

Policy Brief

RETHINKING INDUCTION OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: OPTIONS, STRATEGIES AND CHOICES

Executive Summary

Generally induction refers to the initial experience or exposure to something previously unknown. Two competing and sometimes complementary kinds of induction can be identified in higher education in South Africa. The first is about “those events that occur immediately on the arrival of a new student” (Cook 2006: 7). The second type is an “extended induction” that Cook (2006:7) describes as “a longer-term assimilation of new students into the ways in which the institution operates, particularly as it relates to its teaching and learning methods”. We take induction here not as an event as in the “welcome speech” by the VC, dean, or head of school or programme coordinator during orientation days/week; but as a process which accounts for all transition arrangements (academic, social, cultural, welfare and personal support issues) for all students. It refers to the processes through which policies, the code of rules and procedures, social and academic expectations and requirements, are used to socialize students into the university community in the different spheres of academic and social life on campus

Investment of time and resources in the induction of students to campus life can have a lasting effect on the process of adjustment. Higher education institutions all over the world are deeply worried about the percentages of students who do not complete the cycle of university education. Universities are today confronted with the challenge of designing induction strategies that can mitigate the wastage that emanate from unplanned and partial induction. Effective induction has several benefits: students get to learn among other things the university culture, its expectations of the new students, the available programmes, resources at the university, the value of undergraduate education, need to socialize with their peers and interact with their lecturers productively, the importance of

attending classes regularly and make use of the library effectively. However, lack of this knowledge has seen many students drop out, engage in behaviors that have ruined their lives or quickened their ways out of the university prematurely.

Even with induction, the situation may remain the same if institutions bombard students with large amounts of information at the beginning of the academic year focusing on content, rules and procedures for the whole programme. This policy brief argues that induction is an important exercise that should embrace all dimensions of student life on campus to facilitate their adjustment and adaptation into the university environment. It proposes that extended induction should be institutionalized for all students throughout their stay at the university. Universities will realize their goals if they refocus their attention to clarifying the role and purpose of induction, extending the induction to subsequent years of study and drawing comprehensive plans to orientate new students in the university.

Key Policy Strategies:

- Re-conceptualize existing induction practices taking into account the student body and institutional and contextual specificity
- Introduce comprehensive year-long plans to orientate new students to the university
- Extend the induction programme to all years of study
- Pace and scaffold activities to avoid information overload
- Integrate and balance cognition with lived experience/ experiential learning
- Make information communication technology, such as the internet, facebook, and twitter, available in the induction of students



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Context

Higher institutions of learning have been the hopes of millions of South African students who desire to pursue their studies to advanced levels after high school or the middle level colleges. This is more so now because of the diverse nature of these institutions, which enroll a blend of undergraduate students from formerly disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds. Because of their backgrounds, students may find adjustment to the new environment smooth or difficult. Students who have met the formal requirements for access to university study, but are products of authoritarian schooling, may have a far steeper learning curve than the rest of the students (Craig, 2001). Most students come to university with very little information about the culture and operations of the institution. Depending on whether students received prior information about their institution of choice, their start of university learning might prove to be challenging. The unsatisfactory preparation of most students at high school, especially those from former disadvantaged schools may prove to be a negative factor for these students.

There is an overwhelming need to close the adjustment gap between the students by putting in place strategies that can provide a smooth transition from high school to the university. Induction programmes and practices can assist in providing this much needed intervention. Studies have established that the first year at university plays an important role in determining the rest of students' stay at the university. Students at this time are susceptible to academic failure, social, emotional and psychological challenges as well as financial difficulties (Moss, Undated). These aspects of students' life have been singled out as some of the most difficult challenges faced by most universities today. Although there are some forms of induction at the onset in most institutions of higher learning, lack of consistent follow ups, reliable students evaluation and feedback, lots of information pumped during these sessions, are said to frustrate students' hopes and aspirations at the university. The general belief is that lack of reformed induction robs students of opportunities to learn and results in difficulties in adjustment and adaptation.



Findings

Considerable progress has been made regarding approaches and practices of induction in higher education institutions, though these depend largely on isolated initiatives from individual faculties and staff members. Our findings point to the following:

There are pockets of good practice where induction strategies are stretched throughout the first year of undergraduate studies (and in some cases subsequent years) and some of its dimensions integrated into academic support activities.

Current practices tend to privilege the notion of induction as "Open Day", "Orientation Week", referred to as "Freshers Week" in the USA and "Orientation", "Welcome Week" or Early Induction" in the UK. Through these events students are made aware of the institutional environment, policies, rules and procedures and matters concerning their degree programmes as well as available services

Given the nature of these events, when not well planned, they tend to result in an overload of information that de-motivates and alienates newcomers.

They also tend to neglect the value of student engagement and experiential learning that could enhance their understanding and internalization of the issues concerned.



Assumptions

Conceptualizing student induction as context-bound strategy. Undergraduate students undergo different kinds of adjustment in their integration into a university environment: (i) academic adjustment to an environment with more independent and demanding learning and assessment structures and procedures; (ii) geographic adjustment to a larger campus with new residence or accommodation arrangements; (iii) administrative adjustment to dealing with registration, finance and welfare or assistance issues; and (iv) personal adjustment to a diverse social environment and changing social networks. All these processes and the actors involved differ from institution to institution.

Balancing institutional responsibility with student engagement as key foundation for a strong pedagogy of induction. First, it is important to avoid the temptation of content driven style of induction that replicates the traditional transmission model of face-to-face delivery. Rather than passive absorption of text based resources (requirements, rules and procedures), a more interactive environment is desirable, one which is supported by a constructivist approach where students engage in meaningful learning experiences and encourage independent thought.

Re-contextualizing the past and re-symbolizing the symbolic. In times of rapid social change, it is important to define, explain and deconstruct the assumptions, values and beliefs embedded in the policies, code of rules and procedures and institutional culture features (physical structures, rituals, rites, narratives and stories) of the university. In this regard, colonial or apartheid architecture, the different kinds of ceremonies promoted and unproblematically reproduced, the texts privileged in the narratives of university leaders, etc. should not be taken for granted. They must be constantly interrogated and critically nurtured when they fit the institution's vision, mission and identity, and discarded when they become a stumbling block. Only then will we be able to reinvent the institution without compromising its established and unique role in our changing societies.

Negotiating shared social space and shared meaning. Given their different backgrounds and identities, students hold values and perspectives that sometimes differ considerably from the institutional culture of the university. In this regard, academic staff and institutional leaders have the responsibility of helping students in determining the meaning of cultural symbols and other forms of institutional representation, which requires an understanding of the institution's history in its context, and its implications in student integration into the university community

Policy Strategies

Against this background, it is imperative to rethink and redefine induction of undergraduate students in public and private universities in order to facilitate their transition and encourage effective and efficient utilization of university resources. To achieve this, the following policy strategies are suggested.

- *Re-conceptualise existing induction practices taking into account the student body and institutional and contextual specificity.* This should entail clarifying the purpose of induction. Many students tend to take induction exercises for granted and to keep away from them either because they have been associated with rites of initiation or because the institutions do not clearly state their purpose. The purpose can be clarified in the invitation letters so that students understand in advance what it entails to spell out institutional expectations and to curb confusion especially among the historically disadvantaged students.
- *Introduce comprehensive year-long plans extended throughout the degree duration to orientate new students to the university.* Most institutions have downplayed this strategy; yet it is one of the most potent ways of helping students to experience smooth transition. Universities need to go beyond offering students minimal information to help them solve administrative problems and embark on well drawn up plans of induction. The plans should be structured in a way that they lay the foundation for the students for subsequent years. More importantly, the plan should be structured timely and in such a way that students can be able to distinguish the type of information they receive on programme material, university support services and information pertaining to the general day to day operations.
- *Pacing and scaffolding induction activities appears more rewarding than intensive orientation at the beginning of the year.* There are lots of things in the universities that students need to know, but it is critical that information is presented to students in a way that is user-friendly and can be easily understood. However, these things cannot be learnt at the same time. Universities should reschedule and break down the entire content for induction and spread it over a long period of time. The notion of scaffolding, consisting of timely support through appropriate activities and resource materials that elicit student engagement with focus on grounding elements of academic study including academic thinking, writing, reading and note-taking beyond the



narrow domain of rules and procedures.

- *Integrate and balance cognition with lived experience.* 'Lived experience' in induction pedagogies is essential for a transformation of one's whole vision of learning in an academic environment. In an experiential learning cycle key steps entail: *active experimentation* - wanting to do something and setting it in motion; *concrete experience* - doing something and receiving actual experience as a continuous flow of sensations; *reflective observation* - to capture the different forms of feedback they provide; *abstract conceptualization* or making sense of the experience (Bradber 1999: 23).
- *Extend the induction exercise to all years of study.* Generally, induction should not be limited to the first year; it should be conceptualized as an ongoing exercise, hence extended to all years of study. This will also be helpful to students who show signs of falling through the cracks beyond first year. Instead of compressing all induction material into a week long period, it should also be infused into courses so that it becomes part of the university culture of teaching and learning.
- Make information communication technology such as the internet, facebook, and twitter available in the induction of students. The internet can be used to provide support services to the students specifically information that is basic on induction and general campus life.
- Tailor the induction process to be reflected in programmes/courses.

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Conclusion

There is need to strive to make students as welcome as possible to the university environment. This requires a review of induction strategies to ensure that their goals are fully achieved.

About the Project

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