



YES+ Youth Engagement Strategy Plus (EPP initiative offered by TAFE NSW – renamed to TAFE NSW ‘Start Your Future’ in August 2023)

Executive Summary

The NSW Department of Education commissioned a research team from the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) and School of Education at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to undertake an outcomes evaluation of the Educational Pathways Program (hereafter the EPP evaluation).

This is the baseline report of the evaluation which presents findings on early implementation of the EPP and identifies issues for refinement and improvement.

The Educational Pathways Program (EPP)

The NSW Department of Education piloted the Educational Pathways Pilot Program (EPPP) in 2020-2021. The EPPP consisted of ten initiatives in 24 NSW Public Secondary Schools and was designed to improve further education and career outcomes for young people. The EPPP was evaluated by Western Sydney University in 2021 and a revised and scaled up version of the program was implemented as the Educational Pathways Program (EPP) in 2022 in 145 Public Secondary Schools, increasing to 148 schools¹ across NSW.

The EPP is a direct intervention program designed to support u eD

Methodology

The evaluation uses a mixed-method design involving triangulation of quantitative analysis of program data and survey data of key participants groups and qualitative data collection and analysis in 20 Deep Dive sites. Deep dive sites were chosen to include two or three schools from each of the nine regions of NSW where the EPP is operating to ensure geographical diversity. Individual school choices within regions were made in consultation with the DoE and schools. The evaluation is longitudinal and involves two waves of data collection and analysis. The first wave was undertaken between May and July 2023, the second will occur in Term 1, 2024. The final report is due June 2024.

The quantitative analysis involves analysis of program data provided by the Department of Education and surveys of stakeholders (Students, parents/carers, educators, specialist DoE staff, employers and trainers).

Nuanced insights into how the program works in different schools and labour market contexts are provided by qualitative interviews and focus groups with the same stakeholder groups at 20 'deep dive' sites across the nine EPP regions, as well as with Department of Education support staff in policy and program delivery roles were held in Parramatta. Participant numbers are as follows:

Table 1: Summary of numbers and percentages of participants in evaluation

| Stakeholder group | Survey participants (no., %) | Focus groups/interview participants (no., %) |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| School students in Year 11 and aged 16 years and over | 509 55% | |

Students were circumspect in their feedback on the program and noted strengths as well as aspects of the program that did not work for them. They were not only respectful of each other, but trusted their views would be heard. At times, they argued with each other about the Record of School Achievement (RoSA) requirements, fairness of opportunity and what students should expect of themselves. As experienced qualitative researchers, we know these dynamics produce the most fruitful insights.

Baseline findings

Please note this report and Table 2 below presents findings to date based on one round of data collection and is not intended to be conclusive. It is based on wave 1 surveys and deep dive site visits and partial program data analysis. The Final Report will include longitudinal data analysis and outcomes analysis using intervention and control groups and linked data.

Table 2: evaluation questions and summary baseline findings

| Process evaluation questions | Baseline findings |
|---|---|
| <p>Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?</p> | <p>DoE data shows that key 2022 targets are very close to or have been being met.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement of young people (15-29 years) increased to 80.6% since 2021, yet has fallen 1% below the 2022 target (81.6%) • The increase the proportion of all recent school leavers (who left school the previous year) participating in higher education, training, or work has exceeded the target of 91.6% by 2022. <p>Stakeholders were universally positive about the utility of the program.</p> |

Process evaluation questions

| Process evaluation questions | Baseline findings |
|------------------------------|---|
| | <p>With strong communication and collaboration, the program works well with cooperation between schools, EPP Head Teacher Careers and external parties from industry.</p> <p>Collaboration across schools and with community builds over time.</p> <p>Current inclusion criteria could be used to remind schools not currently in the EPP that would benefit most that they could join the program (funding permitting).</p> <p>Systematic monitoring of student experiences would strengthen the program.</p> <p>Transport deficits need to be addressed where possible.</p> |

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is consensus across stakeholder groups throughout NSW that the EPP is a successful program which is effectively supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals. The range of offerings are considered appropriate to engage students in considering their career choices and offering them experiences which help them refine their choices. A particular strength of the program is that, as far as possible, it is tailored to the specific needs of each student.

The program has been enthusiastically received by students, school staff, parents and employers and industry partners. Overall EPP has been successfully implemented and there have not been significant challenges in implementing the program. A particular strength of the program is that it is inclusive and engages students from a range of backgrounds and abilities.

Although it has been implemented effectively, there are a number of ways in which the program can be improved, including expanding the range of offerings from TAFE and number of places, and rethinking which schools should be included in the EPP using existing criteria to identify schools that would benefit most (and encouraging those schools to opt in), addressing transport barriers wherever possible (especially for regional students), and developing a more rigorous quality assurance framework.

The main challenges to the implementation of EPP are the lack of appropriate TAFE courses in some areas and limited industry placements in local areas. A number of other challenges identified, including lack of supervision capacity for SBATs within businesses due to staff shortages and time pressures, some overlap between the EPP and other DoE programs seeking similar outcomes (such as RIEP, Careers NSW, the Pathways strategy), some courses without practical skills elements, low skill traineeships being offered (e.g. fast-food, retail) and transport deficits and

- G. Existing criteria² should be applied to identify further schools that would benefit from the EPP resources, and that these schools be approached to 'opt-in'. This would require EPP program expansion, and more funding.

- H. Transport is a barrier. Schools should be encouraged to consider economies of scale across regions in providing transport for students. This may include schools-based vehicles, existing funds to hire smaller vehicles like minibuses and people mover cars. Students need to be able use school travel cards for free travel to workplaces and associated workplace training. Funding allowances could be considered for regional and rural school parents/carers and students. This could include petrol vouchers to overcome the costs of private transport. Services and training can be brought into schools (instead of the school students travelling), e.g. mobile TAFE units can be used to bring more TAFE courses into regional and remote schools.

² Criteria for school selection includes: FOEI, ICSEA below 1000, proximity to TAFE, local youth unemployment levels, and proportion of regions classified as regional, rural or remote.