

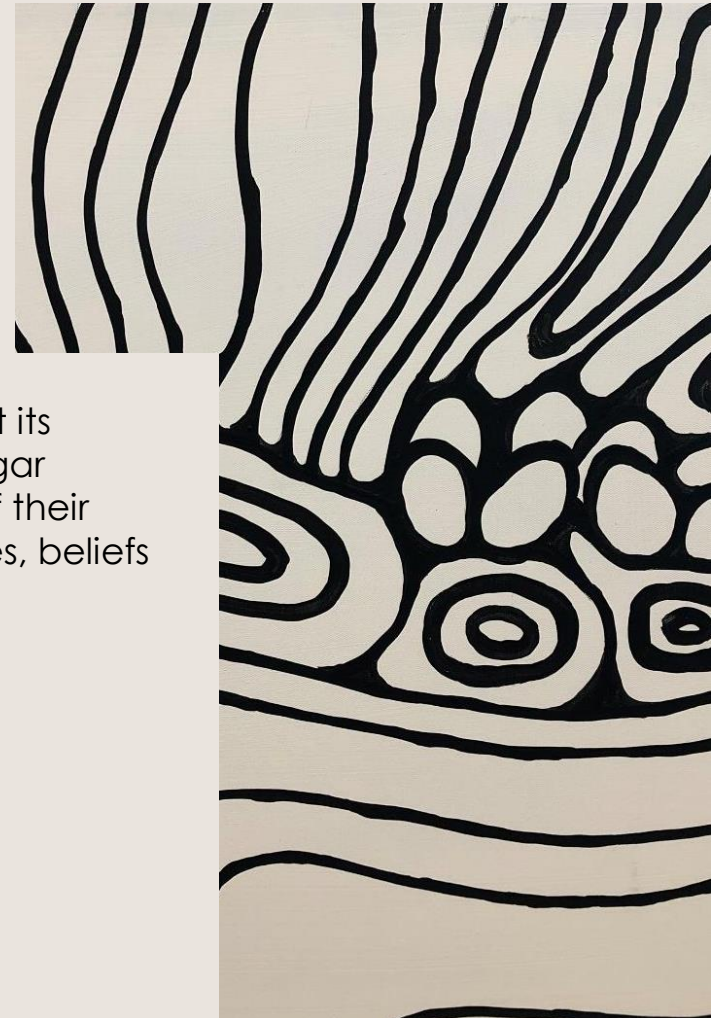


CONNECTING THROUGH CONVERSATION:

Creating a sense of belonging for new pathway students at The University of Western Australia

Acknowledgement of country

The University of Western Australia acknowledges that its campus is situated on Noongar land, and that Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practise their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge.



Artist: Dr Richard Barry Walley OAM

CONNECT

CONVERSATIONS

Today's presentation

- 1 Background
- 2 Program details
- 3 Feedback



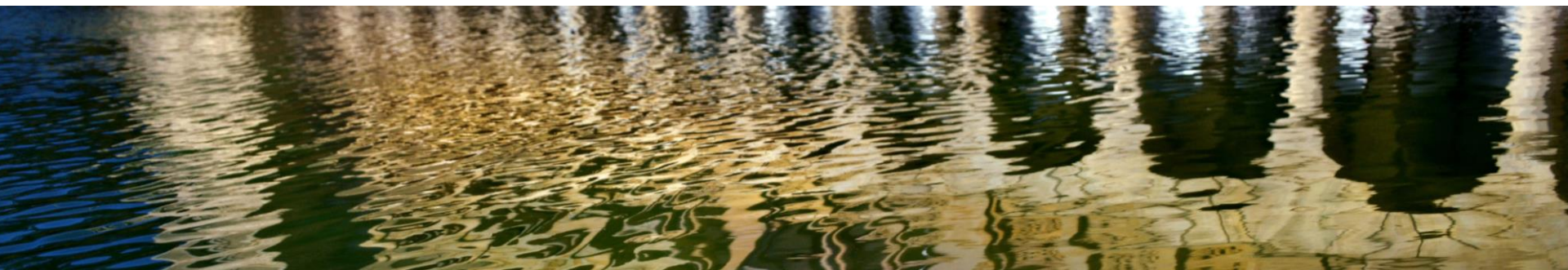
THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA



1. Background

Background

- Kift's (2009) ALTC Fellowship work on transition pedagogy as a third-generation approach requiring "an institutional vision for the FYE (first year experience) that is shared by academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries" (p. 10) and conceptualize FYE as "everybody's business" (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).
- Morieson et. al.'s (2013) 'Belonging Narrative Model' suggests that students "crave a cumulative sense belonging across and beyond disciplinary boundaries and within the dynamic environment of the School and University" (p. 95).
- Ahn & Davis (2020) looked at the impact of demographic/socio-economic factors and found that students' "sense of belonging in higher education is strongly associated with retention" (p. 12), as well as highlighting a "lack of research about how the critical factors of disadvantage operate to determine belonging" (p. 1).
- Long et. al. (2021) found that "training university staff who work with students to deliver well-being programs is a potential avenue for supporting college student mental health" (p. 1).
- Levett-Jones et. al. (2008) found that "positive staff-student relationships are crucial for students to feel accepted, included and valued" (p. 323) and "are key to students' experience of belonging" (p. 316).

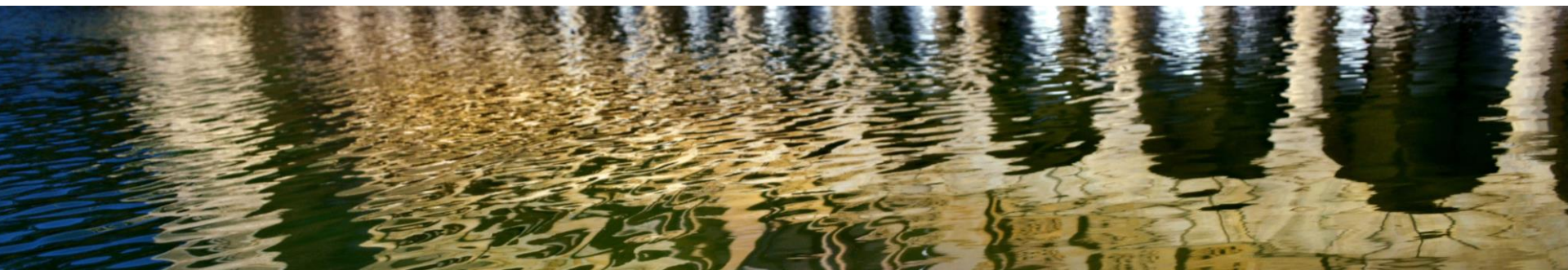


Connect Conversations

What is it?

Connect Conversations is a pilot program at UWA that matches new equity pathway students with volunteer staff members for three 'Connect Conversations' across semester.

Staff members provide guidance, advice, and referral to support services as needed. In S1 2021 students from two pathway cohorts were automatically signed up to the program.



Background

Why was this pilot program introduced?

- The disruption and disadvantage of Covid-19 for 2020 school leavers led to the introduction of new entry pathways.
- UWA introduced the Year 11 Predicted ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) pathway and the STAT (Special Tertiary Admissions Test) entry pathway.
- Connect Conversations was proposed as a way to provide these students with support and advice to help them settle into uni in their first semester.

PREDICTED ATAR PATHWAY

Offers based on predicted ATAR score from the end of Year 11 or Year 12 if available.

Students may use the predicted ATAR pathway to apply for admission to any UWA undergraduate degrees, as well as Direct Pathways to Engineering, Law, Teaching, Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Translation Studies.

Not applicable for Direct Pathways to Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy and Podiatry or undergraduate Medical Sciences major.

STAT TEST PATHWAY

Offers made on the basis of satisfactory results in all sections of the STAT test.

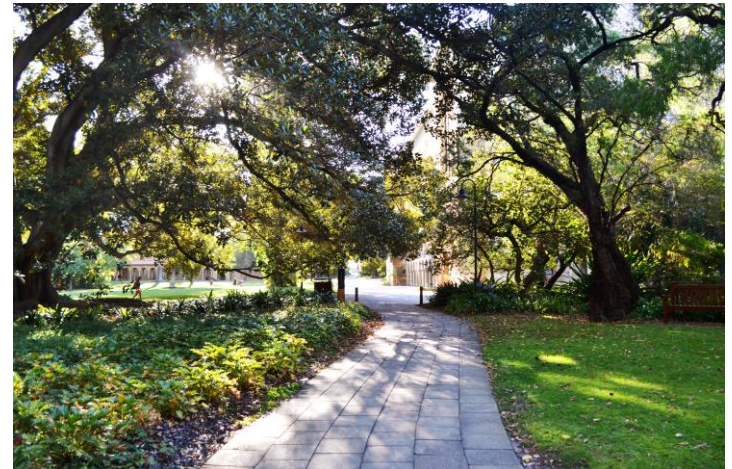
Targeted cohorts

The S1 2021 pilot program was offered to:

- School leavers coming through the predicted ATAR and STAT pathways
- Indigenous students, through a targeted program in conjunction with staff from the School of Indigenous Studies.

Future iterations will aim to offer support to students from cohorts including:

- Low-ATAR/equity pathways
- First-in-Family
- Regional/remote
- Low-SES
- Students with a Disability
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
- Women in Non-Traditional Areas



Aims of the program

The program aims to:

- ❖ Encourage a sense of belonging within UWA for new students from diverse backgrounds and alternative pathways;
- ❖ Increase students' knowledge, awareness and accessibility of university services;
- ❖ Support retention and success of students from diverse backgrounds and alternative pathways;
- ❖ Establish a cross-portfolio, University-wide approach to fostering inclusivity, equity, retention, positive wellbeing and success;
- ❖ Create a culture where 'pastoral care is everyone's business'.



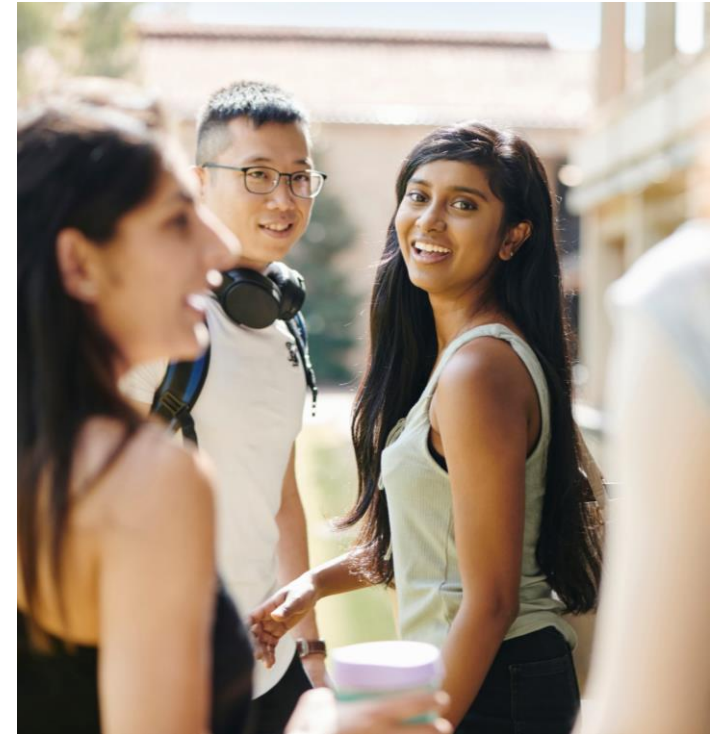


2. Program details

Basics of the program

The main components:

1. Staff training and resources
2. Matching of students/staff and notification
3. Staff send Welcome Email to student
4. Contact for first *Connect Conversation* (f2f, phone, online)
5. Contact for second *Connect Conversation* (as before)
6. Student referrals/staff questions any time as needed
7. Contact for final *Connect Conversation* (as before)
8. Feedback on program



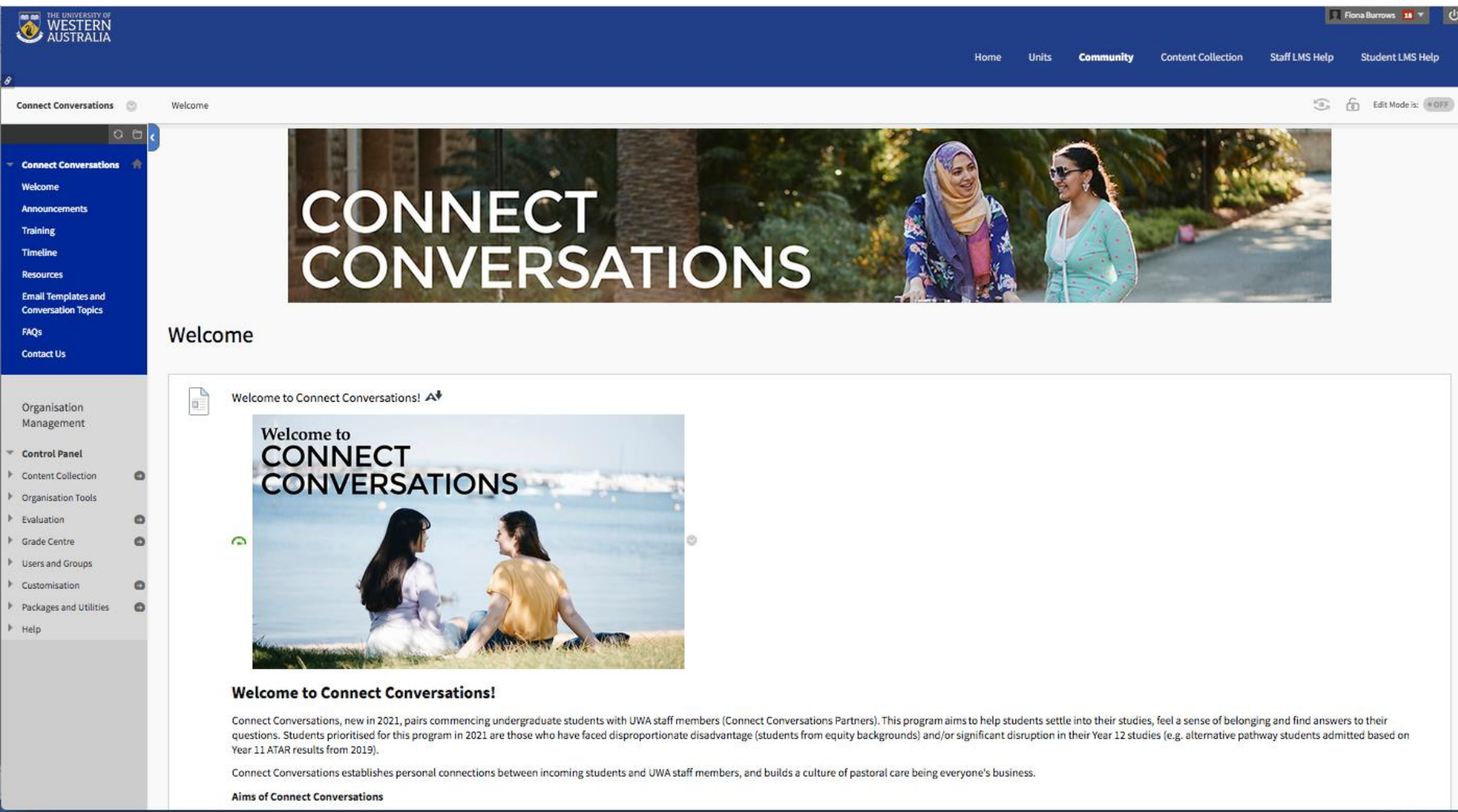
Staff recruitment & training

- Staff were recruited through an EOI process. Professional staff from the Student Life division were targeted first (although any staff member was eligible and welcome)
- EOI form explained the time commitment (2-3hrs/semester), and professional development focus (staff could participate as part of their normal duties)
- Staff were given access to an LMS unit filled with resources, referral information, FAQs, conversation topics, and template emails
- An online training session was held (with a repeat session and recording for those unable to be there) and staff were strongly encouraged to attend



Connect Conversations LMS

An LMS unit provided staff with resources and information



The screenshot displays the Connect Conversations LMS interface. At the top, a dark blue header bar contains the University of Western Australia logo on the left, a user profile for Fiona Burrows on the right, and a navigation menu with links to Home, Units, Community, Content Collection, Staff LMS Help, and Student LMS Help. Below the header, a light blue banner features the text "CONNECT CONVERSATIONS" in large white letters, overlaid on a photograph of two women walking outdoors. To the left of the banner is a dark blue sidebar menu with links to Connect Conversations, Welcome, Announcements, Training, Timeline, Resources, Email Templates and Conversation Topics, FAQs, and Contact Us. Below the sidebar, a "Welcome" section is visible, featuring a smaller banner with the same "CONNECT CONVERSATIONS" text and a photograph of two women sitting on a grassy hill. Below this banner, the text "Welcome to Connect Conversations!" is displayed, followed by a paragraph describing the program's purpose and a section titled "Aims of Connect Conversations".

Connect Conversations Welcome

CONNECT CONVERSATIONS

Welcome

Welcome to Connect Conversations! 📄

Welcome to
CONNECT
CONVERSATIONS

Welcome to Connect Conversations!

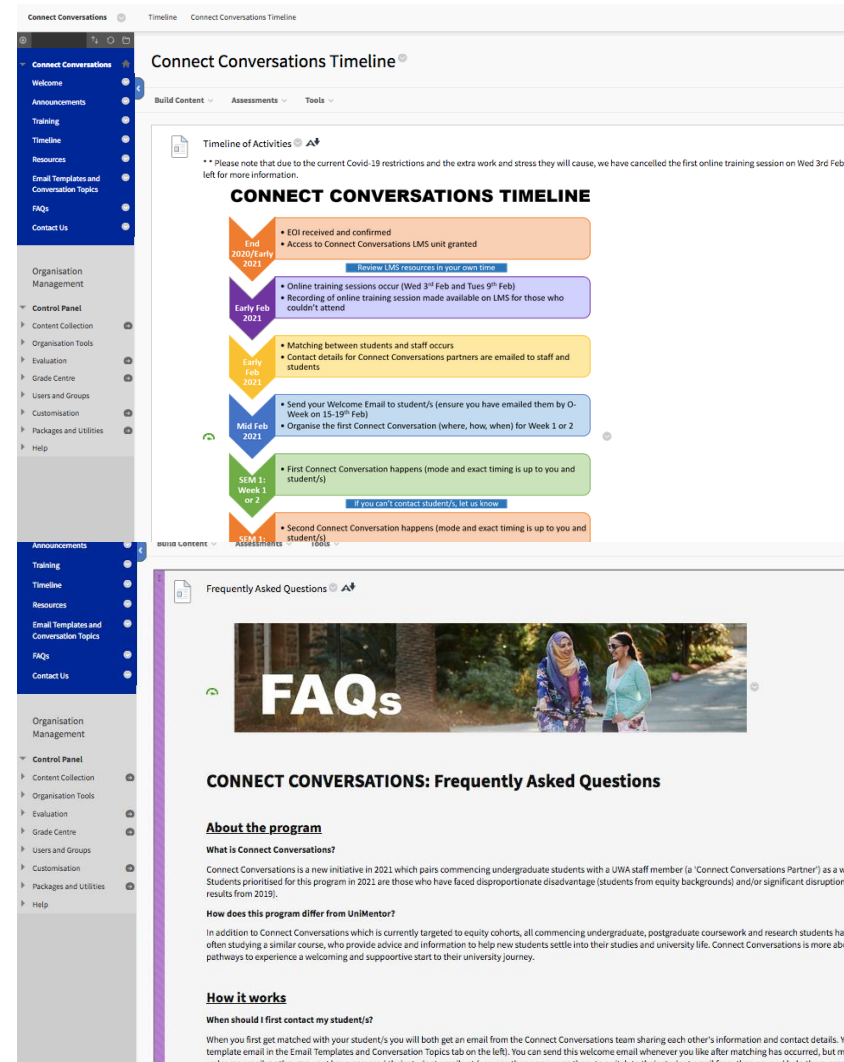
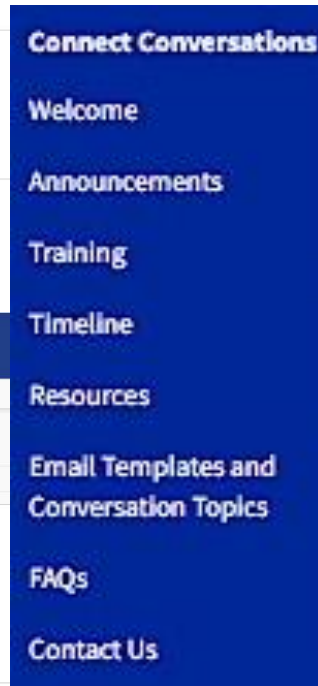
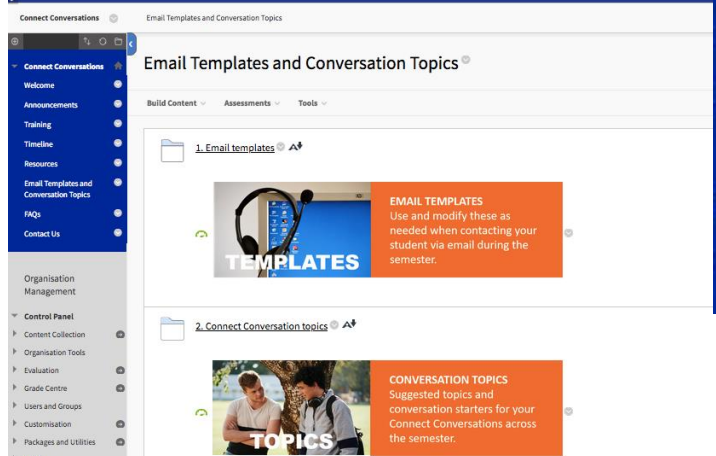
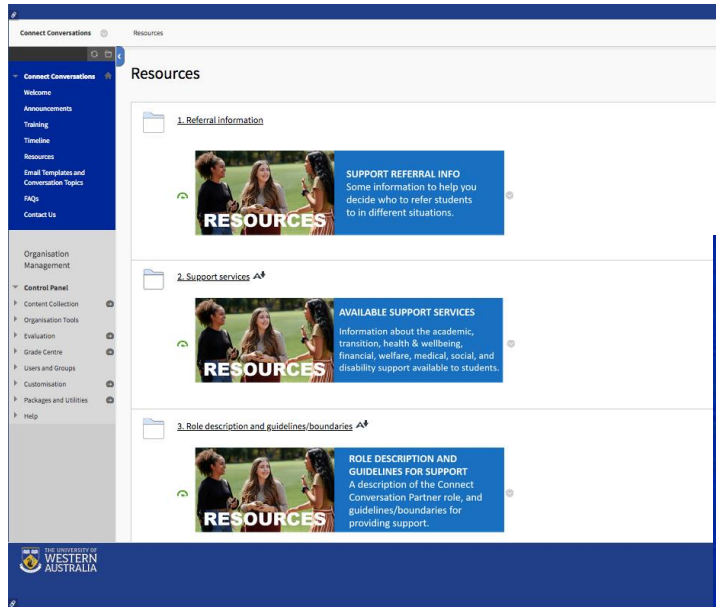
Connect Conversations, new in 2021, pairs commencing undergraduate students with UWA staff members (Connect Conversations Partners). This program aims to help students settle into their studies, feel a sense of belonging and find answers to their questions. Students prioritised for this program in 2021 are those who have faced disproportionate disadvantage (students from equity backgrounds) and/or significant disruption in their Year 12 studies (e.g. alternative pathway students admitted based on Year 11 ATAR results from 2019).

Connect Conversations establishes personal connections between incoming students and UWA staff members, and builds a culture of pastoral care being everyone's business.

Aims of Connect Conversations


Connect Conversations LMS


An LMS unit provided staff with resources and information




Connect Conversations LMS

An LMS unit provided staff with resources and information






Connect Conversation 1 (Wk 1 or 2) 




CONNECT #1

CONNECT CONVERSATION ONE
Suggested topics for your first meeting with your student/s, in Week 1 or 2 of semester.






Connect Conversation 2 (Wk 6 or 7)  




CONNECT #2

CONNECT CONVERSATION TWO
Suggested topics for your second meeting with your student/s, in Week 6 or 7 of semester.




Connect Conversation 3 (Wk 11 or 12)  




CONNECT #3


CONNECT CONVERSATION THREE
Suggested topics for your final meeting with your student/s, in Week 11 or 12 of semester.

Email Templates and Conversation Topics 2. Connect Conversation topics Connect Conversation 1 (Wk 1 or 2)



Connect Conversation 1 (Wk 1 or 2)



Your 1st Connect Conversation (Week 1 or 2) 

In Week 1 or 2 most students are still finding their feet, and they may be suffering from information overload. If they didn't attend O-Week you might want to make sure that they know what they should be doing, and

Other possible questions or topics:

- What are you studying/why did you choose that?
- Are you enjoying your units so far?
- Did you go to Orientation? (*if not, ask if they know about the Orientation LMS unit)
- Have you got your campus card?
- Have you checked your student email yet? (*if they are emailing you with it you don't need to ask)
- Have you got your timetable? How is it looking?
- Are you living on campus/at home/with friends?
- What's your commute like? Do you come on to campus much? (*a very long commute can cause stress)
- Are you working (how many hours a week?)*? Are you looking for a job? (*if they are planning to work)
- Do you know about the HECS census date? Are you planning on dropping any units? (*encourage them to stay)
- Do you know anyone else studying here?
- Have you met any new friends/joined any clubs/social activities yet?
- Have you got a plan for how you're going to manage your time this semester?
- Are you finding your way around campus ok?
- Have you downloaded the UWA app yet?
- Have you joined the UWA Students Facebook?
- Do you know about ACE/ISE/CARS?
- Have you applied for (or considered applying for) any scholarships? (*suggest they search the website)

NOTE: For further information about any of these topics and details about where to refer students for help, ask you a question and you're not sure how to answer, send us an email through the 'Contact Us' tab on the side.

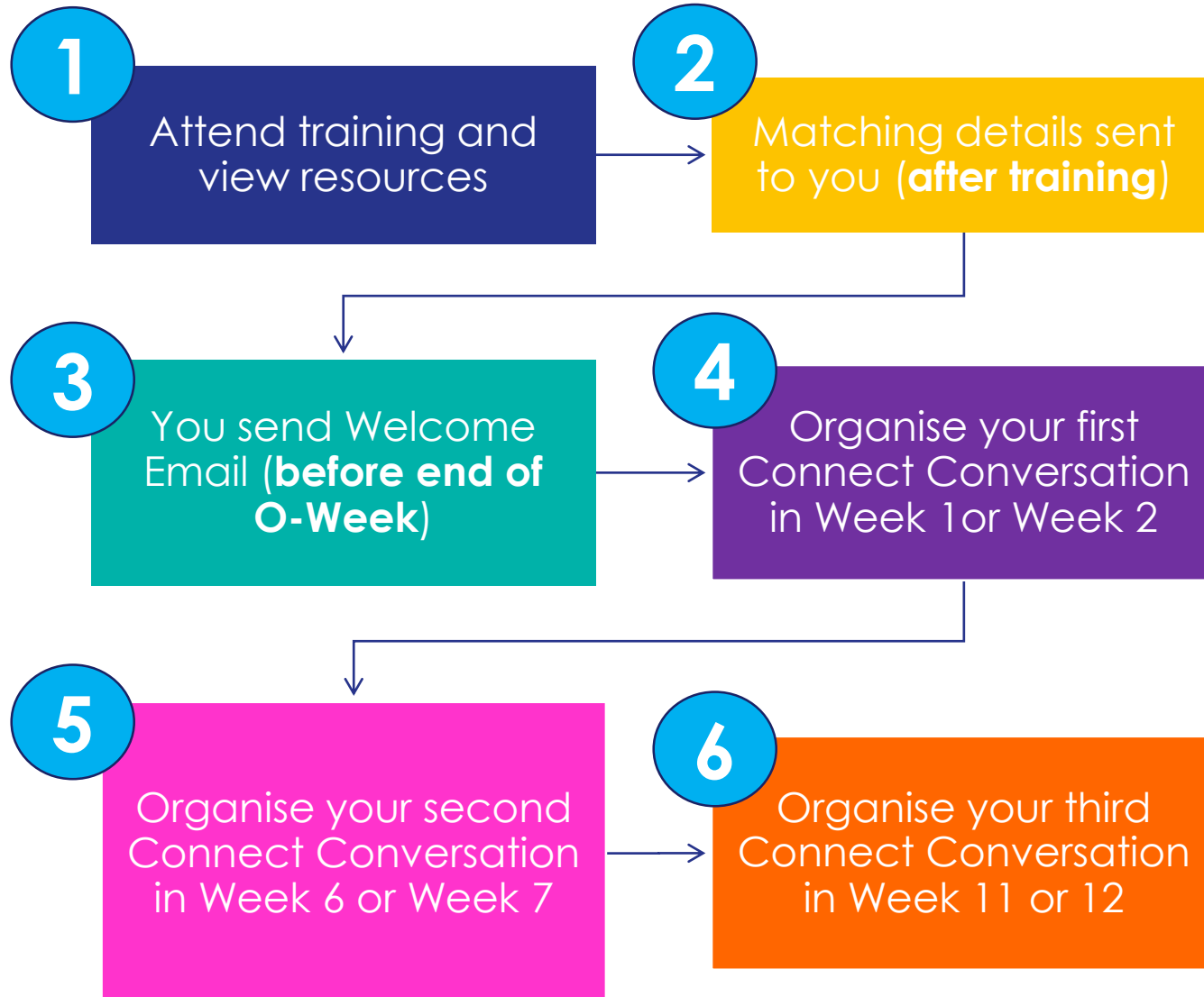
Staff and student matching

Matching occurred pre-semester

- Database of staff participants and students was created
- Staff were assigned a random student match (up to 3, if willing) from the database
- Staff were sent an email with the details of their matched student/s (Name, Email, Course) and a reminder about sending a Welcome email
- Students were sent an email introducing them to the program and letting them know who their matched staff member was (Department, Email, Introductory message). Emails were sent to students' personal email addresses as well, in case they had not yet accessed their university email



Timeline for staff





THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA

3. Feedback



Preliminary feedback

Feedback was gathered from staff:

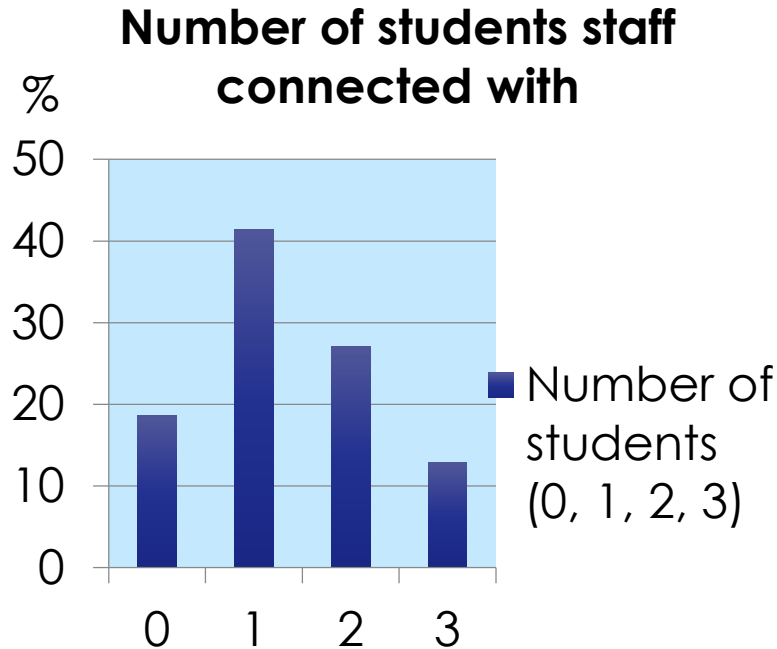
- At the EOI stage
- During training
- A preliminary survey was conducted midway through semester
- A final survey will be sent to both staff and student participants at the end of the pilot

The preliminary survey focused on staff experiences so far, and looked at their experiences of connecting with students across the first half of semester.

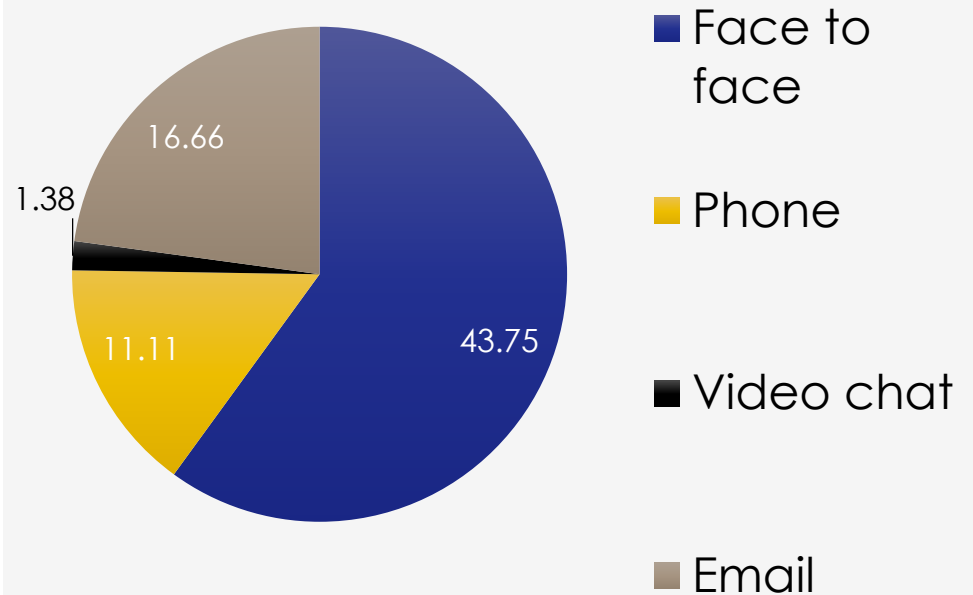


Preliminary Survey Data

83% of staff thought
the program was
valuable



How staff connected with students (%)



Survey Data

Most common services staff referred students to:

- Academic Skills (STUDYSmarter)
- UniAccess (Disability Services)
- Counselling and welfare
- Student Advising Offices

18.5% staff indicated they did not successfully connect with a student (no reply)

Approximately 320 students matched in S1 2021

Common issues students needed help with early on:

- Time management, organising study
- Finding rooms/classes
- LMS (Learning Management System)
- Class allocation
- Travelling to uni
- Student IDs
- Missed O-Week
- Textbooks

Feedback on student experiences

Useful, timely

- "Very positive, appreciated the support"
- "One comment she made as we ended the call: 'Good to have someone contact me.'"
- "I think she liked having someone she could just contact if she needed an answer."
- "Seemed happy about the communications and found it helpful"
- "Appreciated the contact and assistance"
- "Very positive feedback, so far - has indicated she is looking forward to catching up again soon"
- "I think [x] felt less nervous knowing that I was here to help her."
- "I think this is valuable experience for [x] and myself."
- "She seemed to appreciate having someone to touch base with."
- "I think she appreciated being able to email me prior to the first conversation, so she could get her question answered before uni started."
- "I had initially emailed [x] to organise a meeting and he ignored my two emails. I then followed up with a phone call and he gave off "I'm all good" vibes, as soon as I asked a couple of probing questions from the list that your team has provided and he felt comfortable to ask for help he had many questions."

Feedback on student experiences

Did not need the extra support

- "She did not find a need for support at this point as she had already asked her UniMentor questions she had"
- "Seemed to appreciate the attempts I made to call him, but said all was going OK to for him"
- "He would have been fine without the program as well, capable student"
- "Appreciated that she received a call from a staff member but seemed happy enough to find her own way at the University"
- "She doesn't need me really, but I've made it clear that I'm here if she needs a hand"

Did not respond

- "Failed to present for our first agreed meeting and did not respond to future attempts at contact"
- "[x] did not engage in the support offered"
- "He never replied. I messaged him 3 times and never heard back from him"
- "Disappointing to reach out to students who blatantly ignore the approach is not valuable [...] I think it would be worth including something along lines of them coming back to the staff member to indicate thanks but no thanks"

Staff comments

“I would be happy to participate again next semester – I think it is a wonderful initiative”

“I think the program has been very worthwhile. From the staff perspective, the time commitment is minimal given the way you have set up the program and templates for us to follow, and there is value in getting insight from new students about their experience, to feed into continuous improvement of services.”

“Connect Conversations is a great initiative and I’m glad that I had the opportunity to be a part of it”

“I think this is a fantastic program that helps students and also makes the staff more relatable to students.”

“Great initiative. Hope we can continue/expand”



Staff comments

“I really love this Connect Conversations Program. I **think it is so awesome to get to meet with students one on one and get to know them and talk to them** about starting at the University and their semester. In Student Services we don't always get to have meaningful connections with students and often just have faceless exchanges via email when they reach out to us with a problem.

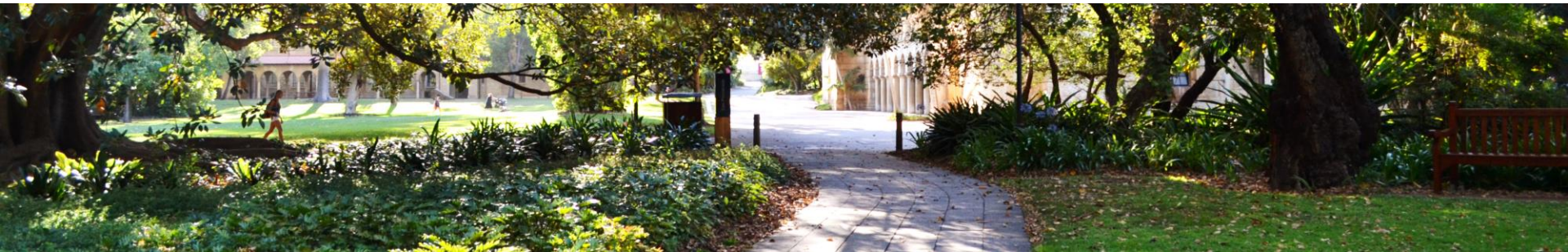
It is so great to be able to give students helpful information and learn more about them to make their university as great as possible and to be able to suggest services to help them succeed instead of as an intervention. I have met with two of my connect students so far and they are both lovely and full of aspiration. **It makes me so happy to be able to assist them through this program** and hope that it will make a meaningful impact on their time at UWA.

I look forward to our next catch ups and can't wait to hear how university is going for them. **This is how I always had hoped to engage with students.**”

Staff suggestions

Suggestions included:

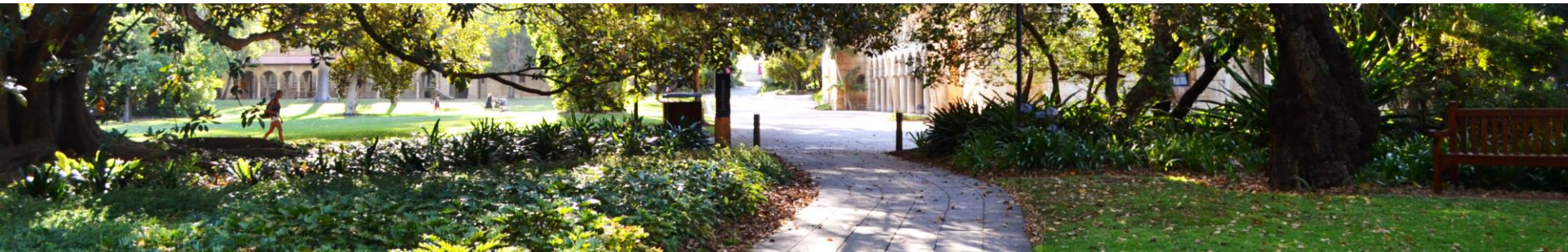
- Further targeting of cohorts needing support
- Refining by ATAR (Aus. Tertiary Admission Rank) and school SES (socio-economic status)
- Targeted matching of staff and students by course/area
- More casual modes of contact (i.e. chat on Microsoft Teams)
- An opt-in system for students
- Better communication to students around respectful email etiquette and responding to staff (rather than ignoring emails or meetings)
- Recruiting Faculty staff and matching by discipline
- Working more closely with UniMentors (student mentors)



Future considerations

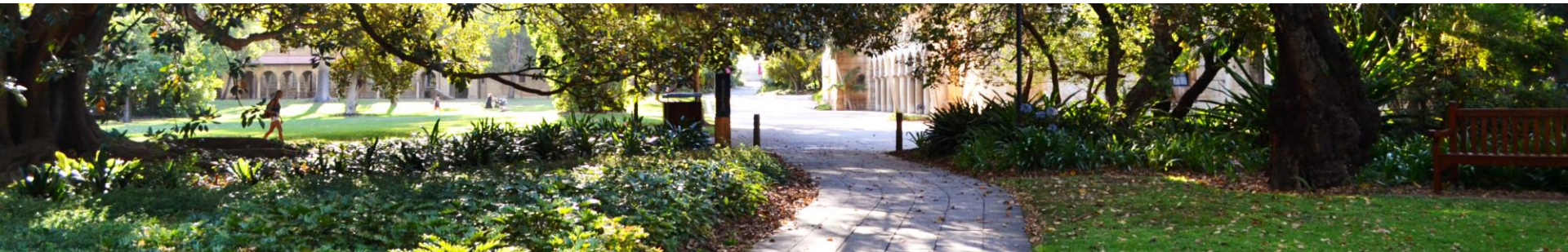
Considerations for future iterations:

- Should program be 'opt-in' or 'opt-out'? Should students sign up for it?
- Would more targeted matching (i.e. by discipline area) negate some of the wider aims ('pastoral care is everyone's business') or provide a more relevant connection?
- Do all equity and pathway students always need transition support?
- How to encourage more staff to sign up?
- How to handle staff complaints about students' failure to respond/poor email etiquette/'no-shows' (in an opt-out system)?



Discussion points

1. What programs do you have at your university that aim to increase belonging/connectedness for new students?
2. Would a program like this one work at your university? What issues might arise?
3. Which kinds of students benefit the most from these programs?
4. Should pastoral care be 'everyone's business'?
5. How can we work towards approaches to FYE and transition support that transcend or cross institutional boundaries/silos?
6. What else can we do to ensure students from equity cohorts or non-traditional backgrounds feel a sense of belonging at university?





4. Questions?

References

Ahn, M. & Davis, H. (2020) Students' sense of belonging and their socio-economic status in higher education: a quantitative approach. *Teaching in Higher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1778664

Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE - A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*. 1 (1). 1-20. DOI:10.5204/intifyhe.v1i1.13.

Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. <http://transitionpedagogy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Kift-Sally-ALTC-Senior-Fellowship-Report-Sep-091.pdf>

Levett-Jones, T., Lathlean, J., Higgins, I., & McMillan, M. (2009). Staff-student relationships and their impact on nursing students' belongingness and learning. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 65(2), 316–324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2008.04865.x>

Long, R., Kennedy, M., Malloy Spink, K., & Lengua, L. J. (2021). Evaluation of the implementation of a well-being promotion program for college students. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12(610931). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.610931>

Morieson, L., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Lukas, K., & Wilson, R. (2013). Belonging in education: lessons from the belonging project. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4(2), 87-96. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intifyhe.v4i2.173>.



CONNECT

CONVERSATIONS



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA

Contact me

Email:

fiona.burrows@uwa.edu.au