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## Tip sheet – Online topic orientation

There are five specific factors that have been shown to directly increase commencing student success and, ultimately, their likelihood of remaining at university. These factors are their sense of capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture (Lizzio, 2006).

Providing a clear online topic orientation for each topic helps students develop and refine these five senses, and contributes to students becoming active and independent learners. This tip sheet has been created to assist you in preparing an effective online orientation to support student success. It is important to consult with the Course Coordinator and the rest of the teaching team to make sure the structure of the topic you are teaching fits with the rest of the course.

### Tip 1: Help students develop their sense of capability and purpose

Students are more likely to be successful in their studies if they are provided with clear information about what is expected of them at university; if they know when and how to reach out for support, and if they have a distinct sense of purpose (Lizzio, 2016).

#### Structuring information

To help students develop a sense of capability, they need clarity around what is expected of them and when. Therefore, it is important to consider online topic orientation when developing a topic site, to ensure it has a logical flow of content, so it is easy for students to navigate, and for students to ascertain what is expected of them in the topic. Be conscious of ‘cognitive overload’ when structuring the topic site. Including all information up front may be important in some cases, but it may cause unnecessary overload in others. The following strategies can be considered to break down information for students.

- Restricting access to some information until certain dates (e.g., hiding certain resources until a particular point in the teaching period, depending on the structure of the topic).
- Using a logical path through the content so that the topic is easy to navigate.
- Using an alternative location for more general course information (and linking to this) to avoid students having to re-read information (e.g. course FLO sites, or course information on course-specific webpages). If you would like a course site set up for the degree (e.g. Bachelor of Business) please contact your eLearning team via [Service One](#). Students can be grouped within course sites so relevant information can be targeted at first, second and third years.

#### Welcome message and video

One way to clearly outline what is expected of students and to help them develop a sense of capability and purpose is to include a welcome message in the announcements forum as well as online orientation such as a [welcome video](#) or [Collaborate](#) session (see [digital guideline](#) 1.4 and [digital guideline](#) 1.10) to clearly outline what is expected of students and when, to help them develop their sense of capability and purpose. Within the welcome video, topic coordinators should look to include the following:

- an overview of what will be covered in the topic and how it has been put together.

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- details on how content will be covered and student attendance expectations (whether this be on campus and/or online and if there is a graded requirement to participate in online forums).
  - details of group work required (if applicable) so students know what to expect in terms of engagement with their peers.
  - information about how students can engage with their peers and teaching staff within the topic (e.g., chat forums, discussion posts) and expectations of engagement.
  - a brief explanation of why content is covered in the topic and how it links to the learning outcomes in the [Statement of Assessment Methods](#) (see [digital guideline](#) 1.9).
  - drawing students' attention to the endorsed [acknowledgement of Country](#) (see [digital guideline](#) 1.5).

## Tip 2: Help students develop their sense of resourcefulness

In addition to the welcome video, information should be included within the topic orientation to help students develop a sense of resourcefulness and encourage help seeking behaviour.

It is worth highlighting to students that Flinders runs a four-week [orientation program](#) for all commencing students. Consistent, university-wide communication materials are developed each year for University orientation and to assist in helping students familiarise themselves with the university environment. There is no need for you to duplicate this work, instead you can focus on orientating students to the topic within the broader context of the course. University-wide information provided to students includes [Learning online](#) and [Finding your way at Flinders FLO](#) sites in FLO that introduce students to the broader university context, support and services. These online orientation modules can help students with:

- 'Setting appropriate expectations
- Guidance in online etiquette
- Information on available support resources
- An assessment of the readiness of the student for online learning' (Bozarth, Chapman & Lamonica 2004 p. 88).

For more information about University orientation information/promotion or for communication materials to include in your initial lectures/tutorials contact the [Student Experience team](#).

### Support and services

In your topic orientation, you should also make students aware of how they can access support and services and it is important to direct students to existing information (rather than duplicating it within each topic FLO site). This will ensure information remains up-to-date and will help students develop their sense of capability and resourcefulness in help seeking behaviour. It is worth including the following:

- direct students to Compass where they can find the [support and services directory](#) that includes an overview of all the academic, wellbeing, financial, career and administrative support available to Flinders' students.

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- a way of drawing the students' attention to the [FLO student support helpdesk](#) contact information which can be found at the bottom of every FLO page or via the quicklinks menu in FLO (see [Links in FLO to support student services and information](#) tip sheet).
  - a reminder about the technology students need to have set up and ready to go before teaching begins, including details about any hardware or specialised software they need for the topic (see [digital guideline](#) 1.14). If the university provides the required technology, students should be reminded of this and directed to the [student computing page](#) for information about how access and support are provided.
  - a brief explanation of the 'Learning Toolkit' (developed by the [Student Learning Support Service](#) and embedded directly into FLO sites) and its purpose. Students should be directed to the toolkit to access assessment specific study resources designed to help them achieve academic success. If your topic site does not include the 'Learning Toolkit', you can email [slls@flinders.edu.au](mailto:slls@flinders.edu.au) to get this set up.

### **Tip 3: Provide opportunities for students to develop connectedness through peer-to-peer relations.**

Building a sense of community is important as according to Astin (1993), (cited in Scagnoli 2001, p. 23) 'students who feel connected to other students and campus community are more likely to persist to graduation'. Furthermore, Lizzio (2016) states that universities can help students 'connect' by providing opportunities for them to meet and positively interact with their peers. Some opportunities you may like to consider, include:

- Using strategies such as 'ice-breakers' to get students interacting and participating.
- Drawing students' attention to the course room functionality of Collaborate and ensuring the room is 'unlocked'. Topic coordinators can encourage students to use this as a space to engage with their peers socially, to discuss strategies or to do group work (see [Communication, interaction and collaboration in tools](#) tip sheet).
- Collaborate sessions using breakout rooms or using a social space online. It is recommended to have a practice session with students when using the Collaborate tool for the first time in week one in each topic so that students feel comfortable with the technology (see Enabling digital [Collaboration spaces for students](#)).
- Ensuring the student discussion forum functionality is enabled and you are actively encouraging participation.
- Highlighting that Flinders offers commencing students the option to participate in one of three [mentoring programs](#) (either online or on campus) and encouraging participation where appropriate. This includes the O'Guides program, the E-Mentor program for students commencing offshore and the UniAccess program for students living with a disability or health condition.

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## References

Bozarth, J, Chapman, D & Lamonica, L 2004. 'Preparing for distance learning: designing an online student orientation course'. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 87-106.

Lizzio, A 2006. 'Designing an orientation and transition strategy for commencing students: A conceptual summary of research and practice (First year experience project)'. Queensland: Griffith University.

Scagnoli, N 2001 'Student orientations for online programs'. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 19-27.

*Support and services directory 2021*, Flinders University, South Australia, viewed 1 May 2021  
<<https://students.flinders.edu.au/support>>.