

Gaps Associated with the Timing of Students' Orientation Programs in Two Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Students' Adaptation. Retention. Integration. Student Orientation Program

ABSTRACT Indubitably, efficient timing of the students' orientation programs could be a panacea to the current challenges of student adjustment and retention. This paper investigated gaps associated in timing of students' orientation programs in two South African universities. The study adopted a mixed method approach. Qualitative data was sought from in-depth interviews of four purposively selected staff and quantitative data was gathered from semi-structured questionnaires administered to three hundred and fifty randomly selected first-year students. Findings indicate poor participation in the orientation program owing to admission delays. Furthermore, short duration of orientation led to low comprehension due to information overload. These findings imply that poor scheduling of orientation is not meeting the students' individual needs. The study recommends that the staff handling orientation consider alternative strategies such as extended orientation to allow time to accomplish orientation objectives, and use of visual online activities to augment time for face-to-face orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Importantly, orientation programs have been introduced in educational settings as a means to acclimatise new members to the educational social milieu (Upcraft et al. 2004; Briggs et al. 2012). Orientation programs can fulfill different transition purposes such as allowing students to understand institutional ethos, locating sites for getting assistance and getting acquainted with the resources they need to succeed (OECD 2008; Appalasammy 2011; Jones 2013). This aligns with several student development, transition and retention theories, which emphasize on institutional initiatives to socially and academically integrate students into the higher education milieu in order to promote student success (Tinto 2012; Poirier 2015). Undeniably, orientation significantly shapes students' personal goals and aspirations, as well as makes them acquire a laconic sense of belonging (Pascarella and Terrenzini 2005). Empirically also, Ted (2011) found that students who took part in orientation had higher first term results. Other scholars also assert that first-year students who fully participate in orientation pro-

grams have a higher likelihood to be retained, after controlling demographic prior schooling and gender variables (Pascarella and Terrenzini 2005; Krause and Coates 2008). Conversely, poor implementation of the orientation result in poor student participation and minimal evidence of differences in the accomplishment of orientation goals among students who attend orientation and those do not take part (Owusu 2014; Poirier 2015). A cause for concern is that, despite many studies asserting the importance of student orientation programs in their diverse forms such as, online orientation, formal and informal, there are mixed views on their ability to address students needs, particularly the whole student life cycle (Owusu 2014; Poirier 2015). Unequivocally, the way the orientation program is designed including the structure and duration are critical success factors enhancing student adjustment and retention.

The timing of orientation programs in terms of the commencement and duration are critical in enhancing the goals of student transition and persistence (Pritchard et al. 2007). To this end, Hussein and Barber (2008) argue that the first three weeks of the first term is a critical decision-making time for most first year students, and therefore it is critical that transition activities commence during this period.

Bedford and O'Brien (2012) observed that the traditional approach to orientation, characterized by week long activities is still common in

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many institutions of higher learning. Realistically, a one-week long orientation tends to have several activities packed in small sessions and this is likely to cause fatigue among the attendees. This fatigue causes most of the orientation attendees to lose focus and therefore they do not gain much from the program activities.

However, despite adherence to this timing by having orientation during the first or second week of the term, observations on the ground in some South African institutions of higher learning show that most students still exhibit poor adjustment evidenced by weaker coping challenges (Modipane 2011; Madhovuzi 2012). Specifically reports indicate that more than thirty percent of the first year students drop out of South African universities every year (Scott et al. 2007; Letseka and Maile 2008). This therefore may be implying that the duration of the orientation may not be adequately addressing diverse students' transition needs. Several scholars advocate for orientation that include co-curricular and extracurricular activities that address students' lifecycle in a holistic manner (Upcraft et al. 2004; Wadroof 2010). In the same vein, Briggs et al. (2012) say that orientation should be long enough to allow as many students as possible not only to participate, but also to assimilate the basic information they need to acquire in the program, and therefore suggested orientation programming that lasts a semester or longer. Therefore, it is critical to investigate possible gaps in the timing of orientation programs in South African higher education.

Problem Statement

Despite the assumed benefits of students' orientation programs in relation to developing a sense of belonging, improved student adaptation to the new environment, and improved learning and persistence (Appalasammy 2011; Jones 2013), observations in most higher education institutions seem to suggest mixed results of this intervention, owing to poor first year students' adjustment and high dropout. South African higher education institutions are not spared from this dilemma as evidenced by the first year student dropout of thirty percent across contact higher education institutions (Scott et al. 2007; Letseka and Maile 2008). This could be pointing to challenges in the implementation of programs, which is also a critical determinant of

achieving the desirable educational transition goals. This paper, therefore, empirically assesses gaps associated with the timing of orientation programs in two institutions of higher learning in South Africa, in order to make recommendations that can bolster such programs.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Approach

The study, which was grounded in the post positivist research perspective, assumed that implementation of orientation programs is a phenomenon requiring multiple interpretations, and hence requires a multiple method approach to ensure credibility of results. Definably, mixed methods approach entails combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches in a single study with a view of corroborating the results (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009). While a qualitative inquiry focuses on discovering people's subjective thoughts and experiences of their social context (Conrad and Serlin 2011), the quantitative approach seeks to collect data from a widely dispersed population in order to discover causal links among various variables, with a view of generalizing results across similar contexts. In this study, the quantitative aspect was used to collect first year students' views and experiences on timing, while the qualitative component sought the experiences, views, insights of the orientation staff in implementing orientation in their respective institutions. In this study, the qualitative approach was dominant. Undeniably, the mixed method minimized and ensured that the weaknesses of quantitative approach are offset by the presence qualitative components and vice versa (Creswell 2013).

Research Design

The study employed a mixed method design and triangulated research approaches so as to corroborate the findings. A mini survey provided quantifiable information on first year students' experiences and opinions about the timing of orientation programs. At the same time, qualitative data from the few orientation staffs enabled an in-depth investigation of opinions, thinking, and experiences associated with the benefits of the orientation program. The trian-

gulation of these methods also enabled credibility of the study findings (Johnson and Christensen 2012).

Research Domain and Justification of Choice

The research was conducted at two formerly disadvantaged universities. Former black universities were chosen due to concerns of high student dropout among most of the first year students (Sommer and Dummont 2011). Also, most of the former black universities still draw the majority of students from rural contexts, some of whom are first generation and of low socioeconomic status (OECD 2008). Such students' characteristic makes it imperative that orientation programming be designed in such a way that it adequately and holistically addresses students' diverse needs.

Sampling Methodologies and Procedures

This study used probability and non-probability methodologies. In probability sampling methodology, samples have equal chances of being selected, while in non-probability methodology, samples do not have equal chances of being selected. The sampling process is biased and leans on the assumed attributes of the samples. In non-probability methodology, samples are selected depending on how they meet the research interests of the researcher. Precisely, probability sampling techniques are ideal for large populations as they provide each participant an equal chance of being included in the sample. In this study, the sampling frame comprised of 350 first year students who were randomly selected through the use of a statistical computer program. This further assisted in reducing bias as well as ensuring generalization of study findings to similar contexts.

Yet, non-probability sampling strives to deliberately select a small number of participants who can provide important information needed for the study (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2012). Thus, the sampling frame composed four orientation staff members who had firsthand participation in orientation programs were purposively sampled to provide insights on their experiences and thoughts about the orientation timing in their respective institutions. The staff helped understand whether the program was

achieving its goals in acclimatizing new students as highlighted by many retention scholars.

Research Methods

The study employed one-on-one in-depth interviews with orientation staff. In-depth interviews were important because they allowed the researchers to probe the orientation staff as pertains their experiences with the orientation programs so as to get detailed qualitative data.

Also, a semi-structured questionnaire facilitated a mini survey that helped the researchers quickly gather data from a large number of first year students (Johnson and Christensen 2012). However, some of the findings were also corroborated from document analysis.

Data Collection Tools

The collection of the qualitative data entailed the use of an interview guide, while the administration of a mini survey entailed the use of a questionnaire.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Given that most of the data was qualitative, the data was analyzed inductively. This means that emerging themes from questionnaires and in-depth interviews were coded and placed into appropriate categories and themes, while data from through the mini survey was presented in the form of tables and graphs. The use of data from the two approaches served to corroborate and strengthen the findings (Creswell 2013).

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Permission for data collection was sought from the "gatekeepers". People who have authority in an organization are titled gatekeepers because they can permit or deny access to conduct research in their respective organizations (Johnson and Christensen 2012). In this study, the gatekeepers were the institutional registrars and deans of the faculties of the two institutions that formed the research domain. Ethical considerations of informed consent and anonymity were adhered to. Thus, a letter seeking permission to conduct the study was the primary document used to gain access by the various participants. Also, participants were informed

of the purpose of their participation in the study and potential benefits in a letter, which was accompanied by the consent form. Participants were guaranteed of anonymity by removing their original names while replacing these with pseudonyms. Also, the researchers explained that there were no material benefits for participating in the study apart from contributing to the improvement of orientation programming.

Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

The study used three methods to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Firstly, peer debriefing was employed during the design of the research methods by giving peers to review the interview guide and the questionnaire. This assisted in ensuring that the questions aligned to the research objectives as advanced by Johnson and Christensen (2012). Secondly, triangulation of approaches provided multiple perspectives, which increased data credibility. Thirdly, member checking was employed where the interview responses were given back to the four participants to elaborate and clarify aspects.

Limitations of the Study

The study focused on public institutions offering traditional orientation programs after student admission. Therefore, the findings may differ from private institutions and those public institutions using a different student orientation model such as first year seminars.

RESULTS

Poor Participation Attributed to Ill Timing of the Orientation Program

Study findings indicated that the orientation program suffered ill timing resulting in close to the three quarters of the targeted student population not attending the program. Of the 316 first year students who responded to the survey, the majority of them pointed out hindrances to their participation in the program to challenges associated with admission. As such, 120 (38%) indicated delays in choosing their careers, 92 (29%) failed to attend orientation because they were still finalizing their bursary requirements, 54 (17%) were still searching for accommodation

and 50 (16%) had not obtained their admission letters. This implies that issues related to career planning and socio-economic factors had the highest influence of students' failure to participate in orientation. Yet, document analysis of the orientation program schedule shows that specific sessions in the orientation program dealt with issues of career choices, dealing with stress and time management. Such topics are critical for any new student and therefore most of the students who participated in this study actually missed this insightful information, which would be beneficial to their well-being. This analytically means that the timing of the orientation program was not appropriate for most students who lost opportunities of acquiring much information about the institutions so that they may adequately adjust and embrace the new institutional milieu.

When students were asked whether there was any follow up with them for not having attended orientation, all of them indicated that they were not consulted by anybody. This means that there was no mechanism in place in the two institutions to cater for those students who missed out on the initial orientation program. Consequently, such students may take long to understand the university processes, which may be critical in their daily academic pursuit. This may include failure to easily bond through social networks. Social networks could be important forums of managing and reducing chances of institutional stress and despondency associated with entering higher education. Therefore, orientation commencement warrants the attention of orientation program managers if orientation programs are to achieve their goals.

Program Duration Too Short

Study findings indicate that the orientation program was failing to adequately educate and acclimatize the freshmen because its programmed duration was too short to cover an array of components that the first year students needed. For instance, a document analysis of the orientation program handbooks showed that orientation program in both institutions lasted three days. The challenges related to the duration of the orientation program are also reflected in first year students' questionnaire responses as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Students experiences relating to orientation duration

Aspect	N=89	%
Missed some activities and failed to catch up	22	26
The topics on the library and time management were good but too short	20	25
Practice of computers was good but we didn't have prior knowledge	18	23
Too many activities, too tired to understand some of the information	29	26
Total	89	100

As can be seen from Table 1, the duration of the orientation program results in several challenges. The data from the 89 students' who took part in the orientation program seem to suggest that the duration of sessions influenced how much content students managed to assimilate. For instance, 18 (23%) enjoyed the practical part on using computers, but felt that the time was too short given that some did not have prior practical knowledge. Also, 20 (25%) of the students who had missed some topics during orientation were unable to catch up. Also, 29 (26%) felt that there were too many activities such that they did not understand some of the information by the end of the day.

The above responses imply that a weeklong orientation program was not adequately addressing both academic and social adjustment needs of the students. Yet, it is important for students to have the opportunity to be active in the program as a means achieve full acclimatization. Also, given this short time frame, this meant that once the student missed a day, it was difficult to catch up. This view was also echoed by some of the orientation staff:

I think that the one to two hour sessions that we have for some activities are too short to address the essential aspects. For instance, making new students understand computers in two hours is definitely not possible (OS2).

The time we have for some sessions needing practical demonstrations is too short. I feel that we need some follow-up programs to reinforce issues such as stress management, time management and how to live harmoniously with others (OS3).

The above responses seem to indicate that orientation covered a lot of useful topics for new

students. However, due to the limited duration of the time allocated to various topics, some students still started the academic year with pending adjustment gaps and this could have had an impact on their esteem, assertiveness, confidence and motivation. It is therefore critical that orientation designers find ways to complement orientation activities way into the term when designing future programs.

Students' Admission Took More Time Than Scheduled

Study findings indicate that the planning and implementation of the orientation program was put at jeopardy because of the dynamics associated with admission. In some instances, admission timespan took longer than was scheduled. This was attributed to the admission phenomenon of having to consider 'walk-ins' and international students for late admission. Walk-ins are students who do not apply in time, but come to register after high school results are out. Some staff that shared reasons for taking walk-ins expressed the following sentiments.

The challenge we encounter is that most of the students who have got good grades for university entry are walk-ins. They come here after failing to get places from the other universities because our cut-off point is much lower than most universities. So you find that they come when we are almost closing registration (OS3).

We take "walk-ins" because their grades are usually much better than most of the regular applicants (OS2).

Sometimes we have international students who are also admitted way into the term. Such students obviously miss orientation (OS1).

Apparently, the above reasons that impeded students from attending the orientation were linked to the need to attract students with potential to succeed in higher education. It is then critical that the designers of the orientation program put in place contingency orientation plans for the walk-ins, otherwise orientation will never achieve its intended goals of acclimatizing all the admitted students.

Inflexibility of the Orientation Program

Study findings indicate that there were no contingency plans to allow any adjustments of the program's timeframe to cater for the students

who were admitted late. Among the students' responses, there was no indication that those who had missed orientation were consulted for further support in understanding the institutional processes. The orientation staff provided an explanation that orientation followed a fixed calendar date, implying that most of the students who registered late were likely to miss orientation. This was reflected in the following sentiments from the orientation staff participants:

We follow a fixed calendar for orientation. Therefore, it's difficult to alter the activities of the program to accommodate for students who are admitted late (OS4).

So far we do not have a mechanism to deal with students who have missed out on orientation because of the program's fixed and uncompromising timeframe (OS1).

As an institution, we always know that student orientation is done during the first week of the term. This is the best way not to disturb other activities on the calendar (OS3).

The above findings suggest that the orientation programs in the two institutions of higher learning under study were not adjustable to suit the admission calendar and its dynamics. This is because most of the students who are admitted late miss all the program activities. This unfortunately is a sheer defeat of the goals of the orientation program.

DISCUSSION

This study finding revealed that timing of orientation programs was poor because it had a negative influence on students' participation in the program. This timing was poor in the sense that most of the students missed the whole or some of the sessions because they were preoccupied in addressing admission related challenges. The fact that three quarters of the first year students who participated in this study were being served for personal needs at the expense of orientation reflects negatively on the planning of the program. This means that the program lost in terms of its objectives. On such a loss, Ted (2011) found that students' participation in orientation positively influenced first term results and formed an important ingredient of student retention. Since the findings indicate that most students were absent during orientation and therefore did not benefit from the program content, they are therefore likely to take

longer to accustom and to acclimatize themselves to their new institutional environments. This finding aligns with Briggs et al. (2012) that poor participation is a result of implementation challenges. This poor participation sets possibilities of them struggling to be on track in realizing goals for their lives and careers. This could be the reason why studies in other South African higher education institutions attest to the fact that the coping challenges constitute one of the highest coping challenges to students during their first year of study (Modipane 2011; Madhovuzi 2012). Apparently, this continued trend could be a sign of non-participation in the orientation program that has content of career planning and strategies to adjust to a new educational milieu. This implies that some of the challenges students encountered in their secondary education are carried over to higher education (Sondlo and Subotsky 2010). Perhaps it may be necessary to shift focus and ensure that students get pending admission support as part of the orientation sessions so as to minimize non-attendance.

The study found the orientation program to be too short to address students' diverse needs appropriately. As such, Hodum (2007) contend that the duration of the orientation program can influence new student adjustment. This study showed that the two institutions under study typically followed a traditional orientation model where co-curricular and extracurricular activities are scheduled for small time frames of one hour or less over a week. This may fail to make the students understand and internalize the lessons adequately. To this end, Bedford and O'Brien (2012) argue that traditional orientation timing has its own challenges in that students experience a lot of information overload, as all presenters try to pass the essential details without much practical learning in a short space of time. Also, short durations for sessions decrease students' understanding of the session topics due to information overload. This is why some scholars such as Billing (2006) now advocate for extended orientation programs that stretch over several months to adequately address curricular and extracurricular activities. This is because such stretching of session topics and activities could help sustain students' adaptation issues such as self-confidence, study skills, knowing sites of help and making social networks.

The findings revealed that the timing of orientation was negatively influenced by the

oscillations of admission dates for new students. Such oscillations meant that most of the students who were admitted late could not take part in the orientation program. Even though most of the students who were admitted late were viewed as having higher grades, it is still important that such students are exposed to first year transition programs like orientation. This is because it has been proven that even students who come with high grades may fail to succeed in higher education if transition issues are not well handled early enough (Blitzer 2009; Poirier 2015). This is because orientation could even offset challenges of student diversity and enhance desirable transition attributes such as assertiveness, belonging which are critical for retention and success. Given the above reality, perhaps introducing extended orientation programs of first year seminars may provide more opportunities for student-student network, as well as provide ample time for staff to develop a rapport with new students. This is also in line with arguments by Briggs et al. (2012) who note that enhancing social integration requires appropriate timing of programs such as orientation and student advising.

The study findings also found that the orientation program was following a predetermined calendar, usually a week after the final date for registration. While conducting orientation within the first three weeks of the term supported insights by transition scholars (Briggs et al. 2012), it was difficult to adjust the fixed calendar in instances where admission oscillated. Orientation program officers, therefore, faced a dilemma of having to deal with a fixed calendar phenomenon and the preset weeklong program when admission deadlines have to be adjusted to accommodate students who register late. While it may be unmanageable to constantly shift orientation dates, it may be important to ensure that proposed dates take into account the characteristics of the students' admission dynamics. This is because of the stark naked reality that issues embedded in the orientation sessions affect the students' learning, adjustments, coping and general orientation of their student lives generally. Thus, it is then critical that the designers of the orientation program put in place contingency orientation plans to cater for latecomers. Otherwise orientation will never achieve its intended goals of acclimatizing all the admitted students.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that the timing of the orientation programs negatively influenced the goals of student orientation programs because only a few students were acclimatised to the new higher education settings. On the one hand, many students failed to attend orientation and used admission commitments as a hindrance to the attendance. This is because of the oscillating nature of admission and registration processes. Also, there was a challenge of the program being too short and having a fixed timeframe. These findings have implications on the design and structuring of orientation programs in institutions of higher learning. To this end, the program managers need not only be sensitive to timing by ensuring that activities are stretched over a longer period to allow all students to benefit from the program. This may call for ongoing program reviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since this study revealed several gaps with regards to the commencement and duration of orientation programs, perhaps such programs could be improved by ensuring that the time for commencement of the program occurs after most of the students have sorted out admission issues. This is because students who participated in this study failed to attend the orientation program due to important admission related commitments. Also, orientation program designers could find mechanisms to nudge students to take part in the initial program, for instance, blocking access to certain services until students take part in some of the planned activities. Perhaps a simulated or a virtual online version of the orientation activities could allow students to complete some processes at their own pace, so as to free more time for experiential activities. This is important to ensure students develop a community of learners, which enhances coping and adaptations to the new higher education system, which in turn enhance their social integration. Alternatively, the orientation model could be adjusted to allow for extended orientation seminars, which could cover specific themes each week. This approach can possibly allay the challenge of information overload usually experienced by students in traditional orientation programs where presenters tend to want to

give a lot of information in a small duration of time.

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Paper received for publication on July 2015

Paper accepted for publication on July 2016