

Tour de Campus: Using a smartphone app to connect and engage students during O-Week. A Practice Report

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly important to use interactive activities to engage with students and effectively incorporate social media into the activities. O-Week is an opportunity for higher education institutions to include strategies to connect the students and to assist with students' sense of belonging within the university community. The "Tour de Campus" activity was designed at the University of South Australia to be used during a campus tour and was included in an O-Week app. As new students were shown around the campus by mentors, they also answered questions, collected prizes and uploaded photos onto the university Facebook page. The session, at the 17th International First Year in Higher Education Conference in Darwin, Australia, also included a demonstration of the activity and discussion with the audience about ways to use smartphone apps or social media to connect and engage students.

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Background

Student engagement is defined in the *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement* as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008, p. vi). Engagement is vitally important to students' overall success at university (Yorke, 2006). Students' agreement with the statement *I feel I belong to the university community* (48% international students, 50% local students), has been identified as a key indicator of student engagement (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010, p. 5). According to Lizzio (2006, p. 3) a student's success depends on five senses being met, including a sense of connectedness.

In 2008, the University of South Australia (UniSA) Business School implemented an activity during Orientation. It included questions about university service locations (where students got stamps as they completed the activity) along with 35 questions which required new students to explore the campus, university website and to ascertain information about their studies. The activity was held as part of a campus tour, where the new students were allocated into groups with their Mentors as part of the Business Mentors peer mentoring program.

Once the students had completed the activity, they then received a free USB. The activity was first started in a hard copy format. In 2012, the activity was re-formatted to include QR codes at different locations on campus and each QR code included a series of questions. The activity was first used in the Business School and called the *Business Passport to Success*. In 2014, it was re-branded to be called *Tour de Campus* and used at other campuses and divisions across UniSA.

Switching to an online version of the activity was influenced by a number of factors, including reducing the use of paper-based products, as well as evidence that a switch to a new technological communication medium would be beneficial. Extensive marketing research which focussed on communication and student engagement was carried out in the Business School in 2013. It included a widespread survey and focus groups with both engaged and non-engaged students. As technology develops, students are now assailed with thousands of advertisements and messages every day. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach students, capture their attention and encourage them to engage, as they pay less attention to each marketing effort. However, whilst this rise in the use of new communication mediums gives universities more choice in methods of communication, it also must be considered that students may not all be equally apt at the use of newer technology. It should be remembered that the predominant use of newer technology can lead to disadvantaging some students when older more established methods of communications are used less (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008). Therefore, those in higher education should also be conscious of the way technological transition is implemented to ensure these students are not neglected.

The need for the use of a direct communication medium like the app to connect students to programs run within the Business School and on campus was also starkly highlighted again in the 2013 Marketing Project's online survey, which found that 42% of disengaged students were simply unaware of the University's offerings. The marketing research projects had 619 responses to the online survey and at the time of the survey being conducted, 8,661 students were enrolled in Business

School courses. This survey found that 94% of students owned a smartphone and that 75% of students would download an application if it were made available to them (Bulling & Phua, 2013, p. 44). The change to the *Tour de Campus* into an app format was therefore a natural progression.

Tour de Campus

The *Tour de Campus* activity was used during O-Week to connect students, enhancing the students' sense of belonging to the campus and other students. The *Tour de Campus* activity was incorporated into the UniSA O-Week smartphone app and was set up in 5 key locations around campus.

The app was made available free to students through the iTunes and Google Play stores. As shown in Figure 1, there was a QR reader built into the app and when the QR code was scanned at each stage the questions came up in the app. Overall the app cost approximately A\$13,000. However, QR codes and a QR code scanner application are free and the activity can also be run just using QR codes. The new students were met outside an Orientation session by their Business Mentors (one international and one local student), and were allocated into groups of 10–15 students to go on a campus tour. In order to overcome the likelihood that some students would not have a smartphone, within the 10–15 students, the

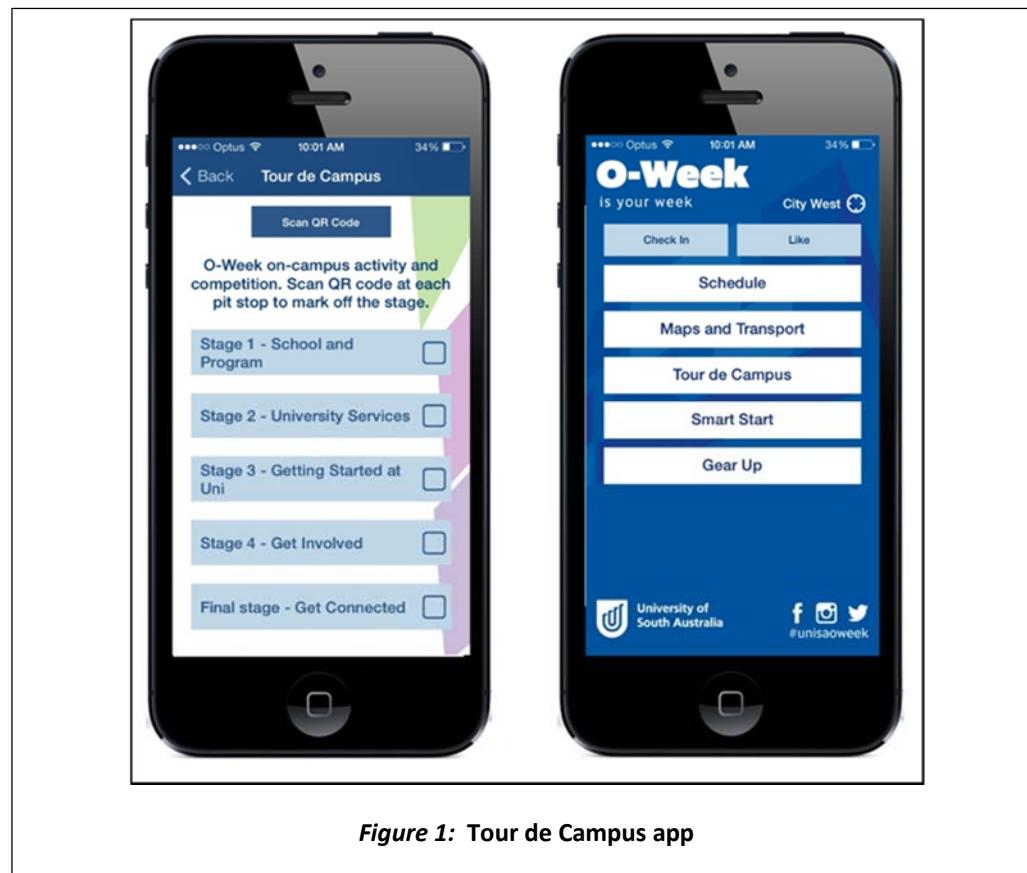


Figure 1: Tour de Campus app

students worked in groups of 2-3 to complete the *Tour de Campus* activity.

At the final stage, these groups uploaded a photo to the UniSA Facebook page and thereby entered into a draw for prizes randomly allocated to those joining the page. Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) have found that there are a large number of undergraduate students (up to 95%) who "communicate as much with Facebook as they do with technologies traditionally used in colleges (e.g., email)" (p. 138). Indeed, this result was found in one of the Business Schools programs offered called Your Culture, My Culture, where the Facebook group has been used with great success with 93% of participants choosing to join the group.

Here are examples of a *Tour de Campus* question and directions:

- *By what date do you need to amend your enrolment to avoid financial penalty (Census Date) for this study period?*
- *Pick up your free student diary and name two services offered by UniSA:*
- *Take a photo of your group at West Bar and post it to the UniSA City West Campus Facebook page - UniSA merchandise to be won for best photo!*

Tour de Campus Feedback and Results

In 2013, the UniSA Business School Orientation program received positive results with 82% of students satisfied with the Orientation program and 95% of students indicating that they would recommend attending Orientation to other students. For 2013, there were approximately 630 students who submitted the *Business Passport* activity which

accounted for 85% of students who attended Orientation. 76% of students who completed the *Business Passport* found it a useful way to orientate them to University.

Comments in relation to the activity included:

Great activity and good incentive to win a free USB.

It was really great to be shown around by the Business Mentors as they knew the in's and out's of the University so it was more personal. I felt like I could relate to them more and ask as many questions as I wanted to as they had been in the same situation previously. It was a great chance to get to know important areas that we'll need a lot from the first day so we felt more comfortable and relaxed in our surroundings.

Results

The results from students O-Week experience at UniSA and the *Tour de Campus* activity was positive.

- 86% were satisfied with their O-Week experience.
- 94% would recommend participating in O-Week to other students.
- 84% of students who completed the *Tour de Campus*' activity found it a useful way to orientate them to the university.

Conclusion

The interactive *Tour de Campus* activity has produced positive results from students. A key predictor of success is that students develop a social network at university, even if this is only one other student (Wilson, 2009, p. 4). The *Tour de Campus* is structured as a group activity to connect

students with the university and other students and to assist with their transition to university.

Outcomes from the Conference Session

There was discussion in the conference session with the participants in relation to these questions:

- What are other strategies used to increase students sense of belonging through connecting students to their university campus and their peers?
- How have other higher education institutions effectively used smartphone apps or social media to connect and engage students?

There were quite a few universities (including, LaTrobe University, Charles Darwin University, University of Technology Sydney and the University of Newcastle) who indicated that they had used smartphone apps as a way to increase students sense of belonging by engaging and connecting with students. The smartphone apps often included:

- O-Week programs;
- Information on university services;
- Geo-caching activities (an activity where GPS is used to locate items);
- Treasure hunt type activities to familiarise students with their campus;
- Social activity calendars; and
- Links from the app to social media, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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