



UNSW
SYDNEY

ASPIRE

Uni in a Ute Evaluation Report

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A. Introduction

THE UNSW ASPIRE Uni in a Ute project was developed and delivered from Term 1, 2017, until January 2018. All activities and resources implemented throughout the project were designed to increase the number of students reaching university by providing Year 11 students with practical study skills and information focused on barriers encountered by regional and remote students that will enable these students to successfully complete their final years of schooling and transition to university.

The project was designed to meet the following objectives:

1. Provide support to assist Year 11 students in their academic endeavours and the complex transition to a higher education context that is outside of their immediate environment
2. Increase the number of students accessing university, by providing Year 11 students with specific practical skills and information that will enable the students to successfully complete their final years of schooling and transition to university
3. Explore the effectiveness of providing Year 11 students from low socio- economic status (SES) regional and remote schools with targeted assistance.

B. Stakeholders

All ASPIRE partner schools with Year 11 students were invited to attend the event. Participating schools are listed below. All schools were initially offered four places at the event, targeting students who would complete their HSC and receive an ATAR in 2018, and who intend to apply and enrol in a university course after completing secondary study.

Each of the attending schools (except for Coonamble) sent an accompanying teacher with their students. Teachers attending were generally either Careers Advisers or Year Advisers. The event was held at the Western Plains Cultural Centre in Dubbo, with a variety of panellists from local organisations and businesses involved in the Careers Panel.

Table 1: Participating schools and local organisations

SCHOOLS	COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS
Condobolin High School	WPCC
Coolah Central School	Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre
Coonamble High School	Taronga Western Plains Zoo
Dunedoo Central School	Grain Corp
Lake Cargelligo Central School	
Lightning Ridge Central School	
Mendooran Central School	
Ungarie Central School	
Walgett Community College	

C. Contextual Information

Regional and remote students face several significant challenges relating to academic attainment and availability of information, advice and guidance. On average, students from regional and remote schools are 2.5 years behind their metro counterparts in mathematical, scientific and reading literacies (Thomson, De Bortoli and Buckley, 2013). They are also less likely to have access to career resources (Gore et al., 2015). Recent research by Harvey et al. (2016) has also indicated that regional and remote students find it more difficult to navigate university culture. The project seeks to address some of these challenges.

All schools that attended the event have a strong relationship with the core ASPIRE program, with many having partnered with ASPIRE since 2010. The development of content for the pilot program was through a consultative process with teaching staff and students to ensure that it addressed real and perceived issues for regional and remote communities. A Training Needs Assessment was conducted with Year 11 students and teachers to identify the information needs of those expected to participate in the event. The following themes emerged from the data collected: all about university, independence skills, academic skills, and career development. These themes formed the basis for the event program, and each activity and workshop delivered was designed to address these themes (more about the themes is included in the next section).

Each ASPIRE partner school was initially offered 4 student places at the event, which was intended to accommodate up to 60 students. ASPIRE recommended that students who would receive an ATAR at the end of HSC and who intended to apply to university would benefit most from attending the event—only a small number of attending students did not meet these criteria (were not ATAR-eligible). As the event was a pilot with no prior notice given the year before, some schools were unable to attend the event in 2017, but expressed strong interest in attending future events for this year group.

D. Implementation

Many students from regional areas of NSW don't have the wealth of guidance, information, opportunities or social capital that their peers from higher SES and metropolitan areas receive. Investing in our regional students and their future through an event such as this is really important in helping bridge that gap. Following the analysis of the data collected from the Training Needs Assessment, the project team (consisting of a Lead Project Officer and six other staff members who each wrote and presented workshops during the event) met regularly to discuss the themes and to formulate a workshop series that would best support students who attended the event. Four student Ambassadors were also selected to join the event also to share their experience and support the students, they specifically ran two of the workshops – one on uni life and one on study skills.

The event was designed to be much like a short conference, consisting of practical skill-building workshops, informational presentations, and industry/career related visits, giving the students a taste of the educational experience at university, and a more adult learning environment in general. To enhance the professional feel, presentation folders with an event schedule were created and given to each student and teacher, and the students were encouraged to take notes and engage and participate in the learning process as they would

be expected to at university. The students' meals, accommodation, social activities and transport was all covered by the grant.

The event was also designed to be highly practical and fun, with team based challenges, group work, social activities including ten pin bowling and a fun trivia quiz, group dinners and a visit to Taronga zoo. The event was designed to take place across three days, with each day focusing on a different area.

The key themes and topics covered included:

About university:

- Applying for university
- Alternative entry and EAS
- Scholarships
- Choosing the right course
- University life

Developing independence and life skills:

- Managing time, energy and money
- Stress management
- Confidence and networking/communication
- Growth mindset and personal success
- Study skills

Career development:

- Career planning and occupational “types”
- Exploring different industries
- Understanding the pathway from school, to uni, to work

The event was held on the 9, 10 and 11th of May, at the Western Plains Cultural Centre in Dubbo. Attending schools travelled to Dubbo and stayed each night in accommodation at the Dubbo Parklands. Given it was a relatively small group of students, there was also plenty of scope to provide personalised guidance and feedback to individual students, and to create a safe and supportive space where they could freely share their experiences and concerns and ask lots of questions without feeling intimidated. All student attendees completed a pre-event survey and a feedback survey at the conclusion of the event. Teachers completed a feedback survey at the conclusion of the event. Where possible, students and attending teachers also participated in a focus-group interview with AimHigh researchers many months after the event took place.

All students who attended *Focus on Success* were invited to attend subsequent existing events held in September and January on the UNSW Sydney campus, with a stronger focus on building the academic skills for the HSC as well as introducing them to university level study such as group project work, critical thinking, research skills and essay writing. These events, part of the *U@UNSW* program, are not run by the ASPIRE tea

In addition, an online Toolkit was developed to make all the learning resources and relevant information related to targeted support of this nature available to other practitioners in the field. In publishing this report and the online Toolkit and circulating it amongst the Widening

Participation sector, this project will contribute to the body of evidence that supports the importance of providing regional and remote primary and secondary school students with targeted widening access strategies.

E. Engagement

The total numbers of teachers and students that participated in the *Focus on Success* event are below:

Table 2: Focus on Success participation

SCHOOL	MALE	FEMALE	
Walgett CC	0	2	
Condobolin HS	0	5	
Coolah CS	1	3	
Ungarie CS	2	2	
Lake Cargelligo CS	1	2	
Lightening Ridge CS	1	3	
Coonamble HS	0	5	
Mendooran CS	2	1	
Dunedoo CS	3	4	
TOTAL STUDENTS	10	27	37
TOTAL TEACHERS	5	3	8

Total numbers of teachers and students that participated in the subsequent *U@UNSW* events are below:

Table 3: U@UNSW participation

SCHOOL	MALE	FEMALE	
Walgett CC	0	1	
Coolah CS	1	2	
TOTAL STUDENTS	1	3	4
TOTAL TEACHERS		2	2

F. Evaluation

1. Explore the effectiveness of providing Year 11 students from low socio-economic status (SES) regional and remote schools with targeted assistance

After each day students completed a quick feedback survey, as well as a more comprehensive survey at the conclusion of the event. Based on this immediate feedback provided by the students, the topics covered at the event were extremely relevant to them:

“Learned to handle stress; learned to face problems, know how to balance things”

“It helped me gain a sense of applying and living the uni life. Trivia and meeting new people”

“This event helped me get out of my comfort zone and learn things about uni that I wasn’t before aware of”

“The event was helpful in giving me the skills and information needed in deciding and going to university”

“Time management - I needed serious help with this, and this helped me lots”

“It helped me realise and consider the bigger picture and my future life choices”

The teachers rated most of the workshops as “very helpful” for students, and all felt that the event was well targeted and addressed students’ needs:

“It was a very well run event and the students took some good information and skills away with them.”

“The sessions regarding stress management and study skills and the confidence sessions.”

“Confidence, study skills, growth mindset, networking ALL OF IT”

Some teachers and students wanted more in-depth information and time spent on particular areas such as completing a scholarship application form, and connecting university study to future possible jobs.

In addition to the event surveys, the team were keen to evaluate the longer-term impact of attending the event, and so from September to November 2017, students and teachers who attended the event participated in focus-group interviews held by AimHigh researchers who visited them at their school. The researchers asked students a range of questions about ASPIRE more broadly and their intentions post school, and focused in on gathering their feedback on the *Focus on Success* event specifically, their reflections about the event and the impact it has had on them throughout the year. All students felt that the event structure and content was a good way to support Year 11 students. All students reported having learned a range of useful skills-- When students were asked what they learned at the event, the most common responses were **stress management** and **study skills**. Students also mentioned **social skills**, **budgeting**, and **applying for scholarships**. Students stated that:

“found all the workshops handy”

“We know how to do stuff now that we might need in the future”

“helped me how to plan stuff, like essays and everything”

The teachers were also positive in their views about the longer-term benefits of attending the event for students:

Teacher 4 remembered that it was a “fantastic program”, and that it was “very beneficial” for her students. Teacher 6 struggled to recall specific details about

the event, but commented that the students “got a hell of a lot out of it”, and “came back looking a lot more focused”, and were now “looking towards the future”.

Based on the feedback of all attendees, as well as the evaluation of the event internally by staff involved, the project team have found that providing targeted support to Year 11 students through this event was extremely effective as it gave them the skills and knowledge needed to navigate their senior school years and enabled them to feel more confident about their educational futures. While there were some areas that students and teachers would have liked additional support in, this only highlights the real need for targeted support for rural low SES students, as this is unavailable to them in their daily lives.

2. Provide support to assist Year 11 students in their academic endeavours and the complex transition to a higher education context that is outside of their immediate environment

The Focus on Success event content aimed to provide support for student in their academic endeavors by focusing on study skills and by providing motivation for working hard in the senior years of study. The team developed the growth mindset and confidence-building workshops, and budgeting activities to attempt to address the complex transition to a higher education context that is outside students’ immediate environment. Furthermore, the overall event design, where students spent time networking and getting to know students from other regional high schools and participating in a more adult learning environment gave them the opportunity to expand their social skills. From the focus group interviews, all students reported feeling more confident about the idea of attending university:

“I was a big no for uni until aspire. There was no chance I wanted to go at all. It showed me the options and gave me a lot of confidence.”

The event had: *“More solidified them [her plans]. Helped me figure out exactly what I want to do, rather than just having a rough idea”.*

The students felt that the event was different to the information and support that they receive elsewhere. Several students cited interacting with university students as a major difference. Students 7 felt that the event provided an opportunity to “get to talk to people who are actually at uni or work at uni”, and “get a better firsthand experience of what it would be like, how to do stuff, where to go, what to do”. Student 2 expressed a similar view: “they [the staff and ambassadors] are more present, they work at unis, they know what’s going on”, and “they went through this recently, they have personal experience”. Student 5 felt that “Teachers don’t know everything that the university people know”. Many of the students said that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet new people. Student 8 said that the other students “were all nice and they wanted to do the same thing”. Student 9 agreed, noting “they were all there for the same reason.”

In the focus groups, teachers described many changes in their students as a result of attending the event, including greater understanding of pathways to university and opportunities for post-school life, improved study skills, improved academic performance, greater determination to attend university, and changed perceptions of larger cities. The project team also believe that attendance at the event visibly improved the confidence of

students' in their own ability to navigate the complex social environment that is a university, and in their ability to access help should they need it. However, the project team felt that students could benefit further from even more in-depth academic support, and so part of the grant funding was used to enable regional students to attend the *U@UNSW* school holiday program (which explicitly teaches essay writing and group work skills for senior students at the UNSW Kensington campus). This was the first time students from regional ASPIRE partner schools were able to attend this event, which was enhanced the learning and experiences further of the four students who were able to attend. The students highlighted **essay writing** and **critical thinking** as key things they learned from the event. Student 2 said she learned that “*you have to do essays different in universities than in school, which is very useful because I didn't think that at all*”. Student 3 highlighted critical thinking and essay writing, noting that she was often told to write essays critically but did not know what it meant. She commented “*Now I know*”.

Evaluation of this event has provided evidence that it is essential to support regional and remote low SES students in their academic endeavours, and also to assist them in developing the skills needed to successfully transition from their current environment into the complex and unknown university system. As a result of this pilot event and the learnings that have come out of the evaluation, ASPIRE is in the process of developing a targeted and sustained model of engaging and support senior students that will include the *Focus on Success* event as well as additional support throughout years 10, 11 and 12.

3. Increase the number of students accessing university, by providing Year 11 students with specific practical skills and information that will enable the students to successfully complete their final years of schooling and transition to university

At the conclusion of the event, compared with pre-feedback collected, there was an increase in students who stated that they would “definitely like to go to university”, which demonstrates a positive attitudinal shift for those who were unsure about their intentions to attend university post-school. During the focus groups, students were able to name a number of universities they intend to apply to, including **Charles Sturt University**, the **University of New England**, **UNSW**, **Wollongong**, **Newcastle**, **Canberra**, **Monash University**, the **Gold Coast**, or **Sydney**. Providing students with the targeted assistance they need to prepare for and navigate higher education will enable an increased number of students to access university—for the cohort participating in this *Focus on Success* event, we will be able to measure this by looking at the number of students who receive offers to study at university for 2019.

Lessons learned

Timing in the year

The best time of year to hold this event, where Year 11 students are out of class for three consecutive days, is difficult to determine for a variety of reasons. Feedback on timing of the event was sought from teachers, and their responses varied, but most agreed that in the first half of the year was best. Feedback was sought from teachers about holding the event in the school holidays—feedback for this was favourable on the one hand, as it would not

take time out of the classroom and would keep students on track during the holidays. However, most teachers were unable to supervise students during their school holidays.

Duration of the event

Based on the volume of content, the event was spaced out over three days. This worked well, as it enabled the event to “theme” each day, making the content cohesive throughout each day. From the focus group feedback, some of the students felt that some of the content was a bit rushed. The project team in the development phase also felt that it was difficult to prioritise content, given that there was so much to cover, and they were quite keen to support students as much as possible. The team were also wary of giving students enough “down time” to process what they were learning, as each day was longer than what they would be used to at school. Here, the information gathered from the Training Needs Assessment was useful in guiding the planning process, however the teams’ existing experience in working with students from ASPIRE regional partner schools was invaluable in designing the workshops and tailoring to meet student needs.

Difficulty taking Senior students out of class

As mentioned above, teachers have often expressed that it is problematic to take senior students out of class in the HSC years. Based on the relationship with ASPIRE and the value schools place on their students’ attending ASPIRE events, this was not an issue in conducting this event. Further, the team were conscious to ensure that each workshop and activity would be of maximum benefit and relevance to students. It is suggested that practitioners using the Toolkit from this event check that each workshop delivered is relevant for the cohort attending.

Ambassadors

Careful selection of experienced Ambassadors (student volunteers) is important for this event, and in future the team would seek to recruit more experienced Ambassadors to this event. Feedback from students about the attending Ambassadors was positive, however the team felt that those who lived on campus, or had come from a regional background themselves, would be even more beneficial to meet and work with Year 11 across the three days.

Recommendations for future events

Increase the number of interactions with students over time

After the conclusion of this event, it was felt that students would benefit immensely from continued and sustained contact and support up until their HSC. For this reason, all students were invited to attend the *U@UNSW* event at UNSW Sydney in the September and January school holidays. This existing event is offered to students at a range of high schools in NSW as an HSC and university preparation course. This year was the first time that students from ASPIRE partner schools were able to attend. As part of the *Uni in a Ute* project, these students and their supervising teachers were accommodated close to or on the UNSW Sydney campus, and spent the week participating in workshops with 300 of the metropolitan Sydney based peers. In the evenings they were supported by ASPIRE staff and experienced a range of activities in Sydney. The confidence of these students in navigating the university systems and application processes have visibly improved, and it is

recommended that all students participating in *Focus on Success* be offered some sort of sustained support after the completion of the event. Based on this learning, next year ASPIRE will increase the interaction with students in years 10 to 12 through the new ASPIRE Advantage program. The ASPIRE Advantage program incorporates learnings from both the *Uni in a Ute* project and also the HEPPP funded *Click On Mentoring* project, as well as knowledge from across the team. ASPIRE Advantage will incorporate sustained engagement with senior students, paired with mentoring support, and will provide students with an increased number of high quality interactions over their final secondary school years.

Involvement of more schools and scalability

As noted in the feedback, all students and teachers found the event highly beneficial in preparing for HSC and progression to university. We recommend that in future, more schools are offered the opportunity to participate, but that an effort is made to retain the personal “feel” of the event. As mentioned above, workshop groups could still be kept small, with presenters facilitating workshops concurrently, and students rotating around so that they can participate in all of the content delivered.

Teacher involvement

Each attending school (with the exception of one) sent a teacher along to supervise the group. Due to the maturity of these students, this would not be necessary in future, and if schools were comfortable we would recommend teachers share supervision across schools, with one teacher supervising up to ten students each, inclusive of their own group plus others from nearby schools. Interestingly as well, most teachers took a passive role and left students to their own devices in the workshops. Those who participated sometimes impacted on the activities by causing students to feel more inhibited and shy (for example, in the confidence-building workshop).

Staffing

As the event was a pilot, each member of the project team developed and delivered at least one workshop across the event, including the project lead. In future it is recommended that the project lead focus solely on managing the event as a whole, and other staff develop and deliver more workshops. It would also be possible to run multiple workshops concurrently to enable the participation of more students.