

## **Supporting Student Transition and Early Engagement: An Online Induction Program**

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### **Abstract**

*Students face a range of serious challenges when adjusting to university life, particularly those students who are required to move away from home in order to pursue their studies. Through a study of a newly introduced online resident induction program, facilitated by Deakin Residential Services (DRS) at Deakin University, this paper draws attention to the important role of pre-arrival induction programs. Induction programs, such as the one highlighted in this paper, play an important role in enhancing student awareness and understanding of key rules and guidelines applying to behaviour, espousing integral community values, and effectively supporting the transition of residents to their new living learning environment. This paper further highlights the underlying principles transferable to other student residential communities or wider university settings.*

### **Introduction**

Students face a range of serious challenges when adjusting to university life, particularly those who are required to move away from home in order to pursue their studies (Beasley & Pearson, 2006; Leese, 2010; McInnis, 2001; Nelson & Kift, 2005; Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Pittman & Richmond, 2010; Stevens & Walker, 1996; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Initial challenges abound in relation to the realities of a lifestyle involving greater autonomy, increased responsibilities, the development of new social networks, and the sometimes precarious balancing act of family commitments, part-time work, study and social life. Krause and Coates (2008) note that "...the transition to university is a complex and often difficult period of a young student's life" (p. 499). This initial rite of passage can not only be exciting, but also terrifying, with a student's ability to successfully adjust and overcome such challenges playing a key role in determining their future success at university.

Indeed, research highlights that the initial experience in higher education is pivotal in establishing attitudes, expectations, motivation and approaches to learning, and that forming positive social relationships, making connections, and developing a sense of 'fit' with an institution can be vital in aiding adjustment (Bowles, Dobson & Fisher, 2011; Briggs & Hall, 2012; Cheng, 2004; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002). Research further demonstrates that a supportive environment and an appropriate and stimulating induction can increase persistence and success, reduce attrition, and assist students to cope with demands of the higher education environment (Bowles et al., 2011; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, & Kjellgreen, 2008; Leese, 2010). Importantly as Bowles et al. (2011) argue, "the successful integration of first year students should occur in both social and academic domains, as it is believed to be highly likely that difficulties in adjusting to one will impact on the other" (p. 64).

As such, providing a variety of programs, services and other initiatives to appropriately and effectively support students' transition to university has become commonplace within universities across Australia and around the globe. Targeted transition programs, ranging from orientation and induction activities, first year seminars, buddy or peer mentoring, advisory groups, and academic support initiatives, have emerged as playing a particularly key role in reducing attrition, fostering engagement and generally supporting student adjustment to university life (Bowles et al., 2011;

Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006; Jacobi, 1991; Muldoon & Hollingworth, 2010; Quinn et al., 2010; Tinto, 1998; Treston, 2006; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Through a study of a newly introduced online resident induction program facilitated by Deakin Residential Services at Deakin University, this paper draws attention to the important role that pre-arrival induction programs can play in enhancing student awareness and understanding of key rules and guidelines applying to behaviour, espousing integral community values, and effectively supporting student transition.

### **Deakin Residential Services context**

Deakin Residential Services (DRS) was established in late 2013 and assumed ownership and responsibility for the operation and development of all new and existing student residential facilities at Deakin University. The residential community has expanded significantly since 2011, approximately tripling in capacity over a seven-year period, with the team currently managing over 2,700 student beds across four campuses: Waurin Ponds and Waterfront, Geelong (approximately 100km from Melbourne); Warrnambool (250km south west of Melbourne); and Burwood (located 15km from the city centre). Whilst each campus has a diversity of student cohorts and geographical communities, all operate under one set of operating policies, procedures, values and student experience frameworks.

DRS has a critical role to play in enhancing the experience of the students living on campus during their time studying at Deakin. It upholds the belief that residents, student residential leaders, and staff all share the responsibility of building and maintaining healthy and happy communities. In joining the on-campus community, all residents commit and agree to reading the DRS Resident Handbook and completing the Residential Agreement, which clearly outlines community values, and the standards and expectations of behaviour whilst living on campus.

### **Pre-arrival online resident induction**

For many years DRS has provided a range of orientation and transition programs, services and activities to welcome new and returning students to on-campus accommodation. Within this, the DRS team saw an opportunity to proactively enhance resident awareness of the rules, values and community-living expectations of residential accommodation, whilst simultaneously offering a forum through which residents could connect, communicate and share their experiences prior to their arrival. The seven key values and expectations that students are required to uphold in residential accommodation are known by the acronym RESPECT, which stands for Responsive, Encouraging, Safe and Secure, Proactive, Enjoyable, Connected and Tolerant.

Working closely with the Deakin Future Learn team, a tailored online Residential Induction was introduced using Future Learn, a digital education platform, with all new and returning residents required to complete the induction before arriving on site. Incoming residents are to be provided with a link to the induction upon offer of a place within on-campus accommodation, generally one to three weeks prior to their check-in at each campus.

The induction, taking around twenty minutes for students to complete, involves five interactive sections covering rules applying to behaviour, consent, drugs, alcohol, safety and security, and the RESPECT values, whilst also introducing students to the on-campus living environment and key members of the residential staffing team. Short and engaging videos are used throughout to cover content with the aim of sustaining student interest. Participants are further expected to respond to and engage with others on content-related questions as part of an interactive discussion board within each section, with moderation of any commentary by a DRS staff member. The program concludes with a final seven-question test assessing comprehension and requiring a mark of 70% or above to pass.

Residents who fail to achieve a pass mark are provided with one final opportunity to re-sit the same assessment, with the small number who fail a second time being required to meet with Campus Life staff to review induction materials before being signed off as compliant. Students new to the residential community are not permitted to check in or obtain access to their room without prior completion of the module. Returning residential students who fail to attempt or complete the induction program (less than 1% of the entire residential cohort) are issued with a disciplinary breach on their residential student account which, subject to further cumulative breaches (for example, relating to behaviour), will result in additional sanctions, including eviction.

Administratively, completion of the course during peak periods (January-February and June-July) is tracked on a daily basis, reducing to weekly frequency during non-peak arrival times. Student data are exported from the Future Learn system, and cross-checked in the internal student housing database (StarRez), which generates reports identifying non-compliant students, enabling follow-up. Whilst this process is largely manual, and as such time-consuming, the benefits to both staff and students have more than outweighed any administrative frustrations.

Since its introduction in January 2018, over 2000 residents have successfully completed the program, with an unanticipated 7,000 posted comments from those involved, collated from the discussion forums within each section of the induction. Themes that have emerged from these comments are described below. Many residents have remarked on the benefits of the induction program, noting that the coverage of residential rules, community values, fire safety and sexual consent in particular, have been of value in guiding their expectations of residential life, allaying nerves, and aiding transition to the on-campus community. As one first-year student commented, “the course was a great way to understand the policies, rules, what to expect when living on res and how to treat other people. The videos and readings were engaging and easy to understand!”

Importantly, access to the induction program will continue throughout the remainder of 2018, providing support to late or future trimester arrivals whilst ensuring a consistent transition experience for all. Based on the success of the program in its first year to date, content will be further reviewed in preparation for roll-out again in 2019.

### **Emerging themes: Consent, alcohol consumption and returning resident engagement**

The nature of comments by residents engaged in the program has proven to be of interest, particularly in relation to areas such as alcohol consumption and sexual consent. Many students commented on their appreciation of the inclusion of consent, a topic of particular focus in recent years following the release of the Australian Human Rights Commission ‘Change the Course’ Report (2017), noting that they valued coverage and discussion of such an important issue at an early stage – providing a clear message regarding standards of acceptable behaviour.

An additional common theme emerged in relation to alcohol, and interestingly, student comments indicated a seemingly reduced interest in binge or heavy drinking, with many commenting on a preference towards more healthy lifestyles or a conscious decision not to drink at all. As one student commented:

*I've experienced issues of peer pressure in the past when it involves drinking, and the most important thing to remember is you should never feel forced to drink if you don't feel like it! It is completely okay to say no and have a night in, just as it is equally okay to go out with friends and have some drinks!*

DRS was also impressed with the level of engagement from returning residents, who frequently responded to student questions on the discussion forum within the general introductory section of the induction. Questions and responses concerned matters such as what to pack or what to expect from the first few weeks; some also shared their own experiences of living on residence during the previous

year. Returning students, in addition to the moderating staff member, also played a key role in redirecting any student questions not covered or answered in the induction to other information sources, including the DRS website.

### **Induction and platform satisfaction**

As part of the induction program, residents were also asked to provide feedback on both the content and design of the course. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with students commenting on the interactivity of the induction, specifically the ability for students to engage in conversation and dialogue with both new and returning residents about what to expect from life on campus, what to bring, and other residents' thoughts on community values and behavioural expectations.

Many also commented on the engaging format of the platform with one student noting:

*as a returning resident there wasn't really any new information here for me, but I thought the format was great! It was much better than just getting people to read some information and tick a checkbox at the end.*

### **Merits, drawbacks and potential transferability of the program**

The residential induction program provides an opportunity for early engagement with students transitioning to higher education; in this case, those relocating to on-campus accommodation as part of their studies. Research demonstrates that contact with current university students and staff can positively influence prospective student aspirations, and furthermore, that engaged students are more likely to persist, achieve success and complete their qualifications (Briggs & Hall, 2012; Leach & Zepke, 2004; McKenzie & Schweizer, 2001). As Briggs and Hall (2012) argue,

*The positive effect on applicants of interaction with school, college and university staff, students and others who are enthusiastic and encouraging cannot be underestimated. Students tell of one-off encounters with students or staff on university visit days, or of longer-standing relationships with subject teachers or guidance workers that have 'tipped the balance' and enabled them to imagine themselves as university students. (p. 12)*

Other evidence suggests that the interactive nature of the induction program, providing students with the opportunity to engage in conversations regarding their expectations, interests and any concerns, is likely to play a key role in aiding student transition, supporting students to develop early friendships, and establish commonalities with others prior to even arriving on campus (Bowles et al., 2011; Lowe & Cook, 2011; Tinto, 1998; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Introducing students to key staff and student leaders within their campus precinct via short welcome videos is intended to develop student affiliation, a sense of belonging, and a level of comfort with their future university; and, in this case, new on-campus home (Pittman & Richmond, 2010). Research conducted by Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) in particular, highlighted that social support and integration was "vital for successful adjustment to university life" (p. 709). Their study noted that providing students with opportunities to make friends early on in their university experience helped them to settle in, provided social support, enhanced students' general sense of wellbeing and belonging, and "provided a buffering effect when students experienced difficulties" (p. 716).

Finally, the essential content provided to students as part of the program - important information regarding rules, values, and expectations - arguably acts as a crucial enabler to transition. Research demonstrates that the availability of student support services, accessibility to information, the usefulness of resources, the relevance of study material and study skills support, enable a more effective transition to the higher education environment (Bowles et al., 2011). As would be expected, the converse has the opposite effect – resulting in added pressure, the formation of unrealistic expectations, and ultimately, disengagement from university life (Leese, 2010; Lowe & Cook, 2011).

Authors Lowe and Cook (2003) argue, “when universities do not help incoming students form realistic expectations of themselves and of their institutions, the demands of the new environment can be overwhelming” (p. 55).

In considering its potential transferability, there are a number of elements of the DRS Resident Induction which have the potential to be utilised at other accommodation sites, and also perhaps within a broader university environment, to facilitate positive transition outcomes for students.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of specific elements which have facilitated the high level of student engagement, as demonstrated by the level of interaction and positive comments within the discussion forums.

In particular, the nature of the contract between students and DRS enables residential staff to mandate compliance by only permitting residents to have access to their room following successful completion of the induction. In cases of non-compliance, internal disciplinary action can be undertaken. It is possible that not all residential sites and certainly the broader university would have recourse to similar actions.

Additionally, the initial creation of the induction module, and subsequent monitoring and tracking of student compliance has proven to be administratively challenging and time-consuming at times, simply due to the manual processes involved, and it is worth considering the value of having a dedicated staffing resource to undertake, coordinate and lead the project to ensure its success.

It is also important to highlight that this induction program complements the existing orientation and transition activities facilitated by DRS, and does not, nor should not, replace the value of the face-to-face programming and compulsory briefings which take place following student arrival on-campus.

## **Conclusion**

Student interaction and feedback has indicated that the implementation of this pre-arrival induction program within the Deakin residential context has raised awareness of critical rules, values and expectations. Comments from students indicate that it has offered an engaging forum for residential students to connect, communicate and share their experiences. By proactively reaching out to students with information, guidance, and an opportunity to connect with their peers at an early stage - before they have the opportunity to experience fear, failure, disappointment or confusion - this induction supports and enhances student transition, whilst contributing to a consistent and positive arrival experience for all.

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