

Kingston University London

Kingston University's winning entry in the Widening Participation or Outreach Initiative of the Year is all "About a Boy" – or, more precisely, Nick Hornby's book of the same name.

This was the reading material for the #KUBigRead, a pre-arrival shared reading project of a kind that is a regular welcome activity in the US but was a first for the UK.

For the project, the university worked with the publisher Penguin to develop a bespoke Kingston edition of the book, chosen for its relevance to city living and managing change, as well as its wide appeal.

The book was mailed to students due to enrol at Kingston. When they had read it, they were invited to discuss the book in online forums before the start of term and then in discussion groups during the first week on campus.

Students said that the initiative made them feel welcomed and less nervous about the start of their degree, and staff who used the book in introductory sessions with students also lauded the project.

Leaders at the institution credit the #KUBigRead as having played a significant role in the 24 per cent reduction in Kingston's dropout rate in 2015-16.

The judges praised the way in which the project overcame the challenges of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment in a large and diverse institution. "The #KUBigRead is a distinctive and successful scheme that promises to more than repay the investment made with better retention and student achievement, plus a greater sense of belonging right from the start," the panel said.