



Paving the Way: University as a Post-school Option for Tasmanian School Students

Phase Four: Follow-up Focus Groups and Interviews

Prepared for the Office of Marketing, University of Tasmania
Project: Understanding Tasmanian School Students' Post-School Pathway Intentions
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As a reflection of this institution's recognition of the deep history and culture of this island, the University of Tasmania wishes to acknowledge the muwinina people; the traditional owners and custodians of the land upon which this campus was built.

We also recognise the value of continuing Aboriginal knowledge and cultural practice, which informs our understandings of history, culture, science and environment; the University's role in research and education, and in supporting the development of the Tasmanian community.

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The Peter Underwood Centre

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Executive Summary

Phase 4 of the project *Understanding Tasmanian School Students' Post-School Pathway Intentions* focused on understanding barriers and enablers experienced by young people in relation to university pathways. The focus group and interview research was targeted at staff, students, and parent/carers at Colleges in which the majority of the school population were unlikely to continue to university, as identified through phase 2 and 3 of the project. Using a process of reflexive thematic analysis, the phase 4 data were grouped into four themes: local context; visibility, accessibility, and perceived value of pathways; financial factors; and aspirations and personal relevance.

The research was conducted in three Colleges – one from each region of Tasmania. The local context for each College was shaped by local industries and geography. The employment opportunities and educational emphases associated with each context were fundamental to the aspirations of young people, as were prevailing attitudes and perceptions within the communities. More specifically, findings showed that, in areas with limited diversity of local industries, there is a risk that some post-school options will become more prominent than others. This can lead to a high concentration of engagement with a small range of pathway options. Further exacerbating this trend is a tendency for students to aspire to familiar pathways in which their families or friends might already be working.

Support from family and staff at the Colleges played a crucial role in assisting young people to explore their post-school options. In general, families provided personalised support in accessing information about different pathways as well as helping with emotional and practical challenges during the transition from school. College staff sometimes fulfilled similar roles, providing guidance and information. However, it was reported that access to information and support was not uniform for all students. Further, while positive relationships between staff and students are essential, relying solely on individual staff members can lead to uneven results. System-wide, multi-modal support programs are recommended, as well as easily accessible information targeted at families and other supporting adults.

Both students and staff expressed the need for more information on available careers, associated pathways, and opportunities. One aspect of this was the need to provide easily accessed and up-to-date information for students and parents, who reported a reliance on “piecing together” information from various sources. Another aspect was addressing a lack of awareness of different options for various pathways; how personal skills and interests might inform choices; and how opportunities may develop as time passed. Understanding where pathways lead is crucial for students when making career choices. While some students were comfortable with their chosen pathways, others felt uncertain and hesitant to commit. Reasons for delaying decisions included concerns about making the wrong choice; being overwhelmed by the available options; and fear of being locked into a specific career. The lack of predictability about future outcomes caused varying levels of anxiety among students, with some feeling content to navigate the future as it arises, while others perceived it as their only chance to get it right.

The perception of university as a pathway is an important aspect to consider. In some demographics, university is generally considered a prestigious option. However, in this research, many students viewed vocational education and training (VET) pathways as offering stable, well-paid work, while university was seen as expensive and a risky delay to earning a reliable income. Concerns about accumulating high levels of debt, uncertainty about the effectiveness of university qualifications in practical job preparation, and the perceived stress of studying while potentially earning little income contributed to

this perception. However, some students still valued university for the lifestyle it offers, such as meeting new people and taking control of their education.

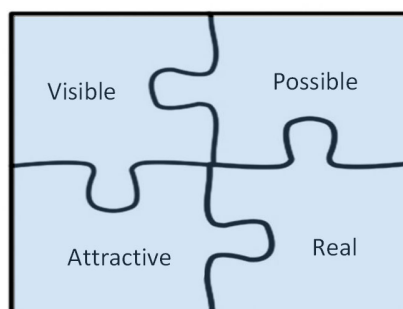
When choosing a university, factors such as cost of living, available scholarships, relevance and reputation of courses, and desired lifestyle played a role. Some high-achieving students planned to attend interstate universities due to the attractive scholarships they offered, while others valued having a local university campus. Concerns about the quality of online education also impacted students' preferences. Finally, stereotypes and biases were evident in students' and adult perceptions of different pathways. In particular, some young people's stereotypical views of university students as conceited and wealthy can create a sense of "us vs. them" and may discourage some students from considering university as a viable option.

Aspirations are an important part of pathway choices for young people. Aspiration formation is shaped by social interactions and influenced by available knowledge, skills, and resources necessary for transforming future possibilities into reality. Perceptions of self as well as costs and benefits and likelihood of success on a pathway also play a role. Alignment between aspirations and pathway choices was facilitated by several key factors identified in the data. These factors included personal interactions with individuals on a particular pathway or in a specific career; positive family attitudes towards university attendance; immersive experiences within pathway-associated environments; and personal support from school or university staff. Building personal relevance and connection to a chosen pathway was crucial for facilitating aspirations among students.

By providing supportive contexts and positive experiences, educational institutions can influence aspirations and encourage the application of strategies for achieving them. In this research, many students had limited exposure to and understanding of university campuses and what it means to attend university. This lack of familiarity created a personal relevance gap and increased the perceived risk associated with pursuing a university pathway, even among academically-skilled students.

Paving the way to university requires multiple approaches addressing practical, social, and personal factors. Practical factors may include financial and logistical issues around housing, transport, and study and living expenses. Social and personal factors may be addressed through providing information and experiences of university courses, campuses, and potential careers; cultivating positive family and community attitudes; and facilitating development of readiness and capabilities necessary for students to explore, aspire to, and engage with positive pathways.

Recommendations are grouped into four areas: Making pathways visible, possible, "real", and attractive. These are presented in section 3: [Paving the way to university: Summary and recommendations](#).



1 Introduction

This research was the final phase of a four-phase study investigating the post-school pathway intentions of Tasmanian year 10, 11, and 12 students. The research was commissioned by the University of Tasmania's Office of Marketing to better understand the intentions and interests of young people who are finishing high school, with particular attention to barriers and enablers to attending university. Phase 4 captured perspectives on university and non-university pathways of year 11/12 students, school staff and parents or carers. Colleges were invited to participate that had student populations where the majority were unlikely to continue to university, based on the results of the phase 2 student survey and phase 3 analysis of applications to the University of Tasmania. This report focuses on findings relevant to university pathways and will begin with an overview of current trends in Tasmania as well as research on supporting pathways to university.

1.1 Higher education in Tasmania

Tasmania generally shows lower levels of university attendance compared to national figures. However, attendance at university is also variable within the state. This variability is reflected in the difference in attendance between urban and regional areas. For example, the proportion of residents of Greater Hobart attending university in 2021 was 4.9%, as compared to 3.6% of the total population (<https://profile.id.com.au/tasmania>). This is slightly higher than the national average for 2021, which was 4.7%.

The following graphs illustrate current trends in education in Tasmania and Australia. They serve to provide context for the data analysis. For example, Figure 1 shows the relatively large proportion of Year 10 school leavers across the population (15 years and over) as compared with the national average, as well as the relatively larger proportion of people achieving a Certificate III qualification (Certificate III is considered a vocational equivalent to Year 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Lim & Karmel, 2011)). With the implementation of extension schools well underway¹, it is to be expected that more people will complete Year 10 and likely through to Year 12 in coming years, potentially leading to more students who may consider a university pathway.

¹ For more information, see: <https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/students/school-colleges/years-11-12-extension-schools/>

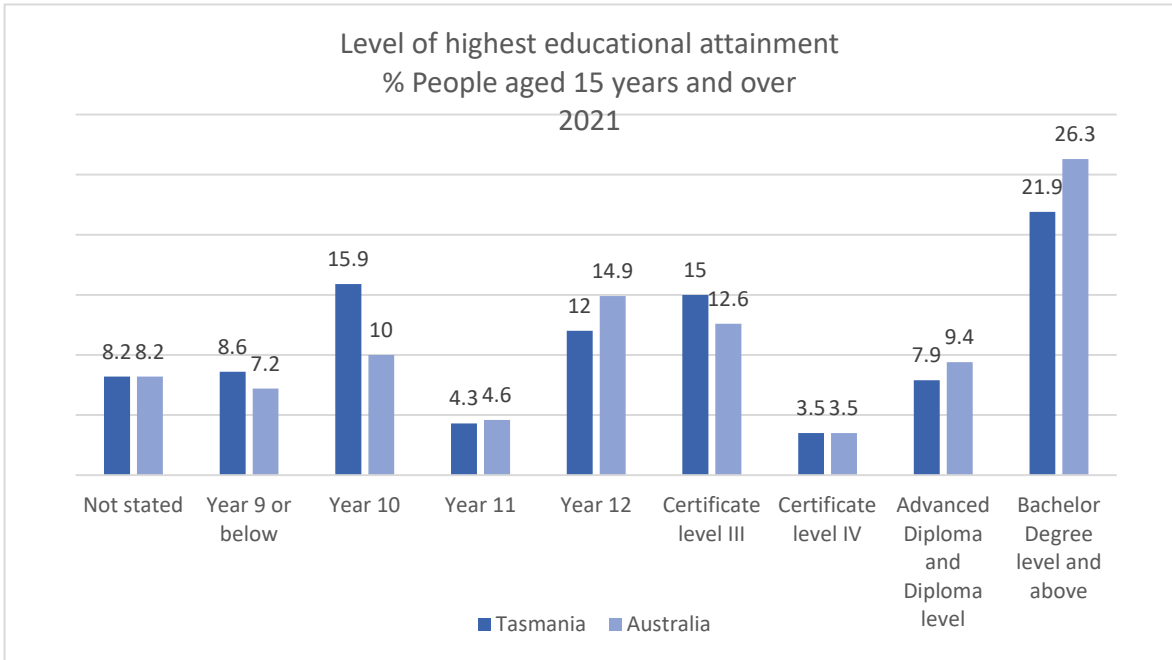


Figure 1 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>

The percentage of people attending a tertiary institution in Tasmania increased between 2016 and 2021. This increase was primarily in vocational education (+4135 people), a trend that is also apparent nationwide (see Figure 2). The factors contributing to increased interest in vocational training are not clear, but may reflect strong industry demand and job availability, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Tasmania, industries requiring vocational education are prominent employers, especially outside urban areas, as shown in Figure 3.

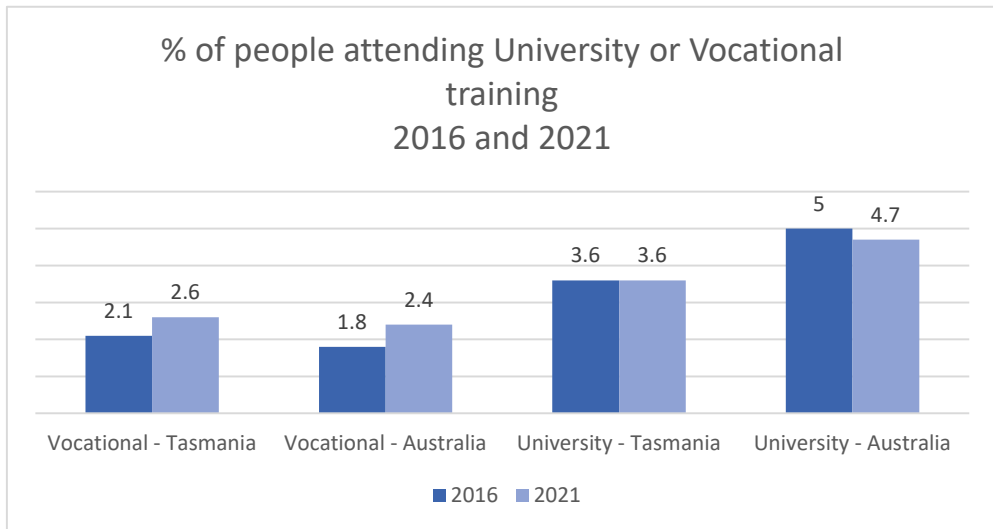


Figure 2 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>

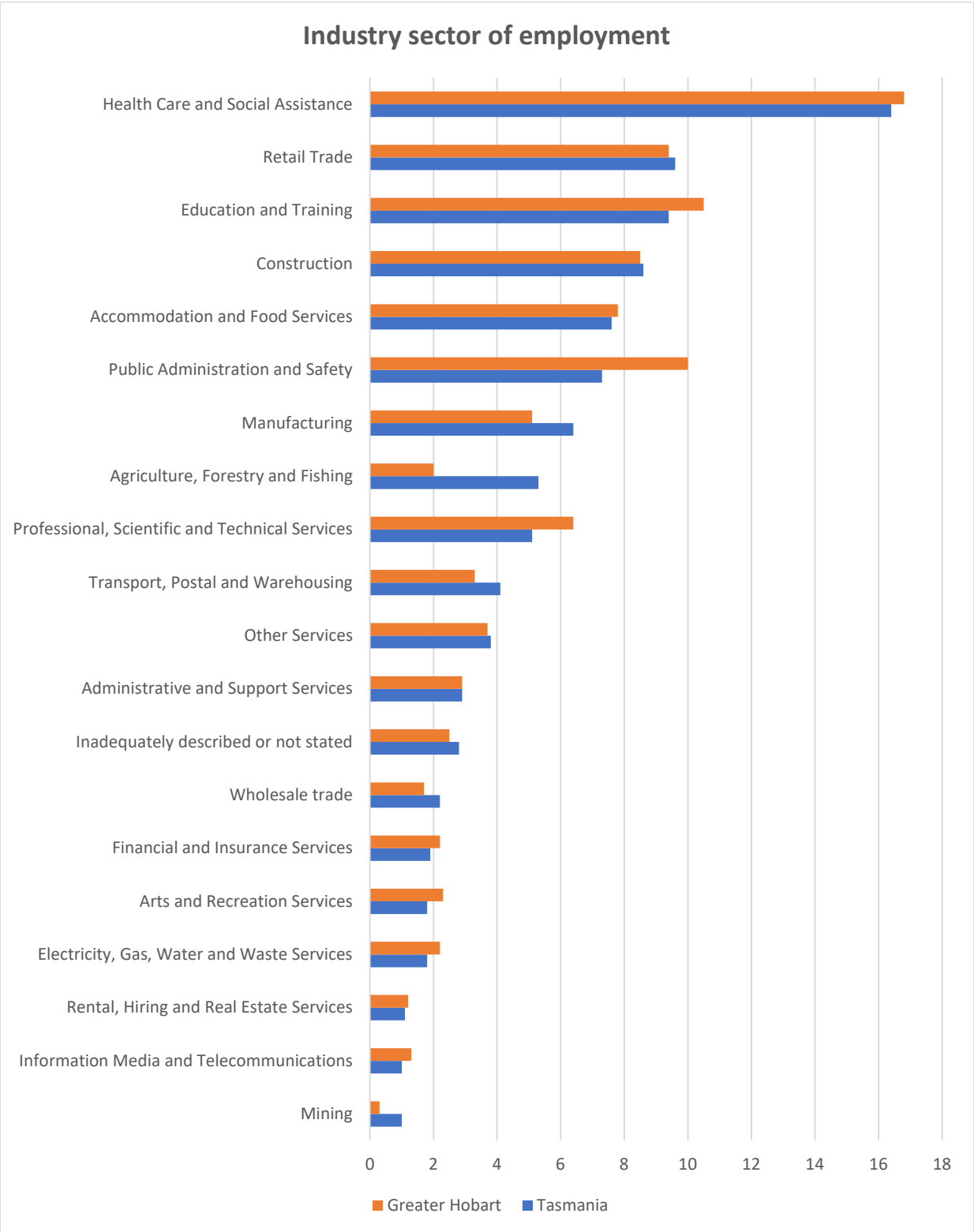


Figure 3 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021 (Usual residence data), <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>

1.2 Research focus

The University of Tasmania aims to facilitate increased access to university opportunities for Tasmanian students. To accomplish this goal, it is important to gain insight into the aspirations of students nearing the end of their secondary education, particularly regarding their plans after school. This includes identifying the factors that influence their decisions to pursue a university education, their choice of institution, and the specific course they intend to pursue. The University is seeking a deeper understanding of the various expectations, goals, and prospects of students with regards to their future.

The University's Office of Marketing commissioned the Peter Underwood Centre to conduct a research project investigating the post-school intentions of Tasmanian Year 10, 11 and 12 students from all school sectors. The overarching research question was:

Why do Tasmanian school students intend to pursue particular post-school pathways?

The specific objectives were to:

- Identify the main reasons Tasmanian school students intend to pursue specific post-school options (including but not limited to: attending the University of Tasmania or another university; pursuing vocational education; entering the labour market);
- Identify the types of courses and industries/sectors Tasmanian school students are interested in targeting as a post-school pathway;
- Understand the profile of students with different post-school intentions and interests; and
- Understand how post-school intentions and interests may be influenced by the University's: product offerings (in terms of campus locations, courses and delivery modes), brand positioning, and communication channels and strategies.

The study consisted of four phases, all of which are now complete:

1. Expert Informant Focus Groups: Insights from key experts, i.e. current Tasmanian school students; parents; and school staff.
2. Student Survey: The survey design was informed by the phase one expert focus group outcomes and delivered in 2020 and 2021. It was completed by 1160 school students.
3. Quantitative Data Collection: For triangulation with qualitative data, analysis was conducted of elements such as courses completed during years 10-12, credentials attained, ATARs, and post-school enrolments.
4. Follow-up sub-cohort focus groups and interviews: Involving a smaller number of students from schools with low proportions of students intending to attend university and designed to provide deeper understanding of students' intentions.

This report presents the findings from the fourth phase of the study – follow-up focus groups and interviews.

1.3 Participants

Phase 4 of the study focused on Tasmanian school students:

- Enrolled in Year 11 or 12
- Aged 15-19
- Attending one of three Colleges in either the North, North-West, or South of Tasmania
- From Colleges where post-school pathways do not tend to include university (based on phase 2 and 3 findings)

Two focus groups were conducted in each College:

- one with students who intended to continue to university, and
- one with students who intended to follow some other pathway.

In addition to the focus groups, school staff and parents were invited to participate in interviews.

Table 1: 2023 focus groups - schools and participants

	College A	College B	College C	Total
Type	Government	Government	Government	
Location	South	North-West	North	
Year levels	11 – 12	11 – 12	11 – 12	
Students: Uni pathway group	5	3	4	12
Students: Non-uni pathway group	5	4	4	13
School staff	1	4	4	9
Parents	0	2	3	5
Total	11	13	15	39

1.4 Data collection

Data collection commenced in September 2022 and concluded in May 2023. There were delays in data collection caused by ongoing challenges of COVID-19, including limited access to schools.

Focus groups were conducted at the Colleges by Peter Underwood Centre researchers. Interviews were conducted either at the Colleges or by phone. Student participants were invited to one of two focus groups according to whether their post-school choices included university or were directed at a different pathway.

1.5 Data analysis

Data was coded to create themes reflecting the perspectives of participants, following a reflexive thematic analysis framework and using NVIVO software (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were developed and interpreted in light of relevant literature.

1.6 Key findings – phase 1

The following are the key findings from the phase 1 focus groups (see Crellin et al., 2019, p.3). These findings informed the phase 2 survey and, in turn, the approach taken to the phase 4 focus groups and interviews. They are presented here as background to the present analysis:

Phase 1 focus groups (2019)

- Going straight into work after school is not a highly favoured option – the majority of students appear to want to study at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), an interstate university or Technical and Further Education (TAFE).
- University is preferred to TAFE, mainly because Vocational Education and Training (VET) is considered a less prestigious option.
- While some students do consider long-term outcomes like future work opportunities, earning potential and industry connections, the key considerations are much more short-term. They relate to cost, accommodation, modes and locations of delivery, course availability, application processes, and the perceived reputation of the pathway or institution.
- Cost is often a major deterrent to studying at university, regardless of whether it is in Tasmania or interstate, and TAFE courses are viewed as more affordable. For students that have to move out of home to study at UTAS, there were mixed views amongst all participants as to whether it would cost more or less to study interstate instead.
- Overwhelmingly, participants portrayed young people as being hesitant to relocate to a different area of Tasmania or interstate.
- School, family, the internet and friends are the key influences and sources of information.
- Overall, with a few exceptions, the influence from family as a source of information is largely based on students being encouraged to follow a similar pathway to the one their family knows about and is comfortable with – whether that is university, TAFE, or work.

2 Findings and discussion

The findings from this research were grouped into themes according to what was important to participants as well as relevant background literature. These themes form the structure of the report and are as follows:

- Local context – place and people
- Pathways – visibility, accessibility, and value
- Money talks – financial factors
- Aspirations and personal relevance

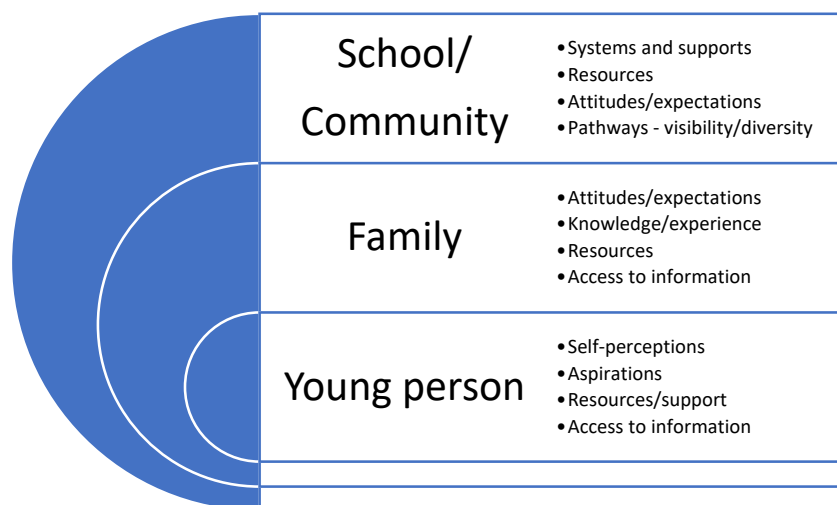
The final section is entitled “Paving the way to university” and presents a summary and recommendations.

2.1 Local context – place and people

All three of the participating Colleges were situated in areas associated with socio-economic disadvantage. Each College possessed unique characteristics associated with its local area. However, there were also many similarities between them attributable to demographic and geographic factors. Factors instrumental in shaping post-school pathways included:

- Low diversity and high visibility of local industries and businesses
- Local culture and attitudes that did not necessarily prioritise university
- Financial, social, and cultural resources of families were often limited
- Accessibility of information and insight depended on available sources and was uneven

In Tasmania, the value of education and the desirability of following individual dreams and ambitions is part of the broader social narrative (Denny et al., 2020). However, for young people living in communities that are isolated – whether geographically, economically, or both – there can be a range of barriers to realisation of such goals. For some, it is simply a question of financial costs. For others, there can also be powerful influences from factors such as: culture in the local community (including sense of



belonging); attitudes of immediate social group; and family expectations (Schmidt, 2022). Further, families from low socio-economic backgrounds often possess educational cultural capital that does not align with the knowledge and experience necessary for pursuing some pathways – such as choosing, applying, enrolling, and succeeding in higher education (Fischer et al., 2019). All these factors combine to create a particular social ecosystem to which young people belong.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of engaging with local communities. That is, consistently listening and responding to the ideas and concerns of young people, families, school staff, and local community members to ensure that information and support are relevant and accessible.

The value of participation of community members in addressing social issues and co-designing social marketing programs is well documented. Benefits include improved understanding, insight and ability to connect with specific communities (e.g. Dollinger et al., 2022; Schmidtke et al., 2021) and, within communities, higher levels of emotional investment in programs and products, including changed perceptions and attitudes (e.g. Saleme et al., 2023; Tee & Üzar Özçetin, 2016; Teichmann et al., 2016). It follows that co-designing approaches to improving access to higher education, including design of information and marketing, can be worthwhile.

The following sections present the data in terms of the influences of family and the local community, including employment opportunities, culture, and schools.

2.1.1 Family – the first circle of influence

Family support was evident in searching for information and discussing the most appropriate and achievable options, but also in supporting more holistic aspects of their child’s transition from school. Parent A explained how the family visited the nearest university campus to help her daughter get a “picture in her head of what it looks like”. Parent D described a need to support her child in managing their expectations should they not be accepted into their chosen course, stating that this may prevent mental health issues in advance. Parent C found themselves sitting alongside their son to help him focus on the task of navigating information and exploring his future.

Families provide complex and highly personalised supports. It is essential to ensure that information about pathway options is easily accessible to families of potential students.

Parent C: ...some of my kids could've [found information] really well. [My son] is not one. He's way laid back. And so I've been there alongside him, trying to support what he wants to do and help him navigate that. And even with me there, it hasn't worked very well.

Families are not always convinced of the benefits of attending university:

Staff member G: I can assess [the students'] ability [and] I can see that they're clearly academic, they would be absolutely fine at university-- and yet they're still really not sure that they could go to university... I was surprised to find that mindset around university. I think some of that comes from-- sometimes it's from their family. So especially if they're first in family, ... sometimes the family's about, "Well, why do you have to go to college? Why would you go to university?"

The spectrum of family involvement in post-school pathway choices extended from heavy involvement as advisors and emotional and financial support to absence. The reasons for an absence of family involvement are varied and out of the scope of this report. However, it is likely that investing in the capabilities of families will support all young people in navigating their options, both directly and indirectly via their peers.

Families in this research supported young people by...

- Visiting places relevant to pathways, talking to people, and seeking out information that made pathways seem more familiar and achievable.
- Exploring pathways together with a view to developing trust that a pathway would lead somewhere, even if it's not the original goal.
- Talking in ways that were positive and supportive, even if some things were daunting or didn't go as planned.

2.1.2 Local courses and employment shape pathways and places

The data suggests that local course offerings and employment opportunities are shaping young people's awareness and aspiration, particularly in regional areas of Tasmania. While this is not surprising, the data suggests that local expectations and awareness of pathways may be acting as a kind of funnel. That is, school courses are offered in response to industry needs and find strong interest among certain groups of students, which in turn creates more exposure to these areas and drives further interest.

A focus on a limited range of options was recognised by some school staff as problematic because it reduces the diversity of post-school pathways aspired to by students. This is further exacerbated when careers become stereotyped, for example by gender, academic ability, or practical skills.

Courses are driving pathway choices:

Staff member D: [we try to] be as diverse as we possibly can with what we can offer for students, but we do unintentionally end up offering the same qualifications quite regularly. So we do have a health services certificate which will lead to nursing. We do have a building certificate which will lead to building. Hairdressing, retail, and childcare. And a lot of the larger numbers of students go into those courses and are driven down those pathways. And so they're quite appealing to a lot of students.

Perceptions of career options:

Staff member C: ...a lot of girls probably look at primary education, nursing. But again, ... some of them are saying, "Well, I can't get a job as a nurse [in this area]." ... So that's probably where a lot of our sort of mid-range girls are looking to go into, things like nursing, primary education, and that's, I think, the limiting thing.

Local employers were also directly influencing pathway choices. Some larger employers proactively approached schools and Colleges and provided work experience for students, often simultaneously recruiting for apprenticeships. These employers were thus visible to students and their pathways were more concrete than less visible options.

The tendency to aspire to familiar pathways was affecting diversity of student interests across multiple post-school directions. School staff in the North and North-West reported that companies were finding it difficult to fill apprenticeship positions, particularly in agriculture and forestry. Staff member D reported that apprenticeships in the construction industry were seeing a lot of uptake, in spite of targeted exposure to people and pathway possibilities in other areas. Staff member D explained that this was due to young people being more attracted to careers in which family members or friends were working (i.e. "visible" careers).

Staff member D: ...that's one of those big silo areas - everyone knows a builder, everyone's uncle's a builder, etc. They go like hotcakes to be real professional about it. But they do.

2.1.3 Uni means leaving home

In regional areas of Tasmania, the pursuit of a university pathway implies either choosing a locally-offered course, an online course, or leaving home. This decision is momentous in a young person's life and requires a great deal of preparation, both financially and emotionally. Overall, attitudes to online learning among young people were negative. Participants cited factors such as isolation and motivation difficulties with online study. Some also described a desire to get away from home and explore the world, while others said that they did not want to leave the local area and/or their families.

Leaving home to attend university was described by participants as financially demanding. In general, those who were not expecting to receive a scholarship would be obliged to support themselves while studying.

Leaving family behind:

Student: To do my dream degree literally means that I have to move, I have no other choice. And that's quite overwhelming in regards to leaving a tight-knit family behind, younger siblings, stuff like that.

Moving away from home:

Parent A: [For uni, the first thing I think of is] it's a challenge and most likely they'll have to move away... they're most likely on their own for the first time after being supported by their families through to the end of year 12.

Saving the money to pay for university:

Staff member A: they need to work over the holidays in order to allow them to afford to go to uni - not the fees or anything, because you can delay those, but just to live.

2.1.4 The local schools and Colleges

The young people in this research looked to teachers and support staff at their Colleges for guidance. They reported multiple modes of support, including classes and workshops, small group sessions, workplace experience, visiting university campuses, and access to adult advisors such as school staff and UTAS representatives. Positive views of the Schools Recommendation Program² were also reported. That said, access to information was uneven across the Colleges. Importantly, one student reported that, compared with a College attended by a friend, people at their College had less idea of what was available and how to go about following a pathway.

Student: It's just different [at this College]. Yeah, because I have friends that go to [a different College] and they're like, "oh everyone there basically knows what they're doing and when they're doing it and how they're gonna do it", from what I've heard, and everyone here's like, some people don't really know, they just know that they want to do something.

Equitable student support and guidance coupled with general attitudes of teachers and peers to academic goals and ambitions were cited as important. These aspects are presented in more detail below.

² For more information, see: <https://www.utas.edu.au/study/schools-recommendation-program>

Current approaches to pathway guidance in the Colleges

The three Colleges in this study offered a range of approaches to pathway support, from having dedicated university pathway support (i.e. UniHub) to having staff members who were the ‘go to’ person to access information and insights. The different approaches showed various benefits and limitations. These are summarised in the following table:

Approaches to university pathway support		
Approach	Benefits	Limitations
Dedicated university support staff within the College, e.g. “Uni-hub”	Visible point of contact	May primarily utilise “cold” information
	Easy and equitable access to information and practical supports	Dependent on staff capacities and personalities, e.g. to support connections with students
	Can create positive relationships and experiences for students	Dependent on staffing continuity
	Can engage with students and their families as well as community members	Careers advice can be limited to dedicated staff members, becoming “siloed”
Staff member acting as “go to” person for information and insights, e.g. careers advisor	Can create positive relationships and experiences for students	Dependent on staff capacities and personalities, e.g. to build and maintain connections with students
	May be seen to be favouring some students or pathways over others	May be less knowledgeable about university pathways than dedicated university staff member
	Can engage with students and their families as well as community members	Careers advice can be limited to dedicated staff members, becoming “siloed”
		Dependent on staffing continuity
Information disseminated at school, e.g. during “home-group” time	May reach a wider group of students and their families	Dependence on “cold” information
	Can easily introduce opportunities that may be distant from existing options in the local community	May leave uncertainty about how to take “next steps”
		Relies on student attendance in these classes (which can be low)

Student experience in schools

There were many examples in this research of the effectiveness of individual school and university staff members and the positive results that followed from the strong relationships, connections and experiences they curated.

However, some of the students reported uneven support, with less focus on students interested in following a university pathway. They felt that some students were given more support than others, and that they were obliged to “chase” teachers for information and guidance. These participants felt that there was an emphasis on vocational training because of the area in which they lived, in which most students were likely to pursue a trade or apprenticeship.

Overall, the above findings reflect a reliance within pathway support on the personalities, capabilities, and perspectives of specific staff members. Authentic relationships between staff and students carried obvious importance to the success of pathway support. However, reliance on highly-motivated individuals to supply this kind of engagement is destined to provide uneven results. For this reason, development of system-wide, multi-modal support programs are recommended (see section 3.)

School and local culture: Is academic ambition discouraged?

Members of all three of the university-pathway focus groups shared experiences of feeling misunderstood because they had academic ambition. They described being different from peers who were unwilling to commit to academic work and being discouraged by some teachers from taking on a heavy academic load. The participants reported receiving comments such as: “it’s a lot of work”; “maybe that’s not the pathway for you”; and “you’re gonna be there for years!”. One student said that he thought such discouragement was due to “loss aversion”, adding that “They don’t want to see [students] fail so they set low expectations, so they can achieve it”.

These experiences of having academic ambition questioned or challenged is perhaps not surprising, given that the schools participating in this phase of the research project were selected based on phase 2 and 3 findings that indicated that post-school pathways do not tend to include university. However, it also points to a culture that may not recognise value in an academic pathway, creating a social risk barrier for young people whose interest and/or ambition is not understood.

2.1.5 The local young people

Supporting young people’s post-school transitions requires understanding the influences that shape who young people are. There were some general observations apparent in the data, such as that more girls than boys aspire to attend university. This gender inequality, observed by two of the interviewed staff members, is in keeping with international and national trends (Gore et al., 2017). In contrast, teachers reported that boys tended to be interested in trades pathways or in going straight into a job. Interestingly, some members of a focus group (university pathway group) believed that girls received more support than boys when they showed interest in academic pathways.

Adult participants were asked about the attributes that young people needed in order to achieve their goals. They reported that confidence was needed for success, as well as grit. Motivation and the ability to be proactive were also perceived to be essential attributes for “hunting down” and piecing together information. School staff members B, C and G all stated that students needed to show initiative and

determination, and not wait to have information “hand-fed” to them. At the same time, school staff recognised that some students needed more or different support than others in accessing and making sense of information. For example, young people from families and communities less familiar with higher education may not know how to be proactive or show initiative.

While acknowledging the value of such individual characteristics, it is important to also remember the essential role of systems and supports in enabling young people to navigate their options for the future, regardless of their personal dispositions. All the attributes below are influenced by previous experiences and circumstances. For example, grit or resilience requires social supports and resources that may not be easily available in regional and low SES communities (Bottrell, 2013).

Staff member G: I think some of it's got to come from them. They need a bit more initiative to engage with [what's out there] because sometimes they're a bit reluctant to seek information and do stuff for themselves. And some of it is almost, "Someone's going to hand it to me on a platter." Or there's also some who are a bit scared of what's out there and what happens after school. Because school is sort of like a safe and a known environment.



Figure 4 What young people need for success

Staff member E: I think kids know now that they won't stay in one job. We hear a lot of stuff about, "Oh, they don't have any resilience" and "they don't like to think". I've been thinking about that a lot, and I think they just don't put up with things anymore. It's not the old days where the boss is the boss and comes and tells people what to do and we all revere them and go, ooh, ahh. If they don't like it, they will leave and they will pick and choose. ...And you hear businesses, there's a lot of talk in the media about businesses saying, "Oh, we can't retain these people," or whatever. But unless they're cared for and valued and allowed their time off-- they're a different kettle of fish.

2.2 Pathways - Visibility, accessibility, and value

2.2.1 They can't be what they can't see

As mentioned in section 2.1.2, the data shows that students gravitate towards careers that are visible to them. Staff members from the three Colleges described general preferences among students for pathways such as trades, nursing, and teaching – all careers which have an apparently linear trajectory of training to employment. There was also evidence of lack of awareness among young people of how pathways can branch into different opportunities.

Overall, there were calls from both staff and students for more information on the variety of available careers and the associated pathways and opportunities. This is an issue that is recognised nationally as a priority for effective student career preparation (Australian Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE), 2016; Keele et al., 2020).

Awareness of how skills and interests can guide career directions:

Staff member D: When you have a conversation with students about what other positions their skills could transition to, that information isn't broad. ... And then you have a conversation where a student is actually quite talented as a sportsman and you talk about podiatry or going into physiotherapy and then the conversation broadens to, "Oh, well that actually sounds like something that I would be really good at because I have the sports interest and the skill," and then it continues from there.

Career and pathway awareness:

Staff member A: I feel like they know about the mainstream careers, like being a nurse, being a teacher, but there's so many other jobs out there that I feel like the students maybe don't know about, so therefore wouldn't know which degrees to study. So I feel like more information about the range of careers that are out there and then the university degrees that would lead to them would be helpful.

Personal experiences: Almost all of the students who had chosen a university pathway described personal experiences that had led to their choice. For some, this was a tangible event or situation that informed their understanding and aspirations. For others, it was information and guidance from an important person in their lives. This finding highlights the importance of direct experiences and “hot” information gained through interactions with important others to creating personal relevance and perceived legitimacy of post-school pathway options (Schmidt, 2022). These concepts are explored further in section 2.2.3.

Student: I know I want to be a child psychologist; I've wanted to since grade seven. And I know, to do that, I'm gonna have to go to uni... My brother goes to a child psychologist because he's autistic and needs that bit of support. And I know, like certain companies, I know the fact that they are looking for psychologists because my brother was on a wait list over a year to see someone.

2.2.2 Knowing where a pathway leads

A further aspect of the visibility of pathways was understanding where pathways would lead. There was some reference to the idea that university is valuable in terms of providing a good, rounded education, as well as the value to society of educated, intelligent people. However, the majority of participants reported needing to have a good idea of the type and certainty of a job at the end of study and training.

Future opportunities or locked in to a career?

Some of the focus group participants had thought deeply about how their pathway choices may support their options in the future, while others were unsure and unwilling to commit. Some staff members and parents identified an increased tendency for students to delay choosing a pathway. These adults gave possible reasons for delaying decisions such as:

- Students are not ready to decide
- Students are concerned about making the wrong choice
- Students are overwhelmed by the options
- Families are advising students not to waste money on study until they're sure
- Students don't want to lock themselves in
- Students are afraid to fail

Not sure what job is at the end:

Staff member G: There are the, what is it, enrolled and registered nurses. It's very specific jobs and I think it's easy for students to understand what it looks like, whereas I think for some qualifications, whether it's TAFE or university, it's like where you could do this, and then they're not always 100% sure what it is that they will be doing in a job at the end of that one.

In the student focus groups, some participants described concern about becoming “stuck” in a career or a job. There was also a sense that much of what might happen in the future is impossible to predict, requiring trust that a chosen pathway will provide as-yet-unknown opportunities. The idea that there is no way to know where a pathway might lead caused differing levels of anxiety, with some students content to navigate the future as it arose, and others describing themselves as having “one shot” to get it right.

It is interesting to note that, in the phase 2 survey, a majority of respondents (around 70%) indicated that their chosen pathway option following school would be a steppingstone to future opportunities and/or directions. This shows that the majority of students feel positive about future options. However, there is also a significant number who may feel pressure to make the “right” choice (Crellin & te Riele, 2022).

Student: If I'm honest, I don't know [if this career is my forever choice]. I kinda am aiming in that direction. But it's not something I've really thought about. ...Not the best with making decisions too, so that kind of makes it a little bit harder. Laziness, second guessing choices I've made, sometimes, depending on what it is, you know, if it is what I want to do.

Student 1: It feels like you only get one shot at it, like you get one life to live, is this the right way to live? This one chance?

Student 2: That's exactly right!

Student 1: Yeah, I feel as though we've been given 50 Choose Your Own Adventure books. But there's a page open in all of them. And they all might be good options or maybe not so good options, but you don't know. Until you start. Until you get into that degree or, yeah.

Parent D: when she looked into those courses, she was excited. And definitely, yeah, twinkle in the eye interest in everything. I think our conversation alongside that was that you've got to get out there, and you might do that course and see that there's something else that's even better for you, because you don't know. She doesn't know what's out there, and I couldn't list all the job opportunities or experience you'd have, based on my limited knowledge of science. So I think just knowing that there's so many options out there, she just has to work hard at what she wants-- to get to what she wants to do. And lots of pathways-- you might end up a different path to where you expect.

2.2.3 Information: Navigating the options and identifying next steps

A common theme among students and parents was the challenge of finding accessible information. Students described needing to “piece together” information from various sources, and parents described frustration with locating information that was relevant and up-to-date. Across all participants, a need was recognised for career information that showed the sorts of opportunities and directions various pathways and career-paths may offer. Although there are websites that carry this kind of information (e.g. <https://myfuture.edu.au/home> or <https://careerify.tas.gov.au/>), none of the participants in the study reported using such resources.

Student: There's less education about uni because I didn't actually find out anything at all until end of last year because I had to search it up myself. Not many people actually have been told the options you have for uni, compared to trade.

Parent C: there are just so many options. It's like [the school advisor] says, "Go look online, there's some courses online." But you can get lost online, and you track down different ones and they're not running anymore. It just feels like maybe there's almost, in a way, too much.

Locating and acting on information about university was reported as a significant barrier for young people and their families, likely exacerbated by a lack of general knowledge around how universities and career qualifications are structured.

Many of the students in this research came from families and communities that traditionally have limited experience of university. Further, resources and knowledge to investigate post-school pathway options may be limited. One teacher described these limitations as having an “empty backpack” as compared with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Alternatively, one could say the virtual school bag of students in this research contained *different* knowledges, experiences and dispositions (Thomson, 2020), which means they are well-prepared for some pathways, but less so for others such as university.

Visibility of university pathways is an important consideration. For careers that are less visible or do not exist within communities, enabling students to connect with that pathway is challenging (Corbett et al., 2017). When considering career directions

Student: I think there is a lot of information, it's just sometimes it's not the easiest to understand. It's not very straightforward like even if you go and do your own research.

I: Oh like on the uni website?

Student: Yeah it's like, these are the courses we do! How do I do them? Well, these are the courses we do!

Staff member G: There are some kids who are interested in some other things like becoming a professional gamer, and I don't know enough about that area, if that's something you can do here?

outside of their experience, school staff and parents sometimes felt uncertain about how to offer guidance to young people. Limited access to educators with relevant expertise was also cited as an issue.

Parent C: He loves technology stuff, so maybe something to do-- I don't even know what's out there. ...Something to do with technology and photos might be a focus for him for the next few years, but I really don't know where that might lead. And he certainly doesn't either.

Student: [before I got to College] it was just sort of me and YouTube, because the computer graphics teachers I had would be like, Wow, that's so cool. I'd be like, Yeah, can you help me? [but] they only understand how to use it in terms of 3d printing purposes. They don't know how to texture a model, or like, animate it or anything. That's just not what they specialise in, which can be really tough because YouTube actually does, okay, it's pretty good sometimes, but when you have a really specific issue, that you don't know how to explain. It's kind of hard to figure out what you're supposed to do.

Hot and cold information

Comments in the student focus groups indicated that knowing and speaking with people who are in a career is an important part of students imagining themselves following a similar pathway. This finding is in keeping with research into the tendency for young people - particularly from lower socio-economic communities - to give more credence to “hot” information from their social networks than “cold” information, such as from university websites and admission guides, since “hot” information connects more directly to their interests and identities (Smith, 2011).

Some focus groups members described school and onsite university staff members as important sources of emotional and practical support. These adults were reported as being the first choice as a source of information, which could become “hot” information because of positive teacher-student relationships. However, the primary sources of “hot” information came from other young people. Some school staff showed awareness of the value of such information and harnessed it to support students, for example by actively connecting College students with ex-students who were studying at university. Similarly, a kind of “hot” information was sometimes created by College students visiting campuses, university students and lecturers visiting Colleges, and through the presence and activities of university staff working within Colleges.

Student: I'm doing the community service course at the moment. So that's where I kind of heard about [Teacher Assistant work]. And then I have a few family friends that, like, are teachers and whatnot. And they've always talked about how they need TAs at the moment, how they're so low on that extra help. So I wanted to look at that a little bit more. And then I did my placement and then spoke to E, who was the one that kind of talked me through it all and everything. And she gave out heaps of different options. And then offered me a spot hopefully next year.

Staff member C: the recruiting person was a bit "Oh, uni's great," but it's actually getting people up here and saying, "These are the possibilities, these are the careers," not the brochure stuff. And what I'm doing in my role is, if I know someone who's doing something in uni-- I've got one of the girls in Hobart now, she does engineering. And I just said to her, "Can you talk to these people? They're thinking about coming to Hobart. They're thinking about doing this," and she's been great.

2.2.4 Perceptions of the university pathway

A key finding from phase 1 of this project was that, in general, university was considered a more prestigious pathway than a Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathway. This finding was not evident in phase 4, particularly among student participants. Instead, VET was seen as a path to stable, well-paid work, while university was generally seen as expensive and as a risky delay to a reliable income. Some of the student participants described university as attractive because of the lifestyle – meeting new people, finding like-minded groups, and taking control of their education and life. However, this was not a dominant aspect of the discourse on university pathways.

Only seven of the fourteen adult participants believed that attending university would lead to better job opportunities than other pathways. Some student focus group members also described the benefits of university in terms of creating future opportunities, earning better money, and building connections with like-minded people.

Becoming an adult:

Student: [going to uni is] also just moving away from home. So, like moving away, and being away from your parents, and under the shadow of being associated with such and such a child or whatever, like you become your own self

The value of participation in higher education is the subject of international research on increases in negative community perceptions (Cook et al., 2019) as well as the workforce positions that university graduates tend to occupy (Jackson & Li, 2022). Findings include increasing doubt in communities that the costs of higher education will lead to better employment, and a significant mis-match between graduate qualifications and the jobs they occupy in the years following course completion.

The present research also found evidence that the value of attending university is being questioned. For most young people in this study, university was associated with the accumulation of a “massive” HECS debt. The costs of attending higher education were seen as a financial barrier for students and their families. However, it was not cost alone that was of concern. Participants mentioned factors such as:

- the cost-benefit of a university qualification (including substantial debt coupled with doubt that a high-paying job would result from university qualification).
- Uncertainty of effectiveness of a university qualification in practical job preparation and supporting employability.
- the amount of time necessary to gain a qualification (during which students are not earning or earning very little).
- the perceived stress and hard work of studying, especially if working at the same time.

Which university?

Once the decision had been made to attend university, the question of which university was decided by:

- cost of living/available scholarships
- relevance and reputation of available courses
- reputation of the university
- desired lifestyle

Particularly in the North and North-West of the state, high-achieving students reported that scholarships available from interstate universities often made interstate study more attractive and affordable than attending UTAS (the financial influences on future pathways are discussed further in section 2.3). In the South, having a local university campus was reassuring and none of the focus group participants on university pathways were considering studying interstate. One commented that “I don’t think I’m

Will university lead to a good job?

Parent C: I used to think you would go to university, study at the career you wanted, and you come out and you get a really good job. I don't know if that's the case anymore. I think maybe you come out with a lot of qualifications. I don't know if that's going to be more likely to get you a job these days. I tend to think that life experience and work experience is more important than a piece of paper. ... I used to see it as a very clear pathway, university, and now I'm thinking maybe it's not. You could sit with university for a long time and wander around all the degrees and come out with a big [debt] and maybe get a qualification and then find that you're not prepared for the job anyway, or the job has changed.

prepared to leave Tassie yet”, while another stated that “I’ve always lived in Tassie, so I’ll probably only leave once I’m done with the degree”. These comments resonate with the findings of the phase 2 survey, in which the foremost social reason for choosing the University of Tasmania was that it is “a safe environment” (Crellin & te Riele, 2022).

Some of the students considering an interstate university had also given thought to the reputation of the institutions and the quality of the courses on offer. They were concerned about the prospect of having to engage with their courses online, for example if lectures were only offered in this format. In general, studying online was not seen as an ideal way to engage with university.

Stereotypes – what are the characteristics of people who attend university?

Participants were asked to describe the personal characteristics ideal for four pathways: university, TAFE, apprenticeships, and straight into work. Stereotypes are useful as an indicator of (often unconscious) assumptions and biases that people may hold. The descriptors used by participants for the two main areas of post-school pathways are shown below (university and apprenticeships/TAFE). Of particular interest are the views that people who choose a university pathway are conceited and rich – both attributes that were expressed during student focus groups, and both pointing to a sense of “them” and “us”. This in turn may lead to a conclusion that university is “not for us” and highlights the social risk that some students face if they wanted to follow this pathway.

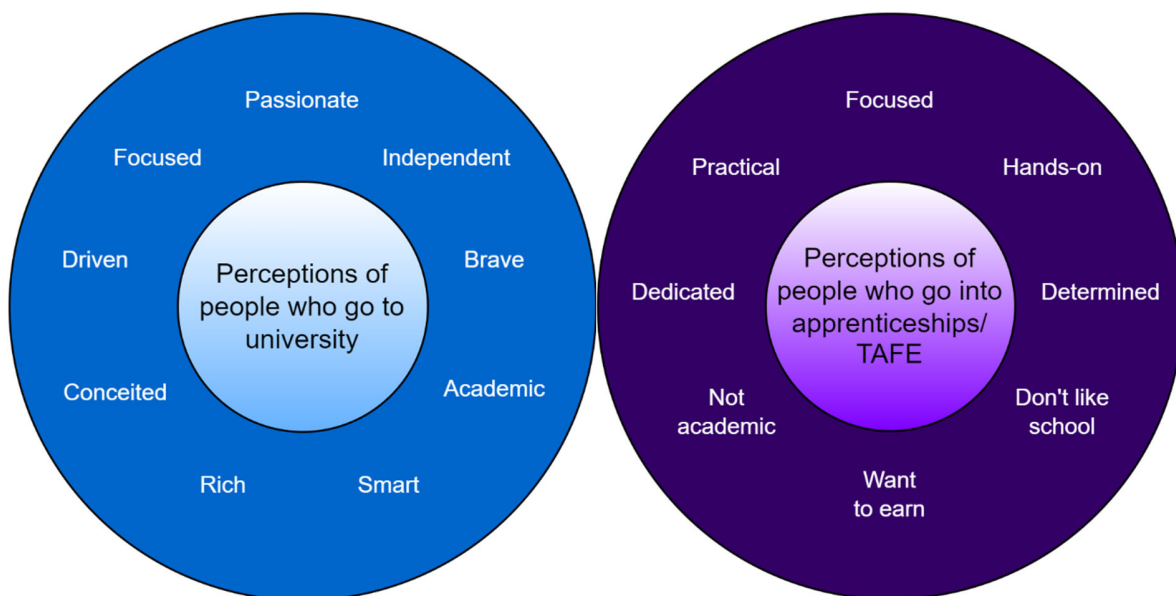


Figure 5 Stereotypical perceptions

2.3 Money talks – financial factors

2.3.1 The priority of earning a wage

Student: Money's a big issue for people

Phase 4 of this project focused on schools with students whose post-school pathways do not tend to include higher education. These schools were situated in areas associated with socio-economic disadvantage. It was therefore not surprising to find that financial issues were a priority for many students. Staff noted that many students would simply finish school and go straight into the workforce unless they were offered the right financial and practical support to continue their education and training. In addition, pathway choices were influenced by the likelihood of earning a good wage, and how soon this could be achieved.

Holding down multiple jobs while finishing school

During focus groups, students spoke about the jobs they were currently employed in while completing their year 11 and 12 studies. One year 12 student in the non-university pathway group reported holding down three jobs concurrently, two of which were school-based traineeships, one in banking and the other based in the hospitality sector. For students planning university pathways too, gaining paid employment while completing school was important as a means of saving money to support their intention to attend university.

Staff member C: we've noticed in the last two years a lot of the kids are the breadwinners in their family or significant contributors too. Especially if they're the oldest child in the family, they'll have a part-time job and they'll be paying for their little brother's and sister's stuff. Things like that. And you sort of sit there and go, "Wow, these kids are doing adult things." And they're trying to get through year 11 and 12. And they're trying to think about university, but they've also got one eye on their little brother or sister. Or when the bills are due and things like that, so it's really difficult then.

Student: I've always been saving towards [university] to be able to give myself the best shot that I can. Yeah, it's been a lot of work. I think it was, at some point, something like 20-25 hours a week, outside of college. Yeah, basically I clicked my fingers and six months of my life disappeared. However, I don't regret it. Because I feel like it's developed character.

2.3.2 Impact of HECS debt on university intentions

Debt incurred for the costs of university education, (e.g. HECS-HELP and FEE-HELP) has been identified as a constraint on students' choice and participation in higher education (Braithwaite et al., 2022). Research from the United Kingdom has found that higher education aspirations are connected with the consumption value that students attach to it (Hassani-Nezhad et al., 2021). In the current research, the accrual of a student debt was described by students as "a bad idea" and was generally seen as a strong dis-incentive to studying at university. The reality of student debt as a barrier is widely recognised, as evidenced by the removal of HECS fees by some state governments to address shortages of staff in certain professions, for example in nursing. **Financial incentives such as removing the need to accrue major debt and support through scholarships were decisive to the choices considered by the participants in this research.**

Student: I think it's just terrifying. The whole idea of debt. Like it's just so scary. I come from a family who has had a lot of debt. And growing up knowing that your family's in debt is terrifying as well. So that puts an extra layer of like, I don't want to ever get in debt, because I saw what it did to my family growing up.

Parent E: She got the first round offer from UTAS on the Wednesday, [but then] on the Sunday the Victorian government announced no HECS debts for nursing students if they worked with them for two years. [So] she is applying through VTAC to see what offer she gets in Melbourne ... and then see what happens with the scholarship options.

2.3.3 Importance of scholarships

Focus group conversations revealed the extent to which post-school options were considered through a financial prism. Scholarships were a crucial support that enabled students to pursue higher education pathways with much greater chances of success. Their accounts showed their awareness of the stress and anxiety that would be associated with full-time study if they were having to support themselves through working. **Students were also aware that without sufficient financial support they would be limited in their ability to enjoy the lifestyle that university study offers, such as meeting friends and doing things.**

Student: I don't want to just live there, eat in my room, I want to, you know, go out, hang out with my friends, have experiences. And, obviously, you don't need to go shopping every weekend, but things like maybe a coffee date, or you know, some brunch, those extra things that sort of make university life.

A scholarship really takes the pressure off. Instead of having to get there worried about employment, worrying about workload, having to worry about surviving as well, it really takes that burden off. I guess it's - you've got to be comfortable to be able to not only make a big jump to leave, but to be able to financially support yourself.

2.4 Aspirations and personal relevance

Understanding aspiration formation and the enablers and barriers to their realisation is important to broadening pathway options for young people. Aspirations are formed through social interactions (Slack, 2003; Smith, 2011) and are subject to available knowledge, skills, and resources that enable not only imagining future possibilities but making them a reality (Appadurai, 2004; Sellar et al., 2011). It follows that developing interest in university pathways is only useful to disadvantaged communities if it is accompanied by knowledge, skills and resources supporting realisation.

2.4.1 Personal relevance – connecting young people with pathways

In this study, pathway choices were easiest when young people’s self-perceptions aligned with their ideas about the pathway and/or the pathway goal. For example, some participants on a university pathway described themselves as “academically-minded” or as looking for “like-minded” people, both characteristics they associated with attending university. Another characteristic associated with a university pathway was passion for a subject area and/or feeling drawn towards a particular career that required a university qualification.

A few key factors supporting alignment of self-perceptions and a university pathway were apparent in the data. These included:

- Knowing and speaking with people who were on a particular pathway or in a particular career (“hot” information/positive experiences).
- Positive family attitudes towards university attendance
- Opportunities to experience and be immersed in a pathway-associated environment (such as visiting university campuses or workplaces).
- Personal support from people such as school or university staff.

Creating connections with a career path – the case of the Military

In one College, students described attending classes during which visitors from the Army, Navy and Air Force told stories and described experiences and benefits of working for the Military. The students were even asked to participate in a marching drill.

This approach to engaging potential future recruits utilises personal stories and physical experiences that heighten the ability of young people to imagine themselves in these roles.

2.4.2 Forming aspirations

Aspirations to attend higher education are often framed in terms of students from disadvantaged backgrounds needing to “set their sights higher” (Harrison, 2018). However, the full picture is more complex. A supportive context of possibility for these young people enables them to expand their range of hopes and aspirations. When schools and other agencies provide such a context, “they can impact on

how these young people come to see themselves and their place in the world far more positively” (Mills, 2018, p.574).

The perceptions and understandings that influence aspirations are intertwined with social and cultural environment (including barriers and enablers) and may include (Dietrich et al., 2012; Lergetporer et al., 2021; Oyserman et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2022; Van den Broeck et al., 2023; Zimmermann, 2020):

- Self-perceptions (what sort of person am I? What am I capable of?)
- Perceptions, expectations and aspirations of parents, family, peers, and wider community
- Pressure to maintain social status/be accepted (social risk)
- Perceived costs and benefits of pathway
- Perceived probability of success
- Exposure to and knowledge of pathway
- Sense of belonging and desire to leave or to stay in the local area
- Being able to imagine oneself on a pathway and/or in a specific career.
- Ease of using strategies, such as thinking about, seeking out, and acting on information.

Staff member G: Some people haven't quite pictured themselves going to university before, and I don't know how much of it comes from the student and how much of it comes from the family. Because sometimes, if they're the first in the family, they didn't really know that was something that they could do. So then when we take students to the university [to] visit the campus and we're having more discussions around it, then they start to think, "Ah, actually..."

Influences on aspirations such as those listed above were evident in the present research and can be expected to operate throughout the lives of young people, shaping how they see themselves and how they conceptualise who they might become. Aspirations, including those involving university, therefore begin to form early (Parker et al., 2016).

Aspirations are sometimes defined in terms of “possible selves” – positive and negative images of the self in a future state (Oyserman et al., 2006). This way of looking at aspirations includes the idea that people must be able to perceive plausible and detailed connections between their present selves and a possible future self in order to persistently apply strategies for achieving or avoiding it. Such strategies

are more likely to be applied when the meta-cognitive experience is positive – that is, it feels “easy” to think about future possibilities and the sense of associated risk is acceptable (Oyserman, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2006).

Importantly, possible selves are malleable and sensitive to changes (positive and negative) in the environment (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). This means that both schools and universities can make a difference.

Staff member E: I mean, lots of kids-- I suppose, kids here want to do teaching and nursing and things that they see. I mean, they're not going to go, "Oh, I'm going to be a viticulturalist or something". They don't drink wine and they don't go to restaurants and those sort of things here.

2.4.3 From aspirations to pathway choices: Practical, social and personal influences

Broadly dividing influences on aspirations into three types – practical, social, and personal – is helpful when considering approaches to university pathways as an option for young people and their families. This division supports targeting practical influences (such as financial supports), social influences (such as “hot” information (see section 0)), or personal influences (such as demonstrating how young people can feel a sense of belonging at university).

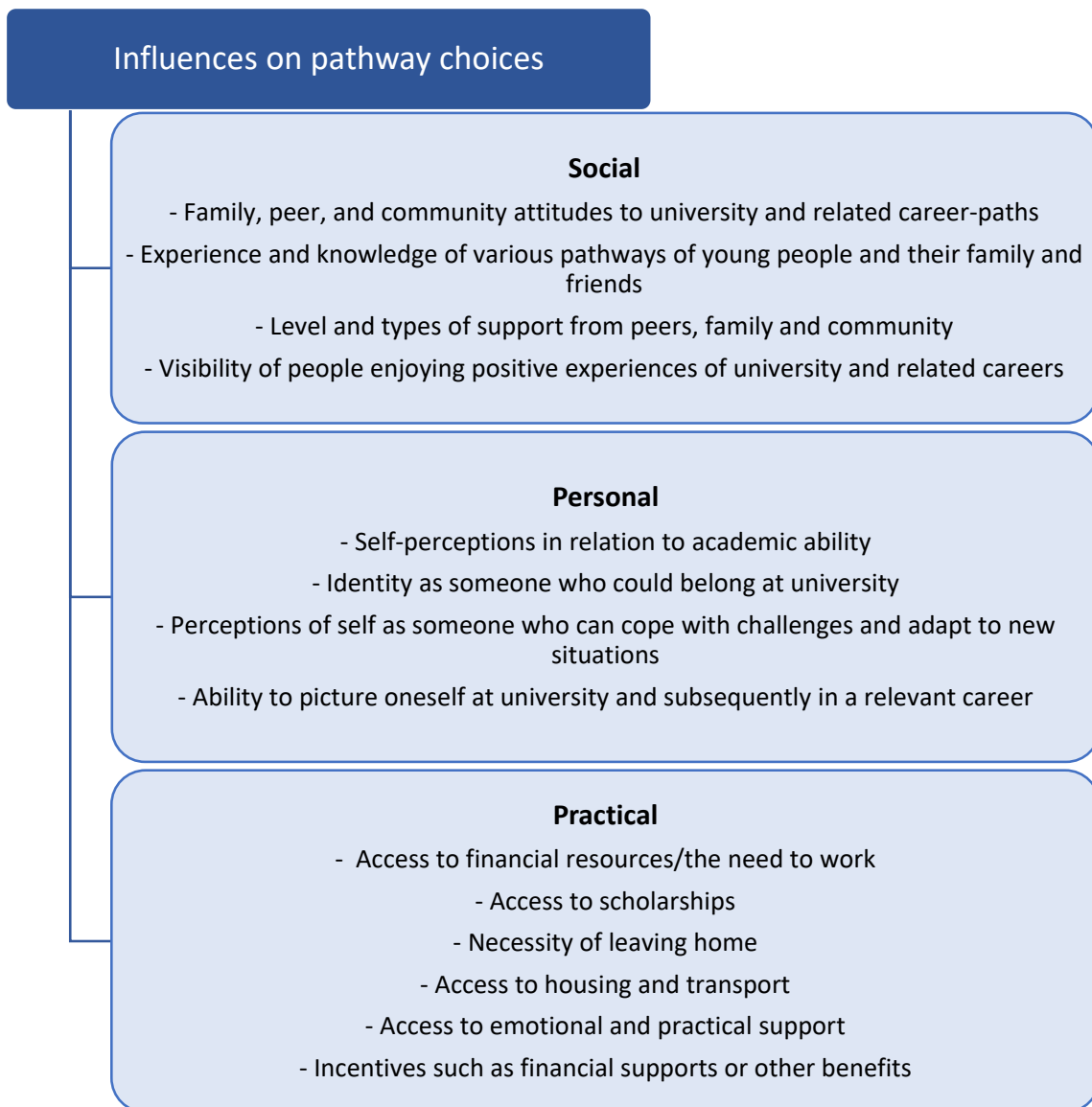
Staff members at the participating Colleges indicated that many students have little experience or understanding of university campuses and what ‘going to university’ involves. If students cannot picture themselves at university, it follows that, for them, there is low personal relevance and high sense of risk associated with this pathway, even when they possess strong academic skills.

I: So what do young people in this area need to make their planned pathways come true?

Staff member D: The magic question. They need targeted intervention. They need opportunities. They need people who are going to be there with them to help them understand. And they need concrete evidence. They need to be able to go and experience something for themselves, see something in action, feel and be immersed in an environment. They need key relationships and experiences that are positive when they seek those experiences. I think that that's probably a big part of it- is going and having a really positive experience and then still remaining connected to that experience in a mentor programme or a schools programme of some form.

Staff member C: more stories about kids from the [area], with more engagement in the primary schools and high schools. These are the things that we need [here].

The presence of this 'gap' between schooling and higher education underscores the importance of offering multiple ways for students to gain information and experiences of universities and campuses so that they can make their future plans in ways that feel familiar and relevant. Family attitudes, readiness and capabilities to support students in their investigation of pathways also play an important role.



Staff member C: [on the excursion to UTAS] he was looking around, looking around. He's one of our top students here. And he's looking around, staring up at everything, went into the business school down there and the round sort of lecture theatre they've got. And I said, "Oh, what do you think?" And he goes, "I'm coming to university now."

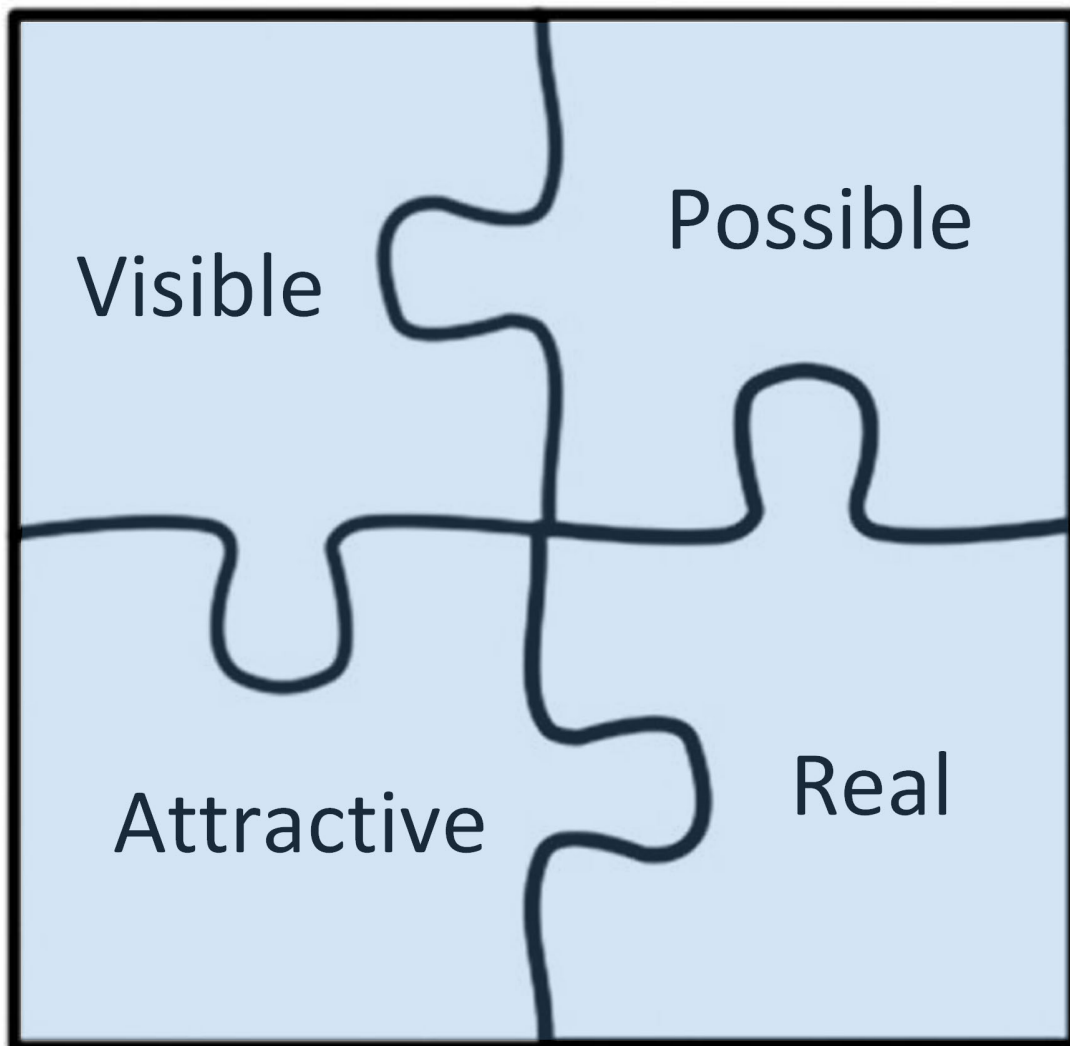
Staff member G: Well, I guess what I think of university might be different to what young people think... I think it's starting, but it needs to be demystified a bit and made accessible. ...because if you don't know anything about university, it seems like a place where other people go. And it's like, "Am I part of that? I don't think I am."

Parent D: They went to Hobart last year and this year, and they've been to the clinical school in Launceston and given them opportunities to talk to university students and people in the same boat as them. They organised somebody to come to talk to them about UTAS when that was coming up, and showed them the accommodation. They show you some of the accommodation at UTAS so it's a little bit more familiar. And it's all been really big things, I think, that have probably given her the motivation to-- yeah, "I can see this next step-- what it's going to look like for me."

3 Paving the way to university: Summary and recommendations

The young people in this research came from communities in which university was traditionally less familiar as a pathway. The attitudes of families, peers, and other community members were not always supportive of higher education as a post-school choice. The individual perceptions and decisions of young people are mediated by the social and cultural ecosystems in which they live. It is therefore essential to work together with students, families, schools, and communities to ensure that post-school pathways are accessible and attractive.

Our recommendations focus on four areas for action that will make pathways visible, possible, attractive, and real.



Recommendation 1: Making pathways visible

Young people are supported to explore and plan future options when courses, jobs and careers are visible to them.

Building knowledge and awareness

- Long-term planning for sustained and broad engagement that begins early in schooling. This should include a coordinated approach to community and school outreach, marketing, and support, including within the university as well as with other education providers.
- Ensure access to well-supported and resourced career counselling staff
- Provide experiences and connections with experienced people, especially for less-visible pathways and careers
- (Co)-design information in multiple formats to support accessibility and relevance as well as sharing of information, such as between young people.

Recommendation 2: Making pathways possible

Young people are supported to pursue future options when they have access to trustworthy and relevant knowledge and to practical resources.

Building capacity and confidence

- Ensure that families and supporting adults are well-informed about careers and pathways
- Reduce social risk, for example through demonstrating relevance and value of pathways across whole communities
- Minimise assumed knowledge (e.g. of expectations, systems, hierarchies, and processes)
- Offer accessible, positive, practical, and hands-on assistance in all aspects of pathways (e.g. applications; financial; academic; wellbeing; housing; transport)
- Provide templates and examples showing how to do things like applications, cover letters, portfolios etc.
- Cultivate positive self-perceptions and soft skills (e.g. reflective practices; help-seeking; communication; goal setting)

Recommendation 3: Making pathways “real”

Young people are supported to feel that a pathway is concrete and achievable when they are connected to people and places with direct and authentic relevance to that pathway.

Building connections and relevance

- Deliver information face-to-face wherever possible, including through people who are active in various pathways, or who have recently taken a pathway

- Identify and communicate ways in which young people from similar backgrounds find a sense of belonging/confidence/enjoyment once they get to campus. Demonstrate ways in which university and university careers are “for me”
- (Co-)design information that adds detail to understandings of what a university pathway and associated careers are like, such as giving lived examples of young people at university or in a career doing everyday things and dealing with challenges.
- Provide schools, families, and the broader community with information and ideas for how they can "normalise" university for potential students, e.g. by visiting campuses, helping to find information, and talking about the future opportunities this pathway may bring
- Facilitate visits to campuses and places of employment to support relevant experiences

Recommendation 4: Making pathways attractive

Young people are supported to consider a pathway attractive when immediate and longer-term benefits for themselves and their communities are made clear and explicit.

Building positive emotions and narratives

- Student and community co-design opportunities can be helpful for improving relevance and buy-in
- Demonstrate how pathways contribute to local context as well as more broadly
- Highlight the rewards of university life and how it is different to being at school
- Ensure that connections between career options and student strengths, interests, and desired lifestyles are deliberately explored
- Provide financial support and incentives and ensure that these are well understood
- Ensure that employment opportunities are visible, both for future careers and as a way for young people to support themselves while studying

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