



UNIVERSITI
TEKNOLOGI
MARA

Cawangan Negeri Sembilan
Kampus Rembau

2024

RONA TINTA

e-BULETIN
EDISI
2024

FAKULTI PENGURUSAN & PERNIAGAAN
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA
CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN, KAMPUS REMBAU



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eISSN 2785-9126



9 772 785 912 007





UNIVERSITY'S ORIENTATION: TIME FOR A FRESHER AIR!

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In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, universities are under increasing pressure to stay relevant. One of the most important yet often overlooked areas that demands attention is the university orientation program. Traditionally, orientation has been seen as a brief period where new students are introduced to campus facilities, meet academic staff, and attend introductory lectures. However, as universities strive to remain meaningful in the 21st century, it is becoming clear that the traditional orientation model no longer meets the needs of today's diverse student body.

Why the Traditional Orientation Is No Longer Enough

The university experience has evolved dramatically over the past few decades. With advances in technology, globalization, and changing societal expectations, the expectations of students entering higher education have also changed. Today's students are not just looking for academic excellence; they are seeking holistic personal development, career preparation, and a sense of belonging. Orientation programs, which often last just a few days, tend to be too focused on administrative logistics and academic formalities, failing to address these deeper needs.

One of the key shortcomings of traditional orientation is its emphasis on information overload. New students are bombarded with facts about course registration, library systems, and campus rules in a short amount of time. While these are important, they can easily be communicated through digital platforms before students even step foot on campus. What is needed is a reimagining of orientation as a more dynamic, continuous process that goes beyond the first week and focuses on helping students adjust to university life in a more meaningful way.

Emphasizing Well-Being and Mental Health

University is a significant life transition, and it can be overwhelming for many students, particularly those who are away from home for the first time. While traditional orientation may offer a cursory mention of mental health services, it often fails to provide students with the tools they need to manage the emotional and psychological challenges that come with university life. Research consistently shows that mental health issues among university students are on the rise, and without the proper support systems in place, this can have a detrimental impact on academic performance and student retention.

A rejuvenated orientation program should place mental health and well-being at its core. Rather than a one-time session on where to find the counseling center, orientation should introduce students to strategies for managing stress, coping with homesickness, and balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Peer mentorship programs, wellness workshops, and ongoing support groups can be invaluable in helping students navigate the emotional complexities of university life.

Fostering a Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

Universities are increasingly diverse environments, attracting students from a wide range of cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. One of the key challenges of university life for many students is the feeling of isolation and not belonging. Traditional orientation programs, which often focus on broad, one-size-fits-all messages, fail to address the unique needs of students from different backgrounds.

A modern, relevant orientation should actively foster a sense of community and inclusion. This could include creating specific programs tailored to the needs of international students, first-generation university attendees, and students from marginalized communities. Orientation should go beyond simply introducing students to the physical campus; it should introduce them to the social networks and support systems that will help them thrive. Creating spaces where students can connect with others who share their experiences and challenges can go a long way in helping them feel like they belong.

Integrating Career Preparation and Life Skills

One of the primary reasons students attend university is to prepare for their future careers. Yet, traditional orientation programs rarely make career preparation a priority. In many

cases, students are left to figure out how to navigate career services, internships, and job opportunities on their own, often missing out on valuable resources until it's too late.

To remain relevant, orientation programs should integrate career preparation from day one. This could involve workshops on resume building, networking, and job search strategies, as well as introducing students to career advisors early on. Universities should also consider including sessions on practical life skills that will serve students well beyond their time on campus, such as financial literacy, time management, and interpersonal communication.

These skills are crucial not only for academic success but for personal and professional growth. By embedding these elements into orientation, universities can equip students with the tools they need to succeed both during their studies and after graduation.

Leveraging Technology to Enhance the Experience

In an age where technology permeates every aspect of life, universities must adapt their orientation programs to include digital tools and platforms that enhance the student experience. While many universities now offer some form of online orientation, these are often limited to basic logistical information. There is a significant opportunity to use technology in more creative ways to engage students and help them transition to university life.

For instance, universities could create interactive mobile apps that guide students through their first semester, providing them with personalized resources, campus maps, and event notifications. Virtual reality (VR) could be used to give students immersive campus tours or simulate real-life scenarios they might face during their time at university. Social media platforms can also be harnessed to create online communities where new students can connect with each other, share experiences, and seek advice.

By leveraging technology, universities can make orientation more accessible, engaging, and relevant to the digital generation.

Making Orientation an Ongoing Process

Perhaps the most important shift that needs to happen in university orientation is the recognition that it should not be a one-off event. Transitioning to university is not something that happens over a single week. It is a process that unfolds over the entire first year and beyond. A modern orientation program should reflect this reality by providing ongoing support and resources throughout a student's university journey.

This could involve a series of follow-up events, workshops, and check-ins throughout the first semester and into the second year. By maintaining a continuous connection with students, universities can help them navigate the challenges they face at different stages of their academic and personal development.

Time to Reimagine Orientation

In conclusion, as universities strive to remain relevant in an increasingly complex world, it is crucial that they reimagine their orientation programs. The traditional model, with its focus on administrative logistics and information overload, is no longer sufficient. A rejuvenated orientation should place greater emphasis on mental health, foster a sense of belonging, integrate career preparation, leverage technology, and extend support beyond the first week.

By adopting these changes, universities can create a more meaningful, supportive, and relevant orientation experience that truly meets the needs of today's diverse and dynamic student population. It is time to move beyond the outdated approach and embrace an orientation program that prepares students not just for university, but for life.