

## **University First Year Advisors: A network approach for first year student transition and retention. A Practice Report**

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### **Abstract**

*Focussing expressly on student support and retention, improving the first year experience has been addressed by Murdoch University through the implementation of a School discipline-specific network of professional First Year Advisors (FYAs). FYA initiatives, both broad-based and varied, have been developed in alignment with the changing needs of students as identified throughout the semesters. A combination of outreach telephone campaigns and face-to-face student support enables FYAs to conduct a “just in time” approach to positively increase student engagement, and ultimately, retention. With a bespoke database, FYAs and academic staff have been able to streamline the process of reporting students in need of support, and gather data relating to student retention. The FYA program is yet to be formally evaluated although initial feedback and student consultation is promising. This paper outlines the program’s development, current initiatives and expected outcomes.*

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## **Introduction**

How we assess the importance of a student's first year at our universities is dependant on the particular lens we bring to the issue. Marrington, Nelson and Clarke (2010) make a clear economic case that "systemically monitoring first year higher education students and intervening with those identified as at-risk of attrition" (p. 1) brings substantial financial benefits to Australian universities, through the savings on what would have been "lost revenue." Reid and Solomonides (2010) highlight the compelling argument that many of the student engagement activities which are undertaken to improve retention, actually also play an important part in promoting "deep learning and mastery" (p. 9)—surely a goal that cannot be ignored by those educators with a strong belief in the transformative nature of higher education. Concomitant with these agenda in the current Australian context is the reform program of the Federal Government, following the findings of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) and the subsequent funding programs which form the backbone of the *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The task set out for universities by the Federal Government is a revitalised approach to achieving equality in education opportunity for Australians; a widening of participation to ensure that by 2020, 20% of students enrolled in undergraduate study come from low income backgrounds, and that by 2025, 40% of those aged 25-34 will have attained a bachelor-level qualification.

Murdoch University (MU) has a student enrolment of 18,000, including a significant

group of mature-age students (57%) and those from low income backgrounds (17%) (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010). Retaining first year students has been an increasing concern for MU and in 2009 the University undertook its own review of student retention. This review involved interviews with School Deans and representatives from support services and the Guild of Students, and it was identified that MU "has been slow to formalise retention plans and policies" (Martin-Lynch, 2009, p. 3). More importantly, it became clear that the retention figures "have become progressively worse over the period 2001 to 2006" (p. 3); at this time the University's retention rate for first year students was 77%. Martin-Lynch identified concerns about transition issues, and the lack of cultural capital available to many of these MU students, particularly given the lowering of entry scores and the number of first in family students to undertake university education. There was an urgent need to develop a formal approach for first year MU students, in order to improve student retention and also improve the university experience for students. The Federal Government's funding to support initiatives in this area also assisted a more formalised and creative approach by MU. In assessing best practice, MU reviewed the work undertaken at its sister Innovative Research Universities<sup>1</sup> academy, Griffith University, where an approach and program aimed at enhancing engagement,

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' Note: Twenty-six of the 39 universities in Australia have formed four relatively homogeneous clusters based on similar developmental histories and orientation. These coalitions provide lobbying power and benchmarking opportunities. The four groups are: The Group of Eight (n=8), the Australian Technology Network (n=5), the Innovative Research Universities (n=7) and the Regional Universities Network (n=6).

persistence and satisfaction for commencing students had been researched and developed (Lizzio, 2006; Wilson & Lizzio, 2008).

## Development of the First Year Advisor program

In late 2010, MU commenced the development of a First Year Advisor (FYA) program. The approach led by the Director of Student Life and Learning, was to involve the School Deans from MU's 14 Schools (including two regional campuses) very early in the discussions, to ensure a program structure that was compatible across the University. In fact, for MU, Lizzio's (2006) *Five Senses of Success: connectedness, capability, purpose, resourcefulness*, all set within a sense of *culture*, provides a framework not only for success for the first year cohort, but also for establishing, nurturing and sustaining a functioning FYA network across the University (see also Burnett & Larmar, 2011). In January 2011, the new FYAs commenced working at MU. Each FYA position at MU is a School-based non-academic role. These positions are reportable to a School Dean at a School level as well as to an FYA manager as part of the coordinated, cohesive, first year network at the institutional level. The FYA network consists of 18 people (15 full-time equivalent) distributed among the 14 Schools, based on first year cohort size.

Prior to Orientation Week 2011, MU FYAs completed two weeks of intensive professional training conducted by a wide variety of University staff and some private providers. The initial training focused on three main areas: the rationale for the FYA role, University support services and effective interpersonal communication. A

number of key researchers in the field of First Year Experience presented the rationale upon which the development of the FYA network was based. An integral aspect of the FYA role is directing students to the relevant support services available. Therefore, meeting with support staff throughout the University, including those located on regional campuses, was essential for building both a knowledge base and establishing rapport. FYAs were also involved in a number of in-depth training sessions focusing on understanding the online student portal of the University website, the processes and steps required for student enrolment, and the learning management system. A variety of communication workshops focused on enhancing effective face-to-face and telephone communication. In these workshops, FYAs devised scripts and scenarios to develop a variety of approaches to communicate with students, including cold-calling students, negotiating difficult situations and dealing with crisis behaviour. Due to the increase in mental health issues among students entering University (Stallman, 2010), FYAs were also encouraged to complete *Mental Health First Aid Course* (Jorm and Kitchener, 2011; Kitchener & Jorm, 2002) over a two-day seminar, during the first semester of 2011. This increased level of support for such students informed a more empathetic and holistic approach, further enabling successful transition to the tertiary education environment.

## Program initiatives

FYA program initiatives can be divided into two approaches: (1) targeting individual first year students, and (2) targeting the whole first year cohort. A summary of FYA program initiatives, broken down by approach, can be found in Table 1. The most extensive of all initiatives undertaken by FYAs are the six outreach telephone campaigns, described in Table 2. Each campaign (excluding the at-risk student contact campaign) has a brief duration and is specifically timed within the semester to offer students an opportunity for “just in time” academic recovery (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). The at-risk student contact campaign is an ongoing outreach initiative that is continued throughout both semesters of students’ first year, and is the chief focus of the FYAs in relation to outreach telephone campaigns at MU. This approach, and the use of a systematised reporting and data capture software, present a unique model.

At MU, a student is defined as “at-risk” if they show evidence of disengaging from their studies. Specific behaviours identified include missing a first class or laboratory; missing multiple classes or laboratories; failing a diagnostic test; failing to submit first assessment item; failing to submit an assessment item; failing an assessment item; not engaging in online tutorials; requiring additional academic support; and help needed with English as a second language (see also Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009). At-risk student contact campaigns rely on reporting by academic staff in first year units (subjects). Reports are submitted via a webform on the existing interface used for class management. Once logged in, the reporting staff member can select multiple or single students, and report on one or more at-risk behaviours listed on the webform (as listed above). All first year students that are reported as at-risk are contacted; no cohort is specifically targeted or omitted. Data from at-risk reports are then uploaded to

Table 1 Summary of FYA program initiatives at MU, divided into target audiences.

Individual Students	Whole Cohort
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Outreach telephone campaigns</li> <li>○ Open door policy for students to drop in, student meetings and direct referrals from staff members</li> <li>○ Respond to any student-initiated contact by email or telephone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Coordinate welcome and course advice session at orientation</li> <li>○ Establish and/or support School-based student associations</li> <li>○ Establish and support School-based peer mentoring programs</li> <li>○ Establish and facilitate regular School social events</li> </ul>

*RightNow* (RightNow Technologies Inc., 1997-2011), customer relationship management software customised specifically for the FYA role at MU. FYAs are notified of reports for their School via *RightNow* and can access and log subsequent interactions with students within the database at any time.

## **An innovative and edifying approach**

The FYA network, as described here, is a potentially useful model for other higher education institutions with an interest in supporting first year student transition and retention. Deviating from models where FYAs are Faculty- or centrally-based (e.g., Burnett & Larmar, 2011), the MU model allows all FYAs to focus on the unique needs of each School cohort, while offering standard information on the University's systems, support services and resources, and developing institution-wide transition strategies through the network as a whole. It is anticipated that having each FYA based within a School will lead to greater accessibility of support for students and increased *connectedness* to their School, within the wider University community. The professional, non-academic FYA role at MU is also contrary to other models where advisors are primarily academic staff (e.g., Burnett & Larmar, 2011); the dedicated FYA role allows students to have lengthy meetings where necessary and FYAs are able to be heavily involved in many aspects of student life on campus. MU's model is also distinct from those described by Quinn, Bennett, Humphreys, Nelson and Clarke (2011) and Nelson, Quinn, Marrington and Clarke (2012), as staff, rather than students, are providing advice to first year students, with the intention to allow for greater control and consistency in

the advice given. Importantly, the FYA network meets fortnightly to discuss transition and retention issues at MU, the outcomes of campaigns and current activities within Schools, promoting cohesions among the FYA network and standardisation of the approach.

## **Preliminary results and expected outcomes**

At the point of writing this paper, the FYA network had been operating for almost two full semesters. It is too early to determine whether this initiative has led to improved long-term retention of first year students at MU. However, it is clear that the FYA network has already significantly improved the experience of first year students at MU, based on informal feedback from students and staff. The initiatives targeting individual students have been extremely successful; the outreach telephone campaigns have been welcomed by students in almost all cases. It has become clear that a telephone call is an effective form of intervention for students. Outreach contact often results in a referral to appropriate academic staff members and/or services on and off campus (improved *resourcefulness*), simple explanations of university procedures and policy (inclusion into academic *culture*), and crucial advice regarding how to succeed with university study, greatly empowering students (improved sense of *capability*). Importantly, students have repeatedly remarked that it is good to know that the staff at MU believe in them and are there to support them, providing strong evidence of an improved sense of *connectedness* and belonging within the University *culture* (Lizzio, 2006; Wilson, 2009).

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Table 2 Description of outreach telephone campaigns undertaken at MU including their timing and duration in the semester.

Campaign	Description	Pre Sem	W0	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	W9	W10	W11	W12	W13	W14
Warning Letter	Received a warning letter after failing 50% or more of their units in the preceding semester	*															
Accepted Not Enrolled	Accepted a place at MU, but subsequently had not enrolled in units by orientation week		*	*													
Not interacting on LMS	Failed to interact with the online learning management system for their Foundation Unit*					*											
External	Studying Externally						*						*				
Withdrawn	Withdrawn from all units before Census Date													*			
At-risk	Were reported as at-risk by academic staff members				*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

\*Foundation Unit – a unit (subject) emphasising foundation skills for learning that all students must complete in their first year of studies at MU

In addition to proactively advising students, FYAs strongly encourage first year students to telephone, email or drop-in if they need help or support. Indeed, FYAs have been surprised by the amount of student-initiated contact they have received, and the diversity of reasons as to why students have sought assistance. With an open door policy, FYAs have managed a high volume of student-initiated drop-in visits, including referrals from staff members and other students. The following email was sent to an FYA from a student who was referred to the FYA network by a fellow student:

This is my first semester studying at Murdoch University. I honestly believe that I would not have had such a positive and successful semester if I did not have access to the support from [the First Year Advisor].... If I did not have access to someone like [my FYA] I may have dropped out of university altogether. Knowing that there are First Year Advisors at Murdoch University to help me with any questions I have in my first year is not only comforting and an essential resource, but a great support as well. I hope First Year Advisors for Education will be available to first year students in all future years. (First Year Student, Week 10, Semester 2, 2011).

Most importantly, many drop-in visits are by students who have an established relationship with the FYA due to previous campaign-related telephone contact, and were thus potentially at-risk of disengaging and/or discontinuing their studies. For example, the following quote was sent to one of the FYAs by email after advising the student on multiple occasions during semester, where contact was originally initiated by the FYA during an outreach telephone campaign:

Just wanted to thank you very much for all your help and support throughout this semester. My transition from high school to uni has been much easier knowing that there is someone I can turn to, who is reliable and constantly willing to help. You ALWAYS provide me with fantastic advice that I can take away and use throughout my entire degree. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate all you have done for me :) (First Year Student, Week 14, Semester 1 2011).

FYAs have often been approached by students who are feeling disillusioned and state that “uni is not for them.” FYAs are able to discuss students’ situations in detail and help to determine why they are not enjoying their studies. In many of these cases, students are unsure of what direction to take. In such instances, belonging to an integrated FYA network is invaluable, as comprehensive advice can be given to students. Rather than aiming to retain students only within their own School, FYAs work together to help students establish which course/degree might be right for them, thus improving students’ all important sense of *purpose*. This also facilitates clarity for students on the question “What is a university?” (Lizzio, 2006, p. 3) and simultaneously enhances students’ sense of *culture*. In this way, it is anticipated that the FYA network will enable increased overall retention levels within the University.

FYA initiatives have also led to improvements in the experience of first year students via their whole-of-cohort initiatives. For example, FYAs have conducted social events for first year students and also facilitated and supported the establishment of student societies in many Schools for which these did not exist prior to 2011. It is clear that this has led to greater levels of *connectedness* between

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students and MU. These effects are not limited to first year students, as can be seen from the following quote from an academic staff member following the first social event for one of the student societies:

I have had several students contact me since the BBQ yesterday and the overwhelming consensus is that it was a fantastic success and that the students are very keen to see it continue ("we should do this more often" seems to be the most common line!). This is the first time I've seen such enthusiasm from the students in my 3 years at Murdoch. (Sarah Etherington, Lecturer, Murdoch University).

FYAs are available to provide ongoing administrative support to their resident student societies, if necessary. FYAs have also commenced peer mentoring programs within their Schools whereby established students meet weekly with first year students and informally discuss how their studies are going and provide motivational advice, again improving students' sense of *connectedness* and also *capability*.

### Conclusion

Following the recommendations of the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008), university doors are set to widen, thus increasing the numbers of non-traditional students that may be under-prepared for tertiary study. Initiatives such as MU's FYA network will become essential if we are to provide the dedicated support required by these (and all) first year students in the future. Since the FYA program is still relatively new at MU, it is likely to evolve over the next few years. However, the activities and structure of the network, as described here, are intended to continue

into the future. The development of the *RightNow* system will allow for comprehensive data capture and retrieval, which will be crucial for quantifying the effect that the FYA network has on student retention. In the long term, we anticipate that implementation of the FYA network will enable a better transition to first year university for MU students, especially those non-traditional students, leading to increased retention and thus address the new agenda in higher education—to increase participation and completion rates among Australian higher education institutions.

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