



Educational Pathways Program Evaluation: Baseline Report

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Glossary

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
CIT	Careers Immersion Team
EPP	Educational Pathways Program
DoE	NSW Department of Education (the Department)
FOEI	Family Occupation and Education Index
GTO	Group Training Organisation
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
HSC	Higher School Certificate
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
NGOs	Non-government organisations
NSW	New South Wales
PISCF	Participant Information Statement and Consent Form
RIEP	Regional Industry Educational Partnerships program
RFT	Request for Tender
RoSA	Record of School Achievement
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SBAT	School-based apprenticeship and traineeship
SBATEOs	School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship Engagement Officer
SERAP	State Education Research Applications Process
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
TTFM	Tell Them From Me survey
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETSS	Vocational Education and Training for Secondary Students

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 Years 9-12 public high school students to remain in education and/or transition into employment and training, and better understand the career pathways available to them.

The evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to:

- Assess the process of implementing EPP initiatives through which the program is delivered.
- Assess the extent to which short term outcomes are being met.
- Identify major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement across each initiative and the program as a whole.

Key Evaluation questions and indicator questions

The evaluation was guided by two key evaluation questions with eight Process and Outcomes sub-questions (see Table 2) relating to program process and outcomes.

The key questions are:

1. Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?
2. What are the major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement?

¹ For a complete list of EPP schools, see the DoE EPP information: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/career-and-study-pathways/educational-pathways-program/about-the-pilot/participating-schools>

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%	101	38%
Parents/carers	184	19 %	22	8%
School staff and non-school based EPP staff	179	19%	97	36%
Trainers/employers/industry partners	59	6%	33	12%
DoE support staff	n/a	n/a	14	5%
TOTAL	931		267	

Recruitment of students to participate in the qualitative data collections emphasised inclusion. Most were selected by teachers directly involved in the program. Evaluators stressed to these recruitment partners that it was important we speak to students with a range of speaking skills and from a range of backgrounds. This was reflected in the sample of students who participated in the evaluation. It is important to note that while data showcased in this report is often from articulate students, we have been careful to reflect the views of all students including those who required questions containing content and structure for affirmative or negative answers. Data has been edited slightly for readability. In more than one instance, teachers enlisted 'pairs' of friends where one student relayed the experiences of their friend who was not confident in speaking in a group. In another setting, a student declined a focus group but 'hung around' the room where interviews were taking place and – on invitation - was keen to be interviewed alone. In another, an Aboriginal student remained after all other students had left and shared her experiences.

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
Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?	<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 and value to the EPP and believe the EPP is assisting young people to reach their post school destination goals, based on findings from surveys and focus groups.</p> <p>The next phase of research will test the impact of the EPP empirically.</p>
Are stakeholders aware of the EPP's purpose?	<p>Stakeholders do have good awareness of the EPPs purpose, based on findings from surveys and focus groups.</p> <p>Employers, as could be expected, are less sure of program scope.</p>
Did the targeted students/schools engage with the EPP?	<p>Survey and focus groups with stakeholders indicated the program is well utilised by students from low SES backgrounds. Some but not all stakeholders in schools focus on inclusion (disability, Aboriginal and so on) however program data is incomplete and has limited demographic</p>

Process evaluation questions	Baseline findings
	data, and not currently collected on inclusion categories apart from gender and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
What do stakeholders think about the quality of the EPP?	In general stakeholders appraised the quality of the program as high, however the duty of care and quality of placements need to be monitored.
Was the EPP implemented as intended?	Yes, it has been implemented as intended. No unintended consequences. If the program were to be expanded, then inclusion of higher needs schools is recommended.
Was the EPP scaled up version (from 24 pilot schools to an additional 124 schools) been refined in line with the recommendations of the evaluation of its pilot phase?	Yes.
Was the EPP implemented efficiently with best use of resources?	Regions where there were existing networks were highly efficient in their use of resources. Economics of scale were operating across schools. Others were building the mechanisms (networks) that enable more efficient use of resources.
Success indicator questions	Interim findings
To what extent has EPP achieved its short and medium term expected outcomes?	Short term outcomes metrics to 2022 (baseline) have been recorded. The Final Report will report on medium-term outcomes.
How many/what % of students go on to their post-school destination of their choice (education, training, work)?	The EPP is supporting students to try out, and find, post school careers pathway that suit them. For example, the survey of students found that 60% of EPP students agreed that 'I know what career I want in the future' - 10% higher than non-EPP students (50%). The Final Report will report using linked data to ascertain if the EPP is making a difference to outcomes for young people post-school (for example, whether it has reduced the numbers of young people not in employment, education and training for EPP schools versus a comparison group).
What are the major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement?	Success depends on proactivity of key staff like the Head Teacher Careers.

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

cost for families (some of these are the same as those identified in the EPPP evaluation by Barker et al (2021).

Thus, the preliminary conclusion of this evaluation is that EPP appears to be achieving its objectives and that it should be successfully expanded to other schools in NSW where these schools meet the criteria and would potentially benefit. However, this is a baseline phase of the evaluation which has not empirically examined the outcomes of the program. In the next phase of the evaluation outcomes of students engaged with EPP will be compared to those who have not participated in the program, and this will provide a definitive examination of the EPP's effectiveness.

Interim recommendations

- A. TAFE NSW delivers two EPP initiatives (TAFE NSW Early School Leavers & Start Your Future). The range of courses and number of student places within the Start Your Future initiative could be widened (subject to funding and human and other resources). Service offerings should be aligned to demand from local industry, student interest and skills shortages.
- B. NSW Department of Education programs with similar outcomes be reviewed and streamlined to avoid confusion and duplication at the school level (i.e. RIEP, EPP, Careers NSW, Training Services NSW, and any other similar programs).
- C. A monitoring framework to assist with quality assurance should be developed in relation to the EPP encompassing the range and number of EPP offerings, student feedback and satisfaction surveys, and monitoring of the quality of apprenticeships and traineeships providers. For SBATS, this should include reporting mechanisms where (a) students are not gaining knowledge and skills in the workplace setting; (b) occupational health and safety standards are not being adhered to. Another method of monitoring could be 'spot' interviews with students post-activity/work experience.
- D. Rigorous local labour market scoping and data and student preferences should drive what is offered as part of the EPP. The Department to provide data analysis and advice to EPP schools on labour demand and emergent industries. EPP HTCs and schools should use these data to develop relationships with local employers and industry where these do not already exist.
- E. EPP staff need to work with students to build their knowledge about labour markets and work options. This includes options that are currently available and accessible as well as the skills, knowledge and futures thinking required for sustainable careers.
- F. EPP staff should provide culturally responsive mentoring and support for students and families. This includes addressing cultural barriers that may hinder students from exploring new experiences or accessing opportunities beyond their immediate communities/areas.

- 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.