Online Orientation – a blended learning approach to student transition

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A report on first year transition at the University of Auckland recommended a number of changes. This launched an entirely new approach, and in 2015 the face-to-face Orientation Programme was overhauled and a new Online Orientation course went live for undergraduates. The launch was the culmination of nearly three years of work to improve the transition experience and was part of a broader change process across the institution to better meet the needs of students new to tertiary study. Online Orientation exceeded expectations in being on time, on budget, with 88% of all new students accessing the course – higher than our already ambitious target of 80%, receiving very positive feedback from students and staff.

Nevertheless, there were several key learnings along the way. This paper explores those learnings by examining how:

- Best practice and innovation drove the project forward
- Students expect institutions to use technology to engage them in the learning process, and that blended learning environments are now the norm
- Online learning has now become the dominant method for adult learners. It also improves access for students with disabilities and assists ESL students who have the additional cognitive load of interpreting what is being said before being able to comprehend and develop understanding.

Introduction

The University of Auckland is a large research-led institution which spans over six campuses and has approximately 40,000 students. Of the student population, roughly 13% are from overseas and 80% are from the Auckland region. Each year, approximately 5,000 new first year undergraduates enrol with the University.

Context and background

In 2012, the University of Auckland commissioned market research company, Colmar Brunton, to undertake a survey of incoming first year students prior to arriving on campus. A follow-up survey was also conducted eight weeks into the first semester. The surveys gauged students’ perceptions, hopes, expectations and fears prior to starting at the University, and then examined the students’ reflections on their experience of settling into University two months later. In addition, two interns from Bowling Green University, Ohio, were tasked with desk research, interviewing key internal stakeholders and identifying current University programmes and best practice in key first year transition areas. Their findings, along with the results of the surveys, were compiled into a report making some high-level recommendations to the University on how to improve the first year transition experience. A number of these recommendations related to Orientation week and the information students receive prior to arrival. Because the suggested improvements were sweeping and involved stakeholders from across the University, a working group was formed, which in turn became our net of influences (Krause & Coates, 2008) to advocate for this project across the University. This paper looks at one aspect of the improvement process – the development and delivery of Online Orientation.

Rationale

The University operates a broad range of programmes and services aimed at retaining students and encouraging academic and social engagement, all with a view of improving the student experience and outcomes for students (Tinto, 1998). These range from personal wellbeing services such as counselling; emergency financial assistance; and assistance for students with disabilities, to engagement services such as sport and recreation activities; support for clubs and societies; and peer mentoring. Some programmes, such as the Tuākana mentoring and tutoring scheme and the First Year Experience Programme are run through faculties, while others, such as the UniGuide Programme (which pairs new students up with a senior student at Orientation), are operated centrally. Programmes such as Student Learning Services are focused on improving academic skills, while others, such as student events or student leadership programmes, aim to help students maximise the ‘out-of-classroom’ aspects of the student experience (Pascarella & Terenzini,
All of these groups have a vested interest in conveying information to students during Orientation and all compete for students’ attention during this time. Other groups are less focused on issues of first year transition, but arguably place even more value on Orientation because it is their only chance to give students vital information. The previous Orientation Programme spanned a full week, with a range of face-to-face general information and faculty-specific sessions which new students could elect to attend; it is estimated that only a third of all first year students attended.

A number of concerns were raised about the previous approach:

- The face-to-face Orientation was too long. The time requirement contributed to low attendance (students weren’t prepared to sacrifice a week’s income or vacation to attend Orientation).
- Too much information was given to students at Orientation. A slower release would be more effective, timed to coincide with interest/need.
- There was a duplication of material and/or messages.
- More online material should be available to students at any time. Students are actively seeking information from the University website and social media pages well before the beginning of the semester. With ongoing changes to the digital environment, it was essential for the University to introduce an online element of Orientation (Hanna, 1998).

In 2013, work began on restructuring the face-to-face elements of Orientation and creating an Online Orientation resource to address these concerns.

**Implementation**

*Developing a University-wide approach*

In order for anything university-wide to be successful, there needs to be a high level of communication, buy-in, investment, and collaboration across a wide variety of areas; including faculties, service divisions, central staff professionals, and students (Kift, S. M., Nelson, K. J., & Clarke, J., 2010). The concept of collaboration has been highlighted in student affairs literature for some time. Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience (2004) is grounded in identifying crucial aspects of creating an integrated approach to academic learning and holistic student development. Building on this, Learning Reconsidered 2 was written in 2006, creating a practical guide for implementation. Here, the authors explain that collaboration, if forced, can become superficial. They provide practical strategies to developing successful partnerships which advise to start small, identify and support champions, focus on real problems, initiate conversation, expect and manage conflict and evaluate the outcomes (Keeling, 2006).

Thus, this project was firmly grounded in a third generation approach (Kift, 2009) involving collaboration at strategic and operational levels, with:

- A governance group drawn from various parts of the University.
- A working group comprising faculty and service division staff, both academic and professional.
- A project team made up of personnel from all parts of the institution.

Cross-disciplinary input was crucial to ensure the online resource was not only fit for purpose, but had broad institutional support.

*Gathering data and evaluating outcomes*

At every stage of the change process, gathering and analysing data was critical. In-house research formed the basis of the business case for change, alongside the data capture undertaken by Colmar Brunton. Work was also undertaken to analyse the financial impacts of the change and examine the institutional benefits in terms of student retention. The student voice was also a powerful driver of the change (Fielding, 2004), with various student groups consulted throughout the project implementation. While the results of student consultation provided useful data, the working party was also mindful of the concerns around implications that the group has one “voice” and that a “monolingual assumption is illusory” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p.6).

A variety of data was used to evaluate the project’s success. Quantitative measures, such as the number of students logging onto the site, the amount of time they spent on each section as well as the demographic
information on which types of student were accessing which pages has proved extremely useful in making iterative changes to the resource post-pilot phase. Qualitative evaluation, or ‘perceptual findings’ (Nora & Blanca, 2009), has been gathered from student users of the resource as well as staff across the University who have a role to play in student transition, to gauge the effectiveness of the new tool.

Student expectations
The development of Online Orientation took place against the backdrop of significant expansion in online learning at the University. The first MOOCs went live in 2014 and a new compulsory online course in Academic Integrity for enrolled undergraduates launched at around the same time. This institutional appetite for online learning reflects the growing expectation among students that they should be able to engage in self-directed learning at their own pace (Dobbs et al, 2009) and that students from non-traditional backgrounds in particular are more likely to benefit from the flexibility and autonomy that this method of learning affords (O’Malley & McCraw, 1999).

Results

Google Analytics
The results from the launch of Online Orientation were pleasing in terms of the number of students accessing the modules. Google Analytics allowed us to analyse detailed statistics about Online Orientation’s traffic and traffic sources.

![Analysis on student access to Online Orientation 2015](image)

**Figure 1: Results from 2015**

Further analysis was required to review online engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008) and to assess student behaviour on pages that were interactive in comparison to those that contained static text. Analysis of time spent on particular pages revealed that content the University thought would be important to new students was not viewed in the same way by the students themselves.

Analysis using Google Analytics allowed us to review how well each page was received by students and the average time students spent on those pages. This allowed us to evaluate certain pages’ relevance, review content in those pages, and show our stakeholders that information presented in an interactive way, whether it’s videos, games or quizzes, is well-received by students. However, we noted that ‘gamification’, while attractive and appealing to students, and increasing the likelihood of repeat visits, doesn’t necessarily result in an enhancement in student learning (Zhu & Grabowski, 2004). This is why it was important to maintain a good balance between games/quizzes and information in static text.
Living in an age where technology is an integral part of students’ lives (Prensky, 2001), the way information is presented by the University is critical to engagement. We explored ways to communicate certain information to students in an interactive way that would appeal to them while also allowing them to process core information about the University before they came on board. One of the biggest successes of Online Orientation was the interactive maps, which allowed students to get to know (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003) the campus and its facilities well before they physically stepped onto campus during Orientation.

Information was tailored to our diverse population of students (O'Neill, Singh, & O'Donoghue, 2004), including where they came from (whether it was outside New Zealand or outside Auckland), which equity group/s they belonged to and their faculty of study. This tailored approach was well-received by students, with 67% reporting that the content presented was relevant to them and their studies.
Faculty Orientation Day

The project included making changes to the face-to-face component of Orientation as well as introducing the online component. Online Orientation was designed to complement the face-to-face element, dedicating an entire module to providing students with information about their Faculty Orientation Day and its benefits. Faculties were highly engaged in this project, creating ‘welcome’ videos for inclusion in the module, which encouraged students to attend their Faculty Orientation Day. Messages about key Orientation events were also posted in this module to get students excited about the social aspect of Orientation. All material presented in Online Orientation promoted social and academic participation (Tinto, 2005) and resulted in a dramatic increase in students attending their Faculty Orientation Day and Orientation events.

![Attendance during Faculty Orientation](attachment:image.png)

**Figure 4: Comparison of Faculty Orientation attendance between 2014 and 2015.**

**Discussion**

It is clear that the implementation of Online Orientation and the restructure of the face-to-face components of Faculty Orientation have largely addressed the problems uncovered by the initial report. Faculty Orientation attendance is up, interaction with the Online Orientation resource is high and feedback from students is encouraging. Similarly, staff who engage with students during their transition report that there is an improvement in the levels of preparedness in the first weeks of the semester and that the nature of questions being asked at the University’s Student Information Centres and call centre are more thoughtful and considered, reflecting a quicker transition for some students.

Results from post-implementation student survey indicate that students who engaged with Online Orientation are more likely to feel they have transitioned well. This supports the arguments of Kuh, among others, that meaningful changes in students’ knowledge, understanding, personal learning and development occurs in a variety of ways, both inside and outside the classroom environment (Kuh, 1993).

Colbert’s paper on an online learning pilot for first years in English at the University of Wolverhampton found that full participation in online activities was a good indicator of student commitment to the module in general (Colbert, 2007). However, with all blended learning initiatives it is difficult to say with any certainty whether online learning in particular contributes to better student success at University (Lizzio, 2006).

“It is assumed, and logically so, that all of these [technological] advancements do not only serve to enhance our communication and teaching, but that the ultimate benefit associated with instructional technology comes in the form of enhanced student learning and, subsequently, persistence to graduation. Yet, with as much riding on this new technology researchers, educators, practitioners, and proponents of these new electronic tools, there is a huge gap in the research literature specifically devoted to the
empirically- and theoretically-driven investigations of the link between technology and performance indicators/outcomes such as grade performance, course completion, re-enrolment, persistence, and graduation rates.” (Snyder & Nora, 2009, p.16)

Clearly more work is required to better understand the connections between technology, the student experience and student outcomes (Robinson & Hullinger, 2010).

**Conclusion**
This paper has explored the various ways best practice and innovation underpinned the development of an online resource. We have demonstrated how capturing and analysing data assists with key developments and achieving institution-wide support. Changing how and when students are presented with information by moving to a blended model has achieved pleasing results. Overall, the outcomes from Online Orientation have exceeded expectations. The post-implementation survey revealed that students welcomed additional online material drip-fed and tailored to their needs and enjoyed the deliberately ‘student-friendly’ voice of the resource.

As Online Orientation continues to be embedded into the students’ transition experience, work continues to make the resource accessible, relevant and engaging. One of the challenges for the institution is to take key content which does not necessarily lend itself to gamification and find innovative ways to present it. We note that while gamification is clearly desirable – and even expected among large sections of the student community, the challenge for the institution is to gauge whether this has true learning benefits for all. Further research in this area is welcomed.
Bibliography


