

Pre-Arrival Tool: Services Reaching Out To Students with Offers

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Abstract

Quality pre-arrival information that is clear and easily understood by students from a diverse range of backgrounds, cultures and languages is essential to ensure new international students are well prepared for their study overseas and have a sense of connection to the university during the pre-arrival process.

Up until 2009, Victoria International mailed pre-arrival information to international students who had gained admission to the university. There were issues with this communication method; a four to six week delay in students receiving information, the information could only be updated annually, and there was an increasing student preference for online, rather than paper-based information. In response to student needs, Victoria International launched an online pre-arrival tool in 2009. International students are guided through the pre-arrival process with a focus to better prepare them for student life at Victoria University.

Student focus groups were conducted to obtain feedback on the content, tool functionality and design. Key findings showed that students preferred pre-arrival information in an online format and indicated that the tool contained valuable information in an easy-to-use and creative way. Future plans to enhance the tool include creating versions for different student cohorts, for example; study abroad and exchange, postgraduate students, and students with families.

The same local design company has recently been commissioned to come up with a concept to develop a similar approach for arrival (welcome to wellington) and post-arrival information (with a focus on achieving academic success). We plan to develop, test and launch the post-arrival online tool in 2011.

Keywords

Pre-arrival, pre-departure, online support, prospective students

Introduction

Victoria International is the international office at Victoria University of Wellington dedicated to the recruitment, admission and support of international students. The team at Victoria International prides itself on an innovative approach to student services.

Up until last year, as with many international offices, Victoria International had a traditional approach of communicating with students overseas by posting hard copies of a Pre-departure Handbook with the offer pack. Although the offer pack had been reviewed many times, the method of sending the offer packs by courier to the student home address had remained in place for many years.

In 2008, our student support staff started taking a more active interest in students who had gained admission to the university, but not yet commenced their studies. There was a general concern that that new international students were arriving in Wellington unprepared.

The Pre-departure Handbook mailed to students and/or agents was a passive approach. There were issues with this communication method; firstly, there was often a four to six week delay in students receiving the information, and in some cases the key information did not reach its destination; secondly the information could only be updated annually; and finally there was a student preference for online, rather than paper-based information.

The International Orientation structure was working well; however, there was an opportunity identified to change the format of the pre-arrival information, with the aim of encouraging new students to better educate themselves and arrive in New Zealand more prepared for a successful experience.

The student support team felt that the way to do this was to get the information online in an easy and accessible way for students to use from their home country. Quality pre-arrival information that is clear and easily understood by others coming from a diverse range of backgrounds, cultures and languages is essential to ensure new international students are prepared for their time studying overseas and have sense of connection to the university during the pre-arrival process.

Our Response

In early 2009, the support team along with our e-marketing area at Victoria International brainstormed ideas about how we could better engage students with offers and better prepare them for their arrival in New Zealand. Victoria International then commissioned a local design company to propose a design solution to our problem.

The result was to replace the print material with an interactive online solution. An online pre-arrival tool was launched in June 2009. International students who had gained admission to the university were sent the relevant links in the e-offer package and through the tool were guided through the pre-arrival process and better prepared for student life at Victoria University.

Focus groups of enrolled international students were used to inform the content and development of the tool, and obtain feedback on the content, tool functionality and design during the development process. Key findings from these focus groups confirmed the hypotheses; students preferred pre-arrival information in an online format as opposed to paper based. Final testing with and feedback from students indicated that the tool contained valuable information in an easy-to-use and creative way.

One of the key challenges in designing the tool included communicating a large amount of text in a format that would engage students and encourage them to progress through the tool, and choosing imagery suitable for a market cross-section. The majority of the text is presented in question and answer format, with answers feeding in from Victoria International's active knowledge base to ensure up-to-date information is provided. This approach illustrates good practice to meet changing student communication needs by providing immediate, up-to-date information in easily readable blocks, and in an interactive format, and provide guidance to students before arrival.

Outcome and Benefits

The approach is a sub-site that is divided into four main sections; Before You Get Here, Arriving in New Zealand, Getting Started, and Wellington Lifestyle. Each section contains relevant topic areas. The tool can be found through the web link: <http://prearrival.victoria.ac.nz/>

By moving all pre-departure information online there was the added benefit of being able to increase the level of detail provided to students, but in bite-sized pieces, allowing Victoria International to more actively engage students with the information provided. For example, students can access the airport meeting service online registration, accommodation online application, university student services portal, campus maps, New Zealand and Wellington information, insurance and visa information, all in the same place.

Frequently Asked Questions are updated in real time which means that students are receiving the most up-to-date information every time they access the Pre-arrival Tool.

The team at Victoria International believe that an enhanced service has been achieved by moving to a medium that students want to use – the web. The tool is actively pushed out to students who have gained admission to the university by providing links with the offer letter that is sent electronically to all students and/or their agents.

Site activity can also be tracked to measure uptake; in the period leading up to Trimester 1 2010, there were an average of 30 unique visits per day. Between August 2009 and August 2010, over 7400 unique visits have been made to the site.

Future Plans

The pre-arrival tool has given Victoria International the opportunity to build more information into the pre-arrival process for new international students, but still present the information in a clear and understandable way.

Future plans to enhance the tool include creating versions for different student cohorts; for example, Study Abroad and Exchange, postgraduate students, and students with families. Victoria International recently commissioned the same local design company to come up with a concept to develop a similar approach for a post-arrival tool (with a focus on achieving academic success), and plan to develop, test and launch the post-arrival online tool in 2011.

Acknowledgements

Rachel Carter, *former* Projects Coordinator, Victoria International
Matthias Nebel, *former* Services Manager, Victoria International
Charles Brooks, e-Marketing Coordinator, Victoria International

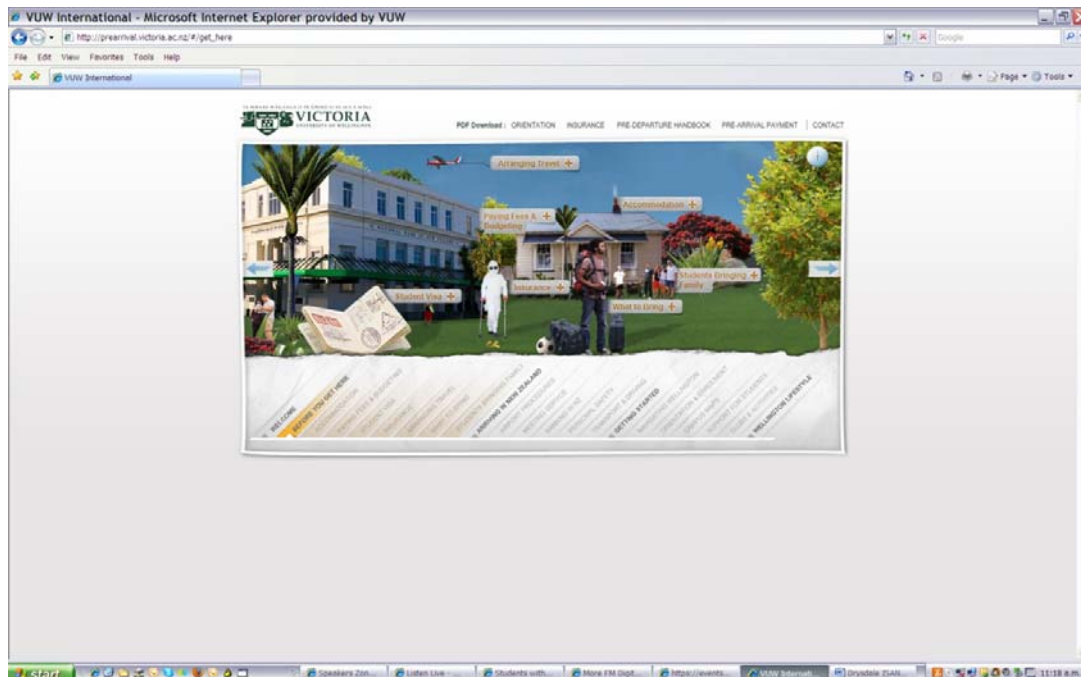
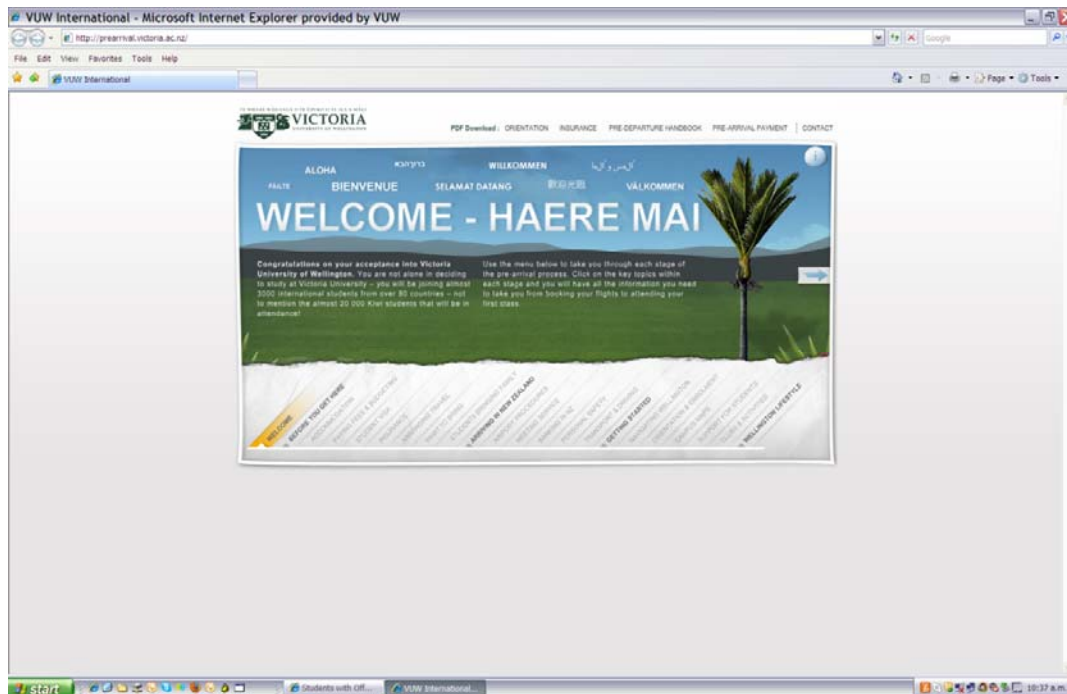
Appendix 1

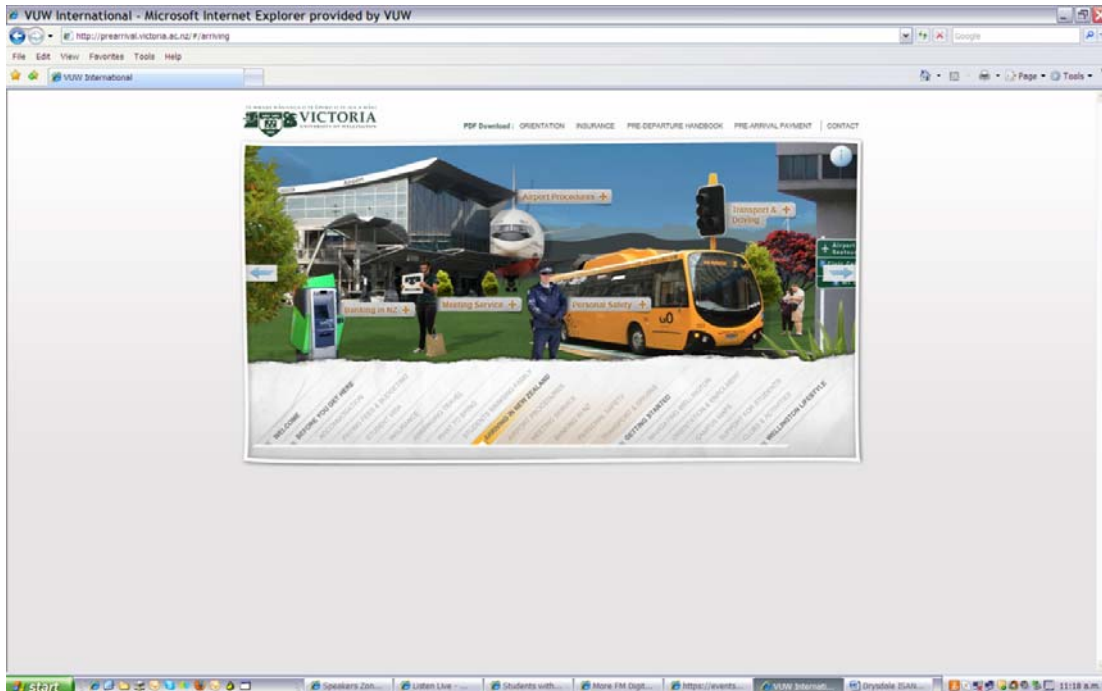
Students with Offers section

www.victoria-international.ac.nz

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the 'Students with Offers' page on the Victoria University website. The page features a large banner image of a cityscape with the text 'Students with Offers' and a sub-headline: 'Now is the time to start planning your travel, accommodation, and study at Victoria. Follow our guide to make the transition a smooth one...'. Below the banner, there is a 'PRE-ARRIVAL GUIDE' section with a list of tasks: 'Apply for accommodation', 'Find out more about living costs in Wellington', 'Pre-pay your tuition fees', 'Apply for a student visa', 'Book your flights and complete our Meeting Service Form', and 'Understand your medical and travel insurance requirements'. To the right, there is an 'ORIENTATION DATES' section stating that orientation is compulsory for all new international students and providing dates for Trimester 3, 2010 and Trimester 1, 2011. The browser's address bar shows the URL 'http://www.victoria.ac.nz/international/offers/index.aspx'.

Pre-arrival Tool





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