

RESEARCH PAPER

Connections and first impressions: Orientation for enabling students

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Orientation is an important transitional phase for students entering higher education, but even more so for enabling students that largely lack the cultural capital of 'traditional' university entrants. Staff and student surveys and focus groups identified a number of strategies for enhancing orientation and these have been progressively implemented. Subsequently students were surveyed at the conclusion of their orientation and then again after three weeks of classes to quantify their immediate impressions of the revised approach, provide an opportunity to reflect on how it prepared them for the first weeks of their program and to identify any remaining gaps or inadequacies. The initial surveys indicated that students most valued the sessions delivering specific course information, followed closely by program specific information. The follow up surveys affirmed this and indicated that the revised orientation helped students feel prepared for their first weeks of study. Importantly, the process supported a student-centred approach to orientation which delivered the essential administrative and program information whilst minimising information overload. This facilitated the integration of existing, and the development of new, resources to support enabling student transition as well as clarification and guidance for staff concerning their role in orientation.

Keywords: orientation; transition

Introduction

The Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle has been running since 1974 and has undergone significant growth in student numbers during that time (University of Newcastle, unpublished data). In excess of 2,000 students commence this program each year with a significant proportion coming from Low SES, first-in-family and/or low educational attainment backgrounds. Additionally, many have work, family and other external commitments to balance with their study. A minimum entry age of 20 means

students enter the program after a break from school of at least several years, but often longer for the majority.

Many students entering tertiary education experience difficulties during this transition due to the differences between university-style education and most other forms, especially schooling (Perry & Allard, 2003; Gill et al., 2011). Importantly, the move into university is typically a personal investment of the cultural capital students accrue during their time at school and in other educational programs (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012), which may be limited for enabling students. Attending university, especially for students that are mature aged, first-in-family or from similar backgrounds, also represents a significant social displacement (Briggs et al., 2012).

Hence, orientation, as the first real interaction for students with the university, is an important transitional phase (Edward, 2003). Significantly, the importance of orientation and the connections and impressions it fosters is arguably even more important for enabling students that largely lack the cultural capital of 'traditional' university entrants and face many challenges entering an unfamiliar environment and culture.

Developed incrementally over a number of years, Open Foundation orientation sessions had developed somewhat independently of other activities and initiatives within the Centre. By Semester 1 2014, the standard orientation comprised four main elements. The first, and opening activity, was a General Information Session (1-1.5 hours) which aimed to welcome students to the Program, introduce them to Centre staff and provide them with an overview of key information, which was largely administrative in nature. This included an introduction to, and address by, the support staff, such as learning advisers, counsellors and others. Former enabling students (mentors), now in their undergraduate programs, also addressed the students about their experiences. The second major component of orientation was a relatively recently introduced series of breakouts or Course Information Sessions (25

minutes each). These sessions, conducted by the course lecturers and a former student from that course, provided a course introduction and overview for students interested in, or intending to study, that elective course. At the conclusion of these sessions, mentors took students on a Campus Tour culminating in a BBQ intended to provide a social element and to allow staff and students to interact. The fourth element was a voluntary Enrolment Help Session to assist students with any online enrolment issues.

The project reported in this paper aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the existing orientation approach from a student, staff and Program perspective. The ultimate aim was to develop an orientation process which holistically addressed the needs of students, introduced them to the institution in a non-threatening way and provided them with the best preparation to successfully commence their enabling program.

Methods

Focus Groups

Two separate voluntary focus group rounds were held with students. The first was conducted at the end of Semester 1 2014 and involved 'experienced' students ($n = 10$ students), who had already completed one semester of their program and were able to reflect on their orientation experience and subsequent transition to enabling study. In Week 4 of Semester 2 2014, recently commenced students ($n = 4$) participated in a second round of focus groups to obtain input from students that were early in their program and for which orientation was a recent past event.

Staff focus groups were also held at the end of Semester 1 2014 to determine staff opinions on current orientation practices and to solicit suggestions for improvements ($n = 11$ staff).

Surveys

A paper survey consisting of four multiple option and one free text questions focussing on the orientation experience was distributed to commencing students at the conclusion of the Semester 2 2014 Orientation (Survey 1; $n = 240$ responses). A short follow up survey, conducted via Survey Monkey, was conducted in Week 4 of Semester 2 2014 (Survey 2; $n = 44$ responses) and distributed to the same student cohort as Survey 1. This survey sought student feedback on the orientation changes implemented as a result of the focus group feedback.

Survey 1 was repeated on commencing students at the conclusion of the Semester 1 2015 Orientation (Survey 3; $n = 330$ responses) to assess any changes in student attitudes to the revised orientation. A χ^2 analysis (SPSS 21; IBM Corporation: New York) was used to compare responses between the 2014 and 2015 surveys. An online survey, conducted via Survey Monkey and focussing on student perceptions of their recent orientation, was conducted in Week 3 of Semester 1 2015 (Survey 4; $n = 164$ responses) and distributed to the same student cohort as Survey 3.

Redeveloping Orientation

The essence of the Staff Focus Groups was that the existing orientation approach had not kept up with changes in the student body and information available (especially online), that it was not sufficiently student focussed and provided information that may seem negative. This led to some comments about re-thinking the purpose of orientation, such as:

‘Maybe the question is: why do we hold orientation anyway? Who does the current arrangement really serve? Actually, it serves us - ‘get them all together at once, tell them all at once’ and then off you go. So, it’s not really student centred, it’s logistical.’ (Staff Focus Group Semester 1 2014).

Hence, staff suggested that orientation should be less detailed in terms of support and administrative aspects, but have a greater focus on welcoming students, validating their place in the program, raising awareness of support and course choice - essentially "... putting ourselves in the students' place."

Taken together with information from the student focus groups, the four main orientation components were evaluated. As a result, several changes were trialled during the Semester 2 2014 Orientation, which mainly related to the opening General Information Session (GIS) and the Course Information Sessions (CIS).

General Information Session

Students commented that the GIS, considered an important part of transitioning students into the unfamiliar world of tertiary study, was reassuring to see many other students present '... just like [them]...', but also intimidating, for example 'I was very intimidated. It's a room full of strangers and it's a lecture theatre! I've only seen those on TV and this is massive ...' (Student Focus Group Semester 1 2014).

Additionally, students reported that this session was too long and that much of the information covered was available online or in other ways, such as UON Prep (bridging) courses and the Academic Survival Skills Online modules. Some even described the session as boring and one admitted to 'nodding off'. Hence, there was a conflict between informing and transitioning students into the Program and a perceived excess of information leading to overload and repetition.

As a result, the session was shortened to 45 minutes and focussed on welcoming students, validating their decision to commence the program and providing information directly relevant to the commencing phase of their studies. Advice was provided to students that their Open Foundation experience is transformative, but requires the formation of good habits, engagement and self-belief. Critical administrative elements were addressed, however

reference was made to the Commencing Student website, online learning systems (Blackboard) and the Student Liaison Officer as sources of further 'just-in-time' information. This was supported by a *Getting Started* handout containing key staff contacts, dates and information sources.

The role of mentors in the GIS was also considered. Previously, several mentors delivered an open address to students, however this met with mixed reviews. Generally, these presentations were welcomed with mentors considered as role models and a source of inspiration in terms of what enabling students can achieve, but they could also be perceived as intimidating and someone far more capable than the commencing students. To highlight the positives, mentors were provided with guidance so that they focussed specifically on advice, tips and experiences that helped them commence and move through their enabling studies.

A broad range of embedded support is a key feature of the Open Foundation Program and, at orientation, consisted variously of a workshop-like session or brief introduction and overview presentations by individual staff. However, students commented that there was a fine balance between the benefits and disadvantages of promoting support, finding it both comforting and confronting. The comforting comments related to the reassurance provided by the diversity of support available, the fact that it was free and the belief it created in students that the program focussed on their success, such as:

'Knowing all the support that's available is really, really important - I think I would have felt a lot more anxious not knowing or not having that there because I haven't used any of it yet, but it makes me feel better just to know it's there if I need it.' (Student Focus Group Semester 2 2014).

However, some students had mixed feelings around the reassurance gained by knowing the services existed and perceived negative connotations of the support being required, as illustrated by the following comment:

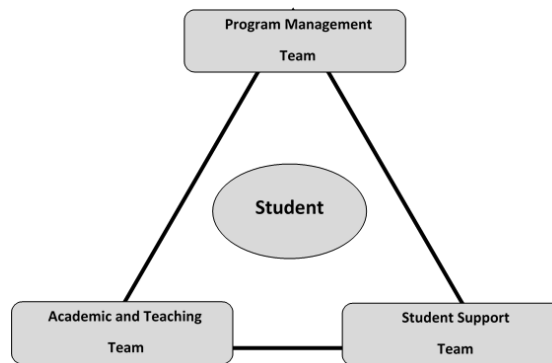
‘To be honest, the student support is amazing. I found that actually, you could take it in a negative way, in that “we are going to do ALL this, because most of you are probably going to leave”. It seems that it’s saying, “it’s so overwhelming, that we need to throw this at you”, and it’s great and I love that it’s there, so that I can use it if I need it, but I don’t want to start out thinking that I will need it.’

(Student Focus Group Semester 1 2014).

Despite this, there was a need to positively raise student awareness of available support as a key element of the program and also given that low rates of awareness and use of Support Services have been identified as factors contributing to enabling attrition (Hodges et al., 2013).

As a result, Support staff were introduced together as a Support Team (‘putting a face to the name’) available to assist students with a range of support aimed at maximising the student experience and prospects of success. This was supported by clear support information on Blackboard sites and inclusion in the *Getting Started* handout. Additionally, support staff were positioned as one of three teams (Fig. 1) that worked cooperatively to guide and assist students throughout their Open Foundation journey. Given the pivotal role of the Student Liaison Officer as a primary point of contact and another source of advice, information or access to Support Services, a brief introductory presentation was retained for this role.

Figure 1: Model presented to students showing the three teams of staff involved in their journey through the Open Foundation program.



Course Information Sessions

Staff and student focus groups consistently rated these sessions as the most relevant and informative element of orientation, with some suggesting that they were the ‘main event’ on the day’s schedule. In terms of positives, the sessions provided an opportunity to meet the lecturers and other students interested in that course, started building connections with the academy and were a vital opportunity to clarify what the course entailed and to assist course selection. However, student feedback suggested there was some inconsistency in information provided across course sessions and a greater opportunity to provide more detailed information about course expectations. Responding to this, the CIS were slightly lengthened to 30 minutes and staff provided with a clear guideline to focus on course expectations, including academic knowledge and skills, as well as implicitly identifying the overall approach of the course. For example, highlighting the ‘factual’ nature of science and mathematics courses compared with the more interactive, argument-based humanities courses.

Importantly, student feedback indicated that the contribution by former students in CIS was not well received if it merely reinforced the lecturer’s comments or commended the course. However, they were welcomed if they provided a balance to the lecturer, gave ‘real life’ examples and personal experiences, outlined the relationship between the enabling course and their undergraduate studies and validated students’ ability to succeed. The following comments typify the positive response to mentors in these sessions.

‘... [the mentor] was really good and the reason I think she was good is that all the things that she talked about are all the things that she was thinking about when she was in our position. So I found it relevant, what she was saying and also we all had an opportunity to talk about anything that was on our mind – any questions ... she was in our position once...’. (Student Focus Group Semester 2 2014).

‘... if you didn’t have the student mentors, you’ve just got the lecturers who are already done with their degrees, who are done with all of that and that’s sort of like, way behind them. Whereas ...[the mentors] they’ve only recently completed the Open Foundation and they remember what it’s like and it’s got them into the degrees that they want to do, so there here saying ‘well look, we’re proof that this can work and get you to where you want to be’. (Student Focus Group Semester 2 2014)

Fine-tuning Orientation

The changes trialled at the Semester 2 2014 orientation were evaluated on the basis of Surveys 1 and 2. The outcomes from Survey 1 are discussed in the next section in order for a comparison with Survey 3 (Semester 1 2015) to be made. However, Survey 2 provided an insight into the effect of the changes trialled in Semester 2 2014 and set the focus for implementation in Semester 1 2015 of a more fully redesigned orientation approach.

Student Survey 2

Survey 2, which was conducted after students had experienced three to four weeks of their program, sought feedback on the changes implemented for the orientation in Semester 2 2014. In this survey, 91.7% of respondents answered yes to the question ‘*Do you think all the content presented on the day was relevant to you?*’. This suggested that the revised

format had successfully overcome the perceived negatives previously associated with orientation, especially the GIS.

The majority of respondents indicated that they were aware of some (55.6%) or most (30.5%) of the information as a result of online research prior to attending Orientation. Answering the question '*What do you remember about Orientation this semester?*', 30.0% of student responses related to the positive, helpful and supportive nature of the sessions and staff, meeting the teaching staff and Course Information Sessions.

The majority of students also completed their course self-enrolment without assistance resulting in only 8.3% indicating they attended an enrolment help session at Orientation. This suggested that students were comfortable using online systems and that a transfer of information from the face-to-face orientation session to online was likely to be satisfactory for students. Nonetheless, despite 11.1% of respondents indicating that an online orientation alone would be partially useful, none considered that it would be useful and 88.9% specifically indicated that it would not be useful at all. During the staff focus groups, most staff felt that a face-to-face orientation was essential. However, staff were more open to considering the benefits of a partial online orientation or supplementary activities to better prepare students. Nonetheless, they considered aspects such as the Course Information Sessions and the insight gained, and connections made, by visiting the campus and participating in lecture and tutorial-like sessions could not be replaced online.

The Redeveloped Orientation

In response to the Semester 2 2014 orientation feedback, the changes trialled in that semester were fully incorporated into the orientation for Semester 1 2015. Although there was some minor fine tuning of content, logistics, delivery methods and the like, no major changes were made to the overall orientation approach.

Separately to this project, a suite of short videos had been made available through the Centre's website addressing key aspects of the program, presented mainly by former students, as well as individual videos providing a brief overview of each course and presented by course lecturers. Although not specifically for orientation, these videos were promoted during both the GIS and CIS as additional sources of information to assist students prepare for, and transition into, the program and courses.

Student Surveys 1 and 3

At the conclusion of the orientation sessions in 2014 and 2015, the same short survey was completed by students to indicate their immediate response to orientation and to allow a before-and-after comparison of the changes.

In Survey 1 (2014), 84.6% of commencing students rated orientation as 'very useful', 15.4% rating it as 'somewhat useful' and no students indicated it was 'useless'. In 2015 (Survey 3), a significantly higher percentage of respondents, 92.1%, rated orientation as 'very useful' ($\chi^2 = 12.49$, $p = 0.002$) and 7.0% as 'somewhat useful'. The percentage of commencing students answering 'No' to the question '*Do you have any questions that were not answered today?*' was 94.6% in 2014 and 95.8% in 2015, respectively ($\chi^2 = 0.33$, $p = 0.57$). This suggests that no critical information was lost when orientation was redesigned.

The CIS were consistently rated the most valuable activity in both surveys (Table 1). There was a slight, but significant, difference between Survey 1 and Survey 3 ($\chi^2 = 8.28$, $p = 0.04$) in terms of the most valuable orientation activity, mainly due to small increases in the proportion of 2015 responses rating Mentors and Support Services as most valuable. Again this suggests the refinements made to these activities were beneficial.

Table 1: Percentage of student responses in Survey 1 and Survey 3 to the questions ‘*What did you find was the most valuable part of the day?*’ and ‘*What did you find was the least valuable part of the day?*’.

Orientation Activity	Survey 1 (2014)		Survey 3 (2015)	
	Most valuable	Least Valuable	Most valuable	Least Valuable
Information Session	26.8%	31.3%	23.9%	26.7%
Course Information Session	49.2%	4.9%	43.3%	4.3%
Mentors	13.6%	15.6%	18.6%	15.1%
Support Services	10.2%	12.9%	14.0%	16.2%

In Survey 3 (2015), orientation was specifically described as interesting, informative and useful in 50.9% of the free text comments, whilst 15.7% related positively to the provision of course choice and/or decision-making information. Other positive comments related to orientation easing nerves (12.91%), exciting students about commencing (9.3%), and friendly, helpful staff (7.4%). No negative comments were made.

Student Survey 4

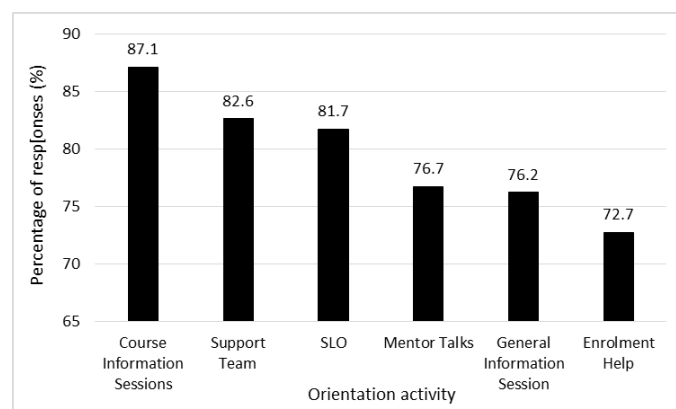
Survey 4 was the most comprehensive survey and was targeted at students in the third week of their program. At this time their orientation experience was recent enough to allow an evaluation, whilst their experience in the program allowed them to reflect on the preparation provided by orientation.

In response to whether orientation helped students be ‘ready and prepared’ for the first few weeks of classes, 85.4% agreed and only 14.6% disagreed. The majority of positive responses centred on students understanding course and program expectations and requirements (33.0%), feeling prepared or at ease (23.9%) and from being able to meet their course teaching staff (19.3%). Limited specific comments were provided by those that disagreed with the preparation provided, but most related to the difficulties of navigating a large campus, some repetition of pre-semester bridging courses (which are not undertaken by

all students) and the reality of commencing a program of study. Separately, 28.0% of respondents indicated that there were additional items that could have been covered to help their preparedness, which fell into two main categories. The first included requests for additional information relating to campus layout and navigation (28.6%) and academic preparedness matters, such as workload, independent learning, study routines/planning and similar issues (23.2%).

The majority of orientation activities were rated highly by students (Fig. 2), and again the CIS were the most highly rated activity overall. The shortened, more targeted GIS, including the Support Team and Student Liaison Officer introductions and mentor talks, received generally high approval (Fig. 2). Student comments were overwhelmingly positive and noted the value of mentors discussing their experiences and the enthusiasm of the staff and mentors. The *Getting Started* handout was well received with 53.2% of respondents rating it as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ and an additional 29.5% rating it as ‘good’.

Figure 2: Percentage of responses rating the orientation day components as ‘Excellent’ and ‘Very Good’ for Semester 1 2015 survey (Survey 4).



Although 62.2% of respondents were aware of ‘some’ of the information presented at orientation due to independent online research, 4.9% said they were not aware of any of the

information and only 12.8% indicated they were aware of 'most' of the information. However, several comments highlighted the complementary nature of the online information and the on campus orientation, such as '... [I was aware of most of the information, but] I still did learn a lot at orientation day. It was fantastic to not just read the information but hear it.'

Three new, or enhanced, resources were utilised at the orientation for students commencing in 2015. Of the students that utilised these, 75.0%, 74.3% and 75.0% rated the program videos, course videos and Commencing Student website, respectively, as 'excellent' and 'very good'. However, 26.8% to 33.5% of respondents did not directly respond to this question suggesting they did not use or were not aware of these resources despite promotion at orientation and in the *Getting Started* handout. Typical comments from these students were '...which webpage?...', with others commenting along the lines of 'I was not aware of the course videos prior to orientation despite them being quite obvious once they were pointed out to me.'

A wide range of comments were elicited by the free text question '*What were one or two things that you found helpful or easy in your first few weeks of classes?*'. The highest proportion (28.6%) related to the supportive and insightful teaching staff, which was followed closely by support, assistance and a friendly environment (15.0%). Notably, many positive comments related to campus navigation (16.4%) and to course and time management (14.3%), despite misgivings in other questions. A further 12.9% related to the benefits of online resources, including Blackboard.

Responses were equally diverse to the question '*What were one or two things that you found difficult or challenging in your first few weeks of classes?*'. The main challenge (44.1%) related to the adjustment to university life, study and the learning environment, whilst workload difficulties, including the pace and volume of work, and the out-of-class

time commitment accounted for an additional 27.2% of responses. Technology aspects (11.0%), including online systems and email, and parking difficulties (10.3%) were also considered challenging.

Although a relatively small number of responses were received to the question *'Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your Orientation experience or the experience of your first few weeks of classes?'*, most (23.5%) related to recommending the program or commenting that they had enjoyed their experience. A further 11.8% were positive about the support and learning assistance available, whilst 15.7% related to workload surprises and unfamiliarity with the university teaching environment. The remaining comments were provided by only one or several respondents.

Conclusion

Obtaining student feedback on the nature and content of orientation was incredibly informative. One such benefit was a recognition of the significant changes and enhancements in information available to students through improved websites, program and course videos, enhanced course and program Blackboard sites and an array of other information delivery channels and resources that had been introduced in the last few years. Developed for other purposes, these resources clearly had an untapped link to orientation and transition which, when adopted, were very positively received by students. Although the approach previously taken was found to be largely effective, this and other small, but significant, enhancements resulted in an orientation process that better serves the needs of students transitioning into the program and of staff in preparing students with the information and resources they need to make that transition.

During the project, the task of balancing what students 'enjoyed' and what experience indicated they needed to know was difficult. However, the current process meets these needs

and has permitted strong connections and valuable first impressions to be established. As the first formal contact with commencing enabling students, orientation now provides an enhanced opportunity to ease anxiety and improve confidence, effectively congratulating students on their choice and validating their 'right' to engage in tertiary education.

Given the potential uncertainties of commencing students and their associated fragility (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2013; Holdsworth, 2010), a positive, welcoming first contact is influential. Additionally, orientation generally, and the CIS specifically, is the first real step in forming the student identity through meeting and interacting with their peers and future teaching staff. This represents a significant first opportunity to engage students and potentially reduce subsequent attrition as the ability to construct a connection between the identity of a new student and their newfound interest in education may empower them to subsequently prioritise their studies over external factors (Whannell, 2013), although only time will tell in this regard. Nonetheless, the overwhelmingly positive response by students in relation to orientation helping them be ready and prepared for their studies is a strong indicator. Importantly, Hodges et al. (2013) found that enabling students who were engaged in their program in Week 2 had a significantly increased persistence rate.

Despite these successes, focus group and survey data have indicated additional elements that may further enhance orientation, such as a dynamic knowledge base for students similar to an FAQ resource. Work is continuing on these with a view to future implementation.

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