Does starting on an academic note make a difference?

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An orientation program may set the scene for what is to follow for commencing students; therefore it is important to ensure that the initial impression a student receives is an appropriate one. In 2005 the orientation program for commencing students at Swinburne University of Technology was redesigned in order to enhance the academic focus. In 2006 the “First Year Academic Orientation Program” was evaluated to assess the success of the transition from a primarily social, to an academic, orientation. Two studies were conducted. Firstly, 799 first year students attending orientation completed an initial evaluation. The evaluation data was used to explore if there were demographic or student status (eg. full vs part time; local vs international) differences regarding the levels to which orientation contributed to: developing a positive attitude to Swinburne; managing university study; and understanding how students can overcome problems. In addition, demographic and student status differences in who would seek assistance for problems and an exploration of the reasons why some would not seek assistance were considered. For the second study, all first year students will be invited to respond to an online “First Year Orientation and Transition Survey” in April-May 2006. Utilising this data, differences between students who did or did not attend the Academic Orientation in terms of adjustment to university; knowledge about university services; positive attitudes towards Swinburne and understanding how to learn in a university environment will be explored. Further, participants who attended orientation will be asked to reflect on the experience and nominate what aspects of Orientation assisted in their first weeks of university. Finally, a qualitative analysis of the written responses to questions about what are the most difficult aspects of becoming a university student and what factors assisted in the adjustment to university life will be presented.