

The Online Orientation Program at AIB: An Iterative Approach

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The advent of COVID lockdowns and the move to online education set many higher education institutions into a frenzy of reassessing the onboarding process for incoming students. We take this opportunity to share our experiences in providing a facilitated online orientation program at AIB, the home of the [largest Australian online MBA](#). Successful orientation or onboarding programs are crucial to student success, particularly in improving [retention and developing a sense of belonging](#). The focus must be on the [student experience](#) and their integration into the educational institution to ensure satisfaction, engagement, and persistence.

The evolution of the orientation program at AIB

As an online educational provider, our online orientation program has continued to evolve and improve since its inception in 2016. The initial program was non-facilitated and included a compulsory quiz to complete before a student could access their first subject. AIB's Teaching and Learning Framework sets out the core values of the AIB Orientation Program as being responsive and adaptive to individual student needs, aptitudes, and contexts. We continually need to improve the onboarding experience.

In 2019, the Academic Dean set the task of creating a facilitated and tailored orientation program to optimise the preparedness of our students for online study. The development process included design workshops with all areas involved in the student journey at AIB (including current students). This inclusive, consultative approach was central to establishing what students needed in an orientation program.

Our research and consultation with other institutions found that most higher education orientation programs fell into two categories. Face-to-face programs focused on social interaction, and online programs primarily focused on policy and procedure (i.e., tick that you have read and understood what is required). AIB needed to provide an engaging and interactive model as an online provider. Our two significant inspirations were Professor Lizzio (2006), Griffith University, [Five senses of student success model](#) and the Massey University NZ (2009) approach to Orientation.

Incorporating the five senses of student success

The revised AIB Orientation Program focuses on early purposeful engagement and fostering a sense of belonging. It is primarily structured around Lizzio's five senses of student success, which cover the following:

- **capacity** (self-assessment activities to help students understand their motives for study, their strengths and weaknesses and their goals)

- **connectedness** (opportunities for students to network and to know where and how to ask questions)
- **purpose** (enabling students to review and critically evaluate why they are studying)
- **resourcefulness** (enabling students to review and investigate their resilience and researching skills)
- **understanding academic culture** (how it works, policy, procedure, academic integrity, referencing and academic writing).

The AIB Orientation Program has been developed to mirror our MBA subjects with sound educational design principles and includes interactive activities with feedback, touchpoints, and video content. The program is built around learning outcomes and is the first step for the AIB Academic Literacies framework, which is the AIB framework for developing information, academic and digital literacies.

The AIB Orientation Program focuses on enabling students to identify their strengths and areas they need to develop further and to ensure they know what supports are available. There are forums and webinars for each intake of students to connect with each other and staff and ask questions, and interactive and recorded webinars. The Orientation Coordinator (a position created by the redevelopment) facilitates the program, with support from the Academic Skills Advisor, First Subject Coordinator, and the Student Central Team to ensure our students build critical relationships at the beginning of their study and know the contacts for support.

The AIB Orientation Program has inbuilt feedback opportunities for students to provide advice on improvements. This feedback is regularly acted on as part of the ongoing review process, and we note the 98.8% rating of Orientation being helpful in the 2022 HEPP-QN admissions survey.

Current challenges

A current challenge with the program is our ability to identify students who need additional support readily. As a non-compulsory program, we can encourage but not enforce participation. The program also requires students to submit a short piece of writing for which they are provided feedback. This writing exercise builds their confidence as they embark on what, for many, is their first experience of formal study. To this end, we are looking at better use of data analytics to review student interaction and engagement. Another challenge is adapting our provision of writing support in a context where Generative [Artificial Intelligence](#) can often be used to produce [assignments](#).

Improving the basics of navigating the Student Learning Portal has been a significant point of feedback from our students. The AIB Orientation Program is housed in a learning management system, which brings limitations and advantages, such as interactivity and access to data analytics. The AIB Orientation Program is also integrated into the MBA delivery process to ensure this feedback is included in all reviews and upgrades of the AIB Student Learning Portal.

A February 2023 review of the AIB Orientation Program considered the effectiveness of the current approach and looked carefully at the current research.

A student focused approach to improvements

Some of the recent research findings that will be considered and that were not available at the time of initial development of the AIB Orientation Program are:

- Including student mentors in the webinars, more student stories in the AIB Orientation Program, and student peer led webinars and support mechanisms outlined in the [SalesForce 2022 connected student report](#). The feedback from the current orientation program sees students asking for more student stories and experiences. While we already have student-led WhatsApp groups each term, more facilitation and guidance to fully optimise these are needed. The approach at AIB has been student-led with these developments. However, we must be careful not to assume that all students are comfortable participating in social network platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.
- [Influence of satisfaction and preparedness on online students' feelings of anxiety](#), as outlined by Abdous (2019).
- Encouraging students to feel [engaged and empowered in the online learning experience](#) as outlined by Burke and Larmar (2020).
- Ensuring that AIB continues to lead the way in the online orientation process as supported by Tanis (2020) on the [seven principles of online learning](#).

What is often raised but not articulated in the literature is how to tailor or personalise orientation programs to a particular student journey. For example, a student with long-lived experience in management but no exposure to academic study compared to a student who recently completed the bachelor's level. We look to research such as [Developing personalised education: A dynamic framework](#) and possible developments in artificial intelligence to assist in branching our online subjects to personalise the experience.

Conclusion

Online education is constantly evolving, and AIB continues to review how we can best meet the needs of our students. We look forward to the findings of a recent internal review of the orientation program to take it to the next level in working with our students to improve their levels of satisfaction, engagement, and persistence. Future enhancements will also need to address how we equip our students for the significant ethical challenges brought about by [artificial intelligence](#) developments and the impact on the skills required in studying at an academic level. The student's voice is central to the ongoing development of the AIB Orientation Program.



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Editor

Professor Day has extensive leadership and management experience in several large universities in Australia and New Zealand, including as Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International) at Massey University in NZ and Executive Dean at Macquarie and the University of Southern Queensland.

Her key strengths include managing across breadth, building strong teams with a shared focus across multiple areas and interests, and liaising effectively with internal and external individuals and groups. She was the inaugural chair of the South Australian Premier's Council for Women. She steered the establishment of Massey University's Centre for Professional and Continuing Education, prepared Massey University's Internationalisation Strategy and developed a 'Learning Futures Strategy' to steer strategic approaches to teaching and learning delivery modes and media-rich delivery.



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