

The Crucial Role of International Student Support Experts: Creative Initiatives Empowering International Students at the University of Adelaide

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Abstract

This paper advocates for the role of “international student support experts” in Australian higher education by showcasing four creative, cost-effective initiatives developed by the University of Adelaide’s International Student Support team. These initiatives address the nuanced needs of international students, countering the trend towards centralised support models that may overlook their specific circumstances. The first initiative is a dynamic online space on the University’s Canvas learning management system (LMS), “MyUni”, offering essential resources, community-building activities, and an effective communication channel. The second, “Fantastic Race”, is a game app that promotes cultural exchanges, teamwork, and a sense of belonging among commencing international students. The third initiative is a self-guided campus tour chatbot that allows students to explore facilities and services at their own pace and complements traditional campus exploration in an enjoyable, informative manner. The fourth, “Adelaide Ready”, is a comprehensive pre-departure program that includes student reels; staff presentations; and interactive webinars on essential topics, such as accommodation, healthcare, and campus life. These initiatives epitomise the University of Adelaide’s commitment to providing an outstanding international student experience and to fostering a sense of community and belonging. Their successful implementation underscores the crucial role of international student support experts as advocates, mentors, and guides. These professionals bridge cultural gaps, anticipate diverse needs, and tailor support services to ensure the holistic well-being of international students. In the evolving landscape of global education, they are essential for attracting, nurturing, and retaining international talent in Australia.

Keywords

International student support, Specialised support, Higher education, Student experience, Digital initiatives, Student engagement, Global education

Introduction

The Australian higher education sector is currently facing significant challenges due to recent government policy changes. These have included announcements about higher international student visa fees, a cap on new international student enrolments, and revised conditions for post-study working rights (Australian Government, 2024).

These enacted and forthcoming changes seem to signal a potential contraction of the sector in the near future (Group of Eight Australia, 2024). This situation will likely intensify competition among Australian universities seeking to attract and retain international students. Consequently, in the coming years, Australian universities may need to recalibrate their value proposition, focusing not only on the quality of their academic programs and career-ready attributes but also on the specialised support services tailored to international students.

This shift in focus highlights two critical considerations for institutions. Firstly, there is going to be an increasing need for tailored international student support services that address the unique challenges faced by this student population (Tran et al., 2022). Secondly, these specialised support services will have to be integrated as a core component of an institution's strategic plan, rather than treated as an auxiliary function (Mohamad & Boyd, 2022).

However, these emerging imperatives contrast sharply with the current trend in Australian higher education, which seems to indicate a shift towards centralised student support models. These models, while aiming for service standardisation and efficiency, can overlook the specific needs of international students. They typically offer generic solutions that do not address the unique challenges international students face, such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, and unfamiliar academic systems (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2015; Smith, 2007).

In an evolving educational landscape with potentially fewer international students choosing Australia, institutions prioritising a specialised international student support model may be better positioned than those endorsing a centralised one. Research from the United States indicates that specialised support services are crucial in attracting international students and influencing their enrolment decisions. Students view these services as essential for their social and academic adjustment, ultimately enhancing their overall student experience (Cho & Yu, 2015; Glass et al., 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

This paper showcases four creative, cost-effective initiatives developed by the International Student Support (ISS) team at the University of Adelaide. By examining their positive impact on the international student experience, it aims to demonstrate the crucial role of “international student support experts” in creating environments that support and nurture international students during their transition to university life and beyond.

As advocates, mentors, and guides, these experts ensure the holistic well-being of international students. The initiatives featured in this paper highlight how specialised support can effectively address the unique challenges faced by international students, from acclimation to integration into campus life. In the current reshaping of the Australian international education sector, such tailored approaches are likely to become essential for maintaining Australia’s competitive edge in the global higher education market.

By presenting the University of Adelaide’s model, this paper aims to contribute practical insights to the ongoing discussion about best practices in international student support. These insights may help institutions across the Australian higher education sector enhance their support services, thus improving the international student experience and graduate outcomes.

The role of international student support experts at the University of Adelaide

The ISS team at the University of Adelaide embodies the concept of international student support experts through its student-centred mission and comprehensive, collaborative approach. Indeed, the ISS team’s mission focuses on empowering international students by providing timely, clear, and accurate advice, facilitating meaningful connections, and celebrating cultural diversity. Through partnerships with students, staff, and volunteers, ISS leverages its expertise in culture, compliance, and international transitions to enhance the student experience. This approach fosters an inclusive environment and encourages a sense of community and belonging within the University.

A key strength of the University of Adelaide’s ISS team lies in its multifaceted organisational structure that combines international student advisory services, social programs, and student communication and engagement portfolios. This integrated model enables the creation of tailored, culturally sensitive support programs that directly address the specific needs of international students. In particular, the synergy between one-on-one advisory appointments and social programs ensures a responsive, proactive approach to emerging issues. For example, when International Student Advisors noticed an increase in students reporting accommodation and tuition fee scams, a bespoke interactive workshop series was quickly organised. Conducted in collaboration with the South Australia Police Cybercrime Training and Prevention Section, the workshop aimed to educate students about how to avoid scams and keep themselves safe.

The ISS model is further enhanced by its student engagement component, particularly the International Peer Mentor (IPM) program. IPMs are international and domestic students who collaborate with the ISS team to deliver quality transition support to new international students, while also developing leadership skills and forming long-term friendships. Through their involvement, IPMs also play a key role in enhancing the University's celebration of cultural diversity by co-creating inclusive and engaging cultural exchange and festival experiences throughout the academic year. Strategic partnerships with other student support services—focusing on academic skills, counselling and disability support, health, and well-being—further strengthen the ISS operational framework and ensure a comprehensive support network for international students.

To illustrate the value of this model, this paper presents four innovative, cost-effective initiatives developed by the ISS team:

1. An international student-centred, dynamic online space on the University's Canvas learning management system (LMS), "MyUni", that integrates essential information on getting started at university and adapting to life in Adelaide, community-building activities, and helpful resources.
2. The "Fantastic Race" game app that promotes cultural exchanges, teamwork, and a sense of belonging among commencing international students during Orientation Week ("O'Week").
3. A self-guided campus tour chatbot that allows students to explore campus facilities and services independently.
4. The "Adelaide Ready Pre-departure Program" that offers comprehensive pre-arrival preparation for international students in an engaging and interactive way.

These initiatives exemplify cost-effectiveness through the multiple factors. Existing software subscriptions are strategically used, minimising the need for additional financial investment. Diverse expertise within the ISS team is leveraged, avoiding costs associated with hiring new staff or outsourcing services. Furthermore, efficient staffing means only one full-time equivalent staff member is required to oversee the programs' development, implementation, and evaluation.

The following sections will explore these initiatives in detail, examining their development, implementation, and positive impact on the international student experience at the University of Adelaide.

Enhancing student engagement via a virtual international student support hub

Connecting and communicating with international students to increase their awareness of and engagement with services, programs, and activities supporting their academic journey is a crucial part of ISS's work at the University of Adelaide. The team adopts a flexible blend of in-person and virtual interactions to accommodate students' varying preferences and schedules, ensuring inclusive and equitable access to the support they need. Communication methods range from face-to-face appointments, workshops, and events to short-form videos, Instagram takeovers, and newsletters.

Through monitoring and evaluation of student communication and engagement activities, the ISS team identified potential to further leverage MyUni, where students spend a considerable amount of their time daily. This insight led to the strategic decision to utilise MyUni as a central hub for ISS services. Thus, the limitations of email communication (i.e., students selectively engaging or overlooking mailings) and website data monitoring and analysis (i.e., not having direct access to the International Students website's analytics) were addressed. By integrating its services into MyUni, the ISS team intended to seamlessly connect with students in an environment they frequently used

for their academic activities, increasing the likelihood of effective engagement. The team would also gain unfettered access to student activity analytics through MyUni.

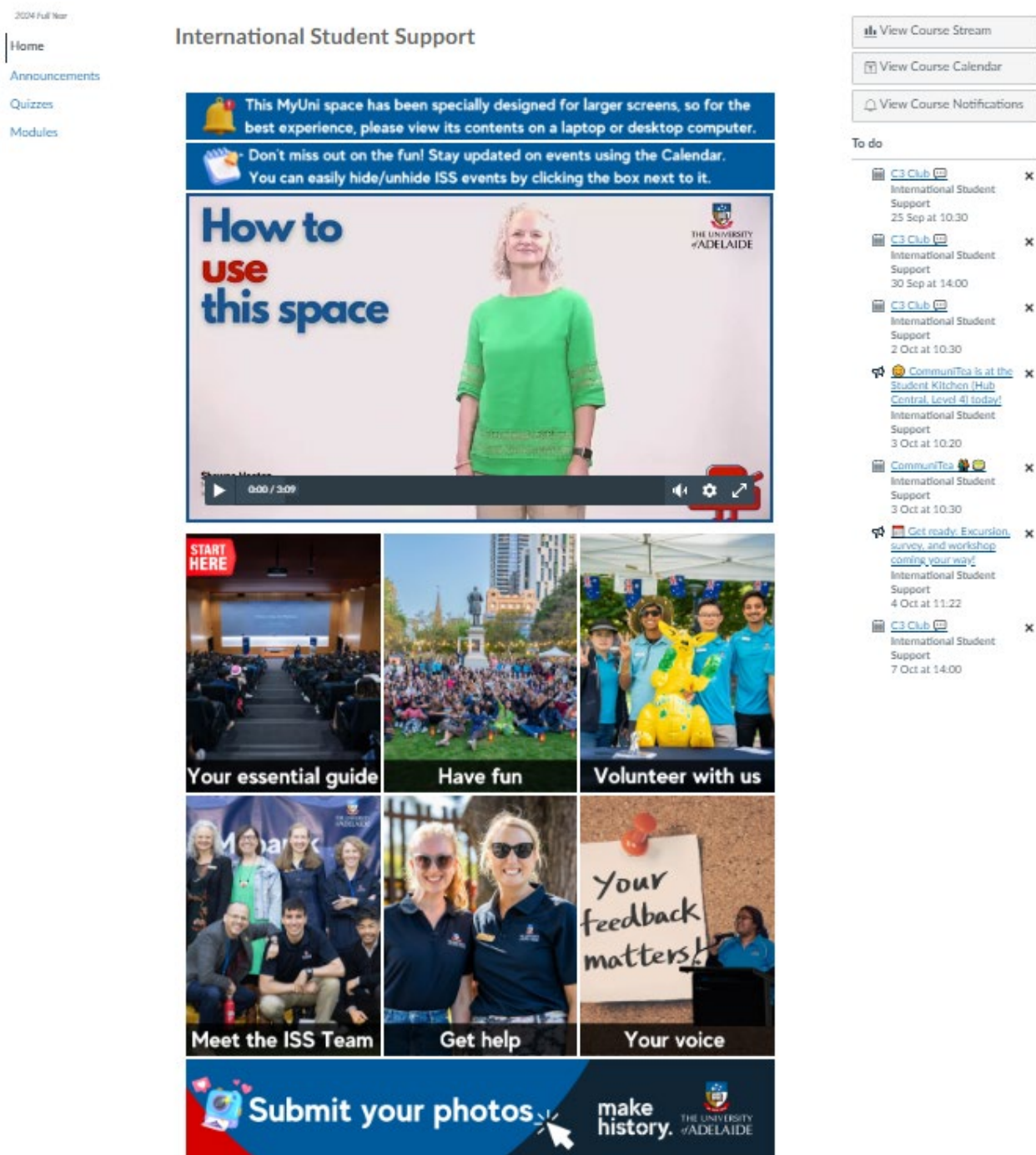
Based on these anticipated advantages, the team expanded an existing online module on essential information about adapting to life at university and in Australia into a dynamic digital space fostering community engagement. The development process involved input from all members of the ISS team in their different capacities as well as consultations with current international students. This participatory approach ensured that the diverse expertise within the team was employed effectively, resulting in the creation of a range of key features for meaningful student engagement.

For instance, short-form videos featuring ISS staff were filmed to introduce each of the online space's sections: "How to use this space", "How to join in the fun", "How to volunteer with us", "Meet the ISS Team", "How to get help at uni", and "How to share your voice" (see Figure 1). These videos humanise ISS services, creating an inviting atmosphere for students seeking assistance. International Student Advisors crafted the video scripts so as to ensure clear, accurate, and relevant content. This paper's author managed the video recording process and online space design, while Social Programs Assistants (current student casuals working with the ISS team) gathered feedback and suggestions to meet student needs and expectations.

The online hub also encourages student participation through photo submissions and a feedback section. The photos submitted by students are shared and showcased on the ISS Instagram account. This creates a sense of community pride and engagement and serves as a useful recruiting tool for prospective students. Feedback data is collated and, once actioned, shared with students via the fortnightly International Student Newsletter. This fosters a sense of transparency and accountability as well as providing valuable insights for continuous improvement of services. Moreover, the online hub also includes a customisable calendar function that allows students to stay informed about current ISS events and activities (see Figure 1).

Since its launch in February 2024, this digital space has significantly boosted student engagement with ISS's social programs and activities. After releasing the lineup of social programs for each fortnight on the hub, events typically sell out within less than 48 hours. This demonstrates a shift from ISS's previous reliance on a mix of promotional channels and repetitive promotions. This digital platform has made it easier for international students to access information regularly, whether independently, prompted by the ISS fortnightly newsletter, or through their MyUni calendar tool. To date, the homepage has recorded over 50,000 cumulative views, with similarly high interaction across other sections. The announcements within the space have proven highly effective in increasing event registrations and in serving as timely reminders for students. For example, the "CommuniTea" weekly morning tea saw a 70% increase in attendees (from an average of 80 to 135 students) in Semester 1, 2024, compared to the same period in 2023.

Figure 1
International Student Support MyUni space



Beyond its engagement success, a notable aspect of this initiative is its cost-effectiveness. By leveraging the existing Canvas LMS and utilising affordable content creation and video editing tools like Canva and Adobe Premiere Rush, the ISS team has developed a high-quality, engaging online space with minimal financial expenditure. This last point speaks volumes about the value of having such an integrative ISS model. In fact, by harnessing the comprehensive expertise of its members across the advisory and student communication and engagement portfolios, the team can

be dynamic and flexible in its service delivery. This enables ISS to experiment, evaluate, and innovate when needed.

Connecting international students to their campus, city, and community in a FUNtastic way

Orientation and transition programs for international students coming to Australia play a pivotal role in fostering a supportive and empowering environment that is conducive to their academic achievement, career success, and human flourishing. Launched as part of its Semester 2, 2023 Orientation program, the ISS team successfully designed and implemented a novel, purpose-built, low-cost, Amazing Race-style game app and activity (Fantastic Race). To date, over 600 commencing international students have taken part in this innovative experience, aimed at welcoming them to the University and the City of Adelaide, while building a sense of community and belonging from day one (Sereni, 2023).

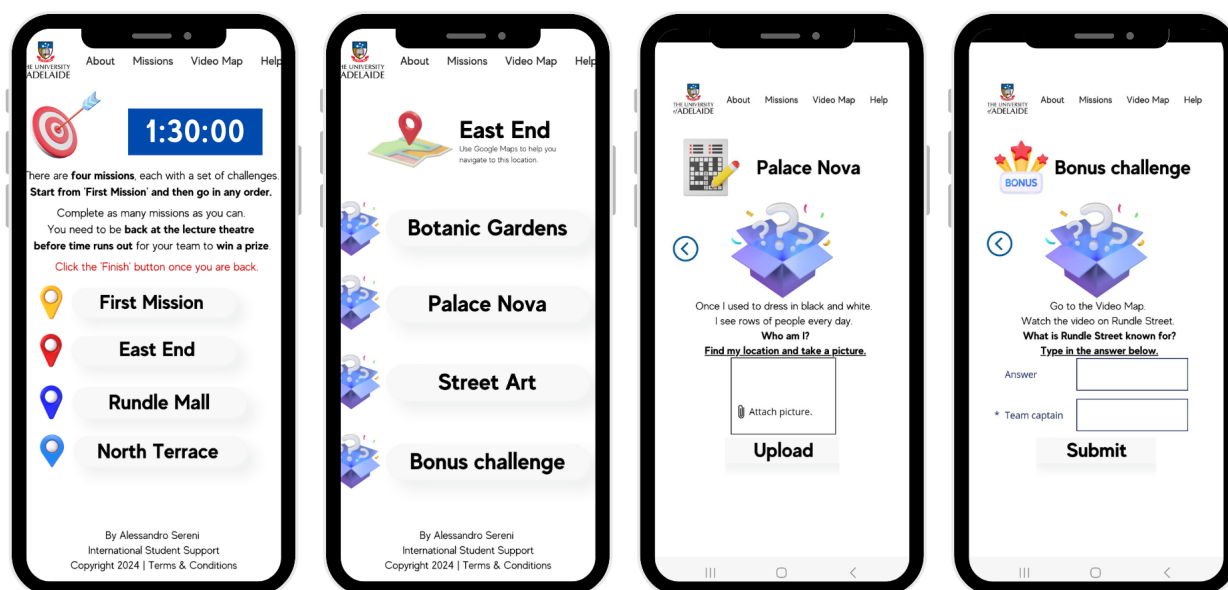
Fantastic Race was designed using the University's Microsoft 365 environment to develop the game app in an easy and data-secure way. The ISS team's deep understanding of international transitions and compliance with ESOS Standards has played a crucial role in structuring the game's challenges. Divided into randomised teams, participating students must complete several challenges in which they explore the University campus and the City of Adelaide. Along the way, they learn tips to facilitate their transition to university and life in Australia, all in a fun, friendship-building manner. The Fantastic Race gameplay and prizes have all been designed to encourage connection, conversation, and camaraderie before, during, and after the activity (Sereni, 2023).

To bring the Fantastic Race concept to life, the game app was built using a combination of easy-to-access tools in an innovative way to ensure seamless functionality and an engaging user experience. The Canva graphic design platform was instrumental in creating visually appealing app screens to guide participants through the game's information and challenges. Power Apps, a Microsoft platform normally used for custom business applications, served as the backbone for building the app's interactive interface and functionality. This included designing the layout and integrating clickable buttons that enable participants to navigate through different game challenges and submit their responses (see Figure 2).

Power Apps's drag-and-drop interface simplified the development process, enabling the ISS team to customise the app's features without extensive coding knowledge. The team also made use of online forums on Power Apps functionalities and features to learn from other fellow practitioners and fast-track the game app creation. To enhance the game app's functionality, Power Automate was utilised to connect various app flows to SharePoint, a centralised repository for storing multimedia content, such as photos and videos, taken during the challenges. This integration has facilitated seamless data management and enhanced security, ensuring that participant submissions and progress are securely archived and accessible to authorised staff only.

Finally, Excel has played a pivotal role as the operational hub where all team submissions are logged, and points are calculated to determine rankings throughout the race. Excel has been used to keep track of participating teams' progress within the game in real time (i.e., once the picture of a particular challenge is uploaded, it is recorded in the relevant worksheet with a time stamp). It has also served as an e-ledger that can be counted upon for transparency and fairness.

Figure 2
The Fantastic Race Game App



Notably, the game app was built using the University of Adelaide's existing IT infrastructure. Students can only access the game app via multifactor authentication by logging in with their student ID and password. The pictures they upload via the game app are not stored on their phones but directly in the University SharePoint. After a selection of these pictures is published on social media, all upload records are deleted.

During the game app creation process, the Copilot artificial intelligence (AI) tool was employed to assist with the technical elements. The ISS team used prompts to generate step-by-step instructions on how to connect the different platforms in a functional, seamless manner. By harnessing the power of Canva, Power Apps, Power Automate, SharePoint, and Excel, alongside AI-driven assistance from Copilot, the ISS team thus created an engaging, inclusive experience that has now become a staple offering during O'Week.

The impact of Fantastic Race is evident in the enthusiastic feedback from student participants:

I wanted to express my sincere gratitude for organizing such an amazing and incredible event that brought us all together, fostering friendships across diverse cultures, and filling our hearts with laughter and joy. Thank you so much for making it a truly wonderful experience. (Anonymous student, post-orientation feedback email, July 18, 2023)

As a former participant in the activity, I can say that it was super fun and helped a lot to make your first connections at Uni! (Anonymous student, LinkedIn comment on post celebrating the activity, December 8, 2023)

Encouraged by the success of Fantastic Race, the ISS team decided to explore ways to apply game design elements and digital features to other Orientation activities such as the self-guided campus tour chatbot.

Campus tour power up: Using a chatbot to expand access and inclusivity

Campus tours run by International Peer Mentors (IPMs) are a core component of the International Student Welcome. They allow commencing international students to learn about main campus locations and facilities from their fellow peers in a friendly way. IPMs also share essential information about support services on campus and important tips on navigating the transition to Adelaide and university life. Campus tours are usually capped at a maximum of 40 students, led by two IPM guides, to ensure everyone can hear the information provided and enjoy the experience in an organised and safe way.

However, there has been a growing number of commencing international students per study intake and sometimes limited availability of IPM volunteers. This has challenged the ISS team's aspiration to provide each commencing international student with the best possible Orientation experience. Consequently, the team assessed the viability of a self-guided campus tour, with the chatbot emerging as a potential solution.

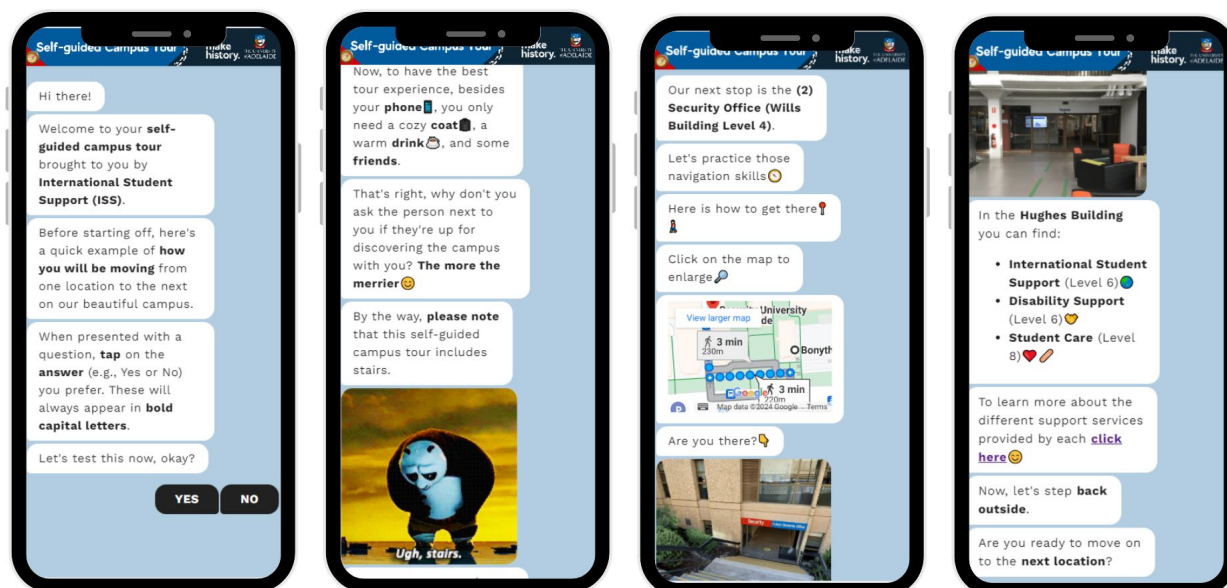
The chatbot's design was influenced by the author's participation in the "Design a Feminist Chatbot" course offered by the UAL Creative Computing Institute and completed via the Future Learn massive open online course (MOOC) platform. This course emphasises the importance of inclusivity, empathy, and user-centric design in chatbot development. Applying these principles, the self-guided campus tour chatbot was crafted to prioritise accessibility and user engagement, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, would feel welcome and supported.

Thanks to the chatbot's on-the-go accessibility, it also provided the opportunity for a virtual campus tour to international students with a disability, thus expanding the inclusiveness of the offering. International students with a disability could in fact take this self-guided tour remotely and then register for an in-person "Accessibility Tour" afterwards.

The initiative's development process was streamlined by utilising a basic scripted chatbot structure. This was provided by the Design a Feminist Chatbot course convenors via Glitch, an online collaborative web development platform. This allowed the ISS team to focus on crafting a compelling script and enriching the user experience. The chatbot thus replicated the existing face-to-face campus tours digitally, incorporating GIFs, emojis, and conversational elements to replicate the friendly and engaging nature of traditional tour guides.

The chatbot's user experience was designed to be intuitive and engaging. Accordingly, upon launching the chatbot on their mobile devices, students are greeted with a welcome message, provided with prompts familiarising them with how to use the chatbot, and asked whether they have access requirements before starting their tour. As students navigate through the tour, the chatbot provides detailed descriptions of various locations on campus, enriched with historical facts and insider tips from current international students. Interactive maps guide students to each location, ensuring they can easily find their way around (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
The Self-guided Campus Tour Chatbot



The chatbot also provides links to upcoming O'Week events, additional information about support services on campus, and contacts for further assistance. This ensures that students always have access to the information they need, which promotes a sense of security and support. The self-guided campus tour chatbot is thus seamlessly integrated within the ISS digital network of support channels. No matter the platform or initiative with which students first come into contact, they can easily navigate and/or be referred to the most appropriate service or activity.

Launched in time for the Semester 1, 2024 International Student Welcome, the self-guided campus tour chatbot registered over 300 unique accesses over the course of a single day. This successful initial engagement highlights its potential as a convenient and useful way to introduce the campus to commencing international students when campus tour volunteer numbers are low. Given that updating and refining the chatbot's information and adding extra features is simple, it is likely to remain a helpful tool to adopt, adapt, and deploy when needed. Its positive reception underscores the potential of digital solutions in enhancing the student experience and in fostering an inclusive campus environment.

Adelaide Ready: The University of Adelaide pre-departure program

While the self-guided campus tour chatbot complements the on-campus Orientation experience, the ISS team also recognises the importance of supporting students even before their arrival in Australia. Building upon the learnings from the previous initiatives, the team turned its attention to the pre-departure phase of the international student experience and created the Adelaide Ready Pre-departure Program. This initiative is designed to equip students for success from the moment they accept their offer to study at the University of Adelaide.

In June 2024, the ISS team launched a comprehensive pre-departure program tailored to assist international offer holders in smoothly transitioning to their new academic and cultural environment. Commencing in March 2024, Adelaide Ready was developed in consultation with the University of Adelaide Pre-departure Program Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG). This group

includes various university units (International Recruitment, Accommodation Service, Ask Adelaide, Future Students, and Student Engagement and Success) and external partners (StudyAdelaide and Medibank).

The program aims to deliver a variety of resources designed to equip international students with essential knowledge for their arrival in Australia. These include student reels, pre-recorded staff presentations, and webinar sessions. The program intends to provide crucial information, offer avenues for personalised advice, enable engagement with university services before arrival, and foster students' confidence and autonomy for their new journey. As such, key areas are addressed, such as accommodation, healthcare, and enrolment procedures.

At the heart of the program is the "Preparing to Arrive" webpage, presenting essential information about life in Adelaide, packing tips, safety and security, health insurance, accommodation, enrolment, and campus life. This content is shared through bite-sized student videos, with more detailed information accessible via hyperlinked pages featuring short pre-recorded staff presentations. Students are invited to explore these resources through a personalised email invitation before attending the webinar sessions. Engagement data clearly show the positive impact of this approach. The webpage has seen a 28.5% increase in traffic compared to the same period in 2023, with student and staff videos garnering over 1,800 unique views on YouTube since their release on May 24, 2024.

To complement the online resources, the Adelaide Ready webinars—modelled on a flipped classroom approach—serve to reinforce the information provided on the webpage. These webinars feature interactive quizzes with prizes, a panel of current students, and ask-the-experts breakout rooms. Registered webinar attendees receive a post-webinar follow-up email with additional useful links and resources. Thanks to the International Orientation promotion embedded in the webinars, around 200 international students signed up for the Semester 2, 2024 International Student Welcome and O'Week events before the official invitation was sent out. This highlights the positive influence of the pre-departure program on the student life cycle.

The success of the webinars is reflected in student feedback. Data collected from Zoom webinar surveys, displayed in the browser at the end of the webinars, indicate a 93% positive webinar experience rate, a 94% webinar expectations met rate, and a 98% webinar clarity and organisation rate. Interactive quizzes at the beginning and end of the webinars have proven key to maintaining high participation levels. Post-webinar surveys have shown that, overall, students appreciated the blend of interactive quizzes, the student panel, and the opportunity to ask questions to expert staff. While not all questions could be answered during the webinars, students had the option to submit questions beforehand and via a feedback form afterwards. Their questions were then addressed by the ISS team in a Q&A document shared with all registered attendees after each webinar.

The Adelaide Ready Pre-departure Program exemplifies a comprehensive approach to supporting international students. By providing essential information and resources in an interactive and engaging way, it ensures students' smooth transition to their new academic and cultural environment. The ISS team looks forward to reflecting on the student feedback post-webinars to further refine the program's structure and content to maintain its initial success.

Conclusion

Through a series of innovative, cost-effective initiatives, the ISS team has addressed the unique challenges faced by international students, from pre-arrival preparation to on-campus integration. The diverse expertise and specialised knowledge required to deliver these initiatives highlights the critical role of international student support experts in creating an environment that not only attracts but also nurtures and retains international talent.

The student-centred online space on MyUni serves as a central hub, seamlessly integrating academic activities with essential resources and community-building activities. This innovative approach ensures that international students remain well informed and engaged throughout their academic journey, effectively mitigating feelings of isolation and enhancing their overall campus experience.

Building on this foundation, the Fantastic Race app and the self-guided campus tour chatbot further foster a sense of belonging and community. These initiatives facilitate cultural exchange, teamwork, and autonomous exploration, promoting students' meaningful interactions with both peers and mentors. The Fantastic Race app, in particular, demonstrates how game design elements can create engaging Orientation experiences that resonate with international students. The self-guided campus tour chatbot represents a significant step towards inclusivity. It ensures that all students, regardless of their physical abilities or time constraints, can familiarise themselves with the campus environment.

Perhaps most crucially, the Adelaide Ready Pre-departure Program addresses the often less prioritised pre-arrival phase of the international student journey. By providing comprehensive information and interactive webinars, this program ensures that students are well prepared for their transition to university life in Australia, equipping them to succeed from the outset.

Collectively, these four initiatives embody international student support experts' achievements. They bridge cultural gaps; ensure a comprehensive support system; and create dynamic, interactive, and accessible platforms that support international students' academic and social integration. The success of these programs, evidenced by increased engagement rates and positive student feedback, underscores their effectiveness in contributing to student retention and long-term success.

While the Australian higher education sector grapples with challenges, such as potential contraction and increased competition, the University of Adelaide's approach could serve as a model for other institutions. The initiatives developed by the University's ISS team demonstrate that with creativity, expertise, and a deep understanding of international student needs, impactful and cost-effective solutions can be created to enhance the international student experience. As the higher education landscape continues to evolve, specialised international student support services will likely become crucial in maintaining Australia's competitive edge in the global education market and ensuring the success and well-being of international students on our campuses.

Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The ISS team at the University of Adelaide is committed to enhancing the experience of international students through best practices and innovative solutions. In line with this commitment and acknowledging the growing adoption of generative AI in the higher education sector, the author used Claude 3.5 Sonnet to suggest improvements to the structure and flow of this paper after independently developing its original ideas and primary content. While the AI tool provided useful suggestions for content organisation, it showed limitations in refining stylistic elements and maintaining consistent grammar. Following the application of this tool, the author critically reviewed and edited the content as necessary without further generative AI assistance. The author assumes full responsibility for the final content, arguments, and conclusions presented in this paper. The purpose of this declaration is to ensure methodological transparency and to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the role of AI tools in academic research and writing.

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