

Impact of centrally coordinated higher education pre-commencement of teaching student support initiative (FedReady) on student engagement: A regional university case study

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Summary

This case study describes how a dual-sector regional university (ie an institution that offers both higher education and vocational education training programmes), in Ballarat (Victoria, Australia), implemented a voluntary, no-fee, student academic capability supportive initiative in 2012. The initiative required 4-6 months of planning prior to the first delivery. The FedReady 5-day initiative was purposely designed to provide both domestic and international students from all disciplines, with academic knowledge and skills that support student transition and practice, two weeks before the start of their teaching semester. The initiative complements existing Federation University (FedUni) student academic support initiatives targeted at supporting students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, first in family student cohorts and those who have minimal experience with higher education. The initiative is co-delivered by both staff and student academic leaders (students employed as staff) and is delivered twice a year. The initiative is comprehensively evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative methods in conjunction with faculty and service centre staff feedback. The initiative was implemented on all main FedUni campuses in 2014. In 2012-2013, the initiative had a narrow implementation/pilot on only one main campus. The impact of the programme is demonstrated in both the qualitative and quantitative evidence provided in this paper. Initial evidence highlights student development in both social belongingness and academic preparedness in the higher education domain. The initiative is institutionally recognised and also forms part of the student academic progression support system, where students are directed to the service, where appropriate.

Due to overarching success of the initiative (1,659 of current students have engaged with the initiative), it is now delivered face-to-face on the three main FedUni campuses (gradual introduction to other main campuses in 2014 [Gippsland] and 2017 [Berwick]). It is also delivered via a two-week facilitated online programme plus self-paced learning modules to offer just-in-time support (since 2015). The initiative is co-developed by both staff and student academic leaders in response to becoming an open access institution and the growing need to better prepare higher education students for positive and effective learning in higher education. The initiative has been developed utilising both existing university funding and human resources and external resources supported by the national Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) scheme. The initiative has been successfully running for five years (six deliveries) and has been recognised institutionally via two successful Vice Chancellor Awards 'Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning Awards' (2015 and 2016) and received a 'Highly Commended' by the Australian Financial Review Awards (2015).

Description of project

Kift, Nelson and Clark (2010) clearly describe the importance of the first-year higher education experience in context with long-term student success. Similarly, Devlin and McKay (2017) describe the importance of meeting student needs in order to create a sense of support, belonging and connection with the learning environment. The FedReady initiative provides students with a range of opportunities to develop specific learning skills, self-awareness, self-efficacy and motivation (Kahu, 2013). This initiative clearly aligns with key factors described by Devlin and McKay (2017, p. iv) such as facilitating connectivity to the institution, adequately “understanding and responding to particular circumstance and needs of students”, preparing students for the realities of university study and supporting inclusivity and engagement with the learning environment. FedReady also aligns with the conceptual model of the Social Justice Framework as described by Nelson and Creagh (2013). For example, there are abundant opportunities for students and staff to exercise the self-determination principle (i.e. authentic involvement with programme design, enactment and evaluation) and the participation principle, where socially inclusive practices enhance student learning and teaching and the overall student experience (Nelson & Creagh, 2013).

The concept of FedReady was led from a team of staff closely engaged with existing student academic support initiatives. The majority of the student support initiatives embedded within this regional dual-sector university, commence in Orientation Week, otherwise known as O-Week. Traditionally, O-Week commences the week prior to the teaching semester. Student support activities in O-Week include a range of social and faculty opportunities relevant to a student’s discipline area. There were minimal academic-focused, support specific engagement opportunities available to students, prior to the commencement of the teaching semester. Prior to FedReady, students had minimal opportunity to practice skills such as academic writing and reading, research skills, referencing, demonstrating academic integrity and understanding academic language.

The aim of FedReady is to provide students with flexible, accessible and just-in-time student academic support in preparation for the commencement of their learning journey. FedReady is purposely developed to complement existing student academic support initiatives embedded within the teaching semester, such as peer mentoring, peer assisted study sessions, online tutoring support and individual student consultations with learning skills advisors. The structure of FedReady is based on a 5-day face-to-face program (See schedule in Table 1) which covers a number of key academic preparation areas and provides students with real opportunities to practice skills and receive both formative and summative feedback regarding skill competence. FedReady staff who deliver these sessions also work directly with academic teaching staff who are encouraged to embed these topics/modules into regular curriculum planning. These modules closely align with expectations relevant to various forms of assessment, critical thinking and time management.

Table 1: FedReady Structure Program (Session No. 1 – 6)

No.	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
1	Introduction & Overview	Writing Skills: Introduction to Academic Writing	Study Skills: Help & Support	Study Skills: Time Management	Presentation Skills: Presenting to an Audience
2	Study Skills: Note Taking	Writing Skills: Topic Analysis	Referencing Skills: Ways to Reference	Referencing Skills: Rules of Referencing	Presentation Skills: Presentation Planning
3	Study Skills: Moodle and more	Study Skills: Critical Thinking	Referencing Skills: Plagiarism	Referencing Skills: In-Text Referencing	Presentation Skills: Practice Presentations
4	Campus Tour	Study Skills: Academic Reading	Writing Skills: Essay Structure/Report Structure	Writing Skills: Proofreading & Polishing	Study Skills: Exam Preparation
5	Research Skills: Search Skills	Study Skills: Resilience for Success in Your Studies	Research Skills: Using Library Resources	N/A	Study Skills: Mock Exam
6	N/A	N/A	FedReady: Family & Friends (evening)	N/A	N/A

In preparation for the delivery of FedReady, a number of key stakeholders collaborated to review initiative logistics, peer review of content and ensure delivery meet innovative learning design standards. Key stakeholders included the staff leading existing student academic initiatives, learning skills advisors and student academic leaders (ie students employed as staff), who peer lead students given their previous education lived experience. In addition, preparation involved reflecting on previous attendance patterns and previous participant feedback from both students and staff. Attendance patterns often demonstrated a decline of student engagement progressively during the week. This impacted on session and activity planning, to ensure priority sessions were earlier in the week. Marketing merchandise packs were also distributed at the commencement of FedReady to provide students with core student academic service information.

FedReady is promoted via a number of methods. These include face-to-face advertising (eg. university wide Open Days, enrolment days, signs and posters close to faculty enrolment areas), phone call enquiries, a range of social media platforms

(ie Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and through a number of website advertising platforms (eg. direct links from the university enrolment page).

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

The effectiveness and impact of the mechanism FedReady initiative is documented via both quantitative and qualitative feedback. The evaluation process incorporates components relevant to registration processes, attendance and feedback and aligns with those described by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Project Evaluation Methodology (ALTC 2011).

Student attendance (n) has steadily grown since its introduction (n= 100 students [2012]; n= 102 [2013]; n=185 [2014]; n=415 [2015]; n=857 [2016]; n=565 (Semester 1 only [2017]. The initiative has been delivered six times (face-to-face) and more recently developed in online training capacity to increase access to students unable to attend face-to-face sessions

In Semester 1 (2017), a total of 565 students enrolled for the FedReady initiative. Survey responses of 160 students (approximately 29%) identified that;

- (1) FedReady had taught them important skills they will need for university studies;
- (2) FedReady was useful in preparing them for study;
- (3) That the staff and student leaders at FedReady were helpful and supportive and
- (4) Respondents would recommend FedReady to all commencing students.

Key faculty staff also acknowledge the student benefit relevant to the intended initiative outcomes. This initiative is now used strategically to support students at risk of poor progression of completing their studies. The initiative is now embedded through the student administration system linked to academic progression processes. Student and staff feedback highlight the benefits of the self-paced online modules, that students can access anytime during their learning journey and can be linked directly to course/program learning content.

Qualitative feedback collected as part of the regular and comprehensive evaluation is featured below:

"FedReady allows me to go into my degree knowing people, knowing how comfortable I am at university, so that I don't just get lost." (Student Participant, 2013)

"FedReady was an excellent platform to get a new student such as myself, on the right foot to achieving success within my degree. Along with the practical skills I learnt, I also made great friends who were like minded and also wanted to aim high. I would recommend FedReady to any other commencing student" (Student Participant, 2014)

"They were able to inform us of information we didn't know we needed to know. I presumed that we would be given all this information when we first started classes

and we would be eased into the assignments with full assistance during the classes.” (Student Participant, 2014)

“FedReady should be a compulsory component for transition into University. It is essential to understand and every day was as important as the others.” (Student Participant, 2014)

“The course content has been extremely helpful in assisting me through the various modules. It is very informative and step by step directions are easy to understand.” (Student Participant, 2015)

“I found that Fed ready answered all the questions i would not have asked for fear of looking silly during the first week. It also answered questions that I did not know that I needed to ask. Allowed me to start my study feeling comfortable with my surroundings and with what was expected of me.” (Student Participant, 2015)

“FedReady was a fantastic experience. The content and layout was exceptional, well beyond what I had imagined.” (Student Participant, 2015)

“I would recommend FedReady to all future students who have not studied in a university environment before, to help them get a better understanding of university life and what is expected of them during their time studying. FedReady gives you a great insight into what the expectations of your lectures are and what is expected of you.” (Student Participant, 2015)

“It was great to meet other people and knowing I was not alone with the way I am feeling. Also the staff made you feel welcomed and that you have made the right choice.” (Student Participant, 2016)

“On my first day I was actually questioning why I was there as a mature age student amongst other students my children's age; I felt like a fish out of water and very uncomfortable. Then by the end of the second day I had found my feet and actually made some friends, some of which were school leavers. A truly engaging experience.” (Student Participant, 2016)

Up until now, we have been unable to currently investigate the relationship between FedReady attendance and engagement with student progression at the course and/or program level. Further research during 2018 and 2019 will involve student grade point averages and successful transition between program year levels towards completion.

Reflections on the project

The key barrier to the initiative is student attendance. Although this voluntary initiative has demonstrated marked impact and success for the wider commencing FedUni student cohort, the challenge is influencing a student’s decision to attend prior to the commencement of the teaching semester. Extensive mapping has occurred to ensure that topics covered in FedReady are not duplicated in O-Week. Having this week also allows students a 2-week opportunity to engage with both higher education social and academic transition experiences. The student cohort is

primarily part-time, time-poor and are engaged in some form of employment concurrently with their study. Prior to the commencement of the semester, students often prioritise engaging with part-time work to earn funds instead of engaging with a non-compulsory academic activity. In an effort to address this barrier, the initiative is more recently being embedded into normal university processes linked to academic progression. For example, if a student is demonstrating poor academic progression and significant challenges, attendance at an upcoming FedReady week can become a learning hurdle requirement. For some students, it may become a condition of continual study and linked to their study plans for the following semester (prior to recommencing classes). In such instances, FedReady will remain in the week long programme. In addition, student academic skills are also commonly linked to accreditation standards and embedded throughout programme curriculum. This happens gradually during the teaching and learning process. To complement FedReady, an internal project has also commenced to map ideal student attribute skills and competencies relative to current academic and social student support services (ie extra curricula student experiences). Both responses, ensure that FedReady continues to meet the student cohort needs and compliments, rather than duplicates, existing support services for students.

Maintaining staff and student academic leader continuity and experience as part of the initiative can be a barrier particularly if staff retention and turnover is high. At times, internal competition for resources can influence who is available to facilitate the initiative which can disrupt delivery. This barrier can be overcome by ensuring adequate communication channels across all key staff at all times. It is essential to adequately document both explicit and implicit knowledge sharing processes across the institution. It is paramount, that there is strong, positive leadership, management and authentic collaboration, accountability and ownership of the initiative across the university.

The format of FedReady also needs to remain agile and 'fit for purpose'. The learning tasks, assessment activities and the virtual classroom activities require periodical revision. On occasion, the number of sessions and the complexity of each session requires revision to suit the target audience particularly given the student experience and background (ie domestic students compared to international students). The current virtual activities utilise Adobe Connect learning and teaching technology. In addition to the learning technology platforms, it is essential that both student participants and facilitators have competent skills in successfully navigating learning and teaching platforms.

Follow up and future plans

The rollout of FedReady Online commenced in 2015. This component of the initiative is currently being expanded and revised for future delivery. The leading team is also exploring how to potentially incorporate student orientation, transition and academic skill development from pre-enrolment until the completion of the teaching semester. Future exploration of FedReady considers how to develop skill and attribute development and linkage with student belonging, engagement and student wellbeing. Providing students with choice and variable options is crucial to meet the ever changing student demands, particularly in a regional dual sector

context. The team leading FedReady continue to engage with numerous key stakeholders which encourages cross-university collaborations and process mapping. These processes underpin cross discipline involvement and authentic input (ie student wellbeing and conduct is embedded into activities to provide students increased awareness of the university culture).

Future plans regarding FedReady also include exploration of offering a fee-for-service product to external higher education cohorts including a variant targeted for partner provider students studying at FedUni partner locations. Components of FedReady are specific to the FedUni context and have been developed intuitively to suit this audience. There is the potential to vary the activities, provide comprehensive planning and lesson plan documentation to external providers to complement their student academic support initiatives. This future plan is currently under investigation, development and planning.

The FedReady learning activities and format is constantly evolving. 'Doing by learning' is an essential element of FedReady. Student activities must remain at the heart of initiative across all facets. Future delivery and planning must ensure that there are less didactic student experiences and more student-centred and student-active activities to build capability. The initiative must remain current, align with internal and external expectations and build upon feedback and valid, rigor evaluations focused on sustainability, meeting intended learning goals and the student experience.

Related publications and resources

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