

# Climbing Ladders, Avoiding Snakes: Navigating the Path to Student Success

How do we meaningfully understand the complexities students face during their university journeys? How can educators effectively support students as they navigate these challenges? At the University of Kent, we are embracing innovative methods grounded in rigorous research to answer these fundamental questions.

In 2024, Dr Yetunde [Kolajo](#) and Dr Lucy [Panesar](#) collaboratively developed the Student Success Snakes and Ladders activity, a novel educational resource specifically designed for university staff. This creative adaptation of the classic board game transforms playful engagement into insightful professional development, offering staff members a deeper understanding of the multifaceted student experience.

The [activity](#) involves staff playing a specially designed version of Snakes and Ladders, where each landing on a snake or ladder prompts a card describing real-life scenarios that influence student progress. These scenarios are derived from extensive longitudinal research conducted by Dr Alex Hensby, Dr Barbara Adewumi, and Dr Yetunde Kolajo (2024), which examined the journeys of 25 Academic Excellence Scholarship ([AES](#)) students who began at Kent during the 2019-20 academic year. Through detailed comparisons of individual narratives, motivations, and pivotal moments, this study sheds light on the critical factors that shape student trajectories.

Additional insightful scenarios have been contributed by Lee Fellows, Deputy Director of Student Services and Head of Student Support and Wellbeing, bringing authentic perspectives from student support contexts. As staff play the game, they are encouraged to use blank 'catch' cards to propose practical interventions to counteract setbacks represented by snakes. This empowers staff and fosters solution-focused discussions

This activity exemplifies the educational concept of 'Serious Play' (Rieber, Smith, and Noah, [1998](#)), integrating rigorous research and real-life student experiences into an engaging format. The use of chance inherent in Snakes and Ladders poignantly symbolises the unpredictable ups and downs of student academic life, promoting empathy, reflection, and actionable insight among staff.

At the University of Kent, student success and belonging are at the heart of our mission. The Student Success Snakes and Ladders activity is integral to this commitment, aligning directly with our Access and Participation goals as outlined by the Office for Students. Our proactive approach ensures that equality, diversity, and inclusion are not merely aspirational ideals but actively practised values shaping every student's academic journey.

By engaging staff in reflective and strategic conversations prompted by this activity, we foster a richer understanding of student needs and experiences. Our aim is clear: to transform our commitment into tangible practices that empower every student to thrive academically, personally, and professionally at Kent. Through thoughtful play and purposeful reflection, we continue our journey toward inclusive excellence.