

Concurrent Session G
Tuesday 13 September 2016
1:50pm – 2:40pm



Session 6
#UONinspire: Reinventing Orientation
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Natalie Downing's experience at the University of Newcastle is extensive spanning more than 20 years in various positions including Associate Director – Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment, General Manager Campus Life, Manager - Residential Life, Head of College and Assistant Academic Registrar in a number of faculties. Natalie has a particular interest in student and staff engagement and student recruitment.

Ruth Pring is a communications professional with more than twelve years' experience in the higher education sector. Ruth's current role is Communications and Engagement Manager in the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment, University of Newcastle. Her previous roles have primarily been in international education at Swinburne University of Technology and La Trobe University.

In 2016, the University of Newcastle's Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment set out to reinvent its orientation program. The objective of the project was to improve student engagement and retention. Encouraged by practices observed through international competitor benchmarking, particularly in the United States, the Faculty sought to create an inspiring and interactive orientation experience that would truly engage students and give them a sense of efficacy, empowerment and relevance as they commenced their studies.

The traditional format for our orientation day was a welcome from the Pro Vice-Chancellor, a peer-to-peer Q & A session that serves as a general introduction to university, followed by Program Information Sessions and then lunch. Students also have access to centrally run activities such as campus tours, an expo and entertainment. This is in keeping with the format used across the Faculties at UON. In addition, the Faculty has always run a session for female students, intended to address the fact that our disciplines are typically gender imbalanced.

Our 2016 Orientation introduced two new sessions to the day - named Inspire and Interact. The day also had a central theme of 'Be Part of the Solution', which drew together the commonalities of the Faculty's degrees in architecture, construction management, computer science, engineering and industrial design. The theme was also intended to leverage the inclinations of the incoming generation of students, who commonly express a desire to make a positive difference in the world. It also reflects the Faculty's strategic direction for both research and education, which aligns our programs with solving the major challenges - present and future - we face as a society.

The Inspire session featured a series of live presentations and videos from graduates ranging from start-up entrepreneurs, to humanitarian engineers, travelling architects, to CSIRO leaders, to PhD students and a young engineer who works for Disney. The intention was to show the students a spectrum of the unpredictable and exciting possibilities that their degree might lead to - challenging the narrow assumptions they typically hold about the Engineering and Built Environment professions. It is hoped this will convey a sense of possibility and potential to help mitigate the

doubts students often experience as they actually commence their studies and wonder whether they are on the right path.

Inspire was followed by the Interact session, which engaged the students in a hands-on problem solving activity. The students worked in groups that were deliberately randomised to mix disciplines and encourage new friendships. The activity was simple enough to ensure that students could solve it quickly, but open enough to allow students to develop an infinite range of solutions of varying levels of sophistication. The activity was reflected through a live social media feed, using the hash tag #UONinspire. As well as celebrating successful solutions, the feed allowed students share their ideas through photographs and videos. The intention of this session was to activate students' learning, introduce them to cross-disciplinary learning and connect them with their peers.

These new orientation sessions were co-hosted by a young female science graduate, who works in STEM outreach, and a male academic, who won the University's premier teaching award in 2015 and has an exceptionally engaging teaching style. The hosts contextualised students' learning experiences and continually tied them back to the overarching theme of positive problem solving.

The Faculty also piloted post-orientation follow up workshops for students in weeks 3 and 5 of semester. These were: Get Ready (the fundamentals for new students), Get Set (resources for study success), Get Connected (student groups, professional bodies and industrial experience), and Get Inspired (advice from students who've recently graduated).

These workshops were designed to provide timely practical information and inspiration to reconnect students with their big-picture objectives, therefore helping them overcome typical periods of doubt or uncertainty about their study choices and their capacity for success.

In this paper, the authors will share their experience of designing and implementing this program, including the challenges they faced, the outcomes, and their reflections on what they would do differently next time. They will also share insights from their benchmarking observations and their early findings on how the project has impacted attrition.