

## Three-tiered support: Individual, school and institution-wide initiatives through a first year advisor network

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### Abstract

*The First Year Advisor Network (FYAN) at Murdoch University has a three-tiered approach offering (i) individual, (ii) school-based and (iii) institution-wide student access to support that addresses the diverse needs of the contemporary student population. The programs, campaigns and open-door policy of the FYAN, along with the unique structure of the network, have been developed to provide these varied points of access to student support. Importantly, First Year Advisors (FYAs) act as a generalised support for all students and as a hub to accessing specialised support at the University. This paper highlights the range of initiatives developed by the FYAN and emphasises that while outreach contact is a successful way to promote access to support, many students still self identify as at-risk and will access FYAs for direct and referral advice.*

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## Introduction

Widening participation and increasing the number of non-traditional and low socio economic status (low SES) students in higher education has been a focus for Australian universities, particularly since the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). The issues surrounding student transition, support and retention have been widely researched (Kift, 2009; Marrington, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Tinto, 2001; Wilson, 2009). The literature recognises that many Australian universities are facing student disengagement and high attrition rates in many disciplines of study. Students are entering tertiary study through a variety of non-traditional and alternative pathways, and many of these students are withdrawing within their first year of study (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordstrom, 2009). This can be attributed to a wide range of factors and the issues that students face within their first year of study at a higher education institution. Therefore “universities need to initiate, support and promote student personal, social and academic engagement in the early weeks of first year to retain students” (Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009, p. 2). The first year experience literature indicates that student populations at universities locally, nationally and internationally are becoming more diverse (Yorke & Thomas, 2010), with an increase in students entering higher education through non-traditional pathways. The student population at Murdoch University (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012) has the highest proportions of mature-age, low SES, regional/remote, part-time and external students among the Western Australian universities, and the diversity continues to grow as it widens the participation of students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace

Relations, 2011). To reach the contemporary cohort of first year students, a three-tiered approach has been developed at Murdoch: (i) individualised, (ii) school-based and (iii) institution-wide approach.

The First Year Advisor Network (FYAN) was introduced at Murdoch in January 2011, after an internal review (Martin-Lynch, 2009) highlighted the increasing attrition rates and the necessity to develop a formal approach to the first year experience. The unique structure of the FYAN (Box et al., 2012) is fundamental to its ability to achieve these objectives. The network functions as a cohesive group to provide a consistent and coordinated approach to student support at all three tiers and works together to provide support and to promote access to the support available from other parts of the University. The network, as a cohesive group, provides a consistent and coordinated approach to student support at all three tiers and works together to promote access to the support available. The need for this holistic approach to support for students is outlined by Nelson et al. (2009), who state that providing personal, social and academic support are vital for successful first year experience programs. The range of support provided and promoted by the FYAN creates a “building blocks” approach to first year transition, recognising that each individual will access support differently.

## Promoting awareness of the First Year Advisors

A vital aspect of enabling first year students to access their First Year Advisor (FYA) as a support service is ensuring that the students are aware of the existence and identity of their school FYAs. Explicit promotion of the FYAs across the

University to staff and students began with the inception of the FYAN. Promotion of the FYAN is strategically timed throughout the first year student's journey, from accepting their offer at Murdoch to completing their first year of study. In the lead up to semester, the admission letter from the University encourages students to contact their FYA if they have questions regarding any aspect of their enrolment process; First Year Advisors attend Early Enrolment Days in the two weeks leading up to Orientation Week (O Week); and students meet their FYA during orientation sessions, whereupon they are given material displaying the FYA logo, contact details and a description of the type of issues FYAs can assist with. Promotion of the FYAN continues throughout the first four weeks of the semester where students attend UniEdge (explained further in Promoting access at the institution and school level). FYAs attend all first year lectures within the first four weeks of semester (known as "lecture bombing"), encouraging students to develop help-seeking behaviours and to contact their FYAs. At this time the first year *Facebook* page is also opened, presenting an informal, quick way for students to ask questions regarding any aspect of university life and to receive timely information regarding common transition questions. Each FYA also contacts all their first year students via email weekly with a newsletter containing important School and University information.

In a survey of students in their first year, conducted in Semester 1 (S1) 2012, 99.3 % (n=401) said they were aware of the FYA(s) in their school. One student commented:

I found having a designated person to go to with questions very helpful, especially being new to university

studies. My FYA was very keen to help and guided me in the right direction when needed.

As part of the ongoing promotion of the network, the FYAs created a logo image of a helping hand (Appendix A) which is recognisable to first year students as a safe place to find personalised support. The FYAN developed branded postcards which are given to students at the School Orientation Day. Postcards are also distributed throughout the University at all support service points. This encourages students to associate their School FYA with all areas of support at the University. It also enables students to find their School FYA's contact details at a multitude of locations across campus. The FYA logo is displayed on office doors of all FYAs and throughout the school buildings branded signs direct students to their FYA.

After two years, the FYAN is now embedded in the University staff culture ensuring that relevant University staff are aware of the support provided by FYAs. This has been achieved formally and informally through information sessions hosted by the FYAN for academic staff, self promotion and informal discussions with School staff members. Staff throughout Murdoch direct students to contact their FYAs, who they know will answer many of their students' questions or will direct them to appropriate support service. In 2012, FYAs have recorded 378 direct referrals from staff members across Murdoch. As one academic staff member stated in a staff survey in S1, 2012:

Students come to Murdoch with many problems, and of course FYAs cannot solve all of these, but they can and do help enormously in helping students adjust to University life. Previously students were (really) left to their own devices and many did not succeed. We

also have informed advice on the issues of transition in our School.

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.

## Promoting access at the individual level

At an individual level, the FYAs interact with students in two main ways. First, students initiate contact with their FYA as a result of the information described above—the open door policy of the FYAs

In 2012, there were 12,994 incidents where FYAs contacted students for different campaigns. These are recorded through the *RightNow* software program. Of the total number of incidents, only 22 incidents were recorded as the FYA being

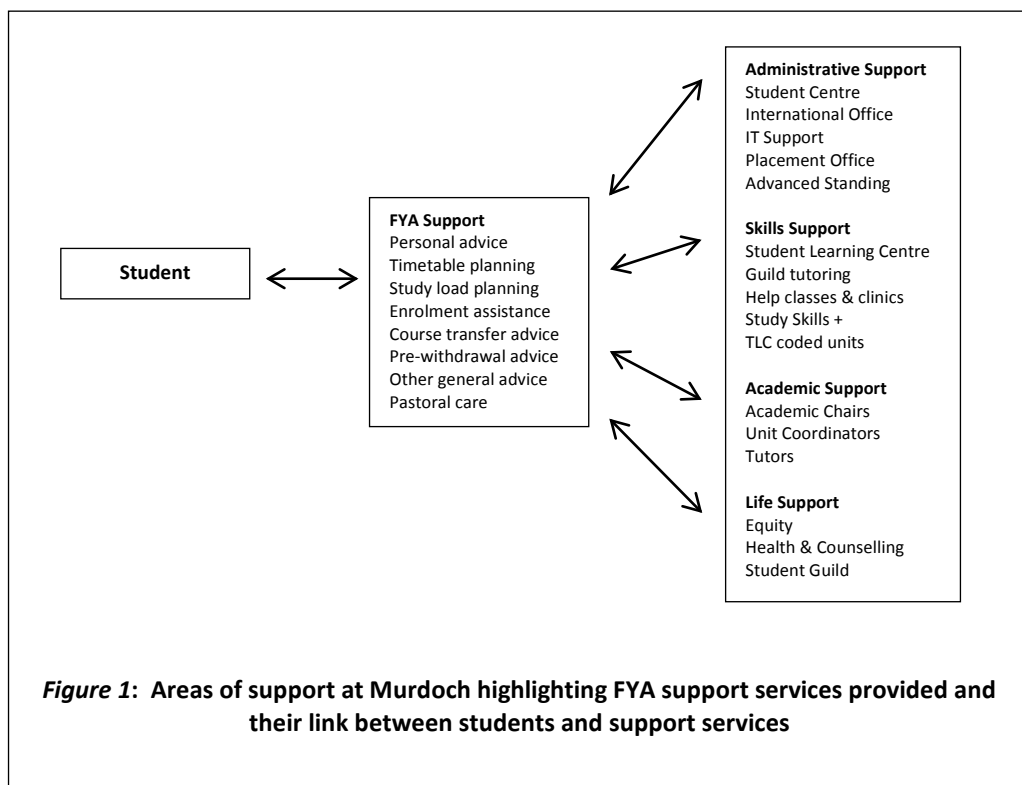
**Table 1: Overview of support promoted via campaign contact in 2012**

Support promoted	Number of incidents (%)
FYA support	11,305 (87.0)
Academic support	1,004 (7.7)
Skills support	374 (2.9)
Administrative support	206 (1.6)
Life support	105 (0.8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,994</b>

gives students the necessary confidence to approach their FYA directly. Second, the students may be contacted by their FYA in an outreach capacity as a result of being part of bespoke and timely phone campaigns which target students who may be at risk of disengaging from their studies (Box et al., 2012). While academic staff initially raised fears of driving students away by unwanted contact, as one student explained in a survey in S1 2012, outreach calls often open up a channel of communication and encourage students to seek further help:

(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

unable to make contact with the student due to no phone or email details available (0.2%). Table 1 gives an overview of the supports promoted during contact with students. This breakdown highlights that for 87% of outreach campaign contact in 2012, the FYA was able to provide the necessary support without referral. Also highlighted in Figure 1 are the four other areas of support FYAs are enabling students to access from a single location.



FYAs contact students to offer them direct advice and promote the appropriate support when required. Throughout the promotion of the FYAN, students are also encouraged to initiate contact with their FYAs via email or phone or to drop in to their FYA's office if they require assistance. The high profile, approachability and open door policy of the FYAN has resulted in a large number of student-initiated contact. In 2012, there were 5,353 incidents of student-initiated contact with FYAs. Table 2 indicates the initial mode of contact between student and FYA. These figures highlight a considerable number of contact initiated by students (28% of the total incidents dealt with in 2012), also emphasising students' preference to initiating contact via email.

A wide range of administrative, skills, academic and life supports have traditionally been available to students at Murdoch. However, FYA promotion of these supports has increased students' access to them. For example, attendance at the co-curricular Chemistry Clinic at Murdoch has shown an increase in S1 attendance since the implementation of the FYAN (S1 2011: 79 students, S2 2011: 85 students, S1 2012: 159 students, S2 2012: 76 students). The Academic Chair for Chemistry, Mineral Science and Extractive Metallurgy, Dr. Leonie Hughes, who coordinates the Chemistry Clinic, credits the increase in attendance at these clinics, which have a direct impact on student performance, to the advice offered by FYAs through the at-risk campaigns.

**Table 2: Mode of contact chosen by students when initiating contact with FYAs**

Mode of contact	Number of incidents (%)
Call	1,007 (18.8)
Email	2,896 (54.1)
Walk-In	1,450 (27.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,353</b>

**Table 3: Incidents related to advice given by FYAs**

Support Offered	Number of incidents (%)
Administrative support	457 (8.0)
FYA support	3,459 (60.4)
Skills support	223 (3.9)
Academic support	1381 (24.1)
Life support	208 (3.6)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5730</b>

Table 3 provides an overview of outcomes of student-initiated contact with FYAs in 2012. This table shows that over 60% of the enquiries from students can be dealt with by the FYA directly and no referral to other services is required. It is also evident from the table, that students require a large range of support from other services within the institution. The FYAs are able to effectively direct students to these services.

In 2012, 2,323 students contacted their FYAs for support, despite never being part of a contact campaign or showing signs of disengaging from their studies. FYAs encourage student-initiated contact and promote their open door policy through the various programs and promotions they offer. Table 4 highlights that the number of

outreach contacts from FYAs, and student-initiated contacts, varies between schools. This data strengthens the argument that

there is a need for both outreach contact and open, student-initiated access to support. By working directly in a school, FYAs gain insight into the unique culture and discourse of that cohort and adapt their working style and time allocations accordingly.

**Table 4: Types of contact favoured in different schools**

<b>School</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Campaign Contact</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Student-Initiated Contact</b>
Kulbardi Centre	100.0	0.0
No School Recorded	3.2	96.8
Not For Award	60.0	40.0
School of Biological Sciences and Biotechnology	90.3	9.7
School of Business	83.6	16.4
School of Chemical and Mathematical Sciences	90.4	9.6
School of Chiropractic and Sports Science	81.5	18.5
School of Education	57.0	43.1
School of Engineering and Energy	92.9	7.2
School of Environmental Science	85.2	14.8
School Of Information Technology	89.0	11.0
School of Law	79.6	20.4
School of Media Communication and Culture	84.4	15.6
School of Nursing and Midwifery	87.6	12.4
School of Psychology	74.3	25.7
School of Social Sciences and Humanities	85.5	14.5
School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences	84.1	15.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>71.6</b>	<b>28.4</b>

## Promoting access at the institution and school level

The FYAN has developed a wide range of coordinated programs and initiatives aimed at supporting all first year students. Whereas other institutions have implemented transition programs that are solely school-based or centrally located (Burnett & Larmar, 2011), FYAN-initiated programs aim to create supportive learning environments by connecting students to academic skills, administrative and life supports through programs coordinated at both the institution and school tier. Broadly, research into the first year experience indicates that students who feel supported by their university at

both a personal and academic level are more satisfied with their university experience and have higher levels of individual competence (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayaek, 2007; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007). All levels are crucial for promoting access.

The principal FYAN-coordinated programs offered at the institution and school tiers are: (i) School-based Orientation sessions; (ii) *UniEdge* – a university-wide program that extends Orientation activities into the first four weeks of semester and offers events throughout the semester; (iii) the School-based Peer Mentoring Program;

and (iv) a first year online student portal, entitled My First Year.

### *Orientation Week*

The FYAN are responsible for the coordination and implementation of the Course Orientation sessions that are provided for all students in each school during the week before semester starts. FYAs work in collaboration with academic staff from their school and from the University's support services to offer students an informative, engaging and meaningful introduction to their School and Murdoch. The FYAN pools knowledge and resources to develop a general framework for the Course Advice Sessions which is adapted for the needs of each School with the aim of ensuring students have access to supports and services that are essential during their first few weeks of semester.

School-based Orientation sessions provide study advice, outline course requirements, discuss expectations of university and appropriate work/study balance regimes – all of which have been shown to lead to improved student outcomes (Cope, 1978; Crockett, 1978; Tinto, 1975; Savage & Smith, 2007-2008). An FYA is usually the first staff member to greet new students at Orientation. From the beginning of their first year experience, students know they can go directly to their FYA to access a variety of supports.

Feedback on the structure of Orientation from S1 and S2 2012 was positive.

This was so beneficial and helped me to be aware of the various facilities and staff at the University. It allowed me to feel more like the member of the uni community rather than just a number.

Overall it was a very informative day. All the information was delivered in a manner which was in no way overwhelming in regards with what to expect.

In the S1 2012 Orientation survey, 88.2% (268) of the 304 first year respondents agreed that attending O Week made them feel more prepared for their studies at Murdoch; while 88.3% of the 308 students who answered the questions agreed that attending O Week made them feel less anxious about their studies. In S2 2012, 93.7% (134) of the 143 respondents felt that the School Course Advice session was either “excellent” or “good” at letting them know about support services available on campus.

### *UniEdge transition program*

*UniEdge* is an institution-wide first year transition program developed to connect students to life and learning support. It provides opportunities for skill development and goal setting, helps to connect student to their campus community and provides practical information about the “when, what, where and how” of being a first year student. *UniEdge* was developed as an extension of Orientation Week. It was designed to avoid information overload following a single orientation session which attempts to communicate all information that first year students will need for the entire year (Boin & Lever, 2008; Wilson, 2009). It is also a means for integrating students, both academically and socially, to ensure a greater likelihood of persistence at university (Tinto, 1993).



**Table 5: Number of student who were “Happy” or “Very Happy” in reaction to UniEdge**

	Number of students (%)	
	S1 2012	S2 2012
Glad they attended	39 (97.5)	18 (94.7)
Felt more confident to approach support services	37 (92.5)	18 (94.7)
Recommend UniEdge to other new students	38 (95.0)	19 (100.0)

The UniEdge program was piloted in S1 of 2012 and consisted of a series of one-hour seminars offered during the first four weeks of semester. Sessions were designed to be fun and interactive and to help students navigate Murdoch. In S2 2012, the program was adapted based on an analysis of survey data gathered from student attendees, FYAs and others who provide support services, Unit Coordinators and tutors for Foundation Units. This resulted in a shortened version with a greater focus on skills.

Regardless of which iteration of UniEdge they have undertaken, student feedback has been very positive (Table 5).

Student and staff comments on the program were also very positive:

I found it useful getting to know about FYAs and how there are different ones for individual areas. Most enjoyable and good to learn about the services available.

A good concept to get students engaged in University culture – to most students it helped raise awareness of the services.

A more flexible, “expo” style format for UniEdge is being devised for S1 2013. This format was developed with the intention of attracting more first year students, as there was some concern that the formality of the

seminar style was discouraging students from attending or favouring students with high levels of motivation (Astin, 1999).

### *School-based Murdoch Peer Mentoring Program*

The FYAN introduced and implemented an institution-wide, school-based Peer Mentoring Program in 2011. Since then, the program has expanded and achieved considerable success. It commences in Week 3 of semester and continues throughout the semester and builds on both the Orientation and UniEdge programs. The Peer Mentoring Program provides continued support and a weekly access point for students, promoting social and academic integration, which are crucial for effective student engagement and thus retention (Kantanis, 2000; Crockett, 1978; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). The program is open to all first year students. FYAs recruit experienced students from each school, with pairs of mentors being matched with up to eight first year students from the same school. Mentor groups meet weekly for a cup of coffee and students are encouraged to share their experiences as first years. The program enables first year students to learn about University support services, gain knowledge and skills from experienced students and make friends; all of which help students form an identity as a university student, which can prevent the

“drift away from university life” (Nelson et al., 2009) that can occur in a student’s first semester.

In S1 2012, 128 mentors and 480 mentees participated in the program. These students were invited to complete an online survey. Student feedback on the mentoring program has been very positive.

It allows you to meet other members of the same School and in doing so help [sic] you create a network of people you can rely on for help and support. By having students that have been in your situation run the mentoring system you gain a thorough insight into what is expected from you as a student and a different perspective of looking at the work you must complete.

Provides a more personal platform for students to enquire about issues/problems with more senior students in the university.

I feel that the program builds a bit of culture within the School and that it provides way for students to meet people who have been where they have. I enjoyed it as I felt like I was helping out the students.

When mentees were surveyed, 95.7% (n=71) said they would recommend the Peer Mentoring Program to first year students. When asked what they found useful or enjoyed about the program, 53.6% said it helped them to fit in, 47.8% enjoyed accessing resources and advice on university services and 82.6% said they benefited from gaining knowledge and skills from experienced students. In addition, 68.3% of mentees found the mentoring session either “extremely useful” or “very useful” at aiding their transition to university.

## *Online student portal My First Year*

“My First Year” is an online portal developed in 2012 and made available to students from S1 2013. It is accessible through the Murdoch website and has been developed specifically for all first year students at Murdoch. It is designed to reflect the fact that today’s students tend to depend on fast and convenient access to information and support through mainstream technologies such as the Internet (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray & Krause, 2008). “My First Year” offers a flexible and user-friendly way for students to access support at Murdoch. It includes content aimed at easing a student’s transition to the University and provides one access point to all current information, contact details and procedures that will help first year students become active participants in the university community. “My First Year” is promoted in the lead-up to and during Orientation Week and is likely to be one of the first channels of communication a student opens with the University. It is available to all first year students and may prove especially valuable for external students unable to attend on-campus events. Although no survey has yet been conducted to determine this, anecdotal evidence suggests that first year students studying externally are finding it a valuable resource.

## **Conclusion**

The FYAN are formally evaluating, and continually reflecting, on all areas of the Network to have a clearer understanding of which initiatives are working well and which areas may require adaptation or change. This process takes into account student and staff feedback, outcomes surrounding student contact and support and data surrounding student issues.

This paper has presented the Murdoch First Year Advisor Network's three-tiered approach to supporting students and promoting access to academic skills, administrative and life supports and services. Through offering a variety of initiatives at the individual, school and institutional tier, the FYAN ensures that FYAs are catering to Murdoch's diverse student cohort. As a cohesive network of individuals, with representation from all the schools at Murdoch, the FYAN is able to ensure a consistent and systematic approach to promoting access for all first year students that accounts for their specific needs in each school.

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