

Kaity Conn's students in rural NSW have experienced terrific success through career education and your students can too...

I was not always a Careers teacher. Like many teachers in the NSW Public Education system, my life and work experiences have been varied, and the strengths I have developed in its course have enabled me to confront challenges, as well as to seize and create opportunities.

I grew up in The Hills district and began teaching as a temporary teacher in the north of Sydney before moving to rural NSW in 2011 to teach English and History. I loved the way these subjects taught students to use their voice and explored the stories, pathways and possibilities of humanity.

Then, in 2014 I retrained in career education. I made this change as I felt that, in my new setting, highlighting the careers-based relevance of sometimes obscure-seeming knowledge and skills could prevent disengagement. So, I learned more about career education through further study and working first in disability employment and then at Western Sydney University in career education, before returning to the profession as a Careers Adviser at Young High School.

Equipping youth with skills to make them employable in our fast-changing world is a universal challenge, and youth employment in rural and regional settings is particularly problematic. These issues can be sources of concern for our communities and affect the wellbeing of the young people in our schools, but they can be successfully addressed by using Career Education as a tool for deep learning. The suggestions below are drawn from my experiences working with our community to develop real opportunities that have supported our students, K-12, to thrive within and beyond the classroom.

K-12 career development: building learning communities and positive futures



Figure 1. *Unlock Your Future* logo. Figure 2. Participating students from Maimuru PS, Monteagle PS, Murringo PS, Wombat PS, Young HS, Young North PS and Young PS.



Our school's project was called *Unlock Your Future*. The idea involved authentic learning; we simulated real-world employment conditions, providing a platform for students to build their skills and confidence in a supported environment. It provided learning opportunities for the top skills needed for future employment and also included in our syllabuses, such as complex problem solving and creativity. By implementing this sort of pedagogical creativity, combined with an awareness of the skills required for future success, we found we were able to better develop each student's transferable skills to prepare them for our rapidly changing workspaces.

As the Careers teacher at Young High School, I wanted the students to feel like they had personally achieved, and that they could keep achieving. The K-12 *Unlock Your Future* program created an opportunity to combine three goals at once, to innovatively address transferable skills acquisition, to develop student understandings of Career Development, and to support year 6-7 transitions.

The program was also intended to develop a mindset of self-confidence and efficacy in our students.

Our local project

Some 360 K-12 students from seven local schools were involved. The schools involved were comprehensive and culturally diverse, and there were students with all levels of ability participating. Initial data demonstrated many of these rural students did not have familial role models with higher education degrees and many did not know adults who were employed in the careers to which students themselves were aspiring. We felt that this was an important issue as many of our students would not necessarily have the connections or guidance that other more advantaged students may take for granted.

Statistics demonstrated that mental health was also a big issue in our local area, and whether directly or indirectly, we understood this was also likely to impede career aspirations and outcomes further.

Utilising the [Australian Blueprint for Career Development](#) (Career Education's K-12 Curriculum), Career Development research and employment research, I developed *Unlock Your Future*. The program utilised the school's strong performing arts culture as a foundation for creating a workplace scenario in which students could learn and be creative even if they were not 'artists'. A similar program could be adapted based on any activity which suits your school. In this case, we employed students in different roles to facilitate and perform a children's variety show whilst participating in other Career education follow-up activities, which developed skills and generated useful data for benchmarking and ongoing assessment.



The legwork

As a Careers teacher, I have autonomy to apply for a variety of useful grants. This one (from the Rural and Remote Education Office) specifically asked for creative and innovative programs, so as part of the application I wrote the script and selected the songs that drove the story. At least one dot point from every competency in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development was covered in the script. The content promoted self-awareness, positive self-concept, opportunity awareness (about different paths or careers) and decision-making. It emphasised that developing a strong sense of self, exploring options and making good decisions are more important than having all the answers about your future.

Job descriptions for over 60 different roles were developed along with 7 online applications distributed using Google Classroom. In addition to tasks, the role descriptions included a student's reporting line and teams they were likely to work with. The online applications collected relevant data for analysis and also provided qualitative evidence of how capable students were of identifying, describing and marketing their own skills prior to involvement in the program. These were compared with data from follow-up surveys and activities completed after the performances.

Call to Stage	You will use the plot book to follow the progress of the show and send Cast Movement team members to collect the next act.
Cast Movement	You will work with Call to Stage and Holding Room Teams to make sure that messages about when acts need to come to stage are clear and on time. You will walk acts to their performance and count the students to make sure everyone is leaving on time.
Holding Room Management	You will monitor students and teachers in holding rooms to make sure they have everything they need and that they remain quiet and calm in this area.

Figure 3. Example of job descriptions for roles from the Backstage category.

Authentic learning

High school students who wanted to be involved had to access job description booklets, follow the instructions, access the application forms on Google Classroom, select the correct application form, select their roles and provide information about their suitability as a candidate. Leadership positions were by interview, and other roles, announced via posters around the school. The majority of students had multiple roles and were supported to balance these effectively.



Figure 4. A lighting technician shines the spotlight during rehearsal; the band and senior choir, Young High School and Young Public School Hip Hop Dancers.

Students operated in teams which had tiered structures and shared leadership based on skill level and willingness. This structure promoted fairness, along with the development of respectful negotiation and strong communication. The leaders were given broad parameters for what was required and suggestions on how this could be achieved. They negotiated and worked creatively together.

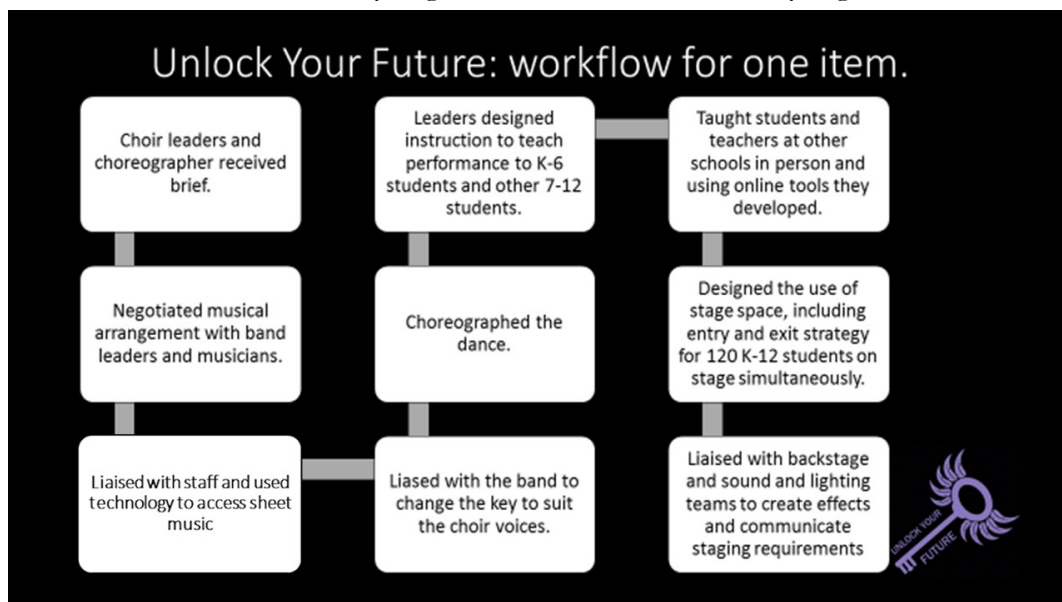


Figure 5. Workflow diagram for receiving a brief and presenting an item with choir, dance and musical elements.



We held weekly meetings to give and receive updates and have discussions. These discussions included how to manage competing priorities, how to ask for help and how to communicate constructively to solve problems. These meetings supported students to navigate workplace expectations, relationships, best practice and laws.

Our data

The show was a great success with over 1,000 audience members attending 4 sessions. The feedback from audience members, teachers and students was overwhelmingly positive:

- Over 78% of students reported increased self-confidence;
- Over 80% of students involved reported learning or improving upon skills;
- Over 90% believe that the skills they utilised would be useful in employment.

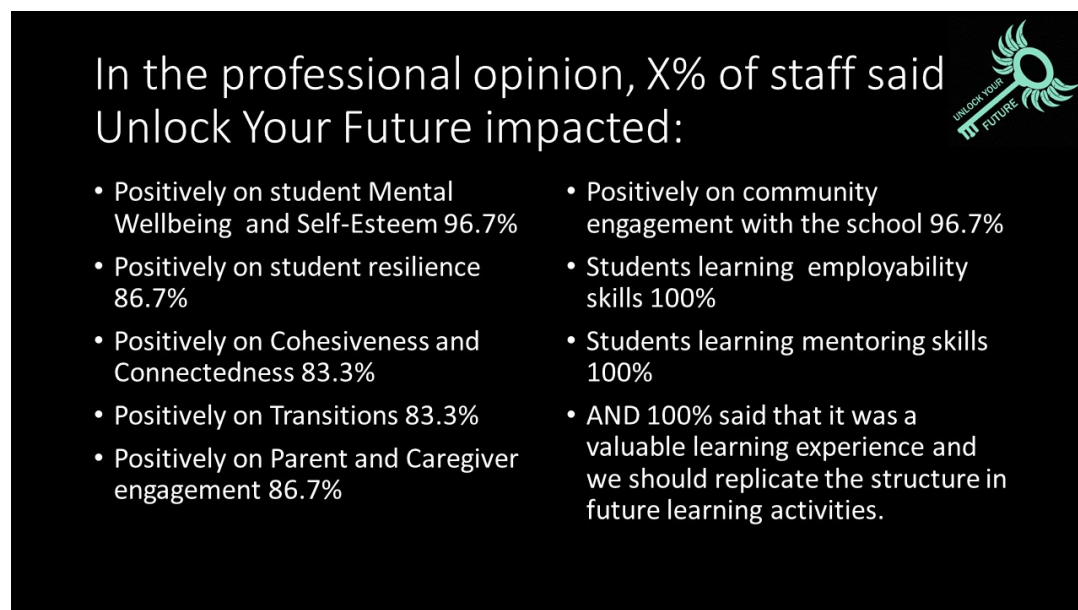


Figure 6. Statistics describing the perceived impact of *Unlock Your Future* from the perspective of our teaching staff.

The table below illustrates the percentage of students who identified the skills they had used in their roles. They selected as many as relevant to them:

Communicating clearly with others	86.8%	Reporting on progress	39.6%
Being creative	67.9%	Designing something	28.3%
Using technology	41.5%	Training or mentoring someone	41.5%
Teamwork	90.6%	Managing your time and deadlines	60.4%
Collaborating with multiple teams	58.5%	Being organised	86.8%
Giving or following instructions carefully	83%	Adapting or changing plans to meet challenges	60.4%
Making good decisions	62.3%	Presenting to or performing in front of others	58.5%
Managing others	62.3%	Research and analysis	5.7%
Making or building something	24.5%	Learning new things	58.5%
Giving feedback to others	52.8%	Leadership	50.9%
Negotiating with others	45.3%	Reporting on progress	39.6%
Problem solving	73.6%	Designing something	28.3%

Figure 7. Table featuring student perceptions of the program. Teamwork, communication and being organised received the highest responses.

Any list of skills required for ‘the jobs of the future’ will include many of those in the table above. Additionally, many teachers commented that the skills encompassed in *Unlock Your Future* also supported student learning.

What did we all learn?

Our students have knowledge from the classroom, passion, skills of all kinds, a willingness to learn and share, creativity, community-mindedness and a drive to succeed. With carefully implemented support, students are willing to take responsibility, lead, work together, show resilience and solve problems, all with fantastic outcomes.

The teachers involved were amazed by the ability of these comprehensive, culturally diverse, K-12 students to work independently of teacher instruction and in teams to achieve their shared goals. Another consequence of their involvement was that teachers felt they would be comfortable giving the students greater leadership and responsibility in future activities as a result.



Figure 8. There were over 250 students in the choir, dancers and the band performing together in the Finale, supported by many offstage roles.

Conclusion

In Young's community of local public schools, carefully structured Career education and authentic learning opportunities supported students to cultivate many of the skills they need to thrive in both learning and work environments. Students involved in *Unlock Your Future* had opportunities to contribute to shared goals and experience success through hard work and perseverance, and this impacted positively on their wellbeing, resilience and confidence.

The program has the potential to be scaled up or down for just about any activity. I would encourage other communities to actively seek opportunities to collaborate and utilise the varied skills of the teachers and students in local public schools for joint projects to support Careers learning, skills development, engagement, self-confidence and positive futures of all students.



Useful career education resources

Below is a select set of links to resources that support Career Education implementation in all schools.

[Australian Blueprint for Career Development](#)

[Future Ready: A student focused National Career Education Strategy](#)

[MyFuture](#)

[Skills Road](#)

[World Economic Forum](#)

Kaity Conn is a Careers Adviser at Young High School. She has been responsible for implementing extensive improvements to the delivery of Career Education to the school and its community of primary schools and providing professional development to both teachers and students. She has presented her acclaimed programs at the Careers Advisers Association of NSW and ACT Annual Conference. She has previously taught English and History in NSW Schools, and Career Education programs to undergraduate and postgraduate students at Western Sydney University.