

The National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project, Report on Policy Settings and Best Practice Guide. *A Good Practice Report*

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Abstract

This good practice report outlines findings from the recently completed National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project (2026) to share the work and recommendations on FFUR policy settings and principles. Together, these aim to strengthen transitions into higher education for underrepresented cohorts. We focus on introducing the *Best Practice Guide* and FFUR Framework elements, highlighting the importance of place-based and cohort-tailored contextualisation. We outline key elements of the taxonomy of FFUR offerings, common learning outcomes, and governance guidelines that collectively enable portability, quality, and equity. We contextualise FFUR offerings within Australia's evolving pathways ecosystem and show how the FFUR Framework can be adapted across place and tailored to specific cohorts. This good practice report contributes a practical architecture to both understand and operationalise equitable pathways, with scalable concepts and evaluation principles aligned to the Student Success conference theme of 'Transitions: pathways to tertiary education'.

Keywords: Access; pathways; FEE-FREE Uni Ready; enabling; equity; widening participation

Introduction

Australian enabling education, now funded nationally as FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) offerings, has provided free, non-award preparation and critical pathways into higher education for more than 50 years, especially for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. FFUR offerings develop academic literacies, discipline (humanities and social sciences [HASS] and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM]) knowledge, critical thinking, study skills, and discipline readiness that underpin successful transitions for students into undergraduate study.

Recent policy has expanded FFUR places to more institutions and increased and made consistent funding per equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL). The National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education and conducted in consultation with the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC). Its purpose was to inform the Australian Government on FFUR offerings, national consistency, and portability, so that completion can be recognised across more undergraduate providers, and to ensure alignment with wider equity and widening participation targets, as outlined in the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024).



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This good practice report outlines the project deliverables and their impacts on students, transitions, achievement, retention, and success. The aim is to have the project outcomes and deliverables applied more broadly and used in other contexts as FFUR policy and practice grows and changes over time.

Project Description and Methodology

The aim of the National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project was to produce a policy settings report and a best practice guide with recommendations on course design and transferability; minimum standards focused on demonstrated capability ('uni-readiness'); and a framework for national recognition to support mobility between providers. These were presented to and discussed with the FFUR National Working Group which was coordinated by the ATEC.

The FFUR project activities were to:

1. Map and analyse current FFUR practices, cohorts, delivery modes, and challenges across institutions.
2. Co-design a national framework comprising a taxonomy of offerings, common learning outcomes, minimum standards, governance guidelines, and portability mechanisms.
3. Recommend policy and data settings to incentivise admission of FFUR completers and strengthen evaluation for equity.
4. Develop possible tools (registry, completion certificate/badge, rating guide) to operationalise recognition and support transitions beyond the 'home' provider.
5. Develop a practical practitioner's guide on best practice approaches to FFUR course and curriculum design.

This study employed a mixed-methods (Bergman, 2008) design to examine FFUR course practices across the Australian higher education sector. Data were collected through an open-ended national survey, complemented by semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted across 13 universities. An expert reference group was also drawn on to evaluate findings. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative framework, involving cycles of data familiarisation, coding, theme development, and refinement. Analytical rigour was strengthened through peer debriefing within the research team, member-checking with selected participants, and review by the Expert Project Reference Group (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC; Approval No. H-2025-0164). Participating institutions included both long-established and recently implemented FFUR programs, enabling the study to capture diverse institutional contexts and delivery modes, including regional provision, those fully online, school-based initiatives, and courses delivered in correctional settings.

Findings

Student cohorts in FFUR offerings include identified equity groups and those who have experienced past educational disadvantage. Our study identified that the key needs of FFUR students include flexibility, trauma-informed support, scaffolded literacies, inclusive and supportive learning environments, cultural and community responsiveness, and financial assistance. The following key themes emerged from discussions with FFUR providers of a wide range of offerings and across different parts of the country:

- Pedagogy and literacies: common values—care, empowerment, and equity—are enacted through enabling pedagogies and discipline-embedded literacies that surface the 'hidden curriculum', strengthening navigational capital and aiding portability.
- Supports and governance: FFUR-specific supports (including mentoring and 'just-in-time' transition approaches) also connect in with wider institutional services, and quality assurance is embedded via institutional academic governance, regular reviews, contextualised evaluation, and cross-institutional collaborations.
- Successes, challenges, and portability: providers support portability but caution against over-standardisation, which inhibits flexibility, responsiveness to local and specific cohort needs, and just-in-time innovations. Institutional benchmarking demonstrates common principles and approaches that can support recognition, while costs of regional/on-Country unit delivery and administrative processes remain challenges.
- Community collaborations and partnerships: collaborations and partnerships with schools, regional hubs of various types, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, prisons, and community groups enable relevance, inclusive

practices, and place-based design, building the confidence and educational capitals that underpin success and transition.

- Institutional barriers: barriers to enrolment exist at both systemic and operational levels (Dean, 2024). These include the administrative burden associated with what students experience as complex and time-intensive enrolment processes; lack of belonging; cultural concerns; experiences of subtle yet powerful discrimination; mistrust toward formal institutions among communities; and the challenge of geographical isolation, particularly affecting students in rural and remote areas.
- Program structures and delivery: FFUR program structures and delivery modes vary considerably across the sector, with units and courses offered through face-to-face, blended, and fully online formats.
- Innovation and future directions: FFUR courses and units are undergoing continual refinement to keep pace with the wider pathway ecosystem changing: evolving student needs; contemporary pedagogical practices; and rapid technological change, including the incorporation of generative AI, modular curriculum design, authentic assessment, and community co-design. Participants identified several future priorities, such as strengthening Indigenous-led curriculum development; expanding flexible, place-based and hybrid delivery models to enhance accessibility; and greater national recognition of the transformative role of FFUR programs.

The FFUR Framework and Best-Practice Architecture

In this good practice report, we focus on introducing the *Best Practice Guide* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026) and FFUR Framework elements provided in the *FEE-FREE Uni Ready Project Report on Policy Settings* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026) and highlighting the importance of place-based and cohort-tailored contextualisation. In the following discussion, we outline the FFUR Framework and the need for understanding the four offering types which have developed (and continue to develop) over time in response to higher education and diverse cohort needs across the national pathways landscape.

The FFUR Framework (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026) recommended to government comprises:

1. A nuanced understanding of FFUR cohorts;
2. A FFUR Taxonomy of offerings;
3. Common learning outcomes;
4. A National FFUR Access Scheme (governance guidelines and minimum standards); and
5. Evaluation principles contextualised to FFUR offerings.

FFUR Cohorts

Educational disadvantage is complex. Research shows that it should not simply be reduced to formal equity groups (Burke, 2012; Di Gregorio et al., 2025; Severs et al., 2016) as this obscures many dimensions of disadvantage and their impacts on equity and inclusion in higher education. While important for understanding broad patterns, these categories often miss the diverse and intersecting factors that impact on people. The demographic features of FFUR cohorts, whose disadvantage may shift or compound over time through factors such as financial hardship, regional isolation, caring responsibilities, trauma, or addiction (Di Gregorio et al., 2025), require careful consideration. This enables responsive approaches that recognise both structural issues and individual lived experiences, which have occurred in the past and/or present to limit access to higher education for an individual, in order to prevent disadvantage from deepening (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026).

A nuanced understanding of FFUR cohorts requires confidential collection and analysis of varied student data, interpreted through an intersectional lens. Mixed methods and broader measures of student success provide richer insights into learner needs, particularly for those experiencing multiple, overlapping barriers. Traditional metrics such as marks, pass rates, or completions indicate *what* is happening, but not *how*, *why*, or *when*, nor how institutions should respond. Further guidance is available in Measures of Student Success in the *Best Practice Guide* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026).

More inclusive evaluation tools help ensure learners' circumstances are recognised accurately, supporting the goal of expanding transformative educational opportunities (Allen, 2025). The *Factors that Impact Educational Disadvantage* discussion in the *FEE-FREE Uni Ready Project Report on Policy Settings* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026) provides understanding of the forms of educational disadvantage and other factors that FFUR students have experienced, and/or are experiencing, in their lives. This is critical, as the educational approaches which matter to students are based on

student-centred design (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026; Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026; Dollinger et al., 2022).

FFUR Taxonomy

FFUR offerings have expanded and responded over time according to community needs and wider changes in pathways and higher education courses. Because institutions tailor FFUR programs to their own student cohorts, offerings vary widely in entry requirements, delivery mode, duration, and curriculum. These courses are not recognised in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and do not enable wide-ranging national portability.

Important work by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA, 2019) has defined three categories, Enabling Courses, Enabling Pathways, and Enabling Initiatives, summarised in the *NAEEA Declaration on Enabling Education in Higher Education*. However, new pathways and forms of FFUR have since emerged as universities continue to respond to changing policy contexts, reductions in prerequisite requirements for degrees, and evolving student needs.

Institutions increasingly offer FFUR units rather than full courses, including single units designed to prepare students for specific degrees. Some of these units are recognised for credit, often as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), into undergraduate awards. Sector feedback highlights the continued need for a place-based, cohort-responsive FFUR ecosystem rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

Based on sector consultation, the document introduces the following four overarching elements of a [FFUR Taxonomy](#) (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026), clarifying four contemporary FFUR types:

1. FFUR Courses — multiunit programs designed to build university readiness and grant access to higher education.
2. FFUR Micro Units — short, targeted units for discipline-specific preparation, often taken before or alongside first-year study.
3. FFUR-Embedded Units — one or two FFUR units within pathway diplomas to support transition.
4. FFUR Community Projects — community- or school-based FFUR learning delivered where there is significant demonstrated need.

This taxonomy consolidates diverse institutional practices while maintaining the sector's commitment to place-based responsiveness. It also distinguishes which FFUR types may benefit from national standards (particularly for students seeking portability) and which should remain flexible.

The *FEE-FREE Uni Ready Project Report on Policy Settings* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026) also notes that some FFUR units may be better aligned with the National Microcredentials Framework (NMF; Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), as they do not grant access to undergraduate awards but instead provide targeted preparation.

Overall, we emphasise that while consistency and improved standards are needed across the sector, these must not compromise the local adaptability that has been central to FFUR success in widening participation.

Recommendations Formed From the National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project Research

In the *FEE-FREE Uni Ready Project Report on Policy Settings* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026), we recommend that the Government:

1. Adopt a national approach, such as the FFUR Framework, as the basis for policy, quality, and portability.
2. Apply minimum standards focused on demonstrated capability ('uni readiness') rather than fixed volume of learning requirements.
3. Implement a National FFUR Access Scheme for recognised, transferable Type 1 courses.
4. Establish a National FFUR Access Registry with option for a standardised national completion certificate for ease of portability.
5. Enable FFUR 'top-ups' and cross-provider access to expand study options and reduce any inequity.

6. Support universities that invest in high quality FFUR provision and reduce barriers to higher education for these cohorts by incentivising admission of FFUR students to Awards. Suggested approaches are outlined as part of the FFUR Framework.
7. Strengthen evaluation and data practices to better capture diversity, change, and intersectional disadvantage, and long-term pathways and outcomes for students.

(Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, & Garske, 2026, p. 10)

The Best Practice Guide

The *Best Practice Guide* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026) offers a structured, accessible synthesis of principles and approaches to support higher education practitioners in designing and delivering high-quality FFUR programs and courses. Developed by the University of Newcastle in collaboration with partner institutions and sector experts across Australia, the guide consolidates contemporary research and sector evidence into clear, practice-oriented recommendations. The resource provides practical, implementable strategies and process-based guidance relevant to providers establishing new FFUR offerings, as well as those seeking to refine established programs.

Central to the guide is the integration of national expertise in FFUR pedagogy and widening participation. Drawing on consultation with practitioners across diverse educational contexts, the guide emphasises the importance of contextual cultural responsiveness, flexibility, and innovation in addressing educational disadvantage and improving pathways into and through further higher education (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026). These consultations informed the development of principles that support providers to align program and course design with equity objectives and sector priorities.

Divided into seven key themes, the *Best Practice Guide* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026) brings together research on the philosophies and equitable approaches that underpin FFUR programs. It explores approaches to course and governance structures, best practices in teaching into the humanities and STEM disciplines, and pedagogies that underpin teaching in face-to-face and online modes. Embedded throughout the seven thematic areas are videos, photographs, and featured quotes highlighting student stories and practitioner reflections. Together with the content areas, these collectively demonstrate how FFUR programs can be structured, taught, and governed in ways that address educational disadvantages and support diverse learner pathways.

Underpinning all recommendations is a sustained commitment to valuing the varied circumstances and trajectories of FFUR students and to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing as a foundational element of program practice. This key theme is further centralised by the website design that showcases the beautiful artwork of Wiradjuri, Wongaibon artist Renee Lamb. Through this alignment of evidence, equity, and pedagogy, the *Best Practice Guide* (Bennett, Allen, Mansfield, Hamilton, et al., 2026) offers a robust resource for new and current providers seeking to enhance both student experience and educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Consistency with flexibility is identified as key to FFUR pathways. A coherent national language and standards for ‘uni-readiness’ which are able to be enacted locally, including on-Country and community delivery, are also very important. Place-based approaches, including on-Country delivery and community-embedded projects, have been identified as part of the project as central for trust building and participation in regions with limited prior access.

The FFUR Framework is deliberately modular, with providers being able to adopt the common outcomes and governance elements sector-wide, while calibrating volume, delivery, and unit mix to local cohorts and destination degrees. This avoids re-creating barriers through over-prescription and over-standardisation while improving portability (for example, using ‘top-ups’ for STEM prerequisites rather than enforcing uniform program length) and enabling innovations in response to community and institutional needs.

FFUR represents a mature yet always evolving ecosystem. The framework and tools produced from this project are designed to establish best practice as conveyed by established providers from across the country. These outputs are intended to enable consistency, while preserving the flexibility that enables providers to continue to be able to innovate and respond to our diverse communities and their developing needs, as well as to changing admissions landscapes.

An important FFUR sector-wide project, the National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project outputs aim to create portable, equitable, and context-responsive routes to university for learners who have historically been excluded. Given the strength and longevity of the approaches outlined, these enabling approaches also have strong potential to inform and reinforce best practice across other pathways and equity initiatives, including inclusive pedagogies, across higher and other forms of education.

The NAEAA represent the majority of the participating institutions on the National FEE-FREE Uni Ready (FFUR) Project. The Association and its website provide an important body of knowledge and resources to enable further future development of FFUR, with a wealth of resources and knowledge from across the FFUR sector.

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