

## APP OR WEBSITE? CHOOSING YOUR MOBILE PATH

“It’s everything you need, wherever you are.”

The author will describe the experience of developing and launching Murdoch Mobile, a mobile platform for staff, students and visitors at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Deliberately adopting an approach that differed from most universities at that time, the author will outline how and why this strategy was identified, the lessons learnt along the way, and the future plans to continue developing an intuitive mobile environment that adapts to the unique characteristics of each user.

Development of Murdoch University’s mobile website commenced during the latter half of 2010 and was driven by three key factors: a desire to leverage developments in mobile technology; address the inability of the main website to adapt to mobile devices; and an opportunity to be ahead of the curve in providing a mobile presence for the Murdoch University community.

A preliminary review examined available mobile development frameworks as well as mobile offerings from other Universities and organisations nationally and internationally. While the UCLA Mobile Web Framework was briefly considered it was quickly decided a lightweight custom development (dubbed the “Murdoch Mobile Framework”) would allow the greatest degree of flexibility and integration with existing Murdoch systems. Consideration was given towards developing a dedicated iPhone app but there were several risks identified with this: the lack of available expertise; the possibility of the app being rejected by Apple; and the inevitable need to develop and support additional apps for Android and Windows Mobile phones.

The initial scope for content for the Murdoch Mobile site was limited to three distinct areas: static content, which could be managed via the University’s web CMS; dynamic data, such as news and knowledgebase articles, imported via RSS; and interactive data, such as maps, student timetables, library catalogue searches and a staff directory, requiring closer integration with existing systems.

Version 1.0 of Murdoch Mobile was launched at the start of 2011. It quickly proved popular with students and maintained a consistent level of usage throughout the year. It was clear from the beginning that student timetables and map applications were, by a large margin, the most heavily used features of the site. This indicated that the site was

of most value to current students who needed to know where they needed to go and when they needed to be there.

A new version of the framework was developed in the latter half of 2011, aimed at making it easier to add new content via the CMS (new pages could now be detected and imported automatically), taking further advantage of HTML5 and CSS3 features (which would in turn make the site faster for users), and improving the maps application. A significant change was to move away from device detection in favour of media queries, which helped tailor the site to a range of different devices. While the original version of Murdoch Mobile was targeted solely at iPhones, the new version worked across all mobile devices, including iPads and even desktops.

Additional functionality was also added during 2012 in order to allow students to view their exam results via their mobile device. This had the added benefit of lessening the load on our main website during a period of predictably heavy use. Course and unit listings were also added when we realised the course listings pages on the main site were not viewable on mobile devices.

At the time of launch Murdoch Mobile placed Murdoch University ahead of many of its peers in the realm of mobile development. Over the past two years there has been an intense focus on mobile development and rapid progress in the area which has threatened to leave Murdoch Mobile behind.

Consequently further work is scheduled for Q1 of 2013. Plans include improvements to maps, more features for current students, and a full refresh of the styling. While our mobile strategy includes ongoing efforts to make our main website compatible with mobile devices, the provision of a dedicated mobile site affords opportunities to engage on a more personal level with users.

There is a popular saying among web developers that “content is king”. However, for Murdoch Mobile we intend to take the approach that “context is king”: this means showing content to the user that is based on where they are (on campus? offshore?), in real time (are they late for a lecture? is the student service centre open?) and, where possible, who they are (a current student? a research partner? a staff member?).

Mobile technology allows us to answer all of these questions and provide the information that our users need – wherever they need it and whenever they need it.

**PRESENTERS**

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