

Don't Forget the Chilli Sauce! A Weekend Orientation Getaway Experience

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Abstract

The University of New South Wales initiated a weekend '*Orientation Getaway*' for international students in 2005. The program was coordinated by International Student Services (ISS) and facilitated with the help of ISS Peer Mentors. The program aimed to enhance both the group and individual needs of students during their critical transition phase. At the group level the '*Orientation Getaway*' developed a sense of belonging and built support networks within the international community whilst enhancing student confidence, knowledge of Australian culture, and career and study awareness at the individual level. The ISANA session will outline the design, implementation and evaluation aspects of this program so far.

Key Words:

orientation, peer mentors, community building, student support

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share the weekend *Orientation Getaway* experience that was implemented by International Student Services at the University of New South Wales in conjunction with regular orientation activities. Through the discussion of various aspects of the program it is hoped that other institutions can gain an overview into the program. Both staff and students strongly believe that the *Orientation Getaway* was an invaluable step towards a successful international student experience.

Orientation Getaway Design and Implementation

1. Objectives

1. To provide a support network for newly arrived international students
2. To improve students self esteem and self confidence
3. To enhance the sense of belonging of new international students to the UNSW community
4. To further integrate the peer mentor program with orientation activities
5. To increase awareness and knowledge of Australian culture, study and career concerns

2. Program

The venue selected was chosen to enable a balance of fun team-building activities and conference facilities for more structured and informative sessions to support new international students with various aspects of their stay in Sydney and at UNSW. Team-building activities included canoeing, a high ropes course, a local beach visit, a campfire and damper activity, a bush-dancing class, sporting activities and evening parties. The more formal components of the program included a session on academic skills run by the UNSW Learning Centre, a session on career planning run by the UNSW Careers and Employment Service and a session on Australian Culture and Slang.

The program was selected to run from Friday to Sunday, the weekend before week 1. This time was decided on after consultation with students.

3. Marketing

All commencing international students were notified of the *Orientation Getaway* before and after their arrival in Australia. The event was marketed to students before their arrival through the orientation brochure sent with their pre-departure information, a welcome email sent by the international student advisers, through peer mentor email correspondence and via the international website. Once students had arrived they received information in their Welcome Pack and at Arrival Briefings. For 2006 we have incorporated the program information in their *Preparing For Student Life*, pre-departure booklet that they receive in their home country.

4. Registration

On average, the actual cost off the weekend was \$260 per student. However, this was subsidised for full fee paying international students to encourage their participation. Non-award exchange and study abroad students were able to attend at the full cost. The fee included transport, cabin accommodation, all meals and activities.

Students registered with an application form that was included in their official International Student Orientation Program and booklet. This form was either faxed or emailed back to ISS with payment details prior to their arrival. An early bird price was established to encourage participants to sign up early, one month before the weekend. The majority of students registered after their arrival in Australia, 1-2 weeks before the weekend.

5. Human Resources

Peer Mentor Commitment

The event relied heavily on the support of Peer Mentors. 8-12 peer mentors were selected to participate in each weekend. Peer Mentors were allocated to the following roles:

- Group Leaders for ice breaking games and sporting activities
- Registration Assistants to help with name tags, room allocations etc
- Transport Leaders for each bus journey
- Party Coordinators to select music and activities etc
- Session and Meal Assistants (setting up, distribution of handouts, packing up,)
- Wake-up Duty
- Group Games Coordinator

ISS Staff

One staff member, an International Student Adviser coordinated and planned the Orientation Getaway with support from other staff. Three staff members were present to facilitate and supervise during the weekend. Other ISS advisers visited for half a day to help out with small group activities. Guest speakers were invited from within and outside the university to help run sessions.

Results

Participating Students

During Session 1 and Session 2 there were a total of 132 students that participated in the weekend that were represented from 33 various countries, as outlined below.

Table 1: Nationalities represented at both the Session 1 and Session 2 2005 Orientation Getaway

1. Austrian	1	10. Hungarian	1	19. Myanmar	2	28. Taiwan	2
2. Bangladeshi	3	11. Indian	2	20. Pakistan	6	29. Thailand	3
3. British	3	12. Indonesian	25	21. Philippines	1	30. Tanzania	1
4. Canadian	3	13. Ireland	2	22. PNG	1	31. USA	4
5. Chinese	16	14. Japan	3	23. Slovakian	1	32. Vietnam	3
6. Dutch	1	15. Kenya	1	24. Serbian	1	33. Zambian	1
7. Fijian	1	16. Korea	3	25. Singapore	8		
8. German	17	17. Malaysia	7	26. Switzerland	1		
9. Hong Kong	5	18. Mozambican	2	27. South African	1	TOTAL students	132

Student Feedback

Feedback forms were handed out to each participating students during the last session of the Orientation Getaway. Student feedback from the weekend was extremely positive. 92% of surveyed students (n= 106) would highly recommend the trip to other new international Students. When asked an open-ended question about how the Orientation Getaway is useful in helping them adjust 50% of the students responded that the friends they made on the weekend would help them adjust to their new environment. 32% commented that the weekend was both fun and informative, with a further 10% commenting that it helped them adjust specifically to Australia.

It would also be of use to conduct longitudinal research on the perceived student's impact of their participation at the Getaway 6 months afterwards. This will be implemented in 2006.

Evaluation

Student and staff evaluations from the Orientation Getaway identified the following recommendations:

Session 1 2005 Orientation Getaway

- Team activities were highly valued by students.
- The Bush-dancing lessons were a popular and fun activity.
- We needed bottles of chilli sauce! The venue did not cater for students with a liking for spicy food. We had pre-arranged halal food, but forgot that chilli sauce would make western food edible for some students.
- Some students did not enjoy “free time” and needed more structured activities other than dancing and music in the evenings, while other students wanted more free time.
- Evaluations reflected that we did not provide a designated space for students to adequately meet Islamic prayer requirements throughout the weekend.

Session 2 2005 Orientation Getaway

- Board games in the evening enabled all students to participate in an activity in a fun and non threatening atmosphere.
- Students greatly enjoyed the camp-fire and making damper activity.
- Students felt disappointed that they did not meet Australians on the weekend.

Conclusion

The Orientation Getaway has proven to be a success. Of most notability are the friendships and support networks that the students formed throughout the weekend (objective 1). These support groups often last beyond the camp, well into the duration of their stay. The success of the support network objective contributes to that of the second and third outcomes of increased self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of belonging within UNSW. Objective number 4, to further integrate the peer mentor program with orientation activities was partially met as the peer mentors did provide a support network for the new students but perhaps not to the same extent as new students with each other.

The last objective was met in theory with the theme of the Orientation Getaway and sessions on Australian society and culture, but as the students themselves highlighted, what they really want is to actually meet Australian students on the weekend. This challenge is our focus for 2006.