

South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2023

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High Stakes High School

The experiences of
South Australian
Year 12 students

PROJECT REPORT NO. 34 | JANUARY 2023



Commissioner
for Children &
Young People

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act'). The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular, children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making, and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian young people who contributed their insights, ideas and suggestions in relation to their experiences of Year 12. Please note that all quotes used in this report are reproduced verbatim. Special thanks to the leadership teams, staff and students of the following schools and services who so warmly welcomed and practically supported my engagement. Without their assistance and commitment to student voice and agency this consultation would not have been possible.

- Aberfoyle Park High School
- Cornerstone College
- Golden Grove High School
- Mark Oliphant College
- Nazareth Catholic College
- Plympton International College
- St Ignatius College
- St Peter's College
- Seaton High School
- Wilderness School

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Commissioner's Foreword

Our education system must do all that it can to empower South Australia's children and young people to develop their talents, interests and capabilities in ways that will enable them to make a meaningful contribution to their community.

Central to this ambition is ensuring that students attend schools that are safe, secure, and predictable environments which foster the value of learning as well as high achievement, engagement, and leadership. Students also need their school to teach them how to utilise resources that go beyond the classroom, connecting them with their local community in ways that have an impact and which set them up for their future.

There are significant and substantial differences in the way students are being prepared for adulthood between schools and across sectors. These differences are particularly obvious when viewed through the lens of relationships and skills that support lifelong health, safety, wellbeing, and individual aspiration.

In addition to completing Year 12, research has highlighted the significant benefits available to young people who attain their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE); not only in terms of the educational outcomes, but across the social, economic, cultural, and health-related benefits this achievement delivers.

Higher levels of education are associated with much better health overall. Research shows that young people who complete Year 12 are much

more likely to embark on further education and obtain meaningful and secure employment. This brings with it the associated economic stability, improved living conditions, and higher levels of civic engagement that lead to a longer, healthier life. Conversely, research shows that early school leavers – those who don't complete Year 12 – can be significantly disadvantaged throughout their entire lives both in terms of their health, as well as socially and financially.

Research also shows that the benefits of completing Year 12 are not evenly distributed amongst the community in the way we might expect. The social, economic, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds of young people are known to have a direct impact on each student's educational outcomes, and on the subsequent career choice and economic success they can achieve.

A student's background not only affects how they engage with their education, it impacts on the range of services they will need and access over the long term. Not only does it influence how they see themselves, it also impacts the value they place on their abilities and skills, as well as how they see adults and authority more broadly.

From my interactions with children and young people, I am aware that achieving educational success and avoiding the negative effects that arise from poor educational outcomes, requires substantial changes to be made at the most fundamental levels.

These much needed changes include:

- **How students learn** – teaching methods, hands-on learning opportunities.
- **What they learn** – financial literacy and other 'life skills', relationships and sexual health education, civics, and citizenship education.
- **Where they learn** – the look and feel of study or play spaces, policies regarding uniform, bathroom access.
- **What support they receive to learn** – classroom learning supports, counselling and mental health supports.

Young people at all levels of school tell me they feel an immense amount of pressure to complete Year 12 and achieve a high ATAR score. They have been told for years that their ATAR score is used as a key indicator of both their value as a person and whether they will have a successful life. They report that this pressure is not only coming from their teachers and parents, but also from the media, with children as young as eight saying they worry about Year 12 and their future beyond school if they don't do well on their ATAR.

Beyond the immediate pressures of Year 12, young people have the added pressure of determining whether their subject choices are leading them to the career opportunities they seek. They're often not sure that their subject choices reflect their true interests and aspirations, or if they may be unwittingly narrowing their options too soon.

Young people, regardless of their gender or the school sector they're in, also tell me that they don't feel as though they're being well prepared for adulthood. This is a significant source of concern to many young people as they complete their senior school year.

They also tell me that when they're studying in Years 11 and 12, the increased pressure and workload they experience makes it extremely difficult for them to balance their commitments between family and friends, part-time or casual work, and staying fit and healthy.

The overwhelming narrative senior students told me, was that doing well requires them to give up something they enjoy and which really matters to them.

Given the pressure many young people feel in their senior years, and the significance being placed on their ATAR as a predictor of their future success, I felt it was important I get some real-time insights into young people's experiences of Year 12 in South Australia.

From February to October 2021, I undertook a series of face-to-face consultations with groups of students in Year 12 attending four Adelaide schools: Seaton High School, Aberfoyle Park High School, Cornerstone College, and Nazareth Catholic College.

I also engaged with an additional 72 Year 12 students via one-off conversations at St Peter's College, Mark Oliphant College, Saint Ignatius College, Wilderness School, Plympton International High School, and Golden Grove High School.

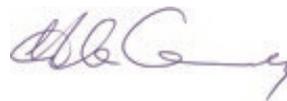
In addition to these conversations, I surveyed a broader group of Year 12 students across the state. The survey questions I asked covered their expectations, challenges, and highlights, as well as how prepared and supported they felt during their final year of school. My survey also asked them how confident they felt about life beyond Year 12, and what they thought would improve their final year experience, including what would have made them feel better about their future overall.

The purpose of this report is to bring these voices, experiences, and perspectives to the fore. My hope is that it will be used to inform

future approaches to the support offered to final year school students to improve their journey and reduce the stress levels this group of young people experience overall.

By deepening our understanding of the significant challenges and barriers being faced by South Australian young people in their final year at school, we will be able to make systemic improvements that have insight from those with lived experience.

Ideally these improvements will extend to changing the ways in which we engage with children and young people throughout their entire schooling years, supporting them to not only prepare for Year 12, but to develop a lifelong love of learning. Imagine a world in which all final year students are optimistic about their future and the choices available to them; a future they embark upon with confidence and enthusiasm for what lays ahead – not dread and fear of not measuring up.



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People



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Context

If we all agree that a good education is the key to lifelong physical and mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion, employment prospects and economic security then we need to define what achieving a good education looks like. As a fundamental human right of all children, having access to an education that develops their individual personality and talents to the full is enshrined in Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Education is not just a human right in and of itself – it is also a means of realising other human rights, supporting social and emotional development, and building fair and inclusive societies. Universal access to education is also recognised for its potential to reduce inequality and poverty.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration articulates Australia's national goals for education. It establishes that education systems must promote equity as well as excellence in educational outcomes while preparing all young people to become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed citizens.

In South Australia, school education is compulsory for children and young people between the ages of six and sixteen. The main indicator of school attainment in South Australia is completing a Year 12 or equivalent senior secondary certificate or vocational qualification by the age of eighteen. Students work towards achieving their SACE throughout Years 10, 11 and 12. This includes provision to combine their SACE studies with either a vocational education and training (VET) program,

an apprenticeship or traineeship, an industry pathways program, or a flexible learning option (FLO) program.

Some students complete subjects with assessments that contribute to an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) for university entry. Other students complete applied or vocational learning that is directed to employment-based training or work. Another group aim to complete their Year 12 certificate without an ATAR or vocational qualification. This means that among those who set out to attain their SACE, there is a significant variation in the areas of study, experiences, and methods of assessment that can and need to be applied.

National reviews of education systems in Australia have shown that achieving a high ATAR 'dominates the educational experience of senior secondary students' placing 'unnecessary mental pressure on young people', sending distorted messages about 'the broader goals of senior secondary education' as well as what schools, the education system, and the community value most.¹

Although the purpose of an ATAR is to provide a nationalised ranking of students for university entry, the dominance being placed on the importance of achieving a high ATAR is driving student choices and setting expectations. This is often at the expense of developing broader skills or of gaining an understanding of the range of pathways that can be taken toward pursuit of different careers that don't require a university degree. This is the case despite the reality that many young people gain entry into further education and employment studies based on their workplace experience, and on the vocational education and training they undertake at school, and even via alternative selection processes that look at entry requirements not related to their ATAR.

National reviews and research in the area acknowledge this is the reality and highlight the need to reconsider what outcomes are being valued and measured when it comes to schooling, particularly during the senior secondary years.

To this end, the SACE Board has developed several positive initiatives, including a Learner Profile Project that aims to shift thinking towards a more holistic view of student 'achievement' – one that goes beyond academic skills and takes into account the value of a 'fully rounded' education which also supports opportunities for social and recreational skills development.

This view is consistent with the recommendations made in the 2020 *Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training*. This report recognises the range of attributes young people need to thrive in a changing world, including those gained from experiences outside the classroom.

Beyond job prospects and security, educational attainment also influences behaviours and decision-making related to health, civic engagement, and family life. As such, the costs of lost or unequal educational opportunity are not limited to individuals, but also have implications for social progress, productivity, creativity, and innovation across entire communities, both locally and nationally.

South Australia does not routinely conduct a post-school destination survey. Surveys of this kind are conducted in jurisdictions such as Queensland's Next Steps Survey, Victoria's On Track Survey and the Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey for students in New South Wales.

Many of the indicators that should shine a light on how South Australian young people are faring hide the patterns of engagement, retention and lived experiences of school students in their senior years.

Where decision-making overlooks the lived experiences and opinions of young people, it is unlikely to address the challenges young people face at school and beyond.

Key Findings

Through a series of face-to-face conversations and online qualitative survey, young people shared their experiences, feelings, and reflections in real-time as they navigated the highs and lows of their final school year.

A total of 223 young people aged 16 to 19 years took part in the Year 12 survey. Most respondents were either 17 years (50.7%) or 18 years (43.8%). A smaller number were aged 16, 19 or 20 years. Most respondents (67.5%) identified as female, while 29.3% identified as male, with 3.3% identifying as non-binary. A total of 70.9% were attending a Government school, with 26.9% attending a Non-Government school, of which 18.8% were in a Catholic school and 8.1% in an Independent school.

Number of face-to-face sessions:

26

Number of schools that participated:

10

(5 Govt, 2 Catholic, 3 Independent)

Number of Year 12 students consulted:

101

Number of Year 12 survey respondents:

223



Of the young people who participated in the Year 12 survey:

23%

came from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds

7%

identified as living with a disability

3%

had experiences living in out of home care

21%

identified as sexually diverse and 5% identified as transgender or gender-diverse

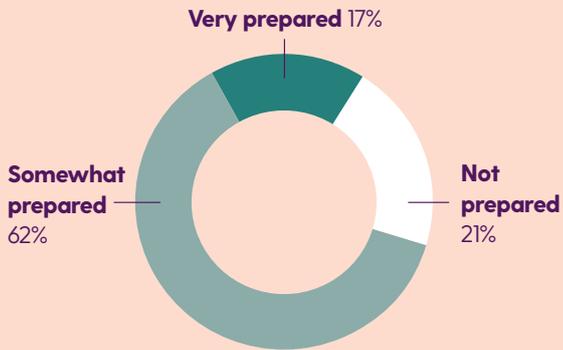
6%

had carer responsibilities for a family member

1%

identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

How prepared do young people feel for Year 12?



- Young men were less likely than young women to feel prepared for Year 12.
- Young people in Independent schools felt more prepared for Year 12 than those in Catholic or Government schools.
- Young people in Government schools were significantly more likely than those in non-Government schools to say they did not feel prepared for Year 12.

How supported do young people feel during Year 12?

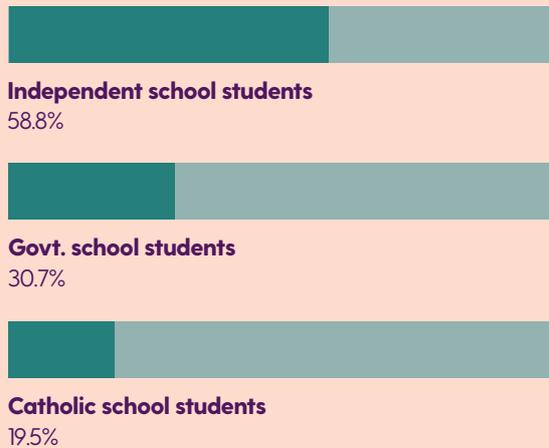


Post school options

- 100% of respondents attending Independent schools reported receiving some information about applying for university or TAFE.
- 5% of respondents attending Government or Catholic schools reported information about applying for university or TAFE was ‘not covered at all’.
- 27% of respondents (more than 1 in 4) said they did not receive any information about jobs or career pathways.

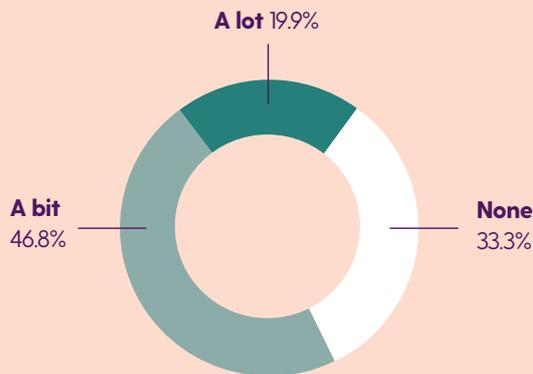
While young people in some schools reported receiving very little information about career options, others had access to a designated staff member who provided comprehensive career counselling well before the beginning of Year 12.

Young people who reported receiving ‘a lot’ of access to individual career planning, by sector:

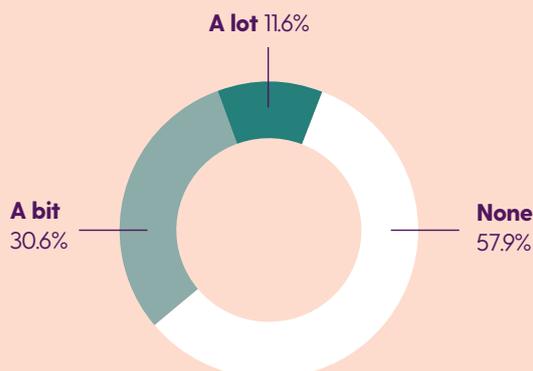


Personal support

Amount of information received by young people on mental health:



Amount of information received by young people on relationships/sexual health:



- Year 12 students in Catholic schools were three times more likely than those attending Independent schools, and twice as likely as those attending Government schools to report mental health information being covered 'a lot'.
- Drug and alcohol education was much more likely to be covered in Catholic schools.
- Only 11.6% of respondents said they had received 'a lot' of education about relationships and sexual health, with Catholic school students making up the highest proportion of this percentage (26.8% Catholic compared to 11.8% Independent and just 7.8% of Government school students).
- Many of those who did receive relationship and sexual health education reported that what was being taught was inadequate or fearmongering, sometimes emphasising abstinence over practical advice.



The best things about Year 12

- Relationships with peers and teachers that made senior school students feel heard, respected, and supported within their school.
- Events, activities, and 'rites of passage' that made the year fun.
- A growing sense of independence and freedom associated with reaching significant milestones and being given more leadership opportunities.
- Relief and the sense of accomplishment that comes with working hard and 'getting through it together'.



The worst things about Year 12

- Stress, expectations, and the pressure to get a good ATAR.
- The challenges of balancing the demands of Year 12 with commitments to family, work, sleep, sport, and 'life' in general.
- The lack of focus on student wellbeing in favour of academic achievement and the school's reputation.
- Concerns about the future and feeling ill-equipped to navigate the adult world.

Key Messages

1

Young people want to increase their chances of completing Year 12 successfully, but such 'high stakes' can come at a cost. Many students report that due to the need for them to have a purely academic focus, serious life issues tend to be ignored despite the significant impact they can have on their wellbeing and capacity for engagement with their studies.

2

Young people said relationships with friends, family, and teachers are essential to successfully completing Year 12. Feeling heard, respected, and trusted are crucial. Having fun and having spaces that are conducive to their needs are key, as is achieving the variety of significant milestones and 'rites of passage' that come at this age.

3

Teachers and school leaders relationships with students in their senior years impacts on motivation and engagement with their education, confidence and capacity to make future plans, including understanding of pathways available beyond school and into the workforce.

4

Young people who felt confident about their future plans attributed this to comprehensive and relevant information and support. Others were proud of the plans they had made despite having had insufficient information or guidance. Some young people spent years mapping out pathways to reach their specific goals, while others focused simply on getting through. A smaller number simply wanted permission to enjoy their final year of school without the pressure of ATAR.

5

Young people, including those who said they were confident about their future work or study pathways, did not feel confident about life post school. Neither did they know what to expect outside of the routine and structure of the school day. Many students said they felt 'scared, nervous, and unprepared' for post school life.

6

Young people who felt prepared for Year 12 said they had benefitted from helpful information, support, and advice from family members, teachers and other school staff, and felt confident and comfortable with their subject choices.

7

Young people who didn't feel prepared for Year 12 said they had insufficient information; that what they did know came 'too little, too late' – and that they wanted more understanding of the workload, expectations, subjects, scaling, and assessments they would be required to complete in their final year of school before they started it.

8

Young people who felt supported at school identified teaching staff who they said cared about them and who were willing to put time and effort into listening to their concerns, get to know them and look out for them, particularly when they fell behind, or were dealing with serious issues within or outside of school.

9

Young people who did not feel supported at school highlighted the lack of recognition or acknowledgement of complex issues they faced outside of school, particularly those affecting their school attendance or engagement with their learning such as mental health issues. They said this included the difficulty they experienced in accessing school counsellors and psychologists who were qualified and experienced enough to provide them with the support and guidance they needed. They also gave examples of insufficient and unhelpful career advice and guidance they had received.

10

Young people described the importance of having flexible timetables and an ability to choose subjects that are practical and aligned with personal interests, as being highly motivating. Similarly, they said having dedicated spaces without constant supervision to study, 'chill', relax and bond with their peers was crucial.

11

Young people identified the need to challenge the false and unhelpful narrative around achieving a high ATAR as the only worthwhile pathway post school. These narratives are dominant in children's lives from a young age and exacerbate the pressure they feel to have everything figured out by the time they start Year 12, let alone by the time they complete it.

The Positives

- “Year 12 is always a very serious and transformative time, so there is always bad news being given to someone about uni, family, whatever. Everything is bigger, which can be good and bad.” – 17 year old, male
Independent school
- “Year 12 can sometimes feel like the perfect blend between freedoms and independence and stability at school.”
– 17 year old, non-binary,
Independent school
- “Specialising in the subjects that matter to you the most. Complete responsibility over our studies.” – 17 year old, male, Government school
- “Being able to see all of the hard work you have put in throughout high school come together and pay off. Support from teachers who want to see students do well. Celebrations and events that show that the school is proud of their year 12's and the journey they are taking/have taken.” – 18 year old, female, Government school
- “That the teachers treat everyone like adults and not like children. Having free periods to be able to study [would be] very helpful and not having to do research project.” – 17 year old, male, Government school
- “I feel that I know where I'm headed at least for the next few years, and I also feel that I have the skills and network now to support me as I change.”
– 17 year old, female,
Independent school

The Negatives

- “ ATAR is referred to as the be all and end all, and failure to achieve the desired score means you can't go to university. And there's no mention of alternative pathways – it's essentially not a possibility.” – 18 year old, female, Catholic school
- “ Decrease the pressure of ATAR and encourage students to do more of what they like, rather than what would give them the right marks.” – 17 year old, male, Independent school
- “ The stigma around Year 12 is worse than the actual experience. I think that we need to abolish this to make the experience better.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school
- “ Some teachers belittle your passions... They praise many students as a tokenistic ideal standard, but the reality is not everyone is going to meet that (about A graders). The school needs to better prepare us for the real world... Right now we're in the dark. There is not an equal investment into subjects. Sports is praised way more than the arts. They encourage you to express your ideas but then don't listen to them.” – 17 year old, female, Government school
- “ I feel like we don't get enough time to choose what we want to do in the future, as I feel like having a few months to decide what your career is gonna be is unfair and not right.” – 17 year old, male, Government school

Recommendations

Attaining a Year 12 SACE is beneficial to South Australia's young people. It has a positive lifelong impact on their health, financial security, and overall wellbeing. Retaining students through to the end of Year 12 increases the likelihood of young South Australians finding opportunities to succeed post school.

To increase the likelihood of young people remaining in education until the end of Year 12 and achieving a SACE, school leadership and educators must take the time to better understand the Year 12 student experience, and then implement strategies that will actively address the challenges students say they face.

By improving the overall experience of Year 12 for students and by placing a focus on providing them with support for their mental health and wellbeing, retaining students through to the end of Year 12 is far more likely to happen.

Ideas from young people include providing a more inclusive and adult-orientated learning environment and providing access to supportive adults who senior students can trust to convey and support the school to act on the issues and concerns they raise.

We must support senior students to remain engaged in their senior secondary education so that they are better equipped to take advantage of the variety of post-school pathways available to them.

1

Every year each school should develop a tailored Year 12 Student Charter with their new Year 12 group.

At the beginning of the school year, involve student representatives, school leadership, the School SACE Coordinator, and Year 12 Subject Teachers in the development of a Year 12 Student Charter by investing in a development day that is set aside specifically to tailor the Charter to the Year 12 student cohort for that year.

The charter would act as a reference point for Year 12 students and staff, setting out the collective and shared expectations, rights, and responsibilities of the students, teachers, and school administrators, who as members of the school community commit to supporting students enrolled in Year 12 to complete their SACE with the least amount of stress and duress.

The Charter would provide an overview of how the students and school staff will work together to establish and maintain the unique learning culture, and the kind of environment they agree is needed for Year 12 students to feel supported.

This would include creation of a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable environment that considers the different cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, religious, ideological, and political backgrounds of the year group enrolled. The Charter would be mindful of the potential impacts any existing school policy may have on Year 12 students and adjust these accordingly.

The Charter would also cover the behaviour of leaders, educators, and specialist staff who would be monitoring their Year 12 students learning experiences and fostering development of a supportive learning environment that the school commits to maintaining throughout the year. It would also ensure effective student representation alongside opportunities for student-led projects and peer-led reviews to occur. The Charter would also include details of where students can go to seek advice, interventions, and support for non-academic aspects of their Year 12 journey, such as their health, welfare, safety, and wellbeing. There would also be a process established to enable students to report or raise concerns they may have in relation to incidents of harassment or discrimination by teachers or peers.

2

Ensure each Year 12 cohort receives specialist Relationships and Sexual Health education and basic Mental Health First Aid training.

Young people report that current relationship and sexual health education is non-inclusive of gender and sexual diversity and not explicitly addressing issues relating to consent, harmful sexual behaviours, and sexual violence. They are calling on us to deliver relationships and sexual health education co-created with students to all students in Years 11 and 12.

Young people talk about feeling overwhelmed and not being supported to maintain their own mental health whilst supporting their friends who are having mental health issues. Many young people report that supporting their peers at times when their own mental health may be fragile, is causing distress and they are worried about making things worse and not knowing the community supports that exist and when and how to tap into them. Young people need tools to provide them with the confidence they're seeking to provide "help" to their mates.

Through school based psycho-social education and Mental Health First Aid training and access to self-help resources, young people can learn what they need to know to help a mate, including what to do and where to turn when they're ready to seek adult help. This training should include a focus on suicide prevention.

“

Many young people described the overwhelming pressure they feel to succeed and to get good grades and a good ATAR in their final year of school, as the only things that matter. For these students the resulting competition and inevitable comparison being made between students has a significant and lasting impact on their self-confidence and sense of wellbeing.



The challenges of Year 12

Whilst most students involved in this project mentioned many of the positive aspects of being in Year 12, such as gaining new knowledge, growing as a person, learning about themselves, and finding their identity, these were not universally experienced.

For some young people, the end of Year 12 could not come quickly enough with some saying they struggled to identify any positive aspects of their final year other than bonding over how much they disliked school. Many students identified the significant difference there is between Year 11 and Year 12, both in terms of workload, assessment deadlines and exams, including how this causes unnecessary pressure that results in many students feeling burnt out as they struggle to maintain their motivation throughout the year.

On top of school and study commitments, many students had part-time or casual jobs while some young people had carer responsibilities. Many described the challenges they faced in staying physically and mentally healthy as they balanced school with work and family responsibilities, friendships and social commitments, sport and exercise as virtually impossible. Prioritising school was always done at the expense of something else, with a number of students reflecting that their academic success was secondary to their mental health.

In addition to the balancing act required to manage the competing demands of Year 12, young people described the following as challenges they faced:

- **Pressure to get a high ATAR**
- **Managing relationships with teachers**
- **Lacking knowledge of adult learning opportunities**
- **Feeling underprepared for adulthood**
- **Having a limited understanding of their post school options**
- **Difficulty communicating the challenges they were facing to their parents/carers**

“ No spare time. No time to go to gym and be healthy. Can't really see friends or go to birthday dinners as assignments and work is due.” – 17 year old, male, Government school

“ Amount of pressure put onto us by families, friends, teachers and media, workload, the teachers only really teach in a lecture style way which makes it difficult for me to learn, bad mental health I had due to the work.” – 18 year old, female, Government school

“ All the stress. Having a casual job, three volunteering positions, thinking about my future, financial stability, caring for younger siblings/grandparents, getting your P's, being responsible for a vehicle, relationship drama, sexual assault, a lack of information on sexual health and male roles in both relationships and with sexual partners. Shall I continue?” – 17 year old, female, Government school

Pressure to ‘get a good ATAR’

Year 12 can be a stressful time for young people as they navigate an increased workload, deal with pressure to perform well, meet the expectations of themselves, peers, parents, and teachers, and prepare for the next stage of their lives. This includes making decisions about their future study or career pathways.

Many young people described the overwhelming pressure they feel to succeed and to get good grades and a good ATAR in their final year of school, as the only things that matter. For these students the resulting competition and inevitable comparison being made between students has a significant and lasting impact on their self-confidence and sense of wellbeing.

Conversely young people who were not looking to go on to university, and therefore not so focused on their ATAR, felt ignored and unsupported in the choices they were required to make. For them to be given more support from their school and teachers was identified as a significant challenge. They felt they were considered to be less important than those who were focused on achieving a high ATAR. Many students reported that if they had more information, resources, and support about the range of pathways they could take from school into a job and career, Year 12 would have been a much more positive experience.

“*It feels like you’re in a goldfish bowl, or pressure cooker. There isn’t enough time in the day to get everything done that is expected of us by the school & it falls back on us for ‘bad time management’. The school doesn’t take any responsibility for the anxiety it causes its students, because students that are scared of failure rake in high ATARS and become a selling point.*” – 17 year old, female, Independent school

“*Exams are unrealistic for determining how good I am at a subject due to anxiety, and multiple other issues. I can ace my classwork but fail the exam.*” – 17 year old, female, Government school

“*The teachers are constantly pressuring us to do well and get merits at the expense of our wellbeing. Since merit students help the teachers, there is always going to be a lot of pressure from teachers, which often is not helped by parents. It’s so internalised at my school that anything A- or lower is a failure that everyone is just ruthlessly flogging themselves to output work. It’s not going to work forever.*” – 18 year old, female, Independent school

Relationships and support from teachers

In the same way positive relationships with teachers was reported as being one of the best things about Year 12, there were also young people who reported that negative experiences with certain teachers was amongst the worst things they experienced.

Many young people described interactions with teachers who gave them the impression they did not care about their student wellbeing or mental health. It appeared they were only interested in those who were doing well academically. Some young people felt that some of their teachers were unsuited, unprepared, and unsupported to teach the new generation of senior students. Likewise, they found teaching styles to be inflexible with lecture style teaching dominating the methods that many teachers preferred, making it challenging for those students with differing learning styles to engage and stay motivated.

Young people said the key to feeling heard, trusted, or respected was having teachers who treated them like young adults, rather than children. Many young people said that teachers appear to care more about enforcing school rules than about how young people are being treated, or how they are faring. Some students described a particular lack of understanding from teachers in relation to disability and anxiety.

- “ *Some teachers picking favourites and treating other students less. School doesn't seem to care about year 12 mental health.*”
– 18 year old, female, Catholic school
- “ *Some teachers don't motivate students to achieve goals – they just tell us to reconsider our options. It comes off as if they're saying we're never good enough. Teacher's yell and bark at us at assemblies and don't treat us like adults which some of us are.*” – 18 year old, male, Government school
- “ *Teachers fussing more about bags & uniform than they are about the mistreatment that happened to some of their students.*”
– 18 year old, female, Government school

Lack of adult learning opportunities

Some young people felt their behaviour was more restricted throughout Year 12 than any other time in their school journey. This was particularly so in terms of what they could and couldn't do, and where they could and couldn't go during free periods.

There was considerable variation in the treatment of Year 12 students between the schools involved in the project. This was particularly evident in relation to how Year 12 students were able to use their free periods and what permissions they needed to come and go

from the school campus throughout the day. In some cases, young people were afforded these 'freedoms' based on their grades. This was extremely frustrating for some young people who were unable to take advantage of study periods in ways that worked best for them because they weren't performing as well as others. They said this disparity felt as though they being punished and that they weren't being respected or trusted to be responsible for their time and actions.

Other young people felt that school had limited their independence in ways that seemed arbitrary and unfair. They also reported that they felt these restrictions did not prepare them for entry into the adult world. Many young people reported few or no opportunities for them to demonstrate leadership and engagement, and that their views were rarely taken into account and mostly disregarded by teachers and school leaders when they did express them.

Even in schools that had mechanisms in place for students to have a say and inform school culture, spaces, policies, and practices, students reported that they felt these opportunities did not provide them with any real or genuine capacity for influence – in other words they saw none of their ideas or suggestions being actioned.

- “ *The struggle of feeling like your mental state and emotional maturity has progressed passed school and feeling more like a young adult than the child some teachers still treat you as – it makes motivation hard.*”
– 18 year old, female, Government school
- “ *Study method was not flexible. Sometimes classes did not feel necessary to attend, for example, why do I need to be supervised as I write my assignments, I'm completely capable of independently finishing of those tasks.*” – 18 year old, male, Government school

Some young people noted that their Year 12 cohort was much smaller than their Year 11 student numbers had been. They suspected that despite there being ‘a few dropouts’ the school had also asked some young people to leave before they started their final year of school. Many young people reported that they were aware of ongoing pressure being applied to peers who the school believed may not successfully complete their SACE certificate, and that this was done either by excluding them or by encouraging them to pursue VET pathways.

Young people felt that tactics like these were being applied partly because of the pressure schools are being placed under to maintain their SACE completion rates, and uphold their public standing and reputation.

“ *The school doesn’t motivate us to get a high ATAR if [the students] don’t need it. Any students that don’t need a high ATAR don’t bother unless they’re self-motivated. [The school is] trying to weed out the kids who will not contribute to 100% SACE completion.*” – 18 year old, female, Government school

Feeling unprepared for adulthood

On top of the intense stress of just getting through Year 12, young people described the pressure, fear and uncertainty they felt in relation to what the future beyond school looked like. They were worried about choosing pathways while not knowing where they will be this time next year, or what kind of courses they may want or be able to pursue. They also expressed concern about perceived knowledge gaps they had in relation to crucial life skills that they needed at this time, and how this left them feeling unprepared for life beyond school.

Many Year 12 students expressed generalised worries about their lack of preparedness for the future; about not knowing their place in the world post school. Some young people reported feeling fearful of being unable to handle the responsibilities and expectations they would face. They felt that the long-term impact of COVID-19 was exacerbating the levels of unpredictability throughout what is already a stressful and uncertain time for young people.

Very few young people were provided with information about how to go about living independently, or what financial literacy and relationship skills they might need. Many reported inadequate, inconsistent, and non-existent education in the areas of intimacy and sexual health, and drug and alcohol use.

Others linked their fear of the future with a lack of information and support in relation to what was needed to prepare them for Year 12. This included having little or no understanding of the range of post-school pathways and options available to them before starting their final year, including how this lack of knowledge made it difficult for them to make end of year decisions about career and future study pathways.

While many young people enjoyed greater subject choices in Year 12, others felt let down by their school’s subject timetables and choices. Some young people were not adequately supported to make informed decisions about which subjects were needed to gain entry to particular university or vocational pathways, and blamed themselves for making ‘wrong’ choices once it had become too late to make a change.

Many of those who were completing the SACE Research Project (RP) during Year 12, found this particularly stressful, and would recommend that all students be made to complete this in Year 11, lightening their final year workload so they can focus more consistently on studying for exams.

- “ My school only cared about getting us into Uni or TAFE courses. Didn't teach me any life skills and barely provided the opportunity to learn them. As a disabled student I feel really disadvantaged when it comes to me learning to live my life outside of school.”
– 18 year old, female, Government school
- “ We neeeded [sic] to be taught how to live independently. Lots of students don't have parents who can teach them those things, and thus the cycle continues.” – 18 year old, female, Government school
- “ The school needs to better prepare us for the real world. They have not taught us how to apply for uni or get a job. Right now, we're in the dark...” – 17 year old, female, Government school
- “ The amount of stress and academic pressure, especially on top of trying to making decisions about a future that it's even harder than usual to predict due to the pandemic.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school
- “ Constant feeling of impending dread related to the uncertainty of post-school life.”
– 18 year old, male, Government school
- “ Pressure from parents/family, not feeling ready about going into the world (eg not knowing how to do taxes, why I need a credit rating and what it is, etc. ATAR.”
– 18 year old, female, Government school

Confidence about pathways and options

Young people's real-time insights into their experience of Year 12 highlighted a clear difference between students attending Government schools and those at non-Government schools. The main difference related to the types of pressure students in Year 12 were under as well as the level of support and information students had in relation to their future education, training, and employment options and pathways.

Designated career counsellors were available to students attending most non-Government schools, and able to be accessed prior to commencing Year 12. Career counsellors provided advice and information on the various pathways available, tailored to the individual student's needs and interests. In several Independent schools senior students from Year 10 onwards, were informed about university application processes and the need to select Year 11 and 12 subjects that were relevant to their interests and university preferences.

For those young people in Independent school who did not have university aspirations, this had the adverse effect of undermining their self-confidence and future aspirations. They described teachers not accepting or respecting their choices and alternate career goals and aspirations. Many reported the pressure to attend university as intense, with teachers amplifying this stress. These young people said that as a result they did not receive enough information about alternate pathways into jobs, industries, or further education options, including apprenticeships, VET and TAFE.

By contrast, students in government schools noted that there was less of an expectation for them to go on to university and were encouraged to go down other pathways that included apprenticeships in trades or agriculture that could be taken through VET courses and TAFE. Some young people felt that they were actively discouraged from pursuing higher education pathways even if they had wanted to. Others were ushered towards VET courses in Year 10, often presented to them as a way of ‘getting a head start on their career pathways’ or because of the ‘boost’ that VET can provide to their ATAR.

Some young people said they found that developing their personal learning plan (PLP) for SACE subject choices was quite helpful in terms of encouraging them to think about their career aspirations, options, goals, and plans beyond school. Others gained confidence about their future career direction by taking up work experience opportunities. Some young people who had done work experience reported that they had struggled with placements because of the lack of industry relevance they provided.

- “ Teachers spend 40 odd minutes on university and ATAR and only 30 seconds on TAFE. They forget that there are more ways into the future than uni.” – 17 year old, male, Government school
- “ I want to know more about uni stuff, and it doesn’t happen... they give you a career quiz and push you into VET and training options.” – 17 year old, female, Government school
- “ I feel like there are too many students struggling through year 12 to just end up with a job that won’t use that knowledge. People should have many more pathways opened to them at a younger age, especially to trades.” – 17 year old, male, Independent school
- “ I’m having a gap year immediately and having some time to heal, but after that I have no idea. It’s a massive cause of anxiety for me.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school





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Beyond having subject teachers who are organised and adequately equipped and trained to teach Year 12 subjects, young people said that teachers and support staff need to be more supportive, show more care and empathy, be more understanding of students' diverse needs, listen to and communicate better and more often with students, and 'get to know' them more by providing them with regular reassurance and guidance when asked for or needed.

What young people say would make Year 12 better?

Young people had a range of ways in which they felt schools and the system could better prepare them for Year 12 and support them to complete their final year of school, thereby improving their overall preparedness, confidence, choices and hopes for the future.

Those young people who felt well-supported in their final year highlighted the importance that access to spaces and support mechanisms had on their Year 12 experience. They said these things made them feel heard and respected, and validated mental health concerns and demonstrated the school leadership team prioritised student wellbeing as well as academic performance.

Common experiences described by Year 12 students who felt their final school year could have been much better, generally fell into four key areas:

- **Better preparation and overall engagement from teachers and the school prior to starting Year 12**
- **Access to adults who are more supportive overall**
- **Greater focus on student wellbeing over academic achievements and provision of mental health supports**
- **A more inclusive learning environment**

“ Having more options and alternative learning methods so students can learn in a way that suits them. We still sit at desks getting lectured by a teacher and graded on our ability to follow instructions. What would make year 12 better is if teachers actually talked to each other and planned out the year so that 5 assignments weren't all due within the span of 3 days.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school

“ People who aren't directly benefiting from my grades to help me out, or at least to be in charge of decisions. I had to fight, hard, to drop a subject. I shouldn't have had to.” – 18 year old, female, Independent school

“ If I could redesign year 12 I would... increase mental health support, increase deadline policies, allow leniency with uniforms – be practical, provide more praise, make students the priority. Teacher tutoring sessions. Acknowledging student part time work schedules and allowing them to submit assignments later in the evening.” – 17 year old, female, Government school

“ A well-planned structure that year 12s are aware of and would allow year 12s to prepare at least mentally for what is to come.” – 18 year old, male, Government school

Better preparation and engagement

Young people highlighted the importance of being made aware of the challenges and expectations associated with Year 12 in a way that did not exacerbate their stress levels or perpetuate unrealistic ideas of success.

Students reported that they were constantly being exposed to messages about the importance of Year 12 from a very young age, including how stressful they can expect it to be. They reported that this wasn't helpful unless it came with more useful and practical information about what they will experience thereby enabling them to put their final year of school into better perspective.

Many students would have liked some reassurance that there is always more than one way to get where you want to go. The following comment from one young person – “I did not want to think I have no future because I got a B on an assignment” – was reflective of the sentiment held by many.

“ Also having less expectation in the way we talk about Year 12 – yes, it's a really important year, but I feel like hearing how stressful it's going to be before I'd even begun put me closer to cracking under that pressure.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school

Many young people felt that improving the structure of Year 12 overall would help. This included knowing assignment start dates, deadlines, exams and breaks in advance to help them plan ahead and better acknowledge the busy reality of young people's lives outside of school. There was a commonly held view that having 'more time', 'more flexible time-tables' and 'spreading out deadlines evenly throughout the year' would be very helpful.

In addition to being taught more engaging content, young people said that having teachers use more engaging teaching methods is vital to their capacity to remain motivated and would improve their likelihood of success. Young people reported that they are looking for more flexible learning options and methods of assessment than those currently being used. They want these to enable them to study and learn in ways that best suit them as individuals.

Young people believe that catering to diverse learning styles would definitely have a positive impact on grades. Common suggestions included providing more visual learning methods less writing, and introducing more hands-on tasks that can be used to assess their skill levels. They also said they wanted teachers to include content that inspires them, thereby encouraging them to learn.

Many young people said they felt they would have been more engaged if they could see clearer links between their studies and their future career and employment prospects. Others wanted learning content to be more practical and relevant to their lives, and to cover the things they need to know to live post school.

Many young people said they would have benefitted from more support, more information, and more experiences earlier in their school journey, so that they knew what to expect when they got to Year 12. This was particularly important to those who were the eldest child in their family, as well as to those who were the first in their family to enrol in Year 12.

Suggestions for reducing the gap between Year 11 and Year 12 students ranged from having information sessions at the end of Year 11 to starting Year 12 in the last weeks of Term 4 each year. Providing Year 11 students with more opportunities to experience similar learning environments to those offered in Year 12, including a few 'trial classes' to introduce you to what a subject is like, would also assist.

Young people who did not have the option to undertake Year 12 or 'Stage 2' SACE subjects in Year 11 said they would have liked to do so. Many of those who did have this option said they valued the opportunity and felt it helped them to develop good study habits and important practical skills.

“ More time. Follow suit with other states and start year 12 in term 4 of the year before. Also more emphasis from teachers and support staff on developing the skills necessary BEFORE year 12 began. Most of that support came too late and too little.”
– 17 year old, male, Government school

In addition to clarifying expectations for Year 12 students before they begin, young people said they wanted clearer explanations of how assessments would be done, and what weight is given to exams versus assignments. They also wanted to see more examples of what was considered high level student work, as well as more support to meet the deadlines set, particularly when they were struggling with completing assignments due to extenuating circumstances.

They also emphasised the need to ensure that their parents, carers, and other family members were all informed about what to expect from their Year 12 student, including tips on how they can best support their child or sibling throughout their final year.

“ If there was perhaps a program from students who aren't at school all the time, because of VET. Say a specific class (not a library study), where students in this position can catch up on work with support from a teacher. I found it difficult to focus in a library study.” – 18 year old, female, Catholic school

In addition to receiving clearer timelines and task sheets for assignments earlier, young people said they would have preferred to have

had more transparent information about SACE requirements and the ATAR earlier. This included knowing how the scaling of subjects works, how to attain bonus points, and how the ATAR is calculated. They said that having access to this information is key to challenging the common myths and misconceptions students have regarding the process, adding that some teachers clearly struggle to understand the system, let alone explain it to their students.

“ Talk more about what to expect. Offer more one-on-one time to help find strengths and weaknesses to then develop a career path.”
– 18 year old, female, Government school

“ Speak more about scaling of subjects, encourage students to do subjects that they excel in, ensure all teachers who are teaching year 12 classes are experienced.”
– 17 year old, female, Government school

Having more time and guidance to make informed decisions about subject choices and future pathways was considered essential. Young people wanted career counselling and information about university and non-university pathways much earlier in their school journey. They felt it was particularly important for young people to see the correlation between their interests and their SACE subject choices, including having a much better and up-to-date understanding of what future job opportunities would likely be available to them by the end of Year 12.

Young people also wanted to be encouraged to do subjects they enjoy rather than just those in which they would do well. They wanted a better introduction to subjects before starting Year 12, including an advance supply of subject outlines and timelines for completing key learning areas and assessments, saying this would enable them to set up a study timetable over the summer break.

Young people wanted to increase student access to tutors and see strategies introduced to reduce the stigma around a student's need for a tutor or 'special support' arrangements. They emphasised the need for 'study sessions' and for a mix of spaces and resources to be made available to help revise, catch up on, and generally manage their study loads.

“ *Having career counselling and uni visits prior to year 12 – being taught some year 12 subject content in year 11, term 4, as per Sydney's schooling system – being able to do some holiday lessons to do assignments before year 12 commences.*” – 18 year old, female, Government school

“ *More accommodation and support from peers and teachers, and not having to advocate for or explain myself when people asked why I needed help.*” – 17 year old, male, Government school

Beyond having subject teachers who are organised and adequately equipped and trained to teach Year 12 subjects, young people said that teachers and support staff need to be more supportive, show more care and empathy, be more understanding of students' diverse needs, listen to and communicate better and more often with students, and 'get to know' them more by providing them with regular reassurance and guidance when asked for or needed.

Supportive adults

There was a desire from young people for their teachers to be more supportive, understanding, and encouraging. They said they wanted more one-on-one time with some teachers, particularly those who modelled respectful adult to adult relationships and that this was critical to them remaining interested and engaged with their learning.

Some young people wanted to know where and who to go to for help when they were facing stress and pressure, or who to get more support from in relation to disabilities and mental health issues, and how to address more severe mental illness if this was occurring.

Young people living with disability described barriers to feeling understood by peers and teachers as significant impacting on their overall capacity to prepare themselves for Year 11 and to then maintain their motivation throughout their final year.

Having regular 'check-ins' and easy access to resources and spaces for students and teachers to meet was also key, with many students emphasising that 'everyone is going through different things at different times, whether they are vocal about it or not'.

Some young people highlighted the need to 'stop praising A graders' because 'not every kid fits in that box' and that 'everyone is trying at their own pace and with their own abilities'.

Given the positive impact good relationships with teachers can have on their overall experience of Year 12 some young people wanted to see additional training and support provided for teachers. Others suggested that being able to have one-on-one conversations, or small group interactions between young people and teachers, would mean students would be provided with more timely feedback on their work. This was something that many young people considered to be very important as it helped them know whether they were doing okay, needed to change their approach or do more for particular subjects and tasks.

- “ More support for year 12s, and honestly more support for the teachers that need it. Some teachers seemed to be struggling and they deserve the support just as much as the students do. Not making ATAR seem like the be all end all. There is far too much pressure and the school honestly, needs to chill out about it.” – 17 year old, female, Catholic school
- “ More help with stress. Better organisation from teachers so that we don't have to cram half of the course at the end of the year when we have exams to worry about too.” – 17 year old, female, Government school
- “ If teachers and staff cared more about wellbeing, home life [and] assignments, than whether a student is in full uniform.” – 18 year old, female, Government school

Wellbeing and mental health support

Many Year 12 students said that they wished they had known how to manage the balance between school and homework with their health and wellbeing alongside other commitments such as sport, work, social life, family, and other non-school responsibilities.

To stay motivated throughout the year, young people said they needed to be taught more practical strategies on how to manage time and how to be more organised generally. They wanted to learn techniques for working smarter and faster and know how to pace themselves. For many Year 12 students, being prepared mentally, emotionally, and physically was just as important as being prepared academically.

Some young people emphasised that in addition to being prepared, knowing how to maintain your mental health was crucial. This included having access to teachers, counsellors, and psychologists if these were needed, in addition to external supports being in place, emphasising that family and friends play an important role in providing students with the guidance and support they need.

- “ Focusing more on my mental and physical health. Focusing my preparation on managing mental and physical health. This would be useful as a class for year 11s about to enter year 12. The class would teach year 11s how to manage mental and physical health specific to year 12. The class would focus on sleep, diet, exercise, accessing mental health resources (KidsHelpline/ Beyond Blue), blue light, time management, social life, and communication with teachers. Managing mental and physical health would improve academic performance.” – 18 year old, female, Government school

There was a prevailing view that the mental health of Year 12 students is not adequately considered. Many students said they felt there needs to be much greater awareness of mental health issues with easier access to resources and services that provide emotional support and care for mental health issues that arise. Particularly practical help to manage high levels of stress and anxiety.

Many students felt that their wellbeing only became a concern for schools when they weren't performing academically. Given that many young people face complex challenges inside and outside of school, it was critical that school counsellors and other available support services be equipped to deal with issues that went beyond academic underperformance and high levels of stress.

“ If schools were held accountable (particularly private ones) about valuing results more than student wellbeing. PROPER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT for students should be well funded everywhere, and teachers should be further educated in it. Just a better general understanding of what year 12’s may struggle with would be good.” – 17 year old, female, Independent school

While some students talked about the need for regular more formal mental health check-ups, other students suggested that having regular ‘check-ins’ would allow students to talk to people they trust about how they’re feeling. They also wanted to be better equipped to support their peers throughout the year, and be taught the skills they need to respond to their peers when they’re in need without risking or compromising their own mental health.

Young people said they needed to know more about what support is available to them both inside and outside of school, and for there to be clearer referral pathways. Whether accessing support at school or through an external service provider, young people wanted to feel safe when they pursued this, and to be sure their privacy was respected. They also said that being able to choose from a range of communication options, including treatments or support offered via text or email, would reduce the stigma associated with seeking this kind of support.

“ Better accommodation for people struggling with disability or mental illness, more education for teachers on how to support students who are struggling, more resources for people who don’t want to attend uni, less of a focus on high grades/high ATAR and more of a focus on setting personal goals that you want to aim for.” – 17 year old, male, Government school

“ It would be helpful if someone else from outside school could come in to give support or act as a steppingstone to get help from outside of school.” – 17 year old, female Government school

Young people’s responses emphasised the importance they place on their friendships and family situations for emotional wellbeing as well as for motivation to stay academically engaged. Having a caring group of friends and being involved in activities that are just for fun allowed for more ‘bonding’ between Year 12 students. This could be the difference between student groups having a positive or negative final year experience. Along with financial security and family support, students said that these fun activities are what make a positive difference to their Year 12 experience.

“ Having greater financial security. I come from a single-parent family reliant on Centrelink benefits to live, but these benefits do not provide my family with a liveable wage. Having that financial stress alleviated would have made Year 12 must easier.” – 17 year old, female, Catholic school

“ Increased focus and understanding for students who need help e.g., students behind in their schoolwork, students with learning difficulties, students with mental illness, and students with troubled home lives. This could be done by helpers within the school, organized study groups, and/or by incorporating helping these students specifically into teacher training. This would need to be done with sensitivity because students may want help, but not want to be seen as different/less intelligent by the rest of the class.” – 18 year old, female, Government school

Inclusive school environments

Young people emphasised the importance of an inclusive and welcoming school environment where Year 12 students feel trusted, respected and as though they belong. Having more opportunities to 'have a say' and to 'demonstrate leadership' were considered fundamental to fostering a supportive school environment and key to maintaining positive student wellbeing overall.

Young people said they wanted opportunities for students and teachers to get to know one another from the start of their final year. They needed teachers to listen to their issues and be able to change their expectations and practices to support students in more practical ways. Beyond the need for teachers to use more engaging teaching and learning methods, young people focused on the significance of having access to food and tea and coffee, alongside a range of dedicated spaces in which Year 12 students can either socialise, study, or collaborate with each other comfortably.

- “ All students writing short introductions to their teachers at the beginning of year 12. These introductions would tell teachers any information the students feel is important for the teachers to know including learning styles and anything students need help with.”
– 18 year old, female, Government school
- “ I don't think this is a state-wide thing, but I would've felt more supported if my school had a year 12 space with a kitchen perhaps. Class would've been more relaxing and easier to get through if I could have tea/coffee and my breakfast while studying. I missed a lot of meals because I felt I didn't have the time, and I think I would've concentrated better with food/tea/coffee.”
– 17 year old, female, Government school
- “ I would've liked the school environment itself to feel more safe and comfortable. In class I felt listened to but outside of that, my wider school community felt unsafe and overwhelming.” – 17 year old, male, Government school
- “ Giving the students more of a say in school matters, change research project to year 11, more free private time for students, not making students do religion as a subject in year 12, better sex education more focused on non religious views.” – 17 year old, male, Government school

Endnotes

- 1 Education Council, 2020. Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training. Available at <https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/pathways/Final%20report%20-%202018%20June.pdf>.

