

## **Enhancing student participation through day and night enabling programs**

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South Australia's Flinders University has established a reputation for social justice and equity. One example of this is its innovative Foundation Course, a bridging program begun in 1983 to allow students with educationally disadvantaged backgrounds an alternative pathway to university study. Although the idea of a tertiary preparation program is not new—and dates back at least as far as the famous Bauhaus art school *Vorkus* or Foundation Course in 1919 in Germany (Itten, 1963)—the original Flinders Foundation Course focused specifically on people with educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. It was the first of its kind in Australia and was inspired by a Canadian model. The philosophy of the Flinders course was that people who wish to study at university should be given the opportunity to do so, regardless of how social, economic, or other factors obstructed their traditional study pathways (namely, the completion of secondary school). This philosophy still underpins the Foundation Course, which is now known as the Foundation Studies Program (FSP). The initial on-campus course was held in the evenings to accommodate people with work and/or family commitments during the day. This course continues to be offered at Flinders University in the evenings. Since 2011, there has also been a day-time version of the course. This paper will discuss and compare both versions of the FSP and propose that as they complement each other and cater to different cohorts, they are both necessary. Having just one version of the course would disadvantage some members of the community who the course was originally intended for. Insights gained from running two FSPs can be applied to both versions and hopefully enhance the participation of day-time and evening students alike.

### **Background to the day-time FSP**

Apart from the moral imperative of allowing all socioeconomic groups opportunities to undertake university study, from a pragmatic perspective, numerous studies have shown that having low socio-economic status does not lead to low academic results (Clements, 1993, p. 362, as cited in Beasley, 1997, p. 214). For example, focusing on a competitive and traditionally elitist field of study, Bamford, Kutieleh and Wells (1998, p. 11) found no significant difference between the academic performance of LIB (low-income background) Flinders University law students and that of traditional students. More recently, Gil (as cited in Warden, 2011) concluded, after three decades of researching how to widen access to university study, that '[a]cademic talent is equally distributed across all of the social strata.' In line with such findings, Australian universities are widening participation.

The influential *Bradley Review of Australian higher education final report of 2008* identified Australia as being behind other OECD countries in terms of equity groups participating in higher education (Ryan, 2011, p. 76). The Bradley Review led to Australian government guidelines for increasing the rate of university students from low SES backgrounds to 20% by 2020 (HESA 2013 - Other Grant Guidelines, 1.40.1, as cited in Hodges et al., 2013, p.13). In response to government directives about universities widening participation, focusing in particular on students from 'low socioeconomic status (LSES)' backgrounds (Australian Government, 2009, pp. 12–13), and forming partnerships with the vocational sector, in 2011, Flinders University, in conjunction with TAFESA (Technical and Further Education, South Australia) began a day-time version of the FSP. It was originally held at two metropolitan Adelaide campuses (Noarlunga and Adelaide) for the first three topics and at Flinders University for the final topic. The four topics in the course are Introduction to University Study through Academic Writing, which familiarises students with university expectations and conventions, such as essay construction and Harvard referencing; Developing the Skills of Academic Literacy, which encourages students to think more critically about academic readings and also improve their writing skills; Developing the Skills of Academic Numeracy,

which teaches students basic numeracy and statistics through a data collection and analysis project that students choose; and Flinders University: An Introduction to Different Areas of Study, which exposes students to the four Faculties at Flinders, thereby allowing them to make informed choices about their undergraduate degrees and also appreciate connections between different areas of research. Although the content of both versions of the FSP is the same, the day-time FSP is run over three months, whereas the night-time version is run over around seven months. Since 2012, the day-time FSP has been run twice a year.

### **Course integrity**

In order to enable one course to be run within two different organisations, both versions of the FSP required adaptations. One such adaptation involved the course content. In terms of student equity and quality control, it was vital to maintain consistency between two versions of the course. After all, in almost 30 years of running the FSP at Flinders, the course had evolved into something that was proven to be effective in preparing students for university study and instilling confidence in them. (For instance, in 1997, Dr Vic Beasley, who started the Foundation Course and received for his efforts an Equal Opportunity Achievement Award in 1994, conducted a study in which he compared samples of Flinders students who had completed secondary school with those who had completed the Foundation Course but had not completed secondary school. He found that the Foundation students performed as well as, and even slightly better than, the students who completed secondary school (Beasley, 2006)). Yet many of the lectures in the evening FSP were quite specialised. They had been created either by postgraduates, or by people who had finished their postgraduate studies, and the creators based their lectures on their own specific research interests and expertise. One of the challenges was to select lecture topics that could be delivered by people other than the original lecturers. In some cases, this meant abandoning lecture topics and, in other cases, removing content that was too specialised for a lecturer with general knowledge to feel comfortable lecturing on. However, one of the appealing aspects of the second topic in the FSP (An Introduction to Academic Literacy) was its variety of subject-matter. In order to engage students, it was important to retain the variety and not make lectures so generic that they lost their appeal as unique topics. And, in the words of President Nixon's press aide, 'Mistakes were made' (Ziegler, as cited in Hale, 2012, p. 167). Even with an awareness of the aforementioned issue, some lectures were still deemed by the TAFESA lecturers to be too specialised and had to be abandoned or simplified after the pilot program in second semester of 2011. For the first time in the FSP's history, other factors needed to be considered when constructing lectures, such as 'double branding', in which the strengths and benefits of both Flinders University and TAFESA were communicated to students and other stakeholders. The lecture slides themselves, along with the topic handbooks, had to have the TAFESA logo incorporated into them, alongside the Flinders University logo, to show that this initiative was indeed a collaboration between the two institutions.

Another change related to the word count of the day-time FSP homework assignments. Initially, the word count was the same for the day-time and evening homework assignments, but it was reduced for the day-time students to reflect the extra time demands on students completing the course in three months rather than seven. For Zepke and Leach (2005, as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2006, p. 109) pointed out that one requirement for student success is that workloads need to be reasonable. Having said that, we also have to be conscious of maintaining some intensity in the FSP to replicate the intensity in first-year university, so that the demands in first year do not overwhelm students. Hodges et al. suggest that one of the factors preventing students from completing their enabling courses could be inadequate time management skills (2013, p. 103). As the day-time FSP students frequently mention time pressures as being particularly challenging in the FSP, we recommend introducing one session on time management in future FSPs.

And the changes to the day-time FSP also affected the traditional night-time FSP. For example, lecture topics chosen for the night-time FSP were considered based on whether they were replicable by different lecturers at TAFESA. Flinders lecturers were instructed to provide notes on their PowerPoint slides so that other people could make sense of the slides. In turn, the TAFESA lecturers and tutors often taught subjects they might not have been comfortable with, but they extended themselves and adapted well. Another change to the night-time FSP involved the timetabling. Prior to the partnership with TAFESA, Topic 2 of the FSP had nine lectures/tutorials, but as nine sessions were difficult to accommodate in the day-time FSP, this number was reduced to eight lectures at all campuses. Again, the issue of consistency was viewed as paramount.

Apart from logistical challenges, the partnership between Flinders and TAFESA generated mutual benefits. For example, many of the night-time FSP tutors were recruited to teach at TAFESA, as their experience was invaluable. Furthermore, in 2012 the FSP commenced at Mt Barker (a town 33 kilometres from Adelaide) TAFE SA, and this was video-conferenced to various regional TAFESA campuses across South Australia. The impressive videoconference facilities offered by TAFESA created an exciting way for FSP students to study in a way that they had never done before. Student feedback on this mode of delivery was extremely encouraging. Furthermore, the imaginative topics regional students chose for their videoconference oral presentations (such as *Which breed of goat will reach maturity faster?* and *How does a drought affect the price of milk and how does this coincide with the price of grain?*) made the presentations engaging and clarified our decision that all future FSP students must choose their own unique oral presentation topics.

### **Demographics**

Six different FSPs (one per semester) have now been run at various TAFESA campuses, and as a result, some demographic trends have been observed across the campuses. One of the most significant changes to the FSP cohorts was that many people who would previously have undertaken the night-time FSP at Flinders chose instead to do the day-time FSP at TAFESA campuses. The main reason appears to be that students can finish their studies in three months rather than seven. Again, time is of the essence. Although we always need to be mindful about how we can improve our teaching and administrative practices to retain students, it is also true that students often withdraw from university studies for reasons unrelated to institutional performance, such as part-time work (McInnis, 2001, p. 5, as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2006, p. 111). As many of the night-time FSP students have work and family commitments, perhaps a shorter night-time course with less of a break between Topics 1 and 2 and Topics 3 and 4 (currently one month each) could lessen the attrition due to these external factors.

Another reason students found the day-time FSP more attractive than the evening version is that students wanted to begin their studies at a location closer to their home than Flinders. A more subtle reason expressed by TAFESA staff is that sometimes students do not feel comfortable enough to study at university but feel that TAFESA matches their skill level. At any rate, 86 students completed the night-time FSP in 2012, whereas 284 completed the day-time version of the course in the same year.

Who continued to enrol in the night-time FSP? The most recent figures at hand (from semester one, 2014) are representative of trends we have observed in the last few years. Generally, there are more female than male students at both Flinders and TAFESA campuses (with 63.9% female students in the 2014 night-time FSP and 58.8% female students in the semester one, 2014 day-time FSP). Again, at all campuses, the <21-year-old age group was represented the most (with 38.2% being <21 at Flinders and 63% being <21 at the various TAFESA campuses). Clearly, the <21 age group are drawn to the FSP, and find either the prospect of studying at TAFESA campuses or of finishing their studies within three months especially attractive. (It would be interesting to gauge whether the

figures would change if a three-month day-time FSP were held entirely at Flinders.) The main reason for this pattern—which has been supported by much student feedback—is that students who do not achieve their desired ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, or Year 12, result) consider the FSP as an alternative way of getting into a specific university course or into university in general. This is supported by Hodges et al, who concluded that ‘secondary students appear to be somewhat strategic [in] selecting enabling programs as a legitimate pathway for higher education’ (2013, p. 16). And although this changes the original focus of the Foundation Course on students with educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, it could be argued that as the benefits *all* cohorts gain from undertaking the FSP compensate for any deficiencies in their secondary schooling, the change in emphasis does not matter in the grand scheme.

It appears that the night-time FSP is convenient for many >25 year-old students who either work during the day or have family commitments. It is reasonable to speculate that due to these same work/family commitments, these students appreciate having extended time to devote to their studies with the more ‘leisurely’ pace of the night-time FSP.

**Table 1:** Students by gender (Sem. 1, 2014)

	Female	Male
Night-time FSP	63.9%	36.1%
Day-time FSP	58.8%	41.2%

**Table 2:** Students by age group (Sem. 1, 2014)

	<21	= or >21
Night-time FSP	38.2%	61.8%
Day-time FSP	63%	37%

**Table 3:** Academic achievements (average overall mark)

	Sem. 1, 2014
Night-time FSP	68%
Day-time FSP, Sem. 2, 2013	66%
Day-time FSP, Sem. 1, 2014	74%

In terms of academic achievement, this varies. Although the average overall mark for the semester one, 2014 day-time FSP students was 74%, and the average overall mark for the night-time FSP students in 2013 was 68%, this latter average was higher than the average overall mark for the semester two, 2013 day-time FSP students, which was 66%. So comparisons should not be drawn too hastily. It should also be noted that although many day-time FSP students expressed their concerns that a three-month FSP was intense in terms of workload and pressure, this did not appear to affect the overall academic performance of the cohort. (As mentioned, in response to such feedback, part of our calibration involved reducing the word count of homework exercises—which I often referred

to jokingly as ‘learning opportunities’— and increasing the time between the final assignment and the final essay in Topic 1.)

A quite distinct group of day-time FSP students are those who undertake their lectures and tutorials through means of videoconference relay from Mt Barker TAFESA. With generally only one or two inside the ‘satellite’ classrooms, regional students interact with the principal class at Mt Barker, along with students from other regional campuses, connected to each other through multiple video cameras and screens. The lecturers, tutors and students became very proficient at using this type of technology to pursue their studies. One negative aspect was that after completing the course, students who were not able to relocate closer to Flinders University in order to begin their degree frequently voiced frustration over their limited opportunities for online undergraduate study. This is an area of concern and supports James’s finding (2007) that people living in rural and remote locations are significantly under-represented at universities, and this situation had not really changed in the 15 years leading to James’ 2007 conclusions (pp. 5–6). Hopefully, Flinders’ options for online courses will expand in the future. However, as part of the ongoing evolution of the course, another (albeit temporary) solution has emerged. A staff member from the Admissions section of Flinders speaks to the Mt Barker and regional FSP students each semester and has started advising students about how they can structure their degrees so that students can spend some of their time in Adelaide and some in their regional homes. And the regional students are adapting accordingly and following this advice.

As students become more demanding for online learning options and the option of re-introducing an online FSP for night-time metropolitan students is being explored by the University, there may be scope to use some of the videoconference technology already used in the day-time.

### **The principles of equity and social justice**

Although the emphasis of the FSP has changed since 1983, from being only for people with educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, to a course that is available to many segments of society, the original premise of social justice has not been forgotten. In 2012, we offered extra support to a young lady with Down’s syndrome to facilitate her successful completion of the night-time FSP. As with many of the FSP students, she was not initially sure about whether she was able to complete the tasks required to study at university. But to her—and our—great delight, she was determined and talented enough to do what was required to complete the FSP successfully and is now undertaking a Drama degree at Flinders.

The principle of social justice was also extended to include inmates in one prison in South Australia. In 2013, another day-time version of the FSP was designed and implemented at Mobilong Prison in South Australia’s rural Murray Bridge. This enabled extremely educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged students to experience university-style lectures and tutorials and prepare for university study after their release. Seventeen students began this course and 10 successfully completed it. With the insights we gained from this pilot program into the importance of education in reducing recidivism and giving prisoners hope, we introduced into the day-time and night-time FSP new lectures/tutorials on prisoner education and re-entry, so as to inform the other FSP students about a vital social equity issue among a largely neglected group in society. It was pleasing to see at least one FSP Mobilong student enrolling in a Science degree at Flinders after being released.

One way Flinders University has encouraged all of its FSP graduates to study after the FSP is to offer them guaranteed entry into any one of nine undergraduate degrees (Arts, Business, Environment, Engineering Science, Government and Public Management, Information Technology, International Studies, Science and Theology) upon successful completion of the FSP. Successful FSP graduates are also eligible to apply for almost all of the other undergraduate degrees at Flinders University and compete for places against other

students who have undertaken Foundation courses or the STAT (Special Tertiary Admissions Test).

### **Student feedback**

Both the Flinders University and TAFE SA FSPs will only continue to be viable for as long as they meet the changing demands of students. Therefore, formative and summative feedback is used to assess students' perceptions of the course in terms of its contribution to their confidence in their abilities and preparation for university studies.

Many students express growth in self-confidence in their academic abilities. One mature-age student from the first semester of 2013 had this to say of the day-time FSP:

"I was not able to go to University and did not complete High School. This was something I always felt disappointed about and I always questioned whether I would be capable of further study. I would highly recommend this course to anyone considering University study particularly if you are unsure of how you would go."

Another student from the day-time FSP in semester two, 2013, had the following feedback:

"This program has given me my first victory in what feels like an eternity. The team behind the Foundation Studies Program has made a profound difference to my life and I have not even enrolled yet lol."

A student from the night-time FSP in 2013 highlighted the practical skills he gained from the FSP:

"I have almost made it through my first year in the Paramedic science degree and haven't been happier. Without the Foundation Studies Program you ran last year, there is no way I would be where I am now. I still use many of the techniques and writing styles we were taught and believe this is a key reason for my success this year."

And from the night-time version of the 2014 FSP, a student summed up his a view in a lyrical fashion:

"The Foundation Course is a take-off zone where you can expand your wings and soar with excitement as well as inspiration in attaining the thirst for knowledge and most importantly, 'how to use the knowledge'."

### **'Take-off zone': realising an academic dream**

Flinders University is committed to accepting into many courses students who successfully complete the FSP. To date, a large number of such students have availed themselves of these opportunities and have enrolled not only at Flinders University but also at the other two universities in South Australia. Table 4 below shows the number of students who completed the FSP at the main locations. A comparison is also drawn between the evening course at the main Flinders campus and its day-time counterparts at TAFESA locations (Noarlunga, Adelaide CBD and Mt Barker).

Table 4 shows that the number of students who returned to university study after the completion of the FSP was marginally different amongst the TAFESA campuses. However, the percentage of students who enrolled in university after undertaking the FSP at Flinders University was measurably greater than those who undertook the FSP at the off-campus locations. It is possible that this is due to many of the night-time students being mature-age and possibly more committed to the course than their younger counterparts at off-campus locations. It is also possible that students of all ages who commit to the longer version of the

course are more committed and determined to pursue university courses. Also, the reported proportion of students from off-campus locations who return to university studies could be a misrepresentation of the trend, as, for various reasons, several students enrol at the other two universities in South Australia.

**Table 4: Further Study Rates by FSP Location**

<b>Further Study Rate*</b>	<b>Flinders</b>	<b>Noarlunga</b>	<b>Adelaide</b>	<b>Mt Barker/Regional</b>
2012 Bachelor Pass in 2013	54	38	88	9
FSP Completions in 2012	86	85	178	21
Further Study Rate	0.62	0.44	0.49	0.42
2013 Bachelor Pass in 2014	41	76	134	18
FSP Completions in 2013	66	101	182	19
Further Study Rate	0.62	0.75	0.73	0.94

\*Note: The Further Study Rate is defined as the number of students who return the following year to commence a Bachelors Pass degree, following a successful completion of the FSP in the previous year.

**Table 5: Attrition Rates for FSP Pathway Bachelor Pass Students by FSP Delivery Location**

<b>FSP Study Year</b>		<b>Flinders</b>	<b>Noarlunga</b>	<b>Adelaide</b>	<b>Mt Barker /Regional</b>
2012	<b>Failed to return in 2014</b>	12	7	25	4
	<b>1st Year Bachelor Pass in 2013</b>	54	38	88	9
Attrition Rate**		0.22	0.18	0.28	0.44

\*\*Note: The attrition rate is defined as the number of students who fail to return to the University to undertake the second year of their Bachelors Pass degree, having used the FSP as a pathway to their first year of undergraduate study.

Table 5 delineates the inconsistency of the attrition rates across the four locations in the last two years. While the causes for this are far from being clear, it is not unreasonable to claim that the rate for the Mt Barker and regional centres is caused by Flinders University having limited offerings of online courses, which may prompt students to consider other alternatives. Admittedly, the rate of attrition is also high for the other three locations. However, the first two do not deviate significantly from the University's average attrition rate (18.2%). Some of the students who dropped out were telephoned by a 'retention officer' at the University, with a view of identifying the reasons for their withdrawal. The analysis showed that the main factor was financial reasons, followed by family commitments. Course related reasons were not ranked highly.

## **Conclusion**

There have been numerous challenges involved in creating a day-time version of the FSP, many relating to students' real and perceived demands on their time. The day-time FSP has increased hopes but also provided disappointments for some regional students who are frustrated by limited online options for study after the FSP. However, it has also enabled many students from a wide variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to experience the thrill of learning and enter university, where they would have found this difficult in the

traditional way. Patterns are emerging about the different cohorts who are drawn to both the day-time and evening FSP, but it is clear that each FSP has something different to offer people and we continue to learn about how to improve both versions. Surprisingly perhaps, creating a day-time FSP influenced the form and nature of the night-time FSP, but overall one has informed the other. The whole is more than the sum of the parts, and there is merit in retaining day and night ... night and day.



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