# Orientation Online: Introducing commencing students to university study. A Practice Report

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## Abstract

*Adjusting to university and preparing for the first week of classes is a difficult process for many students entering higher education. Students often find they are overloaded with information during orientation week, which negatively impacts on their readiness for engaging with their studies. This practice report describes an evidence-based approach to information provision in the early period of transition to university study. By adopting an approach that makes information available earlier, and in a way that is easier to engage with, an online tool called* Orientation Online *was created. Feedback from students has been positive and, with careful ongoing maintenance, the tool provides a viable option for reducing confusion amongst commencing students.*

# Information and transition

Within the widening participation agenda in higher education, there is increasing difficulty in managing student transition to university as commencing students come to university with diverse levels of preparedness (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). This difficulty is acute in the initial stages of the commencing student experience. Commencing students are required to negotiate a vast quantity of information in order to be admitted, enrolled and have access to institutional resources such as the university learning management system, library and email. First year orientation communications, events and activities have been criticised for not recognising the lack of preparedness of many new students and subjecting them to "information overload and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures" (Kift 2008, p.12). Timely and relevant provision of information to students is essential if students are to commence classes successfully. Inadequate provision of information can create a lasting impression of institutional incompetence and confusion in the minds of new students (Edward, 2003) and thus negatively impact on their ability to make a successful transition to university.

There are several challenges associated with the provision of timely and relevant information. Firstly, information provided to students is often underpinned by requirements of legislation, IT systems and university policies, and therefore laden with technical, legal or bureaucratic language. Students who are not familiar with such formal communication can struggle to cope with large quantities of this type of information (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006).

A second factor that is becoming a particular challenge is the tendency for "satisficing" when processing large quantities of information. Bawden and Robinson (2008) suggest that when faced with large quantities of information, particularly electronic, people tend to skim through the information until they reach a level of understanding that is deemed "good enough." This tendency has come to be called "satisficing" (Simon, 1955). Some authors (e.g. Carr, 2010) suggest this tendency to skim through information is due to an increasing reliance on search engines such as Google and a dramatic explosion in the availability of information available in the 21st century.

Overcoming the tendency for satisficing amongst commencing university students is particularly problematic when developing curricula because the aim of learning in higher education is to engage students in deep learning and engagement with the body of knowledge within their particular discipline (Toohey, 1999). Although there are a number of techniques for engaging students in deep processing of discipline-specific knowledge in their coursework, techniques for helping students understand the co-curricular factors important for successful transition to university study are less obvious.

In this vein, Lodge (2011) suggests that an evidence-based approach to information provision based on research conducted in the psychological science and marketing disciplines can lead to better quality information processing, especially at the time when students are attempting to integrate the information they must absorb in order to successfully commence classes. Research suggests that the way in which information is processed in circumstances such as those faced by commencing

students is more akin to a search task than to a traditional approach to consuming information like reading (Lorigo, et al., 2008). The tendency to skim through information is most obvious in the design of popular websites, such as *iGoogle* and *Facebook*. These sites have evolved to cater to the propensity to search by using colours and consistent formats and by breaking the information into smaller, easy to identify sections. A Google search result page only has 10 results at a time because this is around the quantity of information that the brain is adept at consciously dealing with at any point in time (see Miller, 1956).

The way information is presented on the most popular websites is not the way most information is presented to commencing students. Large quantities of text are commonly used to explain what students need to do to commence classes. Given the tendency to approach information as a search task rather than a linear reading process, it makes sense to create an online environment that caters to this tendency. Presenting information in smaller chunks with use of colours and links to highlight various aspects of the information, leads to it being processed in a different way to when the information is presented in large blocks (Rayner, 1995).

It is within this context that an online orientation to university was created for commencing students at a regional university in Australia. *Orientation Online* is based on the principles of good web design for information search. It aims to make information necessary for a successful transition to university available in a timely and easy to digest manner. It was anticipated that *Orientation Online* would assist students in their transition

and lead to less confusion and, ultimately, less likelihood of attrition.

## Orientation Online

*Orientation Online* was created to complement a suite of activities aimed at assisting beginning student transition. The other activities include a week designated as Orientation Week, transition courses, parent and partner information sessions and a series of communications scheduled to provide just-in-time information via broadcast email. Although Orientation Week is an effective opportunity for students to engage with the institution and become familiar with the processes and resources available (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas 2009), not all students attend Orientation Week and an increasing proportion of students are opting for online or distance education. *Orientation Online* therefore serves as a mechanism to assist students who require information before Orientation Week, those who are unable to attend Orientation Week and those who are overloaded with information. Students are directed to and encouraged to complete *Orientation Online* in their offer letter, enabling early student engagement. *Orientation Online* contributes to making orientation "longer and thinner" in that information is provided to students earlier and they are given more time to assimilate it (see Crosling et. al., p. 12). By providing information online, the emphasis of Orientation Week is able to shift to a greater focus on creating a sense of celebration and building peer networks.

Table 1 *Orientation Online aims, aligned modules and example learning activities*

| Orientation Online aim | Corresponding module | Example learning activities |
|---|---|---|
| Introduce students to Orientation Online | Module 1: Introduction to Orientation Online | Become familiar with the navigation of Orientation Online |
| Assist students to build peer networks and become part of the university community | Module 2: Meeting people and finding friends | Find out how to contact other students, mentors and teaching staff |
| Give students a clearer understanding of what to expect of themselves and the university and set goals | Module 3: Course and career goals | Articulate their career and course goals |
| Assist students to be better prepared for the start of teaching | Module 4: Getting organised before teaching starts | Learn how to use email and internet account Locate lecture and tutorial rooms Learn how to check fees online Develop an awareness of important dates |
| Increase awareness of how to access learning resources and support services | Module 5: Academic success | Learn how to find books and journals Locate online learning resources Find out where to go for more information and support |

In order to facilitate information processing, *Orientation Online* was divided into a series of modules all based on a particular transition theme. Within each of the modules, a series of activities was created to engage students with the information rather than present it as a large block of information all at once. The specific aims of *Orientation Online,* the distinct modules and the learning activities within the tool are mapped in Table 1.

*Orientation Online* utilises links and separates text into small sections for easy processing. An example of this is shown in Figure 1.

## Student feedback

An online feedback tool was integrated into *Orientation Online* and the number of students logging on was also tracked through a connection between *Orientation Online* and the university's student management system. Using this resource was not compulsory, however, 257 students worked their way through the material in the trial period and 68 of these left detailed feedback. The students who worked through the resource were a representative sample of the entire university cohort in that there was a spread of respondents across the four faculties within the institution. There was also a representative sample of students studying at each of the two main campuses with one quarter of the respondents studying off-campus.

Respondents were asked to indicate how useful *Orientation Online* was to them, how easy it was to use, what could be added to *Orientation Online* to make it more useful, what was the least useful part and any additional comments or queries. The first two questions were assessed on a three-point scale and the response patterns over the course of the trial are displayed in Table 2.
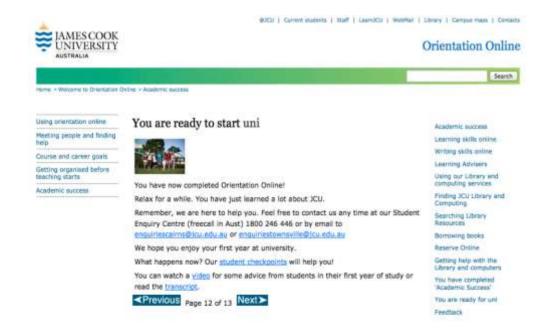


*Figure 1*  Example page from Orientation Online

The qualitative feedback from students who completed *Orientation Online* was also generally positive. General comments about *Orientation Online* were mostly about how useful, well organised and easy it is to use. One student commented, *I found Orientation Online to be relevant and easy to use. I feel better prepared for my university experience after completing this* and this quote is representative of the feedback about the tool overall. When asked about the least useful parts, students were also positive about their experience with the most negative comments concerning broken links and a lack of specific information for subgroups of students such as distance learners. When asked about possible improvements, students suggested that some additional information specific to some specific cohorts would be helpful—again distance education students—and more detailed fee information. Again, the majority of comments suggested the tool was valuable

and did not need much enhancement.

## Conclusions

Overall, *Orientation Online* appears to have been very well received by beginning students with both qualitative and quantitative feedback suggesting that the students who used the tool found it very easy to use and very helpful. James et al. (2010*)* noted that approaches to orientation should recognise the importance of early student engagement. Early engagement helps students digest information and assists student to prepare for their first week of classes by illustrating what the expectations are of them as university students, and increasing their sense of belonging within the institution (Crosling et. al., 2009). Using an approach that both allows engagement early and presents information in an easy to process way, *Orientation Online* appears to be a useful addition to the approaches currently

Table 2 *Responses to questions about Orientation Online usefulness and ease of use*

| Question | Not useful/easy | Somewhat useful/easy | Very useful/easy |
|---|---|---|---|
| How useful was Orientation Online to you? | 2% | 47% | 51% |
| How easy was Orientation Online to use? | 0% | 26% | 74% |

used to assist students in preparation for the beginning of classes.

While online resources such as *Orientation Online* show great potential, it is possible for them to degrade with time if the intent and methodology for achieving effective communication are not well articulated and protected. Maintenance of the resource is best devolved to communications professionals working within preconceived policies and guidelines based on sound research evidence. Without this protection, such resources will inevitably, through an osmotic process driven by input from multiple staff with a variety of agendas, make a partial reversion to the lengthy technical, legal and bureaucratic language it was initially designed to overcome. This practice report has illustrated that *Orientation Online* is a useful way of assisting student transition, however, like any other resource, it must be maintained and enhanced to build on the potential demonstrated. It is hoped that this report might act as a catalyst for further innovation in this area.

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