

Bradfield Senior College evaluation

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We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

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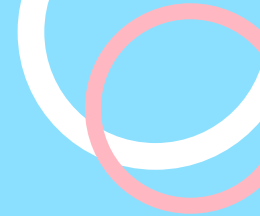
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Executive summary



About Bradfield Senior College

Bradfield Senior College (BSC) is a senior secondary college established in 1993 that offers a non-traditional educational model integrating both vocational education and training (VET) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) courses. It caters to Year 11, Year 12 and HSC Pathways students. The college is jointly funded by the NSW Department of Education (the department) and TAFE NSW. It is located in a purpose-built facility on TAFE NSW's Northern Sydney Institute campus at St Leonards.

The college focuses on extending VET options for students, particularly those interested in pursuing careers or further study in creative industries. Focal subject areas and/or areas of teacher expertise include performing arts, design and visual arts, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and business and service industries. BSC provides an adult-style learning environment offering personalised and project-based learning experiences that prepare students for the workplace.

The evaluation

This evaluation was a recommendation from the department's review of BSC in 2018 (NSW Department of Education 2018) which found little evidence to conclude on the impact on student outcomes. The evaluation was required to reference statistically similar schools and be completed before the current funding agreement ends.

The Evaluation and Effectiveness (E&E) unit in the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) conducted the BSC evaluation to address the question: What is the impact of the BSC educational model on student wellbeing, engagement and learning outcomes?

A convergent parallel mixed methods evaluation methodology was used where E&E gathered qualitative and quantitative data in parallel and integrated it during the interpretation and reporting stages of the research. Data was obtained from:

- in-depth interviews with students (n=18)
- focus groups and interviews with BSC staff (n=12)
- a survey of current students (n=159)
- surveys undertaken by BSC of current students (2022), past students (alumni) (2016 to 2021) and parents (2017 to 2022)
- school enrolment data (2017 to 2021)
- system administrative data (such as NAPLAN, NCCD, TAFE data, RoSA, HSC)
- existing datasets: Tell Them From Me (TTFM) Student Survey (2019 and 2021), NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey (2020 and 2021).

BSC's unique characteristics and educational model meant that a suitable and comparable public school could not be identified. Instead, we constructed a virtual comparison group in which we matched 629 recent BSC students with 629 recent students in other NSW Government schools, using demographic, academic and disability datasets. We used this counterfactual group to compare outcomes such as retention, HSC completion and ATAR eligibility.

The evaluation was limited by several factors, including:

- the significant disruption to schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- the lack of a direct comparison school
- the necessary use of aggregated system data
- inability to compare attendance data, particularly in constructing the counterfactual group.

Planning for the evaluation commenced in the second half of 2021, data collection concluded in March 2023 and this report was finalised in April 2024.

Evaluation findings

To what extent has BSC improved student wellbeing?

For this evaluation, we examined student social and emotional wellbeing as defined by the American Psychological Association (2018) and reflected in the NSW Wellbeing Framework for Schools (2015).

The evaluation found that for many BSC students and parents, the college provided a safe environment to connect and learn. For many this was a significant change when compared to their experience at previous schools.

In relation to social wellbeing, the evaluation found that:

- **Compared to their previous schools, students generally felt more socially connected and experienced more positive peer interactions.** Not only did many students build friendships and feel included (some for the first time), the friendships developed at BSC were often sustained after leaving the college.
- **Students reported experiencing less bullying than at their previous schools.** While the college may not be completely bullying-free, BSC students were significantly less likely than their NSW Government school peers to report experiencing bullying.
- **Students have more positive relationships with their teachers at BSC compared to their previous schools and compared to other NSW Government school students.** BSC teachers were praised for their support and encouragement, ability to cater to student strengths and needs, and advocate for students when required.
- **Students feel a stronger sense of acceptance and belonging in the BSC community compared to their previous schools.** The college was often described as a community that embraced young people who previously felt excluded because of their sexuality, neurodiversity, mental health conditions or otherwise not fitting into mainstream schools.

- **Students feel well supported and cared for because BSC prioritises their wellbeing, facilitates exploration of who they are and adopts a holistic educational approach.** Many students and parents felt grateful and relieved that they found a school that focused on student wellbeing, interests and potential, rather than academic performance and maximising HSC marks.

In relation to emotional wellbeing, the evaluation found that:

- **Students experience more positive thoughts and feelings compared with their previous schools.** Many students reported feeling happier after moving to BSC.
- **Students feel a stronger sense of self and, to some extent, optimism.** Students and parents identified improved emotional development and self-understanding and being more valued for who they are since moving to BSC. TTFM recorded a decline in student optimism across the board between 2019 and 2021. While optimism levels are quite low for everyone, the decline was greater amongst students at BSC than for students at other NSW Government schools. Conversely, a number of students revealed in interviews and surveys that their futures looked brighter since their move to BSC.
- **For some students, the move to BSC has been ‘life-changing’** with reported reduced suicidal thoughts and at-risk behaviour and improved vision for their future since arriving at the college.

These findings are important considering the high prevalence of disabilities and mental health conditions among BSC students. Many students choose to attend BSC due their belief that their current schools inadequately address their mental health concerns.

To what extent has BSC improved student engagement in learning?

For our analysis we adopted Newmann’s definition of student engagement: ‘the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote’ (Newmann 1992:12).

Analysis of our quantitative and qualitative data sources revealed mixed findings for student learning engagement. For example, of the 7 TTFM indicators associated with engagement in learning, BSC students scored lower than their school peers in relation to perseverance, attendance, effort and homework behaviour, but higher in positive behaviour and interest and motivation. However, the reasons for these results are not known. That is, we do not know if BSC students’ results are an improvement on results from Years 9 or 10 (considering many students move to BSC when they feel low levels of engagement), or if the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions were greater on BSC students given their higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to the general school population. Results on engagement in learning for all students in NSW Government schools and BSC were quite low.

Alternatively, the tenor of the qualitative and internal survey results was generally very positive, with participants giving various examples of improved engagement. Considering the contradictions in the messages from the data, specific findings in relation to engagement in learning were:

- **The shift to BSC resulted in re-engagement for many students who were at risk of dropping out of school.** For some students, remaining at their previous school was not a sustainable option and for others, the option to move to another NSW Government school was limited by a poor attendance, engagement and/or academic record.
- **Compared with their previous school experiences, BSC students indicated they felt more engaged in learning and generally enjoyed school more.** Reasons for this include satisfaction with the adult learning environment, additional subject offerings such as a variety of VET courses, reduced stress around grades and a greater focus on facilitating the next stage, and improved social relationships, feelings of acceptance and mental health.
- Anecdotal insights from interviews and focus groups suggest that **attendance improved for some BSC students.** However, this has not been confirmed by other sources of evidence available for this evaluation. Although we know the student attendance rates at BSC, we do not have information on students' attendance rates before they moved to the college. TTFM shows that self-reported attendance is lower for BSC students than for their NSW Government school peers. While the attendance of some students may have improved since moving to BSC, others continue to attend sporadically, especially those with significant mental and/or other health issues. The potentially disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions on already vulnerable students with mental health conditions should also be considered.
- **BSC students report increased positive academic engagement behaviours compared to their previous school, such as feeling/being more productive, more motivated, and submitting better quality work.** BSC students also scored better than their NSW Government school peers in the TTFM survey on positive classroom behaviours such as obeying school rules, listening to the teacher, participating in class and not being disruptive. However, a few comments in the BSC surveys suggested that disruptive behaviour by a small minority of students may not always be managed well in the classroom and can be disruptive to learning.

In summary, the data is inconclusive at a system level as to the impact of BSC on student engagement in learning. The data records both positive and negative results relative to NSW Government schools. However, we have no information on what student engagement was like before the move to BSC, except for what students and parents told us in our qualitative sample: according to students and parents, BSC has helped to re-engage students who have become disengaged and/or are at risk of dropping out and has positively impacted students' levels of motivation, interest, attendance and classroom behaviour.

To what extent has BSC improved student academic outcomes?

The evaluation evidence suggests that students who moved to BSC did about as well as their government school peers in terms of HSC completion. Fewer of them were eligible for an ATAR, but this is not so much an indicator of academic success or an indicator of post-school ambitions (an ATAR is only required by those wishing to go to university in the first year after completing the HSC). When it comes to VET outcomes, BSC students outdid their government school peers in terms of participation and had higher completion rates than the NSW VET system more broadly.

However, HSC and VET completion rates only reflect one aspect of what might be considered indicators of successful schooling.

The second part of this chapter shifts to examine ‘successful schooling outcomes’ which provides a more detailed examination of schooling success. We use the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (COAG 2019) to define successful schooling outcomes, which identifies key attributes of a successful schooling experience. Our findings in relation to 4 key outcome areas are summarised as:

- **Staying at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway.** We know that the worst outcome for students is to leave secondary education without a viable alternative pathway. Many students who come to BSC have previously been at risk of leaving school. BSC has been successful at retaining students until they graduate or move to training or employment. Indeed, very few BSC students drop out of a career pathway – about 90% either graduate, choose to study elsewhere or move to employment. In recent years, BSC has reached Year 11 to Year 12 retention rates similar to NSW Government schools and the matched comparison group.
- **Developing aspirations and clear goals towards a future career.** We found that typically, BSC students had high expectations of finishing Year 12, could see themselves going to university or TAFE, and had similar levels of academic confidence and resilience as other NSW Government school students. Further, responses from students and parents in interviews and surveys indicated that the college had a positive impact on its students who were often previously unmotivated or disengaged young people who were at-risk of dropping out of school.
- **Achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment.** Not all students aspire to enter university. This is particularly the case at BSC where the focus is on preparing students for a range of potential pathways, with a particular focus on vocational preparedness, particularly in creative fields. We found that BSC Year 12 students complete their HSC at similar rates to students in NSW Government schools. About half of BSC students also graduate with at least one VET qualification. Current and past BSC students often felt that the move to BSC improved their academic results because they re-engaged with learning and were able to access subjects that were more aligned with their interests.
- **Transitioning to a planned post-school destination.** We found that a very high percentage of BSC students achieved the goal of transition to further education, training or employment (74% in 2020 and 90% in 2021). These percentages are higher than for students in NSW Government schools.

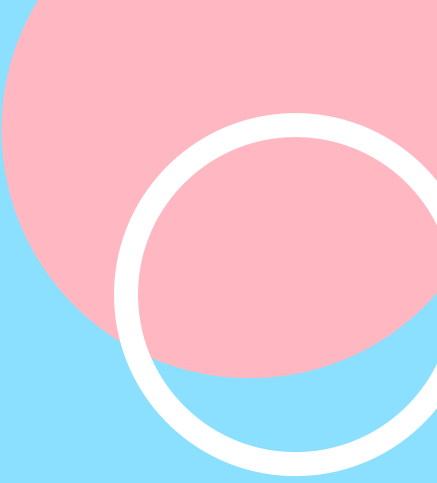
The influence of school climate on student outcomes

The role of school climate is an important influence on student outcomes. School climate refers to the character of school life that reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organisational structures (Cohen et al. 2009). BSC provides a school climate that supports safety, respectful relationships, supportive teaching and learning, and a structure and environment that creates a sense of belonging and provides adequate materials. This has contributed to improved wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes for several of its students.

- **Safety.** BSC's approach has fostered a sense of physical and emotional safety, a sense of acceptance and belonging, and improved mental health outcomes. Physical and emotional safety is a priority at BSC and the college has implemented numerous strategies to ensure students are confident that they will be treated respectfully and safe from bullying, discrimination and exclusion. Strategies for promoting safety include reinforcement of the Bradfield Cultural Principles, universal conflict resolution training and education about cyberbullying, use of restorative practice and mediation practices, and transparent enforcement of the TAFE Student Conduct and Discipline Policy.
- **Teaching and learning.** The teaching and learning environment at BSC is effective in supporting students to develop their knowledge and skills in a more autonomous, less hierarchical environment. Highly selective recruitment of staff, engaging in supportive teaching practices, breaking down traditional teacher–student power dynamics and promoting student autonomy have been instrumental in fostering a positive teaching and learning climate. However, some students may struggle to adapt to a more autonomous learning environment and may require additional help to navigate their transition. Providing opportunities to engage with industry and engage in work experience, training and co-curricular tuition also contribute to a teaching and learning environment that reflects the college community's creative industries and vocational training preferences.
- **Relationships.** The relationship dimension of school climate is prioritised by the college and has a considerable positive effect on BSC students. Areas of particular strength were said to be advocacy at school, social connectedness, respect for diversity, and positive and collegiate relationships between staff and students. These are, of course, areas that schools generally seek to excel in, but in the experience of BSC students, were insufficiently attuned to their needs. Deliberate strategies to support relationships include restorative approaches to conflict and provision of training to students, staff and parents around diversity and conflict resolution.
- **Environment and structure.** Facilities, resources, curricula offerings and timetabling structure are environmental factors at BSC that contribute to establishing a positive school climate to support student outcomes. Features that differ from most students' previous schools include a wider range of creative arts offerings, the ability to study multiple creative arts subjects requiring major works, and specialised facilities for creative arts subjects. BSC also connects students to industry partners to better prepare them for post-school pathways.

Conclusion

The evaluation found that BSC contributes to improved engagement in learning for most of its students and appears to have a positive impact on their wellbeing outcomes. BSC also appears to be positively impacting academic outcomes, particularly for those who might have been at risk of disengaging from school. Most students stay at BSC long enough find a potential career pathway, are motivated and aspire to a specific career goal, have developed key skills and knowledge needed to pursue the career of their choice and successfully transitioned to a post-school destination in further education, training or employment.



1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the evaluation

This report presents the findings of the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation's evaluation of Bradfield Senior College (BSC) undertaken from 2022 to 2023. BSC is a senior high school that uses a non-traditional educational model.

The evaluation follows CESE's comprehensive review of the school in 2018. The Bradfield Senior College Review (NSW Department of Education 2018) considered the following questions:

- How effectively is BSC preparing students for higher education, training and/or work?
- How does the BSC model compare with other programs and services offered by the department or TAFE NSW for senior students wanting a vocational pathway or with complex needs?
- What will be the impact on future students if the department and/or TAFE NSW do not continue to fund BSC?
- What governance arrangements would meet the expectations of both funding parties? Are there any current barriers or enablers in the relationship between the department and TAFE NSW that should be noted?

The review found that the majority of BSC students completed their study and transition to further study or work. BSC students were also engaged, had a positive sense of belonging and experienced less bullying. It also raised a few concerns around matters such as perseverance levels, effort and truancy. However, the review found there was insufficient evidence to conclude on the impact on student outcomes and recommended that the department evaluate BSC with reference to statistically similar schools, before the expiry of the current funding agreement.

Thus, this evaluation was initiated to examine the impact of BSC on student outcomes, specifically wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes, focusing on the period from 2017 to 2022.

1.2 Structure of this report

Chapter 1 provides a descriptive background of BSC, looking at the college focus, what the college aims to offer, and who the students are. Chapter 2 sets out the evaluation design and methods. The 3 chapters that follow present the evaluation findings on wellbeing outcomes (Chapter 3), engagement outcomes (Chapter 4) and academic outcomes (Chapter 5). Our key evaluation insights and conclusions are presented in Chapter 6.

1.3 Bradfield Senior College

BSC provides students in Years 11 and 12 with a non-traditional alternative to mainstream secondary schools. The college is jointly funded by the NSW Department of Education (the department) and TAFE NSW and is located in a purpose-built facility at TAFE NSW's St Leonards campus. BSC caters for Higher School Certificate (HSC) Pathways students and provides an adult-style learning environment that is designed to encourage a personalised and work-oriented environment for students. Students can complete traditional HSC and TAFE certificates or TAFE vocational courses over a period of between 2 and 5 years as part of their study. The college aims to provide students with the opportunity to begin career training as part of their HSC, combine part-time work and study, complete their learning in an adult-oriented, work focused environment, and take responsibility for their own learning.

A key feature of BSC is its integrated delivery of both VET and HSC courses. The educational approach offered by BSC was originally established in 1993 to extend VET options for young people. Since the early 2000s, BSC has bolstered its focus on the creative industries to meet student demand in this area.

Staff are employed by TAFE NSW and accredited by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) for the delivery of HSC courses. The HSC courses are compliant with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) for vocational courses and provide students with the flexibility to select a broad range of courses that align with their interests and post-school goals.

1.3.1 Courses of study

Focal subject areas and teacher expertise include performing arts, design and visual arts, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and business and service industries. Although the BSC structure and resources are geared toward students pursuing vocational study and careers in the creative industries sector, students can engage in a pattern of study that ensures Australian Tertiary Academic Rank (ATAR) eligibility for university entry.

The college offers 10 different TAFE vocational HSC courses and more than 20 HSC courses across a broad range of key learning areas (KLAs).

1.3.2 Timetable structure for students

The timetable structure at BSC also differs from most traditional secondary schools. For each course a student is enrolled in, they will have 2 scheduled sessions per week running for either 1.5 or 2 hours each. Classes run between 9 am and 5:30 pm every day, although a student's individual timetable will vary depending on class scheduling. Students may have a timetable that sees them start and finish college later in the day or start and finish college early on a particular day. Students may also have a 2-hour gap between their classes.

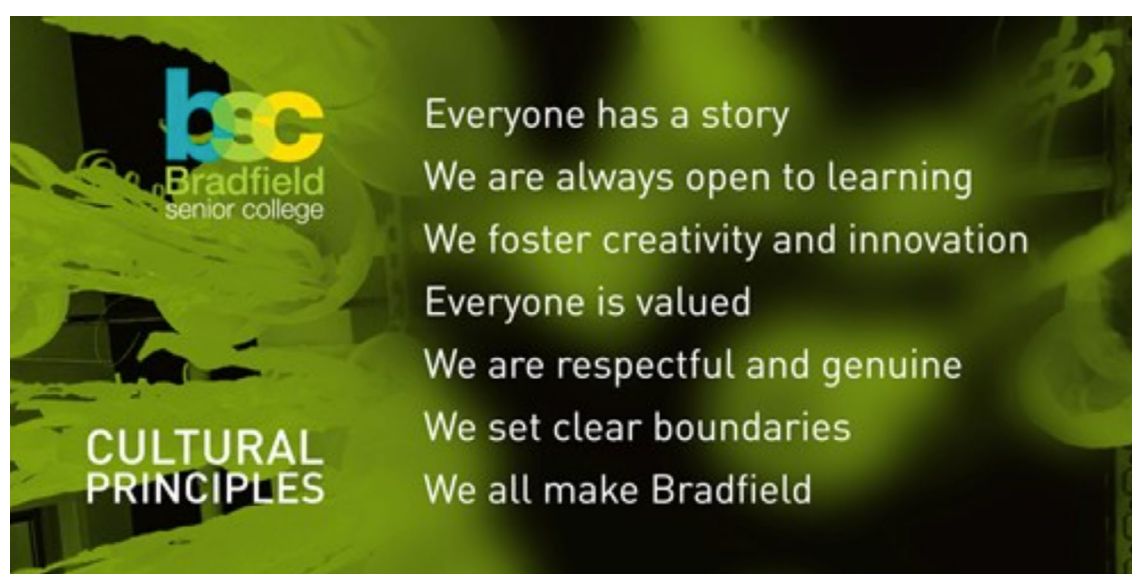
Students are not required to be at the college if they do not have a class, though Year 11 students are not permitted to leave the campus between classes. Where students miss a scheduled class, their parent or carer must inform the college of the absence.

1.3.3 BSC's philosophy and culture

Respect for all members of the BSC community is a strongly held value at the college. The college promotes principles (Figure 1.1) which focus on respect, diversity, creativity and collaboration.

Figure 1.1

The Bradfield Cultural Principles (2022)



Source: Bradfield Senior College

1.3.4 Individualised learning support

The college offers an 'Industry Experience Program' one day per week, where Year 11 students have the opportunity to explore career goal planning, develop interpersonal skills including conflict resolution, resilience and positive thinking, work on their resume, develop a portfolio, gain mock job interview experience, complete a Certificate II Workplace Skills, participate in individual, group and peer mentoring, and gain up to 70 hours of real industry experience.

Support for students during their time at BSC includes a learning centre where students can access teacher support with course work, personal or career counselling and access to a quiet space. BSC also ensures that every student has a Bradfield Individualised Plan (BIP). The BIP provides a clear plan of study to ensure that each student's learning needs are supported and the right learning experiences are provided. The BIP also helps students to explore career options, build on skills and strengths and provides support throughout HSC studies.

Students studying at BSC have access to a range of facilities to support learning, including several studio spaces for music, dance, fashion design and performance courses, photography and media labs, and a workshop to accommodate design and industrial technology courses.

A thorough application process provides the college with an understanding of past schooling experiences and intended goals. The process enables the college to recognise and plan for the individual needs of their students before they arrive at BSC. The college aims to support all students by focusing strongly on mental health and wellbeing. However, a targeted focus on these aspects aims to support those who have experienced bullying, isolation, ill-health and disengagement at previous schools.

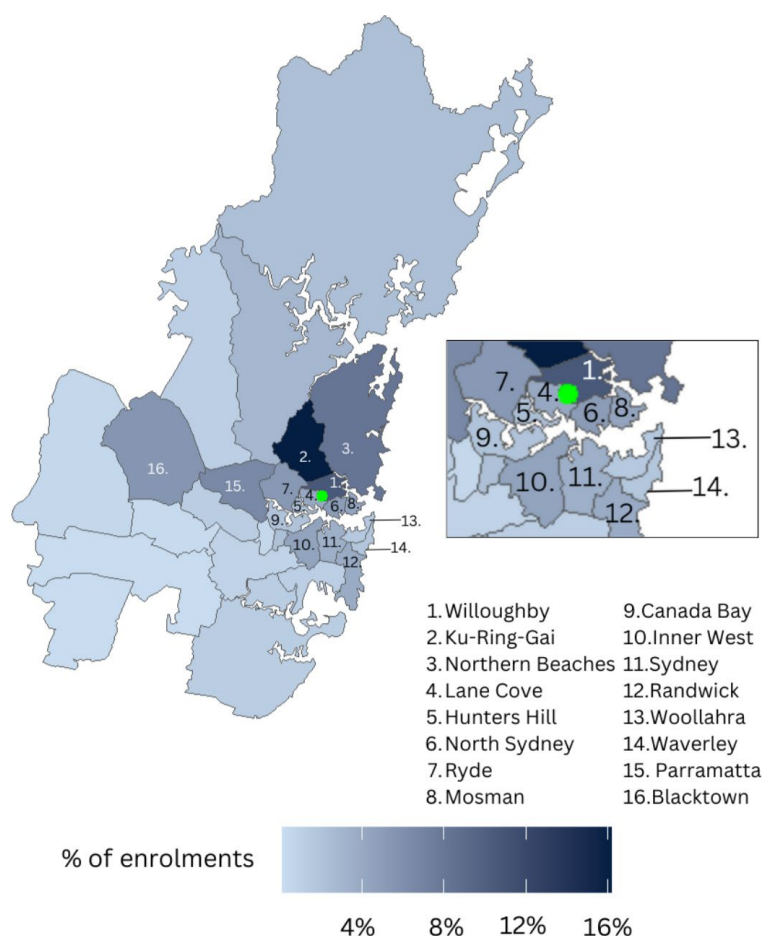
The use of personal development and wellbeing approaches, and the integrated academic and career programs on offer, are developed to aid in fostering educational engagement, positive wellbeing, and attainment of positive academic outcomes and qualifications.

1.3.5 The BSC student cohort profile

Many of the students who attend BSC have specific ambitions, learning preferences and needs. This section provides a more detailed profile of BSC's students from 2017 to 2021 – where they live, what type of schools they came from, demographic characteristics and the reasons why they went to BSC.

Most BSC students live quite close to the college but a few have quite a long daily commute

BSC is located at St Leonards in the Willoughby local government area (LGA). Students are largely from North Sydney and other LGAs close to the college. BSC also attracts students from across the Sydney region, such as from the Blacktown and Parramatta LGAs, with some students commuting around 90 minutes each way as seen in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2**BSC enrolment by Sydney region LGAs**

Source: BSC enrolment data 2017 to 2021

Previous schooling experiences

BSC students are slightly more likely to have attended a government school than a non-government school prior to coming to the college. In 2021 there were 324 students enrolled in BSC and 59% of these students previously attended a government secondary school. BSC also offers individual HSC and VET courses to students who may be enrolled at other schools for their other studies.

Compared to other government school secondary cohorts, BSC students are more likely to identify as female, non-Aboriginal and from an English-speaking background

When comparing the BSC student cohort with student cohorts from other government schools in Sydney and NSW, a significantly lower proportion of BSC students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or come from a language background other than English (LBOTE) (Table 1.1). While BSC has a lower proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students than Sydney overall, we know that in 2021 the proportion of government secondary students in the Northern Sydney region who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander was 0.7%, which is significantly lower than at BSC.

Table 1.1

Proportion of students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or come from a language background other than English (LBOTE) at BSC, in Sydney and in NSW public secondary schools, 2021 to 2022*

Category	Calendar year	BSC students	Sydney public school secondary students	NSW public school secondary students
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	2021	1.9%	3.5%	8.7%
	2022	3.4%	3.6%	8.9%
LBOTE	2021	11.2%	57.3%	36.2%
	2022	9.6%	57.7%	36.9%

*Complete BSC enrolment data provided up to 2021 and 2022

Sources: NSW Department of Education Census, 2021; BSC enrolment data 2021 to 2022

A significantly higher proportion of female than male students attend BSC compared with Sydney and NSW public secondary schools, according to data collected at enrolment (Table 1.2). However, while the department does not record students identifying as non-binary, BSC records over 10% of students as non-binary. The college director also noted that enrolment form data is often completed or influenced by the parent and that a substantial additional proportion of students (possibly up to a further 20% more) would identify as non-binary. Some students later request a change to their records during their studies at BSC.

Table 1.2

The proportion of students who identify as male, female and non-binary at BSC, in Sydney and in NSW public secondary schools, 2021 to 2022*

Gender	Calendar year	BSC students	Sydney public school secondary students	NSW public school secondary students
Female	2021	61.3%	48.6%	48.7%
	2022	60.5%	48.5%	48.6%
Male	2021	28.3%	51.4%	51.3%
	2022	28.2%	51.5%	51.4%
Non-binary**	2021	10.4%	–	–
	2022	11.3%	–	–

*Complete BSC enrolment data provided up to 2021 and 2022

** Note that the NSW Department of Education does not record students identifying as non-binary

Sources: NSW Department of Education Census, 2021; BSC enrolment data 2021 to 2022

BSC has a proportion of students requiring an adjustment for disability

All Australian schools are required to participate in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on an annual basis. The NCCD collects data about school students with disability in Australia who are receiving adjustments in a consistent, reliable and systematic way. The NCCD model relies on the professional judgment of teachers and school teams, based on evidence, to determine the level of adjustment (quality differentiated teaching practice, supplementary, substantial, extensive) provided to students with disability to access and participate in education and the broad category of disability (physical, cognitive, sensory, social/emotional) that is the main driver or focus of the adjustments. The NCCD enables schools, education authorities and governments to better understand the needs of students with disability and how they can be best supported at school. For this evaluation, we used NCCD data of BSC students.

Most students choose BSC because of its environment, subject options and creative focus

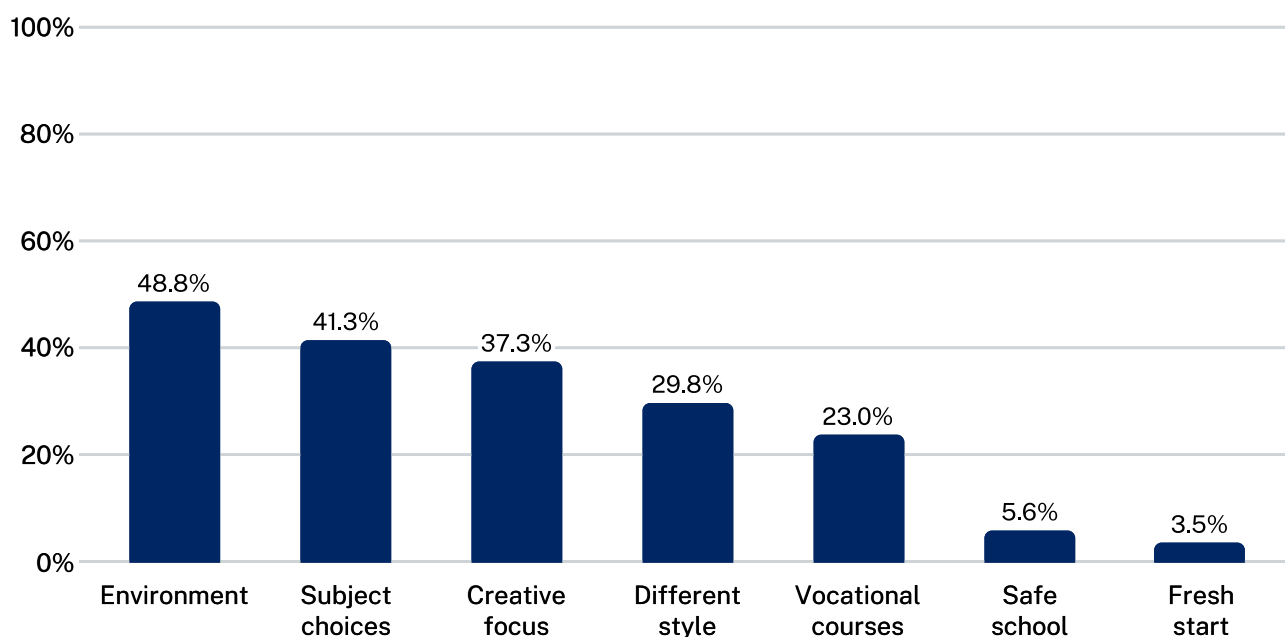
As part of the college application process students are asked to explain their reasons for choosing BSC. Responses showed that for many, the college suits their needs and preferences, which may be due in part to BSC's range of subject types and courses including vocational offerings, staff expertise, or the ability to respond to the learning, developmental and social-emotional needs of diverse students.

The most common reasons are shown in Figure 1.3 (students could provide multiple reasons). 'Environment' is defined as 'the cultural environment – for example, adult learning environment, one that is less hierarchical and is accepting of difference,' while 'different style' is defined as 'the learning environment characterised by project-based and practical learning as opposed to just traditional academic schooling' (BSC Administrator 2023).

Among all students who enrolled from 2019 to 2021 (when data collection was consistent), almost half stated the BSC environment influenced their decision. The college's creative focus, subject options, provision of vocational courses and BSC's 'different style' were also commonly cited reasons.

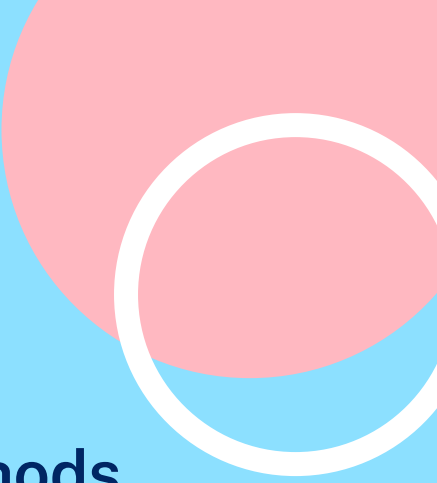
Figure 1.3

The proportions of respondents among all enrolling students (2019 to 2021) who provided the most commonly cited reasons for studying at BSC (multiple responses possible)



Source: BSC enrolment data 2019 to 2021

Enrolment data from the past few years suggests that students who go to BSC tend to look for a career in creative industries and/or require a different style of learning environment in which to study and grow. BSC aims to offer individualised support combined with a wide range of subjects, industry experiences and pathway opportunities. The college's Industry Experience Program, including a major industry-focused collaborative project (colloquially known as 'the Project') at the start of Year 11, is an element that sets BSC apart from other schools' offerings. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, we examine the extent to which the college has been able to cater for the unique needs of these groups, and to promote positive wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes for students.



2 The evaluation design and methods

The evaluation examined the impact of the BSC model on student wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes from 2017 to 2022. Planning for the evaluation started in the latter half of 2021 and data collection ended in March 2023.

2.1 Three key domains are the focus of this evaluation

The program logic in Appendix A outlines how the BSC educational model aims to impact students' wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes. We define the 3 outcome areas as they were applied in our methodology below.

Although we separated these domains to facilitate a structured report, the boundaries are blurry and, at times, aspects of the domains overlap. For example, research showed that engagement in learning and academic achievement are related to student wellbeing (Aulia et al. 2020; Hossain et al. 2023). For our evaluation we adopted the following definitions:

- **Wellbeing** is a critical component of the academic success and overall development of a student. It encompasses building and maintaining relationships and managing emotions, and contributes to good mental health.
- **Engagement** in learning is defined as 'the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote' (Newmann 1992).
- **Academic outcomes** refers to a range of attitudes, skills, and knowledge that, by the end of secondary schooling, prepares a student for productive and satisfying postschooling destinations. Outcomes may include formal qualifications, certifications and awards in addition to moving into further study and obtaining work.

While measures such as standardised tests (including the HSC) were once considered adequate proxies for successful academic outcomes, the changing nature of secondary education, including integration of the VET system at secondary level and other changes, has led us to reconsider what we might mean by 'academic success', particularly at the end of secondary school.

Given the aims of BSC and the student cohort described in Chapter 1 and using the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (the Mparntwe Declaration), we expand the definition of academic success to also focus on ‘successful schooling’ outcomes:

The senior years of schooling should provide all students with high quality advice, support and experiences to make informed choices about their future and smooth the initial transition to further education, training or meaningful employment. (COAG 2019)

At the start of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 we explain the concepts of wellbeing, engagement in learning, and academic outcomes as they related to our findings.

2.2 Evaluation questions

The evaluation questions below were developed in collaboration with the BSC working group, forming the basis for the chosen methods for this evaluation:

- To what extent has BSC improved student wellbeing?
- To what extent has BSC improved student engagement in learning?
- To what extent has BSC improved student academic outcomes?

2.3 Methods

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected to inform an understanding of the impact of the BSC experience on its students. Qualitative data was gathered via interviews, focus groups and open-text responses in the surveys. Quantitative data was gathered via surveys and administrative datasets such as HSC results and other qualifications.

The evaluation aims to determine whether observed differences in student outcomes are due to BSC’s educational model or because the student group composition of BSC is different from that of other schools. Since enrolment at BSC is voluntary, it is likely that students applying for BSC in Year 10 differ systematically from students from other NSW schools.¹

Where possible, we have designed quantitative and qualitative data methods and analysis to facilitate a counterfactual comparison:

Quantitative: Using administrative data, we adopted an ‘exact matching’ approach and did counterfactual analysis to compare BSC students with students from other NSW Government secondary schools who had similar characteristics from 2017 to 2021. A retrospective quasi-experimental research design, using the matching approach, allows us to consider observed differences in selected student outcomes between BSC students (BSC group) and the matched comparison students (comparison group) as being attributable to BSC.

¹ It is difficult to estimate the impact of volunteer bias and the direction of its effect. In the absence of random assignment, it is appropriate to therefore control for selection bias (such as self-selection or referral bias) for unobservable factors correlated with participation.

Where outcome data was only available at the aggregate level, we have also used descriptive statistics to compare the outcomes between BSC students and all NSW Government secondary school students. We used a z-test to compare the proportions of interest between groups.

Qualitative: We asked participants to compare their experiences at BSC with previous school experiences and to envision or speculate about their outcomes had they not transferred to BSC.

Table 2.1 provides an overview of the data sources used for the evaluation and the table in Appendix B shows how the data sources align with the evaluation questions.

Table 2.1

Overview of all data sources

Method	Data source (date of distribution)	Sample size	Response rate
Interviews	Current BSC students (2023)	18	–
	Director (2023)	1	–
Focus groups	Staff members (2023)	11	–
Surveys	BSC Alumni Survey (2022)	110	8%
	BSC Parent Survey of current and past parents (2022)	283	26%
	BSC Year 11 Student Survey (2022)	70	42%
	BSC Year 12 Student Survey (2022)	36	21%
	CESE Student Survey of current BSC students (2022)	159	51.8%
	NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey (2020, 2021)	82 (2020) 80 (2021)	59.8% 50.9%
	Tell Them From Me Student Survey (2019, 2021)	194 (2019) 152 (2021)	66.9% 53.1%
Administrative data	Bradfield enrolment data (2017 to 2021)	–	–
	NAPLAN data (2015–2019) including related demographic individual and school characteristics	–	–
	Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with Disability (2019–2022)	–	–
	BSC TAFE VET qualifications (2017–2021)	–	–
	Record of School Achievement (RoSA) and HSC attainment data (2017–2022) (provided by NESA)	–	–

2.4 Quantitative data sources

Quantitative data was obtained from administrative data routinely collected by the department as well as surveys administered by both CESE and BSC.

2.4.1 Tell Them From Me Student Survey

Tell Them From Me (TTFM) is a suite of surveys conducted annually from 2015 to measure student engagement and wellbeing. The surveys are not compulsory but since 2021, participation in the student and teacher survey is expected in all NSW Government schools. BSC is not required to take part but did so in 2019 and 2021. Student survey data is collected in Term 1 each year. Questions in the survey are not mandatory and respondents may skip any question they choose. Participants are provided with a 5-point agreement scale to record their response for each question. Results showed the percentage of students who indicated a positive response to the item by selecting 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

TTFM data is available only at an aggregate level. Results in this report are given as percentages of BSC students responding against the mean percentages for all Years 11 and 12 students combined in NSW Government schools. The TTFM Student Survey was completed by 194 BSC students in 2019 (response rate: 66.9%) and 152 in 2021 (response rate: 53.1%), the 2 years for which data was analysed for this evaluation. Over 40,000 NSW Government school students in Years 11 and 12 complete the TTFM survey annually with response rates of 54.0% and 64.5% in 2019 and 2021 respectively.

We use confidence intervals (CI) in our TTFM figures in this report. For this report, a 95% CI simply means that if the same survey was conducted multiple times, drawing each time from the population of BSC students or government school students, we would expect 95% of the CI is generated to contain the population's level of agreement. The precision (length) of the 95% CI is marked on each bar or column using a marker (I—) and is impacted by the sample size of each group. The BSC cohort (up to 194 students) is much smaller than the size of the NSW Government school student cohorts (over 40,000). The CI marking for the government school student sample is so narrow that you cannot see it in most TTFM charts. The narrowness is due to the large number of government school students who participated in the survey and the certainty we have about the population's level of agreement.

2.4.2 The NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey

The NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey has been conducted annually since 2014. All NSW students (from government and non-government schools) who left school in the previous calendar year are invited to do the survey. Participants consist of students who finished Year 12 in the previous year (Year 12 completers) and those who left school before completing Year 12 (early school leavers). The latter group includes students who left school in Years 10, 11 or 12. In 2020, 82 former BSC students responded (response rate: 59.8%) and 80 former BSC students responded in 2021 (response rate: 50.9%).

Responses for BSC students were extracted from the complete dataset. Responses were assigned a base weight – the ratio of the population to the number of respondents. Individual weights were adjusted to minimise non-response bias and based on whether students have certain characteristics that influence the likelihood of responding. For more information refer to the [2021 NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey – technical report](#) on the department’s website.

2.4.3 CESE Student Survey

In August 2022, all current BSC students were invited to participate in a survey that aimed to gauge their educational experiences at BSC compared to their previous school. The invitation was sent by email and required students to give their informed consent to participate in the online survey. The survey was designed and conducted by CESE specifically for this evaluation and completed by 159 students: a response rate of 51.8%. Refer to Appendix C for the CESE Student Survey questions.

2.4.4 BSC surveys

The college also distributed 3 surveys in 2022 for the following groups:

- current students in April 2022 (Appendix D for the BSC Student Voice Survey questions)
- parents of students from 2017 to 2022 (Appendix E for the BSC Parent Survey questions)
- former students who left BSC in 2016 to 2021 (Appendix F for the BSC Alumni Survey questions).

The BSC surveys offered the opportunity for respondents to answer some questions in open text fields.

2.4.5 Administrative data

BSC enrolment data from 2017 to 2021 included information on student demographic characteristics, their previous schooling experiences, reasons for studying at BSC and reasons for leaving BSC.

NAPLAN data included student demographic characteristics, information on parents' education, students' NAPLAN participation status and results of BSC and NSW Government secondary school students in 2015 to 2019.

The NCCD dataset includes BSC and NSW Government school students in 2019 to 2022. NCCD enables schools, education authorities and governments to better understand the needs of students with disability and how they can be best supported at school.

The BSC TAFE VET qualifications dataset included information on the enrolments in VET courses and VET qualifications obtained for BSC students in 2017 to 2021.

The RoSA and HSC attainment datasets included data on student status, HSC completion and ATAR eligibility for BSC and NSW Government secondary school students in 2017 to 2022.

2.5 Counterfactual analysis

The counterfactual analysis aimed to assess the impact of BSC on student school engagement and academic achievement. We compared the following academic outcomes between the BSC students and the comparison group:

- Year 12 retention rate
- HSC completion rate
- ATAR eligibility rate.

Year 11 to Year 12 retention rates were calculated to investigate students' progression through year levels. Our choice of the base year level is determined by BSC students starting the college in Year 11. The Year 11 to Year 12 retention rate measures the proportion of students who finished their study in Year 12 in the same school as in Year 11. For this evaluation, the Year 11 to Year 12 retention rate (RR) for school i in calendar year t is defined as:

$$RR_{it} = \frac{x_{it}}{y_{it-1}}$$

where x_{it} is the number of students who were enrolled in Year 11 and finished their Year 12 in school i in calendar year t (retained students), and y_{it-1} is the number of Year 11 students enrolled at school i in calendar year $t - 1$. This measure tracks the retention of individual students.

The sampling frame for counterfactual analysis included 933 BSC students who started college from 2017 to 2021 and all Year 11 NSW Government school students in the same period. A comparison group was identified using an ‘exact matching’ approach to match BSC students with those from NSW Government schools who share the same observed characteristics or attributes.

From the matching, the final sample for counterfactual analysis included 629 BSC students (BSC group) and 629 NSW Government secondary school students with similar characteristics (comparison group). This resulted in a coverage rate of 67.4%, indicating that approximately 2 in 3 BSC students have been successfully matched with students in the comparison group based on exact matching criteria. Table 2.2 details the final sample including matching characteristics and shows that the sample is balanced in terms of the characteristics that were considered.

Table 2.2

Balance table of matching characteristics²

Characteristics	BSC group	Comparison group
Students, n	629	629
ATSI, %	0.5%	0.5%
Female, %	61.2%	63.0%
LBOTE, %	16.8%	17.6%
Birth year, %		
1999	3.7%	3.3%
2000	17.0%	17.3%
2001	20.7%	20.0%
2002	22.7%	21.5%
2003	15.9%	18.4%
2004	14.8%	14.3%
2005	5.2%	5.1%
Major cities of Australia, %	99.5%	99.5%
Year 9 NAPLAN Reading participation rate	92.1%	93.6%
Year 9 NAPLAN Writing participation rate	91.4%	92.8%
Year 9 NAPLAN Numeracy participation rate	90.9%	92.2%

² Matching criteria include indicators of whether students require an adjustment due to a disability. Due to data sensitivity, we do not report the proportions for these characteristics in the table.

Characteristics	BSC group	Comparison group
Year 9 NAPLAN Reading band, %		
Band 5	2.5%	2.4%
Band 6	6.4%	6.2%
Band 7	17.0%	17.0%
Band 8	36.8%	35.3%
Band 9	24.8%	25.3%
Band 10	6.8%	7.5%
Year 9 NAPLAN Writing band, %		
Band 5	9.5%	9.5%
Band 6	16.9%	17.3%
Band 7	22.7%	22.9%
Band 8	26.4%	25.8%
Band 9	11.4%	11.8%
Band 10	5.4%	5.6%
Year 9 NAPLAN Numeracy band, %		
Band 5	2.2%	1.9%
Band 6	6.5%	6.7%
Band 7	25.3%	25.1%
Band 8	36.4%	36.4%
Band 9	15.6%	16.1%
Band 10	6.0%	6.0%

2.6 Qualitative data sources

Considering the unique educational model of BSC and distinct attributes of its students, it was important to explore student engagement, wellbeing and student outcomes using qualitative methods in combination with a quantitative approach. Qualitative data provided an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the student and staff experience of BSC.

Interviews and focus groups were the main sources of qualitative data, supplemented by responses to open-ended survey questions. Qualitative data was only collected from BSC students and not from students at other NSW schools.

2.6.1 Student interviews

Face-to-face student interviews were carried out over 2 days at the college. The questions were designed to explore students' experiences at the college and get information about wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes. The full interview schedule is in Appendix G. Interview topics included:

- the reasons students moved from their previous school to BSC
- why they chose BSC over other options available to them
- their expectations of BSC in terms of how they thought it would be different, and how it would improve their school experience and academic achievement
- how their actual experience compared with their expectations
- goals for the future and the difference they thought that BSC would make to opportunities in the future.

A random sample of 20 current students in 2023 was selected by the executive administrator at BSC: 10 students in Year 11 and 10 students in Year 12. In each year level, 2 students were randomly selected from each alphabet decile (A – B; C – D; E – G; H – J; K – M; N – O; P – R; S – T; U – W; X – Z) of the enrolment list alphabetised by surname.

Of the 20 students, 2 students were unavailable on both interview days. Because of this, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 18 current students at BSC, comprising 9 students in Year 11 and 9 students in Year 12 in the 2023 cohorts. Interviews took 15 to 20 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

By including Year 11 and Year 12 students, we were able to obtain perspectives of both new students for whom the decision to move schools was quite recent, and students who had been at the college for at least one year.

2.6.2 Staff focus groups and interviews

Staff were approached for their views on:

- perceived benefits of students attending BSC
- observed changes in terms of student academic and social engagement, attendance and wellbeing.

The full interview schedule is in Appendix H. In-person focus group discussions were conducted in 2 rounds, each lasting around 60 minutes. These discussions involved a self-nominated sample of staff members representing teaching, welfare and academic support staff. Each focus group included 5 participants. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

2.6.3 College director input

A semi-structured interview (the full interview schedule is in Appendix I) was conducted via MS Teams with the college director where her views on the following topics were explored:

- the perceived need for BSC to exist and why other training and education options are not sufficient
- how the perceived value added by BSC can be measured
- what makes a student suitable or not suitable for the college and the details of the admission process
- how students transition to an independent learning model
- project-based learning
- building the capacity of staff to manage students' mental health issues
- follow-up on issues raised in the staff focus groups.

In addition, the college director provided further clarifications and information on request during the research and reporting phases.

2.6.4 BSC surveys' inclusion of open-ended questions

The college distributed 3 surveys in 2022 to:

- current students
- past students who attended the college between 2017 to 2021
- parents of students between 2017 to 2022.

CESE was invited to contribute to the question bank for these surveys in 2022. We added up to 3 questions in each survey to enhance our understanding of how BSC compared with previous school experiences and to ask participants to speculate on students' educational outcomes if they did not attend BSC.

Responses to open-ended questions from the surveys were included in the qualitative analysis. Response rates to optional open-ended questions were high in all surveys with at least 80% of respondents choosing to write a response.

2.7 Qualitative data analysis

The interview and focus group transcripts were created through the artificial intelligence function when using Microsoft Teams for interview recordings. The transcriptions were verified against audio recordings for accuracy and de-identified. Transcripts were coded manually using Microsoft Excel for ease of indexing and retrieval. Themes and categories were based on the evaluation questions and included the following categories:

- wellbeing
- engagement
- academic outcomes
- positive and negative aspects of BSC.

Responses to open-ended survey questions were grouped into the 3 categories addressed by the evaluation questions, namely wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes. Additional general responses addressing positives and negative aspects of the BSC experience were also assigned to separate groups. Any responses that did not fit the main thematic categories were assigned to a miscellaneous category. The code frame used in other qualitative data sources was replicated, while other themes were post-coded.

2.8 Evaluation scope exclusions

The scope of the evaluation excludes:

- external students studying single courses at BSC who substantively attended a different school
- evaluating the leadership and management approach of BSC
- questions related to staff resourcing at BSC
- funding arrangements for BSC.

2.9 Ethics and limitations

2.9.1 Ethics

BSC is jointly funded by the department and TAFE NSW. The duality of the students' enrolment meant that we did not automatically have access to all BSC student records, nor could we obtain additional data from the students and staff, such as interviews and surveys, without observing additional ethics protocols. To conduct this evaluation, we first obtained ethical approval from Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2202-03-322) in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

Interview information letters, consent forms and the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2202-03-322) Approval are in Appendix J. Please note that the online CESE survey required students to indicate their consent electronically at the commencement of the survey.

2.9.2 Limitations

There are several limitations worth noting in this evaluation which are summarised in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Limitations of this evaluation

Areas of limitation	Explanation
The data collection period was impacted by COVID-19	The administrative data used in this evaluation is from 2017 to 2022. Some datasets are incomplete due to the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic. For example, the TTFM survey was not conducted in 2020 and, while BSC maintained attendance records in 2020 and 2021, attendance was not consistently recorded across all NSW Government schools. This limited the use of attendance as a proxy for engagement in learning.
Lack of direct comparison	BSC operates a unique model and there are no directly comparable schools.
Quantitative data quality	BSC student data is not retained in the department's enrolment and registration number (ERN) system, leading to a lack of availability of consistent student information. BSC has been keeping student data internally using its own internal record management system which was accessed for this evaluation. In the absence of measured data on wellbeing and engagement, the evaluation relied mostly on survey data and perception-based information. This scarcity prevented us from triangulating data from various sources, which could have enhanced the reliability and depth of our analysis. An attempt to undertake a comparative analysis of HSC results (bands) was impractical due to the non-comparability of different HSC courses.
Qualitative data quality	The interview data is self-reported and therefore vulnerable to errors of memory and social desirability bias. For example, student accounts of their experiences, especially at previous schools, were shared from the student's subjective perspective and it is possible that some information may have been reported out of context. It was not possible to corroborate these accounts. Although responses to open-ended survey questions can provide some detail to support the numerical or categorical data, they are generally not regarded as a high-quality qualitative data source. A particular problem is the brevity of most responses, which results in a lack of context.
Survey data	The TTFM survey data was not designed for the purpose of this evaluation, therefore we only used selected items as they applied to the key domains addressed in the evaluation. Further, the TTFM data is aggregated data for the college only and cannot identify individual students. Comparisons can only be against the government school mean for Years 11 and 12.

Areas of limitation	Explanation
Survey data (continued)	The TTFM survey data was collected in 2019 and 2021, spanning before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that in 2020 and 2021, NSW students experienced learning disruptions due to the pandemic, leading to classes being delivered online, modified or cancelled. These changes likely influenced students' perceptions of learning conditions but the exact impact remains unmeasurable. An additional survey was conducted with BSC students to gather insights on wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes. The survey was unique to BSC and not distributed elsewhere which means there can be no comparison made with other students.
The 'senior effect'	We use the term 'senior effect' (our term) to represent a theory we developed in recognition of a common occurrence students experience as they transition from Year 10 into Years 11 and 12 – that is, that learning experiences are improved compared to their junior years. It was supported by analysis of 4 years of TTFM student data which showed a decline in positive responses from Year 7 to Years 9 and 10, followed by an uplift in Years 11 and 12. For example, Year 11 students may experience fewer formal interactions with staff and may be more accepting of other students. Meanwhile, staff expectations of students might lift on the assumption that, in senior school, they will be more serious about their studies. However, one of the most compelling factors that could play into the 'senior effect' is that Year 11 students have the opportunity to select subjects that align with their interests and strengths, resulting in increased efficacy and greater enjoyment in the subjects of study. Undertaking subjects of their choice can improve attitudes towards education. The 'senior effect', if in play, can be a limitation of this evaluation when, in surveys and interviews, BSC students are asked to imagine a hypothetical scenario. They are asked where they think they would be if they did not go to the college. Their responses are unlikely to have considered the 'senior effect' as BSC students will likely be unaware that for most students, schooling experiences tend to improve in the senior years, regardless of the school. Therefore, it is difficult to know if some of the improvements experienced at BSC are specific to BSC or if they would have emerged at their previous school had they stayed.

Areas of limitation	Explanation
Attendance data as a proxy for engagement and wellbeing	Attendance data may have provided a proxy measure for engagement and wellbeing, however a comparison group is needed to conduct this analysis. Either of the following approaches may have been adequate: • Compare BSC student attendance with government school student attendance in the same time period. The issue with this approach was that while BSC thoroughly collected attendance data across the evaluation data period, government school attendance data was highly variable in completeness. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decisions made at a school and/or network level during periods of online delivery and/or substantial absenteeism, attendance data was often incomplete and inconsistent. • Compare BSC student attendance with the students' previous records in Years 9 and 10. The issue with this approach was that attendance records of students prior to enrolling at BSC were not consistently recorded or submitted when enrolling at BSC. There is no fair and adequate means of comparison in either case.
Model limitations	The matching technique used in this evaluation can be subject to a common limitation, namely, biased results due to unmeasured confounding variables or pre-existing differences. This means that there is a risk that study outcomes are influenced or skewed by factors that were not observed, considered or accounted for. Also, while we had quite detailed data concerning BSC students – for example, previous suspension and expulsion data, violent behaviour incidents and career goals in Year 10 – we did not have similarly granular data for students in other NSW Government schools.

3 To what extent has BSC improved student wellbeing?

This chapter presents our findings regarding the extent to which BSC has improved student wellbeing outcomes. We begin by defining wellbeing as it relates to our evaluation (Section 3.1). When asked about the impact of BSC on students, many respondents mentioned the term ‘mental health’. Section 3.2 explores these participant references to mental health as an overall sense of wellbeing which is followed by social wellbeing (Section 3.3) and emotional wellbeing (Section 3.4).

3.1 Definitions

Wellbeing is critical for students’ overall development, academic success and happiness. Feeling connected to others, building positive relationships, managing emotions and feeling optimistic are all vital elements for promoting students’ mental health and their engagement in learning.

Our definition of student wellbeing encompasses emotional wellbeing (which includes positive emotions and the minimisation of negative emotions such as anxiety and depression) and social wellbeing (which includes social connectedness and relationships). Although the precise nature of the relationship between mental health and wellbeing is not well specified in the literature, we adopt the American Psychological Association (2018) definition which suggests that emotional and social wellbeing are sub-components of mental health:

A state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.

3.1.1 Emotional wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing refers to the way a person thinks and feels about themselves, including being able to adapt and deal with daily challenges. (AIHW 2012)

Emotional wellbeing involves experiencing positive emotions such as positivity, optimism about the future and satisfaction. The development of coping strategies and supportive systems can minimise negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, depression and sadness.

3.1.2 Social wellbeing

The department's 'NSW Wellbeing Framework for Schools' notes that:

Social wellbeing includes the extent to which we experience positive relationships and connectedness to others. It is important for pro-social behaviour and our empathy towards others. (NSW Department of Education 2015)

Relationships directly impact a student's social connections and support system, providing a measure of the level of trust, care and meaningful interaction within a student's social network. Positive and meaningful relationships contribute to a sense of belonging and connectedness, which are fundamental aspects of social wellbeing.

Many of the dimensions of emotional and social wellbeing are examined through the TTFM survey that is conducted at least once a year in all government schools. A list of the relevant dimensions and how they are defined in the TTFM survey is provided in Appendix K. We draw on the TTFM survey as a source of data throughout Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

3.2 Mental health as an overall sense of wellbeing

Current and past students, parents and staff experienced improved student mental health after moving to BSC. In some cases, respondents said these improvements were life changing. They highlighted improvements in self-reported mental health compared with previous schools, including more positive feelings about school, reduced anxiety around attending, improved social networks, greater ability to focus on schoolwork and better school response to students' mental health needs.

Bradfield has provided a safe and supportive environment that has allowed me to create new social and academic experiences and has significantly impacted my mental health in a positive way. Being given the time and resources to focus on my learning in the way that I want, and in the areas that I want, have given me a better outlook on the future. (Student, CESE survey)

If I'm having a bad day, I know I can come to school, see others [students] and feel better, even if I'm sick emotionally or physically. And they're just the most supportive, best people ever. They get me. And they're the best versions of themselves here, and I'm the best version of myself. And I've really, really come out of my skin. (Current student, interview)

Well, I've got quite a bit to compare it to. I've been to 2 schools before this one. So, in comparison to them, I would say, it's really good, in a lot of ways. It's been really helpful to me, especially for my mental health, coming from a school where I struggled a lot with that. (Current student, interview)

In the BSC Parent Survey, 86% of responses from parents of past and current students said their child's school experience would have been worse if they were not enrolled at BSC. Several parents noted improvements in their child's mental health and credited this to the support from and accommodations made by the college:

Bradfield had a fantastic impact on our daughter. She went from an unhappy depressed student to a positive one. They understood her issues with anxiety and assisted her in managing this. With Bradfield's support she continued on to her preferred course at university which she completes this year.

(Parent, BSC survey)

Bradfield is a place that encourages students to think, be creative, be mature and responsible. It is a place of inclusiveness, where different is beautiful and celebrated. I cannot speak highly enough of this wonderful school that never gave up on my daughter despite her struggles with her mental health.

(Parent, BSC survey)

Good fit for my child. He was struggling with anxiety and mental health issues for a number of years. Bradfield didn't make those issues disappear, but they definitely provided an environment that was more supportive and got him through school. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

In the BSC Student Voice Survey, 81% of Year 11 and 86% of Year 12 respondents felt their school experience would have been worse if they did not attend BSC. A few students also shared that their mental health and/or general wellbeing had improved since moving to BSC. Some ex-students reflected on their time at BSC and identified improved mental health as a critical outcome of their move to the college:

I hated school before Bradfield, but moving to Bradfield was much better for my mental health. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

Another way it impacted my career path is that my mental and physical health issues were supported by the staff at Bradfield, allowing me to improve in my wellbeing much more than I would have at my previous school – I feel that if I had stayed there, my health would have been a lot worse and I wouldn't have been able to pursue further study as easily. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

3.3 Improved social wellbeing through connectedness and relationships

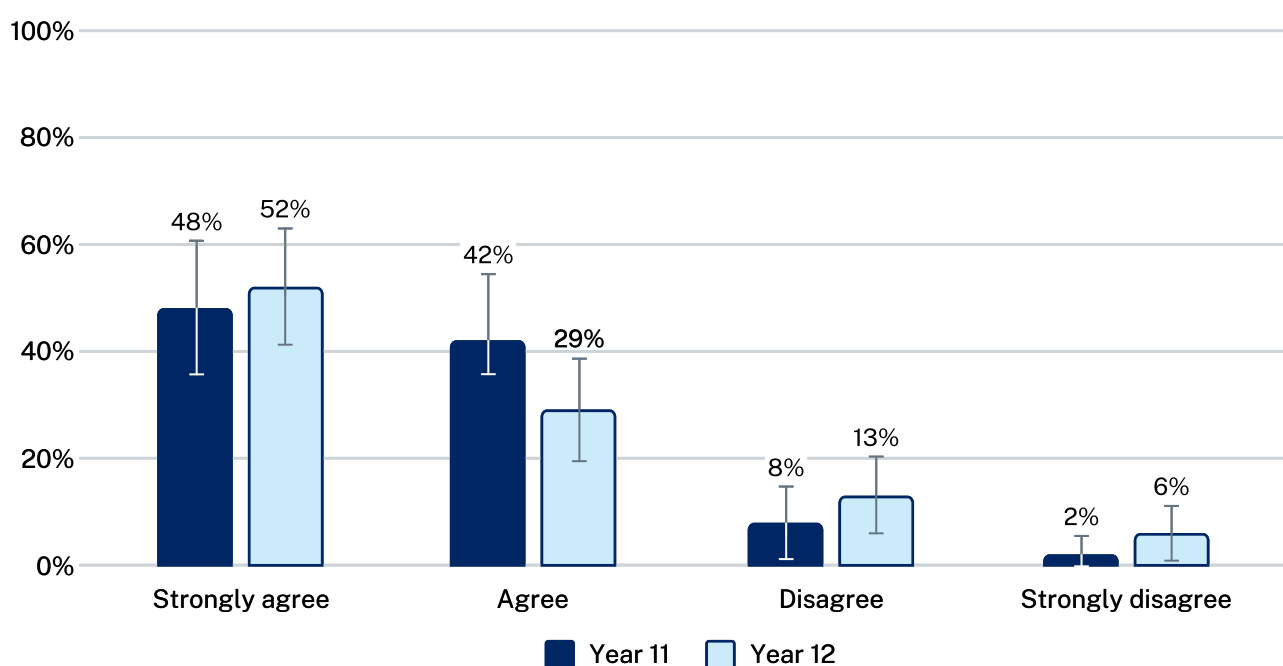
Positive relationships with teachers, social interactions with peers and increased social connectedness and inclusion were commonly identified by students, and parents of current students, as characteristics of the BSC experience – characteristics that had not typically been part of their experience at previous schools.

3.3.1 Compared to previous schools, students generally felt more socially connected and experienced more positive peer interactions

The majority (85%) of current Year 11 and 12 students surveyed agreed with the statement ‘Overall I feel more socially connected at BSC than at my previous school’ (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Student perceptions of social connectedness at BSC in comparison to their previous school



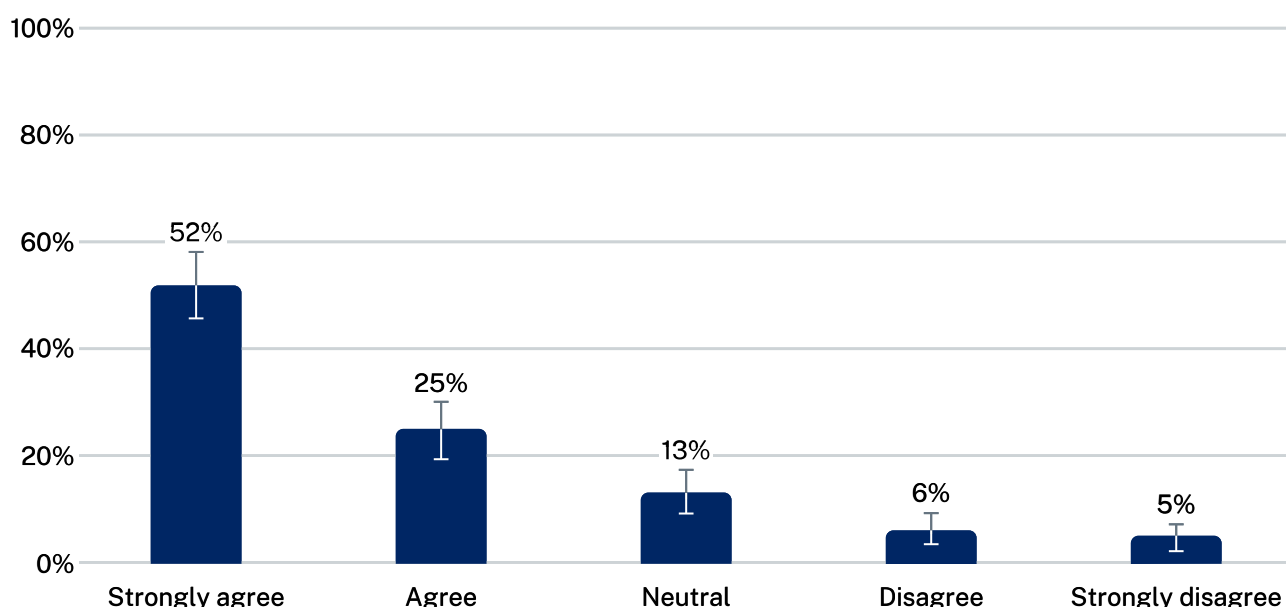
Source: CESE Student Survey

Comments from student interviews aligned with the survey results. More than half of the students who were interviewed mentioned making new friends since starting at the college and thought the college to be a friendlier, more accepting environment than their previous schools. Given that for some students, friendships had been difficult or non-existent in previous schools, this is noteworthy.

Similarly, 76% of surveyed parents agreed that their child felt more socially connected at BSC than at their previous school (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2

Parents' views that at BSC their child felt more socially connected than at their previous school



Source: 2022 BSC Parent Survey

A few surveyed parents commented on the inclusivity of the BSC environment which resulted in their child feeling safe and accepted, and led to improved social interactions and reduced anxiety.

My daughter suffers from anxiety and social issues. She has bloomed at Bradfield. She has a large group of friends, she likes going to school, [and] she has had less issues with school-related anxiety this year.
(Parent, BSC survey)

[My child] grew in confidence and is a lot more comfortable in social situations these days. Being validated by his school made a huge difference in that arena. He's always been different. At Bradfield he was assured that was okay and to own it. The pressure to be the same as everyone else was removed. He was able to develop wonderful friendships with other students in an inclusive environment, and strong relationships with supportive staff members.
(Parent, BSC survey)

Not only did many students build friendships and feel included, some for the first time, but the friendships developed at BSC often continued after leaving the college. While this may not be unusual for senior school students, for students who suffer with social anxiety or have not experienced deep friendships in the past, this is especially important in developing self-concept and self-confidence, and laying the foundations for a peer support network in the post-school years.³ One former BSC student commented that the friends “made at Bradfield have also become friends for life and a huge support system”. Similarly, a parent observed that her daughter “is still friends with fellow Bradfield students 2 years later and has no ongoing friendships from her other schools”.

I'd say it [BSC] has made a huge difference. Especially having friends, after going through an entire year, basically speaking to no one. Like having a genuine friend group I really care about and they care about me ... and everyone is really nice, genuinely. And I've like never really experienced that environment at a school before. **(Current student, interview)**

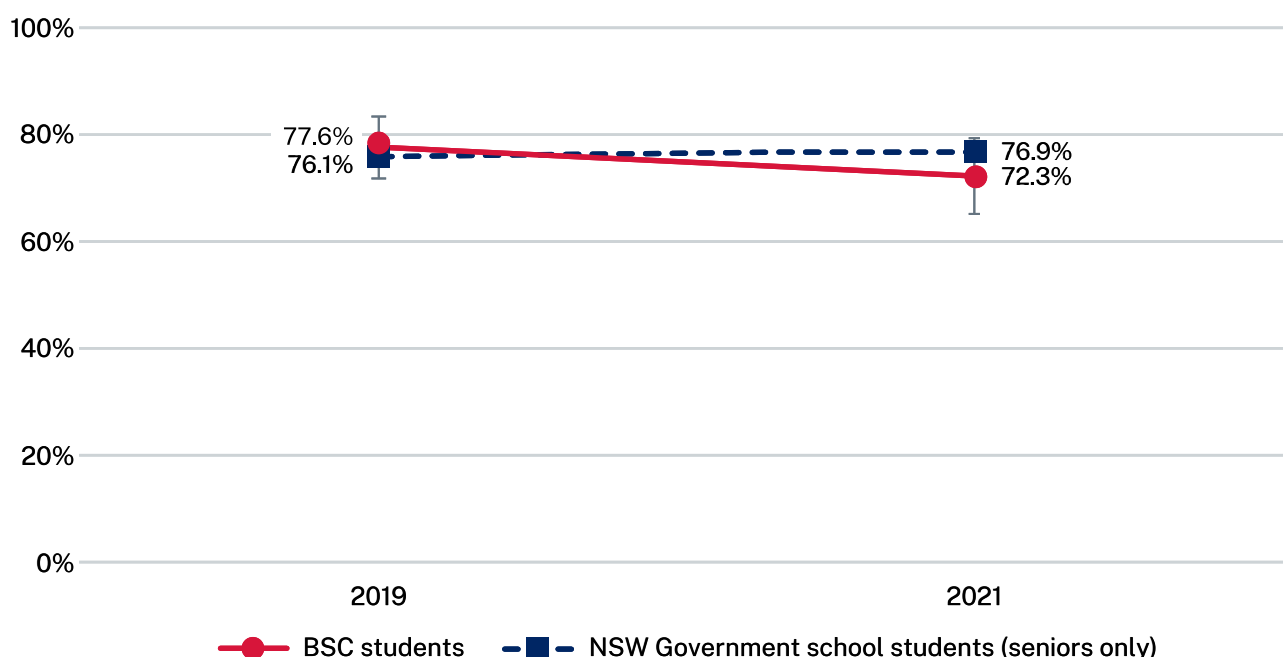
I resented my old school and was so miserable. I was so lonely and just wanted to hurry up and finish school. Bradfield offered a place I could enjoy school and make really positive friendships. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

In the TTFM surveys, ‘positive relationships’ is defined as ‘friendships with peers they can trust and that help them form positive social connections and meaningful participation within the school’. In 2019, just over 77% of BSC student respondents reported having positive relationships with peers, which was similar to respondents in other government schools (Figure 3.3). As the preceding quotes suggest, many BSC respondents reported negative social experiences at previous schools, which makes the ‘on par’ result with other Year 11 and 12 students noteworthy.

3 The importance of friendships in adolescent development is well established in psychology. However, emerging evidence from neuroscience suggests that the presence or absence of friendships during the teenage years may impact reward and motivation processes in the brain, and may be one way that friendships influence wellbeing (Güroğlu 2022).

Figure 3.3

The proportion of respondents at BSC and in the senior years in NSW Government schools who were positive about peer relationships



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

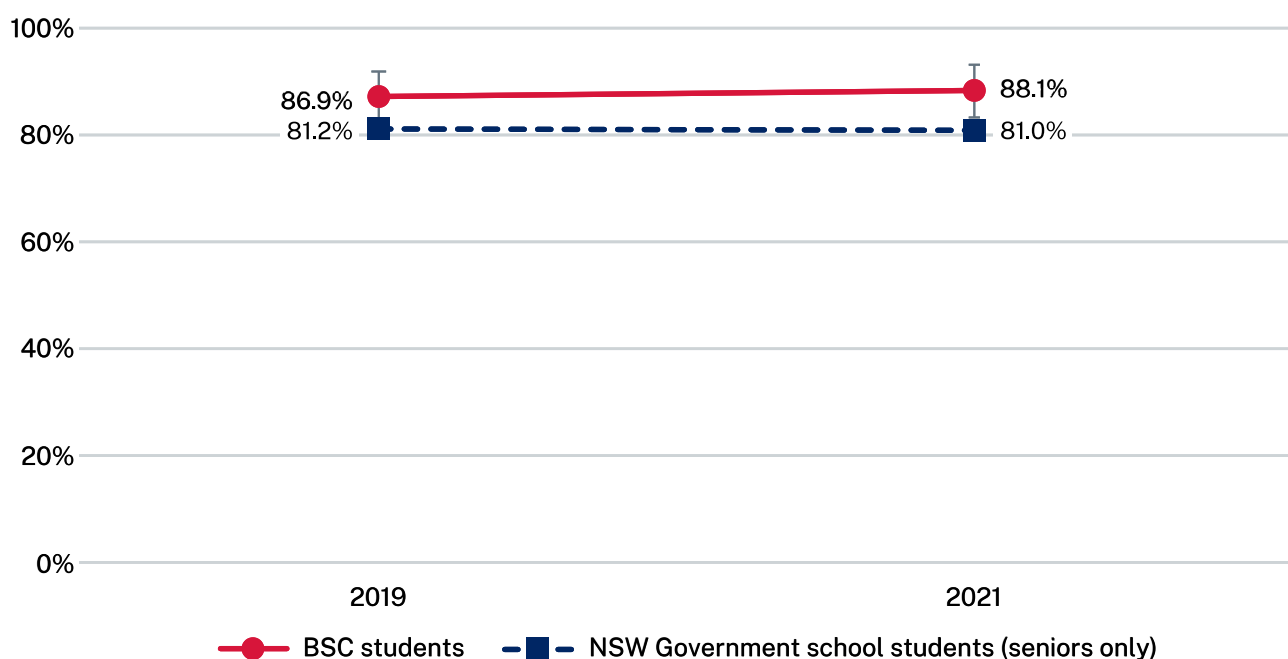
Note: In Figure 3.3, the precision (length) of the 95% confidence interval (CI) (marked by the upright line) is impacted by the sample size of each group. The Bradfield cohort size (up to 194 students) is much smaller than the size of the NSW Government school student cohorts. The CI marking for the government school student sample is so narrow that you cannot see it in Figure 3.3 and in subsequent TTFM charts. The narrowness is due to the large number of government school students who participated in the survey. For more detail about this please refer to Section 2.4.1.

3.3.2 Surveyed students report experiencing less bullying than at their previous schools

In the TTFM surveys for both 2019 and 2021, nearly 90% of BSC student respondents did not consider themselves to be victims of either physical, verbal, social or cyber bullying (Figure 3.4). In contrast, a higher percentage of respondents at NSW Government schools reported experiencing bullying in 2019 and 2021 and this difference was statistically significant.

Figure 3.4

The proportion of respondents at BSC and in the senior years in NSW Government schools who did not experience bullying



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

A number of students shared their experiences of being bullied in previous schools, especially those who identify as LGBTQI. One student recounted the following experience at a previous school:

I was bullied really badly... Like [one] student would call me like derogatory slurs, and he got suspended for a day and then I was put back in the same class with him. But he just continued to do that, and the same thing outside of school. The students would follow me around after school, then people from my school would call me queer slurs and throw food at me. I just had basically no support. I found the teachers to be really difficult, really sometimes rude and unreasonable. I felt like I was getting picked on a lot by teachers.

The experience shared by this student was not uncommon, as is noted by the following student who claimed that prior experience of bullying was widespread among BSC students:

Well, talking to a lot of the other friends that I've made in other groups and they've all like come from schools where they were, you know, being bullied or picked on, so it's like you come here and it's a really safe place and you have people who may have gone through the same thing that you've gone through. So, you can really connect and become a community with people much easier. (Current student, interview)

Another student felt that the accepting nature of the BSC environment meant that bullying did not really exist:

I think one of the greatest things about this school is simply, like I said before, accepting everyone. It's accepting of everybody else and their values and who they believe they are. And that unites everyone here, so that there isn't really anything such as bullies or naysayers because everyone is part of a community that functions towards its greater good. **(Current student, interview)**

One parent credited BSC with playing an integral role in helping their daughter not only overcome the harmful consequences of bullying, but to thrive:

My child suffered significant bullying prior to coming to Bradfield. Her emotional state was very fragile. The supportive nature of other staff and students allowed her to flourish. If this opportunity did not exist there is no chance she would have completed Year 12. It is highly likely that her mental health would have continued to deteriorate with potentially tragic outcomes. We feel that this school has transformed her life and allowed her an opportunity to reclaim her life following the devastating bullying she received at her previous school. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Many students did not explicitly mention bullying, but there were repeated references to the 'safety' provided by the BSC environment suggesting that they had felt unsafe in previous schools, while 2 parents stated that their children were no longer being bullied, implying that this had been the case at their previous school.

3.3.2.1 However, the BSC environment is not completely free from bullying behaviours

While most respondents – both current and past BSC students – described feeling included and experiencing a safe, welcoming environment, a few had a different experience. Referring to the TTFM survey results (Figure 3.4) we note that just over 12% (averaged 2019 and 2021 results) did not agree that their current school experience was free from bullying. In contrast to the TTFM survey, smaller proportions of respondents in the alumni and parent surveys mentioned bullying. Similarly few of the student interview respondents complained of bullying. Only one ex-student out of 107 in the alumni survey identified harassment as an issue, and 3 parents out of 124 identified bullying as an issue. The parent comments were:

I think that the school should no longer seek to passively eliminate bullying and antisocial behaviour with 'thoughts and prayers' but should instead actually seek to remove this behaviour with actions and consequences. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Whilst being a freeing environment there was still a lot of the same troubles as a regular school. Racism, homophobia, transphobia, harassment. Usually not handled correctly. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

The college director reported that they implemented a number of strategies to tackle bullying, including instilling the Bradfield Cultural Principles (refer to Section 1.3.3) which promote respect for individuals, commitment to learning, respectful relationships, the fostering of community through collaboration, and celebration of unique gifts and talents. Furthermore, at the start of Year 11, students undertake conflict resolution training as part of the Project, and restorative practice and mediation are encouraged where there is peer-to-peer conflict. Annual cyberbullying sessions are also reportedly held and the TAFE Student Conduct and Discipline Policy, which systematically deals with bullying, was said to be key.

However, the general experience, as evidenced by the predominant views of student, parent and staff respondents, was that there is considerably less bullying present at BSC and that the college provides a place of safety, particularly to students who have often felt unsafe at their previous schools. This is discussed further in Section 6.2.

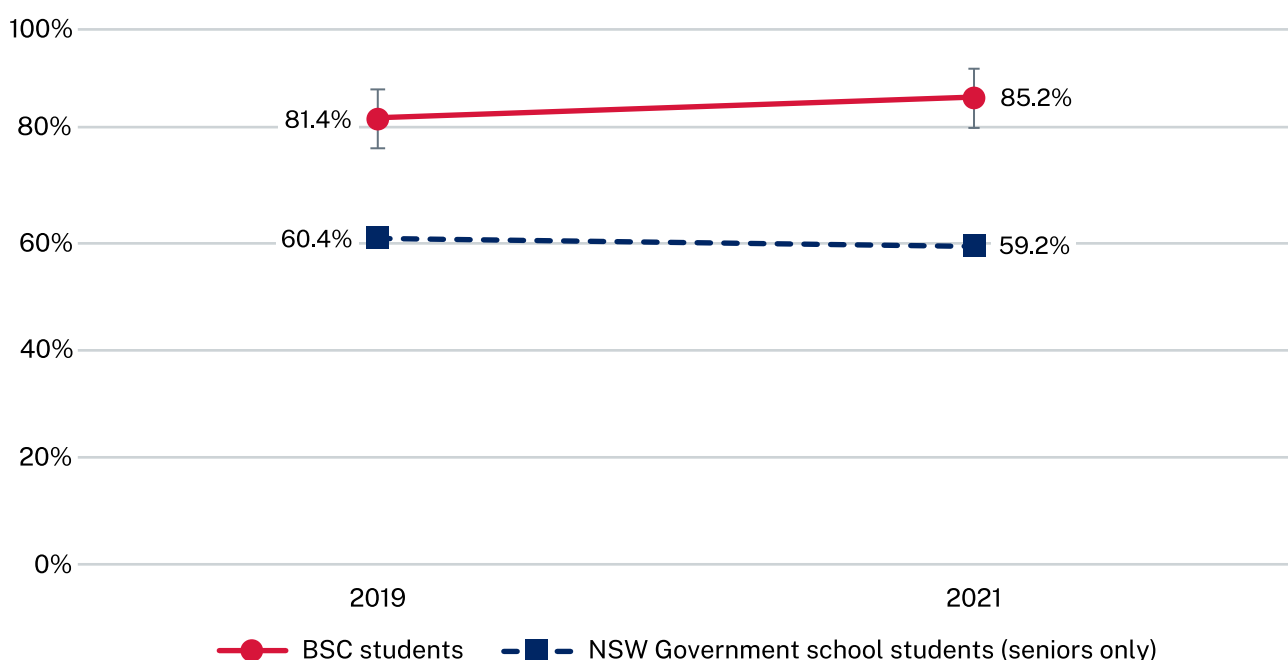
3.3.3 Students had more positive relationships with their teachers at BSC compared to their previous schools and compared to other NSW Government school students

Positive student–teacher relationships, defined in the TTFM survey as ‘fair and supportive interactions with teachers in both the social and academic arenas’, were cited by many students, teachers and parents sampled as a key reason for students feeling more confident, positive and engaged in learning. Also linked to positive relationships is a TTFM indicator called ‘advocacy at school’ which involves teachers providing encouragement and advice.

The TTFM survey gauges student agreement on several statements about whether teachers encourage students, cater to their needs and strengths and acknowledge student progress. Survey results in 2019 and 2021 found statistically significant differences between BSC respondents and senior students at other NSW Government schools – that is, more BSC respondents experienced positive student–teacher relationships than other NSW Government school students. In both years, more than 80% of BSC respondents expressed having positive relationships with teachers. By contrast, only around 60% of student respondents at other NSW Government schools held the same view (Figure 3.5). Interestingly, at a time when there was less face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of BSC respondents who were positive about student–teacher relationships rose from 2019 to 2021 by just under 4 percentage points.

Figure 3.5

The proportion of respondents at BSC and in the senior years in NSW Government schools who were positive about student–teacher relationships



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

Teacher advocacy is measured in the TTFM survey and is understood to refer to teachers who show interest in and actively care about the educational progress of the students. Again, the proportion of BSC respondents who responded positively to items relating to teacher advocacy was significantly higher than for respondents in the other NSW Government schools (76% versus 58.6% in 2019 and 79% versus 59.4% in 2021).

Student respondents generally felt that an atmosphere of ‘mutual respect’ and ‘connection’ had been created at BSC through practices such as addressing teachers by their first names and being treated as equals.

You call your teacher by their first name instead of their last name. And that’s a big thing. (Current student, interview)

You have an actual connection with the teachers, which makes it easy to ask for help. You can express it. (Current student, interview)

Both student and parent respondents commented extensively about the value of positive student-teacher relationships. These relationships were characterised by mutual respect, understanding and accommodation of students’ diverse situations, and focused on student wellbeing above academic achievement.

Everybody treats each other with respect. It’s very casual, very friendly, you know, it’s not as uptight as usual schools. Like, we have a lot more chats with our teachers, you know? We have a friendship with them almost, and we learn to see them as people, as well as teachers. So, it’s really good for us, because we have faith as well, and the people that teach us, we don’t just see them as, like,

a voice teaching us. We see them as a person who's been through experiences teaching us. It's very beneficial, I think, for us, taking all that knowledge and like remembering it, we have more respect for the knowledge, and that's why we value it more. **(Current student, interview)**

One parent described the relationship as “a mutual respect between student and teacher” (Parent, BSC survey), while another said:

Acceptance and understanding were key to providing a learning environment that worked for our daughter. Small achievements were celebrated and she was not made to feel as if her HSC was the be-all and end-all in her life. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

The importance of supportive student-teacher relationships and teacher advocacy is explored further as a factor of school climate in Section 6.4.2.

3.3.4 Students feel a stronger sense of acceptance and belonging in the BSC community compared to previous schools

Students, parents and staff felt the college excelled at embracing student differences and making students feel like they belong.

Bradfield Senior College gave me a sense of belonging and hope for me to continue with work and strive for the best. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

Several students talked about the inclusive and accepting nature of the BSC social environment, where students felt they could be authentic. For many, this experience was quite different to their experiences at other government and non-government schools. In the interviews, numerous students talked about the college being a community that embraced young people who had previously felt excluded in school settings because of their sexuality, neurodiversity, mental health conditions or otherwise not fitting into the ‘mainstream mould’.

Well, I've spoken to people who are really into school, and a lot of them find that at their old school, they felt very pushed away, like they were different. But everyone at Bradfield is kind of just, like, there's no discrimination. Like how you dress, how you speak, how you look. No one judges you for that. Like you can wear whatever you want, people probably compliment it, more than dislike it. There's no judgment around the school. **(Current student, interview)**

I think Bradfield is really a haven for queer people, especially trans people. And also neurodivergent people. I've come across a lot of other autistic people [here]. So, I think it's really good as it's just being a space for people who don't fit into the standard model of school education, I guess. **(Current student, interview)**

These student perspectives were echoed by parents and staff members as well.

Bradfield provided an inclusive and supportive environment for students who did not fit in with the ‘normal’ with respect to academic learning style, gender preferences etc. it was a fabulous experience for my daughter. **(Past parent, BSC survey)**

I think the thing for me that stands out the most is that ... it is a safe environment for queer and gender diverse students, and that's very, very unique in probably the world. I think it's also somewhere for students that just don't fit in for other reasons as well. Whether it's behaviour stuff, or they have been bullied or are neurodiverse, that kind of thing. Bradfield is a place where people feel safe, you know, comfortable, and that's particularly for trans and gender diverse kids.

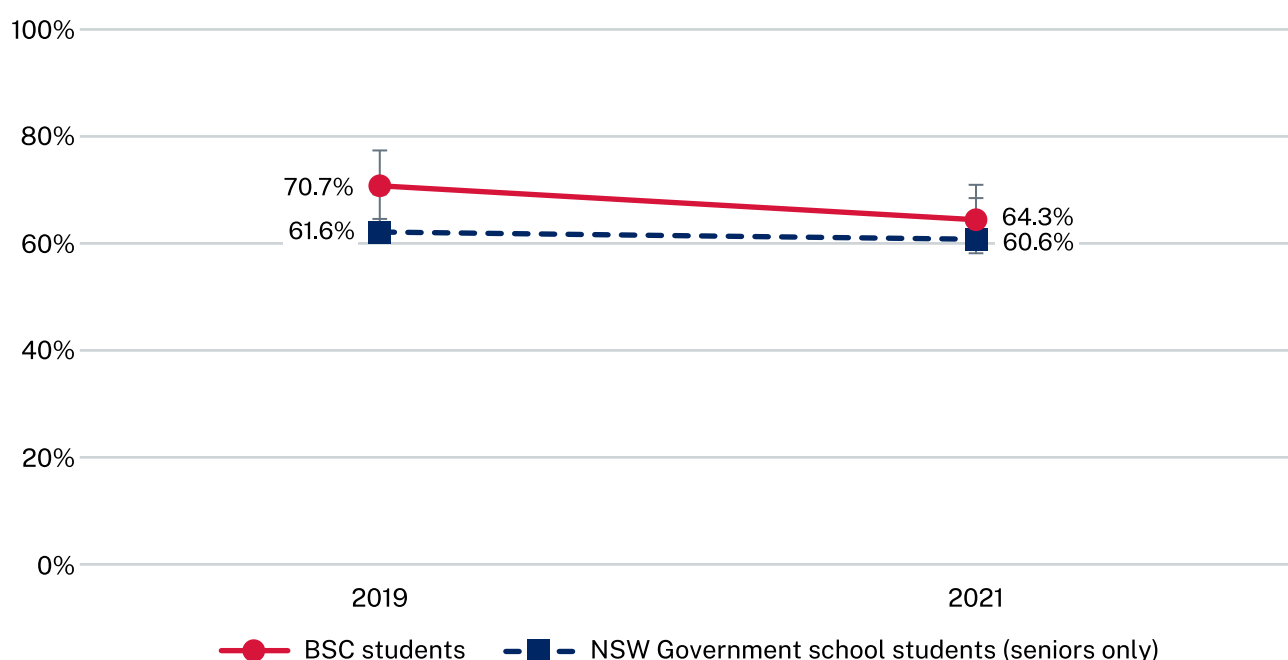
(Staff member, focus group)

So, what I know about the students that we get, or how they present when they come here, is there's just this relief. There's a relief that they don't have to force themselves into a structure that doesn't fit them. It could be the hours, it could be the subject choices, it could be that they don't feel part of the normality of the school, whatever that may be. And that could just be someone who's super creative and super smart, who doesn't want to wear a blue ribbon in their hair, or they don't want to wear a uniform, or they don't like the tone with which they're addressed by teachers. **(BSC Director, interview)**

Around two-thirds of BSC respondents expressed feeling a sense of belonging in the TTFM surveys, defined as feelings of being accepted and valued at school (Figure 3.6). In 2019, significantly more BSC respondents than their peers agreed that they experienced a sense of belonging. However, in 2021, this score declined by 6.4 percentage points for BSC respondents while remaining stable for students in other government schools. We offer some thoughts as to why this might be in Box 1.

Figure 3.6

The proportion of respondents at BSC and in the senior years in NSW Government schools who felt a sense of belonging



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

BSC students may demonstrate less resilience than other NSW Year 11 and 12 government school students in the face of difficulties, such as the COVID-19 pandemic

The TTFM Student Surveys in 2019 and 2021 show that in several of the wellbeing and engagement domains, both BSC students and other NSW Government Year 11 and 12 students recorded a lower positive score in 2021 than in 2019. This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact across all school types.

While the COVID-19 pandemic affected all students, in some respects it appears to have had a greater impact on BSC where a higher-than-average number of students already deal with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. This hypothesis is supported by:

- our evaluation data drawn from the views of parents (BSC Parent Survey) and students (CESE interviews) whose comments that suggested the COVID-19 pandemic was especially challenging for many students at BSC
- research findings that the negative effects of the pandemic on the mental health outcomes of adolescents were exacerbated for those with previous or existing mental health disorders (Panchal et al. 2023; Headspace 2020; Bower et al. 2021; Kleine et al. 2023).

BSC students experienced a greater decline from 2019 to 2021 than other NSW students in several areas. For example, Figure 3.6 and Figure 3.7 show that BSC students' feelings of belonging and optimism fell to a greater extent than for students in other NSW Government schools.

Similarly, BSC students' scores declined more in the TTFM 'engagement in learning' domains than they did for other NSW students:

- Figure 4.3 – valuing school outcomes
- Figure 4.4 – attendance
- Figure 4.6 – homework behaviour
- Figure 4.6 – effort.

However, there are areas that do not reflect this trend:

- Figure 4.3 – interest and motivation
- Figure 4.3 – perseverance
- Figure 4.6 – behaviour.

While our qualitative research data, research literature and several TTFM items support our hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionately negative impact on BSC students, we have not determined why this only applied to selected TTFM variables.

3.3.5 Students feel well supported and cared for because BSC prioritises their wellbeing, facilitates exploration of who they are and adopts a holistic educational approach

The college places a high priority on student wellbeing and giving students the opportunity to explore their identity. As the college director explained:

It's the ability to explore, to use these 2 years to explore and really understand who you are. ... And if they come to us not having any idea where they want to be and where they want to go, and they leave us knowing exactly where they want to go, or having a really good idea and being able to manage whatever is happening for them and go that next step, that's the key.
(BSC Director, interview)

Several students and parents expressed the view that at BSC they're 'not just another number', that the college cares about their wellbeing and potential, not just their academic performance and the achievement of high ATARs:

They want the kids to succeed and pass. They are not aspiring for the kids to get ATARs of 99 but instead are trying to help them learn, be their best and get through. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

And I feel that Bradfield, they let you be you, you're not just another number that they're trying to get good grades out of – they're seeing you for you.
(Current student, interview)

The entire learning environment is respectful and kind, seeking to stand alongside students, respecting them as individuals instead of being focussed on grades and school status. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Another parent shared their experience of how their daughter had been discouraged from aiming too high at her previous school but at BSC she was able to set her goals higher:

At Bradfield she wasn't just a number, she was seen as a person and valued. At her old school they never recognised who she was and what she was good at. They told her she wouldn't be able to do Advanced English as she wasn't good enough. At Bradfield she completed Advanced English and did well in it. Her marks improved and she was happy to go to school. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Teachers echoed the view that the focus of the college extended beyond academic performance:

The focus here, it's more holistic, there's the expectations, academic expectations, but there's also ... we want them to become people who feel like they're a part of the community, and then you can take that into the community. The skills that they need to do that, it's not just being able to remember the insides of a textbook. **(Staff member, focus group)**

3.4 Improved emotional wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing involves experiencing more positive and fewer negative emotions. Coping strategies and emotional support systems can minimise negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and sadness.

3.4.1 Students experience more positive thoughts and feelings at BSC

Many interviewed students reported feeling happy, or are happier, at BSC than at their previous school. Some parents expressed a similar view regarding their child.

A current Year 12 student noted in an interview that even though they continued to face health challenges, they were happy: “I’m still sick ... but I’m happy”. Other students commented on feeling happier and having increased motivation:

I feel a lot happier. I feel very motivated to do stuff, even stuff I don’t like to do, even seemingly unconnected things like putting away clothing.
(Current student, interview)

I honestly enjoy it so much more than regular schooling. Just the environment, it’s more relaxed, I don’t feel like people are constantly on top of me for like, not just like work, but just everything you know, they kind of let you guide yourself in your learning, umm, instead of constantly being at you, like “you’ve gotta do this” and “do that”. And I enjoy that much better, I feel less pressure and less stress.
(Current student, interview)

3.4.2 Students feel a stronger sense of self and some have increased optimism about the future

Past and current BSC student respondents expressed the view that BSC facilitated their emotional development and provided the opportunity to understand their identity and to thrive. Some students had experienced bullying or being dismissed by others at previous schools. There were also students who felt valued academically but not socially in their previous school. Students and parents felt that BSC encouraged them to gain or regain a sense of value.

In a way I guess it helped build some self-esteem because before I came [to BSC], I honestly saw no future for myself. (Past student, alumni survey)

It gave me a sense of self and being more confident to be myself and not care what people think of me as much and it made me realise I’m actually smart.
(Past student, alumni survey)

I am so grateful to the staff and teachers for helping [child’s name] fall in love with learning again and helping her to become so much happier and more confident in herself. She knows herself now what she is capable of and is backing herself to do well and be her best. (Parent, BSC survey)

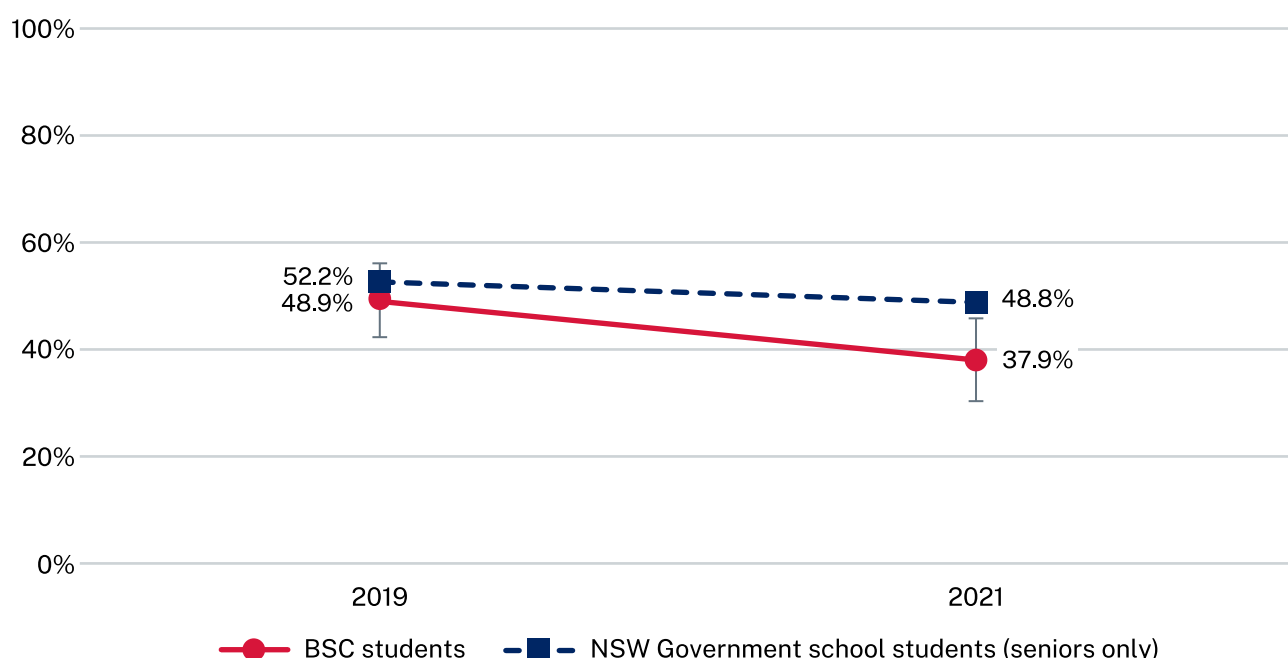
My son’s self-esteem was heightened at Bradfield. He had teachers who believed in him and showed that they cared. ... I rave about the standard of not only the teaching at Bradfield but the inclusive nature which is nurtured. ... Outstanding.
(Parent, BSC survey)

Well, I'm alive, which is good. And, like, I have ADHD, right. I've been embraced by other people that have ADHD and I've gone, "You know what? This isn't a con, it has its pros". I've been able to accept myself for who I am. I'm no longer starving myself. I'm, you know, happy in my body. ... I'm happy in the clothing I have, and I'm happy with how I look most of the time. And it's like, I'm just happy.
(Current student, interview)

Optimism is characterised by hopefulness and confidence about the future, a tendency to take a favourable view of things, and an explanatory style marked by evaluating negative events as temporary, external and specific to situation (NSW Department of Education and The Learning Bar 2023). The TTFM survey showed a decline on indicators of optimism for all students between 2019 and 2021 (Figure 3.7). We suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred after the 2019 survey was conducted, may still have been negatively affecting students when the 2021 survey was conducted. Although the proportion of respondents at BSC who felt optimistic was similar to senior students in other NSW Government schools in 2019, the BSC results were significantly lower than other NSW Government senior students in 2021 (refer to Box 1). The reasons for this are not known and can only be speculated. For example, we suggested the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted BSC students' mental wellbeing more severely because of the higher prevalence of existing mental health issues.

Figure 3.7

The proportion of respondents at BSC and in the senior years in NSW Government schools who felt optimistic



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

On the other hand, in the student, past student and parent surveys and student interviews, we heard repeatedly that the experience at BSC had made students feel more optimistic about their futures. For some, this was because they were now engaged in and/or succeeding at school and have been assisted to imagine and plan a future aligned with their interests. For some, friendships, peer and teacher validation and improved social networks had made them feel accepted.

I feel like I am looking a bit more into like the future because up until recently, especially at Bradfield, I haven't been looking like I've been just going day-to-day, like that's cause that's all I could, you know, handle at the time. Like there was no point in looking ahead when I don't know what tomorrow's gonna be like so. **(Current student, interview)**

Well, I thought I was gonna have no future. I was totally going to kill myself [laughs]. And I thought, well, there's no way I'll be able to have a job. Like, I'm just too sick for that. We did work placement at Bradfield...and I was like, "Oh my god, this is possible. I could do this". **(Current student, interview)**

The supportive and productive environment. I've found my quality and work submission has increased during my first term at Bradfield. I'm also excited to go to school and excited to explore my future instead of feel unproductive and unclear about my future like I did at my last public school. **(Student survey)**

3.4.3 Some students experienced reduced suicidal thinking and self-harm after moving to BSC

For some interviewed students, moving to BSC was perceived to be a 'life-changing' experience as previously they had been 'at risk' or had engaged in self-harming thoughts or behaviours. Now these same students were less at risk at BSC. One staff member described BSC as follows:

You know, you got much higher rates of self-harm and suicide for these kids and so to come to a place like this is literally, you know, it's lifesaving stuff. **(Staff member, focus group)**

A current Year 12 student said that other students had confided to her that they would have 'killed' themselves if they had not moved to BSC and that she had also contemplated it. Several parents commented on the difference BSC made for young people who were at risk of suicide. For example, a parent of a past student commented in a survey:

I strongly believe that Bradfield saved my daughter's life. She was bitterly unhappy, depressed, anxious, and unsupported at her school. For this, I will be ever grateful. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

During interviews, some students reported that being at BSC not only reduced suicidal thoughts but helped to significantly improve their mental health. This view was strongly shared by parents as the following comments demonstrate:

But he's still alive, and he had been real suicide risk for a year before. ... I'm grateful my young man is alive and thriving. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

My young person has been revived thanks to the amazing team at BSC. They have recovered from where they were, bullied and self-harming, reclusive and no confidence. The staff, the environment and the curriculum spoke to them all in such a fresh and inclusive way. We can't thank them enough.

(Parent, BSC survey)

My daughter is thriving academically socially, physically and mentally. Prior to coming she self-harmed, was self-destructive, was targeted on social media and was not eating properly. As a result, her grades slipped and she was in a vicious cycle. This school [BSC] has improved her after-school prospects e.g. she has applied for uni and [it] has meant she is living her best life. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Teachers also commented on how the BSC environment contributed to the flourishing of previously at-risk students.

Seeing how students have come to this school with really severe mental health conditions and how they've actually blossomed. Like I've had a student at the start of my course, I like to do a goal setting activity where I encourage students to write their goal. ... and one student had written, you know, to stay alive. That was their goal. At this point in time, they're thriving. They really, they find they've found their feet and they've made connections with other students, which was a huge worry for them at the start and they've bonded with their teachers as well.

(Staff member, focus group)

3.5 Summary

The evaluation found that for many of the BSC students surveyed or interviewed, the college provided a safe environment to connect and learn. For most students, this was in significant contrast to their experience at previous schools. This view was also reflected by parent survey respondents.

Students often reported improved mental health and self-confidence. Positive relationships with peers and teachers and a sense of belonging contributed to this improved sense of wellbeing. Students also told us that the supportive and accepting environment at BSC had helped them to become more engaged in their learning.

These findings are important considering the prevalence of disabilities and mental health conditions among BSC students. Many students choose to attend BSC due to a perception that their current schools inadequately address their mental health concerns.

4 To what extent has BSC improved student engagement in learning?

This chapter presents our findings regarding the extent to which BSC has impacted on student engagement in learning. We begin by defining engagement in learning and introducing the framework we use to distinguish between 2 main dimensions of engagement: internal and external (Section 4.1). We then look at the various states of engagement:

- Section 4.2 unpacks BSC student engagement levels when compared to other NSW Government schools
- Section 4.3 offers findings relating to disengagement with learning that some BSC students experience before coming to BSC
- Section 4.4 looks at the first of the 2 main dimensions found in literature: internal engagement
- Section 4.5 examines student attendance and what can be considered as a proxy for internal engagement when students regularly attend classes while at school and as a proxy for external engagement when their daily attendance at school is consistent
- Section 4.6 addresses external engagement, the second of the 2 main dimensions of engagement.

4.1 Definitions

For our analysis of engagement in learning we adopted Newmann's often-quoted definition of student engagement: 'the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote' (Newmann 1992:12). Research has shown that school engagement in the early, middle and upper grades all contribute to student resilience, which is important for all students, especially those at risk.

Appleton et al. (2008) argued that student engagement models developed in the last 2 decades typically comprise between 3 and 5 components which can mostly be classified as either internal or external engagement.

- **Internal engagement** refers to a student's motivation and investment in the cognitive processes needed to engage in learning. It also refers to the positive emotional responses which indicate a sense of connection and value attributed specifically to school. Internal engagement is considered to provide the impetus and persistence needed for desiring academic achievement.
- **External engagement** refers to observable participation in class activities and academic pursuits and may include regular class attendance, adhering to school and classroom rules, active participation, attentive behaviour, effort and task completion.

The framework of internal and external engagement serves as a way of organising our findings in this chapter. However, we find that attendance represents an intersection of both internal and external engagement and have therefore addressed it under a separate heading.

4.2 BSC student engagement levels compared to the state

The TTFM Student Survey (Figure 4.1) included indicators of both internal and external engagement:

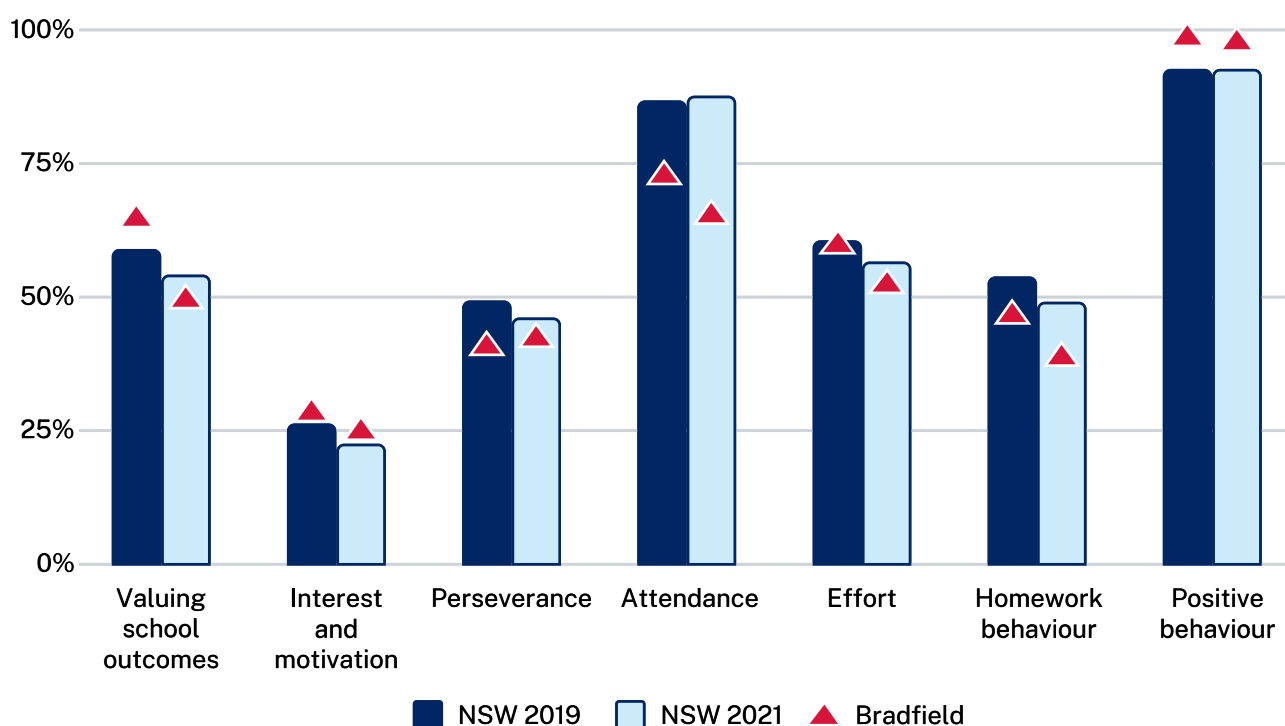
- internal engagement – valuing of school outcomes, interest and motivation and perseverance.
- external engagement – positive behaviour, effort, homework behaviour and attendance.

These TTFM indicators are described in more detail in Appendix L.

There were statistically significant differences between BSC respondents and their peers in other NSW Government schools in 2019 and 2021 on 3 of the 7 engagement indicators (attendance, perseverance, homework behaviour) and on 'valuing school outcomes' in 2021. BSC results were significantly higher in relation to 'positive behaviour' in 2019 and 2021, and in relation to 'valuing school outcomes' in 2019. On 'interest and motivation' and 'effort', students at Bradfield were similar to their NSW Government school peers.

Figure 4.1

The proportion of BSC students responding positively to TTFM engagement indicators compared with senior students in NSW Government schools



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

Note: indicators of homework behaviour and attendance may not accurately reflect BSC student sentiments because the wording of the TTFM items for these 2 indicators assumes a less 'adult-style learning approach'.

There are some issues to consider when interpreting these results.

One is that, according to the college, students are not set homework, reflecting the more adult-style learning approach, which raises questions about how students might have answered questions in TTFM about homework.

A second issue is that we do not know how BSC students answered these questions in Years 9 or 10, if these results represent an improvement or a worsening of engagement levels, and how this might compare with results from NSW Government school peers.

Based on survey responses from students, parents and teachers, who said that only 25% to 35% of students would have remained at their previous school to complete Years 11 and 12 (refer to Figure 4.2), it is not unreasonable to suggest that BSC students might experience higher levels of engagement than in Years 9 and 10 (refer to section 4.4.2) and possibly also experience greater engagement gains than their peers.

4.3 Disengagement with learning experienced by some students prior to coming to BSC

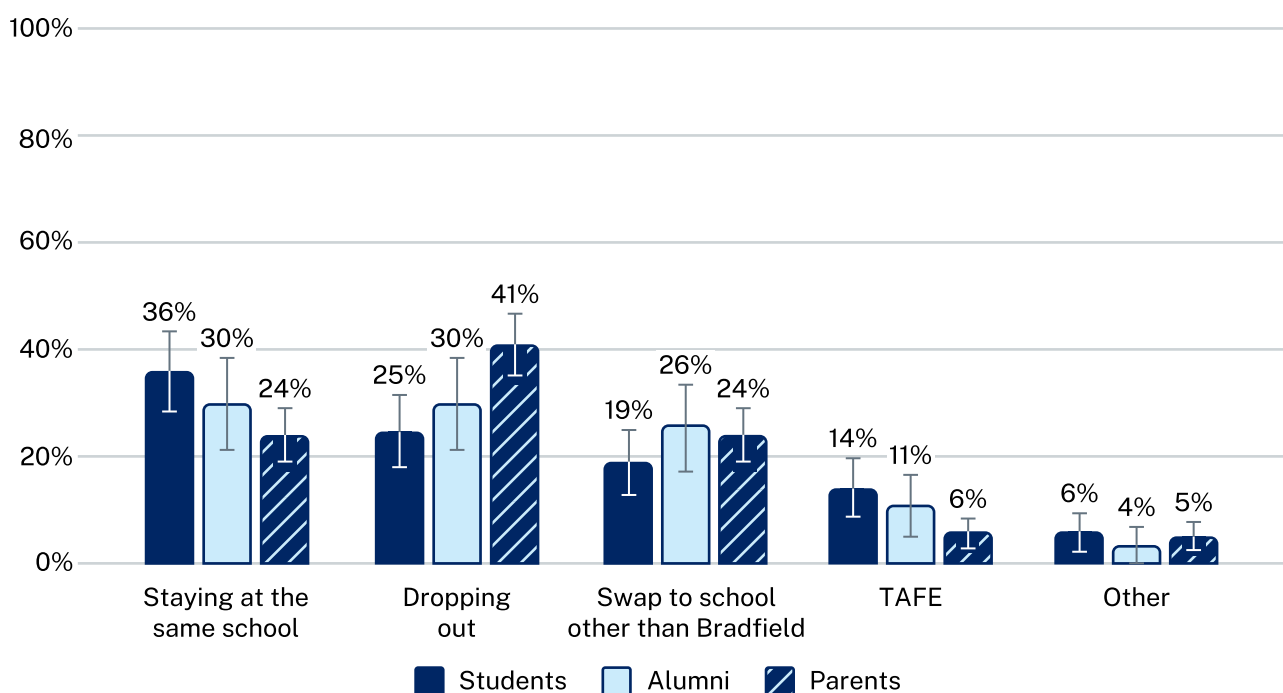
In the absence of a control group, we obtained quasi-counterfactual data by asking respondents what they would have done if they did not enrol at BSC. Although the responses reflect hypothetical intentions, they show that many students who previously considered dropping out of school found themselves engaged in learning at BSC and less inclined to drop out. The feedback from past and current students, and parents, suggests that the BSC environment supports learning engagement in a way that their previous schools did not.

Our data suggests that the shift to BSC resulted in a turnaround for many students who were at risk of dropping out of school.⁴ Figure 4.2 combines data from the CESE Student Survey, the BSC Alumni Survey and the BSC Parent Survey. All 3 surveys asked what the students would have done if they did not go to BSC. In the CESE Student Survey, around 25% believed that they would have dropped out of school, around 20% would have gone to another school, and just over one-third would have remained at their previous school.

In response to the same question, fewer alumni participants than current students believed that they would have stayed at the same school, while nearly one-third felt that they would have dropped out entirely. Parents surveyed put the likely dropout rate even higher at 41%.

Figure 4.2

The views of parents, students and alumni regarding the options of students had they not enrolled at BSC



Sources: BSC Parent and Alumni Surveys; CESE Student Survey

⁴ NSW Department of Education policy states that students must complete Year 10 (or equivalent), then remain in approved education or training, or a combination of education or training and paid work, until the age of 17. 'Dropping out' therefore refers to students over compulsory schooling age who withdraw from secondary education without a plan for further education, training or paid work.

The student interview data sheds further light on the options students felt were open to them and why they decided to attend BSC (Figure 4.3). Numerous students stated that they had considered going to another school; however, enrolling at another school was not always easy. Being outside a specific catchment area and not having a good academic track record were cited as barriers to moving to another mainstream school:

Every school, like if you are not in the area, they just reject you, unless you're like going to selective and you have like the top of the top grades.
(Current student, interview)

Figure 4.3

Sample quotes from student interviews about the most likely options students considered other than enrolling at BSC

What would you have done had you not come to BSC?

Remained at old school

The only other option I can think of, really, was just staying at that school, umm, and doing pathways. There really wasn't any other option I could think of.

Enrolled at another school

I was considering [name of school], however, that is selective and you really need to have the, uh, aptitude for that. And, like, through COVID, in Years 9 and 10 my marks really dropped and I was quite unmotivated.

TAFE

Umm, TAFE. Going and doing a course at TAFE. ... There was of course staying at my school, umm, or my mum was like [name of school in the area] and I was like 'oh, the reputation there is not good, mum like no, thank you.' Yeah, that was kind of like it.

Dropped out of school completely

I mean I know, definitely, that if I wasn't here, if Bradfield didn't exist, I definitely would not have finished school. Uh, so I don't know what I'd be doing, but definitely wouldn't still be in school.

Despair

Well, I thought I was gonna have no future. I was totally going to kill myself [laughs]. Yeah. And I thought, well, there's no way I'll be able to have a job. Like, I'm just too sick for that.

No other option

I didn't have another option for another school.

Given that some BSC students had a history of disengagement from school, poor academic performance, and often high rates of absenteeism (according to enrolment forms and views expressed in interviews and surveys), applications to other schools were often unsuccessful. Even though students believed moving to another government school was a possible option, some students said the reality of being accepted was low. The negative comparisons students made between their previous schools and BSC, especially in interviews, suggests that for many, the option of remaining at their previous school may have been one of resigned acceptance rather than an active choice. For others, the situation at their old school was untenable, even for those with high academic aspirations:

If I hadn't found Bradfield, I would have just dropped out and never done high school again. Which sucks, because, you know, and I'm really into academic stuff and I really want to go uni. It would have sucked if it had gone that way.
(Current student, interview)

Some students viewed dropping out as the only alternative, possibly due to not knowing of other options available:

If Bradfield didn't exist, I definitely would not have finished school. So, I don't know what I'd be doing, but definitely wouldn't still be in school.)
(Current student, interview)

Um, well, originally, I just wanted to get out of my current school. Like I just I couldn't stay there. That's all I knew, I couldn't stay there. ... But if I didn't get into here when I did, I most likely would have dropped out and just figured something else. Because I could not stay at my old school. (Current student, interview)

One parent, with 2 children attending BSC, said that both had disengaged from school and would have dropped out if they did not go to BSC. Another parent had a similar view:

Bradfield College was the difference between my young person dropping out of education and having a very uncertain future, as opposed to now: successful, enthusiastic and enjoying her university course. (Parent, BSC survey)

4.4 Internal engagement

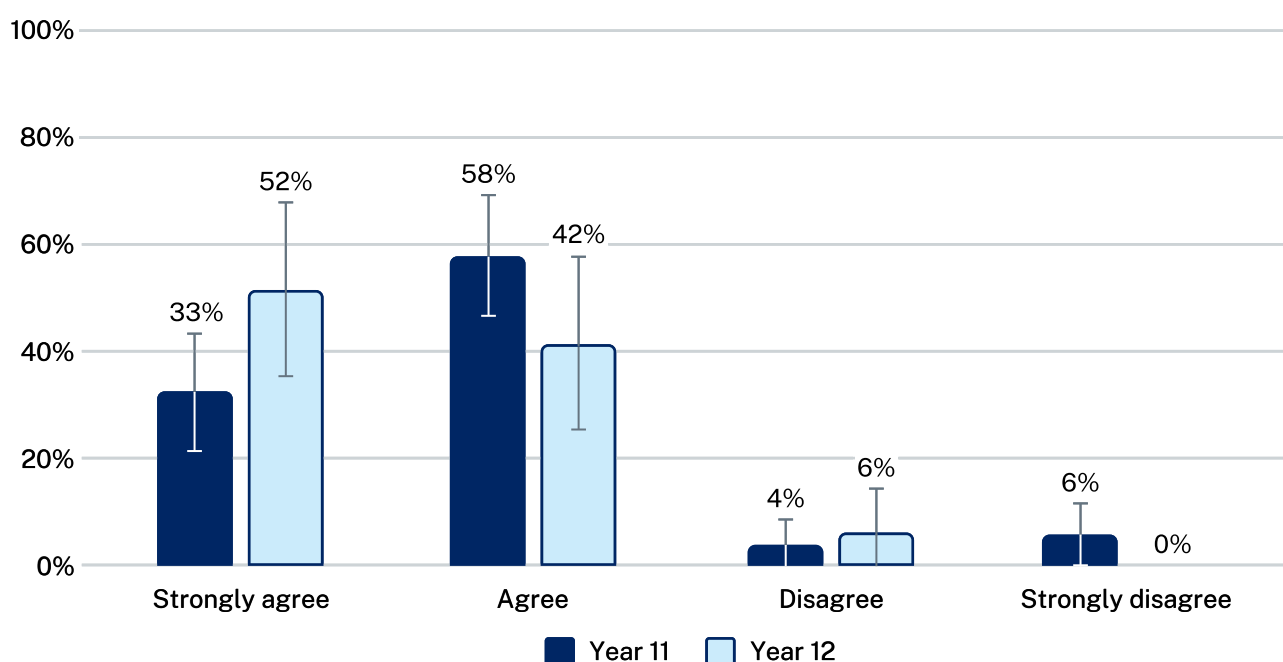
Internal engagement refers to the positive emotional responses that indicate a sense of connection and value attributed specifically to school.

4.4.1 Students enjoy learning at the college more than at their previous school

BSC students indicated they felt more engaged in learning and generally enjoyed school more than at their previous school. Over 90% of students surveyed in 2022 indicated that they felt more engaged and this was particularly so for Year 12 students in their second year at BSC (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4

Proportion of student respondents who agreed that 'Overall I feel that at Bradfield assignments/activities are more engaging than at my previous school'



Source: BSC Student Voice Survey

Of the current students interviewed, one-third explicitly expressed enjoyment in school. Some students' enjoyment of school or learning increased, and others experienced an enjoyment of school when there had been none before. A few parents commented that their children enjoyed going to school since moving to BSC. One parent commented that even the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns did not dampen her daughter's enjoyment of learning, while others attributed increased enjoyment from the efforts of teachers in stimulating student engagement by making classes fun.

Oh, like, it's so weird. Because every time that I come to school, I'm actually like, excited. Like, I get to see my friends, I get to do this class, I get to see these teachers. **(Current student, interview)**

I already enjoyed learning quite a bit, but I think coming [here] and having the teacher support as well, absolutely skyrocketed how much I enjoy it. **(Current student, interview)**

The passionate and dedicated staff made learning experiences engaging in subjects (Sciences and English) that my child was previously disengaged with. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

One key factor that contributes to greater enjoyment among students is BSC's deliberate fostering of an adult learning environment. The college focuses on responsibilities, rather than rules, and seeks to break down the hierarchical power dynamic between students and teachers.

The director said the college intentionally fostered an adult learning environment and noted how important it was to many students who chose to attend BSC from difficult school environments where issues such as the wearing of school uniform or jewellery became the focus of disciplinary action:

I think it is the adult learning environment. ... Not having to wear a uniform matters, just not having to call people 'Mr' and 'Mrs', little things like that help them in that transition from childhood to adulthood. I think schools generally like compliance, because it just means that their life is much easier. And when you're managing 1,500 students, I can imagine that that would be important. Yes, try to hold that line and contain everything. The blue ribbon becomes a metaphor for doing that. ... And you know, if they start to question it, which we want young people to be doing, they're shut down and so they don't feel they're able to express themselves in the way that they need to. **(BSC Director)**

Parents and students agreed, seeing the adult learning environment as key to the way the college recognises students' desire to be treated more like adults and prepares them for life beyond school.

I feel like it's set the school structure. Sets you up so it prepared [you] for life outside of school and you learn all these like, different things that you won't learn at a normal high school. The teachers treat you more like adults, which I feel is more like a workplace than a school. **(Current student, CESE survey)**

Bradfield obviously has the best interests of their young people at heart, and the philosophy of allowing students to express their individuality whilst also treating them as young adults (with the requisite privileges and expectations) is a massive positive. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Students are expected to be self-directed and self-motivated in their learning. Several students identified the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning, a mindset that is facilitated by the BSC's teaching and learning environment. The emphasis on academic responsibility extended to responsibility for their own behaviours and choices.

An interesting observation from the BSC Student Survey was the marked difference between Year 11 and Year 12 respondents to the question 'What could be improved or is getting in the way of your learning?' While only 22% of Year 11 responses (out of 49 responses) identified issues for which they took personal responsibility, 65% of the 31 Year 12 responses indicated the responsibility lay with themselves which suggests that as the students progressed into their second year at the college, they were taking greater responsibility for their learning.

Other factors that contribute to students' greater enjoyment of – and engagement in – school and learning include:

- additional subject offerings, which provide more diverse subject choices while enabling a traditional HSC subject pathway, particularly in creative fields
- reduced emphasis on achievement (such as achieving an HSC Band 6 or a high ATAR) and reduced stress related to grades
- improved social relationships and mental health.

While the data suggests there have been improvements in engagement and learning outcomes since students moved to BSC, the possibility that the 'senior effect' may also be influencing these results cannot be discounted.⁵

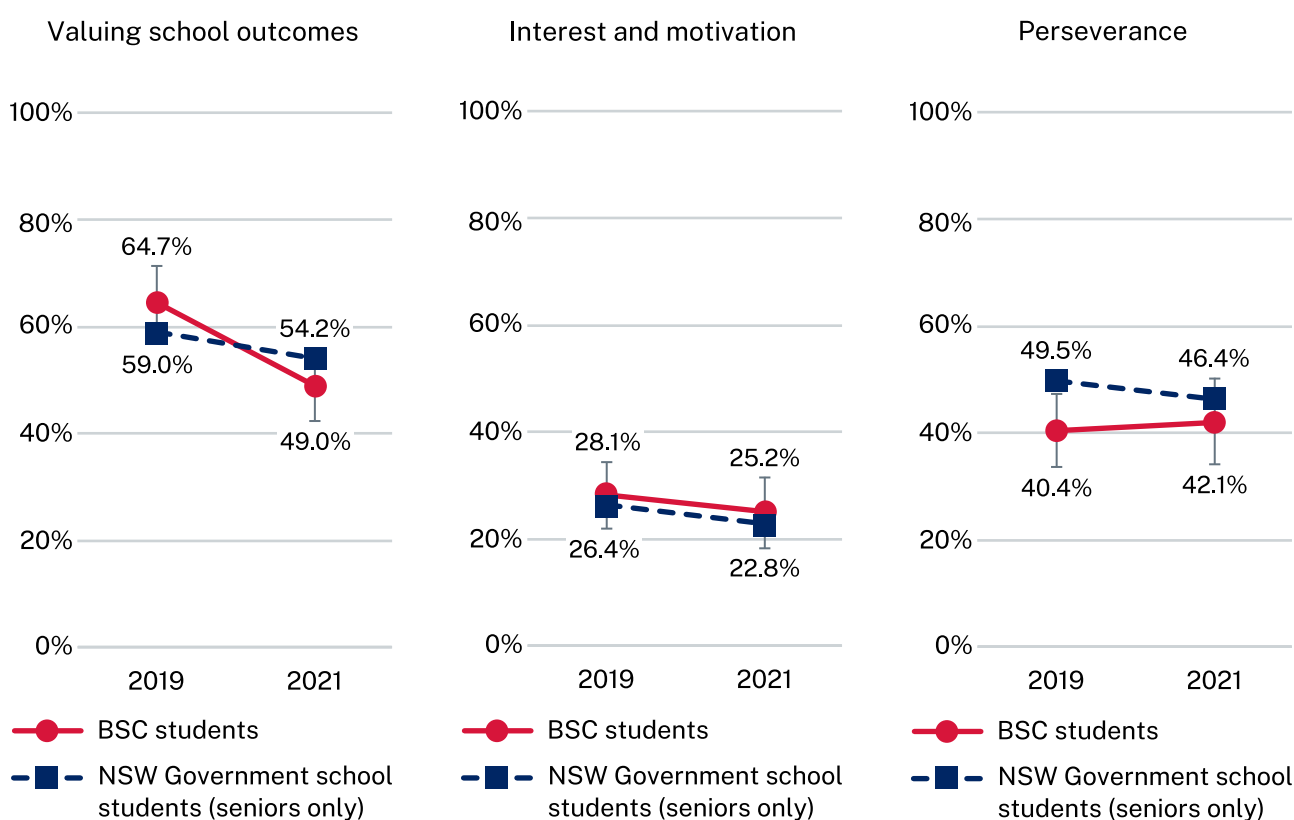
4.4.2 According to TTFM survey results, with some exceptions, both BSC and government school students' levels of internal engagement are generally low

On indicators of internal engagement, such as 'valuing school outcomes', 'perseverance' and 'motivation', BSC respondents appear to be similar to students at other NSW Government schools. For both groups, the TTFM survey results were low. The only exception was that more NSW Government school students self-reported stronger levels of perseverance. However, statistically significant differences were only observed in 2019 but not in 2021. Refer to Figure 4.5 for each of the 3 graphs.

⁵ The 'senior effect' describes a tendency for students to enjoy school more in Years 11 and 12, regardless of the school they are enrolled at, due to factors such as increased breadth of subject offerings that align more closely with interests, smaller class sizes, maturity and often being treated more like adults by teachers.

Figure 4.5

The proportion of positive responses on TTFM from BSC students and NSW Government senior school students for indicators of internal engagement



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

Compared to students in NSW Government schools, BSC respondents displayed similarly low levels of interest and motivation. The results for perseverance were significantly lower for BSC students in 2019 but not as much in 2021.

For the most part, BSC respondents were similar to other secondary schools on the TTFM survey. However, the qualitative findings present a different picture. Views expressed in student interviews, and student and parent surveys, suggest that some students have developed a more positive attitude towards learning since attending BSC. For example, one Year 11 student attributed her motivation to do schoolwork to the fact that she is doing subjects that really interest her, which is consistent with the literature on the association between academic content and engagement (Corso et al. 2013).

Because now that I can choose subjects that are specifically, literally like, all my subjects combined are me as a person, I want to do them. Like want to do the work. Because I'm interested in it. (Current student, interview)

In the staff focus groups, one teacher said BSC allows students to complete more than one subject that contains a major work and portfolio as its principal form of assessment. Numerous BSC students have the desire and the capability to complete the types of subjects that require major works. The reluctance by mainstream schools to allow students more than 1 or 2 of these types of subjects is largely due to their demanding nature and the fact that the major works are due earlier, in August and September of Year 12. However, it is these subjects that the students really want to pursue, that really ‘fire them up’. The teacher explained:

Many schools limit [major works] to 1 or 2, and there’s no limit here. So, you’ll get students doing 4 major works, and if you want to work in the creative industry, the thing you have to learn is how to manage your work. ... The reason schools do it, is because if you have too many, you don’t get the best marks.

But our point is if you do it – what you’re learning is the process of, “How do I manage that? How do I achieve this? How do I manage my time?” And the process is more important than necessarily what mark you get out of it. There’s also that you’ve got the flexibility of pathway – some of those students doing 4 [major works] will split up and over 2 years in Year 12 in order to actually achieve what they want to do. (Teacher, staff focus group)

4.5 Evidence of engagement in student attendance

Attendance can be an indicator of both internal and external engagement. The motivation to go to school, and/or to attend classes once there, demonstrates interest in and motivation for schooling and valuing learning outcomes. However, the act of attending school and classes also reflects internal engagement.

4.5.1 For some students, attendance rates have improved

We heard from, and about, students whose attendance rates had improved since commencing at BSC. The main reasons given for improved attendance were enhanced motivation, increased engagement in learning, stronger social relationships, reduced bullying and being happy to go to school.

At my old school, I had about 52% attendance in my last year. And now I’ve had 2 days off in 8 weeks. (Current student, interview)

Our daughter now enjoys going to school, is focussed on completing her HSC and her attendance has improved enormously compared to [her] old school. (Parent, BSC survey)

She actually wants to go to school, which in itself is a small miracle (Parent, BSC survey)

In the staff focus groups, teachers had positive observations about student attendance. One teacher noted that some students' school attendance improved at BSC, while another shared that a student who had not attended school since Year 7 but after enrolling at BSC had achieved close to 100% attendance. A third teacher commented:

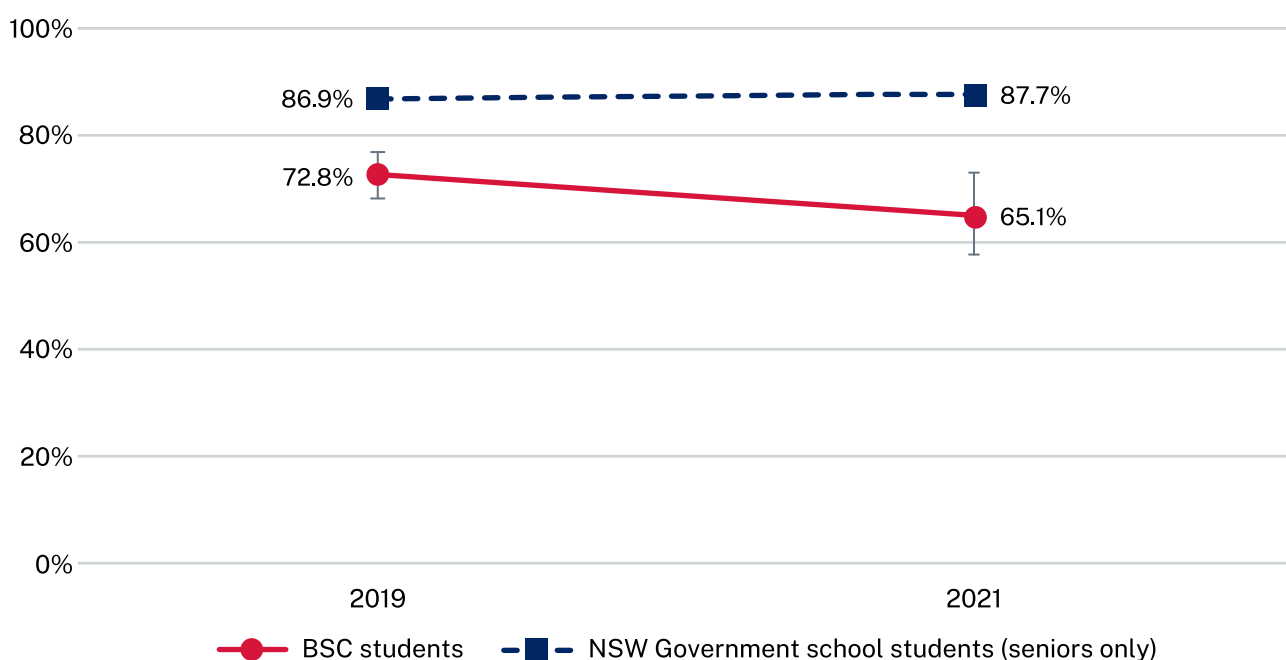
I think they disappear in mainstream schools – or whether they have low attendance or they just disappear into the background, they don't participate, they don't engage. (Teacher, staff focus group)

However, the TTFM results showed that, compared to their peers in other NSW Government schools, self-reported attendance of BSC respondents is statistically significantly lower, especially in 2021 (Figure 4.6), reducing by 8% between 2019 and 2021.

To determine the proportion of students engaging in positive attendance behaviours, the TTFM survey asks students to comment on how often they had missed a day at school or skipped a class without permission. While parents and carers are expected to account for student absences, the nature of the adult learning environment and increased student independence in the senior years may have influenced BSC student responses. As presented in Box 1, we speculate the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have a disproportionately negative impact on BSC students, which may be a contributing factor to lower student attendance.

Figure 4.6

The proportion of positive responses from students at BSC and NSW Government schools regarding attendance



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

4.5.2 Students with significant mental health issues may still find regular attendance challenging

Although the attendance of many students seemed to have improved since moving to BSC, some students continued to attend sporadically, especially those with significant mental and/or other health issues, due to their conditions and medical requirements.

I still struggle a lot with attendance, I struggle a lot to get to all my classes. So instead of being late, I just miss entire classes a lot of the times. And one of my 5 subjects, I didn't do the whole Year 11 basically, or a lot of Year 11. I did some of the work from it. But I wasn't able to, like, consistently go to the class.
(Current student, interview)

The prevalence of poor attendance was confirmed by staff in a focus group:

But one thing is, because of the mental health thing, class sizes don't feel sometimes as big because attendance is an issue so you will always have students missing from your class. (Teacher, staff focus group)

In a focus group discussion, teachers explained that BSC helps students with poor attendance by using a flipped classroom approach where learning materials are made available online for students before the in-class lessons. If students are away, they can catch up using the online classroom materials.

4.6 External engagement

External engagement involves observable behaviours that reflect a student's involvement in school and learning, including regular class attendance (refer to section 4.5), adhering to school and classroom rules, active participation, attentive behaviour, effort and task completion.

4.6.1 Some students display increased positive academic engagement behaviours relative to their previous school

Students at BSC reported positive classroom behaviours such as being more productive. Current students reported that they are more motivated to work, work more efficiently and produce better quality work. One respondent commented on "handing completed work [in] for the first time [in] about 2 years", while another said:

I definitely get more work done in the time that I'm given, because of all those other factors leading to me wanting to be here, wanting to do the work and yeah. I've definitely, like my grades may have not improved, but the amount of work and the actual work that I'm doing – the content – has improved.
(Current student, interview)

One student claimed to be more productive than at their previous school due to improved focus, while another reported that they had given up on learning at their previous school but were now motivated to put in the effort, even when things were hard.

I enjoy the social aspect of Bradfield. Like, that's the reason I come every day. And then being able to, you know, add that social bit to my learning and makes me more motivated to actually get stuff done and do the work.

(Current student, interview)

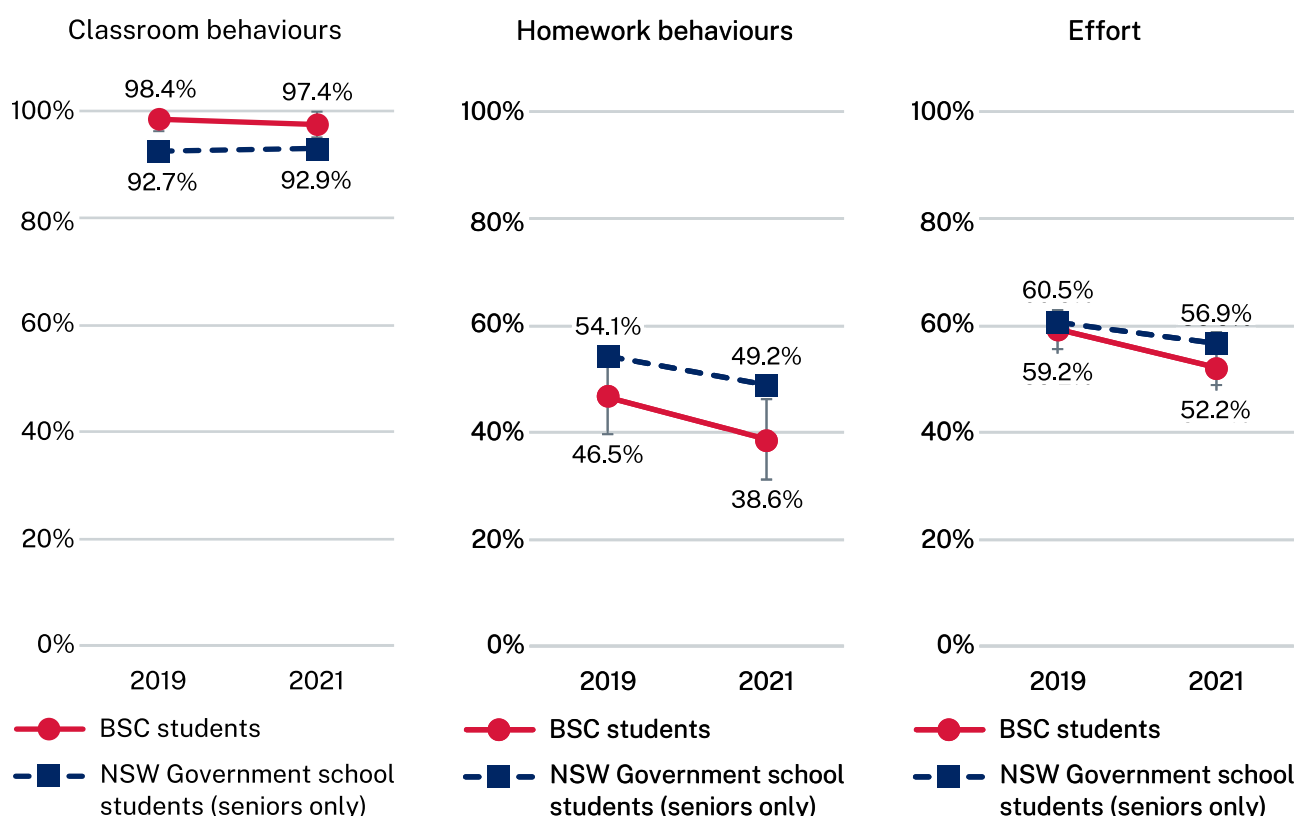
A parent commented in the BSC survey that “the maturity Bradfield fosters in her ... has grown into autonomy/self-motivation to do her work”.

In the TTFM survey (Figure 4.7), significantly more BSC students (around 98%) than their peers at NSW Government schools (around 93%) indicated positive classroom behaviour such as obeying school rules, listening to the teacher and not being disruptive. Between 50% and 60% of BSC students reported investing effort in schoolwork such as trying hard to perform well and participating in class. Homework behaviour, which is defined as effort invested in learning outside of school hours, was rated below 50% in both 2019 and 2021 for BSC students, while their NSW Government school peers were statistically significantly higher in both years.

The findings suggest that while BSC students may display external engagement through positive classroom behaviours, by their own admission, many students are still not applying themselves to the academic content by expending effort on mastering curricular content or investing time on learning outside of school hours.

Figure 4.7

The proportion of positive responses in the TTFM Student Survey from students at BSC and NSW Government schools regarding effort, classroom behaviours and homework behaviours



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

The low level of reported homework behaviour could be explained partially by the longer school day. Several students who were interviewed commented that although the school day was longer than they might have liked, the longer class periods and the gaps in the timetable meant that they were able to complete all tasks at school and did not have to do any work at home. Thus, students may have reported not doing homework at home because they had in fact completed all their work during college hours.

It's good to have the 2-hour classes because you get more work done, which means you don't have homework. (Current student, interview)

While homework may not have been expected, it is likely some students put in many extra hours for the Project which may be why the TTFM results for homework still suggest homework is being completed. One Year 12 student spoke of her enthusiasm for working on the Vivid Project in an interview: "I loved it so much I stayed 6 hours behind on my birthday trying to get things done".

4.6.2 Some less engaged students can disrupt the learning environment, especially when teachers do not respond effectively

Nearly all the BSC students interviewed reported engaging in positive behaviour in the classroom, such as listening to the teacher, not needing to be reprimanded for being inattentive or for disruptive behaviour, and not getting into trouble for breaking school rules.

However, BSC survey responses to questions asking participants for suggestions about improvements needed or general feedback produced some comments about the need to better manage students. A few Year 11 students (5 out of 68 participants) and a few parents (5 out of 246 participants) indicated that the engagement of some students may be negatively impacted by poor management practices of a few teachers and by a perceived tolerance of negative behaviours.

There was also a sense from some students that they struggled to be seen and to elicit teacher attention when students with emotional, social, behavioural or disability issues tended to dominate class and teacher time.

It is very hard to cope in a school where everyone is struggling mentally. As much as teenage me enjoyed the freedom Bradfield gave me. I wish I went to a more 'normal' school with more rules. (Past student, alumni survey)

My daughter's impression was that the teachers were not able to control the more rowdy kids, and she felt quite unsafe. It was an extremely lonely and psychologically damaging year for her. (Parent, BSC survey)

Completely disappointed in Bradfield. We felt it only catered for students with difficulties and problems. Students were disruptive in class, teachers with little control, teachers over-compensating for students who did little or no work, drugs in school, would not recommend. (Parent, BSC survey)

I would encourage the school to take a firmer stance on negative behaviour in order to minimise impact on other students. (Parent, BSC survey)

Another issue identified is the focus given to students' strengths rather than continuing to stretch their skills in other subjects and a perceived culture of underachievement or not having high expectations of students.

... the program was insufficiently challenging. It gave a great artistic outlet, but at the expense of not supporting my child to develop other talents (e.g. maths, business, language, literacy). It would be great if creative teachers could tune into the multidimensional nature of our kids – who change frequently and are shaped by opportunities. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

I think the 'Bradfield student culture' is a little toxic. The 'not studying' or failing is normalized among students, which is an easy hole to fall into and [then] not care about Year 12. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

Another issue raised by a small number of students and parents was the use of vapes and drugs. When asked in the BSC Student Voice Survey about 'What could be improved or what is getting in the way of your learning?', some Year 11 students commented:

The vaping and 'hook ups' in the unisex and female bathrooms. On many occasions I have gone to use the unisex bathrooms, as the female [bathrooms] are usually full of vape-addicted students, but as usual, 2 or more people are having a small drug party or hook up. While this isn't a big issue, it's very, very annoying ... **(Past student, alumni survey)**

The vaping in the bathroom and the playground. Sometimes the talking in class, although none of it compares to how bad it all was at my last school. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

It should be noted, however, that vaping and drug use are prevalent in most secondary schools.⁶ So, while the behaviour is clearly distressing or irritating to some students, and has impacted their views about the college, these problems must be understood as being endemic across the school system.

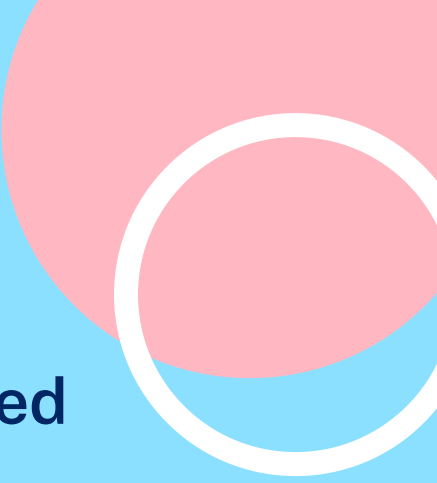
4.7 Summary

While many BSC students show signs of increased internal engagement with school, there is less evidence of external engagement. That is, while students may feel more positively about school, and some may be attending more regularly, many are still not investing effort in doing the work.

The TTFM findings show that all students, regardless of where they attend school, display generally low levels on most indicators of engagement, which means that BSC students demonstrate similarly low engagement with school to other students in NSW Government schools. It is also noteworthy that despite their mental health, neurodiversity and other challenges, BSC students display similar levels of engagement to their peers in other NSW Government schools in the TTFM survey.

Based on student and parent accounts, the engagement of many students has improved since attending BSC. While there is clearly further room for improvement in BSC students' academic engagement, when considering their context, the evidence suggests that the BSC environment has contributed to enhanced engagement for many students.

⁶ The vaping 'epidemic' among children and young people and in schools is well documented. Refer to, for example, the [Sydney Morning Herald article on vaping in schools](#) (2023).



5 To what extent has BSC improved academic outcomes?

This chapter contains our findings regarding the extent to which BSC has improved student academic outcomes, our third and final evaluation question. We start by defining academic outcomes in terms of successful schooling as it relates to our evaluation. We name 4 key components drawn from the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and explain how these components will be used to structure this academic outcomes' chapter (Section 5.1). In Section 5.2 we look at the academic achievement of BSC students compared with both NSW Government schools and with the individually matched comparison group. Sections 5.3 to 5.6 explore each of the 4 components regarding BSC and use evidence from the evaluation to explain the findings.

5.1 Definitions

Before we examine the outcomes in this key area, we will determine what we are interested in when we look at academic outcomes. The traditional perspective is that 'academic outcomes' refers to students' performance in courses as measured by course assessments and often standardised testing, such as the HSC.

However, the limitations of such a specific definition are recognised in the research literature, where the definition of 'academic outcomes' has become less clear in recent years as our education system has shifted from a single, linear pathway, to one characterised by multiple and diverse pathways.

There is little consensus in the literature about what 'academic outcomes' are or what 'academic success' looks like across secondary school settings, particularly in the Australian context. Much is written about the factors that contribute to academic success (for example, Hattie 2006) but very little about how to define and measure academic success (the terms 'academic outcomes' and 'academic success' tend to be used interchangeably in the literature).

The focus in the literature and in educational policy appears to have shifted somewhat away from ‘academic outcomes’ as measured by standardised testing and completion rates, toward the concept of ‘successful schooling outcomes’. This language shift is evident in key policy statements such as the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) which calls on educators support young people by:

providing high-quality, relevant and engaging education and support necessary to complete their secondary school education. The senior years of schooling should provide all students with high-quality advice, support and experiences to make informed choices about their future and smooth the initial transition to further education, training or meaningful employment.

And by:

helping them acquire the cognitive and social skills necessary for life after school and equip students to remain engaged in learning throughout life. This support requires effective partnerships with education and training providers, employers, industry and the broader community.

In this chapter, we assess BSC’s success at improving ‘academic outcomes’, and in the first section we address this question using a traditional concept of academic success from the data we had available (namely HSC completion).

However, we propose 4 additional criteria that more closely align with the concept of ‘successful schooling outcomes’, using the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration as a guide. These 4 criteria are identified in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1

The 4 components of successful schooling outcomes

	Staying at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway
	Developing aspirations and clear goals towards a future career
	Achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment
	Transitioning to a planned post-school destination

A note about the quantitative comparisons in this chapter

To determine the extent to which BSC has improved academic outcomes, we compare BSC students with other groups of students across the 4 components of successful schooling outcomes and their related academic indicators (Table 5.1). We compare the outcomes of the following groups from 2017 to 2021:

- the whole BSC student cohort with all other NSW Government students in Years 11 and 12
- the 629 BSC students (67.4% of the Bradfield cohort) matched exactly with 629 students (the comparison group) on a relevant set of variables (refer to section 2.5)
- all BSC students with all NSW students (government and non-government) who participated in the NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey in the calendar year directly after they left secondary school.

Table 5.1 lists the 4 components and shows the academic indicators and relevant comparison groups we have used to determine the extent to which BSC has improved academic outcomes for its students.

Table 5.1

Australian educational goals and the evaluation measures we have used to determine improvement

The 4 key components reflective of the Mparntwe Declaration	Academic indicators	Evidence drawn from
Staying at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway	Retention	Comparisons with NSW Government school students and between BSC matched students and the comparison group
Developing aspirations and clear goals towards a future career	Expectations of academic success	Comparisons with NSW Government school students using TTFM data in 2019 and 2021 ⁷
	Academic buoyancy	
	Academic self-concept	
	Academic motivation	Student perspective (CESE Student Survey)
	Perspectives from parents, students and alumni	BSC surveys and interview data

⁷ The TTFM constructs of academic buoyancy, academic self-concept and expectations of academic success are dimensions that are influential in underpinning secondary school students' academic achievement. How these are defined by the TTFM survey is given in Appendix M.

The 4 key components reflective of the Mparntwe Declaration	Academic indicators	Evidence drawn from
Achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment	HSC attainment	Comparisons between BSC matched students and the comparison group
	ATAR eligibility	Comparisons between BSC matched students and the comparison group
	VET qualifications and progress	TAFE VET qualifications data for BSC
	Perspectives from parents, students and alumni	BSC surveys and interview data
Transitioning to a planned post-school destination	Post-school destinations	Compared with all NSW school leavers using Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey data

5.2 BSC students' academic achievement

In the first instance, we look at the academic achievement of BSC students compared with both NSW Government schools and with the individually matched comparison group. Specifically, we look at attainment of the HSC and eligibility for an ATAR.

5.2.1 Compared with NSW Government schools, BSC students attained the HSC at a similar rate

The Higher School Certificate and unit accumulation

The Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the highest educational award in secondary education in NSW. It is awarded to secondary school students who have satisfactorily completed Years 11 and 12. To be eligible, students must meet HSC course requirements and sit for the statewide HSC examinations. Year 12 students who do not receive an HSC may have fulfilled some but not all the necessary award and/or course requirements.

While most students complete their HSC over 2 years in Years 11 and 12, the HSC Pathways scheme provides more options for gaining the HSC. One option is the strategy of unit accumulation, where students can undertake HSC courses at a slower rate, and have up to 5 years to complete, starting from the first year they complete an HSC course. This strategy (commonly referred to as 'Pathways') is promoted at BSC, where for a range of reasons including mental health, illness, caring responsibilities, work commitments and other reasons, students may need to undertake HSC studies over a longer period than the traditional 2 years. The option is available to all NSW students and is an arrangement made with the school/college. However, it is up to schools if and how they promote or offer the scheme. BSC explicitly offers the scheme to students in its information and promotional material and during the application process.

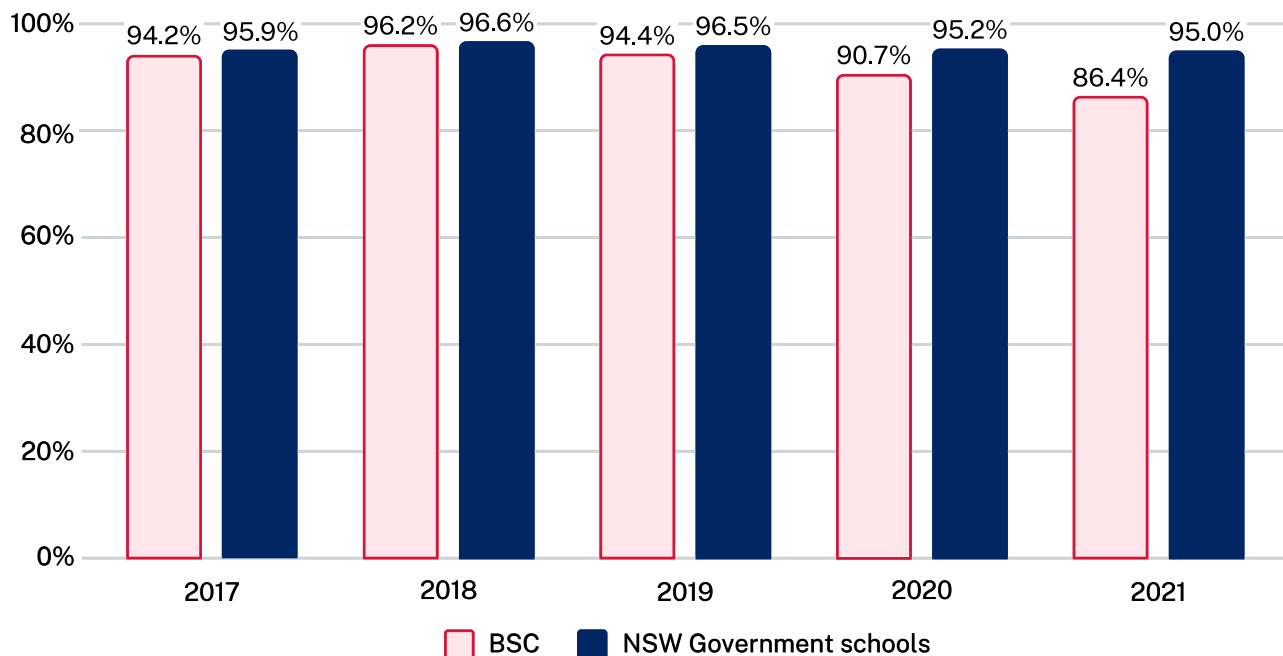
A high proportion of Year 12 students at both BSC and all NSW public schools (Figure 5.2) received an HSC award. In our analysis of 5 years of data, the HSC award rate was similar for both BSC and Year 12 students in NSW public schools up to 2020. In 2020 and 2021 the rate was lower for BSC but remained stable for other schools.

However, interpretation of the data is complicated by the prevalence at BSC of HSC unit accumulation (one of the HSC Pathways options). Accumulation is a strategy encouraged for some students by BSC as an alternative to the traditional 2-year HSC. A higher-than-average proportion of BSC students use the accumulation option under HSC Pathways and the number has increased throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The college reported that pre-pandemic, around 10 to 15 students a year used the accumulation strategy but this increased to 25 in 2020, 17 in 2021 and 53 in 2023. HSC Pathways students are included in the data in Figure 5.2 as they may be 'active' in Year 12 but may not complete the HSC in that year. BSC suggests that the growth in accumulation was the most likely explanation for the completion rate drop in 2020 and 2021, as college data does not show a change in withdrawal patterns.

Figure 5.2

Proportion of enrolled Year 12 students who attained the HSC at BSC and at NSW Government schools



Source: HSC attainment data 2017 to 2021 (NESA)

Note: this data includes students undertaking the HSC via HSC Pathways, including those who were enrolled in Year 12 but did not attain an HSC in that year according to the rules of flexible study.

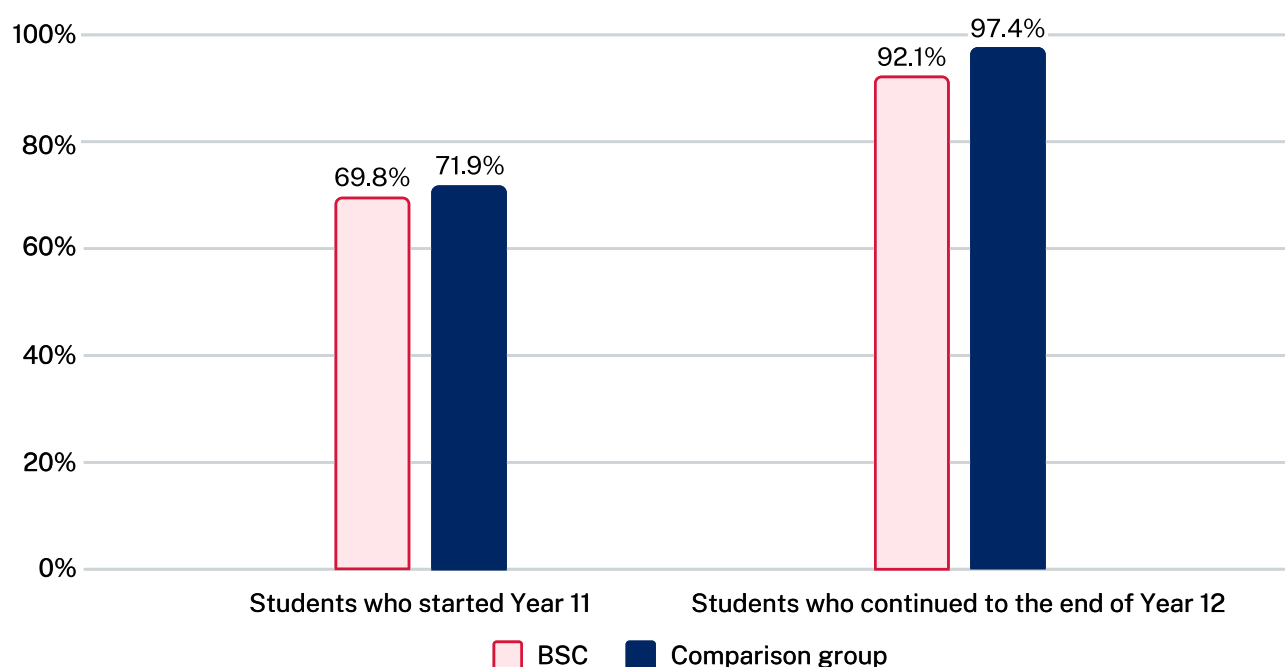
5.2.2 BSC Year 11 students were as likely as the comparison group to attain the HSC, but the subgroup that completed Year 12 were slightly less likely to attain their HSC

Looking at the HSC attainment rates of the matched BSC and comparison group students, the outcomes were similar for both cohorts who started Year 11, with 69.8% of the BSC students and 71.9% of the comparison group students attaining the HSC. When we look at the subgroup who continued at the same school through to the end of Year 12 (bearing in mind that students may have left their school for a multitude of reasons during Year 11), BSC students attained the HSC at a slightly lower rate of 92.1% compared with 97.4%, a difference of 5.3% which was statistically significant (Figure 5.3).⁸

This suggests that BSC Year 11 students are as likely as their characteristic-matched peers at government schools to attain the HSC. However, those who continue to complete Year 12 are slightly less likely to attain the HSC than their matched peers at government schools. While the rate for BSC completers was lower, it should be acknowledged that the attainment rates for both cohorts were high (more than 90%) and similar to the rate for all NSW public schools (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3

Comparison group analysis – averaged proportion of students who attained the HSC, 2017 to 2021



⁸ 95% CI [2%, 9%], p-value<0.01

5.2.3 BSC students are much less likely to be eligible for an ATAR than their peers at NSW Government schools or the comparison group

Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)

An ATAR is optional and issued by the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC). It is a state-based rank based on students' HSC results from a prescribed pattern of courses. To be eligible for an ATAR in NSW, students must satisfactorily complete at least 10 units of HSC courses. These courses must include at least:

- 8 units from Category A courses
- 2 units of English
- 3 board-developed courses of 2 units or greater
- 4 subject areas.

A student must elect to be issued with an ATAR. Thus, obtaining an ATAR is subject to meeting strict conditions and a choice by the student..

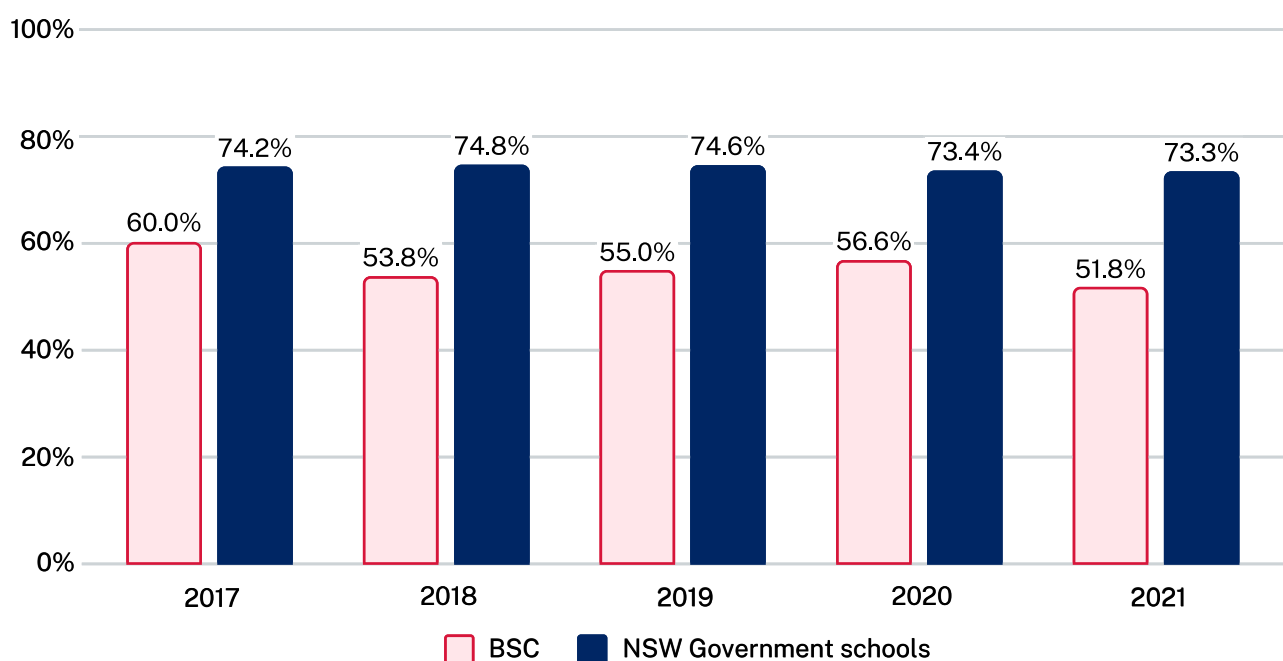
An ATAR is calculated using an aggregate (grouping) of the scores received across subjects studied during Year 12. This includes the highest scaled study score in an English subject, the highest scaled study scores in 3 further subjects, and 10% of the scaled study scores for the remainder of a student's subjects. 'Scaled' means that the scores are weighted up or down depending on the performance of other students taking that subject.

At BSC, helping students to pursue a post-school pathway does not necessarily equate to gaining a high-ranking ATAR. Rather, students are encouraged to identify their career goals and appropriately pursue the skills, knowledge and qualifications they need to access their chosen pathway.

Obtaining an ATAR is a prerequisite to gaining entry to university in the year after completing the HSC. Figure 5.4 shows that a much lower proportion of graduating BSC Year 12 students (18.6% lower, averaged over 5 years) were eligible for an ATAR compared with NSW Government school students.

Figure 5.4

Proportion of Year 12 students eligible for an ATAR at BSC and all NSW Government schools



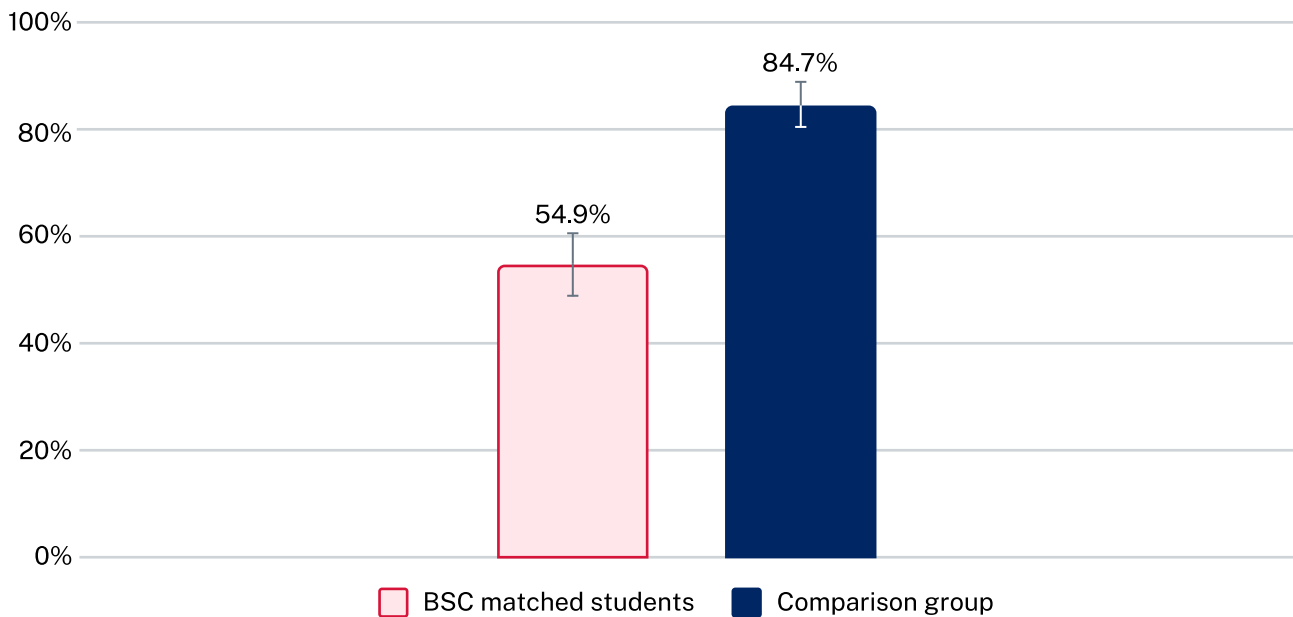
Source: HSC data, 2017 to 2021 (NESA)

Data from the comparison group analysis also shows that BSC students were much less likely to be eligible for an ATAR. In the analysis, 54.9% of BSC graduates were eligible for an ATAR compared with 84.7% of graduates in the comparison group (Figure 5.5). The difference between the rates was statistically significant.⁹ The most likely reason for the lower eligibility rate is that many BSC students choose course combinations that make them eligible for the HSC but ineligible for an ATAR (for example, more Category B or non-board-developed courses than permitted).

⁹ 95% CI [23%, 37%], p-value<0.01

Figure 5.5

Comparison group analysis – averaged proportion of Year 12 completers eligible for an ATAR, 2017 to 2021



Source: HSC data, 2017 to 2021 (NESA)

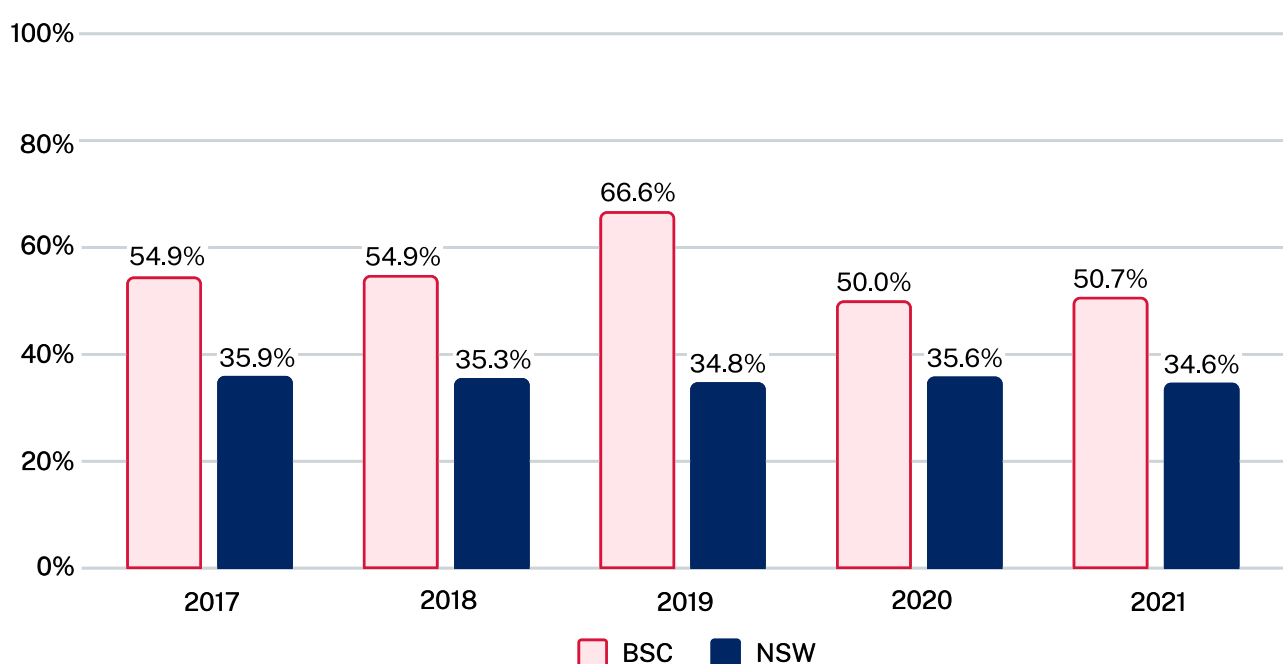
These figures are not surprising as BSC's explicit focus is helping students to pursue their own post-school pathway, whether that is university, training or employment, and does not push students to pursue an ATAR if it does not align with their chosen pathway. The ATAR eligibility rates for BSC students are consistent with students' expectations for a post-school destination with only about half of students nominating university as their goal (refer to Section 5.4.2). Thus, ATAR eligibility cannot be considered a useful measure of academic outcomes.

5.2.4 There is strong uptake and completion of VET courses among BSC students compared with students at NSW public schools

Many BSC students explained that a key reason for enrolling at BSC was to undertake skills-based, creative and/or job-focused courses which were either not offered or were less accessible at their previous schools. VET course enrolment data shows that on average over 5 years, 55% of BSC students enrolled in VET certificate courses, compared with 35% of students in NSW Government schools (Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6

Proportion of BSC and NSW Government students who started at least one VET certificate I, II or III

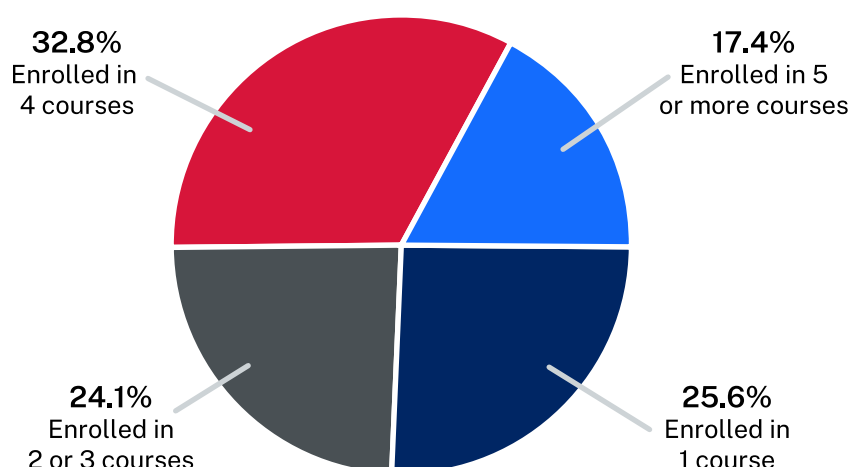


Source: TAFE VET data, 2017 to 2021

To ensure that students are achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment, BSC students are encouraged to undertake as many VET courses as needed. Figure 5.7 shows the VET course enrolment pattern for 2021, where more than half of BSC students undertake 4 or more subjects. It was reported by students and staff that studying several VET subjects was often not possible at their previous schools due to either capacity or school policy.

Figure 5.7

Percentage of TAFE certificate I to III enrolments per BSC student undertaken in 2021



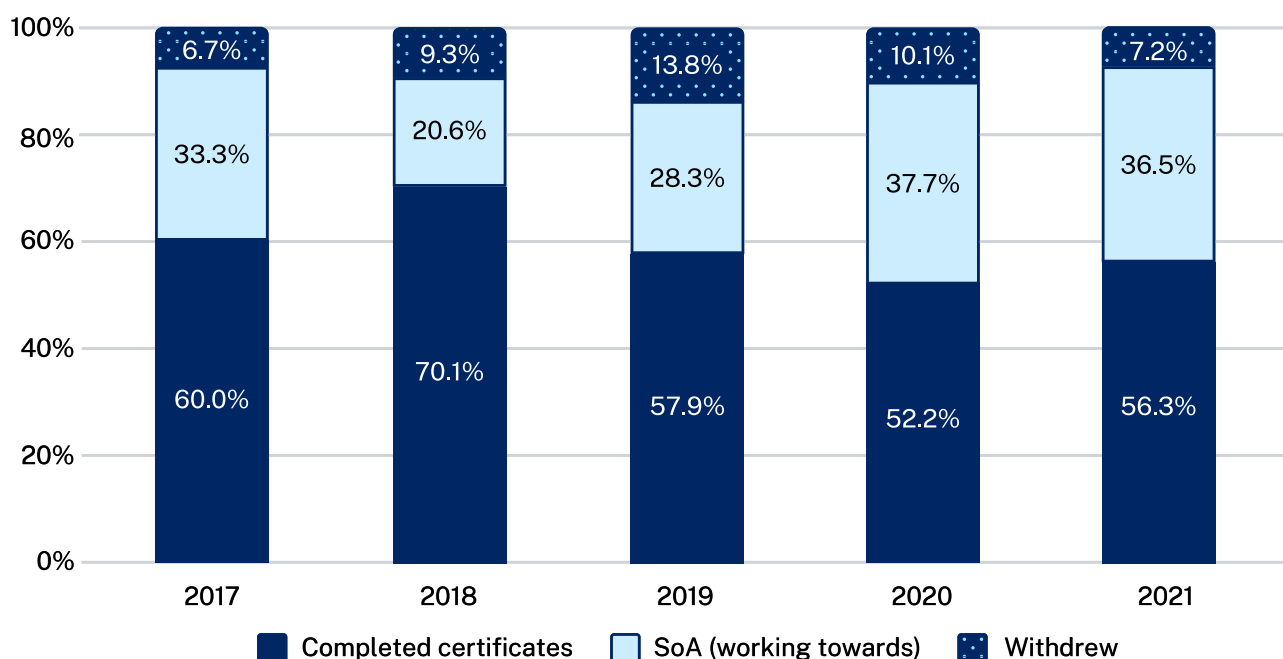
Source: TAFE VET course data

The VET course completion rate of BSC students is higher than the completion rate in the NSW VET system more broadly.¹⁰ The average completion rate over the 5 years to 2022 for BSC was 59.3% (Figure 5.8).¹¹ Unfortunately, VET system data was not available for the same years, however the average 2-year completion rate (2017 and 2018) was 46.7% for the whole NSW VET system.¹² Data was also not available to compare BSC completion rates with the completion rates of either NSW Government students or the comparison group.

¹⁰ While TAFE is the biggest provider, there are many other providers including numerous private sector, government agencies/affiliates and non-government organisations (for example, many registered training organisations, adult and community education, group training, apprenticeship providers and so on).

¹¹ BSC VET course completion data sourced from TAFE NSW. NSW comparison data sourced from NCVER [VET qualification completion rates 2022](#).

¹² Data was also not available to compare BSC completion rates with the completion rates of either NSW Government students or the comparison group.

Figure 5.8**Outcomes of VET course enrolments at BSC, 2017 to 2021**

Source: TAFE VET course data

The data also showed that very few BSC students withdrew from VET courses (9.4% average over 5 years) (Figure 5.8). However, about one-third of enrolments (31.3% average over 5 years) were incomplete with the status 'statement of attainment (SoA) working towards'. The college director explained that a substantial number of students undertake VET courses that facilitate further study at TAFE but they do not require the VET certification or the units to count toward the HSC. For these students, an outcome of 'SOA units towards' is sufficient for fulfilling ongoing TAFE requirements and so the students may choose not to complete the assessments that would gain them the VET certificate.

5.2.5 Anecdotally, many students reported improved academic performance since moving to BSC

Our qualitative interviews revealed that half of the 18 student interviewees reported that their grades had improved since attending BSC. While these assertions cannot be verified, they suggest that numerous students at least perceived themselves to be performing better academically at BSC compared with their previous schools.

... I had never gotten good marks on anything until I went to Bradfield, because I was feeling unsafe. So I couldn't really complete the work ... so I was averaging like, just passing like 50, 60%. And like, a couple, like [unclear] I got 95 for something. And that was like ... a couple of classes I'm averaging like 98 or something. I've got a couple of 80s and 70s, and stuff. So like, being able to just actually do well. And also get really good feedback from teachers and stuff that just feel like I can learn and be safe ... **(Current student, interview)**

I went from being lucky if I got like a 20 out of 100 to being like, I get 97s. I think the lowest one I got this term was like 70 something. Yeah, it's amazing. And then the teachers are just so encouraging. **(Current student, interview)**

At Bradfield she wasn't just a number she was seen as a person and valued. At her old school they never recognised who [she] was and what she was good at. Told her she wouldn't be able to do advanced English as she wasn't good enough. At Bradfield she completed advanced English and did well in it. Her marks improved and she was happy to go to school. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

Many students felt that the BSC experience was what enabled their achievement and further success:

I achieved an ATAR that allowed me to get into the course I wanted at the uni I wanted. Teachers were a huge part in giving me the confidence and knowledge that allowed me to be completing my current studies. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

Would not have pursued my degree and probably would not have finished school if I had not come to Bradfield. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

I started Bradfield as a nervous and shy person and I am now a university student, living out of home at 18, working, and loving every second of it! **(Past student, alumni survey)**

Motivated and supported me to work towards my goals without marks being the sole focus. **(Past student, alumni survey)**

5.2.6 Summary – BSC academic achievement

The key dataset available to the evaluation to assess academic achievement is HSC attainment, which revealed that BSC students are achieving similarly to their peers at other government schools and the comparison group for this evaluation. This can be an achievement in itself, given the personal and educational challenges that many BSC students clearly faced both before and during their time at BSC, including being at risk of disengaging from school altogether.

Another key dataset examined VET participation and outcomes. We found that BSC students have higher levels of uptake in VET courses than their NSW Government school peers. We also found that BSC's VET course completion rate was significantly higher than in the overall VET system and course withdrawal levels were less than 10%.

The other dataset we reviewed was ATAR eligibility, which confirmed what we already knew from other system data: that fewer BSC students want to go to university than is the case at other schools. However, as ATAR eligibility is directly linked to an individual's subject choices, and because VET participation is so high at BSC, we do not find it a useful measure of academic achievement.

5.3 Successful schooling outcome 1 – staying at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway

The first outcome we examined is what may be considered a precursor of later academic or schooling outcomes. For continuing students (that is, those who do not take an early leaving vocational pathway such as an apprenticeship) to improve academic outcomes, they must first be retained in secondary education long enough to identify and prepare for accessing a viable career pathway.

Retention of students in the post-compulsory education period may be considered an indicator of student persistence in pursuit of educational goals. The following discussion examines the outcomes of BSC students in this area.

5.3.1 Many students indicated that if they had not moved to BSC, it is unlikely that they would have finished school

Many students who moved to BSC were at risk of disengaging from school for a range of reasons, including a disconnect between available subject choices and student interests, dissatisfaction with their Year 7 to 10 school climate, mental and/or physical health issues, feelings of alienation from peers and the school, and bullying.

In the BSC Student Voice Surveys, Alumni Survey and Parent Surveys, and the CESE Student Survey, around one-third of respondents said they would have dropped out of school if they did not go to BSC (Figure 4.2). Past students and parents also supported this view in open comments.

Without Bradfield I probably would never have finished school and survived my senior high school years. So, I owe Bradfield a lot. (Past student, alumni survey)

I also don't think I would have finished high school if I hadn't moved to Bradfield, and getting my HSC did benefit me in terms of employability and further study.
(Past student, alumni survey)

The dedication and sensitivity shown by all the Bradfield teachers and staff is quite literally the difference between some kids surviving and thriving, or dropping out because they just cannot develop a sense of belonging at other schools. (Parent, BSC survey)

Probably would not have finished school if I had not come to Bradfield.
(Past student, alumni survey)

Of the 18 students interviewed, 4 indicated that if they did not move to BSC, they would have dropped out of school altogether with no clear pathway to further study or work. A further 3 noted there was no alternative to BSC.

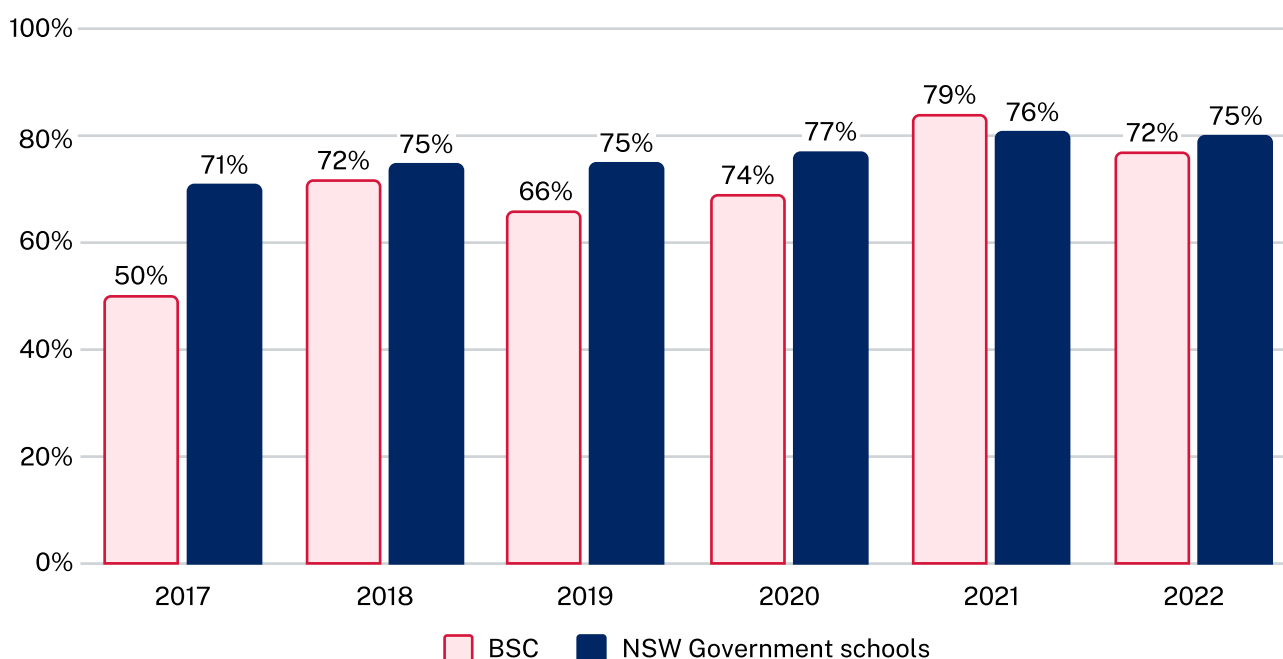
I think it is wonderful. I mean I know, definitely that if I wasn't here, if Bradfield didn't exist, I definitely would not have finished school. Uh, so I don't know what I'd be doing, but definitely wouldn't still be in school.
(Current Year 12 student, interview)

5.3.2 The BSC retention rate was similar to NSW Government schools in recent years

In the past 3 years (2020, 2021 and 2022) BSC's retention rates were similar to other NSW Government schools (Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9

Year 11 to Year 12 retention rates of BSC students compared with NSW Government school students, 2017 to 2022



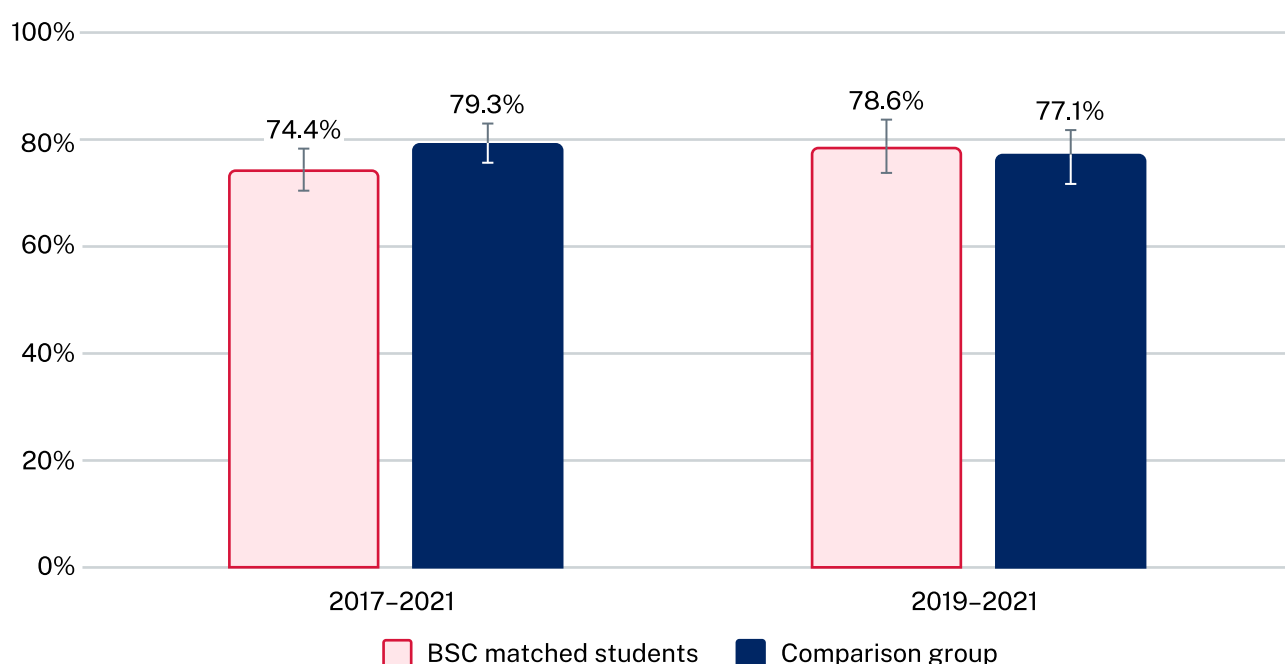
Source: NESA, RoSA and HSC attainment data

Note: in this figure our data includes the most recent year of 2022.

When we compared the BSC matched students and comparison group results, we found that averaged retention rates over 5 years (2017 to 2021) showed that BSC is about 5% lower than the comparison group (10%). However, more recent results from 2019 to 2021 reflect the same improvement we noted in the comparison with NSW Government school students with BSC matched students – actually, a little higher (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10

Year 11 to Year 12 averaged retention rates of BSC matched students and the comparison group, 2017 to 2021 and 2019 to 2021



Source: NESA, RoSA and HSC attainment data

Note: the comparison group data for both groups only includes data up to 2021, unlike the public school retention rates that include 2022.

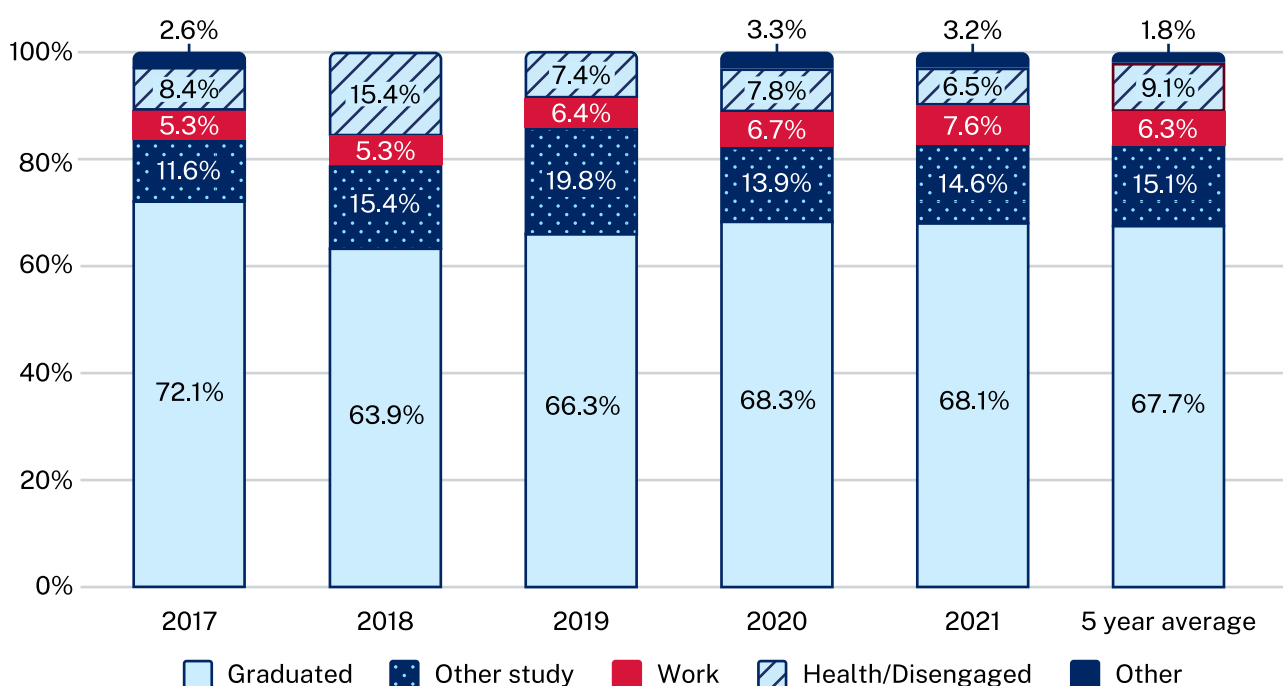
While Year 11 to Year 12 retention rates may reflect continuity of, and perseverance in, secondary education, as well as sustained commitment to the college, it is important to note that Year 12 and HSC completion is not necessarily the objective for all BSC students. Leaving secondary education at the end of Year 11 could reflect individual student decisions to pursue other study, training or work options (21% of BSC students leave before completing Year 12 to undertake study elsewhere or work – refer to Figure 5.11).

5.3.3 Very few BSC students drop out of a career pathway – about 90% either graduate, choose to study elsewhere or move to employment

BSC exit data from departing students between 2017 and 2021 (Figure 5.11) captures their reasons for leaving. On average, two-thirds (67.7%) of departing students left because they graduated from Year 12. A further 15% moved to study elsewhere and 6% left to commence employment. Thus, nearly 90% of students stayed at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway. The remainder discontinued for health (9%) or other (2%) reasons. The college director stated that some of those who discontinue for health or other reasons returned the following year to resume their studies, but the return of these students is not captured in the data.

Figure 5.11

Reasons students provided to the college for why they are leaving BSC, 2017 to 2021



Source: BSC exit data

5.4 Successful schooling outcome 2 – developing aspirations and clear goals towards a future career

The second successful school outcome we consider is the extent to which being at BSC motivates students academically, helps them to develop a clearer view of their future and inspires them to pursue their study, training or work goals. This discussion particularly focuses on factors known to impact students' aspirations, such as academic buoyancy and student and staff expectations.

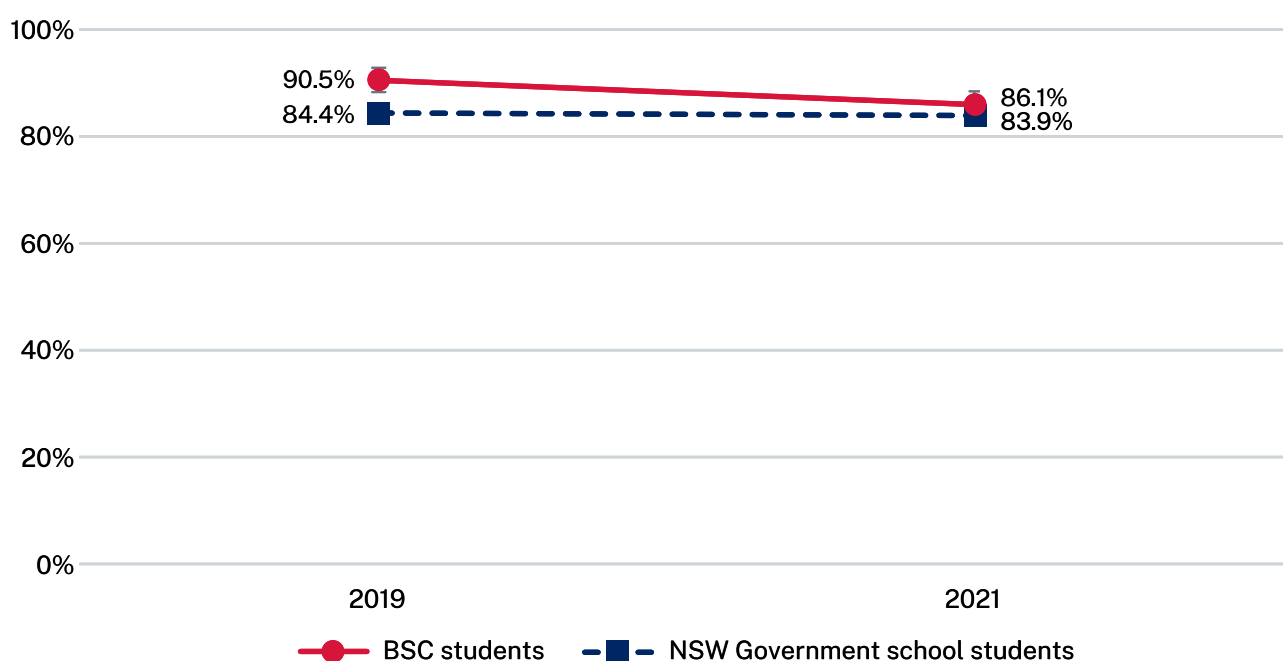
5.4.1 BSC students have higher expectations of finishing Year 12 than other public school students

Our analysis of TTFM data showed a higher proportion of BSC students expected to finish Year 12 in both 2019 and 2021 than the proportion of students in NSW Government schools (Figure 5.12). In 2019, 90.5% of BSC students expected to complete Year 12 compared with 84.4% of NSW Government school students. In 2021, there was a small decrease for both groups – 86.1% for BSC and 83.9% for government schools.

For students who have experienced disengagement from, or difficulties with, school before coming to BSC, expecting to complete Year 12 may be seen as a considerable achievement.

Figure 5.12

Proportion of BSC and NSW Government school students' expectations of Year 12 completion



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

5.4.2 Most BSC students (like other school students) expect to continue in further education – for most this means university, but TAFE is increasingly popular

BSC students see themselves continuing to further education at about the same rate as students in NSW Government schools. In 2019, 80% of BSC students and 87.4% of government school students stated they expected to undertake further education, while the figures in 2021 were 87.4% for BSC and 86.9% for government schools (Table 5.2).

University continues to be the most popular post-school education destination for both groups, although TAFE appears to be increasing in popularity with BSC students.

Table 5.2

Expectations of BSC and NSW Government school students regarding going to TAFE or university post-school

Post-school option	BSC students		NSW Government school students	
	2019	2021	2019	2021
TAFE	29.2%	34.8%	25.2%	25.1%
University	50.8%	53.1%	62.2%	61.8%
TAFE or university	80.0%	87.9%	87.4%	86.9%

Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

The rise in expectations of further study after leaving BSC included rises in both the proportion of students who want to go to university and the proportion who want to go to TAFE. In 2019, BSC students' preference for TAFE was higher than that for government schools and significantly higher in 2021 (refer to Table 5.2). This may be due to the college's focus on creative industries, the VET courses students have already completed or intend to complete, and BSC's location within a TAFE campus. Around half of BSC students have experience of one or more VET subjects, providing students with a clearer understanding of the TAFE sector and the opportunities that exist there.

Undertaking VET units of study in Years 11 and 12, without necessarily completing a certificate, is an encouraged strategy that enables students to focus on the HSC and simultaneously commence their post-school pathway early. A statement of attainment (SoA) towards a certificate is issued and can be used towards higher level VET qualifications once they finish secondary studies (personal communication, Director, BSC).

In both years, fewer BSC students expected to go to university when compared to other NSW Government school students. In 2019, BSC students were statistically significantly less likely than their NSW Government school peers to expect to attend university: 50.8% of BSC students and 62.2% of NSW Government senior school students. The gap between the 2 groups reduced in 2021, with slightly fewer students in NSW Government schools and slightly more BSC students expecting to attend university.

It may not be surprising that a larger proportion of BSC students do not expect to go to university, compared with NSW Government schools generally. For many creative professions, university study is not required. Instead, students might prioritise work experience, internships, portfolio building or specialist training through alternative tertiary institutions such as TAFE or private tertiary providers – for example, the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), JMC Academy or the Australian Institute of Music (AIM) – which students might not consider 'university' in the typical sense.

Growth in these aspirational indicators for BSC students is particularly noteworthy given the number of students who were previously disengaged from school, had poor mental health, neurodiversity or other experiences impacting school engagement.

[BSC] provided the flexibility for me to complete my HSC and supported [me] in achieving my goals. (Past student, alumni survey)

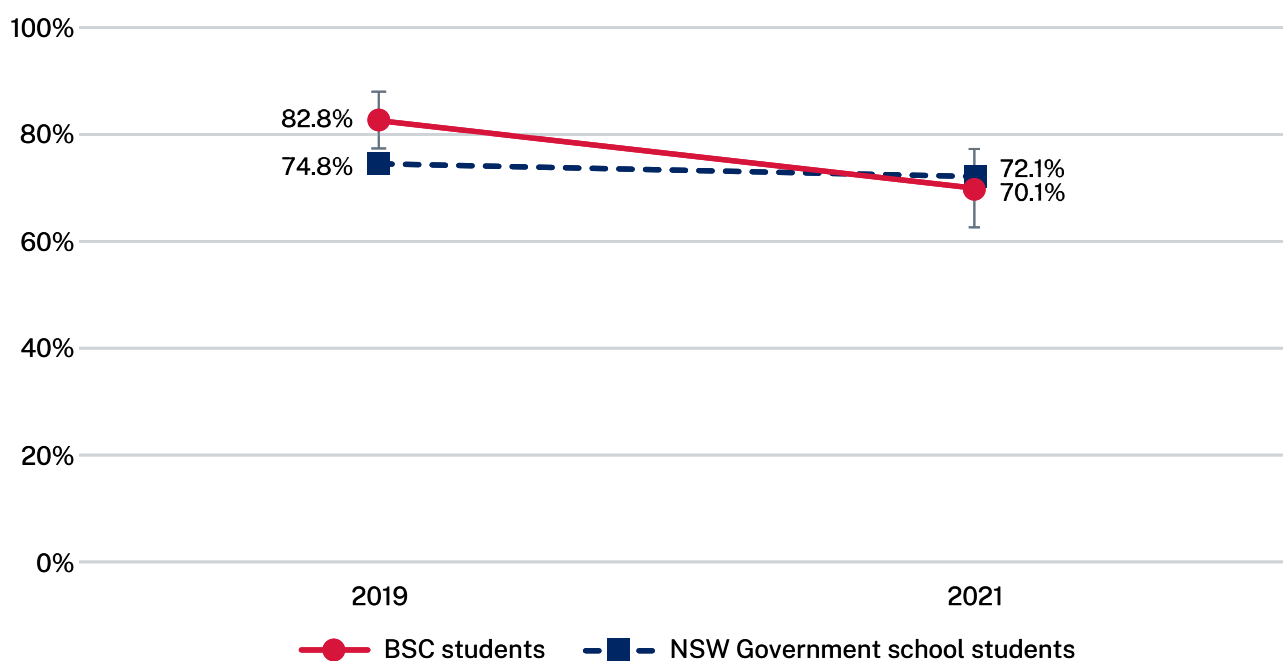
5.4.3 BSC students demonstrate similar academic self-concept to other NSW Government school students

Academic self-concept refers to how well a student feels they can learn and perform in their schoolwork. Academic self-concept and academic achievement are viewed as mutually reinforcing, each leading to gains in the other.¹³

TTFM measures of academic self-concept suggest that BSC students are similar to NSW Government school students in terms of the proportion that report positive self-concept. Results for both groups decreased in 2021, which may have been related to the disrupted schooling and shift to online learning that year due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 5.13).

Figure 5.13

Proportion of BSC and NSW Government school students who report a positive academic self-concept



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

¹³ A comprehensive discussion of academic self-concept can be found in Marsh HW and Martin AJ (2011).

The fact that BSC student perspectives are similar to – and, in 2019, significantly higher than – other NSW Government school students is curious, considering the difficulties and discouragement many BSC students experienced in previous school contexts. For instance, we heard from several students who said that before BSC, they felt they were underachieving, unsupported and often incapable of doing well at school.

I've found my quality and work submission has increased during my first term at Bradfield. I'm also excited to go to school and excited to explore my future instead of feel[ing] unproductive and unclear about my future like I did at my last public school. (Current student, CESE survey)

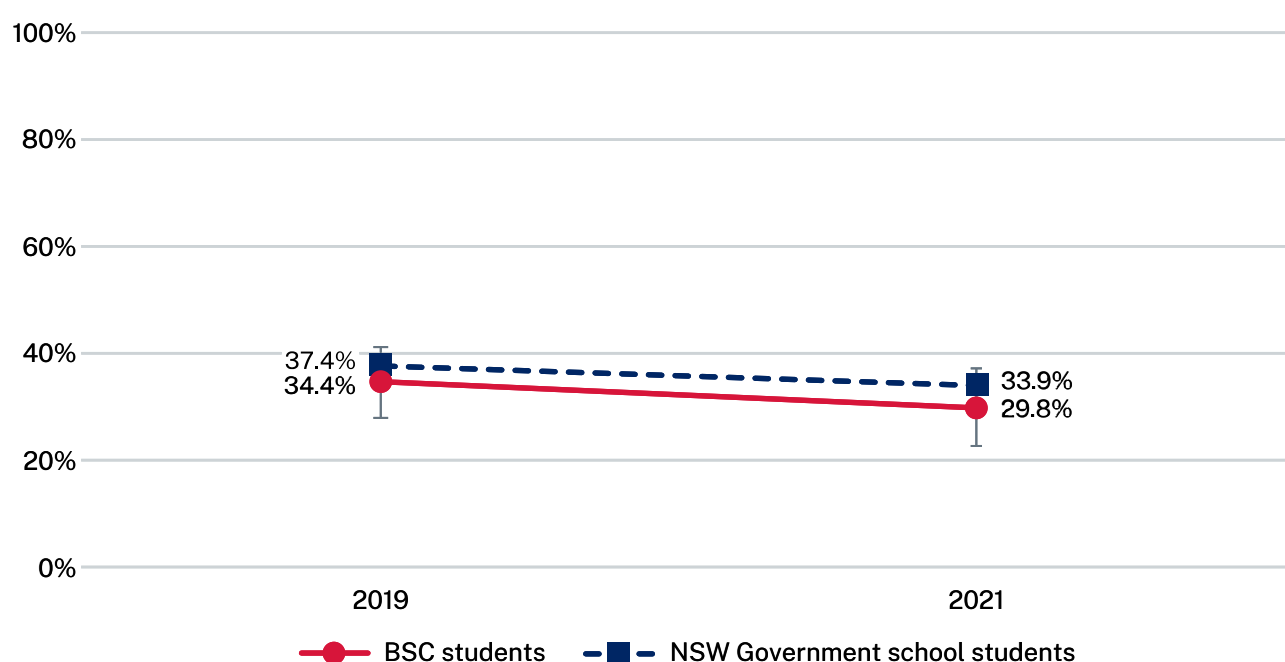
5.4.4 BSC students display similar academic buoyancy to other NSW Government school students

Academic buoyancy, also known as academic resilience, refers to students' ability to successfully deal with academic setbacks experienced in the ordinary course of school life. Such setbacks might include poor grades, exam pressures, difficult schoolwork and navigating competing deadlines (Martin and Marsh 2008).

The TTFM survey examines students' self-assessments of how they manage academic setbacks. Figure 5.14 shows that for both BSC students and other government school students in NSW, academic buoyancy is similar and quite low. Results for both groups declined in 2021, possibly in response to the experience of disrupted schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We refer to this decline for all students from 2019 to 2021 in Box 1 in Section 3.3.4 and suggest that the pandemic had an impact across all school types.

Figure 5.14

Proportion of BSC and NSW Government senior school students who report positive academic buoyancy



Source: TTFM Student Survey, 2019 and 2021

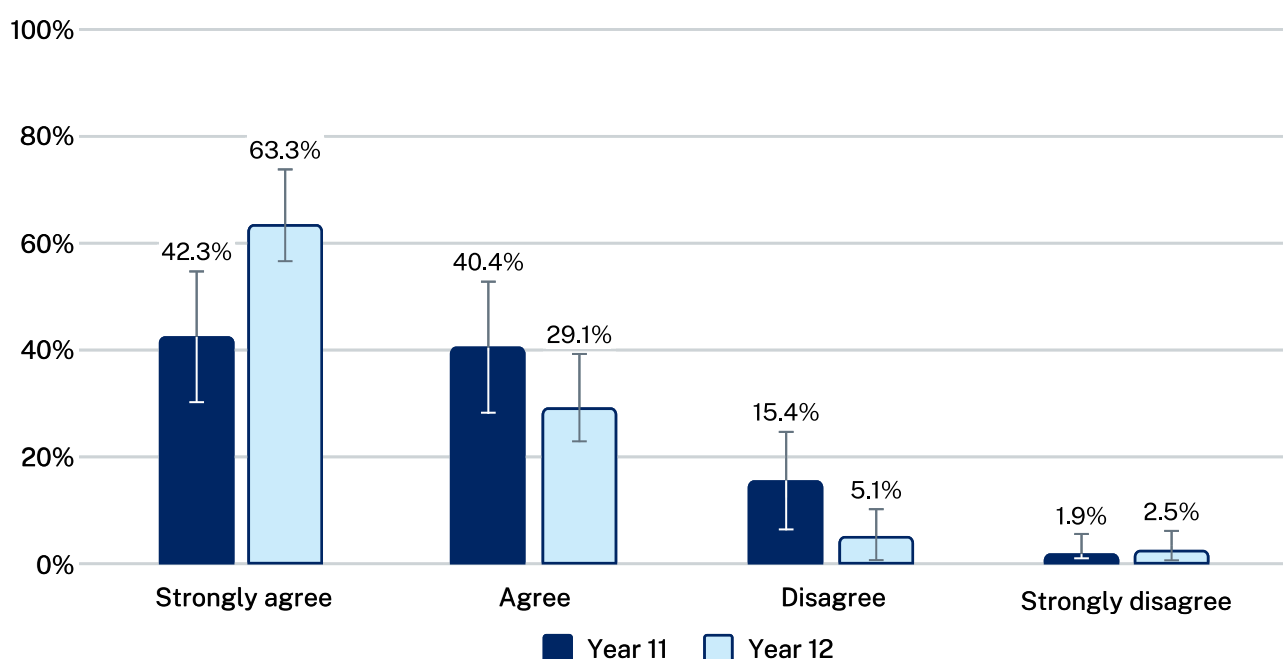
5.4.5 BSC has improved many students' levels of academic motivation and academic aspiration

The 2022 CESE Student Survey asked students to indicate their level of agreement with this statement: 'I feel that at Bradfield my desire to do better in education is stronger than at my previous school'. Results showed that 89% indicated their desire to do better in their studies was stronger after changing schools (54.5% 'strongly agree' and 34.5% 'agree'). As might be expected due to the likelihood that less motivated students might leave after Year 11, this sentiment was stronger among Year 12 students (Figure 5.15). Some parents also noted the improvement:

Bradfield college was the difference between my young person dropping out of education and having a very uncertain future, as opposed to now, successful, enthusiastic and enjoying her university course. (Parent, BSC survey)

Figure 5.15

Current students' responses to a statement about desiring now to do better in education than previously



Source: CESE Student Survey

The qualitative data suggested that attending BSC also appears to have impacted many students' aspirations to pursue further study and/or career paths. Our analysis of student survey and interview data suggests that the reasons may include that BSC exposes students to an array of post-school options they might not have been aware of or thought possible.

It's both changed and broadened my horizons. (Current student, interview)

If I stayed at my old school, I wouldn't even have considered university. I would have just done a short TAFE course and tried to work. Now I can see that I can actually do it if I want to. (Current student, interview)

In interviews, several students mentioned that they were either able to identify future aspirations for the very first time or they were able to renew aspirations that they gave up because they did not seem attainable. This also emerged in the past student and parent survey data.

I feel like, the chance of going to uni is become a real possibility. Whereas before it was, like, it felt like something I wanted, but it didn't feel possible. So, yeah, I was going, 'Oh, I'm never gonna be able to get to uni, at most in like 5 years I'll go to TAFE or something'. To [now] I'm planning on going straight to uni after school, and hopefully, getting like an 80 ATAR. Regardless, I feel like it definitely has changed my mind. **(Current student, interview)**

As well as making students aware of post-school options, students and parents reported that BSC equipped students with confidence to pursue those options.

Bradfield gave me the experience that I needed not only to get into uni, but to even have the confidence to apply in the first place.
(Past student, alumni survey)

Gave me the confidence and tools to go on to further study.
(Past student, alumni survey)

She is now doing well and has the confidence to go to uni which she would never have done if she stayed at the government school. **(Parent, BSC survey)**

One student reported in interview that she had been so disengaged at her previous school that she had been advised to leave school after Year 10, but at BSC she discovered her passions and now aspires to complete not only an undergraduate degree but also a higher research degree at a top-ranking university overseas. She commented: "I'm also able to think, 'I can actually do anything now.'"

5.5 Successful schooling outcome 3 – achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment

The third component of successful schooling we examined relates to BSC students attaining relevant academic skills and knowledge to facilitate access into the next stage of their career pathway. Individual students are likely to have differing academic or career goals, which may include different pre-requisites – for example, the HSC, an ATAR that facilitates university study, completion of VET units of study that facilitate TAFE study and/or an apprenticeship or completing Year 12 to access job options.

In Section 5.2, we reviewed BSC's data on academic outcomes, and comparisons with NSW Government schools and with a comparison group established for this evaluation on HSC completion, VET enrolment and completion, and ATAR eligibility. All of these impact students' eligibility to move on to further study, training or employment. In this section we add to the discussion by looking at the exposure to industry facilitated by the college.



Image courtesy of Bradfield Senior College

5.5.1 BSC facilitates exposure and access to industry

A key theme in the student interviews and surveys was the important role BSC played in helping students to become 'work-ready'. This is achieved in a few ways.

- BSC's Industry Experience Program, including the Project which runs over the first 2 terms of Year 11. The Project requires students to work collaboratively and alongside industry partners, drawing on student skills across subject areas, including design and visual arts, performing arts, STEM, humanities and business studies. In 2023, the initiative produced several films, while in previous years it involved projects for Sydney's Vivid Festival. The Project initiative emphasises collaboration and cooperation, creativity and development of individual skills and interests, and seeks to emulate a workplace situation. The Project was frequently mentioned by students and staff as being a highlight of the BSC experience.

The Project is fundamental to the way we approach learning at Bradfield, using audience as the motivator instead of a mark or grade. Using a studio style of learning, where deep learning is possible, the Project helps students find their place at the college and build transferable employability skills. **(BSC Director)**

- Practical preparation for entering specific industries is provided through the college's Industry Experience Program, where students are assisted to undertake career goal planning, prepare their resumes and portfolios, participate in mock job interviews, develop key workplace skills such as conflict resolution and positive thinking, and undertake work experience.

Like Music Industry, we learn so much. At the moment we're recording show reels, and stuff that we can actually send in professional videos that we can send into places if we want a gig. **(Current student, interview)**

- Side-by-side access to a range of skills-focused TAFE courses that students can undertake alongside their board-approved HSC subjects. The ability to study workforce-oriented TAFE subjects in their areas of interest was a key reason that a few students chose to come to BSC.

I've been able to do 2 TAFE courses while I've been here. I'm in the process of doing a fashion TAFE course. And I'm doing my first year of a contemporary visual arts TAFE course. And I can take my credentials for that elsewhere to another TAFE after high school if I feel so inclined. **(Current student, interview)**

- Encouragement and facilitation of opportunities for workplace experience. The college's capacity to be flexible and accommodate work commitments was praised by some students.

I got into a TAFE course at Taronga Zoo. And they were, cool, well, you're away on Thursdays. We'll move all your classes on Thursdays. **(Current student, interview)**

The connections of college staff to industry were identified as a feature that set BSC apart from other school environments. Some students reported that as a result of such connections, they had gained industry experience in their chosen field (for example, gigs, work experience/placements, jobs).

People seem to get jobs straight out of school. Because a lot of the teachers here have worked in the industry that they're teaching, so they have real life experience. They're not just a teacher, so then they have their own connections as well. **(Current student, interview)**

The college director emphasised that what they are most interested in at the school is how well they prepare the students for their futures. This was succinctly summed up in the following comment:

Bradfield forces students to look out, whereas many school systems force them to look in. **(BSC Director)**

5.6 Successful schooling outcome 4 – transitioning to a planned post-school destination

An objective of schooling is to support students to prepare for life beyond school, whether that is further education, training or employment. The annual NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey conducted by CESE collects information about school leavers from NSW Government, Catholic or independent schools in the first 6 to 12 months after leaving school. The survey has been conducted since 2014 and unpacks information on educational pathways, attainments and destinations of young people in NSW, and informs policymaking related to students' post-school education, training and employment.

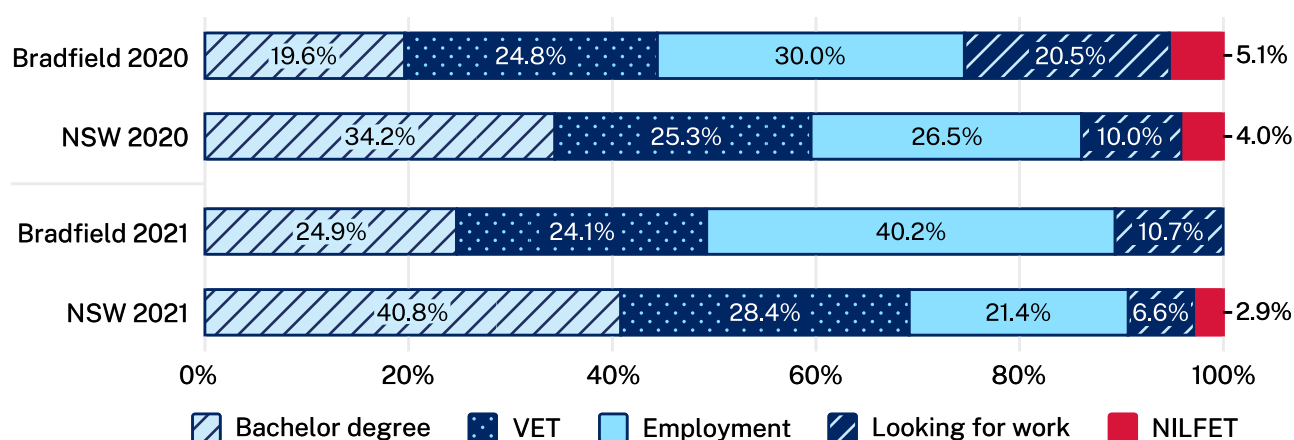
For this evaluation, we accessed aggregate data from BSC and compared this data with other school leavers across NSW.

5.6.1 When they leave BSC, the majority of students take up study or work opportunities

According to BSC exit data, about two-thirds of students stay at BSC and complete Year 12. Of the remainder who leave school early, about 66% leave to pursue further study or work (Figure 5.11). The NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey data shows that BSC students have a similar profile to other students in NSW schools, with the majority moving to further education or training, or to employment. Compared with NSW Government school students, a larger proportion of BSC students moved to work than to study. Similar to the general NSW student cohort, a very small proportion were neither studying, working or looking for work (Figure 5.16) which we interpret as they did not have a productive post-school destination.

Figure 5.16

Post-school destinations of BSC and all NSW school students (government and non government), 2020 to 2021



Source: NSW percentages from NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey fact sheets, 2020 and 2021

5.7 Summary

This chapter set out to examine the extent to which attending BSC improved students' academic outcomes. The data traditionally associated with measuring academic outcomes (such as data relating to the HSC) reveals that BSC students have similar outcomes to students at other government schools. In terms of VET outcomes, BSC students appeared to be doing better than either their government school peers or the TAFE system as a whole.

In addition to HSC, ATAR and VET outcomes, we examined what we have defined as 'successful schooling outcomes' in an effort to more completely reflect the factors that contribute to a successful secondary education. The received wisdom is that the least favourable schooling outcome is to leave secondary education without somewhere to go and without a plan for the future. BSC has been successful at retaining students until they either graduate or move to training or employment.

Developing academic and career motivation and aspirations recognises that achievement of satisfactory life outcomes is positively related to motivation and having a vision for the future. We found that BSC students had high expectations of finishing Year 12, saw themselves as going to university or TAFE, and had similar levels of academic confidence and resilience as their government school peers. We also found that a high percentage of BSC students transitioned to a planned post-school destination, at rates similar to other NSW Government schools.

The final component we considered was transitioning to a productive planned post-school destination, which alludes to transitioning from secondary education to further education, training or employment. We found that a high percentage of students achieved this and the proportion that failed to do so was smaller than for NSW public schools overall.

However, the significance of these findings lies in consideration that, bearing in mind the difficulties, disabilities, setbacks and negative experiences that drive many students to BSC in the first place, doing as well as their peers at other schools may be considered quite an achievement. If, as our data suggests, some students would have disengaged from education completely had they had not moved to BSC, then re-engaging with learning and completing the HSC, or staying in education long enough to gain work skills and experience, or obtain an apprenticeship, may be viewed as improved outcomes.

6 Summary, insights and conclusion

In this section we summarise the key insights from the evaluation, specifically focusing on how BSC has improved student wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes. Before summing up our conclusions, we include some insights from the evaluation of the characteristics of school culture that have contributed to student outcomes at BSC.

6.1 Wellbeing outcomes

Based on the evaluation evidence, BSC appears to have improved social and emotional wellbeing during a student's time at the college. Students with poor mental health noted that the college was a supportive environment where consideration for their specific needs was provided. For many students, the college provided a safe environment where they could connect and form positive relationships with their peers and develop positive relationships with their teachers. These experiences were often described in contrast to the students' previous school experiences.

According to students and parents, the college prioritises student wellbeing, provides support and care for students, adopts a holistic educational approach and has established an environment where students feel a strong sense of acceptance and belonging.

In comparison to their previous schools, students at BSC reported feeling more socially connected, claimed a stronger sense of belonging, experienced more positive peer interactions and less bullying where students had been bullied previously. BSC students also noted more positive interactions with teachers. This view was strongly supported by the 2019 and 2021 TTFM survey results which demonstrated that significantly more BSC students were positive about their relationships with teachers, compared with their peers. Similarly, BSC students were significantly less likely than their peers to consider themselves to be victims of either physical, verbal, social or cyber bullying. Despite this, BSC is not free of bullying as some incidents were reported in survey data. However, the fact that 87 to 88% of BSC students report an absence of bullying is very impressive given that many of them reported that their previous school experiences were unbearable.

Students at BSC also described experiencing more positive thoughts and feelings since moving to the college and reported feeling valued as a person with a stronger sense of who they are. While BSC students in the 2019 TTFM survey, compared with NSW Government school students, showed similar levels of optimism about

the future (about 50% of both groups were optimistic), BSC students significantly decreased in optimism in the 2021 survey (by 11%) while their peers decreased by only 3 to 4%. This could suggest that global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, had a more substantial effect on BSC students than their peers. Finally, for some at-risk students, moving to BSC led to reduced negative thinking in relation to suicide or self-harm.

6.2 Engagement outcomes

Evaluation findings showed that BSC generally has a positive impact on student engagement outcomes, although some areas of engagement could be improved further. Over 90% of students surveyed in 2022 indicated that they felt more engaged at BSC than at their previous school. This was even stronger for Year 12 students in their second year at BSC. The adult learning environment seems to be a critical element in the engagement of BSC students in their learning. Our data also suggests that the move to BSC resulted in students being re-engaged with school, especially those who were at risk of dropping out of school and education entirely.

The college provides an important alternative for students whose interests and prospective career pathways are not necessarily catered to in traditional NSW schools. Some students said that without BSC they would have left school (including education options outside of schooling) entirely. Views expressed in student interviews, and student and parent surveys, suggest that some students have developed a more positive attitude towards learning since attending BSC.

Students at BSC said they enjoyed learning more at BSC than at their previous school. For some students, improved engagement outcomes were reflected in improved school attendance – although for students experiencing significant mental health or personal issues, regular attendance was still a challenge.

Results from the TTFM survey indicate that BSC students' levels of interest, motivation and perseverance were slightly lower than their NSW Government school peers, though for the most part not in a statistically significant sense. Levels of internal motivation across the board were quite low, as reflected by TTFM. The qualitative data told a different story, however, and suggested that compared with their previous schooling experiences, many BSC students displayed increased positive academic engagement behaviours, including improved productivity, improved motivation to work and improved work quality.

BSC students experienced a greater decline from 2019 to 2021 than other NSW Government school students in several aspects of engagement in the TTFM survey: valuing school outcomes, attendance, homework behaviour, and effort. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected all students, it appeared to have had a greater impact on BSC, where a higher-than-average number of students already deal with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. This is further supported through the findings from our parent surveys and student interviews which indicated that some BSC students found the pandemic especially challenging. We suggest that this may be a symptom of lower resilience among BSC students, though we cannot draw conclusions about any trends here in the absence of a third data point in the time series.

6.3 Academic outcomes

Evaluation evidence suggests that students who moved to BSC did similarly well as their government school peers in terms of HSC completion. Fewer of them were eligible for an ATAR, but this is not so much an indicator of academic success as an indicator of post-school aspirations (an ATAR is only needed by those wishing to go to university in the first year after completing Year 12). BSC students had higher participation in VET compared to their government school peers and had higher completion rates compared with the overall NSW VET system.

However, HSC and VET completion is only part of the story. For a more rounded understanding, we looked to indicators of the broader concept of successful schooling outcomes, which are more aligned with the ultimate goals of secondary education. We identified 4 key successful schooling outcomes as follows:

Staying at school long enough to identify a potential career pathway. BSC has been successful in retaining students in schooling until they either graduate or move to training or employment. On average, more than 90% of BSC students have graduated, chose to study elsewhere or moved to employment, demonstrating that even if students left school early, the majority knew what they wanted to do.

Developing aspirations and developing clear goals towards a future career. BSC students had higher expectations of finishing Year 12 than other NSW Government school students, which may be due in part to the confidence that students have in being supported by the college to get to the 'finish line'. Most BSC students expected to go to university or TAFE after leaving school. BSC students also shared similar levels of academic confidence and resilience as other NSW Government school students. Both parents and students shared stories and perspectives about the very positive impact the college has had on supporting students towards defining a future career pathway or encouraging students who had previously been at risk, unmotivated or completely lost as to what their future might be.

Achieving key requirements to facilitate further study, training or employment. BSC students attained the HSC at a similar rate but are less likely to be eligible for an ATAR, compared with their government school peers. Numerous current and past students reported that the move to BSC had improved their academic results, often because they re-engaged with learning and discovered subjects that ignited their imaginations.

Transitioning to a planned post-school destination. A high percentage of students successfully transitioned from BSC to further education, training or employment. When compared with other NSW school students generally, a larger proportion of BSC students moved into work rather than study or training. The proportion of BSC students who did not go to an education, training or employment destination was smaller than for NSW Government schools generally.

These findings are particularly significant when we consider that, according to their own reports, many students were likely to have lost interest in school or completely disengaged from education, due to difficulties experienced at school, poor mental health, personal difficulties or lack of interest and/or direction.

6.4 Understanding student outcomes through BSC's school climate

Students, parents and staff indicated that BSC's most valuable and distinctive characteristic is the climate of respect, personal responsibility and support, especially for those students whose aspirations may differ from those of their mainstream peers. Our findings show that students' wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes are deeply impacted by this climate.

6.4.1 What is school climate?

School climate is 'the quality and character of school life [that] reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organisational structures' (National School Climate Council, n.d.). Educational researchers have become increasingly interested in the role of school climate in recent years as the multiple contributors to successful student outcomes have been more clearly understood. Accordingly, student outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors from the national and state government levels to the school, classroom, individual student and family levels. School climate sits within the group of school-level influences.

Cohen et al. highlighted the compelling case for considering how school climate impacts student learning:

Common sense tells us that students who feel safe, connected, and engaged in school are more likely to learn well. In the last 30 years, a growing body of research has confirmed the importance of the learning climate for children and adolescents. Compelling empirical research shows that a positive and sustained school climate promotes students' academic achievement and healthy development. (2009:1)

Our conceptual framework for understanding the influences on student outcomes (Figure 6.1) draws on the research literature of Cohen et al. 2009 and Nilson et al. 2016. This framework situates and focuses in on school climate and Cohen's 4 dimensions of school climate:

Safety

- Clearly communicated rules about physical violence and verbal abuse, and clear and consistent enforcement
- A sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school
- A sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion

Relationships

- Mutual respect for individual differences at all levels of the school — student-student, adult-student, adult-adult
- Collaborative and trusting relationships among adults and adult support for students in terms of high expectations for success, willingness to listen and personal concern
- Network of peer relationships for academic and personal support

Teaching and learning

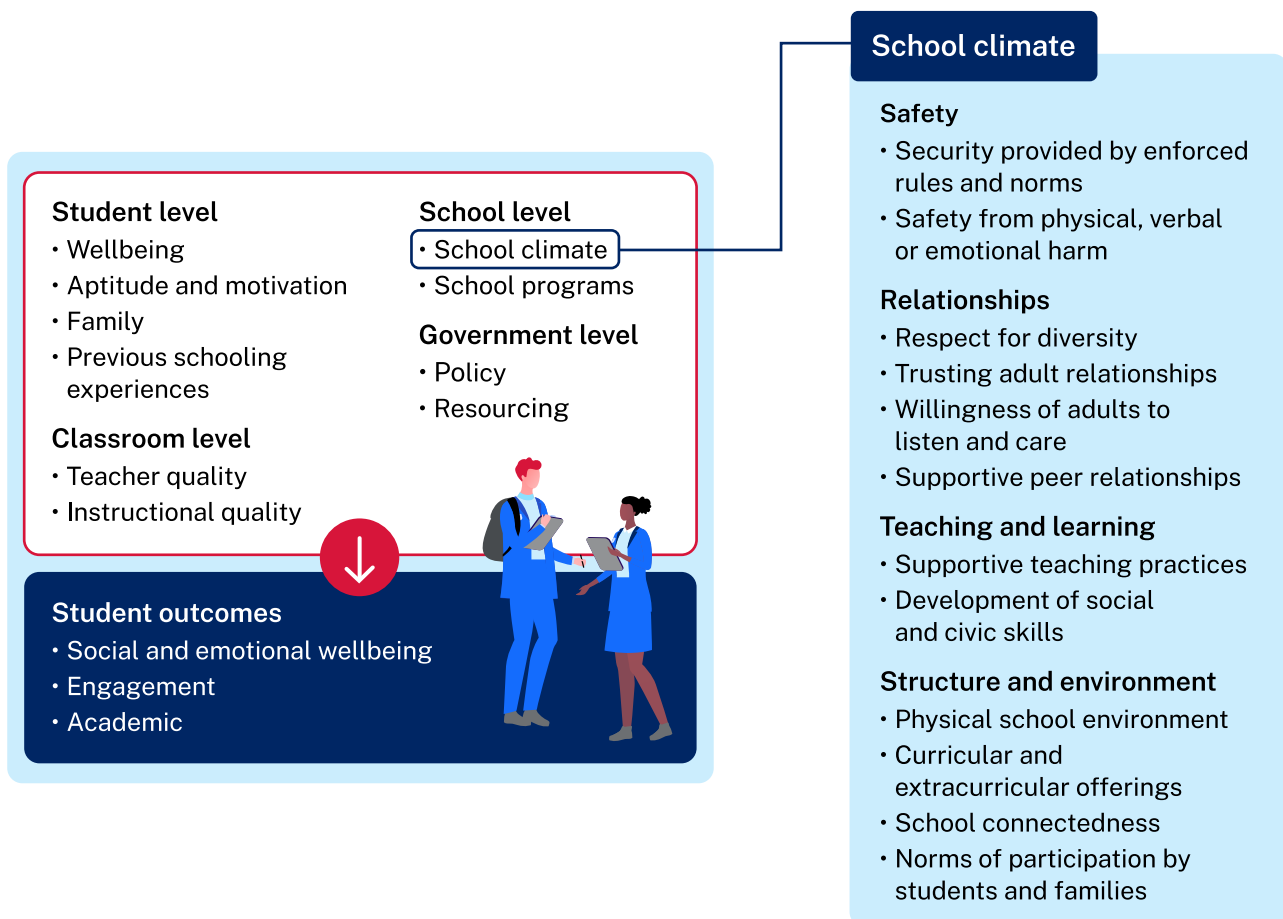
- Supportive teaching practices such as constructive feedback and encouragement for positive risk taking, academic challenge, individual attention, and opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills in a variety of ways
- Support for the development of social and civic knowledge and skills, including effective listening, conflict resolution, reflection and responsibility, and ethical decision-making

Environment and structure

- Positive identification with school, sense of belonging, and norms for broad participation in school life for students and families
- Cleanliness, order and appeal of facilities, and adequate resources and materials

Figure 6.1

A conceptual model to understand the influences of student outcomes, with a focus on school climate



6.4.2 BSC's school climate and its contribution to student outcomes

In this section, we use Cohen et al.'s 4 dimensions of school climate (refer to Figure 6.1) to analyse the ways in which BSC fosters a positive school climate and suggest ways in which the climate could further improve. The full analysis is included in Appendix N.

Safety

The evaluation indicates that BSC's approach appears to have contributed to a sense of physical and emotional safety, acceptance and belonging, and potential improvement in mental health outcomes. Physical and emotional safety is a priority at BSC and the college has implemented various strategies to instil confidence in students that they will be treated respectfully and protected from bullying, discrimination and exclusion. This is particularly significant for many students at BSC who faced difficulties in previous schools. Strategies for promoting safety at the college include reinforcing the Bradfield Cultural Principles, offering universal conflict resolution training and education about cyberbullying, implementing restorative practice and mediation practices and transparently enforcing the TAFE Student Conduct and Discipline Policy.

Although much of the evaluation evidence demonstrates that BSC has strong positive relationships, a few concerns were raised by students and parents about insufficient consequences for students engaging in antisocial behaviour. These concerns were outweighed by reports of improved safety. Recognising that a key element of the BSC approach is to assist students in taking responsibility for their own actions, strengthening the school climate in this area might require the college executive to work more closely with staff in developing further preventative strategies, such as communicating the behaviour policy clearly to parents and students prior to enrolling and regularly reminding students of rules and the natural consequences of breaking rules throughout their time at BSC. Ensuring all staff respond consistently and effectively to antisocial behaviour may also reduce the sense that some behaviour and incidents are ignored.

Refer to Appendix N – Table 7.9 for evaluation evidence regarding the safety dimension of school climate.

Teaching and learning

A key characteristic of BSC is its deliberate emphasis on creating an adult learning environment that fosters student autonomy and responsibility for learning. There is substantial evidence suggesting that these approaches may have helped students in re-engaging or maintaining engagement, potentially contributing to students feeling well supported and helping them in progressing toward their academic goals.

Part of this is a focus on responsibilities and breaking down power dynamics between teachers and students to better reflect tertiary education and work environments. Along with promoting student autonomy, staff also engage in a range of supportive teaching practices aimed at working alongside students with

diverse characteristics, engaging and extending student interests and skills through performances, work experience, additional training and co-curricular activities. The college is also especially selective in its recruitment of staff, explicitly prioritising applicants' capacity to work with diverse young people and help them to thrive.

Our evaluation found that the teaching and learning environment at BSC appeared to be effective in supporting many students to develop their knowledge and skills in an adult learning environment where teachers have high expectations and utilise individual learning plans. However, some students and parents reported that the transition to a more autonomous school climate was challenging and that some students required additional help to navigate this transition.

The college could consider additional strategies to potentially enhance school climate, ensuring that students are adequately prepared for the adult learning approach and offering sufficient support for those students who struggle to adjust. Support may be realised by ensuring that classroom management approaches balance the needs of all students – those with complex and acute needs who require extensive support in particular areas, and those with less acute needs who require different support and may not express their needs so clearly.

Refer to Appendix N – Table 7.10 for evaluation evidence regarding the teaching and learning dimension of school climate.

Relationships

The evaluation found that the relationship dimension of school climate is heavily prioritised-by the college and has a considerable positive effect on BSC student outcomes. Many BSC students reported a high level of advocacy at school and reported high levels of social connectedness. BSC's respect for diversity is embedded in the Bradfield Cultural Principles to which staff regularly refer.

The college seeks to foster positive and collegiate relationships between staff and students as an intentional strategy to encourage students to view themselves as adults. Staff and parent workshops are provided on diversity, conflict resolution and communication. The college pre-emptively responds to bullying by prioritising the restoration of relationships. There is a focus on training staff to support students with diverse needs and the college accesses TAFE supports for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and mental health issues.

These strategies contribute to a school climate where diversity is respected and where trusting relationships between students and teachers can be developed and maintained, leading to better student outcomes.

Refer to Appendix N – Table 7.11 for evaluation evidence regarding the relationship dimension of school climate.

Environment and structure

The college facilities, resources, curricula offerings and timetabling structure all appear to contribute towards a positive school climate and support student outcomes. The curricular offerings of the college are especially supportive for students wishing to pursue studies and eventually careers in the creative arts.

A wider range of creative arts offerings is available at BSC than at other secondary schools and students are allowed to study more than one subject requiring a major work. The physical infrastructure also includes specialised facilities for creative arts subjects that many students were not able to access at their previous schools. Together these provisions afford students enhanced opportunities for pursuing their interests and developing expertise in the creative arts. BSC also prepares students for their future workplaces by connecting them to industry partners and facilitating opportunities for collaborative project work to provide valuable industry experience that will set them up for success.

The main concern raised by students about environmental and structural aspects of the school climate was on technology such as the poor wi-fi and challenges associated with logging into various platforms using different passwords. While the technology issues that students have identified are not unique to BSC, it is important to note that when students feel like they cannot readily access the learning platforms and resources they need, they may become disengaged from their learning.

BSC could enhance this dimension of school climate by improving aspects of technology infrastructure, including wi-fi and technology platform access which would lead to better outcomes for BSC students.

Refer to Appendix N – Table 7.12 for evaluation evidence regarding the environmental and structural dimension of school climate.

6.5 Conclusion

BSC has contributed to improvement of the wellbeing, engagement and academic outcomes of many of its students. Its school climate supports safety, respectful relationships, supportive teaching and learning, and its structure and environment create a sense of belonging and provide adequate materials. While this is an expectation and hope of most schools, BSC differs in that it caters to the unique interests and, in some cases, particular social and emotional needs of its students. For some BSC students, previous secondary schooling experiences had been extremely challenging and some believe they would have disengaged from secondary education altogether if they did not enrol at BSC.

Our evaluation evidence indicates that BSC has improved engagement in learning for many of its students and has improved wellbeing outcomes. BSC also appears to have delivered academic outcomes that are at least on par with – and in relation to VET, better than – NSW Government schools. In terms of schooling outcomes, the evidence indicates that most students are staying at BSC long enough find a potential career pathway, are motivated and aspire to a specific career goal, develop key skills and knowledge needed to pursue the career of their choice and successfully transition to a post-school destination in further education, training or employment.

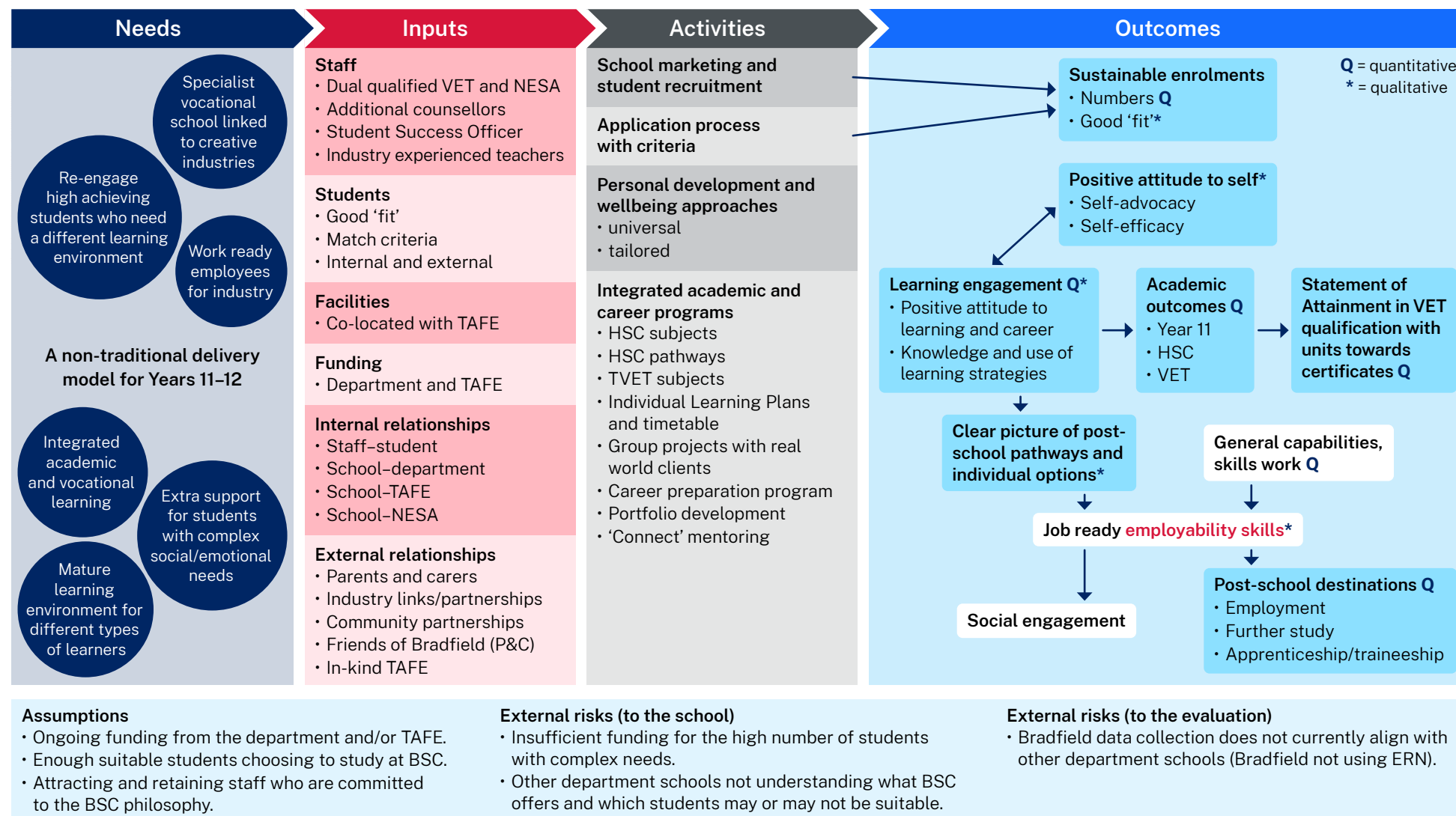
To refer to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration's Commitment to Action, this evaluation has found evidence to suggest that BSC is 'providing high-quality, relevant and engaging education and support necessary to complete their [its students'] secondary school education' and is 'helping them acquire the cognitive and social skills necessary for life after school and equip[ing] students to remain engaged in learning throughout life' (14).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Program logic of the BSC educational model



Appendix B – Summary of data sources relative to evaluation questions

Source	Data	Evaluation question
Tell Them From Me Survey	Student ratings of various indicators of academic wellbeing and engagement	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
CESE Student Survey	Other comment responses to these questions: At the time when you decided to enrol at Bradfield, which of the following options was the most likely alternative to studying at Bradfield?	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
BSC Student Voice Survey (Years 11 and 12)	Open text responses What is your highlight of Term 1? What learning experience stands out for you? It could be a class, a teacher, a topic, or other What could be improved or is getting in the way of your learning? What support do you need to overcome those challenges? Do you have any other feedback or ideas that you would like to share with the college?	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
BSC Parent Survey	Open text responses What is the main reason your young person came to Bradfield? From what you have experienced of Bradfield, what learning experience has stood out for you or your young person? Do you have any other feedback that you would like to share with the college?	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
BSC Alumni Survey	Open text responses In what ways did Bradfield impact your current work and/or study choices?	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
BSC student Interviews	Transcripts	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes
BSC staff focus groups and interviews	Transcripts	Q1. Wellbeing outcomes Q2. Engagement outcomes Q3. Academic outcomes

Appendix C – CESE Student Survey of BSC students

Survey question	Response option(s)
1. What calendar year did you apply to come to Bradfield?	• 2019 • 2020 • 2021 • 2022
2. Which year of study are you currently undertaking?	• Year 11 • Year 12 • Partly Year 11 and partly Year 12 (Pathways option)
3. Was your previous school ...	• A government (public) school? • A systemic (local) Catholic high school? • An independent school?
4. At the time when you decided to enrol at Bradfield, which of the following options was the most likely alternative to studying at Bradfield?	• Staying at the same school • Swapping to another school (other than Bradfield) • Going to TAFE • Dropping out of study/school • Searching for a job • Other (please comment)
5. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement below as you compare your experience at Bradfield with your experience at the school you attended just before coming to Bradfield. a) Overall, I feel that at Bradfield assignments/activities are more engaging than at my previous school. b) Overall, I feel that at Bradfield my desire to do better in education is stronger than at my previous school. c) Overall, I feel more socially connected at Bradfield than at my previous school.	• Strongly agree • Agree • Disagree • Strongly disagree

Appendix D – BSC Student Voice Survey (Year 11 and 12)

Survey question	Response option(s)
1. What is a highlight of your first term at Bradfield?	Open text
2. What learning experience stands out for you? It could be a class, a teacher, a topic, Project Week or other.	Open text
3. What could be improved or is getting in the way of your learning?	Open text
4. What support do you need to overcome those challenges?	Open text
5. What impact has Bradfield had on your education?	• A lot of positive impact • Some positive impact • A little positive impact • Very little positive impact • No impact
6. Had you not come to Bradfield this year, do you think your school experience would be ...	• Better than it is now • The same as it is now • Worse than it is now
7. If you had not come to Bradfield this year, what would you have done?	• Dropped out of school • Changed to another school • Stayed at the same school • Gone to TAFE • Other
8. Do you have any other feedback or ideas that you would like to share with the college?	Open text

Appendix E – BSC Parent Survey

Survey question	Response option(s)
1. In which year did your young person apply to come to Bradfield?	• 2016 • 2017 • 2018 • 2019 • 2020 • 2021 • 2022
2. In which year did your young person start at Bradfield?	• 2015 • 2016 • 2017 • 2018 • 2019 • 2020 • 2021 • 2022
3. What year is your student in?	• Past student • Current Year 11 student • Current Year 12 student
4. What was your young person's last school directly before attending Bradfield?	• Government school • Non-government/ independent • Other education provider – for example, TAFE, home-schooling
5. What is the main reason your young person came to Bradfield?	Open text
6. If there was more than one reason for your young person coming to Bradfield?	Open text
7. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: a) Bradfield provides/provided learning experiences that meet/met my young person's education needs. b) Bradfield provides/provided an opportunity that aligns with my young person's interest in the creative industries. c) Overall my young person feels/felt more supported in their studies at Bradfield than in the school they attended directly before Bradfield. d) Overall, my young person feels/felt more socially connected at Bradfield than in the school they attended directly before Bradfield.	• Strongly agree • Agree • Neutral • Disagree • Completely disagree

Survey question	Response option(s)
8. What impact would you say Bradfield has had on your young person's senior school education?	• A big positive impact • Some positive impact • No impact • Not sure • Some negative impact • A big negative impact
9. Had your young person not come to Bradfield, do you think their school experience would have been ...	• Worse • The same • Better • Other
10. If your young person had not come to Bradfield, what do you think they would have done?	• Dropped out of school • Changed to another school • Stayed at the same school • Gone to TAFE • Other
11. From what you have experienced of Bradfield, what learning experience has stood out for you or your young person?	Open text
12. Do you have any other feedback that you would like to share with the college? Please provide your name in this field if you would like us to follow up something specific.	Open text

Appendix F – BSC Alumni Survey

Survey question	Response option(s)
1. Which year did you leave Bradfield Senior College?	• 2016–2017 • 2018 • 2019 • 2020 • 2021
2. Are you currently studying?	• Yes • No
3. Which educational institution are you attending?	• University • Private college • TAFE • Other
4. Are you studying full time or part time?	• Full time • Part time • N/A
5. Please provide details of the course you are studying.	Open text
6. Aside from any course you may have named in Q5, have you completed or partially completed any other courses since finishing your HSC? a) If yes, please provide details.	• Yes • No Open text
7. Are you working?	• Yes • No
8. Which best describes your working arrangement/mode?	• Full time • Part time • Casual • Volunteer • N/A
9. If working, please provide details (for example, position title, type of work).	Open text
10. If you are not studying or working, what are you doing?	Open text

Survey question	Response option(s)
11. Looking back on your experience at Bradfield, to what extent did Bradfield have an impact on your current work/study choices?	• A lot of positive impact • Some positive impact • A little positive impact • No impact • A little negative impact • Some negative impact • A lot of negative impact
12. In what ways did Bradfield impact your current work and/or study choices?	Open text
13. At the particular point in time when you decided to come to Bradfield, what would your most likely alternative have been?	• Dropped out of school • Changed to another school • Stayed at the same school • Gone to TAFE • Other
14. Had you not come to Bradfield, how different do you think that your current study or work situation would be?	• Worse than it is now • Pretty much the same as it is now • Better than it is now
15. Would you recommend Bradfield to prospective students? Please rate from 1 to 5 (1 being unlikely, 5 being very likely).	• 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5

Appendix G – BSC student interview guide

Year 11 students

1. Firstly, I'd like to ask how you are going at Bradfield so far?
2. What are some of the things you like about the school?
3. Are there things you're not so keen on?
4. Would it be okay to ask you a bit about your decision to apply to Bradfield?
[Note: student may answer yes or no here. If no, continue at Q6]
 - a. When did you start thinking about changing schools?
 - b. What were the main reasons you wanted to change schools?
 - c. How did you know about Bradfield?
 - d. When did you make the decision to apply to Bradfield?
 - e. What attracted you to Bradfield?
 - f. What other options did you consider?
 - g. Why did you decide on Bradfield in the end?
 - h. How were your parents/caregivers involved in the decision-making?
Did they support your wish to change schools?
5. Before you started at Bradfield:
 - a. What difference did you hope coming to the school would make?
[Probe: educationally; socially; wellbeing]
 - b. Were you worried about anything regarding the school?
 - c. How have things turned out so far in terms of these issues?
6. What are you thinking about doing post-school?
7. Do you think this school will make a difference to your opportunities for the future? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Year 12 students

1. When did you start at Bradfield?
2. Generally, how do you like the school?
3. What are some of the things you like about the school?
4. Are there things you're not so keen on?
5. Would it be okay to ask you a bit about your decision to apply to Bradfield (if you can remember)? [Note: student may answer yes or no here. If no, continue at Q6]
 - a. When did you start thinking about changing schools?
 - b. What were the main reasons you wanted to change schools?
 - c. How did you know about Bradfield?
 - d. When did you make the decision to apply to Bradfield?
 - e. What attracted you to Bradfield?

- f. What other options did you consider?
- g. Why did you decide on Bradfield in the end?
- h. How were your parents/caregivers involved in the decision-making?
Did they support your wish to change schools?
- 6. Before you started at Bradfield:
 - a. What difference did you hope coming to the school would make?
[Probe: educationally; socially; wellbeing]
 - b. Were you worried about anything regarding the school?
 - c. How have things turned out in terms of these issues?
- 7. What difference do you think the switch to Bradfield has made, in terms of:
 - a. Your overall wellbeing? [and socially?]
 - b. Enjoying learning?
 - c. Your academic progress?
 - d. How you view the future?
- 8. What are you thinking about doing post-school?
- 9. Do you think this college will make a difference to your opportunities for the future? If yes, how? If no, why not?

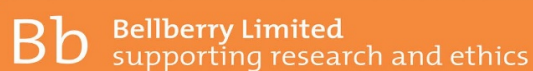
Appendix H – Staff focus group and interview guide

1. Could I start by asking about you and your role here at the school?
(your role; how long you've worked at the school; how you came to be teaching at the school)
2. What would you say sets Bradfield apart from your previous school/TAFE or other education institutions?
3. What would you say that Bradfield (as a college) is good at?
4. Is there anything Bradfield could do better at?
5. To what extent do you think Bradfield promotes:
 - a. Student wellbeing
 - b. Student engagement in learning
 - c. Positive academic outcomes
 - d. Can you give some examples?
6. What types of students does Bradfield suit?
7. Are you aware of any students who began at Bradfield but left before finishing Year 12?
 - a. If yes, are you aware of the reasons why they left? Without using names, can you share some of those reasons?
8. Do you believe it is important that a college like Bradfield be an available option for senior students? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Appendix I – Director interview schedule

1. Why does Bradfield need to exist?
2. Could you tell us a bit about the interview process and the selection process for the students?
3. Do the staff undertake specific training or extra training because of the number of students with mental health issues?
4. What would you say that Bradfield (as a college) is good at?
5. Is there anything Bradfield could do better at?
6. What types of students does Bradfield suit?
7. So – wish list – if the magic money unicorn came along? What would be the priority you'd want to spend some more money on?

Appendix J – Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee Approval (HREC 2202-03-322)



20-May-22

Dr. Wendy Moran
NSW Department of Education
105 Phillip St
Parramatta NSW 2150

Dear Dr. Moran,
Re: Application No: 2022-03-322
Study Title: Bradfield Senior College Evaluation
Application Type: NEW
Type of Review: FULLBOARD

Name of the Documents Submitted & Approved: Attachments

HREC 2202-03-322 Parent-Guardian Information letter v2_9May2022_clean
HREC 2202-03-322 Student Information letter v4_9May2022_clean
HREC 2202-03-322 Student survey v4_9May2022_clean
HREC 2202-03-322_Protocol_V6.0_9May2022_clean

Includes:

Receipt of the following documents has been noted:
Moran - Resume
2022-03-322 W Moran_Fully Executed_HREC Indem

Additional sites covered by this approval:
2022-03-322: Dr. Wendy Moran, NSW Department of Education, New South Wales
Bradfield Senior College, New South Wales

Date of Meeting: 27-Apr-22

Date of Approval: 20-May-22

Period of Approval: 20-May-22 - 20-May-23

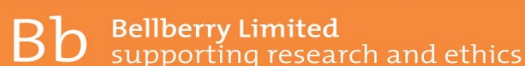
Thank you for submitting the above-mentioned application.

I wish to advise that the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project and that the application meets the requirements of the National Statement subject to the conditions mentioned below. For clarity, the 'Date of Meeting' is a system-generated field. Please only take note of the 'Date of Approval' and 'Period of Approval' as relevant.

CONDITIONS:-

- **This letter constitutes ethical and scientific approval only. You must not commence the research project at any site until your Research Governance Office/ Institution/Organisational delegate has granted their approval. Sites are responsible for ensuring there are executed indemnities, contracts, and appropriate insurance in place before the commencement of the study at the site. Sites are also responsible for ensuring their site-specific documents are based on the current Master approved documentation.**
- All changes to the approved study documentation must be submitted to Bellberry via an Amendment Form for review and approval prior to implementation.
- Safety reporting and Serious Breaches should be reported to the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee as per the monitoring guidelines posted on the website www.bellberry.com.au

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- A progress report must be completed annually for the duration of the trial. The due date for all additional sites will fall in line with the lead sites original approval date. Submission of the progress report is to be within 30 days before the due date. Requests for an annual extension will be granted upon successful completion and noting of a progress report.
- A final report is due on completion of all closeout activities (clinical trials) or final reconciliation of study activities (non-clinical trials). The site must also provide a copy of the Sponsor's final report where there are study outcomes that the HREC should be aware of such as issues related to participant safety
- The Principal Investigator must inform the HREC, by way of an amendment, of the outcomes of any audit by a regulator or organisation/body.
- The data collected for the purpose of this research project cannot be used for any other purpose without the approval of a Human Research Ethics Committee. Requests to use this data for other purposes must be made in the form of a formal research proposal
- All research data, including electronic data is to be stored by the Principal Investigator for 15 years after the research has been completed or after the last contact, whichever is the later. Data must be recorded in a durable and appropriately referenced form and comply with relevant privacy protocols.
- Copies of all Master/Site specific documentation and any other data used in this research may be inspected at any time by representatives of the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee. This may be in the form of a Bellberry site monitoring visit or requested electronically via a desktop audit.
- Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee approval is conditional upon your meeting any statutory and licensing obligations; data custodian or other organisational authorisations that you may have with this project.

Details of Ethics Committee:

The Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) reviewed this study in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, incorporating all updates) on the above meeting date. Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committees do not disclose personal details of its reviewing members. A member listing is available as an attachment in eProtocol. Please note that the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigators were not members of the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee that reviewed this study.

This study has been given the above reference number. Please remember to log on to eProtocol for all further correspondence with the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if further clarification is required.

Yours sincerely

Brian Stoffell

Chair, Committee I

BELLBERRY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Committee Name/NHMRC Codes: A/ EC00372; B/ EC00419; C/ EC00430; D/ EC00444;
E/ EC00450; F/ EC00455; G/ EC00458; H/ EC00459; I/ EC00468; J/ EC00469; K/ EC00470; L/ EC00471.

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03-Aug-22

Dr. Wendy Moran
NSW Department of Education
105 Phillip St
Parramatta NSW 2150

Dear Dr. Moran

Re: Application No: 2022-03-322-A-1

Study Title: Bradfield Senior College Evaluation

Type of Application: Amendment/Investigator Brochure Form

Name of the Documents Submitted and Approved:

Attachments

HREC 2202-03-322 Student survey v5_30Jun2022_clean

Evaluation V7.0_19July2022_clean

Includes:

Additional site covered by this approval:

2022-03-322: Dr Wendy Moran - Bradfield Senior College, New South Wales

Date of Approval: 03-Aug-22

Thank you for submitting the application mentioned above.

I wish to advise that these documents have been reviewed and approved by the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee.

The Principal Investigator is responsible for fulfilling any site-based governance responsibilities regarding this submission.

Details of Ethics Committee:

The Bellberry Human Research Ethics committee (HREC) has scientifically and ethically reviewed this study. This Bellberry HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, incorporating all updates). Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee does not disclose personal details of its reviewing members. Please note that the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigators were not members of the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee that reviewed this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if further clarification is required.

Yours sincerely

Michael James

Deputy Chair, Committee I

BELLBERRY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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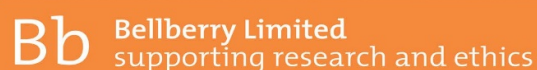


Committee Name/NHMRC Codes

A/ EC00372; B/ EC00419; C/ EC00430; D/ EC00444; E/ EC00450; F/ EC00455; G/ EC00458; H/ EC00459; I/ EC00468; J/ EC00469;
K/ EC00470; L/ EC00471

e-protocol

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10-Feb-23

Dr. Wendy Moran
NSW Department of Education
105 Phillip St
Parramatta NSW 2150

Dear Dr. Moran

Re: Application No: 2022-03-322-A-2
Study Title: Bradfield Senior College Evaluation
Type of Application: Amendment/Investigator Brochure Form

Name of the Documents Submitted and Approved:

Attachments

HREC 2202-03-322 Student Interview Consent v1_13Jan2023
HREC 2202-03-322 Staff Interview Consent v1_13Jan2023
HREC 2202-03-322 Student Interview Information letter for students v1.1_6Feb2023 - Clean
HREC 2202-03-322 Staff Interview Information letter v1.1_6Feb2023 - clean
HREC 2202-03-322 Student Interview Information letter for parents v1.1_6Feb2023 - clean
HREC 2202-03-322 Staff Interview discussion guide v1_13Jan2023
HREC 2202-03-322 Year 12 Student Interview discussion guide v1_13Jan2023
HREC 2202-03-322 Year 11 Student Interview discussion guide v1_13Jan2023
HREC 2202-03-322_Protocol_V7.1_6Feb2023_clean

Includes:

Additional sites covered by this approval:
2022-03-322: Dr Wendy Moran, Bradfield Senior College, New South Wales

Date of Approval: 10-Feb-23

Thank you for submitting the application mentioned above.

I wish to advise that these documents have been reviewed and approved by the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee.

The Principal Investigator is responsible for fulfilling any site-based governance responsibilities regarding this submission.

Details of Ethics Committee:

The Bellberry Human Research Ethics committee (HREC) has scientifically and ethically reviewed this study. This Bellberry HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, incorporating all updates). Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee does not disclose personal details of its reviewing members. Please note that the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigators were not members of the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee that reviewed this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if further clarification is required.

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Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Stoffell', is positioned below the 'Yours sincerely' text.

Brian Stoffell

Chair, Committee I

BELLBERRY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Committee Name/NHMRC Codes

A/ EC00372; B/ EC00419; C/ EC00430; D/ EC00444; E/ EC00450; F/ EC00455; G/ EC00458; H/ EC00459; I/ EC00468; J/ EC00469;
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Appendix K – Definitions of indicators of social and emotional wellbeing on the TTFM Student Survey

Measure	Description
Social wellbeing	
Sense of belonging	Students' feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers and by others at school. It reflects the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others at school.
Victims of bullying	Students are asked about their experience of bullying during the previous 4 weeks. Bullying is defined as being hurt more than once by another person in a position of real or perceived power. It can be physical, verbal, social or cyber.
Teacher–student relationships	The extent to which students experience both fair and supportive academic and social interactions with their teachers.
Advocacy at school	The support received from adults in the school, who consistently provide encouragement and who can be turned to for advice.
Positive relationships	Students' friendships with their peers that help them form positive social connections and meaningful participation within the school.
Emotional wellbeing	
Optimism	Optimism is characterised by hopefulness and confidence about the future, a tendency to take a favourable view of things, and an explanatory style marked by evaluating negative events as temporary, external and specific to situation.

Appendix L – Definitions of indicators of internal and external engagement on the TTFM Student Survey

Measure	Description
Internal engagement	
Values schooling outcomes	Students who value schooling outcomes and meet the formal rules of schooling are considered institutionally engaged. These students feel that what they are learning at school is directly related to their long-term success, and this is reflected in their school and class attendance as well as their effort in completing homework.
Interest and motivation	Interest can be viewed as a set of interactions a student has with various ideas, events or subject matter. Motivation entails the various thoughts and feelings that underlie our behaviours. For students, this can involve an intrinsic enjoyment of school learning and an orientation to achieving mastery, or an extrinsic orientation to receiving praise or tangible rewards.
Perseverance	Perseverance refers to the ability to pursue one's goals to completion, even in the face of obstacles. It draws on the positive characteristics that support wellbeing. Perseverance relates to students' intellectual engagement and is closely connected to optimism, academic self-concept and academic buoyancy. Combined, these measures provide information about students' self-perceptions of positive emotions and their ability to navigate everyday school life.
Both internal and external	
Attendance	The extent to which students report that they skipped classes or missed days at school without permission or arrived late for school or classes.
External engagement	
Effort	Student effort refers to how hard students try to succeed in their learning. Effort is related to students' sense of self-efficacy and is a key component of their intellectual engagement. Students who are intellectually engaged are interested in what is being taught at school, they are motivated to learn, and they exert considerable effort in their school subjects.
Homework behaviour	Homework refers to the time invested by students in learning and studying school subjects outside of school hours. Positive homework behaviours reflect engagement with schoolwork that extends beyond the classroom.
Positive behaviours at school	Behaviours that occur in the learning environment, such as whether students are listening to their teacher or being disruptive.

Appendix M – Definitions of indicators of academic disposition on the TTFM Student Survey

Measure	Description
Expectations of academic success	The extent to which students agree that their teachers have high academic expectations of them (and their peers) and the school staff value academic achievement.
Aspirations	Students' expectations to complete secondary school and pursue post-secondary education.
Academic buoyancy	Students' perceptions of how well they deal with challenges and setbacks that occur at school.
Academic self-concept	The extent to which students agree they are able to successfully learn at school. The questions gauge students' self-perceived confidence and positivity levels with regards to schoolwork as a whole.

Appendix N – Evidence of school climate dimensions at BSC

Table N1

Evidence of the safety dimension of school climate at BSC

Safety dimension (Cohen et al. 2009)
- Clearly communicated rules about physical violence and verbal abuse, and clear and consistent enforcement - A sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school - A sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion
BSC's approach
- BSC's philosophy is to instil the Bradfield Cultural Principles from the start of the school year. This fosters a clear stance promoting everyone's physical, social and emotional safety, especially the following: - No. 3 Everyone is valued - No. 4 We're respectful and genuine - No. 5 We set clear boundaries - No. 6 We value and celebrate diversity. - Students are given conflict resolution training as part of their project work in Year 11 which provides a narrative around the drama triangle (perpetrator, victim, rescuer/ caretaker and so on). - Use of restorative justice practices and mediation where necessary and possible. - Cyberbullying presentation at the beginning of the year. - BSC encourages a culture of noticing and letting someone know about any bullying incidents. - The TAFE Student Conduct and Discipline policy is applied: email to parent community first which usually sees any anonymous material taken down. Police advice, if needed.
Supporting evidence
- Students and parents described a strong sense of physical and emotional safety, and being well cared for by genuinely caring staff (section 3.3.5). - Students and parents reported improved mental health (section 3.2). - A few individual students indicated that their move to BSC had resulted in reduced suicidal ideation and self-harm (section 3.4.3). - Students, parents and staff report an environment that values respect for difference. This is particularly so for students who are neurodiverse, LGBTQI, experiencing mental health issues, or non-conformist (section 3.3.4). - Students report experiencing less bullying than at their previous schools (section 3.3.2). - Students feel a stronger sense of acceptance and belonging in the BSC community compared to previous schools (section 3.3.4).

Table N1 – continued

Evidence of the safety dimension of school climate at BSC

Illustrative quotes
“Here they were very, very accepting. And, you know, my wellbeing has never really been better because I felt so safe. ... So, my wellbeing has been pretty good here.” – Current student, interview “Honestly, it’s the first time I’ve ever felt safe at school.” – Current student, interview “He feels safe and free from the pressures that were causing anxiety and humiliation at his previous school.” – Parent, BSC survey “It is a safe environment for queer and gender diverse students, and that’s very, very unique in probably the world.” – Staff member, focus group

Table N2

Evidence of the teaching and learning dimension of school climate at BSC

Teaching and learning dimension (Cohen et al. 2009)
• Supportive teaching practices such as constructive feedback and encouragement for positive risk taking, academic challenge, individual attention, and opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills in a variety of ways • Support for the development of social and civic knowledge and skills, including effective listening, conflict resolution, reflection and responsibility, and ethical decision-making
BSC's approach
• The college intentionally fosters an adult learning environment that promotes autonomy and encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. • The college focuses on responsibilities, rather than rules, and the seeks to break down hierarchical power dynamics between students and staff (for example, through having no uniform / dress code, addressing teachers by first name). • Supportive teaching practices are evident, and include individual learning plans, access to school counsellors, adjustment for different learning styles and disabilities, and active engagement strategies for students who experience personal difficulties or are at risk of falling behind. • Teachers provide opportunities for extending student interests (for example, performing, work experience, additional training, extracurricular tuition). • Students are provided with many opportunities to pursue subjects of interest, especially courses in creative industries and creative arts. • BSC chooses staff carefully, prioritising experience in working with diverse young people, including young people with mental health conditions.
Supporting evidence
• Many students and parents identified the adult learning environment as key to the way the college recognises students' desire to be treated more like adults and prepares them for life beyond school (section 4.4.1). • Student survey responses suggested that BSC students tend to take more responsibility for their learning the longer they are at the college. (section 4.4.1). • Several students in the interviews commented on the support provided by college staff. • Students identified staff capacity to adjust to individual student needs and learning styles as an enabler. • BSC Director confirmed that finding staff with the right 'fit' and experience in working with diverse young people was a priority in staff selection.

Table N2 – continued

Evidence of the teaching and learning dimension of school climate at BSC

Illustrative quotes
“I feel like it’s set the school structure. Sets you up so it, like, prepared [you] for life outside of school and you learn all these like, different things that you won’t learn at a normal high school. The teachers treat you more like adults, which I feel is more like a workplace than a school.” – Current student, interview “I went from being told that I’d never amount to anything to being like, you can amount to everything. Like, and I’m getting encouraged to go for anything, kind of thing. So, it’s just a massive difference.” – Current student, interview “The extra support that they have, and with my learning gap, I don’t think I would be able to do as well at a normal school when there isn’t that extra support.” – Current student, interview “On one of the first days, one of the teachers said, and that really stuck with me, ‘If you’re feeling like shit, just come to school. We want to see you. We want to make sure you’re okay. You can just sit in class and do absolutely nothing, but we just want to make sure you’re okay.’ And like, oh my god, they treat me like a human.” – Current student, interview “The teachers offer us opportunities. I get very motivated to learn the stuff, like my English teacher will post a writing competition. Like, I feel invested in it.” – Current student, interview “Bradfield does something extremely unique, they create socially aware, emotionally intelligent and resilient young adults who are able to collaborate and who are willing to become accountable for their results.” – Parent, BSC survey “The adult learning experience allowed my child to take responsibility for their own learning at a pace and in a style that suited.” – Parent, BSC survey “We need the right person who’s going to fit the culture. And then we train them.” – BSC Director

Table N3

Evidence of the relationship dimension of school climate at BSC

Relationship dimension (Cohen et al. 2009)
• Mutual respect for individual differences at all levels of the school – student–student, adult–student, adult–adult • Collaborative and trusting relationships among adults and adult support for students in terms of high expectations for success, willingness to listen and personal concern • Network of peer relationships for academic and personal support
BSC's approach
• Respect for diversity is embedded in the Bradfield Cultural Principles, to which staff regularly refer. • There is a focus on training staff to support students with diverse needs. The staff training agenda is tailored to the characteristics of the enrolled cohort, however all staff undertake training focused on supporting diverse students – for example, mental health first aid, Prism LGBTIQA+ Inclusivity training, general capabilities training. • The college accesses TAFE supports for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and mental health issues. • The college seeks to foster positive and collegiate relationships between staff and students as an intentional strategy, to encourage students to view themselves as adults. • Staff and parent workshops are provided on diversity, conflict resolution and communication. • Student wellbeing is prioritised in teacher practice (for example, special provisions for students struggling to meet deadlines, providing options for students to catch up on missed work). • Students are encouraged to explore, test and pursue interests without expectations about HSC performance.
Supporting evidence
• Students, parents and teachers emphasised the college's culture of acceptance and respect for diversity (section 3.3.4). • Positive relationships between staff and students was a strong finding from the data, these relationships being quite different in nature from the norm at other schools (section 3.3.3). • Many students in the BSC community report a high level of advocacy at school, further strengthening the relationships between students and staff members. Having teachers that students believe care about them as people is particularly important in supporting wellbeing in the school environment and contributes to further removing the authority barrier. TTFM results revealed that BSC students' perceptions of teacher advocacy were significantly higher than students at NSW schools generally. • Students at BSC experienced a greater sense of social connectedness (than at their previous schools), developed friendships and felt respected and supported by peers. (section 3.3.1) • BSC students' experience of bullying was significantly lower than for students in NSW generally. This was reinforced by the vast majority of comments from students and parents (section 3.3.1).

Table N3 – continued

Evidence of the relationship dimension of school climate at BSC

Illustrative quotes
“Queer kids. Oh, my gosh, we can be ourselves here. Like, it’s amazing.” – Current student, interview “I think [BSC has a] reputation for being a safe place for queer and gender diverse students. I think it’s also somewhere for students that just don’t fit in for other reasons as well. Whether it’s behaviour stuff, they’ve kind of got form around there or have been bullied or are neurodiverse, that kind of thing. Bradfield is a place where people feel safe, you know, comfortable and that’s particularly for trans and gender diverse kids.” – Staff member, focus group “There’s like a huge power imbalance in a lot of schools. And I feel like Bradfield is very much not like that. I feel kind of on the same level with a lot of my teachers.” – Current student, interview “What actually happens with the level of respect that’s in the environment, it filters down everywhere and so students will actually get fired up if someone is offensive to their teacher ... any of that sort of disrespectful behaviour, it just doesn’t get any traction amongst the other students.” – Staff member, focus group “People come here and they breathe, they exhale. And they say, okay, I can just be who I am. And I can just focus and create my learning environment here. And so I think it is about the ability for students to be able to find themselves within an environment rather than being squeezed into a mould that the school expects of you.” – BSC Director, interview “More importantly, he grew in confidence and is a lot more comfortable in social situations these days. Being validated by his school made a huge difference in that arena. He’s always been different. At Bradfield he was assured that was OK and to own it. The pressure to be the same as everyone else was removed. He was able to develop wonderful friendships with other students in an inclusive environment, and strong relationships with supportive staff members.” – Parent, BSC survey “Students have come to this school with really severe mental health conditions and ... they’ve actually blossomed. Like I’ve had a student at the start of my course, I do a goal setting activity where I encourage students to write their goal. And one student had written, ‘to stay alive’. That was their goal. At this point in time they’re thriving. They’ve found their feet and they’ve made connections with other students, which was a huge worry for them at the start and they’ve bonded with their teachers as well. And that’s something that I haven’t seen in other schools, particularly in the school that I was at before. And it’s so honouring for me to teach at a place that values the academic, but also the other side, the critical part of what makes us who we are and how they’ve actually overcome those internal struggles.” – Staff member, focus group

Table N4

Evidence of the environmental and structural dimension of school climate at BSC

Environmental and structural dimension (Cohen et al. 2009)
• Positive identification with school, sense of belonging, and norms for broad participation in school life for students and families • Cleanliness, order and appeal of facilities, and adequate resources and materials
BSC's approach
• Students identified a range of facilities at BSC that were unavailable or under-resourced at their previous schools (for example, recording studio, performance spaces, rehearsal rooms, support and study facilities). • The broad range of industry- and arts-focused subjects available at BSC is a key factor that appeals to students, many of whom experienced barriers to specialising in their chosen fields at their previous schools. • BSC provides students with opportunities to be connected in with industry that they have generally not experienced at their previous schools. Opportunities include experience in and exposure to industry through the Project in Year 11, work experience and job placements, gigs, and flexibly fitting studies around work commitments. • The BSC school day runs longer than most secondary schools, and lesson periods are typically 1.5 to 2 hours in length. While this requires some adjustment for students initially, students are supported to engage with assigned work within their timetabled lessons during which they are able to access support from their teachers.
Supporting evidence
• Some students commented that being able to study subjects aligned with their interests was motivating and made them more likely to engage in learning (section 4.4.2).
Illustrative quotes
"I think Project Week, and just Vivid in general is truly remarkable. The engagement that everyone has in a collective goal is so motivating and inspiring." – Current student, interview "I've been loving Project Week because it's such a wonderful taste of the adult world. We are gaining new skills that are crucial for multiple workplaces." – Current student, interview "People seem to get jobs straight out of school. Because a lot of the teachers here have worked in the industry that they're teaching, so they have real life experience. They're not just a teacher, so then they have their own connections as well." – Current student, interview "[The teachers] know a lot of other people in the industry. Like, the Wellbeing teacher ... she was an artist. And so like, she's left now, but I've been texting her about, you know, 'Do you know any artists that I can learn from?' and she sends me numbers, and so then I go and talk to them." – Current student, interview

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