



Assessing the impact of orientation programs for first-time entering undergraduate students on student learning: The case of a selected university in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of orientation programs for first-time entering undergraduate students on student learning at a higher education institution. It is a common practice that South African universities offer orientation sessions for first-time entering students. These orientation programs encompass a rigorous effort to improve student retention and academic performance. Drawing data through a qualitative approach was aimed at emphasizing that making sense of action and meaning always involves understanding the other. Such a qualitative research methodology allowed to better understanding of the experiences of both students and lecturers who are involved in the processes of orientation programs and student learning. Semi-structured interviews were used to interview 12 participants. The interviews gave the most direct and straightforward approach to gathering detailed and rich data regarding the phenomenon of interest. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The study findings revealed that students who take part in this program tend to have a better level of academic performance compared to those who do not take part in the orientation program. The study concludes that new strategies must be organised in implementing an orientation program for better student academic performance. The study recommended the enhancement of the role orientation programs that play in facilitating new students' integration into academic environments, fostering not only academic success but also personal development and retention. This study contributed to the broader scholarship in higher education by highlighting the intricate relationship between orientation programs and student outcomes.

Keywords: Orientation, First-Time Entering Students, Student Learning, Academic Performance

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from high school to university is a significant milestone for many students, often accompanied by a range of challenges that can affect their academic and social adjustment. Orientation programs have been increasingly recognized as pivotal in supporting first-time undergraduate students during this transition. These programs not only introduce students to the academic environment but also facilitate social integration, providing crucial support systems for new students as they navigate the complexities of university life. However, despite the growing implementation of such programs, there

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remains a gap in research specifically addressing their impact on student learning outcomes, particularly within the South African context.

It is fundamental that orientation programs play a critical role in facilitating this transition, as it significantly impacts student academic performance, retention, and overall academic and social well-being.¹ Considering the diverse backgrounds and experiences of incoming students, effectively designed orientation programs can help develop a strong foundation for student learning and engagement, promoting not only academic success but also a sense of belonging within the university community.

Literature suggests that while orientation programs can enhance students' sense of belonging and engagement with the academic community, there is limited empirical evidence evaluating their effectiveness regarding specific learning outcomes. For instance, studies have explored various factors impacting student success, such as academic self-efficacy and retention rates,² yet few have systematically assessed how these programs directly influence student learning in South Africa. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this critical gap by evaluating the impact of orientation programs on the academic performance and engagement of first-time entering undergraduate students at a selected South African university.

According to some scholars, comprehensive orientation initiatives serve multiple purposes, including providing vital information about campus resources, establishing connections among peers, and fostering relationships with faculty.³ Moreover, the profound effects that targeted orientation efforts can have on students' academic achievements, recognizing that well-structured programs can significantly alleviate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety commonly faced by new students. These orientation programs have been linked to enhanced social identity and belonging, contributing to improved student performance and increased retention rates in the second year.⁴ This underscores the necessity for orientation programs that not only focus on academic acclimatization but also nurture a supportive learning environment reflective of students' diverse social contexts.

Another important consideration in the orientation program is that the inclusion of both online and face-to-face components within orientation programming can cater to various learning preferences and effectively engage different student populations.⁵ For instance, Crozier's research advocates for the integration of asynchronous online modules in orientation to accommodate the unique logistical challenges learners might experience, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Such integrative approaches can enhance accessibility and ensure that all students, regardless of geographical or situational constraints, receive support during their transitional phase.

In addition, the fostering of familial and community networks throughout the orientation process has been found to bolster student perseverance and resilience.⁷ According to this notion, engaging families in orientation not only aids the student but also equips parents to support their children's educational

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- ¹ Rossen Petkov and Maya Parmakova, "A Comparative Review Of First Year Experience Program Components Aimed At Ensuring Successful Transition Of High School Students To A Liberal Arts University And A Student Perspective In The Case Of An American University In The Balkans," *Educational Alternatives* 21, no. 1 (2023): 105–19, <https://doi.org/10.62991/EA1996124834>; K. M. Soria, B. L. Clark, and L. C. Koch, "Investigating the Academic and Social Benefits of Extended New Student Orientations for First-Year Students," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 20, no. 2 (2019); Asi Owusu Georgina et al., "Orientation Impact on Performance of Undergraduate Students in University of Cape Coast (Ghana)," *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies* 6, no. 7 (September 30, 2014): 131–40, <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEAPS2014.0370>.
- ² Dhanesh Nadeejaya Liyanage, "Different Aspects and Students' Feedback Toward Effective Fresher Orientation in Sri Lankan Public Universities," *International Journal of Educational Science and Research* 8, no. 5 (2018): 7–12, <https://doi.org/10.24247/ijesroct20182>; Daniel P. Nadler, Michael T. Miller, and Jennifer Casebere, "Student Satisfaction With Orientation," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 6, no. 1 (December 19, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v6i1.2480>; Hollie Gammel Smith, Brooke Rodine, and Audrey Williams, "Using Student Learning Outcomes to Evaluate Orientation Programs," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 19, no. 2 (January 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v19i2.2798>.
- ³ Soria, Clark, and Koch, "Investigating the Academic and Social Benefits of Extended New Student Orientations for First-Year Students"; Elena Sandoval-Lucero, Kyla Antony, and William Hepworth, "Co-Curricular Learning and Assessment in New Student Orientation at a Community College," *Creative Education* 08, no. 10 (2017): 1638–55, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.810111>.
- ⁴ Soria, Clark, and Koch, "Investigating the Academic and Social Benefits of Extended New Student Orientations for First-Year Students."
- ⁵ Nicole Crozier, "Designing Effective Online Orientation Programs for First-Year University Students," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 28, no. 2 (May 27, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v28i2.3739>.
- ⁶ Crozier, "Designing Effective Online Orientation Programs for First-Year University Students."
- ⁷ Catherine A. Buyarski et al., "Engaging Families in Supporting Their Students," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 19, no. 1 (December 19, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v19i1.2779>.

journeys effectively. For instance, orientation programming that empowers families to ask pertinent questions and understand campus resources can bridge the gap between family support and student autonomy, thus enriching the overall educational experience.⁸ This highlights the interconnected roles that students and their support networks play in aiding academic success within the university setting.

Based on the above information, the primary objective of this study was to assess how the design and implementation of orientation programs contribute to the learning experiences of new undergraduate students. Through a qualitative research approach, the study viewed data derived from student feedback on their experiences during orientation programs. These are perceptions that provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of orientation programs in facilitating student learning and adaptation to the university environment.

Lastly, the study was organized into several key themes that included the review of related literature and the theoretical framework underpinning successful orientation programs; an examination of current orientation practices at the selected institution; an analysis of the findings from the qualitative data highlighting student perceptions of the programs; and finally, recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of orientation programs based on the findings. By addressing these themes, the study aimed to offer actionable strategies for improving orientation initiatives and supporting the academic success of new students in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Orientation programs for first-time entering undergraduate students are critical in facilitating a smooth transition from high school to higher education. These programs aim to provide essential information about academic expectations, campus resources, peer connections, and institutional culture, thereby addressing the diverse needs of incoming students. Different studies underscore the significance of orientation programs, emphasizing how well-structured orientations can promote academic success and foster student engagement and retention.⁹

Establishing a connection between faculty and students is one of the primary objectives of effective orientation programs. For example, Haggard-Duff et al. believe that orientation programs can enhance the student-faculty relationship, contributing significantly to the overall experience of students in the faculty of education.¹⁰ This suggests that faculty involvement during orientation can enhance students' feelings of support and belonging, critical factors in student retention and success. As Woo et al. articulate, orientation programs play a pivotal role in addressing retention barriers, which is vital for any academic program.¹¹ Collectively, these arguments support the view that faculty presence and engagement during the orientation process can significantly impact retention and student satisfaction.

In the realm of pandemic responses, many institutions adapted their orientation offerings to accommodate online modalities rapidly. Crozier explored how the integration of asynchronous online elements into orientation programs provides flexibility to cater to diverse student needs, particularly during times when traditional, face-to-face interactions are limited.¹² Online orientations have the potential not only to present essential information about university resources and culture but also to introduce technological tools students are expected to utilize throughout their academic journey. According to Korstange et al., effective online orientation can demystify many aspects of university life, thus alleviating the anxiety that often accompanies the transition to higher education.¹³

⁸ Buyarski et al., "Engaging Families in Supporting Their Students."

⁹ Hongryun Woo et al., "Preparing Doctoral Students to Succeed in Counselor Education Programs," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v24i1.2903>; Crozier, "Designing Effective Online Orientation Programs for First-Year University Students."

¹⁰ Lauren Haggard-Duff et al., "Avoiding Bad Connection: Orientation Phone Calls Foster Student-faculty Connection in an RN-BSN Program," *Nursing Forum* 55, no. 4 (November 11, 2020): 793–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12497>.

¹¹ Woo et al., "Preparing Doctoral Students to Succeed in Counselor Education Programs."

¹² Crozier, "Designing Effective Online Orientation Programs for First-Year University Students."

¹³ Ryan Korstange et al., "The Online First-Year Experience: Defining and Illustrating a New Reality," *Adult Learning* 31, no. 3 (August 10, 2020): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159519892680>.

Moreover, the design of orientation programs should reflect the unique social and academic contexts of students. Sandoval-Lucero et al. presented that orientation programs contribute significantly to student learning and retention, particularly when these programs are tailored to specific co-curricular learning outcomes.¹⁴ Indeed, the success of new student orientations seems closely tied to their ability to create a supportive social structure, integrate students into the institutional culture, and enhance academic preparedness.¹⁵

A more specialized approach is demonstrated by the adventure of orientation programs as they not only foster personal development but also focus on specific measurable outcomes surrounding autonomy and purpose achievement among students. Such experiential learning opportunities during orientation can produce lasting effects on students' adaptation behaviours and engagement levels throughout their academic careers. In addition, the critical inclusion of family and community networks in orientation programs must be taken into consideration. Engaging families in orientation activities enables a collaborative support system, which has been shown to enhance student commitment and retention by bridging their home and academic environments.¹⁶

Effective orientation programs are multifaceted, intertwining academic preparation, social integration, and faculty involvement, all critical for fostering positive student outcomes. With the continual evolution of educational practices, particularly considering digital transitions prompted by the recent pandemic, future orientations must stay adaptable and inclusive, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of incoming undergraduate students, thereby fostering long-term engagement and success within higher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Orientation programs for first-time entering undergraduate students draw on established theories that explain how institutional and individual factors shape student learning and persistence. In particular, the framework is grounded in Tinto's Student Integration Model and Glasser's Choice Theory as described by Rockinson-Szapkiw et al.¹⁷ Tinto's model posits that a student's academic and social integration into the institutional environment is critical to their continued engagement and ultimate success; this idea has been extensively validated in subsequent research on persistence in higher education.¹⁸ The model suggests that effective orientation programs serve as initial platforms that socialize students into the community by facilitating connections with peers, faculty, and academic resources, thus reducing the sense of isolation and improving student retention.¹⁹

Complementing this perspective is Glasser's Choice Theory, which emphasizes the role of individual decision-making and personal responsibility in achieving desired outcomes.²⁰ According to Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., this theory holds that students actively choose behaviours that maximize their satisfaction and success, underscoring the importance of creating orientation initiatives that empower new students by highlighting autonomy and self-directed learning.²¹ Integrating these two theoretical perspectives, the framework allows researchers to examine not only how orientation programs aid the social

¹⁴ Sandoval-Lucero, Antony, and Hepworth, "Co-Curricular Learning and Assessment in New Student Orientation at a Community College."

¹⁵ David Deggs, "Students' Adjustment to College," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 18, no. 2 (January 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v18i2.2752>.

¹⁶ Woo et al., "Preparing Doctoral Students to Succeed in Counselor Education Programs"; Sandoval-Lucero, Antony, and Hepworth, "Co-Curricular Learning and Assessment in New Student Orientation at a Community College."

¹⁷ A. J. Rockinson-Szapkiw, L. S. Spaulding, and A. R. Latham, "Completion of Educational Doctorates: How Universities Can Foster Persistence," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 9 (2014): 145–69.

¹⁸ E. T. Pascarella and D. W. Chapman, "A Multi-Institutional Path Analytic Validation of Tinto's Model of College Withdrawal," *American Educational Research Journal* 21, no. 3 (1984): 337–57.

¹⁹ Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Latham, "Completion of Educational Doctorates: How Universities Can Foster Persistence"; Pascarella and Chapman, "A Multi-Institutional Path Analytic Validation of Tinto's Model of College Withdrawal."

²⁰ W. Glasser, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1998).

²¹ Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, and Latham, "Completion of Educational Doctorates: How Universities Can Foster Persistence."

and academic integration process but also how they can nurture individual agency and informed decision-making.²²

This theoretical framework is therefore built upon the combined insights of Tinto's Student Integration Model and Glasser's Choice Theory. This integrated approach provides a dual lens—one that captures the essential role of institutional structures in fostering student integration and another that emphasizes the vital role of personal choice in enhancing student learning experiences during the critical orientation period.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The research approach for this study was qualitative, as it is best suited for exploring and understanding the intricate and subjective experiences of individuals regarding orientation programs.²³

Research Paradigm

This study was underpinned by an interpretivist research paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm provided a valuable lens for examining orientation programs for first-time undergraduate students, particularly in understanding how these programs influence student learning and adaptation in higher education. This paradigm emphasized the subjective meanings and social processes that shape student experiences, drawing attention to how individual perceptions and interpretations impact their educational journeys.²⁴

Study Design

This qualitative study employed a case study design, which is effective in exploring a specific phenomenon across multiple contexts. This design allowed for in-depth examination of orientation programs through the diverse experiences of various students.²⁵ By gathering data from multiple participants, the research uncovered common themes while also highlighting the rich diversity of experiences among first-time undergraduate students.²⁶ This approach facilitated a detailed exploration of how orientation programs affect student learning and adjustment to university life, thereby informing best practices for future implementation.

Study Sample and Population

The sample population for this study was composed of eight (08) first-time undergraduate students and four (04) university lecturers from four different departments. This target participant group comprised first-time undergraduate students and their lecturers, who had recently completed their orientation programs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse range reflecting different backgrounds, disciplines, and experiences.²⁷

This composition was essential for understanding the perspectives that shape the orientation experience in higher education, particularly for students. The inclusion of students in this sample population, therefore, allowed for a deep exploration of their specific needs and expectations as first-time undergraduates. This notion comes from the understanding that students undergoing the transition to higher education often experience a range of emotions and challenges, including feelings of uncertainty or a lack of belonging.²⁸ Orientation programs are designed to address these issues, fostering a sense of community

²² Glasser, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*.

²³ Gerardo Fuentes Vilugrón et al., "Analysis of School Educational Spaces," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 25, no. 1 (April 28, 2023): 53–80, <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v25i1.3363>.

²⁴ Yoremia Lestari Ginting et al., "Scholarship as a Corporate Philanthropy, 'A Half Blood Philanthropy' Strategy to Sustain," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 7, no. 5A (May 2019): 24–29, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2019.071505>.

²⁵ Fuentes Vilugrón et al., "Analysis of School Educational Spaces"; Ginting et al., "Scholarship as a Corporate Philanthropy, 'A Half Blood Philanthropy' Strategy to Sustain."

²⁶ Fuentes Vilugrón et al., "Analysis of School Educational Spaces."

²⁷ Amy Luckowski, "The Lived Experience in the Clinical Setting of Nursing Students with Disabilities," *Nursing Education Perspectives* 37, no. 5 (2016): 256–61.

²⁸ M. J. Mayhew, J. A. Van Der Linden, and S. C. Kim, "The Role of Social Support in the Transition to College: A Multi-Institutional Study," *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 2 (2009): 178–97.

among new students, which can significantly impact their learning outcomes and retention rates. This is the reason why Killingback, Ahmed, & Williams (2019) argued that feedback modes that enhance the student-lecturer relationship can promote a greater feeling of belonging, ultimately enriching the educational experience for students. Moreover, orientation plays a crucial role in stabilizing students' academic journeys, providing them with essential skills, knowledge, and networks that aid their adjustment.

Furthermore, the role of lecturers in this context is critical. Lecturers offer invaluable insights into the effective implementation of orientation programs, as their pedagogical approaches and attitudes significantly influence students' adaptation to university life.²⁹ According to Salim et al., lecturers' responsibilities extend beyond traditional teaching; they are integral in shaping programs that meet the evolving needs of students.³⁰ This multi-dimensional understanding is vital, as it captures both student and educator insights on the efficacy of orientation initiatives. The collaborative dynamic between students and lecturers is essential; evidence suggests that positive lecturer engagement can enhance student learning experiences and promote deeper reflection among students regarding their academic endeavours.³¹ Moreover, studies indicate that lecturers' perceptions of students' needs can differ, which may affect the design and implementation of orientation programs.³² Understanding these differences is important to develop programs that are tailored to address both collective and individual aspirations of students, thus maximizing the effectiveness of these programs.³³ The effective integration of student feedback is essential. Evidence reveals that a lack of cohesive understanding between lecturer feedback and student expectations may hinder effective learning during the early stages of university.³⁴ Therefore, incorporating both lecturers and students as a sample population in the study deepens the understanding of how orientation programs can be optimized to cater to the complexities and diverse needs of first-time undergraduate students. A synergistic approach that values both perspectives can enhance the design and delivery of these critical programs, promoting not only academic success but also a comprehensive integration into university life.

Data Collection

In this study, the data collection process began with the selection of participants, ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives is represented. For students, selection involved outreach via university communication channels, ensuring inclusion of varying demographics such as academic discipline, year of study, and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, lecturers from various departments were selected to provide insights into their experiences with orientation programs, contributing to a holistic understanding of the educational environment.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as a critical method for collecting data from students and lecturers. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of participants' thoughts and experiences. This format provided a balance between predetermined questions and the freedom for participants to elaborate on their responses. Once participants were recruited, semi-structured interviews were scheduled, allowing for flexibility in timing and setting, which was crucial for accommodating students' schedules. The interviews were conducted in person, on a face-to-face basis, while at the same

²⁹ Syahrudin and Beatus Tambaip, "Implementation of the Independent Campus Learning Policy "MBKM": An Overview from the Perspectives of Students and Lecturers," *Journal of Education Research and Evaluation* 7, no. 3 (August 27, 2023): 351–61, <https://doi.org/10.23887/jere.v7i3.61918>.

³⁰ H. Salim, M. Al-Khaldi, and S. Al-Khaldi, "Lecturers' Responsibilities Extend Beyond Traditional Teaching: A Comparative Study of Academic Responsibilities in Higher Education," *European Journal of Education Studies* 9, no. 10 (2022): 1–10.

³¹ Mayhew, Van Der Linden, and Kim, "The Role of Social Support in the Transition to College: A Multi-Institutional Study."

³² H. Y. Ong et al., "Understanding Lecturers' Perceptions of Students' Needs: Implications for Designing Orientation Programs," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 44, no. 3 (2022): 249–63.

³³ S. Syahrudin and B. Tambaip, "Implementation of the Independent Campus Learning Policy "MBKM": An Overview from the Perspectives of Students and Lecturers," *Journal of Education Research and Evaluation* 7, no. 3 (August 27, 2023): 351–61, <https://doi.org/10.23887/jere.v7i3.61918>.

³⁴ Y. Zhang and Y. Zheng, "Lack of Cohesive Understanding Between Lecturer Feedback and Student Expectations May Hinder Effective Learning During the Early Stages of University," *Journal of Education and Learning* 7, no. 4 (2018): 304–11.

time, participants were allowed flexibility in the platforms depending on their preferences. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to probe into specific aspects of the orientation experience.

A minimum time for the interviews was allocated to gather a rich data set, allowing for thematic saturation wherein no new themes emerged from the data (Luckowski, 2016). Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private location to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Each session was audio-recorded, with participants' consent, to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Following the interviews, audio data were intended to be transcribed verbatim to create a reliable textual basis for analysis.³⁵

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from these semi-structured interviews necessitate careful analysis. For this reason, data analysis employed thematic analysis, a method well-suited for qualitative research focusing on informing educational practices.³⁶

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent is obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process by anonymizing data and securely storing all records. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, reinforcing an ethical commitment to their autonomy and comfort.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Students commonly report that personalized interactions during orientation, such as meetings with faculty and peer mentors, help to cultivate their sense of identity within the academic community, further supporting their adaptive learning.³⁷

Within this study, participants consistently highlighted the transformative nature of orientation programs on their academic and social integration. One notable perspective comes from students who reported a marked improvement in their confidence and preparation for college life post-orientation. For instance, Student 1 stated:

"After the orientation, I felt like I was ready for everything. It really helped settle my nerves about starting university."

With this sentiment, students articulate their anxiety before entering university and how orientation programs alleviate these concerns, enhancing their sense of belonging. Lecturers also recognize the importance of these programs, emphasizing that they facilitate an understanding of the academic landscape. Lecturer 1, 2 & 6 noted:

"Orientation serves as a crucial platform for dispelling myths about university challenges and provides students with direct access to resources."

This notion asserts the role of instructors in setting academic expectations from the outset.³⁸ When students were asked about this sentiment, Student 5 remarked:

"The sessions on academic integrity and resources opened my eyes to what I need to succeed here."

Furthermore, data gathered reveal the positive effect of orientation on social networks. This is where students perceived the orientation program to bear a significant enhancement in their ability to form social connections. In this instance, Students 2 & 4 concurred that:

"It created an instant bond; I now have friends in every class, and we help each other out."

³⁵ Amirul Mukminin et al., "The Long Walk to Quality Teacher Education in Indonesia: Student Teachers' Motives to Become a Teacher and Policy Implications," *İlköğretim Online* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.17051/io.2017.16366>.

³⁶ Luke Pickard and Julie Brunton, "An Outdoor Orientation Program in Its Infancy, Student Perception Influencing Best Practice," *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v24i1.2910>.

³⁷ Ann M. Gansemer-Topf and Kristin Economos, "'I Don't Just Give Tours,'" *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention* 20, no. 1 (December 19, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v20i1.2819>.

³⁸ Courtney Wright et al., "The Revised 'Common Time' Program as a Strategy for Student Engagement and Retention at University," *Student Success* 8, no. 1 (March 26, 2017): 79–86, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i1.354>.

This articulation was reinforced by Lecturers 1 & 4 who stated:

"Creating community through orientation not only aids in social adjustment but has been shown to improve academic retention significantly."

Additionally, experiences shared during these programs demonstrate an increase in intrinsic motivation towards academic engagement. Student 3 elaborated:

"I learned that the journey is as important as the destination. That mindset shift has changed how I approach my studies."

Such reflections resonate with academic research that correlates orientation with increased student engagement and success.³⁹ A critical aspect raised by both students and lecturers is the impact of peer-led orientation modules. Students 3 & 5 shared:

"Hearing from upperclassmen made it easier to ask questions. Their honesty about challenges made us feel more at ease."

This peer-led dynamic is supported by research that indicates upperclassmen contributions help lower-classmen acclimate to university culture effectively, enriching their educational experience.⁴⁰

DISCUSSIONS

The significance of the orientation programs for first-time entering undergraduate students is that these programs are essential in laying the groundwork for student learning and achievement. As these programs evolve, the integration of diverse instructional methods and relevant stakeholders' support frameworks will be essential in nurturing a positive, inclusive educational environment.

This study, aligned with an interpretive paradigm and utilized a collective case study design, enabled a comprehensive exploration of first-time undergraduate students' experiences with orientation programs. This is the framework that the researcher preferred to ensure that the complexities and contextual factors influencing students' learning are thoroughly investigated, producing findings that are not only rich in detail but also beneficial for enhancing the design and implementation of orientation programs in higher education settings.

Furthermore, the interpretivist approach underscores the significance of reflecting on the qualitative outcomes of orientation programs. For instance, students frequently report gains in various domains: interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and an understanding of institutional culture, which collectively comprise their learning experience during the transition.⁴¹ This notion illustrates how resilience can be cultivated through such programs, indicating that understanding and addressing students' emotional and psychological needs during orientation contributes greatly to their overall well-being and academic performance

By capturing students' narratives and lived experiences, researchers can better understand the specific elements of orientation programs that resonate with students. For example, engaging with upper-division leaders has been shown to enhance peer relationships, which can serve as a critical support network for first-time undergraduate students.⁴² This insight aligns with the broader interpretivist emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge and experience through social interactions. Moreover, a nuanced examination of these programs through an interpretivist lens can highlight disparities in student experiences—especially among underrepresented groups. Reflection on the attendance and engagement patterns of diverse student populations can provide critical insights into how orientation programs may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities or provide support for specific groups. The adaptability of orientation programs to consider these dimensions can foster a more inclusive environment, which is crucial for the success of all students.

³⁹ Timmy Ma et al., "Admission Predictors for Success in a Mathematics Graduate Program," *ArXiv Preprint ArXiv:1803.00595*, 2018.

⁴⁰ Gansemer-Topf and Economos, "I Don't Just Give Tours."

⁴¹ Gansemer-Topf and Economos, "I Don't Just Give Tours."

⁴² Gansemer-Topf and Economos, "I Don't Just Give Tours."

The findings also prove that orientation programs significantly influence students' academic readiness, social integration, and motivation to engage with their studies. Both students and lecturers agree on the multifaceted benefits these programs provide, indicating their necessity in the first-year experience at university.

Employing semi-structured interviews within this qualitative research framework allows for an in-depth exploration of first-time undergraduate students' experiences with orientation programs. This methodology not only centres the voices of students but also shapes the potential for institutional improvements in orientation strategies based on the findings garnered from their lived experiences.

These semi-structured interviews also provided a robust framework for gaining a comprehensive understanding of both student and lecturer perspectives regarding orientation programs. By allowing respondents to express their experiences in detail, this approach sheds light on the multifaceted nature of academic integration, ultimately informing better practices in student orientation initiatives.

Future research in this study should therefore focus on comparative analyses between various institution types and methodologies in orientation programs, examining their long-term effects on student learning outcomes and retention rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions should prioritize creating opportunities for direct personal interactions. Fostering personalized interactions between students and faculty or peer mentors during orientation programs is essential. Such interactions will significantly enhance students' sense of belonging and community within the academic environment. For instance, personalized settings support students' adaptive learning and improve their confidence and preparation for university life.

The inclusion of clear and structured content regarding academic expectations and available resources has proven crucial for first-year students. Orientation programs should therefore serve as platforms to bridge gaps in students' understanding of academic integrity and expectations. This notion should align with the idea of providing students with actionable insights into university life to increase their engagement and ensure a smooth transition.

Enhancing social networks among students during orientation programs is vital. The findings indicate that orientation programs significantly improve students' ability to form crucial social connections that benefit their academic journey. This means that creating a sense of community during orientation is pivotal for fostering social adjustment and retention. Therefore, implementing team-building activities or group discussions during orientations can help facilitate these connections.

The study further recommended that incorporating peer-led modules into orientation programs appears to be an effective strategy. This peer-led approach can significantly aid in acclimatizing students to the university environment, preparing them for future challenges. Hence, institutions should evaluate the integration of peer mentorship as a central component of their orientations.

Implementing these recommendations can significantly improve the transition experience for first-time undergraduate students, equipping them for successful academic and social integration.

CONCLUSION

The study highlighted the essential role of orientation programs in facilitating academic and social integration for new students. The primary purpose of the study was to evaluate how these programs influence student learning, retention, and overall success in the university environment. Findings indicated that personalized interactions with faculty and peer mentors, structured content concerning academic expectations, and opportunities for social networking are crucial facets of effective orientation programs.

The significance of these programs is evident. Testimonials from students indicated that orientation activities help to reduce anxiety and foster confidence, contributing to a smoother transition into university life. Furthermore, when students feel supported and connected, they are more likely to persist in their academic endeavours. This is consistent with the literature, which suggests that orientations positively influence retention rates and create a conducive environment for learning.

Ultimately, enhancing the design and implementation of orientation programs should remain a priority for educational institutions. Recommendations derived from the findings suggest a need for tailored orientation experiences that address specific student needs. This includes fostering connections through peer-led sessions and providing robust guidance on academic resources. Institutions that adopt these strategies will likely see improved student adjustment and performance, as supported by research indicating a positive correlation between well-structured orientation programs and student success outcomes.

The findings of this study reinforce the invaluable contribution of effective orientation programs in shaping the experiences of first-time undergraduate students. It is imperative that universities continue to innovate and refine their orientation practices to better meet the needs of their diverse student populations, thus ensuring a positive and successful start to their academic journeys.

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