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A Model for Running Effective Educational Scavenger Hunts During Campus Orientation to Onboard new University Students. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

University orientation plays a crucial role in fostering student engagement, social integration, and retention. This practice report describes the development and refinement of a game-based orientation activity: a digital scavenger hunt designed to enhance engagement, social connectedness, and campus familiarisation. The activity was guided by the ENGAGE framework, a practical six-stage model for creating effective scavenger hunts. Over three years (2023 to 2025), it was iteratively improved based on participant feedback and evaluated using the MEEGA+ game evaluation framework. Feedback highlighted strong outcomes in social interaction, campus exploration, and enjoyment. Importantly, the initiative demonstrates how game-based activities can be scaled across years with minimal staff input. This report shares lessons learned and presents a practical, low-effort, and effective model that other institutions can adapt to improve student transitions and success through engaging, game-based orientation experiences.

***Keywords**:* Orientation; retention; game-based learning; serious game; gamification; scavenger hunt

Introduction

Student orientation plays a vital role in helping new university students adjust to academic life, understand available support services, and develop a sense of belonging. Effective orientation experiences can positively impact student retention, academic performance, and long-term success (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2020). Given the significant financial and reputational impact of student attrition (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017), institutions are continually refining their orientation strategies to enhance participation and long-term student success. For many institutions, the challenge lies in making orientation both informative and engaging, particularly for cohorts navigating a new, and often overwhelming, campus environment.

Game-based learning has emerged as a promising strategy for enhancing student engagement in educational contexts, including university orientation. Prior research suggests that game-based orientation activities can support engagement, promote active learning, and facilitate meaningful social interactions (Elsom et al., 2021; Fitz-Walter et al., 2011; Talton et

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al., 2006). In particularly, technology-supported scavenger hunts offer an interactive and social approach that encourages students to explore their campus while collaborating with peers. However, there are limited models for universities to follow to help run practical, low-effort and effective scavenger hunts.

This report presents a scalable game-based orientation initiative designed to support first-year students during their transition to university. The initiative, a digital scavenger hunt delivered via the GooseChase platform, aimed to encourage campus exploration, foster social interaction, and increase awareness of student services through an interactive, team-based experience.

Initially developed in 2023 and refined across three consecutive years, the scavenger hunt was informed by student feedback and evaluated using the MEEGA+ (Model for the Evaluation of Educational Games) model, a validated tool for assessing the quality of educational games (Petri et al., 2017). The activity targeted students across three creative degree programs (Film, Animation, and Games), comprising a predominantly younger, on-campus cohort. While this presents a limitation in terms of generalisability, the design principles and iterative development process offer valuable insights for other institutions seeking to implement or enhance orientation programs for similar cohorts.

This report outlines the rationale, design, implementation, outcomes, and broader applicability of the initiative within the context of student success. In particular, it demonstrates how the scavenger hunt supports student transitions into tertiary education and leverages gamification to promote learning, social connection, and campus exploration, which are key factors that contribute to improved retention and overall student success of a first-year student.

Literature Review

The first-year transition into university is widely recognised as a critical period influencing students' academic engagement, social integration, and overall success. In the literature, *Transition Pedagogy* provides a well-established foundation for supporting this phase, advocating for intentional, curriculum-focused, whole-of-institution and whole-of-student approaches to foster learning, success and retention (Kift, 2015; Nelson et al., 2012). Within this broader framework, orientation programs play a key role in initiating student engagement by helping learners familiarise themselves with academic expectations, campus environments, and available support services, while also helping to normalise the stress and uncertainty that can accompany this significant life shift (Conley et al., 2014). Research shows that participation in well-designed orientation activities is associated with improved student satisfaction and social integration (Myrtveit et al., 2017).

The significance of orientation lies in its ability to support students during one of the most pivotal transitions in their academic journey. Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model argues that students who feel connected to an institution—both socially and academically—are more likely to persist and succeed. More recently, Kahu and Nelson (2018) proposed a comprehensive engagement framework that highlights four key psychosocial constructs that mediate interactions between student and institutional characteristics and student engagement and success: self-efficacy, emotion, belonging, and well-being. Programs that successfully support these constructs may be critical levers for improving engagement and long-term success. One activity that has proven successful in supporting student engagement, belonging, and wellbeing during transition are gamified or game-based activities. These experiential formats offer a practical avenue for translating transition theory into engaging and active student-centred orientation experiences.

Gamification is the application of game design elements to non-game settings, and it has emerged as a promising strategy to enhance student engagement during orientation. The rationale is simple: games can increase motivation and active participation through experiential learning and play. Studies have shown that gamified and game-based activities provide an interactive and engaging way for students to explore university facilities while fostering peer collaboration (Elsom et al., 2023; Fitz-Walter et al., 2011; Stark et al., 2021). Games also have broad appeal across age groups, with the average Australian gamer being 35 years old and 84% of people aged 18-64 years play games (Brand et al., 2023). This suggests that well-designed game-based activities have the potential to engage a diverse student population when tailored appropriately. One important challenge for implementing effective technology-supported scavenger hunts is the significant time, resources, and logistical coordination that is often required. Developing a well-structured orientation game involves designing engaging tasks, integrating suitable technology, and managing on-campus logistics, all of which can be resource-intensive (Elsom et al., 2023).

This report addresses these gaps by providing an iterative evaluation of a technology-supported scavenger hunt, demonstrating improvements in engagement and learning outcomes over multiple years using the MEEGA+ model. It also tackles implementation challenges by presenting a scalable, low-effort model that minimises staff workload while maintaining effectiveness, offering practical insights for universities looking to adopt similar initiatives.

Scavenger Hunt Design

Project Overview and Rationale

A scavenger hunt was designed as a structured activity for university orientation that aimed to promote exploration, social interaction, and service familiarisation. These goals align with transition theory, which emphasises the importance of connection, confidence, and engagement in the early stages of the student experience.

Initially introduced in 2023 and refined across two subsequent years, the current iteration of the activity runs for 90 minutes and involves 31 tasks designed to be completed by teams of approximately five students of all age groups on campus. The tasks varied in difficulty, with some requiring students to decipher clues, locate specific campus landmarks, interact with faculty members, or collaborate with other teams. For example, one challenge involved finding a specific library book, while another required teams to recreate a famous movie scene. The tasks encouraged creativity and teamwork from students in fun ways to promote connections with each other.

The scavenger hunt was facilitated using the third-party platform GooseChase, which enabled real-time tracking of progress, submission of responses via text, photos and videos, and gamified engagement elements such as live leaderboards, points and team-based competition. A scoring system was implemented, with each task assigned a point value based on difficulty and effort required. The GooseChase platform recorded team performance, providing valuable usage data for evaluating participant engagement. Tasks were deliberately distributed across key campus locations, ensuring that students became familiar with important buildings, facilities, and student services. Challenges were designed to encourage problem-solving, collaboration, and creative engagement with campus resources. These included a mix of photo- and video-based challenges, riddles, trivia, and location-based missions. The open, playful format also enabled students to build relationships with peers in a relaxed setting, supporting early belonging and social confidence.

A Model and Framework for Broader Use

To support broader adoption, a practical model has been developed based over the three years of iterative implementation. The scavenger hunt model is intended for educators, orientation organisers, and professional staff responsible for on-campus, onboarding activities in tertiary contexts. This model includes a full list of tasks from the 2025 scavenger hunt (see Appendix) and a step-by-step scavenger hunt design framework for staff at other institutions to adapt the tasks in the scavenger hunt to better suit their program called the ENGAGE framework.

Figure 1

The ENGAGE Scavenger Hunt framework

The **ENGAGE framework** outlines a six-stage design process for creating a campus-based orientation scavenger hunt. The stages include:

- **Establish**: Define learning objectives and identify target services, locations, and interactions; outline the scavenger hunt boundaries.
- **Navigate**: Scout the area to find accessible, high-impact locations aligned with your objectives.
- **Gamify**: Convert learning goals into playful challenges of varied effort, incorporating clues, puzzles, and creative tasks.
- **Assess:** Playtest and prepare evaluation tools (e.g., surveys) to ensure enjoyment and safety.
- **Game On!**: Deliver the event with facilitator support, printed maps, and tools like QR codes for digital access to the app and feedback surveys.
- **Evaluate**: Analyse participant feedback and task data to refine the experience for future cohorts.

This model allows institutions to design engaging, purposeful orientation experiences that are both scalable and contextually relevant. It offers a practical approach to enhancing the student experience while addressing strategic goals around transition, belonging, and retention.

Methodology

The scavenger hunt was run during orientation events at an Australian university across three consecutive years: 2023-2025 with approximately 730 students. The activity targeted new students across creative disciplines and was designed to support early transitions into tertiary study by encouraging peer interaction, active exploration, and campus familiarisation. The students in these degrees were predominantly a younger cohort and attending university on-campus. Participation was voluntary, with students encouraged to form teams of five. The initiative was inclusive by design, ensuring accessibility and broad appeal through a mix of low-effort, creative, and social tasks.

To assess student perceptions of the scavenger hunt experience, the MEEGA+ questionnaire was employed (Petri et al., 2017). MEEGA+ is a validated evaluation framework specifically designed for assessing serious and educational games in educational contexts. It measures two core quality factors: usability and player experience, encompassing dimensions such as challenge, social interaction, fun, relevance, learnability, operability, and perceived learning. These dimensions are assessed through a standardised 5-point Likert scale, allowing for consistent and comparative measurement across implementations. MEEGA+ was selected due to its established reliability and construct validity, demonstrated in prior studies evaluating educational games and gamified learning activities in university settings. Its focus on both experiential and learning aspects made it particularly suitable for evaluating a game-based orientation initiative aimed at fostering engagement, collaboration, and campus familiarity. In addition to its quantitative measures, MEEGA+ includes three open-ended questions that provide rich qualitative data, offering insight into participants' experiences, perceived value, and suggestions for improvement which is an essential component for iterative refinement of the initiative.

Additionally, the platform used to deliver the scavenger hunt also provides insightful usage data about the event including real-time tracking of student participation, task completion, and engagement levels. It allowed students to submit text, photo, and video responses. The platform recorded general usage metrics such as the number of active teams, task submission rates, and mission completion percentages, providing quantitative insights into student engagement.

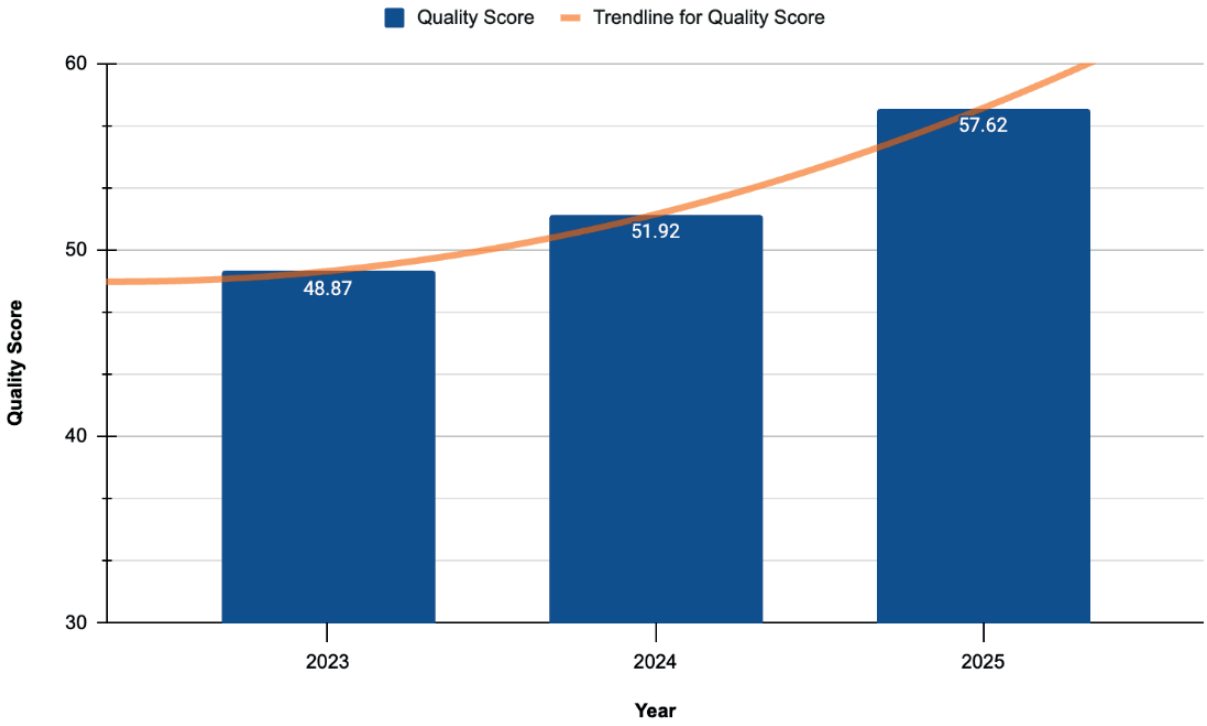
Impact

Survey results from over the three years (n=174) showed positive responses across all player experience domains. Social interaction, fun, and campus exploration generally received the most favourable ratings. Qualitative responses reinforced these findings, with students praising the activity for fostering friendships, building confidence, and making orientation more enjoyable and memorable. Participants appreciated the collaborative nature of the tasks and noted that the game format made them feel more prepared for the start of their studies.

A key component of the evaluation was the overall quality score derived from the MEEGA+ framework. The overall quality score is derived using Item Response Theory (IRT), which analyses participant responses from the survey to estimate a latent trait representing game quality. This score is then transformed onto a (50,15) scale, allowing classification into three quality levels: Low (<42.5), Good (42.5–64.9), and Excellent (≥65), providing a standardised measure of the game's effectiveness and engagement The quality score for the 2025 scavenger hunt was 57.62 (n=51). In comparison, the 2023 iteration yielded a quality score of 48.87 (n=43), and the 2024 iteration scored 51.92 (n=80). This upward trend suggests that iterative refinements to the scavenger hunt design have positively impacted student engagement, perceived learning, and usability.

Figure 2

Quality Score from the Past Three Scavenger Hunts and Trendline for Quality Score



Highlights from the 2025 Iteration

Data from the GooseChase platform showed strong participation, with 36 active teams submitting a total of 746 tasks during the event. On average, teams completed around two-thirds of the available missions, demonstrating consistent engagement throughout the 90-minute activity. As GooseChase only requires one device per team, the exact number of individual participants wasn't recorded. However, based on the team structure and event setup, it's estimated that around 180 students took part in the scavenger hunt. Of these students who participated in the scavenger hunt in 2025, 51 completed the post-activity survey. Respondents were enrolled in a range of creative disciplines that included Film, Animation, and Games programs. Most participants were aged between 18 and 24, reflecting a predominantly younger, on-campus cohort. The group was also diverse in terms of gender identity, with 47.1% identifying as women, 33.3% as men, 11.8% as non-binary, 2.0% as agender, and 5.9% preferring not to disclose. Survey respondents reported a broad range of familiarity with digital games. While many played games regularly, either daily or weekly, others reported only occasional or rare engagement. This variation suggests that the scavenger hunt was accessible and enjoyable regardless of students' prior gaming experience, supporting its inclusive design and broad appeal.

The 2025 MEEGA+ survey results provided valuable insights into how students experienced the scavenger hunt. In addition to standard items measuring fun, challenge, and social interaction, four custom questions were added to assess how well the activity helped students explore campus, prepare for university, meet others, and learn about support services. The majority of MEEGA+ survey items received consistently positive responses, with median scores of 1 (Agree) or 2 (Strongly Agree), indicating a favourable participant experience. The highest ratings were for social interaction and campus exploration, key goals of the initiative. Only one item, about becoming so focused that players forgot their surroundings, had a neutral median score. This could be because students were moving around a real campus, not immersed in a screen-based game.

The survey also included open-ended questions, where students shared what they enjoyed most and suggested improvements. These responses helped explain what worked well in terms of the scavenger hunt design and what adjustments could be made in future versions of the scavenger hunt.

Qualitative feedback reinforced the survey results, particularly in highlighting the social benefits of the activity. Many students described the scavenger hunt as a fun and easy way to meet new people and build early connections. The most frequently mentioned theme was *Social Interaction* and *Teamwork*, with participants consistently valuing the opportunity to engage with peers in a relaxed, playful setting. *Exploration and Campus Familiarisation* was another dominant theme. Students appreciated how the activity helped them navigate important campus locations and feel more confident about starting classes. Other recurring themes included the activity being a *Fun and Memorable Experience*, opportunities for *Creativity and Problem-Solving*, general positive sentiment, and enjoyment of *Competition and Challenge*. Together, these responses suggest that the scavenger hunt was an effective and engaging way to introduce students to university life.

Students also shared suggestions for improvement. The most common concern related to *Technology and Usability*, with some students experiencing difficulties with the app. While some technical aspects were outside the team's control, this feedback suggests a need for clearer instructions and support. Others commented on *Game Content* and *Task Variety*, suggesting a broader mix of task types and more interactive or collaborative challenges. Additional themes included requests for improved *Hints and Support*, and concerns about *Accessibility and Inclusivity*, particularly the physical demands of navigating campus within a time limit.

Discussion

The results of the 2025 scavenger hunt highlight its effectiveness in supporting student orientation through active, social engagement. Positive feedback across key areas such as social interaction, enjoyment, and campus familiarisation suggests that the activity provided a meaningful and enjoyable introduction to university life. In particular, students appreciated the opportunity to meet new peers in a relaxed setting, reinforcing the value of early connection and belonging in supporting transition and retention. The activity also helped students feel more confident navigating campus spaces and services, suggesting that playful, experiential approaches may be more effective than traditional orientation formats. These findings support broader research into transition pedagogy and the importance of building confidence and connection in the first weeks of university.

The steady increase in quality scores across the three years of implementation highlights the value of iterative development. Each iteration of the scavenger hunt incorporated feedback and lessons learned from previous deliveries, resulting in a more engaging and effective experience over time. The 2025 version achieved the highest MEEGA+ quality score to date, suggesting that a continued process of review and refinement can significantly improve the impact of game-based orientation activities. Institutions aiming to enhance orientation outcomes may benefit from adopting a similar approach using feedback loops and ongoing evaluation to fine-tune delivery year on year.

This model, along with the ENGAGE framework, offers a practical, scalable method that other universities can adapt to suit their own context. The structure encourages exploration and teamwork while also promoting service awareness and peer support, all of which are aligned with the key priorities of the student success framework.

Limitations and Future Work

While the scavenger hunt proved effective for the target cohort, its applicability is currently limited to a specific student demographic. The majority of participants were younger, school-leaver students enrolled full-time and attending classes on campus. As such, the findings are most relevant to similar cohorts in creative disciplines with strong on-campus orientation programs. The limited participation of mature-age, part-time, and online students suggests that alternative or supplementary approaches may be needed to support these groups effectively. Future work should explore how game-based orientation activities might be adapted for diverse student populations, including those studying remotely, balancing work or caregiving responsibilities, or re-entering study after a long break. To address this, a version of the scavenger hunt is currently being adapted for online delivery and will be trialled with a broader cohort outside of the creative industries. This future iteration will aim to evaluate the model's relevance and accessibility in different disciplinary and delivery contexts, helping to extend its utility across a wider range of student experiences.

Conclusion

This report presents a practical model for game-based orientation that fosters social connection, campus exploration, and early confidence among new students. The 2025 iteration of the scavenger hunt demonstrated improved outcomes through iterative refinements and continued use of the MEEGA+ evaluation framework.

By delivering an engaging, team-based activity supported by a flexible design framework, this initiative offers a scalable model for other institutions. It highlights the value of using technology to support active learning and community building in the first-year experience. With student engagement and retention more important than ever, universities stand to benefit from adopting playful, purposeful activities like this one to welcome and support incoming students. The full task list is included in the appendix to support adaptation and implementation at other institutions.

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Appendix

Scavenger Hunt Tasks

This appendix provides a complete list of the 31 tasks used in the 2025 iteration of the university orientation scavenger hunt.

Title	Clue	Points	Submission type	Notes/Answer
Believe in your selfie	Take a team selfie with a staff member, mentor OR current student (2nd year and above!)	300	Photo	
LEND me a hand	Find DVD PN 1997.G36 2002 and snap a photo. (Make sure you put it back where you found it!)	300	Photo	Find a specific DVD in the library
Comic relief	Visiting S02 (aka the Webb Centre)? While you're there ignore what this character on the wall tells you and DO laugh at him.	300	Photo	Take a photo with a character on the wall
It's selfie inception!	Take a team photo with another team in the background taking a team photo with a staff member, mentor OR current student (2nd year or above).	300	Photo	
Crouching tiger, hidden teammate	Have a team member hide or camouflage themselves... then surprise us by revealing themselves!	300	Video	
A big red door	Find the big red door on the “Old South Brisbane Library” and snap a team photo outside to show us just how tall it is!	300	Photo	
Dressed to a T-(shirt)!	Take the fanciest team photo in your brand new student tees!	300	Photo	
Drop anchor!	This SHIP is INN! Take your best nautical-themed team photo out the front of this location...	300	Photo	
emiT dniweR	.esrever ni looc kool dluow taht gnihtemos mliF	300	Video	Reverse the text for the answer
Heyyyy Macarena	A 90s classic, let's see each team member's Macarena moves! How well does your team know the lyrics? Let's hear you sing along while dancing!	300	Video	
Meme Team	Recreate one of your team's favourite memes (complete with meme text) and send the results to us.	300	Photo	
Represent!	Find the Student Representation Council or Counselling services and snap a team photo outside. Make sure to check out what they do while you're here!	300	Photo	
Rock out!	Challenge another team to a game of scissors, paper, rock and film the epic outcome!	300	Photo	
Safe and secure	Give us a thumbs up with your team in front of Campus Support. This place is available 24/7 for all emergencies and incidents, how good is that? 👍	300	Photo	
Arcade rewind!	It sure looks like your team is having heaps of fun playing this old school video game arcade machine together...	300	Photo	
Shhh...	People might be watching a film in this specific location so take a QUIET team photo outside!	300	Photo	
Star struck!	Point to a printed film poster for a film, animation or game made by a staff member.	300	Photo	
Take a break...	Need a cinema snack? Tell me how much change from $5 do I get if I choose 023?	300	Text	Vending machine (answer is $2)

Title	Clue	Points	Submission type	Notes/Answer
Find & unwind	Did you know there is a Student Common Room just for you on this campus? Find it and share a photo of your team putting it to good use!	300	Photo	
What's that sound?	- .... . / ... --- ..- -. -.. / ... - .- --. . (Take a team photo outside this room!)	300	Photo	Need to decipher the morse code
What's this old contraption?	Find it in the depths of the Film School and tell us... what's the fourth piece of advice on this old device?	300	Text	Answer “Never run tape splices”
With our powers combined!	Snap a photo that includes students from the film, animation AND games degrees!	300	Camera	
Judge a book by its cover	Find a book in the library with an interesting cover and come up with a fake plot for it.	300	Video	
An ostrich told me...	Find the OG ostrich from this award winning stop motion film and take a team photo with it.	300	Photo	
Keep it clean	Have a team member throw rubbish into a bin... spectacularly! The most impressive throw gets bonus points!	400	Video	
Who you gonna email?	Find the photo of your first year advisor somewhere around campus and take a photo of the whole team with them.	400	Photo	
Breaking news!	Record a news video reporting on the highlights of your orientation day so far, outside of the TV Studio in S04_1.30.	500	Video	
Game on!	Recreate a classic video game with your team and film it!	500	Video	
Hello computer!	Give us your best team robot dance next to a university computer that one of your team members has successfully logged into.	500	Video	
Lights, camera, action!	As a team, recreate a scene from a well-known film.	500	Video	
Stop! Motion time.	Send us a stop motion animation using everyday items. You can use the app "Stop Motion Studio" to help you to create it!	500	Video	