



EduVenture: Sparking the Conversation. Creating Moments of Connection

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Abstract

The EduVenture project, initiated under the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), aims to address barriers faced by regional and remote students in aspiring to and preparing for higher education. This initiative stems from the Australian Government Department of Education's (2019) *National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* and is led by Taree Universities Campus, a Regional University Study Hub, in partnership with the Australian National University and the University of Newcastle. By leveraging community consultation and co-design principles, the project fosters engagement between Taree Universities Campus, local high schools, universities and industries to enhance students' aspirations and career preparedness. Phase 1 of the project emphasised gathering community insights, including perspectives from students, educators and local community members, including Indigenous leaders, while Phase 2 implements hands-on experiences, such as career workshops, industry collaboration and campus tours. Activities are tailored to address the socio-educational challenges identified in the Mid Coast region of New South Wales, where students and schools face significant socio-economic disadvantage and low attendance rates.

Key Words: *aspirations, career, community, confidence, consultation, youth*

Introduction

The EduVenture project is born out of the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), which responds to the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2019). This research identified that regional and remote students experience additional challenges that may act as barriers to aspiration and preparedness for higher education. As a Regional University Study Hub (Regional University Study Hubs Network, 2024), it aims to widen participation in our local community, a key requirement in our funding agreement with the Department of Regional Education. Therefore, this project became an opportunity to trial ways we could engage and build relationships with our local schools.

The EduVenture project directed resources to develop innovative, sustainable partnerships between Table A universities and a Regional University Study Hub, and to build community-driven initiatives,

thus promoting higher education for under-represented students. In 2023, Taree Universities Campus joined the Eastern Australian Regional University Centre Partnership funded by the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), in collaboration with the Australian National University and the University of Newcastle.

Phase 1 focused on community consultation to co-design the project, while Phase 2 delivery includes practical, relevant and hands-on experiences for high school students, to expand and build their aspirations. The *Australian Universities Accord* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024) highlights that young people from low socio-economic status areas share similar aspirations with those from high socio-economic status areas; however, they often lack opportunities for these to develop. EduVenture aims to bridge this gap.

Context and Community Consultation

Initial project planning began in 2022 with community consultation. It was essential that this project was built with the specific needs of the community in mind. Such consultation ensures students are engaged in relevant and meaningful experiences locally and are offered realistic future opportunities and role model examples of a variety of pathways, thus motivating them to find accessible and purposeful postschool pathways.

An analysis of two key public schools in the New South Wales Mid North Coast region revealed educational trends that are concerning (see Tables 1, 2 and 3). The data indicate that these schools have disproportionate numbers of students from socio-educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically in the bottom quartile. Additionally, both institutions demonstrate sub-optimal attendance rates and struggle to retain students through the senior years of schooling. These local-level statistics provide important context for understanding educational challenges in the Mid Coast region.

Table 1: High School Demographic Profile

School	Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage				% of First Nations Students
	Bottom quartile	Second quartile	Third quartile	Top quartile	
Chatham High	77%	17%	5%	1%	45%
Taree High	53%	28%	13%	6%	23%

Note: These data come from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2024).

Table 2: School Attendance Rates

School	Student attendance rate	First Nations student attendance rate	% of First Nations students at the school
Chatham High	68%	63%	45%
Taree High	76%	66%	23%

Note: These data come from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2024).

Table 3: Chatham High School Senior Cohort Enrolment Numbers Over Recent Years

Year	Student Numbers		
	End of Year 10	End of Year 11 (% decline from Year 10 of previous year)	End of Year 12 (% decline from Year 11 of previous year)
2023	93	68 (39.8%)	31 (42.6%)
2022	113	54 (22.9%)	48 (29.4%)
2021	70	68 ^a	41 ^a

Notes: These data come from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2024).

^a Percentage data not available.

The community consultation process included current high school students, careers advisors and school principals, local Biripi Elders, First Nations representatives from Taree Indigenous Development and Enterprise, Taree Universities Campus staff and local university graduates and students. The consultation, facilitated by representatives from the Country Universities Centre network, exposed the following key points:

- Students want to hear real stories, from the early years of high school.
- The importance of local, accessible, impactful role models.
- Hearing from universities in Year 11 is too late.
- Exposure to local work opportunities from businesses.
- Students need to understand the relevance of school to the world of work.
- Engagement of parents and community members to inspire and encourage students.
- How can Taree Universities Campus create a “social” side of university?

Consequently, the EduVenture project would facilitate Phase 2 activities focusing on career/aspiration-building each term, with the Australian National University, University of Newcastle, Taree Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and local industry guest speakers. The visits would begin in Term 2 for students in Year 8 in 2023 at six local public high schools, and then continue over a two-year period with the final visit in Term 2 of Year 10 in 2025.

The project aims to:

- increase the visibility of the different journeys that students take post-school and empower them to make educated choices
- increase student self-belief and confidence to tackle decisions and challenges associated with school and transitioning out of school.

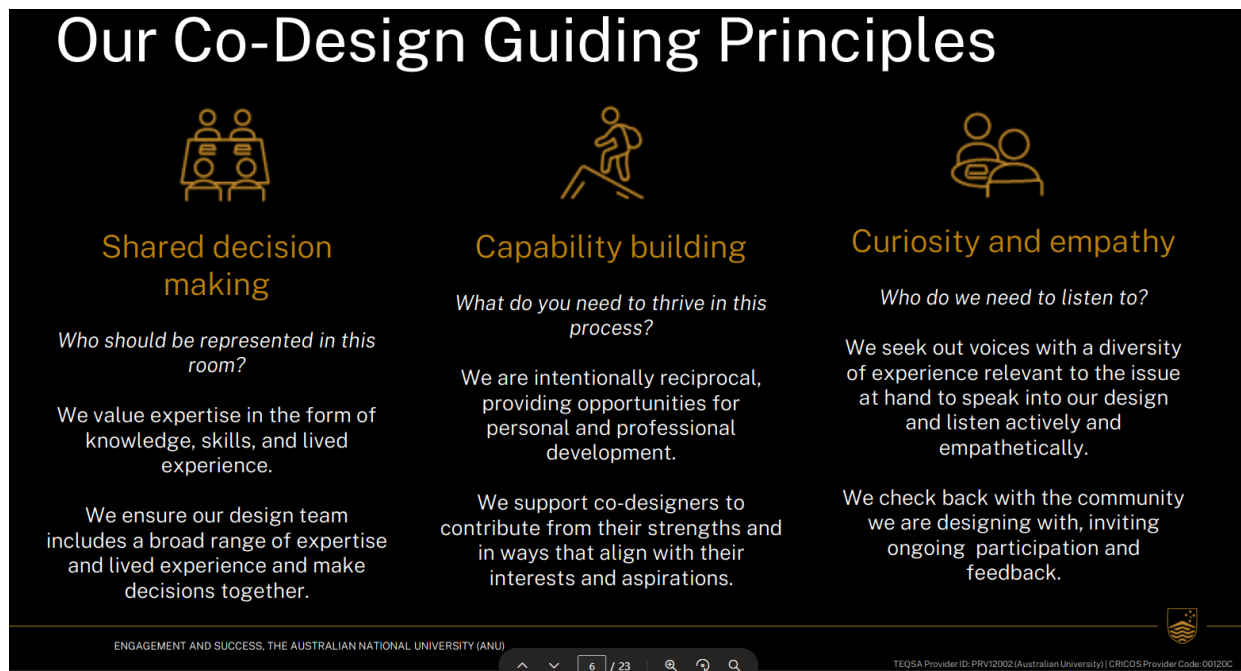
Through the community consultation, insightful learnings were gained both initially and throughout the project. These included:

- understanding the need to be adaptable to ensure inclusivity of opinions,
- understanding that consultation is not a one-off occurrence (this continues to be a key theme throughout the project), and
- realising that two key voices were missing: the target cohort (Year 8/9 students) and their parents.

Co-Design

Following the development of the Program Logic and Evaluation Plan (see Appendix A), practical deliverables needed to be established to ensure each activity was focused and related back to the project aims. The co-design was facilitated by our partner, the Australian National University, and followed essential co-design principles of shared decision-making, capacity building, and curiosity and empathy (see Figure 1).

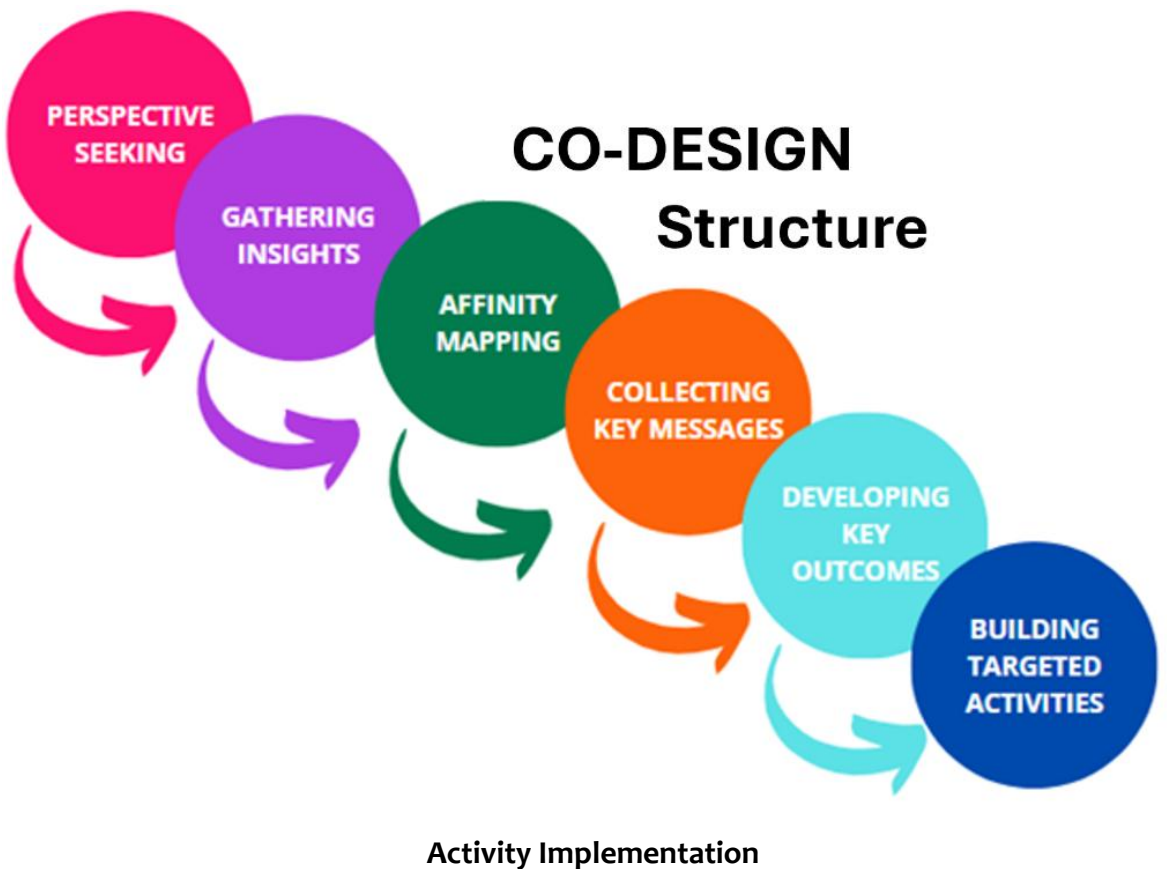
Figure 1: Co-Design Principles Used During Phase 2 of the Project



The Australian National University and Taree Universities Campus teams learnt about each other's backgrounds and experience, allowing the activities to be designed around the sharing of real-life experiences. This was a key element heard from the students in the community consultation. Figure 2 shows the co-design structure.

It is important to note that, even though all effort was made to tailor the activities to our regional context, at each school the team still reflected, refined and modified activities. This demonstrated that, even in one community, many different journeys exist, highlighting the importance of flexible, community-led strategies.

Prior to the midpoint of the project, a second formal co-design was held with the Australian National University, University of Newcastle, Taree Universities Campus and careers advisors from the local high schools. The purpose of this session was not only to design the school visits, but also to act as a mid-project touchpoint for all stakeholders, allowing them to review the primary aim and purpose of the project, and to ensure that all facilitators were aligned in the delivery, thereby ensuring consistent and impactful visits to schools for the students. This became important as we started the second half of the project.

Figure 2: Co-Design Structure: Turning Aims into Actions

To bring the project to life, activities were sequenced with intentionality, including many opportunities for feedback, evaluation and reflection, thus allowing school visits to be continually refined. In keeping with the career management competencies outlined by the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* (National Careers Institute et al., 2022), the feedback taken from the community consultation was sequenced across the two years to align with student development:

- Year 8: Build positive self-concepts; interact positively with others; understand that careers are more than a job and will change throughout life; explore student strengths and build an understanding of transferable skills and how these can be articulated into a resume.
- Year 9: Exposure to real career stories from student alumni and local business representatives; mini career taste-tester workshops with the Australian National University and University of Newcastle, attendance at Taree Universities Campus' career expo (CareerQuip) and Gloucester Connect Career Expo, excursions and campus tours to the University of Newcastle and TAFE, to feel what it is like to be on campus.
- Year 10: Introduction of the Human Library Project (Taree Universities Campus, 2024); building mentor relationships from our local community, review skills, strengths and interest work from Year 8 and establish how they can be linked to the world of work; create a careers information session prior to Year 11 subject selection; utilise virtual reality technology to immerse students in career experiences and interview skill techniques; offer further excursion opportunities for students to see options in the local area and beyond.

Challenges

One of the greatest challenges throughout the project has been connecting with the correct people at each school and having buy-in from careers advisors and school staff, including supervising teachers. Building relationships and listening to staff and student feedback has been critical in ensuring effective program delivery. Including careers advisors in the second co-design was an effective measure, helping to ensure that they not only knew what to expect during the visit, but to also to give us input about their particular students.

Further challenges have included meeting the needs of such a diverse group of students and finding the balance between meeting their needs, answering their desires from feedback, and exposing them to careers they have never heard of. Our Year 9 visits have included choice and options, which work well to engage a greater number of students.

Evaluation

Evaluation for EduVenture has been two-fold. For the wider Eastern Australian Regional University Centre Partnership project, an online Qualtrics survey was developed to be administered three times over the two years: pre-, mid- and post-project surveys. The survey comprised both qualitative and quantitative data (see Appendix B). Post-visit questionnaires were also developed, with three quick questions for students to offer immediate feedback following each school visit. At the time of writing this report, the project was at the midway point. While data are demonstrated below, some of the most impactful feedback is the student connections through conversations with Taree Universities Campus staff and Uni Ambassadors. Often student confidence to chat and ask questions is not revealed until a relationship is formed and connections are made. It is this side of evaluation that led to our tag line: *Sparkling a conversation. Creating moments of connection.*

The following graphs show improvements across one year, from the pre- (conducted 2023) to mid- (conducted 2024) project surveys. For example, 12% more students already agree or strongly agree they know more about study options after school (see Figures 3 and 4) and 6% more agree or strongly agree they are considering studying at university (see Figures 3 and 5), in line with a positive shift in responses to what studying at university might be like (see Figure 6). In terms of students' interests and skills, although a large percentage (>60%) stated pre-project that they agreed or strongly agreed how to use them in the future (see Figures 3, 7 and 8), the number of different careers students stated they were interested in increased substantially in the mid-project survey, with responses becoming more specific and moving away from broad career fields (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of Students who Agreed and Strongly Agreed with Survey Prompts Pre- and Mid-project

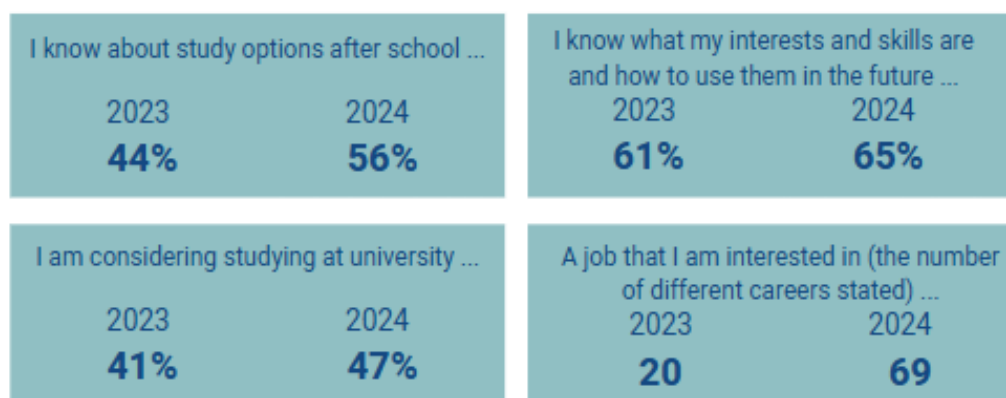


Figure 4: Distribution of Pre- and Mid-project Student Responses when Prompted “I know about study options after school”

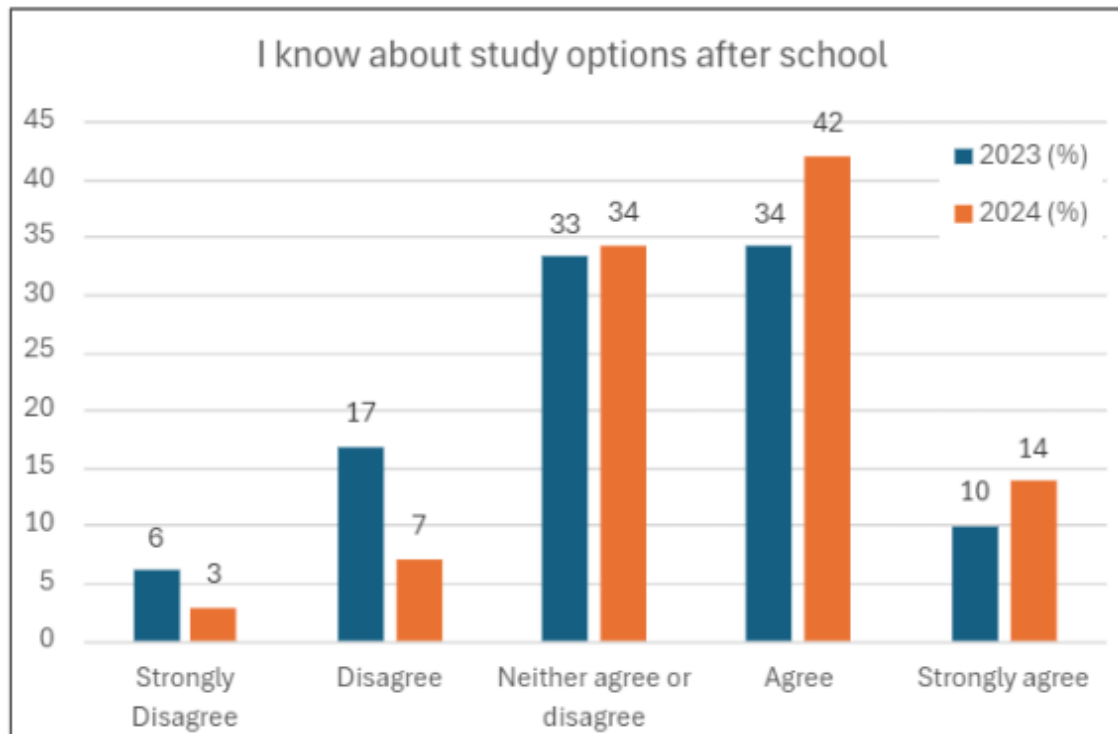


Figure 5: Distribution of Pre- and Mid-project Student Responses when Prompted “I am considering study at university after school”

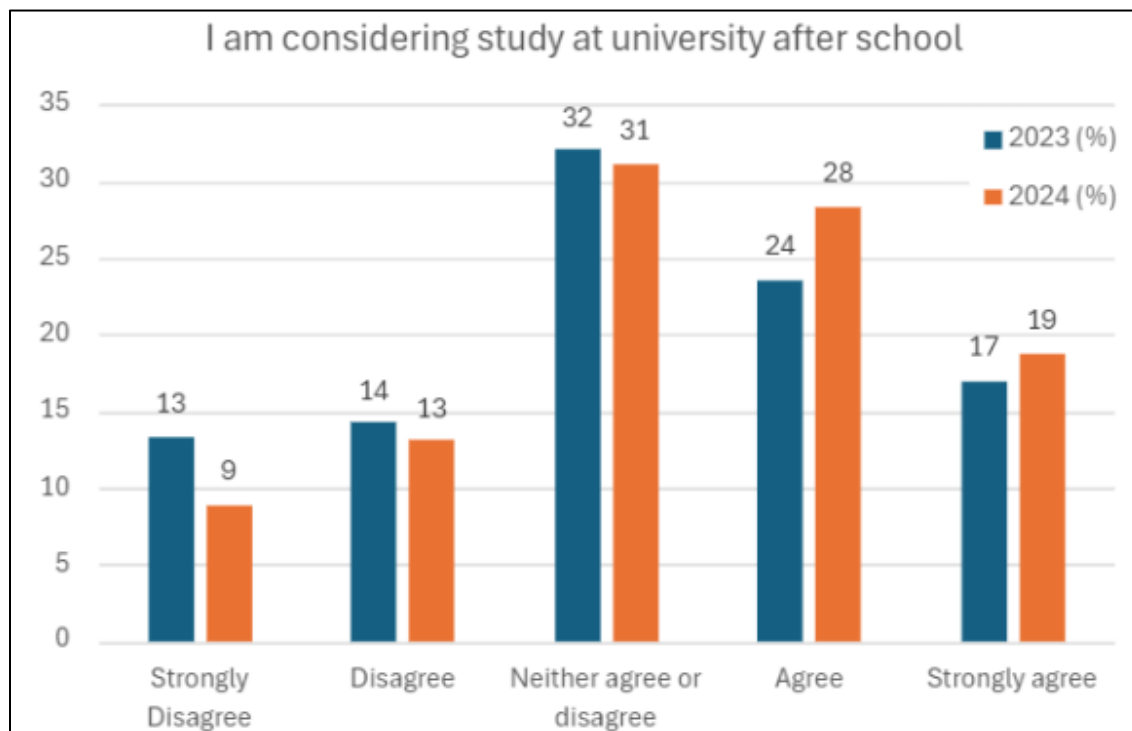


Figure 6: Distribution of Pre- and Mid-project Student Responses when Prompted “I know what studying at university might be like”

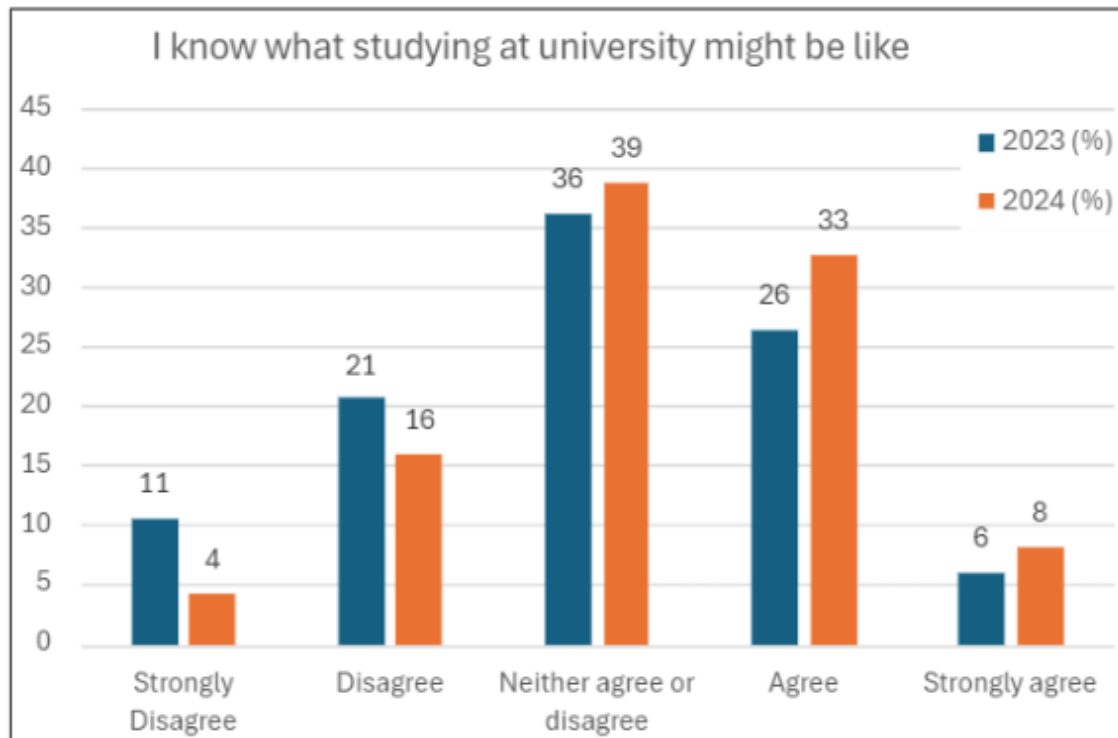


Figure 7: Distribution of Pre- and Mid-project Student Responses when Prompted “I know what my interests are and how to use them in the future”

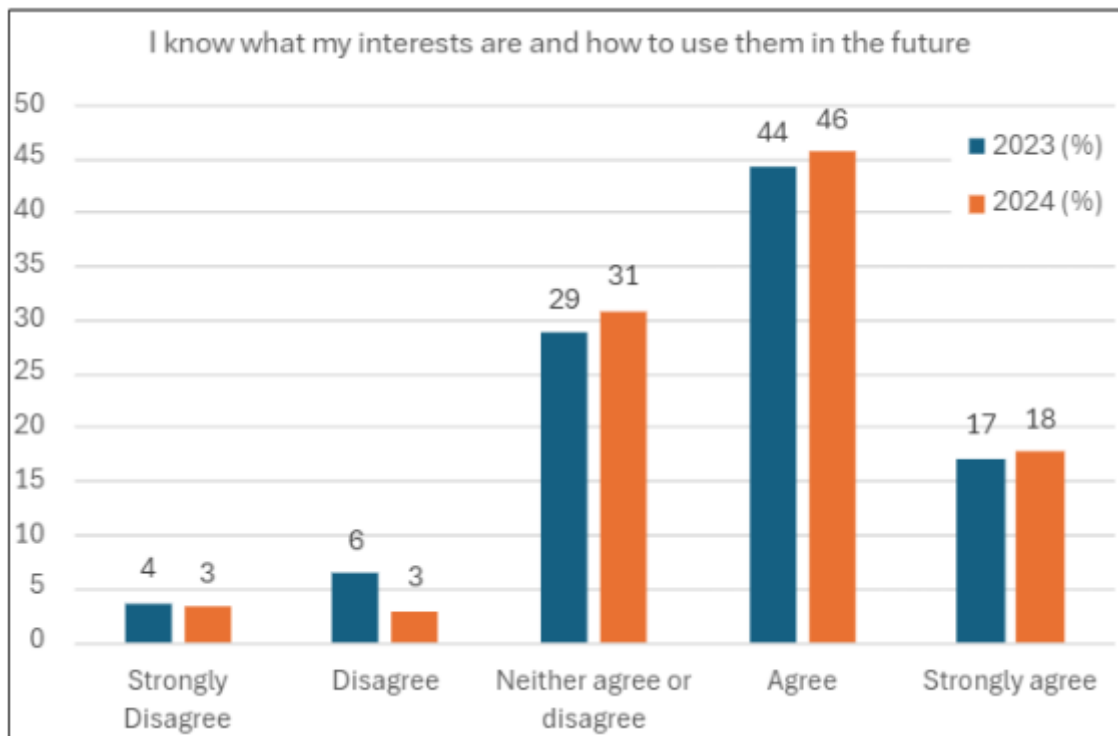
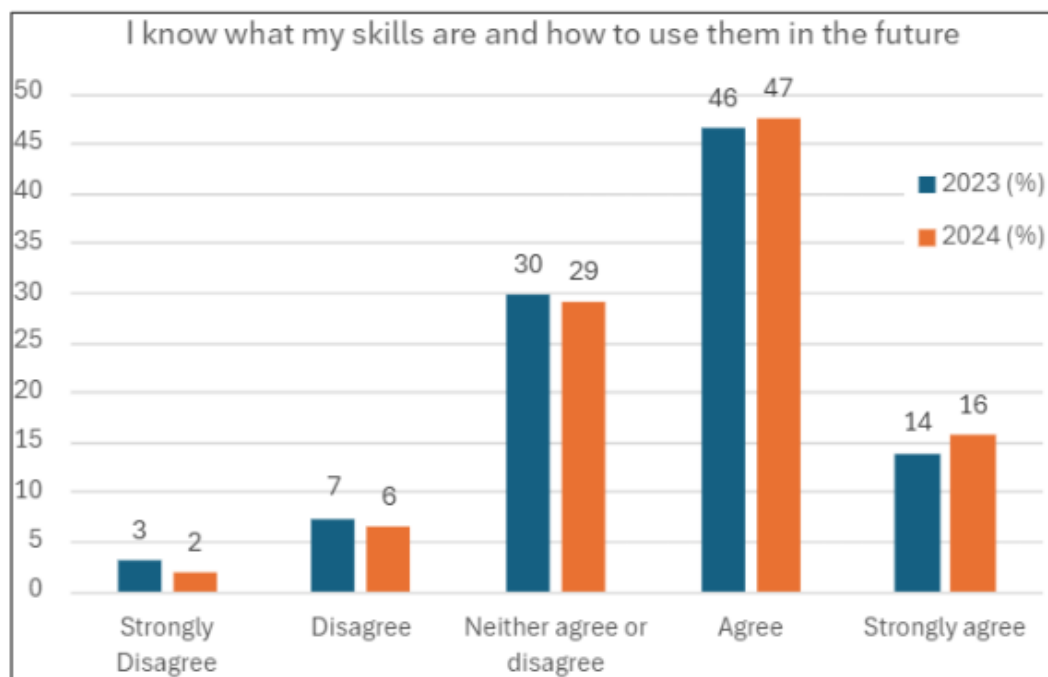


Figure 8: Distribution of Pre- and Mid-project Student Responses when Prompted “I know what my skills are and how to use them in the future”



The survey also captured valuable qualitative data regarding attitudes towards university study. These reveal several key themes that emerged from students' reflections. When asked about their feelings towards university, students expressed a complex mix of emotions that can be broadly categorised into three main areas:

- **Excitement and opportunity:** Some students viewed university with enthusiasm and optimism, seeing it as a pathway to their desired future. As one student noted: *"I feel excited at the opportunity of being able to go to university and study courses and get degrees in areas that I want to learn more about."* Another expressed similar sentiment while acknowledging some apprehension: *"Scared, but excited, happy to learn and want to do my dream career."*
- **Uncertainty and anxiety:** A significant number of responses reflected uncertainty and anxiety about university. Students expressed concerns about making the right choices, with one student sharing: *"I feel a bit nervous because I am growing up and I am studying my life job and so I don't want to make the wrong choice."* Others simply stated their uncertainty directly: *"I am not sure"* and *"uncertain."*
- **Practical concerns:** Some students identified specific barriers to university participation. These included concerns about academic ability (*"If I was intelligent enough, I would go"*) and financial considerations (*"I wanna go but the only thing is cost"*).

When asked about what support would help them feel more confident about post-school pathways, students identified several key areas for improvement:

- **Information and exposure:** Students expressed a desire for broader exposure to career options, with one requesting to *"have more ranges of topics to discuss about future career options and branch out from the typical areas."* Another specifically asked to *"show us what the jobs we would like to do actually look like and inform us about what we have to do to get there."*

- Practical guidance: There was a clear desire for specific, practical information about educational pathways. Students wanted to understand “*what degrees lead to what*” and requested information about “*how to actually get there and what qualifications we need.*” Some students also expressed interest in personalised guidance, with one suggesting “*a survey that i put in what I’m good at and what I’m interested in and it gives me a list of jobs I would suit.*”
- Experiential learning: Several responses indicated a desire for first-hand experience and exposure, with requests to “*show us what it’s like there*” and for “*more activities to our interests.*” This feedback suggests students would benefit from a comprehensive career guidance approach that combines broad career exposure with specific pathway information and opportunities for experiential learning.

In terms of moving forward, we acknowledge the project has demonstrated some excellent results so far, but continued discussions with careers advisors, students and industry have led to the refinement of activities and practice. The project’s final year will bring practical experiences for students, as they participate in campus tours of the University of Newcastle and the local TAFE.

Careers advisors have sought some support in preparing students for subject selection in Year 11, delivering activities on personal reflection and linking skills and interests to possible job options in the future. Resources such as the Australia’s National Career Information Service’s *myfuture* website (<https://myfuture.edu.au>) will be utilised to ensure these sessions are evidence-based and the information delivered is accurate. Additionally, a major inhibitor for our regional schools is the challenge for students to participate in work experience, because of a lack of opportunity, an increase in occupational child protection and safety requirements, as well as minimal industry areas willing to take on work experience students. Taree Universities Campus will therefore be providing training in virtual reality, to offer students an opportunity to experience different occupations inside the school or regional university study hub environment.

Conclusion

EduVenture has provided a learning experience for all those involved, from the local regional university study hub (Taree Universities Campus), school students, teachers and the broader partnerships with the Australian National University and University of Newcastle. Having the opportunity to work locally in schools allows Taree Universities Campus to respond to feedback and the specific needs of this community. Building relationships and connectedness between stakeholders has been an integral positive side of the project, with sustainability for future endeavours.

Whilst it has been established that a two-year project will not demonstrate immediate impact in the community, counting the moments of connections and sparks of conversations has demonstrated that it has been a worthwhile opportunity to improve the aspirations of students across six high schools in regional New South Wales and to learn how Taree Universities Campus can best work with schools and students in outreach activities.

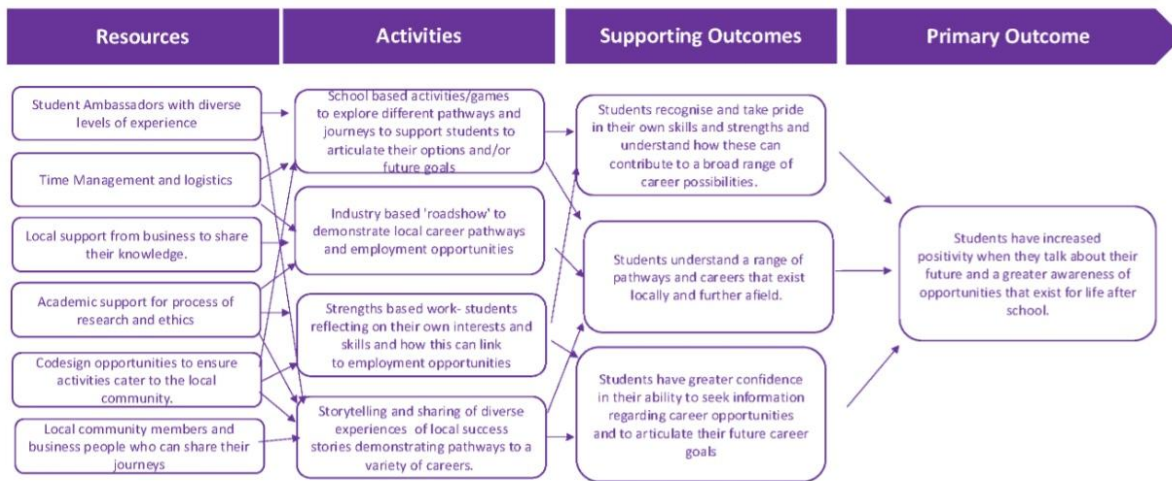
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Appendix A: Program Logic and Evaluation Plan

Program Logic



Evaluation Plan Template

Primary Outcome	Supporting Outcome	Target Audience	What data collection tools will you use?	When would these tools be implemented?	Where will the tools be implemented?	Who will be implementing the data collection tool?
Students have increased positivity when they talk about their future and a greater awareness of opportunities that exist?	<p>Students recognise and take pride in their own skills and strengths and understand how these can contribute to a broad range of career possibilities.</p> <p>Students understand a range of pathways and careers that exist locally and further afield.</p> <p>Students have greater confidence in their ability to seek information regarding career opportunities and to articulate their future career goals</p>	Year 8 students across 6 schools in the Mid Coast Council area. Approx 500-600 students.	<p>Research Survey Questionnaire</p> <p>Workshop Evaluation Surveys/activities.</p>	<p>Research Survey Questionnaire will be conducted pre; mid; end of the 2 year study.</p> <p>Evaluation Surveys will be collected after each session. These will inform next workshops- they will not be reported in the data collection for EARCUP.</p>	<p>Research questionnaires will be conducted and collected in the school session.</p> <p>ANU will be responsible for the storage of data</p>	The RUC and ANU staff members and facilitators.

Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey Questions

School _____ Unique Code _____ Date _____

I identify as (circle the answer):

Female

Male

I prefer the term:

I prefer not to say

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Yes, Aboriginal

Yes, Torres Strait
Islander

Yes, both Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander

No or
Prefer not to say

Have your family or friends studied at university?

My parent or guardian

My sibling

Someone from my
extended family

A friend

Someone else I know (write who):

I don't know anyone who
has studied at university

How much do you agree with each of the following statements?

I know what my interests are and how I can use them in the future	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know what my skills are and how I can use them in the future	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know what job I want to do as an adult	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know about study options after school	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I know what studying at university might be like	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am considering study at university after school	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can imagine myself as a university student	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

How do you feel when you think about university?

The job(s) I imagine myself doing when I am older are:

What do you think you will do when you finish school?

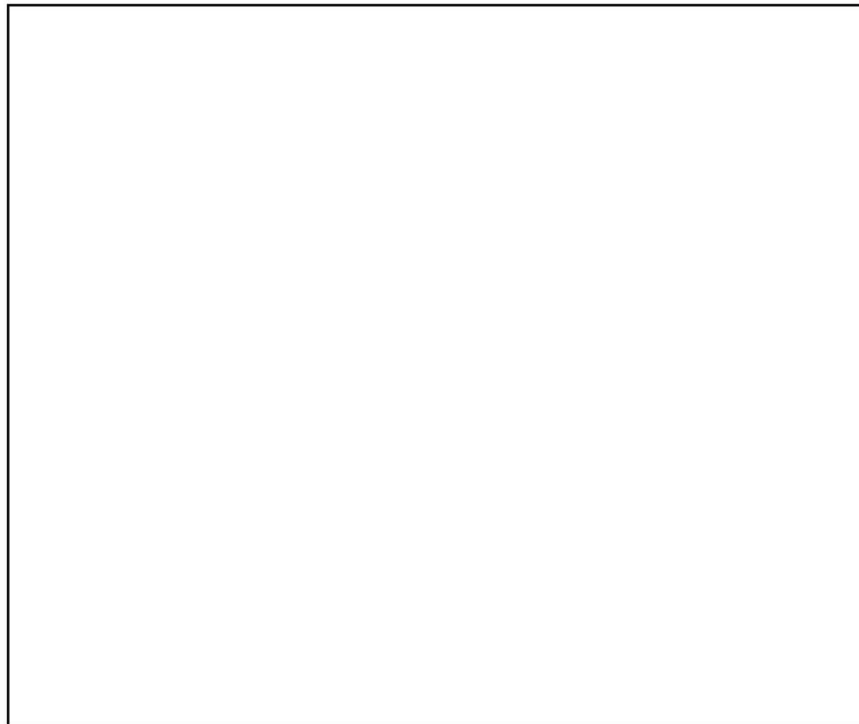
Full-time employment TAFE/Apprenticeship University Gap Year

Something else (write what): I don't know

What would you like to know about university?

What could we do to help you feel more confident about what you would like to do after school?

Describe a University student:



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