The First Year Advisor’s Network: enhancing the first year experience in response to the Review of Australian Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT: In response to the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education, Murdoch University redesigned its transition procedures drawing on research into best-practice in transition and the first year experience. It now offers all commencing students an integrated support program, centred on a school-based network of dedicated First Year Advisors who are available to assist all commencing students in their first two semesters of study. This case study outlines the model and illustrates the ways in which it can be altered to suit different contexts. Evaluation of the program through qualitative surveys of students and staff indicate that the First Year Advisors’ Network has been highly effective in enabling students to get timely assistance, and that staff have come to rely on the Advisors to provide pastoral advice.

1. Introduction

A year after publication of the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent Scales, 2008), Murdoch University in Western Australia was facing several challenges: the number of students reporting that they felt disconnected from campus life was increasing, attrition rates were unacceptably high and the number of students seeking assistance with academic study was also growing. Anticipating that the diversity of the student population would increase as changes recommended by the Review were implemented, and that greater diversity would intensify these challenges, Murdoch University undertook a comprehensive review of its transition procedures. It drew on research into best-practice in transition and the first year experience to redesign student support from the ground up (Kift, 2008; Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2001; Tinto, 2006-2007; Wilson, 2009; Wilson & Lizzio, 2008).

As a result of this process, Murdoch University now offers all commencing students an integrated program of academic and pastoral support, regardless of their socioeconomic background, matriculation pathway, age, ethnicity or other sociocultural factors. The centrepiece of the program is a school-based network of dedicated First Year Advisors, who assist students throughout their first two semesters of study. This paper provides a case study of an institution-wide response to changes in higher education policy. It further outlines the way in which that response was adapted to meet the needs of students on Murdoch’s three on-shore campuses (one metropolitan and two regional) to illustrate the scope and effectiveness of this role.
2. Higher education in the Australian context

From the mid-1980s, when economic rationalism entered the Australian political domain, there have been major changes in the Australian higher education system that mirror changes in the overall political landscape. Successive governments, drawn from both of the major political parties, have produced policies that have stressed the economic benefits of education to the individual and the nation. This emphasis on utilitarianism led to profound changes in the nature of university education. These changes include:

- increased competition between universities and the development of intensely competitive marketing strategies (Marginson, 2006);
- growing recruitment of international students, particularly from South Asia and China, and greater diversity among the domestic student population (Marginson & Considine, 2000);
- proliferation of courses and subjects driven by student demand (Gallagher, 2000);
- pressure on staff to employ innovative approaches to teaching and learning, while maintaining high standards (Nunan, George & McCausland, 2000);
- widespread use of information and communication technologies in teaching and learning, both on campus and for distance education, and in other aspects of university activities (Krause & Hartley, 2005).

Over the same period, universities became more responsive to the needs of first year students during their transition to university and their first year on campus (Lizzio, 2006; McInnis, & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Tinto, 2001). Commonwealth initiatives aimed at increasing school completion triggered a surge in the number of young people qualified to apply for university place and prompted a new interest in the process of transition from school to university. Many of these “non-traditional” students were enthusiastic and capable, but not necessarily well-prepared for a traditional university education and attrition rates were high. The inaugural Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference was held in 1995 to address specific issues relating to students’ transition to university and the quality of their experiences on campus. Universities established programs to support commencing students and improve the quality of teaching in first year units; for example the Monash Transition Program conducted research into transition, placed academics in schools to work with teachers and senior students and brought secondary teachers onto campus to teach first year units, assist academic staff to develop their own teaching skills and conduct research into transition from school to university (Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel, & Dobson, 1998; Peel, 1998). In part, this interest in first year students can be attributed to the economic cost of attrition, estimated at $15,300 per student, per year (Marrington, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), but there is also a genuine recognition that the universities have a moral responsibility to provide appropriate support to their students including those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012).

3. Creation of the First Year Advisors’ Network

Inaugurated in 1974 as Western Australia’s second university, Murdoch has a long-standing commitment to social inclusion. The student profile has always included significant numbers of students from national equity groups, including regional and rural students, low socioeconomic status, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and mature age students. In 2009, Murdoch was faced with several challenges: (i) attrition rates were increasing; (ii) an increasing number of students were struggling with the academic demands of University study; and (iii) many students were having difficulty making friends on campus which would support their social transition to university (Martin-Lynch, 2009). Anticipating that the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) would increase student diversity further, the Director of Student Life and Learning commissioned a review of student retention, which identified concerns about the lack of cultural capital available to
many commencing students, particularly those who were the first in their family to undertake university education and those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. The report concluded that Murdoch needed to develop a coherent first year policy (Martin-Lynch, 2009) and in 2010 work began on a first year support program based on research undertaken at Griffith University (Lizzio, 2006; Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). The First Year Advisors (FYAs) commenced operation in January 2011.

4. Responding to Student Diversity

Predictions of an increase in student diversity were well founded. As the total number of commencing students has increased, the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences has also increased. By 2012, only one third of commencing students were following the traditional pathway from school to university; while the percentage of mature age students had remained stable, the percentage enrolling through alternate entry programs was increasing. There were also significant differences between Murdoch’s three campuses. The South Street Campus, which is home to law, engineering and veterinary science, continues to attract more “traditional” students – those who are less than 21 years old, have enrolled at university directly from school and have high entry scores (known as the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank or ATAR). In contrast, the Rockingham Campus, which is located in an industrial area that is also home to a large naval base, attracts more students entering through articulation schemes with the technical education sector or through bridging programs. Students on Murdoch’s Peel Campus are a special group as the campus was the exclusive home of the School of Nursing and Midwifery until 2012. In 2013 it was renamed the School of Health Professions and now offers some courses in chiropractic and counselling.

The FYAs are now an integral part of the first year experience at Murdoch (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012). The network consists of 16 advisors. Initially there was at least one in each School, but following a consolidation of the Schools from 14 to 8 in 2013, there are now 2-3 in each School on the main campus and one on each of the regional campuses, Rockingham and Peel. The FYAs operate on three main levels by:

(i) maintaining an open door policy, enabling students to get timely assistance without an appointment;
(ii) engaging in regular outreach ‘campaigns’ during which they contact first year students who have shown evidence of needing additional assistance;
(iii) co-ordinating three separate programs that engage students in different aspects of University life: Orientation; UniEdge and Peer Mentoring.

Murdoch University’s First Year Advisors’ Network is distinctive in that it includes all students, rather than focussing solely on students deemed to be disadvantaged or at-risk for on the basis of their ethnicity, family background or geographical location. In contrast to transition programs at other universities, Murdoch’s program is School-based, but centrally co-ordinated and embedded within the university structures.

The FYAs are dedicated, pastoral staff. Unlike academic staff, who often struggle with competing demands, the FYAs have time to talk with students, help them to clarify goals, explain expectations of university life, suggest study strategies and refer them to support services where appropriate – all critical functions of an effective advisor program (Wilson, 2009). Each FYA is semi-autonomous and focuses on the needs of students in their own School. The network provides support to individual FYAs and ensures that responses to student needs are consistent. The FYA network originally met fortnightly to plan activities and campaigns addressing transition issues that affect the whole university (Martin-Lynch, 2009), although the frequency of these meetings has changed to monthly in 2013.
4.1 Outreach campaigns

Over the course of the year the FYAs run eight outreach ‘campaigns’ to support vulnerable students. They contact all international students at least once each semester, while external students are contacted at least twice. Other campaigns are specifically timed within each semester to offer specific groups of students an opportunity for just-in-time academic recovery (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). Just prior to the start of the semester, the student administration office provides each FYA with a list of students in their School who have accepted a place, but has not enrolled in units by the start of Orientation, and with a second list of students who have received a warning letter after failing 50% or more of their units in the preceding semester. Within the first two weeks of the semester, they FYAs are notified about students who have enrolled, but not interacted with the online Learning Management System by downloading course materials or engaging in online activities. Prior to Census Date, they are given lists of students who have withdrawn and shortly afterwards, lists of students who have with withdrawn, but without a formal intermission.

At Risk

The at risk campaign, continues throughout both semesters of a student’s first 12 months of study. Students are defined as being at-risk if they show evidence of disengaging from their studies. This might include failing a diagnostic test or assessment task; missing classes; not engaging in online tutorials or requiring assistance with academic literacy and numeracy (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009). Tutors and/or Unit Coordinators observing these behaviours report the student to the FYA in their School using the At-risk Student Alert function on the class management intranet website, MyStudents. On receiving the report, the FYA telephones the student to discuss the situation, ask questions and provide assistance. If there is no response after two phone calls, the FYA will email the student using a standardised message tailored for each campaign theme.

To ensure that the reporting system works effectively, the FYAs liaise with first year unit co-ordinators and tutors at the start of each semester and explain the nature of their role, and the importance of just-in-time intervention to reduce attrition (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). They also provide training in the practical aspects of using the At-risk Student Alert. The FYAs continue to meet with the first year unit co-ordinators in their Schools during semester to discuss issues affecting students and to promote events designed to improve the students’ experience. These meetings play an important role in the success of the program by encouraging staff to report at-risk students before problems reach the critical stage. All interactions between the FYAs and students are logged using RightNow a customer service program that has been customised into a case management system. FYAs are able to check to see what advice or support has been given previously, and as all FYAs are able to access case files they can share information about students enrolled in dual degrees, or who change Schools. RightNow also facilitates the FYAN’s capacity to redistribute the caseload when individual members are on leave or if there is a surge in demand in some schools.

4.2 Support Programs

The First Year Advisors also play a leading role in three separate programs that promote student confidence, improve preparedness and encourage engagement; all of which are preconditions for a successful first year (Boin & Lever, 2008; Kantanis, 1995; Quinn, Bennett, Humphreys, Nelson & Clarke, 2011).
Orientation Days

The FYAs work closely with academic staff to design and deliver Orientation activities. They provide study advice, outline career opportunities, discuss expectations of university life and appropriate work/study balance regimes – all of which have been shown to lead to improved student outcomes (Savage & Smith, 2007-2008). One of the most important activities they undertake during Orientation is helping students to set goals for their first year (and beyond) using the purpose-designed Goal Card. This is a business-sized card on which students to outline their goals; the reverse lists the key predictors for success (Lizzio, 2006) and research by Wilson (2006). The FYAs also distribute postcards to each new student. The card welcomes students, outlines the FYA’s role and lists their contact details. Students are told that they can drop in without an appointment as well as phone or email for help. By the end of Orientation, many students have already developed a rapport with their FYA.

UniEdge

The second program run by the FYAs is UniEdge, a series of seminars designed to extend the process of Orientation over the first four weeks of semester and address both academic and social transition (Boin & Lever, 2008; Wilson, 2009). The seminars, which are presented jointly by the FYAs and staff from the Centre for University Teaching and Learning, cover key academics skills that students may not have mastered at school and community-building activities to position students for success in their first assessment tasks and foster a sense of community among first year students. In 2013, UniEdge introduced an additional element into the program. The FYAs hold an information expo on Bush Court, the university common, to distribute information about student services to students who have not attended the UniEdge seminars.

Peer Mentoring Program

The final part of the transition program is the university-wide Peer Mentoring Program. This program, which replaced the existing, but not always successful School-based programs, complements UniEdge; the emphasis is on enculturation into the academic life of the university through the Schools. The FYAs recruit and train second and third year students within each School as mentors. Pairs of mentors are then matched with up to eight first year students; groups meet weekly throughout the semester in an informal setting. Mentors provide course-specific guidance to students and refer them to the School’s FYA where appropriate. In Semester 1 2012, 128 mentors and 380 mentees participated in the program.

5. Regional variations

Murdoch University’s two regional campuses at Peel and Rockingham each have distinctive characteristics resulting from their location and the type of they course offer, leading to significant variations in the ways that the FYAs operate. Lower average cohort numbers are exchanged for a wider set of responsibilities, leading to more variety within the role. Owing to the smaller size of the regional campuses, the FYAs have a higher profile than on the South Street campus. They are well-known to all staff and students and are often called upon to undertake activities that are not associated with this role at the South Street Campus. In reality, they act as campus chaplains assisting and advising on a wide range of issues since they are often the first person to detect a problem and look for a resolution. In the last twelve months either or both of the regional FYAs have been asked to help design a student lounge, resolve timetabling issues that made it difficult for some student to attend class, organise a transition program for articulation students entering a course in second year and represent the university at an award ceremony.
5.1 Peel

Murdoch’s Peel Campus is some 60 kilometres from the South Street Campus on the outskirts of the satellite town of Mandurah. Until 2012, Nursing and Midwifery was the only university School on the Peel Campus, but post graduate courses in Chiropractic and Counselling are being added this year and the school has been renamed the School of Health Professions. In some respects, having all commencing students enrolled in one degree on a small campus makes the FYA’s job easier, but there are also challenges that arise from the structure of the course and the sociocultural backgrounds of the students that make the FYAs role crucial in the process of transition.

In Australia, nursing and teaching continue to provide a path towards upward mobility for many people who do not regard the elite professions as accessible (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Laming, 2012). Nursing is an attractive occupational for many students looking for secure, reasonable well-paid employment, especially in regional areas (Laming & Kelly, 2013), and the entry requirements are moderate. The majority of the students enrolling in the Bachelor of Nursing are mature age students and many have gained access through alternative entry programs. They are likely to be combining study with work and with family responsibilities and a large minority are from CALD backgrounds.

The course structure can also lead to difficulties for some students. It is inflexible, fully prescribed and taught wholly on campus. Students who miss more than 2 tutorials in a unit their unit for any reason fail automatically, and as units are not timetables in both semesters, students may have to wait 12 months to repeat the unit. In some cases, this means being out of contact with the university for six months as there are no other relevant units available. Also, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia insists that students to complete each year of training before continuing to the next. Time away from study makes recommencing the course more difficult as the students have lost momentum and find it difficult to see themselves in their chosen role. Reorganising their lives, giving up full time work and refocusing on their long-term goal is also difficult.

Owing to the small size of the campus, the Peel FYA is well-known to all students and staff. As well as playing a prominent role in Orientation activities, she is often present at university functions that an FYA would not normally attend. The FYA on the Peel Campus is also responsible for organising activities that would be run by the Student Guild on the South Street Campus – the foodbank, the Multicultural Festival with African drumming and a steel band and “Stamp Out Stress Day, which features yoga classes, meditation with a Buddhist nun and a chocolate fountain. The FYA also played a leading role in establishing the staff-student tunnel ball competition complete with annual trophy. Lizzio (2006) demonstrated that student engagement with extra-mural activities reduces attrition and increases students’ enjoyment of their studies. The Peel FYA’s involvement in these activities puts her in regular contact with the students and establishes her as an approachable figure. She is able to address most of them by name, something that has long been understood to increase students’ confidence and reduce attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977).

Having a small cohort of commencing students on a small campus also enable the FYA to seek out at risk students and “accidentally” meet them coming out of a tutorial or walking to the car park. In this way she is able to initiate a conversation in a non-threatening manner. Many students lack the confidence to address their lecturers or unit co-ordinators directly about their concerns and the FYA is often asked to sits in on a discussion between a staff member and student to offer support.
5.2 Rockingham

In many ways, the role of the FYA on the Rockingham Campus is more flexible (and more challenging) than any other. More than 90% of students at the Rockingham Campus are enrolled in teacher education, and the FYA is nominally a member of the School of Education, however there is a rapidly growing cohort of students studying tourism and events management, and applied accounting. In addition, each semester 10-12 elective units from courses offered only at other Murdoch campuses including sociology, community development, sustainability, sound, sports science, history, public relations, Asian Studies, Australian Indigenous Studies, English, creative writing and drama. These electives at the Rockingham Campus enable students living in the surrounding area to complete parts of their courses locally instead of travelling 30-40 kilometres to the South Street campus. The FYA at Rockingham provides support to all of these students, and as a consequence, is required to liaise with several different Schools.

Like all FYAs, the Rockingham FYA provides advice and support on a range of issues including study skills and career planning, and refers students to the support services when necessary, but his role is more prominent than that of FYAs on the South Street Campus as staff from Equity and Social Inclusion and Counselling are available one day per week and there is no Student Health Services on campus. Not only does he make appointments with these services, but he carries out triage, providing mental health first aid and fast tracking referrals when necessary. Like his counterpart on the Peel Campus, the Rockingham FYA provides welfare assistance normally organised by the Student Guild including food vouchers and emergency loans and assists second and third year students. The FYA on the Rockingham Campus is unique in that he also helps students enrolled in the bridging program OnTrack, and in HeadStart, a program for secondary students enrolled in preparatory units for the West Australian Certificate of Education. He also offers tutoring in mathematics and science; staff from the Centre for University Teaching and Learning are available three days per week, but none of them is able to provide assistance in these areas. None of these extra responsibilities was included in the original role description; they have been added in response students’ needs and rely on the skills of the current FYA employed at Rockingham. Paradoxically, they also mean that he has less time for one-to-one consultations with first year students.

6. Evaluation: effectiveness and cost

Creation of the First Year Advisors’ Network has had a profound impact on the whole Murdoch University community. As Table 2 indicates there is a steady demand for their services, but evaluating the program is a complex process, which must take into account both human capital and economic capital to develop a true picture of its effectiveness.

Table 1: Interactions between First Year Advisors and students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of 1st year students enrolled</th>
<th>Total number of students contacted</th>
<th>Number of student initiated contacts</th>
<th>Number of campaign contacts</th>
<th>Total number of interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sem 2, 2011</td>
<td>4273</td>
<td>3,486</td>
<td>N/A**</td>
<td>6,085</td>
<td>6,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sem 1, 2012</td>
<td>4360</td>
<td>4,853</td>
<td>3,017</td>
<td>7,529</td>
<td>10,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sem 2, 2012</td>
<td>4407</td>
<td>3,953</td>
<td>2,519</td>
<td>7,111</td>
<td>9,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sem 3, 2013***</td>
<td>4476</td>
<td>3,309</td>
<td>1,134</td>
<td>3,581</td>
<td>4,652</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* this includes all students contacted, not just first year students
** data was not collected during this period
*** from January 1st 2013 – March 20th 2013 = 2.5 months
6.1 Human capital

Evidence drawn from evaluation of the program, which is undertaken at the end of each semester, indicates that the First Year Advisors’ Network has had a positive impact on retention. In Semester 2, 2011 95.6% of students were “happy to receive the call from their FYA” and 93.5% agreed or strongly agreed that the call was helpful; in Semester 1, 2012 the figure was 100% in response to both questions. The following comment is typical of many from the student evaluations:

[My FYA] was an amazing help, at first I didn't think I could go to her for help, then I received a phone call from [her] and we made an appointment and sat down and talked about all of my issues and how I could resolve them. In the end, [she] helped me to resolve my problem and I am now very comfortable with the position that I am in. (student survey, Semester 1, 2012).

Moreover, 87.2% of respondents to the corresponding staff evaluation indicated that the FYAN has had a positive impact on students’ experiences.

The introduction of the First Year Advisor role has been of huge benefit to students and academics. It's hard to imagine how we managed without them! (First Year Unit Coordinator: Staff survey, Semester 1, 2012)

Both academic and professional staff have come to rely on the FYAs to assist students by providing advice that they may not comfortable giving or have time or skills to provide.

FYAs have taken up a lot of the routine pastoral care work that would otherwise be required of me, and hence would often not get done due to the number of students (usually about 400-450). It is great that I can deal with the special cases and issues that arise, knowing that a lot of other pastoral care work is being done for me by the FYAs. (First Year Unit Coordinator: staff survey, Semester 1 2012)

6.2 Cost-benefit analysis

An initial analysis of the retention data suggests that in addition to providing a valuable service to both students and staff, the First Year Advisor program also provides a positive net financial return. Fifty-six per cent (440/786) of students commencing in Semester 2, 2011 who displayed at-risk behaviours and had active contact with their First Year Advisor were retained for three or more semesters. Retention continued to improve for at-risk students commencing in Semester 1 2012, with 61.3% (1,180/1,924) retained for three or more semesters. Further analysis will be completed in late-2013 for students commencing in Semester 2 2012.

The 2009 review of retention by the Director of Student Life and Learning estimated each student who discontinued their studies represented an average loss to Murdoch of $30,000 over three years, the usual length of an undergraduate degree (Martin-Lynch, 2009). This figure was confirmed by Marrington, Nelson & Clarke (2010). Retaining an additional 100 at-risk students beyond first year, equates an increase in revenue of $3 million. Even after factoring in students who are retained beyond first year but eventually discontinue in their second or third years, a positive financial gain still results after accounting for the $1.5 million yearly operating cost for the FYA program.

7. Concluding comments

Murdoch University’s First Year Advisors’ Network is a bold and innovative response to Commonwealth policy intended to complete the process of refashioning Australian higher education from an elite to a mass system. The combination of an open door policy, the outreach campaigns to vulnerable students and tailored programs has created carefully tiered levels of support for all new students and an improvement in the first year experience
at Murdoch University. The Murdoch University First Year Advisors’ Network was created to be flexible and dynamic in the way it responds to student needs. Its distinctive features - the distribution of the FYAs across each school under a central co-ordinator and detailed recording of data - give it the capacity to provide invaluable information to the university and to monitor its own effectiveness; a quality lacking from many first year transition programs (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000). It is a model that would be widely applicable to other tertiary institutions with an interest in improving student engagement, retention and the overall first year experience.

REFERENCES:


