Australian National University

GROWING CAREERS PROJECT

The Smith Family
Learn today, change tomorrow.

FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE GROWING CAREERS PROJECT



INTRODUCTION

International evidence shows that when young people have multiple exposures to the world of work during secondary school, they are more likely to be in employment, education or training post-school. Yet these types of opportunities aren't always available in low socio-economic communities where resources are limited and student needs are high.

The Smith Family's Growing Careers Project delivered 103,202 opportunities for students to participate in career education from 2021-2025. The Project exceeded the delivery target, provided valuable exposure to the world of work and may have contributed to stronger career readiness. The evaluation's assessment of the Project's delivery and impact is constrained by the available data.



The Growing Careers Project

The Growing Careers Project (GCP) trialled an approach to career education delivery that provided secondary school students with access to an evidence-informed, sequential series of opportunities, tailored to student need and year level. The Smith Family partnered with 59 schools in low socio-economic communities nationally, with the shared goal of supporting young people to transition from school to further education, training or work, contributing to long-term career and life success.

In 2021, a Grant Agreement was established between the Commonwealth of Australia – as represented by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, now the Department of Education (the Department) – and The Smith Family regarding the GCP. With the provision of $38.2 million in funding, the Project was to deliver 76,725 career education opportunities over four years. Through two variations to the Grant Agreement, the Project term was extended to six years and the delivery target increased to 86,725 participations (to be met by the end of 2026).

Evaluation of the GCP

The Agreement with the Department included a commitment to evaluate the GCP's approach to providing career education.[1] A team comprised of Professor Nicholas Biddle of the Australian National University, Dr Delwyn Goodrick and The Smith Family's Research and Evaluation team drew on the following to understand the Project's implementation and the factors that strengthened and challenged its delivery:[2]

- With nine GCP schools across New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia:
  - Student survey
  - Student focus groups
  - Interviews with school staff
- Annual interviews with a sample of Smith Family team members across all states and territories.

A summary of the findings from the evaluation of the GCP are presented in this report.

> "[The Growing Careers Project] has opened up a lot of things that I didn't know existed... it also showed me what I [don't want to do]."
>
> **Year 12 student**

> "It has been a wonderful program as it has helped me and my students to explore various opportunities that wouldn't have been possible otherwise."
>
> **School staff**

[1] While the Project runs to the end of 2026, the evaluation focuses on delivery to the end of 2025 as the implementation approach of the GCP in 2026 is substantially different to the first five years of the Project.

[2] Evaluation data collection with school staff and students was approved by the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the Education Departments in NSW, Queensland and South Australia.

Evaluation findings

Over 100,000 opportunities for students

From 2021 to 2025, the GCP provided 103,202 opportunities for students to participate in career education, significantly exceeding the goal of 76,725. The vast majority of GCP schools remained engaged in the Project, continuing their participation to the end of 2025.

Total GCP participations varied by state/territory and year level. Year 10 students had the highest rate of participation (see infographic on right).

The Project's success was enabled by:

- The strength of existing relationships between GCP schools and The Smith Family
- Ensuring the offering to each school and their student cohort was clearly adding value – this was especially important where schools already had a significant focus on career education and access to a range of programs and providers
- A flexible and responsive approach to working with schools, and
- A willingness to work alongside other career education programs and providers, collaborating to ensure the best experiences and outcomes for students.

> [GCP team member] has been great to work with, in terms of flexibility and willingness to take on a new idea. And to try and make things work for the school and some of the practical things that we think are important to the students."
>
> **School staff**

> We try to work alongside other organisations, rather than compete with them. We look at each other's objectives and see how we can work together to complement each other."
>
> **The Smith Family team member**

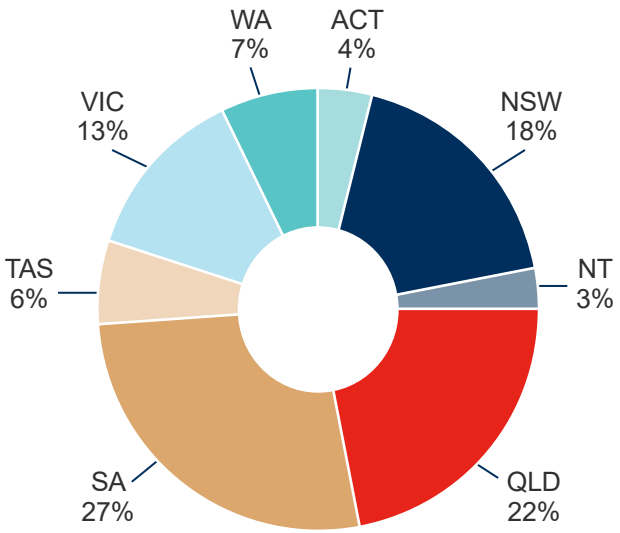


103,202
career participations delivered

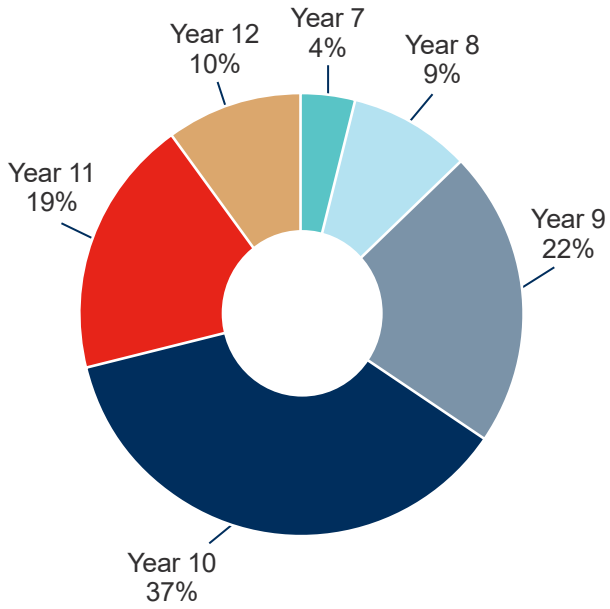


59
partner schools

Total GCP participations by state/territory



Total GCP participations by year level



Benefits of GCP participation for students

Student focus groups and school staff interviews show participation in career education opportunities can support a range of short-term outcomes (for example, career readiness) that are likely to contribute to positive longer-term outcomes (such as better employment outcomes) for participating students. In the GCP, students particularly appreciated experiential and outward-facing activities through which they visit workplaces, hear from and speak with people in the roles they're interested in and participate in hands-on activities.

Qualitative evaluation data indicate that participating in GCP programs and activities can:

- Increase students' awareness and knowledge of careers
- Support informed decisions about pathway planning
- Help students see the relevance of school to their future
- Be most beneficial when participation begins in early secondary school and occurs multiple times through to Year 12
- Provide students with exposure to a wider range of career options than would have been possible otherwise, as GCP schools generally do not have the networks or resources available to them that The Smith Family could leverage for the delivery of the Project.

Survey data indicate that GCP participants broadly feel they have received sufficient support regarding their career futures, and that they feel ready to make a career decision. Significantly, when analysed with students' self-reported GCP participation, survey responses suggest career readiness increases with participation in GCP programs and activities.

> "Out of school is good. If they come to the school, they tell you. If you go to them, they show you."
>
> **Year 10 student**

> "It's really helpful, especially when you hear that they've gone through the [training] course and an alternative method, you know, not just straight to uni... because you can hear how they got there. So, it's not just one way."
>
> **Year 12 student**

> "One of our students went to a presentation and had a chat to the presenter about work in VR [virtual reality] and aviation that he was interested in and they were profiling. He then asked them, 'Can I come and work with you?' And they provided the details. He was a go-getter. He got the details and he got in early and now he is on an aviation pathway with them."
>
> **School staff**



The need for more quality, consistent career education is clear

Survey data also show that a substantial number of students have concerns about their ability to make a career decision, or the extent to which their current studies are helping them with that decision. This reinforces the need for students in low socio-economic communities to receive more high-quality, consistent career education opportunities than they often do.

With many students citing their family as their main source of career advice, the need for opportunities where students are introduced to a wide range of career options that extend beyond the areas in which they live is clear. The GCP has provided such opportunities and this exposure is one of the most important aspects of the Project.

Improving students' experiences of career education

During focus groups, students provided the following suggestions for improving career education:

- Ensure students do not feel pressure to pursue a particular pathway (for example, university) when it does not suit their interests or aptitudes
- Target opportunities to meet the needs and interests of specific students
- Focus on opportunities that provide direct experience of the world of work and interactive activities.



Challenges to the Project's implementation and evaluation

Implementation was challenged by:

- Ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Project timelines not always aligning well with those of schools and the employers involved in program and activity delivery
- Limited time for career education in the senior secondary years when in-class teaching and core curriculum are prioritised
- What works in one school or jurisdiction may not in another.

The enablers described on page 2 proved essential in responding to these challenges and ensuring the successful implementation of the Project.

The evaluation was also challenged by the impacts of COVID-19 on schools' capacity and the flow-on effects to research in schools. In addition:

- There were delays in obtaining approvals for the evaluation, which reduced data collection with school staff and students to two waves, limiting the capacity to examine change in student outcomes over the course of the GCP.
- It was not possible to collect student-level participation data. The evaluation relied on aggregate participation numbers for each GCP program and activity, allowing for reporting on the number of participation opportunities provided through the Project but not the unique number of students reached or the frequency with which individuals participated.
- Evaluating an intervention like the GCP, which operates alongside similar programs and is aiming to shift outcomes that are often not measurable in the short-term, is challenging and this experience has provided considerable insight for future research.

> "We can learn about all kinds of jobs, but by actually going there, experiencing what they do and how they do it – that's really helpful. We actually get to see the physical space, the offices. And we get to go outside our area and our comfort zone."
>
> **Year 11 student**

Ongoing impact of the GCP

The GCP has successfully supported thousands of students from low socio-economic communities to access career education opportunities. Its delivery has demonstrated how organisations can work with schools to deliver career programs and activities, and the challenges which arise in doing so.

The GCP has had a lasting impact on some of the participating schools, increasing knowledge among staff and providing resources and connections that can be leveraged beyond the term of the Project.

There have also been changes within The Smith Family which will have ongoing positive impacts, including an expanded suite of career programs and activities to offer schools and students, greater knowledge and capability in the career education space among team members, and improved systems and processes for delivering large-scale projects.

These findings suggest there is value in continued government investment in initiatives that expand access to quality career education opportunities.



> “It’s helped the students, but it has helped me too – to connect with other organisations in the area to share a vision of success.”
>
> **School staff**

> “We’ve learned a lot too, at the school, through the offerings from GCP. We will continue some of them where we can, maybe some spin-offs with some of the employers we have met.”
>
> **School staff**

> “We can use the ideas [from GCP] as a base. We now have some relationships and connections as well with workplaces... I have some Year 9 girls that I [will] take to a place we have been to through GCP.”
>
> **School staff**

> “We would never have been able to provide so many different programs and activities here. We just would not have the time or resources to make it happen. Students have had access to a wider range of career programs… it is good they are exposed to so many options.”
>
> **School staff**

Thanks are extended to the students, school staff and Smith Family team members who participated in the evaluation. Their willingness to share their insights and experiences of the Growing Careers Project was invaluable.