

# School-Based Enabling Programs: Creating Opportunity and Connection. *A Practice Report*

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## Abstract

A growing body of literature and rhetoric from the secondary sector recognises that traditional senior secondary curriculums are not catering to all university aspirational students. This need created an opportunity for University Preparation Pathways (UPP) at Murdoch University to provide a transitional path for an underserved cohort. FlexiTrack High (FTH), a pioneering school-based enabling program, demonstrates how effective course design can create opportunities for underserved cohorts, contribute to the Government's goal of raising tertiary participation rates amongst young people and foster connections between tertiary and secondary institutions. Utilising a second-generation Enabling Transition Pedagogy (ETP), this report explores the pedagogical underpinnings of an effective school-based program. Autoethnographic data obtained through a unique collaboration between Murdoch and partnerships schools, as well as quantitative progression data and student surveys, provide early indicators of the wide range of impacts an explicit model of this nature can have on students and schools.

**Keywords:** Transitions; enabling programs; high school; enabling transition pedagogy.

## Introduction

The year 2008 is often referred to in enabling education<sup>1</sup> research as that of the Australian Bradley review's "great reveal", which signalled a paradigmatic shift in higher education. In the quest for a highly skilled workforce, the federal government ushered in reform to widen university participation (Bradley et al., 2008). The government's agenda included a specific goal

<sup>1</sup> University preparatory education for non-traditional students



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for higher participation rates amongst young people, targeting a 40% increase for 19–25-year-olds, by 2025 (Blyth, 2014). In this emergent space, tertiary institutions have responded with the creation of enabling programs to equip a diverse cohort of students with the necessary academic confidence and abilities to progress to tertiary study (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014), whilst secondary schools have sought stronger relationships with external educational institutions in a bid to widen curriculums (SCSA, 2022). Such initiatives have seen an increase in both year 12 completion (83%) and a growth (45%) in the tertiary education sector (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated further adaptation; schools have adopted different modes of learning and universities have created multiple avenues for university entrance for high school students.

A growth area in this educational context is school-based enabling programs. These programs provide an alternative for university aspirant students not flourishing in ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank)<sup>2</sup> curriculums and are an effective model for strengthening the transition from secondary to tertiary learning. As interest grows in school-based enabling programs, it is important to not only understand what pedagogies and practice are most effective but to also understand the impact these programs are having on students and school communities. The aims of this report are two-fold. Firstly, to detail the application of a second-generation enabling transition pedagogy (ETP) (Jones et al., 2022) at Murdoch University to create the FlexiTrack High (FTH) program. This is in order to elucidate principles and strategies that pedagogues can apply to their own context. Secondly, to show the relationship between the program and student growth, preparedness, opportunity and connection. Qualitative data for this research was collected through an autoethnographic collaboration with teachers from partnership schools and Murdoch FTH academics. It was understood that teachers, integral members of the school-based model, were well positioned to draw comparisons with other curriculums, report their observations of the student learning journey but also provide reflection on how the program impacted their community. Additional data was gathered from student surveys, completions and progressions. Prior to analysing the impact of this model, the context and program design will be outlined to contextualise why an enabling transition pedagogy is required to address the needs of diverse enabling cohorts.

## Context

A growing body of literature and rhetoric from the secondary sector highlights an increasing dissatisfaction with ATAR curriculums. Since 2009, ATAR has been the national entry standard for year 12 students desiring university entrance (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). While each Australian state and territory is responsible for the structure and implementation of senior secondary curriculums to create aggregate ATAR grades, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) provide content and achievement standards in English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, to ensure consistent curriculums nationally (ACARA, 2022). It is argued that traditional ATAR curriculums diminish a love of learning, alienate learners (Watson, 2019) and limit deep learning (McGraw & Fish, 2018; NSW Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, such limiting structures do not allow students to follow their educational passions (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Within education research, it is argued that ATAR curriculums do not adequately prepare students for tertiary learning as they do not explicitly teach academic reading, critical thinking, and academic integrity, nor scaffold the pathway to tertiary education (O'Connell et al., 2019). ATAR curriculums, with discrete units, narrowly scoped achievement standards and heavily weighted exams, reduce interdisciplinarity and opportunities for scaffolding or social and emotional learning. ATAR fails to capture the full spectrum of student ability (Pilcher & Torii, 2018) and while it is an effective grade predictor for recall-based subjects such as bioscience, it is less so for clinical subjects (Russell et al., 2021). Most concerning, ATAR tends to reflect socioeconomic differences with scores influenced by postcode (Blyth, 2014). Additionally, there is concern that the ranking system itself creates mental health issues among young people in response to pressure (O'Connell et al., 2019; Watson, 2019). As such, ATAR is becoming less relevant. In 2017, 60% of university undergraduate offers did not come via ATAR pathways (Pilcher & Torii, 2018) and more recently only one in four year 12 students participated (O'Connell et al., 2019) in this ranking system. Manny, Tam and Lipka (2019) assert that one size does not fit all. Cohorts such as these require evolving and reformed education systems that are integrated, purposeful and equitable (O'Connell et al., 2019; Pilcher & Torii, 2018). To address the mental health needs and reduce alienation for diverse cohorts, opportunities for belonging and connection are also required (Crawford, 2021; Hughes et al., 2022).

Murdoch University's FTH, the first school-based enabling program in Western Australia, was born out of the cultural context described above. In 2017 the principal of South Hedland Senior High School, frustrated with the senior secondary curriculums, made a request to Murdoch for an online enabling program for her year 12 students struggling in ATAR. She knew that her students were aspirational and capable but despaired that the current curriculums available did not engage or support them. It was here that the educational disadvantage created by ATAR was recognised and a new enabling cohort identified. The needs

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<sup>2</sup> The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all the students in their age group <https://www.uac.edu.au/future-applicants/atar>

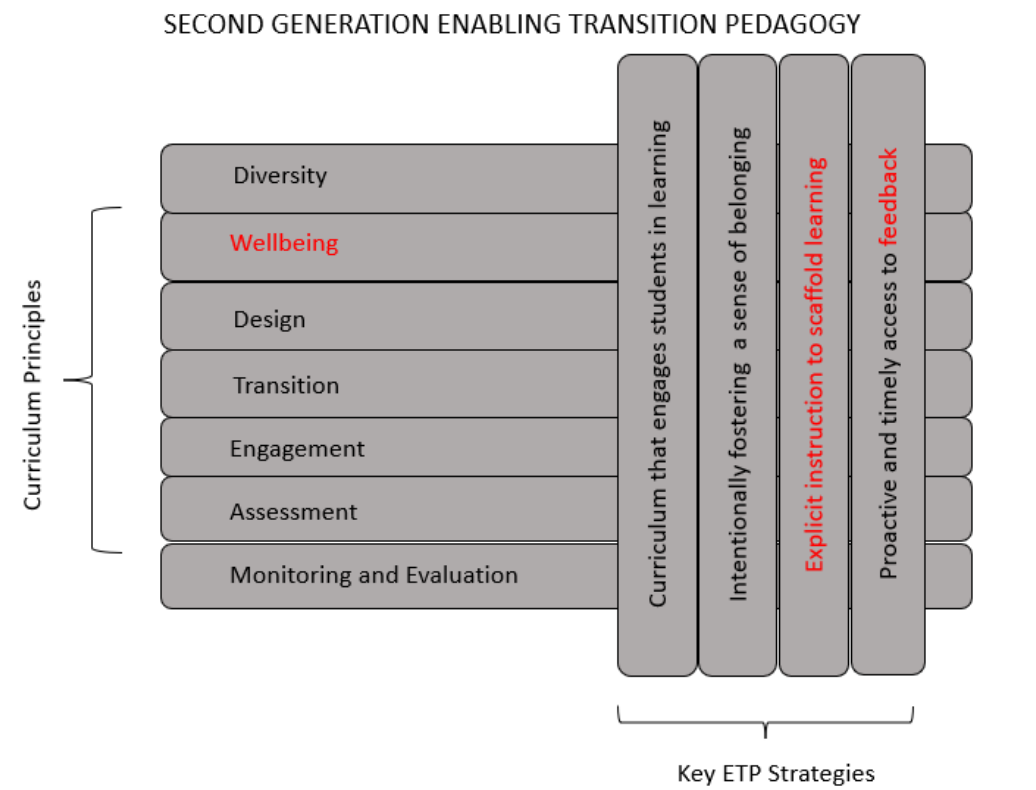
of this cohort offered an opportunity for stronger connections between schools and universities “to enrich schools’ cultures and facilitate greater academic success at both university and school for disadvantaged students” (Hughes & Brown, 2014, p. 2). The designers of FTH recognised that both secondary and tertiary institutional stakeholders needed to combine forces to co-construct a transitional space for the underserved cohort. Aware of the high attrition for purely online learners (Coussement et al., 2020; Whannell & Whannell, 2012) and understanding that this cohort were accustomed to face-to-face teaching, it was proposed that a new model was needed, a model that incorporated timetabled classes in schools with a dedicated teacher and an online tutor from Murdoch’s enabling education team available in the online space. This approach aligned the vital inputs of success: a highly trained *team* of educators and an effectively designed online enabling program – in essence, a highly supportive, pedagogically rigorous bridge to acculturation. It provided a space to intentionally foster a sense of belonging and connection that would enable students to see themselves as members of an academic community, thereby sponsoring motivation (Tinto, 2020). The resulting blended, embedded, school-based model is both an enabling program and a wellbeing initiative. From the *regional* pilot study in 2017, FTH has evolved and grown. It commenced delivery in the Perth region in 2018. The program then garnered endorsement by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) in 2019, allowing students to gain 4-unit equivalent credits towards their Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE). Further detail regarding the design of the program is described below.

**Program Design**

FTH was built upon an already established and effective program FlexiTrack (FT). FTH utilises the FT curriculum but adapted to the high school context. Originally designed by Angela Jones, FT was an innovative program for post-secondary enabling students requiring a flexible online program. It was a bespoke, dynamic space that was, “brimming with resources that have been poached, mashed-up, repurposed and curated specifically for the online enabling learner” (Jones & Olds, 2019, p. 111) and a resource few schools would have the budget or expertise to provide. FT prepares students for tertiary learning through the enactment of the enabling transition model developed by Jones, Olds and Lisciandro (2022) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

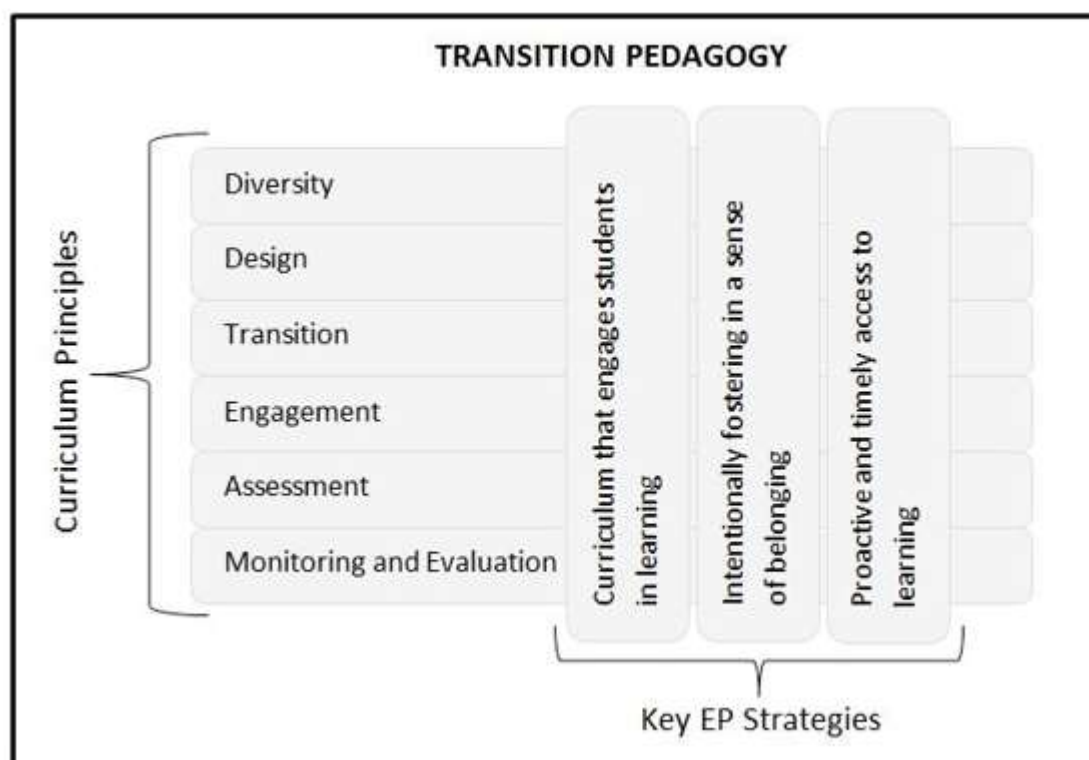
*Second Generation Enabling Transition Pedagogy (Jones et al., 2022)*



The enabling transition pedagogy (ETP), Figure 2, was as an adaption of Kift's first year transition pedagogy (2009) to meet the needs of different cohorts of enabling students. Enactment of the principles and strategies is made possible through careful curriculum design and choice of learning activities. When evolving both programs, it was recognised that the ETP needed refining to meet needs of shifting enabling cohorts. Since the inception of the ETP, research into university student populations has identified the growing need for effective mental health supports in tertiary spaces (Baik & Larcombe, 2016; Hughes, et al. 2022), particularly enabling students (Crawford et al., 2016). Additionally, the literature noted the challenge of retention and engagement for online students (Coussement et al., 2020; Whannell & Whannell, 2012). An oscillation between the ETP and designing both programs led to the creation of a second generation ETP. This second generation ETP includes "Wellbeing" as an underlying curriculum principle. The strategy of "Explicit instruction to scaffold learning" was also included, and an amendment of "Proactive and timely access to learning" to "Proactive and timely access to feedback", as learning was now covered in the new strategy.

**Figure 2**

*The Enabling Transition Pedagogy (Jones et al., 2016)*



Wellbeing, as a principle, is demonstrated in the programs through the embedding of social and emotional learning curriculum and pedagogy, from lectures on grit, social and emotional intelligence, questionnaires on growth mindset, to the use of growth mindset language in all teaching materials including unit guides, LMS sites, and assignment rubrics, such as "getting there" and "not yet" to foster growth. Pedagogy and curriculum that draws from educational psychology can explicitly address gaps in socio-emotional learning through the development of metacognitive skills (Lisciandro et al., 2016). Theories of social and emotional development such as "growth mindset" underpin the curriculum to sponsor reflective learners, flourishing and wellbeing in their broader lives (Olds et al., 2019). These inclusions sustain students' wellbeing throughout their enabling journey (Crawford, 2021; Hughes, et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). The ETP is also enacted in other deeply embedded curriculum design principles and interdisciplinary learning opportunities (Jones et al., 2016). The program is designed to meet students where they are at, in their world, and draws on popular culture and contemporary themes to locate cognitive pegs to hang their new university knowledge upon. Modules are driven by concepts like "positive social change", "how science responds to global challenges" and "media constructions of gender and race".

The strategy of “Explicit instruction to scaffold learning” was applied to target a diverse online context, an approach still relevant in tertiary cohorts (Hughes et al. 2022). Explicit instruction is a “systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students” (Rosenshine, 1987, p. 34). FTH is heavily scaffolded, with each assessment preparing the student for larger assessments in later modules. This is to purposely create multiple opportunities for mini mastery, learning experiences vital for building self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which according to Tinto (2020) is “the bedrock upon which student learning is built” (p. 14). Referencing quizzes and essay plans prepare students for more challenging and rigorous tasks such as a 1250-word conceptual essay. On-demand instructional videos (with captioning), transcripts, interactive digital assets and an online tutor provide 24-hour scaffolded support to ensure accessibility to learning for *all* students in the program. The provision of specific inductions into academic literacies (Ardzejewska & Gorzanelli, 2019) is enacted through a series of essay writing lectures and interactive workbooks. It was the identified need, inclusion and positive response to multiple opportunities of explicit instruction in the design that solidified it as an additional strategy in the ETP. Finally, “Proactive and timely access to feedback” through the program’s growth mindset feedback cycle, facilitates engagement in assessment and transition. The nature of scaffolding allows for a constant cycle of communicating progress to inform learning, and the reflective journals and supporting activities give students beneficial opportunities for stronger insights into themselves as learners (Willans, 2019).

It was for these reasons that the ETP-inspired curriculum was chosen for FTH. The curriculum stands in contrast to ATAR curriculums in Western Australia in design and implementation. The outcomes of FTH are holistic, yet focused toward university readiness:

1. Identify, locate and use academic sources.
2. Summarise and critically analyse academic texts.
3. Apply foundational mathematics to solve problems and interpret data.
4. Construct an academic text in accordance with academic conventions.
5. Create and present an oral presentation in accordance with academic conventions.
6. Apply a range of independent and collaborative learning skills such as time management, self-regulation, effective communication and teamwork to complete tasks within set timelines.
7. Engage in regular reflection on the learning process, including social and emotional learning.

It is the enactment of the ETP and the inclusion of specific enabling strategies absent in ATAR curriculums that enhances learning for the underserved cohort. In addition, the FTH model builds community and connection for all stakeholders. University expectations not explicit in ATAR curriculums are communicated to teachers through training days, and a teacher’s guide. Tutors model best practice in feedback principles and ensure consistency of grading standard by marking all student work. The impact of the program to-date was explored through qualitative and quantitative methods.

## Method

A mixed-methods approach was used to capture data on the impacts of FTH on students and the high school community. Autoethnographic reflections formed the basis of the qualitative data, and de-identified FTH unit student surveys (referred to as EQU080) and progression data obtained from Murdoch University’s Student Surveys databank and Office of Strategy, Quality and Analytics<sup>3</sup> were ascertained to quantitatively explore student success. Autoethnography is a qualitative approach to research and writing that seeks to describe a personal experience which can then be analysed and understood in a larger cultural or community context (Ellis, 2004). This cross institutional qualitative method was considered effective as it offered an authentic way to capture insight at the coal face. As teachers are considered an integral part of the success of the program and an integral part of the learning community, autoethnography as a method offered both an opportunity for reflection and a vehicle for recognising teacher contribution. A level of bias could be assumed for qualitative projects of this nature, quantitative data over four years was obtained to reduce this. Six teachers demonstrated willingness to participate, performing the role of participant/researcher by completing a set of reflective questions. Of the four schools participating in this research, two were Catholic and two were public, three schools were based in the metropolitan Perth area and one in the regional Bunbury area. The participating teachers ranged in teaching background, three being Careers teachers, one English, one Humanities and Social Science and one Teacher Librarian. The reflective questions were informed by the *Describe, Evaluate, Interpret and Plan* reflective model created by Boud, Keogh and Walker (2005). The questions were as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Permission to use the quantitative data was granted by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No 2022/160.)

1. What hopes and expectations did you have for the course prior to teaching it?
2. What impact has the FTH program had on the school community? (i.e., yourself as an educator, the students as learners, or the collective beliefs of the community).
3. How have the relationships with the academic staff involved impacted the experience of implementing the program in your school?
4. How would you like to see FTH evolve in the future?
5. How does FTH differ from other Year 12 curriculums and how do the specific differences contribute to student learning?

Reflections were de-identified to uphold confidentiality and views presented in the practice report are offered collectively to avoid individual identification. The reflections were collated into a single document, and a thematic data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. The first two steps of the thematic analysis were to "familiarize" ourselves with the data by reading the responses for the purpose of locating commonalities, recurring topics, words and phrases and "generating initial codes" (p. 87). The reflections were reread and colour coded. The next step involved "searching for themes" by collating codes into potential themes (p. 87). These themes were then "reviewed" by discussion and checked against the coded extracts to narrow and define the final major themes of student growth, preparedness, opportunity and connection (p. 87). The findings of the autoethnography, student surveys and progression data are discussed below.

## Impact

The story of holistic student growth was a dominant theme in the autoethnographic reflections. Many of these students have become disenfranchised and alienated by the education system, yet as they progress through FTH a growth in self-efficacy and skill becomes evident. Participant 3 noted, "FTH works with students on a personal level to reach their full potential and break down preconceived ideas on their capacity to learn." Participant 6 also noted, "the changes in students' self-esteem and respect are a pleasure to see... they take great pride in their growth, especially as they look back to compare their earlier writing to the later." The autoethnography data also revealed this growth has transferred to other subjects, "a further impact of the course was the lifting of academic standards of the students in other subjects" (Participant 1). With a growth in skills and belief in their capacity to learn, "tertiary opportunities for those students who did not fit the ATAR model" (Participant 3) were created. A teacher from one regional school noted:

in a demographic where university is often not known and therefore not really considered as an option, FTH is not just giving students opportunities that weren't available to them, it is beginning to show students that it is a viable and worthwhile option. (Participant 5)

Teachers noted that growth was facilitated through the thoughtful structures and explicit instruction in academic skills such as writing and research. Participant 4 noted "I believe this was testament to the well-structured and guided learning the students encountered. The learning experiences for the students was progressive and scaffolded in a way they could see their improvements and own personal growth." Participant 5 similarly reported:

the method of assessment is also different in FTH as a university entrance course in so far as it focuses on students developing strong research skills, the focus being on academic integrity rather than specific knowledge applied in exam conditions.

These findings were supported by comments in student unit surveys:

lectures were highly effective, they summarised the module clearly, and it provided me with all the detail and knowledge I needed to complete the assignments. It was almost like being in a lecture and someone talking to you, someone who had all the answers. I can't think of any improvements everything was perfect. (EQU080 2018)

Furthermore, another student added:

I liked how this course showed the standards that University requires and that I have the capabilities to do them as well. I learned the different types of reports and wide varieties of referencing both of which I had no clue about before starting this course. I believe that I am more ready and able to go into Uni than I was before and this course really showed that to me. (EQU080, 2021)

Students also reveal the impact of support from their Murdoch tutor, "the best aspects of FlexiTrack High is the level of support from the tutors and the immediate improvement and quality of your writing as you continue through the course. FTH has changed the way I write for the better" (EQU080, 2021).

Connectedness was also noted in the autoethnographic reflections as something that worked to close the gap between the institutions, to build understanding, opportunity, relationships and community. All participants observed that the alliance between the academics and teachers contributed to professional development and establishing professional connections. Participant 5 noted, “the connection with the university has provided greater insight into the differences between school curriculum and university expectations”. Participant 3 similarly reported, “the pastoral approach to FTH bridges the gap to tertiary education by breaking down barriers.” Students once on the periphery in their year twelve classes, through a new shared learning environment, became part of a community, something essential for the well-being of enabling cohorts (Crawford et al., 2016; Hughes et al. 2022). The program creates a strong learning community that bridges the liminal space between high school and university, as Participant 4 described:

as a community, I believe we have developed stronger links with Murdoch university. That we have highlighted the success that can come from following an alternative entry to university ... I have found the staff at Murdoch very supportive and more importantly, accessible.

Student comments demonstrate how the communication in FTH created stronger relationships:

I really enjoyed this unit. In my opinion, the best aspect of this unit was the communication students had with the Unit Coordinator and the Tutors. Communication was comprehensive and allowed relationships to be formed between students and teachers. The exceptional level of communication also facilitated a feeling of support for the students and optimized opportunities for improvement. (EQU080, 2021)

Such learning communities are vital for transitioning students into tertiary spaces (Tinto, 2020) and student-educator relationships contribute to self-efficacy and subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution (Larsen & James, 2022).

FTH has sustained steady growth since its inception, achieving high student satisfaction and pass rates (see Tables 1 & 2). The program has continued to evolve through consultation with secondary stakeholders. FTH is not advertised, rather its reputation for quality teaching and learning has spread via recommendations from partnership schools.

**Table 1**

*Student Satisfaction Rates EQU080*

Teaching period	Score/% rating	N of Resp	University wide comparison score/rating
2018	90	13	NA
2019	86	20	80
2020	97.37%	38	NA
2021	90.63%	64	78.45%

**Table 2**

*Participants and Completions*

Cohort	*Number of Participants	Number of Successful Completions
2018	25	23
2019	41	40
2020	102	102
2021	185	174
2022	232	NA

High pass rates are influenced not only by effective curriculum but by the careful selection of students by schools prior to commencement and withdrawals for students of high concern before census date. FTH also incurs a fee to offset cost for the

university and to increase student commitment. While completion rates are high, conversion has been influenced by competing university practices that accept FTH certificates as entrance into their undergraduate courses, as well as the impact of COVID-19. Though larger quantitative studies are not yet complete, and further longitudinal studies will be required to reveal trends in more depth, early data indicates the program prepares students for success in their undergraduate studies. The 2018 cohort of FTH students achieved an average GPA (Grade Point Average) of 2.410 in their final year of undergraduate studies in comparison to 2.783 GPA achieved by ATAR pathway students. A GPA score in the 2 range indicates a credit or 60-70% grade average. This is consistent with national trends which found that students who graduate from an enabling program perform at similar levels as traditional students during their undergraduate degree programs (Chesters et al., 2018; Dodd et al., 2020; Lisciandro, 2022). FTH students also enter a wide range of disciplines, consistent with the diversity of ATAR students (Lisciandro, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Traditional secondary school curriculums require change in order to cater to diverse, university aspirational cohorts and meet government goals. Such an education revolution is sponsored through strong connections between tertiary and secondary stakeholders and the provision of holistic programs that address academic, social and emotional outcomes (Hughes & Brown, 2014). The FTH team-teaching model demonstrates that these connections can bridge gaps not only between secondary curriculums and university expectations but also in acculturation for students who previously felt like cultural outsiders. Students participating in enabling programs such as FTH are given vital opportunity to form alliances with academics, breaking down barriers and enhancing the student-educator relationships. Such an alliance forges connectedness, belonging and increases self-efficacy (Larsen & James, 2022). The early findings here suggest that a blended, embedded, school-based program, designed with thoughtful consideration of the ETP, can foster student growth, preparedness, opportunity and belonging, and also build valuable connections with school communities.



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**Please cite this article as:**

Olds, A., Jones, A., Sturniolo-Baker, R., Clarke, S., Dawson, J., McGrath, W., Plumb, C., Schwartz, C., & White, C. (2022). School-based enabling programs: Creating opportunity and connection. A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2436>

This practice report has been accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information

**Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.**



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