

Orientation Online: a new program at James Cook University to help commencing students prepare for university study

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This session outlines and discusses the development of an online orientation program initiated by James Cook University (JCU) for commencing students in 2009. The main purpose of the program was to make important information for commencing students available much earlier. In the past, this information was only made available to commencing students during Orientation Week, the week before teaching starts. The program was also intended to enable commencing students who could not attend Orientation Week, and family and friends of commencing students, to access this information. The program was based on five modules – Using Orientation Online, Meeting people and finding help, Course and career goals, Getting organised before teaching starts, and Academic success. A discussion of the program, its development, usage and feedback from students, provides an opportunity to explore the possibilities for inspiring commencing students to prepare, carefully and in advance, for university study. This session will allow participants to view JCU's Orientation Online program and to identify the primary needs of students, from a range of backgrounds, when preparing for university study.

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Background

Orientation is an important part of the first year experience at James Cook University.

It was recognised that commencing students face an enormous challenge in terms of collating, considering and utilising a large quantity, and diverse range, of information and services presented during Orientation Week (O Week), the week before teaching starts. It was also acknowledged that an increasing number of students were unable to participate in O Week largely due to work commitments and/or by choosing to study by flexible delivery. Making information available online was seen as a good option for extending the reach of O Week.

Orientation Online was introduced essentially to enable commencing students to prepare for studying at JCU earlier (before O Week) and to prepare without attending O Week (studying by flexible delivery or unable to attend).

Aims and content of *Orientation Online*

It was critical that *Orientation Online* would support the core aims of JCU Orientation. These are based on established first year principles that relate to:

- Strengthening each student's sense of purpose,
- Developing student resilience,
- Building a peer support network, and
- Supporting quality teaching and learning experiences.

Furthermore, it was anticipated that the introduction of *Orientation Online* might improve retention and progression of first year students.

Through the use of *Orientation Online*, students:

- articulate their career and course goals,
- find out how to contact other students,
- learn how to use their JCU email and Internet account,
- learn how to use IT portals eStudent, LearnJCU and Students*Online*,
- work out their lecture timetable (on-campus students),
- locate their lectures, tutorials and general access computers (on-campus),
- develop an awareness of census dates,
- check their fees and charges online,
- find books and journals using the Library catalogue,
- learn how to borrow, extend and put Library books on hold,
- locate online learning resources,
- pick up tips on how to succeed at university, and
- find out where to go for more information or assistance.

Orientation Online was designed to help commencing students prepare for learning at JCU. The initial development plan included specific information for flexible delivery students. However, this was not implemented at the time the program was introduced. Feedback from students who used *Orientation Online* reflected a strong need for information specific to flexible delivery study modes. It is anticipated that this information path will be implemented for the 2009 mid-year intake.

Acknowledging that students benefit from the support of family and friends, guest access to *Orientation Online* was made available to the general public. It was also regarded important that the program could be easily viewed by JCU staff to aide referrals to the program.

Built into *Orientation Online* was a feedback form and automatically generated report of usage that provided statistics on the number of students who logged-in to the program and their status (faculty, campus, study mode, international vs domestic).

Student reaction

Orientation Online was evaluated using online feedback from commencing students who had worked through the program and an automatically generated report of the categories of students who had logged-in to the program.

Orientation Online was made available in Dec 2008. By Feb 2009, 257 commencing students had logged-in. Feedback was received from 68 of these.

The examples below are a mix of comments highlighting the challenge inherent in creating an information resource capable of meeting a diverse range of needs.

Add what:

“How distance education works – what they get in the mail ... and when they should expect to receive it. None of this information is provided.”

“More interactivity to ensure that the content was understood and tasks can be completed.”

“I personally found the online orientation very well put together - with a wide variety of information to help new students like myself.”

General:

“Overall it was really helpful and really interesting. I was away for O'week, and my first few days at uni have been extremely overwhelming, especially since i was away for the first 2 days of lectures! The orientation online has really helped me get my bearings, and now I've been able to catch up on what i missed! Thanks!!!”

“i found it hard to get back in and take off where i left it i had to start all over again every time!!!”

“Great first step for people about to attend as it points out new things we have to learn, we can prepare ourselves before starting so we aren't thrown in the deep end.”

In this session

Participants will hear about the development of *Orientation Online* and the outcomes of its first use in 2009. An opportunity will be given to view the main features of *Orientation Online*. (15 mins)

Only one of the following activities will be conducted in this session. Participants will nominate which activity would be of most value to them.

(a) Identifying primary needs of commencing students from a range of backgrounds when preparing for university study

Each person in the audience is given a written profile of a commencing student that specifies equity group, age, level of familiarity with Townsville or Cairns, and study mode (on-campus or flexible delivery). Participants, in pairs, will discuss what they need to do before teaching starts and write these as dot points in order of priority. These lists will be handed back to the presenter who will collate the information and send it to those who provide their email address after the Conference. (15 mins)

OR

(b) Questions, answers and discussion

The presenter will invite questions about *Orientation Online* and will facilitate a broader discussion that draws on each participant's knowledge and experience of the use of online resources to support orientation of commencing students. (15 mins)

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