UK national charities supporting university student mental health, such as Student Minds, are involved in developing specific standards and charters for universities following the strategic priority of the Department for Education to 'stretch and reward universities that commit to the improvement required, providing tools and support to get them there' (DfE, 2018). Each university has responded in their own way and some creative approaches have emerged often suggested by the students themselves of what is important, what works well and how mental health difficulties could be prevented during transition to university (Student Minds, 2017).

Individual and more nuanced developmental experiences of students' transitions have previously been overlooked (O'Donnell et al., 2016) specifically the emotional aspects involved in transition and the crucial role it plays (Young et al., 2020), therefore the focus in this study was chosen to be emotion work and the exploring of the 'other' in supportive roles during transitions and how they create a conducive mindset for learning, in line with what Hochschild (1979) described as the emotional 'offer'. Koster (2011) suggested that emotional work until more recently has been undervalued and is often still invisible in universities, but with the introduction of the new mental health standards there is now an engagement and developing openness to initiatives that help students in ways that have benefits to student as described by the students themselves using what is known as a student-sympathetic approach (Gale & Parker, 2012).

Dogs have long been involved in emotion work (Fine, 2010) as a support mechanism in education (Jalongo & Petro, 2018) and recognised as important to human health (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2014) with associated impact on student retention (Gray & Hackling, 2009). A dog's presence has been found to enhance wellbeing in a variety of education contexts (Grové et al., 2021). In the university context, a dog presence can take different guises. There have been 'puppy rooms' where the university has arranged for students to meet young dogs on site for fun and therapeutic effect prior to examinations and other stressful events during their university studies. There are organisations who offer to bring a therapy dog into the higher education context with the assurance being that the dog and owner have been vetted and approved and include third-party insurance. There have been case examples of tutors bringing their own dog to work with the presence utilised as the 'social lubricant' (Levinson, 1972) for icebreaking or diffusing tense situations or simply stimulating conversations in tutorials through developing a shared point of reference (Gallard & Taylor, 2017). All of these activities have the potential to have a positive effect on the student if an interaction or relationship with a dog is of interest and/or important to them. This paper reports on research undertaken into a newer initiative of 'dog borrowing' (the act of caring for a dog belonging to someone else for a short period of time) as a transitional support project arranged by a university in the UK. The aim was to better understand the experiences of those students who opted to take part and to learn more about the

key factors when dogs rather than people undertake emotion work in a support role as part of a university facilitated transitional activity.

It is under acknowledged in the research literature that students can feel a sense of loss when they leave home for independent living at university because their new student living situation does not allow for shared living with a companion animal – something they may have been used to all their lives at home. The project idea came from a narrative provided by a student during routine surveying of students about programme induction experiences; the student had left behind and had been missing their own dog, and it was having a toll on their wellbeing and motivation towards their new life and studies. The student suggested that the incorporation of companion animals in some way would have meaning for them in the context of their own interests and insight into what they might find fun, a welcome distraction, therapeutic and emotionally stabilising during settlement in their new place away from home. It was also heard anecdotally by tutors that other students were reporting they were missing their own companion animals during the transition to independent living and might also feel the same way. A dog borrowing initiative was implemented by the university as a trial opportunity afforded to dog-loving university students which involved walking or minding a dog for short periods in their free time in the first weeks of arriving at university as part of suggested induction activities and it also became a pilot research project aimed at exploring the experiences of those students taking part. The dog borrowing scheme entailed students being matched with a dog and their owner in the local area using an introduction agency ([borrowmydoggy.com](http://borrowmydoggy.com)). The student would arrange with the dog owner a personal schedule of caring for the dog with them engaging in activities mostly consisting of walks with the dog but also visits with the dog to dog-friendly places. In some cases, the dog borrowing would be for only short periods (around 30 mins), or a few hours or longer. It could be a regular daily schedule or a more ad hoc and flexible arrangement of dog borrowing once or twice a week with short notice. The schedule was decided between the student and dog owner as an informal contract using the agency's online platform.

## **Method**

### **Overview**

The study was about what students said about taking part in an organised dog borrowing scheme during the transition phase in the first year of university in the UK. The approach was qualitative which is appropriate when the research intention is to learn from students' personal experiences. Data was collected from one-to-one interviews and a focus group. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data.

## ***Participants***

Primary Education and Education Studies first-year students in a post-1992 university in the north-west of England participated in dog borrowing activities as voluntary activity. Prior to participation, students were made aware that this was a novel pilot scheme and that the study was being conducted to learn more about their experiences through taking part and to collate their accounts. All students on the programmes were invited to participate, and they were informed that it would involve the dog borrowing activity and being interviewed and joining a focus group. No course credit or other incentives were offered, however, they were told they would be given the opportunity to join a dog borrowing platform for free which normally requires payment of a small fee. The platform used in this project was owned by national company (see Acknowledgements). As part of an academic collaborative relationship, the company offered to waive the joining fee for the participating students in exchange for an early report of findings from the researcher about the student perspectives and experiences of using the service and noting of their help in dissemination publications. The use of this company for this project afforded better matching of students to a wider range of dogs and their owners in the local area as well as the multiple safeguarding protections that their introduction platform provides. There was also third-party insurance included from membership of the scheme which was a condition of permission from the university to carry out the project.

Twelve students (male  $n = 2$ , female  $n = 10$ ) agreed to take part and attended the interviews. Six students also opted to join the focus group (female  $n = 4$ , male  $n = 2$ ). All participants were aged between 18 and 20 yrs. All participants had chosen to study at a university that necessitated a transition to independent living.

## ***Procedure and data collection***

During induction week, a representative of the company came into the university and gave a talk to students about their platform and the researcher also attended at the same time and explained the follow-up study. Following this the students were emailed further information and a link to the online consent form they needed to sign to participate. Following the receipt of consent, students were emailed a bespoke link to the platform site to join for free. Once students became members of the platform they were matched to dogs and their owners through the usual process. Matching on the platform took into account postcode, availability, the narrative provided by the dog borrower about their motivations, the dog owner's narrative about their dog and requirements and, to a lesser extent,

the preference of dog breed of dog borrower based on what the borrower wrote about themselves and the students response to visual images of the dogs available to the borrower.

Following 12 weeks participation in the scheme, students who opted to take part were invited into the university site to be interviewed and to attend a focus group 2 weeks after that. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask additional questions as appropriate ignited by the participant responses. The main questions of the interviews were: What was your motivation for taking part in the scheme? What were the hoped for benefits? Were there challenges? Was the scheme what you were expecting? Has the dog borrowing continued? (If yes why, if not why not?). Has the experience had an impact on your student experience? The focus group lasted 1 hour 20 mins and the starter question was: What has dog borrowing at university meant to you?

### ***Data analysis***

Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to conducting Thematic Analysis (TA) was followed. The six steps included transcribing, dataset familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing/refining of themes and reporting. The researcher positionality and interpretation using this approach was acknowledged and accepted as a part of this methodology.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The British Educational Research Association (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and the British Psychological Society (2010) Code of Human Research were adhered to. The researcher/author's own university code of practice for research was followed, and ethical approval for the project was given by the university. All participants were provided with an information sheet about the study which included assurances that identifiable information would be anonymised and that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time, following which informed consent was taken.

### ***Results***

As might be expected from this self-selecting group of dog-loving students, the overall experience of dog borrowing was positive and enjoyable for the students. There was also a positive impact on those around and connected to student; course peers/housemates were often included in the dog borrowing activity and they were said to have been glad of the opportunity, the families of students enjoyed hearing about connections the student made with the dog and felt reassured by the enjoyment

of the loved one away from home, and tutors were told fun anecdotal stories by the students which acted as positive icebreakers in university sessions.

Delving deeper into what the students said about their experiences of dog borrowing, there were various benefits and challenges noted. Following analysis, the main themes of the dog borrowing experiences found in the data were;

- (1) Emotional state
- (2) Context building
- (3) Socialisation

These themes are discussed in more detail below.

### ***1<sup>st</sup> theme: emotional state***

Participants continually referred to the emotional aspects of their experiences moving away from home and how having the dog borrowing opportunity provided ways to help themselves address how they were feeling when a situation was challenging and/or their internal state was not adaptive or conducive to their wellbeing.

#### ***Mood***

Students often talked about their mixed feelings of starting university. Although many of the participants noted that there were mostly positive feelings and excitement when starting their university course, their feelings often changed in the first few weeks. Negative mood states were helped not just by the presence of the dog but also just the knowledge that it was an option available to them during those times:

My mood was all over the place. One minute I was elated, excited and then the next I was thinking I might have not planned for this enough especially when I was having money problems. Being able to go to get B\_\_\_\_ (dog) and it not costing me anything was important in helping my mood (Participant 7)

There were times when I was in a really bad mood. I am normally an easy-going sort of person I think but then with all the noise and drama in my flat I was beginning to think that I was a different person. Those times were definitely made better once I went to get A\_\_\_\_ (dog). And when I went to get A\_\_\_\_ (dog) it wasn't only him that made me feel better. Just talking to G\_\_\_\_ (dog owner) about my problems and why I was there suddenly lifted my mood (Participant 4)

#### ***Coping***

Starting a university course and living independently for the first time takes some adjusting to. Students spoke of wanting to be able to help themselves

deal with the changes and pressures and cope in their new context, and the dog gave an outlet when they were feeling they were on the edge of not coping:

After all the excitement getting my results and moving to \_\_\_\_ (place) I think I got caught up in it all. But once I was alone in my new bedroom not getting along with someone I was living with I wondered if I could cope with this. That person was so annoying and I felt stressed when we were together at the same time in the kitchen. In those moments I would just text C \_\_\_\_ (dog owner) and see if I could go out before it got messy! (Participant 3)

Some students described a lack of motivation towards university demands yet at the same time felt more able to cope knowing they were motivated towards the dog borrowing activity:

I just hated how I felt. It felt so hard to even want to get out of bed. I knew I needed to go into Uni. But then when I had arranged to look after D \_\_\_\_ (dog) I was straight out of bed and then I knew I was coping fine. I felt better but what is that all about? (Participant 1)

One participant noted how reassuring it was to have some motivation even if it was inconsistent. They suggested that without the dog borrowing outlet they might have worried more about their mental health status.

### ***Adaptive change***

Students also reported that the dog borrowing activities were often a catalyst for a state change to a more positive outlook:

I was so pleased to have M \_\_\_\_ (dog) to walk. I really miss T \_\_\_\_ (own dog). I am not used to being without a dog to walk ... just those first two weeks before I was messaged by A \_\_\_\_ (dog owner) were really hard and I think having it as something I can choose to do that I like and it being possible takes me away from being upset about being away from my friends from home (Participant 8)

Other students felt it did not have such a big impact on changing how they were feeling but talked about how it was contributory to their overall happiness with potential for the opportunity to be more meaningful over time and in the future:

To be honest, it was more because I knew I might be a bit bored. Dogs are fun and I like not being stuck inside which I know might happen if I don't have something fun to do. It gets me out (Participant 11)

## ***2<sup>nd</sup> theme: context building***

Students spoke of their choice of university necessitating a move to independent living. This was said to be both exciting and an additional pressure. A number of participants referred to how the dog borrowing activity had created a positive initial impression of the place they had



joined and reported that their friends and family were also intrigued or impressed that this was part of their student experience thus enhancing the reputation of the university:

I told my mum that I was going to borrow a dog sometimes and she thought that was a great idea (Participant 4)

My sister said she didn't get that when she went to Uni. She loves dogs and she said she would have definitely been up for that and here in a shot (Participant 2)

My friend J\_\_\_ couldn't believe it and he wants to do that too. He said he should have come here to (Participant 9)

### *Milieu*

Most of the participants reported that they were very settled into their new life away from home. Their broader university life was talked about often and a number of students said they had, after some fluctuations in emotions and external study pressure, integrated into the academic community and, on top of this, a supportive community had been built for them beyond the usual course, work and house/flat mates:

We have our own little group chat. A couple of times we have been able to meet up with the dogs too (Participant 1)

A\_\_\_ (dog owner) knows C\_\_\_'s owner ... they said they told them about BorrowMyDoggy. And they know we are students too and they talk about us I think but I don't mind. I think they compare notes ha ha ... (Participant 8)

### *Therapeutic space*

Some students explained they had a set pattern of dog borrowing pre-arranged with the owner, others described a more fluid, flexible arrangement. Most students reported that they had been matched fairly well, although one student felt as though the dog owner was not as flexible as they would want which had led to one awkward exchange when they were busy with assignment work and they had asked to cancel looking after the dog at short notice. However, mostly participants were able to take advantage of borrowing the dog at times they felt valuable and purposeful for them:

Yes I just text when I can do. I have a job now but it hasn't made me want to stop as I would miss it too much. That waggy tail when he sees me is what I look forward to and it always makes me feel better ... (Participant 1)

It is just something I do now. I work out when I am free and let them (dog owner) know when suits me. Normally when I have too much pecking at my head ha ha... (Participant 11)

There were also some concerns shared about how they would feel if or when they had to let the dog/owner down in certain circumstances which shows that attachments had been made.

It does worry me. What if I am ill and I can't go. I think S\_\_\_ relies on me a bit, and H\_\_\_ might wonder what is going on (Participant 2)

### **3<sup>rd</sup> theme: socialisation**

Students noted that their university social life had been shaped from dog borrowing:

It is now just sort of normal to me and I like to suggest I come get X\_\_\_ (dog) after Uni lectures as I can often get a friend to come with me too

#### **Settlement/Integration**

There was also an opportunity to meet with local people and take advantage of local knowledge through their matches:

I have loved meeting A\_\_\_ (dog owner) and the messages she sends me are so funny. Although they are about getting M\_\_\_ (dog) you end up having a chat when you are sorting out dates. She is a bit quirky but so nice (Participant 8)

C\_\_\_ (dog owner) has really helped me get to know the area. When I was feeling homesick I said I was looking for other stuff to do and she gave me some good ideas of what to do (Participant 3)

#### **Conversation starter**

Students talked about how when they were talking to other people in the university for the first time the topic of dog borrowing came up regularly and that it was an easy way to make small talk:

Everyone in my group knows that I look after a dog when we finish for the day. They ask me about it all the time. They ask to see pictures (Participant 12)

It sort of has become my thing. All the tutors say introduce yourself in a new group and it is so much easier to divert to talk about B\_\_\_ (dog) and what that has been like. The others want to know because they had heard about it in induction and wondered what it was like. I show them videos and pictures I've got on my phone (Participant 3)

#### **Acceptance**

Some of the students talked about how they felt they compare to the stereotype of 'student' and if they felt they aligned with and connected to their programme peers or flat/house mates. The desire to 'belong' or whether they 'fit in' (or not 'stand out') were frequently mentioned:

I don't have a job yet and I don't really get on well with the people I am living with so I really only have a few people who I have made friends with on the course but they like to go out drinking all the time so it is good to have something that is a bit more me (Participant 9)

Everyone else seems so into going out but I am more of a homebody and I like a bit of space. But I also liked knowing that what I was doing in my spare time was interesting to other people rather than a bit weird. The other students think you are a bit boring if you don't do what they like doing so I kind of made out that getting the dog was a responsibility but in fact I just didn't want to go out again. I can't afford it. To be fair I do like dogs more than some people (Participant 8)

One participant felt a sense of acceptance and self-worth from the initial matching process alone:

I really loved when we were matched to dogs. It was so much fun looking at the all the dogs as I love dogs so much anyway. But then when the owners chose me I won't lie that was a buzz (Participant 2)

The feelings of acceptance and worth appeared to have had a positive impact on their self-esteem. Overall, it seemed to participants that, in social terms, it was a low risk putting themselves forward for matching in the dog borrowing process (it is unusual for someone not to be chosen as there is a greater proportion of owners to dog borrower). The students took great delight when they were contacted by owners.

## Discussion

This study looked at the experiences of students who opted to take part in an initiative of dog borrowing as part of the settlement into university life following a transition to independent living. From an analysis of the data, three main themes emerged broadly about emotional state/stabilisation, the contributory factor in the context/ethos and social effect. The data reflects other research findings that students experience multiple challenges and uncertainties during transition to university (Thompson et al., 2021). In this research, the data also suggested that stabilising *socially* low-risk activities, like dog borrowing, can have a positive impact on how the student views their new situation and their sense of their own ability to cope. Alongside this, a dog can be something that engages students and provides a welcome distraction during the transition period but also allows more settled emotions and consequential benefits to their attention to learning. At times, it was mentioned that the main support they turned to when they were feeling their mood and overall wellbeing decline, and what helped them move to a more positive frame of mind, was this new and engaging continuity focus within their lives – the dog. However, what also emerged was that the owner of the dog might have equal status in that continuity; the dog owner was available to take messages, give advice, offer

counselling, inject fun and interest in their lives and provide a distraction that was meaningful. This would be an interesting area to explore more in future research – is the dog or the owner characteristics which has the greater effect? This stability afforded by having a continuity focus as a source of social support identified is already known to be a great buffer against student stress contributing to academic achievement (DeBerard et al., 2004) and for successful transition to new environments (Hays & Oxley, 1986).

Also arising from the data analysis was how the dog borrowing activity was a catalyst for integration into their new community. Studying at university is a social process (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012) and the establishment of social networks provides students with a sense of belonging which in turn helps them assume the role of HE student more easily (Buote et al., 2007; Hommes et al., 2012). Universities often look for ways to help students orientate to their new environment through the setting up of social networks (Hommes et al., 2012). The social situation of students in the first semester of their university lives is known to be especially important with social networks critical for an emotional support when previous support networks are left behind (Wilcox et al., 2005). The additional community connections built by the student who were borrowing a dog were, in some cases, seen as important when the usual university social connections were not what the student hoped or expecting them to be. Additional informal and incidental signposting and guidance from local people not part of the university culture meant that orientation to the place was helped through what Young et al. (2020) noted as a significant social and emotional adjustment period. These informal interactions made with others were equally or sometimes more important as the key introductions taking place inside the usual teaching known to help (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Hommes et al., 2012). However, this did not mean that the dog owners who students were matched with were overly relied on up but instead it facilitated a (mostly) friendly mutually supportive and beneficial relationship borne out of the dog borrowing transaction. Moreover, the relationship was more personalised and based on a shared interest – the dog – which acknowledges the more nuanced development needs and interests that students have (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Universities are asked to look for ways to help students orientate to their new environment through the setting up of interesting social networks (Hommes et al., 2012).

Further, Wilcox et al. (2005) highlighted that 'making compatible friends' is the most important aspiration for students who start university, which is related to academic, emotional, and social support, and affects their sense of belonging as well as, ultimately, retention. From the analysis of data in this study, it would appear that the dog owner is another example of friendship which can provide a buffer to the challenges and the source of stress the more typical student social life can bring (Thompson et al., 2021). The specific relationship with a dog friend needs further attention too. According to previous research into the attachment bonds made with dogs, the responses and feelings that were talked

about by students go beyond the core feature of friendship (common interests and shared values). The interactions with dogs would appear to have had a positive and noticeable impact on wellbeing as tangibly felt and described by the participants which has been previously noted in research studies as physiological changes and reduction of stress through lowering of cortisol levels (Beetz et al., 2011) and increasingly positive emotions (Henderson et al., 2020) when a person who like dogs spends time with a dog friend in particular.

Based on what the participants said, the wellbeing of students would also appear to have been enhanced by the interpretation and alignment of their values to those of the university; this is an example of what Briggs et al. (2012) describe as a supportive climate for learner development which is perceived as 'friendly' and what Yorke and Thomas (2003) consider being supportive in various ways. By following up on the suggestion and interests of this one group of animal-orientated students who were used to having a companion animal in close proximity (and then facing a new reality without the companion animals in their lives) it had been interpreted to mean that the university viewed their emotional lives as important. In addition, the potential for anxiety and distress the pressure of adaptation to HE might bring them living without what they associate as a main source of emotional support was taken seriously. The findings and lens for reimagining the university as an emotionally supportive space is not a new idea, but these findings add weight to what has previously been found about how universities have shifted their conceptualisation of what the student transition experiences is and how they have a broadening understanding of what transitional support activities might be well received and of use. Dog borrowing is an example of a university understanding what might work practically and make a difference for students when they have left behind what they know and appreciated at home rather than relying on suggestions from tutors of what they believe might work well based on their own interest. The project involved an action toward helping students feel more 'at home' which facilitates students' settlement in their new environment (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016) and met what is known to be the student's need to feel connected to the university community and values (Wilcox et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2014).

An additional finding of this study is that in the primary topic of research being the relationship with the dog (and owner), and the researcher/author being a dog owner, this created a richness in dialogue. As has been found by prior research, conversations about dogs with dog lovers can lead to improved social interactions and communication irrespective of the presence of the dog (Tissen et al., 2007) and this is an interesting finding in itself. As the interviews and focus groups progressed the dog (and their owner) references also became fewer and the student participants moved into different more honest disclosures. A space opened up for talking more broadly about participant experiences, their hopes and fears in their independent living, with students expressing themselves more openly than this author has experienced previously in similar research contexts. However, in reporting this,

care must be taken to not overestimate the value of the dog as the shared focus and catalyst for connection between people (and it needs reiterating that the dog was absent during the research data collection) but it is worth noting that it was part of the researcher's experience. Other researchers might want to look more closely at this in future studies.

The three themes arising from this research have implications for the planning and delivery of pastoral care for higher education students. Theme 1: Emotional state – professionals in the HE sector should consider and not dismiss the stabilising effect of first-hand experiences with dogs and other companion animals and more actively seek out partnerships in the local area or with national organisations to work with or signpost students to. Theme 2: Context building – institutions should re-evaluate their marketing materials and induction support looking specifically at what other 'from home' aspects align with the values of university being promoted and look for new connections that might ignite the sense of belonging prior to and in the early days of university life. Theme 3: Socialisation – academic and support staff might consider the ways that the human-animal bond might feature more prominently in pastoral care as a 'social lubricant' in a practical but also an ethical and safe way by consulting related literature beginning with some of those referred to in this paper.

## Conclusion

The study has revisited the topic of transition to university and wellbeing support for students settling in a new place and becoming independent in their learning and living. It took a student-sensitive and emotion work led approach drawing on the bond between people and companion animals. A dog borrowing scheme in higher education was documented which has shown a new way of engaging with community partners (local volunteers who let dog-loving university students walk or mind their dog for short periods) and that it is possible to mitigate the sense of loss some students feel not being able to continue to take therapeutic effect from access to their own companion animal, enhance or adaptively change their emotional state and give access to need-specific social support. In addition, the findings might also give pause for thought about how universities could continue to explore their understanding of the emotional needs of their university students with insight into the part both human and non-human friendship bonds can play in students feeling more settled in a new environment which is contributory to being able to learn well.

## Limitations

This study took a qualitative approach in order to understand better what students thought and felt following a few months of taking part in a dog borrowing scheme during their transition to university. The researcher/

author interpretation has informed the analysis, and it is acknowledged that as a dog-orientated person themselves there is potential for this positionality to lead to specific takes on what was found in the data even through rigorous analysis of the codes and categories in the qualitative research process. Repeat studies would be important and might include alternative views.

In this research, it is not possible to claim that the dog borrowing scheme is solely responsible for the positive impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of higher education students. The evidence suggests that there were key characteristics arising from the experiences of dog borrowing; namely from the stabilising low-risk social activities, friendships and physical exercise but controls for the extent to which they contributed in the context of other aspects of the participants' lives was not included in this study. Other researchers might want to explore this more.

A key question emerging from this study is whether it is the support of the dog or the relationship with the owner that has the most significant impact in supporting student wellbeing and mental health which could have implications for planning and delivering pastoral care for higher education students. It has not been answered in this research and so further investigations are needed into whether there is a special feature of canine companions for students or a vehicle for developing a better understanding of effective relationships with other people where the dog instead sheds light on the core features and attributes.

The sample size was small as it was a type of convenience sample – the group of participants was self-selecting and based on their interest and motivation towards the activity, willingness to engage in the dog borrowing scheme and volunteer their time during the subsequent data collection activities. It was not a comparative study and there was no control group or alternative offer. Other studies may look at including different conditions and variables to consider to what extent a dog has value over other animals, or other bespoke interest borrowing in the community has equal or more value to dog borrowing scheme.

In this study, no negative impacts of the dog borrowing scheme during student transition to university life emerged but this is not to say that there were none. The data was based on participant disclosures and reported experiences and events. There is equal possibility of detrimental effects, however most of the potential issues and pitfalls were circumnavigated by having a rigorous risk assessment and planned procedures protocol in place developed by the partner organisation ([borrowmydoggy.com](http://borrowmydoggy.com)) and within institution. This is an important consideration should other researchers replicate the study or if institutions are inspired by the scheme reported on.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Diahann Gallard** is a senior lecturer, programme leader of the education professional doctorate (EdD) and researcher at Liverpool John Moores University and chartered psychologist registered with the British Psychological Society

## ORCID

Diahann Gallard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9764-3752>

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