

# Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre

## Supporting Innovative Research and Evaluation



### EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE CITY FOOTBALL CLUB CITY FUTURES PROGRAM

NOVEMBER 2025

FEDERATION UNIVERSITY  
COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION &  
RESEARCH CENTRE

SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

**EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE CITY  
FOOTBALL CLUB CITY FUTURES  
PROGRAM**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land, sea, and nations. It pays our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. The CERC further acknowledges our commitment to working respectfully to honour their ongoing cultural and spiritual connections to this country.

The CERC would like to acknowledge our industry partner Melbourne City Football Club (MCFC) who developed the City Futures Program designed to empower future generations. We also acknowledge the contributions of the secondary schools in Melbourne, Victoria's southeastern suburbs, for their delivery of the program and engagement with evaluation.

This report would not have been possible without the thoughtful insights and lived experiences shared by the program's participants. Their reflections have been instrumental in highlighting the program's impact on students' personal growth and professional development.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University is an innovative initiative that aims to build evaluation capacity and expertise locally, nationally and internationally. The CERC understands the value of listening to the community and can deliver timely, sustainable evaluations tailored to the needs of a wide variety of organisations.

Professor Joanne Porter is the Director of the CERC. Joanne has led several successful research projects and evaluations in conjunction with local industry partners. She has guided the development of the CERC since its formation in 2018.

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# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....	3
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	5
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.2 KEY FINDINGS.....	5
1.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	6
2. EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE CITY FOOTBALL CLUB CITY FUTURES PROGRAM.....	9
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
2.2 THE CITY FUTURES PROGRAM DELIVERY .....	10
2.3 PROJECT AIM AND OBJECTIVES .....	10
2.4 PROJECT DELIVERY/ACTIVITIES .....	10
3. FINDINGS.....	12
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	12
3.2 INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS.....	12
3.3 INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE CITY FUTURES PROGRAM .....	17
3.4 MEASURING SUCCESS WORKSHOP WITH CITY IN THE COMMUNITY YOUNG LEADERS .....	20
3.5 COMBINED ANALYSIS SUMMARY .....	20
4. METHODOLOGY .....	22
4.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	22
4.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY .....	22
5. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND PRACTICE.....	24
6. ABBREVIATIONS .....	24
7. LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES.....	24
8. APPENDICES .....	25
8.1 Appendix 1: Measuring Success Workshop Outcomes.....	25
8.2 Appendix 2: Interview Questions.....	34
8.3 Appendix 3: Human Research Ethics Committee Approval.....	35

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Youth engagement in schooling is categorised by engagement behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively. Engagement is demonstrated when students are participating in academic and extracurricular activities, feel a sense of belonging in their surroundings, and are personally invested and accountable for their learning.

When sport is included in school curriculum, it supports the development of students physically, socially and emotionally. Sport in school encourages students to be inclusive, build connections, develop skills in teamwork and resilience, and may foster the development of pride in some students.<sup>4</sup>

The Melbourne City Football Club (MCFC) launched the City Futures Program in 2023, specifically designed for secondary school students in Years 7 to 9. The program is integrated into the school curriculum, with dedicated periods allocated for each year level. Its primary aim is to enhance students' academic engagement, behaviour, school attendance, teamwork, leadership skills, and overall citizenship development.

This report has been developed for the MCFC for the evaluation of the City Futures program. The Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC), in partnership with the MCFC, aimed to investigate the program's impact on students, schools, and communities. The evaluation engaged with key stakeholders, whilst ensuring students' and teachers' experiences remain central to their key learnings.

### 1.2 KEY FINDINGS

The participants positively reflected on the MCFC football program. For the teachers and administrators of the program, they were able to identify positive changes in the student's behaviour and performance, both academically and within football. They were encouraged by the student's ability to set their own goals and accept consequences for poor behaviour, such as removal from the program:

*"They [the students] actually appreciate the program for giving them... forward planning, organisational skills, working as a team." (Teacher/school administrator)*

Staff and administrators of the City Futures program saw potential expansion of program activities more actively in their communities, outlining the benefits this could have on the student's sense of identity, accountability and connection with their communities:

*"... Just respecting your community... chances are next time they [the students] go back to that area, they're going to respect that area a lot more because they had some input into it." (Teacher/school administrator)*

For the students engaged in the program, important themes that arose from the discussions were centred around the enjoyment they get from the being in the program. Students enjoyed being outside kicking a football with their friends. Some noticed a change in their own behaviour and said that others had given them feedback that their behaviour had improved:

*"Because, at the start of the year, I feel like everybody was... telling me I was*

*really bad and then, throughout the year, I've gotten better. So, now it's like, I'm more confident in my abilities."*

Students felt that their sessions broke up their academic day allowing them to "reset" and this improved their concentration and engagement in their work. They felt more confident and saw the importance of supporting each other:

*"Yesterday we learned about behaviour and just, like, how to improve your behaviour in soccer, like not letting your team down and just always having that positive energy."*

They felt more confident with social interactions in daily life because of the program. Some students played club football and expressed enjoyment in the relative freedom of the training sessions as club training and matches were more serious and positional changes are far less frequent. The students suggested having the training sessions more frequently since they enjoy the discipline of the training and the fitness benefits that supported their football skill development as well as overall health and wellbeing.

A key feature of the City Futures program is the facilitation by City in the Community Young Leaders. It was evident in the measuring success workshop with these peer educators that their influence was beneficial for the students, as they could be seen as role models. When asked about their impact on the students, the Young Leaders stated the program gave the students several important things:

*"Having role models and mentors in their lives and a safe space to be vulnerable and open."*

The City in the Community Young Leaders were able to identify the positive impact of their mentorship on the students' personal growth, including their "self-improvement and self-development":

*"The impact is to target self-development in each individual. Increased confidence, self-esteem, physical and mental wellbeing and overall community connection within the club and school."*

The Young Leaders spoke positively about the program, also discussing how their role greatly benefited their own learning, development and career prospects. During the professional development measuring success workshop, the Young Leaders identified that they had provided a safe and supported learning environment for the students, where they believed they provided encouragement and positive feedback whilst also being firm, understandable and relatable.

Outcomes from the evaluation of the City Futures program suggested that it is an impactful program on the health and wellbeing of high-school students. Both students and facilitators highlighted the benefits to student engagement, confidence, physical and mental wellbeing. Based on these findings, several key recommendations have been outlined below.

### 1.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to deliver the City Futures program across Victorian schools.
  - a. Maintain the relationship with three existing schools to continue running the program.
  - b. Consider expanding to more schools in Melbourne suburbs including private, public and specialist schools.

- c. Explore expanding the program to regional and rural areas in Victoria.
  - 2. Explore opportunities to document student experiences on entering the program to completion of program.
    - a. Document various student experiences across year levels involved in the program to determine impact of program longitudinally.
    - b. Follow-up with students' post-program to determine program impact beyond involvement.
  - 3. Continue to build relationships with local communities in which the program is run.
    - a. Maintain relationships with key stakeholders such as local businesses and Victoria Police to assist in building community pride.
    - b. Build new relationships with local community stakeholders such as emergency service groups, education providers and potential employers to grow students' connection with these groups.
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# MELBOURNE CITY FOOTBALL CLUB (MCFC)

## CITY FUTURES PROGRAM



### EVALUATION:

To determine the impact and outcomes of the City Futures Program for students, teachers, and program facilitators.

#### PARTICIPANTS

- ✓ 5 teachers/program administrators
- ✓ 10 students
- ✓ City in the Community Young Leaders

#### METHOD

- ✓ 3 focus group interviews & 5 individual interviews
- ✓ 2 thematic analysis
- ✓ 1 Measuring Success Workshop

#### STAFF & ADMINISTRATOR EXPERIENCES

*“The difference is definitely **more engaged... more enthusiastic about everything.** They [the students] just love the coaches... and **wanting to improve more.**”*

#### CITY IN THE COMMUNITY YOUNG LEADERS EXPERIENCES

*“Having [the students] **believe in themselves** as a person and believe that they can **be better** footballers and individuals **during and after school.**”*

#### STUDENT EXPERIENCES

*“I’ve been through most of the program. I’m **much more confident** in my life skills when it comes to soccer. And... I’ve **become a better person in general.**”*



### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Continue to deliver City Futures Program** across Victorian schools, **expanding to more schools** and regional areas.
2. Capture student experiences over the course of the whole program to **measure long-term impact.**
3. Continue to **build program relationships with community.**



## 2. EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE CITY FOOTBALL CLUB CITY FUTURES PROGRAM

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Youth engagement in schooling is categorised by engagement behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively. Engagement is demonstrated when students are participating in academic and extracurricular activities, feel a sense of belonging in their surroundings, and are personally invested and accountable for their learning.<sup>1</sup>

In Australia, more than 20% of young people in government schooling do not complete year 12 studies, a number that has continued to rise over the last seven years.<sup>2</sup> Disengagement in schooling is multifactorial and will differ depending on the individual students' circumstances, such as their environment, health and wellbeing, cognitive abilities, and family situations<sup>3</sup>. These circumstances can include influences from the student's life on a personal level, a social level and a community level.<sup>3</sup>

When sport is included in school curriculum, it supports the development of students physically, socially and emotionally<sup>4</sup>. Sport in school encourages students to be inclusive, build connections, develop skills in teamwork and resilience, and may foster the development of pride in some students.<sup>4</sup>

The Melbourne City Football Club (MCFC) launched the City Futures Program in 2023, specifically designed for secondary school students in Years 7 to 9. The program is integrated into the school curriculum, with dedicated periods allocated for each year level. Its primary aim is to enhance students' academic engagement, behaviour, school attendance, teamwork, leadership skills, and overall citizenship development.

Currently, the program is being implemented in partnership with three schools in Melbourne Victoria Southeastern suburbs. The City Futures Program offers in-school training delivered by experienced MCFC coaches, combining football development with academic and personal growth. Classroom discussions cover a range of health and personal development topics, and the program adopts a holistic approach that emphasises teamwork, leadership, and community engagement. Students also benefit from exclusive opportunities such as workshops, excursions, and access to professional training facilities.

This report has been developed for the MCFC for the evaluation of the City Futures program. The Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC), in partnership with the MCFC, aimed to investigate the program's impact on students, schools, and communities. The evaluation engaged with key stakeholders, whilst ensuring students' and teachers' experiences remain central to their key learnings.

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<sup>1</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2019). *Identifying students at risk of disengaging*. Accessed 10 November 2025. Available from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/engagement/Pages/identify-students.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Hare, J. (Feb 5, 2024). *The rate of teens finishing year 12 is falling*. Accessed 10 November 2025. Available from: <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/the-rate-of-teens-finishing-year-12-is-falling-20240205-p5f2e3>

<sup>3</sup> Gossner, M., Dittman, C.K., Lole, L. & Miller-Lewis, L. (2025). Community insights into School Disengagement: Perspectives from a Regional-Rural Australian Context. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 35(2). <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v35i2.791>

<sup>4</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2025). *Quality School Sport*. Accessed 10 November 2025. Available from: <https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/quality-school-sport>

## 2.2 THE CITY FUTURES PROGRAM DELIVERY

Outlined below is a summary of activities of the City Futures program currently being delivered in three schools in Melbourne Southeastern suburbs. The program is tailored to the needs of the school it is delivering to, and may vary in delivery hours, times/days of week and programs during school hours or after school hours. Some schools have existing relationships with community organisations which they utilise within the program.

Program activities include:

- 4 - 8 hours of delivery per week including during school, and after school
- Students visit City Football Academy (CFA) once per term for Immersion Days, going behind the scenes of a day at Melbourne City
- Students participate in 3 tournaments per year at CFA
- Students also act as ball kids 2-3 times per year at Melbourne City A-League matches, and Asian Champions League matches
- Students also receive additional benefits like coming to training the day before Grand Final, visits to Parliament, guest speakers and player appearances at their school
- Year 9 students compete in the 'Blue Ribbon Cup' against Victoria Police every September
- Year 9 students are part of a graduation ceremony at CFA in December.

## 2.3 PROJECT AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This project aims to conduct a qualitative study of the City Futures Program to ascertain its impact and outcomes for students, teachers, and program facilitators.

Evaluation of the program enables the MCFC to assess its effectiveness. By understanding its effectiveness, MCFC can maintain or improve the quality of future programs that can benefit future students, trainers, and communities. Objectives of this evaluation were:

- To capture the student's experience of participating in the City Futures program.
- To explore the program's impact on students' engagement with school through interviews with teachers and program facilitators.

## 2.4 PROJECT DELIVERY/ACTIVITIES

To evaluate the program's effectiveness in supporting students' holistic development, the CERC in partnership with MCFC, conducted a series of in-depth interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with students. Data collection took place between September and October 2025.

The participants in this study comprised three key stakeholder groups: students who engaged with the City Futures Program, teachers directly involved in its delivery, and City Futures Program facilitators. The program has been implemented across three secondary schools in Melbourne's southeastern suburbs. Approximately nine teachers were identified as having contributed to the program's implementation, alongside ten MCFC program facilitators who supported its delivery and coordination.

The CERC collaborated with the MCFC to facilitate the focus group discussions and interviews for this evaluation. As part of the program's integration into the school curriculum, students and teachers were invited to participate in the evaluation process. All participating schools had previously agreed to the evaluation component as part of their partnership with MCFC.

MCFC was responsible for recruiting study participants and provided the CERC team with a list of selected individuals, including contact details and signed consent forms. Communication regarding the evaluation was coordinated by MCFC, which liaised with both students and school staff. Parental consent was obtained for all student participants, covering both their involvement in the City Futures Program and the evaluation process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students who chose not to participate were not included in the discussions.

Teachers who agreed to participate were interviewed individually via virtual face-to-face sessions conducted through Microsoft Teams. All data collection activities adhered to ethical standards, ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation throughout.

A professional development workshop was also held with the City Future Young Leaders, which was facilitated by the CERC director. This workshop explored the peer educators experiences of being mentors and leaders in the City Futures program, and how they believed success could be measured for stakeholders engaged with the program.

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Two thematic analysis that were undertaken exploring the experiences of teachers and administrators, and students of the City Future Program. A total of five teachers/school administrators were interviewed as part of this evaluation, and three focus groups with students involved in the program were undertaken, consisting of 10 students. A total of 15 participants were included in the overall analysis of the City Futures Program. Participant experiences have been described below under several themes. These themes describe the cohorts experiences in facilitation, supporting and engaging with program activities.

#### 3.2 INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

##### Introduction

In discussions with the five various teachers and school administrators of the Melbourne City Football Club Future's program, there were four major themes that emerged, which consisted of *'Getting into the Program'*, *'Setting Goals and Expectations'*, *'Building Confidence, Leadership and Teamwork'*, and *'Connecting with Community'*. These themes encapsulate the teachers' perceptions of the program's efficacy in fostering not just athletic development, but also broader life skills and personal growth among participating students.



Figure 1: Identified themes – Teachers and School Administrators

##### Getting into the Program

Teachers consistently highlighted the Melbourne City Futures Program's role in providing a unique and inclusive opportunity for students as they begin their high school journey. Importantly, this opportunity extended beyond high-performing students or naturally gifted athletes. As one teacher explained:

*"I know that I put a lot of students in the first year in the program and staff are saying, well, they've been terrible in this class, they've done this, they've done that. And I said, well, it's about giving them a chance, let's give them an opportunity. This is something they're really keen to be in school and let's see what happens." (P3)*

This inclusive approach was seen as critical for fostering initial engagement, particularly among students who might otherwise be disengaged from traditional academic pathways. One teacher described the program as a valuable external support that could help students connect with school:

*"I think it's a wonderful opportunity for schools to provide, suppose an experience for students to connect sometimes through an external provider. Because if they're already struggling with, you know, staff, other peers, this can help sort of, I suppose, be a buffer to help repair and get them to reconnect again" (P2)*

Another noted that the program gave students a tangible reason to attend school, contributing to improved attendance and motivation:

*"With the students they're able to have a reason... to come to school first and foremost." (P4)*

The program's uniform was also identified as a symbolic and motivational element, fostering a sense of belonging and pride among participants:

*"I think the uniform as well is a big buy in for a lot of kids. They want to be part of that". (P3)*

High demand for the program was evident, with waiting lists and a structured disciplinary system, such as a three-strike rule, ensuring both accountability and sustained engagement:

*"I've got a waiting list all the time of kids wanting to get into the program." (P3)*

### **Setting Goals and Expectations**

Given that each school had a limited number of places available, the establishment of clear goals and expectations was seen as essential to maximising the program's impact. The teacher's emphasised the importance of ensuring that students understood the level of commitment required for participation and personal development. Goal setting was often tailored to individual needs, such as punctuality or classroom engagement, and formalised through signed agreements involving students and their families:

*"Everyone has an understanding of the expectations. It's on paper now." (P1)*

Expectations extended beyond the program itself, with student behaviour in other classes also monitored and linked to program privileges. This reinforced the idea that participation in the program was a holistic commitment to school engagement:

*"The students are well aware that their behaviour in the program is important, but it's just as important their behaviour outside like in all their other subjects that they do." (P1)*

Facilitators also highlighted the value of student-led goal setting, which fostered a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation:

*“It's powerful when the student comes up with their own goal. We kind of push them towards something, but then they come up with it and we write it down.”*  
(P1)

This approach was seen as instrumental in helping students develop self-management and self-reliance, skills considered crucial for their broader personal and academic growth, both within and beyond the program. One teacher reflected on how this process of goal setting and accountability fostered a deeper sense of connection and mutual respect between students and the wider school community:

*“I think what comes with that is a level of respect... and then everything else starts to fall into place to address any sort of need.”* (P2)

### **Building Confidence, Leadership and Teamwork**

Teachers consistently recognised the Melbourne City Futures Program as having a significant impact on students' self-confidence, particularly during the early years of high school. The program provided a structured yet supportive environment where students could begin to develop a stronger sense of identity and purpose. One teacher reflected on the broader developmental impact of the program:

*“... the maturation as they're going through the start of their schooling... it's not just coming from them being in school. I think I really do believe it's from... being a part of something else.”* (P1)

The transition into Year 7 was identified as a particularly vulnerable period, with students often testing boundaries in a new environment. Facilitators noted that setting clear expectations early helped students settle and thrive:

*“Coming into Year 7... they're nervous... but if we can lock in these expectations and behaviours early on from the get-go, we're seeing the fruit of that now come through our Year 8s.”* (P1)

A key strength of the program was its focus on developing leadership and teamwork. Older students were given opportunities to mentor younger peers, lead parts of training sessions, and model positive behaviours:

*“... just seeing the students, the older ones help the younger ones. We've got an older student who's quite good technically. He takes some of the sessions...”* (P4)

The collaborative nature of the program also fostered a culture of mutual support and understanding, helping students navigate differences in skill level and develop empathy:

*“They're getting a bit more used to each other... trying to help each other rather than... get frustrated... because of the ability differences.”* (P5)

The teachers also observed growth in essential life skills such as organisation, forward planning, and teamwork—skills that extended well beyond the sporting context:

*“They actually appreciate the program for giving them... forward planning, organisational skills, working as a team.”* (P3)

Ultimately, the program was seen to strengthen not only individual confidence but also peer relationships, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive school environment:

*“They’ve really strengthened their relationship with each other and others, I think, which is a great thing.” (P4)*

### **Positive Change at School**

Teachers consistently observed that the Melbourne City Futures Program contributed to noticeable and sustained positive change in students’ engagement, behaviour, and overall school experience. Students involved in the program were described as more enthusiastic, motivated, and connected to their learning:

*“The difference is definitely more engaged, the students more enthusiastic about everything. They just love the coaches, the little prizes at the end of the lessons as well... and wanting to improve more.” (P5)*

Students who had previously been identified as challenging or disengaged were now demonstrating significant behavioural and academic improvements. One facilitator reflected on the transformation of a group of students transitioning into Year 7:

*“Some of these students... they’ve just completely flipped... they’ve realised what they got and they’ve used it to pull their head in essentially.” (P1)*

This shift was also evident in students’ academic habits, with many showing greater attention to assessments and classroom responsibilities:

*“Kids [are] keeping up to date with their work across the board... making sure that they’re paying attention to assessments.” (P3)*

The program also appeared to have a positive impact on students’ emotional wellbeing and school attendance. Teachers described students as visibly happier and more eager to attend school on program days:

*“They’re a lot happier... on the days that we have the program... they’re super keen for it.” (P4)*

Attendance data supported these observations, with program participants among the most consistently present student groups:

*“They would be one of our best attended groups in the school.” (P3)*

Importantly, the program contributed to a reduction in low-level behavioural issues, particularly among younger students. Being part of the Melbourne City Futures Program was associated with a sense of responsibility and pride, which translated into improved classroom conduct:

*“Knowing they’re part of [the] Melbourne City program... it comes with a level of responsibility... that’s dramatically decreased [negative behaviours].” (P2)*

### **Connecting with Community**

One of the other major positives seen in the Melbourne City Futures Program was its capacity to foster a profound connection between students and their broader community. Teachers consistently highlighted how the program encouraged students to develop a sense of respect, responsibility, and belonging beyond the school environment with one commenting:

*“... just respecting your community... chances are next time they go back to that area, they’re going to respect that area a lot more because they had some input into it.” (P1)*

The program also created opportunities for students to engage with community organisations and events, such as the Blue Ribbon Cup, which brought students together with Victoria Police in a commemorative football match:

*“They verse the police... to acknowledge those that have passed on duty, but also... to build that more positive connection between law enforcement and just regular people like us.” (P1)*

These events were seen as powerful tools for challenging negative stereotypes and building trust between young people and community institutions, particularly in the context of media narratives around youth crime.

Students also had the opportunity to engage with Melbourne City FC’s professional team, including attending training sessions and participating in joint activities. These experiences generated excitement and deepened students’ connection to the program:

*“We watched half of their training session and then did our own training session on the other field... which was a brilliant experience.” (P5)*

While competitive success in inter-school matches was not always the focus, facilitators noted that students valued the chance to participate in tournaments and represent their school and community:

*“We haven’t had much success playing outside against other schools, but they definitely love being part of these little tournaments.” (P5)*

Importantly, the program used football as a foundation to explore broader themes such as leadership, mental health, nutrition, and civic responsibility. These lessons were embedded in activities that students found engaging and relevant:

*“It’s not just about that. We can use it to teach them leadership... mental health, nutrition, the benefits of giving back to your community.” (P1)*

Looking ahead, there was a strong desire among staff to expand the community engagement aspect of the program even further, recognising its potential to deepen students’ learning and social development:

*“Next year the plan is to do more community stuff... I want to have a stronger emphasis on the community aspect.” (P1)*

### 3.3 INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE CITY FUTURES PROGRAM

#### Introduction

Three focus groups were conducted at three high schools in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The children that attended the sessions were actively training in the football program on a weekly basis. During the focus groups the students were asked to reflect on their experiences with the program. Three major themes with several minor themes emerged from the thematic analysis including, “*Just for Fun*”, “*Just for Me*” and “*Just like Them*”. Due to small group numbers, participant numbers have been removed to protect the students’ anonymity.



Figure 2: Identified themes – Students

#### Just for Fun

The first major theme that emerged from the discussion with the students was that they enjoyed the training sessions with the MCFC coaches. They looked forward to going to school on days when the training was scheduled. The students who play club football noted that the training had a “*fun vibe*” and that they could try to play in various positions, whereas their club practice were less flexible and they tended to specialise in a particular position and that didn’t vary greatly. They also found the break from study refreshing, describing it as a “*rest for our brains*” and felt they could concentrate better on their work after a training session.

A common theme throughout the focus group discussions was the “*fun vibe*” and “*building connections*”. Several students indicated that they enjoyed the sessions greatly and looked forward to attending each week:

*“Just, like kicking the ball with friends, that’s fun. Because play with your mates.”*

Some of the participants played in club teams as well and find that the “*vibe*” of the MCFC program is different, more relaxed, than their club training sessions, one student outlined “*it’s like very laid back. It’s very fun. Yeah, it’s not like ... not muck around, but not take things seriously. It’s less stressful.*” The emphasis is not on winning but on playing together and enjoying the sessions. An interesting comment was about the freedom of the MCFC training. Since the goal was not to develop a winning team, but

to enjoy football, they participants have more freedom to try to play in various positions, which they enjoyed:

*“I reckon the reason to play football here because there’s less stress on you than the club. So, here you have more confidence to just like be yourself. But, at the club you’re mostly forced into boundaries of what the coach says.”*

Another student confirmed this sentiment, discussing how the program facilitators “let you be free”, which gave the students a sense of freedom in trying out new game positions they may not have had a chance to try before:

*“Whatever position you want to play. They’ll just, like, let you do it. You have so much freedom when you play in this program. It’s just so good.”*

The participants found the break from the classroom a welcome respite during their study schedule, one student stated, “having a break is good for our brains.” They commented that they feel refreshed and can work better after the football training sessions:

*“Yeah, because, like, when we do too much work, we might need to have a break and then come back to work.”*

### **Just for Me**

The participants felt that they were getting several benefits from the program. They were aware that their behaviour had improved since beginning the program and that they are developing skills in the game as well as transferable skills for life in general, using words and phrases like “confidence”, “I’ve gotten better”, “I have more enthusiasm” and “Cultural and social skills make you confident.”

The students felt that they were gaining skills for life. These include cultural and social awareness and responsibility with comments such as “...not letting your team down...” They seemed to find value in helping and supporting each other:

*“If some of us become professionals, like, use these skills and like, take them to other places.”*

Several students commented that they feel the program has had a positive impact on their behaviour in school generally. The “carrot and stick” concept has means they are rewarded for good behaviour by being allowed to be in the program and poor behaviour may lead to losing their place in the program:

*“Yesterday we learned about behaviour and just, like, how to improve your behaviour in soccer, like not letting your team down and just always having that positive energy.”*

Some students felt that their confidence in their football skills had improve as a result of being in the program. They also notice an improvement in their self-confidence:

*“I think I’m a bit more talkative now. I don’t know. I’ve been through most of the program, yeah. Like, I’m much more confident in my life skills when it comes to soccer. And I’m just, like, I’ve become a better person in general.”*

Another student outlined how they had grown as a person, discussing how others had highlighted to them that their behaviour was negatively impacting their schooling, and they had improved

throughout the year:

*“At the start of the year, I feel like everybody was... telling me I was really bad and then, throughout the year, I’ve gotten better. So, now it’s like, I’m more confident in my abilities.”*

While students didn’t specifically state that they had scored higher marks in assessments, they did say that they felt more engaged in their studies, and they are developing skills in the program that are helping them to cope with the pressure of their academic endeavours. This pertains particularly to their behaviour in class. They mentioned that they are less inclined to “muck around” in class. This may be attributed to the knowledge that they could be removed from the program if they misbehave.

*“Like from the day that I have, like, Melbourne City, like I have more enthusiasm with my other subjects...”*

### **Just like Them**

The participants in the focus groups were able to see the coaches as role models and has had an impact on their behaviour. Some students are running small training sessions with primary school children and using the examples of their coaches in the development of activities and interactions with younger students:

*“The coaches, they’re like role models. So, they demonstrate everything. We, sort of, learned from them. So, about behaviour. Yeah, we learned from them and stuff.”*

The students made several comments strongly suggesting that they like the discipline of the training. While they find the coaches “laid back” and “relaxed” they also want to be highly active during the training sessions. They understood that training hard improves their fitness, which, in turn, allows them to develop better skills:

*“Because, like, they make us learn from our mistakes and, like, what we do wrong. So, yeah, as I said, they discipline us, like, not in a bad way, but yeah.”*

*Facilitator: “And that is a good thing about the program, the discipline?”*

*Student: “Yeah.” “No, we just need more discipline.”*

The students linked the discipline with improved fitness. They found the physical demands placed on them during training gave them better ability to perform in matches. This, in turn, supported their confidence in their own abilities on the pitch.

*“They help us, like, discipline and, like, fitness. Like teamwork and stuff.”*

The students mentioned that they were learning social skills that help them “to be supportive” of each other in the other areas of their school day. They appreciated the power of teamwork for mutual benefit:

*“You learn new skills, like how to be work as a team and, like, during those sessions and in those schools.”*

### 3.4 MEASURING SUCCESS WORKSHOP WITH CITY IN THE COMMUNITY YOUNG LEADERS

#### Introduction

A measuring success workshop was undertaken in May 2025 with the CERC Director and the City in the Community Young Leaders of the City Futures program. This workshop was designed to encourage the Young Leaders to explore how they measured success in the City Futures program, and how the program may impact the lives of those involved.

The workshop included a brainstorming activity where the participants explored measures of success by stakeholders, followed by an activity to explore pathways to success for youth involved in the City Futures program. Young Leaders were also asked to complete a survey about their experience mentoring within the program, feedback and suggestions.

#### Findings

It was evident in the measuring success workshop with these peer educators that their influence was beneficial for the students, as they could be seen as role models. When asked about their impact on the students, the Young Leaders stated the program gave the students several important things:

*“Having role models and mentors in their lives and a safe space to be vulnerable and open.”*

The City in the Community Young Leaders were able to identify the positive impact of their mentorship on the students’ personal growth, including their *“self-improvement and self-development”*:

*The impact is to target self-development in each individual. Increased confidence, self-esteem, physical and mental wellbeing and overall community connection within the club and school.”*

The Young Leaders spoke positively about the program, also discussing how their role greatly benefited their own learning, development and career prospects. During the professional development measuring success workshop, the Young Leaders identified that they had provided a safe and supported learning environment for the students, where they believed they provided encouragement and positive feedback whilst also being firm, understandable and relatable.

A comprehensive summary of this workshop is included in Appendix 1.

### 3.5 COMBINED ANALYSIS SUMMARY

The participants positively reflected on the MCFC football program. For the teachers and administrators of the program, they were able to identify positive changes in the student’s behaviour and performance, both academically and within football. They were encouraged by the student’s ability to set their own goals and accept consequences for poor behaviour, such as removal from the program. Staff and administrators of the City Futures program saw potential expansion of program activities more actively in their communities, outlining the benefits this could have on the student’s sense of identity, accountability and connection with their communities.

For the students engaged in the program, important themes that arose from the discussions were centred around the enjoyment they get from being in the program. Students enjoyed being outside kicking a football with their friends. Some noticed a change in their own behaviour and said

that others had given them feedback that their behaviour had improved.

They felt that their sessions broke up their academic day allowing them to “reset” and this improved their concentration and engagement in their work. They felt more confident and saw the importance of supporting each other. They felt more confident with social interactions in daily life because of the program. Some students played club football and expressed enjoyment in the relative freedom of the training sessions as club training and matches were more serious and positional changes are far less frequent. The students suggested having the training sessions more frequently since they enjoy the discipline of the training and the fitness benefits that supported their football skill development as well as overall health and wellbeing.

A key feature of the City Futures program is the facilitation by Young Leaders. It was evident in the measuring success workshop with these peer educators that their influence was beneficial for the students, as they could be seen as role models. The Young Leaders were able to identify the positive impact of their mentorship on the students’ personal growth. The Young Leaders spoke positively about the program, also discussing how their role greatly benefited their own learning, development and career prospects.

Outcomes from the evaluation of the City Futures program suggested that it is an impactful program on the health and wellbeing of high-school students. Both students and facilitators highlighted the benefits to student engagement, confidence, physical and mental wellbeing. Based on these findings, it would be beneficial for the City Futures program to continue to run in the three schools it is currently engaged with and explore expansion into more schools. This expansion should consider a broad range of school types, including private, public, mixed and single-gendered schools, specialist schools and those located in regional and rural Victoria.

To gain a deeper perspective on the impact of the program, further longitudinal evaluation of student experiences should be considered. This longitudinal view could involve documenting a student’s journey through the program from year 7 to year 9, capturing their lived experiences at various points during this time. This long-term view of the student’s experience may better describe their maturation, building of confidence and evidence of transferring the skills they have learnt in the program beyond their schooling. Documenting impact of the program beyond schooling can have beneficial effects for local communities in which the students live and study.

The City Futures program currently connects with local communities in which the programs run, which has seen strong relationships form with key stakeholders such as businesses and local police. Strengthening these relationships with continued community connections such as sporting events and skills showcases may help students increase their pride in community and ultimately decrease anti-social behaviour.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The approach of the CERC to this research was informed by a Participatory Evaluation and Co-Design Framework.

#### **Participatory evaluation**

A participatory evaluation framework puts people from the community and those delivering the programs, projects and services at the centre of the evaluation. Participatory evaluation is a distinctive approach based on the following principles:

- That evaluation should be a co-designed, collaborative partnership through 360° stakeholder input, including project participants and project funders;
- That integral to evaluation is an evaluation capacity-building focus within and across projects;
- That evaluation is a cyclical and iterative process embedded in projects from project design to program assessment;
- That evaluation adopts a learning, improvement and strengths-based approach;
- That evaluation supports innovation, accepting that projects will learn and evolve;
- That evaluation contributes to the creation of a culture of evaluation and evaluative thinking;
- That there is no one or preferred data collection method rather the most appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods will be tailored to the information needs of each project.

#### **Co-design**

Co-design is a process and approach that is about working with people to create ‘interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives and will reflect their own values and goals’<sup>5</sup>. Co-design can be done in many ways but is about collaborative engagement that is bottom-up, creative, and enables a wide range of people to participate and importantly steer decisions and outcomes. Co-design is not a consultation process but a partnership approach where ‘end-users’ actively define and shape strategies and outcomes. The role of the ‘expert’ is to facilitate this process.

### 4.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

An explorative qualitative research design was used to understand students' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the city's future program.

#### **Qualitative data**

Data were collected using focus group interviews and in-depth face-to-face interviews among the participants. Three focus groups, each comprising 10 student participants, were organised to explore shared experiences and perspectives. Additionally, five in-depth individual interviews were held with teachers to gain deeper insights into their views. All sessions followed a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix 2: Interview Questions), allowing for guided yet flexible conversations. Although described as face-to-face, the interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. Each session

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<sup>5</sup> VCOSS (2015). *Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*. V. C. o. S. Service. Melbourne.

lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. All focus group discussions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed using the Microsoft Word transcription tool. Similarly, the individual interviews conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams were recorded and transcribed using the platform's built-in transcription feature. The resulting transcripts were electronically generated and then reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy and completeness.

### Data Analysis

A thematic analysis technique was used for qualitative data with findings presented under theme headings together with participant quotes. The thematic analysis utilised Braun and Clarke's six-step process, which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the report (Figure 58)<sup>6</sup>.

As qualitative analysis is an inductive process, some interpretation of the data was required to create the thematic map. It was actively acknowledged that the researcher's interpretations would inform the results of this study, hence, any prior conceptions of the topic were reflexively bracketed to the best of the researcher's abilities<sup>7</sup>.

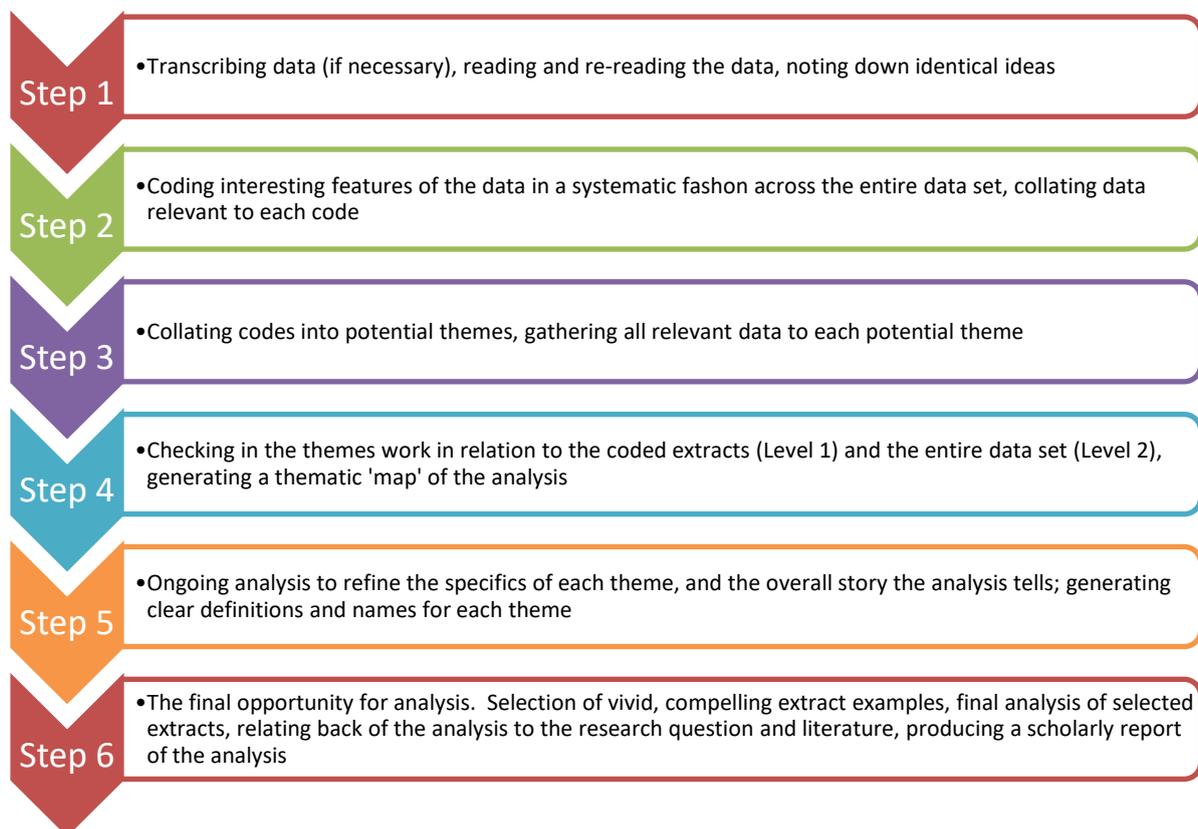


Figure 3: Six-step thematic analysis

The Young Leaders measuring success workshop was analysed with the support of AI software Co-Pilot. This generative AI tool supported by Federation University assisted in collating the information gathered under theme headings, which were then critically analysed by the CERC research team to determine the final results.

<sup>6</sup> Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd

<sup>7</sup> Berger, R. (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>

## 5. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND PRACTICE

Federation University aims to promote and support responsible research practices by providing resources and guidance to our researchers. We aim to maintain a strong research culture which incorporates:

- Honesty and integrity;
- Respect for human research participants, animals and the environment;
- Respect for the resources used to conduct research;
- Appropriate acknowledgement of contributors to research; and
- Responsible communication of research findings.

Human Research and Ethics application: *Evaluation of the Melbourne City Football Club City Futures Program (Approval number: 2025-143)* was approved by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 3) prior to data collection and analysis. Participant anonymity was maintained by removing any identifiable information from the evaluation.

## 6. ABBREVIATIONS

CERC	Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre
CFA	City Football Academy
MCFC	Melbourne City Football Club

## 7. LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1: Identified themes – Teachers and School Administrators	...12
Figure 2: Identified themes – Students	...17
Figure 3: Six-step thematic analysis	...23

8. APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix 1: Measuring Success Workshop Outcomes

COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION  
& RESEARCH CENTRE (CERC)

MELBOURNE  
CITY FOOTBALL  
CLUB (MCFC)

MEASURING  
SUCCESS  
WORKSHOP

MAY 2025



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**Federation**  
University

Collaborative Evaluation &  
Research Centre (CERC)



FEDERATION UNIVERSITY  
COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION  
& RESEARCH CENTRE

SUPPORTING INNOVATION RESEARCH AND  
EVALUATION

MELBOURNE CITY FOOTBALL CLUB  
(MCFC)  
MEASURING SUCCESS WORKSHOP

29 MAY 2025





# PURPOSE

The MCFC peer educators engaged in a capacity building workshop with the CERC in May 2025. The workshop encouraged them to explore how they measured success within the MCFC City Futures program, and how this program may impact the lives of youth engaged in soccer in Melbourne's South East.

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# ACTIVITY ONE

Brainstorming measures of success for MCFC stakeholders

Q. What do you think is a measure of success for the MCFC City Futures program? What does this look like for the young people, MCFC, the schools and the program funder?

## GROUP ONE & TWO

### Stakeholder measures of success

#### Young People

1. Skills improvement
  - Progressing into MCFC pathways
  - Scoring goals & having fun
2. Self improvement & connection
  - Being around friends/making new friends
  - Increased maturity

#### School

1. Behavioural improvements
  - Improved participation & receptiveness in class
  - Improved leadership & student networking skills
2. Attendance & engagement in program & school
  - School connectivity; inclusion & collaboration

#### Potential Funder

1. Improved school attendance rates
  - Behavioural improvements
  - Multicultural engagement (South-East)
2. Decreased youth crime rates
  - Community engagement & integration
  - Physical health/wellbeing improvements
  - Impacting low-socioeconomic areas

#### MCFC

1. Community engagement
  - Outreach into South-East region
  - Team over self
  - Better healthier lives through football
  - Improving health & wellbeing of students
2. Revenue stream
  - Facility usage
  - Club exposure

# ACTIVITY TWO

Pathways to success - what can we achieve?

Q. How does the MCFC City Futures program impact the lives of young people over the course of the program?

## PEER EDUCATOR COMBINED RESPONSES

### How were students pre-program?

- Chatty, talkative & disruptive
- Shy
- Lacking confidence
- Isolated
- Distracted
- Easily influenced
- Unmotivated
- Disrespectful

### How did I help?

- Was a role model
- Gave constructive feedback
- Was firm & understandable
- Took time to learn about students
- Practiced patience
- Actively listened
- Provided examples of success
- Provided appropriate level of challenge for growth
- Provided encouragement & praise
- Was vulnerable & relatable

### How are the students post-program?

- Respectful, first to say hello & goodbye
- Improved leadership skills
- Determined & hard-working
- Constructive
- Increased confidence & self-worth
- Caring & thoughtful
- More connected in school

# PEER EDUCATOR SURVEY

Experiences, feedback and suggestions

The MCFC City Futures peer educators provided insight into their role experiences. Answers were recorded in Mentimeter and a summary has been provided below.

## How do you feel about work?

Peer educators responded "strongly agree" to all questions, demonstrating their passion for their work and the support they felt to perform their role.



**7** OUT OF **7**

All seven peer educators stated they were seeking full-time work with the MCFC.

**Current role at the MCFC**

## What are your stress levels?

Peer educators did however, highlight higher stress levels.



# PEER EDUCATOR SURVEY

Experiences, feedback and suggestions

role-model  
progression  
genuine-impact improves-lives  
confidence  
positive-influence  
connection opportunity  
engagement fun  
difference friends football growth  
learning

## Best thing about your role

Presented in a word cloud, peer educators provided words to describe the best parts of their role in the City Futures program.



## Role support at MCFC

Support as a peer educator in the City Futures program was rated as high.

## Improving the role

Some suggestions on what could improve the peer educator role were provided in long answer responses.

Better support from MCFC and external sources.

Further opportunity for coaches and staff.  
More funding.

Full time program facilitators.  
Company progression.

Being able to have more of an influence on the type of programs run.

# PEER EDUCATOR SURVEY

Experiences, feedback and suggestions

## Training suggestions

Presented in a word cloud, peer educators provided suggestions that could improve the training in their role.

psychology  
mentoring  
coaching-courses  
facilitation-training  
andy-smith  
youth-worker opportunities  
simon-zappia behavioural-management  
internal-cfg leadership-work  
paul-wong session-with  
tom session

Peer educators shared what impact they believed the City Futures program was having on young people.

## Impact of the program

"Having them believe in themselves as a person and believe that they can be better footballers and individuals during and after school".

"Self-improvement, and self-development. Learning new skills, growing, improved confidence and becoming a leader".

"Having role models and mentors in their lives and a safe place to be vulnerable and open".

"The impact is to target self development in each individual. Increased confidence, self-esteem, physical and mental wellbeing and overall community connection within the club and school".

"Personal improvement in behavioral and social outcomes. Added benefit of football training to become better players".



## 8.2 Appendix 2: Interview Questions

### **Interview Questions**

#### Students

1. What have you enjoyed about the program
2. What would you change about the program
3. What have you learnt doing the program
4. How does being involved with the program affect your time at school
5. How do the program facilitators run the program
6. What have you told your family about the program
7. What advice would you give to the school about the program

#### Program facilitators / teachers

1. What differences have you seen in the kids since starting the program
2. How does the program impact the kids behaviour
3. Have you seen any behavioural changes with the kids
4. What do you believe are the benefits of kids / schools being involved with these sort of programs
5. Do the kids attend the program regularly
6. Have you seen any impact to the kids attendance levels since starting the program
7. What advice would you give to the school about the program

### 8.3 Appendix 3: Human Research Ethics Committee Approval

Dear Joanne,

I am pleased to advise you that the Low Risk Ethics Committee has approved your ethics application, titled *Evaluation Plan - City Futures Program*, reference 2025/143.

**Approval period: 05/09/2025 to 05/09/2030**

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. The project must be conducted strictly in accordance with the proposal approved by the Committee, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the Committee.
2. The Chief investigator must advise the Committee, via email to [research.ethics@federation.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@federation.edu.au), immediately of any complaints or other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project.
3. Where approval has been given subject to the submission of copies of documents such as letters of support or approvals from third parties, these are to be provided to the Ethics Office prior to research commencing at each relevant location.
4. **Amendment requests** must be submitted to the Committee **PRIOR** to implementation of such changes. Amendments cannot be implemented prior to receipt of approval from the relevant ethics committee. Amendment requests may include:
  - Changes to project personnel
  - Project extension (note, extensions **CANNOT** be granted retrospectively)
  - Amendments to project procedures
5. **Annual and Final Reports** **MUST** be submitted by the following deadlines:
  - *Annual Progress Reports* annually on the anniversary of the approval date. Amendment requests will not be accepted for projects with overdue annual reports.
  - *Final Report* within one month of project completion, which may be prior to the expiry of ethics approval. Submission of a final report will close off the project.
6. It is incumbent on the research team to keep track of reporting requirements and submit reports on time. Reminders may not be sent by the Research Office and should not be relied upon.
7. If, for any reason, the project does not proceed or is discontinued, the Committee must be advised via the submission of a Final Report.
8. The Human Research Ethics Committee may conduct random audits and/or require additional

reports concerning the research project as part of the requirements for monitoring, as set out in the current [National statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#).

9. The Ethics Team must be notified of any changes to contact details for any member of the research team. This may include, but is not limited to address, phone number and/or email address.
10. Failure to comply with the current [National statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) and all updates, and/or with the conditions of approval, will result in suspension or withdrawal of approval.

If you require any further information, if something is not clear or you would like to provide feedback, please contact the Ethics Team via email at [research.ethics@federation.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@federation.edu.au) or call +61 3 5327 9765.

Kind regards,

**Research Ethics Team**  
Research Services | Research and Innovation

**Federation University Australia**  
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[federation.edu.au/research/support-for-students-and-staff/ethics/human-ethics](http://federation.edu.au/research/support-for-students-and-staff/ethics/human-ethics)



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