



A caring approach to the first-year university student experience

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a revised approach towards orientation and welcome for commencing students at a research-intensive university in Australia. First-year students, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, face a range of challenges during their transition to university. This paper describes how we have translated research into practice by taking an evidence-based approach, designed in collaboration with students, and informed by three key aspects in student experience literature: engaging students, building an inclusive community, and fostering a sense of belonging. The approach is informed by key principles of care ethics theory, highlighting the importance of care as a concept in the design of first-year experience initiatives. The case study includes quantitative and qualitative data from admission and attendance rates and a student survey (n=1052). Student survey data is analysed through a reflexive thematic analysis approach using both inductive and deductive coding. The findings and discussion outline the key success outcomes of the approach both in relation to engagement, community, and sense of belonging and how these contribute towards supporting first-year student transition. Areas for future research are suggested.

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Introduction

The first year of study is a critical point in time for commencing university students. Often constituting a significant change in their lives, transition into university can involve separation from established support networks, and a range of personal, social, academic, and financial difficulties (Kane & Williams, 2021; Kift, 2015; Sanagavarapu et al., 2019). New relationships are needed for many students as they initiate and begin navigating their student journey (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). Those who withdraw from or fail their studies in the first year are statistically unlikely to successfully return to studies at any institution in the future (Koch & Gardner, 2017), which can have broader flow on effects on students and their futures (Feldman, 2017). As participation in higher education is linked with better financial, social and health life outcomes, supporting students to stay and succeed in their first-year studies should be a key priority for all universities (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021).

The first-year experience (FYE) has become a focal point to support students and ensure student satisfaction with degree programs (van Rooij et al., 2018). However, across Australian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), there have been continuing deficiencies in first-year student engagement and satisfaction (Nelson & Clark, 2014), with commencing students reporting consistently lower satisfaction with their education experience than their counterparts in the US, UK, and Canada (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2022). Lower satisfaction rates are also more pronounced for international students studying in Australian HEIs compared to their counterparts in other countries (QILT, 2022).

For HEIs, the first year of university study is also a critical period. Institutional awareness is reflected in their increased investment in initiatives that support commencing students to navigate challenges (Feldman, 2017; Wood & Breyer, 2017), including orientation programs, peer mentoring, seminars, and foundational courses. Such initiatives are typically offered in the first year because of the overall influence on the student journey, and the need for universities to engage and support students to increase student success and retention (Baik et al., 2015).

One of the most effective ways universities can support new students to respond to these challenges is by providing scaffolded, timely support through orientation and welcome initiatives that extend across the first year (Kift, 2009). The design of these initiatives must engage students with the university experience in ways which prioritise connecting new students with each other and the wider university community (Mossop & Lymn, 2021; Schreiner et al., 2012). Emphasising the importance of community initiates a sense of belonging for new students which is key to their wellbeing, satisfaction, and success at university (Strayhorn, 2019). Despite the most recent Australian university student experience results showing some improvement from a pandemic-related slump, commencing students continue to provide mid to low ratings for critical indicators relating to the first-year experience, including sense of belonging, opportunities to interact with other students outside study requirements, and orientation/induction activities being relevant/helpful (QILT, 2022).

First-year attrition, the proportion of first-year students who commence a course each year and who do not complete the course that year or the following year (Department of Education [DoE], 2023), has been flagged as a major risk factor for Australian HEIs. This risk is even greater for students studying online, with attrition rates almost double that of those studying on campus (Department of Education [DoE], 2023; Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2017). The most recent DoE data (2023) reveals a 18.17% attrition rate for Australia's commencing UG students, comparable to the overall college first-year attrition rate of 18% in the USA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, this is in sharp contrast with the

UK, where commencing university student attrition is 6.9% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). Unlike in other countries, most UK students move away from home to attend university (Whyte, 2019), potentially enabling new social connections and a stronger sense of belonging to occur. While outside the scope of this paper, as the UK is a key competitor destination for international students, further research exploring comparative differences could yield useful insights for the Australian context.

The concept of caring, encapsulated in a new thread of research on Care Ethics, theorises what it means to provide and receive care, and positions care as a fundamentally relational concept. Originally theorised within second wave feminism (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984/2013; Ruddick, 1989), care ethics theory has now been taken forward in a range of disciplines and applied at social, political, and institutional levels (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993, 2010). Studies in secondary schools have demonstrated the important impact that feeling 'cared-for' has on the student experience and learning outcomes (Lewis & Pearce, 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). While care is not yet a significant topic of research in HE, nascent research indicates the importance of how care functions within universities, and calls for additional research into care in HE (Baker, 2023; Schultz, 2022). This paper contributes to this gap in the literature by looking at care and the first-year university experience.

Relationality and opportunities to connect with other students and staff underpin the concept of a more supportive caring student experience (Bovill, 2020; Strachan, 2020). Adopting a caring framework to improve the first-year student experience requires a redesign of the mental models of support for students and a revamp of the activities offered to effect positive outcomes. Students in the first year may prioritise relations of care and the welfare of others in ways which sit in opposition to university-driven performance goals and metrics (Keddie et al., 2020). Such "relationship rich experiences" are important for students, particularly in response to increasing diversity among the cohort and well-being challenges (Felten, 2020, p.9). New students who commenced university studies during the pandemic reported that a sense of belonging could be fostered through a caring community of staff and peers in which care, responsiveness and respect are demonstrated, and mental well-being nurtured (Scaia, 2021). This is particularly relevant considering that health and stress are the most common reasons undergraduate students in Australia consider dropping out of university (QILT, 2022). Moreover, a caring community comprising supportive social networks, trusted relationships, friendship, and peer support is critical to helping students navigate their studies (Bryson, 2014; Hamshire & Wibberley, 2014).

This paper presents a case study grounded in the key principles of care and relationality within an orientation and welcome program in one large, multi-school faculty at a research-intensive Australian university. In so doing, we contribute to a growing field of scholarly work taking an "institutional turn" towards focusing on care, and the values and practices which underly institutional policies and practices (Urban, 2020, p.278). The paper proceeds as follows. First, we describe the context of the case study and summarise how the concept of care is applied to a university orientation program. Secondly, we describe the inclusion of student perspectives as a key component of the new orientation program design. Third, we outline the program and its constituent parts. Finally, we detail the research design and discuss the results and outcomes before offering our conclusion, which includes avenues for potential further study.

Case Study Context

This case study reports on a caring approach adopted by a large, multi-school faculty at a research-intensive Australian university to welcome and support first-year students' successful transition to university. At the beginning of each year, the largest faculty at this university

welcomes approximately 3,000 new coursework students, with its large and demographically diverse cohorts mirroring the trend in university student populations across the Australian higher education sector (Oliver, 2021).

Revising the existing orientation and welcome approach

At the beginning of 2019, a renewed focus on the student experience included a comprehensive review of student orientation. Key findings indicated:

- Low attendance rates at orientation events (average 28% of the incoming cohort)
- Limited opportunities for new students to connect with others
- Primary focus on providing information in a formal, lecture style format.

Student perspectives revealed negativity, boredom, receiving too much information in a short space of time, and lacking opportunities to interact and engage with other students and staff. At that time, student 'word of mouth' was resoundingly clear: avoid Faculty orientation events. The situation presented a challenge and an opportunity for change. Aligned with the university's strategic priority to enhance the student experience and foster a sense of belonging, a total redesign of the orientation and welcome process and program was undertaken.

An Orientation Framework Based on Care

There are many ways to think about and define care. For our orientation framing, we drew upon Held's (2006) definition of care as both a practice and a value, which is:

a practice involving the work of care-giving and the standards by which the practices of care can be evaluated. Care must concern itself with the effectiveness of its efforts to meet needs, but also with the motives with which care is provided. It seeks good caring relations (p.9).

We applied this definition through prioritising the value of relationships, interrogating motivations and assumptions regarding the needs of first-year students, and continuously evaluating the outcomes of the support and guidance provided during orientation and welcome initiatives. We proposed that 'care' is critical to the design of an effective welcoming and orientation program, inextricably linked to concepts of engagement, community, and sense of belonging, as outlined below.

Engagement

Providing early opportunities for new students to engage in educational and social activities with peers, as well as connect with staff and the wider university community, are key to establishing higher levels of early engagement (Krause et al., 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012). Student engagement is multi-faceted and involves academic, social, and emotional factors (Bryson, 2014), thus engaging students across all factors leads to better learning outcomes, higher success rates (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012), and greater levels of student satisfaction and fulfillment (Case, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008). We drew on Zepke's (2015) holistic view of student engagement which advocates for the importance of student well-being, active citizenship, community, and student participation. In our approach, engagement as a concept covered two aspects of student engagement: student participation in purposefully-designed activities which establish, facilitate, and encourage connections with peers, staff, and campus life at an early stage; and student partnering in the co-design of the orientation model itself.

Community

Building and supporting a community among the new cohort which encourages friendships and peer support is critical to helping new students navigate the challenges of university life and study (Bryson, 2014; Hamshire & Wibberley, 2014). Given that the incoming cohort is diverse and will experience their first year in different ways, it is important to build an inclusive community which recognises intersectionality across nationalities, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, political viewpoints, and socio-economic statuses. Our approach to creating a more inclusive community centred on modelling collaboration and connection among diverse groups of students and staff (Hannon et al., 2017; Picton, 2018). As the orientation period typically represents the earliest opportunity to establish positive, in-person interactions between students and staff in ways which can support student well-being and student satisfaction (Fernandes et al., 2017; Yao, 2015), we involved many different student and staff volunteers to model an inclusive community welcoming of all new members from the first day on campus.

Sense of belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging for commencing students supports an enhanced experience and is positively associated with academic success (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012). While there are many ways to define sense of belonging, we drew on Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman's (2020) interpretation which emphasises helping students to feel valued and respected, to fit in and be part of the community, and to feel an affinity with the institution. This outcome is achieved through facilitating making friends and meeting people, which students report as one of the strongest contributors to feeling a sense of belonging (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020).

Collectively, these theoretical concepts suggest a theoretical framework grounded in understandings of care and relationality which could be incorporated into and extend existing approaches to contribute to an enhanced FYE. However, we recognised the importance of genuinely partnering with students as a key cornerstone of our approach.

Partnering with Students to Design a More Caring Approach

One of the most effective ways for universities to take a more caring approach is to engage in partnership with students (Baik et al., 2019). Through four consecutive Student-Staff Partnership Projects (2019, 2020, 2021, 2023), with fourteen student partners in total, we actively involved students in the evaluation and design process, listening to their perspectives, and valuing their contributions. While a full description of these partnered projects is beyond the scope of this paper, each involved a different aspect of co-designing and evaluating orientation and welcome experiences, and explored different approaches to create a sustainable student volunteer scheme.

The Revised Orientation and Welcome Model

Key elements of the orientation and welcome model involved dedicated staff resourcing, an engaging communication strategy, staff and student volunteers, and additional online and in-person activities and events throughout the first semester. This case study focuses on the on-campus welcome day event to connect new students with the physical campus, and to provide opportunities to make friends with other students in their degree program. The immersive experience allowed new students to meet and connect with the Faculty community and participate

in a range of activities. The cycle of activities was repeated several times across one day to accommodate our multi-school Faculty's large number of commencing students.

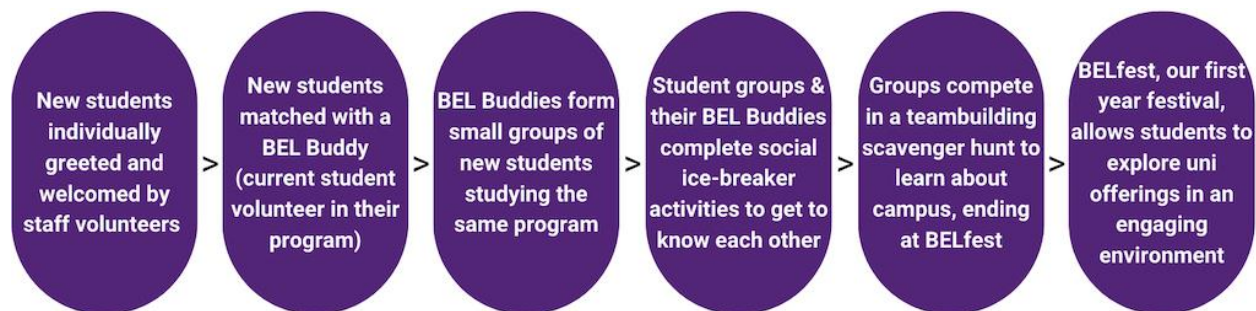
A dedicated FYE coordinator was appointed to ensure our strategy and practice aligned with theory, enabled successful delivery, and engaged all stakeholders - students, staff, faculty, and institution - to counter any perceptions that orientation was an 'add on' activity. The FYE coordinator laid the groundwork for building an inclusive community through engaging a diverse volunteer group of current students, along with academic and professional staff, to welcome and support new students. The student volunteers, known as *BEL Buddies*, had completed at least one semester of study and attended an online training session addressing support of new students, how to facilitate social connections for new students, and the value of their volunteer role.

To further promote student engagement with orientation and create a sense of readiness and excitement, a purpose-designed communications strategy was used. Through informal, student-friendly, and inclusively worded communications (website, emails, social media), new students were invited and encouraged to engage with orientation, including attending the on-campus welcome day.

In reflecting a framework based on care, with engagement, community, and sense of belonging as central concepts, the key elements of the on-campus welcome day are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Key elements of on-campus welcome day



In the next section, we evaluate the effectiveness of our approach, focusing specifically on the on-campus welcome day event within the revised orientation and welcome model.

Research Design

While the model consists of several components as part of a broader strategy to emphasise care in the FYE, the focus of this paper is the on-campus welcome day event. This event was co-designed and evaluated in partnership with students through four Student Staff Partnership Projects, resulting in an innovative, student-centred approach to orientation. The approach was applied to all new students within the largest faculty at a large, research-intensive university, providing a model for the broader comprehensive university strategy. As university systems do not currently support the tracking of student progress and experience through the different components of the broader model, our focus was to measure, in depth, a central component of the model that we can control.

Data Collection

Two types of data were collected: commencing student enrolment numbers (sourced from the university's internal database system); and the number of students who attended the on-campus welcome day event (sourced from the Faculty's orientation attendance records, collected at registration desks upon students' arrival on orientation day). This allowed us to measure and compare the percentage of commencing students who attended the on-campus welcome day in Semester 1, 2019, *prior* to our redesigned approach to orientation, with the percentage of commencing students who attended the on-campus welcome day in Semester 1, 2023, *after* our redesigned approach to orientation. Faculty admission numbers and demographic factors have remained consistent, with no other cohort or program level interventions over this time.

We also collected survey data from students who attended the welcome day event in Semester 1, 2023. The aim of the survey was to gain insights into the experiences of the commencing students who attended the on-campus welcome day event. We co-developed the survey methodology in discussion with four student partners as part of a Student Staff Partnership Project focused on evaluating orientation. In co-designing the survey, the student partners emphasised the importance of simple survey design, the need for clear and student-friendly language, and a survey that would take no longer than two or three minutes to complete. The survey (see Appendix 1) was anonymous and consisted of a mix of three, quantitative multiple-choice rating questions and one, free-text open response question to provide qualitative data. The open response question was, "What have you enjoyed about the event, and what (if anything) can we do to improve it?".

The survey was online only, distributed via QR codes on signage posted at the exit of the first-year faculty festival, the final component of the on-campus welcome day event. The signage invited students to provide their feedback by completing the survey. Additionally, as our volunteer BEL Buddies circulated around the festival event, they actively encouraged new students to complete the online survey. During their training, they had learned about the purpose of the survey and the value of emphasising the importance of gaining student feedback to improve the FYE. As a further incentive, students who completed the survey were given the opportunity to collect a free university T-shirt. The effectiveness of this approach is reflected by the survey response rate of 65% (n=1052). Within this, 845 students responded to the free-text, open response question, representing a 52% response rate. This response rate compares favourably with other student experience surveys, for example, a 37% response rate to the national Australian Student Experience Survey (QILT, 2022), and a 68.6% response rate to the UK National Student Survey (Office for Students, 2022).

Ethics approval was granted by the University's Ethics Committee before commencing data collection. The research, classified as low-risk, aligns with the standards of human research ethics outlined in Australia's *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated 2018* (Universities Australia, 2022).

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis focused on the student enrolment and attendance metrics. Using data from the welcome day event in semester 1, 2019 and the revised welcome day event in semester 1, 2023, we compared percentage rates of attendance at orientation and how this changed over time. We also reviewed the results of the quantitative survey items which asked students to rate their experience and indicate the extent to which they felt welcomed by selecting one option from a multiple-choice list.

Qualitative data were analysed from the free-text, open response question in the online survey using a thematic analysis approach, identifying themes and patterns to generate meaning from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used approaches to analysing qualitative data and can be used flexibly across a range of research contexts (Xu & Zammit, 2020). We drew upon Braun and Clarke's (2021) revised approach to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which provides a series of clear and practical steps to undertaking thematic analysis on a dataset. This approach requires working iteratively through six phases: 1) data familiarisation; 2) coding; 3) searching for and creating themes; 4) theme development; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) reporting the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Phase 1 involves reading through the qualitative data to become familiar with the data and note any particularly prevalent or relevant themes. Phase 2 involves assigning codes, which Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 59) refer to as "heuristic devices" to capture the meaning of data. These codes represent building blocks of analysis, later grouped together and refined in themes through Phases 3, 4, and 5, which represent the walls of analysis, from which the story of the data can be told (Phase 6) (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The RTA method of analysis was deemed particularly suitable for two main reasons. First, RTA views researcher subjectivity as a strength, which can be used as a reflexive analytical tool and resource. Given that we conducted this research in our own workplace, on an initiative we have been directly involved in, our chosen analytical approach needed to allow us to utilise our knowledge and experience in our analysis as it would be difficult for us to take an objective stance. Secondly, as a theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data analysis, RTA allows for both inductive, data-driven meaning as well as deductive, theory-driven meaning to be developed. This enabled us to consider the data through the lens of care ethics theory.

Data were coded at two levels to achieve both data driven and theoretically driven meaning. First, the data were coded inductively, to capture how student participants experienced and perceived the on-campus welcome day event. We used descriptive codes which were close in meaning to the words used by the students in their survey responses. For example, the extract "my BEL buddy was so nice and supportive" was coded inductively as 'feeling supported'. Subsequently, we drew on Swain's (2018) example to code the data deductively, using a set of six pre-determined, theoretically driven codes. These codes were based on key concepts within care ethics theory that we believed were relevant to the first-year student experience through our extensive literature review work. For example, the extract "my BEL buddy really helped me" was coded deductively as 'being cared-for'. "Being cared-for" refers to a key principle in care ethics theory regarding how care and caring relations function within institutional systems (Noddings, 1984/2013, Tronto, 1993, 2010), conveying meaning at a conceptual level.

The coding process was initially undertaken by the first author, and then reviewed and revised by the second and third authors to increase the rigour and subsequent confidence in our understanding and interpretation of the data. The data were coded using a combination of Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel software, and a code book created using Microsoft Excel. As multiple authors with different areas of expertise were involved, four meetings were held to deepen our understanding of the codes used, review our shared codebook, and develop, revise and refine themes collaboratively. These steps were essential to establish inter-coder reliability. In sum, 61 codes were created, forming the basis of the key themes outlined in the findings and discussion section.

Discussion

The key findings are reported and discussed below according to our three success measure areas focused on the concepts of engagement, community, and sense of belonging.

Success measure 1: Engaging new students with the orientation and welcome process to establish and facilitate connections with peers, staff, and campus life.

The data provided strong evidence of effectiveness in terms of engaging new students with orientation events and activities. The cohort attendance rates at orientation events designed to foster social connections increased from 28.6% in Semester 1, 2019 to 56.2% in Semester 1, 2023.

Student survey data revealed that 96% of respondents agreed that they felt welcomed, and 94% rated their overall experience as either excellent or good. In response to a multiple-choice survey question asking how they felt about their orientation experience, 85% of students selected the option, "Loving it! Everyone should attend".

An analysis of the qualitative survey data revealed a notable pattern in comments regarding the extent to which students experienced positive emotions in relation to participating. For example, "I feel welcomed and amazing, thrilling", "I feel so surprised, I love it!", and "I feel so happy to meet the people here". 'Joy' was one of most frequently expressed emotions, with many responses indicating how much students "loved" different aspects of the on-campus experience day, and particularly how much they valued connecting with others.

The data also showed that students enjoyed experiencing a range of different processes intentionally designed to facilitate student-to-student connections, including organised introductions, group activities and games. The new students described finding ways to connect such as having informal "little chats", favouring interacting in small groups compared to large discussions, and finding common ground with others enrolled in the same program. Related to this, a significant pattern in the data revealed that students identified and valued the actual activities and processes designed to forge social connection, rather than simply valuing the benefits of the social connection itself. Many comments focused on team activities: "a good way to introduce yourself to new people", "doing activities all together is a great way to bring everyone together", and "I enjoyed the ways of ice breaking and the games".

The finding that students experience a strong sense of positive, joyful emotions in relation to participating in orientation supports research indicating that student engagement has a strong emotional component (Picton et al., 2018; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). Given that this component is often overlooked by staff (Bryson, 2014), being more aware of the role emotions play in the FYE in terms of engaging students and supporting their transition is important. Furthermore, considering emotional needs is highly relevant from a care ethics perspective. A key principle is the concept of determining needs (Fraser, 1989) in a way which is non-assumptive and attentive to the needs of those requiring care (Tronto, 1993). Through this lens, the finding that first-year students have important emotional needs, including the need to feel supported, contributes towards how we can better determine and support needs for incoming students in a way that acknowledges their lived experiences.

Our redesigned communications strategy, promoting orientation as an opportunity to make friends and connect with others, supported a significant increase in orientation attendance rates. Using more student-friendly, less 'corporate' institutional language helped to create a more welcoming

tone, encouraging students to participate. The importance of style, mode, and language of communication to connect with new students cannot be underestimated.

While the overall feedback from the student survey data indicates the effectiveness of the approach, there were a small number of contrasting, critical responses provided. For some students, the emphasis placed on social connection did not go far enough, and they desired more opportunities to interact with other new students. For example, "it's a good opportunity to know other people, but we still didn't talk as much as I expected". Some of these students suggested that we put more effort into facilitating social engagement and teamwork through an even greater number and variety of group activities including the suggestion to "somehow force more engagement as a team".

Overall, the findings support the effectiveness of the different approaches and opportunities within the model which work together to engage students in the orientation and welcome process. In particular, the finding that students enjoyed activities intentionally designed to facilitate engagement, and indeed wanted more of this, suggests that students perceive social interactions as processes which benefit from facilitation. While the aim of orientation is to encourage, not force, social connection, this is an insightful finding as it positions team engagement and interaction as something needing outside facilitation. An interpretation through the lens of care ethics theory suggests that the needs of first-year students include a desire for greater social connections with their peers, and therefore a design that creates opportunities for, and facilitation of, social interaction with their peers.

Success measure 2: building an inclusive community of students and staff to collaboratively welcome new students.

Prior to the redesign, the only student or staff volunteers involved in orientation and welcome were a small number of dedicated Faculty event staff members assisted by several, paid Faculty Student Ambassadors. Central to our revised approach was involving a community of 160 student volunteers and 70 volunteer staff members to welcoming new students.

One of the themes in the data centres around how new students reported feeling supported and cared for during their orientation experience, and how this support was primarily provided by other people. Many survey responses reflected how supportive, pro-active, helpful, and friendly the staff and student volunteers were, for example: "I loved how helpful the staff and BEL Buddies were" and "really helpful in learning the area, my BEL Buddy was friendly and full of great advice!"

The data indicated the effectiveness of the orientation design by showing that new students valued being connected with, and guided by, other people at an individual and small group level. Analysing the data revealed that students acknowledged and appreciated the care work of these volunteers. The data also indicated that new students have an awareness of, and feel a sense of responsibility for, future new students, caring about what happens to them, too. This is evidenced through survey comments which encouraged the continued provision of this care and support, for example, "keep doing this" and "would recommend". New students are encouraged to contribute to this caring activity by becoming student volunteers for future Faculty orientations, assuring the sustainability and scalability of the student volunteer pool. For example, in calling for BEL Buddy volunteers for semester 1, 2024, interest from the 2023 commencing cohort has been high.

Considering the finding that students have a strong positive response to feeling supported and guided by volunteers indicates that, as first-year students, they may be experiencing feelings of uncertainty and overwhelm, resulting in a need for guidance. Indeed, some students indicated

that they experienced confusion about the structure of the day and desired more step-by-step instructions. A small number of students found the large, university campus confusing to navigate and suggested we provide more guidance in future. This aligns with other first-year experience research showing that commencing students have specific needs and face challenges in transitioning to university (Kift, 2009; Wood & Breyer, 2017; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). The uncertainty and need for guidance may possibly be heightened in this environment, given the vastness of the physical campus and the large numbers in the incoming student cohort in our Faculty, with 1621 students welcomed on a single day. Our findings strongly suggest that a helpful way to assist new students to navigate these feelings of uncertainty is through the inclusion of orientation volunteer roles at the staff and student level, contributing to building a culture of support and care which can enhance the first-year experience.

These findings reflect that the theoretical concepts of *caring about*, in terms of moral obligation, and *caring for*, in terms of caring activities (Noddings, 1984/2013), function at different levels within the university setting. If we consider that the staff and student volunteers who attended the orientation day felt motivated to care about the experience of new students, they were then able to actively contribute to caring for them through assisting with purposefully designed welcome activities. More broadly, this reflects how care is a fundamentally relational concept (Engster & Hamington, 2015), which benefits when a “sophisticated sense of human inter-dependence” is recognised and valued (Tronto, 1993, p.101), particularly when it comes to student experience initiatives.

Success measure 3: fostering a sense of belonging among the incoming cohort.

Opportunities to connect with students and staff from the faculty was one of the strongest themes from the survey’s qualitative comments: “I really enjoyed meeting and talking with new friends that I met today. I’m excited to study with them”, and “the welcoming nature has made me more comfortable here”. The comments demonstrate that the community aspect of the approach was invoking a sense of belonging and helping students feel they fit in at the university. Significantly, 98% of respondents agreed they had met new people and had the opportunity to make new friends at orientation.

The positive emotions expressed in the student responses indicate that they felt valued and recognised by the efforts made by staff and students to welcome and support them. These results align with research into factors which influence how first-year students perceive their own sense of belonging (Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). However, we also acknowledge extant literature that speaks to first-year student belonging as something that is fluid, changeable, and difficult to define (Guyotee et al., 2021). Instead of something stable that can be provided by the university, it is perhaps more useful to consider belonging as a “flickering state of being”, which comes and goes for students (Gravett et al., 2023, p.10). Thus, rather than establishing a sense of belonging, organised first-year initiatives provide important opportunities for students to feel a sense of belonging, which may manifest differently for different students. Extending these initiatives throughout the first year (Kift, 2009) provides a basis for further opportunities to facilitate a sense of belonging for students.

Conclusions

Limitations

Students were invited to complete the survey during the Faculty’s festival event (scheduled at the end of the welcome and orientation day), spending a couple of minutes doing so. While providing

immediate responses likely improved the response rate compared with emailing the survey post-orientation, the trade-off was limited time for new students to reflect on their experience. More time between the orientation event and survey completion may have yielded richer insights into students' first-year experience, even if at risk of achieving a lower response rate.

Another limitation was that students who were invited to complete the survey by student volunteers may have felt inclined to provide more socially desirable responses. Further, the pleasing survey response rate did not account for those students who attended the welcome and orientation event but did not complete the survey, nor commencing students who did not attend the Faculty's on campus welcome day event, but may have attended other Faculty and/or institutional events throughout orientation week.

In partnering with students, the survey was intentionally designed not to be overloaded with questions. Consequently, no demographic data were collected. This will be addressed in future research to help us gain insights into how the experience may differ for different students, and how we might better support their first-year experiences in inclusive ways.

Conclusion and Future Focus

This case study has outlined a research-informed approach taken to evaluate, re-design, and deliver a more caring welcome and orientation approach to support the transition of students commencing university studies in a multi-school faculty. As the largest faculty in a research-intensive Australian university, the redesigned orientation and welcome day responded to a previous disconnect between first-year theory and practice. Incorporating care ethics theory to the design of the FYE is, to our knowledge, the first reported and thus provides a major contribution to practice. Our approach responds to growing calls from students for a more relational approach to orientation, and from the emergent research to prioritise care as a core concept in the FYE. We have demonstrated the relevance of the theory by applying measures of success to three key concepts: engagement, community, and sense of belonging.

A positive impact on our approach was partnering with students at each stage. Their insights and support were critical and contributed to the successful outcomes. As a result, our innovative approach provides a sustainable and scalable way to deliver a welcome and orientation experience that prioritises engagement, community, and sense of belonging for students. The Faculty's resourcing of a FYE coordinator role facilitated the establishment of an ongoing community of staff and student volunteers, thus assuring a sustainable future of this strategy. Further, modelling a collaborative and inclusive community, where students and staff interact positively with each other, contributes to institutional citizenship for academic and professional staff. We hope that our approach may assist other universities, faculties or schools in (re)thinking their approaches to orientation and fostering a positive sense of belonging.

Genuine caring work requires continuous evaluation. In developing our revised model of orientation and welcome, we have re-assessed the experience of students and the impact of activities, and adjusted elements as required. In so doing, we believe our model has matured to the extent that it can now be adjusted and adapted to suit different contexts and numbers. We suggest it may be particularly beneficial in HE contexts where partnering with students is less common than it is in Australia.

More research into caring and relational pedagogical practices in universities is particularly relevant because of its potential to improve the experiences of under-represented student cohorts in HE. Areas of future focus for us include building on the positive impact we have achieved, extending the approach through new initiatives such as creating visual stories to meet the needs

of neurodiverse students, and focusing on the in-class experiences of students across the first year. We seek to understand how to reach students who are not engaging with orientation, and may thus risk disengagement from the broader university community during their studies. Finally, we believe more research into caring and relational practices within our universities has the potential to improve the experiences of under-represented cohorts contributing towards a more equitable first-year experience.

Conflict of Interest

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Appendix 1

Online Survey – New Students

Item 1: On-campus welcome day event survey

Select the option that best describes you: (multiple-choice, choose one)

- I arrived with friends that I met before today
- I arrived on my own but I've since met a few other people
- I am here on my own and I haven't met anyone else yet

Has the BEL Faculty made you feel welcome so far? (multiple-choice, choose one)

- Yes I feel welcome
- No, not really
- Unsure

How would you rate this event? (multiple-choice, choose one)

- Excellent
- Good
- Ok
- Bad

“What have you enjoyed about the event, and what (if anything) can we do to improve it?” (free text open response question)