



UNIVERSITY of  
TASMANIA



Peter Underwood  
Centre

# Understanding Tasmanian School Students' Post-School Pathway Intentions

Phase One: Expert Informant Focus Groups

## Summary Report for Schools

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July 2020



## Acknowledgements

A big thank you to the participating students, school staff and parents/carers for contributing their views and experiences.

Cover photo credits:

- Two top photos - Osborne Images
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## Suggested citation

Crellin, T., Te Riele, K. & West, M. (2020). *Understanding Tasmanian School Students' Post-School Pathway Intentions. Phase One: Expert Informant Focus Groups. Summary Report for Schools*. Hobart: University of Tasmania, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment.

ISBN 978-1-922353-46-0(print)

ISBN 978-1-922352-47-7(electronic)

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## Glossary

ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
IMAS	Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UCP	University Connections Program
UTAS	University of Tasmania
VET	Vocational Education and Training



## Introduction

The Peter Underwood Centre at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is undertaking a study which seeks insights into the post-school intentions of Tasmanian Year 10, 11 and 12 students. The first phase of this project involved focus groups in 5 schools: 3 government schools, 1 Catholic school, and 1 independent school. In total 44 students, 18 parents or carers, and 25 school staff contributed their insights and views. We are grateful to all the staff, students and parents in these schools for their support. This report provides a summary of the key findings.

## Considerations for different post-school options

In the student focus groups an activity invited students to indicate what they thought they might like to do when they leave school. Figure 1 shows the frequency with which different options were named.

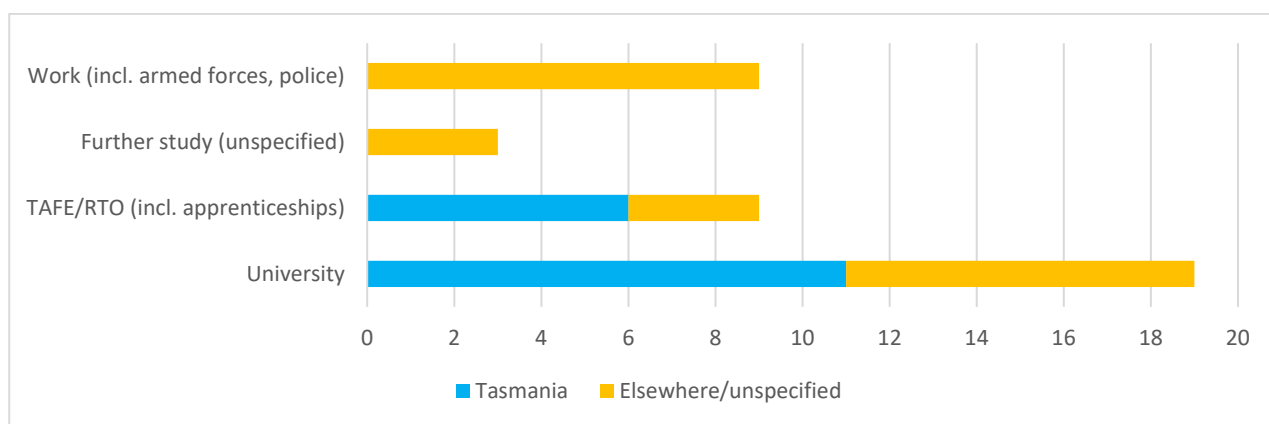


Figure 1: Categories of post-school options named by students

This section provides key findings in relation to the following options: enrolling at the University of Tasmania; enrolling at an interstate university; going to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or another Registered Training Organisation (RTO) or getting an apprenticeship; and finding employment. The analysis of all the data led to 6 categories of considerations for post-school pathways:

1. The offering: How and where it is delivered, how available it is and how easy to access/apply for, and the perceived quality or prestige.
2. Practical logistics: Costs and accommodation.
3. Personal readiness: The student's own (perceived) capability to pursue a particular option.
4. Social factors: The attractiveness of the social environment as well as the extent to which the option provides access to support networks.
5. Long-term outcomes: Future work opportunities, earning potential, and industry connections.
6. Tasmanian patriotism: In relation to the choice to study at the University of Tasmania versus an interstate university.

Many participants across the 5 schools acknowledged that aligning post-school plans with interests and passions is a key consideration for young people and is central to deciding on a pathway. However, participants did not tend to unpack this consideration in relation to specific post-school plans. Instead, practical, short-term considerations dominated the discussion about attending university, pursuing vocational education, or entering the labour market.

## Enrolling at the University of Tasmania

Considerations	Findings
The offering	<p>Students largely focused on course availability as a consideration. Many thought the University of Tasmania offers only a limited range of courses. However, students also commented favourably on the availability of specialised courses, for example through the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS). School staff and parents primarily spoke about reputation as a consideration, with mixed views about the academic quality and prestige of the University of Tasmania.</p> <p>Many participants identified campus locations as a positive factor, although some said that for some students even a relatively small travel distance can be a barrier. There were mixed views about the attractiveness of online modes of delivery.</p> <p>Overwhelmingly, participants suggested that applying to enrol at the University of Tasmania was relatively easy in comparison to interstate universities. Participants spoke positively about University College as an alternative entry pathway.</p>
Practical logistics	<p>Cost dominated the discussion around why students choose to go to university or not in general. Several aspects were included in cost, but primarily it related to course fees, Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt, and the cost of living while studying—such as accommodation, transport, and textbooks. Some school staff mentioned scholarships, but generally these were not raised as a solution to concerns about the cost of studying at university.</p> <p>Only a small number of participants made comments about cost directly in relation to studying at the University of Tasmania: seeing course fees as more affordable; and accommodation costs as similar to studying interstate if students need to move out of home to study at the University of Tasmania. Some participants also spoke about the difficulty of securing accommodation in Hobart.</p>
Personal readiness	<p>When participants were asked what they knew about the University of Tasmania, many responses focused on students' own capability and on perceived challenges and demands of studying at university, which was seen as a big step up from Year 12.</p>
Social factors	<p>A large number of participants made positive comments that the University of Tasmania has an open, laid back and familiar environment. Some expressed concerns about negative impacts on the social environment due to online study; young people living at home; and the planned campus move from Sandy Bay to the centre of Hobart. There were a few comments about international students at the University of Tasmania, with some participants seeing this as positive exposure to different cultures. Some participants also spoke about easy access to support networks when young people study locally, and that this is a reason for choosing the University of Tasmania.</p>
Long-term outcomes	<p>Instrumental outcomes (such as future work opportunities, earning potential or industry connections) did not feature in relation to study at the University of Tasmania.</p>
Tasmanian patriotism	<p>Some participants emphasised that staying in Tasmania is a key consideration for young people, and the University of Tasmania is a good option that enables this to happen.</p>

Overall, participants were concerned with immediate considerations such as cost and accommodation when it came to enrolling at the University of Tasmania, and noted certain courses that the University does not offer. Interstate universities were used as a point of comparison to studying locally. Reasons for choosing the University of Tasmania over other options include the physical campus locations and social environment, place-based specialised courses, and alternative entry options.

**“** *I think if you live in Tassie, I think we all kind of see UTAS as a really good uni.* **”**

Parent

## *Enrolling at an interstate university*

Considerations	Findings
The offering	<p>Course availability was often one of the first things that participants raised when asked what they know about interstate institutions. Participants suggested that the only reason some young people are considering interstate universities is because their chosen course is not available at the University of Tasmania.</p> <p>On the other hand, there was also a suggestion that some young people forego their first preference in order to stay in Tasmania.</p> <p>Some participants thought that interstate universities have a higher academic standing, in part due to their greater variety of courses or stricter entry requirements.</p> <p>In comparison to comments around enrolling at the University of Tasmania, participants felt that entry to interstate universities is harder, for example because higher Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATARs) are required.</p>
Practical logistics	<p>Cost was identified as a major deterrent to studying at university, regardless of whether it is in Tasmania or interstate. Some participants felt that the costs associated with studying at an interstate university are higher than those associated with studying at the University of Tasmania.</p> <p>Quite a large number of participants made general comments about the high cost of studying interstate, and others felt that without financial support from parents it is an inaccessible option. However, if young people have to move out of home to attend the University of Tasmania, there was a sense among some participants that the cost was on par with attending an interstate institution.</p>
Personal readiness	<p>Some people suggested that the 'brightest' students should attend interstate institutions. This suggests that they considered interstate universities require a high level of personal capability and readiness.</p>
Social factors	<p>Where participants spoke about the positive aspects of the social culture and environment at interstate universities, they focused on considerations like meeting new people, gaining wider networks and experiencing a different lifestyle.</p> <p>Being away from family was identified as a barrier to studying at an interstate university.</p>
Long-term outcomes	<p>Instrumental outcomes (such as future work opportunities, earning potential or industry connections) did not feature much in relation to whether to study at an interstate university.</p>
Tasmanian patriotism	<p>Several participants felt that some students choose to study at an interstate university because they do not like Tasmania, or they want to leave the state.</p>

Immediate considerations like course availability and cost appear to be front of mind for young people when they are weighing up whether to enrol at an interstate university. This is similar to their thoughts about the option of studying at the University of Tasmania.

There also seems to be a link between perceived prestige and perceived difficulty of 'getting into' an interstate university.

**“** *I know there's a lot more opportunities on the mainland than there is down here...  
Because we're such a small place. There's only so much we can do.* **”**

Student

## TAFE / RTO (including apprenticeships)

Considerations	Findings
The offering	<p>The reputation, quality and prestige of TAFE dominated the discussion about this pathway. Students in particular overwhelmingly portrayed TAFE as a place of practical learning. This was both seen as a positive quality of TAFE and a reflection of lower prestige—i.e. the idea that TAFE caters to less academically inclined students or more ‘hands-on’ learners.</p> <p>On the other hand, some of the adult participants were very aware that TAFE is seen in this way and directly challenged this view, arguing that academic and vocational learning should not be pitted against each other or seen as in a hierarchy.</p> <p>Similar to the discussion around location of delivery in relation to the University of Tasmania, participants noted that students will sometimes choose a TAFE course that is delivered locally, even if it is not their preferred preference. Reasons for this include barriers of accessing transport, accommodation and funding if they were to move away from home.</p>
Practical logistics	Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that TAFE, RTOs and apprenticeships are an affordable option for young people.
Personal readiness	<p>Some participants saw TAFE as a good option for students with lower personal capability, such as students who have needed learning support through school.</p> <p>Many participants perceived study at TAFE or another RTO as a useful stepping stone. If a young person is not ‘ready’ or ‘capable’ yet for university study, then TAFE was seen as offering an alternative pathway to university. Some students treated TAFE as a ‘back up plan’ if they do not get accepted into university.</p> <p>A number of school staff felt that some students approach TAFE as a place to go when you do not know what you want to do. It is seen as a ‘safe’ option.</p>
Social factors	<p>In contrast to the discussion about the University of Tasmania and interstate universities, participants did not elaborate on the social environment nor on support networks as considerations for young people thinking about TAFE.</p> <p>This could perhaps be because these factors are not as important when considering TAFE—young people may not think of TAFE as a place to expand social networks or as a pathway that requires support from family.</p>
Long-term outcomes	<p>A few students spoke with some awareness about industry needs and future work opportunities in relation to TAFE. These considerations were generally not spoken about in relation to university.</p> <p>Similarly, a small number of adults spoke about the earning potential that can come from pathways after TAFE, in a way that was not discussed in relation to university. For example, participants commented that tradespeople can earn high incomes, and that many white-collar jobs are moving offshore or being automated.</p>

The lower cost, easier access, more practical approach, and future work opportunities make TAFE study attractive compared to universities. However, study at TAFE or another RTO was also commonly viewed as a ‘back-up plan’ rather than a student’s first choice.

**“** *I think it's a good option for those who don't like school, who aren't into the whole bookwork and study sort of thing. So getting that practical experience is a lot more helpful.* **”**

Student



## Employment

Considerations	Findings
The offering	There were mixed views about the feasibility for young people to transition straight into employment after leaving school. Some participants considered this more difficult than going on to university or vocational study. Others thought this pathway was possible for young people who already have casual or part-time jobs that they do after school. However, even for them gaining full time employment after school may be hard because, as some participants pointed out, employers tend to prefer young employees for unskilled jobs since they can pay them a lower wage. Echoing the discussion around university and VET, one participant made the point that some young people will pursue a job in their local area, even if it is not their first preference, if they are reluctant to move away from their community.
Practical logistics	Practical logistics did not feature in relation to moving into employment. This is likely because factors such as cost and accommodation are less relevant to young people planning to get a job.
Personal readiness	A few comments were made that young people have to consider whether they can work independently and handle stress if they are weighing up employment as a post-school pathway. More frequently however, similarly to TAFE, participants saw employment as a back-up plan: a stepping stone to tertiary study or something to undertake when you are unsure about your aspirations. For some students, this could be similar to having a gap year, rather than as actively choosing employment as the post-school option. Alternatively, some participants saw work as a good option for young people needing a few years of experience in the labour market before being ready to pursue further study. Finally, for students who <i>do</i> know what they want to do, pursuing work as the initial post-school option may be due to the need to save money in order to be able to afford going to university.
Social factors	Similar to the discussion about TAFE, participants did not elaborate on support networks as a consideration for young people thinking about employment. However, some students did touch briefly on the perceived lack of a social environment in workplaces. For example they felt that they would have no 'life' if they pursued employment straight out of school.
Long-term outcomes	Participants took into account considerations around long-term outcomes in relation to employment, similar to thoughts about TAFE. One student spoke about the idea that technology might change work in the future while another student spoke confidently about the availability of work opportunities in hospitality in Tasmania and interstate. The majority of comments about long-term opportunities, however, were in relation to earning potential, with a few students indicating that earning money straight out of school is a drawcard for them.

Compared to the other pathways that were discussed in the focus groups, participants had significantly less to say about the reasons why young people may wish to pursue employment directly after school. There was mixed feedback from participants about its feasibility and popularity as an option. Similar to considerations about study at TAFE, seeking employment after leaving school could be a temporary 'back up' plan rather than something students intend to do long-term.

“ A couple of students that I've bumped into walking around, who went straight into work, they're saying that now they're starting to think that maybe it is the time to go to uni. ”

School staff

## Sources of information

As part of the focus groups an activity was conducted to gain a general understanding of where or who young people seek information from about what they want to do after school. Figure 2 provides a tally of the main sources of influence. Where a source was mentioned less than three times across all of the participating schools, it is not included.

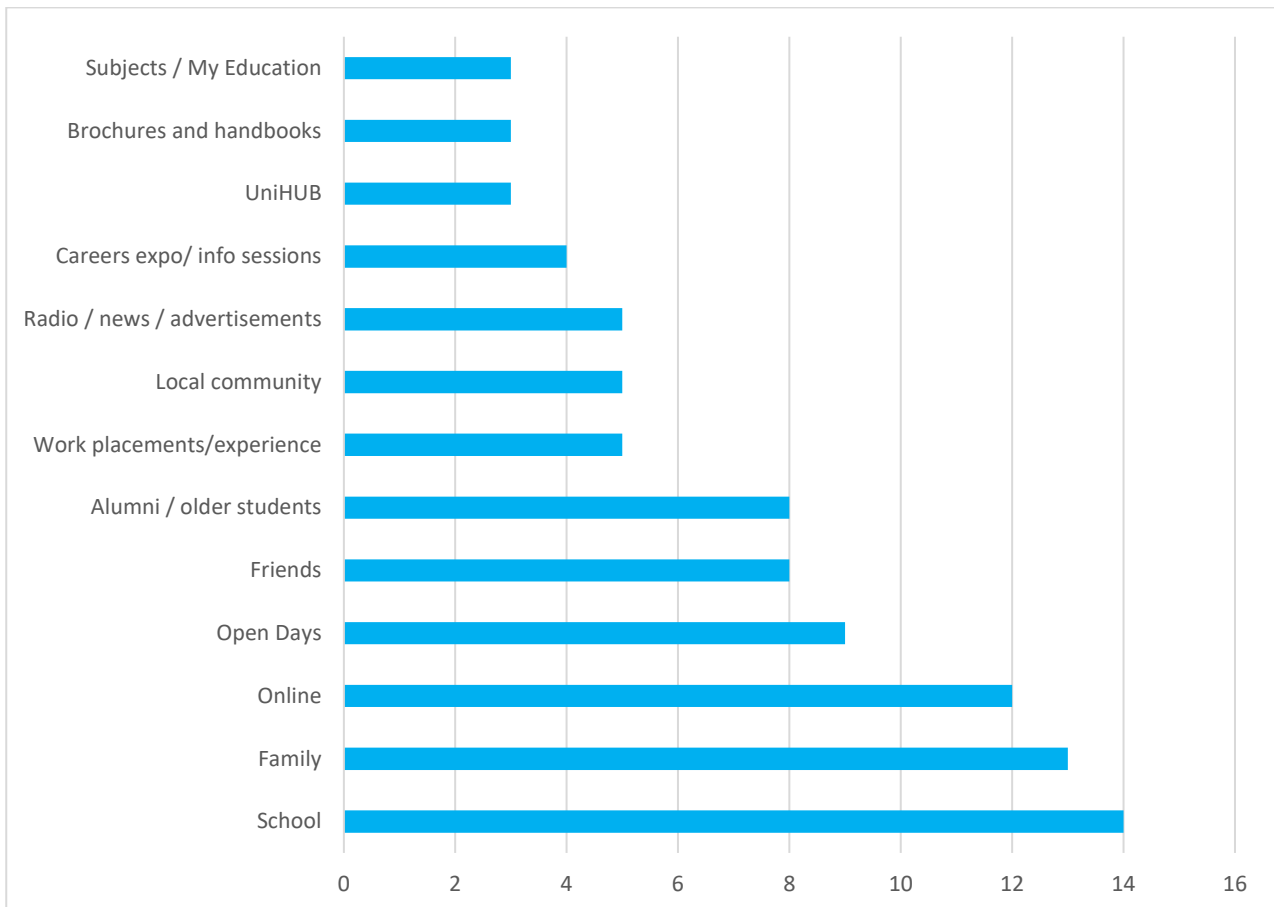


Figure 2: Brainstorming activity results: sources of information

Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that the key influences are:

- School
- Family
- Friends
- Online information, and
- Outreach by the University of Tasmania.

These are discussed in the following pages. As is evident in Figure 2, participants also indicated that alumni/older students were a key source of information. This is not elaborated on below, as it was not mentioned in the broader discussions.

## School as a source of influence

Option	Key findings
University pathway	<p>Students at one school felt that teachers are a key influence for young people wanting to study at the University of Tasmania, but not so much for interstate universities. Students across the board indicated they are selective about which school staff they approach to talk about university as a post-school option. Generally, they target younger teachers who have recently studied at university as they see these teachers as having more reliable knowledge: <i>“the young teachers, they just got out of uni, so they know what it's like, and they went to uni's that we'll probably go to, and so they're good for information as well”</i> (student).</p> <p>A staff member added that students are aware of potential teacher bias (encouraging or discouraging students to pursue study in the teacher's own discipline). Therefore, it can be beneficial to seek advice from teachers about subjects outside of their expertise, such as <i>“having the maths teacher tell them about their options in performing arts”</i> (school staff).</p>
TAFE pathway	<p>The majority of participants felt that schools focus less on TAFE compared to university: <i>“TAFE is less talked about in high school. They don't really know much about it in high school, but uni, you hear about it almost all the time in high school”</i> (student).</p>
Employment pathway	<p>Some young people felt that going straight into the labour market is not promoted or supported much by schools.</p>

**“**College is more promoting university and TAFE and that, than actual jobs and such. **”**

Student

## Family as a source of influence

Option	Key findings
University pathway	<p>Families are a key source of information and influence, particularly in relation to either supporting or discouraging going to university. For the latter, several aspects were identified. First, that university simply is not on the radar for some families. Second, for some families the cost of pursuing university means <i>“they can't afford to send them”</i> (school staff). Third, a few participants suggested that some parents are worried that going to university will lead to their child moving away from them. These types of comments only came from school staff, and not from students or parents themselves. When a student does not have family members who have been to university, sometimes they seek out information from other sources. On the other hand, when these family members have successful lives and careers this may lead young people to question whether going to university is worthwhile.</p>
TAFE pathway	<p>Family are also a key source of information and influence about vocational learning, including apprenticeships: <i>“Dad's really hands-on, not so academic, same as me, so Dad's pushing me to go for the apprenticeship”</i> (student).</p>
Employment pathway	<p>A few participants said that students sometimes choose to enter the labour market after school to work in a vocation similar to a member of their family. Several school staff members felt that some parents actively encourage employment as the preferred post-school pathway so that their child can provide financial support to the family.</p>

**“**Students will be very much influenced by what their mum and dad's experience was, or older brother or sister. **”**

School staff

## Friends as a source of influence

Option	Key findings
University pathway	A few participants spoke about the influence of friends in relation to university in general: <i>“Definitely, your friendship network. [If] friends are going to uni I guess you're more likely to. Just that sort of peer, what feels accessible or normal”</i> (parent).
TAFE pathway	Only one participant spoke about the influence of friends in relation to TAFE. This school staff member felt that friends do not always have accurate up-to-date information, and can spread misinformation—e.g. about the hourly wage for trainees. <i>“I think with friends, as long as you're there to hear what they're saying, then you can correct it. But other than that, if you're not then maybe they are getting the wrong information”</i> (school staff).
Employment pathway	None of the participants spoke about the influence of friends in relation to entering the labour market straight after school.

“ [Friends] are not doing the same degree as you, or going on the same pathway. They have these different mindsets ... So they can kind of influence you in deciding what you want to do. ”

Student

## Online sources of influence

Option	Key findings
University pathway	Online sources are a helpful supplement to talking with family and school staff. Young people find university websites reliable and prefer to use them because <i>“You can find exactly what you want most of the time [by] going directly to the source”</i> (student) and when students know what course they are interested in, the website <i>“tells me about my prerequisites and all that”</i> (student). Therefore students may be more inclined to consult a web page rather than speak with someone face-to-face about university. On the other hand <i>“Sometimes they use phrases and stuff that you don't quite understand, so it's better to talk to somebody about those types of phrases”</i> (student). One student suggested that universities should be more visible on social media.
TAFE pathway	Focus group participants did not identify the internet as a source of information or influence for TAFE as a post-school option.
Employment pathway	Participants indicated that social media can be influential for students looking to enter the labour market. Some participants suggested that there are downsides to sourcing information about the workforce online. For example <i>“you don't know when they update information”</i> (student) or whether the job is still available. A school staff member added that <i>“with the internet they get sort of the glossy brochure version of the job”</i> (school staff) which is not realistic.

“ If I do have any questions, I can't ask [the website]. I can't just sit and talk to somebody about it. So that's where family or staff members come in. ”

Student

## Outreach by the University of Tasmania

Activity	Key findings
Open Days	<p>Participants spoke a great deal about University of Tasmania Open Days. Overwhelmingly, the comments were positive and that students find them of value. This suggests that Open Days are a key source of information or influence.</p> <p><i>"I think a lot of people are really looking forward to being able to go to uni... they go to these Open Days, they see all this cool stuff, they get to see what the results are"</i> (student).</p> <p><i>"Open Days at the uni, it's something I've always been pleased that they offer... I haven't been, personally, but the kids have been to several over the years ... it breaks down that barrier - they've been to the campus. They know roughly where it is. It's not quite as daunting as it might be"</i> (parent).</p> <p><i>"We had a student the other day look at the University College when we visited and she said, "This is for me." ... But I'm sure if she hadn't have gone that day, I don't think her eyes would have been opened. So those visits are really important, that interaction..."</i> (school staff).</p>
Presence in schools	<p>One of the schools that took part in the focus groups has a University of Tasmania UniHUB on-site. The participants from that school spoke extensively about the positive influence that it has on students' pathway planning.</p> <p><i>"The UniHUB, they actually employ people that work at the uni, so they have the actual information there... So it's all legitimate information"</i> (student).</p> <p>Participants felt that the UniHUB is influential because the information that is provided is immediate, reliable, personalised and easy to understand. Students are also drawn to the practical support provided by the UniHUB, e.g. around completing their enrolment. Some participants also highlighted the University Connections Program (UCP):</p> <p><i>"They are instrumental in getting students out the door and into university. ... They've seen it. They've interacted with UTAS people in all walks... we have such a great relationship with our staff and the UTAS staff working together with these students. So the students are quite happy to ask for advice or—and they're doing their assessments with them, so that's absolutely, I think, pivotal to getting a lot of our students on that tertiary pathway"</i> (school staff).</p>
Other activities	<p>Other University of Tasmania activities that were referenced by participants as having a positive influence on students' post-school pathways included: Children's University Tasmania, Discovery Day, science days, robotics competitions, and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.</p> <p>Some participants made the comment that the University of Tasmania does a better job of providing information to Tasmanian students than TasTAFE and interstate universities. A few participants had suggestions for the University of Tasmania, including making organised campus visits less 'dry' and provide more visits by University staff to schools.</p>

**“** We're always doing stuff hosted by UTAS, and people who work for them. **”**

Student

## Conclusion

This report has provided an overview of key findings from Phase 1 of the research: focus groups with Tasmanian Year 10-12 students; parents; and school staff from 5 schools from across the government, Catholic and independent sectors. To summarise:

- The majority of students plan to go on to further study after school: at the University of Tasmania, an interstate university or TAFE. Going straight into work featured far less.
- University is preferred to TAFE, mainly because VET is considered a less prestigious option.
- Key considerations for students tend to be about the short-term: relating to cost, accommodation, modes and locations of delivery, course availability, application processes, and the perceived reputation of the pathway or institution. Only a few students consider long-term outcomes such as future work opportunities, earning potential and industry connections.
- Cost is a major deterrent to studying at university, regardless of whether it is in Tasmania or interstate. TAFE courses are viewed as more affordable. There was little awareness about scholarships, and accommodation costs were a particular concern.
- Many participants portrayed young people as being hesitant to relocate to a different area of Tasmania or interstate.
- Family and friends are influential, even though they may not always have complete or accurate information.
- Schools and school staff are perceived as a useful source of information for post-school study, especially at university, but less so for going into employment.
- Online sources are seen as informative and reliable for universities, but less so for employment.
- Open Days and outreach activities into schools are highly valuable and appreciated.

The project is continuing with a survey for students in Tasmanian schools from all sectors; interviews with students; and analysis of student pathway data. The full project will be completed at the end of 2021.

For any questions or comments, feel free to contact the research team:

[UnderwoodCentre.Enquiries@utas.edu.au](mailto:UnderwoodCentre.Enquiries@utas.edu.au)

Attention: SPSPI team

You are welcome to share this summary report with your school community.





A partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian State Government  
in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania.