

THE
INSIGHT
PARTNERSHIP

Evaluation of The Duke of
Edinburgh's International
Award Disadvantaged
Youth Program
2021–2025



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Acronyms and abbreviations

| Acronym | Meaning |
|------------|---|
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| ATAR | Australian Tertiary Admission Rank |
| CALD | Culturally and Linguistically Diverse |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| DYP | Disadvantaged Youth Program |
| Duke of Ed | Duke of Edinburgh's International Award (informal shorthand used by participants) |
| FLO | Flexible Learning Option |
| HSC | Higher School Certificate |
| NAO | National Award Operator |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| NT | Northern Territory |
| PCYC | Police Citizens Youth Club |
| SES | Socio-economic Status |
| Tas | Tasmania |



Executive summary

Purpose and scope

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award – Australia (Duke of Ed) Disadvantaged Youth Program (DYP) covering the 2021-2025 funding cycle (Stage 3). The key question addressed is: to what extent has the program contributed to national policy objectives for young people, particularly in relation to education engagement, equity, wellbeing and successful transitions?

This review was commissioned to assess program performance against contract requirements and to demonstrate policy alignment to support consideration of continued Commonwealth funding. It is the third evaluation of the program, following comprehensive assessments in 2018 and 2021.

Methodology

The review draws on multiple data sources:

- Program participation data for all Stage 3 participants (4,989 young people as at 31 December 2025) covering all Australian States and Territories
- Participant survey (207 responses, 14% response rate)
- Case studies and focus groups at three keystone sites (Plumpton High School NSW, Centralian Middle School NT, St Helens District High School Tas)
- Interviews with Duke of Ed Leaders and State Office representatives
- Policy analysis comparing program outcomes with Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) objectives
- Trend analysis comparing results with 2018 and 2021 evaluations

Due to late commissioning, this evaluation has a more focused scope than previous cycles, with fewer keystone schools and no teacher survey component. However, the participant survey sample is representative and findings align with established patterns from earlier evaluations.

Key findings

Contract performance

The program exceeded its Stage 3 target of 4,500 participants, supporting 4,989¹ disadvantaged young people (111% of target). Over the full program duration since 2015, the DYP has supported 12,658² young people, exceeding cumulative targets by 48%. The program consistently reached priority cohorts including young people from low socio-economic backgrounds (71%), regional and remote communities (55%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (18%) and those experiencing learning difficulties (26%) or living with disability (5%).

Policy alignment: keeping up

The review finds strong evidence that the program contributes to maintaining school engagement and preventing dropout. Participants report improved organisation (81%), increased school enjoyment (60%) and better academic outcomes (68% report improved school results). Duke of Ed Leaders consistently identify Duke of Ed as a factor that helps at-risk students stay connected to school and develop positive peer

¹ Cumulative participants enrolled between November 2021 and December 2025; data provided by Duke of Ed National Office.

² Cumulative participants enrolled between May 2015 and December 2025; data provided by Duke of Ed National Office.



relationships. These outcomes directly support national commitments to improve school attendance and engagement for priority cohorts.

Policy alignment: finishing school

The program makes a meaningful contribution to school completion and post-school readiness across tertiary education, vocational and employment pathways. Through recognised ATAR contributions and university entry, skills development and applied learning opportunities, Duke of Ed supports young people to build employment-relevant capabilities and support their CV/eportfolios with digital credentials. Survey results show 92% of participants report developing job-relevant skills, with strong improvements in communication (92%), problem-solving (89%) and adaptability (88%). Schools report that for some students, Duke of Ed participation is decisive in achieving sufficient credits to complete Year 12.

Policy alignment: priority cohorts

The program has been highly effective in reaching and engaging priority equity cohorts. 18% of participants in Round 3 identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people, which exceeds their 3.2% representation in the general population³. Financial barriers are successfully removed, enabling participation from low socio-economic communities at scale. The program's flexible design accommodates the varied circumstances of disadvantaged cohorts while maintaining structured progression and recognition.

Policy alignment: wellbeing

The program demonstrates significant contribution to mental health and wellbeing outcomes. Participants report increased confidence (89%), improved resilience (89% don't give up as easily), better stress management (85%) and pride in achievement (95%). The program's emphasis on challenge, self-direction, physical activity and community contribution aligns with contemporary wellbeing frameworks. These outcomes were particularly important in supporting recovery from COVID-19 impacts, with 2025 results returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Program trends

Comparison across three evaluation cycles (2018, 2021, 2025) shows consistent positive results with a COVID-related dip in 2021 and recovery to pre-pandemic levels by 2025. This pattern suggests the program provided protective benefits during the pandemic period and supported disadvantaged young people through disruption.

Structure of this report

Section 1 provides background on the Duke of Ed and the Disadvantaged Youth Program. Section 2 outlines the review methodology. Section 3 establishes the policy context for the program. Section 4 presents detailed findings organised by policy objective, incorporating participant and Duke of Ed Leader perspectives, quantitative survey data and case study evidence. Section 5 provides conclusions and recommendations regarding continued funding.

Overall assessment

The Disadvantaged Youth Program demonstrates strong performance against contract requirements and clear alignment with Commonwealth education policy priorities. The program reaches priority cohorts at scale, delivers measurable outcomes in engagement, wellbeing and skill development, and provides a protective factor for educational success among disadvantaged young people. The evidence base is robust,

³ ABS Census, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-census/latest-release>, accessed 15 December 2025

consistent across multiple evaluation cycles, and supports the case for continued investment. Detailed findings and recommendations are presented in Sections 4 and 5 of this report.



1. Background

1.1 About the Duke of Ed

The Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award—Australia (Duke of Ed) is a structured youth development program for young people between 14 and 24 years old, which is offered internationally. It has a flexible structure, with three levels of accreditation: Bronze; Silver; and Gold.

Participants are expected to undertake activities in three areas (Service, Physical Recreation and Skills) as well as plan and undertake an Adventurous Journey. Participants must undertake these activities for different periods: 3 months for Bronze; 6 months for Silver; and 12 months for Gold. The Participants must also spend time in a Residential Project with other young people for the Gold level.



Figure 1. The Duke of Ed Framework

In Australia the Duke of Ed is administered through the National Award Operator (NAO). The NAO licences Duke of Ed Centres directly in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania to deliver the Duke of Ed to young people. The NAO also licences Award Operating Authorities in New South Wales, Queensland and Northern Territory to manage the delivery of the Duke of Ed in Duke of Ed Centres in their respective jurisdictions. Delivery of the program is through licensed Duke of Ed Centres, typically based in schools and youth/community focused organisations (e.g., Australian Defence Force Cadets in Army, Air Force and Navy, PCYC) or some disability organisations. Each Duke of Ed Centre has a Duke of Ed Leader, who is typically a teacher in a school or somebody with a leadership role in the youth or community group. Activities are generally delivered through volunteers.

A total of 34,728⁴ young people registered to complete Duke of Ed in 2025.

⁴ Data provided by Duke of Ed National Office.



1.2 About the Disadvantaged Youth Program

The Australian Government provided The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award - Australia a grant of \$3m (plus GST) to support 4,500 disadvantaged young people to participate in the Duke of Ed from November 2021 to July 2024, equating to 1,500 young people per year. The contract was subsequently extended with the activity extended to 30 December 2025 due primarily to COVID-19 impacts.

The program targets young people who face potential barriers to participating in the Duke of Ed, being aged 14-18 and from at least one of the following categories:

- An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background
- A refugee background
- A rural, regional or remote community
- Low socio-economic circumstances
- Living with a disability (for this group, the age limit is 14 to 24)
- A young person who is disengaged from their community.

1.3 The program has met the contract requirements

This was the third funding cycle for the Disadvantaged Youth Program. From May 2015 to December 2025, the program has supported 12,658⁵ young people who otherwise would not have accessed the Duke of Ed nationally.

The core funding requirements to support the target number of participants, and for those participants to be from the priority cohorts⁶, were exceeded with the total number being 48% higher over the three funding cycles (Table 1). The reach to priority cohorts is covered in more detail in Section 4.

Table 1. Number of participants per stage

| | Years | Target no. | Actual no. |
|-----------------------------|--|------------|------------------|
| Stage 1 | 2015 to 2018 | 1,500 | 3,755 |
| Stage 2 | 2018 to 2021 | 2,500 | 3,914 |
| Stage 3 (this cycle) | 2021 to 2024 Activity extended to December 2025 Agreement ends on 30 June 2026 | 4,500 | 4,989 |
| Total | 10.5 years | 8,500 | 12,658 (+48%) |

The contract for Stage 3 was extended because the funds had not been spent by the target date, in part because of the lag effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Award Operator has enhanced its internal processes to streamline applications and is confident that these improved processes will support efficient and effective program delivery.

⁵ Cumulative participants enrolled between May 2015 and December 2025, data provided by Duke of Ed National Office.

⁶ Core funding requirements were to support the target number of participants and for those participants to be from priority cohorts. Specific reach percentages to individual priority groups were not contractually mandated, though the pattern of reach is assessed in this review as part of overall program effectiveness.

National reach

Participants from all States and Territories were supported through the program (Figure 2), indicating that the DYP has been successful in achieving national reach. Importantly, 21% of supported registrations were from the Northern Territory, indicating effective targeting in that area.



Figure 2. Participation by State, number and percentage, Round 3

2. About this review

This report presents the findings of an independent review of the Disadvantaged Youth Program. The key question addressed by the review is to what extent has the program contributed to the key national educational policy objectives for young people nationally.

This is the third cycle of review for the program, aligned with Stage 3 of program funding. Evaluations were also completed towards the end of Stage 1 (2018) and Stage 2 (2021). This evaluation was commissioned late in the funding cycle, which limited the timeframe for data collection. Consequently, this review is more focused than the comprehensive evaluations conducted in 2018 and 2021, with fewer keystone schools, a smaller interview sample and no teacher survey component. However, the participant survey achieved a representative sample (207 responses, 14% response rate), and the findings align consistently with the patterns established in previous evaluation cycles, providing confidence in the robustness of the results.

The review methodology comprised a range of inputs and perspectives.

Policy and other objectives

- *An analysis of current national policy drivers for education*—to inform evaluation design and analysis.
- *A review of contract objectives*—to inform evaluation design and analysis. This review does not include a detailed assessment of compliance with terms of the contract.

Program data

- *Summarisation and analysis of program data*—review of deidentified data about the participants, including location, age, reason for funding and demographic information. The data was provided by the NAO, drawn from the national database of registrations. The data covered registrations from February 2021 to November 2025 for all young people who received support from the program either individually or as part of a school group. This evaluation also considered the program data from two previous evaluations (Round 1, 2018 and Round 2, 2021).

Participant perspectives, including trend data

- *Survey of participants in 2025*—online survey of all 2025 participants, distributed via the Duke of Ed Leaders. The survey instrument was based on that used for previous evaluations to support analysis of trend data. There were minor modifications for this round, primarily in asking an additional question about job readiness. There were 207 responses (14%), which is sufficiently representative for this purpose.
- *Review of previous perspective data*—primarily survey responses from Stage 1 and Stage 2 evaluations.
- *Focus groups with participants in keystone sites*--used as case studies for this report (Plumpton High School, Western Sydney NSW, Centralian Middle School, Alice Springs NT and St Helens District High School, TAS) either online or face to face.
- *Interviews with two young people who have already completed the Duke of Ed*--included as case studies of Duke of Ed achievers to represent the longer-term impact of using the Duke of Ed Framework.

Educator perspectives

- *Interviews with Duke of Ed Leaders in keystone sites*—Plumpton High School (Western Sydney, NSW); Centralian Middle School (Alice Springs, NT); and St Helens District High School (St Helens, TAS) exploring:
 - How the program was run in their location
 - The specific activities of participants, including use of funding
 - The changes Duke of Ed Leaders observed as a result of their participation in the Duke of Ed



- The factors that contributed to success for participants, including the role of Duke of Ed Leaders.

Process performance and insights

- *Interviews with the National Award Operator*—covering program management, activities for this funding cycle, and key issues and concerns.
- *Interviews with a sample of State Offices*—NSW, Tasmania, Western Australia and ACT exploring
 - The reach and demographic profile of DYP participants in their jurisdiction
 - Implementation approaches and partnerships with Duke of Ed Centres
 - Specific examples of program impact and participant outcomes
 - Administrative processes and any barriers to effective delivery
 - Observations on how the program aligns with state-based education policy priorities.

3. Context for the Disadvantaged Youth Program

3.1 National education policy direction

The Disadvantaged Youth Program is funded from the Australian Government Department of Education, and the program is most relevant to the policy directions for education nationally. The key aspirations in education policy are set out in the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034), which runs from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2034 and focuses on three objective areas agreed by Education Ministers:

- *Catching Up*—addressing learning loss and gaps
- *Keeping Up*—maintaining engagement and preventing dropout
- *Finishing School*—supporting completion and post-school transitions.

The Agreement commits to support for priority equity cohorts, being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in regional, rural and remote areas, students with disability and students from a low SES background.

An additional key direction for education is providing support for the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Four of the policy areas are directly relevant when considering the impact of the DYP:

- Keeping up
- Finishing school
- Support for priority cohorts
- Fostering mental health and wellbeing.

Catching up relates to curriculum and individual academic learning, and is less relevant for the DYP.

The four policy areas are explored below in the context of the DYP.

3.2 Keeping up

What this commitment means

The focus of this commitment is to support students to continue to engage effectively with school. The measurable objective is to increase the student attendance rate, and specifically to achieve an attendance rate for the priority cohorts that is the same as the overall student population. States, Territories and the Commonwealth have agreed to implement initiatives that support:

- Connections between schools and non-school services
- Wellbeing for learning and engagement (focused on in school wellbeing coordinators)
- Student engagement in learning, in the words of the Agreement ‘for example, through greater student participation, attendance, inclusion and/or enhanced school/family engagement’.

Considerations for this review

This is a key area for the DYP and an important test of its effectiveness. The first question for the review is:

- *To what extent has the DYP contributed to supporting students to engage effectively with school and had a positive impact on their learning?*



3.3 Finishing school

What this commitment means

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement⁷ includes commitments to increasing the rate of students who complete Year 12 or equivalent, or a non-school qualification, recognising the role that schools play in supporting students to achieve alternative qualifications.

This sits alongside an equivalent policy commitment to invest in post-school pathways, particularly for young people who are potentially at-risk, including Youth Empowerment and Transition to Work programs.

Considerations for this review

This is also a key factor for the DYP. The review has therefore considered the question:

- *To what extent has using the Duke of Ed Framework supported the development of skills that enable an effective transition for young people to post school options, ranging from further education to employment?*

3.4 Support for priority cohorts

What this commitment means

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement identifies four specific priority equity cohorts requiring intensive support: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in regional/rural/remote locations, students with disability, and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each group faces distinct challenges requiring tailored interventions.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students represent the most significant completion gap, with lower retention rates than non-Indigenous students.
- Students with disability face systematic exclusion with only 58% completing Year 12.
- Regional, rural, and remote students confront geographic isolation limiting subject choice and access to qualified teachers.
- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds lag several years behind peers in high SES areas in key learning areas.

In addition to the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, there is significant targeted investment to boost support for each of these groups to achieve the national aim of improving retention and learning outcomes.

Considerations for this review

The DYP funding agreement aligns with national commitments to support these priority cohorts, as well as young people who are disengaging from school or their community. That is, the program is designed to support the key national policy objectives for education. The review therefore asked the question:

- *To what extent has the program reached these target groups?*

3.5 Supporting mental health and wellbeing

What this commitment means

The Productivity Commission review of the National School Reform Agreement (the previous funding arrangement between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories) called for programs that could support student engagement beyond academic curriculum in practical life skills and leadership development,

⁷ <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/national-school-reform-agreement/better-and-fairer-schools-agreement-20252034>, accessed 10 November 2025

community engagement opportunities, and support for alternative education and career pathways. The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement includes a specific commitment to develop initiatives that promote wellbeing to support learning and engagement. There is also a commitment across Government to supporting and improving mental health and preventing suicide, with a focus on young people because they can be more vulnerable and because early intervention is likely to generate lifelong benefits. This is major area of focus for all Governments.

This commitment is both an objective in itself (to support improved mental health of young people), and an enabler of other objectives; that is, improved wellbeing will support improved learning and educational outcomes.

Considerations for this review

The Duke of Ed Framework has been designed to foster wellbeing. This review explicitly considered:

- *To what extent had use of the Duke of Ed impacted on the wellbeing of the participants, particularly exploring life skills such as increasing resilience and learning to set goals?*

4. Where the program made an impact

Program outcomes summary

The 2025 participant survey demonstrates strong outcomes across all policy-relevant dimensions:

Engagement and persistence

- 95% feel proud of what they have achieved
- 94% are learning to set their own goals
- 89% report they don't give up as easily
- 78% say they like going to school more since using the Duke of Ed Framework

Skills for employment

- 92% have developed skills useful for getting a job
- 92% have improved communication skills
- 89% are better at solving problems
- 88% can cope better when things change
- 81% are better organised

Wellbeing and resilience

- 89% report increased confidence
- 89% say they don't give up as easily⁸
- 85% can cope better with stress and challenges

These results are consistent with findings from previous evaluation cycles in 2018 and 2021 and represent outcomes across the full cohort of disadvantaged participants, not a selected subset. The dimensions are explored in the remainder of this section.

4.1 Keeping up: maintaining engagement and preventing dropout

Overview

The Disadvantaged Youth Program has been effective in engaging young people in school, and in getting young people to reengage if they have started skipping school.

Duke of Ed achieves this through a range of mechanisms:

Self-directed activities

Duke of Ed provides a flexible structure for young people to choose activities that are meaningful for them. Young people and Duke of Ed Leaders have said this is a key factor for getting the participants involved, in that they can pursue ~~follow~~ their own interests within the framework of a school setting.

Building peer relationships

Participants become part of a group who are using the Duke of Ed Framework, which is both a source of new friendships and also a cohort that support each other to tackle a range of challenges. It is clear from the case studies that some of these are close friendships that are very important to the participants.

⁸ Item repeated as indicates both persistence and resilience.

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Learning new behaviours | Participants and Duke of Ed Leaders say that being with peers doing Duke of Ed activities helps model positive behaviours, and has helped young people learn different ways of moving through the world and being with others in the school environment. |
| Public recognition | Many Duke of Ed Centres have formal ceremonies to present completed Awards, sometimes standalone events (e.g. an Award dinner with parents) or as part of a school speech day. The Duke of Ed Leaders say that for some of these young people, it is the only time in their school career that they are recognised publicly for something they have achieved. For some young people, this very formal recognition (including with a presentation from the State Governor for achieving the Gold Level) becomes an important and significant achievement. |
| Academic recognition | Each State has a system for awarding a final certificate at the end of Year 12 (e.g. a Record of School Achievement in NSW, or a Certificate of Education in Tasmania) which requires a minimum number of 'points' from completing courses and demonstrating achievement of educational outcomes. Completion of Duke of Ed levels count for points towards the final certificate. Some universities also recognise completion of Duke of Ed towards calculations of university entrance requirements. The State Offices say that the points from Duke of Ed have been a critical element for some students in achieving enough points to qualify for their final certificate. |
| Family support | Participants say that their families are very proud of them for what they have achieved. Duke of Ed Leaders make an effort to contact families so that they are aware of what their children have done. For some families, this turns around previous experiences in which the school had only called with concerns or reports of misbehaviour. |
| Removes stigma | Duke of Ed is a strengths-based approach, and the full range of students use the Duke of Ed Framework. It is not a targeted 'remedial' program for people with learning or behavioural challenges. This supports an environment in which young people experiencing disadvantage can participate alongside their more advantaged peers. |

These elements can be in play to greater and lesser degrees in different Duke of Ed Centres or with different participants, but they all have a bearing on the perspective of the young people who use the Duke of Ed Framework.

What participants say

"I really like this program. It made school more enjoyable, and I've learnt plenty of skills."

"This has been my favourite subject that I have done in school. Absolutely loved it."

"I really enjoyed every aspect and the challenges helped us all grow stronger and motivated."

83% Say that they are better organised.

78% Say their school results have improved.

73% Say like school more since using the Duke of Ed Framework.



Participants also report improved daily school experience. For example, participants consistently identify friendship development as a key benefit, with 39% citing "my friends were doing it" as a primary motivation for participation. The initial impetus consistently translated into improved relationships as a result of participation. This social dimension is particularly important for disadvantaged cohorts, where peer disconnection is a known risk factor for disengagement.

In the focus groups, participants said that their Duke of Ed activities were the highlight of their week. They called out the challenge but characterised it as good challenge. They said they look forward to the "Duke's sessions" and have been inspired by kids from previous years who have done interesting things. For many of them, Duke of Ed is now embedded in the school culture.

Self-directed learning and goal setting

A critical protective factor for maintaining engagement is the development of agency and self-direction. The survey results show strong evidence of this dimension:

- 94% of participants say they are learning how to set their own goals (64% mostly or absolutely)
- 95% feel proud of what they have achieved (74% mostly or absolutely)
- 78% reported that trying new things was a primary motivation for participating.

These results indicate that the program successfully develops intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, both of which are strongly associated with sustained educational engagement and reduced dropout risk.

These factors are explored further in section 4.4.

Duke of Ed leaders

Duke of Ed Leaders say that Duke of Ed has helped young people stay at school. In some cases, they pointed to young people who had started to drop out and the role it played in helping them to come back to school. They report improvements in behaviour of the young people using the Duke of Ed Framework, particularly in being more respectful, building social connections with their peers and reduced instances of damaging behaviour.

Some schools have whole year groups using the Duke of Ed Framework as a way of building a strong cohort to help support peer relationships and to develop a culture that promotes connection and challenge. The Duke of Ed Leaders say that the social connections that the young people make are also an important part of what works to keep kids at school.

Trends over time

The questions reported in this section were asked at the end of previous DYP stages and so can be viewed over time (Figure 3).

Overall, participants say they are better organised, their results have improved and they like going to school more. The percentages dipped in 2021, which was the year with the biggest impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been some improvement in these figures since then, indicating that the overall population participating in the DYP is recovering from the impacts of that period. Significantly, during the COVID-19 period, 63% of participants still said that they liked going to school more because of Duke of Ed.

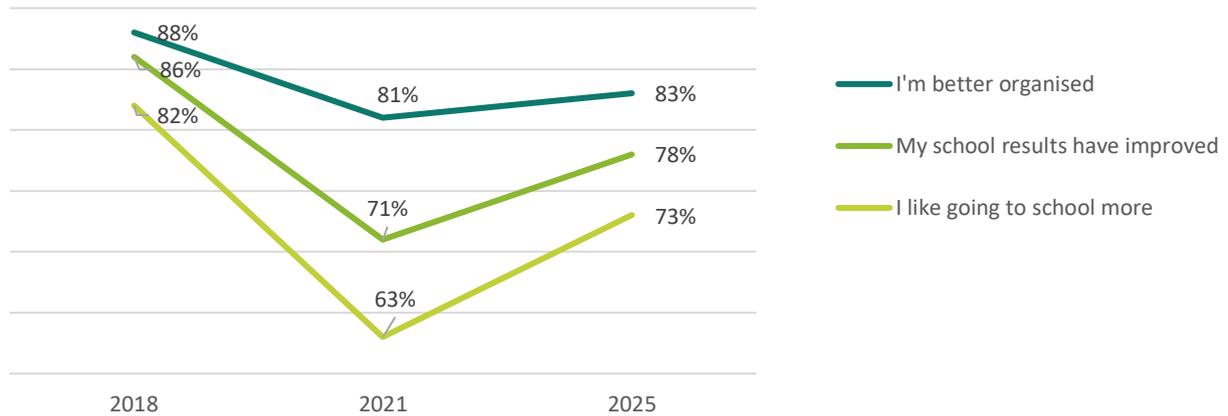


Figure 3. Impact of Duke of Ed, Stages 1 to 3

Evaluations of Stages 1 and 2 included schools that offer alternative pathways to school completion (e.g. Victor Harbour FLO School SA⁹); in those cases, the Duke of Ed formed part of their program for re-engagement. Some schools also combined Duke of Ed with other offerings such as the Clontarf Program (e.g. Dripstone Middle School NT), which has been very successful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly in the Northern Territory. These cases clearly demonstrated that the DYP was an effective mechanism for schools to offer alternative pathways for young people who were disengaging from school.

⁹ Disadvantaged Youth Program Evaluation, Round 1, 2018. The evaluation report included a case study of Victor Harbour Flexible Learning Options (FLO) School, which is a unit within the High School that provides alternative education pathways for young people who have disengaged from school. The FLO Unit integrated Duke of Ed into the curriculum for the participants.

Case study: St Helens, Tasmania

“It’s not like something you can blame on somebody else: it’s your commitment, you’ve got to follow through with it.”

Duke of Ed participant on what they learnt about goal setting

St Helens is a small, coastal town on the coast of north-east Tasmania, and is classified as 'outer regional'.

The District High School in St Helens has offered the Duke of Ed via the DYP for around four years. Young people in the area face a range of barriers to participation, including costs, and some of them are technically homeless, living in transient accommodation in campsites and having to move every 28 days.

With the support funding, and an enthusiastic leader, the program has grown; in 2025, a high of 31 young people signed up, including two participants who are working towards their Gold Level. For such a small school (500 pupils in total from Kindergarten to Year 12), this is a significant achievement.

Duke of Ed has had a profound impact for this group. The young people said:

“You learn good life skills”

“We know what we are going to have to do when we’re older”

“It teaches you how to balance priorities”

“You have to keep pushing, and also that it’s important to start organising early’ (in relation to setting up community service activities)”

“I’ve used it on my resume, and I now have a part time job in town”.

A key element of Duke of Ed for this group is their community service, where they have visited a nearby nursing home weekly or fortnightly to either do activities with the older people (painting, indoor bowls, fishing) or simply talk. The young people say that this was the highlight of their Duke of Ed experience, because they feel like they are doing something valuable for their community. They called out learning valuable lessons about respect, empathy and compassion and that they have improved their communication skills.

For this cohort, the adventurous journey was also a highlight. They spoke of hikes on the Freycinet Peninsular or the Walls of Jerusalem for the more experienced participants, including hiking through snow this year. One of the participants has made short videos of their trips and posted them to YouTube, adding an extra dimension to the experience. This has both taught valuable lessons in planning and resilience, and given them the skills to continue outdoor activities outside of school and Duke of Ed.

The Duke of Ed Leader says that she can see significant changes for the participants over their time in Duke of Ed. Each year, there is an Award ceremony where the young people cook a meal, serve the meal for their parents and talk about their experience with Duke of Ed.

The Duke of Ed Leader says the young people start the year shy and uncertain; by the time of the Award ceremony they are willing to stand up and share their stories with the whole group.

The funding for this group has covered registration costs and some of the equipment for the Adventurous Journey, which was also supplemented by borrowing gear from another school. The Duke of Ed Leader says that any cost is a barrier for these young people, so the funding has made their participation possible. For one young woman in particular, Duke of Ed was the activity that kept her in school for two years after her attendance started to decline.

The Duke of Ed has supported kids at school, helped them learn new skills, improved their communication skills and built connections in their local community.

4.2 Finishing school: supporting completion and post school transitions

Overview

Duke of Ed can point to a positive contribution towards supporting young people to complete Year 12 and develop vocational skills. The specific program design and response aspects highlighted are as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Academic recognition | The contribution of the Duke of Ed to their ATAR has been a significant incentive for many participants and supports their completing Year 12. |
| Job related skills | Participants spoke of choosing to do activities that helped them develop skills specifically relevant to their future employment. Some schools use the community service activity to teach job related skills. For example, two of the case study sites did food preparation for local community services, giving the young people skills they could demonstrate when applying for jobs in hospitality. In addition, participants say that they are better at communicating, solving problems and coping when things change because of their Duke of Ed experience, which is critical for successful employment pathways. |
| Links to part time work | Participants say that their Duke of Ed experience was a key factor in getting part time work, and expect this to lead to future employment opportunities. |
| Links to vocational training | The flexibility of Duke of Ed means some schools align it with vocational training and alternative pathways (e.g. allocating class time each week for Duke of Ed). In some cases, this is specifically to help young people who were disengaging from mainstream schooling to help them find a pathway to successfully completing school and building their confidence. |
| Building friendships | Duke of Ed helps build effective friendships that can be very important for some young people as a reason for going to school, and as an antidote to poor experiences from not connecting socially to their peer group. |

What participants say

“I have developed new relationships, skills and mindsets which transferred back at school, continuing to talk to my new friends and using the new mindset to help me in my education. I'm so grateful and blessed to have this opportunity and I pray that I'll be able to do Gold.”

“It looks good on my resumé.”

“I got to know more people and even got more confidence in myself. And even more as a leader.”

“A great program that really pushes you to your limits. It's incredible to find how much stronger, both mentally and physically, you become after the adventurous journeys.”

92% Say they have developed skills that are useful for getting a job.

92% Say they are better at communicating with others.

89% Say they are better at solving problems.

88% Say they can cope better when things change.



While the survey did not explicitly ask about part-time work, participants volunteered this information both in open responses and unprompted in focus groups. Multiple participants noted that Duke of Ed "looks good on my résumé" and helped them secure part-time employment. Duke of Ed Leaders confirmed this pattern, particularly in schools where community service activities were structured to develop hospitality or retail skills.

These capabilities align directly with employer priorities. The program's contribution to employability extends beyond the formal ATAR recognition to include the essential "enterprise skills" increasingly valued in the contemporary labour market.

Duke of Ed Leaders

Duke of Ed Leaders consistently say that the ability to use Duke of Ed to count towards a Year 12 certificate is a significant incentive for young people to use the Duke of Ed Framework, so Duke of Ed is both a benefit in itself and supports the broader educational outcome.

In the case studies, all Duke of Ed Leaders pointed to at least one student in their cohort who they believe would have stopped going to school if they had not engaged with the Duke of Ed, and that being part of the Duke of Ed group had changed their perspective and their behaviour in the school environment.

State Offices

There are multiple stories across all jurisdictions of Duke of Ed being a key part of a young person's academic portfolio. For example, the Tasmanian State Office worked with one school to help a young person identify enough points to get their certificate; completion of the Duke of Ed gave them just enough to qualify.

Trends over time

The trends over the three stages of evaluation for the job related skills show a similar COVID-19 related dip in 2021, but not to the same degree as the questions related to school performance. The figures in 2025 are slightly lower than 2018, but similar and are still around 90% for all the questions (Figure 4). This shows that the program has consistently supported disadvantaged young people to develop skills that will help them navigate the higher years of school and the transition to post-school pathways.

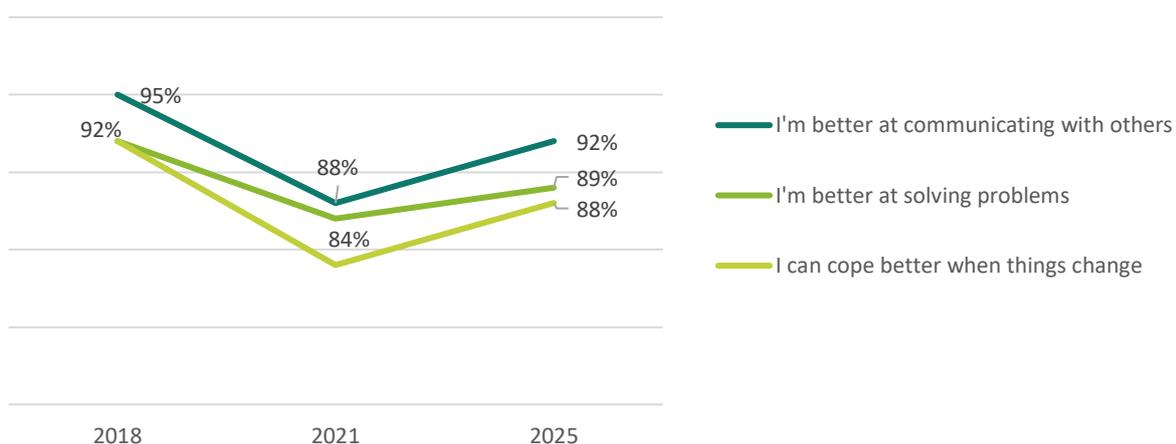


Figure 4. Impacts of Duke of Ed relating to school completion and preparation for employment

Case studies: Duke of Ed achievers applying skills after school

Hassan, Plumpton High School (Western Sydney)

“Goal setting was huge. Whenever I sit down now, I think about what I want to achieve, not just doing something for the sake of it.”

Hassan began the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award in Year 9 with little understanding of what the Duke of Ed entailed.

“Honestly, I knew nothing about it. I thought it was just like Scouts.”

Initially drawn to the Adventurous Journey component of the Duke of Ed, he soon discovered that the Duke of Ed was much more: setting goals, building resilience, and committing to long-term growth.

Over the years, he progressed from Bronze to Silver and finally Gold, learning critical job-ready skills along the way. Time management, accountability, and teamwork became second nature, helping him balance school leadership roles, part-time work and Duke of Ed commitments.

Completing the Duke of Ed shaped his future. Today, he is studying biomedical science at university, working part-time in school administration to support other Duke of Edinburgh participants, and even launching a photography business inspired by his Duke of Ed skill activity.

“Without the Award [Duke of Ed], I would still be wondering what I wanted to do in the future.”

Hassan’s highlights from completing the Duke of Ed included speaking at an international Gold Award event in Nigeria representing Australia, where he shared his journey and learned how the Duke of Ed impacts communities globally. He overcame challenges—such as staying motivated and managing time—through persistence and support from peers and the school’s Duke of Ed Leader.

The Duke of Ed remained a defining experience for this graduate, helping him uncover his passions and forge lasting connections. As he put it,

“Do it for yourself. The Award [Duke of Ed] helps you realise your passion, even if you think you don’t have one. It gives you lifelong connections and skills you’ll use forever.”

Melissa, Northern Beaches (Sydney)

Melissa, a recent Gold Level achiever began the Duke of Ed in Year 9. From local hikes to a demanding Gold-qualifying expedition in the Snowy Mountains, she says the experience was both challenging and rewarding.

“Finishing Gold was such a long journey physically and mentally, but it taught me that if I can do that, I can do anything.”

Her journey almost ended before it began. When costs became a barrier, she and her family questioned whether continuing the Duke of Ed was possible. Disadvantaged Youth Program funding changed everything.

“That funding was a tipping point. Without it, I would have missed out on all these opportunities and skills.”

The financial support enabled her to complete the Duke of Ed and cultivate skills that shape her life today. She developed time management, leadership, resilience, and communication skills, qualities she now applies to her university studies and part-time work.

“Doing the logs taught me accountability. Leading hikes taught me patience and confidence. These skills have shaped how I manage my life today.”

Currently, she has completed her first year of university studies in international relations and socio-legal studies. She credits the Duke of Ed – and the funding that made it possible – for influencing her career aspirations and personal growth.

“Without the Award [Duke of Ed], I would be less developed. It gave me so many skills and pushed me out of my comfort zone.”

Completing the Duke of Ed was not easy. Balancing volunteer commitments with the demands of the HSC tested her persistence, and there were moments she wanted to give up. Yet, pushing through those challenges gave her confidence and broadened her horizons.

“The Duke of Ed is something you’ll carry for life. You’ll do things you never imagined and grow in ways you can’t predict.”

4.3 Support for priority cohorts

Overview

The DYP has achieved its aim of reducing the barriers to participation for the priority cohorts. All of the program participants stated that they were dealing with at least two potential barriers including low socio-economic status (financial hardship), living in a rural/regional or remote location, learning difficulties or coming from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (Table 2).

Table 2. Reasons for participants applying for support (% of respondents, multiple responses possible), Stage 3 (2025)

| | |
|--|-----|
| Low socio-economic status | 71% |
| Rural/regional/remote | 55% |
| Learning difficulties | 26% |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background | 18% |
| Social or behavioural challenges | 17% |
| CALD | 14% |
| Family breakdown | 8% |
| Living with a disability | 5% |

Participants also reported dealing with eight other factors, but all at lower rates (less than 2%) including homelessness/housing insecurity, domestic violence, isolation and substance abuse.

The DYP has achieved this goal by:

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Promoting the opportunity | State Offices run training for Duke of Ed Leaders, and as part of the training course, promote the funding for Duke of Ed Centres for the target cohorts. |
| Targeting funding | State Offices have specifically approached some locations where there is potential interest in Duke of Ed and suggested that the Duke of Ed Centres apply. This includes working directly with some organisations that work with the target groups, such as disability peak organisations (Motor Neurone Disease Australia) or community organisations (Air Force Cadets, PCYC). |
| Building on success | The reach to young people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is outstanding, and reflects continued growth over the program that builds on success. Duke of Ed Centres have been established in schools with high proportions of these students, and Duke of Ed has been rolled out alongside other support programs like the Clontarf Academy, resulting in synergistic layering of impact. |
| Incremental growth | Some Duke of Ed Centres have experienced incremental growth, Having successfully received funding in earlier years, they continue to apply and use that money to grow the number of participants. The program has assisted Duke of Ed Centres in schools to run a small 'proof of concept' and then grow the Duke of Ed Centre off the back of the early successes. |

Word of mouth

Successful Duke of Ed Centres talk to other groups and encourage them to get involved. Duke of Ed Leaders also talk to each other. There is scope to increase the support for Duke of Ed Leaders to foster peer connection and learning.

What participants say

“It’s great. I wouldn’t be able to do this without the funding so am highly appreciative.”

“It has helped me lot with my physical and mental health. I would love to thank the government and my teacher for doing this for our school.”

“It’s been an exceptional experience, and I have absolutely loved everything I have done, through the funding provided to the school.”

“I have a learning disability and completed Duke of Ed with support from school.”

The survey results also demonstrate that the program design effectively balances structure with flexibility:

- 88% of participants say they can fit what they need to do for the Duke of Ed into their week
- 90% report being able to do activities that were interesting to them
- 94% say they have learned new skills.

This data confirms that despite the challenges facing disadvantaged cohorts (time poverty, caring responsibilities, unstable housing), the program's flexible design enables meaningful participation. The high proportion of participants reporting personal choice in activities (90%) demonstrates that the program successfully delivers self-directed learning, a core principle of the Duke of Ed Framework and a key policy objective in contemporary education frameworks.

What the Duke of Ed Leaders say

Duke of Ed Leaders report that any cost is a barrier to participation, so the Australian Government funding support has been critical in making it possible for disadvantaged young people to do Duke of Ed. Duke of Ed Leaders also report being very good at “scrounging” resources from different places, including borrowing equipment from other schools to support the Adventurous Journey to avert the young people having to buy their own gear.

Support from School Principals is critical; in some cases, having access to external funding has been a feature to help School Principals see the benefit of the program.

The value of participation in the program seems to be lasting. For example, in one case, in the ACT, a Duke of Ed alumnus has become the Principal of a high school. He approached the State Office because he wanted to find a way for his students to have the opportunity to use the Duke of Ed Framework.

Trends over time

Overall, the DYP has reached the target cohorts and the profile of participants is roughly equivalent comparing 2021 to 2025¹⁰ (Table 1).

There has been a slight increase in the proportion of participants who identify as coming from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, and who identify as living with a disability.

¹⁰ Data from 2018 was not available.

Other groups have fallen, or the categorisation has changed, so the data may not be completely consistent year to year. Isolation was a major factor in Stage 2 because of COVID-19.

Of all the changes, the decline in percentage of participants who identify as coming from a diverse cultural background (down to 14%) stands out as an area that requires attention as this is significantly lower than the background rate in the population of 27% of people who were born overseas, and 23% of people who speak a language other than English at home¹¹.

Similarly, whilst the rate of participants identifying as living with disability has increased slightly to 5%, it is lower than the background rate in the population of 21%¹² and may warrant additional focus in the future.

Table 3. Barriers reported by participants, 2021 and 2025

| Cohort | 2021 | 2025 | Change |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|--------|
| Low SES | 73% | 71% | ↓ |
| Rural/regional/remote | 57% | 55% | ↓ |
| Learning difficulties | 34% | 26% | ↓ |
| Isolation | 20% | | n/a |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander | 16% | 18% | ↑ |
| Social/behavioural challenges | | 17% | n/a |
| CALD | 21% | 14% | ↓ |
| Family breakdown | 21% | 8% | ↓ |
| Disability | 4% | 5% | ↑ |

¹¹ ABS Census 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/cultural-diversity-australia>, accessed 15 December 2025

¹² ABS 2022, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>, accessed 15 December 2025

Case study: Centralian Middle School, NT

“I’ve become more mature, trying to understand people’s opinions.”

Centralian Middle School, at Alice Springs in the NT, set up a Duke of Ed Centre two years ago, and has already grown to 39 participants in its second year, with 10 carrying on from Bronze to Silver.

The students come from mixed backgrounds, all low SES, and some who have experienced domestic violence, trauma, alcohol abuse or are from diverse cultural backgrounds. The students say that Duke of Ed was a really positive experience for them:

“I’ve learnt new skills, things that are really useful for after school.”

“I’ve started teaching dance classes. It was hard at the beginning with lots of setbacks, but I’ve stuck with it because I like being with younger kids and I like teaching.”

“I want to learn how to lead a group and play a bigger role in school events.”

“It’s taught me you have to commit to your goals. I had to switch around for some things to make it work.”

“Sometimes doing volunteering work, you have to partner up with someone you don’t know, and you have to communicate with them more to make it work—split up jobs, share tasks.”

“The big hike made me more resilient. I didn’t really want to do it beforehand, but I had to, and then I realised I really enjoyed it.”

For some of their community service, the group prepared food for a local foodbank and for events at a local club. This gave them both a connection to their local community and helped them develop skills in food preparation, which they then have used to get part time jobs. It also put the students in contact with people who are very disadvantaged, and helped them to see their own lives in context.

The Duke of Ed Leader says that they have seen the students ‘come out of their shells’, learn to be ‘comfortable with being uncomfortable’, learn to persist to overcome barriers, and also seen the individuals develop as leaders in the school community. The Duke of Ed Leader calls the parents as each young person finishes their Duke of Ed to let them know their child has completed the Duke of Ed, and reports a sense of pride from the parents that their child has achieved something really valuable.

For one participant, the Duke of Ed turned his life around. After not attending school in Year 7, once he signed up to Duke of Ed, he turned up every day and stayed all day. He has completed the Bronze Level in 2025 and is going on to do the Silver Level in 2026. There have been no behavioural problems and his school performance has dramatically improved, from not attending to getting Bs and Cs.

Another participant was unable to play sport because of a heart condition. For their physical recreation component, they trained as an AFL umpire and now umpires games and attends morning training sessions to cook breakfast for the teams.

The school will change from just a Middle School (Yrs 7-9) to become a high school covering Years 7 to 12 on the one campus in 2027. The intent is to expand Duke of Ed into the higher years, particularly to support some students to achieve the Gold Level and to help students get to the end of Year 12.

The Duke of Ed Leader also said that with a low SES group, any cost was a barrier to participation and the school was grateful for the financial support it receives from the Australian Government:

“If we didn’t get the funding, we couldn’t run it.”

4.4 Fostering mental health and wellbeing

Overview

The review considered the contribution to mental health and wellbeing by using the Duke of Ed Framework and, specifically, the DYP, through four contributors to mental health:

- Emotional resilience: that is, an ability to handle challenges and difficult emotions
- Social connection: that is, building and maintaining healthy relationships
- Physical health: there is evidence that good physical health and activity support better mental wellbeing
- Effective cognitive functioning: that is, a positive approach to thinking, learning and making decisions.

The review found that there was evidence that participating in the Duke of Ed contributed to developing these attributes for participants through:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Emotional resilience | Duke of Ed creates a range of challenges in different domains for participants to complete. They learnt to make choices about how they use their time, set goals and deal with issues as they attempt to achieve those goals. It also creates an incentive for the participants to continue to push through any barriers that emerge. |
| Building social connections | The process builds peer-to-peer relationships which both boost mental health and are protective against mental health related incidents. The process also teaches the participants how to develop connections with new people who they otherwise might not interact with. The community service elements help create links to the wider local community and teaches participants the benefits of making an active contribution to that community. |
| Physical health and activity | Duke of Ed requires the participants to do both a physical activity and the Adventurous Journey, which is a significant physical challenge. The intent is that participants include physical activity in their everyday lives to support their overall health. |
| Cognitive framing | Participants learn about self-agency, discover activities and passions and learn that difficult tasks can be completed effectively. They also learn persistence, as the activities must be completed consistently over time, and not just in a short burst. |

What participants say

“Duke of Ed has shaped me into another person. Duke of Ed gave me opportunities to work physically hard, and I never felt that energetic when hiking in my life. Furthermore, it helped me connect with people I never talked to, and now they're my best friends. Duke of Ed was just opportunity after opportunity, and it helped me grow into a better person with new values and experiences.”

“It was such a fun experience being able to get to know my peers outside the classroom. It helped to create stronger bonds between people, even those that we never thought we'd have become friends with before Duke of Ed. I really enjoyed every aspect, and the challenges helped us all grow stronger and motivated.”

“Our supervisors have been our number one supporters since day one, always encouraging us to become greater people and do greater things. Duke of Ed not only assists you to be physical but heals you mentally, giving you something to look forward to.”

“Duke of Ed changed my social life for the better.”

- 95% Say they are proud of what they have achieved.
- 94% Say they are learning how to set their own goals.
- 92% Say they are better at communicating.
- 90% Say they can do good things for their community.
- 89% Say they are better at solving problems.
- 88% Say they can cope better when things change.

Participants say that they have encountered challenges in using the Duke of Ed Framework, particularly in managing time and completing tasks, as well as the physical challenge of the Adventurous Journey and that they have learnt that they can tackle and deal with those challenges (interviews in case studies).

Duke of Ed Leaders

The Duke of Ed Leaders say they run Duke of Ed because they can see the potential benefits for the young people they work with linked to their experience from Duke of Ed. These are factors or attributes that are both immediately beneficial, and protective against potential challenges in their future lives, especially around improved problem solving, resilience, persistence and critical lessons in developing relationships and learning to collaborate effectively. They speak with significant pride in the achievements of their groups, and are clearly excited about the participants' own sense of achievement.

Duke of Ed Leaders also point to the Duke of Ed as a self-directed activity.

“For many of the kids, their activities [*in school and life*] are prescribed and mandated, and [*Duke of Ed*] gives them a chance to make their own choices. They discover new things plus a sense of independence from making their own choices.”

This is a consistent theme: that the young people learn to make their own choices, and this helps them grow substantially and gives them the skills to engage openly with new opportunities.

Trends over time

Across the three stages of the Disadvantaged Youth Program, surveys have shown consistently high results for the participants around dimensions relating to mental health and wellbeing, including better communication, better at solving problems and coping when things change.

In common with the other attributes, there was a dip in Stage 2 (2021) related to COVID-19, particularly in response to the statement ‘I can do good things for my community’. The Stage 2 evaluation found that as a result of COVID-19 responses requiring social isolation, there was less opportunity in that cycle for community-based activity (Figure 5).

It is important to recognise the degree to which all of these attributes have returned to similar pre-COVID-19 levels, which may also indicate that Duke of Ed has played a role in helping these young people rebound from the COVID period.



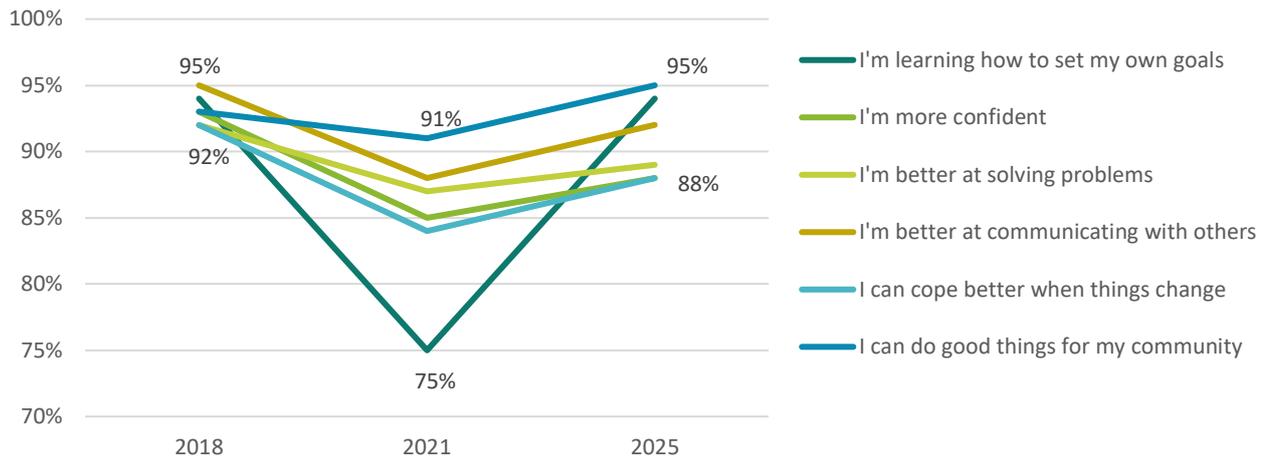


Figure 5. Mental health and well-being, 2018 to 2025

Case study: Plumpton High School (Western Sydney, NSW)

“The Award [Duke of Ed] only has good sides. It helps you get better at talking to people, managing time, and finding your passion.”

Plumpton High School, a low SES area with a high proportion of students from diverse cultural background, has a mature Duke of Ed program, having grown from around 30 participants per year to now offering Duke of Ed for free to all Year 9 students (around 20% of the total funding is covered by the support from the Disadvantaged Youth Program). As a result, there are 131 students currently registered for Bronze, 50 registered for Silver (capped because this is the maximum the program can support) and 32 registered for Gold.

A key element in the program is that the young people learn to be independent. For some of them, the Adventurous Journey is the first time they have spent a night away from home and had to cook for themselves. The large cohort also creates social connections and momentum, helping bring the whole group along in completing the requirements of the Duke of Ed. The social connections are especially useful in supporting the mental health of the young people, creating effective peer relationships and good relationships with teachers to help support their learning experience.

The program involves a significant commitment from the school. The Year 9 students have an extra PE class each fortnight just for Duke of Ed, and there are two teaching leads for Duke of Ed as well as the classroom teachers. All parts of the school are involved, as many of the students do activities with other faculties (e.g. volunteering to help with music and bands, or creative writing as a skill with the support of the English teachers out of class time). Duke of Ed has become embedded as part of the school culture.

In 2025, Gold participants undertook their Adventurous Journey over nine days in Queenstown, New Zealand (with only a small co-contribution from each participant of \$250). The group stayed at a sheep station, and did extensive walks over the nine days, including summiting Ben Lomond. For many of the participants, this was their first overseas trip and was a life-changing experience.

The ATAR points from achieving Duke of Ed levels have also helped the young people in their school careers—both as an incentive for using the Duke of Ed Framework (to count towards their Higher School Certificate) and in helping with university applications, including supporting successful applications for early entry.

For one student, the Duke of Ed has been a journey of confidence and leadership. Through community service as a junior Scout leader, she learned to speak up and manage groups effectively. Reflecting on the experience, she said “It initially took some confidence to lead a group of kids who weren’t listening. But I had to put in the effort and build patience.” She also highlighted how the Duke of Ed improved her physical stamina and resilience, helping her participate more in sports and boosting her academic performance at school.

“Finishing the Award [Duke of Ed] and seeing all the work put in was the high point. It gave me direction.”

For another student, the Duke of Ed has been instrumental in developing time management and accountability. He noted that the structure of logging activities and setting goals helped him fight procrastination and improve his overall academic results. Both students agreed that the Duke of Ed builds essential job-ready skills, including communication, teamwork, resilience, and problem-solving. Each participant noted that these skills translated directly to their retail jobs, helping them take more initiative and excel in their roles.

“Before, I procrastinated a lot. Now, I get tasks done straight away instead of leaving them for later.”

Challenges were part of the journey, from managing peers who resisted advice to overcoming setbacks during Adventurous Journeys. Yet, these experiences taught both students patience, humility, and persistence.

5. Conclusion

This review finds that the Disadvantaged Youth Program represents a highly effective investment in achieving Commonwealth education policy objectives for young Australians.

The program delivers measurable impact at scale

Over more than a decade since 2015, the Disadvantaged Youth Program has supported 12,658 young people who otherwise would not have accessed the Duke of Ed, exceeding contract targets by 48%. This is not simply a matter of numbers: the program consistently reaches the specific cohorts identified as priorities in national education policy, including young people from low socio-economic backgrounds (71%), regional and remote communities (55%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (18%), and those experiencing learning difficulties (26%) or living with disability (5%).

The program's reach into these cohorts has been sustained across all three funding cycles, demonstrating reliable delivery infrastructure and genuine engagement with disadvantaged communities rather than opportunistic one-off interventions.

The evidence base is robust and consistent

Three independent evaluations over ten years show remarkably consistent results:

- 89-95% of participants report improved confidence
- 87-95% report improved communication skills
- 87-92% report improved problem-solving ability
- 84-89% report improved resilience and ability to cope with change
- 88-92% report developing skills useful for employment

These are not marginal improvements. The scale of positive response, sustained across different cohorts and different evaluation periods (including the disruption of COVID-19), provides compelling evidence of genuine program impact.

Importantly, the 2025 results show recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels across most indicators, suggesting the program played a protective role in helping disadvantaged young people recover from pandemic disruption—a finding with particular policy significance given the well-documented disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged communities.

The program directly supports current policy priorities

The alignment between the Disadvantaged Youth Program outcomes and the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) ministerial objectives is striking:

Keeping Up: Strong evidence that the program maintains engagement, improves school attendance and enjoyment, and prevents dropout, particularly for at-risk students.

Finishing School: Clear contribution to Year 12 completion through ATAR recognition, skills development and improved social connection. Duke of Ed Leaders consistently report students who would have left school early but remained engaged due to Duke of Ed participation.

Priority cohorts: Demonstrated reach to all identified equity groups at scale, with sustained delivery over multiple funding cycles.

Wellbeing: Comprehensive evidence of improved confidence, resilience, social connection and pride in achievement, all core protective factors for mental health and wellbeing.

The program also contributes to the policy objective around post-school transitions, with 92% of participants reporting development of employment-relevant skills and multiple pathways to vocational training and further education.

The program offers exceptional value

The Disadvantaged Youth Program removes financial barriers that would otherwise exclude young people from accessing and using the Duke of Ed Framework. This is not a subsidy for optional enrichment; for many participants, this funding makes the difference between finishing school or not, between isolation and social connection, between disengagement and achievement.

The program leverages existing Duke of Ed infrastructure (State Offices, established delivery networks) and volunteers (Duke of Ed Leaders, activity assessors, supervisors), providing reach and impact at a scale that would not be achievable through a standalone initiative. Financial support enables access; the Duke of Ed Framework itself provides the transformative structure and experience.

The case for continued funding

The evidence presented in this review demonstrates that the Disadvantaged Youth Program:

- Meets and exceeds its contractual obligations
- Delivers sustained outcomes aligned with current Commonwealth, State and Territory education policy priorities
- Reaches priority equity cohorts at scale
- Provides protective benefits for mental health and wellbeing
- Contributes meaningfully to school completion and post-school transitions
- Represents a cost-effective intervention leveraging existing infrastructure and volunteer networks

Discontinuation of this program would remove access to the Duke of Ed for thousands of disadvantaged young people annually. The evidence base clearly shows this would represent a loss not simply of opportunity for individual enrichment, but of a measurable protective factor for engagement, wellbeing and educational success.

In an education policy environment increasingly focused on equity, engagement and whole-of-student development, the Disadvantaged Youth Program represents precisely the kind of non-academic intervention that research identifies as critical to addressing educational disadvantage.

Recommendation

The evidence supports continuation and, where feasible, expansion of Commonwealth funding for the Disadvantaged Youth Program. The program has demonstrated consistent delivery against contract objectives, sustained impact across multiple evaluation cycles, and strong alignment with current and emerging policy priorities.

For an Australian Government committed to the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement objectives, the Disadvantaged Youth Program represents a proven, scalable mechanism for translating policy intent into tangible outcomes for young Australians who face the greatest barriers to success in education and beyond.