



Careers in the Making:

A follow-up study of ABCN
mentees 10 years on



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people in Australia face increasing challenges in transitioning from school to early careers. Fewer than half of those from low socio-economic backgroundsⁱ enter university by age 22ⁱ and they are also twice as likely to be unemployed at age 24 compared to their better-off counterparts.ⁱⁱ Since 2005, ABCN has connected low-SES schools with business, delivering innovative mentoring programs to develop students' skills and mindsets, aspirations and networks, reaching more than 60,000 young people to date.

In 2021-2022 ABCN conducted a long-term follow-up study of mentees who had participated in programs between 2010-2012. The research generated compelling evidence to support the long-term changes for young people described in ABCN's Theory of Change.

ABCN would like to thank EY, which generously funded this research.

KEY FINDINGS

The research findings confirmed the real and enduring benefits of ABCN's mentoring programs. Alumni reported high levels of engagement in post-school education and work, the majority in work they found meaningful, and which offered them a clear career path.

Alumni showed strong retention of key learnings gained from ABCN programs, often *directly connected to their mentor*, 10 to 12 years after program completion. Nearly 90% had applied the learnings and skills in their lives post-program. While benefits for alumni are not uniform, for a significant proportion the impact of mentoring is profound, for example, influencing them to complete school, go to university or pursue ambitious career aspirations.

■ **ABCN alumni gained 'gateway' work-readiness skills and traits**, contributing to their high level of engagement in post-school study and employment. These capabilities were primarily interpersonal skills, goal-setting, careers knowledge and self-confidence. **82%** had undertaken further study or training post school, and **87% were fully engaged in work and/or study**, compared to 72% for this age-group nationally. Alumni were also better equipped to make informed choices about post-school pathways.

■ **Alumni developed future-focused capabilities and thinking**, underpinning both their work and personal lives. 70% named their career as their

priority for development over the next five years and alumni placed high emphasis on continuous learning and self-development. **Three quarters were very satisfied with their current lives;** the same proportion (75%) were very positive about their future prospects, substantially ahead of life satisfaction rates for young Australians nationally.**

■ **Connection with ABCN mentors was the stand-out feature of the programs.** Nearly 70% of alumni named the mentor connection as a most memorable aspect of participating in programs. This striking longevity arose from mentors' ability to offer careers advice, life lessons and role-modelling in work-based settings.



Nearly 70% of alumni named the mentor connection as a most memorable aspect of participating in programs

KEY FINDINGS

The findings presented in this report provide compelling evidence of the long-term impacts of ABCN's career-mentoring programs consistent with those described in ABCN's Theory of Change. Further, they point to the pivotal role for the business sector in bridging the persistent gap in opportunities and outcomes experienced by some young Australians.

■ **Participating in ABCN mentoring during Years 9-11** built a foundation of work-readiness skills and traits that, for many alumni, served them at critical points in their transitions to post-school study and work.

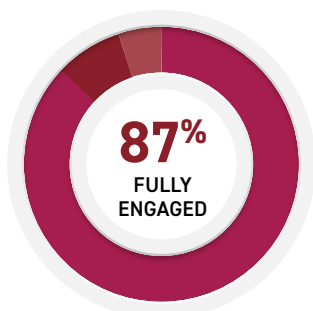
■ **The benefits of in-school mentoring typically had real-world applicability and enduring value.** Alumni continued to translate techniques and learnings from ABCN programs to their developing careers, 10 years on.

■ **The lasting benefits alumni attributed to ABCN**

programs point to the efficacy of focused and structured mentoring, with relatively few contact points. Alumni's retention of key learnings – attitudinal and behavioural – acquired through interactions with their mentors spoke to the effectiveness of the ABCN model.

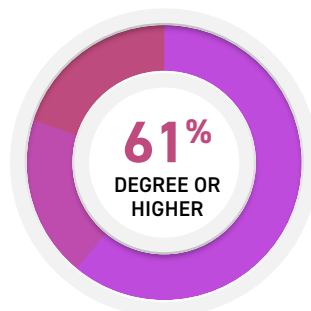
■ **Early experience of mentoring among students** from low-SES backgrounds may help establish a mentoring mindset, pre-disposing young people to actively seek further mentoring support in forging their longer-term careers.

ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT IN
WORK AND/OR STUDY



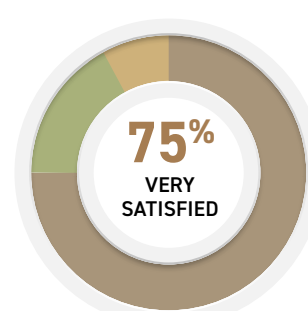
8% PARTLY ENGAGED
5% NOT CURRENTLY ENGAGED

ALUMNI'S POST-SCHOOL
QUALIFICATIONS



21% OTHER QUALIFICATION
18% NO POST-SCHOOL QUALIFICATION

ALUMNI SATISFACTION
WITH LIFE OVERALL



17% FAIRLY SATISFIED
8% LESS SATISFIED

ALUMNI SATISFACTION
WITH CAREER PROSPECTS

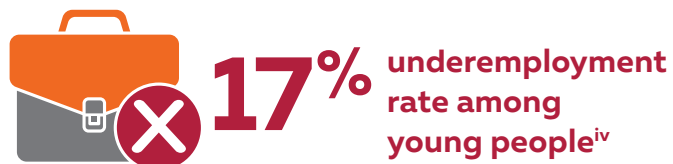


14% FAIRLY SATISFIED
11% LESS SATISFIED

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The ages of 18-30 are a key time of change, in which young people typically experience several major life transitions as they embark on their independent lives and careers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Young people in Australia face increasing challenges in transitioning from school to early careers. An insecure job market, fewer entry-level jobs^{iv} and longer, fractured transitions into full-time work contribute to:



Young Australians in their mid-twenties, forging their careers in the pandemic era, have also experienced a period of unprecedented transformation in the way we work and study. The disruption driven by COVID-19 has aggravated the pre-existing vulnerability of young people in the labour market when it comes to securing and maintaining quality jobs. For those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, the proportion not in employment, education or training (NEET) reached a level over twice that of their better-off peers.^{viii}

The contours that shape young people's lives are often described in terms of extended transitions between education and work, job insecurity, and the flow-on effects of technological advances. A lesser understood perspective is how young people navigate these transitional years and what resources they draw on – or require – to do so successfully.

Evidence for the effectiveness of youth mentoring is growing.^{ix} However, while the multiple benefits of mentoring (e.g. on school completion rates, engagement in post-school education and work) are increasingly well supported, there is an acknowledged scarcity of evidence when it comes to the long-term outcomes of young people who have been part of mentoring programs and who are now young adults.^x

As young people embark on their post-school lives, mentoring or similar careers-related education may plausibly play a role in determining the pathways they take.

ABCN's long-term alumni research afforded a unique opportunity to understand the role of ABCN's mentoring programs in shaping young people's pathways at a distance of 10-12 years post-school. As school-leavers' pathways grow less uniformly linear, the mid-twenties are a key stage for exploring the transitions young people have made, and the capabilities that enable them to navigate the world of work. Approaching the research from within a life-course framework, i.e. taking account of chronological, personal, environmental and social aspects, allowed for exploration of the multiple factors that have influenced alumni's journeys to date.^{xi}

ABOUT ABCN

ABCN is a not-for-profit that **brings business and schools together** to improve opportunities for students in the future world of work. We connect volunteers from our member companies with students from low socio-economic backgrounds to provide workplace-based or online mentoring programs.

Our programs **develop students' confidence, skills and aspirations**, vital for thriving in the workplace of the future.

Established in 2005, ABCN is a network of 48 leading companies and more than 200 partner schools in metro, regional and rural areas across Australia. More than 200,000 students and 50,000 corporate volunteers have participated in our mentoring and other initiatives since inception.

Our vision is for all young Australians to **reach their potential in the future world of work**, regardless of socio-economic background.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

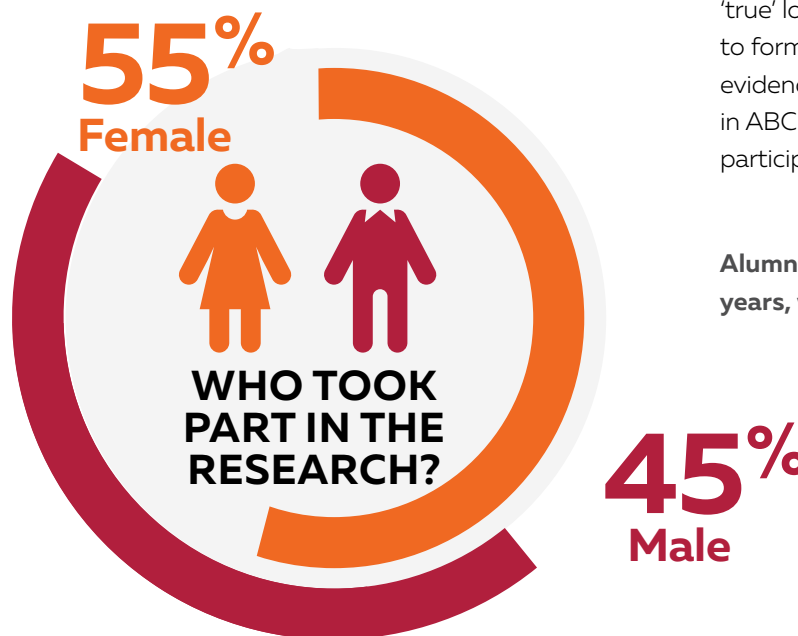
The objectives of the alumni follow-up project were as follows:

- To build a clearer picture of the pathways of ABCN alumni, 10 years post-program completion.
- To gain insight into which areas of ABCN's work, and which program elements, influenced the pathways of ABCN alumni.

- To build understanding of how alumni draw on their experience and learning from ABCN in a real-life context, i.e. in and alongside their emerging pathways through education, the workplace, and other experiences
- To provide learning that will guide future program direction and content, including post-program support to alumni.

The study was retrospective in type rather than a 'true' longitudinal study since it involved returning to former ABCN participants and seeking to build evidence of the long-term impact of their participation in ABCN programs on their lives significantly after their participation had ended.^{xii}

Alumni were aged between 23-27 years, with a mean age of 25 years



ABCN'S THEORY OF CHANGE

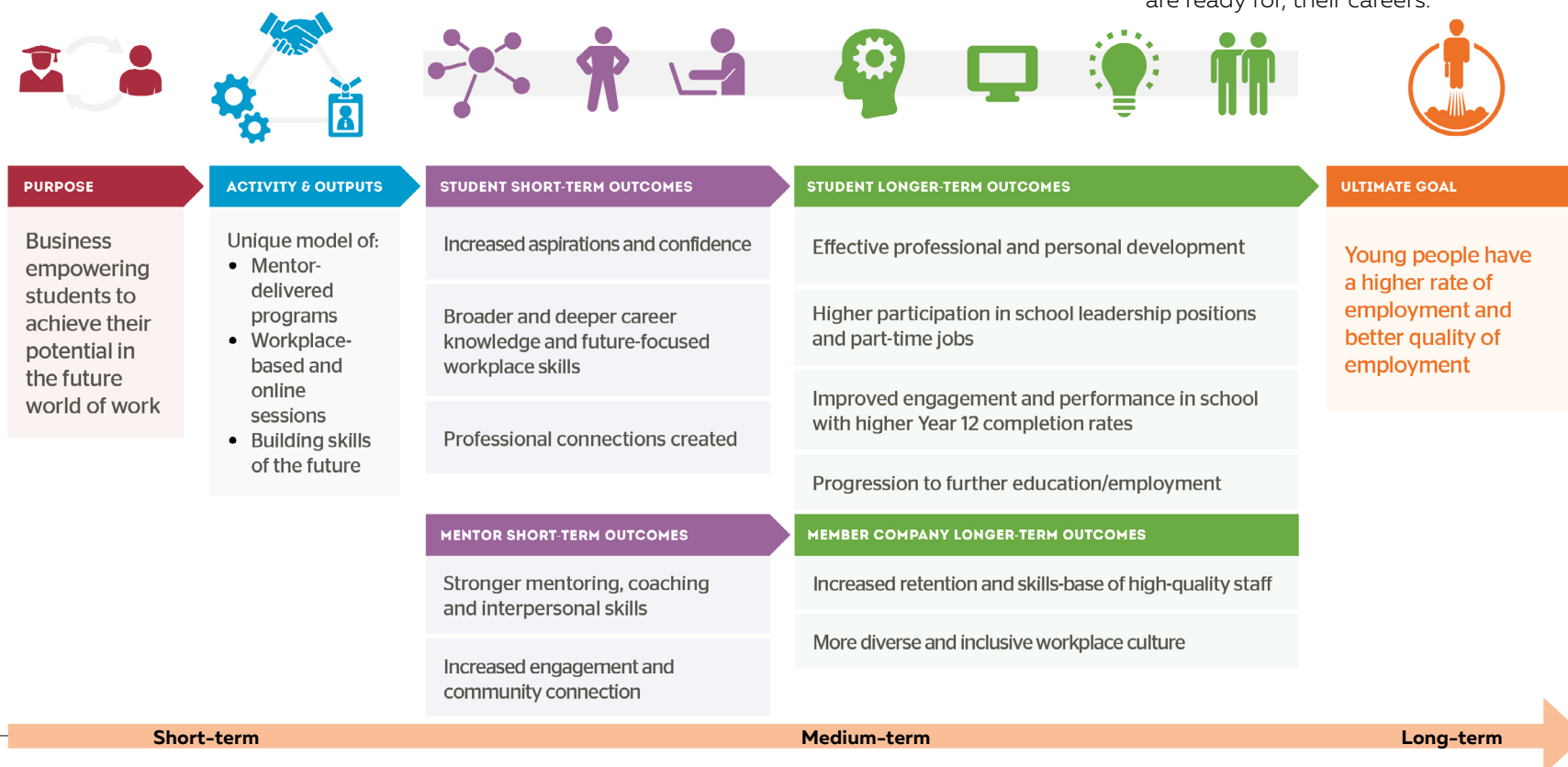
A theory of change is an explicit theory or model of how a program or policy causes the intended or observed outcomes. It is comprised of an intervention model (what activities are implemented to achieve change) and a change model (what is expected to change due to these activities).

ABCN's horizon of change is expected to be long and it is anticipated that many of the outcomes will be ongoing or occur months or even years after students have participated in our programs.

The Start of a Career Journey

By participating in ABCN programs, students gain confidence in, and understanding of the world of professional work, and know how to enter it.

They build career aspirations and are confident to pursue them. Students make progress towards, and are ready for, their careers.



ABCN'S UNIQUE MENTORING MODEL

ABCN's programs are fully facilitated workshops that focus on the future world of work. They take place in workplace settings, real and virtual, and are designed to promote interaction and connection between students and mentors. Through this approach, students develop key skills, increase their understanding of careers and workplaces, and raise their aspirations about what is possible and their understanding of pathways to get there.

Mentors also benefit through honing their coaching skills, stimulating their creativity and deepening their understanding of different generations and cultures.

ABCN offers 12 Core Mentoring Programs including:



GOALS Year 9:
Develops self-management skills; encourages completion of Year 12



Aspirations Years 10-11:
Builds awareness of post-school pathways

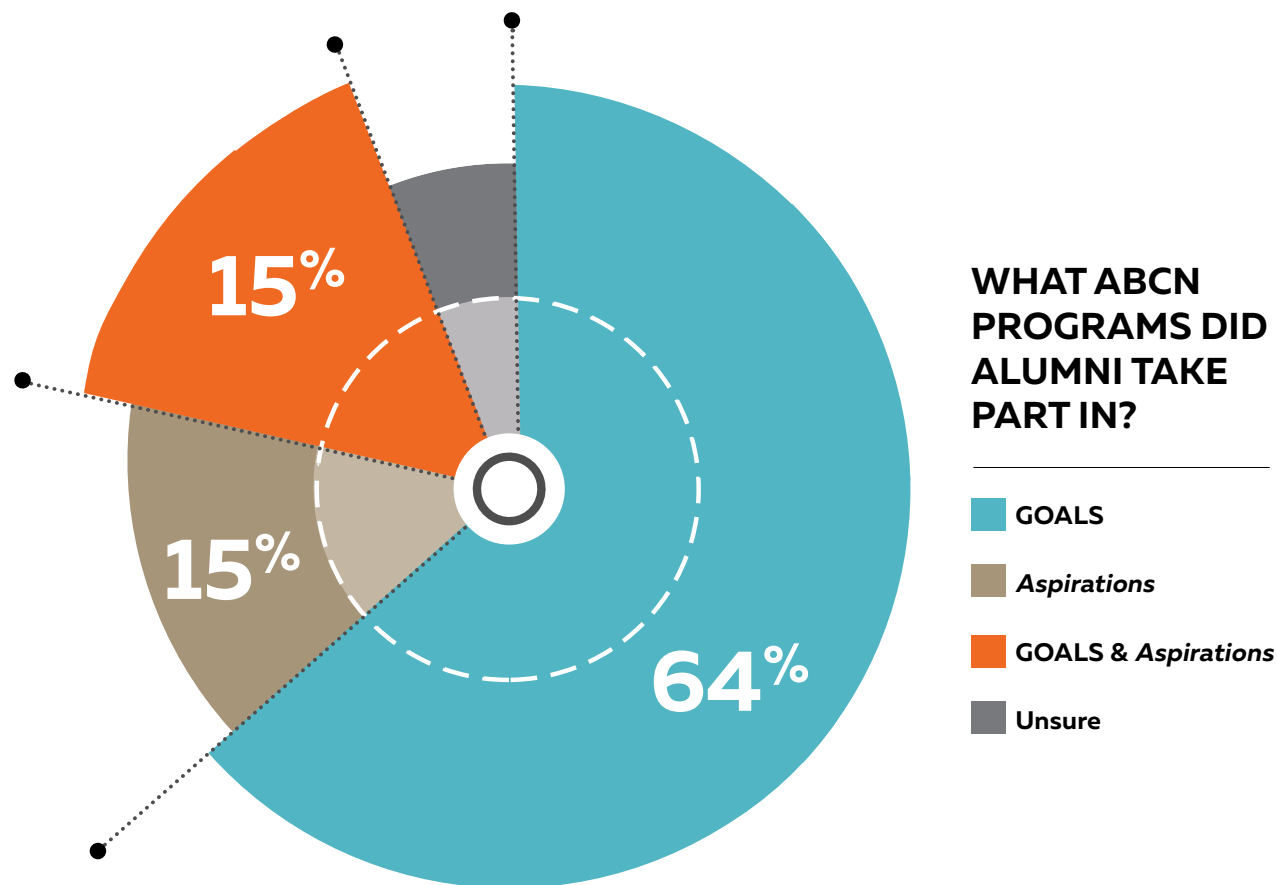


METHODOLOGY

In October–December 2021, ABCN carried out research into the long-term outcomes of alumni who had previously taken part in ABCN's GOALS or *Aspirations* programs between 2010–2012. The sample frame for the research was comprised of all students who had taken part in GOALS and/or *Aspirations* programs in NSW and Victoria between 2010–2012. Alumni were traced using only students' name and former high school, compiled from extant ABCN records. Of 1200 names, around 600 were initially traced.

A mixed methods design was adopted to best capture the multiple dimensions of young people's pathways post-school, including study outcomes, current engagement in work and training, and future aspirations. The notion of 'youth in transition' in research has been criticised for assuming young people follow a linear trajectory, an approach that can be unregarding of complexity.^{xiii} Interviews allowed scope for exploring the extended and sometimes fractured transitions between school, study and work that are an increasingly common pattern.

ABCN conducted an online survey that was sent to alumni who had agreed, after contact on social media, to take part. Sixty-seven completed questionnaires were received. A smaller sample of nine alumni also took part in qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted online between December 2021 and March 2022 and lasted between 30–70 minutes.



Questions explored the experience and impact of ABCN programs. Alumni's post-school pathway, current occupation, their views on employability, and potential future pathways. The qualitative data has been coded using a thematic analysis approach.

The survey included both closed and open recall questions. Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of selected elements of the GOALS/

Aspirations programs. Open-ended questions were used to capture respondents' recollections of the program and its application to their own lives. A series of questions focused on respondents' post-school pathways and current occupation. Finally, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their lives, and to share their views about future plans.

ALUMNI'S POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS

Among the ABCN alumni who took part in this research, the vast majority had proceeded to further study post-school. Only 18% had not undertaken any post-school education or training, including 3% who had not undertaken any study or training beyond Year 11.

Post-school pathways: study and training

University accounted for over half of alumni's highest post-school qualifications, with 61% having attained (or working towards) a Bachelor's degree, and 14% proceeding to attain (or study for) a Post-graduate Degree. This compares with a national rate of 60% of young people who achieve a degree, and 48% for low-SES students.²

In a few cases, alumni embarked on a first job first before returning to study, in order to pursue a different career from the one they originally intended.

ALUMNI'S HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION (ACHIEVED OR ENROLLED IN) %

14%

Post-grad Degree

47%

Bachelor's Degree/Degree Cert

15%

Advanced Diploma/Diploma

6%

Cert III/IV

15%

Year 12

3%

Year 11

²Among 25-34 age group, population with a Bachelor's degree =50% females, 37% males.

CASE STUDY: “My relationship with my ABCN mentor gave me a broader understanding of the options available to me.”



Sarah Pervaiz
Age: 25
Profession:
Corporate counsel
Location: Victoria



Overview

Sarah Pervaiz, 25, took part in the GOALS program when she was a 15-year-old high school student in Victoria. ‘The program gave me access to insights as to what it is like to work in legal practice. This led me to tailor my studies throughout VCE so as to ensure I completed subjects that I both enjoyed and was good at.’

‘The most valuable aspect of the ABCN program for

me personally was the connection I formed with my mentor, and the insights she would provide as to her pathway to becoming a lawyer. As I am the first lawyer in my family, I didn’t have any guidance as to what is expected of an aspiring lawyer and what the usual processes were. My relationship with my mentor filled this gap at an early stage, which gave me the ability to have a broader understanding of the options available to me throughout my educational and career development.’



Building a post-school pathway

After finishing school, Sarah gained a place to study a Bachelor of Law at La Trobe University. ‘My participation in the ABCN program was pivotal in forming my study and career plans after secondary school as it provided me with unique insights that secondary students wouldn’t otherwise have, and helped develop skills such as leadership and team building from a young age.’



Developing employability skills for real-world application

While studying full-time, Sarah also continued the casual retail job she began in Year 10, up until finishing her degree. She also gained work experience related to her future profession: ‘In my penultimate and final year of my degree, I also maintained a few

volunteer positions at local boutique law firms and community legal centres in order to gain more practical experience.’

Sarah credits her ABCN experience with laying a strong foundation of capabilities whose real-world value has endured from school to the corporate world: ‘Having participated in the skills training elements such as leadership and team-building enhanced my development. I learned to look at myself honestly and determine what room for improvements there were and act accordingly. As I have developed in these areas, it helped me progress through both my degree and consequentially my career, as they are all skills that transfer across various areas of life.’



Future focus: the ongoing value of mentoring

Sarah intends to continue building her career as a corporate in-house lawyer. She sees her ongoing participation in mentoring, both as a mentor and mentee, as instrumental to fulfilling her career goals: ‘The teachings my mentor can provide me from her experience, and her undying support in conjunction with my work ethic and hunger to continuously learn and develop, are great enablers to my aspirations’. She is still in contact with her ABCN mentor.

1.

Building early work-
readiness skills through
in-school mentoring



BUILDING EARLY WORK-READINESS SKILLS THROUGH IN-SCHOOL MENTORING

- At the time of program completion, alumni recalled significant gains in their interpersonal skills, confidence and goal-setting abilities, **nearly 50% rating their growth very high.**
- Alumni gained **early career-enabling skills** through ABCN programs, i.e. interview, interpersonal and problem-solving skills (also termed **Enterprise Skills**) that operate at the gateway to alumni's transitions to post-school study and work.
- Around half of interviewed alumni had changed their intended post-school career, and most described plans for future career development, signalling a **high degree of career mobility** in the initial post-school years.
- Alumni reported **enduring benefits** from taking part in ABCN's programs, in their interpersonal skills, confidence and knowledge of careers pathways.

Interpersonal skills, confidence and goal-setting were key learnings at program completion

Alumni recalled interpersonal skills and confidence as the top areas in which they had made gains on completing ABCN programs, typically as 15-16-year-olds. For over half of alumni, 53%, interpersonal skills, including networking, communication and interview skills were a primary benefit of taking part in ABCN programs, and showed long-lasting benefit.

'Communicating effectively was the most significant change I've had since I completed the program. It's definitely helped me understand how to network and the importance of it post-high school.' **Female, 25**

Alumni were asked to rate the extent to which the program they participated in had developed a range of knowledge and capabilities, from career aspirations to confidence levels. **Interpersonal skills and confidence were the two attributes that alumni rated highest,** with around half of all alumni rating the impact on these capabilities very high, i.e. 8-10 on a 1-10 rating scale. On all measures, between one third and half of participants rated the impact very high.

Nearly 90% of alumni provided examples of how they had continued to apply the lessons learned from ABCN's programs in their lives since participating, both in post-school study and the workplace.



1.1 Developing interpersonal skills for the post-school world

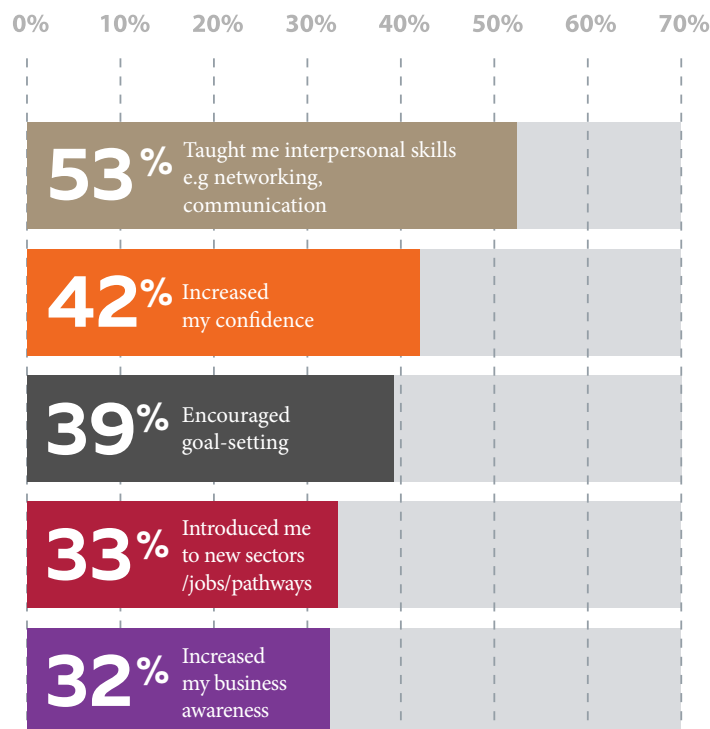
Alumni rated growth in **interpersonal skills** – communication, interview skills, networking, and knowledge of workplace conventions – a significant impact of their participation in ABCN programs. An average score of 7.1 was recorded overall, **with nearly half (48%) rating their growth very high, in the range 8-10.** The skills ABCN alumni developed are those included in the broad category termed Enterprise Skills; work-readiness or employability skills that may be soft or technical, but are largely transferable. The ability to communicate effectively, work in teams, and solve problems are considered three of the most foundational work-readiness skills, required both as 'gateway' skills for gaining employment, and for career progress.^{xv,xvi}

“What the program essentially helped me to do was two or three things. One was my ability to communicate with people of any professional stance, because if you take an area I grew up in, it’s quite colloquial, the way we talk, the way we act, the way business is conducted. But when we enter into our professional stances, there’s a certain manner that you have to learn. And you have to adjust. That’s one of the key things I learnt from speaking to different professionals.”

I also learned how to be able to network in their environment, to establish, I’d say, a connection with someone whether it’s professional, social, or career-orientated.’ **Male, 24**

‘I have a vivid memory of learning how to greet people with a good and firm handshake through a little exercise we practised during the program that has stuck with me for years and I definitely apply this when meeting new people. I know it may sound unimportant but I truly feel it gives me a confidence boost when I greet people.’

What were the most significant changes in your life after completing the program? Top 3



1.2 Developing self-confidence

A stronger sense of self-confidence was a key and lasting benefit for alumni of participating in ABCN programs. **Fifty per cent rated the impact on their confidence very high, in the 8-10 range.**

A body of evidence points to the importance of high self-esteem as a predictor of young people’s long-term wellbeing on a range of measures, including employment. Specifically, interventions that cultivate self-confidence among job-seeking graduates have been shown to enhance career management and employability skills.^{xv}

While confidence per se may not be a skillset, what was clear from alumni’s recall was that self-confidence was valued as an **enabling quality**, for example, boosting their early steps into further education and the workplace.

‘I was able to be more confident in business, running my own events. I used skills I learnt from the program that I had developed over time.’

‘I learned to speak with confidence and not be afraid of people in business. I used to be terrified of anyone who looked remotely corporate. Now I do business with international CEO’s and feel confident about it too!’



1.3 Post-school pathways: broadening and raising aspirations

For one third (33%) of alumni, **the programs were highly effective at broadening or raising their post-school aspirations.** Learning about new sectors, jobs and career pathways exposed alumni to opportunities they might otherwise have had scant awareness of and, for some, motivated them to continue education.

While the average program impact on alumni aspirations was moderately high (6.3), **those who saw a significant impact often associated the program with profound shifts** in their decision-making about future pathways and careers.

For example, the program helped alumni determine whether to continue at school and pursue tertiary education.

Over a fifth, 22%, said that participating in an ABCN

“The program gave me opportunities to visit the CBD while in high school. The most memorable experience was the excursion to the Commonwealth Bank in the city and being able to have a tour of the organisation. The excursions helped me travel outside of the school environment and my community, which in turn helped me develop new understandings of the environment as well as what is possible around me.”



program encouraged them to complete school, reflected in the high rate of Year 12 completion among alumni.

‘Shortly after completing the program I selected my elective subjects for my HSC where I chose more business and law-orientated subjects instead of ones that would be considered more fun.’ **Female, 24.**

Alumni recalled **expanding their view of occupations and sectors** after taking part in ABCN programs. Greater awareness of business, in particular, was a key learning for nearly one third (32%) of alumni.

‘I definitely knew afterwards that I wanted to pursue a career in business and felt inspired by one of the mentors I met.’

‘I think it made me more aware of what was out there, beyond the typical pathways from uni. It made my career planning a bit more realistic.’ **Male, 25.**

In some cases, alumni gained from a close-up view of particular roles and from observing these roles in real workplace settings. This first-hand observation exerted a powerful influence on some alumni's decisions about post-school pathways, especially into roles that were not visible in their own communities. Alumni described seeing a place for themselves in a sphere they had previously considered inaccessible:

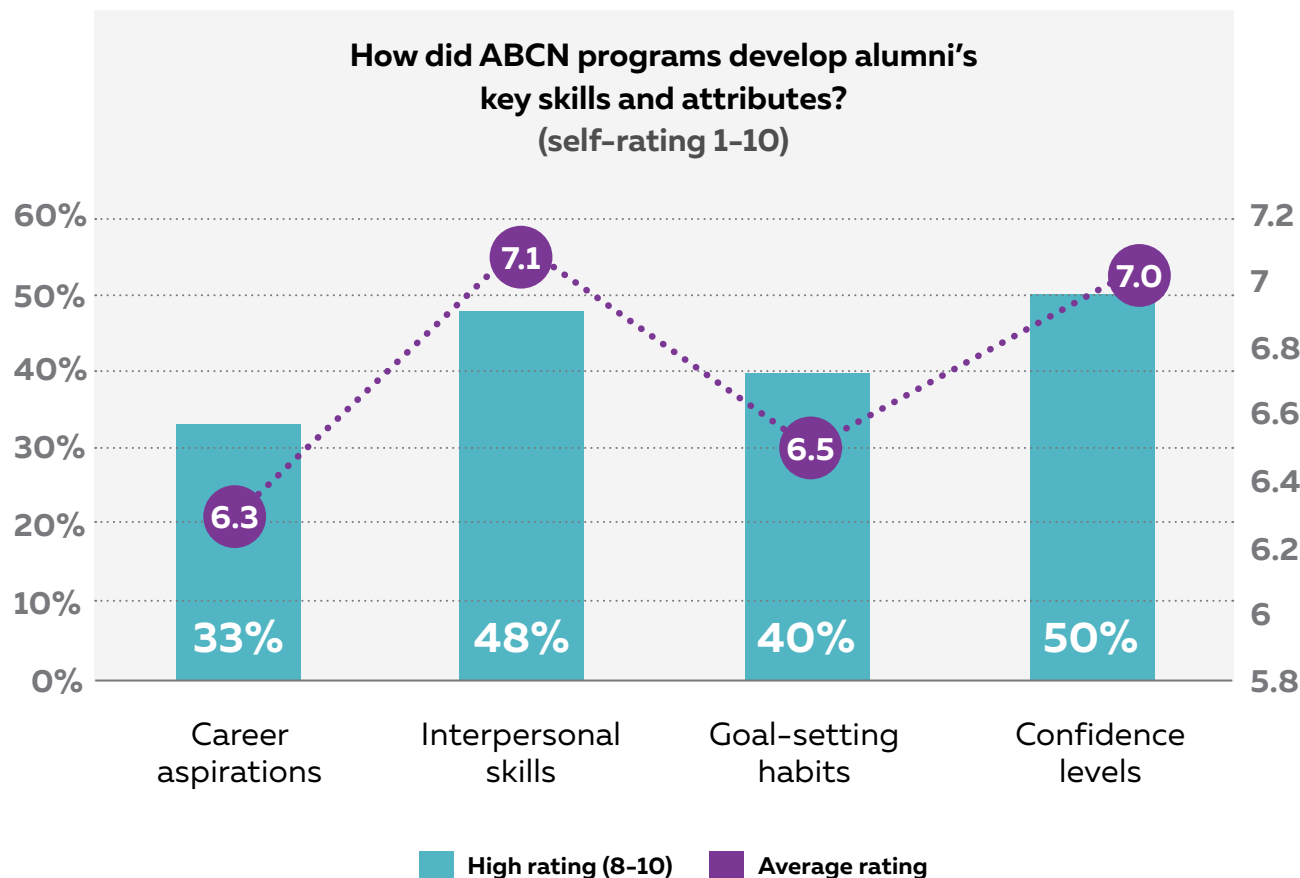
'The program allowed me to see what career paths there were and how I could apply myself. It influenced me to do public speaking.' **Female, 25.**

'I would go to these big, hotshot buildings in the city and think, 'these people are just normal people, like me?' And if they can do it, then absolutely that's an opportunity for me. It inspired me to work.' **Female, 24.**

In addition to broadening and raising aspiration, alumni recalled how the programs helped to seed **realistic approaches to career planning**. This might include not simply an overall career objective, but a clearer grasp of the intermediate steps required to reach it, often a combination of tertiary education, goal-setting (discussed below) and gaining work-experience:

'The exposure to investment banking piqued my curiosity as a high school student. At the time I wasn't aware of the field, which ultimately led to me doing research in the domain.'

Male, 26



1.4 Establishing goal-setting habits

Developing the ability to set and work towards goals formed a key learning for alumni, with 40% rating the effect on their ability to set and work towards their goals very high (average score=6.5).

Goal-setting habits, linked to improved capacity for intentional self-development, have been associated with positive outcomes in emerging adulthood, in both work and personal spheres,^{xix,xx} and is widely regarded as an essential tool for thriving in both education and the workplace.^{xxi}

Alumni commonly attributed their ability to identify and systematically pursue goals to their early exposure to the practice as part of ABCN's mentoring programs.

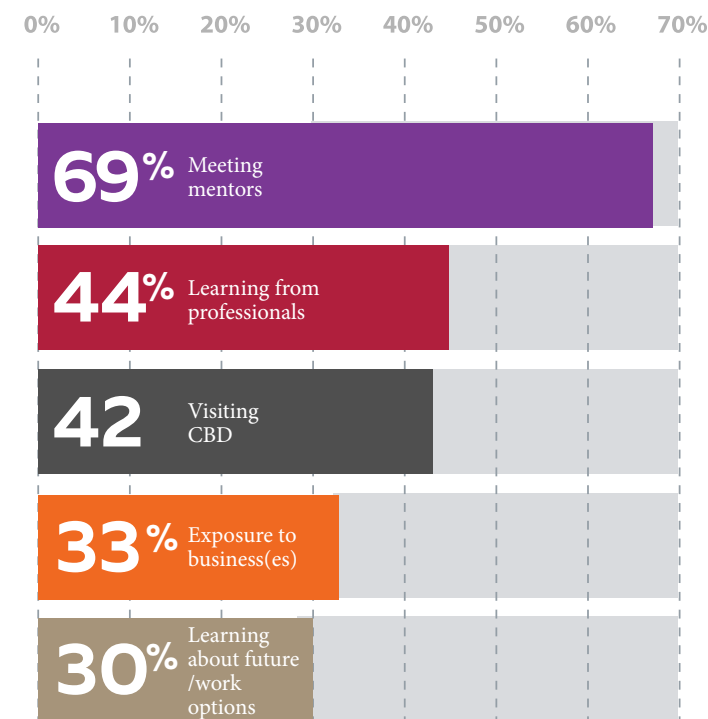
'I initially learnt to set goals through the program. They also helped me to set short- and long-term goals which would help me to build a stronger desire to push through all circumstances (good/bad/unsure) in my current life at the time.' **Male, 24.**

“Being exposed to mentors who were great quality people. My mentor in particular shared her journey with me and inspired me to set goals and strive to achieve them. I gained plenty of confidence and understanding of the corporate world.” **Male, 25**

The lasting legacy of developing goal-setting techniques in adolescence was evident among ABCN alumni. In their responses, around one third described how they continue to use these strategies in both their professional and personal lives:

'In my career now, goal-setting is an integral part in producing better outcomes for the students I work with.' **Female, 26.**

What is most memorable about the program you took part in? (Top 3)



Most memorable elements are closely matched by what alumni enjoyed most about the program: Interacting with mentors (64%), learning outside the classroom (48%), and visiting the corporate world (41%).

THE MENTORING EFFECT

ABCN mentors are the key to lasting impact

When alumni were asked to select the most **memorable elements** of the program they had participated in, one element of ABCN's programs – **meeting mentors** – stood out clearly.

Almost 70% of those surveyed ranked the mentor connection as an element of participating in ABCN programs that had stayed with them, more than 20 points ahead of the next ranked element, Learning from Professionals (arguably, a closely related feature of the programs alumni took part in).

The value of mentor interactions, and their striking longevity, arose from four key benefits they offered students (discussed later):

- Direct exposure to an individual from a professional background
- Personal advice and encouragement from a trusted source beyond the classroom
- A strong personal rapport, helping to reinforce learnings from the programs
- Key learnings, or 'life lessons' with enduring value.

These findings further attest to the potential of well-implemented youth mentoring programs to improve young people's educational and employment outcomes. They are a particularly important resource



THE MENTORING EFFECT

ABCN
Business Partnering with Education

for low-SES students who are the most likely to benefit.

The views and experiences shared by alumni point to the instrumental value of mentoring in shaping young people's lives post-school. Aligning with a growing body of research, they demonstrate that mentoring can play a vital role in contributing to young people's educational engagement and career development, through validating aspirations, offering guidance and recognising talent.

How ABCN mentors drive long-term benefits

The research generated compelling evidence of the effectiveness of ABCN's mentoring model, supporting young people at formative stages of their post-school planning and beyond:

- Meeting mentors stood out clearly for alumni as a

top-ranked feature of participation in ABCN programs. Nearly 70% of alumni named meeting ABCN mentors as a **most memorable aspect of participating – over 10 years post-program.**

- Interactions with mentors provided inspiration, personal support and offered a **broader view of career pathways** than many alumni were previously aware of. Coupled with workplace visits, **careers mentoring made visible and accessible a professional sphere to which few alumni had any previous connections.**

- Alumni's early mentoring experience through ABCN embedded the value and benefit of mentoring as a tool in their developing professional lives. Those who had gone on to seek out further mentoring opportunities, in education or the workplace, were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits.

THE MENTORING EFFECT

A high proportion of alumni recalled their mentors and were often able to identify their mentors' name and member company, over a decade after the program had ended. For alumni, this direct exposure to an individual from a professional background clearly had potential to generate a lasting rapport. The connections alumni formed with their mentors served to underpin the learnings they took from the program, both personal and in terms of workplace understanding and careers knowledge across several dimensions:

1 **Mentors showed alumni a broader horizon of possibilities** than they would otherwise have had exposure to. In addition, some mentors contributed to significant shifts in alumni's self-perception and view of what they might achieve in the future:

'My prospects, as a Samoan in Australia, I'd have found myself stuck as a stereotype, 'big dude', 'all brawn no brain'. My mentor was awesome, not only did he have great listening skill, he also showed a lot of care in what every student's vision was for their future, not saying 'it's stupid' but actually showing each student a

pathway to achieve it. A lot of kids your age these days have big dreams but only see big hurdles to jump over, I'm here to show you the small steps that will help to achieve that and create momentum from it, which stuck with me till today.' **Male, 26**

'Meeting my mentor and being able to relate to her upbringing encouraged me to look into business careers I normally would have overlooked.' **Female, 25.**

'I didn't have any guidance as to what is expected of an aspiring lawyer and what the usual processes were. My relationship with my mentor filled this gap.' **Female, 25.**

2 **ABCN mentors offered advice, encouragement and role-modelling** to alumni, from a trusted source outside the classroom. In particular, some alumni were inspired by the personal qualities that their mentors demonstrated:

'Through observing my mentor at the time, I was able to learn how to have time and patience toward people younger/less experienced and unsure compared to myself. I don't remember much about the actual program itself, but I do remember the way I was treated by my mentor which partly has to do with the current path I'm on for my life right now.' **Male, 25**

3 **The personal connection formed between mentor and student** was often the driver of lasting impact. Alumni spoke warmly of the sense that their mentor took a genuine interest in them as an individual. This rapport helped to broaden alumni's perceptions of both the business world and the types of people who worked in it.

'I'd always felt intimidated by people who worked in the corporate world. But it wasn't like that at all. My mentor was a great listener and genuinely cared about mentoring me and encouraging me. She was lovely and I still remember making a great connection with her. We used to laugh and bounce ideas off each other and it was enjoyable...I'd love to know what she's doing now.' **Female, 25.**

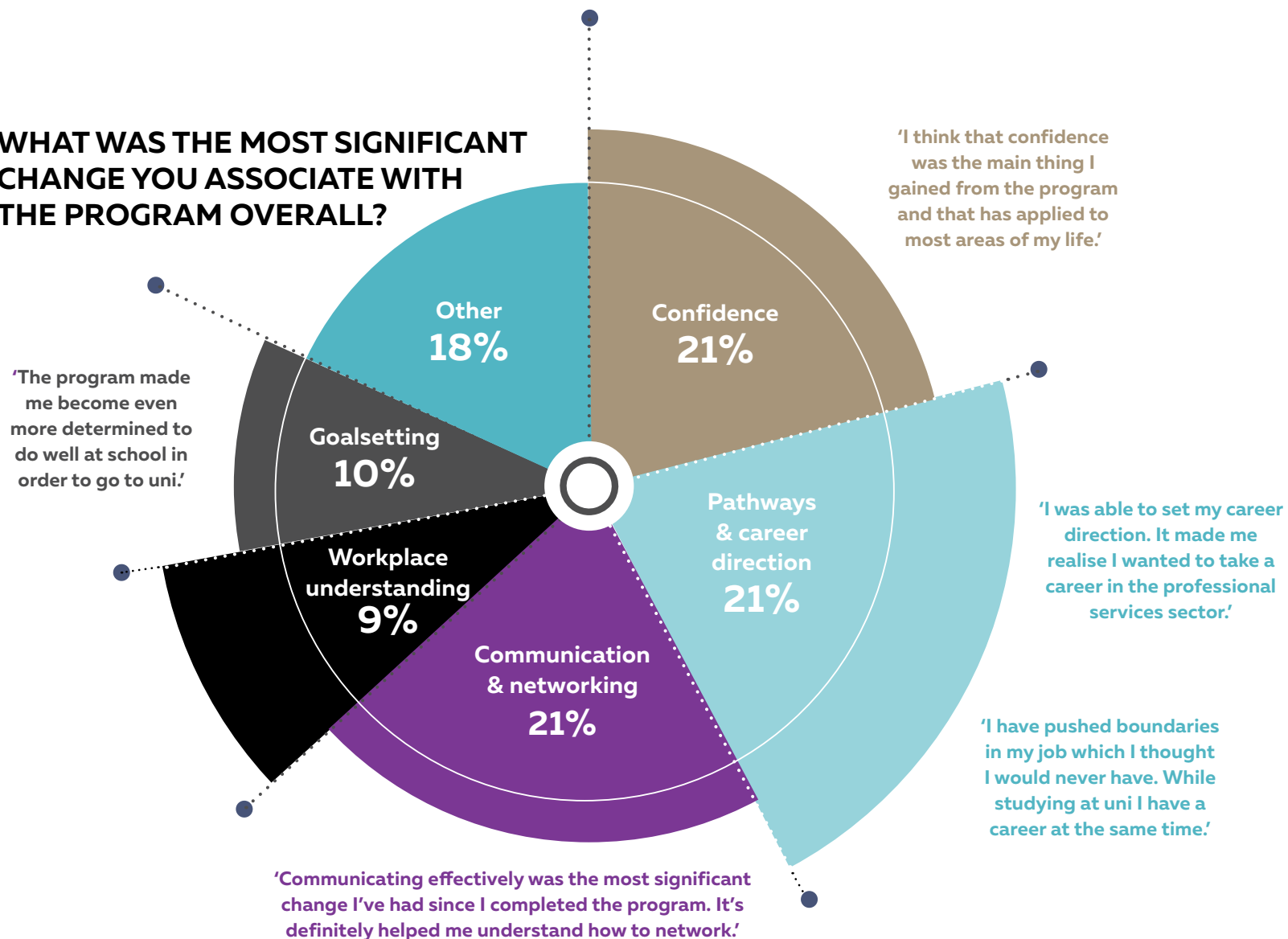
4 **Mentors had shared a key learning or 'life lesson'** with long shelf-life/enduring value for alumni. Some recalled still applying what their mentor had taught them in their current lives, 10 years later.

'When I was in this program I had little confidence. The mentor I had taught me to hold a coin while speaking and focus on the coin in my hand. This helped my confidence. I then went on to do debating and became school captain. I now for a living speak at social media events. I still have that coin. This program was the best thing I ever did!' **Female, 25**

What was the most significant change alumni experienced?

When it comes to the impact of ABCN's GOALS and Aspirations programs, confidence, knowledge of pathways and careers, and interpersonal skills were named by alumni in equal proportions as the Most Significant Change that resulted from their taking part. Responses to this open question were grouped and coded.

WHAT WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE YOU ASSOCIATE WITH THE PROGRAM OVERALL?



ABCN alumni pathways: where are they now?

Among ABCN's alumni, 87% were fully engaged in work and/or study (compared with 72% for this age-group nationally^{xxiii}). A further 8% were in part-time work or study/training. Almost a third of alumni were engaged in more than one activity, for example, combining study and work, or two types of work.







Early career destinations

Around 70% of alumni were working in one full-time role. Of these, the majority were employees; however, 5% stated that they were self-employed or a small business owner.

A further 8% were combining two types of work, sometimes a full-time role with an additional part-time role, or a business start-up.

Over half of alumni who specified their main occupation were working in professional roles, using the ABS Classification of Occupations.

What are alumni's current occupations?

Occupations by major & sub-group (ABS classification)		%
	Group 2 Professionals	
	■ Business, HR & Marketing	13
	■ Design, Engineering, Science & Transport	7
	■ Education	11
	■ Health Professionals	7
	■ ICT Professionals	11
	■ Legal, Social & Welfare	4
	Group 3 ■ Technicians & Trades	9
	Group 4 ■ Community & Personal Service Workers	6
	Group 5 ■ Clerical & Admin Workers	13
	Group 6 ■ Sales Workers	11
	Group 7 ■ Machinery Operators & Drivers	6

Note: 2% of Alumni occupations unclassified.

Continuing study

15% of alumni were studying at the time of the survey, the majority combining this with full or part-time work. Only 5% named study as their sole occupation. Courses alumni were engaged in were fairly evenly split between post-graduate degrees, undergraduate degrees or vocational training.

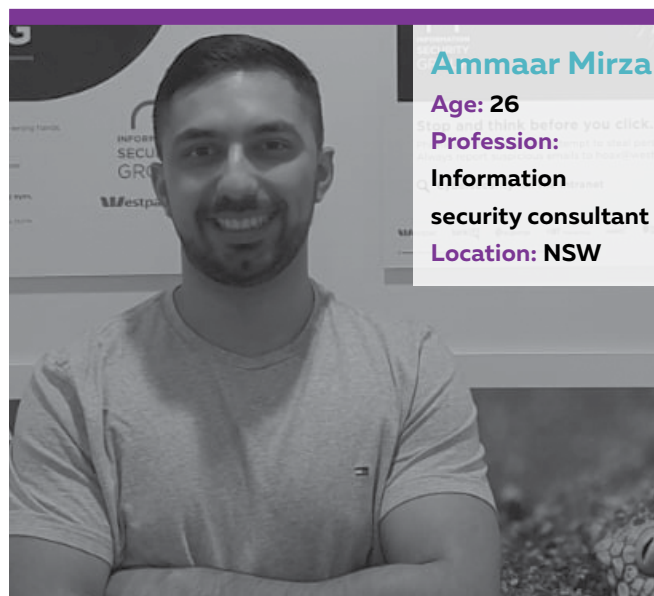
Not currently engaged in employment, education or training (NEET)

A small minority, 5%, of those surveyed were not currently engaged in paid work or study. Of these alumni, their situations were described as home duties, looking for work, or taking a career break, e.g. due to relocation. There was no evidence of any alumni being long-term NEET (i.e. continuously for six months or longer) or inactive NEET. This compares to a rate of 15% not in education or work among the 20- to 24-year-old age-group nationally.



³ Pre-pandemic NEET rate for 20-24-year-olds in Australia was 11% (OECD)

CASE STUDY: “ABCN taught me it’s about working out your goals and how you can develop to hit those goals.”



Overview

Ammaar Mirza, 26, had been drawn to computing since primary school but wasn't sure what direction his future career would take when he took part in the GOALS program at Canterbury Boys High School, NSW. 'The exposure to investment banking piqued my curiosity as a high school student. At the time I wasn't aware of the field. I was the first person in my family to apply to university.'



Developing employability skills while studying

While studying at the University of Technology Sydney for a Bachelor of Business and Accounting, Ammaar worked at the Energy and Water Ombudsman. The role offered him a chance to put his developing skills to work and gain crucial experience: 'I thought it was a good opportunity to have a chat to my general manager and get involved in some of the finance work to try and get some real-life experience with accounting.'

'You see there's a pattern to the questions they're asking. You can work backwards and prepare yourself. For example, a lot of them are going to ask you how do your values align with our values?'



Building an early career pathway

After graduating, Ammaar worked as a business analyst at Westpac before deciding to explore more technically-focused opportunities: 'I realised there are so many other roles in the bank, why limit myself to only doing what I thought I wanted to do? You have to be open to change. When I started working at the bank, I was trying out different roles, which is how I got into cybersecurity. It's a question of just jumping in and doing it.'



Future focus: setting career goals

Ammaar is a Senior Information Security Consultant at Westpac. He plans to embark on an MBA in the future. His experience of the GOALS program is something he continues to draw on: 'It's always about stepping-stones, and it's relative to where you are in your career. It's working out 'what do I need to do to get there?' and formalising some strategy, whether it's extra education or extra skills or experience. How do you develop yourself to hit those goals?'



The ongoing value of mentoring

His early mentoring experience is something that has remained with him too. 'Since I started working, I've been involved in a lot of different mentoring programs, with university students, or school students. I'm sure that it inspires a lot of people who feel, "Hey, maybe I'm in a similar boat to you."'

2.

Forging early careers:
putting skills to work in
the post-school world



FORGING EARLY CAREERS: PUTTING SKILLS TO WORK IN THE POST-SCHOOL WORLD

■ Skills and knowledge acquired during ABCN programs facilitated alumni's early steps into the world of work.

■ Most alumni described a clear sense of career direction.

■ **Nearly two-thirds were in a job they wanted as a career.** Longer school- to-work transitions not unusual (for example, extended periods studying, or short-term employment) reflecting broader population trends. However, these transitions were rarely regarded as problematic by alumni themselves.

■ In their emerging careers, alumni were predominantly acquiring and consolidating technical competencies, alongside further developing Enterprise skills, in particular, management capabilities.

2.1 Alumni's post-school pathways

The age range of alumni who participated in the research, 23-27 years, situated them midway through the key transitional period associated with early adulthood.^{xxvi}

Since their involvement in ABCN's GOALS and Aspirations programs, alumni had finished school; most had also completed their post-school education and taken initial steps into early careers. To what extent did taking part in ABCN's programs influence these initial post-school pathways, and how have alumni continued to develop the 'gateway' and work-readiness skills gained through ABCN mentoring?

The survey suggested that participation had a moderately high impact overall in terms of **broadening or raising young people's career aspirations** (average impact 6.3) with 33% reporting very high impact. Yet alumni described other ways that ABCN influenced their subsequent decision-making when it came to choosing future study or work pathways. Some gained **clarity of direction or focus about their choices**, for example,

discovering and aligning subject choices to their strengths and interests. Others reported a **stronger motivation to continue their education**:

'It encouraged me to pursue my interests when choosing my path to tertiary education.' **Male, 24.**

'Following the program, I chose to study business-related subjects in which I discovered a passion for business management, and I have since gone on to work for Woolworths supermarkets where I've held multiple different management positions, and led a team of 24 people.' **Female, 25.**

For others, the effect of career mentoring on their pathway was an instrumental one; ABCN helped them acquire skills that could be applied in pursuit of their chosen academic or career aspirations. **Goal-setting** recurred in relation to this:

'I definitely wanted to set my goals to achieve more in study and work. It also helped me apply myself more to these aspects of life.' **Male, 26**



- Post-school training or career switching was widespread among alumni.
- Enterprise skills gained through ABCN – including interview skills, teamworking and goal-setting – were key to steering a course through change and uncertainty.
- Alumni who switched pathways continued to build capabilities through study and work.

Non-linear pathways

Among the alumni who took part in interviews, **only half had followed the career path they intended** to at the time they left school. An equal proportion had changed path at least once between school and the time of interview, either in their choice of post-school field of study, or work, or both. Interviews explored the reasons and experiences that led to these choices.

The effect of switching career tracks was evident in longer periods between completing education and embarking on a career that alumni considered was the right one. This finding among ABCN alumni

reflects a broader population trend of extended, more complex and fractured transitions between education and full-time work.^{xxvii} However, in very few cases did alumni regard this transitional period in a negative light. The capabilities and self-development alumni gained through both work and personal experience outweighed the effects of uncertainty and false-starts. Alumni were also able to draw on their accrued work-readiness and ‘navigation’ capabilities to steer a course through periods of change and uncertainty.

2.2 Changing direction in study or work

A minority of alumni recalled **rethinking their initial career goals while still at school**, for example, from law or medicine, or opting for a broader-based degree that would widen opportunities for future careers. In some cases, ABCN directly influenced these decisions.

‘In the program I did with ABCN, I loved being in a corporate setting, I loved being in the city. And that’s when my thinking when choosing courses changed. I knew I may not get into law, but I wanted to do something that would continue to change the future. So I thought if I can do business and match that with tech, then that might be something worth trying out.’
Female, 24.

Rethinking career direction while studying or training

was something that around a third of interviewees had experienced. This applied to alumni engaged in vocational courses, undergraduate courses and progressing to post-graduate training. A more grounded, realistic understanding of their intended field of work often informed the change.

‘Growing up I always wanted to be a psychologist then after I got to uni and studied it for 12 months I thought ‘I hate this’ and I thought if I’m unmotivated learning it, I’m not going to be any use to anybody. So I changed to Human Services, then, same again, so I deferred and worked in retail for about a year.’ **Female, 26.**

Alumni recounted interim periods of work in sectors such as retail or hospitality, lasting between one and three years before proceeding to continue their training and/or work. Lessons learned from ABCN’s programs played a role in alumni regaining direction:

‘So there was a dilemma (when I got my post-grad uni place), because I could develop a career in this side job. But I did choose to pursue a more academic route because I thought, in the long run, that’s what I’ve been working towards. Even in my downtime, where I was out for three years from academia, I still had to set goals. And that kept me in line as to not lose the focus of the bigger picture.’ **Male, 25.**

Rethinking pathways through work

For ABCN alumni, **the experience of doing a job was often one of the most influential factors** in determining subsequent career pathways. Early jobs helped to clarify individual interests, strengths, weaknesses, and preferred working environments. This applied both to 'interim' jobs and to 'career' jobs (i.e the roles alumni had studied, trained or aimed for).

Alumni gave examples of how their choices shifted through **experience of under-utilising their skills**, or perceiving a mismatch between their interests, capabilities and role-requirements:

'After working in retail for several years, I knew I had all these skills I wasn't utilising, and I just felt there was more I could do and more I could offer and there wasn't a place for that where I was.' **Female, 26.**

'While studying Business and Accounting, I got involved in some of the finances at work to try and get some real-life experience with accounting. And did that for about a year. At that point, I realised that this is definitely not what I want to do for a career.' **Male, 26.**

2.3 Developing skills for career longevity

ABCN alumni overall clearly rated their learnings from participation in ABCN programs as significantly helpful to them as school-leavers first negotiating the world of work. The principal areas of gain – Enterprise and Life skills – contributed to a foundation of 'gateway' or work-readiness capabilities that enabled them to approach and largely succeed in their early roles. How have alumni continued to develop and extend these skills subsequently?

Interviews sought to understand what opportunities, and experiences, contributed to alumni building skills with long-lasting currency in the workplace. Alumni also outlined how they intended to further develop their capabilities.

“You need to have some of those hard technical skills, and the sound skills to analyse and review information. But it's more about just building up the soft skills more and more, and people management skills, which would be the next step for me.” **Male, 25**

Enterprise skills

Transferable skills – often soft skills – were the primary capabilities that alumni considered they had developed through participating in ABCN's mentoring programs, preparing them for the post-school world.

Nearly 50% rated their growth in interpersonal skills (interpersonal and interview skills, workplace behaviour conventions) very high as a result of the GOALS/*Aspirations* programs. These were also the skills that alumni had continued to acquire and consolidate in the course of their early careers.

There was a close alignment between alumni's direct experience of skill requisites and the findings of employment research. In addition to communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, analytic and evaluative capabilities are regarded as key transferable skills, required by employers for highly capable, adaptive workforces.

Interpersonal skills

Alumni's ability to interact **confidently and effectively** in a work setting – often in an unfamiliar context – had required them to adapt and stretch their existing skills. Developing adeptness in communication applied to both **1)** the ability to fulfil a specific organisational function and **2)** the ability to engage socially and 'fit in'.

Some saw interpersonal skills as a major learning that accompanied their first steps into the professional world. This was, notably, raised more often by alumni from minority backgrounds.

'Definitely at the start, I was quite hesitant to go up and introduce myself to someone or do any of that for a while. Observing people is a big thing – you see that everyone kind of knows each other and you get an idea of what the corporate talk is like and how they're networking, and then, fast forward six months from being helpless, you're a customer-facing figure, you go around and figure out what their business problem is.' **Male, 26.**

'I definitely continue to network as much as possible. And communication-wise, I'm a team leader now so I have to communicate quite well a lot of the time. So I would say that my business English skills aren't the best but I think that experience has helped and has pushed me to work on it more.' **Male, 25.**

Teamworking and problem-solving

Most alumni had gained a grounding in the ability to work in teams, through education and casual jobs. This was a capability they had continued to build in their careers, often in more challenging contexts than previously encountered:

'What I've learned the most in a corporate setting is a lot about people; not just how to talk to them, but how to compromise with multiple attitudes and behaviours.' **Female, 24**

Honing interpersonal skills in a work environment is a continuous area of learning and development in alumni's early careers

The ability to lead teams was an emerging requisite of alumni's jobs, but one most had not yet developed to an advanced level. Likewise, **responding to problems and solving them**, in a time-constrained way was described as a capability that could not easily be acquired other than through accumulating real-world experience:

'Teamwork is huge. Problem-solving, as well. Working in a few different places, I think you have to make yourself a valuable employee to be able to be your best, over years.' **Female, 26**

'You need to be able to look after yourself, plan to do what you need to do and not expect that if it goes wrong, someone else is going to fix it. You have to be able to plan or there's going to be a flow-on effect.' **Male, 25**

Interview skills

While few alumni were enthusiastic about the interview

process, alumni took the view that techniques could be developed and honed. Here, ABCN mentoring had provided them with an early foundation to build on.

'There are things that help, like mock interviews. And the STAR method. And you just have to keep doing interviews to get better at them, push through the rejections. It's a numbers game.' **Male, 25**

'My mentor gave me some great tips to utilise throughout the interview process. I specifically remember her teaching me about turning negatives into positives. I already knew from GOALS what makes employees stand out. That was still with me from when I was 15.' **Female, 26.**

Life skills

In addition to the enterprise skills ABCN alumni had continued to acquire and consolidate in the course of their study and work careers to date, they had also developed a range of qualities that fall under the umbrella term Life skills. These meta-cognitive traits and attributes include self-awareness, confidence, resilience and drive.

These four competencies have been identified by employers as essential for young people to make successful transitions into work.^{xxvii} Of these, confidence emerged as a key and lasting benefit for alumni of ABCN programs.

In interviews, alumni often considered Life skills inseparable from the core enterprise and technical skills in which they were increasingly proficient.

Self-awareness

Alumni's gains in employability skills, both soft and technical, went hand in hand with a more keenly developed sense of their own areas of strength and weakness. Self-awareness is one of the core capabilities employers identify as a requirement for young people to enter and succeed in the workplace.^{xxviii} It is plausible that the self-awareness evident among alumni was partly the product of the job interview process of which most had some recent experience, in which identifying and demonstrating individual skills is a typical component.

'You're not going to learn your strengths till you're exposed to a whole lot of situations and you're not going to learn your shortcomings until you've made multiple mistakes. Then you learn and work on it.' **Male, 25**

Confidence

Fifty per cent of alumni rated their growth in confidence through participating in ABCN programs as very high. While gains in confidence were also evident from alumni's assessment of their other skills and capabilities, surprisingly, alumni (in interviews) seldom

singled out confidence per se as an attribute that had contributed to their career success. This finding may reflect its meta-cognitive nature, as a quality that is acquired often through experience rather than a learned skill. If anything, it was more often the case that alumni spoke of the ongoing need to overcome a residual **lack** of confidence as they forged ahead in their careers:

'I've had to get more confident, less shy, more comfortable talking to management. I have developed some skills from my supermarket job, though I hate to admit it, because I've been required to manage at times, and brought these to the professional world.' **Male, 25**

However, alumni's assessment of their own growth in skills and capabilities testified to an accompanying growth in confidence, even if it was not always as explicitly expressed as the following:

'I'm relatively confident that six months down the track, if I wanted to leave and go into enterprise architecture or change management or whatever it might be, I could.' **Male, 26**

Resilience

The ability to persevere in the face of challenge, or to reframe failures, was a trait some alumni regarded as

'You're there for a reason, your employer obviously sees something in you. The imposter syndrome, everyone has a self-saboteur, but you have to stay grounded. For me that was a big one, having to change my mindset, constantly, from I can't, to I definitely can.' **Female, 26**

a key learning in their early working years. For some, resilience was a question of mastering particular, challenging skills – often Enterprise skills – while for others, resilience lay in putting up with an unrewarding job, and doing it well, until they found a better one.

'I've learned by making mistakes. The first time I was asked to do an employee performance management plan because the person was underperforming, the way I communicated that to him, it came off quite badly. It taught me to check the way I communicate and be supportive.' **Male, 25**

'I worked in fast food for about 12 months when I was 18 or 19. It was chaotic. It taught me to be patient and to be understanding. Everyone's just trying to do their job.' **Female, 26**

Continuous learning

A strong learning disposition was widely considered an essential attribute by alumni for succeeding and progressing in their careers. The pace of technological change, skills obsolescence and the COVID-19 downturn have contributed to a climate where continuous upskilling and reskilling are a requirement of working life. This was a reality clearly reflected in ABCN alumni's views.

An appetite for learning, whether through on-the-job experience or formal training, was regarded by alumni as a precondition of success in their developing careers. Alumni were pragmatic about taking opportunities for upskilling in an increasingly insecure job-market:

'I think it's important to put your hand up for any training you can get and if it's not for you, it's not for you, but you take opportunity wherever you can.' **Female, 26**

The rapid pace of technological transformation had made itself felt even at this relatively early stage of alumni careers. Some alumni showed a keen awareness of the shelf-life of skills:

'You have to be receptive, open to change, keen to learn. If you're not keen to learn you're screwed no matter what you're doing. When I started, cloud technology was big. Now, new kids are arriving from uni with new tech skills in automation.' **Male, 26**



2.4 What else has enabled alumni's early careers?

Alumni identified a range of 'gateway' skills, often fostered through their ABCN mentoring experience, that facilitated their early steps into post-school work, both temporary and vocational. Mastering basic interview skills, interacting with team-members, demonstrating problem-solving abilities, self-management and a learning disposition in an operational environment, whether a supermarket or an investment bank, were the capabilities alumni frequently drew on in their accounts of their early career pathways.

In addition to these continuously developing capabilities, two other external factors had contributed to their career progress, mentoring and management.

Workplace and student mentoring

Mentoring, where it was available, stood out to alumni for its early-career boosting benefits. Over half of those interviewed had continued to engage in mentoring post-school, whether in formal or informal relationships.

At university, mentoring continued to provide support and guidance to alumni in working towards their

chosen career paths, particularly in highly competitive fields such as law and medicine.

'I took on mentors at uni as well. And they taught me how to essentially tackle the course itself. Not just the content, but also the logistics of where you want to take your degree, how you're going to apply it.' **Male, 24**

In-job mentoring provided targeted support and advice directly relevant to the sector alumni were employed in. The evidence suggests that mentoring was valuable both to alumni who were still discerning a long-term career direction and those who were on their chosen career pathway.

'When I became a team leader, I had a mentor. I said, I don't have much experience, and he'd sit me down, have one to ones every month or so, talk to me about my aspirations and then he'd expose me to new things so I could learn and develop. He was amazing and I have crazy respect for him.' **Male, 25**

'My mentors have given me really great advice on speaking up, or just taking the initiative. And just being more confident myself, because that's something I've always struggled with, confidence.' **Female, 25**

Alumni who had received mentoring were more likely

to link its benefits to the development of soft skills and career pathways, rather than technical skills.

Management support

Alumni's early career development was often significantly enhanced by the guidance and advice of their supervisors and managers. This kind of support was, unsurprisingly, more likely to encompass both alumni's soft skill development and technical skills. While formal guidance to avenues for career progression might be expected in some roles, such as graduate entry jobs, alumni's experience of learning from management was more widespread. Casual, transitional and short-term roles also afforded opportunities for progression, and for consolidating valuable transferable skills.

Typically, alumni's line managers helped direct them young to potential opportunities for promotion, offered guidance on next steps, or suggested options for further skills development.

'I've learned a lot from my boss. She's pretty knowledgeable. I am currently doing an Advanced Diploma at sector management. My boss said to me this course is really good, it'll help you in what you do now, it'll help you in your career.' **Female, 25**



2.5 Early career challenges

Alumni had, on the whole, found the experience of acclimatising to workplace culture and expectations to be a positive one. There was a broad acceptance that the early years of a person's career were likely to entail challenges, and that learning by doing, incrementally – and occasionally failing – was a normal process of growth and development. Few experiences stood out to alumni as significantly difficult or ones that could not be overcome with experience, or supportive management.

Workplace culture

Alumni recalled how adjusting to new working environments sometimes made for steep learning. The difficulties alumni experienced related to a range of aspects of workplace culture, including forming and managing professional relationships, and learning the norms of workplace behaviour.

'At uni there's sort of camaraderie...But I think in the corporate setting, when I moved there, it's a competition. So that's really where I experienced that for the first time. And it was very different and also difficult for me to navigate because I didn't come here for politics. I came here to work and get experience.'

Female, 25



Confidence

Learning to master low confidence applied to both the social and interpersonal aspects of work, and, to a lesser extent, to alumni's belief in the value of their technical skills.

'My confidence level was really good in my old job. But I think going into the corporate world and having to experience the things that I've experienced there has really affected my confidence. So even now I'm in my mid-20s, and I'm in a new job, I still have that fear.'

Female, 24.

Gender

Gender imbalance in the workplace, and the associated barriers to inclusion, were factors that had influenced the pathways of some female alumni. This issue related to sectors or functions where women are historically under-represented. However, male alumni also acknowledged the need for initiatives to recruit more women into STEM roles.

'It tends to be, especially in areas like corporate finance, or mergers and acquisitions, a massive boys'

club. So I spoke during that time to my direct manager at the time to say, this is not right, we need to find ways and really become that champion.' **Female, 24**

Career uncertainty

Among alumni who had experienced changes of career or study direction, or extended gaps between the two, periods of ambivalence or self-doubt were more prevalent. Worry stemmed from alumni's lack of fulfilment and under-utilisation of their skills (particularly in non-graduate roles), or from their fear of giving up relatively secure work to continue their studies. Awareness of falling behind their peers, in terms of achieving landmark events such as home-buying, marriage or children, sometimes exacerbated anxiety about switching pathways in order to pursue career aspirations.

'I think the big one for me has been falling into a slump. Because like I said before, you get to a point where you know you have to leave, but that's a cycle where you have to put yourself out there. So getting stuck in a job you hate, that was really hard for me.'

Female, 26

'If you don't have a focus on what you want to do, then you won't get anywhere. You will stagnate. And you can stagnate for years.' **Male, 25**

Job insecurity

The growing proportion of entry level and graduate jobs that are short-term contract positions was a cause of economic insecurity for some alumni. Uncertainty about work impeded alumni's longer-term planning, for example, house-buying, or pursuing further study. Some alumni also continued a part-time role (typically in retail or hospitality) alongside their main occupation, to offset the risk of future spells of unemployment.

'I want to find a permanent role within the next five years. I'm happy to take a pay cut as long it's permanent. I want to be secure enough to leave my second job because that's the reason I keep it, as a safety net.' **Male, 25**



CASE STUDY: “It was great to have a friendly high-achieving female I could look up to.”



**Jade
Fitzpatrick**

Age: 26

**Profession: Digital
content writer**

**Location:
Queensland**



Overview

Jade Fitzpatrick, 26, took part in the GOALS program when she was 15, and attending St Albans Secondary College, Victoria. 'ABCN was my first experience of the corporate world. I'd never met anyone like my mentor, Sam. It was great to have a friendly, high-achieving female I could look up to. Meeting with intelligent, successful people showed me I had options.'



Building a post-school pathway

Before completing a degree in Creative and Professional Writing at Queensland University of Technology, Jade started a Psychology degree. 'Growing up I always wanted to be a psychologist then after I got to uni and studied it for 12 months I thought, it's not what I want to do. So I changed to Human Services, then found the same again, so I deferred and worked in retail.'



Gaining employability skills and regaining focus

Working in transitional jobs in hospitality and retail while she studied provided Jade with valuable team-working and interpersonal skills, as well as opportunities to gain management experience. 'It gives you so much respect for people in that industry. It taught me to be patient and to be understanding. One of the big things I learnt was to ask questions. Employers would rather you knew how to do the right thing than continue along not knowing, with repercussions later. Also putting your hand up for extra as well. After working in retail and as a butcher for several years, I knew I had all these skills I wasn't utilising, and I just felt there was more I could do and more I could offer. I thought, I really enjoy writing and I don't see a career slicing meat, so after my degree, I did a graduate certificate in Digital Communications. It was the first thing I'd felt passionate about in a long time.'



Future focus

Jade's ABCN experience had provided her with enduring employability skills that she credits with helping her to navigate her early career/ changes of direction, before landing her first job in journalism. 'My mentor gave me some great tips to utilise throughout the interview process. I specifically remember her teaching me about turning negatives into positives. I already knew from GOALS what makes employees stand out. That was still with me from when I was 15.'

What else has her experience taught her? 'Be diligent, ask questions. Broaden your horizons. Find out what it is what you love and run with it, despite what anybody says or thinks. But sometimes I think you have to do a job that you hate first. I'm currently a content writer for a digital marketing agency. We bring traffic to websites. Everyone wants to be one the first page of Google if they can so that's what we do.'

3.

Building future-focused
skills and careers



3.1 Career progression

- Career development was the priority for over 70% of alumni over the next five years.
- Alumni showed a high degree of self-direction in their approaches to furthering their careers.
- Continuous upskilling was considered essential. Most alumni planned to build their skills, whether through independent study or in-post training.
- Nearly two-thirds planned to progress their careers in the sector or occupation they currently worked in.

Alumni **showed a high level of motivation to develop their careers** on an ongoing basis, coupled with awareness of future opportunities. Over 70% of study participants named their career as the aspect of their lives in which they hoped to make the biggest change over the next five years. An openness to different options for achieving career progression was marked among alumni. Across the spectrum of their occupations, alumni described approaches to managing their careers that were both proactive and

adaptive, seeking and taking up opportunities to enhance their future prospects, both on-the-job and through accredited training.

Career progression formed a clear motivation for alumni to **change roles**, either moving laterally within the same organisation, or into a different one:

- Those working within large corporate firms were most likely to have taken opportunities to move between functions and roles, e.g. from Business Analyst to Cyber Security. At this stage, few alumni described moving to a more senior position in a new organisation.
- Alumni's experience of moving into a new role was often driven by the goal of deepening their experience or gaining exposure to a new sector e.g. from in-house to agency.
- Opportunities for career progression also arose through exploration of new functions and responsibilities within their role e.g. leadership positions, or through alumni developing their skills via training:
- All (interviewed) alumni recounted having opportunities to progress within their current role. These opportunities arose typically in team

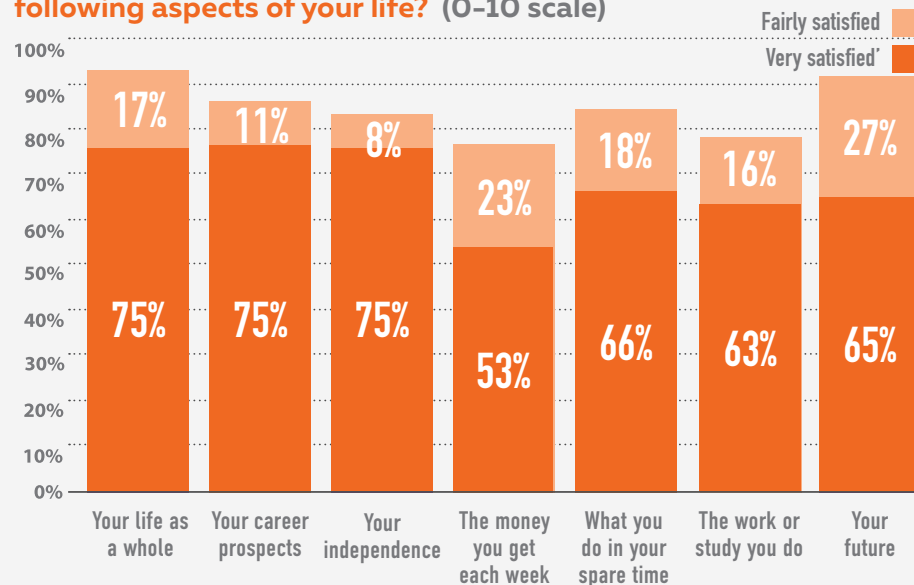
leadership and management roles as well as more senior technical positions.

- Where alumni had undertaken further training to advance in their current job, this was more often on their own initiative, e.g. micro-credentialling or online certificates, though some had also enrolled in Advanced Diplomas or post-graduate training.

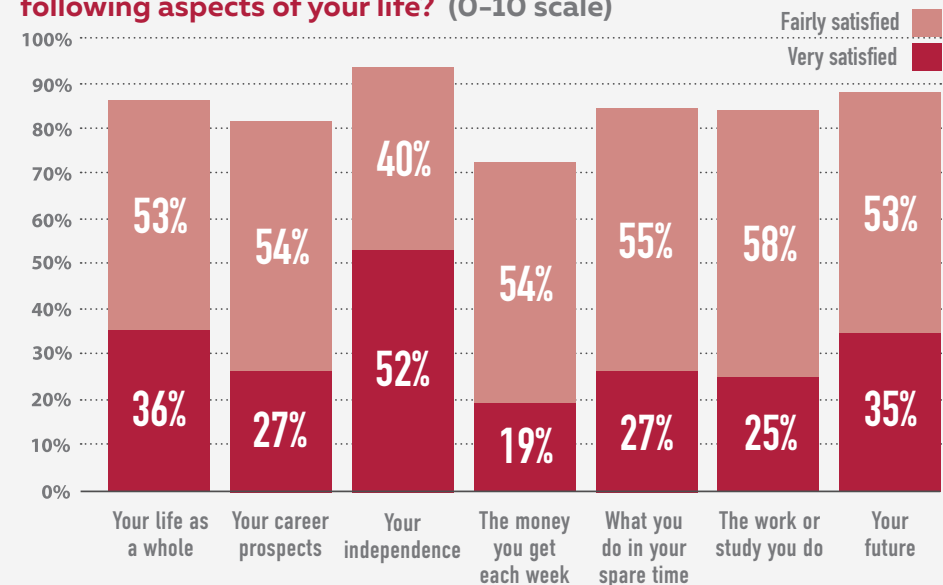
'I've had to work my way up, starting off as casual... but it was a goal that I had in mind to work hard, work my way up and become a team leader and help the business achieve its goals.' **Female, 25**

“ABCN opened my eyes. A survey they showed us said in one person's lifetime they would have 10 different types of career, and this was partly true. I've had five different types of job since the ABCN course and what I've learnt from the mentors is to use each experience in those careers to elevate myself in my next career.”

ABCN alumni: how happy are you with the following aspects of your life? (0-10 scale)



All Australians: how happy are you with the following aspects of your life? (0-10 scale)



Source: LSAY 2009 Cohort (Y09)

3.2 Future orientations: work and beyond

Alumni who took part in ABCN programs are highly engaged in earning and learning, and the majority have clear career direction. How does this relate to their perceptions of life satisfaction and future outlook, in terms of their careers and more broadly?

ABCN alumni reported very high levels of satisfaction across a range of measures related to their work and personal lives. **Overall, 75% of alumni rated their life satisfaction, career prospects and independence very high (8-10) on an 11-point rating scale.** These levels compare very positively with available data for this age-group. While overall life satisfaction for ABCN mentees was broadly comparable to all young Australians (92% vs. 89%), there was a pronounced difference in the

proportion who were very satisfied on each measure.

- ABCN alumni reported rates of very high life satisfaction twice that of the population – 75% – compared with 36% of young Australians aged 25.
- Career prospects were a source of very high satisfaction for 75% of ABCN alumni, compared with 27% of young Australians aged 25.
- Nearly two-thirds, 63%, of alumni reported being very satisfied with their current occupation, compared with 25% of 25-year-olds.
- 65% of alumni were very happy about their future prospects, compared with 35% of young Australians.
- Income was the aspect of life alumni were least

happy with; here, 53% were very satisfied.

- Fewer than 2% were very unhappy (0-2) on any measure, except career prospects. Here, 3% rated themselves very unhappy.

The proportion of ABCN alumni who were very satisfied with their current occupation, whether work, study or home duties, closely matched the proportion who are currently in the kind of job they would like as a career – 62%. Around one fifth of alumni did not consider their current work as a long-term option. However, the majority were positive about their career prospects, 86%, suggesting that even among those who are still working towards securing meaningful work, there is a high degree of confidence in their ability to do so.

3.3 Building a future-proof skillset

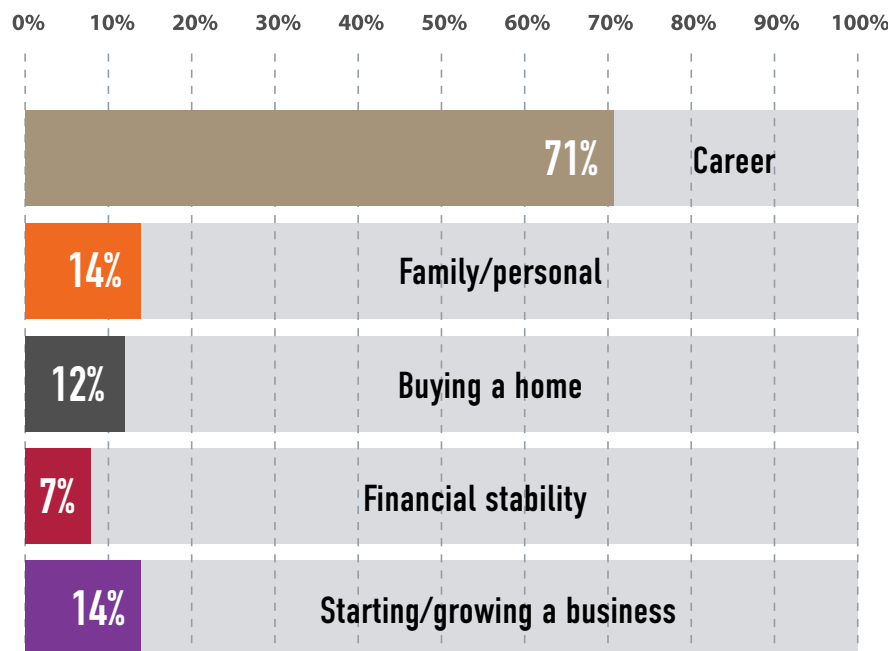
Looking ahead to the next stage of their adult lives, career goals are the clear priority for the majority of alumni, 71% naming this as the aspect of life they most hope to see change in over the next five years. Around one in six identified business goals – starting or developing one – as their priority.

The majority of those surveyed saw a pathway for career development through advancing in their current occupation (if not their current job). Around a third planned to diversify, either moving into a new sector or role.

While **62% of alumni were currently in the type of job they would like to have as a career**, 22% were not. In a few cases, alumni were at a transitional stage, for example, finishing teacher training, relocating, or in a casual job while they completed a post-graduate course.

How do alumni anticipate they will continue to develop their skills to meet the demands of a transforming workplace?

Where alumni outlined plans for career progression, this was often with a view to management and leadership roles. Two main routes emerged as pathways to attaining these goals: formal training and upskilling, or progression in their current roles.



OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, IN WHICH ASPECT(S) OF LIFE DO YOU HOPE TO SEE MOST CHANGE?

Leadership and management skills

Alumni saw a clear route to career progression through moving into roles which called increasingly on team-leadership or management capabilities. These alumni typically planned to stay in the sector or role in which they currently worked.

'I want to diversify my skills and make myself more transferable within the financial services industry in general. I've been looking at team leadership roles. I am looking to develop my management skills, that's

something I'm passionate about. I'd love to develop into operational management, or project management. If I can't go up, I'd rather go sideways, into a different industry. Maybe compliance and risk. Or retail banking I wouldn't mind.' **Male, 25**

'They're expanding our department here, and they've told me to look out for the leadership role in that. So that would be cool. I think it's a quality I have, after being asked to be a manager at Hungry Jack's at 19.' **Female, 26**

Training and study

Most alumni who took part in interviews intended to undertake further training in the short- to medium-term future, some vocational, others a graduate degree, e.g. MBA, or study in a new field, e.g. law.

'I do plan on doing my MBA but, I'm a little young. If you do it back to back with uni, you don't have the opportunity to apply all the things you're going to learn in your MBA in the workplace.' **Male, 26**

A smaller proportion were still intending to complete study or training that would support them in changing career direction:

'I am wanting to finish my degree in Computer Science and hopefully move into that field for work.' **Male, 25**

Mentoring

Ongoing mentoring in the workplace, i.e. not only at the point of transitioning from study to work, was something of enduring value to alumni who had had this opportunity. They typically saw it as playing a key role in their future career development. Formal mentoring relationships were the exception; where alumni referred to workplace mentoring, they were generally referring to ad hoc arrangements that had evolved from individual initiatives, from both alumni and managers.



'Once you get into your field if you have someone who can help you, it's an amazing experience. I wish everyone could have it. You have to put your pride aside, you're not great out of uni and you need that guidance.' **Male, 25**

'One of the biggest benefits is having mentors, whether it's formal or informal, reaching out to people every so often. Someone more senior than you can give you that perspective on what they think you should be doing. Nobody knows everything.' **Male, 26**

Some alumni had also taken on the role of mentoring younger staff, e.g. new graduates, and valued the reciprocal benefit – and learning opportunities – that this role offered:

'The flip side also deepens. Speaking to people that are more junior, fresh out of uni, because they have new ideas and ways of doing things.' **Male, 26**

Returning to work

Among those alumni who gave their current occupation as being home-based with children, full- or part-time, future career plans focused on transitioning back into work. The goal of starting a business, perhaps to allow for flexibility, was particularly prevalent among these – female – alumni.



Starting a business

Almost one in six alumni had their sights set on developing a business venture as the next stage of their working lives. Their sectors spanned design and marketing, retail, financial services and childcare. A small minority were already business owners, whose **aspirations** were typically to grow their enterprise:

'I hope to expand my business and run a bigger team, and help people find their dream jobs!' **Female, 25**

Developing a second income stream in addition to their main occupation was a second driver for alumni who identified business-owning as a medium-term goal.

“It is not expected that you know absolutely everything, but what is desired is that you have a hunger to learn, are humble, can take constructive criticism on board and can honestly reflect on your own work. Critical thinking feeds into this as well, in that you need to be able to critically and objectively think about your own approaches and work, as well as that of others, in order to be able to learn effectively.’ **Female, 25**

3.4 Re-thinking success and failure

In the decade since they left school and embarked on their post-school journeys, how have alumni’s notions of what it means to succeed or fail changed?

Alumni without exception described a shift in perceptions (in interviews), with a clear leaning towards expanded views of success, shaped by their years of study and work to date. A commonly held view was that success is not a discrete category into which outcomes and achievements can easily be sorted:

'I've changed my ideas about success and failure. When you're in high school it's either you make it or you don't. Now I see you only fail when you stop trying. It sounds really corny.' **Male, 25**

Alumni articulated a definition of success that was based less on individual achievements and **more concerned with the ongoing pursuit of their aspirations**, both career-related and personal, despite setbacks.

'I used to ascribe success as how much you earn, what you do. But that's changed. It may be self-development. Success is not always visible to others. I think for me, it's more the increment of effort that you put in. And that's when it compounds and then it is less of a binary thing.' **Male, 24**

The view above, while prevalent, was not the only shift in thinking about success that alumni described. Forging an early career pathway had, for some, the effect of continually **raising the bar on their aspirations** and expectations:

'If I go back to high school, my definition of success was a lower bar, e.g. getting into university and having an office job and that was it. And then as you get a bit older, your definition of success becomes making \$100K, and then you re-evaluate: I want to become a consultant. Looking back, everything was just a stepping stone.' **Male, 26**

CASE STUDY: “I loved the interaction with professionals. My parents were not in a corporate setting.”

Kim Quinones

Age: 24

Profession: Data & digital consultant

Location: Victoria



Overview

Taking part in the *Aspirations* program made an immediate impression on Kim Quinones, 24, while at Lalor Secondary College, Victoria. ‘I loved being in the corporate city. I just loved the interaction and being with professionals. We were taken to a lot of different offices. And I’ve always seen myself in that office, in the office setting. I think it also gave me

exposure to how people interact in that setting, because that’s not really something I would have learned since my parents were not in a corporate setting.’



Gaining career direction while studying

After school, Kim studied for a degree in Information Systems at RMIT. The internships she completed as part of her degree provided her with an opportunity to utilise the skills she gained and clarify her career pathway. ‘It was really interesting to apply technology and all the elements of that into the business world, bringing whatever I studied into my work.’ Kim also identified an opportunity to develop her internship further: ‘I took the initiative to write a proposal to the CEO to basically give me a job as their Salesforce co-ordinator. So I turned my internship into a part-time role.’ Her successive internships provided further valuable exposure: ‘I really understood what I wanted to do, from having that technical business analyst and junior project manager role.’



Early career

After graduating, Kim began her career in the corporate world. ‘One of the companies we visited back when I was in Year 9 was KPMG. Little did I know a few years after that I’d get the opportunity to start my career at KPMG.’ During her early career, Kim also became an advocate of women in STEM careers.

‘I became very vocal about initiating women in STEM programs at KPMG. And more generally, how can we drive women into STEM, and how can we drive more female students to apply for STEM courses?’



Balancing soft skills with technical skills

Kim remains keen to continue learning: ‘I’m always thinking, how can I challenge myself? And how can I put myself in a situation where it’s scary, but I learn? Communication has been a big part of that.’ She says soft skills complement hard skills: ‘In terms of understanding requirements and designing solutions, soft skills definitely play a big part as well as technical skills.’



Future Focus

Kim is now working as a Senior Data and Digital Consultant for a data analytics consultancy, Avanade. ‘If I reflect on it, I have ABCN to thank for helping me kickstart these skills and exposure at such a young age as it enabled me to be prepared for the future.’

We learnt so many things that are applicable to the professional world, like an elevator pitch, networking and presenting – skills I’ve carried with me all the way from school to my career. The program influenced me to aim high, believe in myself and set goals.’

4.

Insights



How have alumni applied and built on the core skills and capabilities that their ABCN participation equipped them with in their post-school careers?

Exploration of pathways and careers post-school among alumni was widespread (half had changed their intended pathway) and can be ongoing into alumni's early twenties. A foundation of skills and traits developed through ABCN participation – interview techniques, teamwork, interpersonal skills, personal confidence – had contributed to alumni's ability to negotiate these transitional years, often combining work and study.

These findings correspond with those of a recent evaluation of ABCN's impact among students in the medium term, i.e. high-school students who had participated in programs in the past three years. Among these Year 8-12 students, three clear domains of impact were evident, broadly grouped into the two following categories: Pathways, Enterprise and Life skills. **The consistency of evidence between these two studies suggests that supporting young people at the point of planning their post-school pathways can produce significant benefits enduring into young adulthood.**

The majority of alumni pointed to a clear direction for their emerging careers; nearly two thirds (62%) are already in the kind of job they intend to pursue longer-term. There is some discernible difference between their approaches to career management. Two broad distinctions emerged:

- Alumni who are portfolio-builders, i.e. who are consciously building key enterprise skills, both technical and soft, with a view to future career mobility
- Alumni who are direction-focused, whose primary objective is advancing their career in their current job or sector through further training and/or promotion

What is common among both groupings is a focus on developing transferable skills – particularly leadership and management skills – that will afford them the best chance of responding to future opportunities (and challenges). Demonstrating an active learning disposition arose as a key personal trait alumni considered necessary to succeed in the world of work.

What are the capabilities ABCN alumni believe necessary to thrive in the fast-transforming economy for future-proofing their skills and career management? How do they regard the role of employers?

Alumni are realistic about the fast-evolving terrain of the labour market, with its requirements of agility and adaptability. Most described plans to further upskill, and few were solely reliant upon their current employers as the provider of these training opportunities. While the drive to build strong/advanced 21st century skills was more characteristic of those in technical or digital spheres, most alumni placed greater emphasis on developing their capabilities to lead and manage teams in jobs similar to the ones they were currently in.

The dominant narrative on the future of work emphasises the importance of a range of broad employability or 'generic' skills, often soft skills, including problem-solving, creativity, analytical thinking and collaboration. Some experts, however, argue that employability skills, rather than being truly generic, are learned and applied in specific industry or occupational roles, and that **their transferability is limited.**

Skills such as problem-solving, creativity, collaboration would **require employees to gain domain-specific or professional expertise in order for these capabilities to have full value.** Speaking to this, very few alumni voiced plans for future career change that involved wholesale retraining or occupational change.



The 'seven-careers-in-a-lifetime' adage, as understood by alumni, seemed more a process of continuous learning, adaptation and evolution than career-switching. (For example, alumni were contemplating a move from early childhood to aged-care management, or from an industry IT role to an IT consultancy role).

While alumni are labour-market savvy, they appear not to regard themselves purely as flexible labour units responding to demand-led conditions. A substantial proportion have entrepreneurial aspirations, whether to start a business or invest, often as a sideline. These plans often arose from a desire to insulate themselves against future shocks (e.g. COVID-19, economic downturn) or precarious employment.

There is a high degree of optimism towards their future careers and lives among ABCN alumni. Few, if any, expressed concern about the impact of technological change on future demand for jobs. Concerns about the future of work were more likely to stem from job insecurity and the high cost of housing.

What does the research suggest about the effectiveness of business mentoring?

The strong and lasting impression ABCN mentors made on students in the programs stood out as a key finding of the research. As an experience that provided

students with educational and career development support, role modelling and guidance, sometimes in a single personal connection, mentors fulfilled a unique role in alumni's school years.

Over the last few decades, youth mentoring has gained increasing popularity as an intervention tool to promote positive outcomes – educational, social and behavioural – among young people. Research often stresses the link between duration of mentoring and its benefits. However, the findings presented here suggest that focused and structured mentoring **with relatively few contact points can make a significant and lasting difference to young people's lives**. Alumni's retention of key learnings – attitudinal and behavioural – acquired from their mentors spoke to the effectiveness of the ABCN model of career mentoring.

While not all young people benefit uniformly, for a significant proportion, in-school mentoring contributed to profound and lasting changes to their future horizons. Among the minority who recalled low impact from

participating in ABCN programs, a typical reason given was that they were already highly engaged in school and/or had a clear post-school pathway. A small number could not clearly recall the program or had only partially attended.

It is plausible that alumni who agreed to take part in this study were among the more engaged in their post-school careers and that those who were faring less well were more reluctant to participate.

Over half of interviewed alumni had gone on to seek out further mentoring opportunities (initially as mentees), indicating that their early exposure to mentoring through ABCN had embedded its value and benefit as a tool of choice in their emerging professional lives. Notably, all of these alumni were university graduates, working in professional roles (or still training). Whether their post-school study and work choices had facilitated their access to further mentoring is hard to determine; however, the cumulative benefit, from alumni's perspectives, was clear.

CONCLUSIONS

In tracing the early career pathways of ABCN alumni, the research has provided evidence that business-led mentoring while at school can have far-reaching benefits. ABCN's GOALS and *Aspirations* programs supported students to make critical decisions about their post-school options, while laying a foundation of essential 'gateway' skills for navigating transitions into post-school study and work.

The rapports alumni formed with their mentors, and the exposure to a corporate environment, were instrumental, lending real and lasting value to the learnings alumni gained. Alumni continued to translate techniques and learnings from their ABCN mentors to their developing careers, 10 years on.

1. Early cultivation of enterprise skills supported alumni in navigating the post-school world, facilitating entry into the world of work. ABCN alumni showed very high levels of engagement in earning and learning compared to their peers. Some evidence points to these skills e.g. problem-solving, teamwork, communication being key employability skills, ahead of technical skills, for entry-level positions.

2. Transitions from education into jobs that alumni consider satisfying may be extended and non-linear; however, alumni continued to build key employability skills (e.g. teamworking, interpersonal skills) during these periods and to gain career direction.

3. Career mobility experienced by alumni is high, driven by both individual aspiration and a rapidly transforming economy. A strong learning disposition is considered an essential attribute for career longevity by alumni across occupations and sectors.

4. Alumni are careers driven, often highly motivated, and describe clear aspirations, usually in their current sectors or occupations. Most have plans to undertake further training or upskilling. Few, at this stage, are contemplating major occupational shifts.

In their emerging careers, alumni see a rebalancing of skill domains e.g. technical skills increasingly draw on a range of enterprise skills, including leadership and management capabilities.

5. In addition to a high level of engagement in work and/or training, alumni's high life satisfaction ratings – across a range of measures including career, independence, future prospects – attest to a highly developed sense of agency and self-efficacy.

Alumni's interaction with ABCN mentors is key to the lasting impact of programs.

6. The lasting benefits alumni attributed to ABCN programs point to the efficacy of focused and structured mentoring, with relatively few contact points. Alumni's retention of key learnings – attitudinal and behavioural – acquired through interactions with their mentors spoke to the effectiveness of the ABCN model.

7. Early experience of mentoring among students from low-SES backgrounds may help establish a mentoring mindset, pre-disposing young people to actively seek mentoring support in forging their longer term careers.



CASE STUDY: “The program helped me to do two things: networking and understanding people.”



Mohammad Hadi

Age: 24

Profession: Post-graduate dental surgery student

Location: Victoria



Building a pathway through networking

‘Learning to connect with someone, whether it’s professional, social, career orientated, that’s the first thing I took on. Even getting to university from Year 12 wasn’t a straight road, because I didn’t end up doing well. I had to build up the pathway to get to where I am.’

While completing his undergraduate degree, Mohammad drew on the networking skills acquired through GOALS and *Aspirations* to decide his future direction. ‘I did a lot of networking with past students, and I took on a few mentors as well. They taught me how to essentially tackle the logistics of where you want to take your degree. Because out of our cohort of 85 only two ended up going into medicine.’



Gaining employability skills and regaining focus

A break of three years after graduating, during which Mohammad worked in mobile phone retailing, helped clarify his ambitions. His skill in the intricacies of repairing phones prompted him to rethink his future career. ‘I ended up choosing dentistry because of that job, because it combines engineering, health and science all in one. At the time I was about to be promoted to a retail operation specialist, I got the offer from uni. I chose to pursue the academic route because in the long run, that’s what I’ve been working towards. Not losing sight of that focus, that’s another thing I

learnt from GOALS. You have your immediate goal, a medium goal, and then you have your long-term goal.’

Mohammad has now realised his ambition of embarking on a doctorate in dental surgery. The skills he gained from ABCN’s programs have provided a strong foundation for his success: ‘Goal-setting has been a long-term element that has developed over time to where it got me into the graduate course I’ve always desired.’



Future focus

For Mohammad, what he learned from ABCN’s mentoring programs has had ongoing value: ‘You might not use it straightaway. But there’s a point in your life when you think, what can I do differently? And then you get to think back to that. Looking back, now that it’s been 10 years since the programs, a lot of the lessons I learnt are very applicable to this point in life.’

‘Because there are certain difficult situations I encountered that I thought I never would. But I did. And having that awareness makes it easier to get through different challenges, different scenarios in the future. You also learn that the older you get the less time you have, meaning making the most of all situations to better your future prospects but at the same time, enjoying the little things.’



Overview

Mohammad Hadi, 24, took part in both GOALS and *Aspirations* as a high-school student in Victoria before going to a degree in biomedical sciences at the University of Melbourne. ‘I’d say at the time, I didn’t know what I wanted to do. What the programs essentially helped me to do were two things: networking and understanding people are huge fundamental concepts that I learnt over the two programs. Being able to communicate and understand the environment around me has also heightened my skills for my intended profession.’

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