

Evaluation summary of Aim Higher program 2021 to 2024

This summary has been collated by CBS Inc. with information and points provided from Flinders University Caring Futures Institute evaluation progress reports 1 – 4 and final report¹.

- The aim of the *Aim Higher* program is to encourage more students to consider open employment as a viable and desired employment pathway when they leave school.
- This program of work is funded by the Department of Social Services via the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) Program through a successful grant application by CBS Inc. The program had initial funding from June 2021 – August 2022. The program was then refunded from January 2023 – June 2024, with 2 additional funding extensions to June 2026.
- CBS Inc. engaged the services of researchers from the Caring Futures Institute at Flinders University to conduct an independent evaluation of the *Aim Higher* program.
- The program targets students in years 9-12 and consists of an information session, two classroom sessions that include a Moonlight Speaker - someone with lived experience who shares their story, and a work experience or work discovery placement. During the second round of funding, the information session was changed to a one-on-one consultation for parents/guardians to provide more targeted information, and training session for teachers. The classroom sessions use the 'myfuture' career development software which has been rolled out by the Department of Education in South Australia as well as support materials developed by CBS Inc.
- Between 2021 and 2024, the *Aim Higher* program engaged with 577 students across 54 schools, with 370 students coming from mainstream schools and 207 students from specialist disability schools or specialist classes in mainstream schools. Students were from metropolitan, regional and rural areas of South Australia. As the *Aim Higher* program has continued, alongside visiting new schools, the team also revisits previous schools on a yearly basis to undertake review sessions with students and work with new cohorts. This provides ongoing connection with students, their families and school staff to support their transition from school to work.
- The evaluation of the program took a mixed-methods approach consisting of interviews with key stakeholders, teachers, students, and parents. Additionally, student surveys were completed before and after the classroom sessions, after a work discovery/work experience placement, and after completing school. Results are outlined in progress reports 1 and 2 that were then compiled into a final report produced in May 2023, and progress reports 3 and 4.
- Progress report 1, 2 and the final report outlined several identified enablers that were viewed as supporting the success of *Aim Higher*. These included organisational factors (existing expertise, systems knowledge, and existing links with schools), program factors (most notably the warmth and expertise of the program facilitators and the inclusion of Moonlight Speakers) and external factors such as host employers open mindedness, and teacher and parental attitudes that were supportive of young people's pathway into open employment.

¹ Hutchinson, C., Kay, K. & Alexander, J. (2023). Evaluation of the CBS Inc. *Aim Higher* School to Work Open Employment Career Development Program: Final Report. Report for Community Bridging Services (CBS) Inc. Caring Futures Institute, Flinders University, Adelaide.

- A wide range of positive outcomes were reported by participants including: increased knowledge of services and supports to facilitate open employment pathways, educators increased expectations of what students might be able to achieve post-school, connection with community and potential future employers, clarification of vocational goals with a broader range of options being considered by many students, as well as personal psychosocial outcomes for students including reported well-being, and improved self-esteem and self-perception as a person with desirable work-related capacities.
- Progress report 3 highlighted the experiences of students after completing a work discovery/work experience placement and compared the thoughts and understandings of open employment in this cohort with those students who had only completed classroom sessions. A majority of students felt that their work experience was well supported, matched their Career Action Plan and helped them to decide on future job options. Additionally, almost 60% of students in this cohort had post-school intentions to seek work in open employment, compared to 43% of students who only completed the classroom sessions. Furthermore, a quarter of these students had intentions to undertake further study post-school.
- Progress report 4 focussed on post-school decisions of students who participated in the Aim Higher program. This included insights into whether the Aim Higher program had helped them to better understand what they wanted to do once they finished school, what choices they made after school and whether it was their preferred option. Data was collected via a telephone survey where 89 past students were identified as having finished school. 50 were no longer participating in the program, declined participation, or did not respond to invitation to participate. 24 surveys were completed, with an additional 6 to be conducted.
- The results of Survey 4 showed that a majority of students felt that Aim Higher had helped them to formulate their post-school choices. Additionally, all participants who were working were employed in open employment settings, and those that were looking for work had intentions to work in open employment. Some participants were studying, with students doing either a SLES program, TAFE or University. Those at University had access plans in place to support their learning.
- Report 4 additionally highlighted that the one-on-one consultations and teacher training gave participants, parents and teachers knowledge of the supports and resources available to students as they transition, and it is notable that many of the participants were taking up the option of SLES or were connected to a disability employment services provider to help support their employment pathways.
- The earlier evaluation work demonstrated a significant shift during the school-based part of the program to more students considering working in open employment post-school. The survey in progress report 4 of the first cohort of students to finish the program and transition out of a school setting suggests that this intention has come to fruition, with all those currently working in open employment positions. Students currently attending SLES, TAFE or University similarly reported an intention to work in open employment settings once they had completed their studies.
- The *Aim Higher* program has been successful in achieving its stated objectives of elevating students' expectations and increasing their perceptions that open employment is a viable employment pathway post-school.