International Student Orientation:
It’s more than just an event
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Victorian TAFE International (VTI) is an association of staff who work in TAFE Institutes in international education in the Australian state of Victoria. VTI exists to support and inform members, improve communication between members and other bodies, to increase awareness and understanding of international education generally and to provide quality advice to the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) on international education issues which will then inform policy and strategic directions for the enhancement of the TAFE brand.

Participation in VTI is open to any international education staff members including those in: management, recruitment, business development, admissions, and quality and compliance in member TAFE institutions in Victoria. The member institutions have each contributed to the development of this document and they are:

- Advance TAFE
- Box Hill Institute
- Bendigo TAFE
- Chisholm Institute
- Gordon Institute of TAFE
- Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE
- Holmesglen
- Kangan Institute
- Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE
- RMIT University TAFE Division
- Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
- University of Ballarat TAFE Division
- Victoria University
- William Angliss Institute
- Wodonga Institute of TAFE

List of Acronyms

- AFIS: Australian Federation of International Students
- ASQA: The Australian Skills Quality Authority. The national regulator for vocational education
- DFAT: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- DIAC: Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (now called Dept of Immigration and Border Protection)
- DSDBI: Victorian State government Department of State Development, Business and Innovation
- ELICOS: English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
- ESOS Act: Education Services for Overseas Students Act of Australian Parliament
- ISANA: ISANA is the representative body for international education professionals in Australia and New Zealand, working in student services, advocacy, teaching, and policy development
- National Code: The code of practice which accompanies the ESOS Act
- TAFE: Technical and Further Education (public vocational education and training providers)
- TEQSA: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, the national regulator for degree programs and above
- VET: Vocational Education and Training
- VTI: Victorian TAFE International Inc.

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© 2013 ISBN: 978-0-9872358-9-3 Good Ideas in International Student Orientation: It's more than just an event by Kate Dempsey is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License
In 2013, the VTI Onshore Special Interest Group investigated what each member institute undertakes in relation to international student orientation in order to incorporate and highlight good practice ideas for orientation and student support into this report.

To facilitate the process, VTI first called for volunteers to join a Working Group to advance the research. Secondly the Working Group devised an anonymous survey where members indicated what activities they undertook for international student orientation. This survey told us that there are variations as to how orientation is arranged in Victorian TAFEs and how much time and money is spent on it. The majority of TAFEs offer either a half-day or a full day international student orientation and a faculty based short orientation/enrolment. All members offer orientation for their international students twice a year, generally in February and July. The costs of orientation programs vary from $1000 to $4000 per student intake.

In the main, TAFE providers provide guest speakers, hard copy information and web links to further information at their orientation programs. They also offer pre-arrival information and they do offer further assistance at other times of the year (for example study skills, English help), but again there is considerable variation in the capacity to offer these additional seminars.

Following the VTI anonymous survey, the Working Group set about interviewing staff engaged in orientation at all 15 member institutes in order to find good practice ideas and to outline any challenges with providing orientation to international students. A copy of this interview questionnaire is included at Appendix 7. The interviews were conducted by the Working Group between July 2013 and September 2013 and the findings were considered and refined by the Onshore Special Interest Group from September to November 2013.

One finding of the interviews was that continuous improvement is a key facet of the work of orientation managers. They work hard each year to try new things and to improve the attendance and the retention of information given to students at orientation. It is clear that there is not ‘one best’ way to undertake international student orientation.

This study of VTI members has found that the most effective way to consider what information students require, when and in what ways, is to think of the international student journey from arrival to graduation as a cycle. This cycle is outlined in the report.

Many examples of good ideas to try are also outlined, including quizzes, treasure hunts, You Tube videos, having student mentors or ambassadors, informal sessions over food, introduction to Australian Rules Football and to cricket (including free entry to a game), introduction (and discount) to the local gym and case study scenarios at the end of information sessions for students to discuss in small groups/pairs and decide on a suitable solution.

During our interviews, the different capacity of TAFE members to undertake orientation (as opposed to the university members) was evident. The TAFE members simply did not have access to the same level of resourcing as universities. Therefore it may well be useful and cost effective to offer some elements of the basic information required for international students (especially pre-arrival information) on a joint basis.

- VTI should seek funding to do a 10 question pre-departure on line service for all members to use. Failing this possibility, this report recommends VTI member TAFEs offer the OSHC on line Student Welcome Service;
- VTI should work with AFIS on a general student information day to be held across several TAFEs;
- VTI should seek funding from the State Government (DSDBI) to offer 3 information days in conjunction with AFIS (one in the city for metropolitan TAFEs, one in Bendigo for western regional TAFEs and one in Gippsland for eastern regional TAFEs).

The key findings of this research are that with tight budgets, TAFE providers in Victoria are working hard to provide excellent student support to their international students. They have told us of their challenges, including having the audience and its needs change each year and they know that orientation is just one event in a series of efforts to make students welcome, feel safe and to ensure they have a positive study experience. Finally, they have shown their enthusiasm for trying new ideas and for sharing good ideas with other international education providers.

Summary

The key findings of this research are that with tight budgets, TAFE providers in Victoria are working hard to provide excellent student support to their international students.
Each year, VTI engages in collaborative research projects, which are of particular interest to the member TAFE Institutes.

In 2013, the Onshore Special Interest Group was keen to put together a report, which looked at what each member does in relation to international student orientation and to incorporate and highlight good practice ideas for orientation and student support.

We set up a small working group to progress the work and brought each draft back to the whole Onshore Special Interest Group to check for accuracy on a bi-monthly basis between March 2013 and November 2013.

The working group consisted of Kate Dempsey, VTI Executive Officer and three institute staff who undertake student orientation. We also invited comment on various drafts from ISANA (student support officers network) and AFIS (Australian Federation of International Students). We commenced with an anonymous survey of all members, asking what activities they offered for international student orientation (results below) and we followed this up with interviews of the majority of member institutes to get further detail about what worked well for them in their student orientation programs.

There are several good guides in existence to help with improving student support and orientation, but they are largely aimed at the university sector or prepared by the university sector. This report aims to document what TAFE institutes do in relation to international student orientation and to advise on ways to improve orientation within the staffing and budget constraints of a vocational education provider.
Overall Findings

The VTI survey of orientation activity by members elicited 12 responses from 11 members of VTI. The responses were from the larger and more active members of VTI and as such offer a representative view of what members do in relation to international student orientation.

In summary, there are variations as to how orientation is arranged in Victorian TAFEs and how much time and money is spent on it. The majority of TAFEs offer either a half-day or a full day international student orientation and a faculty based short orientation/enrolment. Each provider evaluates its orientation program, but it is usually in the form of anonymous sheets given at the end asking students what they liked/didn’t like. In most cases students themselves are not involved in providing advice, information and assistance. In the main, TAFE providers provide guest speakers, hard copy information and web links to further information at their orientation programs. They do offer further assistance at other times of the year (for example study skills, English help), but again there is considerable variation in the capacity to offer these additional seminars.

Orientation is offered twice a year

All members offer orientation for their international students twice a year, generally in February and July. One provider offers orientation in January and another member offers a third orientation in October. Those that offer ELICOS programs may run up to 9 programs in a calendar year (as ELICOS programs only run for 12 weeks).

For those five TAFE institutes which offer higher education degrees, the timing of orientation is difficult as the VET courses start 3-4 weeks before higher education courses.

Significant variation in time spent at orientation

The majority of respondents (33%) offered a half-day orientation for their international students twice a year; this was followed by 25% who offered one full day. So the majority (58%) offer either a full day or a half-day. However there was considerable variation amongst respondents. Two respondents offer 2 full days, another offers 1 and ½ days, and another member offers one full day and then 3 half days. In the main, international student orientation is separate (or separate in part) from domestic student orientation.

Information is given mainly in hard copy form

The majority (75%) give their material to students in terms of a handbook, information pack and a ‘show bag’ of pamphlets and brochures to take away with them. No respondents gave information in soft copy only, although one is about to introduce a memory stick and all members offer web links to other material. Half of respondents do offer information on line as part of orientation, but this is not the main function or focus of orientation.

Costs of international student orientation

The International Office for all VTI member institutes coordinates enrolment, and for most it is completed as part of the orientation program. But in the majority of institutes, each faculty also offers orientation. The costs of orientation programs vary from $1000 to $4000 per student intake. Costs are higher if outings are planned; food is prepared to a sophisticated level (as opposed to sausages or pizza) and if printing costs are extensive. In some instances, speakers also charge for their time. Some providers offer travel between campuses for orientation and this incurs a cost. As does a visit to the beach for water safety advice or providing self defence classes.

Is orientation evaluated?

All VTI member institutes with substantial numbers of international students evaluate their orientation programs - with the exception of one member that is currently overhauling its orientation program. Most offer a form for students to fill in at the conclusion of orientation with simple questions asking students what they liked and what they did not like. An example is in Appendix 1.
Introduction

Education Providers offering courses to overseas students are required to abide by the ESOS (Education Services for Overseas Students) Act, which aims to provide students with a safe and successful stay in Australia. The ESOS Act is underpinned by 15 National Standards (The National Code), which aim to provide consistent good practice across all education providers when dealing with international students.

Standard 2 – Student Engagement Before Arrival specifies that providers should recruit in an ethical and responsible manner and ensure students have the qualifications needed to successfully undertake the course they apply for.

Standard 3 – Formalisation of Enrolment outlines the written agreements made between student and education provider covering what will be offered and the fees payable for the education offering.

Standard 6 – Student Support Services is the key Standard of the National Code for student support and orientation. It outlines information to be provided to students and the various types of support that should be given.

All providers must abide by the National Code and can be audited by either of the government regulators – ASQA or TEQSA and need to provide evidence of student orientation activities. But providers also wish to do more than simply provide the required information, they want to ensure they offer high quality education and a positive, well engaged and successful experience for international students. Therefore the VTI member TAFEs and dual sector universities in Victoria review and evaluate their information and orientation programs annually to ensure students have a positive experience and succeed.

The section below details some of the challenges encountered by VTI member education providers as they strive to continuously improve the support they offer to international students.

Student Support Services

Registered providers support students to adjust to study and life in Australia, to achieve their learning goals and to achieve satisfactory academic progress towards meeting the learning outcomes of the course.

Key requirements for all sectors

An age and culturally sensitive orientation program is required, including information regarding:

- support services available to assist in the transition into life and study in Australia
- legal services
- emergency and health services
- facilities and resources
- complaints and appeals processes; and
- information on visa conditions relating to course progress and, if applicable, attendance.

- Providers must have a documented critical incident policy together with procedures that cover the action to be taken in the event of a critical incident, the required follow-up to the incident, the recording of the incident and the action taken.
- Providers must help students access study support and welfare-related services.
- A contact officer or officers must be appointed as the official point of contact for students.
- Providers must ensure that staff members who interact directly with overseas students are aware of the providers’ obligations under the ESOS framework.
- There is no longer a requirement to appoint a ‘suitably qualified person’ as the international student contact officer. Under the National Code 2007, the provider must clearly identify a member or members of staff as the official point of contact and ensure there are adequate support personnel.
- There must be a written critical incident policy and procedures that include follow-up action required in the event of a critical incident.
What is the value of orientation to students?
Orientation serves to help international students understand their academic requirements, recognise the skills needed to succeed and to feel confident in their study. But more importantly, orientation helps students to form social networks, to find out where to go for help; it breaks down isolation and helps international students feel that they belong.

Orientation serves to thank students for choosing the institution, congratulates them on getting a place, provides indicators that they are welcome and safe and begins the task of broadening cultural awareness (UKCISA 2008). It prepares them for the fact that ‘things are done differently here’ and helps them to gain independence in seeking out answers to the issues they come across. Several orientation activities suggested by VTI members are designed specifically to help with this issue – for example, ‘treasure hunts’ on campus.

Orientation is especially important for international students as they are new to the institution, but more importantly they are new to the country. After the initial excitement of gaining a place, they will begin to worry about how big this decision really is and if they can succeed.

Having a successful orientation program not only allows the institution to ‘tick the box’ for audit purposes against the National Code, it also saves time and energy later. If orientation, and student support in general, is carried out to a high standard, then problems are less likely to occur later – for example: students failing, becoming home sick, feeling depressed or overwhelmed and not knowing what to do or where to seek help.

Encouraging students to attend
Two respondents to the VTI survey did not indicate that orientation is compulsory to their incoming students. The rest (10 or 83%) say it is compulsory to attend in the letter of offer to new students. Only two respondents actually cross reference which students come and cross off names. The rest indicate that it is difficult to ‘police’ who comes and there are many issues which cause students not to be able to attend, e.g. flights are delayed. The general estimate is that around 70% of students do attend orientation at the TAFEs in Victoria.

Several VTI members send a reminder email two weeks before orientation and they find that this helps keep attendance up at orientation.

Getting the Balance Right
In interviews, TAFE providers explained how they have changed and enhanced their orientation offerings, based on feedback from students. They have tried all combinations of events – half day, multiple sessions, having food, festival days over the year, guest speakers, panel of short speeches, no speakers, only staff speaking, information booths, free tickets, social media, you tube videos, email reminders, SMS reminders, prizes, interactive games and quizzes, as well as Facebook interaction.

What they have learned is that what works one year or for one group, may not work well for the next year or the next group. There seems to be many ways to proceed with good practice at orientation, but there is no ‘best’ way to undertake it.

We use the word “COMPULSORY” and promote the benefits of orientation (e.g. chance to meet other students, prizes, food, etc.) to encourage students to attend orientation, but there are always students missing out.

Making the information meaningful and timely will get students to come, rather than worrying about what type of food to serve.

Orientation online – does it work?
Several members who were interviewed considered offering orientation online for students, with a certificate to be granted once all elements were completed. No TAFE members currently offer this alternative, however this is the key tool used by VTI dual sector university member RMIT to get basic required information across to international students.

VTI members participating in this research have suggested that a joint on line orientation program, used by all members and particularly aimed at pre-arrival information may well be a good way to ensure students have basic knowledge before arrival. The online facility has an advantage that it would allow questions to be answered by students for a certificate given upon completion. For audit purposes this appears to have merit. Of course it requires institutions to get a student email address before arrival in order to log on to the website and undertake an online pre-arrival information session.

During the research for this report, the working group undertook a demonstration of the Allianz-Overseas Student Health Care on line at www.studentwelcomeservices.com.au and found it useful. The service is offered to providers for free by one of the two key companies offering compulsory international student health cover. It is quite long, but can be customised to each provider’s need. It has a quiz to capture and measure student comprehension of the topics covered. If TAFE providers subscribe to this service they may be able to save on costs and focus their orientation on more interactive student well-being and social engagement matters.
RMIT has developed a 15-minute video (and their student feedback indicates 15 minutes is the maximum time a video should go for to encourage student engagement). The video has a quiz at the end to ensure and record that students have completed it and do understand the contents. RMIT reminds students by email until all have completed the quiz and they offer a $500 voucher for one lucky student. See the link to the web page at [www.rmit.edu.au/internationalsupport/eai](http://www.rmit.edu.au/internationalsupport/eai) and a photo of the page at Appendix 2. RMIT’s advice is that the video is more ‘user friendly’ than an online survey instrument and has been very successful.

**Small providers**

For those institutes that have an extremely small cohort (many of whom come from the ELICOS program) staff are able to tailor individual packages to each of their students which includes 1:1 meetings to assist with enrolment, accommodation and transition and settlement issues. One example of value added by TAFE Institutes in student support was cited by Bendigo TAFE: Students that attend La Trobe University (Bendigo campus) are tracked and where required additional support is provided by Bendigo TAFE in the form of tuition and counselling.

**Should international orientation be separate from domestic orientation?**

All VTI TAFE members offer a separate international student orientation and also a faculty orientation. The variation in time allocation for orientation, can be explained by this ‘double’ orientation: some providers offer a general half day so that the faculties can then offer more in depth information, while others provide most information at orientation and then timetabling matters are covered at the faculty session. Some VTI members also have a separate morning for international students and then they join domestic students for the remainder of their orientation. There are pros and cons to this separate orientation: on the one hand if they are separate, international students can be assured of gaining information that is tailored to their needs as they are new to the country and education providers can therefore more easily show auditors that they do abide by Standard Six of the National Code. However, if orientation is combined with local students, it is possible that international students will find new friends amongst the local students and this is considered a positive. It also suggests that international students are considered the same as any other student. Perhaps the combination of some separate events and some combined is the best option, although at present this option is offered by a minority of Victorian TAFEs.

**The best time to offer orientation**

All providers who answered our survey indicated that the timing of orientation is especially complex. Many providers have staggered enrolment dates across faculties; VET courses start earlier than higher education courses; international students have flight and visa delays. Those who were interviewed for this research noted the frustration in dealing with each faculty and determining their course start dates. There was a general desire for uniformity of start dates to make orientation easier to arrange, but there did not appear to be the will at a central level to make this happen.

"We consulted with Education Managers on course start dates and came to the conclusion that the first week in February for semester 1 and the second week in July for semester 2 orientation worked well and agreed to centralise TAFE orientation."

Several providers have initiated discussions with Education Managers in each faculty to arrange a mutually convenient time for orientation or to offer a central orientation with a compromise in timing. One provider indicated that they were asked to offer individual orientations for international students which were based on the course start dates; this proved quite difficult as there were too many to organise. They held discussions with the faculty Education Managers to justify the reasoning for a more centralised TAFE orientation, which was accepted and so three years down the track they are running a successful centralised orientation program.

"International Students join the International Student Orientation for VET on Day one and then join the Orientation with Domestic Students on Day Two. It is the same with Degree students."
Guest speakers
Some providers have cut back on the number of guest speakers, noting either that students are overwhelmed and forget who spoke on what topic or that some speakers are more engaging than others. All providers offer speaking places to both internal and external stakeholders. In house presenters are typically from Careers, Counselling, Housing & Finance, Safety, Library, Recreation & Sport and Compliance. A few providers ask existing or past students to speak.

Too many guest speakers can make it boring (and make all presentations blend into one).

External speakers are typically from Medibank or the Overseas Student Health Care. The OSHC representative presents on their services and assists students with their OSHC needs. Many also seek the support of Victoria Police, the Fire Brigade, DIAC, Surf Lifesaving, Sexual Health and Accommodation speakers. Several times it was noted that speakers could be boring in their delivery and content. Since they are offering their assistance for free, this makes the situation somewhat complex to deal with. One provider noted that they had a great speaker from one agency, but when he moved on, the next person who came was not as engaging. Another provider offers a panel of speakers, where each is given 5 minutes only to talk and then students can follow up later with the speaker if they wish. Whilst several of VTI’s dual sector universities have decided not to use speakers anymore, preferring more interactive forms of information sharing, most TAFEs still use them. The universities consider speakers as rather ‘old fashioned.’ They also suggest that if a provider is using a speaker, then the best speakers or guides are other students themselves. Respondents believe speakers should be given clear guidelines to speak slowly and clearly, avoid colloquial language, stay directly on message and only provide basic information which students can follow up later.

Goody Bags
All providers in VTI offer printed material to students at orientation. They have noticed, however, that too many handouts in the goody bags mean that students get overwhelmed. One provider has changed this now to simply offering a provider booklet and a quiz with a prize for answering questions on the booklet. Interviewees also noted the time-cost involved in packing all the goodies into the bags and the disappointment they feel when they see the material discarded around campus.

One provider suggested in future they intend to put the bags on a table and students may take one if they wish (rather than give them out to all). Students may also take only those items they wish for their bag. Providers also noted that they work hard to get discount vouchers or trial offer vouchers and the like from local suppliers and businesses, but have noticed that these are harder and harder to source in recent times.

The key message from providers was that having food, goody bags and so on may help to improve orientation attendance, but in the end the key to success is in making the sessions meaningful to students.

Funding for Orientation
With funding cuts made to TAFE in Victoria in 2012 and the decline in numbers of international students attending TAFE, providers have indicated they have also had a drop in budget allocations for international student orientation. The interviews with providers made it evident that TAFE providers are simply not as well resourced as their university counterparts, making innovative orientation difficult to fund and resource.

We used to take students on a day trip to Healesville but stopped doing it due to budget constraints.

Summary
The 11 TAFE providers who responded to the VTI survey and the student representatives and dual sector universities in Victoria which provided comment on this report all noted the importance of trying many different ways to make orientation interesting and useful to students. It was agreed that there is no one best way to conduct orientation.

Respondents noted the importance of involving a range of teachers, staff and students in the orientation and using student feedback to continually improve their offerings. The key suggestions are to involve students as much as possible, to make sessions as interactive as possible and to provide timely advice to students as they can be overwhelmed with written material.

With a downturn in funding in the TAFE system, there seems to be a good case for co-operation on some aspects of international student orientation. It is unlikely that VTI members will be in a position to do more at orientation in the near future, rather they must do better with less support and funding.
Following our anonymous survey, the VTI Working Group interviewed staff at 15 institutes who are closely involved in preparing orientation programs. It became clear in those interviews, that providers undertake a range of activities over the whole study period for international students to ensure a successful stay. As one respondent said, “orientation is more than just an event”.

Research suggests that providing students with support to cope with the challenges of studying in a foreign country soon after their arrival is highly beneficial (Scott, Gresham & Dennis, 2010) to their study success. While orientation programs focus on the information that students need to survive their first few weeks on campus, they also provide social activities, as students often report that the social aspects of making friends remain an issue for them over time.

This study of VTI members has found agreement that the best way to consider what information students require, when and in what ways, is to think of the international student journey from arrival to graduation as a cycle. In this way, orientation is just one of many activities to engage with international students over the time of their study in Australia.

In order to meet the requirements of Standard Six of the National Code, information, support and assistance must be provided to students at every point in their study experience. For example, the Standard requires information to be provided on course progress requirements and visa conditions. But Victorian TAFE members’ experience is that students are not always in a position to ‘hear’ this information when they first arrive on campus. Similarly accessing study support and other welfare support is often assumed by students to be irrelevant to them in the first few weeks of arrival. It is only later as they settle in, that they realise they need this assistance. Easy access to timely information is the key to success. Our interviews suggest repetition of information also needs to occur at stages throughout study.

The concept of student support as a cycle matching student needs at different times is also recommended by ISANA and by CISA, that is, both student welfare and support staff at Australian education providers and international students themselves.

The following cycle is a suggested model for good practice in international student orientation. It is taken from the interviews in this research and directly from International Student Good Practice Program For Australian Education Providers by CISA and ISANA Templates for Student Engagement.
Information to be included at each step in the cycle

Information should include: Cost of Living, Work Rights, Accommodation Options, Transport, General Visa Conditions, Health and Safety, Customs and Quarantine Information and Australian Culture. All relevant contact numbers and addresses should also be contained in information given before the student arrives. See ISANA list at Appendix 6.

Pre-Arrival:
- Visas (DFAT, DIAC/DIBP, Agent)
- Health Insurance
- Travel Documents
- Getting from Airport
- Living in Australia (intro)
- Public transport (overview) and safety
- Clothing
- Map
- Computers
- Money (ATMs, credit cards, cost of living)
- Accommodation (temporary options)
- Immigration
- Child care and school (if travelling with family)
- Detector Dogs
- Emergency phone numbers
- Customs
- Mobile Phone
- Laws and safety

Upon arrival in Australia:
The Education Provider should ensure that international students are appropriately welcomed on arrival.
- Airport transport recommendations and options should be clear
- Providers should support the International Student Welcome Desk at Melbourne Airport or have institute personnel to assist students with queries at the airport.

The Education Provider will provide ongoing information and assistance aimed at helping the student meet the basic needs of life in Australia (Safety, Health, Accommodation, Local Community Orientation, Integration and Social inclusion). For example:
- Clear guides on shopping for food, transport and what to expect in Victoria
- Activities to enable students to settle in to their new environment.
- Information on temporary accommodation must be clear, precise, and accessible.

Even before orientation day, there is a need for basic information to be given to international students. In particular this should cover where to get help (emergency, medical, dental, health cover issues, telephones, shopping, taxis, postage, driving a car, banking issues).
The Education Provider will offer orientation covering:

i. Information on the local area and services (including safety)
ii. Operations and Institution policies
iii. Course overview

The Education Provider will provide students with the opportunity to contact a trained representative (external or internal) if in need of assistance:

i. Critical Incident hotline
ii. Student counsellor
iii. Student Representative

The Education Provider will clearly explain telecommunication and internet options, specific to the area of study:

i. Pre Paid Mobile
ii. Contracts
iii. Internet options in Australia.

**Settling In**

Once classes start, education providers should promote cultural integration on campus, provide opportunities for informal socialising, offer seminars on study habits, English language help, and plagiarism.

Within the first month of attending class, issues such as work rights, the value of volunteering, rental accommodation, public safety, community engagement, water safety, bush safety, Australian holidays, clubs, recreation options, eating out and the like should be covered.

**Ongoing Information Needs**

Research suggests that sometime into the journey of studying, students move from excitement to shock and following these emotions, they can become isolated and depressed. It is at this time that help is needed with more personal issues such as: setting goals, overcoming loneliness, staying in contact with family at home, developing local friendships and networks for support, engaging in community activities. These needs are best presented to students not as information sessions, but as integrated, interactive and proactive outreach activities to engage students who may be struggling either financially or emotionally.

Within the first few months it is also helpful to offer movie nights, singing/dancing competitions (invite local students too), have a cultural night with guest performers and student performers, or perhaps seek funding from the local government authority for a harmony day celebration.

It is important to maintain engagement with international students as they continue their studies to ensure satisfactory attendance and study performance, but also to assist with timely information and support. Towards the end of a student’s stay, information can be provided on resumes, career options, continued study, visa changes and requirements, holidays, work related issues, feelings associated with leaving Australia and going home.
The key learning from this report of what Victorian TAFE institutes cover in international student orientation is that:

There is not one best way to approach orientation

Sometimes ideas work and sometimes they don’t

Feedback from students is critical to future improvement

Students want short, sharp bursts of information (not long winded speeches or information overload)

They want orientation to be interactive and fun

They want to meet other students and make friends

They want information, which is meaningful to them and timely

We should separate how we provide basic information that is required for those new to Australia from the needs of students for connection, inclusion and friendship.
Best ways to encourage students to attend orientation

Section 3 of this report outlines some of the challenges of providing orientation. One of which was encouraging students to attend orientation where significant information is given to students. VTI members provide a number of suggestions to encourage students to attend orientation. They include:

- Liaise with Agents and reinforce the importance of attending and encourage students to attend
- Provide the orientation program to Agents
- Students must attend in order to be enrolled, get timetable, locate their course rooms and ID cards
- Once students accept their offers they are prompted to register for orientation via an online form. Orientation information is also emailed to students with their eCoE and sent by Admissions team
- Information is sent about their campus of study, who their coordinator is, general information on Melbourne, quarantine information and airport booking information so they can book this free service as new students
- Make simple information available and clear on the institute website with links to the orientation sessions or flyer and information.
- Send email or SMS reminders
- Set up a ‘New to Melbourne’ Facebook page

Involving Students in Orientation

Part of encouraging students to attend is to seek their feedback as to what they enjoyed about orientation and also involving fellow students as much as possible. According to participants in this research, students respond well to other students as mentors or ambassadors at orientation. They like to hear their personal stories and feel more confident to ask them questions. Several TAFEs in Victoria have student mentors, who wear a special T-shirt on campus (at the café, bookshop and library) for the whole semester so students feel free to ask them for assistance.

Some VTI members offer training in leadership and customer service for their student mentors/student ambassadors. Several of the dual sector universities are able to afford to train student mentors in mental health issues, first aid, leadership and event management. The students are able to gain recognition of this learning and even certification for their training.

‘Snappy videos and well trained student mentors – that’s the key’

‘Students use Facebook, more so than our website, so we always use it to communicate with them’

‘Part of encouraging students to attend is to seek their feedback as to what they enjoyed about orientation and also involving fellow students as much as possible’
What do students say that they find useful and interesting?

The survey below shows what students at Victoria University liked about orientation. The quiz was voted as their favourite part of the program by 17% of students. The quiz was very simple and in interview Victoria University staff said they asked some basic questions about Australia. It was a multiple choice and the contestants had bells in front of them. So, whoever had the answer would ring the bell. They had a prize for the winner and some chocolates for the runner up. The student audience was very engaged – giving hints to participants and they also won a prize for the correct answer, if the contestants were not successful. It was fun, lots of laughter and jokes going around. The students were eager to win the prize and enjoyed the competitive nature of the quiz.

Favourite Part of the Program

- Quiz: 17%
- Whole Program: 32%
- Introduction: 12%
- Need more enrolment details: 3%
- Morning Tea: 6%
- Student Support: 6%
- Amazing race: 6%
- Careers: 9%
- OSHC: 3%
- Tour: 6%

Provide food

All providers offer free food as an incentive to attend orientation. This seems to be well received in the main by students and it is recommended that it continue as good practice. However, food must be considered carefully as some providers have been given negative feedback on both the quality of the food (not everyone likes pizza) and on not considering religious holidays or dietary needs (all food must be Halal). One provider noted student feedback that orientation occurred during Ramadan, therefore the free food was irrelevant, as Muslim students could not eat during the day.

Some providers have started offering more innovative food offerings: miniature vegie burgers, corn on the cob, sushi or tacos. These offerings seem to be well received.
Make it interactive

Within budget constraints providers all attempt to make the sessions more interactive. Several ideas for interaction are below:

- Incorporating case study scenarios at the end of information sessions for students to discuss in small groups/pairs/whole group and decide on a suitable solution or course of action to overcome the particular issues or challenges presented in the scenario (source: Enhancing the International Student Experience Project²)
- Students enjoy hearing interesting real stories from students because it makes them aware of situations that they might find themselves in
- Passport challenge (such as offered by Chisholm Institute – see Appendix 3) where students must get their passports stamped for a prize at the end
- Prizes offered could include bookshop vouchers (on campus bookshop), memberships to the gym, university hoodies, water bottles and bags
- Scavenger hunt in pairs to find things around campus makes finding places more entertaining and helps to make friends
- Tour of local gym with discount memberships available
- Lunch with the local Mayor
- Afternoon tea with various community groups and those seeking student volunteers
- Southern Cross University Board Game
- Campus tours on a bus
- Current students who help out on orientation day, so students can ask questions of them
- Football, soccer or handball clinic
- Free tickets to football games as prizes
- Top prize given by one provider was a seat at the Australian Tennis Open Grand final.

To play the game, students take turns to answer questions related to studying at SCU (i.e. questions about enrolment; visa regulations; support services; IT & computing; Library services, settling in; academic skills development etc.) and they must choose an answer from a set of multiple choice answers – this ensures that there is only one correct answer provided. If a player answers correctly, they then roll a dice and move the designated number of spaces on the board. The game is supplemented with snacks, music and prizes for the winners which is extremely beneficial because it adds a festive atmosphere to the occasion. Students commented that this was a clever, fun and/or interesting way to recall or learn information related to their studies and many also commented that they liked the novelty prizes that were offered to players.

See Appendix 4
Ways to make it fun

A video, a general knowledge quiz, a game or anything that is activity based seems to interest students more, according to our respondents. Presenters who share personal experiences of their student years really gets audience attention and they tend to relate to what is said and don’t feel as nervous and anxious to ask questions. The other thing to consider is having a multicultural mix of presenters and staff.

“We also encourage them to taste vegemite with a bit of butter on a cracker – the response is mixed but most of them are willing to try it!”

Following from the challenge (outlined in Section 3) of getting the balance right, this research report suggests offering an orientation program filled with a combination of information as well as fun activities:

- Offer informal Eat, Meet and Greet events where students have an opportunity to chat to various local community group members in a casual and non-threatening manner;
- Aussie Sunday Lunches where students are invited to have lunch with a local Australian family
- A quiz on general knowledge
- Introduction to Australian slang
- Give students a campus map and highlight places to find and the teams that come back first, second and third get a prize
- Show You Tube videos on topics like safety to make it more interesting
- Use existing students as hosts, which helps the new students to adjust, as they feel comfortable asking them for help
- Ensure a mix of cultures and ethnicities in presenters
- Make messages short and sharp – speakers to cover their topic in only 5-10 minutes.
- Train older students as mentors/ambassadors or peer supporters
- Provide a certificate for the training of student volunteers.

Follow up later as students settle in

Interviews with institutes have made it clear that orientation is not the beginning and end of providing information and support to international students. The key message – to make information meaningful and timely – is clear.

A follow up workshop with members from Student Services to talk about issues that students have faced in the first few weeks of study (settling in, homesickness, housing issues, budgets, finding jobs, etc) is also needed. The best time for this to be held is about 4 weeks after classes start as this is when mental health issues are at their peak.

Providers have noted that once classes start it is hard to encourage students to come to a seminar or workshop. Online links to support and counselling services as well as classroom based outreach are crucial here.

“We hire a photo booth and students can take photos for free. We provide dress up hats and clothes. We put the photos on the Facebook page. Students love it. The queue went for miles.”

One member Institute’s flagship cultural theme day is International Student Day (iDay). This event is coordinated by students, and is currently in its sixth year. The purpose of iDay is to promote awareness of the Institute’s international student population, and iDay has grown in exposure not only throughout the student population, but also the external community. Billed as ‘a celebration of life expressed through dance, music and freedom’, iDay is a fun networking opportunity between students, teachers and the wider community. Featuring internationally themed food, events and activities, iDay attracts many demographic categories including international and local students, teachers from the Institute and government representatives.

A major part of iDay, the Wow Expo is an event and tourism day that gives students hands-on experience in organising an expo with an emphasis on international events and associated tourism. Wow Expo features a range of tourism-based displays and demonstrations including: Rio Mardi Gras, The Sydney Gay Mardi Gras, London Fashion Festival, Melbourne Spring Racing Carnival, the Italian Grand Prix, America’s Halloween and the Chocolate Festival in Paris.
Good ideas to demonstrate your orientation efforts (for audit purposes)

- Paper based registration (if you have small enrolment numbers)
- We keep a spreadsheet of attendance and the date the student attended
- We also have a sign in sheet on the day of orientation which helps us check on who actually attended
- We email the students each week with a four-week lead up to orientation and the turn out is good. We send them the campus map at which orientation is held and how to get to the campus. We also tell them about morning tea and lunch, one less thing for them to organise.
- Students complete an Arrival Form, and an Orientation Attendance Form. If students do not come to orientation, we give them a bag of information and ask them to complete a form to say that they have been told about various requirements.
- There is a tickbox in our student management system to ensure all students have attended orientation.

“A major part of iDay, the Wow Expo is an event and tourism day that gives students hands-on experience in organising an expo with an emphasis on international events and associated tourism.”

International student orientation: It’s more than just an event

Photo Booth
Conclusions

In surveying and interviewing coordinators of orientation at the VTI member institutes, we have found that continuous improvement is a key facet of their work. Every year, they seek feedback from students and staff (in the main) and try to consider new ways to make the information they must get across to students interesting and more easily retained.

In terms of good practice, the advice of this report is to consider student orientation as one facet in a cycle of engagement with students. Institutes provide basic information that is needed before students arrive, information for the first few weeks after arrival, at orientation and then ongoing throughout the time of the student’s attendance at the institute.

An issue highlighted by this report is that each TAFE offers orientation for its international students in similar ways, but without the benefit of joint sessions or shared activities across the institutes. Each VTI member offers the same basic information as required by the ESOS Act to international students with little knowledge of what other providers are also doing. In addition, the dual sector universities have considerably greater resources to put into their orientation and student support services than do the TAFEs, in particular the regional TAFE providers.

Aside from and in addition to using the suggestions for good practice made in this report, it may well be useful and cost effective to offer some elements of the basic information required (especially pre-arrival information) on a joint basis. Therefore this report recommends that VTI investigate options for this to occur.

VTI could seek funding to do a 10 question pre-departure on line service for all members to use. Failing this possibility, this report recommends VTI member TAFEs offer the OSHC on line Student Welcome Service.

Since isolation and lack of community connection is a key issue for international students in particular, this report also recommends that joint activities be planned across several TAFEs for international students to meet others in their geographic area as well as students at their own institute and also thereby lower costs of such activities.

VTI could work with AFIS on a general student information day to be held across several TAFEs

VTI could seek funding from the State Government (DSDBI) to offer 3 information days in conjunction with AFIS (one in the city for metropolitan TAFEs, one in Bendigo for western regional TAFEs and one in Gippsland for eastern regional TAFEs).

The key findings of this research are that with tight budgets, TAFE providers in Victoria are working hard to provide excellent student support to their international students. They have told us of their challenges, including that the audience and its needs change each year and they know that orientation is just one event in a series of efforts to make students welcome, feel safe and to ensure they have a positive study experience. Finally, they have shown their enthusiasm for trying new ideas and for sharing good ideas with other international education providers.
In order to help us improve the services that we offer you, we would like you to please take a few minutes to complete this evaluation of your orientation program. The evaluation is confidential and anonymous. Please answer as openly as you wish; all feedback is welcome and helpful for planning future programs.

For each statement below, please **CIRCLE** the number that most accurately describes your experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before I came to Australia I received all the information I needed about the orientation program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was aware that orientation was a compulsory part of my course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The orientation content was consistent with the information about the program that I had been given beforehand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The International Office staff were courteous and helpful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The orientation has given me enough information to stay safe in Melbourne</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The orientation helped me to understand my rights and responsibilities as an International Student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program was fun and enjoyable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The presenters were knowledgeable and well prepared</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program moved along at about the right pace for me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The printed materials were of an acceptable quality and suitable to my needs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The food was of an acceptable quality and suitable to my needs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I could easily understand what was being said by all of the presenters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The information that I gained throughout the orientation will be helpful to me throughout my course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had enough opportunity to ask all of the questions I needed to ask</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel adequately prepared with enough information to start my course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any other comments or feedback that you would like to give:

---

**Thank you for taking the time to give your feedback**
Welcome to RMIT University!
Check out this video to get the most out of your University student experience, and to settle in to life in Melbourne.
Watch the video in full.

Can’t view the video or want the webpage links mentioned in the video? Download the written transcript (PDF 108kb, 5p).

Watch and win
Want to be in the draw to win a $500 Coles/Myer gift voucher?
It’s simple!
1. Look out for the official email from the Dean of Students titled ‘Compulsory Essential information for International Students’ in your student email account and click on the quiz link provided in the email.
2. Watch the Essential Arrival Video in full.
3. Complete all questions to the quiz.

More information
For more information, refer to the written transcript (PDF 108kb, 5p) of the video and follow the links.
Or contact a student wellbeing advisor:
- Email: student.wellbeing@rmit.edu.au
- Phone: +61 3 9925 2078 or
- In person: Student services centre on your campus
Date of Arrival at Chisholm | |
Student ID Number
Given Name
Family Name
Date of Birth | | Male  Female
Course of Study
Address in Australia
Post Code
Telephone Number  Mobile
Email Address
Emergency contact in Australia: Name
Phone number
Address in your Home Country
Country
Telephone Number  Fax Number
Passport Number
Visa Number  Visa Subclass

Orientation Attendance Record

Please tick ✓ the appropriate box and sign the form below

- [ ] I attended orientation day on Wednesday 10 July 2013
- [ ] I did not attend orientation day. I have received an information package containing information about:
  - Studying at Chisholm
  - Living in Australia
  - Public transport in Victoria
  - Student Administration
  - Student safety
  - Student services
  - Overseas Student Health cover (OSHC)
  - Change of address obligation
  - Visa conditions and permission to work in Australia
  - Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) contact information
  - ESOS Act and National Code

Student Signature

Date | | 10.07.13 Orien.Attendance
Enrolment Challenge

The maximum percentage of external units an onshore international student can study is:

A: 25% of the total onshore study load
B: 50% of the total onshore study load

Answer

A: 25% of the total onshore study load

Enrolment Challenge

What is the final day of the study session that you can add, withdraw or change unit enrolments?

A: Sunday in Week 1 of the study session
B: Sunday in Week 2 of the study session
C: Sunday in Week 3 of the study session

Answer

B: Sunday in Week 2 of the study session
Appendix 6

Pre-Arrival Information Template (ISANA)

**Education Provider Main Contact Details:**

[Insert main switchboard line & address, website details]

**International Student Coordinator/Advisor:**

[Insert name & contact details]

**International Student 24-Hour Emergency Contact:**

[Insert name & contact details]

**Homestay Coordinator:**

[Insert name & contact details]

**Emergency Telephone Numbers:**

- Police, Fire, Emergency: 000
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC)*: 131 881

**Medical Centres:**

[Insert relevant local information – particularly centres who are known to specialise in international students/cultures/languages]

**Transport:**

[Local transport information phone number & website for buses & trains AND Local taxi companies]

**Public Facilities:**

- Location of Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs)*

**Location of Public Telephones**

[Insert relevant local information]

**Post Office**

[Insert relevant local information]
Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Your experience will help us to create a best practice guide to international student orientation for all VTI members. Kate Dempsey will collate your answers along with all the other data we collect. If you have any questions or problems, please contact Kate on exec@vti.edu.au or phone 0401 072 372.

Today I have 4 areas I want to ask you about regarding your international student orientation: they are (1) questions about the organisation of orientation, (2) questions about quality and compliance, (3) questions about what do you in your orientation and finally (4) questions about what has worked well for you.

**QUESTIONS ABOUT ORGANISATION OF ORIENTATION AT YOUR INSTITUTE**

1. **Is your international student orientation program separate from that of domestic students?**

2. **Does your international office plan and implement international student enrolment or is this done centrally?**

3. **Do you have a specific budget for international orientation (is it all from one budget area)? Can you tell us your budget?** (no institute names will be used in the final collation and only Kate and I will know your answer)

4. **How do you decide on the dates for your orientation? Who is involved in this decision? Are there any issues/difficulties with this process?** (Prompt: how do you co-ordinate all parties across the institute)

**QUESTIONS ABOUT COMPLIANCE AND QUALITY**

5. **How do you encourage students to attend orientation?** (Prompts: most members put it on the CoE, but what else do you do? Do you send info before the actual orientation? Do you offer incentives, prizes, food, do you know if students react positively to this, do you make it part of enrolment, tick students off a list, how do you know who has come?)

6. **What works to get students to come to orientation? What have you tried?** (Prompt: can you give us a good examples of what you have tried in the past and if it worked or not, can you elaborate or why something worked or didn’t – or perhaps you just do the minimum for compliance and that is it)

7. **How do you know what works? Do you do any evaluation?** (Can we have a copy of your evaluation form? Do you ask students their views? How do you know if various cultural groups are getting what they need from orientation)

8. **How do you demonstrate compliance (for an audit)?** (Do students register, do you make a note in each student file? Have you had any experiences that led to a change of practice in orientation?)
WHAT HAPPENS AT YOUR ORIENTATION

9 Do you use guest speakers? (Prompts: who do you use that is really good, do you have a panel of speakers? How long do guests speak for? What topics do you cover in this way? Do students just sit and listen in the same room all day?)

10 Have you had any issues with speakers and how do you deal with that? (Prompt: they could come late, speak too long, be boring, be culturally insensitive)

11 What is your most popular topic/speaker/activity? (Prompt: which speaker, activity, topic or event seems to get the most reaction from students, can you tell us why?)

12 What are the pros and cons of some of the ideas we have seen? (Prompt: moving students around campus on a great race activity, speed dating with students moving and speakers repeating their presentation, going to the beach – what is enough info on water and fire safety in particular; having past/present students speak, providing some material on line; do you do a follow up (or socialiser) later if students miss orientation, giving students a memory stick)

13 What good ideas have you tried? Or would like to try?

14 Do you want to share anything else/Any other comments or ideas? (Can you give us a sample document, template, form or policy, which we will de-identify and put in the report)?
Endnotes


2. An Orientation Program for First Year International Students in the Faculty of Health at the University of Newcastle, Nuts and Bolts Workshop, FYHE Conference 2010.

3. The information in this section is taken directly from International Student Good Practice Program For Australian Education Providers by CISA (available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/pieronline-studentexperience/accounts/10610/Site/1/6671_CISA_Good_Practice_Program_original.pdf) and ISANA Templates for Student Engagement.

4. See any of these educational websites for details of culture shock definitions and ways to help:
   - http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/shock.htm

5. Universities Australia report found at: