

AUTHOR:

Takalani Muloiwa-Klenam^{1,2} Kristan Sharpley¹ Mpho Thahale¹ Neo Taimo¹ Tshegofatso Mogaladi¹ Jerome September¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa²University of Johannesburg,
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Student perspectives on the challenges of an online orientation at a large South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 gave rise to a number of challenges for first-year experience activities at universities globally. One of the key challenges was the process of onboarding first-year students through an orientation programme that could not take place face-to-face as per the norm. In 2021, the first-year orientation at a large South African university in this study moved to an online platform, becoming a week-long programme conducted on Microsoft Teams and comprising a variety of live and pre-recorded videos. The programme included seven core learning sessions designed to introduce the students to key services available at the university and to lay the foundation for student success. Using data from the university's 2021 Orientation Week (O-Week) Survey, this paper seeks to explore – from the perspective of the students – the core challenges associated with an online orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employs descriptive statistics to decipher the profile of the survey respondents as well as participants' experience of various learning sessions. A thematic approach was used to analyse the open-ended questions to provide the contextual perspectives on the challenges that students experienced with online orientation. The study identified five categories of challenges, which had a negative impact on their process of transitioning into the university environment. The study's findings will help universities to understand the drawbacks of online orientation as well as provide empirical guidance for them as to how they could leverage online orientation for student success in shaping the remote, blended, and hybrid learning discourse. The particular university under discussion subsequently used these findings as guidelines to conceptualise a new three-week blended orientation programme, Gateway to Success, which was introduced at the beginning of 2022.

Keywords: Challenges of orientation, first-year orientation, new technology, online learning, online orientation, orientation programmes.

1. Introduction

First-year student orientation programmes are pivotal for laying the foundation for student success at university. Research has found that students who participate in comprehensive orientation programmes are retained at higher rates and report a greater sense of belonging (Hollins Jr, 2009; Soria, Clark & Koch, 2013). Orientation programmes are known to help new students becoming acquainted with their learning community. They also educate students with regard to the resources and support available to ensure their academic and social success (Ward-Roof, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial that these types of programmes are well-designed to support students in their transition to university.

The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in a national state of disaster in South Africa from March 2020 until April 2022, which brought about restrictions for face-to-face engagements and disrupted contact ones. This lockdown led to South African Higher Education Institutions shifting their mode of education delivery and pedagogy to incorporate Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The shift to ERT meant that most of the teaching, learning and student support activities within universities were delivered online. Student transition programmes such as orientation and first-year experience activities also moved online, which presented challenges for both staff and students.

The shift to online engagement and online learning severely disrupted education, but provided an opportunity to reimagine the way in which learning takes place, and created platforms that enabled a greater sense of agency among students. However, the shift came with various challenges which diluted the orientation experience for many students and created much anxiety about their preparedness for university. This study seeks to understand the challenges of implementing an online orientation from the perspective of first-year students. The findings will help universities to understand the drawbacks of online orientation as well as provide empirical guidance as to how online orientation could be leveraged for student success in shaping the remote, blended, and hybrid learning discourse. This paper provides a stylistic outline of online orientation at one large South African university, followed by a systematic literature review, before outlining the methodological approach adopted in the study, discussing its results and drawing conclusions.

2. Online orientation

The online orientation at the university in the study aimed to provide the required support for a smooth transition period for first-year students, regardless of the physical restrictions around engagement under the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this orientation was to ensure that students still experienced the ethos and spirit of orientation at that university, even from the comfort of their homes.

The orientation had multiple elements. The first aim was to introduce first-year students to the key services available at the university, both in and out of the classroom. These support services are considered pertinent for students to navigate the university landscape and are essential to enable first years' seamless transition into the university environment. The second aim was to introduce and inform students about the academic experience and expectations at the university. These engagements were facilitated by faculty deans and faculty representatives to provide them with a sense of the academic programmes they had enrolled and registered for. This provided students with a sense of the academic culture of each faculty and, inherently, the institution.

The delivery of the online orientation programme was centred on seven core learning sessions, which were all pre-recorded so that students could access them as a continuous resource. The address by the Dean of Student Affairs aimed to inform first-year students about the support services and provided an overview of the support available within the Division of Student Affairs. This support includes the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), Campus Housing and Residence Life Office, the Campus Health and Wellness Centre, the Food Programme coordinated by the Citizenship and Community Outreach unit, Clubs and Societies, as well as leadership opportunities. The Student Affairs Masterclass session aimed to inform students about other support services such as sports, the opportunities provided by clubs and societies, the Development and Leadership Unit, the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), Accommodation Office, the Campus Health and Wellness Centre, and the Food Programme.

The Faculty Academic Programmes, guided by the Student Success Framework, were an important component of the programme. These programmes were the students' first introduction to the academic support that is provided by the university. These sessions were faculty specific and fully informed students on the role of academic advisors as guides through the student journey. The various faculties conducted library presentations. These were also faculty specific and included information about plagiarism and services available such as library tours, academic writing, and online resources. This aspect of the orientation aimed to give students a sense of the academic culture of the university.

The Digital Skills session formed part of an optional short course on the subject. The purpose of this session was to assist students to develop the digital skills needed to succeed at university and served as preparation for the world of work. Students were introduced to the broad overview and intent of the session, which were to provide students with the opportunity to practice using technology and to learn how to access, manage, manipulate, and create digital information. The purpose of the session is twofold: to provide students with fundamental knowledge and skills relating to the foundational concepts of both digital literacy and digital skills; and secondly, to equip them with an understanding of the importance of having these skills in the 21st century, regardless of the degree they are studying and their career aspirations. The Digital Skills session also provided students with an introduction to the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and how to navigate their LMS account, how to access university announcements and their inbox, make use of the conference functionality, access their modules, chats, discussions, assignments, files where additional resources are added, and the pages where they can access their grades. Students were further encouraged to complete the four-week Digital Skills Short Course to be equipped with the skillset to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, create, and clearly communicate information using digital technologies. This short course is part of the First Year Experience (FYE) programme and is facilitated by the Centre for Teaching Learning and Development (CLTD) in partnership with the Development and Leadership Unit.

The Drama for Life performance was a recorded production of a themed play that illustrated the different support services available to first-year students. For the 2021 orientation, the themes were support services, the FYE programme, academic excellence, and fostering a sense of belonging within the institution. The play also emphasised the pride students feel about the university, through using slogans about being a student there, which were also translated from English into Sesotho and IsiZulu. This session also provided students with some ideas about their role during their university journey, the importance of immersing themselves in

the environment and taking control of their future. It communicated that students do have agencies and that their experience of the institution is determined by multiple stakeholders who have the responsibility to create spaces that are enabling for them.

Ultimately the online programme attempted to provide students with a holistic and re-imagined orientation that was all-encompassing, and which introduced them to institutional resources, tools, and academic expectations to enable them to navigate the institution successfully and feel a strong sense of agency during their academic journey.

3. Literature Review and Framework

The study is underpinned by Lizzio's *Five Senses of Successful Transition* (Lizzio, 2006). The theory suggests that in order for students to transition successfully into university, five senses need to be considered and developed. These include a sense of connectedness, which refers to the quality of the student's relationship with peers, and feelings of identification or affiliation with their institution of learning that would ultimately ensure a sense of belonging and immersion within the environment; a sense of capability, which encompasses the students' understanding of what is expected of them as students and their mastery of basic academic skills in order to encourage them to make sense of any given context; and a sense of purpose, which ensures students have clarity and commitment to their education and career choices, and are able to consider how these intersect with their broader goals beyond the university environment. Complementary to the sense of purpose, a sense of resourcefulness enables the student to navigate the institutional system and receive support when experiencing challenges. This sense is cultivated by providing students with clear and accessible roles, procedures and resources alongside encouraging timely, help-seeking behaviour. Lastly, a sense of academic culture is shaped by an appreciation of the core values and ethical principles of the university and how these inform approaches to academic material and relationships with staff and students, all of which largely determine a sense of belonging within the institution. Lizzio (2006) argues that there is no prescribed way in which to design an orientation and transition strategy to ensure success for first-year students. Rightfully so, as each university has its own context to consider to ensure a holistic orientation experience.

Over the last decade, literature has indicated that within the ever-growing participation agenda in higher education, there is a rising challenge in managing student transition to university as new students come to university with diverse levels of preparedness (Smyth & Lodge, 2012; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Kuh *et al.*, 2006). This challenge is critical in the preliminary stages of the new students' experiences. These students are required to negotiate and make sense of an exuberant amount of information in order to be admitted, enrolled, and gain access to institutional resources and support structures, alongside immersing themselves in various components of student life. Therefore, it has been argued that universities have an innate responsibility to create orientation programmes which address the preparedness of new students for university life while being cognisant of not subjecting them to information overload (Smyth & Lodge, 2012).

Contrary to the above, more recent literature argues a shift in the conceptualisation of how issues such as transition and "preparedness" are theorised (Larsen, Horvath & Bridge, 2020; O'Shea *et al.*, 2016; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). It is argued that there is a "deficit-discourse shift" away from an edifice of considering the students themselves to be lacking in certain competencies. Rather there is increasing recognition that higher education institutions cannot

solely meet the diverse needs of an ever-growing student body, and that profiling certain student groups as deficient only results in perpetuating inequality and exclusion rather than acknowledging the students' agency. It has therefore further been recognised that the responsibility for bridging gaps for students cannot solely lie with the institution. Instead, there needs to be a relational engagement between the student and the university to bridge the sociocultural incongruity and to define the transitioning phase of a first year as one that is dynamic and an "educational interface" (Larsen *et al.*, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic propagated a shift to online orientation and transitioning programmes for first-year students across the globe. Literature reveals that prior to the pandemic, online orientation was adopted to transition a new student gradually into the institution and avoid information overload (Smyth & Lodge, 2012; Kift, 2008; Edward, 2003). It also provided an opportunity for students to engage more intentionally with material, as it promoted self-paced learning and provided students with more agency to make sense of information (Jones, 2013). In order for an online orientation to still be engaging, it needs to incorporate an interactive activity before the student can proceed from one section to the other. However, there are still challenges with online engagement, in particular for student orientation purposes: the student's learning experience is completely self-guided, which can lead to confusion; technical barriers; and access challenges, as students are required to navigate the institution's LMS alongside processing information to familiarise themselves with regard to student services available. However, online orientation does provide an opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with their institution without academic pressure (Jones, 2013). Orientation itself can determine the retention, academic success and persistence of students (Marshall, 2017). Therefore, the flexibility of online learning, coupled with the importance of orientation makes it imperative to consider Lizzio's *Five Senses of Successful Transition*, as concessions need to be made in terms of what connectedness looks like in the online space when there are certain barriers to engagement; how students can develop a sense of capability when technical and computer literacy could be a hindrance; how students develop a sense of purpose in the online space, which may be largely premised on online interactive activities; the self-facilitative process of online learning that may impair resourcefulness; and developing a sense of the academic culture of the institution may be hindered due to a lack of interaction with the physical institutional space.

During the time of COVID-19, it can be argued that online orientation also provided an opportunity for students' transition into the shifting paradigm of online learning as has been apparent for online students' academic self-efficacy (Abdous, 2019). The year 2020 marked the birth of a "new normal" and promulgated a new way of existing for students and staff within the higher education sphere (Tesar, 2020). Though it has been argued that COVID-19 was a mere accelerator of the processes that had been put in motion over the last couple of years rather than a radical changemaker; essentially it was an inevitable shift of engagement and COVID-19 the mere catalyst to accelerate this shift to the virtual world in all spheres of life. However, the challenge with the online teaching and learning that emerged was that ideas of digital literacy and digital pedagogies were mostly unexplored, which resulted in much online engagement simply imitating face-to face learning and engagement (Tesar, 2020). Subsequently, while asynchronous, self-paced online orientation programmes are not new to the field of orientation, transition and retention, COVID-19 created the shift to online overnight. This led to many institutions navigating uncharted territory while having to ensure a successful transitioning programme for new first-year students (Crozier, 2021).

It is evident, as per Crozier (2021) and Tesar (2020), that the benefits of online orientation are extensive. It offers students convenience and increased access to information and resources. It can be argued that this develops the students' sense of resourcefulness and capability (Crozier, 2021; Lizzio, 2006). Removing the requirements to be in a designated place at a designated time reduces geographic, scheduling and financial barriers (asides from data) to participation (Crozier, 2021). It further allows the programme not simply to function as an event, but as an ongoing resource, as it enables students to revisit content whenever needed. Further to this, it enables a more learner-centred experience as students choose how they engage in the programme, because it promotes the concept of self-paced learning and engagement (Crozier, 2021). Online orientation allows more of a variety of learning activities to be incorporated and helps students engage with curated content that is customised to their interests (such as text, images, video, quizzes, interactive activities, and discussion boards). It also gives immediate feedback on their learning, which is not always possible with large-scale orientation programmes. It could be argued that this provides an opportunity for students to develop a sense of connectedness and purpose with the institution. Crozier (2021) and Tesar (2020) indicate that online learning is an effective format for knowledge acquisition and attitude performance, as it allows students to have more agency in their learning journey.

The restrictions under COVID-19 resulted in many students feeling isolated and anxious (De Klerk, Krull & Maleswena, 2021). It was recognised more than ever that orientation provides an imperative support mechanism to address new students' expectations as well as their preparedness for the university environment. It provides an opportunity for the students to enhance technological and self-management skills as it provided an induction into online learning itself (De Klerk *et al.*, 2021). When considering the type of media to use for learning activities, it is suggested that it is not the medium itself that influences the learning, but that the medium should be chosen for its desired pedagogical approach and the resources and expertise to design and implement the activity. Aspects such as social presence (or community building), allow students to express their personal characteristics and to present themselves as "real people" to fellow participants, and build a more defined sense of community within the broader sense of the academic culture. This is imperative for the continuous development of a sense of connectedness for the student. Further to this, creating peer-to-peer social connections can be built into an online programme through discussion forums and collaborative ways in which to engage (Crozier, 2021). Incorporating the student voice within the online orientation space creates a further opportunity for the students to develop a sense of connectedness and academic culture. Incorporating the voices of senior students creates a sense of broader community across the institution.

It is evident that an online orientation precipitates an engaging transitioning period for new students and enables a greater sense of agency among them. There are naturally inherent challenges such as technical literacy, the self-facilitation required and navigating the technical components of a learning management platform, as well as the fact that the online space cannot simply imitate face-to-face physical engagement. Subsequently, though, the online space presents the opportunity to transcend certain barriers in terms of access and self-paced learning, and provides more opportunity for interactive engagement, particularly regarding a learning experience such as orientation.

4. Methodology

Study setting

This study was conducted at one of South Africa's largest public higher education institutions. The university is structured into five faculties, namely Commerce, Law and Management (CLM), Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE), Health Sciences (HS), Humanities (HUM) and Sciences (SCI). In 2021, the university enrolled 42 175 students, of which 60% were undergraduate students and 58% were female students. First-time entering first-year students comprised 13% of its student population in 2021.

Study participants

The target population for the study was all students entering the first year of their undergraduate studies who were enrolled at the university on a full-time basis. All the study participants were recruited by email and each email contained a unique survey link.

Data collection and study participants

Data for the study were drawn from the university's 2021 Orientation Week Survey, which has been administered at the university on annual basis since 2018. The 2021 survey was administered online on the Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) platform over a period of four weeks.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to profile the survey participants in terms of their gender, race, nationality, high school quintile, faculty affiliation, place of residence and the number of friends they made during O-Week. Descriptive statistics were also used to summarise the findings regarding the students' overall experience of the O-Week learning sessions.

In order to identify the key challenges of implementing online orientation, two open-ended questions were analysed thematically. The questions were: "Please comment on your overall experience of the 2021 O-Week" and "Do you have any suggestions regarding how orientation could be improved in 2022?". The responses to these two questions were analysed thematically and the key themes are presented in a table together with the relevant illustrative quotes.

Ethical considerations

The study has ethical clearance from the university's Human Research Ethics (Non-Medical) H18/09/17 under the project, Student Experience Surveys. The Division of Student Affairs and the Office of the Registrar at the university granted permission to conduct the study.

Descriptive results

The survey was completed by 32% of the students who were invited to participate in the study (n=1 822). Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents and reveals that 69% of the students who participated in the survey were female and African (80%). The majority of the respondents were South African students (97%). Most of the students were from quintile four and five schools (44%), which refers to better-resourced public schools, followed by quintile one to three schools (39%), which are poorly resourced and have been declared as no-fee-paying schools. Students who indicated they were staying

in a university residence made up 42% of the survey respondents, followed by 32% of the respondents, who reported they were staying at home. With regard to the distribution of survey respondents by faculty affiliation, the Faculty of Humanities reported the highest percentage of students (30%), while the Faculty of Science reported the lowest percentage of students (15%).

Table 1: Distribution of the survey participants by demographic characteristic

Demographic Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	1250	69
Male	566	31
Not specified	6	0
Race		
African	1454	80
Chinese	3	0
Coloured	55	3
Indian	158	9
White	147	8
Not specified	5	0
Nationality		
South African	1761	97
Non-South African	55	3
Not specified	6	0
High School Quintile		
Quintile one to three	236	39
Quintile four and five	806	44
Private/International	277	15
Not specified	36	2
Residence Status		
At home	577	32
In a university residence	765	42
In an off-campus student residence	457	25
Other	19	1
Not specified	4	0
Faculty		
CLM	354	19
EBE	342	19
HS	275	15
HUM	553	30
SCI	293	16
Not specified	5	1

Table 2 presents the distribution of students by the number of friends that they made during O-Week. The majority of students reported that they had made no friends by the end of O-Week. Very few students had made more than five friends who were also in their first year (13%) while 29% of the students had made between two and five friends.

Table 2: Distribution of students by the number of friends that they made during O-Week

Number of friends made	n	%
I did not make any friends who are in their first year	664	36
I made one friend who is in their first year	370	20
I made between two and five friends who are also in their first year	524	29
I made more than five friends who are in their first year	231	13
Not specified	33	2

Figure 1 is an illustration of the distribution of students by their experience of the seven core learning sessions. The study found that the address by the Dean of Faculty, the Faculty Academic programmes and the address by the Dean of Student Affairs reported the highest percentage of students who said the sessions were very informative. The Drama for Life Performance and Digital Skills reported the highest percentage of student who indicated that these sessions were not informative, 12% and 8%, respectively.

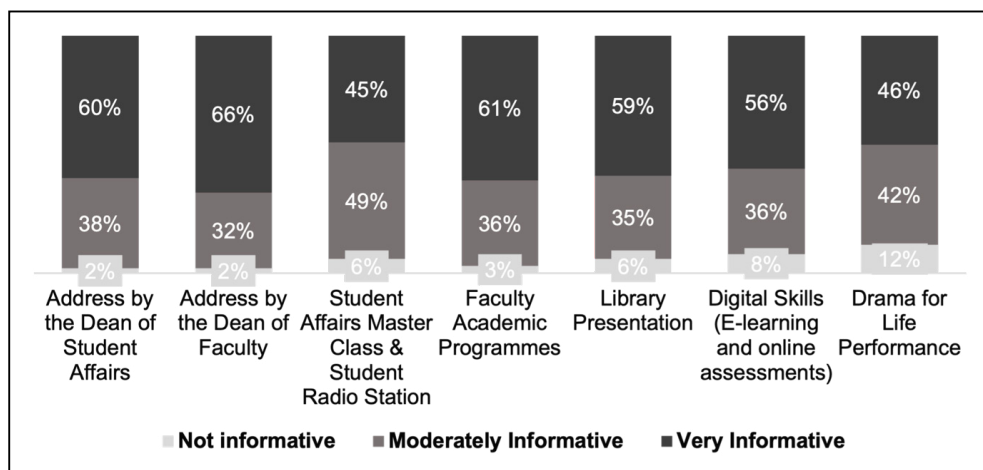


Figure 1: Distribution of the survey participants by how informative they found the learning sessions

Figure 2 reveals that 76% of the students reported that they were proud to be members of the university community, while 24% were not proud to be members of the university community at the end of O-Week.

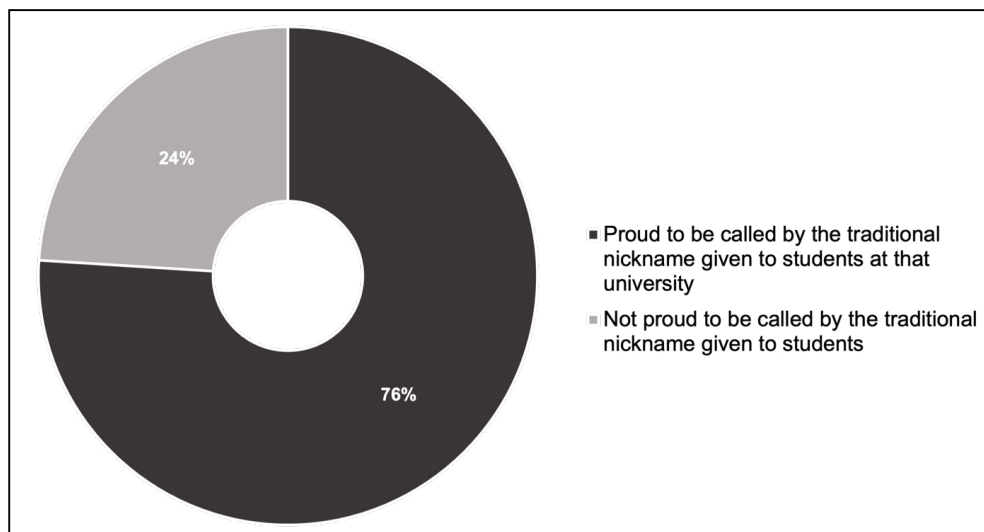


Figure 2: Distribution of students by whether they were proud to be called by the traditional nickname given to students at that university

Thematic analysis results

Table 3 highlights the key themes that emerged from the study regarding the challenges of online orientation. The findings were that students found the orientation to be overwhelming and confusing; lacked opportunities for engagement and making friends; lacked connection with the university; was misaligned with other activities; was too short; conflicted with their home obligations; and their data challenges and poor digital skills affected their participation, In the discussion section, these are categorised into five themes and discussed in greater detail.

Table 3: Emerging themes from the open-ended questions regarding the challenges of online orientation

Theme	Illustrative quotes
Overwhelming and confusing	<p><i>"Didn't really enjoy it because it was overwhelming and lonely."</i></p> <p><i>"I was just very confused by the whole thing of starting university and a lot of things didn't make sense to me. I didn't know what was expected of me most of the time it took time for me to finally understand."</i></p>
Lacked opportunities for engagement	<p><i>"Have something live that will allow students to interact with other students because I still barely know anyone from my course."</i></p> <p><i>"If things are still online, I think having breakout rooms on one of the days would help make engaging and getting to know others in your faculty easier."</i></p>
Lacked opportunities for making friends	<p><i>"I wasn't able to meet other first years and collaborate. Making friends was also hard."</i></p> <p><i>"It was quite hard to make friends since it was online."</i></p>

Theme	Illustrative quotes
Lacked connection with the university	<p><i>"Online orientation didn't feel more like I was a (part of the university community), attending O-week from home was a very boring experience for me."</i></p> <p><i>"I can say I am not fully confident in considering myself as (a part of the university community)."</i></p>
Data challenges	<p><i>"Truth is I did not really experience the orientation week because it was online and I did not have enough data."</i></p> <p><i>"Provide data to the first years and prepare them in time for the orientation if it will be online to accommodate everyone."</i></p>
Poor digital skills	<p><i>"It was online and little bit difficult to find on (the online learning management system) as I was not used to using a computer device."</i></p> <p><i>"Teach FYS about the (university's learning management system) before attending classes. Because other students do not how to use computer or even have access to internet."</i></p>
Misaligned with the other university activities	<p><i>"Allow enough time for registration so that more people can participate in Orientation."</i></p> <p><i>"Residence orientation meant we didn't get enough chances to follow the o-week program."</i></p>
Short duration	<p><i>One-week was overwhelming and exhausting.</i></p> <p><i>"It should be at least 2 weeks not one week."</i></p>
Home obligations	<p><i>"No time, personal/private obligations (chores as I live at home) and scheduling conflicts with my course subjects."</i></p>

5. Discussion

Online orientation has been applauded for being convenient, increasing accessibility to information and resources, being learner-centred and reducing the geographic, scheduling and financial barriers to participation (Crozier, 2021; Lizzio, 2006). There is evidence that online orientation is not new; in the past, it has been used to gradually transition new students and to avoid information overload (Smyth & Lodge, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic played a big role in propagating the shift to this uncharted territory of online orientation for most institutions. While designing and managing effective orientation and transition programmes has been a rising challenge, online orientation is not without its own challenges (Smyth & Lodge, 2012). This study identified five types of challenges of implementing online orientation, which are discussed below.

Programme challenges

Students expressed that the O-Week programme was not aligned with other university programmes, for example, the university registration and the residence orientation. In 2021, the university registration dates clashed with online orientation, particularly for students who were unable to register online at home prior to O-Week. Running registration and orientation concurrently meant that some students were physically on campus for registration when they were supposed to be attending O-Week and from the findings, it is clear that it detracted from their O-Week experience. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the duration of the one-week online orientation, as it resulted in their being overwhelmed and exhausted.

Overwhelming and confusing

For online orientation programmes to be effective, they need to be well-paced so that students have sufficient time to acquire the necessary knowledge (Crozier, 2021). Students said the online orientation made them feel overwhelmed, lonely and confused. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions generally made students studying online feel isolated and anxious (De Klerk *et al.*, 2021).

Engagement and connection

Students' ability to interact during online orientation developed a sense of connectedness and academic culture (Crozier, 2021). In this study, more than 30% of the students reported that they had made no friends by the end of the online orientation. As suggested by Crozier (2021), students also indicated that they struggled to make friends during orientation because it was online and they did not have an opportunity to engage with other students. Furthermore, all the videos were pre-recorded, which therefore meant that the speakers and students had no opportunities for engagement. Students suggested that future online orientation programmes should make use of breakout rooms so that they could have an opportunity to engage with one another. Students also said the online orientation did not make them feel connected to the university. This is supported by the statistics that only 76% of the students were proud to be called by the popular, colloquial nickname given to students of that university. While this figure may seem quite high, it is a decrease from 93% when the university conducted a traditional face-to-face orientation. Larsen *et al.* (2020) suggest there needs to be a relational engagement between the student and the institution in order to bridge the social incongruity and to define the first-year transition phase as dynamic and educational.

Technological challenges

A faculty-based study at a South African university found that one of the students' greatest concerns about online learning was the technological challenges, as some of the students were not living in environments conducive for online learning (De Klerk *et al.*, 2021). The present study established that there were students who did not have a Wi-Fi connection, and experienced data challenges which served as a barrier to them accessing online orientation. Although the university did make arrangements for students to get data every month, at the time of orientation there were students who had not been allocated data yet. Similarly, De Klerk *et al.* (2021) reported that more than 20% of the students who were enrolled on the orientation site did not access the programme during the orientation week. Digital literacy was also a key challenge, as some of the students did not have experience of doing school work on a computer. The university's 2021 Biographical Questionnaire (Wits, 2021) reported that only half of the first-year students had used computers at their high school for schoolwork. The lack of digital literacy skills affected the students' ability to access orientation material therefore delaying their processing of transition into the university.

Home obligations

Online orientation has been found to offer a learner-centred approach and to be more convenient as pre-recorded videos can be accessed from any geographical location, which reduces the financial and scheduling barriers (Crozier, 2021). However, for some of the students at the university, staying at home comes with the burden of household chores, which may interfere with their university commitments. Although online orientation encourages

self-paced learning and engagement, falling behind on a task that is not credit bearing might result in the student not catching up and therefore missing out on critical training that was meant to aid with their transition into university.

Lizzio's Five Senses of Successful Transition

The online orientation activities were designed in a way that students were expected to gain all the different senses from the activities, namely connectedness, capability, purpose, resourcefulness and academic culture. However, due to some of the challenges of online orientation, the students were not able to attain all of these senses. For example, while pre-recorded videos like the Drama for Life play were aimed at helping students to feel connected to the university, the findings reveal that the lack of interactivity in the videos made the students feel that they were not connected to their classmates, lecturers and the university itself during the orientation programme.

6. Conclusion

The study was aimed at understanding the challenges of implementing an online orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of first-year students. The study identified five categories of challenges that students experienced with online orientation: they found it to be overwhelming and confusing, had programme scheduling, technological, engagement and connection challenges, and clashed with their home obligations. These challenges made it difficult for the students to fully benefit from some of the advantages that online orientation offers beyond the traditional orientation. The findings from this study provide empirical guidelines for universities on how online orientation can be leveraged to support students in their transition into the university environment. The university used these findings as guidelines for the subsequent development of a three-week Gateway to Success programme, which was introduced at the beginning of 2022. Gateway to Success was delivered in a blended mode comprising both on-campus and online activities. The programme was held after the formal registration dates and allowed students to become orientated with the various university structures and also engage and interact with their classmates, academic advisors and the academics prior to the commencement of the academic programme (Grayson & September, 2022).

Further research in this area could delve into a more in-depth approach by conducting focus-group discussions or in-depth interviews to get a better understanding of the challenges that students experienced during online orientation. In addition to this, research exploring the relationship between participating in orientation and student progression prior to COVID-19 and during COVID-19 could offer more insights into research on student transitions. This will also help provide insights on conducting orientation pre- COVID-19, during COVID-19 and after COVID-19.

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