

## UniEdge: A first year transition program and its continued evolution through a reflective approach. A Practice Report

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### Abstract

*The shift in Australian higher education policy to widen participation and ensure equity across all student cohorts has led to the need for specific, structured transition programs. The First Year Advisor Network at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia has designed and implemented a transition program for commencing students called UniEdge. The aims of the program are: (1) to help foster a sense of community for first year students; (2) to make new students aware of the support services available; and (3) to improve the confidence and preparedness of new students. The program has received high praise from students, but rates of attendance have been problematic. By reflecting on student and staff feedback, the program has been adapted over multiple semesters, resulting in increased student attendance and therefore a greater impact on the first year experience at Murdoch University.*

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## Introduction

The landscape of higher education is rapidly shifting. Student populations at universities locally, nationally and internationally are becoming more diverse (Yorke & Thomas, 2010). In Australia, there has been a recent focus on widening participation and increasing the number of non-traditional, mature-age and low socio-economic status (LSES) students (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Students from a range of non-traditional backgrounds are entering tertiary study, but many of these students are withdrawing within their first year of study (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2009). In this shifting landscape, a successful transition from pre-enrolment to becoming an established student has been identified as crucial for student retention (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009).

The increase in student diversity has created a situation where many commencing students are under prepared for, or uncertain as to the expectations inherent in, university study (Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck & Ward, 2009; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). As the student population continues to diversify, it becomes the university's responsibility to regularly reflect on current practices and make the necessary changes to ensure that the university culture is welcoming and conducive to learning for all students (Henderson & Noble, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010). For this reason, many universities across Australia have developed transition programs aimed at equipping students with the skills and information necessary for academic success and to enable community building opportunities. James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, for example, offers students a three day

program called *Unistart* that is facilitated by student mentors, academic staff and learning advisors. The program aims to reduce anxiety and provide an insight into basic study skills. Students receive information about university support services and connect with other first-year students from their course (James Cook University, 2013). Another example is the *UniSkills* transition program offered by the University of Western Australia in Perth, Australia, which is only open to students who meet certain eligibility criteria. The program begins with a two day *Flying Start Orientation Program* which provides an opportunity for students to meet other first years and to get to know the campus. This is followed by regular study groups, ongoing social events and weekly emails (University of Western Australia, 2013).

In 2011, the First Year Advisor Network (FYAN) at Murdoch University (MU) (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012; Kemp, Lefroy & Callan, 2013), in collaboration with campus support services, began to conceptualise a university-wide first year transition program entitled *UniEdge*. *UniEdge* was developed to give students the 'edge' through the following main objectives: 1) to help foster a sense of community for first year students; 2) to make new students aware of the support services available; and 3) to improve the confidence and preparedness of new students. *UniEdge* was also conceptualised as an extension of orientation and a way to avoid information overload following a single Orientation session (Boin & Lever, 2008; Kemp et al.; Wilson, 2009). *UniEdge* was piloted in Semester 1 of 2012 and has continued, in modified forms, in each subsequent semester (summarised below and in Table 1). Program modifications have been based on program evaluation

surveys from students as well as feedback from FYAs, support services, unit coordinators, tutors from first year units, and contemporary research. This paper outlines the various iterations of *UniEdge* and shows how a reflective approach to feedback and theory resulted in a modified version of *UniEdge* that encouraged greater student attendance and is therefore having a greater impact on students' first year experience at MU.

## Iteration 1 of *UniEdge*

When the *UniEdge* program was piloted in Semester 1 of 2012, it consisted of a series of one-hour sessions offered during the first four weeks of semester. The first session was delivered during students' first tutorial in their Foundation Unit.<sup>1</sup> Students completed activities designed to help them meet other students and develop clear expectations concerning both the University and themselves. Students were also given material outlining the different support services available on campus. This first session ended with promotion of the *UniEdge* program instalments that were to follow in subsequent weeks. The second, third and fourth sessions were delivered as optional one-hour lectures during weeks 3 to 4 by a pair of presenters: one First Year Advisor and one staff member from the University Student Learning Centre.

Each *UniEdge* session was designed to meet the three previously stated specific program objectives. Firstly, the program aimed to help foster a sense of community for first year students and this objective was achieved via fun and interactive activities, promotion of the Murdoch Peer Mentoring Program (Kemp et al., 2013)

and involvement in a community art project. Secondly, the program aimed to increase awareness of the support services available through appearances from support service staff during each lecture and a passport activity, whereby students obtained a cardboard *Passport* that sent students on a 'scavenger hunt' around campus to find the location of specific support services and obtain a stamp at each station (Student Learning Centre, Health and Counselling, Murdoch Sports and Equity and Social Inclusion). Students who completed the *Passport* went into a draw to win an iPad2. Campus support services were also discussed in lectures by way of some student scenarios, where students were challenged to identify appropriate support services on campus to assist in different situations. Thirdly, the program was designed to improve the confidence and preparedness of new students by embracing diversity and acknowledging students' strengths, challenging negative thoughts and providing specific study, assignment and time management tips. In this and subsequent iterations of *UniEdge*, students have been surveyed to ascertain whether the program objectives were met. Table 2 summarises student responses from surveys (survey collection methods provided in Table 1). When asked: "What was the most useful thing that you learned at *UniEdge*" during this first instalment, some typical responses included:

The skills to survive at uni

Not to be scared to ask, speak out and seek help

Learning how to learn and study smarter. A must for all students!

Despite aggressive advertising methods (see Table 1), an enticing prize (iPad2) and

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<sup>1</sup> A compulsory first semester unit for all commencing Murdoch University students

consistently positive survey results (see Table 2), the program saw very low attendance at the optional lecture sessions and limited numbers of students completing the *Passport Activity* (see Table 3).

## Iteration 2 of UniEdge

The second instalment of UniEdge was implemented in Semester 2 of 2012. Some adaptations of Iteration 1 were made based on reflection on feedback from student attendees, FYAs, support services and academic staff. In order to retain a focus on community building opportunities, key university skills, such as time management and group work, were taught through interactive activities. The first change, however, due to the smaller intake of commencing students, involved condensing UniEdge into three weeks, and starting the program during Orientation week. The Orientation week sessions were run individually by FYAs in each school as part of the school-based Course Advice Session (Kemp et al., 2013). The Orientation session was a shorter, half-hour version of UniEdge intended to give students a *snapshot* to encourage further participation in the program. The second change for Iteration 2 involved removing UniEdge from the first Foundation unit tutorial. The tutors for these units were reluctant to include UniEdge content again in their already full tutorials.

I don't think it belongs in the FDN tutorial as there is already lots of info to cover in the first tutorial and this is just more info for students to take in and make students overwhelmed.  
(Foundation Unit tutor)

For this reason, the UniEdge material was not delivered as positively as hoped during

tutorials, which may have contributed to the poorer attendance at the subsequent sessions in Iteration 1. The third change for Iteration 2 was an increased focus on study skills. The student survey had revealed that the students felt that they benefitted most from the skill-based aspects of the seminar series. There were also suggestions in the student survey that more skill-building would have enhanced the program. Finally, the *Passport Activity* continued, but instead of a single prize available for one participant, all students who completed the activity would receive a USB stick preloaded with an assortment of *student tips* sheets and vouchers redeemable at various outlets around campus.

Although student feedback concerning the seminar style of UniEdge in both Iteration 1 and 2 was extremely positive (Table 2), attendance was lower than hoped, even after the above mentioned changes were made in Iteration 2 (Table 3). First Year Advisors were concerned, therefore, that the program was not reaching enough students, particularly those students who were likely to be most in need of transitional support. There were suggestions that students seemed reluctant to commit an extra hour each week to a not-for-credit, formal, traditional and structured seminar. There was also reflection on the cohort of students self-selecting to attend. The seminar style seemed to favour a biased sample of already high-achieving students. To address these issues, the FYAN reflected on the previous iterations of UniEdge, in light of student and staff feedback and contemporary research in the field, and discussed ways to develop UniEdge to accommodate and engage a more diverse cohort. There was discussion that, in order to appeal to students of diverse backgrounds, a more profound shift from

traditional instruction methods, such as the *seminar style*, was necessary. It has regularly been suggested that the availability of a wide variety of scaffolded learning options will ensure the learning experience suits the need of a large number of students (Tomlinson, 2001). Movement away from traditional styles of learning is consistent with other contemporary research, which indicates that the ways in which students are engaging with the Australian university community are shifting. This is due, in large part, not only to the aforementioned increase in student diversity and participation (Burton, Taylor, Dowling & Lawrence, 2009; Zepke & Leach, 2010), but also to changing educational technologies. Alternative approaches have been proposed that involve the creation of “knowledge communities” (Northedge, 2003) or “learning communities” (Tinto, 2002). In these communities, students can choose their degree of participation according to their background and skill level. The FYAN decided that incorporating such a knowledge community may be a key factor in bringing more of the diverse MU student cohort together for the *UniEdge* program.

### **Iteration 3 of UniEdge**

Rather than expecting all students to attend a session presented in the traditional seminar style, Iteration 3 was driven by the view that “effective teaching requires flexibility, creativity and responsibility in order to provide an instructional environment able to respond to [students’] individual needs” (Tulbure, 2012, p. 398; see also Crisp et al., 2009; and Hillman, 2005). This was difficult to achieve in previous iterations using the traditional lecture style, as much emphasis was placed on giving adequate time to

appearances and mini lectures by support service staff and not to students’ needs. The original seminar format of *UniEdge* was therefore changed for Iteration 3 to flexible, one-hour EXPOs during each of the first four weeks of semester. The intention was to provide first year students with a student-focused support *hotspot*, enabling them to come and go as they pleased without feeling locked in for long periods of time. The hope was that the flexibility of the EXPO format would attract more first year students and avoid targeting only those high achieving students self-selecting into the program. Each EXPO had a different theme to reflect the key supports and skills that students might need to successfully navigate that particular stage in semester (see Table 1).

The objectives of *UniEdge* were still met under the new format in that: (1) the EXPO style showcased a strong and vibrant first year student community and therefore a strong sense of community, especially through the *First Year Advisor Hub* and a *Mentoring Stall* with coffee and snacks; (2) there were interactive stalls for each of the support services available to students and handouts were disseminated (the *Passport Activity* was abandoned during Iteration 3 due to very low participation levels); and (3) the EXPO in Week 3 focussed specifically on helping students to develop the skills necessary for success at university. In addition to the EXPOs, Iteration 3 of *UniEdge* also saw the development and implementation of a *Calendar of Events* that extended over the full semester. A range of additional events, including a *Meet and Greet Lunch* (Week 6), a *Student Sports Day* (Week 8) and an *Exam Preparation Day* (Week 11), were offered throughout the semester. These were still aimed at promoting social inclusion, providing essential skills and embedding

community building activities, but offered at the time when they are needed most. Iteration 3 was offered again in Semester 2 2013, but as a reduced version that reflected the smaller mid-year intake of students. Student feedback from surveys

again confirmed that the objectives of the program were met during Iteration 3 (Tables 2 and 4), and most importantly, student attendance in the Semester 2 instalment of Iteration 3 was double that of previous semesters (Table 3).

**Table 1: A summary of the key differences between each iteration of the UniEdge program.**

	<b>Iteration 1</b>	<b>Iteration 2</b>	<b>Iteration 1</b>
<b>Timing</b>	Semester 1 2012	Semester 2 2012	Semesters 1 and 2 2013
<b>Format</b>	One tutorial and three seminars	Four seminars	EXPO sessions
<b>Duration</b>	4 weeks Started in Week 1 1 hour seminars	3 weeks Started in O Week 1 hour seminars	4 weeks Started in week 1 1 hour EXPO sessions (Sem 2 – Weeks 1 & 3 only)
<b>Frequency</b>	Three sessions offered weekly	Two sessions offered weekly	One EXPO offered weekly
<b>Themes</b>	-Student Expectations -Getting Started as a Student -Strengths for University Study -Tackling Your First Assignment	-Orientation and UniEdge -Tackling Your First Assignment -Your Uni Toolbox	-Getting Started -Getting Supported -Getting Skilled -Getting Connected
<b>Location</b>	Main campus lecture theatre	Main campus lecture theatre	Foyer of main campus lecture theatre
<b>Support Service Involvement</b>	Support Services presented at each session	Support Services presented at each session	Support Services had a stall at one or more EXPOs
<b>Promotion</b>	Orientation/Passports/ flyers/posters/online	Orientation/Passports/ Flyers/posters/online	Orientation/O Guide /posters/online/email signatures/emails
<b>Prizes</b>	Prize draw for an ipad from students who completed the passport activity	All students who completed the passport activity were given a USB preloaded with helpful information and tips for student success	A variety of prizes for various activities during the EXPO including USBs, Frisbees, food, coffee vouchers, food vouchers
<b>Events Beyond Week 4</b>	None	None	Meet and Greet Lunch (Week 6), Student Sports Day (Week 8), Exam Preparation Day (Week 11)
<b>Student feedback survey methods</b>	Survey on the back of UniEdge Passport – only those students completing Passport activity participated	Survey on the back of UniEdge Passport – only those students completing Passport activity participated	Peer Mentor handed paper-based surveys out to students attending EXPO and collected as students left the foyer

**Table 2: Results from students who completed feedback surveys for the UniEdge program. Numbers reflect the percentage of students who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement provided; the other response options were “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.**

Survey statement	Iteration 1 (Sem 1 2012) n=40*	Iteration 2 (Sem 2 2012) n=19*	Iteration 3 (Sem 1 2013) n=75*
<i>Overall I am glad I attended UniEdge</i>	99%	95%	97%
<i>I now feel more confident to approach the support services</i>	99%	89%	83%
<i>If I need help at uni, I know where to go</i>	100%	94%	88%
<i>I would recommend UniEdge to other new students</i>	99%	100%	93%

\*Note that sample size reflects numbers of students who completed surveys, rather than the total numbers of students who participated in the program.

**Table 3: Student attendance for each iteration of UniEdge.**

	Iteration 1	Iteration 2	Iteration 3	
Timing	Semester 1 2012	Semester 2 2012	Semester 1 2013	Semester 2 2013
Commencing first year student intake	2776	1261	2768	1244
Week 1	N/A*	80 (6%)	200 (7%)	186 (15%)
Week 2	143 (5%)	45 (4%)	80 (3%)	Not offered
Week 3	71 (3%)	Not offered	124 (4%)	82 (7%)
Week 4	47 (2%)	Not offered	144 (5%)	Not offered
Passport Activity	40 (1%)	10 (<1%)	Not offered	Not offered

\*Session was offered in Foundation Unit tutorial where attendance was compulsory.

**Table 4: Results from students who completed feedback surveys for the Exam Preparation Presentation that was offered for the first time during Iteration 3. Numbers reflect the percentage of students who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement provided; the other response options were “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.**

Survey statement	Iteration 3 (Sem 1 2013) n=41*
Overall I am glad I attended the UniEdge Exam Preparation Presentation	98%
I now feel more confident to sit my exams	74%
I would recommend the UniEdge Exam Preparation Presentation to other new students	100%

\*Note that sample size reflects numbers of students who completed surveys, rather than the total numbers of students who participated in the program.

## Concluding remarks

Murdoch University’s UniEdge program was developed to provide transitional support to an increasingly diverse contemporary student cohort. Student survey results from each iteration of UniEdge have consistently confirmed that the objectives of the program are being met. Most importantly, between 93 and 100% of students who participated in the program, and completed surveys, would recommend the UniEdge program to other new students. However, student attendance was an ongoing problem and it became clear to FYAs that the students who were participating were of an already high achieving nature, while the majority of students, and therefore students from diverse backgrounds, were not participating in the program. It was only through a drastic change in the format of UniEdge that a greater number, and therefore a potentially greater diversity, of first year students at MU were reached. Specifically, changing the format of

UniEdge from a series of seminars to a series of EXPOs was better suited to students’ preferences and led to the biggest improvement in attendance. The FYAN’s reflective approach, focusing on student feedback and the preferences of the majority of the contemporary student cohort, was the key to providing a more successful program. Overall, it appears that a reflective approach, specifically tailored to each University’s student cohort, and even recognising changes in student cohorts in different years, is essential if transition programs are to consistently enhance the first year experience. The FYAN will continue to use this approach to further enhance the program and lift student attendance.

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