

Virtual Orientation: Enhancing The First Year Experience

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Aims

To support University of Limerick first year students, transition to higher education through online orientation

Findings

New undergraduate students to UL ordinarily experience orientation activities the week before formal lectures commence. This was not viable at the beginning of the academic year 2020/21, resulting in significant logistical challenges, orienting and inducting new students to UL, within the limitations of the pandemic. The transition for new students into an online and hybrid environment, instead of a physical one, was considerably challenging.

Following a review of the then current practices, during the summer period of 2020, and in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic, key issues were identified which were predicted to impact new undergraduate students of UL. These included:

- **A curtailed learning and social experience;** particularly for students entering from second level as many had experienced limitations in their education since March 2020.
- **Significant reduction in peer interaction in UL;** this risked a reduction in opportunity to form communities of learning, develop friendships and socialise. It was likely there would be no physical orientation tours or large-scale orientation activity.
- **Academic supports** that were previously provided in physical spaces and face-to-face would no longer be appropriate.

Significant adaptations were made across central and professional services in UL over the summer period in preparation for the new academic year and to address the gaps noted above. From this, module '*UL1001: Foundations for Success in UL*', emerged to provide additional and adapted support to new undergraduate students to UL.

Programme socialisation was prioritised in the design of UL1001 because of opportunities lost due to pandemic restrictions. A staged approach to transition was taken to avoid information overload for new students. The involvement of older peers as Virtual Guides in UL1001, was crucial to help navigate the transition for new students, given the importance of peer interaction and peer relationships. It also provided an operational solution to the volume of new students, over 3,000, to whom these sessions would be offered. The interaction between older peers and new students was designed to occur in small groups for the first five weeks. These sessions sought to provide a socialising opportunity for new students and was offered within academic programme cohorts and facilitated through Sulis (VLE) programme sites.

Impact

Over 17% of first year students responded to a survey evaluating their experience of online orientation. When asked what they found to be most useful about UL1001, the following themes emerged:

Socialising and belonging: The most significant theme emerging from student feedback, was the opportunity UL1001 provided for socialising and developing a sense of belonging, for new students. First year students identified these opportunities to socialise with classmates and the sense of belonging to their class, programme, and UL as the most important provision of this module. They identified how important it was to be able to meet new people, how that assisted their transition, the importance of the shared experience the meetings allowed, and the empathy amongst one another and reassurance provided by older students.

Learning and information: Learning was referred to throughout the feedback and refers to the acquisition of knowledge about UL, transitioning into UL, and the supports and services available in UL. The Library was specifically mentioned, primarily referring to information about how to use the library, and the supports and services provided through it. Respondents found this module provided useful information to new students, including information about college life, the campus, UL, academic advisors, guidelines, modules, QCA, time management, navigating Sulis, and advice to not fall behind academically.

Questions and help: Respondents reported that UL1001 provided a platform to ask questions both of their virtual guide and of each other. There was a sense of ease and comfort in the environment which encouraged questions. This environment also allowed a quick response to questions in an informal manner.

Group activity: The structuring of group activity and access to group communications were highly valued amongst respondents. Small group activity aided transitional angst

First students also reported on those aspects of UL1001 which they found least helpful. These can be summarised as follows:

Content and logistics: Students felt five sessions were too many and not enough of their classmates attended. The timing of content was problematic for some students, they would have preferred more pragmatic information earlier in the semester, for example how to navigate Sulis. For some, there were issues with the repetition of content and a desire to have information like this before starting college. Students felt it would have been more beneficial to have guides from the course they were undertaking in order to be able to answer more specific programme-related questions.

Timing of the sessions: Students felt the time these sessions were held was very problematic and most references to time referred to this issue. Students referenced the lateness of the sessions, which took time from other academic work.

Interaction: Students' experience of breakout rooms was mixed, some felt there was too much time in the rooms and others felt there wasn't enough. Sometimes there was a sense of awkwardness in the rooms and lack of interaction. It seemed like a difficult way to get to know classmates and interaction was affected by the online mode of communication and learning.

Stemming from the feedback captured in this analysis and in response to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions we are living with in HE, the initiative has undergone further development to address the needs of this year's first years. Specific actions were taken to address the aspects of UL1001 which students found least useful. Analysis of this year's virtual orientation for first year students is underway and will be used to inform an improved experience for next year's students. The Student Engagement & Success Unit are determined to continue this cycle, to review and improve the first-year experience relevant to the needs of our students, on an ongoing basis.



A need to ensure, as far as possible, that a sense of belonging to the institutional and discipline community, so crucial to student success, is fostered among incoming students, who have not yet developed in-person relationships with lecturers and peers (National Forum, 2020).

While evidence supports the success of online orientation, we will endeavour to adapt and improve the experience for our students year on year through student feedback and evidence based research

References

National Forum (2020). Reflecting and Learning: The move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education. [NF-2020-Reflecting-and-Learning-web-ready.pdf \(teachingandlearning.ie\)](https://teachingandlearning.ie)