

Bowser, D., and Race, K. (1991). Orientation for distance education students: What is its worth? *Distance Education*, 12(1), 109-122.

## **Orientation for distance education students: What is its worth?**

Don Bowser and Ken Race

### **Introduction**

The provision of student support programmes has become an integral component in the delivery of Distance Education courses. Unfortunately, many of these programmes have stemmed from the perceived needs of their intended audience and not from research into actual student needs. Further, many of these programmes, like the Orientation programme at UCCQ, have been allowed to continue without any formal evaluation of student needs being undertaken. This paper presents some initial findings on the value to students of the UCCQ programme.

Student orientation programmes are conducted at most tertiary institutions in the week preceding the commencement of the academic year. These programmes are designed to assist students to assimilate into tertiary life and develop a sense of identification with the institution; two aspects of tertiary life which have been recognised as important to student performance.

The provision of an orientation programme for distance education students at UCCQ has the same objectives, attempting to create a sense of belonging while resolving student problems and assisting in their transition to life as a tertiary student.

The UCCQ programme has become an integral component of the support package offered to all of its students studying in the distance mode. Whilst it would be much simpler for students to attend one combined session on campus, the cost of this exercise to many of our students would be prohibitive. Additionally, orientation is held at regional study centres, first, to introduce the students to facilities they may access during their years of study and, secondly, to use a local environment to help encourage and motivate students. Orientation sessions are currently held at 14 centres throughout Queensland and New South Wales. This study presents the result of an evaluation of the UCCQ 1989 distance education orientation programme undertaken to determine who uses orientation and for what reasons.

### **Background to and development of the orientation programme**

Whilst distance education courses have been offered by UCCQ since the early 1970s, orientation for distance education students was not introduced until 1981. In the decade to 1989 the programme has gradually evolved with emphasis on programme content shifting between the various orientation activities. These changes have been made primarily at staff instigation based on what they believed the students wanted.

In 1981 two academic schools (Business and Science) offered distance education Courses. Each of these schools held independent orientation sessions at ten regional centres throughout Queensland in the weeks preceding commencement of the academic year. This approach to orientation continued until 1984 when a decision was taken that future orientation sessions would be institution, rather than school, based. This decision was based on the premise that students would feel more positive about committing themselves to

study, if they were aware of the total number of other students in their local area also making that commitment.

The change was quite fortuitous, as the remaining schools at UCCQ commenced offering education courses soon after. Additionally, the number of study centres used for Student Support was increased to 15, which necessitated a review of orientation travel logistics and a rationalisation of membership of staff orientation teams. Orientation sessions were introduced to centres such as Emerald, Gold Coast and Sydney, as study centres were established and enrolments in these areas became significant.

The unification of approach saw the introduction of numerous changes to the programme. Initially (pre 1985) each orientation team was staffed (by two academic members. Composition of the teams to include one person from the Department of External and Continuing Education (usually from a senior administrative position) and one academic from each of the major distance education academic schools. In large centres, such as Brisbane, additional academic staff were recruited for orientation sessions.

Along with the change in staff, the emphasis of the programme moved from an academic/ course advising exercise to preparing students for all aspects of life as an external student. Administrative procedures were explained, a study skills segment was introduced and a demonstration on the use of computers and associated software was given – all to an effort to assist the students identify more readily with UCCQ, quickly form desirable study habits and to motivate students to study.

Programme objectives had been clearly defined and a set programme established by 1987. The same basic programme was followed in subsequent years with the only alteration being the introduction in 1989 of a brief ten-minute video on external study at the UCCQ and demonstration of an electronic mail facility, Keylink.

Table 1.  
Course of study  
of respondents

Course	Number of students enrolled in the course	Number of students registered for orient.	Number responding	% of total respondents
BAppSc – Physics	69	23	4	1.6
BAppSc – Chemistry	41	12	4	1.6
BAppSc – Biology	117	33	12	4.8
BAppSc – Maths & Computing	125	51	15	6.0
B Arts	224	96	33	13.2
GD Taxation	112	6	3	1.2
AD Biol. Lab. Techniques	76	19	10	4.0
GD Management	454	94	12	4.8
BAppSc – Computing	131	67	23	9.2
BHeSc – Nursing	274	159	59	23.6
AD Indust. Instrumentation	85	23	3	1.2
AD Applied Chemistry	40	7	1	0.4
AD Business	127	17	2	0.8
B Education	141	37	11	4.4
AD Computing	243	69	22	8.8
GD Struct. Timber Technology	16	3	0	0
AD Aquatic Resource Mgmt	30	8	8	3.2
AD Information Services	10	1	0	0
BAppSc – Building Surveying	4	2	0	0
AD Building Inspection	19	3	1	0.4
M Business	137	32	10	4.0
GD Applied Computing	112	29	5	2.0
Course not provided			12	4.8
TOTALS	2617	719*	250	100.0

\* Number of students actually attending orientation exceeded those registering to attend; however course enrolment details for those students attending orientation were not collected.

Number of students actually attending orientation exceeded those registering to attend: however course enrolment details for those students attending orientation were not collected.

Throughout the period all changes and developments were introduced on the basis of staff observation and opinion and over the period there was a steady increase in numbers of student participants - partly a factor of increased publicity of the programme and of increases in commencing distance students (872 students participated in the 1989 orientation programme. No formal evaluation of the revised programme was attempted. The increasing cost in little and financial resources, along with the spiralling student participation rate, led to all evaluation of the programme being undertaken in 1989.

### **The study**

An evaluation of the programme was undertaken to:

- determine the real cost of the orientation function;
- establish whether the needs of the participants were being met;
- identify who was using the orientation and why;
- identify areas where improvement or change was warranted.

The method used was to distribute the questionnaire to Students attending each orientation session. Students were then instructed to complete the questionnaire at the end of the session and hand it back to the session co-ordinator-. if they preferred to take some time to reflect on the proceedings they were advised to take the (questionnaire home, complete it at their leisure and then return it to UCCQ. The intensity of tile pressure to have students complete and return the questionnaire at the end of the session varied between session coordinators, hence the difference in response rates for the various sessions.

While most students handed in the questionnaire immediately after the orientation session, some were returned via the mail. A reminder letter was not sent to students.

### **The questionnaire**

The questionnaire consists of six questions. Questions one and two were identifiers of course of study and venue of the orientation session attended. The third established the respondent's history in relation to previous study and the fourth required respondents to rank, in order of perceived importance and ultimate value to the student, a number of orientation programme objectives.

The remaining two questions were open ended, offering students the opportunity to comment on the programme content, presentation and timing.

### **Survey population**

The questionnaires were distributed to all students at 13 of the 14 centres visited. Students who participated in the orientation were enrolled in courses ranging front master degrees to associate diplomas. Total student participation in the orientation was 872 of which 250 or 28% responded to the questionnaire.

Table 2.  
Questionnaire  
response rates

Centre	Total students attending orientation	Total students responding to questionnaire	Percentage response
Brisbane	195	16	8.2
Bundaberg	53	15	28.3
Cairns	55	28	50.9
Emerald	16	11	68.8
Gladstone	56	18	32.1
Gold Coast	36	10	27.8
Mackay	90	41	45.6
Maryborough	51	15	29.4
Mount Isa <sup>a</sup>	23	0	0
Nambour	38	22	57.9
Rockhampton	112	17	15.2
Sydney	51	8	15.7
Toowoomba	38	13	34.2
Townsville	58	35	60.3
Not Specified	0	1	0
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>872</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>28.7</b>

<sup>a</sup> Questionnaire not administered at this site

Table 2 reveals disproportionately low response rates in the two largest orientation sessions (Brisbane and Rockhampton) and in Sydney and comparatively high completion rates in Cairns, Emerald, Mackay, Nambour and Townsville. Completion rates at Cairns, Emerald, Mackay and Townsville can be directly related to the administrative techniques used, where students were given the questionnaire at the start of the session and requested to hand them in at the end of the session. Further encouragement was given to students at the end of the session to complete and hand in the questionnaires. The remaining students were encouraged to complete the questionnaire at home and send them in by post.

## Data analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to create a data base and tabulate responses. Responses to Questions 5 and 6 had to be categorised according to the type of comment made. Eleven categories of response to these questions were identified and analysed by SPSS routines.

## Costs of orientation

Costs associated with providing a decentralised orientation programme can be divided into a number of discrete segments, some of which are easily costed, whilst others are quite difficult to place accurate cost estimates against.

Identified cost areas are:

- Pre-orientation planning and preparation;
- Orientation delivery;
- Post-orientation debriefing;
- Student travel and time.

## Pre-orientation planning and preparation costs:

▪ Distance Education staff involved in planning and preparation	2500 \$
▪ Video production (amortised over 4 years)	2000 \$
▪ Brochure production, printing and overhead preparation	625 \$
▪ Organising access to venues, equipment and booking travel requirements	300 \$
	<hr/>
	5425 \$

## Orientation delivery costs:

▪ Travel and accommodation	7000 \$
▪ Hire of equipment, venues, security costs	300 \$
▪ Distance Education staff time	2340 \$
▪ Academic staff time	6000 \$
▪ Local staff time (part time tutors, schools)	2800 \$
▪ Refreshments	650 \$
	<hr/>
	19090 \$

## Post-orientation debriefing:

▪ Debriefing session and report preparation	700 \$
▪ Questionnaire analysis	1500 \$
	2200 \$
	<hr/>
	26715 \$

Student travel and time costs are the most difficult to value. Because of the number of centres at which an orientation session is it is relatively inexpensive for most students to participate. Some however, need to travel long distances, stay overnight and spent considerable time away from work to attend the closest orientation session. Timing sessions for evenings and weekends and giving early notice of dates and venues minimises inconvenience and cost to students.

Cost to the institution averaged out at \$31 per student who attended.

### Orientation attendance

A brief review of Tables 3 and 4 would suggest orientation was used predominantly by new students, regardless of whether they have or have not had any previous tertiary or external study experience. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that 80% of the respondents were new students, 69% of these students had previous external study experience and 48% had previous tertiary experience.

It should be noted, however, the 48 % is inflated by the fact that the College has a large postgraduate enrolment. If the postgraduate student figures are excluded, the percentage of new Students with previous tertiary experience is reduced to 35%.

If one compares registrations for orientation against new enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate courses and discounts respondents by 20% to allow for continuing student registration, then 68 % of the new undergraduate students registered for orientation compared with 29 % of new postgraduate students.

Whilst there were some basic assumptions used in calculating these latter statistics, indications are that the primary group attending orientation are new undergraduate students. This is consistent with our expectations. However, it should be pointed out that more postgraduate students would be excluded from attending an orientation session because of their location, i.e. significantly more of the postgraduate students than undergraduate students are located interstate and the only interstate orientation session is conducted in Sydney.

**Table 3.**  
Response breakdown by student category

New	200	80.0
Continuing	49	19.6
No response	1	0.4
TOTALS	250	100.0

**Table 4.**  
Previous tertiary and/or external study experience of new students

	Possible responses	Number responding	%
Previously studied at tertiary level	200	96	48
Previously studied externally	200	138	69

Reviewing the user group on the basis of course enrolments, 58% of all Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing) students registered for orientation. Fifty-one per cent of Bachelor of Applied Science (Computing) students and % of Bachelor of Arts students registered is interesting to note there was not one postgraduate course in the first 10 of the major users.

The Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing) students are all interesting group as, although they only represent 10% of student enrolments, they represent 20 % of orientation registrations and 23.6% of survey respondents respectively. The higher levels of interest shown by this group of students is consistent with their positive and highly motivated approach to most aspects of their course including residential school attendance.

### **Importance and value of orientation activities**

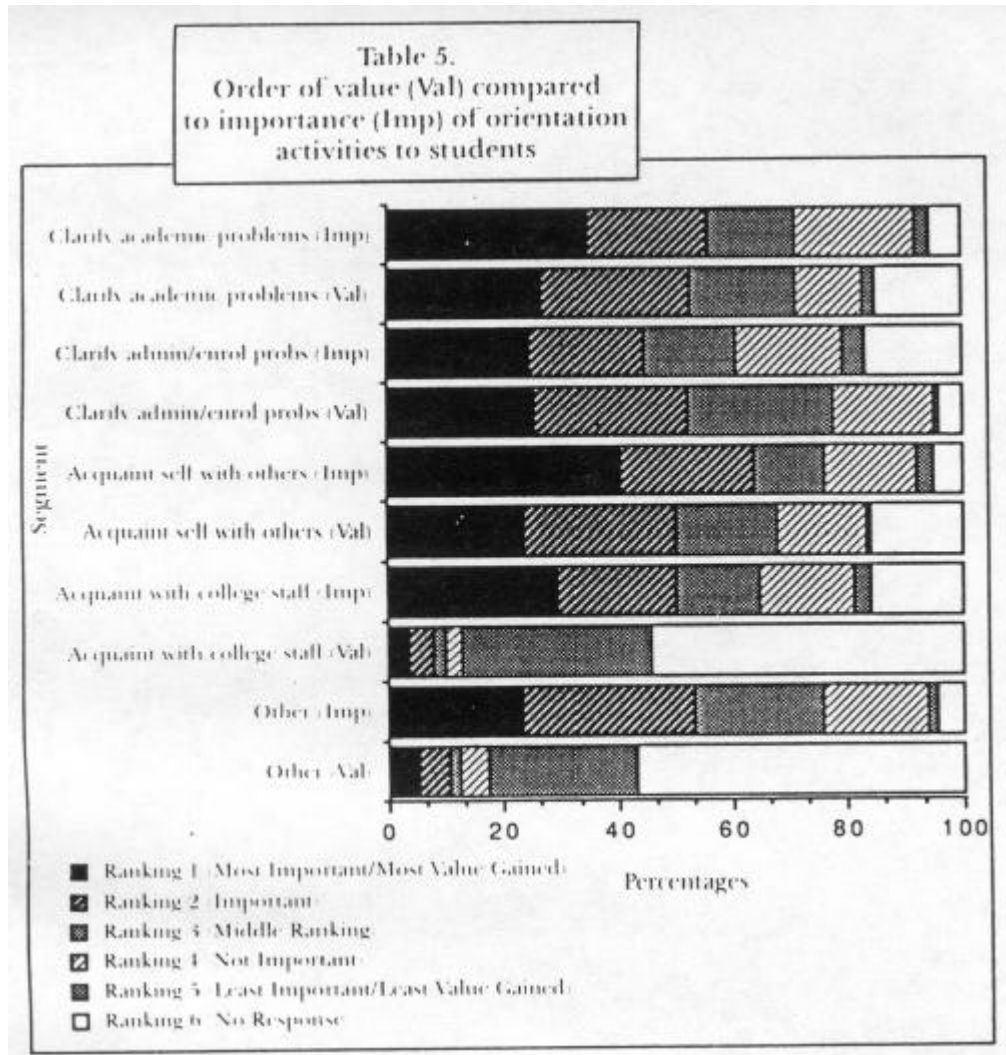
The following discussion is based on responses to Question 4 of the orientation questionnaire. This question required students to firstly rank a number of orientation activities in order of perceived importance and secondly rank the same activities in order of value gained. The results are shown in Table 5 below and have been shown together.

While students were asked to rank activities from 1-5, some perceived one or more activities to be of equal importance or -value and gave them the same ranking, i.e. many students did not rank activities in order of importance from 1-5 but rather allocated 1, 2 etc.. to more than one factor if they felt these factors to be equally important or of equivalent value to them, hence columns do not total 250 but reflect the manner in which students chose to allocate importance of value.

It can be seen from rankings 1 and 2 in Table 5 that first three activities received a high ranking in terms of importance and similarly high value rating. Activities four and five, while ranked as highly important, received low value ratings. This would suggest that, while the orientation programme is focussing on issues important to students, it is not adequately addressing all of these issues.

It is interesting to note that, when students were asked to provide suggestions for improvement, 52 or 20.8% were interested in more specific subject/staff/course information. This response is consistent with the response to activity four which dealt with acquainting oneself with Institute staff.

One important finding from the survey was the level of importance students placed on meeting others. While clarification of academic, administrative and enrolment matters were highly rated, meeting other students was ranked number one (40.4% ranked the activity, as most important and 64% ranked it either one or two). This finding supports the beliefs of many distance education practitioners, who believe students study in the distance mode because of the isolation from the institution and not because of the desire to learn independently. This theory is supported in the report by Dekkers, Kelly and Sharma. One thing that all external students had in common was an expressed need for access to institutional personnel. The most predominant and significant need for access was lecturing staff. It was also clear that the majority of students did not wish to study alone and actively sought out ways and opportunities to meet with other students (p. 8-2).



Responses to Question 5 (Table 6) further support the notion that the orientation programme is addressing the issues that are important to students. This is borne out by the fact that 62 % of respondents did not want or could not think of any change to the programme and 20.8% wanted more emphasis placed on the activities already addressed. The problem of acquainting oneself with academic staff is being resolved via the introduction of teleconferencing into the programme.

**Table 6**  
**Recommended changes**

Recommended changes	Frequency	%
More specific subject / staff / course information / prior information	52	20,8
More Keylink / Desklink information	3	1,2
Supply ID tags for students	6	2,4
Administrative staff needed	1	0,4
Decrease time for Telecom sessions	8	3,2
Clearer directions to venue needed	2	0,8
Shorter individual and total presentation time	6	2,4



More general / lower level computer information	8	3,2
Staff should check equipment / handouts before session	2	0,8
Identify library and other available facilities	5	2,0
More information on union / enrolment / residential schools / subjects	2	0,8
Blank no suggested improvement	155	62,0
TOTALS	250	100

**Table 7**  
**Suitability of date, time and venue**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Not Friday	1	0,4
Hold two sessions	2	0,8
Increase time / include tour	2	0,8
Hold later	3	1,2
Better notification / earlier notification	8	3,2
Clearer direction	3	1,2
Weekends preferred	2	0,8
Need more room / too noisy / too hot	9	3,6
Hold earlier	2	0,8
Hold visits at Tablelands / Innisfail	2	0,8
Yes (no change suggested)	196	78,1
No (not suitable but no reason given)	3	1,2
Blank – no suggestion made	17	6,8
TOTALS	250	100

### **Timing of the programme**

This issue was somewhat important in 1989, as the programme had been scheduled a week earlier than in previous years to enable students to gain advice and take appropriate action before the commencement of semester. While a small number of respondents made suggestions as to timing, the majority 78.4 % were pleased with the date, time and venue.

### **Conclusion**

The objectives of an orientation session should be to provide an experience which enables students to identify with the institution, while resolving before the start of the academic year any administrative or academic problems they have. The session should also be motivational.

The information collected through the questionnaire indicates the orientation programme is being used by those students for which it was designed, and that they have value for the time they commit.

Participation rates in particular suggest the provision of a structured, decentralised orientation programme with a balance of academic and administrative activities does have a place in the delivery of distance courses. Experience has shown that timing of the programme and selection of representatives who are well

versed in the operation of the institution and the courses offered are important to the success of the programme.

The question of balancing the cost of orientation and answering students needs to acquaint themselves with college staff is of concern, as student needs in this area are not being adequately fulfilled by the current programme. However, the cost of satisfying the need by sending academic staff representatives from all disciplines (in some cases to see only one or two students) on orientation is considered to be too costly,. To balance costs and address student needs, i.e. increased interaction, tile introduction of a combination of chat-style videos, introducing first year lecturing staff, and teleconferencing between the main campus and each orientation session may be all appropriate alternative.

Use of teleconferencing would also serve the dual purpose of introducing students to the medium at the same time as they are introduced to academic staff from their discipline.

The high level of importance that students assigned to 'other' orientation activities and the low level of value they received in respect of 'other' activities is difficult to discuss, as students were not asked to specify what they meant by 'other'. It is possible that the ...'other' areas of concern to students are covered in their answers to question 5 where they were invited to make recommendations or changes to the programme. If this is the case, then the principal areas of importance to students under the heading of other is 'more specific subject/ staff/ course information/ prior information ' which, although related to both objectives one and four, is obviously not satisfied by this. The earlier comment on the introduction of video and teleconferencing may also al least partly resolve students' other needs from orientation ( if they are in fact the needs stated above).

## References

Dekkers, J. Kelly, M. and Sharma, R. (I 988) The cost and usage of study centres in distance education. A report commissioned by the Standing Committee of External Studies

## Appendix 1

### ORIENTATION FEEDBACK

The aim of the following questionnaire is to gain feedback on the effectiveness of our Orientation program. The information collected will be used to assist us improve this program.

We feel you are in the best position to advise us what needs to be changed or improved. Please take this opportunity to assist us and our fellow students.

Thank you.

D. Bowser,  
Head — Student Services,  
Department of External and Continuing Education

1. At which centre did you attend the orientation session?

2. Which course are you currently studying?

C	A		
---	---	--	--

3. I am a new  or continuing  external student of Capricornia Institute

If you are a new student, have you previously

- studied at a Tertiary level      Yes       No
- studied externally      Yes       No

4. Rank the following orientation activities in order of importance and value to you

1 = most important; 2 = next most important; etc..

1 = most valuable; 2 = next most valuable; etc..

	Order of Importance	Order of Value
• Clarify academic problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Clarify administrative/enrolment problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Acquaint yourself with other external students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Acquaint yourself with Institute staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. What changes would you recommend to the program (e.g. adding deleting or expanding segment of the program etc..)

---



---



---

6. Was the date, time and place for the Orientation suitable for you? Please make suggestions.

---



---



---

Please hand this document to either the staff member in charge of the Orientation session, the Study Liaison Officer present or return it to:

D. Bowser,  
DECE,  
Capricornia Institute,  
Rockhampton. Q. 4702

Thank you for your assistance.