How to Improve University Orientation: Seven Good Practice Strategies for South Africa

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Abstract

There is a great deal of variability in the practice of orientation across the country at South Africa's universities, and there is limited knowledge of what exactly constitutes good practice in orientation. Many areas of enquiry remain unexplored, and remain blind spots for South Africa's higher education sector. The article addresses this central question: What constitutes good practice for orientation programmes in South Africa? The article argues that a structured and informed orientation strategy is critical in terms of matters of student retention and, in fact, may serve as the key linchpin of students' decision to stay or exit the higher education system. Accordingly, seven strategies to improve national orientation practice are proposed in this article.

Introduction

South Africa lacks a national framework for orientation, one which ensures standards and quality for orientation at universities. What is generally known about orientation as it is practised at universities across the country, tends to be largely anecdotal and not based on sound empirical evidence. There appears to be little uniformity in terms of orientation practice across the national higher education sector. As such, this article raises the central question: What constitutes good practice for orientation programmes in South Africa?

It is useful to note at the outset that the term 'orientation' is the one with which South African students are most familiar. It is the term principally used herein. It is commonplace to encounter other terms such as 'induction' or 'Freshers' Week' (often in a European context), 'student welcome,' and 'transition support' as being typically used interchangeably to describe the process by which new students are introduced to the new academic environment and all the services and support structures available at the university necessary to fulfil their educational goals.

Orientation can be broadly described as a formal structure or programme of events put in place by institutions of higher education to support the positive first-year experiences of

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students. Shobrook (2003, p. 2) describes orientation as a "buffer zone between preparation for university and immersion into higher education culture". Mullendore and Banahan (2005, p. 393) emphasise the principles of intentionality and collaboration which undergird the concept of orientation; they define orientation as "a collaborative institutional effort to enhance student success by assisting students and their families in the transition to the new college environment".

Mack similarly focuses on the issue of intentionality on the part of institutions. Mack describes orientation as

> an intentional experience which demonstrates to a new student the interrelationship among the college's various departments and how he or she fits in. College orientation programmes encapsulate the essence of their institutions by introducing students to the academic life, culture, traditions, history, people, and surrounding communities. The goal is to provide individuals with a holistic view of the new college experience. At the same time, it sets expectations for students' responsibilities in their academic career. (Mack, 2010, p. 4)

According to Jacobs (2010, p. 29), orientation has several purposes:
  (a) disseminating information;
  (b) reducing costly errors, such as the avoidance of missing important deadlines, registering incorrectly or registering for unnecessary classes etc.;
  (c) building a framework for academic success; and
  (d) building community and (e) defining campus culture.

Although orientation is standard practice for higher education institutions, the scope and content of orientation programmes varies considerably across the global institutional landscape and between faculties, schools, and departments. Most institutions of higher education provide a generic introduction to library and computer facilities and student support services. Typical elements of an orientation programme include: the provision of information and guidance about academic requirements and support services of the institution by academics and student services staff; the involvement of peer leaders, mentors, and student volunteers; and, more recently, department-based activities with new students often involving 'ice-breakers' and team-based tasks and challenges.

However, it can be said that in recent decades there is no longer a 'generic' or 'typical' approach to orientation in different parts of the world. Even a cursory scan of international literature about orientation shows that the traditional scope of orientation programmes has now widened considerably (in relation to different factors such as country contexts, student populations, receptiveness of higher education institutions, etc.), and in ways from which South Africa can certainly draw for the purpose of improving the country's orientation practice.

Understanding the Importance of Orientation
Despite the well-understood importance of issues of student retention and success as well as compelling evidence about the key role that orientation plays in building a foundation for academic success (Kuh et al., 2005) orientation has historically been poorly understood and

hence under-estimated in terms of its long-term academic importance to both students and universities. Orientation tends to be low on institutional priorities because it does not easily lend itself to quantifiable evidence about efficacy. In a context of ever-increasing demands for the availability and use of university resources, it is acknowledged that "orientation programmes may receive less than impressive facility assignments, be forced to compete for resources and receive little recognition" (Jacobs, 2010, p. 29). In the past there has been generally little incentive for institutions of higher education to invest substantially in the content and practice of orientation.

As noted earlier, institutional attitudes towards the importance and content of orientation have undergone a notable change in the past two decades. Expectations for orientation have expanded accordingly in line with the increasing complexity of the demands made upon institutions and the higher education sector. Prevailing trends in the higher education sector such as massification, increased consumerism, new technologies, and the growing diversity of student populations have sharpened the need for educational quality and effectiveness and refocused attention on matters of attrition, retention, pedagogical quality, and teaching and learning processes. As a result, institutions of higher education have increasingly looked to orientation to do a number of important things for the institution such as redefining the relationship with students and promoting a sense of belonging amongst students – ultimately helping to retain students in the higher education system.

As awareness has grown of the impact of student diversity in a mass higher education system, orientation has had to address diverse student characteristics and needs in line with the increased complexity of different student populations (Cubarrubia & Schoen, 2010). Orientation programmes have had to respond accordingly and tailor content and offerings to a highly diverse student body in order to integrate them academically and socially into the institution. Consequently, a greater investment of time and resources has been made by institutions towards the goal of ensuring that orientation meets the needs of first-year students in ways which are strongly student-centred and rely less on didactic styles and teacher-centred approaches (Schofield & Sackville, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2010).

It has been possible to see an increase in literature supporting the role of orientation and situating orientation as part of a broader theoretical framework of student development. Research shows that orientation activities are linked to a variety of positive outcomes for first-year students, such as improving preparedness, empowering students with the relevant knowledge and information, and easing academic and social integration issues – which in turn, has a beneficial impact on student persistence and retention and graduation rates for institutions (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1986; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Jones, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008). There is also a growing body of student-centred literature about orientation from various institutions in different parts of the world, often case-study based, which attempts to understand the student experience from the needs and perspectives of students. This body of literature is often detail-oriented, including recommendations for good practice, and offers a great deal of scope for institutions of higher education to learn about and from each other. It is not possible to cite key sources from this body of literature on account of

the size of the pool of the literature. However, it is possible to say that some institutions of higher education, such as Nottingham Trent University and Ulster University in the United Kingdom, have accomplished a large amount of work in the field of good practice in orientation.

Good Practice Strategies for South Africa

How can South Africa move towards good and improved orientation practice? Seven good practice 'strategies' are proposed herein, with an eye to being seen as 'gaps' in terms of how orientation practice currently operates as well as being solution-oriented and therefore relatively easy to implement. The aforementioned seven strategies are outlined below in relative order of importance. However, they can be considered to be interlocking and mutually reliant on each other. While each of the following good practices strategies can individually make a great difference to the practice of orientation, their effects are greatly expanded when interacting synergistically with each other.

Good Practice Strategy #1: Create and commit to a vision for orientation

A sound vision for orientation is the starting point, and indeed the veritable 'core' of the strategic foundation of good orientation practice. Orientation programmes should be based upon the solid foundation of a guiding vision and value system, one which is coherent, well-understood, and which can be easily articulated by stakeholders. Such a vision and value system cannot be generic. It should be aligned to that of the institution of higher education in question. However, there should be certain guiding principles upon which a successful orientation programme is built. An example is proposed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: A vision for orientation

Broad (Long-Term) Goals for Orientation	
• Holistic student development • Academic achievement	• Student persistence • Overall student success
Key Objectives	
Value: Orientation should show students that they are valued and welcomed by the institution and all its relevant stakeholders in line with the 'invitational' theoretical framework proposed by Purkey and Novak (1996).	
Self-empowerment: Orientation should show students that they are capable of exercising their own agency and influence over their own educational performance and achievements, in ways that encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.	
Effective delivery of relevant information: Orientation should aim to prepare students for academic life by: (a) showing them what is expected of them academically; (b) familiarising them with the various on-campus services and programmes that are designed to support students; and (c) providing information about courses, timetabling, and other administrative matters related to the requirements of the course as well as the institution.	
Creation of supportive relationships and networks: Orientation should allow socialisation opportunities such that students are enabled to develop different forms of social capital at the institution and make the relevant connections and relationships which can support their higher education journey.	

Good Practice Strategy #2: Adopt a staged view of orientation

Studies on student transition suggest that orientation should be viewed in the context of a developmental process, beginning with an elucidation of the transitional processes involved in the student life-cycle and a critical assessment of where and how orientation is needed at different stages in the student life-cycle (Haselgrove, 1994; Cook & Rushton, 2008; Morgan, 2012). Cook and Rushton (2008) usefully build upon Haselgrove's (1994, p. 3) succinct description of the student life-cycle of "getting in, being there and moving on" by suggesting that different phases of the student experience be incorporated into a traditional orientation programme. Particular attention is paid to the earliest stages of the student life-cycle, such as that of the initial contact made with the institution of higher education in question. In line with the contention by Tresman (2002) that "the student's learning journey starts with the initial enquiry to the university", orientation should, in fact, begin before students commence their studies.

This early stage can be referred to as the 'first contact and pre-arrival' stage or simply as 'pre-entry'. It can be defined as the earliest contact made with the institution of higher education in question, and specifically, the point between application and enrolment at the university. This particular early stage of the student life-cycle is seen as a discrete one and one which has been hitherto overlooked in terms of its important relationship to retention. It is argued that positive first impressions of the university are associated with student persistence and significantly influence the extent to which students are motivated to persist throughout their studies (Allen, 1999; Kealy and Rockel, 1987). Accordingly, Yorke and Thomas (2003, p. 68) advise that this particular stage of the student life-cycle be accorded special attention by institutions of higher education; notably, they recommend diverse strategies such as "sending newsletters, emails and text messages and having teams of students in high visibility t-shirts to welcome students at enrolment" in order to make a strong impression upon new students.

Tresman (2002) suggests that institutions of higher education have to support students at the pre-entry stage by affording them the relevant information to make informed choices about their studies. Noting that "higher education institutions must ensure that students are not pitched into a level of study in which they cannot possibly cope," Tresman (2002) recommends that institutions provide detailed pre-entry material, even meetings and face-to-face interviews with students wherever possible, so as to try to avoid the wrong choice of field of studies or a possible mismatch between expectations and the realities of the course of study for students.

It is recommended that some aspects of university study should be made familiar to students before they first arrive at university such that they may know where they have to be and what they should be doing when they first get there. Wherever possible, students should be provided with timetables (academic timetables as well as that for orientation events). Even at this early stage, an effort should be made to provide students with reading lists for prescribed textbooks, and maps showing venues for scheduled classes (wherever possible). Personalised letters inviting students to orientation are also seen as a useful and distinctive way of reaching out to students (Clack, 2009; Shobrook, 2003).

Trotter and Roberts (2006) make a case for accurate, up-to-date prospectus, website, and publicity material about the institution as ways to give students as much information as possible at the earliest stages of their contact with the institution of higher education in question. It is certainly possible to see that a dedicated orientation website, i.e. an integrated web page which shares information about a number of different aspects of university – such as enrolment, finance, and accommodation – would help to prepare students for the realities of academic life and serve as a useful reference guide at different points along the student life-cycle. Tours of the student residences on YouTube or Snapchat could, for example, help to familiarise students with the institution and the realities of their new existence as students before they actually arrive on campus.

It appears to be a commonplace practice for some internationally-based institutions to use 'pre-arrival activities and tasks' in order to familiarise students with the requirements and expectations of their course. Such pre-arrival tasks are often linked to the orientation activities taking place at the institution (Foster & Lawther, 2012) and provide an initial sense of what academic life will require of students. They are often discipline-specific, being set by the programme or course within which students are based and help students to understand their subject matter and the kind of thinking they will be required to do.

In line with the idea of a 'staged' view of orientation, 'extended orientation' is now a common practice. Extended orientation refers to orientation activities being spread out over a longer period of time during the academic year. It is argued that extending the length of the orientation period allows students to "assimilate and make sense of the information provided, to socialise with the staff and existing students through a range of activities and to feel that they belong in the higher education community at their institution" (Crosling et al., 2009, p. 12). Extended induction can therefore be seen as a longer-term assimilation into the ways and practices of institutions of higher education.

It is noted, however, that extended orientation may not attract a large number of students throughout the course of the academic year as students have less time to spend on orientation on account of the commencement of their studies and being fully engaged by then in their studies. However, it can be argued that in spite of possible reduced attendance, extended orientation still serves a useful function for those students who may have missed the early part of the orientation programme or who are experiencing difficulties adjusting to the curriculum or, more broadly, to university life.

Good Practice Strategy #3: Balance the academic and non-components of orientation

Orientation activities are typically composed of academic and non-academic components, in order that students are guided towards integration into the institution in both academic and social aspects. It is recognised that the social aspect of orientation is very important, and that it should allow students the opportunity to form the relevant friendships and networks which can support them throughout their higher education journey. Therefore, orientation has had to incorporate social activities with an emphasis on 'fun' (such as welcome parties

at student residences or other social events aimed at first-year students) into the structure of orientation programmes and activities.

It is, however, often challenging to achieve a proportionate balance between academic preparation and 'fun' activities for students. Social activities linked to orientation may inadvertently promote a disinclination towards the academic aspects of university. Fun activities such as 'beer' or 'keg parties' can often introduce students to a different student lifestyle and hence a mindset which is less oriented towards studies. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2010, p. 31) contend that "university orientation weeks with their often heavy emphasis on social activities, having fun and alcohol consumption may in fact be promoting the disinclination toward academic achievement", and they conclude that, "it may be necessary to rethink the activities promoted in orientation week and put an increased emphasis on study skills and academic achievement as integral parts of university life".

Furthermore, Mayhew et al. (2010, p. 340) argue that "orientation programmes are often the first (and sometimes only) structured opportunities administrators have for communicating institutional priorities to students: what messages are we sending if these contexts continue primarily to be positioned for social purposes?"

Good Practice Strategy #4: Give students the information they need at the right time

It is axiomatic that orientation must equip students with knowledge and information about academic life, and how best to settle successfully into their institution of higher education of choice. The kind of information given to students at orientation should include both general and specific kinds of information. While students are typically appraised about matters such as public transport, parking, housing, student employment, careers office, disability support, campus security, and so on, it is also important to include much more detailed information about issues such as safety, ethics, grievances and complaints procedures, or other discipline-specific issues related to dealing with, amongst others, hazardous equipment or working in laboratories.

The transmission of information at the right time, i.e. when it can be most usefully absorbed by students, is of key importance to orientation programmes. The question 'What do students need to know?' is rarely considered in fine-grained detail and in relation to the related question of when students should be receiving particular pieces of information. Too much detail can be counterproductive and lead to 'information overload'. Studies derived from student questionnaire data often report that students experience being overwhelmed by the volume of information received during orientation and may subsequently forget all the information received therein (Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Clack, 2009). A case can be made here, then, for the aforementioned dedicated webpage on orientation on institutional websites.

In order to combat problems of 'information overload', it is also important to consider that orientation may not always have to be offered in a face-to-face format, or solely as a face-to-face format. Online orientation programmes can allow students to self-manage

their orientation experiences while being able to control the volume of information offered and without having to wait until the commencement of orientation programmes in order to do so (Wilson, 2008). Students would then be able to 'self-pace' themselves and work systematically through structured content.

Online orientation programmes could be offered online to the extent that they could be seen as an alternative process of orientation, and one which may be complementary to face-to-face orientation programmes. Although many institutions of higher education have invested in one way or the other in online programmes, it is rare to find comprehensive orientation programmes which are offered online to a similar extent that they are done in a face-to-face context. The design, development and implementation of online orientation programmes are generally labour-intensive and require buy-in and support from many different stakeholders at the institution of higher education in question. It is certainly possible, however, that the benefits of a comprehensive online orientation programme may well outweigh the costs of developing and setting it up.

Good Practice Strategy #5: Allow students to develop healthy forms of social capital at the institution

Studies have shown that the principal source of anxiety for first-year students relates to that of fitting-in and belonging (O'Keefe, 2013; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Hoffman, Richmond & Morrow, 2002). It is therefore important that institutions create specific opportunities for socialising and set up social events – described by Worrall (2007) as "forced networking" – which allow students comfortable ways to meet and engage with other staff and students with whom they will be interacting over the course of their studies. These events are encouraged to be as inclusive as possible and to consider matters of race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion when planning and organising such events.

The underlying ethos of social inclusivity and engagement behind orientation is contrary to that of another institutional practice which is often argued to be part of orientation: initiation or 'hazing' ceremonies and rituals. Orientation is often understood to be associated with initiation. Initiation practices are argued to be an expanded form of orientation for new students and a crucial rite of passage for new students entering the situation. (South African Human Rights Commission, 2001; Dias & Sa, 2014). According to Dias and Sa (2014, p. 1), initiation is regarded by first-year students as "a necessary and inevitable price to 'pay' for their entrance into the academic world".

Though frowned upon and in many cases banned, initiation ceremonies remain pervasive at institutions of higher education all over the world such that educators and lawmakers continue to lobby against the practice on account of the physical and psychological harm posed to students. Orientation programmes can serve as an appropriate platform to speak out against initiation practices and to continue to remind students of the qualitative difference between orientation and initiation.

Good Practice Strategy #6: Help students experience what learning is like at university

It is often argued that orientation should be able to give students an understanding of the expectations and requirements of academic learning, and that students should be able to sample the kind of learning that they will be doing at university. Some institutions use 'pre-arrival tasks activities' to help familiarise students with the content and approach of their respective courses and give them an early opportunity to practise independent learning and study as they will encounter it during the course of their studies (Foster & Lawther, 2012).

However, this is not as easy as it would appear. Studies have shown that South Africa's first-year student cohort, like students in many other parts of the world, tends to be wholly unprepared for the academic demands of university life. According to the Council on Higher Education (2013, p. 54) the under-preparedness of students ranges from "struggling in the formal curriculum to difficulty with adjusting to independent learning and the university environment".

Throughout the first year of study, students' expectations of their studies and of academic life have to be consciously adjusted and managed. Orientation programmes cannot hope to manage the issue of under-preparedness but at the very least they should be able to introduce and initiate a discussion of the difference between students' prior experiences of learning at school and the expectations and requirements of academic life. Orientation should be able to give students the understanding that they will be encountering a new mode of learning; the knowledge of the means to be sufficiently prepared using forms of institutional academic support available; and the opportunities to 'sample' or 'practise' first-year learning activities.

Good Practice Strategy #7: Adopt formal institutional structures and processes for orientation

Good orientation practice stems not only from knowledge and research, but also from the efforts of dedicated personnel who are mandated to manage orientation as a professionalised and high-skill activity. Such dedicated orientation professionals would be able to attend to orientation as a full-time occupation, rather than something which is done at the beginning of the academic year for the duration of a week and then forgotten. There is evidence that institutions of higher education are investing resources and time in retention-related appointments such as that of student retention teams, retention officers and retention counsellors, all of which are responsible for improving the practice of orientation and ensuring that orientation is managed as a developmental priority for the respective institutions. Many such institutional strategies and appointments which are retention-related and have a direct bearing on matters of orientation, are being explored under the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme' at various UK-based universities being funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education

Academy (HEA) (2017). Similar studies in the United States and Canada have been similarly conducted by Hanover Research (2010 and 2014).

Foster and Lawther (2012) recommend the use of assessment techniques which draw on current educational research (Chickering & Gamson, 1991) and focus on evidence of effectiveness and impact. Here, a useful exercise in self-assessment and reflection is provided in Table 2 (below) – which has been developed by Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom in the form of a 'checklist' for orientation professionals in order to assess whether their orientation practices are meeting the needs of students and are aligned with the broader goals of orientation processes.

Table 2: New student induction checklist

Does your induction…		Link to induction principles:
1.	Provide opportunities for students to develop friendship groups and support networks?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks.
2.	Provide opportunities to sample/practise normal first-year learning?	(2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
3.	Provide students their first tutorial during induction week?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
4.	Integrate the pre-arrival task into the induction programme?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
5.	Last as long as a normal teaching week?	(5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.
6.	Use second or final year students for activities such as campus tours?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope; (4) To be reminded of how their course will benefit their future plans.
7.	Minimise the number of guest lectures (preferably integrate them into normal teaching at other appropriate times later in the year)?	(5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.
8.	Treat the induction week as the first week of induction and induct students to new elements and concepts throughout the term?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (4) To be reminded of how their course will benefit their future plans; (5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.

Source: Nottingham Trent University. New Student Induction: Guide for Staff (2017)

Conclusion

The seven good practice strategies outlined herein speak very broadly to the current needs and gaps in current orientation practice in South Africa. There may certainly be further issues which require targeted attention, for example how best to address the needs of specific student populations within an orientation programme. A case in point is that of international students whose needs are often unrecognised within a generic orientation programme. However, there are other categories of students who require discrete and targeted attention and resources within orientation programmes, such as that of disabled or 'differently abled' students and transgender or intersex students. It can be said that such categories of students may have specific needs that may not always be accommodated within a traditional orientation programme.

At the conclusion of this work, it must be noted that the good practice strategies for orientation are, above all, not intended to be prescriptive. They offer a starting point for a national conversation about orientation and the required further professionalisation and improvement of the field of orientation. Discussion and debate are required with South Africa's orientation professionals and other related stakeholders who work directly in the field and can offer nuanced insights into the matters raised herein. The latter will help to further refine this work and embed it in the realities of South Africa's higher education landscape.

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