

**Exploring Views on Learner Orientations and Their Impact on Support and Community in  
Online Synchronous Undergraduate Programs**

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements .....	2
Abstract .....	5
Introduction.....	6
Context of study .....	7
Defining Terms.....	9
Literature Review.....	10
Theoretical Framework .....	16
Technological Support.....	17
Cognitive Support .....	18
Community Support .....	19
Methodology .....	23
Research Participants .....	25
How Research was Conducted: Initial Approach .....	26
Creation of Questions .....	26
Findings.....	28
Faculty Findings .....	29
Technological Ability .....	29
Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness .....	30
Additional Relevant Findings from Faculty .....	32
Student Findings.....	33
Factors Contributing to Learners' Choices.....	34
Student Assumptions about Online Learning.....	34
Technological Ability .....	35
Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness .....	38
Additional Relevant Findings from Learners.....	41
Discussion .....	42
Overall Purpose of an Orientation Program .....	43
The Importance of Support.....	44

Systematic or Technological Support .....	44
Cognitive or Academic Support.....	45
Affective or Social/Community Support .....	46
Additional Areas of Consideration .....	48
Conclusion .....	48
References .....	51
Appendices.....	55
Appendix A: Online Survey (Learners).....	55
Appendix B: Online Survey (Faculty).....	58
Appendix C: Script for Focus Group (Learners) .....	61
Appendix D: Script for Focus Group (Faculty) .....	63

## Abstract

Higher education institutions are settings in which individuals can develop academically, professionally, socially and personally. Orientation programs can support learners by offering a place to build relationships and engage in meaningful discourse about their academic, professional, social and personal endeavors. The goal of this research project is to assist in filling the void that currently exists around orientation initiatives for online learners in two fully synchronous online programs. This study investigates the views of participants in these programs to determine a sense of learners' and faculty members' opinions and insights on how to meet the needs of learners at the onset of their academic journey. Understanding possible delivery methods, content and structure of an orientation program for these online programs may assist incoming learners in building a foundation for academic success and to understand how this will help build and facilitate a stronger online community and network of learners. The findings indicate that learners and faculty agree that technological, social and academic support are fundamental to student success and comfort within the online learning environment. While the research concluded the need for an orientation program, further research may be required to determine the ultimate scope and design for this unique learning environment.

***Keywords:*** *online learning, synchronous, support, orientation, community*

## Introduction

Higher education institutions are settings in which individuals can develop academically, professionally, socially and personally. Many studies have been undertaken to determine the importance of orientation programs, especially to determine the role they play in providing learners with a strong foundation for success in the aforementioned areas. Orientation programs traditionally support learners through various areas of development in their post-secondary journey by offering a platform to build relationships and engage in meaningful discourse that may assist them on their journey. An orientation program can be implemented to meet the needs of learners in many ways. It is commonly recognized as an institutional provision for new university learners (Wozniak, Pizzica, Mahoney, 2012) and as a tool to integrate learners into the social fabric of the institution (Tinto, 1987, as cited in Robinson, Burns and Gaw, 1996, p.55). According to Robinson, Burns and Gaw (1996), “orientations facilitate learners’ transition, progress, academic integration, and personal and social integration” (p.55). Orientation programs are usually implemented to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to be successful in their new surroundings and they are a way to ensure learners have support in the transition to their new setting.

This research study examines two fully online synchronous programs, the Allied Health Sciences Program (AHSc) and the Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education and Digital Technology (BA/AEDT), for which orientation programs do not currently exist. The university suggested the need to fill a gap to cater to the orientation demands of the online learners the same way it does for on-campus students in face-to-face programs. Orientation programs for learners studying in online environments are widely recommended, yet research into the student experience of such

programs has been scarce (Kanuka, 2008; Scagnoli, 2009; Wozniak et al., 2012). According to several authors such as Mensch (conference paper, n.d.), Scagnoli, (2009) and Wozniak et al.(2012) online programs are becoming increasingly popular so there is a greater need to identify what initiatives offered on campus can be translated to these new online environments. This study investigates the views of participants in these two programs to determine a sense of learners' and faculty members opinions and insights on how to meet the needs of learners at the onset of their academic journey. Understanding possible delivery methods, content and structure of an orientation program for these online programs may assist incoming learners in building a foundation for academic success. The desired outcome of this research project is to determine the possible delivery methods, content and structure of an orientation program for these unique programs and to understand how this will help build and facilitate a stronger online community and network of learners. In this research project the online learning space, support systems, and community in online environments are explored as areas that may have influences on the development of an orientation program for these online synchronous programs.

### **Context of study**

The AHSc is intended to serve the educational needs of graduates from diploma programs and offers professionals in the health industry an opportunity to expand their education and experience in a flexible and research-based environment. The health program provides learners with theoretical foundation, practical knowledge, and skills to help prepare them for leadership and teaching positions in the growing health-care system (<http://www.uoit.ca/programs/health-sciences/allied-health-sciences>). Learners can choose to specialize in areas that lead to work in management, informatics (IT, Computer Science), or the education (Training and Development, Learning Professionals) sector. Graduates may also

choose a career in research or pursue graduate studies. While the program is fully online, learners can choose some in-class sections to accommodate their plan and program maps. Learners in this program are offered a face-to-face orientation program and can choose to connect to the orientation program online via the Adobe Connect platform (T, Szarka, personal communication, May 23, 2013). This option is only available to AHSc learners.

The BA/AEDT aims to meet the demands of its diverse student body and recognizes the importance of formal and informal learning as well as problem-based learning. It is based on the combination of theoretical and practical study in the fundamentals of adult learning, as well as the psychology, sociology and developing practices of learning in a digital environment (<http://education.uoit.ca/undergraduate/programs/bachelor-arts-adult-education-digital-technology/benefits-of-the-degree.php>). The admission criteria for the BA/AEDT requires learners to have successfully completed a relevant three-year advanced diploma, however, as of September 2014, the program will be offered as a direct entry for learners from high school.

According to the program description, the BA/AEDT is designed for learners to maximize the use of mobile devices such as Smartphones and tablets (iPads, Playbook, Galaxy, etc.) to foster the development of a mobile learning culture. The program website states that courses are delivered through 12 week modules worth 3 credits each and include a total of 60 minutes of video clips available online (i.e. YouTube or iTunesU) as well as 60 minutes of synchronous group activities in Adobe Connect (videoconferencing) moderated by a Teaching Assistant. The last 60 minutes include a variety of asynchronous activities (i.e. discussion forum, wiki entries, Google Docs, etc.) and synchronous technologies to communicate with colleagues (i.e., Skype, Adobe Connect, IM apps, etc.)

(<http://education.uoit.ca/undergraduate/programs/bachelor-arts-adult-education-digital-technology/online-course-structure.php>).

## **Defining Terms**

The following terms are defined based on several publications and research studies:

**Affective Support:** Supports which provides learners with an environment that creates commitment and enhances self-esteem (Tait, 2000).

**Asynchronous Learning:** An online method of learning by which communication between participants does not occur simultaneously. Learners can access course information, materials and resources at their own pace and in their own time. Asynchronous elements can include email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, etc. (Kerr, 2009).

**Cognitive Support:** Supporting and developing learning through standard and uniform elements, course materials and learning resources (Tait, 2000).

**Community:** Community can be described as a group of people unified on the basis of a common trait or interest they share. Communities share values, beliefs, languages, knowledge, learning and ways of doing things. Communities are characterized by mutual engagement, joint initiative, shared repertoire, and negotiated meaning (Swan & Shea, 2005; Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

**Constructivism:** A learning theory that focuses on student-centered learning. Learners are encouraged to choose their own learning goals, to construct their own meaning and to participate in problem solving, collaboration and reflection (Vygotsky, 1962).

**Distance education:** A form of learning that involves interaction and is enabled through media. Learning in which participants are at a distance from each other, separated geographically from one another. This type of learning may be asynchronous or synchronous (Follinsbee, 2008).

**ELearning:** A form of learning using multimedia to facilitate access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration using the internet and other technologies. ELearning allows for development of knowledge and skills through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and supports interaction with contents, activities, tools, and with other people (Follinsbee, 2008).

**Learning Management System (LMS):** The technology platform through which learners access online courses. A LMS generally includes software for creating, delivering and editing course content, communication tools, assessment tools, and other features for managing online courses (Kerr, 2009).

**Online learning:** Learning associated with content readily accessible on a computer and which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet. Online learning is considered

learning in which the participants communicate and interact directly and virtually with each other synchronously and/or asynchronously (Follinsbee, 2008).

**Orientation Programs:** A commonly recognized institutional provision to facilitate learners' transition, progress, academic integration, and personal and social integration. Orientation programs are usually implemented to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to be successful in their new surroundings and a way to ensure learners have support in the transition to their new setting (Robinson et al., 1996).

**Synchronous:** An online method of learning by which communication between participants occurs simultaneously in person or virtually. Synchronous events include live web-casts, chat rooms, application sharing, and whiteboard sessions (Kerr, 2009).

**Systematic Support:** Support that establishes administrative processes and technological systems which are effective, clear and overall student friendly (Tait, 2000).

**Virtual Classroom:** An online platform used where learners and instructors meet in real time (such as Adobe Connect) (Kerr, 2009).

## Literature Review

This study investigates the views of participants in these two programs to determine a sense of learners' and faculty members opinions and insights on how meet the needs of learners at the onset of their academic journey. The goal of this research project is to determine the purpose, possible content and structure of an orientation program for online learners at this university. In this paper, the review of the literature focuses on what is valued and recommended for orientation programs and outlines recommended purposes, topics and scope of orientation programs based on previous research studies. The theoretical framework adopted in this research project provides insights on various levels of support recommended for learners in online programs and how they can be facilitated through an orientation program.

Much of the literature discusses the concepts of orientation programs and student support in traditional face-to-face learning environments but education continues to move through profound change in how courses and programs are designed and delivered (Kanuka, 2008). The research community needs to consider online environments because of the fundamental shift in

culture especially around the educational, structural and technical requirements of online education (Zawacki-Richter, 2004). In light of these changes, we have seen new possibilities take shape, but also many new challenges (Kanuka, 2008), especially in the realm of online learning.

Online environments can vary in complexity and nature. In much of the literature on this topic, online learning is referred to interchangeably as ELearning, distance education and web-based learning. In this paper, it will be referred to as online learning, which is defined in the definition of terms. Increasingly, teaching and learning are enabled through the internet, multiple sources of online media and various platforms (Brindley, Walti & Zawacki-Richter, 2004). This is one of the major changes and challenges with online learning. Online learning is not restricted to reading notes and discussion boards (Mensch, conference paper, n.d.). In fact it can include numerous synchronous and asynchronous elements. With the multitude of dynamics to online learning, it is more important than ever to understand the online environment for which an orientation program is being designed.

The online environments as well as the notion of online learning may feel overwhelming to some because it requires different competencies (e.g. media literacy), skills and talents (Zawacki-Richter, 2004) than a traditional classroom setting. The BA/AEDT and the AHSc programs are far from traditional. In fact, they offer very distinctive learning environments. The majority of programs at this university are delivered on-campus, however, new media, technologies and platforms are being used (Zawacki-Richter, 2004) to deliver the BA/AEDT and the AHSc programs. Given the vast array of technologies learners are expected to use and become familiar with, it is recommended that learners are prepared and equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to be successful in these programs. To understand

what learners need during this journey is crucial to their success as well as the institutions. The success of learners is often tied to their understanding of their role and responsibilities and in most cases this initial understanding is instilled in orientation programs (Mensch, conference paper, n.d.). Several research studies have been conducted to determine the overall purpose of face-to-face orientation programs and how they can be used to assist learners both at the onset of their studies and throughout their academic journey. The following criteria have been compiled and categorized from several studies and indicate the reasons and overall purpose for having an orientation program:

**Identify goals and objectives**

- Define and substantiate learning goals
- Ensure participants expectations and perceived needs are met
- Stimulate learners' attention and interest

**Review academic and program requirements**

- Present content required in a way that simplifies overall comprehension
- Clearly present the details and complexity the program may entail
- Give and receive advice on the learning material and avenues of delivery
- Build support and counseling for overcoming learning and other difficulties
- Equip learners with the time and resources to prepare themselves for success

**Encourage social interactions**

- Create discussion and questions in which all participants have a vested interest
- Share positive feedback and constructive criticism
- Increase student involvement
- Enhance sense of belonging

(Robinson et al., 1996; Zawacki-Richter, 2004; Scagnoli 2001;2009; Wozniak, et al., 2012)

The criteria listed above are common recommendations for face-to-face orientation programs. Their application and relevance for online learners may vary according to the nature, setting and platform of the online program. While the underlying reasons to have an orientation program may be the same for face-to-face and online learners, the content of an orientation program for online learners may need to include additional elements. These elements can include, but are not limited to providing information on new communication patterns and an

emphasis on how to better manage time (Bozarth, Chapman & Lamonica, 2004). This may include prompts and supports that guide learners from content to activities, enhancing computer skills, navigating around course management systems, and providing FAQs (Wozniak, Mahoney, Lever & Pizzica, 2009). According to Zawacki-Richter (2004) online programs require learners to be more independent, assume more responsibility for managing their own learning; decide when they study and how much they want to learn; and decide when and how they access information and resources. Ability with technology as well as increased considerations for student support and a more comprehensive understanding of the overall program requirements may also facilitate the process of developing additional skills (Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

To facilitate this process, the goal is to provide learners with greater awareness of the unique structures of their new learning context (Anderson, 2008). Clear instruction, navigation and advice are essential to ensure students have the awareness and are engaged early (Wozniak et al., 2009). Failure to engage learners early may leave them feeling overwhelmed, isolated and incapable of embarking on and succeeding on their journey in online learning (Swan & Shea, 2005). This could lead to an inability to fully commit to the learning process and activities required of them. This could also create situations in which learners may feel distracted or overwhelmed by the vastness of new learning environment (Wozniak et al., 2012). The idea is for learners to become increasingly aware of their responsibilities, beliefs, practices and rituals in the course to progress towards expert like status (Khoo, Forret, Cowie, 2009). If the goal is for learners to achieve a better handle on multiple elements of online learning, it is more important than ever for universities to consider how orientation programs can help meet the additional demands for online learners (Wozniak et al., 2012). This will perhaps help ensure students feel supported in their newly immersed environment.

Creating orientation programs for online environments requires detailed knowledge of the environment and of the potential challenges that may exist within it. Based on the researcher's experience, an first hand understanding of the online platforms is similar to learners being able to navigate an on-campus environment. This may be the reason orientation programs on-campus offer tours for learners to become familiar with their surroundings. This is often given as much importance as providing learners with adequate knowledge of their academic, social and personal support services. As such, Levy (2006) recommends an orientation to 'learning space' as the first element to consider for an orientation program for online learners (Levy, 2006 as cited in Wozniak et al., 2009). The learning space in this context includes the LMS, the virtual synchronous classroom (Adobe Connect) and other virtual collaborative spaces since the programs include the use of various forms of technology. Engaging learners requires developing their understanding of the mode of learning (Browser & Race, 1992; Robinson et al., 1996) as well as the perceived usefulness of the space and resources (Wozniak et al., 2012). Learning about the LMS will facilitate the adjustment to the academic environment (Robinson et al., 1996) and any additional elements learners may have to cope with such as self-management skills, information overload and time constraints. Wozniak et al. (2009) suggest that learners should gain insights about the LMS to enhance asynchronous and synchronous communication and increase opportunities for interaction and develop social networks. At which point, the LMS becomes more than a communication tool; it can address concerns of the learner regardless of their comfort level and exposure to technology and learning online.

An orientation program that includes an introduction the LMS and associated virtual classroom components can also offer the opportunity for learners to experiment in a 'risk free playground' (Wozniak, et al., 2012). They can engage in conversations and investigate the

platform at their own pace in a safe supported environment where making mistakes is neither intimidating nor overwhelming. This ‘playground’ can also allow more skilled learners to help those who are less skilled, leveraging student’s strengths and weaknesses and allowing them ample opportunities to engage with the content, their peers and the technology. If learners are provided with sufficient triggers to engage in their academic journey it will have a positive impact on their development as learners (Wozniak et al., 2012) at the onset of their studies as well as throughout their time in the program.

According to Wozniak et al. (2012) the development and design of an orientation program for online learners should not just take place at the commencement of their studies, but over a period of time. Wozniak and colleagues (Wozniak, Mahony, Pizzica & Koulias, 2007; Wozniak et al., 2009) find that an orientation program is required both as a pre-semester activity and as support embedded within the semester. This notion is further supported by thoughts that orientation programs should not be a single point in time, but a continuum of support, extended before, during and after the commencement of a program (Wozniak et al., 2009). That being said a very recent study suggests that orientation is a process that extends over time and continues long after the commencement of semester (Wozniak et al., 2012). This in turn, can contribute to the development of environments that facilitate interactions and the exchange of ideas over a period of time rather than only a single point in time. This is also why the research focuses on the notion of support. Support for learners in any environment does not only occur at the beginning of their studies but throughout their studies. This notion is further discussed in the theoretical foundation on which this research study is constructed.

### Theoretical Framework

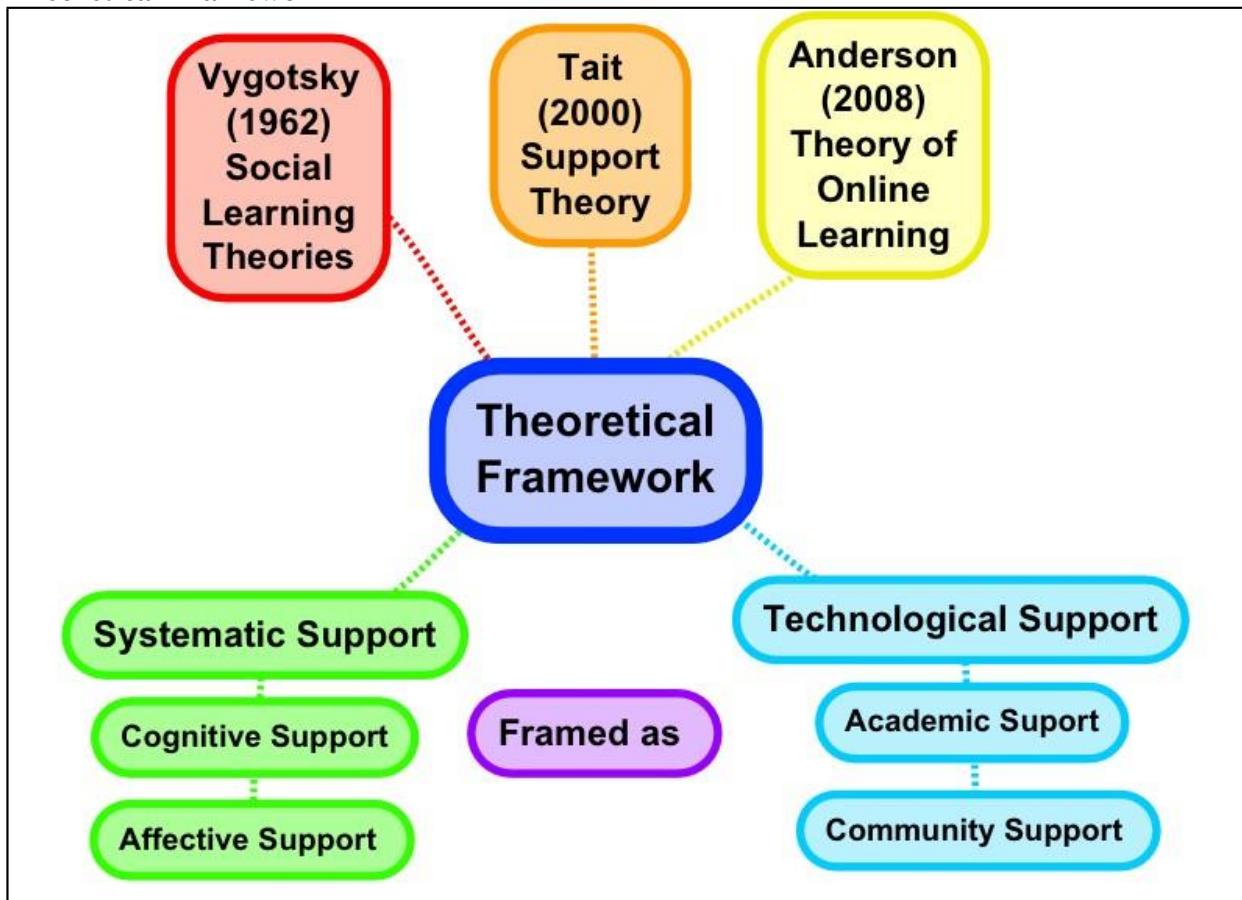


Figure 1: The framework of development for an orientation program for online learners

As much as orientation to the learning space is important and provides a good foundation for online learners, the whole learning environment includes additional factors. The LMS and associated virtual classroom components may very well be the physical space within which the program operates but it does not encompass the technological knowledge and implications, the academic components nor does it include an introduction to the people involved in the learning process (students or faculty). Robinson (1996), Scagnoli (2009), Wozniak et al., (2009; 2012), and others suggest that orientation programs for online learners should include support in the following areas: Technological Support, Academic Support and Social Support. According to Tait (2000) there are three areas of support (Systematic, Affective and Cognitive) that take on added importance when combined with the notion of orientation. These functions also align with

Anderson's framework of online proponents and attributes of learning online. Anderson (2008) suggests that environments online must also include a learner-centered, knowledge-centered and community-centered approach in order for learners to successfully complete online courses and programs. A study by Swan and Shea (2005) refers to five levels of support required in online environments: informational support, emotional support, esteem support, tangible aid, and social network support.

The table below provides a brief explanation of the primary functions of student support outlined by Tait (2000) and aligns them with the topic areas suggested by other authors reviewed in the literature. Each function of Tait's theory is then framed as an area of support which serves as this study's theoretical framework.

Tait's Support Theory	Function of Support	Framed as:
Systematic Support	Establishing administrative processes and technological systems which are effective, clear and overall student friendly	Technological Support
Cognitive Support	Supporting and developing learning through standard and uniform elements, course materials and learning resources	Academic Support
Academic Support	Providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem	Social/Community Support

### **Technological Support**

The use of technology is one of many differences between face-to-face and online learning. Technological advancements have made it more complicated for beginner users with little to no technical experience to participate in an online classroom (Mensch, conference paper,

n.d.). The importance of providing an orientation to this group of learners is far-reaching especially if they are new to technology. Research indicates orientation programs for online learners should focus primarily on technology (Carruth, 2010) because learners who are uncomfortable with technology may address their individual issues during inopportune times and interfere with learning. Wozniak et al. (2012) state that mature learners who transition from their current world (involving work and family life) to an academic world of study online can find it rather challenging. Prensky (2001) suggests that learners who have been surrounded by digital technology all their lives are accustomed to it and another study indicates that learners with significant experience with technology do not necessarily understand how to use technology for learning (Wozniak et al., 2012). In either case having an orientation program for online learners would not only be ideal but beneficial for learners transitioning to online learning regardless of their educational and technological background.

Setting the appropriate expectations (Bozarth & al., 2004) for either group of learners can help with ease of use of the online system (Wozniak et al., 2012). Establishing administrative processes and addressing faculty expectations with regards to technology is very important to address learner anxiety (Wozniak et al., 2012). Orientation programs should not only prepare learners for the technology but should also prepare learners for faculty expectations around their ability to navigate the technology also (Mensch, conference paper, n.d.). If online learners are provided with the appropriate technological support in an orientation program, they may be more comfortable and confident with their abilities throughout the duration of their studies.

### **Cognitive Support**

A cognitive support system must be tailored to the goals of a course or program (Zawacki-Richter, 2004) and provide the means for learners to access this support with ease.

Learning imparted through media enables, but also demands, more self-determination and autonomy so academic support provided initially will assist in learners feeling comfortable with that autonomy (Zawacki-Richter, 2004). The foundation and support learners receive in their program can determine the level of success they feel academically (Palloff & Pratt, 1999 as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2005). While technological support is important, academic support is often the one area learners need most because it is the basis and determining factor for their success and academic achievement (Mensch, conference paper, n.d.). Introducing online learners to the support available through student and academic services is vital to help achieve the academic success learners set out to achieve. Information on available support resources (Bozarth & al., 2004) and helping learners become familiar with learners support services (Browser & Race, 1992 as cited in Robinson et al., 1996) is much easier on campus because these services have more visibility. Universities offering online options should consider doing the same because the same visibility does not exist in online environments. Online environments often depend solely on faculty to provide pedagogical support (Zawacki-Richter, 2004) and not enough emphasis is placed on the other resources available. This means a greater effort must be made to emphasize the availability of these support services in online environments. Considering the specialized nature of these online programs, it would be important to highlight academic support in all its forms to prepare learners for success.

### **Community Support**

According to Tait (2000), affective support which has been framed as community support provides an environment which assists learners, creates and reinforces commitment, and enhances self-esteem (Tait, 2000). Although online learners may be accustomed to a higher level of autonomy, there is also a need to acquaint them in a social capacity because online

environments are becoming more social in nature (Swan & Shea, 2005). The increased social nature of interaction is perhaps due to the increase of synchronous elements in online programs. This section considers how community support offered in an orientation program may assist in building a stronger community and social network among learners and faculty in online programs. The importance of community support, interactions and community are outlined in many social learning theories. For example, Vygotsky's (1962) theory includes an increasing emphasis on social interactions and maintains that knowledge is constructed in the midst of our interactions. Building a community in an orientation program may allow learners to develop interpersonal skills, build relationships and investigate knowledge shared by community members ahead of being exposed to the formal curriculum (Anderson, 2008). The benefit may also be the emergence of four essential elements that cause online communities to prosper – spirit (the recognition of community membership), trust, interaction, and learning (Rovai, 2002 as cited in Swan & Shea, 2005).

Research conducted by Couros (2003), Palloff & Pratt (2005), and Swan & Shea (2005), outlines various methods for online community to be felt and for it to prosper. Pallof & Pratt (2005) state that online communities emerge when people are bound by shared expertise and interests or work in cyberspace with the intention of pursuing learning goals. An orientation program for online learners could establish a community by encouraging social participation and active involvement (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Olofsson (2007) suggests that participants should hold an inclusive attitude towards other group members and feel the benefits of being actively involved and invested in a community. Often this is attained when there is a sense of value and attachment to the group. Anderson states that establishing a learning community is a key approach in maintaining the value of a community and the people within it (Anderson, 2008).

Providing a sense of value and benefit is key especially since communities in educational environments are often voluntary (Couros, 2003). For individuals to feel belonging in a community they must see incentive in participating because the motivation or outcome in doing so is not always explicit (Couros, 2003). While value in interactions is not explicit at the onset, students should feel the connections build and grow over time as the community evolves (Couros, 2003) especially after the orientation process. In this context, the social nature of these programs is emphasized through the notion of Problem-Based learning (PBL) which also emphasizes the benefits of learning in groups in social and collaborative settings. With such a large emphasis on PBL and social interactions, it is important for learners to feel comfortable and supported by their peers. This could be the determining factor between a learner's achievement and failure in the online environment.

According to Swan & Shea (2005) individual success or failure in online courses depends on one's ability to transition from feeling like outsiders to feeling like insiders in that community. According to Couros (2003) the insiders, those familiar with the community already (current and former faculty/learners) can assist outsiders (new faculty/learners) adapt to the new community. An open dialogue between insiders and outsiders allows members to gain insights and knowledge from one another, while all parties are equally valued (Couros, 2003; Swan & Shea, 2005). These criteria would typically emerge when learners have been given the opportunity to discover the learning space (technological support), have been briefed on the academic requirement (academic support) and know the individuals in it (community support) (Wozniak et al., 2009). Community can emerge from an orientation program when there is a greater potential to maintain and carry through connections made with other participants both during and after their time in an online environment.

In order for value to be established, there should be criteria used to help build and promote the community. *The Community Building on the Web* (Kim, 2000) publication provides a comprehensive guide and strategies for designing online communities. It is organized around nine basic design principles that can be used to build successful and sustainable online communities. These nine principles can support and empower members and promote the following (bolding and italics were added):

- 1) ***Define and communicate the purpose*** to ensure prospective members understand the relevance and benefit of the community being built.
- 2) ***Build flexible and widely available space*** that will encourage participation in community.
- 3) ***Create meaningful learner profiles*** to invoke communication between members and help to give the community a sense of value and opportunity to network.
- 4) ***Empower strategies*** around welcoming and encouraging new members and sustaining the impact of existing members.
- 5) ***Develop strong leadership*** in which leaders greet and orient members to the community.
- 6) ***Encourage appropriate etiquette*** and establish rules.
- 7) ***Promote recurring events*** to provide venues for informal interaction and encourage members to create their own events.
- 8) ***Integrate rituals*** around important occurrences (new members, exiting members, etc.), conferences, events etc.
- 9) ***Facilitate member-run subgroups*** for groups with common interests to form.

(Kim, 2000)

These nine principles, along with elements of support and community can help to understand and address common themes and challenges for online learning and the need for an orientation program at the onset of a student's entry into a program. When all of these criteria are met and accomplished, instructors have a right to expect that participants will come to online learning prepared for their new learning environment (Bozarth & al., 2004) and learners will be able to meet those expectations. In the end, a support system must be tailored to the requirements of learners, faculty and the specialized goals of a course or program (Zawacki-Richter, 2004). The form and extent of the support depends on the individuals, their learning styles, their prior knowledge, their occupational backgrounds their goals and their social

obligations (Zawacki-Richter, 2004). No matter the background of the learner, the support provided through orientation programs may contribute to the preparation, familiarity and success of the learner in the online program (Mensch, conference paper, n.d.). These viewpoints demonstrate that an orientation program built on the foundation of social learning theories and support theories can facilitate the interactions learners require in orientation programs and throughout their academic endeavors.

Social learning theories, Anderson's theory of online learning (2008) and Tait's Support Theory (2000) provide the theoretical foundation for this research project. According to The literature reviewed and the theoretical framework of this project, it would appear that:

- systematic support can prepare online learners for the technical components of learning
- cognitive support can assist online learners at an academic and services support level
- affective support can contribute to social and community support for online learners

Ultimately, orientation programs are often the initial introduction learners have of their new environment and they serve as a form of support for learners at a personal, social, academic and technical level in online environments. Support with technology is of utmost important while the importance of learning communities may be a factor to consider. Finally, the literature states that support needs to be ongoing and beneficial for learners, not only at the onset of their studies, but throughout their academic journey.

## **Methodology**

This study focused on gaining insights from learners and faculty on the purposes, topics and value of an orientation program for online learners. The data were collected to understand learners' positions on online learning, technology, support and how these aspects can help inform the topics and reasons for an orientation program.

For the purpose of gaining the best possible insight and understanding from participants, this study employed a qualitative methodology and is reported as a case study. Merriam (1988; 1998; 2009) outlines the benefits of the case study approach. Merriam (2009) suggests that the case study is a bounded system, rich in detail, and presents findings where little research has been conducted. It also provides a comprehensive account of an investigation around which there are obvious intrinsic boundaries, which in this case involve two unique programs and a very particular group of learners (Merriam, 1988). Merriam (2009) also suggests the case study is used to gain a full and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009), which has the ability to assist the university to fill the gap it has discovered.

Case study research assumes that meaning is embedded in people's experience which stresses the importance and relevance of the case study in this research study. Maintaining awareness of participants' opinions also allowed the researcher to discover, understand and make meaning of participants' lived experience and interpret how their individual and collective experience can contribute to the design and development of an orientation program. The descriptive nature of the case study illustrates the complexity of the university's current situation and how personalities may influence perspectives on the issue (Merriam, 1988). Participants' experience will offer a better understanding of how members of the online environment made sense of their experience and how they interpreted these experiences. In order to appreciate the participants' backgrounds, it was imperative to understand who they are, where they are coming from and how they constructed their thoughts on their experience in this very unique online environment. The range of individuals, their level of experience and expertise as well as personality traits may influence their responses and feedback on this topic. Their reactions may provide insights on positive experiences, areas for improvement and allow for discussions for

alternatives choices or options (Merriam, 1988). For these reasons, the descriptive case-study method was chosen.

The case study approach and findings of this research may inform decisions in planning and preparing for the design and development of an online orientation program. The overall flexibility and evolving nature of the case study aligns well with the developing nature and essence of the BA/AEDT and the AHSc programs. The nature of this study also requires a great deal of detail and building an understanding of what already exists and what is missing (Merriam, 1988) which is essentially why this research is needed.

### **Limitations, Validity and Reliability of Study**

As previously outlined, the perspectives of participants were collected by the researcher while maintaining sensitivity to and an awareness of underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data (Merriam, 1988). The meaning of the experiences and information participants shared was mediated through the investigator's own perceptions (Merriam, 1998). Participation was not as high as hoped for. The findings are helpful because they provide a window into the views of the study's participants.

### **Research Participants**

The BA/AEDT participants are enrolled in their first year of the fully online, synchronous program. The cohort consists of 20 learners, five Teaching Assistants and five Professors. Of the twenty learners in the program, seven learners chose to participate in this study.

The AHSc participants are a combination of first to fourth year learners. The program had approximately 80 learners enrolled at the time of this research study and fourteen of those learners chose to participate. One faculty member (professors and teaching assistants) from the AHSc participated while four faculty members from the BA/AEDT participated.

### **How Research was Conducted: Initial Approach**

Once approved by the Research Ethics Board, the researcher approached faculty by email to inform them of the research study and invite participation. In this email approach, the researcher also asked permission to visit their online classes to inform learners of the research in person rather than by email. This approach was used to elicit a higher level of interest in the study and allow learners to meet the researcher conducting the study. The intent of this research was to ask questions through focus groups in Adobe Connect and an anonymous 20 minute online survey using Survey Monkey. Adobe Connect was chosen since it is the online synchronous platform used by the learners in the program and Survey Monkey for ease of use and access. Those who felt uncomfortable with sharing their opinions through a focus group had the option to do so and others participated in the survey. While the option of participating in a focus group was made available, no focus groups were conducted as part of this research project because all participants completed the survey option. All participants in the research have experience with the online technology being used to conduct this research. Learners and faculty were invited to send the researcher an email indicating their preferred method to participate in this research. Neither one of the instruments used for this research collected IP addresses or other personal data from participants. Participants were also able to use pseudonyms to maintain privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher sent participants information for the survey and focus groups via email including the consent and confidentiality agreements of the study.

### **Creation of Questions**

The student survey was created slightly differently from the faculty survey. The survey for learners is attached as Appendix A and the faculty survey as Appendix B. Creating separate

questionnaires for both groups allowed for more specific questions based on the groups' previous and current experience in learning and/or teaching.

The questions asked of participants were based on the researcher's own experience in an online program and a literature review, including research studies conducted by Robinson et al. (1996); Zawacki-Richter (2004); Scagnoli (2001;2009); and Wozniak, et al. (2012). While some of the review of the literature took place prior to building the questionnaires, most of the literature was reviewed after. This caused the researcher to realize that questions could have been constructed differently and more efficiently. The questions consisted of both Likert Scale questions as well as open-ended questions. The Likert Scale and multiple choice questions were written to gain rapid responses to assist the researcher in explaining the demographics of participants, their comfort level with technology and responses that required a simple yes or no response. In keeping with the assumption that there are multiple realities in research, open-ended questions were created to encourage participants to elaborate and provide detailed responses and insights based on their individual experience.

The initial research design also included focus groups. The focus group script for learners is attached as Appendix C and for faculty as Appendix D. In the end, focus groups were not conducted due to insufficient requests to participate; instead, a one-on-one interview was conducted with one student upon request. The reason for lack of response to participate in the focus groups was not stated or known to the researcher. The one-on-one interview was conducted using Adobe Connect. The participant was encouraged to provide input as to how an orientation program for online learners should be developed. The participant was able to share ideas on expectations and outcomes and take the conversation in the direction s/he wanted, without any restrictions or fear of her/his identity being compromised. The one-on-one

interview was transcribed for data analysis and included with the online survey responses. All questions were used to understand what learners would like to see in an orientation program for online learners. Moreover, the questions were used to understand how an orientation program would facilitate support and the building of community for these online programs.

Once the survey and one-on-one interview responses were collected, the data were organized in a spreadsheet by groups of participants. To facilitate analysis, the data were structured and classified by questions asked in the survey and/or one-on-one interview. This allowed the researcher to capture every response, determine emerging themes and determine if there were common and consistent responses. This was deemed the most effective way to ensure that all areas of interest to participants were covered in the findings and that all themes, topics and values relevant to the development of an orientation program for online learners were highlighted. Common responses were filtered, examined and organized into emerging themes found in both faculty and student responses such as Purpose, Topics and Values. These responses are discussed in further detail in the findings section of this research.

### **Findings**

Data were collected from faculty and student perspectives and are presented accordingly. They are compared and contrasted in the discussion section to identify the similarities and/or gaps that exist in their insights. Findings reported in this research do not include any personal information from the participants and maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants as indicated in the consent forms.

The data from faculty responses resulted in the following topic areas: Technological Ability, Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness and Additional relevant findings. The data from student responses are categorized as follows: Factors contributing to Students'

Choices, Student assumptions about Online Learning, Technological Ability, Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness and finally Additional relevant findings. These topic areas were determined based on themes that emerged during the aggregation of data and their connection and significance to the theoretical framework of this study.

### **Faculty Findings**

Four faculty members from the BA/AEDT and one faculty member from AHSc program completed the online survey. Faculty from the AHSc and BA/AEDT were provided with the same survey and results of the findings were compiled. To gain a better sense of the teaching experience faculty members have at the undergraduate level, they responded to questions about their teaching history. It was determined that 60% have been teaching at the undergraduate level for 1-5 years, while 20% have been teaching for 6-10 years and 20% from 11-15 years. To gain a better understanding of the faculty's experience with teaching online, they were asked to identify their years of experience in teaching in online synchronous and asynchronous programs. The majority of the faculty members (80%) have taught in a synchronous program for 1-5 years, while 20% have taught synchronously for 6-10 years. Approximately, 75% have taught for 1-5 years in online asynchronous programs and 25% have taught for 6-10 years in an online asynchronous program.

### **Technological Ability**

Using a Likert scale the researcher asked questions to gain perspective on technological abilities. Faculty members assessed their level of ability to navigate technology as well as the ability of learners in the respective programs. The majority of the faculty indicated an excellent ability to navigate while others indicated a very good ability to navigate the technology. When asked to rate their expectations of learners' ability to use technology, the results varied with 40%

indicating they should have an average level, 40% saying it should be good and 20% indicating it should be very good. A common concern around technology was that learners who have weaker backgrounds take longer to adjust. One faculty member states:

Some learners have a very weak technology background (which is fine) and there is very little in the way to prep them for the first day. Therefore, it takes them about 2-3 weeks to navigate and they miss many opportunities.

### **Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness**

When faculty members were asked if they participated in the face-to-face orientation program at the university, 20% indicated they did, 20% indicated they could not recall, and 60% did not attend. Faculty members were prompted then to respond as to why or why not the orientation program was useful. One participant responded: “I was here before the campus(es) was fully complete, therefore the orientation program wasn't of much use to me.”

When asked if attending an on-campus orientation program would be useful to online learners, 60% agreed while 20% did not. The other 20% did not respond to this question. Then, they were to identify if an on campus, or online synchronous or asynchronous would be best to convey an orientation program. Approximately 60% stated an online synchronous program would be most ideal for online learners, with one participant stating: “Best way for them to understand how the course is going to be delivered.” While one faculty participant stated that both online methods should be used: “Both as the learners need to feel that they will be part of a community for support (synchronous) but they also need to be able to identify the resources that will be available to them when they are able to access them (asynchronous).”

When asked what tool/program should be used to access and deliver the online orientation program, 75% agreed that Adobe Connect should be used, while 50% suggested a YouTube video would be ideal while one participant indicated “a wide variety” should be used.

Overall 80% of the faculty agreed that an orientation program should be mandatory for learners entering the program, while 20% did not believe so. Faculty members did not state the reason(s) for these responses.

Faculty members were invited to share if they would be interested in providing input and expertise into the design and development of the orientation. The faculty participants from both the BA/AEDT and the AHSc programs indicated a keen interest in being a part of this project. “Yes, I would be interested in helping make asynchronous videos of campus and academic life and include important info (such as navigating BB, setting up email, classroom expectations, campus life, etc). I love to be involved in this!” Another faculty member indicated an interest and opinion that may require further investigation:

The nature of the program will have a huge impact on the type of online orientation that will be required. I am more than willing to assist with giving you some insights regarding how the program is put together and what the program graduate outcomes are and how learners will be progressing through the program. This is a very unique program. Therefore the orientation program will also need to be unique.

When asked to give feedback on the purpose of having an orientation program, 80% agreed that it should facilitate both academic success and social interactions. Furthermore, when asked to indicate what an orientation program should include, there was general accord on a number of key areas. One faculty participant suggested that “student services and anything that is required for a student to experience success within the program” should also be included. Another faculty member sums up the consensus and mentions:

I think it's important to know which facilities help learners. I don't think online and remote learners feel a strong university pride because they never experience it. If we could tell them all the supports available throughout the city, it might make them more proud of the university they belong to.

Academic success, student retention, personal integration, community building and better proficiency with technology were all outlined as potential outcomes of an orientation program.

The following chart indicates what topics faculty indicated should be covered in an orientation program.

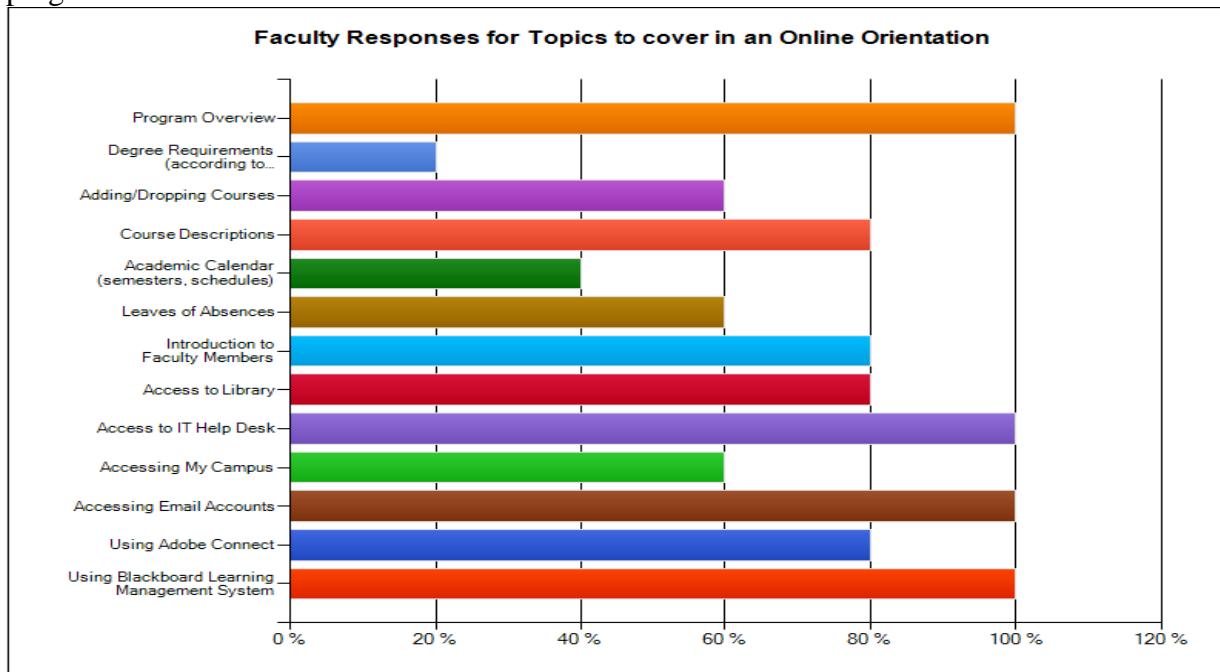


Figure 2: Topics faculty value and believe are necessary to include in the development of the orientation program content.

While all areas were considered important, a consensus on four specific areas was made apparent through faculty responses. All the faculty members participating agreed that the topics of an orientation program should include a program overview, information on how to access the IT help desk, and information accessing email as well as using the Blackboard LMS.

### **Additional Relevant Findings from Faculty**

Faculty members outlined common problem areas learners have encountered in their online learning experience. These topics include but are not limited to technical problems such as skills in recording presentations and time management issues due to a lack of understanding of time requirements. One of the faculty members' in the BA/AEDT program stated that learners should be made more aware of Problem Based Learning (PBL) because: "many of the learners are mature learners who are working full time and trying to take several courses and have many

life responsibilities as well" and another states that "They need to understand that PBL is group based and takes more time than traditional assignments."

Subsequently, when asked what they would encourage learners to know prior to commencing the online programs, the following responses were brought to the researcher's attention.

Information needs to be available to learners in a timely manner. We inundate learners at the beginning of term with a barrage of information that they would need throughout the term, but they can't remember everything so timely reminders at specific times would be appreciated.

Also, some learners do not realize that online courses have mandatory attendance and "skip" class a lot. We need to make them realize that synchronous class time is very valuable and should not be missed. It is not optional.

These findings represent the overall opinions of the faculty members who participated in the survey.

## **Student Findings**

Seven learners from the BA/AEDT and fourteen from the AHSc completed the online survey, and one BA/AEDT student participated in an interview. The survey for both groups of learners had the same questions; however in order to appropriately display the findings, they will be displayed separately to gain a sense of student's opinions in each program.

Of the seven BA/AEDT learners who participated, two learners are under the age of 25 and one in each of the following age categories, 26-30 years of age, 41-45 years of age and one was 46 and older. When the participants were asked about employment, 83.3% indicated they were employed full time and 66.7% engaged in full time study. In the AHSc, five of the student participants who disclosed their age are in the 41-45 age group, while 3 are in both the 26-30 year bracket and the 31-35 year bracket. Two of the participants are 46 and older while one falls

below the age of 25. One participant is a full time student, while eleven participants are engaged in part-time study. Nine of the fourteen are employed full-time and four learners are employed part time.

### **Factors Contributing to Learners' Choices**

In order to learn why learners have chosen these programs, learners were asked which criteria contributed to their decision to enroll. 90% of the participants indicated the online option was their biggest deciding factor. Many learners agreed that the flexibility of the online option is the only reason they were able to consider pursuing a degree at this stage of their career.

### **Student Assumptions about Online Learning**

Learners' preconceptions of online learning varied and ranged from nervousness about how to handle minimal interaction to excitement for a new way of learning. Some learners were under the assumption that it would mimic correspondence learning, with little human to human interaction. The assumption was that it would be a very passive learning experience where the instructor would post lecture notes and have little interaction and lots of online reading which would require learners to complete assignments and work independently. Most learners did not realize there would be as much emphasis on synchronous learning and group work. When learners were asked if their assumptions changed, many responded positively that they had.

The learners concerned with minimal interaction stated that as they got closer to graduating they found that the AHSc program integrates all types of media to assist with the learning process which has contributed to a change in perspective of what online learning is. An AHSc participant shares: "Definitely. I feel much more confident in my ability to work with groups at a distance and communicate through different means to stay connected with my

classmates and professors.” One AHSc student who thought it would be passive, states the following about their assumption having changed:

It has. Almost every course I have been enrolled in has involved group work/projects into it. Despite really loathing working with other learners with different schedules and in different time zones, have I come to appreciate the experience this provides.

A student in the BA/AEDT shares an opinion on the networking involved in the program: “The networking component is definitely a huge part of the BA/AEDT, and I have never experienced an online environment (anywhere in all my years) where so much collaboration through digital tools was encouraged.” Conversely, an AHSc student concerned with instructor interaction answered the following about how experience had changed this view point, stating:

There is more instructor interaction, but a lot of reading still. The instructors do not seem to respect that we are full time workers in my program. There are synchronous requirements that have been difficult to meet. They have also done ridiculous things like assign group work with 13 people in one group that have never met.

Many learners were not sure what to expect in their online learning experience. Generally, original thoughts and assumptions for some learners remained the same while other learners realized their assumptions were based on a definition of online learning that did not apply to the context of their program.

### **Technological Ability**

Learners were asked about their comfort level with technology when starting the online program. Among the participants in the BA/AEDT, 50% claimed they were very comfortable, 33.3% said somewhat comfortable and 16.7% they were very uncomfortable. In the AHSc, 7.1% stated they were completely comfortable, 35.6% claimed they were very comfortable, 14.3% said comfortable, while 42.9% were somewhat comfortable. In addition, it was

important to ask learners about their ability to navigate technology. The following charts (Figure 3 and 4) indicate learners' ability to navigate technology prior to commencing the program.

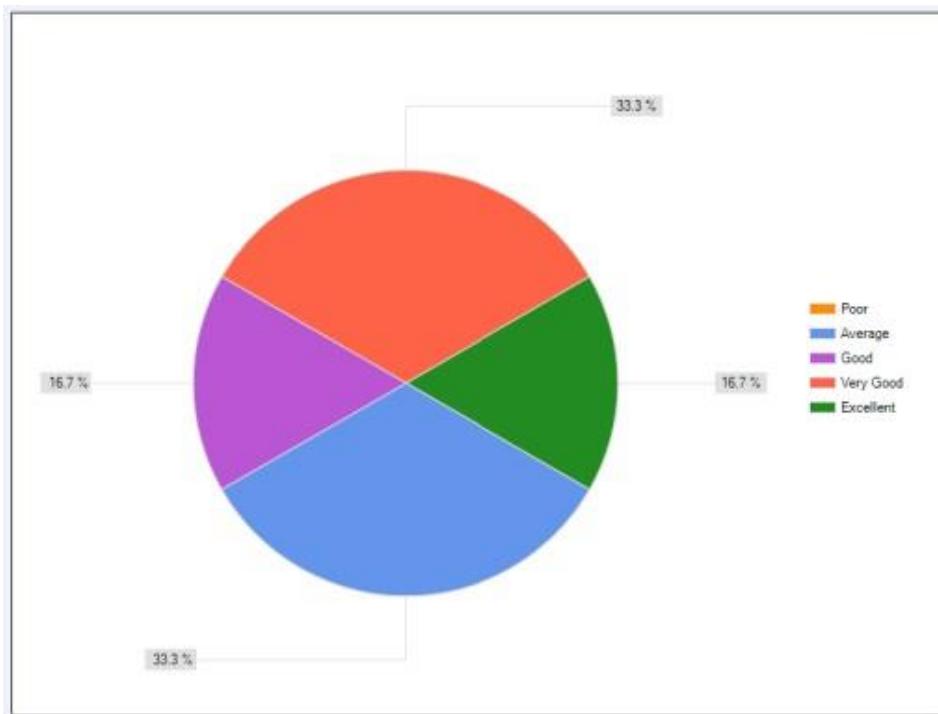


Figure 3: Learners ability to navigate technology upon commencing the BA/AEDT.

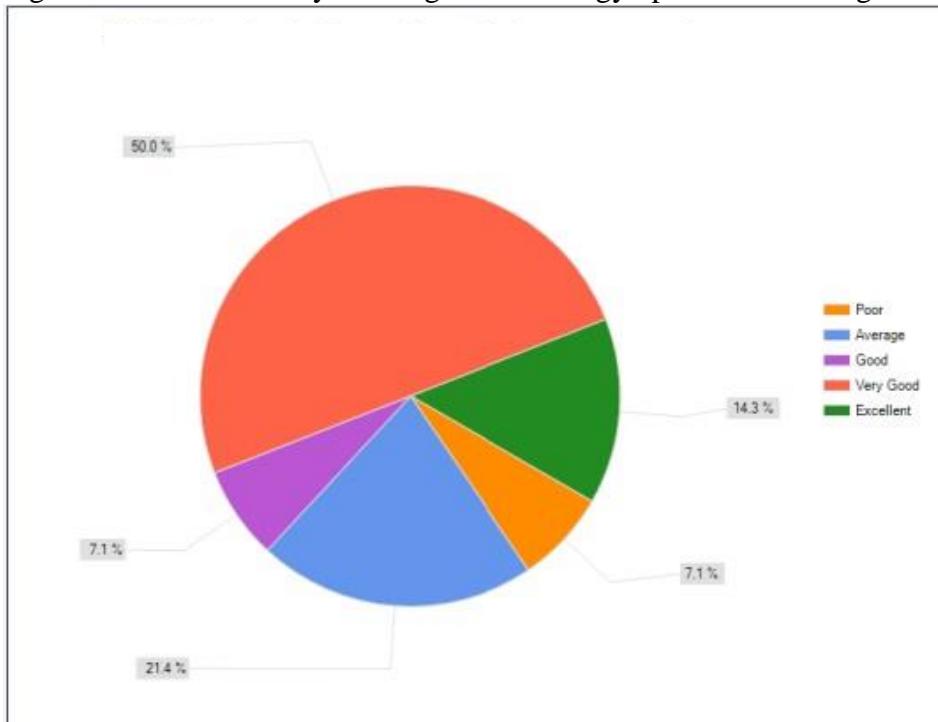


Figure 4: Learners ability to navigate technology upon commencing the AHSc.

It is evident that student opinions around technological ability and experience online ranged, however, there was some consensus around the positive experiences as well as difficulties and challenges faced in the synchronous environment. The following few quotes are an indication of the spectrum of the learners' experience and comfort with online learning.

Quotes are from learners in both programs:

Positive Feedback:

I am a digital immigrant. My work doesn't require much technology. All my previous education were very traditional...Part of the reason I have enrolled the program is to upgrading my technology skills and knowledge since it's my weakness. Hence, it's also a bit of challenge for me. So far with all the support from professors, instructors, TA, peers and family I am doing okay. – BA/AEDT Student

I have a background in IT and many formative years spent at a keyboard. The internet is not new to me nor are the tools borne of it. I was excited to be diversifying into adult education while still richly using what experience I brought with myself. - BA/AEDT Student

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. I realized it's a new development so am not sure what outcome would be. However, I stayed positive and thus far, it's amazing. - AHSc Student

I am a proponent of online/digital learning and was excited to know that I could complete my education while continuing to work. - AHSc Student

Difficulties/Challenges:

I had never taken an online course so it was the first for me. It was also the first time I started university to that was a huge factor as well. - BA/AEDT student

I had never done education online before so I was a little nervous in adjusting to the platform. Once I started navigating the platform I became more confident. There are still little issues that arise, but I am able to trouble shoot before I ask for assistance. - AHSc Student

I experienced a learning curve to using Blackboard. Being self-taught Blackboard is not the best in finding new notifications" AHSc Student

Online learning and technology based learning was new to me and having to learn how to make the most from a non-traditional format, one that conflicts with my pre-

conceived understanding of student and teacher responsibilities on top of the curriculum was difficult. - AHSc Student

The biggest problem is the inconsistency from the instructors and/or their lack of knowledge with the software." - AHSc Student

At first I felt good but then when I realized that the assignments all had some form of DT (create a wiki, create a YouTube video, create a Prezi etc.) without getting any training on any of the software or sites you were expected to use, this made me uncomfortable and nervous. Also, the description you get when signing up for the course is different from when you start it. This was not what I expected.– BA/AEDT Student

### **Orientation Program: Purpose, Value and Usefulness**

The AHSc program offers an on campus orientation program and provided the option for learners to attend the orientation program online through Adobe Connect. In the AHSc group, 78.6% of learners did attend and 21.4% did not, however there was no indication of how many attended in person versus how many online. None of the participants in the BA/AEDT attended an orientation program, nor were they aware if there was one.

When asked why or why not it was useful to attend an orientation program for AHSc, participants indicated that the social aspect of the orientation program was the most worthwhile. Learners said that meeting face-to-face with professors and peers allowed them to make personal connections before congregating online. An AHSc student states: "I am new to online learning. Meeting some of the faculty and learners gives you a sense of community and felt more comfortable after the orientation program." Another AHSc student said that "faculty also treated us with such great respect (recognizing our experience)." Beyond the personal component, learners found the elements such as, "description of what to expect, setting up of student IT access, student cards, etc." very useful and "useful tips on expectations/ requirements/ workload management." One AHSc participant sums up the overall consensus on the perceived use of an orientation program, this way:

It was valuable to have as the initial navigation to the program (WebCT at the time). It curtailed a lot of my anxiety as I was given valuable advice and troubleshooting information at the orientation. It was also great to meet classmates in person so that I could put a face to the name throughout our last four years together.

When asked what kind of orientation program appeals most, 100% of the learners in the BA/AEDT indicated a preference for face-to-face orientation program while 50% opted for synchronous and asynchronous. Among the AHSc group, 61.5% indicated an interest in face-to-face while 15.4% wanted online synchronous and 30.8% suggested online asynchronous. If the university does begin to offer an online orientation program, the vast majority of AHSc student (78.6%) thought that Adobe Connect was the best way to deliver the program while 57.1% suggested YouTube. BA/AEDT learners were results were the opposite and 80% opted for YouTube and 60% for Adobe Connect.

Finally learners were asked if they would participate in an online orientation program if it was optional. 100% of the BA/AEDT learners said they would attend and 85.7% of the AHSc learners also said they would attend. The remaining 14.3% of the AHSc learners would not attend in person. When learners were asked if an orientation program should be mandatory, the AHSc group was equally split, 50% saying yes while the other 50% saying no. In the BA/AEDT, 60% of the learners stated it should not be mandatory while 40% agreed that it should.

To determine what learners' value, the researchers asked what topics they believe are necessary in an online orientation program. The following graphs indicate which topics were considered important by participants.

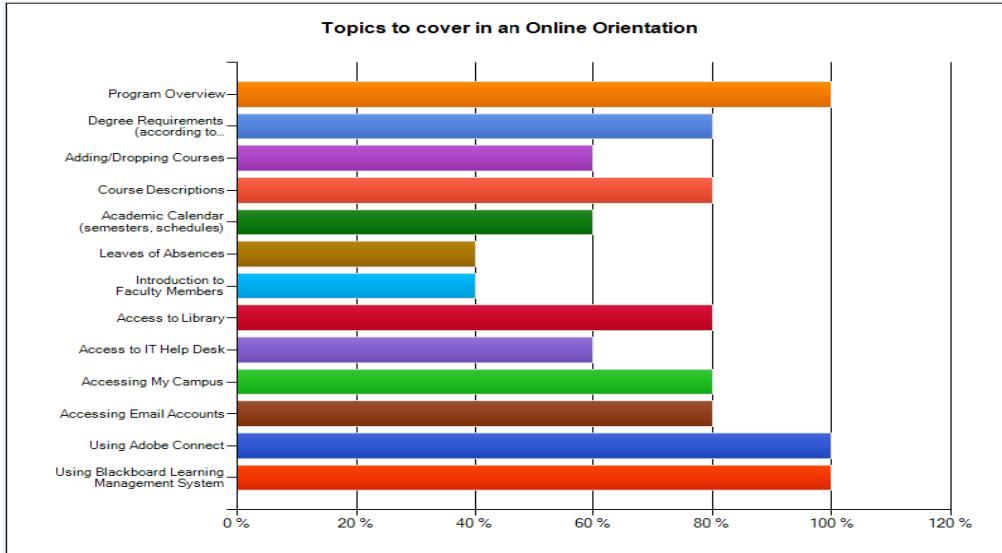


Figure 5: Topics outline as important for learners in the BA/AEDT.

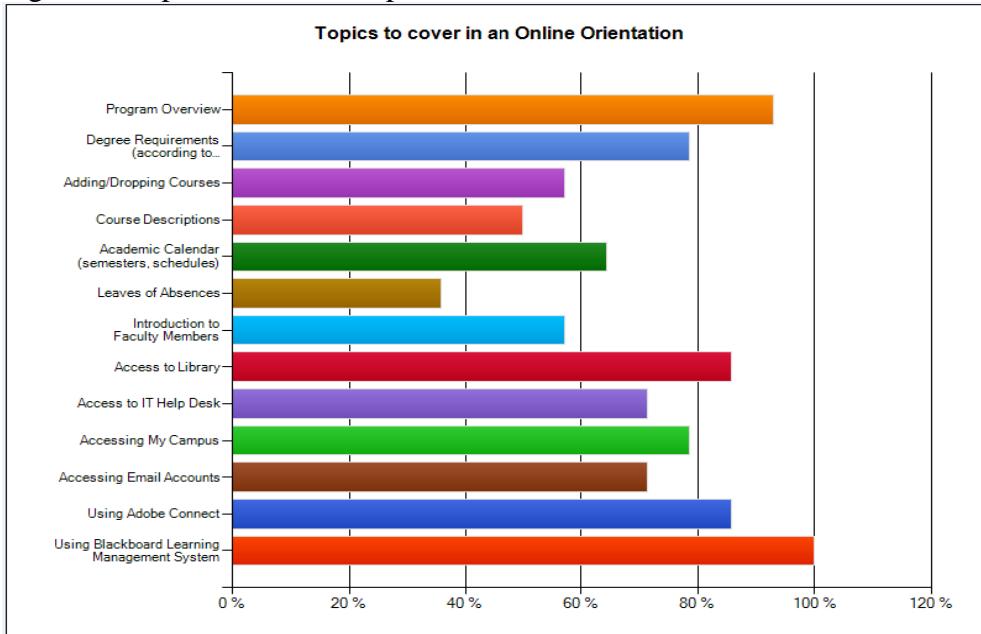


Figure 6: Topics outline as important for learners in the AHSc.

Participants were also asked their opinion of the reasons for an orientation program. The data presented in Figures 5 and 6, indicate the reasons they believe to be most important. All of the respondents from the BA/AEDT agreed that the overall purpose of an orientation program is to facilitate personal integration, community building, and to help build better proficiency with technology. Social integration and fostering an atmosphere of camaraderie was included by 60% of the participants in this group. AHSc participants agreed that better proficiency with

technology should be the main purpose of an orientation program. The focus on both personal and social integration was indicated as important by 50% of the participants and community building by 45% of the group.

### **Additional Relevant Findings from Learners**

In an effort to understand how an orientation program can help learners with challenges they faced, learners were asked about the most difficult aspects of online learning. The common themes that emerged from both groups of learners were as follows:

#### **Group Work**

A large majority of the learners state that group work and group meetings are a large part of their daily and weekly activity and the challenge with this is the coordination of such group work. One BA/AEDT student sums up the concerns well, states: “With so many schedules being different, a lot of sacrifices are made both in life and in quality of work. For all five courses to be group-oriented, it was very difficult.” Another BA/AEDT student stated: “Being paired with someone who isn't prepared to engage with the necessary technology was incredibly hindering.”

#### **Time**

Learners across the board emphasized the challenge of making time for all of the elements involved in both synchronous programs. While they were prepared for the 3 hour online sessions, they were not aware of how much time is involved outside of the three hour sessions such as time required to do readings, discussion boards or group work.

Learners in the AHSc faced unique challenges with time: “Time - the online asynchronous aspect of the program was what attracted me to it. I work rotating shift work like most in healthcare- this makes it nearly impossible to attend class every week.”

#### **Social Interaction**

The need to get to know other learners and have face-to-face conversations was a common concern among participants and not having such opportunities lead to feelings of isolation.

### **Technology**

Technological challenges are often a given in online programs and many issues faced with technology are out of the hands of people in the environment. Learners indicated that lack of knowledge of the Blackboard system was challenging and having to learn on their own was time consuming. As far as difficulties with Adobe Connect, the following is a compilation of many of the comments received on this topic from both BA/AEDT learners and AHSc learners:

“The Adobe Connect software is hit and miss -- logging in as a guest, general room kicking you out all the time -- Makes it hard for group meetings.”

### **Overall Program Requirements**

A BA/AEDT student sums up the feelings of most respondents in saying that:

Full detail about what is expected from this program needs to be disclosed, what happens in tutorials, what's expected outside of tutorial times (discussion boards, wikis, forums etc.) and an overview of software/programs/sites needed to learn in order to be successful in this program.

This data will be crucial when later discussing the findings and how they relate to the literature already written on this topic. The discussion section will state the connections to the literature and the application of findings to this university environment.

### **Discussion**

In this section, the results of the findings will be compared and contrasted to the review of literature. The results of the case study emphasize the importance of technological, academic and social support in orientation programs for online learners. While some of the results were expected, a few new topics, unique to this online synchronous environment came to light through

the analysis of the participants' responses. The overall findings of the study imply that a detailed and comprehensive introduction through an orientation program may provide learners with increased confidence in their academic, technical and social skills within their respective programs.

### **Overall Purpose of an Orientation Program**

The purposes of an orientation program outlined in the literature are consistent with the faculty and learners perspectives on the purposes of having one. They align as well with reasons higher education institutions implement orientation programs. An orientation program built with these purposes in mind may alleviate the areas learners identified as most challenging by this research study.

The following table compares the literature, faculty findings and student findings on the overall purpose of an orientation.

<b>Overall Purpose of Orientation</b>		
Literature	Faculty	Learners
<b>The literature states that online orientation programs should:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identity goals and objectives</li><li>• Review program requirements</li><li>• Encourage social and academic interactions</li><li>• Improve ability with technology</li><li>• Increase student involvement</li><li>• Enhance sense of belonging</li></ul>	<b>Faculty agreed that orientation programs should:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitate academic success and social interactions</li><li>• Increase student retention</li><li>• Encourage personal and integration</li><li>• Encourage community building</li><li>• Improve proficiency with technology</li></ul>	<b>Student responses agreed that the overall purpose of an orientation program is to:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitate personal integration</li><li>• Encourage community building</li><li>• Help build better proficiency with technology</li></ul>

### **The Importance of Support**

The findings suggest that some learners were content with their experience however many learners still experienced difficulty adjusting to online learning. This could be a result of learners not knowing what questions to ask and when to ask them especially when they are unfamiliar with the process in their new environment. In the findings many of the challenges and difficulties faced by learners pertain to absence or lack of support in the areas outlined in the theoretical framework of this study.

#### **Systematic or Technological Support**

From a student perspective, the findings suggest that the new platform for learning was the biggest challenge, cause for anxiety and a test of confidence. Faculty members agreed that the lack of knowledge of the online platform and a weak background in technology set learners back.

Similarly, the literature suggests this is one of the most common reasons learners feel anxious, uncomfortable and unprepared for online learning environments. The literature also mentions that technological advancements make it difficult for novice users to participate in online classrooms. This was also evident through the findings and became an issue even for learners who excelled with the technology. This could be easily avoided if appropriate measures are taken to help learners understand the platform ahead of starting their courses. This could help with situations in which learners did not realize the program involved synchronous learning and were completely unaware of the level of complexity of the technology used in the program. The findings suggest that learners could be more proactive rather than reactive and ensure they research and experiment with the technology ahead of time. Nonetheless, the faculty and university may need to consider providing more information about what the online environment

entails. Concern about technology was at the forefront of the findings, for learners and faculty, as well as the major area documented in the literature.

### Cognitive or Academic Support

From a cognitive support perspective, the literature and findings provide evidence that academic support should be closely examined and included in the orientation program for this group of learners. According to the literature, academic and student support services should be introduced and made available to learners throughout their academic experience. Online environments often depend solely on faculty to provide pedagogical support to online learners (Zawacki-Richter, 2004) and this was found to be problematic in the findings. The student findings suggest that faculty members are not equipped to assist and answer many of the concerns learners have around their academic experience. Interestingly, faculty members also stated that learners are unaware of the support available through student and academic services. This may be a result of neither group being on campus, which implies that other campus groups may need to be involved in the process of introducing and sustaining student knowledge on academic and student support services.

The findings suggest that learners require a more detailed account of the academic and program requirements both for the synchronous and asynchronous elements of the program. Learners suggested that becoming familiar with their role and responsibilities, the program overview and information on how to access services would be helpful in understanding the specialized nature of these programs. This is comparable to literature in that initiation into the role and responsibilities of the online learner contributes to an overall positive student experience (Mensch, n.d.). Not knowing the academic requirements of their program should be a cause for concern, especially when learners are not aware that their academic success depends on their

presence and participation in all synchronous elements of the program. There is an obvious disconnect between what faculty believe drives academic success and what learners believe determines their success in these programs.

### **Affective or Social/Community Support**

The challenge around this kind of support is that community means different things depending on the people and the context. As indicated in the literature online learning requires a level of autonomy however the findings confirm there is also a need to accustom learners to the social environment in the online environment. The literature suggests that if members in online communities have the opportunity to participate and engage, communities can emerge and be of value to all participants if there is potential to maintain and carry through connections they make with other participants. According to the literature social encounters allow learners to develop interpersonal skills and investigate common ground shared by members in their new community ahead of being exposed to formal curriculum. Participants agreed that the need to get to know other learners and have face-to-face conversations was important and helped avoid feelings of isolation. This was confirmed by the findings and feedback received from learners who participated in the orientation program offered to health program participants. Learners felt that the brief yet meaningful encounters with faculty members and other learners made them feel like a part of the community and created a sense of attachment to the group. The findings, however, also suggest that learners had various reasons for not wanting to engage socially such as lack of time and sacrifices they have to make to their family life. On the other hand, a large majority of the learners indicated they lacked a feeling of community because they do now know who they are working with. In fact, many were not pleased with the amount of group work required in the program. They went as far as to say that the quality of their work suffered because of how much

time it took to coordinate meetings and schedules. This could explain why learners also indicated that working with people they had never met was difficult. The value of these interactions was obviously not made clear to learners which may be a reason for the negative comments around group work in the results of the surveys.

Based on the data, it would appear that learners who did not participate in an orientation program or get the chance to interact with others at a personal and/or social level had the most complaints about the amount of group work. Group work is also a driving factor for building community and the literature suggests that collaboration, a sense of shared values and shared identity allow for the active exchange of ideas and help promote interest in being a part of the community (Couros, 2003). The group work aspect may be less daunting or problematic if learners were made aware of the benefits of group work, and problem-based learning and how these benefits are relevant to the world within which they work, where work in teams is unavoidable.

Although the literature encourages community building in online environments, participants of this study did not seem to focus on the idea of community as much as technology and academic preparation. Technology and academic support may seem more important to their success in the program but social support may be important for learners to succeed and benefit from the problem-based learning model used in the BA/AEDT program. The influence that social interaction and community can have on a person's success in online communities seems to be overlooked. Participants in this setting need to find benefit in social support and consider the same level of value in social interactions and community as they do in the academic and technological aspects of online learning.

### **Additional Areas of Consideration**

The majority of student participants emphasized the challenge of making time for all of the elements involved in synchronous programs and professors claimed that learners were not prepared to put in the time. Learners believe faculty should be sensitive and empathetic to their needs (outside of their academic life such as work and family life). Faculty, on the other hand, suggest that learners need to be more aware of their commitments within the program and better prepared for all of the components required. There appears to be a lack of cohesion in what participants understand of their requirements and what they know and what faculty members assume they know. The lack of communication and understanding of roles and responsibilities may also be a reason for learners facing many of the challenges they do in the technological, academic and social areas of their leaning. Overall the findings suggest that addressing concerns around technology and more explanations of academic and program requirements, learners would have more time to spend and appreciate the social encounters and community around them. Furthermore, an orientation program would require significant attention to context and requirements of the individuals that belong to the group.

### **Conclusion**

This research investigated the views of participants in two online synchronous programs to determine a sense of learners' and faculty member's opinions and insights on how meet the needs of learners at the onset of their academic journey. The desired outcome of this research study is to determine the possible delivery methods, content and structure of an orientation program for these unique programs and to understand how this will help build and facilitate a stronger online community and network of learners. Although, varying opinions and degrees of

thought emerged from this research, the case study illustrates that learners and faculty see value and importance in having an orientation program for the BA/AEDT and AHSc programs.

Learners and faculty unanimously agreed that an orientation program would alleviate some of the technological difficulties they experienced. They generally agree that the orientation program should also help clarify program requirements, and deal with the challenge of time management and time commitment required in these kinds of programs. An orientation program for these groups may serve as a way to help learners feel less inundated and avoid feelings of pressure or intimidation and the need to rush through the learning process. In addition, an orientation program may help prevent instances in which participants feel distanced from their colleagues, their faculty and the academic journey and contribute to a stronger online community. Based on the review of the literature, the data and the findings of this research, the university should consider various options in their undertaking of the design and development of an orientation program for these fully synchronous online programs.

The following are recommendations the university may choose to consider when developing an orientation program for online learners:

- Overview of the program:
  - o Strong emphasis on overall program requirements, the multiple unique components, and an explanation and emphasis on problem-based learning
- Academic Support including:
  - o Strong emphasis on course/program requirements and options for study
  - o Information on available support resources (student, library and academic services)
- Technical Support including:
  - o Details of the environment and potential challenges that may exist for learners who are new to technology based learning as well as those who have experience
  - o A tutorial on how to use the learning platform and its functionality
  - o Opportunities to experiment with the technology in a safe supported environment
  - o A clear understanding of online etiquette required in all aspects of the program
- Social Support including:
  - o The personal accounts of current and former learners and faculty members
  - o The opportunity to ask questions and obtain answers prior to starting their courses

- The chance to engage in meaningful conversation and start building relationships

An orientation program is one of many initiatives the university may take to provide a stronger and more positive student experience for its online learners. The subsequent suggestions may also serve as methods to contribute to a stronger online community:

- Encourage online learners to have a voice and be represented in the on-campus student council
- Create an online student council with representation from all online programs to help manage expectations in and outside of the classroom
- Build a professional social network similar to LinkedIn for current learners, alumni and professors to make professional connections, encourage social interaction outside of the classroom and find people with similar interests

Overall, the findings from this research project appear to suggest that an orientation program for online learners could assist learners in understanding the goals and objectives of the learning as well as explanations of the technological, academic and social support available to them. Including these elements may assist future incoming learners with a foundation on which to build and grow as individuals members of this growing community at this university.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Online Survey (Learners)

#### **Consent Form**

Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

You, the participant:

- ✓ Have read, understood and agree to the information in the consent letter.
- ✓ Indicate free and informed consent to research participation by agreeing to the terms in this research consent form.
- Agree
- Disagree

#### **Demographic Information**

1. What is your current age?  
 Under 25 years old  
 26 - 30 years old  
 31 - 35 years old  
 36 - 40 years old  
 41 - 45 years old  
 46 and older
2. Which of the following best describes your current situation? Check all that apply.  
 A full-time student  
 A part-time student  
 Employed full-time  
 Employed part-time
3. Based on your own personal experience, how would you rate your ability to navigate technology upon commencing the program?

**Poor      Average      Good      Very Good      Excellent**

4. How comfortable did you feel starting the online program? And why?

**Very      Somewhat      Comfortable      Very      Completely**  
Uncomfortable      Uncomfortable      Comfortable      Comfortable

**Program Choice and Online Learning**

5. Using the scale below, please indicate how the following criteria contribute to your decision to enroll in this online program.

	No influence	Little Influence	Some influence	Highly influential
<b>Reputation Course Offerings</b>				
<b>Technology</b>				
<b>Online option</b>				
<b>Faculty</b>				
<b>Past experience with the university</b>				
<b>Referral</b>				
<b>Program options</b>				
<b>Other</b>				

**Questions Related to Online Learning**

6. What was your original assumption about online learning?  
 7. Has that assumption changed?  
 8. What do you think is the most difficult aspect of online synchronous learning?

**Orientation Specific Questions**

9. Did you attend the orientation offered by the university prior to commencing the program?  
 Yes  
 No
10. How far did you have to travel to the orientation?
11. Was the orientation useful?  
 Yes  
 No  
 Somewhat
12. Based on your answer to the previous question, why or why not was this orientation useful (i.e. topics discussed, peer interaction, etc.) Please be specific.
13. Which type of orientation appeals to you more?  
 Face to Face (on campus)

- Online (synchronous)
  - Online (asynchronous)
  - Other (please specify)
14. If the university does start to deliver an online orientation, what tool/program should be used to deliver it?
- Adobe Connect  
YouTube  
Captivate  
Jing  
Other (please specify)
15. What do you believe are necessary topics for an orientation to this program? Check all that apply.
- Program Overview  
Degree Requirements (according to program selection)  
Adding/Dropping Courses  
Course Descriptions  
Academic Calendar (semesters, schedules)  
Leaves of Absences  
Introduction to Faculty Members  
Access to Library (off campus)  
Access to IT Help Desk (off campus)  
Accessing My Campus  
Accessing Email Accounts  
Using Adobe Connect  
Using Blackboard Learning Management System  
Other (please specify)
16. What other aspects of online learning do you feel learners need to be informed of in an orientation? (ex. Time commitment required, online etiquette)
17. In your opinion, what is the purpose of having an orientation?
- Foster an atmosphere of camaraderie  
Personal Integration  
Social Integration  
Community Building  
Better proficiency with Technology (ex. Hardware, Software)  
Other

18. Should an orientation be mandatory for learners entering the Faculty?

- Yes
- No

19. Would you participate in an online orientation to your program if it was optional?

- Yes
- No

## Appendix B: Online Survey (Faculty)

### Consent Form

Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

You, the participant:

- ✓ Have read, understood and agree to the information in the consent letter
- ✓ Indicate free and informed consent to research participation by agreeing to the terms in this research consent form.
- Agree
- Disagree

### Demographic Information

1. How long have you been teaching at the undergraduate level?

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 25 years and longer

2. How long have you been teaching in an online *synchronous* program?

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 25 years and longer

3. How long have you been teaching in an online *asynchronous* program?

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 25 years and longer

**Experience with Technology**

4. Based on your own personal experience, how would you rate your ability to navigate technology before starting to teach in the program?

Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Excellent	N/A
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5. What is your expectation of learners' ability to navigate technology before starting the online program?

Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Excellent	N/A
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6. On average, what is *actually* the level of student's ability to navigate technology before starting the online program?

Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Excellent	N/A
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**Orientation Specific Questions**

7. Did you take part in on campus orientation offered by the university?

- Yes
- No
- I can't recall

8. Based on your answer to the previous question, why or why not was this orientation useful (i.e. topics discussed, peer interaction, etc.) Please be specific.

9. Would attending an on-campus orientation be useful for online learners at the university?

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat

10. Which type of orientation would be most beneficial to your online learners?

- Face to Face (on campus)
- Online (synchronous)
- Online (asynchronous)
- Other (please specify)

11. If the university does start to deliver an online orientation, what tool/program should be used to deliver it? Check all that apply.

- Adobe Connect
- YouTube
- Captivate
- Jing

Other (please specify)

12. What would you expect to see in an online orientation for learners in this program? Check all that apply.

Program Overview

Degree Requirements (according to program selection)

Adding/Dropping Courses

Course Descriptions

Academic Calendar (semesters, schedules)

Leaves of Absences

Introduction to Faculty Members

Access to Library (off campus)

Access to IT Help Desk (off campus)

Accessing My Campus

Accessing Email Accounts

Using Adobe Connect

Using Blackboard Learning Management System

Other (please specify)

13. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of having an online orientation?

- Facilitate academic success
- Facilitate Social interactions
- Both

14. Which of the following do you feel an online orientation would contribute to? Check all that apply:

Academic Success

Student Retention

Foster an atmosphere of camaraderie

Personal Integration

Social Integration

Community Building

Better proficiency with Technology (ex. Hardware, Software)

Other

15. In your opinion, should an orientation be mandatory for learners entering the Faculty?

**Appendix C: Script for Focus Group (Learners)**

1. What is your current age?
  - Under 25 years old
  - 26 - 30 years old
  - 31 - 35 years old
  - 36 - 40 years old
  - 41 - 45 years old
  - 46 and older
2. Which of the following best describes your current situation? Check all that apply.
  - A full-time student
  - A part-time student
  - Employed full-time
  - Employed part-time
3. Based on your own personal experience, how would you rate your ability to navigate technology upon commencing the online program?
  - Poor
  - Average
  - Good
  - Very Good
  - Excellent
4. Did you attend any on-campus orientation provided by the university before starting the program?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Can't Remember
5. What type of orientation would appeal most to you?
  - Face to face
  - Online (synchronous)
  - Online (asynchronous)
  - Other

*Discussion surrounding the responses: Can anyone provide an explanation about why they chose either option?*

**General Discussion Questions:**

6. What criteria contributed to your decision to enroll in the Faculty of Education's Adult Education and Digital Technologies? For example, was it the faculty's reputation?

7. For those participants who attended the orientation:
  - a. What did you find most useful and beneficial about the day?
  - b. What would you have changed, if anything?
  - c. Roughly, how far did you have to travel to attend the orientation?
8. For those participants who did not attend the orientation:
  - a. What were your reasons for not attending? (i.e. distance, timing, etc.)
9. What topics should an orientation cover in order to ease the transition of new learners into the program? (If there is hesitation or difficulty in answering I may suggest they think about the tools they are required to use, knowledge of student services etc.)
10. Is there anything you wish you had known or been informed of prior to beginning the program?
11. In your opinion, if an online orientation was designed:
  - a. What would it ideally look like?
  - b. How would it be delivered?
  - c. Should it be mandatory?
12. Are there other ways you believe we could build a stronger online community at the university? (I may prompt them with certain examples such as having an online Graduate Student Council (GSC) or at the very least online representatives for the existing GSC , an online university platform (similar to Facebook or LinkedIn where learners can share their personal profiles with others to network and learn more about their colleagues)
13. Is there anything that could have improved/enhanced if you had an online orientation that we have not covered yet tonight?
14. Does anyone have any additional comments or questions that they would like to ask?

**Appendix D: Script for Focus Group (Faculty)**

1. How long have you been teaching at the undergraduate level?
  - 1-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16-20 years
  - 25 years and longer
2. How long have you been teaching in an online synchronous program?
  - 1-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16 or more years
3. How long have you been teaching in an online asynchronous program?
  - 1-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16 or more years
4. How would you rate your ability to navigate technology before starting to teach in this program?
  - Poor
  - Average
  - Good
  - Very Good
  - Excellent
5. What is your expectation of learners' abilities to navigate technology before starting the online program?
  - Poor
  - Average
  - Good
  - Very Good
  - Excellent
6. On average, what do you believe is the actual ability level of learners entering the program to navigate technology?
  - Poor
  - Average

- Good
  - Very Good
  - Excellent
7. Did you attend the *on-campus orientation* provided by the Office of undergraduate Studies prior to commencing the undergraduate program?
- Yes
  - No
  - Can't Remember
8. Do you believe that the on-campus orientation is useful or would be useful to online learners at the university?
- Yes
  - No
  - Somewhat
9. What type of orientation do you feel would be most effective for online learners in the program?
- Face to face
  - Online (synchronous)
  - Online (asynchronous)
  - Other

*Discussion surrounding the responses: Can anyone provide an explanation about why they chose either option?*

10. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of having an online orientation?
- Facilitate academic success
  - Facilitate social interactions
  - Both
11. A. Which of the following do you feel an online orientation would contribute to. Check all that apply:

- Academic Success
- Student Retention
- Foster an atmosphere of camaraderie
- Personal Integration
- Social Integration
- Community Building
- Better proficiency with Technology (ex. Hardware, Software)
- Other

- b) Please provide more details about your response. How do you feel an online orientation would contribute to the item(s) you selected?

#### **General Discussion Questions:**

12. For those participants who attended the orientation:
  - a. What did you find beneficial to learners about this orientation (i.e. topics discussed, peer interactions, etc)? Please specify.
  - b. What aspects of the orientation would you have changed (i.e. topics discussed, peer interaction, etc.) ? Please be specific and provide details?
13. What criteria contributed to your decision to teach in this program? For example, was it the faculty's reputation?
14. What would you have liked your learners to know prior to commencing the online program?
15. What topics do you believe an orientation to this program of study should cover in order to ease the transition of new learners into the program? (If there is hesitation or difficulty in answering I may suggest they think about the tools they are required to use, knowledge of student services etc.)
16. Are there any FAQs you receive that should be addressed in an online orientation? Please specify.
17. What are the common complaints amongst learners with their online experience?
18. In your opinion, through which tools/programs should an online orientation be delivered?
  - a. What would it ideally look like?
  - b. How would it be delivered?
  - c. Should it be mandatory
19. Are there other ways you believe we could build a stronger online community at the university? (I may prompt them with certain examples such as having an online Graduate Student Council (GSC) or at the very least online representatives for the existing GSC , an online university platform (similar to Facebook or LinkedIn where learners can share their personal profiles with others to network and learn more about their colleagues).
20. Is there anything about your student experience that could have been improved and/or enhanced if you had an online orientation that we have not covered yet tonight?