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### ARTICLE

# Countdown to CQUniversity: An Analysis of a Student-Driven Program Designed to Help Students Transition to University, Before They Start University

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### ABSTRACT

The transition into university study can be challenging, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds who may lack cultural capital or familiarity with academic expectations. As one of Australia's largest regional universities, with a presence in every mainland state, and with the distinction of being Queensland's only dual-sector university, CQUniversity's (Central Queensland University) commitment to regional engagement, inclusivity and flexible study options means that many of our diverse student body in excess of 30,000 encounter these challenges. In response, CQUniversity co-designed a pre-term early intervention program, Countdown to CQUniversity, using a participatory action research (PAR) approach that actively incorporated the student voice into all stages of development. The program comprises five short online modules addressing orientation, time management, academic integrity, critical thinking, and the learning management system. This study reports on the program's development, pilot implementation, and evaluation. Pre- and post-survey data demonstrated substantial increases in students' familiarity with key academic concepts, while qualitative findings highlighted enhanced confidence, perceived preparedness, and appreciation of

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the program's accessibility and relevance. The results indicate that student co-created early intervention programs can improve readiness, support transition, and contribute to more consistent institutional messaging. Implications for the design of orientation resources, integration of student voice, and future research directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Student Engagement; First-Year Experience; Co-Creation; Retention; Student Success

## 1. Introduction

The transition into university study presents a significant challenge for many learners, particularly those from nontraditional or historically underrepresented backgrounds. Students frequently report feeling overwhelmed prior to commencing their studies, a response often linked to limited cultural capital, unfamiliarity with academic expectations, and uncertainty about institutional processes<sup>[1-3]</sup>. These challenges may impede students' ability to confidently engage with disciplinary knowledge, apply higherorder thinking skills, and navigate essential university systems such as learning management platforms, academic integrity requirements, and referencing conventions<sup>[1,4]</sup>. Over the years, the student population has diversified significantly, bringing a wider range of learning needs and readiness levels<sup>[5,6]</sup>. As a result, understanding how to support students at the point of entry, and even before term begins, has become an institutional priority.

To address this complexity, this paper argues that institutions must look beyond traditional orientation formats, which are often operationally focused and inconsistently attended. Research highlights that many students enter university without participating in any form of orientation, contributing to uncertainty and inconsistent levels of preparedness<sup>[7]</sup>. This has become more pronounced since Covid-19 pandemic and the forced transition to online learning<sup>[8]</sup>. Existing research underscores the importance of early, holistic approaches that build capacity, reduce anxiety, and create a sense of belonging before formal study commences<sup>[9-11]</sup>. Transition Pedagogy<sup>[12]</sup> advocates embedding support within the student lifecycle, while Tinto's model of student integration<sup>[13]</sup> highlights the importance of academic and social connectedness in promoting persistence. However, relatively few studies have examined preterm interventions that incorporate the student voice in meaningful ways, nor have many institutions utilised participatory action research (PAR) to cocreate transition resources that respond directly to studentidentified

needs<sup>[14,15]</sup>.

In response to these gaps, this study presents the development and evaluation of *Countdown to CQUniversity*, a preterm, student cocreated early intervention program developed using a PAR methodology. The program aims to provide foundational academic and institutional knowledge to newly enrolled students before they begin their academic journey. This article examines the program's design, implementation, and impact on student preparedness and addresses the following research questions.

### 1.1. Research Questions

How does a student co-created pre-term early intervention program influence students' preparedness for university study?

Which features of the program do students perceive as most valuable in supporting their transition to university?

### 1.2. Background

The notion of a pre-term early intervention program is not unfamiliar, as many institutions adopt such strategies to prepare students for academic life<sup>[7,9,16]</sup>. At CQUniversity, a regional university in Australia, orientation was delivered as an embedded program in the week prior to the start of term; however, there has been a concerning decline in student participation in the orientation programs, and today, a growing number of students are entering university without the benefit of completing any form of pre-entry orientation programs. This identified a gap in institutional support and highlighted the need for a consistent, institution-wide intervention; however, there was no dedicated pre-term program focused on the hidden curriculum to support students in their transition to higher education. Instead, educators incorporated course and discipline-specific information within individual units. While this approach achieved moderate success, it resulted in inconsistent practices, with students exposed to conflicting or outdated

information depending on individual educators' levels of engagement. However, This shift highlights the need for universities to reexamine their orientation strategies and bolster efforts to engage incoming students effectively. By enhancing orientation programs and ensuring broader participation, institutions can better support students in their transition to university life and academic success.

## 2. Literature Review

Student under-preparedness has been widely acknowledged for decades, with early work emphasising the responsibility of higher education institutions to empower students to meet academic demands<sup>[17]</sup>. More recent national policy reviews, including the Australian Universities Accord<sup>[18]</sup>, continue to highlight the need for targeted transition support, particularly for students from diverse or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>[19]</sup>. A broad range of factors influence student success during transition, including isolation<sup>[20]</sup>, financial pressures<sup>[21]</sup>, emotional and social stressors<sup>[22,23]</sup>, and the level of academic support provided<sup>[13]</sup>. Additionally, invisible barriers such as competing family commitments, socio-economic constraints, and uncertainty about university norms can further undermine student readiness<sup>[1,24]</sup>.

Orientation programs represent a common institutional strategy for addressing these challenges. Research shows that orientation initiatives can improve students' familiarity with university expectations and enhance their sense of readiness<sup>[10,11,16]</sup>. However, traditional models often focus on procedural information, provide limited pedagogical depth, and are typically delivered immediately before or during Week one. Webb et al.<sup>[25]</sup> (2017) suggest that this may already be too late with many students already forming misconceptions or experienced avoidable anxiety.

Recent scholarship illustrates a shift towards innovative and digitally supported orientation practices. A systematic review by Walker<sup>[26]</sup> (2025) found that orientation programs contribute positively to retention, belonging, and wellbeing, yet most evaluative studies rely on satisfaction surveys rather than outcome or behaviour-based measures. Fitz-Walter et al.<sup>[27]</sup> (2025) demonstrated the value of gamified, interactive orientation activities in improving confidence and social connectedness. Similarly, Garivaldis et al.

<sup>[28]</sup> (2022) showed how an online learning hub can improve digital literacy and reduce isolation among online students, highlighting the growing role of online or blended support systems.

Although these studies highlight promising practices, several gaps remain. First, few orientation or early intervention initiatives draw directly on student voice through cocreation or PAR methodologies<sup>[29]</sup>. Second, most interventions occur at or after the commencement of the study period, rather than before students begin their first term<sup>[25]</sup>. Third, institutions often lack consistency in how transition resources are embedded, leading to misalignment between disciplines or courses. Finally, the hidden curriculum, such as implicit academic expectations, institutional norms, and unspoken conventions, remains largely unaddressed, disadvantaging students who are unfamiliar with university culture. This study addresses these gaps by presenting a pre-term, student-driven program designed to improve institutional readiness, academic confidence, and clarity of expectations.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach<sup>[30,31]</sup> to collaboratively develop an introductory program that equips students with essential pre-term knowledge by making the hidden curriculum explicit before they commence their university journey. The vision was to create educational experiences that engage students and instructors in a collaborative process of teaching and learning<sup>[32]</sup>. In this study, the research team, who were all educators in the Office of Learning and Teaching, embraced the inherent flexibility of PAR, working closely with students to identify crucial areas for enhancing the university entry experience. This collaborative approach aimed to achieve tangible real-world impact, aligning research goals with student needs and perspectives. Within this methodology, decision-making points, termed "choice points," allowed for collaborative decision-making at each stage of the research process<sup>[31]</sup> (p. 5). The paper outlines six stages involved in the development, evaluation, and integration of the orientation program. These stages included multiple rounds of evaluation, with the findings from each round informing subsequent stages of development.

### 3.1. Methods

The six-stage process undertaken in this study is outlined here and expanded upon in subsequent sections. The first decision point<sup>[31]</sup> involved privileging student experience before any program development commenced, highlighting the importance of embedding student voice throughout the process. To ensure student perspectives informed each stage of development, existing students were invited to participate in interviews via an introductory email and video that explained the project's aims and their role as co-creators. This initial engagement established a collaborative foundation from the outset.

The interviews generated rich data that informed the subsequent analysis phase, during which student insights were systematically reviewed and synthesised to guide curriculum design. Drawing on these findings, the research team developed the program content to align with both student-identified needs and institutional objectives. Following development, the program was piloted to assess its effectiveness and to gather participant feedback. Insights from the pilot informed further refinement of the program. Finally, an evaluation phase examined the overall impact of the program and identified opportunities for ongoing improvement. Together, this structured, participatory approach ensured the program was responsive to the needs of students entering university and supported a more effective transition experience.

### 3.2. Ethical Considerations

The research team comprised professional staff employed as curriculum designers within the Office of Learning and Teaching at CQUniversity. These staff were not involved in teaching, assessment, or student evaluation. Student participants were existing CQUniversity students who were invited to participate via a recruitment email and introductory video outlining the purpose of the study and their role as co-creators. Participation was voluntary and did not affect students' academic standing. Ethical approval was obtained through the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee. As none of the authors had direct teaching or supervisory relationships with participants, potential power imbalances were minimised. This project received approval from the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee:

Approval number 21649. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

#### 3.2.1. Stage 1: Student Voice

Participants were interviewed and invited to reflect on their own experiences upon starting university and share strategies they believed would be helpful for new students embarking on their university journey. Research emphasises the importance of incorporating the student experience and listening to their voice as they become active partners in curriculum design<sup>[15]</sup>. Brooman et al.<sup>[14]</sup> (2015) also recognise the significance of integrating the student voice to inform curriculum development. Morgan<sup>[33]</sup> (2002) and Malecka et al.<sup>[29]</sup> (2020) highlight the effectiveness of peer advice in such situations underscoring the significance of incorporating students' feedback and suggestions into the program development process.

#### 3.2.2. Stage 2: Analysis Which Informed Program Development

The interviews were subsequently transcribed and thematically coded using NVIVO software. The dataset proved extensive, spanning over 420 pages of information. To streamline the transcribed data, themes were identified and refined through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's<sup>[34]</sup> (2006) six-step approach. This involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, generating initial codes, and systematically identifying patterns across participant responses. These codes were then reviewed and organised into broader themes, which were refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research aims. Finally, themes were clearly defined and named to support interpretation and inform subsequent stages of program development. This facilitated a more concise representation of the findings. To ensure a broad range of responses were considered, both negative and positive responses were treated equally because as Willits et al.<sup>[35]</sup> (2016) states, "a balance of positive and negative items is generally recommended to reduce response-set bias" (p. 127). Common themes were identified and highlighted using the Google Docs "Highlight Tool" (see **Figure 1**). Overall, this approach ensured comprehensive data analysis and interpretation.



Figure 1. Google Docs Highlight Tool.

### 3.2.3. Stage 3: Program Development

The student's feedback indicated that understanding the problem areas that they personally experienced was crucial before the start of the term. As a result, five essential topics emerged that required coverage for new students transitioning to university. Subsequently, a program titled *Countdown to CQUniversity* was developed. The five topics that were identified as crucial for new students included:

- o Orientation;
- o Time Management;
- o Academic Integrity/Referencing;
- o Critical Thinking/Assessment Writing;
- o The Learning Management System.

Once these key topics were identified, then deeper data mining occurred to identify the specific elements that students identified as needing to know. Drawing from pre-

vious studies by McCluskey et al. <sup>[10]</sup> (2019) and Webb et al. <sup>[25]</sup> (2017), adjustments were made to the naming conventions of activities and topics to ensure they were user-friendly and inclusive. The subsequent choice point to integrate the student perspective arose during the analysis phase. Students' anecdotal feedback was also incorporated to accurately reflect their voices in shaping the development of each module (see **Table 1**).

Students who made particularly pertinent statements which aligned to themes were re-identified. These students were invited to formalise these statements and be recorded to create a video resource for the program modules. These recordings provided vicarious examples allowing new students to draw direct parallels between their journey and those of past students. This connection fosters the development of student's self-efficacy <sup>[36-38]</sup>. These video clips were used in the introductions to each section in the program.



Table 1. Development of Themes.

Topic	Knowledge Gap	Student Voice
<i>Orientation</i>	How will I know where to go? And when?	"I wish I asked more questions at orientation...because I guarantee that there were people in that room that were thinking the same things as I was and I just never said anything"
<i>Time Management</i>	My assessment is due today. I should probably start it.	"At orientation they told us, if you're going to have another commitment, like a full-time job or even a part-time job, know that this is a full-time commitment, it is a full-time study load. And they'll tell you that and you don't believe it. But it's actually true"
<i>Academic Integrity/Referencing</i>	My ideas stand on the shoulders of giants	"I must give advice to myself - instead of looking out for outsourcing, like doing the assignments from outside of the university, it is better to do the assignments on your own because it not only gives you knowledge, but it also helps you in the final examinations as well"
<i>Critical Thinking/Assessment Writing</i>	I'll need to write and think differently at Uni	"I can see the value in doing my own assignments and using a higher level of critical thinking to support what I am saying"
<i>Moodle</i>	Our Uni, right there on your computer	"Yeah, I remember it was probably week three of Uni. And my teacher had said something about the unit profile and when the assessments were due on Moodle. And I just thought, what is this? Like I had ... no one gave me a copy of this. I don't know what they're talking about. And someone said, "Oh, it's on the Moodle." I said, "What's Moodle?" No one had told me any of that."

### 3.2.4. Stage 4: Curriculum Development

In partnership with curriculum designers, the five modules were crafted to include a brief introductory video introducing the topic, featuring insights from both students and subject matter experts. The *Countdown to CQUniversity* program was piloted as a series of short (10 min) non-compulsory modules via the learning management system delivered to all students after enrolment but before they started their course. Each module encompassed content relevant to the topic, incorporating virtual tours and interactive elements. A 'where to go next' section was included in each module to direct students to specific university resources for further exploration. Furthermore, online meetings facilitated by curriculum designers were organised to provide additional information about the course, units, and programs, allowing students to engage directly and seek clarification on any queries they had.

### 3.2.5. Stage 5: Pilot and Data Collection

The program was piloted with a small group of students to identify necessary refinements prior to wider implementation. A pre-course questionnaire and a post-course questionnaire were integrated into the course site. The evaluation used both closed questions as well as some open-ended questions. The evaluative surveys were both

optional and 468 students undertook the first quiz and 152 completed the final quiz. The initial survey aimed to gauge students' familiarity with various concepts prior to the program. Students were prompted to indicate their familiarity with terms such as Academic Integrity, Referencing, Moodle, Orientation, Critical Thinking, Assessment Writing, and Time Management, or select "none of the above." Similarly, the exit survey presented the same questions to assess whether participants had gained familiarity with these topics throughout the program. Additionally, the final questionnaire solicited feedback on the program's effectiveness, encountered challenges, completion of all modules, and suggestions for future improvements.

### 3.2.6. Stage 6: Embedded Program Evaluation

The pilot was then formally embedded into CQUniversity's orientation program as a non-compulsory activity. Between December 2, 2020, and February 12, 2022, 1871 students participated in the new program. These students were: 299 on-campus, 1183 online and 389 in mixed-mode. Data was collected through a survey sent out on completion of the program. Similar to the earlier analysis phase, Braun and Clarke's<sup>[34]</sup> (2006) thematic analysis was used to explore the qualitative open ended responses while the closed questions are presented as descriptive analysis.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Quantitative Descriptive Results

During the initial pilot, the welcome quiz asked participants to indicate their familiarity with various terms related to academic studies. Among the terms listed, “Moodle” (CQUniversity’s learning management system) had the highest level of familiarity, with 365 out of 468 respondents (approximately 78%) indicating they were familiar with it. This was followed closely by “Referencing” and “Orientation,” with 388 (approximately 83%) and 423 (approximately 90%) respondents indicating familiarity, respectively.

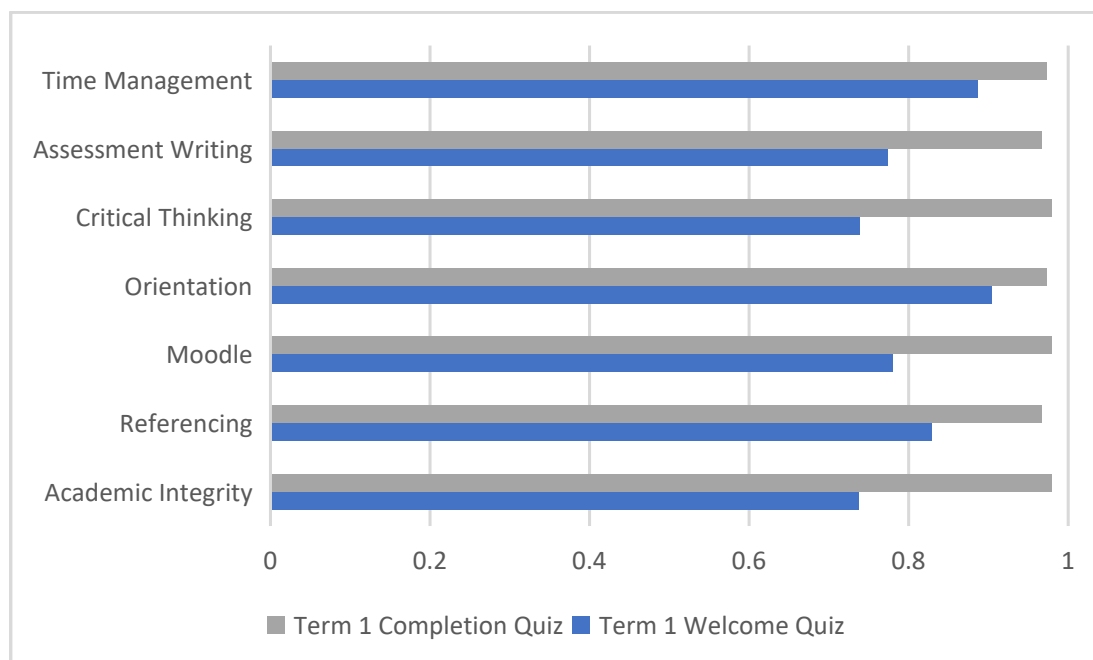
In contrast, the completion quiz aimed to assess participants’ familiarity with the same terms after completing the modules. The results showed an overall increase in familiarity across all terms compared to the welcome quiz. “Academic Integrity” and “Critical Thinking” showed the highest increase in familiarity, with 149 out of 152 respondents (approximately 98%) indicating familiarity with these terms after completing the modules. Similarly, “Moodle,” “Referencing,” and “Orientation” also showed high levels of familiarity, with approximately 98%, 97%,

and 97% of respondents indicating familiarity, respectively (see **Figures 2 and 3**).

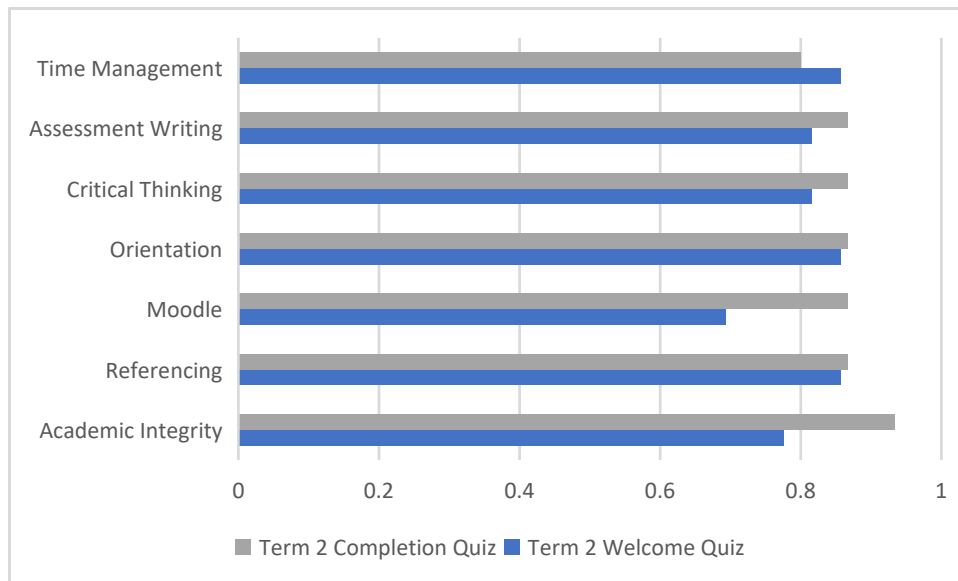
These quantitative analyses suggest that participants’ familiarity with terms related to academic studies increased after completing the modules. The substantial increase in familiarity across all terms highlights the effectiveness of the modules in enhancing participants’ understanding of key concepts and skills relevant to their academic studies.

In the broader implementation, when asked the ease to navigate the site, 1666 students indicated the program was easy to navigate versus 120 who indicated it was not (85 did not answer). When asked how easy the content was to understand, 1800 students stated the information in each module was easy to understand, with 43 disagreeing (22 left blank, 24 made comments with the main concern being that they didn’t know where they were during navigation) (see **Figure 4**).

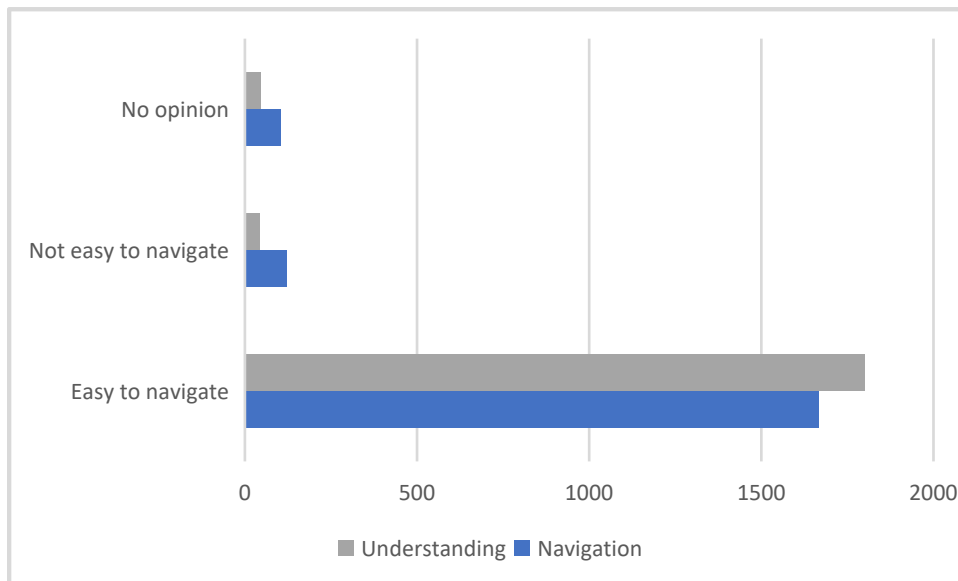
In terms of satisfaction, 755 indicated they were extremely satisfied, 844 moderately satisfied, 227 neither, moderately dissatisfied 30 and extremely dissatisfied 12, 21 didn’t comment (see **Figure 5**).



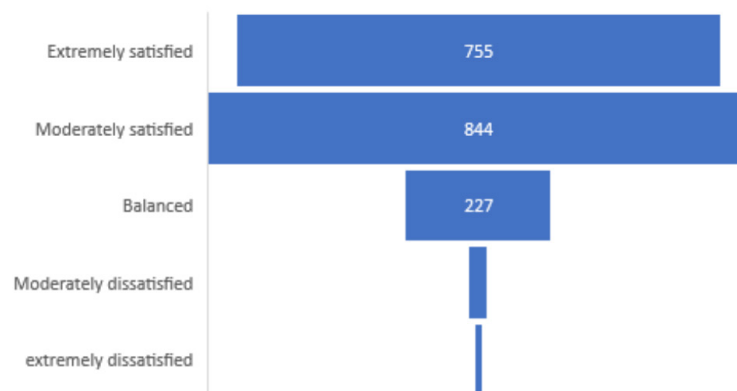
**Figure 2.** Term 1 2020 Comparative Quiz Data.



**Figure 3.** Term 2 2020 Comparative Quiz Data.



**Figure 4.** Evaluation of Embedded Program.



**Figure 5.** Satisfaction.



## 4.2. Qualitative Results

A basic thematic analysis<sup>[34]</sup> was conducted on responses to open-ended survey questions exploring students' experiences of the *Countdown to CQUniversity* program. Three overarching themes were identified in response to what students found most useful: (1) usefulness and informative content, (2) accessibility and navigability, and (3) tools and resources. Within each theme, subthemes capture variation in student experience, including perceived benefits, implementation challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

### 4.2.1. Theme 1: Usefulness and Informative Content

#### Preparedness, Clarity, and Confidence-Building

Participants consistently described the program as highly useful in preparing them for university study. Many emphasised the clarity, relevance, and practical nature of the information provided, noting that it helped demystify expectations and reduce uncertainty prior to commencement. One participant described the program as “extremely helpful... very clear and concise and gave very practical information. The best thing I’ve read so far.” Similarly, another commented, “Lots of information like Orientation... It was very informative and easy to understand.”

Quantitative responses reinforced these perceptions, with 1649 of the 1871 respondents indicating that *Countdown to CQUniversity* contributed significantly to their sense of preparedness for academic study. Students valued the program’s ability to present essential information in an accessible, digestible format, with one noting that it “provided the required information in a manageable way.”

#### A “Tasting Platter” of University Expectations

Several participants framed the program as a broad introduction to university life, rather than an exhaustive guide. Students described it as a “tasting platter” of what they needed to know, which helped them develop a foundational understanding of academic expectations, institutional processes, and success strategies. This framing was perceived positively, positioning the program as an entry point that supported confidence and reduced anxiety during the transition period.

#### Perceived Overload for Some Students

While the breadth of content was generally viewed as a strength, some participants reported that the volume of information exceeded their expectations. One student noted, “There was more information than I was expecting in the *Countdown to CQUniversity*.” However, even these comments often acknowledged the value of the program as a comprehensive starting point, suggesting that information load was a manageable trade-off for preparedness.

### 4.2.2. Theme 2: Accessibility and Navigability

#### Ease of Navigation and Clarity of Design

Students frequently commented on the program’s user-friendly design and intuitive structure. Participants highlighted that the module was “easy to navigate” and that the organisation of content helped clarify what to expect at university. One student remarked, “Easy to navigate, it was very useful and made a lot of things clearer,” while another noted that the program effectively introduced “the systems used and how to prepare yourself and what to expect while studying.” The clarity of presentation was further supported by comments praising the readability of the content and its engaging delivery, including the integration of text, videos, and activities.

#### Emotional and Cognitive Accessibility

Beyond technical navigation, some participants raised issues related to emotional and cognitive accessibility. A small number of students expressed concern about how the program was communicated, particularly through reminder emails. One participant noted, “Receiving those emails makes you feel like you’re already behind,” suggesting that messaging may inadvertently heighten anxiety for some students. Others expressed a preference for the program to be optional rather than perceived as compulsory, noting competing demands during the pre-term period. These responses highlight the importance of aligning program delivery and communication with students’ emotional readiness, particularly for those already enrolled or familiar with university systems.

#### Technical and Formatting Challenges

Although less frequent, some participants identified technical and accessibility issues that hindered engagement. These included comments about small font sizes (“some sections with ridiculously small print”) and occa-

sional video playback issues. While technical problems were typically resolved through simple actions such as refreshing the page, these comments underscore the need for consistent formatting, reliable functionality, and mobile compatibility to support diverse student access needs.

### 4.2.3. Theme 3: Tools and Resources

#### Skill Development and Academic Literacy

Participants strongly valued the program's focus on core academic skills, particularly critical thinking, referencing, and paraphrasing. Students described the modules as a useful refresher or introduction to academic conventions, with one noting, "It was helpful, especially the critical thinking and the referencing section." Another commented, "Good to brush up on certain skills such as critically thinking, referencing and paraphrasing." These elements were seen as particularly beneficial for students new to university study, helping to make implicit academic expectations more explicit.

#### Interactive and Multimodal Learning

The interactive nature of the program was frequently cited as a key strength. Students appreciated the inclusion of quizzes, test activities, and instructional videos, noting that these features enhanced engagement and supported learning. One participant stated, "I like that there were test activities that made you think about what you just learned," while another highlighted "the combination of text and videos used throughout" as particularly effective. This multimodal approach was perceived as supporting comprehension and maintaining interest, contributing to overall satisfaction with the program.

#### Suggestions for Additional Resources

While participants were largely satisfied with the tools and resources provided, several suggested areas for expansion. These included more detailed information about online study, unit management, orientation week, and class timetables. Students also emphasised the importance of ensuring the program functions seamlessly across devices, particularly mobile platforms, to support flexible engagement.

#### Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that *Countdown to CQUniversity* was widely perceived as a valuable pre-term resource that enhanced students' preparedness, confidence,

and understanding of university expectations. By providing clear information, accessible design, and practical tools, the program supported students' transition into higher education. Importantly, participant feedback also highlighted opportunities to refine communication strategies, improve technical accessibility, and tailor content delivery to better accommodate diverse student needs.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into how early, student-informed interventions can support successful entry into university study. Students in this research reported substantial increases in familiarity with key academic concepts such as referencing, academic integrity, and critical thinking following completion of the *Countdown to CQUniversity* modules. Qualitative responses further suggest that the program reduced anxiety, improved navigation of university systems, and fostered greater confidence in preparing for academic study. These outcomes reinforce existing literature on the importance of structured, accessible preparation before the semester begins<sup>[10,26]</sup>.

A key contribution of this project is the use of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework to co-create curriculum with students. Incorporating student voice from the outset aligns with contemporary pedagogical discourse, which positions students as partners rather than passive recipients of institutional knowledge<sup>[14,15]</sup>. The use of PAR not only enhanced the relevance of the program content but also revealed authentic insights into the lived experiences of commencing students, insights that traditional top-down orientation processes often overlook. This approach responds directly to critiques that orientation programs can be generic, outdated, or insufficiently connected to student needs.

The findings also align with Transition Pedagogy, which emphasises the need for coherent, curriculum-integrated, timely support across the student lifecycle<sup>[12]</sup>. Because *Countdown to CQUniversity* is delivered pre-term and embedded institutionally, it provides consistent messaging and foundational knowledge before formal learning commences, thereby reducing the intrinsic cognitive load that students may otherwise face. The emphasis on familiarising students with learning technologies, key academic

concepts, and personal stories from peers supports Tinto's model of student integration<sup>[39]</sup>, which highlights early-engagement experiences as critical to developing academic and social belonging.

Importantly, this program responds to the observed decline in student participation in traditional orientation activities. Rather than assuming low attendance reflects student disinterest, this study suggests that early, flexible, and self-paced resources may better meet the needs of contemporary students, many of whom juggle work, caregiving, regional travel constraints with many studying online<sup>[40,41]</sup>. The findings indicate that online, modular, pre-term resources may serve as an effective complement to existing face-to-face orientation formats, particularly for online and part-time cohorts.

### 5.1. Implications for Practice

The results of this study point to several practical implications for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen student transition and early engagement. First, providing consistent and structured pre-term preparation can help reduce uncertainty, enabling commencing students to build confidence and develop a clearer understanding of academic expectations before formal study begins. Second, embedding student involvement in the design of transition resources ensures that curriculum materials remain authentic, relevant, and responsive to the lived experiences of learners, ultimately enhancing their usefulness and impact. Third, offering modular, online, self-paced formats creates scalable and equitable access for diverse cohorts, including online learners, regional or remote students, mature-age students, and those balancing work or caregiving responsibilities. Finally, integrating orientation content directly into the institution's learning management system facilitates early familiarisation with essential digital environments and reduces the cognitive load students may experience in their first weeks of study. Collectively, these implications highlight the value of flexible, student-centred, and institutionally embedded approaches to supporting successful transitions into higher education.

### 5.2. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. Participa-

tion in the program and surveys was voluntary, introducing potential self-selection bias. The sample is drawn from a single regional Australian university, which may limit generalisability. Additionally, while the study measured perceived preparedness and familiarity, it did not track longer-term outcomes such as retention, GPA, or academic performance.

### 5.3. Future Research

Future studies should examine the longer-term impact of pre-term interventions on academic outcomes, student progression, and retention. Comparative studies across institutions or between online, blended, and face-to-face program formats would further explain how different student cohorts engage with early intervention resources. Research exploring barriers to participation in traditional orientation activities would also contribute to more inclusive and responsive transition strategies. Overall, this study demonstrates that a student-driven, pre-term early intervention program can meaningfully support learners entering university, reinforcing the value of early engagement, co-creation, and pedagogically grounded transition design.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges encountered by students entering academic study at an Australian regional university and offers valuable insights around the value of intervention programs that assist with improving student readiness. Addressing the uncertainty felt by new students in the transition to university is crucial and this study emphasises the need for tailored strategies to foster academic progression and success. The evolution of orientation programs to pre-entry programs that teach the hidden curriculum highlights the importance of integrating such initiatives within the formal curriculum, enabling students to apply acquired knowledge effectively. Additionally, early intervention programs show promise in fostering intellectual enthusiasm and mitigating the impact of delayed enrolment on student readiness. Customised programs tailored to diverse student populations may contribute to improving student progression and completion, emphasising the pivotal role of student readiness programs in shaping higher education experiences and outcomes.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, M.B.; writing—original draft preparation, T.J., M.F. and J.P.; writing—review and editing, T.J., M.F. and M.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

This project has been approved by the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number 21649.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

Data is not available due to privacy restrictions.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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