

Do academic orientations make a difference: a preliminary assessment

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Abstract

Research on the experiences of international students and their adaptation to the education environment in NZ has revealed some dissatisfaction relating to the academic experience of international students in NZ. It has been suggested that the discrepancy between international students' expectations and reality may sometimes contribute to negative views and difficulties with study. Student Learning Support Service at Victoria University of Wellington has designed and trialled a number of academic orientation programmes and materials for international students, in an attempt to ease the transition, raise awareness of possible challenges students may face in a NZ tertiary environment, and ultimately create a more positive and rewarding academic experience. This paper reports on a preliminary evaluation of the influence of our academic orientation programmes on international students' attitudes and study behaviours. Students who attended the July 2004 orientation, as well as those who did not, were invited to participate in a two-stage research programme. They were interviewed at the beginning of the trimester, and at mid-trimester they responded to a questionnaire. We found that students who had attended our academic orientation programmes tended to demonstrate more detailed awareness of the main skills required in their new education environment. They also tended to apply a wider range of study strategies. We tentatively conclude that academic orientation programmes do make a difference.

Introduction

Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) experienced a large increase in international students in the late 1990s. This prompted Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) to run Academic Preparation Programmes (now called *Preparation for Academic Life and Study*) for these incoming international students. These programmes, first offered in 1999, were run at the beginning of each trimester and students attended voluntarily. As well as running these programmes from the SLSS office, we also attended International Student Orientation, run by Victoria International. There we introduced ourselves and our services to incoming international students. Over the years our daily practice as learning advisers has continued to inform our understanding of the challenges facing international students and we have fine-tuned our programmes in accordance with our observations. However, although each programme is evaluated and comments from participants are favourable, we are still not sure that our programmes make a difference to the attitudes and behaviours of new students. Therefore this pilot research sets out to gain some insight into whether our orientation programmes make a difference in these respects.

The academic orientation programmes

Student Learning Support Service offers two orientation programmes to incoming international students. The first programme, *Academic Expectations at Victoria* (AEV), is integrated into the international students' orientation and is held two weeks before the academic trimester commences. It is a one-hour programme with a power point presentation, a student-lecturer panel, a video and some interactive activities, such as a miniature expectations quiz and questions-answers. Participation in orientation is compulsory for international students at VUW under the New Zealand Ministry of Education Code of Practice for International Education (2002). Thus our AEV programme is normally presented to an audience of between 200 and 600 students. The second programme, *Preparation for Academic Life and Study* (PALS), consists of two parts: an initial half-day session on the Saturday immediately after the orientation and weekly workshops throughout the academic trimester. This paper refers to the Saturday programme only. This Saturday half-

day session provides a range of activities: a video, a SWOT analysis, a tutorial session, a student panel and a mini lecture. Participation is voluntary and around 10% of the new international students join the session.

Through these programmes we hope to give students a clear idea of the expectations the academic environment requires of them. Students analyse their personal strengths and weaknesses as they see them in relation to this environment. Thus, our objectives, as listed in our programme planning, read:

- To acknowledge students:
 - for taking on a new opportunity
 - for the contribution they will make to our institution
 - for the skills they bring
- To help students understand the expectations of Victoria's educational environment
- To help students identify their needs (in terms of new skills they might need to learn)
- To give students confidence: intellectual, oral, social
- To encourage help-seeking behaviours
- To inform students of academic support available
- To give some background to NZ political and economic systems

Until now, evaluations of these programmes have focused on student satisfaction. Bresciani, Zelna and Anderson (2004) state, however, that satisfaction surveys do not provide information on the achievement of programme objectives nor do they show how the programme might have contributed to student development and learning (p.20). Even though students' comments show that they are appreciative of our efforts, we still do not know whether attendance at our programmes ensures a more positive and rewarding academic experience for international students at Victoria. Bresciani (2002) proposes that "as educators, student affairs professionals assess the development and learning outcomes of their programs." Consequently, we decided to attempt to assess the outcomes of our orientation programmes.

Research objectives

Based on our programme objectives (see previous section), our orientation programmes should have the following outcomes:

- 1) Students understand that academic requirements at VUW may be different
- 2) Students understand the need to become independent and active learners
- 3) Students understand the need to become active help-seekers

The first outcome can be further divided into:

- a) Students understand the importance of critical thinking
- b) Students understand the importance of referencing

As these outcomes involve long-term skill development and may not be observable immediately, we decided to focus on the effects of our programmes on behavioural/ attitudinal change. Thus, the objectives of our research were to find out if

- Students had changed their expectations of the educational environment at Victoria
- Students had changed their behaviours in respect to study habits

The overarching objective of this research was to explore different ways of conducting outcome assessment of orientation programmes.

Methods

Research design

Two methods were used to collect information for outcome assessment: topic-guided interviews of focus groups, and questionnaires. Interview is not only a good way to obtain rich data, but it is also an excellent way to elicit relevant information. In our case, it gave us opportunities to clarify our questions, or to ask students for explanations of their answers. We chose to interview three focus groups. The main advantages of focus groups are that several students can be interviewed at once and a less threatening environment can be created for participants. Moreover, as this research was our first attempt to assess the outcomes of

orientation programmes, restricting it to three focus groups made it more manageable and allowed us to concentrate on the means of eliciting and measuring outcomes. Questionnaire was chosen as a second method to collect information. It was used initially to collect demographic information and then used again as the main method in the second stage of our data collection. Using a questionnaire as a follow-up method was less time-consuming and more convenient in terms of delivery. More importantly, the follow-up aimed at finding out students' behavioural patterns and this information could be elicited through simple, straightforward questions.

An initial group interview was conducted with each group within a week of orientation. Students were asked six questions relating to:

- perceived differences between studying at VUW and in their home countries
- reasons for these differences
- perceived challenges
- how they would handle these challenges.

The interviews took less than an hour and were recorded on tape and later summarised. During the mid-trimester break, a survey form was sent to the same students as a follow-up. The survey questions aimed to elicit information on students' behavioural patterns. In other words, we hoped to assess whether the orientation programmes had made a difference to students' learning behaviours. The questionnaire consisted of frequency-rated items, yes-no questions and open-ended questions. Most items focused on students' study habits and asked them what they do and how often they do it.

Participants

Four groups of students participated in our research. Initially, thirteen international students were recruited during international orientation in July 2004 via a volunteering scheme. The students were divided into three groups:

- those who attended the AEV session (Group 1)
- those who attended both the AEV and PALS sessions (Group 2)
- those who attended neither AEV nor PALS (Group 3)

We later decided to include one more group of students who attended neither AEV nor PALS (Group 4). This was mainly because the backgrounds of the students in Group 3 (all postgraduate students from Europe) could affect the research results. Table 1 briefly summarises the four groups of participants.

Table 1 Summary of participants

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Total number of students		7	3	3	7
Enrolled programmes	Undergraduate	7	3	-	6
	Postgraduate	-	-	3	1
Ethnicity	Asian	7	2	-	7
	European	-	1	3	-

The majority of the participants were commerce students with entrance English proficiency levels of IELTS 6.0 or above, or equivalent. However, two major differences existed among the groups. Firstly, their length of stay in NZ prior to the commencement of study at VUW was different. Participants in Groups 2 and 3 had just arrived in the country at the time of the first interview. However, all the students in Group 1 and two students in Group 4 had been in NZ for more than three months and had studied in various institutions such as high schools, language schools or language programmes in tertiary institutions. Moreover, the previous educational backgrounds of the participants were different. All but one student in Groups 2 and 3 had already obtained some form of tertiary qualification (i.e. diploma or degree), but less than half the students in Groups 1 and 4 had these qualifications.

Analysis

Measurement of the effectiveness of our orientation programmes is based on the results of two comparisons:

- comparison of the attitudinal differences and similarities between groups 1 & 2 and group 3.
- comparison of the behavioral differences and similarities between Groups 1 & 2 and 4.

The main rationale for excluding Group 3 in the second comparison was that the participants were postgraduate students and were all European students. The similarities in the academic traditions between

European countries and NZ make it difficult to determine if these students' study habits are influenced by their previous tertiary experience or by our academic orientation programmes. A further two participants were excluded from group 2 because one did not respond to our survey and the other was a European student. Consequently, groups 1 and 2 were combined for the second comparison.

Thus we ended up with two groups of students who were reasonably comparable for the second comparison. Both groups were made up of Asian students. There were eight students in the group with orientation and seven in the group without. In terms of prior tertiary qualifications, half of the first group had either a degree or diploma while in the second group the percentage was 43%. Both groups were made up of undergraduate students except for one student in the second group who had enrolled in a graduate diploma.

Results

This section is divided into two parts, each part relating to one of the two comparisons mentioned above in the analysis section. The first part presents the results of the interviews with students during orientation week and thus compares the attitudinal differences and similarities of groups 1 & 2 with group 3. The second part gives the results of our survey of student behaviours at week six of the trimester. This part compares the behavioural differences and similarities of groups 1 & 2 with group 4.

Interview results

The interviews during orientation week had two goals. We wanted to know whether our presentations had changed students' expectations and we wanted to know whether students were planning any particular study behaviours as a result of our orientation programmes.

We found that students who had attended our programmes seemed to have some clear expectations of their new educational environment. They reported that they expected lecturers to teach differently here. Whereas at home, their lecturers tended to teach them all they needed to know in order to pass, they thought that at Victoria they would need to conduct independent research and give individual opinions. They thought that here in New Zealand application of knowledge would be more important than memorization of information. They said that at home, in terms of assignments as well as exams, the final result or product was all-important, whereas in NZ it seemed that the skills or process used to produce the final work were also important. Particular skills seen as challenging were: evaluation and comparison of source materials, paraphrasing and referencing. The group agreed that one of the biggest challenges for them would be studying in a foreign language. They thought time management would become a challenge because of this new language and also because they would be acquiring new skills and having to work more independently than they were used to.

Our group number three who had not attended orientation had some similar expectations as well as some different ones. Like the orientation attendees, they also thought they would need to do some research of their own for assignments and they would need to give their own opinions in assignments. They said that at home summarizing a variety of sources was important whereas here students would need to demonstrate their own thinking and use more quotes in their writing. Like the orientation group, they too stated that at home students had to learn more facts. This group had additional ideas on how class would be run. They believed that students would lead class discussions here whereas at home lecturers lead classes. They thought they would have more contact with their lecturers here than at home.

Although these two groups often gave similar general expectations, the first group provided much more detail and clearly understood the environment well, especially in terms of assessment. They stated, for example, that they would need to paraphrase a lot whereas the second group mentioned that they would quote more. Paraphrasing is generally the preferred convention for incorporating support material into assignments at Victoria. This first group discussed the need to understand and use specific referencing conventions and they mentioned the need to avoid plagiarism. The second group did not touch on these issues. The first group were articulate in their descriptions of skills required and mentioned analysis, application and critical thinking whereas the second group did not identify these particular skills. The first group mentioned they expected to have to manage time carefully whereas the second group did not touch on

this. Both groups expected to spend much time preparing for lectures and reading. The second group did mention one area that the first group had not touched on. This was the expectation of oral proficiency in terms of presentation. The second group also had some ideas about how class was run and how lecturers interacted with students. Some of these ideas were unfounded.

In terms of planned study behaviours, our orientation group had some good ideas. They said they would talk to classmates, tutors, lecturers and us - Student Learning Support. They said they would attend the PALS workshops for international students. They said they would form study groups to clarify concepts. They would ask questions in tutorials and they would prepare before class. In terms of time management, they would use wall planners or personal schedule systems to assign time to all subjects and assignments. They all said they would take and make opportunities to meet and converse with kiwis, not only on campus but also in the broader community.

Our group who did not attend, also stated they would ask friends for help. They would work hard and like the previous group, prepare well before class. They thought they would be very proactive in class and tutorial discussions and above all, they would listen very hard to the lecturer's tips on how to do assignments. As in the discussion of expectations, this group had less knowledge about specifics. They did not mention our service or workshops. Nor did they plan to ask questions of lecturers and tutors.

Survey results

The survey aimed to find out about students' study behaviours and any possible differences between the group with orientation and the group without. The summary below reports results of the frequency-rated questions (questions 1 to 8) and then the yes-no and open questions.

Figure 1 shows the average scores of the two groups for questions one to eight. The frequencies 'very often', 'often', 'sometimes' and 'never' were given the scores 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively and the average scores shown were calculated based on the frequencies selected. The figure shows that, other than question 3 (searching for extra information) and question 6c (talking to lecturers/tutors about tests/exams), the orientation group generally scored higher than the no-orientation group. This means that the actions carried out by students in the orientation group were more frequent than students in the other group. The difference was particularly obvious in 'talking to classmates about assignments' (question 7) and 'talking to Student Learning Support and other services about your study' (question 8). Students in the orientation group also more often prepared before lectures (question 2), participated in study groups (question 4) and read about NZ society and culture (question 5). However, the two groups behaved very similarly in 'participation in tutorials' (question 1) and 'talking to lecturers/tutors about course content and assignments' (questions 6a and 6b).

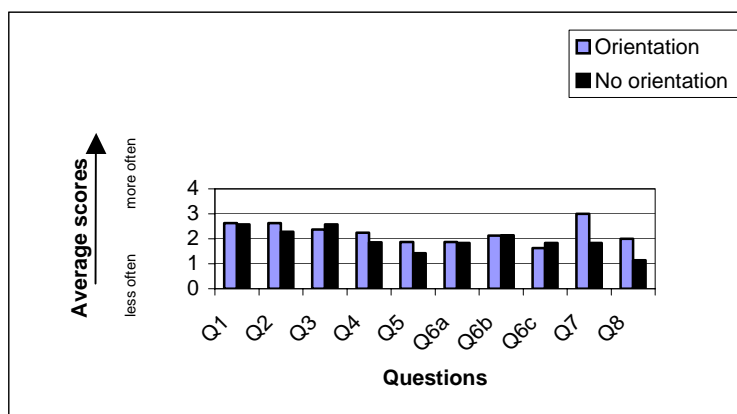


Figure 1 Comparison of behaviours

The participants' answers to questions 9 to 11 were similar to a certain extent. For instance, both groups reported that they actively improved their English, although individual participants used different methods to improve their language. Both groups also reported that they tried to deal with difficulties and challenges in their study, and generally identified essay writing, reading and communicating in English as the main areas of difficulty or challenge. Most of the students in both groups reported talking to lecturers, tutors or friends

as the main way of dealing with challenges. Only one student from each group said they attended study skills workshops.

Questions 12 and 13 were related to students' understandings about examinations and to satisfaction with their study experience. While most students in the no-orientation group thought examinations at Victoria would be different, only half thought so in the orientation group. However, both groups reported they intended using exam preparation tactics such as studying hard, reading more and preparing more. Both groups expressed satisfaction with their academic experience at Victoria so far.

The last question asked for participants' grades. Only six students in the orientation group and four in the other group provided us with this information. Figure 2 summarises the grade distribution of the two groups. The grades of the orientation group fell within the B and A range, while the no-orientation group's grades were in the C and B range.

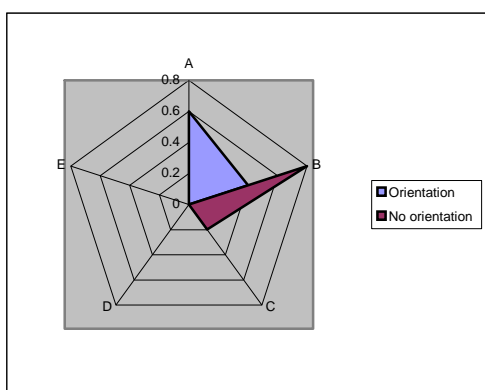


Figure 2 Grade distribution

Discussion

The interviews during orientation week, revealed that students who had been to our orientation programmes had a more detailed set of expectations than those who had not. They could identify important requisite skills of their new educational environment, such as critical thinking, analysis and application. They were clearer about academic integrity issues such as referencing conventions. They realized that their time would need to be managed well if they were to be successful. The no-orientation group were not so specific in their interviews. As they were post-graduates and European it is possible that they did not perceive differences in terms of thinking or time management skills. This would explain why they did not mention these skills. However, our experience in working with other students with similar characteristics reveals that there often are differences in requisite skills between European institutions and ours.

Research shows it is important that we minimize the gap between expectation and experience. Research into cross-cultural and educational adaptation of Asian students in New Zealand reveals that "overall, expectations are more positive than experiences" (Berno & Ward, 2003). Berno and Ward's report states, for example, that 86.7% of students interviewed expected to get good grades in New Zealand whereas only 28.4% reported that this was their actual experience. This study found that one of the factors associated with successful adaptation in New Zealand was realistic expectations. The authors state that "under-met" expectations lead to more depression and academic and social difficulties. They outline the importance of giving information which realistically portrays student life in NZ. This is what we tried to do in our programmes and our orientation group did seem to have clearer expectations than the non-orientation group. Although we will not test post-course satisfaction levels, we would expect them to be high.

The second objective of the interviews was to check planned behaviours. Again, the orientation group were more specific in what they intended to do. Here again, however, the status of the students in the no-orientation group might have affected their responses. Because they were more experienced in tertiary study they might not have mentioned already-perfected skills such as time management. Overall, though, this

group did not plan such a range of strategies as the orientation group and they were unaware of the academic support programmes available to them on campus.

The orientation group's awareness of a wider range of strategies can also be seen in the survey results. The survey shows that, in comparison to students in the no-orientation group, those in the orientation group were more likely to talk to their classmates and learning advisers about their study as well as talking to their lecturers and friends, like the other group did. The proceedings from the first International Student Forum in New Zealand held by Aotearoa Tertiary Students' Association in 2003, state that newly arrived international students do not understand communication behaviours in New Zealand and that international students often do not know how to act in order to resolve problems (Williams, 2003). A 2002 study of international students at Victoria also showed that some students did not know academic support was available to them (Colgan, 2002). Our survey results clearly show that the academic orientation programmes had not only raised students' awareness of the range of help available on campus, but had also increased the incidence of accessing such help.

Our academic orientation programme also seems to have made a difference to students' study habits. Presenters at The First Year in Higher Education conference in Christchurch in 2002 expressed concern about the academic performance of international students at New Zealand universities (Hunter & Pickering, 2002). A 2002 study of international students by Victoria International found that some international students at Victoria felt unprepared for the amount of independent study required (Cronin, 2003). Our survey shows that students who had attended our orientation programmes were more likely to prepare before class. They were also more likely to participate in study groups. Moreover, the orientation group also showed a higher tendency to read about NZ culture and society. During our programmes this activity had been emphasised as an important way to gain better understanding of some course content and to improve English. The difference in the results of the two groups of participants shows that attending the academic orientation programmes may have made students more aware of the different ways to study. These attendees also seemed to have achieved slightly higher in their study, although the connection between higher achievement and attending the academic orientation programme is inconclusive at this stage.

There are two areas, however, where our academic orientation programmes do not seem to have made much difference. The first is in attitude toward exams and tests. The no-orientation group seemed more likely to think exams and tests would be different at VUW and were more proactive in discussing these assessments with their lecturers and tutors. It is possible that this difference was a result of the students in the group having experienced this form of assessment at VUW already, while those in the orientation group had not. Nevertheless, this may be an area for exploration in terms of future programme planning as well as future research.

The second area of little difference is academic skills workshop attendance. Exit interviews of international students at Victoria in 2001 revealed that there was a need for workshops on the Victoria academic culture and requirements (Victoria International, 2001). Subsequently, weekly skills workshops especially catering for international students have been set up (this is part of the PALS programme) and are usually actively advertised during orientations. However, attendance at such workshops has been unsatisfactory, and this can be seen in our survey as well – the percentage of those attending our workshops was minimal in both groups. It is possible that poor attendance is due to unsuitable timetabling or student workload, but at the moment we do not know the reasons. This is another area which will require further research.

Conclusion

This research is a pilot study and conclusions are therefore somewhat limited. Because of the preliminary nature of the work, we were unconcerned by the relatively small sample size. The next stage of research will ensure that samples are larger and more comparative in terms of students' background and previous tertiary study experience. Although samples were small in this research, the methodology we used, especially focus group interview, enabled us to gather some useful information relating to the effectiveness and impact of our programmes. It seems that our programmes do make a difference. The main difference is in the level of clarity and accuracy with which students are able to articulate their expectations of the new environment. The students who had attended revealed good understandings of the differences in teaching/learning styles

and in particular of the skills they would require here. Not only were they able to use terminology like: analysis, application, critical thinking and paraphrasing but it was clear they understood the implications these requisite skills would have for them as learners. This group also had good knowledge of the support available to them. The no-orientation group, on the other hand, did not reveal such a clear understanding of their new environment; nor did they know of customized workshops available to support them. In terms of actual behaviour, there was also significant difference between the two groups. The orientation attendees used a wider variety of strategies to meet the challenge of their new environment when compared with the no-orientation group. They reported talking with a wider variety of people including learning advisers. They also reported more preparation before class and they had spent time reading about New Zealand society and culture whereas the other group had not done this.

However, in two areas results were unexpected. Neither group actually attended workshops regularly (although at the beginning of the trimester, the orientation group had indicated they would). Secondly, expectations of the no-orientation group in relation to exams were closer to reality. We will build more discussion around these two issues into our next research phase. We will investigate the timing, content and format of our workshop programme in an effort to ensure that it is what students want and that it is presented when and how they desire.

Overall, this research shows that we are on the way to ensuring our international students have realistic expectations of their environment and thus higher levels of satisfaction with their experience. It also shows that orientation programmes have some impact on student behaviours and in particular those behaviours which relate to useful communication around course content and assessment.

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