

First-year Students' Adjustment to University Life: A Case Study of Implementing College Buddy Program

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Abstract

Transitioning from secondary to higher education is not a natural step for many first-year university students. Most female students who join Taibah University did not have the chance to visit the university and get to know the programs offered there before they applied. Therefore, the Childhood Studies Department within the College of Family Sciences has initiated the present program – My Uni-Buddy. The program was applied on a small scale to create connection between first-year students and their fellow students in the third year. The aim of the program is to support new students and help them adjust quickly to their new life. The study employs a qualitative approach in which interviews were carried out to collect the relevant data. The findings show that first-year students highly benefited from the program in the academic and social aspects.

Keywords: higher education, first-year students, adjustment, university, student welfare, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Each year, several million students around the world make the change from secondary to higher education. There is, however, a considerable difference between being a student at school and at university, and previous research has highlighted the difficulties faced by first-year university students during their transition phase. Studies have indicated a high rate of attrition among first-year students (Holdway & Kelloway, 1987; Burnett, 2007). Colleges and universities address these issues in various ways. Burnett (2007, p.2) noted that two Australian universities implemented an action research methodology to explore initiatives confronting the reasons behind this rate of attrition. While Burnett provided a global view of the challenges faced by first-year students, the focus of this current study is on establishing an effective method of assisting first-year students to adjust to their new life.

The present paper focuses on establishing the effectiveness of creating a link between first- and third-year university students. The study focuses on new students at the Childhood Studies Department of Taibah University in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. This link is known as 'My Uni-Buddy' and enables established students to support and (with the support of the researcher) guide newcomers during their first year. Taibah University does not run an open day to allow prospective students to visit, meet staff, and tour the various departments. Thus, when they arrive at university, many new students start their academic year in an entirely new environment, in a campus of a far larger scale than that of their school, and with a different attendance policy.

This research assumes that the provision of guidance and support from fellow students from the same department may have a positive impact on newcomers, thus helping them adjust to university life. To investigate this assumption, this research employed a qualitative approach to examine the actions of seven pairs of third-year and first-year university students throughout the academic year. Hence, the primary contribution of this paper lies in the proposed model of My Uni-Buddy program to support the adjustment of first-year students.

To achieve the research aim and objectives, the present study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) How do third-year students react to the notion of My Uni-Buddy? (2) What are the implications of My Uni-Buddy on first-year students? (3) How do My Uni-Buddy students view their experience?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The second section presents a literature review to highlight the key challenges faced by first-year students and their adjustment throughout their university experience. The third section provides the methodology of the study, including data collection procedures and analysis approaches. The findings and discussion are then explained in the fourth section. Finally, the conclusion of this study is presented in the fifth section.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education and Newcomers

It is not surprising that many students all around the world experience difficulty adjusting to their new life in university (Boute et al., 2007, p. 666). According to Carter et al. (2013), higher education institutions face critical issues with new students in terms of their commitment toward their study. To reduce withdrawal rate during the first year of college, higher education providers apply transition programs to help students in the transition process (Sankar & Raju, 2011).

To get the most out of their college years, students need to be engaged in several activities outside their academic and educational spheres. According to Alexander Astin's developmental theory (McCormick et al., 2013, p. 52), higher education students evolve through their physical and psychological involvement in their new academic environment. One of the applied approaches stems from Weidman's theory of student socialization, which is defined as "the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (Brim, 1966: 3 in Weidman et al., 2014).

2.2 Newcomers and Social Skills

Building new friendships is a social skill first-year students must experience and develop. Boute et al. (2007) emphasized the role of friendship throughout this transition phase, claiming that a failure to develop friends during this time can cause students to drop out of their studies. In their research, Boute et al. (ibid) examined the relationship between the adjustment of new university students and the development of friendships. This took the form of a longitudinal study focusing on one thousand and seventy students from six Canadian universities. Their research methods differed considerably from the methods applied in this current study, which (as outlined below) takes a qualitative approach and thus focuses on a limited number of participants. Both studies, however, look at friendship as a social driver that helps first-year students settle in well in their new academic phase.

Universities and their departments acknowledge the challenges faced by new students. While they may differ in their approach to tackling the issue, each seeks to find the most effective solution for its students. Some universities are more explicit in addressing the issue than others, with some Australian universities, for example, running specific programs for first-year students. Burnet (2007, p. 2) noted that the First-Year Student Experience program in an urban Australian university aimed to "implement a practical, specific, student-centered initiative to create a learning environment which would improve first-year students' experience."

As noted above, first-year students tend to feel disorientated at the start of the academic year. Wilcox et al. (2005, p. 713) stated that, during this phase, students require several types of social support to combat their feelings of loneliness and fulfill their "urgent need to belong." Besides that, Wilcox et al. (2005) identified a healthy association between lower rates of withdrawal from university and the social support experienced by first-year students. The current study takes a similar approach through qualitative study in a specific university.

2.3 Means to Support Newcomers

The present study focuses on a specific university within the researcher's context. A similar study by Wilcox et al. (2005) took place at the University of Brighton, in the UK. Twenty-three first-year students from several departments were involved in the study, twelve of whom failed to complete their first year. The main issues cited by the students who withdrew from their university course were related to a perceived lack of social support.

The current study was undertaken at Taibah University, in particular, in the Childhood Studies Department of the College of Family Sciences, the only female-oriented college out of twenty-eight colleges that make up the university. Unlike Wilcox et al. (2005), the current researcher was unable to locate adequate studies examining the challenges faced by students in Saudi Arabia during their first year at university. Hence, this current study aims to fill this research gap by exploring the ways new students adjust and how they might benefit from the support of students from subsequent years.

There is growing interest in the literature to examine first-year students' adjustment to their new academic life. Some studies have adopted an academic approach where students are involved in a course in order to obtain specific study skills relevant to their majors. For instance, Turner et al. (2017) provided an immersive four-week module to help first-year students adjust in universities. The module was based on student-learning activities where students were introduced to essential higher learning skills. From another angle, Workman (2015) worked on an exploratory advising model where first-year students met with their advisor twice during the academic semester. The research suggested further studies to be done on other formats of the academic advising model to contribute to the

development of advising programs in higher education. This study attempts to contribute to the same field with the My Uni-Buddy program.

It is important to note that the program at Taibah University consists of four academic years, divided into two semesters. Hence, first-year students are referred to as first-semester or second-semester students, depending on when they were interviewed. Similarly, third-year students are referred to as fifth-semester and sixth-semester students during the first and second halves of the academic year, respectively.

This study was implemented at the beginning of the academic year 2017/2018. The following section outlines the research methods, followed by the research context.

3. Methods

The concept of qualitative research is relatively unfamiliar in Taibah University, as it is in Saudi Arabian universities in general, due to the majority of Saudi academics employing quantitative methods. The rationale behind choosing a qualitative approach for the current study is to carry out an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon in its natural settings. Data collection was done by employing several tools, including those discussed below.

3.1 Data Collection Procedures

3.1.1 Face-to-face Interviews

Students were invited to take part in face-to-face interviews with one of the two academic staff members involved in the study. This method enabled students to select the most appropriate interview time according to their timetable, and to then contact the staff member to agree upon when to meet.

3.1.2 Group Interviews

Two types of group interviews were undertaken. In the first type, students from both years were invited to take part, with the interviews taking place in the presence of the researcher. The second was year-related, i.e., students from each year were interviewed separately.

3.1.3 Online Interviews

Several online interviews took place throughout the year in order to exploit the advantages of the digital age. The most significant benefit of this type of interviews is that they allowed the participants to answer questions at their convenience.

3.1.4 Students' Notes

Students from each group were encouraged to write down their thoughts and reflections concerning their experience.

3.2 Research Context

The research took place in the city of Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia. The city is the capital of Al-Madinah Province, which is the third most important province in the kingdom. The study was undertaken in the female section of Taibah University, which is the leading provider of higher education programs in Al-Madinah. The university is made up of twenty-eight colleges, some of which are located inside Al-Madinah city, while others can be found in towns and villages within the province. The College of Family Sciences is located outside the main campus but does not form part of a rural campus. Instead, it forms part of the Asalam campus, which encompasses the colleges known as The Girls' College and The Teachers' Preparation College before they were integrated into Taibah University in 2010.

At the time of this study, the College of Family Sciences is the only college in Taibah University to have a female dean. The college consists of five departments, one of which being the Childhood Studies Department where the present research was implemented.

The college provides several activities for both new and established students during the induction week, including an informal gathering organized by the department and volunteers from the fourth year. During the period of the current research, this gathering had three main items on the agenda. The first was to welcome new students in a warm atmosphere and the presence of fellow students from the final year. The second was to invite students to take part in the My Uni-Buddy program (as the researcher wished to avoid announcing this during lectures). Thirdly, fourth-year students organized tours to introduce newcomers to the study halls, classes, and other vital sites within the campus.

3.3 Research Sample

It is important to emphasize that this form of research is not designed to provide statistical generalization (Brikci & Green, 2007), but rather aims to understand a phenomenon in its natural settings. Hence, the sample size is small, and the rationale behind choosing the sample depends solely on the aim of the research.

This current research focuses on the impact of the My Uni-Buddy program on both first- and third-year students, and therefore uses intensity sampling, which, according to Ellsberg and Hesie (2005, p. 1-6), provides “rich information from a few select cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but are not extreme cases”.

Coyne (1997) noted that it is essential to be flexible in qualitative research in order to allow the exploration of the research to develop. Hence, first-year students were invited to take part in the proposed program during their induction week, with the invitation also extended to selected fifth-semester students. In addition, some students from the seventh semester expressed their willingness to become involved and guide and support the new students as much as their own study time permitted. Therefore, this research took place during the academic year 2017/2018 with six students from the fifth/sixth semester and twelve from the first/second semester.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The participants in this study were all volunteers, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All names were anonymized, with participants being given pseudonyms for use in the study. All the scripts were dealt with confidentially.

4. Findings and Discussion

As the study developed, some issues emerged. Several students from the first semester withdrew as the program continued, while others proved hesitant to participate from the beginning. The following sections explore the attitudes of new students towards the program, followed by a discussion of the impact of their involvement in the study, including the areas in which the program was found to provide considerable benefit.

4.1 Welcoming Newcomers

During the induction week, several workshops and lectures were given to new students. Ghadeer, a seventh-semester student, noted that:

“New students are not enthusiastic about attending the induction week. We were the same. It is so dull and mostly lecture-based workshops.” (Ghadeer, third-year student)

Being an active student and well known among academic staff, Ghadeer was asked if she could take part in preparing the informal induction meeting organized by the department. A group of third- and fourth-year students collaborated to hold a welcoming meeting for first-year students, which was also attended by the head of the department and several academic members to give the new students some advice on getting the most out of university life.

To break the stereotype new students held against induction weeks, the My Uni-Buddy program initiated new informal activities. The My-Uni Buddy avoided a formal opening in the theater. Instead, it was held in a large hall in the presence of several staff members of the academic department and established students from the third and fourth year. A friendly talk was held followed by a tour of the campus to help the newcomers navigate a campus containing more than eight main buildings, a nursery, a health center, and the library.

“They were so happy with the tour given to them in the first week. Many of them reflected on how beneficial it was, and that it meant they knew where to find their tutors whenever they needed them.” (Maria, third-year student)

Later that year, as they developed their knowledge of their college and department, first-year students were able to reflect on their thoughts:

“Initially, I wondered what was the point behind the tour, as I thought all I needed was a few days to learn to navigate on campus easily. However, I was wrong; the library is in a different building, and so is the medical center.” (Norah, first-year student)

Even though most of their lectures were held in building No.5, as college students, there would still be some crucial areas in other parts of the campus that they would most likely need to get to in future. Third-year students were able to identify the enthusiasm of their first-year peers during the tour, which could be attributed to the fact that interacting with more established students put the new ones at ease. Such engagement between the two groups has benefited the aim of the program to help first-year students adjust quickly to college life.

In talking to both groups (i.e., third- and first-year students), it became clear that the notion of My Uni-Buddy was new and therefore a trial initiative. The invitation was not extended to those absent during the informal induction meeting.

“I thought there would be more students. If I had had this chance when I was a first-year student, I would have seized it with both hands.” (Hadiah, third-year student)

Students who have spent two years in the university (and have thus passed the halfway mark of their undergraduate journey) may have a clearer picture of the uniqueness of this initiative than newcomers, who may assume that activities held during the first week are the general experience of all first-year students. Hadiyah, who volunteered to support new students, was surprised by the low number of enrollments from the first-year students. As she accumulated more academic and personal experiences, she was able to identify the benefit of the initiative. However, since the program was implemented for the first time, there was no sufficient feedback about its impact on new students. This could be one of the reasons first-year students were hesitant to take part in it.

4.2 Reluctance to Engage

Taibah University sends text messages to its students at the beginning of the academic year to inform them of their required classes. Being new to university life, first-year students tend to ask their relatives and friends about the new experience.

“We have this idea from our friends and relatives that we do not need to go to university during the first week, as lecturers would be busy dealing with established students’ study schedules and other academic-related issues. We were invited to take part in the study during the informal induction meeting, and a few of us did, though some were not sure about the reasons behind it.” (Afnan, first-year student)

Academic advisors tend to have a hectic first week as established students turn to them for academic advice and other issues. While carrying out their role as advisors, they are also members of the academic staff who are requested to start teaching established students from day one. Therefore, many new students assume that there would be nothing to do during the first week, even though several formal and informal activities are held to welcome them. One of which is the My-Uni Buddy program.

“I do not think I need a Uni-Buddy; it seems that I am going to settle in comfortably. The life here is more natural than I had expected.” (Afnan, first-year student)

Afnan came from outside Al-Madinah to study. She was independent, and her eagerness to explore university life was evident when, following a discussion of the current study with the researcher, she chose to take part in it.

“I like the idea of my voice being heard. It is still the first week of the year, but who knows, I might need a piece of advice in the future, and it will be useful to have it from someone who was in my place before.” (Afnan, first-year student.)

Being allowed to take a tour of the college may have encouraged Afnan to participate, mainly as she lived in the University Girls’ Dormitory.

“Students from the fourth year took us on a tour to see the premises and become familiar with the location of the offices of the dean and vice dean. We also went to the library. I feel I know this place very well.” (Afnan, first-year student)

The organized tour of the campus gave first-year students a mistaken impression that such a tour was usual for new students. Afnan assumed that it was common practice for a department to arrange for its more experienced students to assist newcomers. A more significant number of first-year students joined the tour than engaged in the study.

The success of the tour and the resulting observations of first-year students demonstrate that informal attempts to embrace new students are welcome, so long as they do not require further obligations from existing students. Furthermore, Afnan’s tour was facilitated by senior students without the need for any contribution from a member of the academic staff, which may have had an impact in encouraging the engagement of a more significant number of students.

“We have gained a lot of benefits from the tour, and it meant we knew where the main offices, library and fitness center were. Before the tour, we felt lost, because there are many buildings, and it’s a far larger place than our school.” (Shrooq, first-year student)

Even though the tour took place during the first week (at a time when many students were fully engaged in registering their subjects and seeking advice from their academic advisors), third-year students expressed enthusiasm to help the new ones.

“I wish we had been given such an opportunity. It would have had a positive impact on us. We are always there to support them, and I cannot help wondering that if I had been given that support, I might have avoided making mistakes I now regret.” (Gazal, third-year student)

The My Uni-Buddy program is aimed at assisting students to adjust to their new life and enjoy their higher education journey. Therefore, the success of the tour indicated that first-year students were, when given the opportunity, willing to explore their new surroundings.

“It meant so much to us and helped us to settle down more quickly. However, I was hesitant to ask for help at times because I knew my Uni-Buddy was also a student and undoubtedly had her own tasks to complete.” (Norah, first-year student)

Although the program was initiated to help first-year students to adjust to their new life, these students tended to be unwilling to ask for help, mainly when it was unrelated to their academic life. For example, Norah experienced considerable difficulties, including being forced to miss one final exam, and nearly gave up her university place. Her Uni-Buddy was unaware of these circumstances. When Norah was asked about the reason she did not get in touch with Maria, she answered:

“It was in the middle of final exams, how could she help me? I was in touch directly with my department, and they were understanding and supported me through the difficult time... I did get in touch with Maria later to help me organize my schedule for the second semester.” (Norah, first-year student)

Maria said that she was surprised when she heard from Norah about her circumstances, but explained that, at the time, she was going through a crucial part of her studies herself.

“I can understand that she was not comfortable enough to talk about personal stuff with someone she had only recently met. If she did not find support from the teaching staff, she could have contacted me. However, to be honest, it was a hustle and bustle period, and I did not take the step to contact her myself before the exams.” (Maria, third-year student)

Maria and Norah discussed the fact that Norah needed help at some point, but she was reluctant to request this from her Uni-Buddy. However, as time passed, Norah did get in touch with Maria.

4.3 Study Support

As they familiarized themselves with their new environment, the first-year students began to understand the benefit of having more experienced students as friends.

“Frankly, the girls (i.e., third-year students) helped us so much. There is a notable difference between the environment of school and university. The senior students helped us to understand the academic members, their topics and subjects, and the best way to study each subject. That helped us to get high grades and marks.” (Roza, first-year student)

As they found themselves facing new requirements and unfamiliar tasks, first-year students obtained considerable benefit from the program by seeking advice from their student ‘buddies’.

“Most of their inquiries concerned the teaching staff and their way of teaching. I told my two Uni-Buddies that sometimes we have personal experiences that differ between individuals.” (Maria, third-year student)

There is, as noted above, a considerable difference between first-year students’ previous school experience and the teaching and study methods they find at university. This meant that the majority of their questions were related to this particular area.

“Roza had my phone number, and she contacted me to inquire about an exam she would be sitting for in a few days. I told her that the questions were precise and would be from what she explained and told me about her lectures. Her questions were varied and she also asked about some books. It happened that I had one of them, so we agreed to meet on campus so I could give it to her.” (Nadaa, third-year student)

Third-year students agreed that their friends in the first year tended to contact them when they needed academic support. This is one of the aims of the project and draws the attention of the researcher to the type of advice a third-year student might give to her friends and how it might be influenced by her own experiences. During a discussion of this issue, Gazal pointed out that:

“If she asks me about a particular member of the academic staff, I have to be honest with her. So, if I’ve had a bad experience with that person, I have to tell her that, but also remind her that this is only my personal experience.” (Gazal, third-year student)

Nadaa agreed that she also drew on her personal experience:

“If a member of the academic staff did not deal well with all students, I would advise my Uni-Buddy to avoid taking any course with her. However, in case my experience was merely personal, and the staff member was good with the rest of the students, I would advise my Uni-Buddy to be careful not to get on her wrong side.” (Nadaa, third-year student)

Gazal also indicated another approach that enables first-year students to deal with a lecturer who has gained a reputation for being demanding:

“I would tell her to take care to concentrate on her studies and keep a close eye on her tasks and grades. I would also give her information about a lecturer. Besides, I would tell my Uni-Buddy if I have had a bad personal experience and say I wish I had known the lecturer's personality beforehand, so I would know how to deal with her.” (Gazal, third-year student)

As the year progressed, the third-year students found that their new buddies were more concerned about issues related to the teaching staff and their curricular requirements.

“Most of our conversations were related to academic life at university, for example, the type of tutors' questions, how to participate during lectures, and the grades.” (Waad, third-year student)

Third-year students in this study emphasized the importance of the academic dimension of the project for their Uni-Buddies, and first-year students reflected similar concerns. When Shrooq was asked for her opinion of the project, she praised it, expressing how it had helped her.

“It was beneficial to me. For instance, during the midterm exams, I asked her about the tutors who taught her. I asked about the type of questions I could expect, and I even asked about the best way to study a particular subject. I made sure to follow her advice, and I am doing well.” (Shrooq, first-year student)

4.4 Communication

Students were allowed to select the most effective way of communicating with each other. Some preferred meeting face to face on campus. Other students said that they benefited most from advanced communication technology, which enabled them to reply and comment when convenient. The third group combined the two ways of communicating, staying in regular touch through technology and meeting occasionally, especially when an issue arose.

“I asked her questions through WhatsApp, which she generally answered straight away. However, we sometimes met up when there were some issues we wanted to talk about face to face.” (Shrooq, first-year student)

By making the most out of technology, the senior students could also communicate with the first-year students regarding activities held on campus more effectively.

“They kept us updated regarding the activities, additional curriculum, and tours that took place in the university. It was only through them that we knew about these ongoing activities.” (Roza, first-year student)

Furthermore, third-year students tended to invite first-year students to a meeting aimed at breaking the ice. As the two groups socialized, it became apparent that the character of each student played a crucial part in the relationship between the girls. Some of the pairs had a formal relationship, with their conversation mainly directed by questions from the first-year student. Such relationships generally revolved around academic benefits. Other students, however, managed to build a more solid relationship, in which each student began to refer to her Uni-Buddy as a friend.

5. The My Uni-Buddy Model

The proposed model has been created from the data and methodology of the current study. Figure 1 demonstrates the processes involved in the model's three main steps, which can be adjusted easily according to the context in which it is to be implemented.

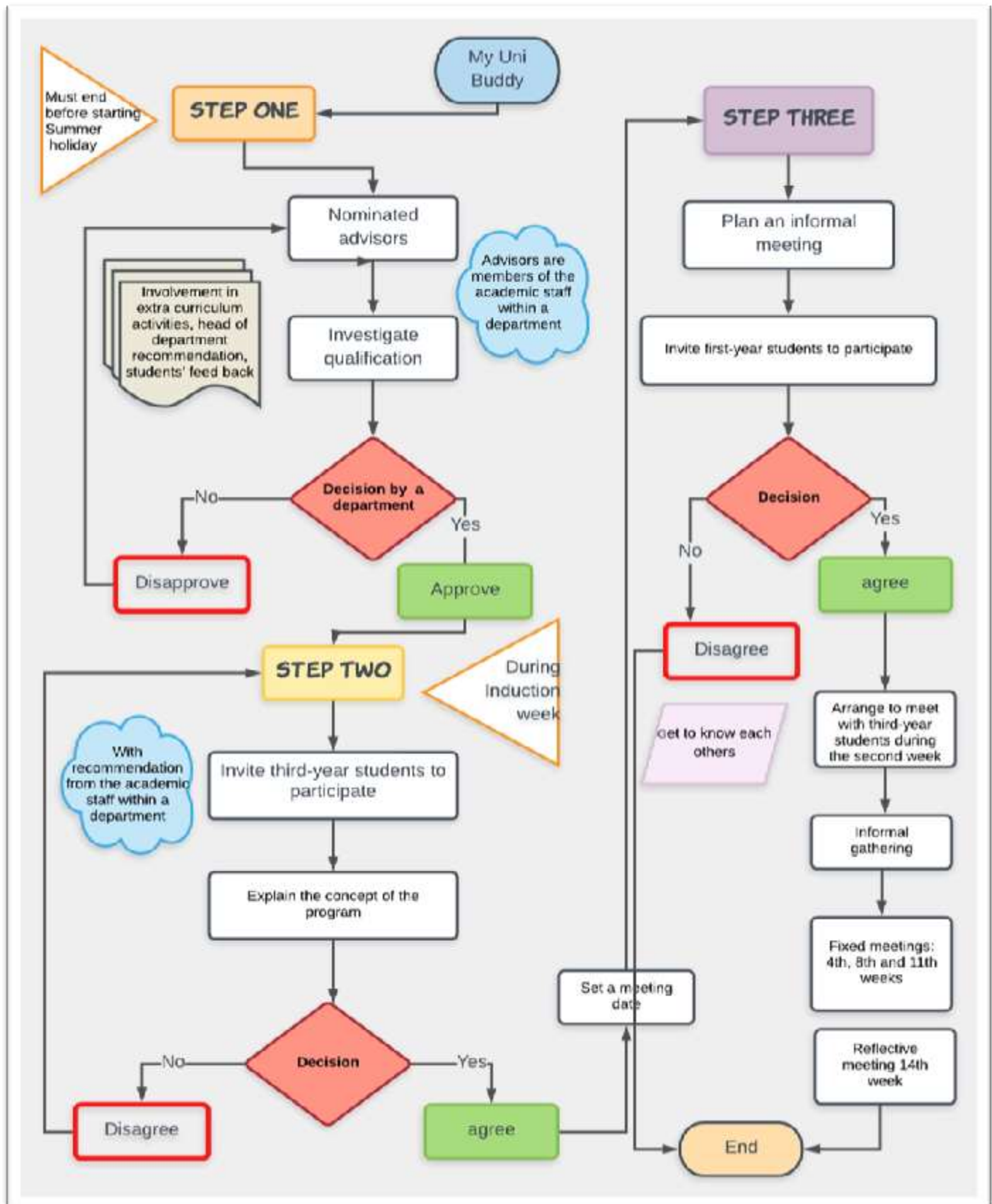


Figure 1. Proposed model of the My Uni-Buddy for first-year students

5.1 Step One

This step must be prepared before the start of the summer holiday. Firstly, advisors from the interested departments are nominated depending on their engagement with students' extracurricular activities and the students' assessments. Secondly, the role of My Uni-Buddy advisors is explained, as an informal supporting advisor to the participating students. The decision is to be made by the department committee. The advisors are then assigned to specific pairs for a whole academic year. Once they are approved by the committee, the second step starts.

5.2 Step Two

In accordance with the university policy, each school must organize an induction week for its newcomers. During this week, third-year students are invited to take part in the program. A meeting with the advisors takes place to explain the idea and benefits of providing support to their new university mates. Third-year students who agree to participate are to be given a date to meet up with the team.

5.3. Step Three

The team (consisting of the advisors and third-year students) meet and plan the informal meeting with first-year students. The idea of having a supportive, informal buddy from the third year is explained by the advisor and, more importantly, by a third-year student. Then, the new students are invited to take part. Those who choose to participate are given a date during the second week to be assigned to their buddies. Initially, they are to have four fixed meetings with the advisors throughout the term and non-specified gatherings among themselves. Finally, during the fourteenth week, a reflective meeting is held to evaluate the experience of the participants.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of an informal support program on helping first-year students adjust to university life. The findings of this paper have led to a proposed model that can be utilized for implementation of the My Uni-Buddy program. New students deserve assistance to make their transition journey to higher education easy. The My Uni-Buddy project attempts to take an effective step in that direction.

It is important to note that this study was limited in both time and scale. The researcher was unsure about getting the cooperation of students at an advanced level in their studies, and how willing they would be in supporting the newcomers. This led to invitations to first-year students to take part in the study being made orally during the informal induction meeting. There was considerably less engagement from new students than the researcher had expected. However, this allowed students from the third year to concentrate on one or two first-year students.

The study also revealed the presence of an informal virtual support group within the department, in which students in advanced semesters were willing to help new students via social networking. Such attitudes expressed the importance of a collaborative atmosphere within the department. It is important to indicate that the engaged and active accounts belonged to students and were not accredited by the department nor the college. It can be concluded that having such personal accounts in an informal situation encouraged new students to express their feelings, enquiries and questions.

In summary, it is essential to note that the project achieved its goal of helping new students to settle down quickly into their university life. In addition, it provided them with profound academic support. Nevertheless, the discussions with the participants revealed several issues that, when resolved, could ensure the project becomes stronger and more professional. For instance, despite first-year students being invited to participate in the study on the first day of the academic year, the first meeting was held two weeks after the beginning of the term. This was due to difficulties experienced by third-year students, which arose from their tight study schedules, including time spent organizing their studies, i.e., adding and deleting some subjects and changing the timing of others. In order to overcome this obstacle, the researcher produced a model to assist in the implementation of a Uni-Buddy project. This paper contributes to the My Uni-Buddy model as a practical attempt to help universities provide their first-year students with an experience proven to make their transition more comfortable. It can be implemented in any department within a Saudi university, as well as any university with a similar academic calendar.

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