

# Educational Pathways Program Evaluation: Final Report

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# Glossary

AAER	Anticipated and Actual Enrolment Return
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
BIG	Back in the Game
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
CIT	Careers Immersion Team
EPP	Educational Pathways Program
EPPP	Educational Pathways Pilot Program
ESL	English as a Second Language
EY	EY (formerly known as Ernst and Young)
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
HTC	Head Teacher Careers
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
KLA	Key Learning Areas
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LFW	Looking for work
LGG	Leadership Governance Group
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NESA	NSW Education Standards Authority
NGOs	Non-government organisations
NILFET	Not In the Labour Force, Education or Training
NSW	New South Wales

P&T	Pathways and Transitions
PISCF	Participant Information Statement and Consent Form
PSDE	Post School Destinations and Experiences survey
PSM	Propensity Score Matching
RIEP	Regional Industry Educational Partnerships Program
RFT	Request for Tender
RoSA	Record of School Achievement
RRR	Regional, Rural and Remote
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SBAT	School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship
SBATEO	School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship Engagement Officer
SES	Socioeconomic status
SERAP	State Education Research Applications Process
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SLSO	School Learning Support Officer
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
SSP	Schools for Specific Purposes
TAS	Technological and Applied Studies
TQI	Teacher Quality and Impact
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETfSS	Vocational Education and Training for Secondary Students





**‘Because that’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?’** Our job is to raise or develop young people who are contributing to community and our society. So, therefore if we’re doing that, we’re doing it right by giving those opportunities. It’s not always a university focus and the Department had been very focused on and that’s why it’s been from the politicians having kids go to university. It’s always been the benchmark and now ... they’ve changed it ... The pathways for our students going into further career opportunities are vocational.’ (School Principal)

# Key messages

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the Educational Pathways Program funded by the New South Wales Department of Education. The evaluation was conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) UNSW Sydney and the School of Education UNSW Sydney.

The findings from focus groups and interviews with stakeholders (qualitative data) indicate that the Educational Pathways Program (EPP) has been beneficial for participating schools and for individual students (and their parents/carers).

All stakeholder groups reported satisfaction with the EPP and agreed it supports students to make informed career choices. Key benefits mentioned included practical engagement with a range of workplaces and training, better information on careers, dedicated support officers and resources, students 'learning by doing', and improved student self-efficacy. Employers valued recruitment opportunities and work-ready young people who held the certificates needed for worksites.

These findings were largely replicated in quantitative surveys of stakeholder groups. Overall, stakeholders noted the positive influences of the EPP initiatives and expressed satisfaction with it.

Most stakeholders thought the EPP program was effective, and suggestions tended to focus not on the program itself but on outside factors that schools could not control, such as TAFE timetabling and resourcing, and transport concession rules.

- The most mentioned EPP initiatives were Enhancing Schools-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT) Engagement, TAFE Start Your Future and the Job Readiness training sessions. Smaller-scale initiatives like Back in the Game were hardly ever discussed by stakeholders.
- Challenges are the availability of TAFE and RTO places (lack of range of courses offered, TAFEs too far away, no 'common TAFE day' allowing students to easily combine TAFE and their studies, changing preferences not matched by TAFE course offerings, and TAFE timetables). Lack of transport and lengthy commutes for students in rural and regional areas compounded these challenges.
- Other challenges within schools included insufficient in-house TAS teachers or outside trainers to deliver VET courses, leading to under-utilised technical education spaces within schools.

The EPP outcome evaluation also drew on the NSW Department-led Post School Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) survey<sup>1</sup>. In order to avoid potential false negative/positive results an experimental pre-post and intervention-control group design was employed, which included propensity score matching analysis to ensure EPP intervention schools and control group schools shared similar core characteristics (i.e. geographical location and socioeconomic status).

The experimental design also allowed comparison of pre- and post-EPP destination outcomes for both intervention and control groups. Analysis of post-school destination outcomes indicated that the EPP impact on destination outcomes was largely not visible; that is, results were not statistically significant in pointing to positive gains or changes in students' destination trajectories. Considering

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<sup>1</sup> The content of the survey is as follows: PSDE 2019 – reflect school leavers prior to the advent of the EPP; PSDE 2022 - reflect school leavers from 24 EPP pilot schools; PSDE 2023 - reflect school leavers from 148 EPP schools.

multiple years of data (2019, 2022, and 2023), and comparing before and after the advent of the EPP, and EPP and control group schools, it appears that the only positive outcome that was statistically significant was employment (taking into account both full-time and part-time) in 2023: The proportion of EPP school leavers in employment were 30.3%, and control school leavers, 27.9%. However, caution is needed in interpreting this result as EPP schools' employment did not change between the 2019 (30.3%) and 2023 survey data (30.3%).

On the other hand, the PSDE survey data clearly demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 on students' destinations, although the trend may be short-term. The peak COVID-19 period had an impact on destination outcomes – most notably, an increase in choosing university study among both EPP intervention and control group school leavers.

It is important to note that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a 'snapshot' in time rather than longitudinal data. Further, post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program on post school outcomes.

Macro-economic factors such as employment demand and the current status or perceptions of TAFE may have played a role in overall trends in school leaver selection of study or work destinations. Of relevance is that many non-EPP schools also have programs aimed at delivering similar functions to EPP schools, albeit with fewer resources. For example, SBATs, along with VET subjects, serve as a key part of careers guidance for students in non-EPP schools. The focus group discussion noted this, with non-EPP schools reporting positive career program outcomes for their students.

Overall, the evaluation indicates that while stakeholders themselves strongly believe the EPP is a successful program which has achieved its aims, direct contributions to positive changes in students' destination were not strongly supported by the quantitative data. Instead, the PSDE data showed the clear and strong potential influences of COVID-19 on students' outlook on study or work destinations. The implications of these findings are detailed in the Report Summary, and in Sections 5 and 6.



Source: EPP, DoE

**‘Since I started my SBAT I’m already working towards being a supervisor and just like learning a lot more because I’m always there now... I’m always learning new stuff, like they’re always finding something new and it’s really good.’ (EPP student)**

# 1 Executive Summary

This is the final report for the evaluation of the Educational Pathways Program (EPP). The EPP is a direct intervention program designed to support Years 9–12 public high school students. Its objectives are to:

- support students to remain in education and/or transition into employment and training, and
- better understand the career pathways available to them.

The EPP was piloted in 2020–21. It consisted of 10 initiatives in 24 NSW Public Secondary Schools. After an evaluation in 2021 a revised and scaled-up version of the EPP was implemented in 2022 in 145 Public Secondary Schools, increasing to 148 schools<sup>2</sup> across NSW; this represents 37% of the 403 secondary schools in NSW (DoE, 2023). The number of schools in the EPP has expanded to 171 in 2024.

Initiatives of the EPP include:

- Innovating careers education
- Enhancing SBAT engagement
- TAFE NSW Start Your Future
- Job Readiness workshops
- Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors
- Apprenticeship and Traineeship Head Start
- Back in the Game
- TAFE NSW Early School Leavers.

The EPP specialist staff provide the following services:

- Executive Liaison and Pathways Planning
- Careers advice
- Assistance in matching students to trainers and employers
- Organising events and excursions to training facilities and workplaces
- Tailored support packages
- Liaison with training institutes and employers
- Parental liaison.

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<sup>2</sup> 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>

The EPP includes key specialist staff including the Head Teachers Careers (HTCs). The HTCs work strategically to engage local executive leaders earlier to ensure greater visibility of program offerings and timing for school staff.

## 1.1 The evaluation

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

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?

The evaluation used a mixed-method design in 2 waves, including:

- surveys of key stakeholders (students, parents/carers, schools-based and EPP staff, employers/trainers/industry partners, and NSW DoE program central office staff and Leadership Governance Group members)
- focus groups and interviews with stakeholders at 20 EPP schools and 5 non-EPP schools
- analysis of EPP program data
- analysis of NSW Post School Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) survey data.

Wave 1 data collection was undertaken between May and July 2023; Wave 2 data collection was undertaken between March and May 2024.

There are a number of limitations to the methodology:

- Some school communities did not partake in the stakeholder surveys.
- The PSDE survey is a point-in-time survey, which does not indicate longitudinal outcomes post-school.

## 1.2 Process

Process evaluation questions focused on whether the program supported students towards their goals, engaged the targeted students, was clear to stakeholders regarding its purpose, provided quality initiatives and was implemented as intended and with efficient use of resources.

The EPP was found to successfully support students to make more realistic choices about their post-school career trajectories. Further, it successfully targeted students and met their needs, including rural and regional, female and male, CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Schools were found to be working with EPP staff to successfully coordinate opportunities for students in regions.

The program had high satisfaction ratings across the surveys, as well as positive accounts from all the stakeholder groups that participated in focus groups and interviews. In contrast, non-EPP school stakeholders expressed a desire to be part of the EPP and for access to the human resources provided by the program: the EPP Head Teacher Career (HTC), School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship Engagement Officer (SBATEO), and EPP School Administration Officer. Non-EPP school staff members who had previously worked in or collaborated with colleagues from EPP schools recognised that EPP staff provided much-needed support to expand students' pathway opportunities while reducing the administrative burden on schools. The program was implemented as intended.

A range of factors were reported to affect program processes. On the positive side, EPP resourcing for schools facilitated several key benefits: increased student support, stronger industry connections with local employers/businesses and trainers, exposing students to a wider range of industries and workplaces, fostering education and engagement with parents/carers, and further supporting student success. The recruitment of quality EPP specialist staff, and effective communication between these staff and schools, along with leveraging regional resources, contributed to continuous improvement of the EPP.

Challenges included external factors, in particular: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school engagement and attendance; workforce challenges such as vacant positions hindering schools' abilities to provide careers support and logistical capacity for activities like excursions; ongoing transport issues faced by students (especially in rural and regional areas); lack of diverse TAFE courses and limited places for high school students in available courses; and macro-economic issues such as size of the local labour market and employer demand.

Internal challenges included the short-term funding for EPP and the fact that HTCs were seconded from base schools and could be recalled at any time.

### **1.3 Outcomes**

The success indicator questions report on whether the EPP achieved its short- and medium-term expected outcomes, how many/what percentage of students go on to their post-school destination of choice (education, training, work) and major learnings, strengths and areas for improvement.

According to stakeholders, the EPP is providing better outcomes than 'business as usual', although its large-scale impacts (i.e. positive gains, changes, or overall trajectories) were hard to achieve through just one program, as the analysis of PSDE survey data suggest. Further longitudinal data collection and analysis would benefit EPP impact measurement in the future.

Overall, the primary data collected – stakeholder focus group and interviews and surveys – indicate the EPP had a positive impact on the knowledge and confidence of participating students (and their parents/carers) when it came to considering future careers/pathways. School staff were likewise enthusiastic, valuing the extra resources and supports for students and citing 'success stories' of student doing traineeships or apprenticeships and transiting into careers. They valued also the 'try it out' aspects of the EPP (such as TAFE Start Your Future).

Analysis of stakeholder survey responses consistently showed higher levels of confidence and knowledge about future careers among students doing EPP initiatives within a school (and their parents/carers) compared to students within the same schools (and their parents/carers) who were

not. Likewise, EPP-participating students reported enhanced knowledge of career pathways into vocational fields and options for further study.

The EPP offered students diverse pathways, including VET, apprenticeships and traineeships, expanding their options beyond the typical choice between completing Year 12 and pursuing a trade. It also assisted early school leavers by providing support in their transitions into employment, education or training.

Non-EPP school stakeholders described working towards obtaining many of the outcomes EPP schools were achieving. Some programs, such as the SBAT, existed before the EPP was implemented. Therefore, some vocational training initiatives had already been implemented in NSW schools prior to the EPP, and other initiatives such as Regional Industry Educational Partnerships Program (RIEP) are available for all NSW schools. However, the stakeholders perceived that EPP increased resources, provided a wider range of activities, and allowed schools to more effectively work within a region to maximise opportunities for students.

Overall, stakeholders believed the program has achieved the intended outcomes – to improve student capacity to make career decisions, access training and apprenticeships, thus supporting their participation socially and economically. However, analysis of PSDE survey data shows that EPP schools produced similar outcomes to non-EPP controls for school leavers in terms of engagement with VET, employment and NILFET. While a higher percentage of EPP school leavers were in work in 2023 compared to the control (30.3% compared to 27.9%), non-EPP school leavers were slightly more likely to be in VET in 2023 (10.6% versus 11.2%) and, significantly, there was no difference in the percentage in training/apprenticeship for 2023 (19.0% for both groups). For the important NILFET indicator EPP school leavers in 2023 had slightly worse outcomes than the control group (3.3% vs 3.0%) but had improved since 2019 (4%), whereas control schools were slightly worse than in 2019 (2.8%)<sup>3</sup>.

It is important to note that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a 'snapshot' in time rather than longitudinal data. Further, post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program on outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: analysis of Post School Destinations and Experiences survey data, multiple years – see Appendix A



## 1.4 Summary of findings

Table 1 presents findings for each research question.

Table 1 Evaluation research questions and findings

Process evaluation questions and findings
<b>Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The EPP has been engaging increasing numbers of students – 3,811 in 2021, 33,131 in 2022 and 58,264 in 2023 (DoE program data – see 4.1.2).</li><li>• Stakeholders were universally positive about the utility and value of 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 (stakeholder accounts – see 4.1.5).</li><li>• Students engaged in the EPP were more likely to know what career they wanted while those not engaged in it were more likely to be unsure. A survey of students at EPP schools indicated that at Wave 1, 60% of EPP students agreed that ‘I know what career I want in the future’, 10% higher than students not doing the EPP (50%) at the same schools. At Wave 2 this had increased to 64% (with a similar 60% of students not doing the EPP agreeing) (stakeholder surveys – see 4.1.4).</li><li>• An intervention-control group analysis of three years’ of Post School Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) data indicated:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ There were no statistically significant differences in outcomes between EPP schools and a matched control group in relation to a Bachelors degree, VET Education, Training /Apprenticeship and Not in the Labour Force, Education or Training (NILFET).</li><li>○ However, there were statistically significant differences for two variables: Work: Take-up of employment by school leavers from EPP schools was constant before and after the COVID lockdown (30.3% in 2019, 30.3% in 2023). Notably, in 2023 a higher percentage of EPP school leavers than of control school leavers were in work – 30.3% and 27.9% respectively, a statistically significant 2.4% difference.</li><li>○ Looking for work: The outcomes from EPP school leavers were consistently higher and the gap compared to non-EPP school leavers increased each year and over time. For example, in 2023, the percentage was 9.3% for EPP school leavers versus 6.8% for control school leavers, which was statistically significant (analysis of PSDE data – see 4.1.3).</li><li>○ It is important to note that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a ‘snapshot’ in time rather than longitudinal data. Further, post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program on outcomes.</li></ul></li></ul>

<b>Are stakeholders aware of the EPP's purpose?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholders have good awareness of the EPP's purpose (Stakeholder surveys and focus groups – see 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).</li> <li>• Stakeholder surveys indicated that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ More than 80% of parents/carers of EPP-participating children in EPP schools agreed that their child could do an apprenticeship or traineeship while still at school.</li> <li>○ EPP and school staff demonstrated high levels of agreement (84%-91% across a range of indicators over two waves) that they knew how the EPP could support students, understood the schools' role, and were familiar with VET pathways (stakeholder surveys– see 4.2.1).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Did the targeted students/schools engage with the EPP?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program is targeted at low SES schools and is well utilised by students from low SES backgrounds at those schools. The program is growing in 2024 from 148 schools, with a further 20 schools to join (DoE program data – see 4.3).</li> </ul> <p>Increasing numbers of students participated in EPP initiatives (3811 in 2021; 33,131 in 2022; 58,264 in 2023) (DoE program data – see 4.3).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program data has limited demographic information but indicates female and male students were roughly equally represented (53% and 47%) and strong participation (11–27%) from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (DoE program data – see 4.3.1).</li> </ul>
<b>What do stakeholders think about the quality of the EPP?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In general, stakeholders appraised the quality of the program as high, with some caveats on certain elements where they perceived content as being too theoretical or writing-based and not sufficiently 'hands-on' and practical (stakeholder accounts – see 4.4.2).</li> <li>• Stakeholder surveys indicated that students engaged in the EPP agreed that the EPP helped them decide what job or career they would like to do after school. There was strong agreement in both waves that it helped 'a lot' (Wave 1: 42% and Wave 2: 39%) or 'a little bit' (Wave 1: 40% and Wave 2: 36%).</li> <li>• Recommending the program to others is a strong indicator of confidence in the quality of the program. Students engaged in EPP initiatives were asked if they would recommend the EPP to their friends. Most students answered 'yes – definitely'. (Wave 1: 63% and Wave 2: 61%) (stakeholder surveys – see 4.4.1). EPP-TAFE co-ordination is crucial to the EPP's operation (stakeholder accounts – see 4.4.2).</li> </ul>
<b>Was the EPP implemented as intended?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, it has been implemented as intended (stakeholder accounts – see 4.5.2).</li> <li>• The initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found that most of the 20 EPP schools we visited were fully engaged with the program.</li> </ul>

- By Wave 2, the smaller sample size of six schools (re)visited were offering an even greater array of initiatives (stakeholder accounts – see 4.5.2).
- No unintended consequences were identified (stakeholder accounts – see 4.5.2).

**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.
- A range of adjustments were made following the EPPP evaluation (Barker et al. 2021) (Barker report and DoE information on program changes, see 4.6).
- The review of the EPPP resulted in two initiatives being phased out and others being rebranded and reconfigured. The new EPP is an improvement on the pilot and the range of initiatives is appropriate ((Barker report and DoE information on program changes, see 4.6).

**Was the EPP implemented efficiently with best use of resources?**

- Stakeholder surveys indicated that, across a range of efficiency indicators, there was a high level of agreement between EPP and school based staff (between 71%-84% across four indicators and Waves 1 and 2) that the DoE, the different parts of the EPP and schools personnel were working effectively together (stakeholder surveys, see 4.7.1).
- Regions where there were existing networks were highly efficient in their use of resources. Economies of scale were operating across schools. Others were building the mechanisms (networks) that enable more efficient use of resources
- Where there were inefficiencies, these related to under-utilisation of resources due to, for example, insufficient VET teachers or external trainers to make use of school spaces, no one available or able to drive a school bus, and TAFE operations deemed to be less than optimal in terms of providing student choice
- HTCs were seconded from base schools for a year at a time and could be returned to their base schools at any time. This caused some challenges in some schools. Short-term funding overall created a number of challenges for EPP due to uncertainty about ongoing resources (stakeholder accounts, see 4.7.2).

### **Success indicator questions and findings**

**To what extent has EPP achieved its short- and medium-term expected outcomes?**

- Short-term outcomes metrics to 2023 (baseline to final) show significant growth in student engagement in the range of EPP initiatives over the period 2022–23.
- Between 2022 and 2023, the referral-based initiatives, Back in the Game and TAFE Early School Leavers saw a 207% and 158% growth respectively; however, numbers of students in these two initiatives are comparatively minor. The major initiatives, such as SBAT commencements (which is a strong outcome indicator), grew by a more modest, yet healthy, 17%, as did employer support for SBAT

engagements (which grew by 23%). TAFE Start Your Future grew by 122% (DoE short-term outcomes data – see 4.8.1).

- Due to the endpoint of evaluation (mid-2024), there are no findings on medium- to long-term outcomes.
- Supplementary data (see 4.8.1) from DoE on VET and SBAT enrolments allowing for comparison in VET activities across NSW Government schools between EPP schools, non-EPP control group schools, and all non-EPP schools, showed:
  - A trend of higher percentages of enrolment in VET subjects: EPP school VET participation rates were 35% in 2022, 36% in 2023 and 37% in 2024, compared with 32%, 32% and 33% for control schools.
  - SBAT commencements showed faster numerical growth at the EPP schools: 711 in 2022, 830 in 2023 and 981 in 2024, compared with 644, 660 and 692 for non-EPP control schools (DoE supplementary data - see 4.8.1).

**How many/what percentage of students go on to their post-school destination of choice (education, training, work)?**

- There was no way of determining whether students go on to a future pathway of ‘their choice’ as available data indicates school leaver outcomes, not whether the outcome matched their ‘choice’.
- Based on analysis of PSDE survey data for EPP schools and group of matched non-EPP schools, the 2023 survey (2022 data) analysis indicated that as of 2023:
  - 10.6% EPP school leavers (and 11.2% non-EPP control school leavers) were in VET.
  - 19.0% EPP school leavers (and 19.0% non-EPP control school leavers) were in Training/Apprenticeships.
  - 30.3% EPP school leavers (and 27.9% non-EPP control school leavers) were in Work.
  - 9.3% EPP school leavers (and 6.8% non-EPP control school leavers) were Looking For Work.
  - 3.3% EPP school leavers (and 3.0% non-EPP control school leavers) were Not in the Labour Force, Education or Training (NILFET) (PSDE data analysis – see 4.1.3).

**What are the major learnings, strengths and areas for improvement?**

- Success depends on proactivity of key staff, in particular HTC, and the strengths of their networks. RIEP also supports industry opportunities for students.
- Current expansion criteria for the program are based on SES status but funding is limited and not available to all schools who want to be part of the EPP.

- **Systematic monitoring of student experiences via a common survey tool and linking EPP engagement with outcomes would strengthen the program.**
- **Transport deficits are an ongoing issue for students, especially for those in remote and regional areas who don't have a drivers' licence/car or parental transport support. School transport options can be constrained (e.g. teachers can't leave classes to drive the school minibus). Students do not have access to public transport concessions for journeys to training/workplaces.**
- **Non-EPP schools faced similar challenges but were more constrained in teacher capacity, as they have fewer resources for educational pathways. However, they were supporting students' VET education and careers (where there were enough staff members in the school to fulfil these roles) and getting students into SBATs, TAFE courses and traineeships/employment.**
- **The TAFE system (and RTOs) are critical to EPP success, yet there are key challenges and barriers for students, especially in rural and remote areas. A VET review is currently underway by the NSW Government.**
- **Monitoring of better-quality longitudinal data showing post-school outcomes is required to determine the EPP impact into the future (triangulation of all data sources – overall findings).**

## 1.5 Conclusions

The findings indicate that, overall, the program is successful and has been implemented as intended, although there is still room for improvement and adaptation.

The HTC's are uniquely placed to network with employers and trainers, and these extra resources in staffing were crucial as regular Careers Teachers do not have time to engage effectively with employers and trainers. The RIEP officers provided important supplementary support and industry liaison.

The program has been enthusiastically received by students, school staff, parents, and employers and industry partners.

A particular strength of the program is that it is inclusive and has engaged students from a range of backgrounds and abilities, learning styles and cognitive abilities. Practical 'learning by doing' was strongly emphasised by students in the EPP as their preference.

Non-EPP schools included in the evaluation sought to join the program and wanted access to the extra resources this would bring. Students in non-EPP schools were also getting some effective VET education and careers advice.

Supplementary data from DoE on VET and SBAT enrolments allowing for comparison in VET activities across NSW Government schools between EPP schools, non-EPP control group schools, and all non-EPP schools, showed a trend of higher percentages of enrolment in VET subjects and SBAT commencements, and a faster growth rate, at the EPP schools compared to the other two groups.

However, school leaver outcomes appeared to be very similar for students in matched non-EPP schools. The findings on outcomes for school leavers based on analysis of the PSDE survey showed little difference for school leavers from EPP schools versus a matched control group of non-EPP school leavers, with EPP schools doing slightly better than control schools on some outcomes, negligible difference on others and less well than control schools for a small number. There was only one statistically significant impact – the take-up of employment by school leavers from non-EPP schools was statistically significantly lower than for the EPP school leavers.

It is important to note that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a ‘snapshot’ in time rather than longitudinal data. Further, post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program on outcomes.

Other factors (such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, macroeconomic factors, labour market and trends related to VET) appear to influence outcomes. Additionally, EPP is still a relatively new program and post-school outcomes may only be apparent once the program is fully embedded in EPP schools.

Although it has been implemented effectively there are a number of ways the program can be improved. These include expanding the range of TAFE offerings and place numbers; using the existing criteria to identify schools that would most benefit from the EPP and encouraging those schools to opt in; addressing transport barriers (especially for regional students); addressing HTC employment arrangements; and developing a more rigorous quality assurance framework.

The main challenges are the lack of a range of TAFE courses and limited places in some areas, as well as limited industry placements. The expansion of fee-free TAFE places is positive but there are still challenges for high school students in terms of range of TAFE offerings and the number of earmarked places, especially in rural and regional settings.

Employer reluctance was noted by stakeholders as a challenge. SBAT ‘paperwork’ was seen as onerous, and young people need the appropriate certificates (e.g. the general construction induction card, or ‘white card’).

Cultural change at the community level (and within schools) is required given the continued perceived superiority of university pathways over VET pathways. This translates through to school KPIs – outcomes which are positive for a student. For example, getting a full-time job or going into TAFE are not valued as highly as a university outcome.

Schools face significant staffing challenges, especially to recruit and retain VET teachers. The staffing arrangements for EPP are also a challenge and the short-term funding creates uncertainty for the program.

The conclusion of this evaluation is that EPP is achieving its objectives and is highly valued by stakeholders. However, better quality longitudinal data on school leavers’ outcomes is required to better measure the EPP impact into the future.

## 1.6 Recommendations

**A. Enhancing TAFE–school collaboration.** The TAFE–school interface is key to the success of the program and VET education in general. In the context of the current VET review, the NSW Government may need to consider increasing the range of available TAFE courses and places earmarked for high school students. TAFE offerings (more broadly) should be aligned to industry

futures, local industry needs and the evolving nature of young people's interest and aptitudes. TAFE attendance should be considered a 'common' day, if possible, to minimise disruption to student learning. Access to qualified trainers and the minimum number of students (15) required by TAFE NSW to deliver Start Your Future courses and the Head Start initiative are often barriers to student engagement in more remote areas of NSW. The Department should negotiate with TAFE NSW to determine a consistent framework that facilitates appropriate staffing, to enable course participation/modified course delivery with fewer students from RRR schools.

**B. Review of similar programs.** VET programs and other programs within the Department aiming for similar outcomes could be reviewed to identify any elements of overlap and streamline to avoid confusion at the school level (i.e. VET and EPP school programs, RIEP, Careers NSW, Training Services NSW and any other similar programs). This review can also identify any gaps for further development of other types of VET programs.

**C. Ongoing roles for EPP Head Teachers Careers.** HTC's are essentially on loan from their substantive positions in schools at the discretion of principals. These officers can be recalled at any time, posing a risk to EPP service delivery. The Department should consider making these roles permanent (ongoing), enabling program consistency and backfilling of vacated positions in schools.

**D. Review the current human resources ratio for remote area schools.** Current HTC-to-school ratio across all EPP schools is a uniform 1:7. School challenges are greater in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) locations. Additional resources in RRR areas can add value to career learning and vocational education opportunities for students. The Department could review the current ratio and consider including fewer schools in a group in remote areas.

**E. Development of a quality assurance framework.** A monitoring framework to support quality assurance should be developed, encompassing the range and number of EPP offerings, student feedback and satisfaction surveys, 'spot' interviews with student post-activity/work experience, and monitoring of the quality of apprenticeship and traineeship providers. For SBATs, this should include reporting mechanisms where (a) students are not gaining knowledge and skills in the workplace setting, and (b) occupational health and safety standards are not being adhered to.

**F. Socially and culturally responsive mentoring.** EPP should provide socially and culturally responsive mentoring and support for students and families. This includes addressing economic, motivational, and cultural and language barriers that may hinder students from exploring new experiences or accessing opportunities beyond their immediate communities/areas.

**G. Transportation support for regional and rural areas.** Transport can be a barrier, especially in RRR areas. Schools should be encouraged to consider economies of scale across regions in providing transport for students. This may include schools-based vehicles or using existing funds to hire smaller vehicles. Furthermore, students need to be able use school travel cards for free travel to workplaces and associated workplace training. Funding allowances could be considered for RRR school parents/carers and students. This could include reminding teachers they can use funds to purchase Opal cards (pre-loaded with credit). Another useful allowance could petrol vouchers to overcome the costs of public or private transport to training or workplaces.

**H. Better access to VET subjects at schools.** Some schools have training facilities that are underused because they cannot recruit staff to provide those subjects due to the general issue that VET teacher training and administrative requirements to maintain accreditation are onerous. Services and training could be brought into schools, utilising existing resources to deliver TAFE

courses in RRR locations. Mobile training units could be additionally utilised in areas where technical learning spaces are not available.

**I. More reliable funding.** The short-term nature of the EPP funding and the secondment of HTCs from base schools create uncertainty and challenges for some EPP schools. If the funding period were extended it would enable EPP schools to fully embed the program into their mainstream activities and recruit appropriate staff.





Source: EPP, DoE

**‘Some kids just don’t enjoy school so that’s why if they know about it and there’s a way for them to work while being at school that might be good for them’ (EPP student, western Sydney)**

## 2 Introduction

The report presents the evaluation findings and is structured as follows:

- Section 2 presents the context and objective of the evaluation.
- Section 3 presents the research methodology.
- Section 4 presents the findings and their implications.
- Section 5 presents the conclusion.
- Section 6 presents recommendations.

### 2.1 Policy context

Governments seek to avoid young people not being engaged in work and study in the post-school years (Barker et al., 2021) given the associated individual and social costs such as unemployment or lower incomes, poorer health and even incarceration. Policies and programs attempt to reduce the number of young people not in the labour force, education or training (NILFET).

NCVER statistics show NSW's VET participation rates are lower than the Australian average for all age groups (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Estimated participation rate of the Australian resident population aged 15–64 years in VET, by state or territory of student residence, 2022 (%)**

	NSW	Australia
15–19 years	40.5	45.7
20–24 years	34.4	36.9
25–44 years	23.5	25.4
45–64 years	15.7	16.5

Sources: NCVER, National VET Provider 2022 and National VET in Schools 2022 collections; Australian Bureau of Statistics (September 2022), National, State and Territory population, (June) Quarterly Population Estimates by State/Territory, Sex and Age.<sup>4</sup>

The NSW Government seeks to improve access, opportunities and choice across post-school pathways including university, training and work for all students<sup>5</sup>. In 2019, research by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) identified that young people who participate in 'VET in Schools' programs are 50 per cent more likely to be in fulltime employment five years after leaving school, than those who do not.

<sup>4</sup> Notes: The estimated participation rate is the number of VET students with a usual residential address in an Australian state or territory, other Australian territories or dependencies and where the state/territory is Not known. Usual residential address refers to where the student usually resides rather than a temporary address a student relocates to for training, work, or other purposes.

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Education's *Our Plan for Public Education* (released Nov 2023).

Recent Australian and NSW Government reports highlights that NSW<sup>6</sup>

- is experiencing significant skills shortages
- needs to attract and retain more skilled trainers, educators, and assessors
- is evolving their VET funding model<sup>7</sup>

Over the past five years, significant reforms have improved access and removed structural barriers to Vocational Education for Secondary Students (VETSS) such as the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) reform to remove university categorisation and treatment of certain Higher School Certificate (HSC) categorisation of VET courses. However, the participation rate for Stage 6 students studying one or more VET subjects for the HSC has remained the same, at one in 3 students, for the last 20 years with participation being greater in rural and remote areas (47%) than metropolitan areas (30%)<sup>8</sup>.

Programs such as the EPP are in place to increase the number of students undertaking a VET course in Years 11 and 12.

NSW has seen a 9.3% increase in the number of apprentices and trainees in training in 2022 compared to 2021. This result led the nation, with more than 115,000 apprentices and trainees in training in NSW (DoE, 2022). The Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning Prue Car stated in March 2024 that the government 'remains committed to empowering students with the skills and knowledge essential for successful futures' (NSW DoE, 2024)<sup>9</sup>. Program background

The Educational Pathways Program (EPP) is an innovative program designed to improve education and career outcomes for young people by introducing NSW public high school students to a range of vocational training and employment pathways. While open to all students, the EPP specifically targets disengaged and disadvantaged young people to support them to engage with tertiary education and work. The program is part of the broader aim to increase skills and reduce the number of students leaving school without a career pathway.

The EPP was launched as a pilot in 24 schools in 2020. As a result of the successful pilot phase, the program was funded by the NSW Government and expanded to 148 Public Secondary Schools in nine regions by 2023. As of March 2024, funding was announced for a further two years, and the program will expand to 20 new schools across the state. Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning Prue Car has stated that the expansion of the EPP would ensure that more school students have access to high-quality vocational education and training (NSW DoE, 2024).

Educational Pathways Program objectives, components and metrics

The EPP is a direct intervention designed around the following five objectives.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, the Disability Royal Commission's Final Report and the Review of Australia's Migration System Final Report. Jobs and Skills Australia's inaugural Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023, released in October.

<sup>7</sup> NSW VET Review, Final Report June 2024.

<sup>8</sup> NESA enrolment and VET Credential System dataset (1998-2022) (unpublished).

<sup>9</sup> More recent data for 2023 and 2024 from NCVER are not available, so it is difficult to know whether the increase has continued, or what current non-completion rates are for apprenticeships and traineeships in NSW and nationally.

<sup>10</sup> Source: Department of Education Educational Pathways Program (EPP) Scale up Detailed Business Case, February 2022, p. vi.

1. Ensure students are aware of their career options and are satisfied with the quality of the careers advice they receive.
2. Increase the number of students that remain, complete or transition into education, employment and training.
3. Support at-risk students who may otherwise exit the education/employment system to attain vocational-oriented experience and qualifications.
4. Boost the number of young people on the School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATs) pathway (a proven pathway to post-school study and employment).
5. Improve skill levels and matching with priority industries through enhanced careers advice to school students that drives behavioural changes in the type and take-up of VET pathways to employment in priority NSW industries.

The EPP includes the following initiatives:

- Innovating Careers Education – led by dedicated Head Teachers Careers (HTCs) who coordinate local Careers Immersion Teams, facilitating collaboration between schools, local industry and employers to create training and employment opportunities for students.
- Enhancing SBAT Engagement – led by dedicated School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship Engagement Officers (SBATEOs) who provide mentoring and support for students considering/undertaking an SBAT.
- TAFE NSW Early School Leavers – targeted wrap-around support services to help early school leavers under the age of 17 transition from school and complete their first course at TAFE NSW.
- Back in the Game – a referral service that provides specialist support to students at risk of disengagement from school to help them either re-engage with education, transition to vocational education or find employment.
- Apprenticeship and Traineeship Head Start – Group Training Organisations (GTOs) offer students opportunities to study fee-free pre-apprenticeship or pre-traineeship VET courses (units of competencies) that include work experience with host employers while at school. This can lead to higher level post-school VET qualifications.
- TAFE NSW Start Your Future (formerly known as TAFE YES+) – helps students identify potential career pathways through vocational tasters in a wide range of industries. Taster courses are delivered at local TAFE NSW campuses.
- Job Readiness Workshops – give students practical tips to help them land their first job and inform students about employer expectations for work.
- Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors – provide students with first-hand accounts (through career events, talks) from individuals who successfully navigated a VET pathway and have gone on to achieve inspiring careers.

The EPP has short-, medium- and long-term program metrics (see Appendix E).

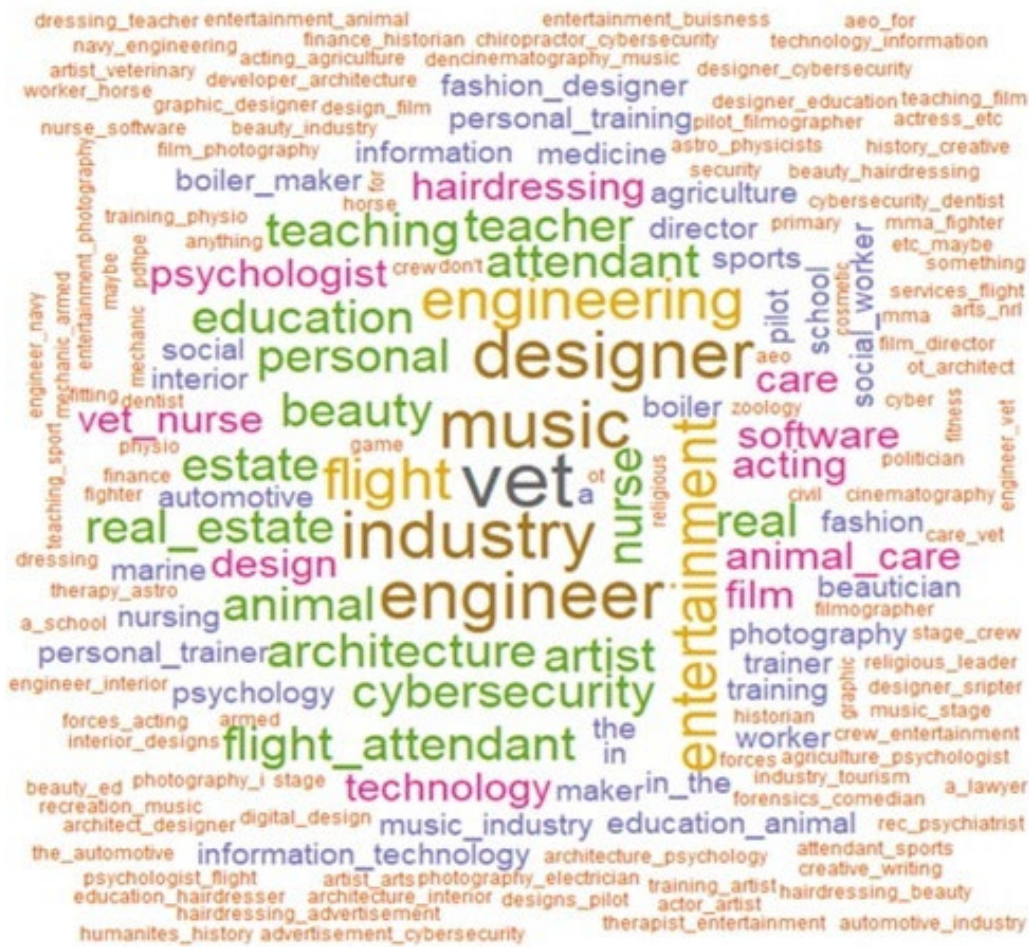
## **2.2 Objective of the impact evaluation**

The objective of this impact evaluation is to assess the process and outcomes of the EPP and identify areas for improvement.

## **2.3 Status of the report**

This is the final report of the evaluation. It builds on a previous evaluation of the pilot phase, the Educational Pathways Pilot Program (EPPP) (Barker et al., 2021) conducted by Western Sydney University, and earlier phases of this UNSW evaluation, including the EPP Evaluation Baseline Report by the SPRC (Blunden et al., 2023). This report triangulates findings from a range of methods and provides conclusions about the effectiveness of the EPP. It contributes to existing knowledge in education interventions designed to assist young people in disadvantaged communities to participate in VET, other forms of higher education, and employment.

Figure 1 Word cloud for question 'What kind of jobs or careers are you thinking about?'



Source: Stakeholder survey: Student responses.

### 3 Approach

The report is structured around evaluation questions relating to process and outcomes. The evaluation questions and data sources are presented in full in Appendix B. This section summarises the key data sources, limitations and ethical considerations of the evaluation.

#### 3.1 Evaluation purpose and research questions

The purposes of the evaluation are to:

- Assess the process of implementing EPP, across the 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.

The research questions below guided the evaluation.

**Table 3 Research process and outcomes questions**

<b>1. Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?</b>
<b>Process indicator questions</b>
<b>Are stakeholders aware of the EPP’s purpose?</b>
<b>Did the targeted students/schools engage with the EPP?</b>
<b>What do stakeholders think about the quality of the EPP?</b>
<b>Was the EPP implemented as intended?</b>
<b>Was the EPP scaled up version (from 24 pilot schools to an additional 121 schools) been refined in line with the recommendations of the evaluation of its pilot phase?</b>
<b>Was the EPP implemented efficiently with best use of resources?</b>
<b>Success indicator questions</b>
<b>To what extent has EPP achieved its short- and medium-term expected outcomes?</b>
<b>How many/what percentage of students go on to their post-school destination of choice (education, training, work)?</b>
<b>2. What are the major learnings, strengths and areas for improvement?</b>

## 3.2 Summary of data sources

The evaluation draws on a range of methodologies and data sources – described in full in Appendix A, Appendix B and Appendix C. Primary data was collected in two waves and supplemented by the provision and analysis of three years of PSDE survey data for pre-post and EPP–non-EPP comparison.

Key sources of data informing this evaluation are as follows.

- Surveys of key stakeholders:
  - Wave 1: 509 students; 184 parents/carers; 179 EPP and schools staff; 59 employers and trainers. 116 school communities out of 148 (78%) had at least one participant.
  - Wave 2: 552 students; 21 parents/carers; 166 EPP and schools staff; 36 employers and trainers. 141 school communities out of 148 (95%) had at least one participant.

The surveys targeted EPP schools, not comparison schools or all NSW schools. There was a screening question which asked students whether they were engaged in any EPP initiatives. It should be noted that while some would have answered no, they may have been included in some school-wide events – but not in specific initiatives like SBATs, TAFE Start Your Future etc. While confined to EPP schools, the results do indicate differences between students actively engaged in EPP initiatives and those that were not, where outcomes were compared in this way.

- Focus groups and interviews<sup>11</sup> with stakeholders at selected sites:
  - Wave 1: 101 EPP students; 22 parents/carers of EPP students; 97 EPP and schools staff; 33 employers and trainers; 14 NSW DoE central office program staff and members of the Leadership Governance Group.
  - Wave 2: 26 EPP students; 29 EPP and schools staff; 18 non-EPP students and 15 non-EPP staff; 7 NSW DoE Leadership Governance Group.
- Analysis of EPP program data (2021, 2022, 2023)
- Analysis of EVET, SVET and SBAT data for EPP schools and non-EPP control schools
- Analysis of PSDE survey data (2018, 2019, 2023).

CESE provided PSDE data on students' study or work destinations after leaving school, an important outcome of the EPP. The evaluation team employed an experimental design, comparing the students' destination outcomes between school leavers from 148 EPP schools and 74 control group (non-EPP) schools.

Control group schools were selected based on propensity matching score statistical analysis (including geographic location and schools' socioeconomic status in the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)) and the available information about the schools (such as school types). Three years of PSDE survey data were analysed (2019, 2020, 2023) to investigate trends in pre-post and intervention-control group data. The hypothesis was that the EPP intervention group would have better post-school outcomes than (a) the same schools prior to the EPP

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<sup>11</sup> Most participants engaged in focus groups; however when a participant could not attend a focus group, individual interviews were held.



intervention, and (b) a control group of matched non-EPP schools. The analysis focused on six outcome indicators of post-school student destinations: (a) education in Bachelors' degree, (b) education in VET, (c) training/apprenticeship, (d) employment (full-time or part-time), (e) looking for work (LFW), and (f) 'not in the labour force, education or training' (NILFET) (see Appendix A for details).

A further source of data was provided by the DoE in August 2024 and analysed. This data shows enrolments in EVET, SVET, and SBATs for EPP schools, and a control group (the same control group used for the PSDE survey data analysis (see Appendix A for intervention and control groups).

For more detail on the data sources, including sample sizes, variables, and EPP schools and controls, see Appendix A.

### 3.3 Limitations

The following are the main limitations of this evaluation.

- *Survey data limitations.* The total population of the stakeholder groups surveyed and the number of potential respondents is not known, as the surveys were distributed by schools. Thus, the response rate was determined based on a best estimate of the number of possible stakeholder distributions. The DoE provided best estimates (see Appendix A for detail) which indicate surveys had differing response rates by stakeholder type and wave, ranging between 1.3% (parents/carers) to 43% (employers/trainers/industry partners).
- While data for 148 EPP schools were included, some school communities had only a handful of responses while others that heavily promoted the survey had 20 or more.
- *Program data limitations.* The DoE provided data on EPP participation but noted that data collection was variable at the beginning of the EPP and has been improving over time with the implementation of an EPP Data and Reporting Officer role from October 2022. Where data is missing – for example, program demographics data – this has been noted.
- As this final report was completed in July 2024, it only presents data from complete data years (2021, 2022, 2023) and thus cannot make any findings on 2024 trends.
- *The PSDE survey* has reasonably good response rates due to persistence of approach and incentives offered, but these rates vary according to status (58.4% of Year 12 completers, versus 32.7% for non-Year 12 completers) (NSW DoE, 2021).
- *It was not possible to 'match' the 148 schools in the EPP exactly with 148 non-EPP schools.* The final control group consisted of 74 schools, some appearing more than once, matched for socioeconomic status and geography. See Appendix A for the list.

The EPP includes eight initiatives. The evaluation focuses on the program as a whole and does not comment on the effectiveness of particular initiatives. As indicated above, some of these (e.g. SBATs) are also available in non-EPP schools, although the resourcing for these is lower in those schools.

## **3.4 Ethics**

Ethics approval was obtained from the UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HC220724) and from the NSW State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) (2023039).



Source: EPP, DoE

'I think it's also given students a real option, the schools now have a real option for students who may be on that edge or disengaged or even students who know they want to be a tradesperson. It's just given them greater focus, so yeah, I definitely think it's the best program the Department has put in in 20 years of being a careers advisor, in my opinion.' (Careers Advisor, regional NSW)

## 4 Findings

The findings are presented under each evaluation question. Findings are drawn from several data sources – a combination of quantitative (program data, quasi-experimental data) and qualitative data (drawn from interviews and focus groups with stakeholders). Data was collected in two waves.

This section provides findings relating to the process of the program. This is informed by:

- survey data (EPP stakeholders)
- focus group and interview data (EPP stakeholders)
- EPP program data, and
- other relevant data, including DoE metrics.

Process evaluation questions focus on whether the EPP is meeting its key objectives and whether it is targeting the students it is designed to assist.

### 4.1 Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school goals?

- The EPP is supporting students to reach their goals.
- Focus groups with students and parents and stakeholder survey results indicate that students and parents/carers from the EPP schools were more confident in their knowledge about career pathways than those in non-EPP schools.
- The EPP has been engaging increasing numbers of students – 3,811 in 2021, 33,131 in 2022 and 58,264 in 2023.

#### 4.1.1 VET context for NSW

The DoE has a key measure relevant to the EPP:

- Increasing the proportion of students who take up university, training or work in the year after school.

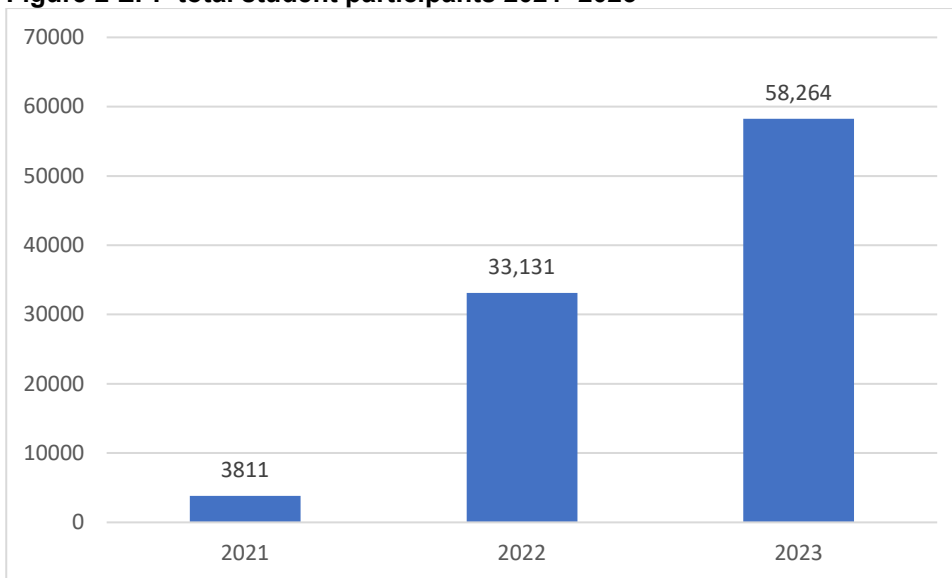
NCVER data indicates that in 2022 NSW recorded a 9.3% year-on-year increase in the number of apprentices and trainees in training, with more than 115,000 apprentices and trainees in training (DoE, 2022). While enrolments slightly increased overall between 2018 and 2022, completions declined for all categories of VET (NCVER, 2022, Figures 12 and 13), and NSW's VET participation rates were lower than the Australian average for all age groups for 2022 (NCVER, 2022). There was no 2023 data available at the time of writing to indicate whether these trends have continued or reversed.

Against this backdrop, the results in the evaluation below indicate that student engagement in the EPP increased significantly from 2021 to 2023.

### 4.1.2 Numbers of students in the program

EPP program data shows a significant upward trend in participant numbers since the program started, climbing from 3,811 in 2021, to 33,131 in 2022 and 58,264 in 2023.

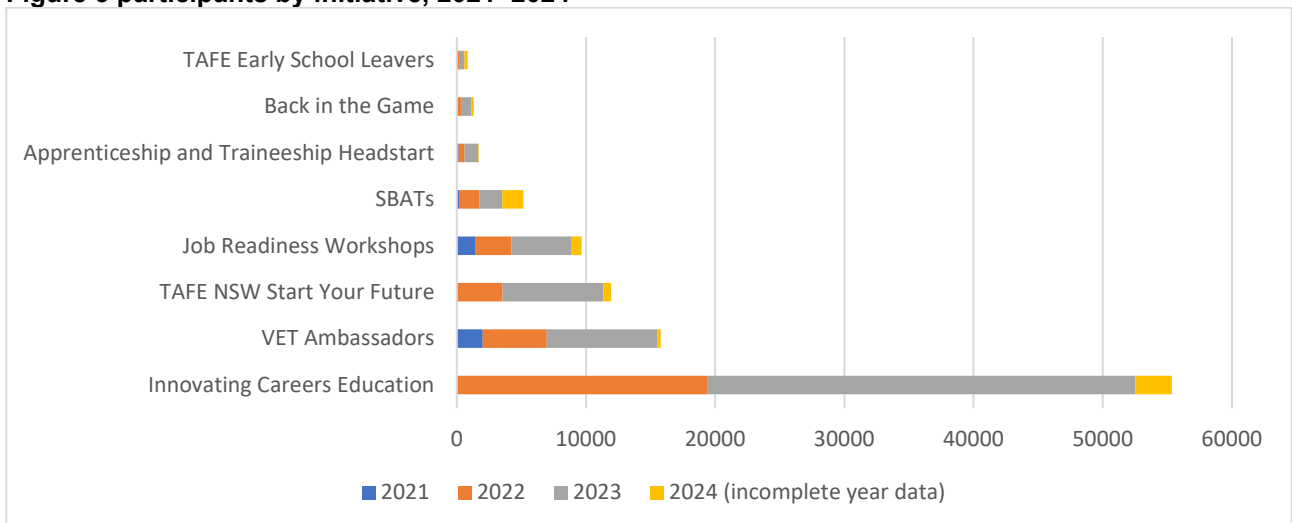
**Figure 2 EPP total student participants 2021–2023**



Source: NSW DoE EPP program data, May 2024. Notes: Data for 2021 is pilot data for 24 schools; 2024 data is partial and is not included.

Figure 3 shows the increasing numbers of students per initiative.

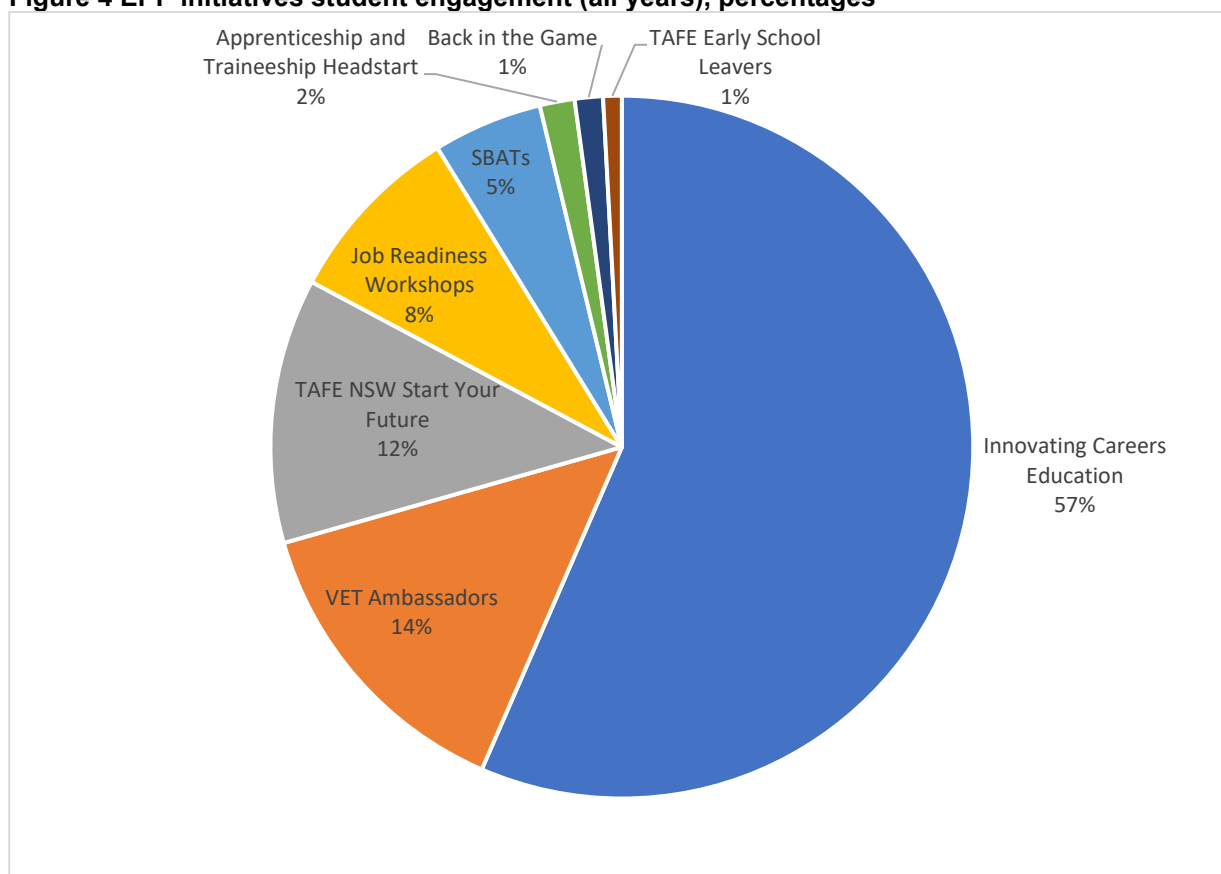
**Figure 3 participants by initiative, 2021–2024**



Source: NSW DoE EPP program data, May 2024. Notes: Data for 2021 is pilot data for 24 schools; 2024 data is partial and is not included.

In terms of which initiatives engage the most students, Figure 4 indicates the cumulative number of students engaged in the individual initiatives as percentages.

**Figure 4 EPP initiatives student engagement (all years), percentages**



Source: NSW DoE EPP program data, May 2024. Notes: Data for 2021 is pilot data for 24 schools; 2024 data is partial and is not included.

Table 4 shows the significant growth in student engagement across EPP initiatives in 2022–23 (2024 data was not included as it is partial). Numbers grew significantly across all the major initiatives including TAFE Start Your Future (122%) and SBAT enrolments (17%). The referral-based initiatives Back in the Game and TAFE early School Leavers saw 207% and 158% growth respectively, but numbers of students in these two initiatives are comparatively low.

**Table 4 EPP initiatives – growth 2022–23**

Initiative	Activity	2022	2023	Growth 2022–23 (%)
Innovating Careers Education	Student participated in student activities	19,435	33,083	70%
VET Ambassadors	Students participated	4,950	8,586	73%
TAFE NSW Start Your Future	Students participated	3529	7820	122%
Job Readiness Workshops	Student participated	2822	4665	65%
SBATs	SBAT enrolments	1518	1771	17%
Apprenticeship and Traineeship Headstart	Students enrolled in the Smart and Skilled part qualification training	440	1079	145%
Back in the Game	Students referred	272	834	207%
TAFE Early School Leavers	Students referred	165	426	158%

### 4.1.3 NSW Department of Education Post-School Destinations and Experiences survey

Table 5 shows outcomes for school leavers from EPP schools and matched control group schools, in 2019, 2020 and 2023, for the broad category outcomes: education in university or VET, work and training, and disengagement from work and training. The total for Bachelor's degree, VET, Training and Work for EPP schools was 83.2% in 2019 rising to 87% in 2023; for control group schools it was 85.4% in 2019 rising to 90.2% in 2023.

**Table 5 Post-School Destination Outcomes by EPP Schools and Control Schools; 2019, 2020, 2023**

		2019	2019 standard error	2020	2020 standard error	2023	2023 standard error
Bachelor's degree	EPP School	21.9%	0.005	20.0%	0.005	27.5%	0.005
	Control School	24.2%	0.008	23.1%	0.008	32.1%	0.008
VET	EPP School	12.2%	0.004	12.2%	0.004	10.6%	0.004
	Control School	12.0%	0.006	12.4%	0.006	11.2%	0.005
Training/Apprenticeship	EPP School	18.8%	0.005	18.1%	0.005	19.0%	0.005
	Control School	19.8%	0.008	19.9%	0.008	19.0%	0.007
Work (FT/PT)	EPP School	30.3%	0.006	29.7%	0.006	30.3%	0.006
	Control School	29.4%	0.009	27.9%	0.009	27.9%	0.008
Looking for Work (LFW)	EPP School	12.8%	0.004	15.4%	0.005	9.3%	0.004
	Control School	11.7%	0.006	12.0%	0.006	6.8%	0.004
Not in Labour Force, Education or Training (NILFET)	EPP School	4.0%	0.002	4.7%	0.003	3.3%	0.002
	Control School	2.8%	0.003	4.7%	0.004	3.0%	0.003

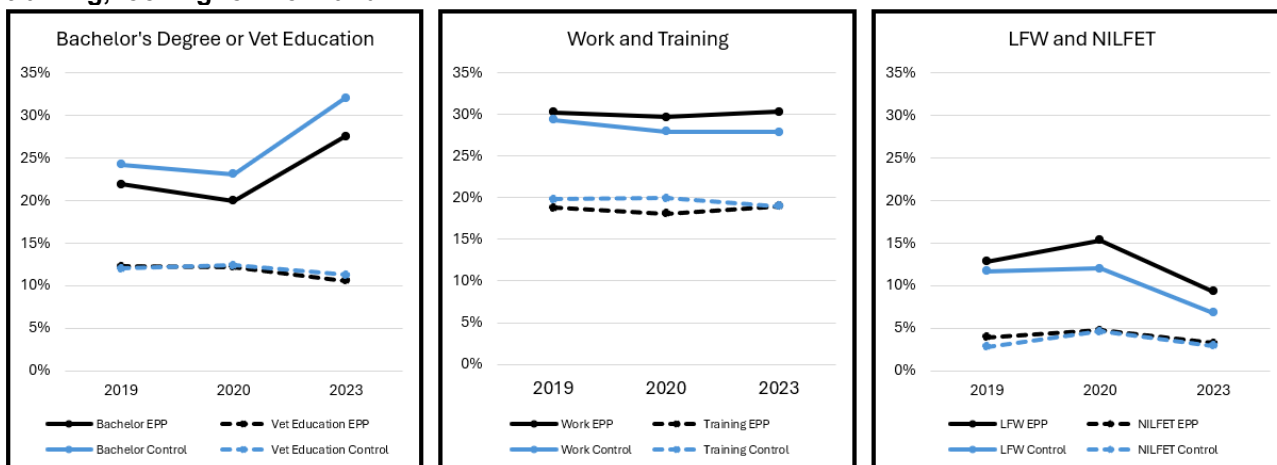
Source: PSDE surveys (selected years, selected variables).

Notes. Sample sizes were (2019) n=6,191 in EPP schools, n=2,712 in control schools; (2020) n=5,924 in EPP schools, n=2,664 in control schools; (2023) n=6,851 in EPP schools; n=3,416 in control schools.

Selected years were chosen to obtain data from before the advent of the EPP and after (see Appendix A for an explanation of methodology and analysis).

Figure 5 presents a visual representation of the student destination outcomes.

**Figure 5 Percentages of students in EPP and control group schools in further education, work and training, looking for work and NILFET**



% of students in EPP and control group schools in Bachelor's degree (top two lines) and in VET (bottom two lines)

% of students in EPP and control group schools in full- or part-time work (top two lines) and in training/apprenticeship (bottom two lines)

% of students in EPP and control group schools looking for work (top two lines) and NILFET (bottom two lines)

- Bachelor's degree:** Overall, there were increases in the Bachelor's degree education pathway for students in both EPP and control schools after the COVID lockdown period (in 2023).
- VET education:** VET take-up was lower at EPP schools (10.6%) than at control schools (11.2%) in 2023, although the difference was not statistically significant. There was a statistically significant decrease in VET take-up at EPP schools from 2020 (12.2%) to 2023 (10.8%), reflecting the overall lower uptake of VET by NSW school leavers.
- Training/apprenticeship:** The percentages and changes over time were steady and similar for EPP and non-EPP school leavers. The only statistical difference was the percentages of EPP (18.1%) and non-EPP school leavers (19.9%) in 2020.
- Work:** Take-up of employment by school leavers from EPP schools was constant before and after the COVID lockdown (30.3% in 2019, 30.3% in 2023). Notably, in 2023 a higher percentage of EPP school leavers than of control school leavers were in work – 30.3% and 27.9% respectively, a statistically significant 2.4% difference.
- Looking for work:** The outcomes from EPP school leavers were consistently higher and the gap compared to non-EPP school leavers increased each year and over time. For example, in 2023, the percentage was 9.3% for EPP school leavers versus 6.8% for control school leavers, which was statistically significant.
- NILFET:** The percentages of NILFET school leavers from EPP schools (3.3%) and control school leavers (3.0%) was similar in 2023. NILFET trends (up from 2019 to 2020 at the height of the pandemic, and then down in 2023) were similar for both EPP and control schools, but EPP school leavers exhibited a decrease from 2019 (4.0%) to 2023 (3.3%).



These destination percentages must be reviewed holistically, as the percentages in one category influence those in other categories. For example, the drop in work for control school leavers could be accounted for by the increase in take-up of Bachelor's degrees. It is not known what proportion of the students who went on to work did so because they did not get into university, or, conversely what proportion of those in Bachelor's degrees were studying because they could not find appropriate jobs. Notably, it appears the overall trends were heavily influenced by the impact of COVID-19 on study or work destination outcomes.

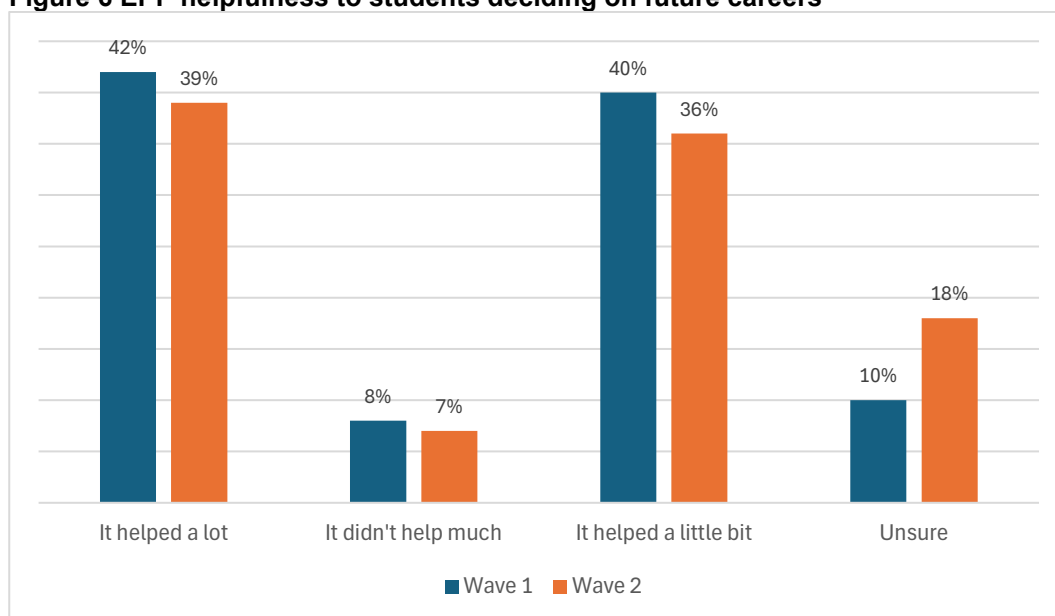
Overall, the large-scale post-school destination data over three years, combined with quasi-experimental methods of EPP and matched control group schools, indicates no significant trend changes due to the influences of a single program (i.e. EPP), especially in the presence of a far more powerful world-wide event (i.e. COVID-19).

The caveat with the PSDE data is that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a 'snapshot' in time rather than longitudinal data. Further post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program, on outcomes.

#### 4.1.4 Stakeholder surveys

Survey data indicates students perceived the EPP as assisting in their understanding of transition into education, employment and training. Students (n=289, n=246 respondents) were asked whether participating in the EPP initiative 'helped them decide what job or career they would like to do after school'. The results are overwhelmingly positive. As Figure 6 shows, nearly half in Wave 1 (42%) and 39% in Wave 2, said 'it helped a lot' and a further 40% in Wave 1 and 36% in Wave 2 said 'it helped a little bit'. Only 8% in Wave 1 and 7% in Wave 2 said it did not help much.

**Figure 6 EPP helpfulness to students deciding on future careers**



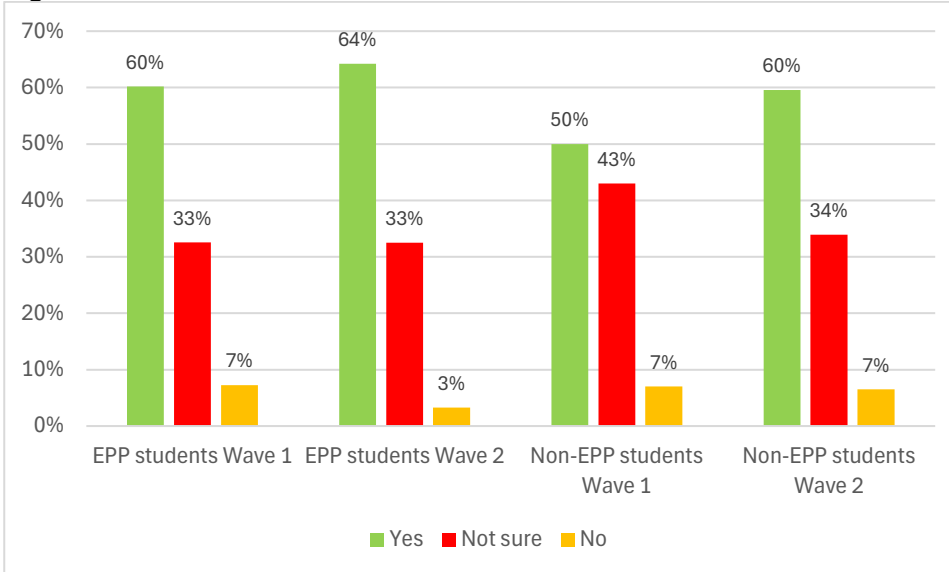
Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 (n=289) and W2 (n=246).

The Wave 1 and 2 surveys<sup>12</sup> of students indicate that the EPP is making a difference for students who participated in it. Figure 7 indicates that at Wave 1, 60% of EPP students agreed that 'I know

<sup>12</sup> Selected survey results are presented in the report. For full survey results, see Appendix E.

what career I want in the future', 10% higher than students not doing the EPP (50%). At Wave 2 this had increased to 64% (with a similar 60% of students not doing the EPP agreeing). Students doing the EPP were more likely to know what career they wanted while those not engaged in it were more likely to be unsure.

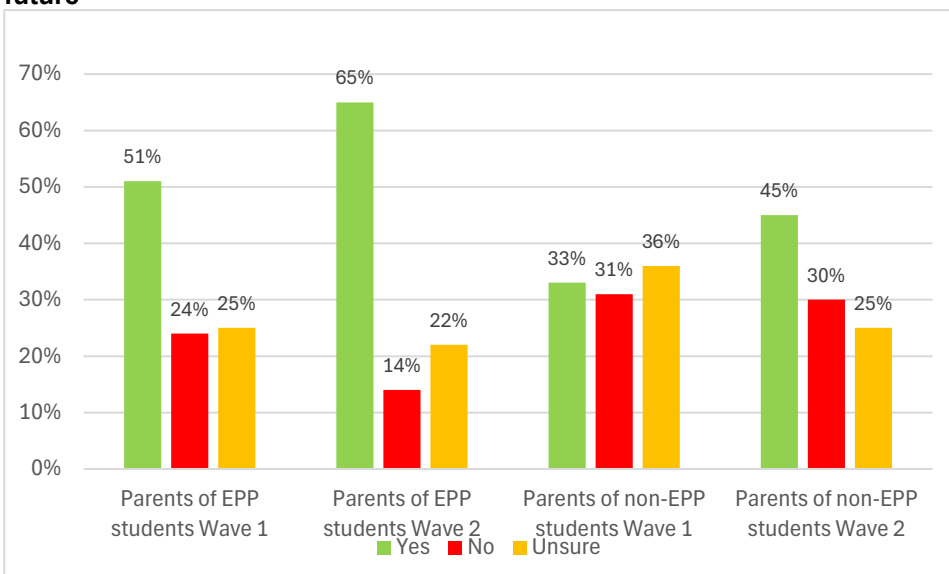
**Figure 7 EPP and non-EPP students – 'I know what career I want in the future'**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. EPP students W1 (n=289) and W2 (n=243); non-EPP students W1 (n=184) W2 (n=277).

As Figure 8 shows, the Wave 1 survey data indicated that parents/carers of students in the EPP were also more likely to agree their child knew what job or career they wanted in the future – in Wave 1, about half (51%) of parents/carers of EPP students agreed this was the case, versus a third (33%) of parents/carers of non-EPP students. In Wave 2, an even higher percentage of the parents/carers of EPP students agreed with the proposition (65%) compared with parents/carers of non-EPP students (45%), although percentages had risen for both groups of parents/carers.

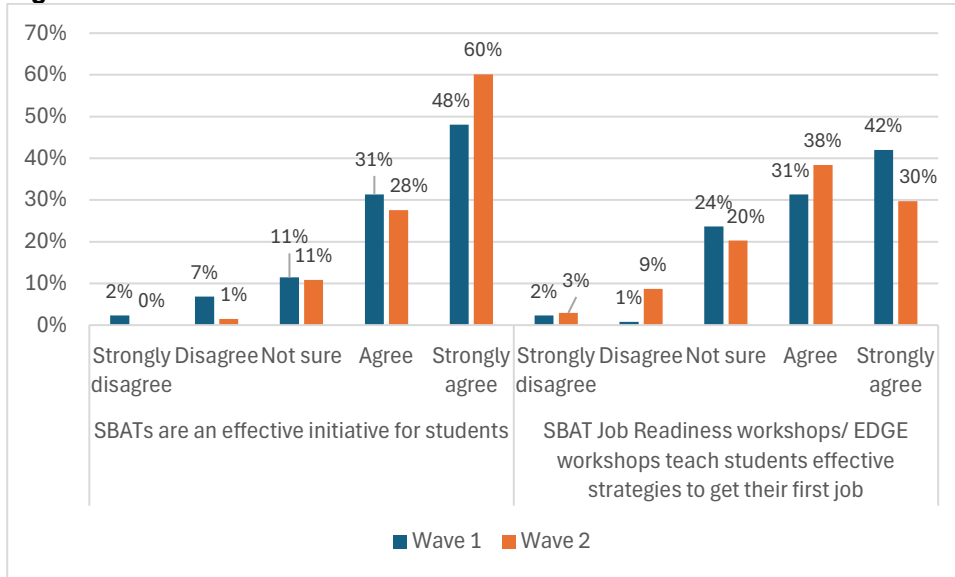
**Figure 8 EPP and non-EPP parents/carers – 'My child knows what job or career they want in the future'**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Parents/carers of EPP students W1 (n=108) and W2 (n=93); Parents/carers of non-EPP students W1 (n=64) and W2 (n=97).

EPP and school staff members were asked various questions on the usefulness of the EPP for students. Figure 9 illustrates that most school staff had positive attitudes to SBATs but were less likely to strongly agree on the Job Readiness workshops by Wave 2 (note that the provider had changed by Wave 2).

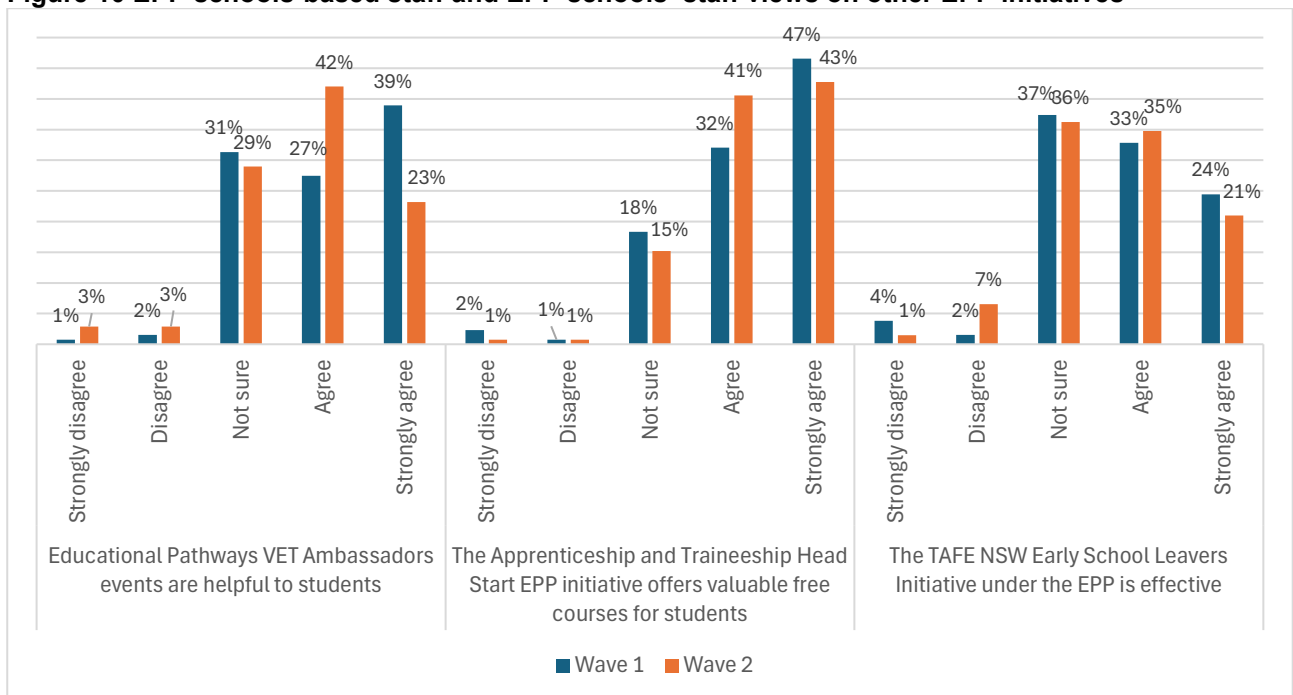
**Figure 9 EPP schools-based staff and EPP schools' staff views on SBATs**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 and W2, Schools-based EPP and schools staff W1 (n=131) and W2 (n=138).

Staff also expressed views on other EPP initiatives. Figure 10 indicates broad support for initiatives, with a general upwards trend of 'agree' but a trend of downward for 'strongly agree' between Waves 1 and 2.

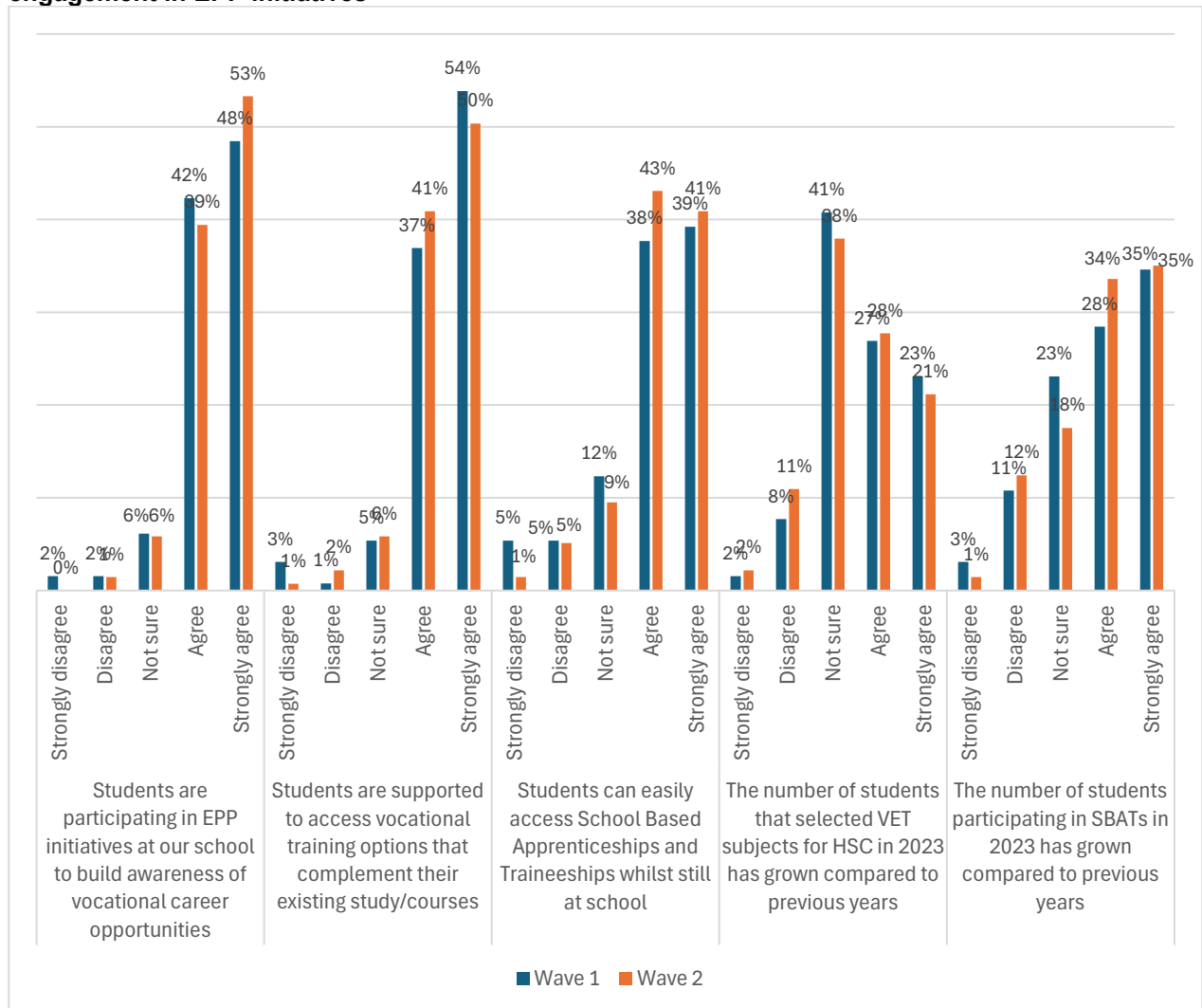
**Figure 10 EPP schools-based staff and EPP schools' staff views on other EPP initiatives**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Schools-based EPP and schools staff W1 (n=131) and W2 (n=138).

A further set of questions on staff views about student support and engagement in EPP initiatives showed strong beliefs in EPP effectiveness and that SBAT engagement is growing, indicated by student numbers participating. Figure 11 shows that there was less certainty about whether the number of students doing VET subjects has been increasing compared to previous years.

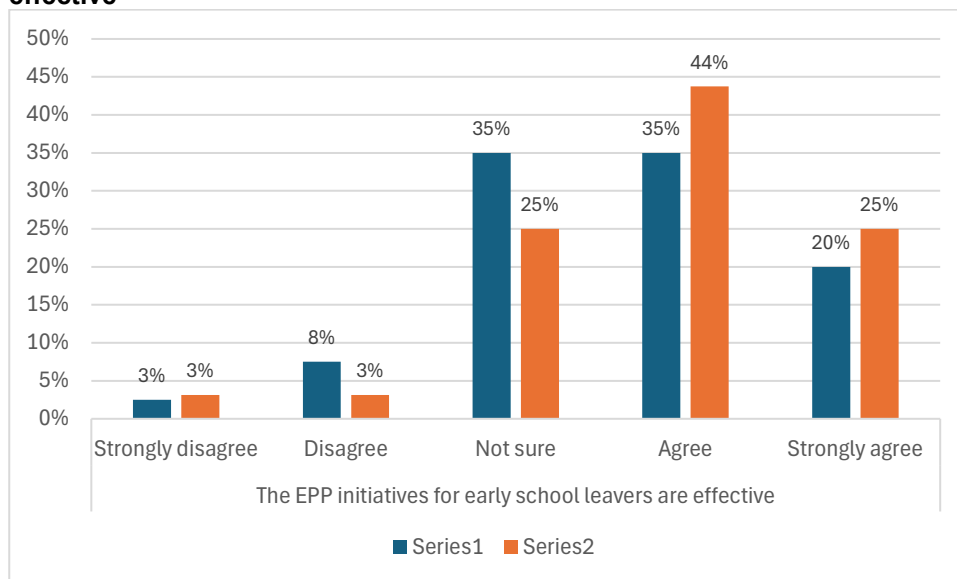
**Figure 11 EPP schools-based staff and EPP schools' staff views on student support and engagement in EPP initiatives**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Schools-based EPP and schools staff W1 (n=131) and (W2=138).

Figure 12 shows that employers tended to agree that the EPP initiatives for early school leavers were effective, with this figure increasing between W1 and W2. However, it is important to note here that the number of respondents for this stakeholder group was relatively small (40 in Wave 1 and 32 in Wave 2).

**Figure 12 Employers, trainers and industry partners – ‘EPP initiatives for early school leavers are effective’**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Employers/trainers/industry partners W1 (n=40) and W2 (n=32).

#### 4.1.5 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews

The qualitative component of the evaluation focused on providing insights on the implementation and impact of the EPP from the perspective of its main stakeholders.

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the DoE Leadership Governance Group, focusing on discussions about how the EPP is supporting students to meet their post-school goals.

In Wave 2, staff members and students from six EPP schools were asked what had changed over the past year. Differences between these EPP schools and a sample of five matched non-EPP schools were also explored. Parents and employers/trainers/industry partners were not interviewed as part of Wave 2.

Overall, students, staff, parents and employers/trainers all thought the program supported students and brought extra resources to do so.

#### Insights from EPP school sites

Most school staff members from the six EPP schools who took part in Wave 2 mentioned that the program was supporting students by offering them a wide and growing range of opportunities.

I feel like there’s a lot more opportunities for them to connect with industry and a lot more work placement opportunities with a few other programs we run at school. (Staff member, EPP school)

There’s lots of TAFE opportunities, lots of our Year 10s are taking up a variety of four or five TAFE, different TAFE courses per term on average. (Staff member, EPP school)

An EPP Head Teacher Career (HTC) stated that over the last two years the program had successfully supported both schools aiming to increase their VET offering and pathways into employment for their students, and those prioritising academic pathways.

I believe that it is pathways for students, so at an academic school I'm bringing industry in engineering, I won't bring in the TAFE ... mobile training units, because it's not appropriate for the school, they are a university academic pathway school, but we are bringing industry in, high-end ... they want graduate university students but they also have cadetships, so they want to come into the school... So the program can actually design different bespoke things for the school, depending on what the school needs. (EPP HTC)

School staff members mentioned that a key factor for the successful expansion of career pathways is providing ongoing support for students to keep up and thrive in their chosen pathways.

Speaker 1: It's a lot of counselling, issues that occur from home, work ... you're trying to get the students to commit to show resilience to finish the course as well ...

Students enrolled in TAFE-delivered VET (TVET) courses or SBATs typically miss one or two school days per week. These absences require them to catch up on missed schoolwork while also managing TAFE assignments and/or the challenges of their external courses, apprenticeships and traineeships. While most schools had electronic learning management systems that enabled teachers to upload classroom materials and information, schools with growing numbers of TVET and SBAT students reported a scarcity of places where students could go to catch up on subjects, as well as of staff to support them in those study sessions:

Speaker 1: It requires a very good electronic learning management system to be in place, like [name of platform], so students can ... work offline, but it also requires a place for the students to go ... and ideally it would be great if there was a tutor there for those students.

Speaker 2: Some [SBAT students] of them have literacy issues ... it would be great to have a support person in there with them when they do have study sessions, supporting them but also supporting other students who are doing other different courses, even to catch up with their coursework ...

In most cases, students were supported by the schools' career advisors and wellbeing teams. However, some schools also employed a school learning support officer (SLSO) and/or a transition support teacher to help students successfully engage with their pathways:

Speaker 1: Another school does it, they've got the Career and Transition team but also an SLSO ... so they sit with the TVET students, the SBAT students ... but they're school funded. (Staff members, EPP school)

I put an application to the Department last year to apply for ... the school to be able to access the transition teacher training ... you had to write a whole sort of submission as to why you'd want that at your school and we were successful at that. So, she's done the week's transition teacher training to then supplement her skills and knowledge here. But it's a school funded thing. The Department funds the training but then it's school funded. (School leader, EPP school)

The importance of the support schools provide to students is further discussed in Section 4.3.2.

The students who participated in the focus groups were enrolled in a variety of EPP initiatives, including TAFE Start Your Future (previously YES+), Job Readiness workshops, Apprenticeship and Traineeship Head Start, ad hoc initiatives developed under the innovative careers education initiative, and SBATs in childcare, hospitality, allied health, automotive, mechanical engineering, construction, aged care, and early childhood education and care.

Students often spoke of the importance of the experiential aspects of the program (learning by doing). This was a strong message from many students in the focus groups, who repeatedly contrasted their hands-on learning experiences with verbal/classroom-based learning.

I don't like math but I really liked how hands-on and practical it was ... it's like the complete opposite of a school environment where you just sit down and take notes. This one you learn as you do your work. (Student, EPP school)

I probably liked the auto one most ... because a) it taught me a lot but also not where you're only in the classroom learning about stuff but then you could physically apply that into the workshop so it was more hands-on as well as learning about it. So you're applying your knowledge that you learnt from the classroom rather than just sitting there. (Student, EPP school)

Most students felt supported by the school in completing their EPP courses. They mentioned receiving different forms of support, including essential information to decide their career pathways, moral and practical support, such as helping with course paperwork and complying with work environment regulations (e.g. vaccinations).

Well last year after I did my pre-apprenticeship course, I was still deciding what type of SBAT I wanted to do and [school staff] helped me out a lot ... they provided me a lot of opportunities to do work experience at. So, I think that's one major advantage or helpful way that they provide to students. So just I guess exposure to many industries and workplace environments was really good for me. (Student, EPP school)

When asked about potential improvements to the EPP, some students suggested SBATs were not yet well known among their peers and that schools should advertise them more actively.

Speaker 1: Maybe get more opportunities for SBATs to all the students.

Speaker 2: Yes. Make the numbers bigger so more kids can be in the same program.

Speaker 1: Yes, because some people don't really know what SBATs are, like the opportunities they have...

Speaker 2: Maybe have a class or even a meeting with every senior kid and tell them how it runs ... (Students, EPP school)

Other students suggested the program should involve students earlier, from Year 7. Some staff members agreed with this view; however, others suggested starting the program in earlier years with the same staffing resources would make the process unmanageable.

For students, the Start Your Future 'tasters' continued to be a clear favourite, but there were often limited places. These tightly focused courses broadened student's horizons considerably. However, there were challenges in the delivery of some programs that meant their reach was limited. See Section 4.4.2 for a discussion on the quality of the EPP initiatives.

## **Insights from non-EPP school sites**

Similarly to school staff in EPP schools, those from the five comparison non-EPP schools also aimed to provide advice and support to students regarding career pathways, VET subjects and SBATs. Non-EPP school leaders, career advisors, and technological and applied studies (TAS) teachers reported accessing external support and knowledge from Senior Pathway Officers, ,

Regional Industry Education Partnerships (RIEP) officers, and Pathways Engagement Officers. One school staff member also mentioned the value of the information and connections from the annual conference of the Career Advisers Association of NSW and ACT. An overview of the roles supporting non-EPP schools with pathways and VET options can be found in Appendix F.

A careers advisor commented that RIEP 'is great... We quite often get offered opportunities that would normally be expensive for free because they've got some funds they can use and spread around the schools'. She explained that her school had a program with RIEP called Another Future but that maintaining it was a bigger piece of work than they had thought. Overall, schools considered RIEP as an important external element of the overall careers support effort.

However, not all non-EPP schools were aware of these support roles and resources and some relied primarily on the personal networks of their career advisors to identify VET courses and pathway options for their students.

In my research and doing the things that I'm doing, connecting with industries from my perspective in my role I've discovered that the Department does have some things there and some programs in place. So, people – personnel dedicated to SBATs and so on...  
(Staff member, Non-EPP school)

Personally, I've just done a lot of networking ... I put some feelers out and had one connection, and the head teacher there said she would take me on as a sort of a mentor, and she showed me how to connect with some various different pathways and options. So, for me, personally, that's how I got the knowledge, and that's how I passed on to my students. (Staff member, Non-EPP school)

The analysis of the focus group discussions identified two main differences in the support available to non-EPP schools compared to EPP schools: the greater amount of time that career advisors needed to invest to find pathways for their students, and the lack of access to valued courses and resources available to EPP schools, in particular vocational taster courses. These two factors combined often represented a significant obstacle to non-EPP schools' ability to support their students' post-school goals.

We don't have a lot of school-based apprenticeships and a lot of it is to do with the fact that we don't physically have the time to do all the groundwork to get it over the line. So realistically, at the end of the day, if a kid comes up to us and says, 'I want to do a school-based apprenticeship and I've got this employer potentially', then it's probably going to go ahead. But if we've got kids who are going, 'I want to do a school-based apprenticeship, but I have nobody', we don't have the time to get feet on the ground to find them. (School leader, Non-EPP school)

Speaker 1: ... The VET courses and things like that, is to avoid that drop-out rate ... A lot of kids ... prior to VET, were going into a trade, doing six months in the trade and then going, "No. This isn't for me." ...

Speaker 2: That's where EPP has more opportunities available to give students, you know, insight as to whether that would be for them or not ... So not only more spots for the Yes program, but also other opportunities that other non-EPP schools don't get access to. (Staff members, Non-EPP school)

The experiences of limited time reported by the career advisors in non-EPP schools resonated with those in EPP schools prior to entering the program.



With the EPP [student are] given more opportunities again, so more access to courses, more opportunities that a normal careers advisor could not obtain ... When the EPP came through, yeah, it was like 'Okay, there's this course, this opportunity in electrotechnology, there's this course running in automotive, there's hairdressing', it's like 'Wow, okay, I don't need to organise that myself now', that pressure's gone ... with EPP now those courses are already set up ready to go, they've got TAFE opportunities, I only need to find the students now. (Staff member, EPP school)

Similarly to EPP students, non-EPP students generally reported satisfaction with the career support they received from their schools. However, experiences varied between schools. Some students mentioned that while they would receive support if they asked for it, the school did not always proactively initiate conversations about career pathways. These reports seem consistent with the experiences of their career advisors, who mentioned a lack of time and resources to offer more proactive support (see above).

Speaker 1: Maybe more discussions about your future and your future plans ...

Facilitator: So you have to make an appointment?

Speaker 1: Yeah, if we actively seek out wanting to do it ... I think it'd be better if they approached us. (Student, Non-EPP school)

## Insights from the Leadership Governance Group (LGG)

DoE Governance Group members felt the EPP is supporting students well but mentioned the need for longitudinal data to better understand longer-term post-school trends.

[S]ome kids complete one of the programs then remain at school and then successfully complete HSC, but then again, where are they in March the following year after the HSC? Where are they three and five years down the track? Because that will be the test of whether what's been offered is actually successful long term. (LGG member, DoE).

A remote area school leader commented on the role the EPP played in taking students out of their area into the wider world:

Our kids are very— narrow's not the word but they lack a bit of vision as to what's out there. For the Aboriginal kids they're on Country here. For the non-Aboriginal kids, they're very safe and content here and that wider world beyond is a challenge. So, in some ways isolation for us is its greatest challenge but it's also a great opportunity in that we can use the EPP program to get kids out of town ... (LGG member).

## 4.2 Are stakeholders aware of the EPP's purpose?

- The stakeholders were aware of the EPP's purpose and could articulate this in focus groups.
- The stakeholder surveys indicated that students, parents and carers, and schools staff, reported they had good to very good knowledge of VET pathways. Employers were aware of EPP, although were less likely to have in-depth knowledge of it.

The EPP's purpose is to support students to remain, complete or transition into education, employment and training. It does this by broadly raising awareness of career options and the quality of the careers advice, supporting 'at-risk' students to attain vocational-oriented experiences and

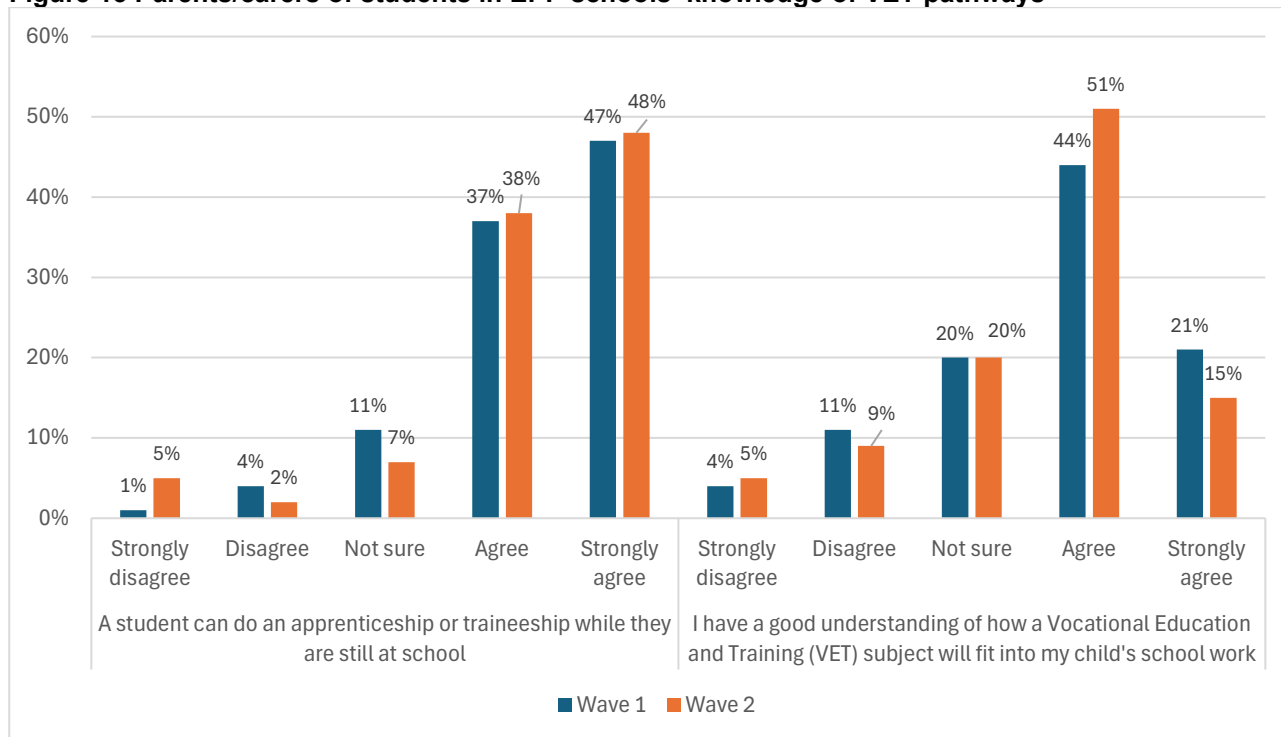
qualifications (thus boosting the numbers of young people in SBATs), and improving skill levels and matching with priority industries.

EPP and school staff are tasked with implementing the program, so their understanding of the program’s aims is paramount. The awareness and understanding of trainers/employers/industry partners of the EPP’s purpose is also crucial.

### 4.2.1 Stakeholder surveys

While there was no direct survey question for parents/carers relating to understanding of the EPP’s purpose, two questions illustrated in Figure 13 indicate parents understood that their child could do an apprenticeship or traineeship while at school and how this would fit in with their schoolwork. More than 80% of parents/carers of EPP-participating children in EPP schools agreed that their child could do an apprenticeship or traineeship while still at school, also understood how VET training combined with school work (however, about a third were not sure about this aspect).

**Figure 13 Parents/carers of students in EPP schools’ knowledge of VET pathways**



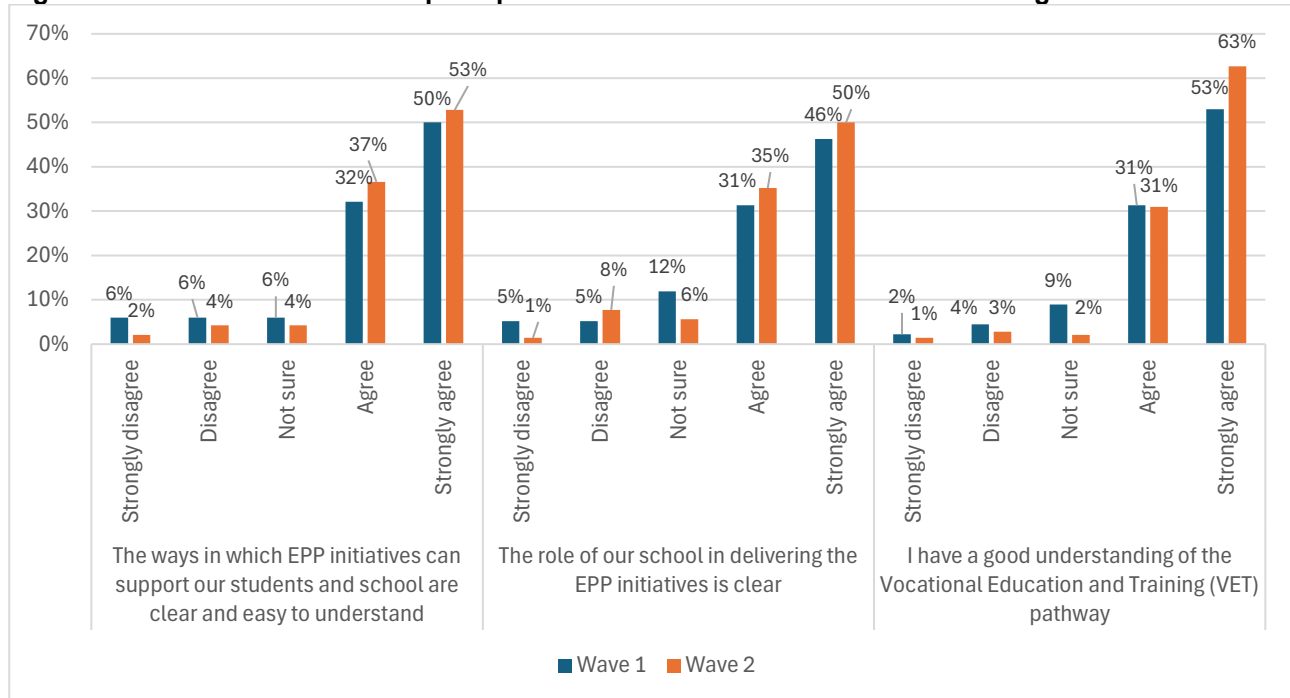
Source: Stakeholder surveys. All questions W1 (n=100) and W2 (n=85).

Figure 14 shows that both EPP and school staff demonstrated high levels of agreement that they knew how the EPP could support students, understood the schools’ role and were familiar with VET pathways in both Wave 1 and Wave 2.

Part of the EPP’s purpose is to ensure young people are job-ready so they can contribute to the NSW economy via employment while at and after leaving school. To engage with the EPP, employers/trainers/industry partners need to be aware of it. Most survey respondents in this stakeholder group were somewhat aware of whether EPP initiatives were offered in the local schools but, unsurprisingly, as external parties they were not sure of all the details.

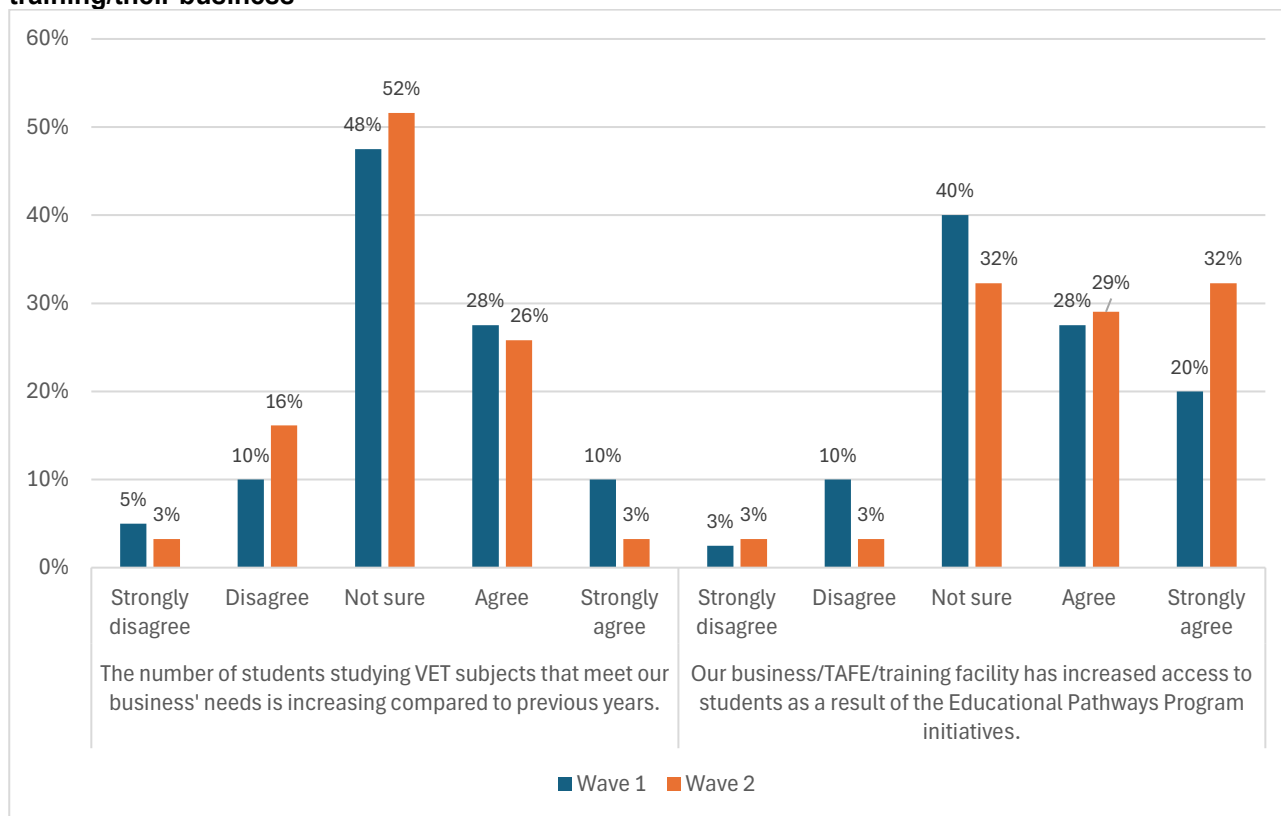
Figure 15 indicates some lack of certainty ('not sure' scores are quite high) from the employers/trainers/industry stakeholders on increasing VET subject students and access to students trainees/apprenticeships due to the EPP.

**Figure 14 Schools and EPP staff perceptions of the role of the school in delivering the EPP**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Schools and EPP staff W1 (n=134) and W2 (n=132).

**Figure 15 Employers'/trainers'/industry partners' awareness of the EPP and engagement with training/their business**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. Employers/trainers/industry partners W1 (n=40) and W2 (n=32).

#### 4.2.2 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the Department’s Leadership Governance Group, focusing on discussions about whether stakeholders were aware of the EPP’s purpose.

The initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found students, staff, parents and employers/trainers/industry partners were aware of the EPP’s purpose, and that it provided greater choice. In general, students understood they could combine school with traineeships and apprenticeships and could complete their Higher School Certificate (HSC) – or not – and that they had future options of higher education, should they choose this later. Parents were being educated about different pathways by schools and many articulated a good understanding of the program. They appreciated what the program offered, especially the range of ‘taster’ courses (see Section 4.1.5 for the importance of TAFE ‘taster’ courses).

In Wave 2 these insights remained largely consistent, although only students were interviewed, not parents or employers/trainers/industry partners.

#### Insights from EPP school sites

By Wave 2, the program appeared to have picked up some momentum; stakeholders were well aware of the EPP’s purpose, and there was greater ‘brand recognition’ among employers.

The program's been going for quite a while in this area so that's a bonus for me. But particularly at [school name] the numbers are continually climbing here. (Staff member, EPP school)

By 2024, several year groups of students had been involved in the EPP and peer support was reported, with older students advising younger student. One school (Grafton High School) had a dedicated space for SBAT students.

The program had increasing recognition from employers, who had been hosting trainees and apprentices and were making active inquiries to the schools they knew were running the program.

Speaker 1: Yeah, I think they're more familiar with what we can offer and they pull you up in the street, they call ...

Speaker 2: They come to us, so industries will come to us now and say, 'We can do this, this and this for your school, would you like to be a part of that?'. (Staff members, EPP school)

However, these experiences were not consistent across regions and among all groups of students. Section 4.3.2 discusses some of the barriers experienced by some groups of students in accessing traineeships and apprenticeships in some sectors and geographic locations.

### **Insights from non-EPP school sites**

Non-EPP schools were aware of the purpose and resourcing of the EPP and wanted to be a part of it, and/or regretted not being among the selected schools. Some schools staff had worked in both EPP and non-EPP schools and were aware of the extra supports available thanks to the program.

At the moment, depending on what we as a school decide is the best at the time opportunities available for students ... we pretty much have to work out our school funds and how much of that we want to use. But that's all we've got to support the students with. EPP has a lot more funding for that. (School leader, Non-EPP school)

Why do we want to be involved? I see a range of opportunities for our kids, that some are able to access it, and some aren't ... A lot of our kids don't know what they want to do. So, what I'd like to do is offer them a range of experiences so that they can make a more informed choice about the pathway that would be suited to them ... I know that [EPP schools] have greater access to courses. I don't know if cost is involved in that too, but a lot of our families don't have the financial backing ... So, for me, it's about access for the students, opportunities, and to try and break some of that cycle where families ... don't go to work. They're on welfare payments. (School leader, Non-EPP school)

### **Insights from the Leadership Governance Group**

The LGG reflected on the program's purpose and how awareness of the program has developed and established itself:

I think community awareness and parental awareness has increased dramatically as it's bedded down and more kids have got SBATs. Certainly, that's been a big impact. Basically, our community understands what an SBAT is whereas 18 months/two years ago they may not have understood what it was, what the value of it was and what it meant for their child. (LGG member).

Businesses are starting to realise how they can access young people and establish that pipeline for their organisation for the future. (LGG member).

### 4.3 Did the targeted students/schools engage with the EPP?

- The targeted schools were engaged with the EPP by Wave 2, and expanded the initiatives they were offering. However, at Wave 1 a few had not implemented it and others described resistance to its implementation.
- 58,264 students engaged in EPP initiatives in 2023, increasing from 33,131 in 2022.
- The program engaged with students including those who are disengaged and disadvantaged. However no specific socioeconomic data is available on EPP student participants, but females and Aboriginal students were well-represented across initiatives.
- 148 schools delivered EPP initiatives as of 2023, with expansion to a further 20 schools planned for 2024.

#### 4.3.1 Inclusivity and EPP – Gender, culture, ability

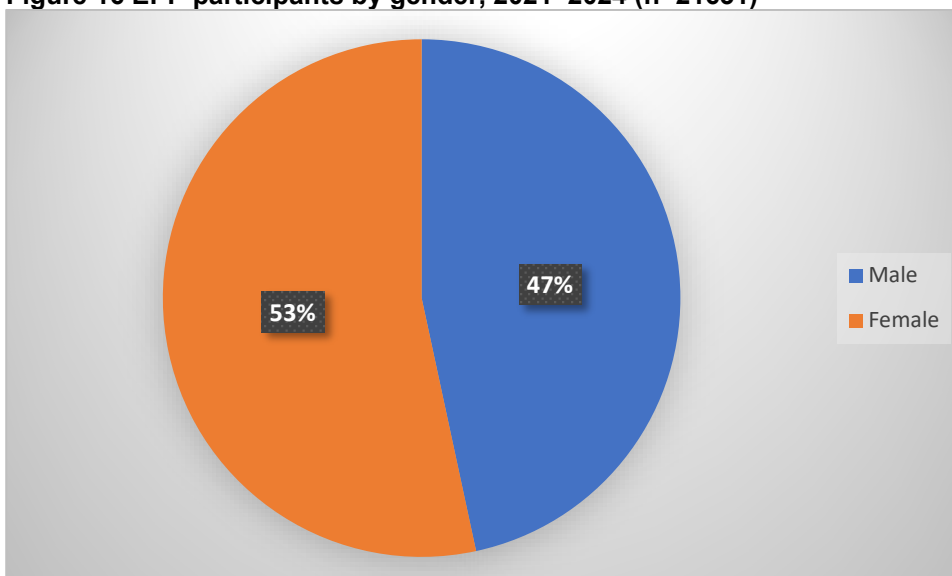
The program data provides limited demographic information on students, confined to gender and Aboriginality.

#### EPP and gender

The gender data by program provided by DoE was incomplete, with gender data not available for all initiatives or years (for example it was missing for major programs including Innovating Careers Education, VET Ambassadors and Job Readiness Workshops). However, Figure 16 indicates gender balance (53% female, 47% male) for data collected from 2021 to 2024. No non-binary gender data was made available.

With these caveats, the data shows that overall, there are slightly more females than males in the EPP.

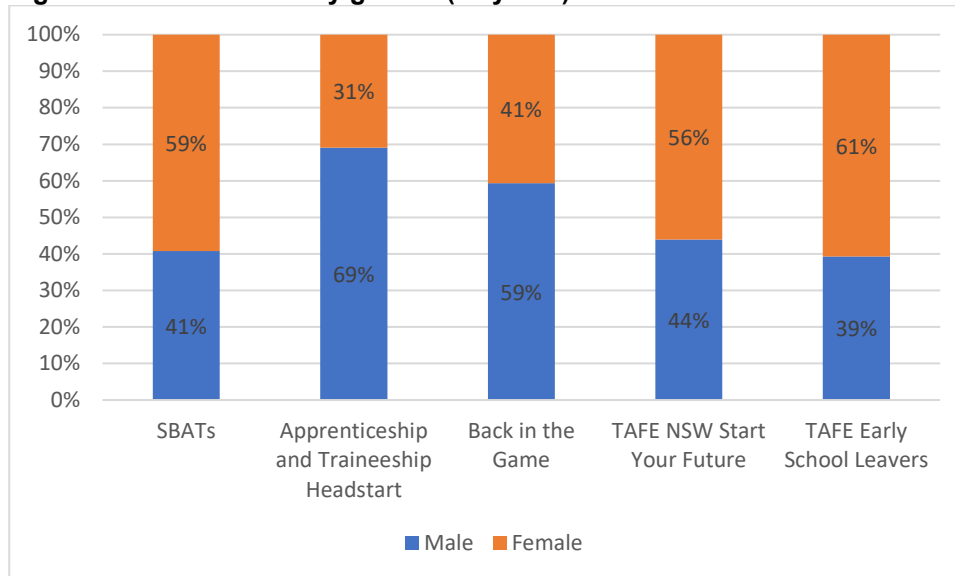
**Figure 16 EPP participants by gender, 2021–2024 (n=21631)**



Source: EPP program data. 2021–2024. n=18,852. Note – 2024 data is to date. Note: Gender data was available for 11,278 of 62,317 program element participants. No data was provided for non-binary or other gender categories.

Figure 17 depicts EPP initiative by gender where data is available (all years). There were higher proportions of males than females doing Apprenticeship and Traineeship Headstart and Back in the Game, whereas SBATs, TAFE Start Your Future and TAFE Early School Leavers had higher proportions of females.

**Figure 17 EPP initiative by gender (all years)**

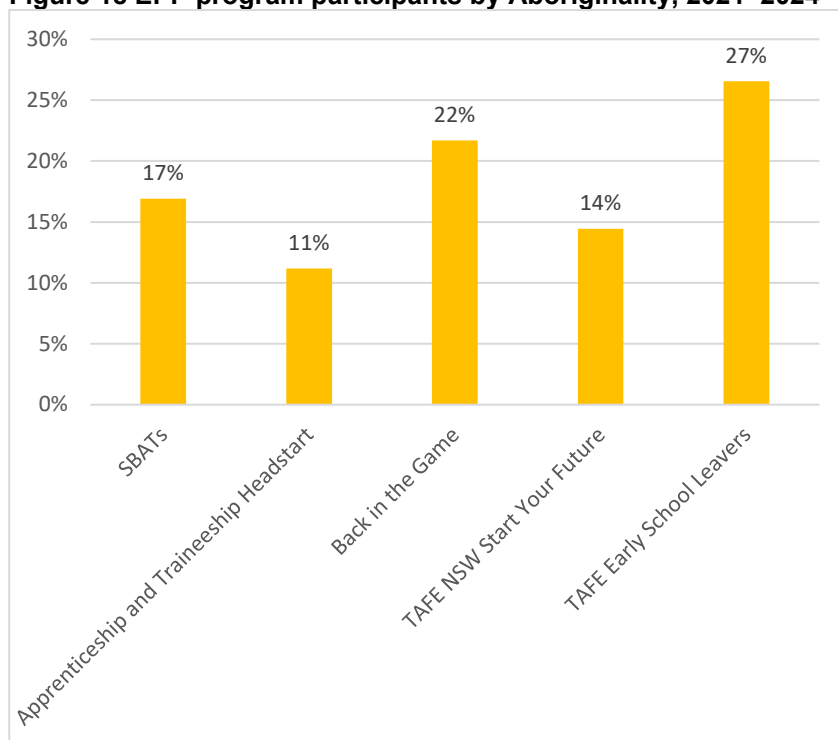


Source: EPP program data. 2021–2024. n=18,852. Note – 2024 data is to date.

### **EPP and Aboriginal students**

Although there was significant missing data for some program elements (see note to Figure 16) and some data missing for some years/program elements, where data was available on EPP participants who identified as Aboriginal (n=3292, all years), 11–27% of the program initiative participants identified as such (Figure 18). The largest proportion of Aboriginal young people (27%) were in the TAFE Early School Leavers initiative.

**Figure 18 EPP program participants by Aboriginality, 2021–2024**



Source: EPP program data. 2021–2024, n=3292 (all years). Note – 2024 data is to date.

### 4.3.2 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the DoE Leadership Governance Group, focusing on discussions about whether the targeted students/school engaged with the EPP.

The initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found nearly all EPP schools were fully engaged with the program and were building engagement and numbers. However, one of the twenty EPP deep dive sites visited at Wave 1 had not yet engaged students with EPP activities at the time the research team visited the school, suggesting that the pace of implementation of the program varied across schools.

The EPP initiatives included a diverse array of students, including students with disability and additional learning and support needs. The program appeared to be effectively targeting the intended students, including female, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD students. For disengaged students who were not enjoying school, the EPP provided greater traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities, allowing them to start earning money, help family and follow family members into trades. Students also discussed experiencing improved self-efficacy and maturity. The EPP is particularly important for remote, rural and regional communities as it allows geographically isolated students to engage in experiences that they would not otherwise have easy access to.

There were some challenges for some groups, in particular students who were uncomfortable travelling outside their community and for students from CALD communities where there was a cultural expectation females would be accompanied.



## Insights from EPP school sites

In Wave 2, the school staff members reported that, in their experiences, targeted students not only continued to engage, but did so in growing numbers compared to Wave 1 (see Section 4.1.2 and Section 4.3.1).

Students and staff members discussed how fear of being judged by their peers or the challenge of having to step outside their comfort zones could hinder participation in the program. They described several instances in which they faced these challenges, including a female student being concerned about being the only girl in a male-dominated profession, and reluctance to attend events outside their usual geographic area.

I thought about like doing a trade because I'm like a hands-on person, I like being hands-on ... So I spoke to [career advisor] and he like advised me to do construction, I wasn't too keen on it because like I didn't want to be like the only girl in my class because it was like a bit awkward, I didn't want to be like the only girl. (Student, EPP school)

Several staff members mentioned that some students were unwilling or unsure how to navigate outside familiar areas, including social groups or cultures. Some barriers were psychological, such as not crossing over some invisible or visible territorial (or cultural) line (e.g. out of their suburb; crossing over a key highway or bridge).

Some staff mentioned student lack of motivation – difficulty in getting up early and travelling to TAFE or a traineeship workplace, for instance. Part of expanding students' horizons includes helping them overcome self-imposed barriers or motivational issues that limit mobility and opportunities. Some students were reportedly 'anxious' and did not like getting public transport at all or leaving the safety of home or school.

Some schools addressed these issues by taking groups of students into new situations and having them broaden their horizons this way. Schools for Specific Purposes (SSP) accompanied students the first time they went to a new or unfamiliar place and continued to provide support as needed (see below).

Below we summarise the main themes from the discussions about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with special needs, and students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds engaged with the EPP.

**Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students participated in many of the focus groups and were engaged in the range of EPP initiatives. School staff thought the EPP was 'inclusive across the board' (Staff member, EPP school) and cited strong participation from Aboriginal students and females looking into male-dominated trades. One school leader mentioned the positive impact that the EPP had on the involvement of Aboriginal students in SBATs at their school:

We have gone from two to nine SBATs in 12 months so there's a clear impact. Now with that we're getting greater engagement with those kids. Probably half of those, if I remember correctly, are Aboriginal so that is helping to retain those students in the school setting which obviously is part of the Premier's priority, closing the gap and meets all those requirements. (School leader, EPP school)

EPP is currently implemented in seven out of 18 Connected Communities<sup>13</sup> schools where Year 9–12 students can access EPP initiatives. In 2024, the program will expand to a further 11 Connected Communities schools in Far West, Far North West, Far South and Mid North Coast regions of NSW.

**Special support program students.** In both waves, the research team found contrasting findings about the inclusion of students with special needs in the program. In some schools, these students were included in EPP activities; in others, special support program teachers complained their students were not always included. In Wave 2, a career advisor and a school leader from two different EPP schools commented:

Yeah, it [EPP] does cater to different kids from different backgrounds. Our support students have probably been going through stages where they like in opportunities being offered to them. And then other times— like term one ... They got offered all the access courses and now term two the support kids have two courses that were available to them. (Staff member, EPP school)

I think also you've got to make sure that we include our inclusive education with our kids with disabilities and they do that through the access program. I think that's been a bonus for our students with special needs to get access to that, that's been a real bonus. So, they feel like they're included and they've got access to career opportunities as well. (Staff member, EPP school)

An EPP HTC mentioned that they were working on expanding their collaboration with the school's support units in their area to make sure all students had access to the program.

We're actually working on that in [location] this year, we're working deeply with our support units to make sure that we are giving them all the opportunities that they're entitled to and that all the support units know about the EPP. At the end of the day the Head Teacher of support will make a decision about a child's capacity to be able to go to a program but they should always be offered it. (EPP HTC)

School and EPP staff members mentioned three factors that could help to improve access to courses and training for special needs students: strengthening the confidence of training providers to include students with disability; providing outreach support, for example through SLSOs attending training with them; and trialling different solutions, as exemplified in these three quotes.

Yeah, I also think it comes down to as [career advisor] was saying the RTOs [Registered Training Organisations], like the training providers. And their confidence with delivering to different cohort groups and strengths. Even when we have our pre-apprenticeship courses coming up when we ask them are you happy to have support kids in or students with language barriers, sometimes they are a bit hesitant. So, I guess it's building the strengths of our training providers to have that confidence to meet our needs. (EPP HTC)

EPP runs access courses for TAFE, for the support unit, a separate course ... so we enrol those kids ... We do integrate. Last year ... EPP ran Head Start program and we had our mainstream and our support kids in together in at TAFE doing automotive and construction programs. I went over and worked with them for a bit ... so there was integration there which is really good. (Staff member, EPP school)

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<sup>13</sup> The Connected Communities Schools strategy is an approach to address the educational and social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and young people. The strategy positions schools as community hubs. It broadens the influence of the community and school leadership to play a role in the delivery of key services and in supporting children and young people from birth through school into further training, study and employment.

I tend to have a support person in there with them. But I'm trialling – this is our first course coming up this year we're going to have ten students from the support unit and ten students from the mainstream. Just to see also how our RTO provider goes with it and there will be assistance and a SLSO in there with them as well. (Staff member, EPP school)

The evaluation included students and staff members from two SSPs. These schools provide specialist and intensive support in a dedicated setting for students with moderate to high learning and support needs. SSPs enrol students from different schools and are characterised by smaller class sizes than mainstream schools; it was mentioned that the SSP teacher-to-student ratio is 1:7 compared to 1:30 in mainstream high schools. In our sample, one SSP was in the EPP and one was not. The EPP school reported that the number of students enrolling in VET courses had increased since they joined the EPP.

I would say probably in the five years prior to remote learning and things we maybe had three kids involved sort of sporadically. Last year as part of the EPP we had three students across the year. This year we've already had three in term one and I'm pretty sure we've got four next term. (School leader, EPP school)

However, despite also having students willing to do SBATs, the school had not been successful in finding employers willing to take them in over six months. This had implications for the students' capacity to select their subjects and for their morale. It is unclear whether these difficulties were related to specific local job market dynamics or were examples of employer prejudice against students coming from SSP schools. Factors hindering students' uptake of EPP opportunities are discussed in Section 4.7.2.

Because of the smaller number of students, SSPs operate under a primary school model, which means that they do not have access to career advisors. In the EPP school, it was the HTC who acted as a career advisor. Before joining the EPP, similarly to the other SSP, the role of career advisor was taken by one of the school's executive team members on top of their other responsibilities. The EPP school staff members stressed the positive impact that joining the EPP had on their capacity to offer VET courses and career pathways to their students.

In previous years, of course, our students have these [work experience] opportunities but it relied on somebody sitting down, googling it, ringing someone else like how do we, then you find one and so you like stick with that one because it took you six months to find it. But there's so many other opportunities and avenues out there we just don't have the skills or the resources to tap into it. So, what was successful about these it's that you go back to [EPP HTC] skills and knowledge capacity to be able, one kid says a word and she's able to go, oh, okay well blah, blah, blah and there's this whole plan. (School leader, EPP school)

Similarly, staff members from the non-EPP SSP discussed the advantages joining the EPP could offer their students:

I think it's been part of that network where you get that information. Because we're often forgotten here. We often don't get sent stuff, and we're just this little isolate who have kids in real need, but we don't get the information. (Staff member, Non-EPP school)

Being part of the EPP program would just make all the difference to their possible futures, and their ability to contribute to society and feel like they're worthwhile. Because a lot of our students don't feel like they are worthwhile people. (School leader, Non-EPP school)

In order to allow all SSPs to have access to a career advisor, it was suggested that one advisor could work across several schools, similarly to an EPP HTC. It was mentioned that, in this scenario, the career advisor would need sufficient hours to build trust with SSP students, which is a fundamental requirement for any successful engagement with them.

Staff members at both SSP schools stressed the importance of providing outreach support to their students attending VET and TAFE courses. Both schools had an outreach program aimed at helping students develop trust and confidence in the new environments and staff they would encounter. As part of these programs, often the schools would organise a trip to the TAFE facilities a week prior to the start of the courses to introduce the students to the TAFE teaching and support staff. Then, on the first day of the programs, the SLSOs would meet the students at the TAFE and remain available onsite, but did not sit in the class with the students. After the first day, the students could choose whether continue receiving the outreach support. Both programs proved successful and were self-funded by the schools.

Based on their diagnoses and the impact that that has on their capacity to engage in the community ...that first step of actually getting there [TAFE] is the barrier that keeps them away from things. So, the point of the outreach program is to bridge that and be sort of that link between our kids engaging at school and our kids engaging in the community. (School leader, EPP school)

TAFE is adult learning, so they have to be able to read and write and be an independent learner. Here, our kids are high needs. So, they're going to require that body to say, 'Come on, what's the answer? I'll write it for you' or ... 'Let's do it together.' Last year, we sent kids out to get a white card. We sent two staff to sit with them, so that we made sure that they actually met the criteria and they put enough of that information onto the pieces of paper, which allowed them to be accredited with a white card. Because if we said, 'Go and do that on your own' ... they've got to find their own way there, which again is an issue because if there's a barrier, they tend to not engage. (School leader, Non-EPP school)

One student mentioned that, due to a health condition, one of their siblings was home-schooled and thus did not have access to a career advisor or career information. The student suggested finding ways to provide information on career options to home-schooled students, possibly by connecting them with career advisors at local schools.

Staff members from both schools reported the often life-changing impact of providing career pathways for their students, who gain skills as well as confidence and self-esteem from participating in the EPP courses.

Speaker 1: Feedback from our students ... has been great. Look we've got one particular student who ... whose attendance at school is not always perfect. Didn't miss a day.

Speaker 2: [I]t was after our very first session out there that she had a medical appointment with a doctor that she has seen since she's been a child and the doctor actually commented to her mum 'What's going on? What's changed?' and he said to the student 'What's going on? You're a different child. I can't believe it.' There was just such a big change. She was relaxed. She was open. He said 'in all the years I've been seeing her I've never seen her this well' ... (Staff members, EPP school)

**CALD students.** Although EPP was valued by CALD students and parents, there continued to be some challenges for some groups, in particular refugees and first-generation migrants with low English proficiency. In some communities, girls were not supposed to travel unaccompanied on public transport and this in some instances limited their opportunities to take up opportunities.

One school mentioned the need to translate the material into languages other than English to ensure the program was accessible to parents who were not fluent in English.

The documentation that comes out for the program is in English only. For a lot of our families, I mean this would be the case in a lot of schools not just our school, but that can be quite overwhelming. A lot of the time it's around how do we get the buy-in from people when you've got people that are English is their second language and/ or their mental health themselves, a lot of our families have their own mental health that they're supporting. So, documentation in itself is really difficult and a lot of the things that we send home it's certainly not about simplifying it, but it's about taking the jargon out and speaking how we would speak to the families over the phone. (School principal, EPP school)

### **Insights from non-EPP schools**

Schools staff had similar positive outcomes for disengaged students that they could point to via individual case studies. For example, a TAS teacher discussed a student:

He's not interested in school at all. He's at 48% attendance for [subject]. I'm not too sure about the other classes – probably worse. But yeah, now he's out. Practically, he's great. He's probably one of the best in the class. I kept telling him, you know, 'We need to do this. You'll get a job easily if you go and do this work placement.' So now he's finally going, and we'll see what happens. (TAS school staff)

School leaders and staff agreed they were seeing an uptick in students seeking out an apprenticeship or traineeship and leaving school as soon as they could. However, conversely, they also discussed several challenges, including in student's motivation. Attendance was down from 2019 in one of the schools.

We're below 80% at the present moment in time. That's pretty much right across the board. So there's a lot more increased absences from students that are just disengaged. I think sitting at home at a computer has certainly helped that, and parents who don't see the value. (School staff member)

The school leader of a non-EPP school mentioned that they were unable to fund an Aboriginal officer despite 50% of their students been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Challenges affecting the implementation of career pathways initiatives in both EPP and non-EPP schools are discussed in Section 4.5.2.

### **Insights from the LGG**

While there was some early resistance in some schools to the EPP, especially from careers advisors who may not have seen the need for it, by Wave 2 this was not mentioned. The LGG member from regional NSW thought the EPP was about engaging students in a way that could combat non-attendance.

I'm really looking forward to some of those changes coming into place ... where we can work with other programs connecting with the EPP program to improve attendance through that strong engagement and seeing real outcomes for students that are realistic and achievable. (LGG member)

The LGG discussed how the EPP had assisted schools by allowing them to leverage already-existing capacity by providing ‘another pair of hands coming into the school – or two in this instance, as the head teacher careers position that comes into the school’. In terms of efficiencies they believed the EPP had allowed schools to engage ‘a greater number of kids’ (LGG member).

A salient point was made about how some EPP schools sat alongside schools with similar socioeconomic profiles that were not a part of the program.

But where we are in a community where there are schools a kilometre apart and one is engaged in EPP and part of a network of EPP and the other isn’t what it’s creating is a significant divide and a reduction of opportunities to the kids who are not involved or to the schools that are not involved. (LGG member)

This accorded with the musings of some non-EPP school staff who felt it was not fair their school was not part of the EPP or that ‘political decisions’ had been made about inclusion. Although criteria were used, schools that neglected to ‘opt in’ are not in the program, despite proven need. In addition, the EPP was not offered in all regions of NSW – notably, until recently western NSW schools were not included.

#### **4.4 What do stakeholders think about the quality of the EPP?**

- Overall, all stakeholders thought the quality of EPP initiatives was very good.
- Most students were satisfied with their experiences and valued being able to try things out and being given responsibilities in workplace and training environments.
- Parents valued their children being exposed to various career options, and positive impacts on their child’s confidence.
- Teachers valued the positive impacts on students’ self-efficacy and saw motivation and behavioural improvements.
- Employers valued trained and work-ready young people who had exposure to their industry.
- EPP-TAFE co-ordination is crucial to the EPP’s operation.

Most issues identified related to broader challenges, rather than to the EPP initiatives themselves. External factors that compromised quality included: lack of range of TAFE and Registered Training Organisations (RTO) offerings, immobility of TAFEs/distance of TAFEs (specially for smaller communities); staffing challenges in schools and budget pressures on schools. Internal factors included a less engaging Job Readiness initiative due to change of provider.

The EPP focus is on students gaining the skills they need and being well prepared to leave school and contribute to the NSW economy (EPP program logic – see Appendix D). Quality of the EPP can therefore be understood as the extent to which the program works effectively and provides a positive and useful experience for students and employers. Quality can also be measured by the level of confidence stakeholders have in the EPP.

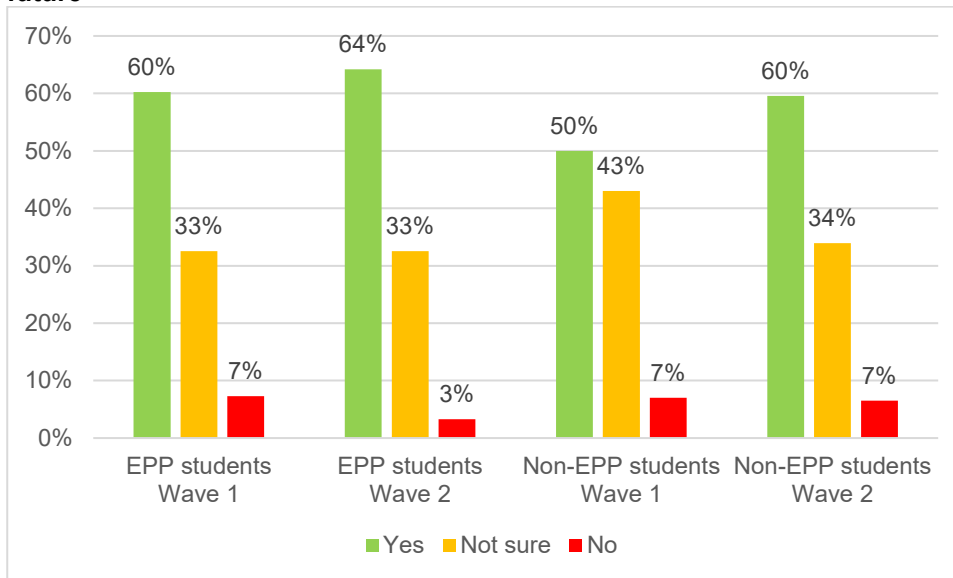
This section reports on perceptions of quality and what constituted quality in the eyes of different stakeholders. Issues related to the delivery of quality are covered in Section 4.7.

### 4.4.1 Stakeholder surveys

Quality measures included confidence students felt in making decisions and whether they would recommend the EPP to friends.

Figure 19 indicates that students undertaking the EPP initiatives were a slightly more likely (Wave 1: 60% versus 50%, a 10% difference; Wave 2: 60% versus 64%, a 4% difference) to agree that they knew what job or career they wanted in the future than students in EPP schools who were not engaged with the EPP initiatives. However, by Wave 2 the differences were minimal.

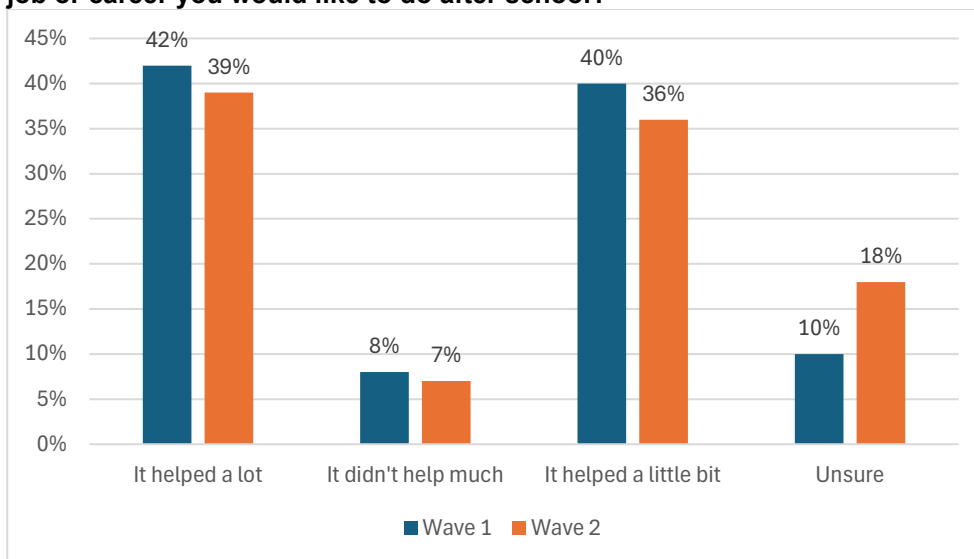
**Figure 19 EPP and non-EPP engaged school students – ‘I know what job or career I want in the future’**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 (n=473) and W2 (n=520).

Students engaged in the EPP were asked if participating in the EPP initiative helped them decide what job or career they would like to do after school. Figure 20 shows there was strong agreement in both waves that it helped ‘a lot’ (Wave 1: 42% and Wave 2: 39%) or ‘a little bit’ (Wave 1: 40% and Wave 2: 36%).

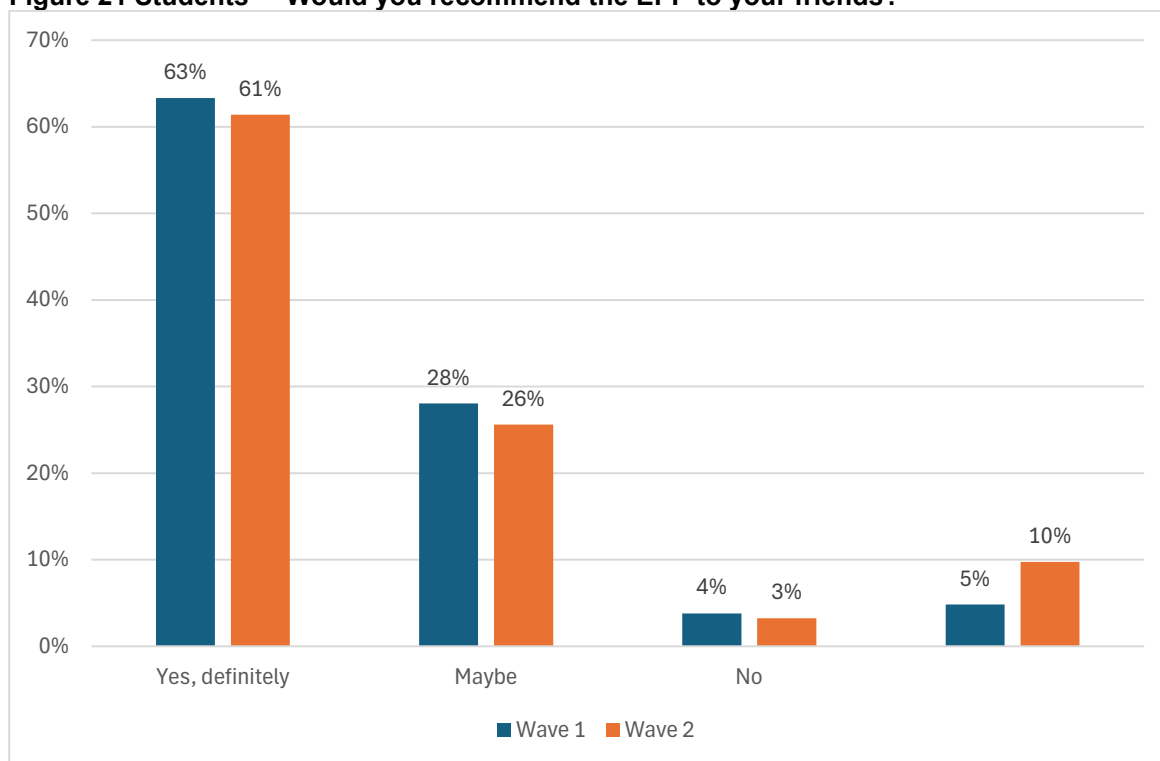
**Figure 20 EPP-participating students – ‘Did participating in the EPP initiative help you decide what job or career you would like to do after school?’**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 (n=289) and W2 (n=246).

Recommending the program to others is a strong indicator of confidence in the quality of the program. Students engaged in EPP initiatives were asked if they would recommend the EPP to their friends. Both in Wave 1 and in Wave 2 most students (63% and 61% respectively) answered 'yes – definitely' (Figure 21).

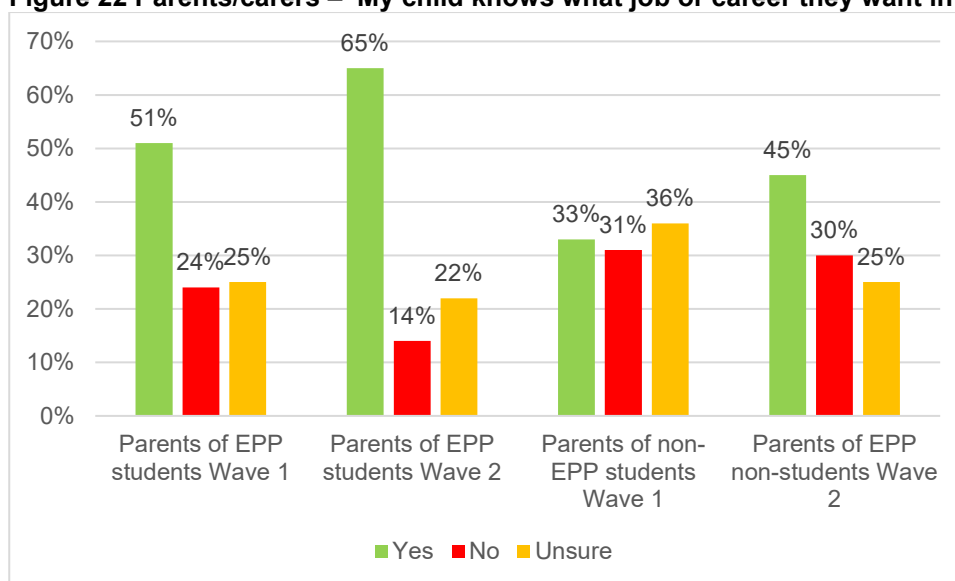
**Figure 21 Students – ‘Would you recommend the EPP to your friends?’**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 (n=289) and W2 (n=246).

Parents/carers of students engaged with the EPP tended to have higher rates of agreement than those with children not participating in the EPP that their child knew what job or career they wanted in the future, as Figure 22 illustrates. This was the case for both waves.

**Figure 22 Parents/carers – ‘My child knows what job or career they want in the future’**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. W1 (n=100) and W2 (n=85).



Analysis of the open text survey responses from 137 stakeholders (representing 75% of 175 schools- and non-schools-based DoE staff) identified three EPP elements with the greatest impact: TAFE NSW Start Your Future, the EPP as a whole (including the role of Innovating Careers Education), and Headstart.

Many respondents (n=41) considered TAFE NSW Start Your Future to have the greatest impact on students. This program was highly regarded for offering a range of courses that provide students with insights into different career options, helping students to engage and develop confidence to pursue VET courses in senior years and make more informed choices about their future careers. One respondent mentioned that the program provides students hands-on practical access in courses that support their identified career pathway. It also gives them a taste of the different delivery style of learning.

Some participants (n=11) saw the EPP as a whole, including the role of Innovating Careers Education, as having the most impact on students. They noted that the Innovating Careers Education initiative supports the running of all other initiatives (except enhancing SBAT engagement) and helps tailor them to the school's priorities and needs. This initiative also provides additional events and activities to support building capacity of teachers, staff and schools to strategically plan and implement career learning into the school's systems. This support enables systemic changes that support students to access vocational education while in school and when transitioning from school.

Ten respondents mentioned the Head Start programs as having a significant impact on students. These programs give students the opportunity to immerse themselves in a specific industry or field through practical training and work experience. They provide hands-on learning opportunities and allow students to gain valuable insights into their desired careers.

SBATs (n=6) and Back in the Game (n=5) were also reported as having a significant impact on students.

Five participants (4%) were not sure which program had the highest impact. One mentioned that the communication around EPP was not effective.

The same question about impact was answered by 30 of the 59 employers/trainers that completed the survey. Most respondents indicated that Start Your Future was the program with the greatest impact on students because it provides students concise but hands-on insights into different skills areas, allowing them to make more informed decisions regarding future study/education pathways.

#### **4.4.2 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews**

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the Department's Leadership Governance Group, focusing on the stakeholders' views on the quality of the EPP.

In terms of quality control and improvement, the EPP program has many layers of governance including the Leadership Governance Group and EPP Working Group (where all initiative leads report data and risk/issues via dashboards, plus regular meetings with individual initiatives).

The governance of the initiatives relies on effective communication and coordination between the Department and the school, within the school, how well the teachers work with EPP/SBAT officers and how well school and Careers Immersion Teams (CITs) teams work with external stakeholders.

The initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found stakeholders viewed the EPP as generally a high-quality program, with some qualifications. Students' measures of quality included elements such as (a) being off-campus/in non-school settings, (b) obtaining practical training/hands-on experience, (c) seeing how industries work, (d) being given support, skills training and then responsibility in a training or workplace setting, and (e) the ability to earn money. Students' main criticism was of experiences that mimicked school and lacked hands-on experience.

Schools valued the EPP; as one regional careers teacher put it, the EPP works as a program because it is 'real'. Schools engaged with most EPP programs and, in most cases, valued their quality, as described below.

## Insights from EPP school sites

In interviews and focus groups, stakeholders raised a variety of processes in terms of quality (whether high or low).

One issue that emerged in Wave 1 was in relation to duty of care in training situations/workplaces. Stakeholders in schools were asked about how they meet duty of care obligations for students who are enrolled in school but located with external partners as part of that school experience. While this was raised at baseline, there were no further concerns or incidences raised by any stakeholders at Wave 2.

In this section we summarise stakeholders' views on three aspects of the program's quality: its impact on students' wellbeing, schools' experiences of its components, and its relationships with external organisations, in particular TAFE.

**Students' wellbeing.** The EPP continued to build students' self-efficacy through placing them in an adult environment with responsibilities and allowing them to 'dip their toe' into a career. See Sections 4.1.5 and 4.2.2 for a discussion of the importance of vocational taster courses.

Speaker 1: That's what I love most doing work experience or something. You're treated not just as a little kid or a little high schooler. You're treated as someone ... a part of their team sort of like that. That's what I love most about it... I feel like when I'm working or something I'm being my own person, I'm independent and I love the independence. It just makes me feel better ... I'm growing as a person. (Students, EPP school)

I think there's been a good mix of variety for the students to engage and it's surprising the kids they would like to be plumbers, don't want to be plumbers, but they've had an interest in it, electrical or something. So, they're really honing where they want to be when they leave school instead of having to guess. (School leader, EPP school)

Many students reported that they learnt a great deal from participating in the EPP courses, particularly the SBATs – not only with regard to the specific subject area they engaged with, but also in terms of how to face challenges.

Speaker 1: It gives you more awareness that there is all this stuff outside of the school so that you should try more in school because it's easier work.

Speaker 2: It teaches you not to stress... (Students, EPP school)

Some school staff members reported that, in some cases, negative behaviours during school hours diminished as students were given responsibility in a training or workplace environment that built confidence, practical and people skills, leading to greater self-efficacy.

Sometimes it can also be used as a bit of a disciplinary tool like if you've got a child in a school-based traineeship or apprenticeship if they're mouthing off to a teacher or doing something that they possibly shouldn't be. You can use that and go 'that wouldn't be acceptable in a workplace, why would you think it'd be acceptable in school?' (School staff)

In some cases, the program helped to re-engage students who were at risk of dropping out of school (see also Section 4.3.2 and below).

Where the kids are going every week, they're getting real jobs, real experiences, it gives the school in my opinion a real alternative if you've got disengaged kids. They might not engage but at least you can offer something to those kids and say here's an opportunity, whether they take it that's a different story. (Staff member, EPP school)

**EPP components.** School staff members and students indicated they valued the quality of EPP initiatives by participating. As a vocational education teacher noted, students were voting with their feet but engaging with the various aspects of the EPP

So, teenagers will tell you straight up or they won't go if it's not valuable to them. We're not making them go... (Staff member, EPP school)

In the rest of this subsection, we summarise the main findings on stakeholders' experiences of the quality of the program's components.

Innovating Careers Education. This initiative offered the greatest flexibility and was used in all the visited schools. The feedback on its applications and impact were consistently positive. One EPP HTC described how schools started to reach out to them asking how they could be helped to meet specific needs through the Innovating Careers Education program. This was a significant change compared to the dynamics when the EPP first started, as exemplified in the following extract.

[Referring to the Innovating Careers Education program] For me has really changed recently and I've seen here and other schools now are coming to me and saying 'Hey, we've got a salon in our school', or whatever it is across the other schools, but here it was 'I've got a salon, it's laying dormant for four days a week. Amanda, what can you do?'. And now we've got a barbering program starting up in the next couple of weeks, a mentoring barbering program with some students from this school ... So that sort of stuff doesn't fall under any other initiative, that's the innovating careers one. (EPP HTC)

Enhancing SBAT Engagement. This initiative aims to increase the take-up of SBATs in EPP schools. It is led by the SBATEOs, who provide mentoring and support for students considering/undertaking an SBAT. The SBATEOs who participated in the evaluation reported different levels of engagement with schools in their areas, depending on the schools' interest in offering SBATs. Schools that engaged with SBATEOs generally had positive feedback. However, in some instances, due to specific issues and challenges in the job market (see Section 4.5.2 for a review), SBATEOs were not able to find businesses willing to take students who wanted to do a SBAT. One school leader suggested involving a number of businesses in the program before offering SBATs to students. This would help avoid uncertainty and disruption to their HSC plans.

If we're going to offer SBAT, I think we should have businesses already onboard before we offer it as an option for the kids because what it means for our Year 11 kids was ... you've got to select your units based on the SBAT being two units but then if the SBAT doesn't come through you've got to have those other— so we've got some kids carrying 14 units hoping that the SBAT comes through that they can drop one. Then be able to drop again for Year 12 to have the 10. (School leader, EPP school)

In Wave 1, in a particular location the take-up of SBATs by multinational fast-food employers was raised as a matter of concern, particularly in schools that did not engage with or participate in the EPP. It was mentioned how, in these instances, schools often did not have the resources to look for SBAT opportunities and so were more likely to passively accept the SBAT offers that students received from fast-food employers. These corporations are eligible for incentive payments attached to SBATs and anecdotally offer entry-level roles that could otherwise be performed (and are performed) by juniors on wages commensurate with the Award or Enterprise Agreement. Upon checking the number of SBATs in fast-food companies in that area, it was found that they represented 29% of the total SBATs, higher than the state average of 15%.

This issue was not reported in Wave 2; however, staff members raised other concerns about barriers, with employers preferring full-time staff to SBATs (see Section 4.5.2).

TAFE NSW Early School Leavers. This initiative provides wrap-around support services to help early school leavers under the age of 17 transition from school and complete their first course at TAFE NSW. EPP HTC spoke positively of this program and its model.

I've got quite a few who have been a part of that program [referring to TAFE NSW Early School Leavers] and it's very, very successful, the model of it really works. (EPP HTC)

A key factor contributing to the success of the program was that TAFE could contact the school if a student did not attend classes. This allowed the school to follow up with their welfare team to offer the student the support they might need.

I know from a couple examples now where the kid has gone off to do TAFE, they've followed that process, they've done the enrolment, but then not shown up at TAFE. And the fact that TAFE are then through this program, been able to contact us and say, 'this kid has not come, they need to be followed up', so that we're able to pass it onto the principal and the principal can follow it up there with their welfare teams ... Whereas other schools who are not part of the EPP, those kids would fall through the cracks. (EPP HTC)

However, it was not clear whether all schools were using this program effectively. EPP HTCs reported two reasons the program might be under-utilised in some schools. First, deputies need to be aware of the program's existence in order to provide a referral when the students sign out of school. Without a referral, the students can still enrol in TAFE but will lose the scholarship and the support provided by the program.

TAFE Early School Leavers, it requires deputies to be aware and to remember ... when the student is signing out of school because if they don't remember they don't do the referral. We're finding that kids are leaving and going to TAFE but they're not getting engaged in the program because there's been no referral for them and TAFE don't have the mechanism to determine if they came from an EPP school. (EPP HTC)

Second, it was also noted that some students would not engage with school or TAFE. It is unclear what strategies and support were available for this group of students.

Speaker 1: Unfortunately, most of those kids don't want to be at TAFE. They don't want to be anywhere.

Speaker 2: They don't want to be anywhere. That's the problem here. That's what I mean by getting off their butt. They don't want to engage in anything ... Where at other schools, I can have someone walk in and say, 'I don't want to be here. I want to go to TAFE and

do screen and media.' I go, 'Okay. Well, let's go.' And that is where that kicks in. Doesn't matter if they're under 17. (Staff members, EPP school)

Back in the Game. Back in the Game (BIG) provides professional support and mentoring for young people aged 15–19 who are still at school, but not engaged with their education.

These kids ... 40 or 50 of them hanging around, not going to class ... These kids get referred to Back in the Game, through [service provider] and they make contact with them, and they try umpteen times over a period of time, to try and engage them ... and then they transition them to work or further study. (EPP HTC)

It is important to note students may be disengaged from school for all sorts of reasons and may be more suited to VET pathways or academic pathways. Like other components of EPP, BIG is not necessarily oriented towards VET pathways for students; its purpose is to re-engage students in learning or other activities. Overall, staff members valued the BIG program, particularly when their own capacity to engage with students was limited. The main factor that seemed to make a difference in the schools' experiences of this program was the quality of the support provided by the non-government organisation (NGO) that engaged the students. Some schools worked with a provider that was described as not particularly effective in engaging students.

So Back in the Game ... I think we've had three [students] in the time it's been here. And they [the provider] just weren't very good at working with the kids themselves. (Staff member, EPP school)

However, other schools praised the quality of the one-to-one support provided by their local service provider.

We've been doing the Back in the Game ... for six months now ... What's happened this term and it's never happened before, I'm having parents ring me saying 'hey this [service provider] I've heard about it from my mate, my son's mate or I've heard about it from a girlfriend, how can you help me get my child into [service provider] and into this type of program?' ... Our parents never knock, they never call, they never knock, but they're starting to now because they've heard about [service provider] at [location]. (School leader, EPP school)

Apprenticeship and Traineeship Head Start. Through this program, students can study fee-free pre-apprenticeship or pre-traineeship VET courses (units of competencies) through Group Training Organisations (GTOs). These courses include work experience with host employers while still at school, potentially leading to higher level post-school VET qualifications.

All the schools we visited provided positive feedback about this program and its added value to the courses they offered.

The Head Start program, so they're the pre-apprenticeship courses, that's something that obviously the EPP funds and we wouldn't be able to offer that and our students wouldn't be able to afford those kind of programs if they weren't offered by EPP. (Staff member, EPP school)

We really like the Head Start program which is the micro credentialling, we'll have more of those if we can. (EPP HTC)

One EPP HTC talked about the positive impact attending one of the workshops had on a student.

He kind of had a very narrow idea of what he wanted to do before doing the program, and at the end he's like 'I love frame and trusses', and he'd never even heard of what

frame and trusses was and he was really enthusiastic about it by the end. So I see that kind of sort of light switch moment and the enthusiasm growing. (EPP HTC)

TAFE NSW Start Your Future. This program helps students identify potential career pathways through vocational tasters in a wide range of industries. Taster courses are delivered at local TAFE NSW campuses. Together with Innovating Careers Education, this program was probably the most popular and used across all schools. The importance of taster courses has been discussed in Section 4.1.5.

Job Readiness workshops. In Job Readiness workshops, students learn practical tips about employers' expectations for work that can help them land their first job. Staff members had positive experiences of the program and described it as much needed.

The ... workshop just worked really well. Our kids engaged all the time. They had the personal care which a lot of kids need. (Staff member, EPP school)

[Referring to job interview skills] It's a skill too that you can't really learn much out of school if you haven't learnt it in there, who is going to teach you once you're at in the wide-open community? (EPP SBATEO)

The Job Readiness workshops were formerly run by The EDGE, and in 2023, by EY. The EDGE offered practical elements such as haircuts and formal dressing for interviews, so it was very participatory. Although the EY module was delivering the same content, it was described as being less 'hands-on' and having more of a 'classroom' approach. Despite conveying the same information, it was seen as less engaging by school staff.

You know they've both got benefits. The EDGE Workshop just worked really well. Our kids engaged all the time. They had the personal care which a lot of kids need... [Some] students up in this area, they'd never worn long pants before and a belt. Or even know how to tie a tie. And those are the skills that kids walk away that can be learnt forever. Whereas, yeah, I think that Ernst and Young, the Job Readiness workshop, I think it's probably too long. A day is too long for those type of kids. (EPP HTC)

EY's contract has not been renewed. Going forward, the Job Readiness workshops will be delivered in-house to allow schools to come up with their own tailored solution for their students.

Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors. The Ambassadors' program allows students to hear from those working in a particular field or career. We concur with the findings of Barker et al. (2021) that where local speakers give careers advice, it is positively received and makes the talks more meaningful for students – 'relatable' persons such as local ex-students who are now working in certain occupations are the best role models, so that students can see a model of their future possible selves. The Ambassadors program was definitely operating in this way by Wave 2. For example, Grafton High School's VET Ambassador is a local who undertook an apprenticeship and now runs his own business.

So, it's great for them to hear of someone else that's struggled at school, really didn't find their passion in school until they found VET in Year 11 and 12 ... and then know that he's done two trades and he's earning \$300,000 a year, he's working six months of the year. And this could be you if you want to work hard. If you find something you're passionate about. And he talks about it not being a job because he just loves that kind of work. (Staff member, EPP school)

**Relationships with TAFE.** In most cases, school staff members reported having positive individual relationships with TAFE staff members. Similarly, students who engaged with TAFE mostly had positive experiences:

So, we were the first group that did it but we had a little classroom set up and he taught us measuring and different components about it. He brought it up on the smartboard all the different types of things, brought in pipes and stuff to set up a tap and then he was talking to us about feedback and said he's going to set up a little wall frame so the next TAFE course can actually work as if they're setting up a full drainage system and stuff like that. (Student, EPP school)

I have to do these like training courses on how to make each product. I found it was like really helpful that there was videos and it wasn't just like reading. Because a lot of school is just getting textbooks, reading it and writing. So it's more helpful with like videos and stuff. (Student, EPP school)

However, many school staff members reported systemic issues affecting TAFE's service delivery, which often limited opportunities. These issues included limited course offerings and/or student places, transportation difficulties, lack of TAFE outreach (especially in rural and regional areas), and lack of 'common TAFE days' to help students balance their training with schoolwork. Overall, a key message articulated by stakeholders both in the first and second wave was that the TAFE system needs revitalisation.

Firstly, school staff members consistently expressed concern that TAFE was under-resourced and unable to meet the demand for vocational options.

School staff frequently mentioned the impact of TAFE-related challenges when discussing their experiences with TAFE. For example, school staff wanted students to be able to access the courses of their choice, but in some instances, they were limited by artificial scarcity caused by TAFE's capacity restraints.

Courses available at TAFE seems to be shrinking every year ... We had tourism, we had information digital technology, and we had community pharmacy. Those four [sic] are not offered anymore. That's just in five years. (Staff member, EPP school)

The range of TAFE options was particularly limited in regional and rural areas, and while EPP HTC's could book TAFE mobile training units, in some instances the units were deemed unable to visit areas due to road quality (assessments the schools did not agree with, noting that commercial trucks used the roads all the time).

School staff often highlighted the disparities in travel distances and transportation options and how these could hinder students' access to EPP opportunities (see Section 4.7.2). There were suggestions that TAFE courses be offered at the schools – for example, in the sometimes under-utilised workshop or lab classrooms that often sat idle due to lack of VET teachers (see Section 4.7.2).

Staff members also mentioned that TAFE could improve delivery of courses in a form that aligned with school timetabling and planning. Several mentioned that in relation to EVET there was previously a common 'TAFE day or half-day' (a specific day of the week); now there was not, schools found it harder to timetable and accommodate combined TAFE and school attendances.

So, our school for Year 11s they do like a half-day on Mondays and then on Wednesdays for Year 12. So TAFE used to run all the Year 11 courses Monday afternoons. And then

going into Year 12 it would be Wednesday afternoons. And that way students didn't miss out on anything and without any consultation, they changed it. (EPP staff)

Smart & Skilled fee arrangements do not apply to TAFE EPP courses. The overall TAFE fee structure is being examined by the current VET review.

Finally, some school staff members mentioned that the TAFE website does not provide useful information to students about what courses are running at what TAFEs. However, on inspection, the TAFE website seemed quite informative to the research team, showing where specific courses were being offered physically, as well as the online options.

### **Insights from non-EPP school sites**

Non-EPP schools likewise strived to expand the opportunities of VET courses and career pathways available to their students. As discussed in Section 4.1.5, careers advisors in non-EPP schools felt stretched and often could only offer limited opportunities to their students. They felt they lacked time for personalised careers advice with students, including multiple conversations with individual students about their career options at different stages of their decision-making process.

School staff members from non-EPP schools raised similar issues regarding the TAFE–school interface. While most staff members spoke positively about their individual relationships with TAFE workers, they also reported systemic issues affecting TAFE service delivery, again concerning course offerings, distance and travelling and timetabling. For example, while a careers teacher mentioned having a TAFE contact who assisted with paperwork and being able to speak directly with TAFE counsellors, she found the centralised contact system (a call centre) frustrating.

Some staff members in a regional school reported that their students now need to travel hundreds of kilometres to enrol in certain courses.

Even on the trade side, TAFE has reduced their offerings. So, for floor and wall tiling, they used to do that locally here at the TAFE. Those apprentices now have to travel to [location] for one week every three months or... there will be one two-day stint every month or something. That's inconvenient, to say the least. (Staff member, non-EPP school)

### **Insights from the LGG**

The LGG pointed to the quality offerings and positive outcomes of the EPP, and the constant review of its operation. The Group was conscious of challenges with TAFE and the VET review and expressed a willingness to work with TAFE them to address them, as shown in this quote:

We can certainly leverage from the TAFE Review. We know it's the interim report at this point, but it points to the fact that locally TAFEs have not been responsive to that demand and therefore the match to what communities are seeing. So, I think we have a real opportunity there to work in partnership with TAFE in response to that review and this would be an ideal opportunity through the EPP ... (LGG member)

One key quality issue discussed was the need for continuous monitoring of VET, the EPP, employers' needs, evolving technology, and employment trends. An LGG member emphasised that they need 'to make sure that the offerings are updated', taking the pragmatic view that:



If we're not offering things that are relevant where there's an opportunity to gain employment or further training then that particular item should be ditched and we need to do that. We have to have quality business partners and we need to be making sure we're making change at the same rate as that in the world beyond school. (LGG member)

The EPP was funded, and then re-funded. Most EPP HTC originally were teachers seconded from other roles. In terms of staffing, a school-based LGG member noted that the uncertainty of funding from the program created problems for schools.

Releasing staff to programs that don't have a definitive timeline... I'm currently in a situation where my school has seven staff working in roles where I can't permanently fill the vacancy and it's this ongoing roll-on and the instability that creates in my staff, the uncertainty and dissatisfaction in my parents and student community because is my teacher coming back? Who have I got? Who have I got next year? (LGG member)

This was in line with findings from Wave 1 where HTCs expressed uncertainty about whether their roles would continue or they should start searching for a new position (or return to a previous role).

The quality assurance and monitoring process the LGG oversees has strongly integrated parents and students. For example, the EPP has regular regional and metro conferences, bringing groups of school communities together. A participant mentioned parents were invited to be part of the conferences and shared their experiences of the program.

I think we should call out the supportive nature of this program that actually enables parents to have a strong voice but also to feel as though their child's best interests are really being understood and heard and that reengagement that has been occurring for young people. (LGG member).

The researchers attended several of these conferences and were impressed by the way students were given key MCing roles and expressed the impact of the program for them to the audience.

There are ongoing challenges in NSW with student attendance and engagement. The EPP was seen as a countervailing influence as it promoted attendance (as students knew part of the week they could be off-campus at TAFE or in training) and offered 'outcomes for students that are realistic and achievable' (LGG member).

LGG members also discussed the wider context, as the EPP sits broadly with TAFE/VET and is co-dependent with it.

More broadly some of the bigger government pieces that are happening at the moment [are] to make sure that we get the full advantage of that for our kids and their opportunities going forward. (LGG member).

## **4.5 Was the EPP implemented as intended?**

- The EPP has been implemented as intended.
- As per Program Logic, it is working towards its key aims.
- There were no identified unintended outcomes.

The Educational Pathways Pilot Program (EPPP) trialed the program in 24 schools. Following the pilot evaluation (Barker et al., 2021), the program was refined and implemented more broadly in

148 schools. The intention is to run all program elements at all EPP schools and expand EPP to additional schools.

Program data indicated that as of the end of 2023, a total of 148 schools are running all of the EPP programs, involving 58,264 students.

All evidence to date shows the program is being implemented as intended, albeit with some caveats around some schools having a slow uptake of the EPP initiatives and some elements not being provided by external providers in a satisfactory manner.

Insights around implementation, apart from the program statistics cited above, largely come from stakeholders.

#### **4.5.1 Stakeholder surveys**

The surveys did not collect data on implementation.

#### **4.5.2 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews**

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the DoE Leadership Governance Group, focusing on the stakeholders' views on whether EPP was implemented as intended.

As mentioned in Section 4.3.2, the initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found that most of the 20 EPP schools we visited were fully engaged with the program. By Wave 2, the six schools (re)visited were offering an even greater array of initiatives.

#### **Insights from EPP school sites**

Overall the program had initially been met with some resistance (as reported in the baseline report) in some schools but has established itself and expanded over time, with increasing numbers of students engaged in all of its initiatives, and a broader range of the initiatives being run. The initial resistance was mostly related to career advisors' fear that EPP HTC's would take their jobs, as exemplified in this extract from a career advisor that had worked both in an EPP school and in a non-EPP school:

Speaker 1: I was saying before that we were all sceptical of it ... and scared because we're like 'It's going to take away our job, our roles, we're going to be made redundant', dah, dah, dah, but it hasn't done that... (Staff members, EPP school)

Many schools were running all initiatives, while others ran most. Staff members at EPP schools discussed several factors that could affect prompt and successful implementation of EPP and its programs. Some concerned the schools and their relationships with the EPP staff members, including the presence of school leadership supportive of diverse career pathways, good relationships between school staff and the HTC's and SBATEOs, and a history of providing VET courses, SBATs and career pathways. Other factors involved contextual and systemic issues, including strong collaborations between schools, EPP and RIEP; the engagement of all main stakeholders in the cultural changes often brought by the program; buy-in from businesses; and complexities related to training to become a VET teacher.

Having a supportive school leadership and good relationships between the school and the key EPP role figures were seen as basic requirements for the successful implementation of the program. All the schools that were visited as part of the evaluation had leaderships that supported the program and staff members who had good and ongoing relationships with EPP HTC and SBATEOs.

It's got to come from the very top, yeah, and if you don't have that at the very top that's a roadblock straight away. So if the principal's not supportive or your deputies aren't supportive then you're not going to be able to put students out into these programs. (Staff member, EPP school)

Some EPP staff members suggested it was easier to gain traction in schools that already had some tradition of providing VET courses, SBATs and career pathways. This was because students learn about their courses and career pathway options primarily from their career advisors, but also by word of mouth from other students or from their families.

When you've got such a [VET and/or SBAT] program that has been rolling on and rolling on lots of parents and lots of students have had either older siblings or friends who are doing different pathways and the interest just builds and they go 'Well that student did this, I want to do something similar'. When you don't have that sort of role models ... it's a little bit more foreign and it's harder to I suppose get in their head... (EPP SBATEO)

Establishing ongoing and strong relationships between EPP and other existing programs, such as RIEP, was also considered important for prompt and effective implementation of the EPP.

At the careers emerging team meeting next week we've got ... a big industry ... are coming and there could be an opportunity for SBATs out of that, and that's in collaboration with RIEP, the Regional Industry Employment Education partnership with them ... we're all collaborating ... RIEP and EPP and schools have all got to work together to get the right students in to make it work. (EPP HTC)

Stakeholders made the point that in order for EPP to retain currency, it must respond to changes in the labour market and skills demand. In this regard, the RIEP can also raise awareness of what career or employment opportunities are available in student's local area.

Finally, many staff members, in both EPP and non-EPP schools, discussed the importance of the cultural changes implicit in embracing the EPP program. These cultural changes concerned the school system, but also students and families, and employers.

Staff members mentioned that some teachers may resist letting students out of their classes because this could affect their own performance against the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) KPIs.

Speaker 1: It's probably been one of the biggest changes here – not so much the last 12 months but over the last few years – the greater acceptance of students not being in class every lesson because they're pursuing other pathways ... there still is quite a lot of resistance in the highly academic subjects and that's something that needs to change ...

Speaker 2: [It's] to do with results. So NESA will say 'You should be getting...' – or the Department saying Band 5s, Band 6s, the school is assessed on that ... So if the results aren't high, like Band 5s and 6s, like marks of 80 plus in HSC, then 'Please explain'.

Speaker 3: I think probably some of those teachers would look at some of the students in their class and think 'Wow, that student is capable of some really bland results in this course', and if they're out two days a week doing an SBAT then maybe they're not going to reach that goal.

Speaker 2: Or any of these courses, Head Start, Start Your Future. (Staff members, EPP school)

Changing teachers' attitudes towards students missing school days to attend VET courses and SBATs requires revisiting how schools are assessed regarding students engaged in these programs. However, this cultural change also entails a personal journey that is specific to each teacher. This latter point is exemplified by the following extract from a career advisor reflecting on how their previous views have changed over time.

Say if you'd come to my legal studies class 12 years ago and you were an SBAT I wouldn't want you in my class, I can tell you that now ... because you would have had an impact on my results, my results I have to report to the principal ... I wouldn't want that. Yeah, I'm converted now, yeah, I will have those students in my class, no problem... (Staff member, EEP school)

Some staff members mentioned that engaging in SBATs or VET courses might indeed change students' perspective on the effort they need to put into their school courses, which can then affect their school performance. However, they also noted that this is no different from students in Year 12 who receive an early university entry, which could also change their views and attitudes towards their HSC final mark because they have already achieved their goal of getting into university.

One staff member welcomed the new NSW Plan for Public Education, which has pathways as one of its focus areas. They noted that this entailed that pathways would now enter the principals' School Improvement Plan (SIP), which includes measurables on how the school is delivering on the main public education foci. The staff member went on to emphasise the need to embrace a whole-school approach to careers, whereby teachers from the Key Learning Areas (KLA) –English, Mathematics, Science etc. – would involve industry in their classrooms and also allow students out.

I think there's a big bit of work there that actually is taking careers a bit wider and getting everybody on board with careers so it doesn't just land on ... Career and Transition teams in schools. So I think that's a pretty big piece of work that I'm going to be looking at which I can do in my role now. The Department's got these fantastic resources to support subject teachers, KLAs [referring to the NSW Plan for Public Education], but how do you do it, how do we get that into classrooms? (Staff member, EPP school)

Staff members at both EPP and non-EPP schools noted that the EPP also entailed a cultural change for students and families. Many students, their families, and communities had traditional views about a separation between vocational and academic learning that do not reflect the reality of the current system.

I think the public perception is still there in a negative way, just going to do a TAFE or do a trade, I still hear it amongst kids that they still see it a lesser option than just staying and picking up a piece of paper, HSC. (Staff member, EPP school)

In some cases, students were questioning whether doing a trade would mean a life of physical labour. A TAS teacher commented that she tries to give them a sense of ongoing potential change and progress in their careers.

I often have a business conversation with them and say, 'Look, you're getting a trade, but by the time you're my age, you could be finished with work and have a whole business operation. You've got to think bigger.' (Staff member, non-EPP school)

Staff members discussed the importance of considering families' socioeconomic backgrounds to understand their attitudes towards VET courses and alternative career pathways.

Speaker 1: I guess it depends on the cohort as well and the socioeconomic backgrounds in the area ... whether the family is more interested in academic pathways versus their pathways of somewhere else. So sometimes the conversation with parents can even be more difficult because they don't even want to open their thoughts to a different option versus 'You need an ATAR, you've got to go to university'. (Staff members, EPP school)

The need to change the negative views of some families about the school system and the opportunities it could offer their children was also discussed.

[T]he lived experience of the parent often becomes the coaching model for the child and so we have to break that model and that happens in the EPP program too, around helping parents to see something more, and in our environment where only 44% of our parents finished Year 12 and of those only 20% cent did some type of tertiary education ... So that's one element I think has been really great is the support in helping parents to see a bigger picture than what they have in their lived experience. (School leader, EPP school)

Overall, the EPP has made inroads, challenging conceptions that there is a hard barrier between vocational and university education. The young people we spoke with were well aware of this, although parents were not interviewed in the second wave.

Staff members also discussed how the successful implementation of some programs, particularly SBATs, strongly relied on businesses' willingness to take students. They mentioned three main factors that hindered their capacity to engage businesses in some cases: having to deal with subcontractors rather than the lead company of large infrastructure projects, companies only wanting full-time employees, and specific barriers such as clauses in enterprise bargaining agreement. For example, some schools reported that despite having had major infrastructure projects nearby that would continue for several years, they were unable to start any SBATs to a lack of interest from the subcontractors carrying out the work and/or clauses in enterprise bargaining agreements excluding SBATs and trainees. Overall, these factors affected the capacity of schools to turn their VET courses into SBATs.

Speaker 1: [colleague name], how many VET courses do we have in construction classes?

Speaker 2: We've got three in Year 11 and two in Year 12 and a group come through accelerated from Year 10, so...

Speaker 1: That's six construction classes.

Speaker 3: How many SBATs have you got in construction?

Speaker 1: Zero

Speaker 3: Hardly any, and yet we've got three major infrastructure projects within a stone's throw from the school... (Staff members, EPP school)

We haven't had any success with SBAT ... not from the lack of the kids wanting to do it but no businesses ... I think the feedback— [SBATEO's name] was saying that businesses are steering away from wanting SBATs. That they want full-time apprentices, not ... SBATs. (School leader, EPP school)

[Referring to employers] In a more metropolitan area they've got quite a good base to choose their candidates from, and if they looked at a school student who can come to work one or two days a week who doesn't have a licence just yet versus a student that's

left school that has a licence and can be there every day this is the one they pick unless they've got some kind of family connection and they go "Well this is the person I want". (EPP SBATEO)

However, in other schools it was mentioned that some businesses were particularly keen to have SBAT students.

You've got other employers who have had someone and they go 'Well look, I will take five, one for every day of the week' (EPP SBATEO)

One school leader commented that businesses really liked younger staff as 'they're bloody cheap'.

Finally, staff members noted that schools' ability to deliver on-site VET courses was constrained by the specific expertise of their staff. With regard to this, in the second wave of stakeholder focus groups some staff members discussed the 'onerous' (according to some participants) requirements to become a VET teacher.

Speaker 1: Around VET within school ... vocational education, we are limited. We would like to offer, but the reality is the commitment and the requirements expected of staff to maintain their qualifications to deliver it is ridiculous. Like they've gone through their third hospitality change I think in five and a half years. Like our hospitality teacher has just done the training for the third time... So as a result we've dropped, we had four subjects at school, five actually, and we've dropped two because staff don't want to maintain their qualifications because of the demands that's required. (Staff member, EPP school)

They also described the need to document student competencies in VET courses as time-consuming.

### **Insights from non-EPP school sites**

This evaluation question dealt with EPP implementation, which was not as relevant to non-EPP school sites. However, they still had some views, as they were aware of the program – in particular, that the 'EPP has a lot more funding' than they did (School staff).

The non-EPP schools described the way schools were included in the EPP as somewhat arbitrary and suggested they had been 'passed over'.

Speaker 1: We missed out on the pilot. I think it was more the politics at their level more than anything else. None of the [region] schools were included in the pilot program.

Facilitator: Is that because your scores are higher or your NAPLAN scores are higher?

Speaker 1: No, because... [Other school] would be generally about the same as us ... none of the schools in the [location] region were ever included to start with. I think it was more of a political decision than anything else. (School leader)

Non-EPP schools had their own careers guidance strategies and faced similar logistical challenges to EPP schools. A career advisor mentioned that she struggled to utilise the school's buses (small and large) due to their frequent use for other purposes. The teacher was looking to obtain a bus licence so that she could book and drive the bus. Other logistical issues related to staff shortages diverting careers advisors into classroom teaching to cover absences.

## Insights from the Leadership Governance Group (LGG)

The LGG was broadly in agreement the EPP had been implemented as intended. The governance processes were operating smoothly, and parent and student perspectives and inputs were part of overall processes. While there was resistance in some schools during the program's advent and scale-up, by Wave 2 the EPP was fully embedded in schools. A LGG member commented:

The mix of programs is good but what's important to understand in this is that every school context is different and not only that, employers are different. Different parts of the state have different needs. Different kids have different needs. (LGG member)

They continued that the EPP needed to be flexible and agile enough to change. Other issues mentioned were the HTC staffing arrangements and how lack of continuing positions affected the implementation for schools. In addition, and common to what was said in schools, the question of whether the program could be extended to students under age 15, and insurance issues, were discussed.

We have a lot of kids in stage five who don't turn 15 till say early Year 10 even or late Year 9 and because it's age based in terms of access to some of the programs like white card and things like that. (LGG member)

Another member drew attention to the limits of the EPP program (in terms of budget, regions, and schools it has been offered or extended to):

I think just listening to that that we need to call out the impact as a system, the fact that there is such demand, that we have schools that we can't actually provide the access to the EPP. (LGG member)

## 4.6 Was the EPP scaled-up version refined in line with the recommendations of the evaluation of its pilot phase?

- The EPP was refined in line with the recommendations from the evaluation of its pilot phase.
- It followed recommendations on a number of initiatives.
- Two elements were phased out and translated into work elsewhere in DoE.

The EPPP was subject to evaluation by Western Sydney University team (Barker et al., 2021). The EPPP (pilot) recommendations and outcomes for the EPP are presented in Table 6. In summary, the review of the EPPP resulted in two initiatives being phased out and others being rebranded and reconfigured. The new EPP is an improvement on the pilot and the range of initiatives is appropriate.

**Table 6. EPP evaluation report recommendations and outcomes (updated 2024)**

EPP Pilot Initiative	Rebranded EPP initiative	Recommendations	Update
Digital careers toolbox	N/A	Update to include careers relevant to non-metropolitan students.	N/A Pilot initiative – not in current program
Digital careers toolbox	N/A	Review and lower the reading age to be more accessible	N/A Pilot initiative – not in current program

EPP Pilot Initiative	Rebranded EPP initiative	Recommendations	Update
		and provide translations.	
Digital careers toolbox	N/A	Increase reach of the revised online tools through Pilot 2 with parent and stage 4 students.	N/A Pilot initiative – not in current program
New Model of Careers Advice	Innovating Careers Education	Resourcing burden on schools' staff could be reduced by conducting fewer activities/events, scheduled earlier & recorded in the school's calendar for the academic year.	<p>HTCs work strategically to engage local executive leaders earlier to ensure greater visibility of program offerings and timing for school staff.</p> <p>Work has commenced on creating a EPP calendar to provide schools adequate visibility of all initiative events occurring with the EPP.</p> <p>Additional information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Coordinated the development of an annual timeline for the TAFE NSW Start Your Future initiative.</li> <li>ii. EVET pilot for Start Your Future enrolments. This will eliminate the admin burden for student enrolment forms to attend courses.</li> <li>iii. EPP SAOs support the reduction of admin burden for schools.</li> </ol>
New Model of Careers Advice	Innovating Careers Education	Consider HTC to work with the school leadership to have careers education included in the school's strategic plans to support the allocation of school's resourcing and teacher professional development to priorities careers.	<p>Innovating Careers Education Team (HTCs) support schools to align EPP initiatives within school strategic plans and calendars.</p> <p>HTCs regularly (measured as a KPI) deliver PL to school teams aligned to the schools' strategic plans.</p> <p>Additional information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. 2023 data to date reflects 208 engagements across all regions for strategic planning through CIT meetings and executive presentations</li> <li>ii. Professional learning is often included within a CIT meeting agenda on an identified topic e.g. Lake Macquarie – strategies for schools to engage the disengaged learner.</li> </ol>
New Model of Careers Advice	Innovating Careers Education	Include a focus on online careers events/activities for parents. Target activities for Stage 4 students because this is a gap in EPPP's delivery and impacts EPPP's achievement of outcomes from the Program Logic models.	<p>A parent campaign was delivered in 2022 showcasing the parent side of their child's engagement in VET. Various social media and promotional channels were used.</p> <p>Additional info:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. 2023 data indicates 40 events/activities specifically focused on parent engagement. 2023 data indicates 8 events/activities specifically focused on Stage 4 or primary students.</li> </ol>



EPP Pilot Initiative	Rebranded EPP initiative	Recommendations	Update
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ii. EPP have not targeted stage 4 students on a program-wide scale.</li> <li>iii. 33,083 students participated in Innovating Careers Education activities in 2023.</li> </ul>
New Model of Careers Advice	Innovating Careers Education	HTC to work with classroom teachers on embedding careers education within the curriculum to support reach to stage 4 students and address resourcing.	EPP have not targeted stage 4 students on a program-wide scale. Bespoke events and activities run by the EPP have focused on Stage 4 students to understand suitability of this approach and whether it is within the scope of the EPP.
New Model of Careers Advice	Innovating Careers Education	Run more professional development with teachers and develop workshops and resources tailored to parents to increase their knowledge regarding careers and viable pathways.	In 2023, 76 professional learning opportunities have been delivered and/or coordinated by Head Teachers across a range of focus areas determined by local need.
YES+	TAFE Start Your Future	Maintain the 2 models of YES+.	<p>The TAFE Start Your Future initiative introduces students to TAFE-style learning across a range of vocations, usually attending a TAFE NSW campus one day per week over 8–9 weeks. In 2023, 7820 students attended a TAFE NSW Start Your Future course.</p> <p>The TAFE Early School Leavers Program is designed to support students who plan to finish their schooling at a TAFE NSW campus. In 2023, 426 students have engaged with the Initiative.</p>
Training Awards Ambassadors	Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors	Leverage the resources created in 2020 by continuing to embed them in The EDGE workshops and Pilot 2 careers education activities and increase the target audience to stage 4 students using the electronic resources.	<p>The Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors play a prominent role within Job Readiness Workshops. Currently, all Job Readiness Workshops have a standing agenda item where a VET Ambassador will attend a workshop to speak to students.</p> <p>Stage 4 delivery is currently out of scope.</p>
Training Awards Ambassadors	Educational Pathways VET Ambassadors	Maintain Ambassadors for a 2-year period and update the video resources after a 2–3 year timespan	Ambassadors continue to visit schools and selection is made on local connection and relevance to students. Existing promotional material is considered current.

<b>EPP Pilot Initiative</b>	<b>Rebranded EPP initiative</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Update</b>
		which reduces recruitment, affiliated training costs and resource development costs. To assist with consolidating pilots to make them more meaningful for stakeholders, merge the promotion of VET pilots (4 & 7).	In 2023, 8586 students attended a VET Ambassador event.
Increasing the uptake of School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships	Enhancing SBAT engagement	Implementation should establish guidelines for how HTC and mentors can collaborate and avoid duplication to optimise networks.	After the Pilot there was movement to establish 'local teams' with the HTC, SBAT EO and SAO operating from a base school.  Formal guidelines have not been established regarding how collaboration should occur, but there is an expectation that it exists to address local school needs.
Increasing the uptake of School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships	Increasing the uptake of School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships	Maintain the SBAT student reporting exemption for the Anticipated and Actual Enrolment Return (AAER) and re-assess the benefits of AAER at the end of the first full year of implementation in 2021.	This has been implemented across all externally delivered VET programs.  See: <a href="https://education.nsw.gov.au/noticeboard/2023/02/removal-actual-enrolment-return-declarations-for-evet-and-sbat">https://education.nsw.gov.au/noticeboard/2023/02/removal-actual-enrolment-return-declarations-for-evet-and-sbat</a>
MBA Pathway	N/A	Modify by rolling out 2020 promotional resources and update after a 2-3 year timespan.	N/A Pilot initiative - no longer in current program
MBA Pathway	N/A	Connect students, parents/carers and educators to the EPPP website and EPPP TV through delivery explicit activities in Pilots 2 and Pilot 5.	N/A Pilot initiative - no longer in current program
EDGE Workshops	Job Readiness workshops	Group smaller schools by location and schedule workshops earlier.	EY contract finishes 30 June 2024. This initiative will be delivered by EPP HTCs from Term 3, 2024.
EDGE Workshops	Job Readiness workshops	Offer more than 1 workshop to larger schools to cater for demand.	Schools can now have 2 workshops a year if requested.
EDGE Workshops	Job Readiness workshops	Increase the number of quality providers and	EY contract has not been reviewed. This initiative will be delivered by schools.

EPP Pilot Initiative	Rebranded EPP initiative	Recommendations	Update
		schedule schools at least 6 months prior to delivery.	
Fee-free 'test and try' VET	Apprenticeship and Traineeship Head Start	Before considering scaling this pilot, schools and GTOs need to forge networks. Pilot 2 can assist with establishing and building these networks.	The Pilot stage concluded in July 2022 and the initiative is well established. The GTOs networks include host employers, RTOs and HTCs.
Fee-free 'test and try' VET	Fee-free 'test and try' VET	Conduct a needs assessment in schools for students' interests and subsequent establish networks with businesses based on industries where there are local employment opportunities or industries with future growth. Networks need to be well established to facilitate effective scaling.	Collaborative discussions were held with HTCs and participating GTOs including internal Training Service NSW teams to discover regional skill shortages, employment needs and identifying RTO capacity to deliver courses.  Data capture is being enhanced that will lead to greater understanding of initiative activities, regional job needs, skills requirements and flexibility to offer new courses in various regions, and the opportunity for remote students to also participate.
Wrap around u17s	TAFE NSW Early School Leavers	Interview data confirms the need for improved monitoring and reporting systems between schools and TAFE.	TAFE provide data on the number of students who receive ESL support when enrolling in a course (usually the Year 10 equivalent), data on course completion and student outcome (students that continue with further studies at TAFE).
Regional VET Pathways	Back in the Game (BIG)	Transport considerations and funding may need to be reviewed to ensure scaling is successfully implemented	Allocating 3 different regionality ratings for all regions newly delivering BIG (metro, semi-metro, and regional) and having different unit costs across those ratings to account for increased expenditure of providers for travel and distance.  Implementing a large list of activities that could be completed through the program (e.g. bank account, TFN, photo ID etc.) and funding claimed for their completion.  Change from a funded one-day engagement milestone to a 5-day engagement milestone. Addition of a discretionary fund for providers to use at their discretion for items to assist young people on their pathway to education, employment or training. Overall funding amount allocated for the pilot provider per young person remained unchanged.

Source: EPPP recommendations (Barker et al., 2021); DoE updates, 2024; EPP program data, 2024.

## **4.7 Was the EPP implemented efficiently with best use of resources?**

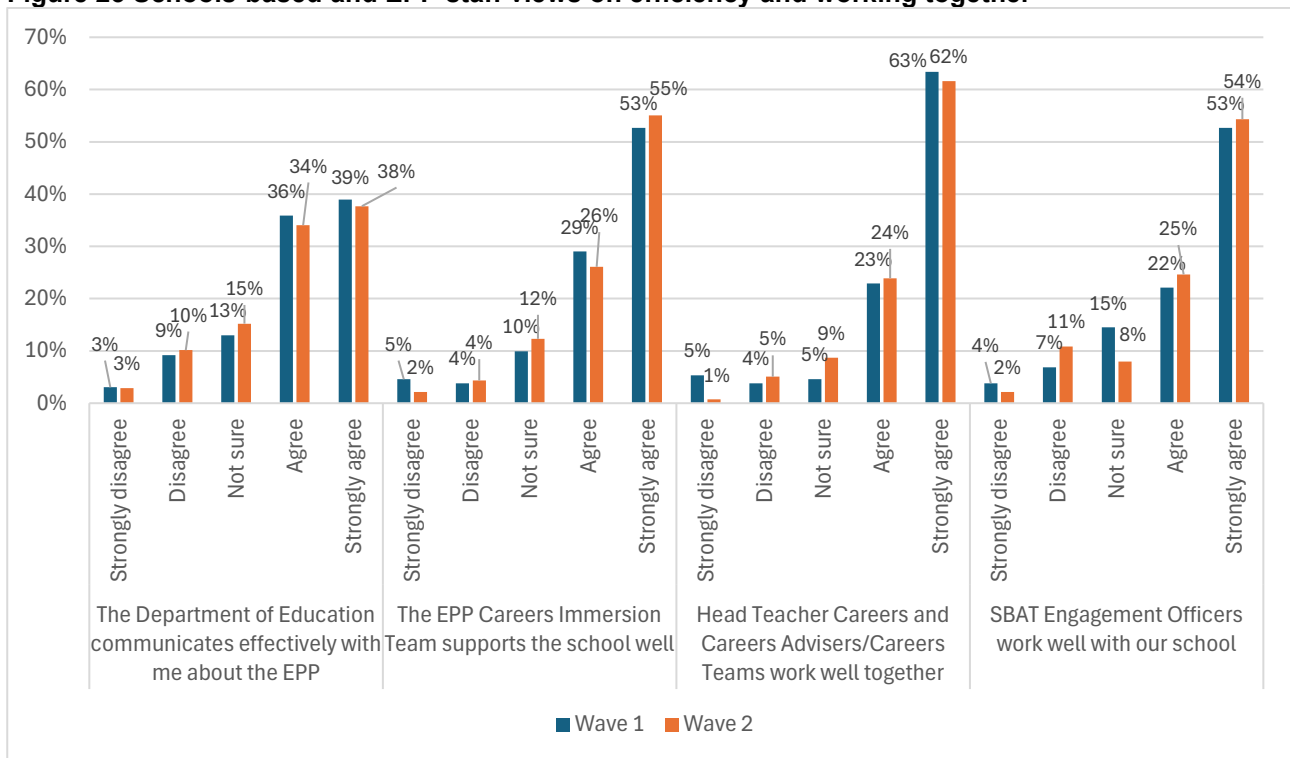
- The EPP has been implemented relatively efficiently, although there may not be optimum efficient utilisation of resources at all sites.
- Transport remains a challenge in rural and regional communities. Students cannot access public transport concessions for travel to and from out-of-school training facilities and workplaces.
- Schools need to follow best practice using economies of scale to make the most efficient use of resources via intra-regional coordination.
- External limitations, such as the limited range of courses or the number of available places in training (RTO) or TAFE courses, may be hindering the program's effectiveness.
- There is some overlap between the RIEP and EPP that may cause duplication of effort.

The EPP runs across regions and key staff such as the HTCs service several schools. Finding efficiencies around initiatives delivery, events delivered by external partners and transport/excursions is important to optimise resources.

### **4.7.1 Stakeholder surveys**

Schools-based EPP staff were asked some specific questions that went to efficiency. Figure 23 indicates high levels of agreement that the DoE, the different parts of the EPP and personnel were working effectively together.

**Figure 23 Schools-based and EPP staff views on efficiency and working together**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. All questions W1 (n=131) and W2 (n=138).

Text comments from the survey on efficiency and upskilling included:

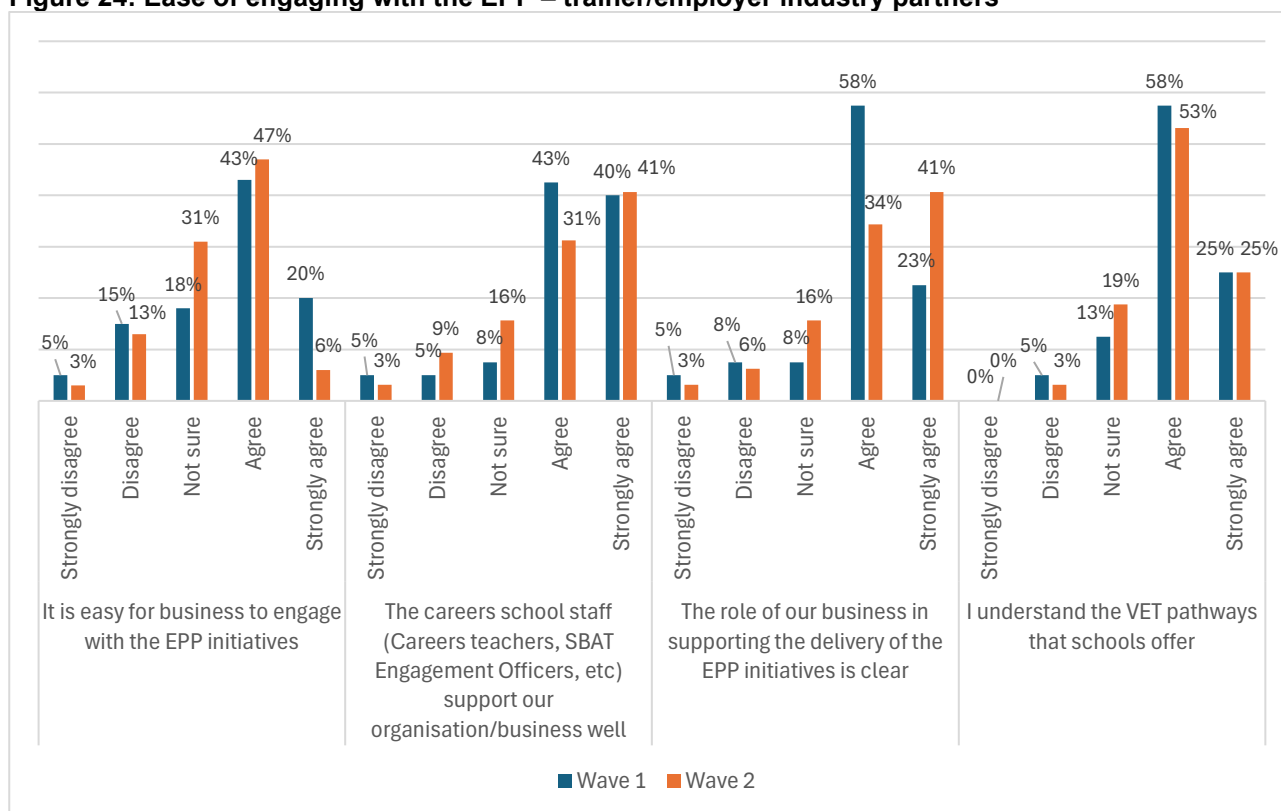
Face to face meetings. It is 100% more effective than emails. Approachability of our EPP reps is amazing. The fact they have administrative staff also means we are not burdened with additional tasks. (School staff),

I love the EPP initiative ... The upskilling of staff to be able to support students through the guidance and support of the Head Teacher Careers has to me been invaluable and the greatest impact on students. If staff capacity is built, then students reap the rewards of this. (school staff).

There were a minority of more critical comments in the baseline report about lack of communication regarding what was on offer to year groups, and about lack of staff cooperation in specific cases. However, by Wave 2 most schools did not share this person’s view about their school, and the EPP had become accepted and embedded.

The views of employers/trainers/industry partners on the ease of engaging with the EPP for their organisation/business are reported in Figure 24. These data indicate about half to two-thirds expressed agreement with statements that the program was easy to engage with.

**Figure 24: Ease of engaging with the EPP – trainer/employer industry partners**



Source: Stakeholder surveys. All questions W1(n=40) and W2 (n=32).

#### 4.7.2 Stakeholder focus groups/interviews

The following subsections summarise key themes from the two waves of focus groups with stakeholders at EPP schools, non-EPP schools and the DoE Leadership Governance Group, focusing on stakeholders’ views on whether EPP was implemented efficiently with best use of resources.

The initial round of stakeholder focus groups/interviews found the EPP was implemented efficiently with HTC’s responsible for several schools within a region, and HTC’s and schools sharing resources to leverage efficiencies. This included combined initiative sessions (like Job Readiness workshops, visits by VET Ambassadors) and joint school excursions/transport sharing.

#### Insights from EPP school sites

Schools were running the program smoothly, without any major issues. Two relevant contextual factors were recent budget cuts to schools and a pay rise for staff. In terms of efficiency in program delivery, it was not clear what the implications would be.

Obviously, last year financially we were well-equipped to have access to a lot of courses. I know this year there’s financial constraints across the whole Department they may infringe on some of those opportunities that we had last year from this year. But we can only come back next year and I can tell you if that’s been infringed. (School leader, EPP school)

Overall, staff members discussed three main systemic issues that affected the effective implementation of the program with best use of resources: transportation challenges, geographical inequalities and staffing issues.

**Transportation challenges.** As mentioned in Section 4.4.2, transport challenges were a consistent theme throughout the evaluation (in both waves), especially in rural and regional areas especially. In some instances, these challenges caused inefficiencies in the utilisation of opportunities and hindered the program's efficiency.

[W]e have schools that just can't do TAFE Start Your Future at all because they can't physically get the kids here. We've got schools that can't do some of the other programs because again they can't get them here. (EPP HTC)

[T]here's definitely difficulties because of transport and no quick fix ... Those little central schools might have a 10-seater or even a 22-seater bus, but they don't have the staff capacity to get the kids to there for the day. So, unless I can go and actually be the supervisor for the day, it just doesn't happen. (EPP HTC)

For most students, attending in-person classes required travelling to a TAFE campus. School staff highlighted the disparities in travel distances and transportation options that often affect students' access to EPP opportunities. In regional areas students face challenges such as their transport needs clashing with parents (having to go to work), infrequent public transport, petrol costs etc. EPP coordinators and schools did what they could to assist the older students obtain a drivers' licence. EPP HTCs have funds that can be used to buy Opal cards for students, but these can only be used for school travel, not for travel to places of training and workplaces.

While students went off-campus to do training at TAFEs and with other RTOs, there was more reference to use of online material delivery in Wave 2. While students accepted the combination of practical/face-to-face and online course modules, hands-on remained their preferred element (see Section 4.1.5). Similarly, some SBAT courses entailed attending in-person classes at a local TAFE, while others had an online component.

While there are no quick fixes for the range of transport challenges, section 6 includes some recommendations on this issue.

**Geographical inequalities.** Increasing resources are meant to produce greater equality of opportunity for remote, rural and regional schools, but the reality is that metro schools have greater access to a range of training opportunities, as an EPP staff member outlined:

Again, it's linked to funding but the apprenticeships and traineeships programs. So, we only got one course for the whole like we got offered one allocation of 10 students and so across a very big geographically area seven schools got 10 kids for one course for the year...The city schools got multiple, lots of numbers, multiple courses. (EPP HTC)

The program offers dedicated HTCs and other staff who provided consistency. There appeared to be retention of staff in these positions, but funding uncertainty means those in time-limited positions may be looking for other work or expecting to return to their 'home school' position. On the other hand, schools whose staff were seconded to the EPP had to backfill positions, often only to see those staff members have their EPP positions extended. This could be overcome by making these positions continuing (see recommendations).

Some HTC were managing upward of five schools, separated by considerable distances. For rural and regional HTCs this required extensive travel or remote contact online to save time. This may require a change to introduce a remote/rural formula for HTCs (see recommendations).

One school leader worried whether there would be enough sufficient GTOs and RTOs to support the program's expansion into Central and Far West NSW.

I can see them going West is do they have the GTO or RTOs to actually provide those courses? We're having difficulty where we are – imagine what it's going to be like in Dubbo ... (School leader, EPP school)

Labour markets are to a large extent local, especially for young people looking for their first job and living at home with parents/carers. To maximise efficiency, the EPP needs to support students through offerings related to three factors: what is currently available and in demand locally, students' preferences, and future/emerging industries and jobs.

**Staffing issues.** Staffing issues in schools, despite a recent pay rise, had not abated. A school leader mentioned difficulties in recruiting and retaining full-time teaching staff, with some switching to part-time or casualising to work fewer hours or to have more control over their work. This made it difficult for principals to fill EFT equivalents.

Duplication of program and functions, and effective communication and collaboration, are important considerations for efficiencies. As discussed in the baseline report, there are layers of programs and agencies (EPP, Careers NSW, RIEP, Skills NSW and TAFE) trying to achieve the same aims – to improve opportunities for young people in VET and employment and meet the needs of current and emerging industries. The NSW Government is currently conducting the VET review, which is expected to report in mid-2024.

### **Insights from non-EPP school sites**

Many of the issues were similar in non-EPP schools, including time and sufficient staffing levels to give students the careers advice they need, transport issues and student motivation challenges. The ratio of students to career advisors was noted as large. Careers advisors were often part-time and could not provide one-on-one or follow-up advice to students. Some positions were unfilled. Teachers in training, on placement, faced accommodation difficulties and some were reportedly living in caravan parks due to unaffordable local rental accommodation.

Although the schools' staffing situation had improved from the 'horror year' (as a school leader called it) of 2022, it was again mentioned that some schools had teachers resigning and coming back as casuals and refusing to perform certain functions such as playground duty. This was partially ascribed to the COVID pandemic, which saw many people reassessing their lives and choosing to work from home or work less than full-time.

Similarly to EPP schools, there were many motivated and engaged students at the non-EPP schools, including some who had made extraordinary efforts involving hours of travel. However, non-EPP careers and VET school staff also mentioned barriers due to lack of motivation or anxiety (see Section 4.3.2) – perhaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic experience, as it was mentioned that attendance rates had declined since 2020.



## Insights from the LGG

In terms of efficiency, the EPP attempts to address skill shortages (as well as the lifetime costs of school leavers who disengage from work, further education and training). An LGG member commented on the value for money in 'growing our own' next generation of skilled trades and professionals:

So, on a macro, we're not employing teachers from overseas. We're not employing electricians from overseas, or carpenters, or whatever. We get those trades that we're looking for from overseas, we're growing them in-house. Obviously, on a macro scale, that has got to be a lot better for our economy. (LGG member)

LGG members, some of whom are schools-based, mentioned similar inefficiency themes such as problems accessing TAFE courses, because they were not run in their region.

I could give you a class of kids in a heartbeat who want to do electrotechnology but we are not located in any public transport route to get my kids anywhere near the TAFE. So they rely on parents having to take time off work, because of their age they're not yet licensed drivers and their parents have to take time off to get them there every week. They last about three weeks before parents go, I can't take time off work every week to get you there, you're going to have to pull out and they don't do it. (LGG member)

The immobility of TAFE was mentioned as a drag on efficiency. As one school-based LGG member stated, 'if the TAFE teacher was just willing to come to my school and deliver it, we would be successful in having 20 more electricians pumped out of my school every single year'. This goes to the wider issue of the revitalisation of the VET sector, how TAFE can best deliver courses throughout NSW, including remote and rural areas, and how the schools–TAFE interface works (or does not work). As mentioned elsewhere, the outcomes of the current VET review in NSW will be highly relevant to the EPP.

## 4.8 To what extent has EPP achieved its short and medium-term expected outcomes?

- The EPP has satisfactorily achieved short-term outcomes and shows growth.
- Further, EPP schools are enrolling a higher percentage of students in VET subjects and SBATs with a faster rate of growth than non-EPP control schools.

The EPP has a number of reportable outcomes over the short and medium term. This report's timeframe covers the short-term outcomes. As the medium-term outcomes are measured 2023–24, and the long-term outcomes 2025–26, these cannot be reported at this time (mid-2024).

In addition to data analysis of students engaged in EPP initiatives year-on-year, the Department supplied supplementary data showing some key indicators for EPP schools, non-EPP control schools (see Appendix A for a list), and for all non-EPP schools (note – all school data is from NSW Government schools and excludes private schools). This provided a second means of analysing short-term impacts.

### 4.8.1 Short-term outcomes – changes over time

Table 7 shows progress against short-term outcome indicators.

**Table 7. Short-term outcomes – baselines, change (2022; 2023)**

Short-Term (2022)	2022 baselines	2023 baselines	% increase from 2022 to 2023
<b>Students are engaged in the range of initiatives that build awareness of vocational career opportunities.</b> No. students and schools participating in initiatives	33,131	58,264	76%
<b>Students are supported to stay engaged in learning through participation in a vocational training options that complement existing study/courses.</b> No. students engaged in two referral-based initiatives ( <i>Back in the Game, TAFE Early School Leavers</i> )	Back in the Game, 272.  TAFE Early School Leavers, 165  Total: 437	Back in the Game, 834.  TAFE Early School Leavers, 426  Total: 1260	188%
<b>Students are provided greater access to School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships while still at school.</b> No. of SBAT commencements	1518	1771	17%
<b>Students have greater access to career advice and support to engage in further study and career pathways beyond school.</b> No. of career events delivered by CITs	225*	508*	126%
<b>Employers have increased access to students interested in vocational career pathways through SBATs.</b> No. of employers supporting SBAT engagement	486**	600**	23%
<b>Greater awareness of vocational study and career pathways available.</b> No. of VET course enrolments by students that select VET subjects for HSC	11581***	11975****	3%

Notes: # The program no longer categorises initiatives as core or needs-based. All initiatives are available to 148 schools \*'CIT events' only counts CIT career events involving students, and excludes CIT meeting, training and reporting. \*\*Noting that this is the number of employers we have listed and that some employers use the one name but have multiple delivery sites. For example, Hunter New England Health take on 100 SBATs all at different locations, for this request we have counted them as 1 one employer. Mentioning this so it can be noted and when we are asked for the next round of data we are made aware of it. \*\*\* Note on No of VET course enrolments by students that selected VET subjects – The above data is the number of course enrolments by students who selected a VET subject in an EPP school for Year 11, 2022 and therefore will be completing their HSC in that subject in the 2023 HSC. \*\*\*\* Note on No of VET course enrolments by students that selected VET subjects – The above data is the number of course enrolments by students who selected a VET subject in an EPP school for Year 11, 2023, and therefore will be completing their HSC in that subject in the 2024 HSC.

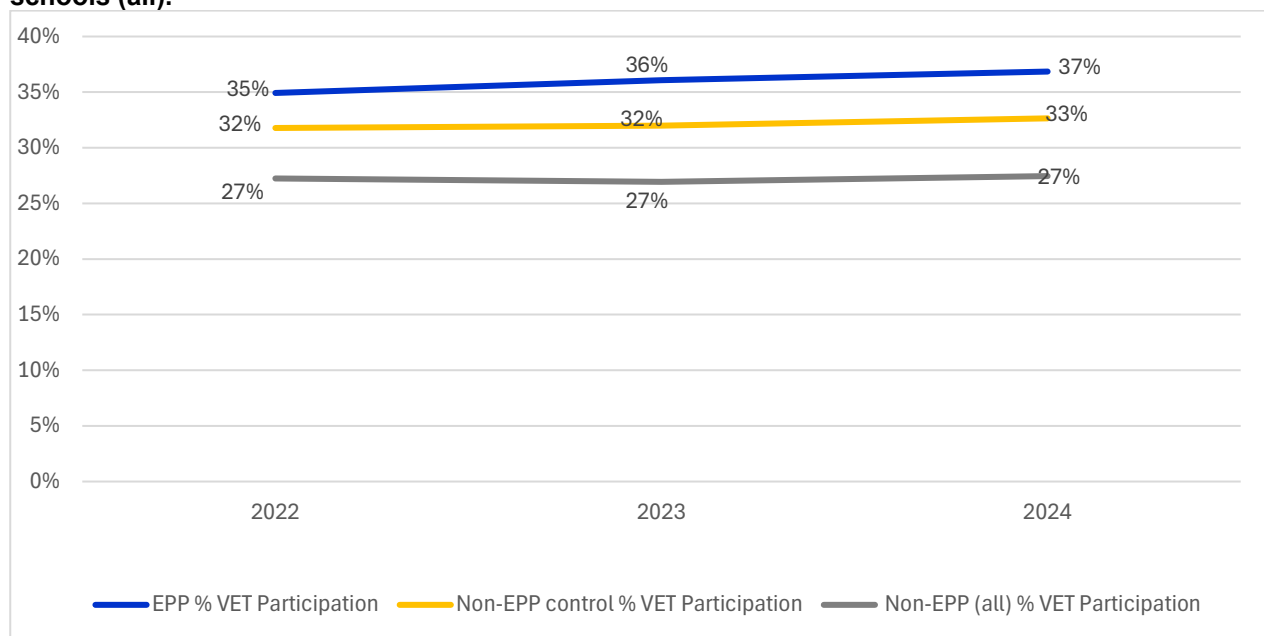
## Supplementary data on short-term outcomes – EPP schools and control schools

A supplementary source of short-term program outcomes data was provided by the Department in August 2024. This data shows enrolments in EVET, SVET, and SBATs for EPP schools, the non-EPP school control group (the same control group used for the PSDE survey data analysis see Appendix A for schools list), and all non-EPP schools (government sector schools only, for years 2022, 2023 and 2024. This data can only measure VET indicators that are common across all schools, as EVET, SVET and SBATs are available to all school students in NSW Government schools. The hypothesis was that the EPP schools would have more students engaged in these activities compared with the similar control group for non-EPP schools. For completion, we have also included all non-EPP schools as well, however this includes high-achieving schools where most students are academically oriented, with few students enrolling in VET subjects and SBATs.

The data analysis reveals that the EPP schools are engaging a higher percentages of students in EVET, SVET and SBATs, than non-EPP control group schools. This is a positive finding. We also included all non-EPP schools, however, it is important to note that this includes more 'academic' schools where students may be less likely to do VET and SBATs, as they are more focused in university pathways.

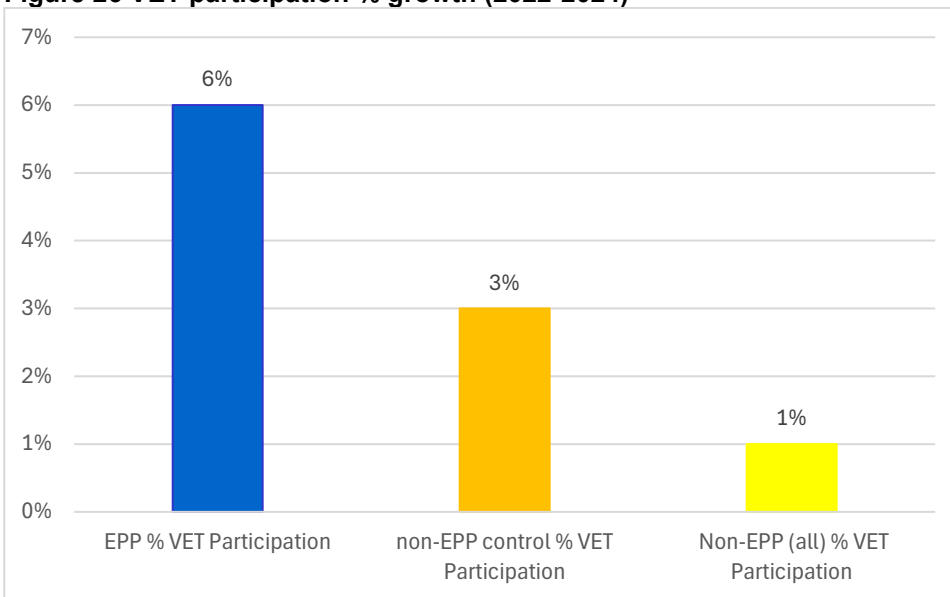
Figure 25 indicates that higher percentages of students are doing VET subjects in the EPP schools (the blue line) versus the non-EPP control schools (the yellow line) (there is a 3-4% gap). Non-EPP schools (all) (the grey line) have a lower percentage for VET enrolments than the EPP schools and non-EPP control schools. There is an 8-10% gap between non-EPP schools (all) and the EPP schools.

**Figure 25 VET participation %, 2022, 2023, 2024, EPP schools, non-EPP control schools, non-EPP schools (all).**



Source: DoE data, August 2024. Total sum of total enrolments 2022 n=108605; 2023 n=104413; 2024 n=107484.

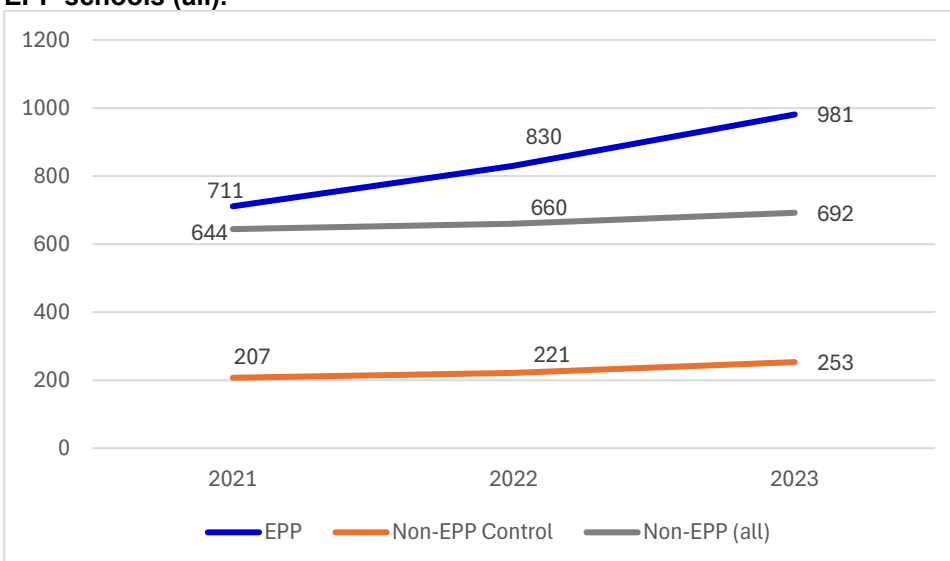
**Figure 26 VET participation % growth (2022-2024)**



Source: DoE data, August 2024. Total sum of total enrolments 2022 n =108605; 2023 n=104413; 2024 n=107484.

Another indicator is SBAT commencements. Analysing numbers, the EPP schools show a trend of increasing numbers of SBAT commencements over time, rising from 711 in 2021 to 981 in 2023. The non-EPP control schools have not seen the same numerical growth trend, and nor have the non-EPP schools (all).

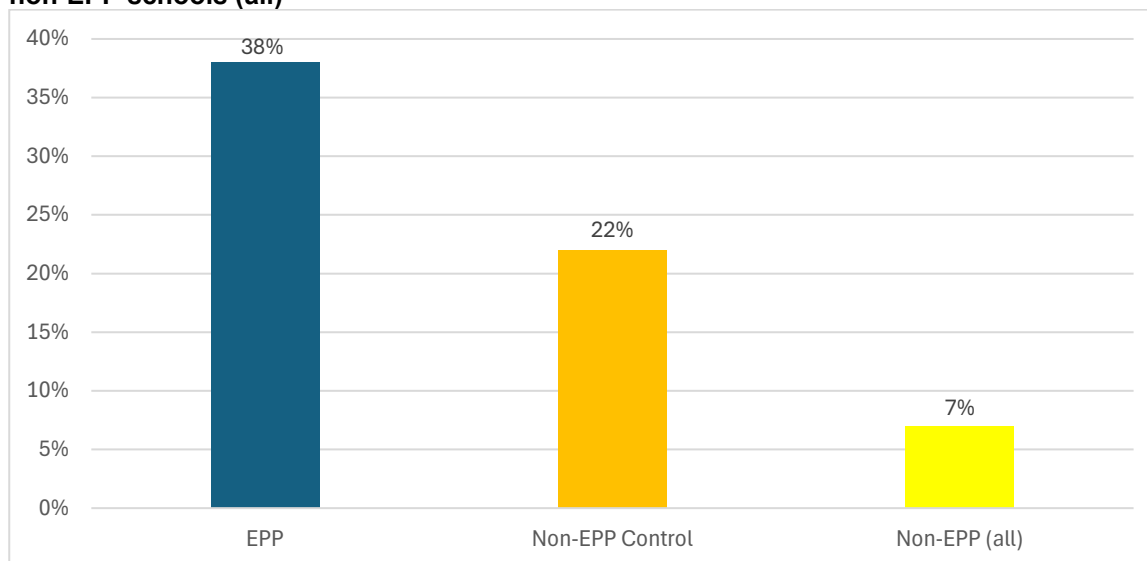
**Figure 27 SBAT commencements (numbers), 2021, 2022, 2023, EPP schools, control schools, non-EPP schools (all).**



Source: DoE data, August 2024. SBATs 2021 n=1562; 2022 n=1711, 2023 n=1926.

Figure 28 shows SBAT commencement percentage growth rates for the time interval 2021-2023. This shows a similar trend, but instead of the percentage of growth in SBAT commencements, Again, EPP schools are outpacing both the non-EPP control group and all non-EPP schools.

**Figure 28 SBAT commencements, % growth 2021-2023, EPP schools, non- EPP control schools, non-EPP schools (all)**



Source: DoE data, August 2024. SBATs 2021 n=1562; 2022 n=1711, 2023 n=1926

In summary, the program data from the DoE indicates numerical increases in students engaged in various EPP initiatives over time. The supplementary data supplied by the DoE allowed for comparison in VET enrolments and SBAT commencements across NSW Government schools and showed EPP schools are enrolling a higher percentage of students in VET subjects and SBATs with a faster rate of growth than non-EPP control schools.

## 4.9 What are the major learnings, strengths and areas for improvement?

The section below summarises the learnings, strengths and areas for improvement emerging from the data collected from stakeholders via surveys, focus groups and interviews with key stakeholder groups.

### Learnings

- **‘Success’ outcomes (KPIs) may need to be reconsidered.** ‘Success’ is commonly thought to be (and measured) as Year 12 completion and going to university. However some schools felt other KPIs, like the number of students going into apprentices and traineeships post-school, should be equally as valued.
- **The proactivity of key staff (HTCs and SBATEOs) is crucial.** Staff with wide range of experience, including in trades, industry and former teachers, bring valuable life experience, skills, practical knowledge and networking but need job security and recognition. Proactivity among these staff was a key attribute and evident in their work to ascertain what schools and students wanted, identify what resources and contacts were needed to get there, and then carry it out. Continuing roles for HTCs would be desirable.
- **Coordination and collaboration between EPP program staff and other staff within schools is very important** for delivering the program for students. This can be affected by staff shortages within schools, which flows on to EPP program delivery, including taking students on excursions.

- **EPP initiatives should remain, at their core, practical**, with a strong face-to-face and hands-on element, supplemented with some online delivery.
- **EPP initiatives content needs to retain relevance.** The job landscape is rapidly changing – some jobs may become redundant in the near future while other industries are expanding. If an EPP initiative is not offering relevant content and opportunities that can lead to employment or further training, then that particular item should be removed. The work of RIEP, which is predictive of future industry and employment needs, is useful.
- **A new direction for VET and TAFE.** TAFE is integral to the EPP and should be better serving its local communities, and especially the school communities in which it sits. TAFEs currently cannot offer a range of courses or sufficient student places. Students are having to travel long distances as local TAFEs do not provide the courses required. Schools complained that they could fill entire courses but were only allocated a few places for students. The entire TAFE sector is under-resourced. We expect the NSW Government's VET review will help address these issues.
- **Having access to and/or proximity to a TAFE campus was a definite advantage.** Metropolitan and regional centre students had more accessibility to TAFE, other RTOs and a range of courses. Smaller community students were disadvantaged by transport barriers or lack of mobility of TAFE or RTO trainers coming to them. This caused under-utilisation of school VET spaces and restrictions on choice, and students were missing out.
- **Student anxiety, lack of motivation and resilience** is an ongoing challenge. We heard that school attendance is still on a downward trend (compared to pre-pandemic), and some students struggled with motivation and psychological barriers. Educators agreed that this has been more noticeable since the height of the pandemic.
- **Pressure from employers** can lead to students exiting school when they cannot manage combining study and work. Employers can be inflexible and demand student work on shifts that clash with their school day or require them to work more or full-time hours.
- **Very few SSP schools have a careers adviser allocation.** The EPP coordinators work with careers advisers and VET teachers primarily within schools; however, due to the way they are funded and resources allocated, SSP schools do not have these positions, and so initially could not work out how to (or who should) liaise with the EPP coordinator.
- **Program resourcing and school staff shortages.** Schools face budget cuts from 2024 (however, staff have been given a pay rise). Resources are taken away from schools or EPP activities are cut back if VET or careers staff are needed for other teaching due to staff shortages. While the program is supposed to resource itself via extra staffing, school staff still complained about needing more staff for EPP. Principals complained about staff retention and overwork as well as staff leaving or casualising themselves. In non-EPP schools careers advisors were part-time and did not have the ability to conduct individual career consultations with students at different intervals.
- **Onerous retraining and reporting requirements for VET subject teachers.** This may reduce the number of teachers willing to step into VET subject roles.
- **EPP overlap and duplication with other programs.** There was some overlap between the EPP and RIEP; however, RIEP was highly valued by both EPP and non-EPP schools.

There may be inefficiencies in some regions with multiple players networking with employers and industry but not coordinating effectively.

## Strengths

- **Providing students with opportunities and pathways through experiential learning.** The EPP offers students practical skills where they ‘do’, not just listen or read. Students valued the out-of-school EPP experiences most highly, while employers valued that students were getting a taste of the workplace, as well as qualifications like white cards/competencies of various sorts. Complaints were reserved for experiences that were too ‘school-like’ or had too much online vs face-to-face content.
- **Novelty value and variety.** Several staff thought bringing people from outside the school and taking students into non-school environments engaged them due to the novelty factor alone, making them more receptive to messaging.
- **Supporting SBAT students to meet requirements.** Both teachers and peers in some schools supported students to ensure they were progressing with requirement, including online work. Having a dedicated space for SBAT students, as Grafton High School does, was seen as building peer support.
- **Support for EPP in schools** is stronger and schools not currently in the EPP wanted to be.
- **Supportive workplaces.** Students explained how valued they felt in the workplace and enjoyed being treated as one of the team, not as ‘a schoolkid’ or judged by their age.
- **The EPP fosters self-efficacy and behavioural improvement.** The EPP, through working with students individually and based on their interests and strengths, sets them up for success. This can produce outstanding results for students who were disengaging at school once they are hooked into a pathway of their own choosing that suits them. Negative behaviours often diminish as students experience self-efficacy and experience responsibility in a training or workplace environment. Students are more able to exit school on their own terms rather than feeling like they ‘failed’. HTC and careers advisers tailor support and opportunities based on students’ aspirations and abilities.
- **The EPP is broadening in scope and scale, and involving more and more students.** Program data shows improvement in engagement from students, and there is some evidence a greater range of opportunities are available although the TAFE–school interface remains in need of attention.
- **Overcoming geographical isolation and broadening horizons.** For remote and Far West schools, the EPP could be used to broaden students’ horizons beyond their town, where there are likely to be few job opportunities for them.
- **Staff proactivity is key to success**, especially that of the HTCs and SBATEOs. Skilled staff had a wide range of experience including in trades, industry and as former teachers, bringing life experience, skills, practical knowledge and networking, but proactivity was the key attribute for success in finding out what schools and students wanted, identifying what resources and contacts were needed to get there, assessing local labour market needs and

realities, and then working with all parties to obtain the best possible opportunities and outcomes for students.

- **Effective collaboration and coordination** between EPP program staff and schools, and EPP staff and external partners (trainers, employers, industry partners), delivers the best possible program for students, training organisations and industries. Further, coordination across schools within a region, and between regions, leveraged efficiencies, streamlined logistics and ensured the best use of program resources, affording students a wider range of experiences.
- **Inclusivity of the EPP and promotion to all students.** The EPP provides opportunities for students from Aboriginal and diverse cultural backgrounds, and females who may try out a male-dominated industry. It caters for students who may have had academic expectations placed on them based on outdated understandings of credentials and university pathways, when they would be better suited to a VET pathway. Opportunities were clearly promoted to students via various channels. Another vector of promotion was peers, as students told their friends and siblings about their EPP experiences.
- **Local and relatable role models.** The VET Ambassador program was successful when local, successful people were the role models. Students found them 'relatable' and saw through this modelling that they could potentially start as an apprentice or trainee, then become a business owner. Students were keen to attend these sessions and ensured they were at school if they knew it was on.
- **Supporting students into unfamiliar environments.** Teachers and EPP staff accompanying students the first time they went to an unfamiliar environment was very important for easing students into training and workplace environments, helping them feel comfortable. This initial 'hand-holding' was valued by students who then felt comfortable going to the new environment with peers or alone the next time.
- **Transport – flexible resourcing and economies of scale.** The EPP has a transport cost component to assist schools in providing transport when needed in various modes, from small vehicles to large buses. Schools and EPP coordinators worked to create a critical mass of students for an excursion or for a training course. This was important for regional schools. The EPP has linked students to the Driver Licensing Access Program (DLAP<sup>14</sup>) and Services NSW to help older students get their licenses. The fact that students cannot access public transport subsidisation for travel to TAFE, training or workplaces, as they can to and from school, is an anomaly that needs to be addressed.
- **Employers registering their own RTO,** where none exists, so they can take on trainees and apprentices. An example that was mentioned is Faircloth and Reynolds (Coffs Harbour). This may be a good strategy to discuss with large employers in Western NSW areas, where the EPP is expanding but there are few RTOs.

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<sup>14</sup> The DLAP is a free program providing support to people in NSW who face extra challenges in getting a license.



## Areas for improvement

Stakeholders discussed ideas for improvement of the EPP, mainly suggesting broader scope/range of offerings, and expansion of the program within NSW schools. Below we summarise suggestions derived from thematic analysis of stakeholder surveys (free text) and focus groups/interviews.

- **Combining study and traineeships and apprenticeships.** There may be room to improve the way students' weeks are structured. Some suggested moving back to having a 'common TAFE/training day' and/or combining time out of school with online learning so that a student can be engaged in an SBAT which does not take them out of their curriculum studies for a day or two a week. To some extent, online modules have assisted students balance their school work with training.
- **Reviewing VET teaching requirements.** Teachers may be disincentivised to deliver VET subjects due to the perceived onerous training/retraining and monitoring of student competencies required. As such, VET offerings may be limited by teachers willing to deliver them – for example, hospitality is delivered in most schools because home economics teachers want to teach it.
- **Improving transport options.** Access to, or lack of, transport is a key facilitator or barrier for students trying to get to a place of training or apprenticeship. It is especially challenging in regional, rural and remote areas. If the aim of the EPP is to reduce inequalities of opportunity that are spatially based, then more work needs to be done on (a) ensuring students have more available transport options (including using funding to obtain Opal cards for them or changing rules around free student transport to include places of training/employment) and (b) getting TAFE and RTO trainers/mobile training facilities to smaller schools.
- **HTCs and uncertain employment.** At the moment the HTC positions are 'on loan' from base schools, taking some teaching staff out of their ordinary roles and therefore necessitating backfilling. Now that the program has been extended, this again impacts on staffing when a HTC was previously in a substantive school role. Longer-term funding and designated HTC positions would address this issue.
- **Low pay for apprentices.** The differential between apprentice pay, and getting paid as a casual in, for example, hospitality can be significant. Raising the pay of apprentices could mitigate against students leaving school early to take up employment.
- **Continuing to address schools staffing shortages** and supporting student teacher placements (including accommodation supplements).
- **Inclusion in the EPP.** Initially, inclusion criteria were set including Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) score, Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) below 1000, proximity to TAFE, local youth unemployment levels, and proportion of regions classified as regional, rural or remote. In 2024, it was announced the EPP funding would be extended for a further two years and to 21 new schools in four new regions - Far West, Far North West, Mid North Coast and Far South Coast. The non-EPP school staff felt their schools, sometimes in the same region as EPP schools, should be included based on formal criteria rather than opt-in or 'politics'.

- **Include younger students.** Stakeholders mentioned the program should be extended to younger students – some suggested as early as Years 5, 6 or 7.
- **Improve TAFE and the TAFE–school interface.** More TAFE places could be made available in courses, and courses could be run more often. The interface between schools and TAFEs needs to be better coordinated to support the structure of the timetable so students do not miss core subject classes. Further TAFE mobility could be improved so school facilities could be better utilised by TAFE teachers, and mobile TAFE units could visit more rural locations.
- **Student skills training.** In the open text answers on possible areas of improvement about half of employers/trainers/industry partners twenty participants (of 40 that responded in Wave 1) mentioned that improvement could happen in relation to the students’ soft skills, such as communication skills, and the students’ general preparedness, referring to their English and mathematical skills. Some participants also mentioned the need to improve the students’ learning around commerce and running a business.
- **Schools staffing challenges.** Although these have eased since 2022, a broader and ongoing issue is overcoming school staff shortages. The evaluators recognise teacher recruitment and retention is an ongoing challenge for DoE.
- **Student engagement and attendance** challenges remain ongoing.
- **Quality assurance framework.** A quality assurance framework should be developed for the EPP program. This should include 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. Further, this should be subject to data monitoring (e.g. via an online student placement report form).
- **Social and cultural barriers** also need to be taken account of (such as unwillingness to leave a certain area; girls travelling unaccompanied on public transport being viewed negatively in some cultures). Special needs students need extra support and clear instructions.
- **Streamlining paperwork.** SBAT-related paperwork can be onerous for employers as they perceive a great deal of paperwork for little benefit. While school staff argued that streamlining is required and supported taking some of the burden away from employers, no one was sure what the solution was. Possibly the DoE could run a focus group with employers on EPP requirements.
- **Data and outcomes monitoring.** Better monitoring of long-term outcomes post-school is needed. This is the only way to know whether programs are making an impact. While the PSDE survey is a source of data, it is point-in-time, soon after school leaving, and not longitudinal.

Non-EPP schools also mentioned a range of improvements for themselves – apart from wishing to be part of the EPP, schools staff mentioned:

- **More Careers Teacher staffing capacity** to meet one-on-one with students at particular pivotal points in Years 10, 11 and 12.
- **Up-to-date information for students on Smart and Skilled** (fee-free scholarship training courses) and on the range of other scholarships that exist.
- **A fairer and more evidence-based way for including schools in the EPP.** There was a perception at some schools that their school had missed out but should be in the program – indeed, sometimes all other schools close by were in it whereas their school was not despite being socioeconomically similar.



Source: EPP, DoE

**‘It’s just like getting my hands dirty, like not doing much like paperwork, because I hate just sitting down listening, writing on a pen and paper. I just prefer to do practical works, like getting outside and like doing, like making things.’ (EPP student)**

## 5 Conclusion

The findings indicate that, overall, the program is successful and has been implemented as intended, although there is still room for improvement and adaptation.

The HTCs are uniquely placed to network with employers and trainers, and these extra resources in staffing were crucial as regular Careers Teachers do not have time to engage effectively with employers and trainers. The RIEP officers provided important supplementary support and industry liaison.

The program has been enthusiastically received by students, school staff, parents, and employers and industry partners.

A particular strength of the program is that it is inclusive and has engaged students from a range of backgrounds and abilities, learning styles and cognitive abilities. Practical 'learning by doing' was strongly emphasised by students in the EPP as their preference.

Non-EPP schools included in the evaluation sought to join the program and wanted access to the extra resources this would bring. Students in non-EPP schools were also getting some effective VET education and careers advice.

Supplementary data from DoE on VET and SBAT enrolments allowing for comparison in VET activities across NSW Government schools between EPP schools, non-EPP control group schools, and all non-EPP schools, showed a trend of higher percentages of enrolment in VET subjects and SBAT commencements, and a faster growth rate, at the EPP schools compared to the other two groups.

However, school leaver outcomes appeared to be very similar for students in matched non-EPP schools. The findings on outcomes for school leavers based on analysis of the PSDE survey showed little difference for school leavers from EPP schools versus a matched control group of non-EPP school leavers, with EPP schools doing slightly better than control schools on some outcomes, negligible difference on others and less well than control schools for a small number. There was only one statistically significant impact – the take-up of employment by school leavers from non-EPP schools was statistically significantly lower than for the EPP school leavers.

It is important to note that the EPP has been fully operational for a relatively short period, and PSDE data is a 'snapshot' in time rather than longitudinal data. Further, post-school longitudinal data collection and analysis is required to better ascertain impacts of the EPP program on outcomes.

Other factors (such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, macroeconomic factors, labour market and trends related to VET) appear to influence outcomes. Additionally, EPP is still a relatively new program and post-school outcomes may only be apparent once the program is fully embedded in EPP schools.

Although it has been implemented effectively there are a number of ways the program can be improved. These include expanding the range of TAFE offerings and place numbers; using the existing criteria to identify schools that would most benefit from the EPP and encouraging those schools to opt in; addressing transport barriers (especially for regional students); addressing HTC employment arrangements; and developing a more rigorous quality assurance framework.

The main challenges are the lack of a range of TAFE courses and limited places in some areas, as well as limited industry placements. The expansion of fee-free TAFE places is positive but there are still challenges for high school students in terms of range of TAFE offerings and the number of earmarked places, especially in rural and regional settings.

Employer reluctance was noted by stakeholders as a challenge. SBAT 'paperwork' was seen as onerous, and young people need the appropriate certificates (e.g. the general construction induction card, or 'white card').

Cultural change at the community level (and within schools) is required given the continued perceived superiority of university pathways over VET pathways. This translates through to school KPIs – outcomes which are positive for a student. For example, getting a full-time job or going into TAFE are not valued as highly as a university outcome.

Schools face significant staffing challenges, especially to recruit and retain VET teachers. The staffing arrangements for EPP are also a challenge and the short-term funding creates uncertainty for the program.

The conclusion of this evaluation is that EPP is achieving its objectives and is highly valued by stakeholders. However, better quality longitudinal data on school leavers' outcomes is required to better measure the EPP impact into the future.

## 6 Recommendations

**A. Enhancing TAFE–school collaboration.** The TAFE–school interface is key to the success of the program and VET education in general. In the context of the current VET review, the NSW Government may need to consider increasing the range of available TAFE courses and places earmarked for high school students. TAFE offerings (more broadly) should be aligned to industry futures, local industry needs and the evolving nature of young people’s interest and aptitudes. TAFE attendance should be considered a ‘common’ day, if possible, to minimise disruption to student learning. Access to qualified trainers and the minimum number of students (15) required by TAFE NSW to deliver Start Your Future courses and the Head Start initiative are often barriers to student engagement in more remote areas of NSW. The Department should negotiate with TAFE NSW to determine a consistent framework that facilitates appropriate staffing, to enable course participation/modified course delivery with fewer students from RRR schools.

**B. Review of similar programs.** VET programs and other programs within the Department aiming for similar outcomes could be reviewed to identify any elements of overlap and streamline to avoid confusion at the school level (i.e. VET and EPP school programs, RIEP, Careers NSW, Training Services NSW and any other similar programs). This review can also identify any gaps for further development of other types of VET programs.

**C. Ongoing roles for EPP Head Teachers Careers.** HTC’s are essentially on loan from their substantive positions in schools at the discretion of principals. These officers can be recalled at any time, posing a risk to EPP service delivery. The Department should consider making these roles permanent (ongoing), enabling program consistency and backfilling of vacated positions in schools.

**D. Review the current human resources ratio for remote area schools.** Current HTC-to-school ratio across all EPP schools is a uniform 1:7. School challenges are greater in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) locations. Additional resources in RRR areas can add value to career learning and vocational education opportunities for students. The Department could review the current ratio and consider including fewer schools in a group in remote areas.

**E. Development of a quality assurance framework.** A monitoring framework to support quality assurance should be developed, encompassing the range and number of EPP offerings, student feedback and satisfaction surveys, ‘spot’ interviews with student post-activity/work experience, and monitoring of the quality of apprenticeship and traineeship providers. For SBATs, this should include reporting mechanisms where (a) students are not gaining knowledge and skills in the workplace setting, and (b) occupational health and safety standards are not being adhered to.

**F. Socially and culturally responsive mentoring.** EPP should provide socially and culturally responsive mentoring and support for students and families. This includes addressing economic, motivational, and cultural and language barriers that may hinder students from exploring new experiences or accessing opportunities beyond their immediate communities/areas.

**G. Transportation support for regional and rural areas.** Transport can be a barrier, especially in RRR areas. Schools should be encouraged to consider economies of scale across regions in providing transport for students. This may include schools-based vehicles or using existing funds to hire smaller vehicles. Furthermore, students need to be able use school travel cards for free travel to workplaces and associated workplace training. Funding allowances could be considered for RRR school parents/carers and students. This could include reminding teachers they can use

funds to purchase Opal cards (pre-loaded with credit). Another useful allowance could petrol vouchers to overcome the costs of public or private transport to training or workplaces.

**H. Better access to VET subjects at schools.** Some schools have training facilities that are underused because they cannot recruit staff to provide those subjects due to the general issue that VET teacher training and administrative requirements to maintain accreditation are onerous. Services and training could be brought into schools, utilising existing resources to deliver TAFE courses in RRR locations. Mobile training units could be additionally utilised in areas where technical learning spaces are not available.

**I. More reliable funding.** The short-term nature of the EPP funding and the secondment of HTCs from base schools create uncertainty and challenges for some EPP schools. If the funding period were extended it would enable EPP schools to fully embed the program into their mainstream activities and recruit appropriate staff.



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# Appendix A Methods and Samples

## Stakeholder Survey

The sample size achieved for the survey was 931, above an expected return rate of 10–15% of approximately 7200 possible respondents. For the focus groups/interviews at the 20 deep dive sites, inclusion of students and school staff/EPP staff was consistent with the sampling target, but n=267 was short of the target (n=316). Due to ethics requirements that limited the fieldwork timeframe, following up with busy parents who were employed during business hours or had limited time, and trainers/employers/industry partners at all sites, was challenging. In particular, it proved challenging to organise focus groups with these two stakeholder groups, and some had to be done as individual interviews, which was more time-consuming.

**Table 8 Summary of numbers and percentages of participants in evaluation (primary data collection)**

Stakeholder group	Wave 1 Survey participants (no., %)		Wave 1 Focus groups/interview participants (no., %)		Wave 2 Survey participants (no., %)		Wave 2 Focus groups/interview participants EPP schools (no., %) Schools n=20		Wave 2 Focus groups/interview participants Non-EPP schools (no., %) Schools n=11	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
School students in Year 11 and aged 16 years and over	509	55%	101	38%	552	58%	26	27%	18	19%
Parents/carers	184	19%	22	8%	200	21%	n/a			
School staff and non-school-based staff	179	19%	97	36%	166	17%	29	31%	15	16%
Trainers/employers/industry partners	59	6%	33	12%	36	4%	n/a			
DoE central office staff/Leadership Governance Group	n/a	n/a	14	5%	n/a	n/a	7	8%		
Subtotals	932	100%	267		954	100%	95		100%	
<b>TOTAL – ALL PARTICIPANTS</b>										<b>2248</b>

### Stakeholder surveys

Research team stakeholder surveys were distributed at W1 and W2. The questions remained the same to allow for comparison.

The survey was distributed to EPP schools throughout NSW. We monitored which school communities responded for Waves 1 and 2.

- In Wave 1, 116 of 148 (77%) EPP school communities participated (i.e. at least one stakeholder returned a survey from that school community).
- By Wave 2, 141 of 148 (95%) of EPP school communities participated (i.e. at least one stakeholder returned a survey from that school community).

Response rates by stakeholder group are indicated below.

**Table 9 Stakeholder surveys – response rates**

	Estimated no. of survey invites	W1 Responses no.	W1 Response rates	Estimated no. of survey invites	W2 Responses no.	W2 Response rates
School student in year 11 and aged 16 years and over	14697	510	3.5%	14697	552	3.8%
Parent/carer	14697	184	1.3%	14697	200	1.4%
School-based staff member or a non-school-based staff member	740	179	24%	740	166	22%
Employer, training organisation, service provider or other industry partner	136	59	43.4%	128	36	28.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>29605</b>	<b>932</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>29600</b>	<b>954</b>	<b>3.2%</b>

**Table 10 Surveys – composition of stakeholder participants**

Stakeholder group	Wave 1 %	Wave 1 no.	Wave 2 %	Wave 2 no.
I'm a school student in year 11 and aged 16 years and over	55%	510	58%	552
I'm a parent/carer	20%	184	21%	200
I'm a school-based staff member or a non-school-based staff member	19%	179	17%	166
I am an employer, training organisation, service provider or other industry partner	6%	59*	4%	36
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>932</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>954</b>

Source: Stakeholders survey.

### EPP program data, supplementary data

The DoE provided EPP program data from the first year of operation to 2024. This was analysed using simple descriptive statistics. DoE provided some supplementary data on VET and SBAT engagement allowing for comparison of participation rates in EPP schools, a control group (the same control group used by the researchers for the PSDE analysis) and all NSW government schools. This was analysed using simple descriptive statistics.

## Post School Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) Surveys

CESE provided the evaluation team with PSDE survey data for Year 12 completers and early school leavers. The selected years were: 2019 (pre-EPP), 2020 (pre-EPP) and 2023 (post-EPP). The analysis focused on six outcome indicators of post-school student destinations, (a) education in Bachelors' degree, (b) education in VET, (c) training/apprenticeship, (d) employment (both full-time and part-time), (e) looking for work (LFW), and (f) 'not in the labour force, education or training' (NILFET).

### Method - PSDE survey data analysis

The 148 EPP schools (the intervention group) was matched to a group of non-EPP control group schools (see Table 11, below). Some schools appeared more than once in the control group because there were not 148 individual schools that fitted the matching criteria.

The following explains the approach used to select these.

- Step 1: Statistical modelling, known as propensity score matching (PSM), was conducted to match the EPP schools to non-EPP schools based on geolocation (latitudes, longitudes, LGA) and ICSEA. Computer program R (Package 'Matching') was used in this process.
- Step 2: Checking the modelling outcomes to ensure that the matching was appropriately done in terms of geolocation and ICSEA.
- Step 3: Fine-tuning adjustment to replace some control schools for additional considerations such as Special schools, Performing Schools, ICSEA and neighbourhood characteristics (e.g. coastal vs. inland).

Note 1. Out of the three steps mentioned, Step 3 was the most crucial process. Based on our knowledge of the school characteristics, we were able to modify the matched school lists and made the final decisions about the matching outcome.

Note 2. In Step 1, an extensive range of propensity score matching modelling was also conducted based on a range of variables, i.e. school sector, school type, campus type, year range, postal code, total student enrolments, gender ratio, language background other than English, full-time equivalent teaching staff and Indigenous enrolments. However, more complex modelling results did not produce better matching outcomes when the school geolocation was not a priority. This is because the propensity score matching process focuses on balancing the distribution of multiple variables between the treatment and control groups, rather than on the sequential inclusion or exclusion of individual variables during the matching process. One example is that when the geolocation was not the priority, Kiama High School was matched to either Kelso High Campus in Kelso or Dubbo College South Campus in Dubbo. Although they may share some school characteristics, we found this matching to be not optimal due to locational differences (coastal/inland), and other differences (for example, Dubbo has a higher proportion of Aboriginal students compared with Kiama). Therefore, Step 3 was necessary in the school matching process. Data analysis of PSDE surveys: Percentages of student responses for each of the six destination categories were calculated and compared between EPP and matched control group schools, and their trends over time in the years of 2019, 2020 and 2023. The main focus of this analysis is whether there was a visible trend indicating that the introduction of the EPP into a school had positive impacts on the aspirations and destinations of students in the EPP schools. Statistical significance was examined through both between- and within-group analyses for program

participant schools (EPP vs. Control) and across different years (2019, 2020, 2023). Specifically, the following comparisons were examined for statistical significance.

#### 1. Between-Year and Within-School-Group Analysis

1-1. Within EPP Schools, Comparison Between 2019 and 2020: To establish the baseline trend before the EPP program within EPP Schools.

1-2. Within Control Group Schools, Comparison Between 2019 and 2020: To establish the baseline trend before the EPP program within Control Group Schools.

1-3. Within EPP Schools, Comparison Between 2020 and 2023: To examine the EPP program effects within EPP Schools, and to compare it to the baseline trend results (under 1-1).

1-4. Within Control Group Schools, Comparison Between 2020 and 2023: To examine any changes within the Control Group Schools, and to compare it to the baseline trend results (under 1-2) and to compare it to the EPP Schools' EPP program effects (under 1-3).

#### 2. Between-School-Group and Within-Year Analysis

2-1. In 2019, Comparison Between EPP and Control Group Schools: To examine any baseline differences between EPP and Control Group Schools.

2-2. In 2020, Comparison Between EPP and Control Group Schools: To examine any baseline differences between EPP and Control Group Schools.

2-3. In 2023, Comparison Between EPP and Control Group Schools: To examine the EPP program effects, by comparing the EPP and Control Group schools, and by comparing the results to the results in previous years (under 2-1 and 2-2).

### PSDE survey sample characteristics

Data on gender and disability was available only for the 2023 survey. In 2023 survey responses for EPP schools and matched non-EPP schools were: male students (49%), female students (49%), and other (2%, including non-binary, use a different term, and refused to answer); students with Aboriginal backgrounds (11%); students with disabilities/learning needs (20%); major cities (77%), regional (22%), and remote (0.2%).

### PSDE survey data statistical analysis

The following comparisons (see below) showed statistical significance with the Bonferroni method for multiple comparisons to adjust the statistical significance. The results are organised per destination category.

#### **(a) Bachelor's Degree Education**

Although EPP schools showed a higher percentage of students pursuing a Bachelor's degree in 2023 (27.5%) compared to their previous years in 2019 (21.9%) and 2020 (20.0%), the trends over the three years were similar between EPP and control schools. Furthermore, control schools had higher percentages of students pursuing a Bachelor's degree, compared to EPP schools in all three years.

- EPP schools between 2019 (21.9%) and 2020 (20.0%); ( $p = .008$ )
- EPP schools between 2020 (20.0%) and 2023 (27.5%); ( $p < .001$ )
- Control schools between 2020 (23.1%) and 2023 (32.1%); ( $p < .001$ )
- Between EPP (21.9%) and Control (24.2%) schools in 2019 ( $p = .017$ )
- Between EPP (20.0%) and Control (23.1%) schools in 2020 ( $p = .001$ )

- Between EPP (27.5%) and Control (32.1%) schools in 2023 ( $p < .001$ )

### **(b) Vet Education**

Similar to the data pattern for Bachelor's degree education, the overall patterns of Vet education take-up were similar between EPP and Control schools (about 11% or 12% across three years for both EPP and Control schools). Furthermore, there was no statistical significance between EPP and control schools in the percentage of VET education in 2023.

- EPP schools between 2020 (12.2%) and 2023 (10.6%); ( $p = .005$ )

### **(c) Work (Full-Time or Part-Time)**

While EPP schools' take-up of employment was slightly higher (30.3%) than that of the control schools (27.9%) in 2023, the percentage for EPP schools in 2023 was not statistically different from the previous years (about 30% in both 2019 and 2020).

- In 2023, between EPP (30.3%) and Control (27.9%) schools ( $p = .011$ )

### **(d) Training/Apprenticeship**

Similar to the data on employment, the percentages of students pursuing training or apprenticeship were not different between EPP schools (19.0%) and control schools (19.0%) in 2023. The difference was statistically significant in 2020 but with a higher percentage of the Control schools (19.9%), compared to EPP schools (18.1%) and this was before the EPP program.

- In 2020, between EPP (18.1%) and Control (19.9%) schools ( $p = .043$ )

### **(e) Looking for Work (LFW)**

The percentages of students in EPP schools who looked for work decreased from 2019 to 2023. However, the data patterns were similar to students in control schools. Furthermore, the percentage of students looking for work was higher in EPP schools (9.3%) compared to control schools (6.8%) in 2023.

- EPP schools between 2019 (12.8%) and 2020 (15.4%); ( $p < .001$ )
- EPP schools between 2020 (15.4%) and 2023 (9.3%); ( $p < .001$ )
- Control schools between 2020 (12.0%) and 2023 (6.8%); ( $p < .001$ )
- In 2020, between EPP (15.4%) and Control (12.0%) Schools ( $p < .001$ )
- In 2023, between EPP (9.3%) and Control (6.8%) Schools ( $p < .001$ )

### **(f) NILFET ('Not in the Labor Force, Education, or Training')**

Although the percentages of NILFET students in EPP schools decreased from 4.7% in 2020 to 3.3% in 2023, the percentages for EPP schools (3.3%) and control (3.0%) schools did not statistically differ in 2023.

- EPP schools between 2019 (4.0%) and 2020 (4.7%); ( $p = .038$ )
- EPP schools between 2020 (4.7%) and 2023 (3.3%); ( $p < .001$ )
- Control schools between 2019 (2.8%) and 2020 (4.7%); ( $p < .001$ )
- Control schools between 2020 (4.7%) and 2023 (3.0%); ( $p < .001$ )
- In 2019, between EPP (4.0%) and Control (2.8%) Schools ( $p = .009$ )

Table 11, below, lists the EPP schools and matched control group schools.

**Table 11 Post School Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) survey data request – intervention and control schools list**

	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A25	Callaghan College – Waratah Campus	9115	Lambton High School	9118
A131	Chifley College – Bidwill Campus	6360	James Meehan High School	6507
A45	Five Islands Secondary College	14678	Tweed River High School	6475
A51	Warilla High School (Base school)	6503	Tweed River High School	6475
A140	Granville Boys High School	6472	Birrong Boys High School	7795
A125	Doonside High School	6397	The Ponds High School	30233
A109	Prairiewood High School	14946	Holsworthy High School	16185
A144	Northmead Creative and Performing Arts High School	7850	Hunter School of Performing Arts	17545
A110	St Johns Park High School	6387	Bass High School	8570
A117	Quakers Hill High School	16110	Oran Park High School	86430
A101	Airds High School	6504	James Meehan High School	6507
A5	Wadalba Community School	16643	Lake Munmorah High School	16629
A87	Grafton High School	9711	The Rivers Secondary College Lismore	9814
A28	Callaghan College – Wallsend Campus	9115	Belmont High School	8739
A143	Pendle Hill High School (Base school)	7809	Crestwood High School	7855
A11	Brisbane Water Secondary College – Umina Campus	6489	Narara Valley High School	14694
A2	Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College – Tumbi Umbi Campus	8727	Narara Valley High School	14694
A92	Vincentia High School	14663	Batemans Bay High School	14942
A85	Tweed River High School	6475	Banora Point High School	16648
A115	Miller High School	6385	Moorebank High School	6386
A133	Chifley College – Shalvey Campus (Base school)	6360	The Ponds High School	30233
A7	Erina High School	8675	Narara Valley High School	14694

	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A9	Kariong Mountains High School (Base school)	28626	Narara Valley High School	14694
A102	Campbelltown Performing Arts High School	10201	Hunter School of Performing Arts	17545
A138	Merrylands High School	8141	Fairfield High School	6467
A35	Glendale Technology High School	6344	Warners Bay High School	8961
A36	Hunter Sports High School (Base school)	9056	Warners Bay High School	8961
A24	Irrawang High School	14964	Lambton High School	9118
A147	Greystanes High School	7806	Birrong Boys High School	7795
A112	James Busby High School	6382	John Edmondson High School	23659
A50	Albion Park High School	14950	Ambarvale High School	14941
A84	Murwillumbah High School	9916	Banora Point High School	16648
A60	Ashford Central School	9412	Condoblin High School	6482
A66	Barraba Central School	9371	Condoblin High School	6482
A63	Bingara Central School	9506	Condoblin High School	6482
A55	Boggabilla Central School	14959	Condoblin High School	6482
A67	Bundarra Central School	9397	Casino High School	9731
A56	Collarenebri Central School (Base school)	6403	Casino High School	9731
A54	Mungindi Central School	6408	Casino High School	9731
A34	Cardiff High School	8999	Swansea High School	6492
A32	Lake Macquarie High School	8991	Swansea High School	6492
A6	Northlakes High School (Base school)	6372	Swansea High School	6492
A21	Rutherford Technology High School	16270	Swansea High School	6492
A15	Singleton High School	9322	Belmont High School	8739



	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A22	Tomaree High School	17492	Belmont High School	8739
A31	Toronto High School	6347	Belmont High School	8739
A33	West Wallsend High School	6442	Belmont High School	8739
A53	Moree Secondary College – Albert St Campus	6407	Binnaway Central School	16165
A71	Glen Innes High School	9419	Bonalbo Central School	6443
A61	Inverell High School (Base school)	16224	Casino High School	9731
A73	Tenterfield High School	9427	Bonalbo Central School	6443
A142	Wiley Park Girls High School	6338	Canterbury Girls High School	6393
A88	Macleay High School	9726	Casino High School	9731
A137	Muirfield High School (Base school)	7847	Castle Hill High School	7864
A108	Hoxton Park High School	6384	Casula High School	6505
A52	Moree Secondary College – Carol Ave Campus	6407	Coonabarabran High School	6404
A13	Muswellbrook High School	6400	Coonabarabran High School	6404
A59	Walgett Community College High School	6411	Coonamble High School	6458
A104	Thomas Reddall High School	14975	Elderslie High School	10224
A106	Bossley Park High School	14943	Erskine Park High School	14957
A129	Cranebrook High School	15109	Erskine Park High School	14957
A136	Chester Hill High School	6469	Fairfield High School	6467
A120	Plumpton High School	17849	Fairfield High School	6467
A78	Gunnedah High School	9480	Wellington High School	6456
A62	Macintyre High School	6437	Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School	9346
A79	Manilla Central School	9370	Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School	9346
A65	Narrabri High School	6409	Yeoval High School	6457
A77	Oxley High School	9349	Crookwell High School	6388

	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A76	Peel High School	9351	Wellington High School	6456
A74	Quirindi High School	6410	Wellington High School	6456
A75	Tamworth High School (Base school)	9353	Scone High School	6401
A70	Uralla Central School (Base school)	9395	Scone High School	6401
A64	Wee Waa High School	16292	Coonabarabran High School	6404
A124	Blacktown Boys High School	7827	Crestwood High School	7855
A123	Glenwood High School	23673	Crestwood High School	7855
A128	Mitchell High School	7837	Crestwood High School	7855
A127	Evans High School (Base school)	6355	Glenfield Park School	16229
A118	Wyndham College	16110	Glenmore Park High School	15821
A132	Chifley College – Dunheved Campus	6360	Bankstown Senior College	6340
A4	Wyong High School	6373	Gorokan High School	6371
A58	Goodooga Central School	6406	Gulargambone Central School	6459
A57	Lightning Ridge Central School	16309	Gulargambone Central School	6459
A8	Kincumber High School	14954	Henry Kendall High School	8680
A113	Liverpool Boys High School	8535	Punchbowl Boys High School	6341
A18	Kurri Kurri High School (base school)	6345	Gorokan High School	6371
A27	Merewether High School (Base school)	9105	Gorokan High School	6371
A111	Ashcroft High School	6380	James Meehan High School	6507
A107	Cecil Hills High School	14747	John Edmondson High School	23659
A141	Kingsgrove North High School	8597	Kingsgrove High School	8596
A103	Eagle Vale High School	6506	Kingswood High School	10698
A10	Brisbane Water Secondary College – Woy Woy Campus	6489	Gorokan High School	6371

	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A29	Callaghan College – Jesmond Senior Campus	9115	Morisset High School	6346
A14	Dungog High School	9518	Morisset High School	6346
A30	Francis Greenway High School	6421	Lambton High School	9118
A19	Maitland High School	9191	Lambton High School	9118
A26	Newcastle High School	9142	Lambton High School	9118
A146	Holroyd High School	7808	Windsor High School	10753
A3	Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College – Berkeley Vale Campus	8727	Lisarow High School	14977
A114	Liverpool Girls High School	8536	Canterbury Girls High School	6393
A72	Emmaville Central School	9424	Tumbarumba High School	6379
A68	Guyra Central School	9416	Tumbarumba High School	6379
A80	Walcha Central School	6439	Tumbarumba High School	6379
A12	Merriwa Central School	9313	Mendooran Central School	11065
A116	Seven Hills High School (Base school)	16110	Model Farms High School	7859
A1	Tuggerah Lakes Secondary College – The Entrance Campus	8727	Narara Valley High School	14694
A82	Ballina Coast High School	9764	Bellingen High School	6362
A83	Mullumbimby High School	9905	Bellingen High School	6362
A91	Bomaderry High School	6500	Leumeah High School	6508
A96	Bowral High School	10239	Queanbeyan High School	10407
A37	Bulli High School	9990	Lisarow High School	14977
A39	Corrimal High School (Base school)	6434	Lithgow High School	10962
A46	Dapto High School (Base school)	10035	Lithgow High School	10962
A41	Figtree High School	10012	Lithgow High School	10962

	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOLS</b>		<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS</b>	
	<b>SCHOOL NAME</b>	<b>INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>	<b>SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)</b>	<b>MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)</b>
A97	Goulburn High School (Base school)	10255	Blayney High School	10998
A42	Illawarra Sports High School	18289	Heathcote High School	8667
A44	Kanahooka High School	6367	Heathcote High School	8667
A40	Keira High School	10008	Heathcote High School	8667
A47	Lake Illawarra High School	6501	Heathcote High School	8667
A98	Moss Vale High School	10247	Elizabeth Macarthur High School	15114
A99	Mulwaree High School	10263	Yass High School	10279
A94	Nowra High School (Base school)	14945	Batemans Bay High School	14942
A49	Oak Flats High School	6502	Ingleburn High School	10214
A100	Picton High School	10230	Camden High School	10219
A95	Shoalhaven High School	6389	Batemans Bay High School	14942
A93	Ulladulla High School	10063	Batemans Bay High School	14942
A43	Warrawong High School	6370	Lurnea High School	6509
A38	Woonona High School	6435	Sylvania High School	8639
A89	South Grafton High School	6444	Orara High School	9662
A90	Woolgoolga High School	9682	Orara High School	9662
A145	Arthur Phillip High School	6461	Richmond High School	10730
A130	Cambridge Park High School	10685	Richmond High School	10730
A134	Chifley College – Mount Druitt Campus	6360	Bankstown Senior College	15388
A135	Chifley College – Senior Campus	6360	Bankstown Senior College	15388
A16	Cessnock High School	6420	Scone High School	6401
A139	Granville South Creative and Performing Arts High School	8144	Hunter School of Performing Arts	17545
A148	Redbank School (SSP)	16312	Penrith Valley School	10712
A105	Bonnyrigg High School	6381	Robert Townson High School	16171

	INTERVENTION SCHOOLS		MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOLS	
	SCHOOL NAME	INTERVENTION SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)	SCHOOL NAME (CONTROL)	MATCHED CONTROL SCHOOL ID (school Australian Government Education ID – 4 or 5 digit number)
A126	The Hills Sports High School	7818	Endeavour Sports High School	8652
A122	Colyton High School	6353	St Clair High School	10719
A20	Maitland Grossman High School	15124	Scone High School	6401
A119	Riverstone High School	16110	Hawkesbury High School	14984
A121	Rooty Hill High School	6358	The Ponds High School	30233
A81	Alstonville High School	14740	The Rivers Secondary College, Richmond River High Campus	9814
A69	Armidale Secondary College	85842	The Rivers Secondary College, Richmond River High Campus	9814
A23	Hunter River High School (Base school)	6433	Warners Bay High School	8961
A17	Mount View High School	14958	Windsor High School	10753
A48	Kiama High School	10047	Wollongong High School of the Performing Arts	10004
A86	Wollumbin High School	14692	Windsor High School	10753

Source: UNSW research team data request to DoE.

## Qualitative data

### Schools and communities

The qualitative data collection comprised of visits to 20 EPP school sites in all nine EPP regions and two focus groups with DoE support staff.

The focus and interviews took place in Wave 1 at 20 EPP schools in nine regions, with 267 participants, at Wave 2 in 6 EPP schools and 5 non-EPP schools in six regions, engaging 95 participants (see Table 8 for stakeholder types, numbers and percentages).

The aim of the focus groups conducted at the deep dive sites was to provide an opportunity for a deep dive into each school community to understand the local contexts in which EPP has been implemented, any barriers and program improvements. In Wave 2, non-EPP schools were included to provide a greater understanding of ‘business as usual’.

**Table 12 Wave 1 site visit locations**

<b>Region</b>	<b>EPP Schools</b>
Central Coast	Wyong HS Brisbane Waters Secondary College Woy Woy
Illawarra	Dapto HS Kiama HS
New England/North West	Inverell HS Uralla HS
Newcastle/Hunter	Muswellbrook HS Callaghan College Jesmond Senior College Campus
North Coast	South Grafton HS Mullumbimby HS Woolgoolga HS
Shoalhaven/Southern Highlands	Goulburn HS Nowra HS
Southwest Sydney	Airds HS Liverpool Girls HS
Western Sydney Blacktown	Chifley College Senior Campus Seven Hills HS
Western Sydney Parramatta	Francis Greenway HS Granville South Creative and Performing Arts HS Redbank HS

## Wave 2

In Wave 2, six EPP sites were identified and matched with six non-EPP schools (chosen from the comparison group of non-EPP schools generated using propensity score matching) and of the non-EPP schools, five agreed to participate. Of the 11 schools, all were visited in person except for Batemans Bay, which participated online.

**Table 13 Wave 2 site visit locations**

<b>Region</b>	<b>EPP schools</b>	<b>Non- EPP schools</b>
New England/North West	Inverell High School	n/a
Newcastle/Hunter	Callaghan College Jesmond Senior College Campus	Lambton HS
North Coast	Grafton HS	Toormina HS
Shoalhaven/Southern Highlands	Nowra HS	Batemans Bay HS
Southwest Sydney	Airds HS	James Meehan HS
Western Sydney Parramatta	Redbank School (special purpose school)	Penrith Valley Learning Centre (special purpose school)

## Appendix B Data sources

**Table 14 Evaluation questions and data sources**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>
Is the EPP successfully supporting students to meet their post-school destination goals?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups, Program data, Post Schools Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) survey data (Selected variables), NCVER data.
<b>Process indicator questions</b>	
Are stakeholders aware of the EPP's purpose?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups
Did the targeted students/schools engage with the EPP?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups
What do stakeholders think about the quality of the EPP?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups
Was the EPP implemented as intended?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups
Was the EPP scaled-up version (from 24 pilot schools to an additional 121 schools) been refined in line with the recommendations of the evaluation of its pilot phase?	DoE information on program updates
Was the EPP implemented efficiently with best use of resources?	Stakeholder surveys, Focus Groups, program data
<b>Success indicator questions</b>	
To what extent has EPP achieved its short- and medium-term expected outcomes?	Program data
How many/what % of students go on to their post-school destination of their choice (education, training, work)?	Post Schools Destinations and Experiences (PSDE) survey data (selected variables)
What are the major learnings, strengths and areas for improvement?	Focus groups, synthesis of all methods

# Appendix C Secondary Datasets

**Table 15. Datasets and variables**

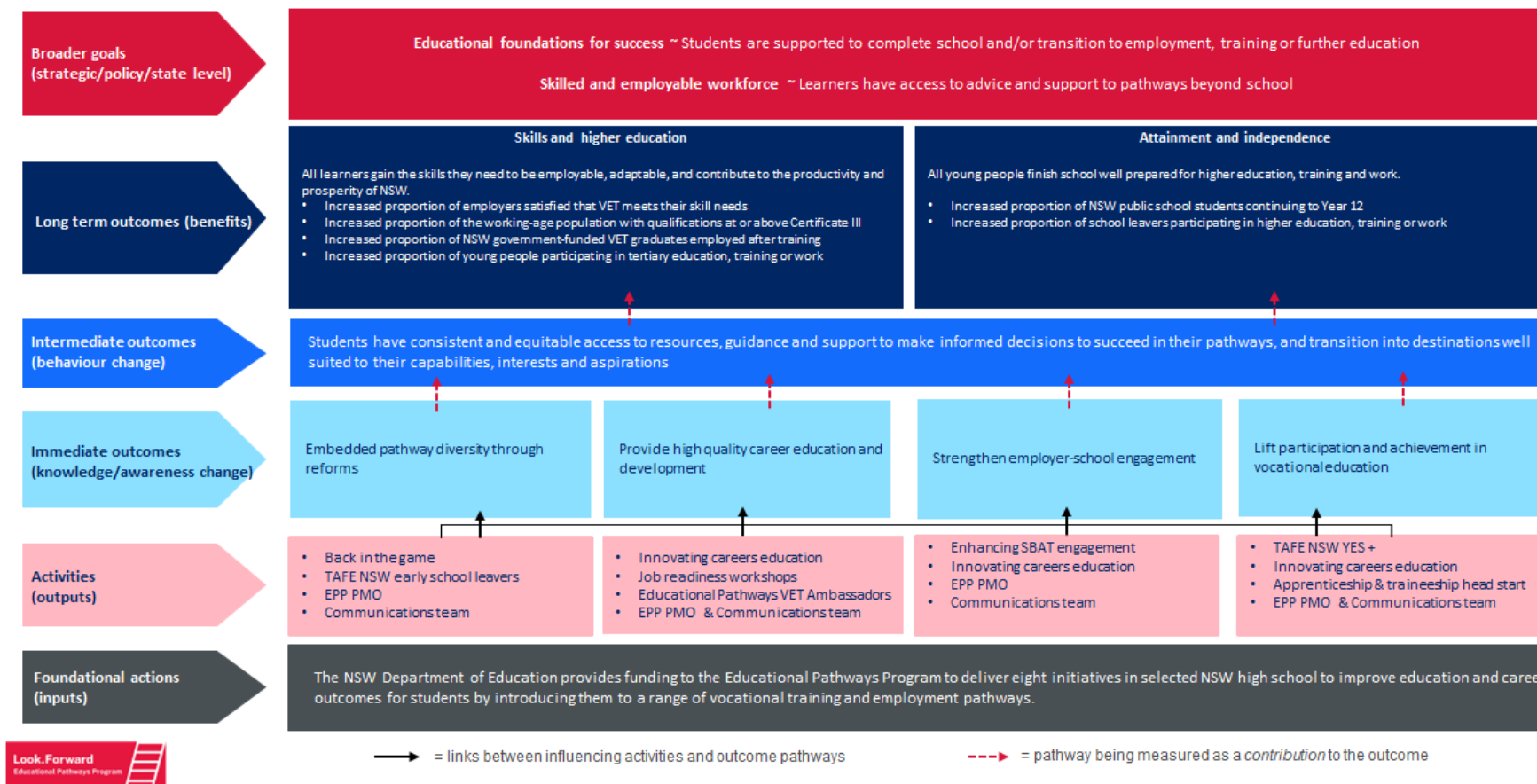
Data custodian	Data sources	Variables
DoE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DoE Annual reports, selected indicators</li> <li>• EPP program data</li> <li>• PSDE survey</li> <li>• DoE data on EVET, SVET and SBAT (EPP and control schools)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School leaver numbers and percentages – key indicators</li> <li>• EPP program – total numbers/by year/by initiative/gender/ATSI/CALD</li> <li>• Post-school Destinations – by year, selected indicators (activities – VET, Work, Looking For Work, Not in the Labour Force, Education or Training (NILFET))</li> <li>• No. and % of enrolments in EVET, SVET and SBAT</li> </ul>



# Appendix D EPP Program Logic



## Educational Pathways Program Logic 2023



## Appendix E Short-, medium- and long-term metrics

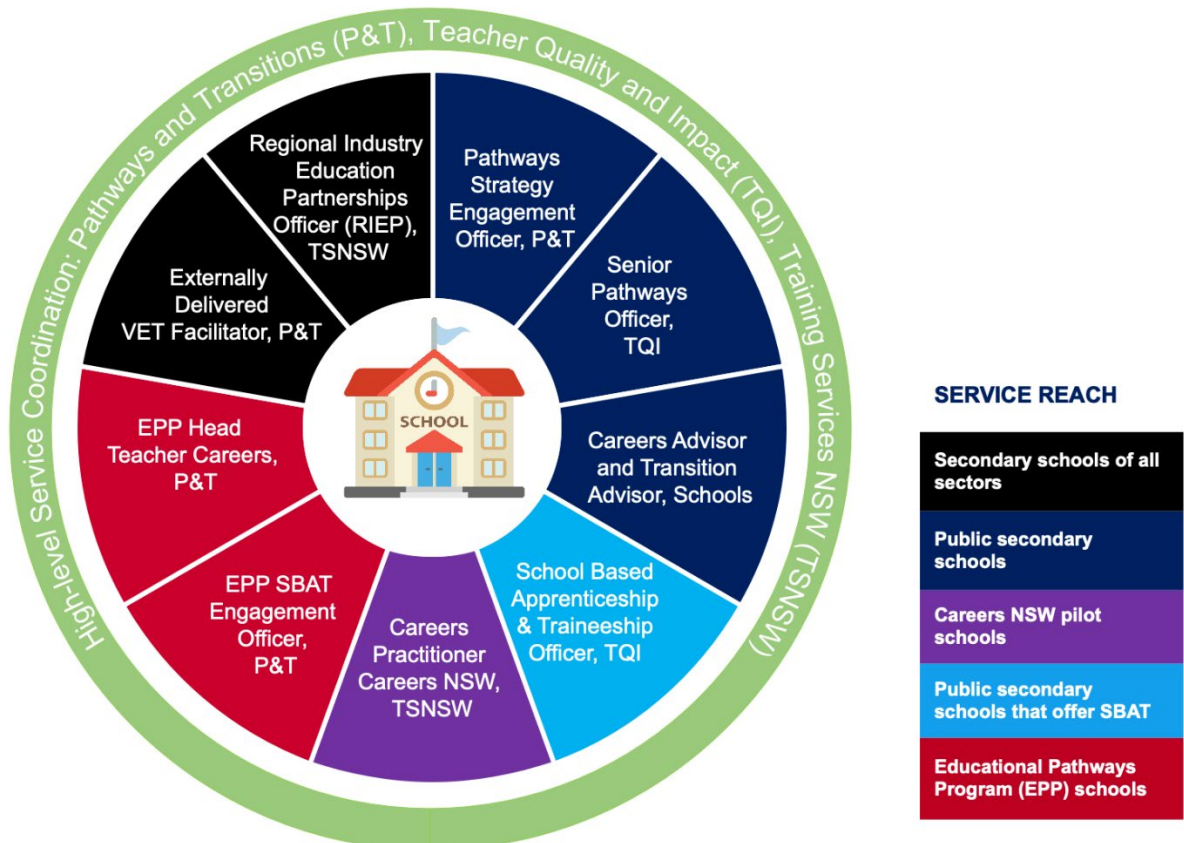
	Short-Term (2022) – set baselines	Medium-Term (2023–24)	Long-Term (2025–June 2026)
1	<p>Students are engaged in a range of core and needs-based initiatives that build awareness of vocational career opportunities.</p> <p><b>No. students and schools participating in core &amp; needs-based initiatives</b></p>	<p>Students have a greater understanding and access to vocational career opportunities.</p> <p><b>% increase completion of EPP delivered initiatives</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of young people completing Year 12 in EPP schools.</p> <p><b>% increase Year 12 attainment</b></p>
2	<p>Students are supported to stay engaged in learning through participation in a vocational training options that complement existing study/courses.</p> <p><b>No. students and schools engaged in 2 referral-based initiatives (<i>Back in the Game, TAFE Early School Leavers</i>)</b></p>	<p>Students are supported to complete school and transition to employment or further education.</p> <p><b>% student who completed referral-based initiatives and achieved HSC or gained employment</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of young people participating in post-school VET, higher education or employment.</p> <p><b>% increase in the proportion of recent school leavers participating in higher education, training or work</b></p>
3	<p>Students are provided <u>greater access</u> to School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships whilst still at school.</p> <p><b>No. of SBAT commencements</b></p>	<p>Students remain at school and/or complete their SBAT that supports career aspirations post-school.</p> <p><b>% increase in SBAT participation ('in training') and completions</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of school leavers engaged in Apprenticeships and Traineeships.</p> <p><b>% increase in Apprenticeship and Traineeship uptake post-SBAT completion</b></p>
4	<p>Students have <u>greater access</u> to career advice and support to engage in further study and career pathways beyond school.</p> <p><b>No. of career events delivered by CITs</b></p>	<p>Increase young people who transition into vocational education/training <u>beyond</u> school.</p> <p><b>% increase of VET for Secondary Students (VETfSS) courses completed</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of the working-age population with qualifications at or above Certificate 3.</p> <p><b>% increase of EPP school leavers (with Certificate 3) employed</b></p>
5	<p>Employers have increased access to students interested in vocational career pathways through SBATs.</p> <p><b>No. of employers supporting SBAT engagement</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of employers satisfied that school students studying VET subjects meet their skill needs.</p> <p><b>% increase proportion of employers engaged with EPP</b></p>	<p>Increased proportion of employers satisfied that school leavers with VET qualifications meet their skill needs.</p> <p><b>% increase of EPP school leavers employed in occupations in skill shortage areas (link to EF8)</b></p>
6	<p>Greater awareness of vocational study and career pathways available.</p>	<p>Increase of students participating in VETfSS programs as part of their HSC.</p>	<p>Vocational training and study considered a valid higher education pathway and/or entry into a rewarding career.</p>

<b>Short-Term (2022) – set baselines</b>	<b>Medium-Term (2023–24)</b>	<b>Long-Term (2025–June 2026)</b>
<b>No. of students that select VET subjects for HSC commencing in 2023</b>	<b>% increase in VETfSS participation and completion</b>	<b>% increase vocational subject completion contributing to university entry and/or employment</b>

# Appendix F Roles supporting Pathways/ Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Nine different roles provide support for pathways and vocational education and training (VET) courses to high schools in NSW. These roles differ from each other for responsibilities, approach and service reach. However, overall, they are meant to complement each other (NSW DoE, 2024a). Figure 26 groups the nine roles in five different categories based on their service reach.

**Figure 29. High-level service coordination: Pathways and Transitions (P&T), Teacher Quality and Impact (TQI), Training Services NSW (TSNSW)**



Note. Source: Department of Education. The Pathways Strategy Engagement Officer has now changed to Pathways Engagement Officer (as the Pathways Strategy has been replaced by the Plan for Public Education early in 2024). There are only 12 Pathways Engagement Officers in a few schools. They are a Government Sector Employment/Public service role, so not integrated into the school structure as a Head Teacher role is.

Below and in Table 16 we provide a description and comparison of the roles and responsibilities of EPP Head Teacher Careers (HTC), School-based Apprenticeship Traineeship Engagement Officers (SBATEOs), Senior Pathways Officers, and Regional Industry Educational Partnerships Program (RIEP) Officers

**EPP HTC and SBATEO:** Both roles are involved in the Educational Pathways Program (EPP), focusing on secondary government schools. The EPP emphasises direct engagement with schools and students, ensuring students are aware of and can access diverse pathways. EPP sits under the Executive Director, Education and Skills Reform.

**Senior Pathways Officer (TQI):** This role supports a broader range of public schools and focuses on strategic initiatives to improve pathways for all students, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged. They work more on policy and statewide program implementation. Sits under the Executive Director, Teaching Quality and Impact.

**RIEP Officer:** This role has a broader remit that includes all schools and focuses on regional program delivery. They are more involved in administrative and compliance tasks, supporting a range of initiatives, including those beyond VET. Sits under the Executive Director, Training Services NSW.

### **Similarities Across Roles**

**Relationship building.** All roles are responsible for building relationships with schools, careers teams, service teams, government agencies and stakeholders.

**Pathway engagement.** Each role assists schools in enabling student pathway engagement.

**Grassroots approach.** Each role is involved in implementing initiatives focused on understanding the local community and taking a from the bottom-up approach.

**Support for VET and SBATs.** Each role supports vocational education and training (VET) learning outcomes, along with School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, although the level of responsibility varies.

**Table 16. Pathways/VET Staff Roles Comparison**

<b>Role Elements</b>	<b>EPP HT Careers</b>	<b>EPP SBAT Engagement Officer</b>	<b>Senior Pathways Officer (TQI)</b>	<b>RIEP Officer</b>
<b>Role type</b>	HT Secondary Studies	Clerk 7/8	SEO1	Clerk 7/8
<b>Reporting line</b>	P&T/Base School	P&T	TQI	TSNSW
<b>Service reach</b>	Support 4-7 schools	Support 5-8 schools	15-20	
<b>Service Remit</b>	EPP schools	EPP schools	All public schools	All schools
Build relationship with schools and careers team to create a supportive environment.	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible
Build relationship with other service teams, government agencies and stakeholders. Build strong networks.	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible
Assist schools to enable student pathway engagement.	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible
Case management and individualised pathways support	Support	Responsible	Support	
Deliver employer engagement programs at schools	Responsible	Support		Responsible
Raising the profile of diverse pathways for secondary students	Support	Support	Support	Support
Assist schools to work towards and meet their Pathways Target	Support	Support		
Provide pathways services to enhance outcomes for educationally disadvantaged and under-represented students.	Support	Support	Responsible	Support
Increase SBAT participation	Support	Responsible	Informed	Support
Increase SBAT completions	Support	Responsible	Informed	
Complete processes and documentation for SBAT		Support		

Role Elements	EPP HT Careers	EPP SBAT Engagement Officer	Senior Pathways Officer (TQI)	RIEP Officer
Manage the delivery of the RIEP program in a region	Support			Accountable
Maintain accurate data collection processes for monitoring and reporting. Respond to urgent data requests.	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible	Accountable (RIEP)
Undertake research and formulate recommendations to support project planning and decision making.	Responsible			Responsible (RIEP region)
Implementation of state-wide initiatives at a local level	Responsible	Responsible	Responsible	Support
Manage a local grants budget	Responsible			Accountable
Manage key project deliverables	Responsible			Accountable (RIEP)
Prepare correspondence, briefings, funding agreements and reports	Support			Accountable (RIEP)
Team management	Support			
Contribute to improvement of communications	Responsible	Support	Support	
Contribute to PL development	Responsible	Support	Support	
Coordinate student work exploration and work experience	Responsible	Responsible		Support
Play a role in subject selection	Support	Support		
Careers learning program delivery	Support	Support		

Role Elements	EPP HT Careers	EPP SBAT Engagement Officer	Senior Pathways Officer (TQI)	RIEP Officer
Parent/carer engagement	Support	Responsible		
Support VET learning, enhance VET learning outcomes and increase VET retention	Support	Support	Accountable	
Supporting RTO registration and compliance with ASQA			Accountable	
Current teaching Qualification	Required		Required	
Visit/contact each SBAT trainee and employer at regular intervals		Responsible		
Post-school support	Support			

Source: Department of Education.