

What **Western** Sydney **Can Be**

**BUILDING TOMORROW'S
EDUCATION SYSTEM**



**BUSINESS
WESTERN
SYDNEY**

FOREWORD

Western Sydney is growing fast. The choices we make now will decide who succeeds and who gets left behind.

Education is at the heart of what Western Sydney can be. From early childhood to high schools, vocational training and universities, demand for learning is rising sharply. Children entering preschool today, and apprentices starting their training now, will shape the workforce of 2050. Industries from construction and health to logistics, advanced manufacturing and digital technology will need skilled workers.

Growth is certain. Whether opportunity keeps pace depends on us.

This report grew from last year's Education Luncheon with Federal Minister Jason Clare, where I argued that Western Sydney needed a unified voice on education ahead of upcoming elections.

Bringing schools, universities and VET providers together is not always easy, but we share a common mission: to unlock the potential of every person and build the region's economy. In February 2026, a workshop of 70 leaders, followed by extensive consultations, set the agenda for this report. I thank the Commonwealth and NSW Governments for their constructive engagement.

Our recommendations focus on three main priorities:

- › **Schools:** Plan and deliver public schools faster, while fast-tracking non-government approvals.

- › **Training:** Build a coordinated VET system linking TAFE, community colleges and private providers to local workforce needs.
- › **Universities:** Significantly increase university places in Western Sydney and bring more campuses closer to where people live.

Education in Western Sydney is like Google Maps: some students have a clear route to opportunity, others face twists, turns and roadblocks. By planning smarter, investing strategically and working together across sectors, we can remove barriers and open multiple paths to success.

Western Sydney has the talent, ambition and energy to thrive. It's time to turn growth into opportunity for everyone.



David Borger
Executive Director,
Business Western Sydney



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Summary of Recommendations

SCHOOLS

NSW should pursue new solutions to plan and deliver public schools faster, while speeding up non-government approvals.

TRAINING

Governments should fund a coordinated VET system aligning TAFE, community colleges and private providers to local workforce needs.

UNIVERSITIES

The Commonwealth should increase university places in Western Sydney. More campuses are needed closer to where people live.

SCHOOLS RECOMMENDATIONS



ESTABLISH A PUBLIC SCHOOL LAND ACQUISITION FUND

Secure school sites early in high-growth areas before prices rise.



EXPAND SHARED USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

Open schools for community use beyond school hours.



CREATE A SYDNEY SCHOOLS PLANNING PANEL

Fast-track approvals for new and expanding non-government schools.



CLOSE THE CHILDCARE GAP

Expand early learning access in high-growth and underserved areas.



CUT RED TAPE FOR SCHOOL EXPANSIONS

Simplify rezoning and introduce flexible enrolment caps.



EXPAND YEAR 5 OPPORTUNITY CLASSES

Increase access to advanced learning for high-potential students.



REFORM SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE CONTRIBUTIONS

End double-charging for local infrastructure costs.



INTRODUCE EARLY LITERACY SCREENING

Identify learning needs and provide targeted support from Year 1.

TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



BOOST VET IN SCHOOLS

Offer more school-based vocational pathways and trade-focused high schools.



UNLOCK MIGRANT SKILLS FASTER

Streamline recognition to get underutilised migrants into jobs.



EXPAND TAFE CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

Scale a proven model across Western Sydney, starting in Liverpool and Campbelltown.



ESTABLISH FUTURE SKILLS WESTERN SYDNEY

Coordinate workforce training across the region.



INTRODUCE NEEDS-BASED FUNDING

Fund VET based on student need and provider outcomes, not sector.



CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Free devices, Wi-Fi and digital skills support for those in need.



AEROTROPOLIS APPRENTICESHIPS

Create direct pathways from Bradfield into emerging local industries.

UNIVERSITY RECOMMENDATIONS



INCREASE COMMONWEALTH SUPPORTED PLACES IN WESTERN SYDNEY

Expand funded university places for a region looking to near-double capacity by 2050.



ESTABLISH UNIVERSITY-COUNCIL ACCORDS

Strengthen local partnerships linking education, industry and community.



REBUILD INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COMPETITIVENESS

Revisit visa fees and student caps that hurt Western Sydney.



EXPAND STUDENT HOUSING SUPPLY

Increase affordable student housing near campuses to ease broader rental pressures.



CAMPUSES CLOSE TO HOME

Examine models to build new suburban campuses.



Western Sydney is shaping Australia's economic future.

WESTERN SYDNEY IS HOME TO THE LARGEST URBAN ABORIGINAL POPULATION, THE OLDEST EUROPEAN SETTLEMENTS AND SOME OF THE MOST DIVERSE COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA. ALREADY, ONE IN TEN AUSTRALIANS CALLS WESTERN SYDNEY HOME, AND IT CONTINUES TO BE ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING REGIONS IN THE COUNTRY.

The promise of Western Sydney is simple: where you start should not determine where you finish. Education is what makes that promise real. It is the education system that will determine who is ready to step into new jobs and whether local young people are equipped to take them. The decisions we make now – about where we build schools, what we teach, how we support students and when we intervene – will shape whether growth translates into opportunity, or leaves too many behind.

BIG AND GROWING FAST

Western Sydney is already the demographic centre of Greater Sydney, and it is accelerating. Today, around 2.7 million people live across the 13 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Greater Western Sydney, from the Hawkesbury to Macarthur, Bankstown and Blue Mountains. That is well over half of Sydney's total population, significantly larger than the eastern and inner-city regions combined.

By 2046, Greater Sydney will grow by close to two million people, with roughly two-thirds of this growth – up to 1.5 million – in Western Sydney.

The pace is stark: Western Sydney will grow by 32% between 2026 and 2046, compared with just 13% in most eastern and inner-city areas. North West Sydney will continue to expand rapidly, but the pressure is most acute in South West Sydney: Camden is projected to grow by 94% and Wollondilly by 82%, effectively doubling in a generation. New communities in places like Melonba, Gledswood Hills, Oran Park and Grantham Farm are emerging at a scale unimaginable just a decade ago.

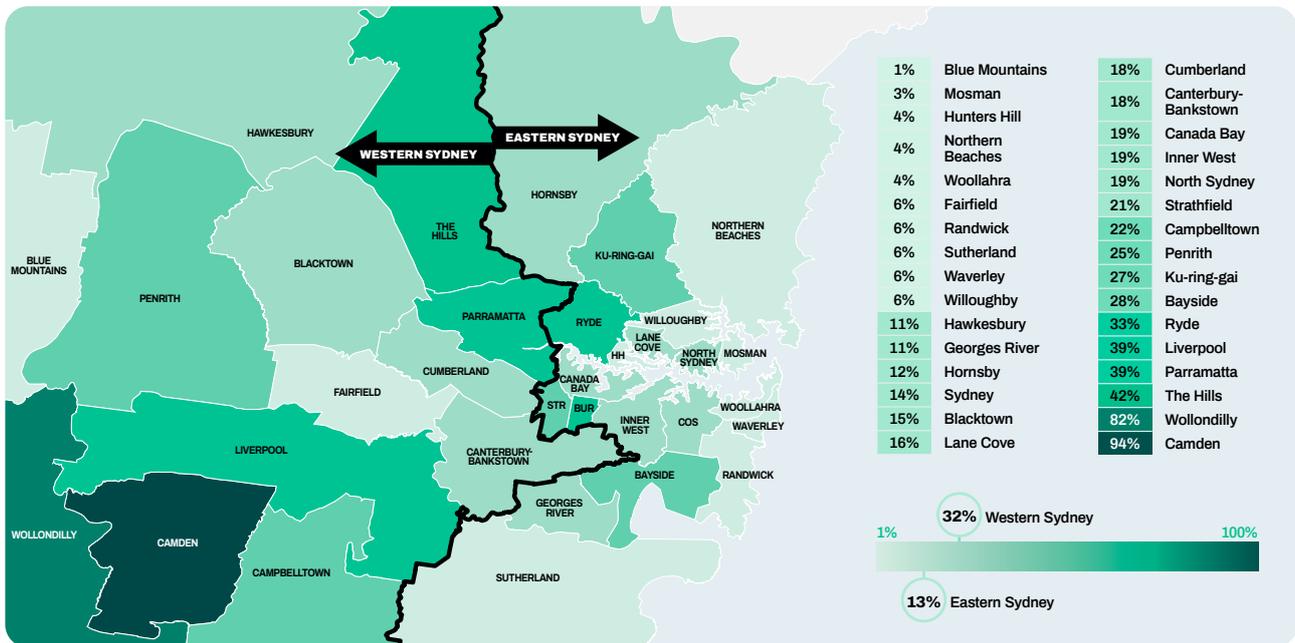
School enrolments tell the same story. Some established areas are flat or declining, but growth corridors are surging. Entire catchments are being created in real time

as families move into new suburbs, putting immediate and sustained pressure on education infrastructure. Public schools remain the default, yet today fewer than 30% of students in Woollahra and Mosman attend public high schools, compared with 72% in Fairfield. Catholic and independent schools provide choice and flexibility, but planning and approval delays often stall their growth for years – a policy inefficiency with real consequences for families.

Image: Bradfield City



PROJECTED LGA POPULATION GROWTH 2026 - 2046¹



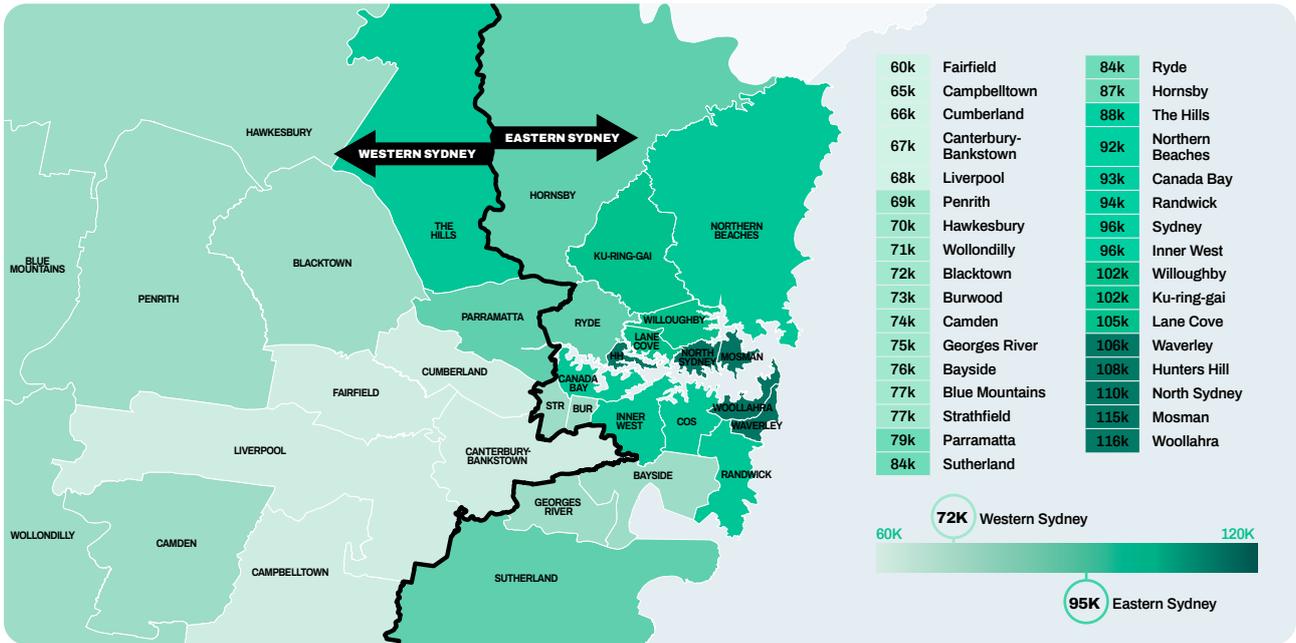
Source: Centre for Western Sydney

BOOMING POPULATION, SURGING SCHOOLS

Western Sydney's population is set to grow 32% by 2046, far outpacing most of Sydney. North West Sydney will expand steadily, but South West Sydney faces the biggest surge: Camden (+94%) and Wollondilly (+82%) nearly double in size. School infrastructure will need rapid, strategic rebalancing to ensure every child has access.

¹ Data in this report to inform maps, charts and analysis has been provided by the Centre for Western Sydney unless otherwise specified, drawing on the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other official government sources.

INCOME DIVIDE - AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOMES BY LGA



Source: Centre for Western Sydney

A CITY STILL DIVIDED

Income shapes opportunity. Western Sydney LGAs sit in lower income brackets, averaging \$72K, with Fairfield, Campbelltown and Cumberland between \$60K–\$70K. Eastern suburbs like Woollahra and Mosman surpass \$110K. This divide mirrors access to high-value jobs and educational outcomes.

THE DIVIDE, DISADVANTAGE AND DESTINY

Sydney is not a single economy; it is divided. Income, opportunity and access to high-value jobs are unevenly distributed. Precincts like the CBD, North Sydney and Macquarie Park dominate as knowledge and professional employment hubs, benefiting from decades of investment, dense infrastructure and proximity to decision-making. The result is a stark income divide: average incomes in many Western Sydney LGAs sit around \$60,000–\$70,000, while Woollahra and Mosman exceed \$110,000.

Western Sydney faces a structural disadvantage built into the city's shape: fewer established job centres, less mature infrastructure and a larger, faster-growing population than anywhere else in Sydney. Many residents travel long distances each day for work, reinforcing patterns of time poverty and limiting economic and community participation. In Eastern Sydney, there are around 1.24 jobs for every resident; in Western Sydney, just 0.8. Local employment has not kept pace with population growth. The region carries the weight of Sydney's expansion without yet capturing its full economic dividend.

Socio-economic data reinforces the divide. SEIFA maps show concentrated pockets of disadvantage shaping educational outcomes and social mobility. These patterns are the product of historical decisions, but they do not define Western Sydney's future.

HOPE AND UPWARD TRAJECTORY

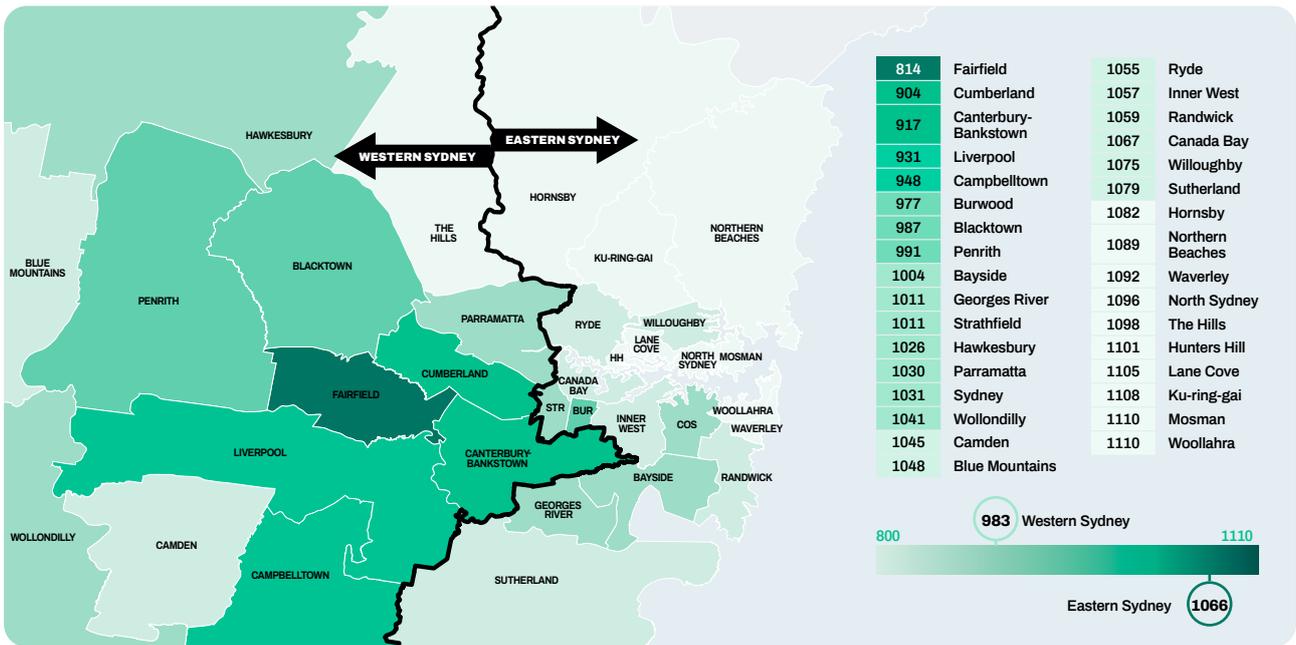
Western Sydney's story is not one of limitation but potential. The region is on the cusp of transformation, with projected growth across health, education, advanced manufacturing and knowledge-intensive industries. Major investments, from the Western Sydney International Airport to new health and education precincts, are beginning to rebalance the city but only if government, business and community continue to invest.

The challenge now is whether Western Sydney's destiny will be defined by disadvantage, or by how decisively we shape our education system to overcome it.



Image: Premier Chris Minns opening AMRF, Bradfield

INDEX OF RELATIVE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

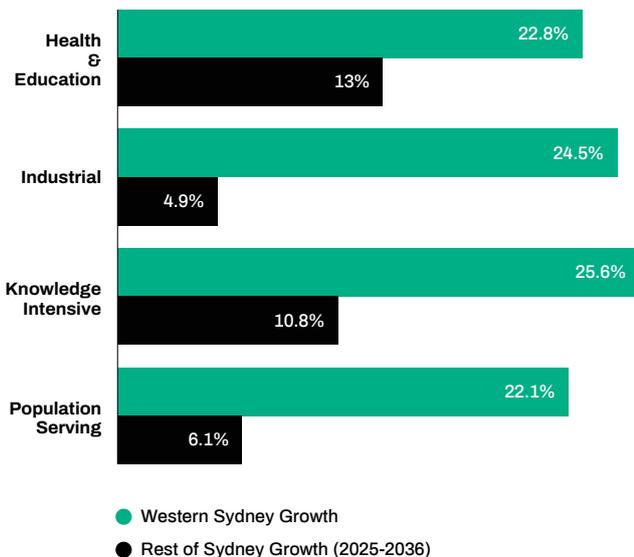


Source: Centre for Western Sydney

WHERE DISADVANTAGE HITS HARDEST

Education, opportunity and social mobility are shaped by socio-economic patterns. Local SEIFA (composite socio-economic) index data shows Western Sydney averaging a score of 983 versus 1,066 in the east, with Fairfield at just 814. Concentrated disadvantage reflects historic settlement patterns and social housing, reinforcing barriers to learning and future prospects.

GROWTH IN INDUSTRY SECTOR



Source: Centre for Western Sydney

- Western Sydney's knowledge intensive sector is growing at 25.56%, more than double the 10.78% growth in the rest of Sydney.
- This rapid growth reflects a shift toward higher-skilled, professional and tech industries in Western Sydney.
- The faster expansion of education and training services in Western Sydney supports this demand for a skilled workforce.
- In contrast, the rest of Sydney shows slower knowledge intensive growth and less pressure on education related to these industries.
- Overall, Western Sydney is rapidly diversifying its economy with education playing a crucial role in supporting knowledge-driven industry growth.

INDUSTRIES OF THE FUTURE

Western Sydney's economy is transforming fast. Projects like the Western Sydney Airport, Bradfield, new hospitals and expanding universities are creating demand for skilled workers. Vocational and higher education must adapt quickly, aligning training and pathways with the industries shaping tomorrow.

SCHOOLS

6 KEY INSIGHTS



RAPID POPULATION GROWTH IS DRIVING DEMAND

Western Sydney suburbs are expanding fast, creating strong pressure for new school places across public, Catholic and independent sectors.



FAMILIES EXPECT QUALITY LOCAL OPTIONS

Parents want good schools close to home, but in many growth areas, catch-up infrastructure or long drives across suburbs show supply is not meeting demand.



PUBLIC SCHOOLS LEAD PROVISION

Public schools educate the majority of students in the region. Programs are underway to build, upgrade and expand capacity, including new preschools and primary/high schools.



CATHOLIC AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COMPLEMENT THE SYSTEM

These sectors offer choice and innovation, but slower planning approvals can limit their ability to respond to local growth quickly.



EQUITY AND EXTENSION PROGRAMS ARE CRITICAL

Support is needed for students facing disadvantage, as well as high-ability learners, to ensure opportunities across the full student journey.



SCHOOLS ARE KEY COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Beyond teaching, schools provide spaces for sport, recreation, adult learning and community activities, strengthening social cohesion.

Western Sydney Is Building Schools. It Needs Them Faster.

IN 2026, THE PROPORTION OF FAMILIES CHOOSING A CATHOLIC OR INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HAS REACHED A HISTORIC HIGH. THE SHARE OF STUDENTS IN NSW ATTENDING A PUBLIC SCHOOL HAS FALLEN FOR THE SEVENTH CONSECUTIVE YEAR.²

While this reflects a diverse system that offers families choice, rapid population growth continues to create strong demand for additional school places in some areas.

In a new suburb, it could take several years before a public primary or high school even exists. Elsewhere, non-government schools seek to build but face significant planning hurdles.

Today, integrating school planning with broader housing, transport, roads and infrastructure investments is more important than ever. This is so areas can accommodate future population growth and the schooling demand that comes from it.

With Western Sydney set to play a bigger role in the national economy, decisions made now on school planning will shape opportunities in the region for decades.

² Schools, 2025 | Australian Bureau of Statistics



PUBLIC SCHOOLS CARRY THE LION'S SHARE

Public schools educate around 236,000 students in Western Sydney, by far the majority.³ A clear program of building and upgrading schools is underway, with catch-up investment focused on North West and South West Sydney.

Guided by improved data analysis and the February 2024 Enrolment Growth Audit,⁴ the NSW Government has prioritised outer suburban growth corridors from Marsden Park to Leppington and Edmondson Park.

Box Hill is receiving a new public primary school and high school, with additional capacity reserved. In Melonba, the recent opening of a new primary school and high school has significantly lifted the public system's share within the local catchment. This shows that once public schools are delivered, families respond.

The pipeline extends into early learning, with the government committed to delivering 100 new public preschools by 2027, including a quarter in Western Sydney. This is an important step, particularly in growth areas where access to early childhood education has historically been limited.

³ NSW Department of Education

⁴ School Infrastructure NSW, NSW Enrolment Growth Audit

⁵ Catholic Schools NSW

⁶ Independent Schools NSW

⁷ Data supplied by EY is based on Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data, population estimates and projections, and local government boundary files.

CATHOLIC AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS FACE BOTTLENECKS

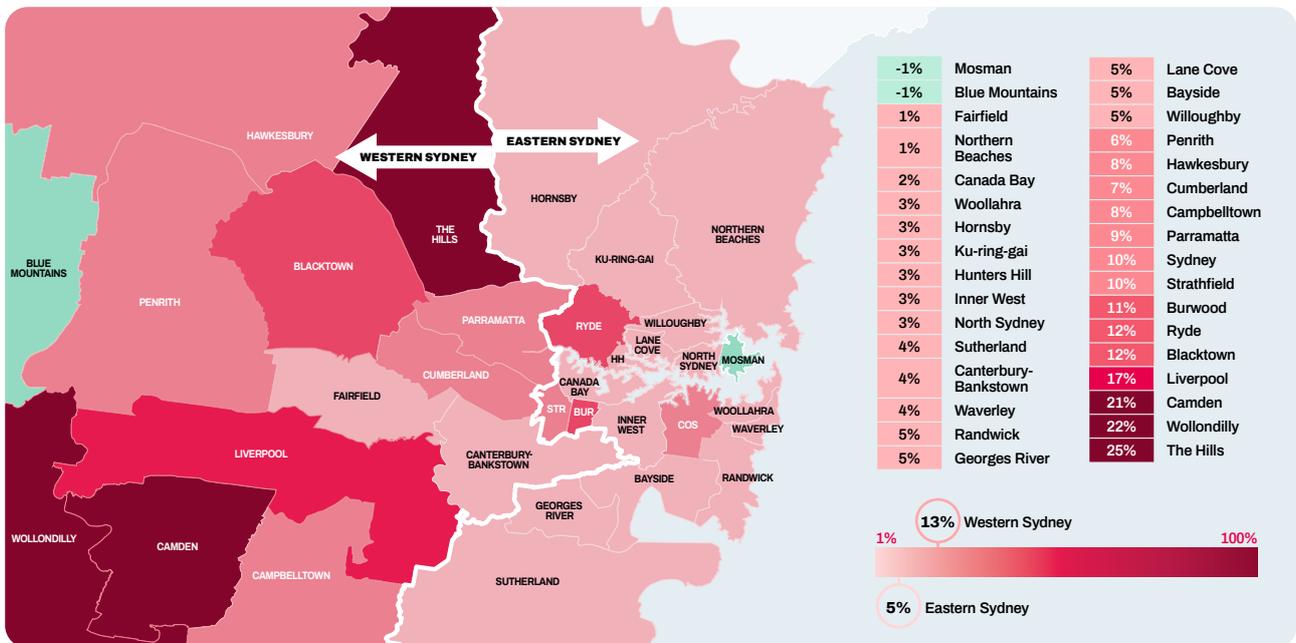
Catholic schools educate about 82,000 students in Western Sydney. This includes more than 46,500 across 80 systemic schools in the Parramatta Diocese, along with parts of Wollongong and Broken Bay.⁵ Independent schools are also growing, educating over 73,000 students, an increase of almost 15,000 since 2020.⁶ New builds and expansions are planned, with Sydney's first Hindu school expected to open in 2027.

These sectors complement the public system. In a multicultural, multi-faith region, they enable families to educate children in schools aligned with their beliefs and values.

Planning approvals, however, are often complex and time-consuming. While public schools benefit from self-approval powers, non-government schools follow standard Development Application (DA) or State Significant pathways, which can take longer to navigate.

Securing consent can take more than two years, with delays at pre-lodgement, repeated minor modification requests and ongoing traffic disputes. One new K-12 independent school at Catherine Field was approved in 2026 after three years and eight months in the planning pipeline.

SCHOOL AGE POPULATION GROWTH 2025 - 2032⁷



Source: EY

SCHOOLS DEMAND IS SHIFTING TO WESTERN SYDNEY

While eastern LGAs face flat or declining enrolments, Western Sydney is projected to grow by 13% to 2032. The strongest growth is in North West and South West Sydney, particularly The Hills (25%), Camden (21%) and Wollondilly (22%). This signals a major pipeline challenge for school delivery in growth areas.

SUPPORTING EVERY LEARNER

Western Sydney's education landscape is complex. Some communities face deep disadvantage, while others have high-performing schools and students achieving at the top level. Both realities matter and both need tailored support. There's no one-size-fits-all solution.

In areas with high socio-economic diversity, early identification of learning difficulties and targeted initiatives, including First Nations education, are vital. Coordinated programs linking schools with youth services, NDIS and community supports help ensure every child can access the opportunities they need.

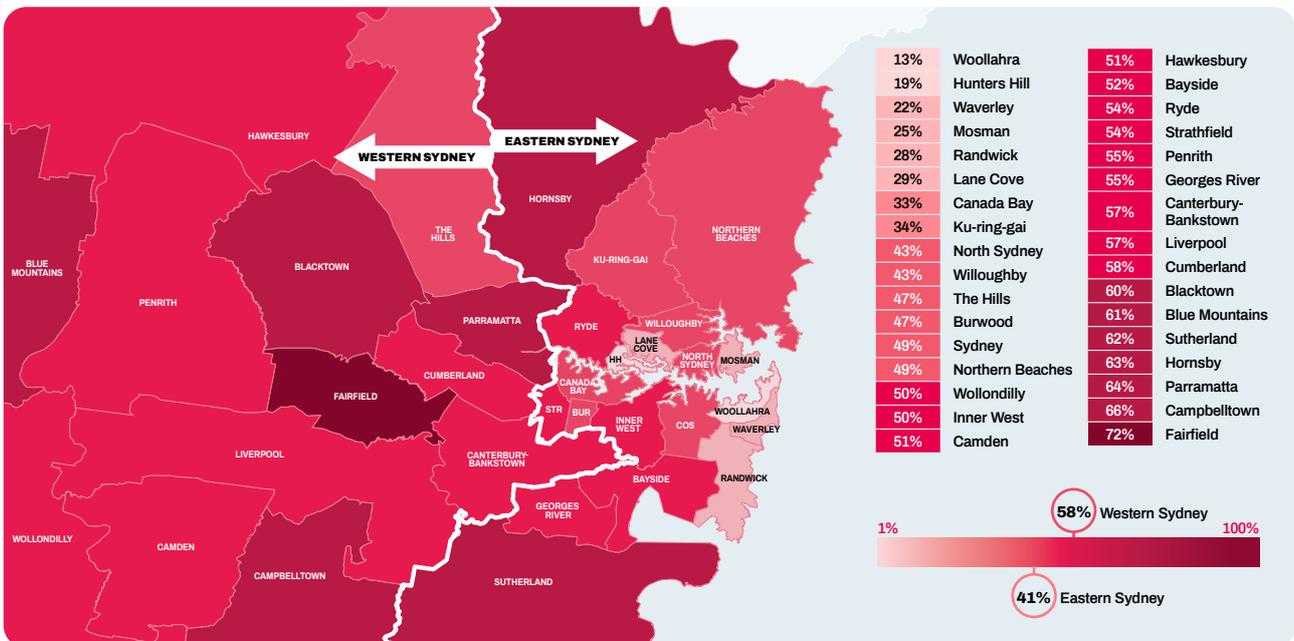
Equity programs must support all learners, including high-ability students who need extension to stay engaged. In early 2026, the NSW Government rolled out the Inspire program, embedding gifted and talented education across every public high school.

Expanding these opportunities beyond traditional selective settings is a welcome shift. As public schools face declining market share, they must compete on excellence, not just access. At the same time, Year 5 and 6 Opportunity Classes for advanced learners are available in only 89 public primary schools across the state, leaving many students seeking further pathways to extend their potential.⁹



⁹ NSW Department of Education Opportunity classes (Year 5–6)

STUDENTS ATTENDING PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS



Source: Centre for Western Sydney

WESTERN SYDNEY RELIES MORE ON PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

In eastern LGAs such as Woollahra and Mosman, fewer than 30% of students attend public high schools. In Western Sydney, this rises to 50–65%, reaching 72% in Fairfield. Overall, 58% of students attend public schools in the west compared to 41% in the east, placing greater pressure on public infrastructure.

SCHOOL PLANNING CHALLENGES AT A GLANCE

PLANNING DELAYS

Approvals for non-government schools are often slow and complex. Many operate under standard DA pathways, taking 12+ months for approvals and modifications. State Significant Development Applications (SSDAs) can be referred to the Independent Planning Commission due to council objections, political donations or community submissions, adding further months or years.

ENROLMENT CAPS

Caps attached to development consents can restrict growth, even where existing school infrastructure can handle more students. Schools are forced to turn away siblings or maintain long waiting lists, increasing pressure on families and nearby public schools.

LAND AVAILABILITY

Over the last 15 years, public school land has often been acquired late, after greenfield sites were subdivided or sold, pushing up costs and limiting options. Catholic and independent schools can move earlier through dedicated funds, but still face rising land prices and competition. Delayed or uncoordinated acquisition reduces the system's ability to respond to population growth.

EXPANSION CONSTRAINTS

Expanding from K-2 to full primary or K-12 on adjoining land is frequently limited by rezoning restrictions. Some independent schools in Western Sydney have doubled enrolments in four years but cannot secure neighbouring parcels for classrooms, labs or halls. Schools must repeatedly justify growth through new applications, a reactive, staged approach that slows delivery in high-growth areas.

CASE STUDY

A LESSON IN RED TAPE

Minarah College's new school at Catherine Field shows how complex and slow planning can be for schools in growing communities.



From the original Environmental Impact Statement to approval, the process took three years and eight months, far longer than the typical 12–18 months for most schools. The site was on unreleased land still zoned Rural, with limited infrastructure, which made the proposal ambitious and complex.

Over 1,000 submissions from Camden Council and local residents opposed the plan. The Department of Planning requested modifications, including reducing the capacity from 1,580 to 980 students, which Minarah agreed to.

The project ultimately required referral to the Independent Planning Commission, which granted approval in February 2026.

The experience highlights the special hurdles non-government schools face in planning for future communities, and the need for processes that match Western Sydney's growth.

Schools Are More Than Classrooms.

They Are The Heart Of Local Communities.

Maximising use of school facilities outside normal hours strengthens communities, supports inclusion, and delivers broader social and economic benefits.

Halls, gyms, courts and fields are often some of the most valuable community assets. Yet too often they sit idle. Access is managed through manual processes such as emails, paper forms or informal arrangements run by the school principal. This makes it hard for community groups to know what's available.

Most schools also lack the administrative capacity to manage demand. The result: public infrastructure is underused, and community opportunities are lost.

Other countries take a different approach. In Finland, schools are integrated with community centres offering

evening programs, sports and lifelong learning. In the United Kingdom, centralised digital platforms let community groups view, book and pay for facilities online. Schools retain control, but access is easier, faster and more transparent.

The results are striking. Schools using these platforms report higher utilisation and revenue, sometimes generating substantial additional income annually.

Sydney Boys High School is an example of a school that opens its grounds for parking and events, generating revenue and boosting community engagement. The NSW Government's Share Our Space program offers a way to expand this model.⁹

⁹School Infrastructure NSW Share Our Space

THE ARTHUR PHILLIP OPPORTUNITY

CASE STUDY

Western Sydney's schools can be the beating heart of thriving, connected communities. Every new or expanded facility is a chance to rethink what a school can be.

Arthur Phillip High School in the Parramatta CBD is the most expensive public high school ever built in NSW. It was reopened in 2020 with a \$225 million investment to create a 17-storey vertical campus for up to 2,000 students. The site offers technology-rich learning spaces, a double-sized multi-sport gymnasium, outdoor courts and rooftop/terrace play areas to maximise limited nearby open space.

Despite these facilities, much of the school including rooftop areas and multi-purpose courts remains closed outside school hours, particularly on weekends.

Making these spaces available with appropriate safety and operational guidelines could provide year-round public amenity in one of Western Sydney's densest neighbourhoods.

Recommendations



ESTABLISH A PUBLIC SCHOOL LAND ACQUISITION FUND

The NSW Government should establish a Public School Land Acquisition Fund.

- > Purchase suitable parcels of land early in the development cycle, before prices escalate and options become constrained.
- > Allow flexibility to expand, sell, swap or reconfigure sites as precinct planning evolves and the optimal school location becomes clearer.
- > Better align acquisitions with population growth, precinct development and major transport.
- > Integrate the fund into cross-sector planning so public, Catholic and independent schools can coordinate capacity.

BUY EARLY, BUILD SMARTER

A dedicated School Land Acquisition Fund would allow government to act earlier in the market by securing strategically located greenfield sites in growth areas such as North West and South West Sydney. Rather than wait for a final site, the Department of Education could secure land early and refine decisions as development patterns evolve.

The NSW Government is already strengthening long-term planning through a Capital Planning Limit, following a recommendation by the NSW Auditor-General. This provides greater certainty over future investment and allows the Department to plan school delivery over a longer 10-year horizon.

A dedicated land acquisition fund could complement this approach by enabling earlier, more flexible site acquisition within that funding envelope.

As an example, the Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation maintains a dedicated land fund that allows it to purchase sites quickly when they become available, then hold, refine or reconfigure

them over time as needs change. This provides speed, flexibility and a clear market advantage.

Early acquisition also captures land value growth, meaning sites can often be sold or exchanged with minimal financial loss if priorities shift.

Applying a similar approach in NSW would allow government to treat school land as a long-term asset rather than a reactive purchase.

International examples of land banking can be found in New Zealand, Ontario and the United Kingdom, aligning school provision with housing growth and reducing delivery delays.



ESTABLISH A SYDNEY SCHOOLS PLANNING PANEL

The NSW Government should create a Sydney Schools Planning Panel, an accelerated one-stop shop for Catholic and independent schools seeking new campuses or expansions. Membership should include at least 50% educators and parent representatives to ensure expert guidance and reflect local needs.

- > Fast-track planning DAs through a Western Sydney Priority Pathway, reducing 2+ year processes to 6–12 months.
- > Integrate approvals with population growth, precinct planning, transport, and housing ensuring schools open where families need them most.
- > Ensure non-government schools have fast, predictable approval timelines, aligned with those already available to public schools through the Department of Education.



FLEXIBLE ENROLMENT CAPS

The NSW Government should permit non-government schools to exceed caps by up to 10% to a maximum of 50 students where infrastructure allows.

- > Shift from strict numerical limits to outcomes-based DA consent conditions, implemented progressively.
- > This will support timely expansion, reduce pressure on public schools and give families more choice.



SIMPLER REZONING AROUND SCHOOLS

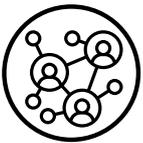
- > The NSW Government should introduce a SEPP (State Environmental Planning Policy) to classify schools as an additional permitted use on neighbouring land in designated greenfield areas, enabling K–2 campuses to expand to full primary or K–12.
- > Require government Infrastructure and Land Use Plans (ILPs) to address potential future expansion, ensuring growth is feasible without impacting densely populated residential or commercial areas.
- > This is critical in North West and South West Sydney growth corridors, where independent and Catholic schools are expanding rapidly.



HARMONISE SCHOOL STATE SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS

The NSW Government should standardise State Significant Development Application assessments for all schools.

- > End automatic referrals of non-government schools to the Independent Planning Commission triggered by council objections, political donations or 50+ submissions.
- > This will reduce duplication, uncertainty and costs while maintaining scrutiny of local and state-significant issues, as applications are already fully assessed by the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure.



CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION

The NSW Government, through the Urban Development Program (UDP), should require annual collaboration between public, Catholic and independent schools using housing, population and enrolment data.

- > Align the timing and location of new and expanded schools to avoid overbuilding in one sector while under-delivering in another.
- > Integrate new school delivery with transport, recreation and community infrastructure
- > Current strategic plans, including the Draft Sydney Plan,¹⁰ could better reflect the role of schools in shaping communities. Better coordination is needed to prevent growing gaps between where families live and where school places are available.

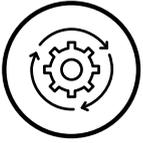
¹⁰ NSW Department of Planning The Sydney Plan



SHARED SCHOOLS

The NSW Government should ensure all new or consolidated public high schools in Western Sydney are designed as multi-use precincts, maximising community use outside school hours.

- > Expand School Infrastructure NSW's Share Our Space program to support adult learning, community sport and recreation, family/child play spaces and parking/shared facilities in more schools.
- > Develop clear guidelines for digital booking systems, safety protocols, staffing models and revenue-sharing arrangements.
- > Incentivise principals to retain a portion of revenue from community bookings.
- > Establish a voluntary pilot with independent and Catholic schools, with the long-term goal to make participation mandatory for all schools receiving public funding.



REFORM INFRASTRUCTURE CONTRIBUTIONS

The NSW Government should end the practice of local councils charging infrastructure contributions to not-for-profit schools.

- > Costs are ultimately passed onto parents, who have already paid for local infrastructure through levies on their homes.
- > Schools should not bear a double charge for community facilities.



CLOSE THE CHILDCARE GAP

The NSW Government should lead a strategic expansion of high-quality early learning across Western Sydney, especially in greenfield and high-growth corridors, ensuring smooth transitions to school and equitable access close to home.

- > Identify under-served areas where limited access to early learning restricts workforce participation and social inclusion.
- > Support non-government providers through funding and planning incentives, creating a one-stop shop for families.
- > Prioritise new public and community-based infrastructure, with increased capital funding for ELCs and preschools.
- > Use Local Environmental Plans (LEPs) and other planning tools to encourage childcare provision in new residential and commercial developments.

LOST IN THE CHILDCARE DESERT

Rhiannon lives in Schofields, one of Western Sydney’s fastest-growing suburbs, but accessing local early childhood education has been a struggle. With limited supply and long waiting lists, her child attends preschool in North Rocks several suburbs away for three days a week, the maximum available.

Rhiannon works full-time in Macquarie Park. On preschool days, she drives all the way from Schofields to North Rocks before continuing to work. It’s an inconvenient drop-off, navigating tight morning schedules, extra fuel and toll costs.

The lack of nearby childcare limits her ability to increase hours or adjust her schedule, despite strong demand in her industry. It also affects her child’s access to consistent early learning.

Rhiannon’s story reflects a broader challenge across Western Sydney, where population growth has outpaced early childhood education infrastructure. Local, accessible childcare is essential to support families, workforce participation and high-quality early learning.



CASE STUDY



MORE YEAR 5 OPPORTUNITY CLASSES

The NSW Government should expand Year 5 Opportunity Classes in Western Sydney, ensuring high-potential students can access advanced learning pathways early in their schooling.

- > Prioritise new classes in high-growth corridors and areas with limited selective or advanced learning options.
- > Use enrolment and outcome data to target underrepresented communities.
- > Align Opportunity Classes with high school gifted programs for clear, continuous pathways.
- > While provision in Western Sydney is broadly proportional to current enrolments, an increase will help identify high-potential students early, reduce primary school disengagement and provide a clearer pathway to secondary extension programs.



SPOT AND SUPPORT EARLY

The NSW Government should introduce a statewide early literacy and learning difficulty screening program for primary students, drawing on Victoria's phonics model, alongside targeted interventions for at-risk cohorts including disengaged youth, students with disability and First Nations students.

- > Conduct universal early literacy and learning difficulty screening in early primary years (eg. Year 1).
- > Provide teachers with structured literacy programs, resources and professional development to deliver targeted support.
- > Develop a regional equity map to identify students at risk of disengagement or NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) pathways.
- > Fund wrap-around programs linking schools with youth services, settlement support, NDIS and community providers.

EARLY LITERACY SCREENING MATTERS

Early identification of learning difficulties is one of the most effective strategies to improve literacy and long-term outcomes. Research shows it reduces remediation costs, boosts student confidence and strengthens engagement throughout schooling.

NSW currently screens primary students, but coverage and consistency vary. Victoria's system-wide phonics program shows how a brief, teacher-administered Year 1 assessment

can identify students at risk of dyslexia or other reading challenges, enabling early intervention. In 2023, Victoria screened around 55,000 Year 1 students with \$11 million in targeted investment.

INSPIRING WOMEN IN STEM

A \$100 million commitment from the Khuda Family Foundation is creating a long-term pathway for Western Sydney girls to pursue education and careers in STEM.

The donation is the largest in the University of Sydney's history.

Established by AirTrunk founder and CEO Robin Khuda, the 20-year program focuses on increasing female participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, where women remain underrepresented.

Students in Years 7–10 are engaged to spark interest in maths, physics and engineering. The Khuda Academy then supports senior students with mentoring and financial assistance. A select number of university students, Khuda Scholars, receive full scholarships and industry pathways.

More than 300 women are expected to graduate, creating a new generation of Western Sydney STEM talent.

Girraween High School student Shulgana Roy, who

is in the first cohort, says it is “so magical ... to be part of something as monumental as this.” She adds that the program’s focus on empowering women is critical: “We need more female representation... and I really hope I can contribute to that.”



SCHOOL TO UNI IN ORAN PARK

The University of Notre Dame Australia is reshaping higher education in South West Sydney.

Its Oran Park Study Centre offers hands-on workshops and professional skills sessions, giving students a more applied and supported experience close to home.

The centre complements Notre Dame's UniPath program, which brings Year 11 and 12 students into university study early, building confidence and aspiration before they finish school.

A 1+1 model allows students to split studies between Oran Park and Notre Dame's Broadway campus, reducing travel, cost and disruption for those balancing work and family.

The approach is deeply embedded in the South West Sydney community, with local schools and university staff collaborating on workshops, curriculum design and outreach.



TRAINING

6 KEY INSIGHTS



GROWTH IS SURGING: THE TRAINING SYSTEM MUST KEEP UP

Employment in Western Sydney is projected to grow by nearly 50% by 2050, creating demand for hundreds of thousands of additional workers.



SKILLS ARE BEING UNDERUTILISED

Apprenticeship commencements are falling, completion rates uneven and school-based pathways still rare. Many migrants work below their skill level.



THE ECONOMY IS DIVERSIFYING

Emerging industries around the Aerotropolis are reshaping the region, while core sectors like health, hospitality, retail and construction expand.



NEW TECHNOLOGIES REQUIRE ADAPTATION

AI, automation and hybrid work models are reshaping skills demand. Digital inclusion is critical to preparing a future-ready workforce.



VOCATIONAL EDUCATION DRIVES WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

VET links schools, universities and employers, delivering trades, technical skills and applied learning that the economy depends on.



BETTER SYSTEM COORDINATION IS NEEDED

TAFE, private RTOs, community colleges and universities all play a role, but needs-based funding would allow the sector to better plan.

Tomorrow's jobs start with today's training.

WESTERN SYDNEY IS ON TRACK TO ADD NEARLY HALF A MILLION JOBS BY 2050, CREATING UNPRECEDENTED DEMAND FOR SKILLED WORKERS.

Demand will grow in scale and complexity. Higher-skilled occupations are expected to grow fastest, while demand for trades, technicians and service workers remains strong.

Vocational education and training is the bridge between learning and work, linking schools, universities and industry into a connected skills system. For a region growing this fast, a flexible training system is essential.



WESTERN SYDNEY IS SHAPING AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMIC FUTURE.

Long known for manufacturing, Western Sydney is evolving into a more diverse economy. Bradfield and the Aerotropolis are driving growth in aviation, aerospace, advanced manufacturing, logistics and digital industries, while health, retail and construction continue to expand.

At the same time, the visitor economy including tourism, hotels, hospitality and destinations like Western Sydney Lakes and Winter Sports World is emerging as a major

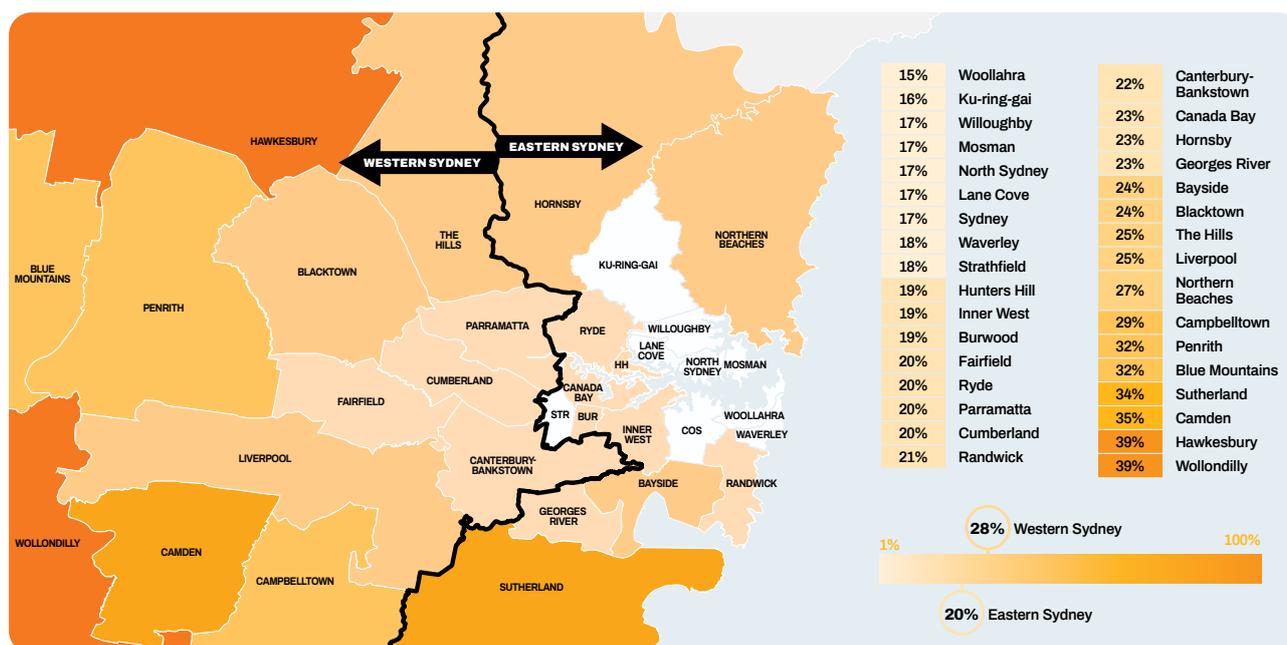
source of local jobs that are place-based and less susceptible to automation.

As Australia ages, healthcare and social assistance will remain the region's largest employer, growing from around 200,000 to more than 330,000 workers by 2050.¹¹

Demand is also rising in community services including disability, youth and aged care sectors already facing critical shortages.

Training providers are central to meeting this demand.

2021 PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WITH CERTIFICATE + DIPLOMA



Source: Centre for Western Sydney

WESTERN SYDNEY THE CENTRE OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Vocational education is a strength of Western Sydney's workforce, but access remains uneven. Around 28% of residents hold VET qualifications, compared to 20% in the east. Outer areas like Wollondilly reach close to 40%, despite lacking its own local TAFE campus. This highlights both strong demand for practical skills and gaps in local training infrastructure.

A KEY ROLE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS

Apprenticeships, traineeships and work-integrated learning remain a cornerstone of workforce development, providing clear pathways into stable employment. Western Sydney has nearly 30,000 active training contracts, one of the largest apprenticeship markets in NSW.¹²

Yet the system is under pressure. Commencements are declining, completion rates uneven and employers report persistent shortages. Participation in school-based apprenticeships remains low, just 0.5–1% of students, compared with 3–4% in South-East Queensland.¹³ This highlights the need for stronger engagement from schools, employers and families.

A growing shortage of qualified VET trainers is also constraining system capacity.

PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING

Gradually, AI and automation are reshaping the workforce. While some roles will change, hands-on jobs across trades, care, logistics and services remain resilient. Apprenticeships must now combine technical expertise with human-centred skills.

As linear career paths fade, workers are increasingly moving between roles, industries and education. Vocational education supports this, enabling people to reskill and adapt over time.

Modern jobs demand a mix of technical capability, digital literacy and communication skills. This makes flexible movement between training providers, universities and industry absolutely critical.

A STRONG BUT FRACTURED ECOSYSTEM

Western Sydney's skills system is delivered by TAFE, community colleges and private RTOs, each playing a distinct role.

TAFE delivers large-scale training. TAFE and community colleges also lead in foundation skills language, literacy, numeracy, digital capability and employability alongside pathways for learners who need additional support. Private RTOs offer specialised expertise, flexible delivery and strong industry links, particularly in apprenticeships.

Community colleges are skilled at supporting learners facing barriers, while also serving a broad cross-section of the community.

This diversity is a strength. But many non-TAFE providers operate under capped funding and short-term contracts, with limited access to needs-based funding. While support funding exists, demand in Western Sydney far exceeds supply.

This uncertainty limits growth, workforce retention and the ability to respond to industry needs.

Fragmentation of the VET sector risks mismatches between where the population is growing, where training is delivered and where jobs are emerging.

JOINING THE DOTS

Western Sydney's growth demands better coordination. Training providers, schools, universities and industry must operate as a connected skills ecosystem, supported by better data, stronger collaboration and more flexible funding.

This includes recognising the full contribution of all providers and aligning funding with both learner need and training outcomes.

By strengthening school pathways, expanding apprenticeships and aligning training with emerging industries, Western Sydney can build a future-ready workforce.

Get this right, and the region can harness its greatest asset: a diverse, skilled and ambitious population. This includes migrants whose capabilities are underutilised due to systemic barriers, not a lack of talent.

LIVERPOOL TAFE: LOCAL TALENT

Liverpool TAFE is at the heart of South West Sydney, giving migrants, first-in-family students and adults returning to study real, practical pathways to work and career. From English language and foundation programs to vocational training, it keeps local talent in the region and strengthens the skills pipeline for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

Too many students still travel outside Liverpool for courses. Last year, the Liverpool Innovation Precinct flagged a TAFE Centre of Excellence, with modern facilities focused on nursing, healthcare and other high-demand skills.

A modernised Liverpool TAFE close to Liverpool Hospital, the planned coeducational high school and potentially a new Liverpool Square near the train station could give more students the chance to train, work and stay in their own community.

The challenge now is delivery: turning ambition into action so TAFE continues to serve a growing South West Sydney.



CASE STUDY

¹¹ *Future Jobs, Future Skills* | Deloitte Australia

¹² *MEGT Productivity Prospectus 2025*

¹³ *Participation in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships is comparatively higher in Queensland than in NSW based on NCVER apprenticeship data and state VET-in-schools reports. See NCVER, Australian apprenticeships, traineeships and VET in schools: 2024 at a glance and NSW Department of Education, VET delivered to secondary students report.*

Built for the Job



For Kalan, a future in the trades was always close to home. “When I was really young I used to work in the shed with my grandfather,” he says. “I’ve always liked working with my hands. Carpentry just made sense. You can see what you’ve built at the end of the day.”

At CathWest Innovation College in Mount Druitt, Kalan is turning that early passion into a career in construction. Through its school-based apprenticeship model, he’s completing his HSC while working in industry and training with TAFE NSW. Students spend dedicated time on the job, without falling behind at school.

For Kalan, it’s already paying off building skills and earning an income.

“I didn’t want to finish school and then start from scratch. This gets me ahead,” he says. “I’m learning things on site you just can’t get in a classroom. It’s made me more confident about where I’m heading.”



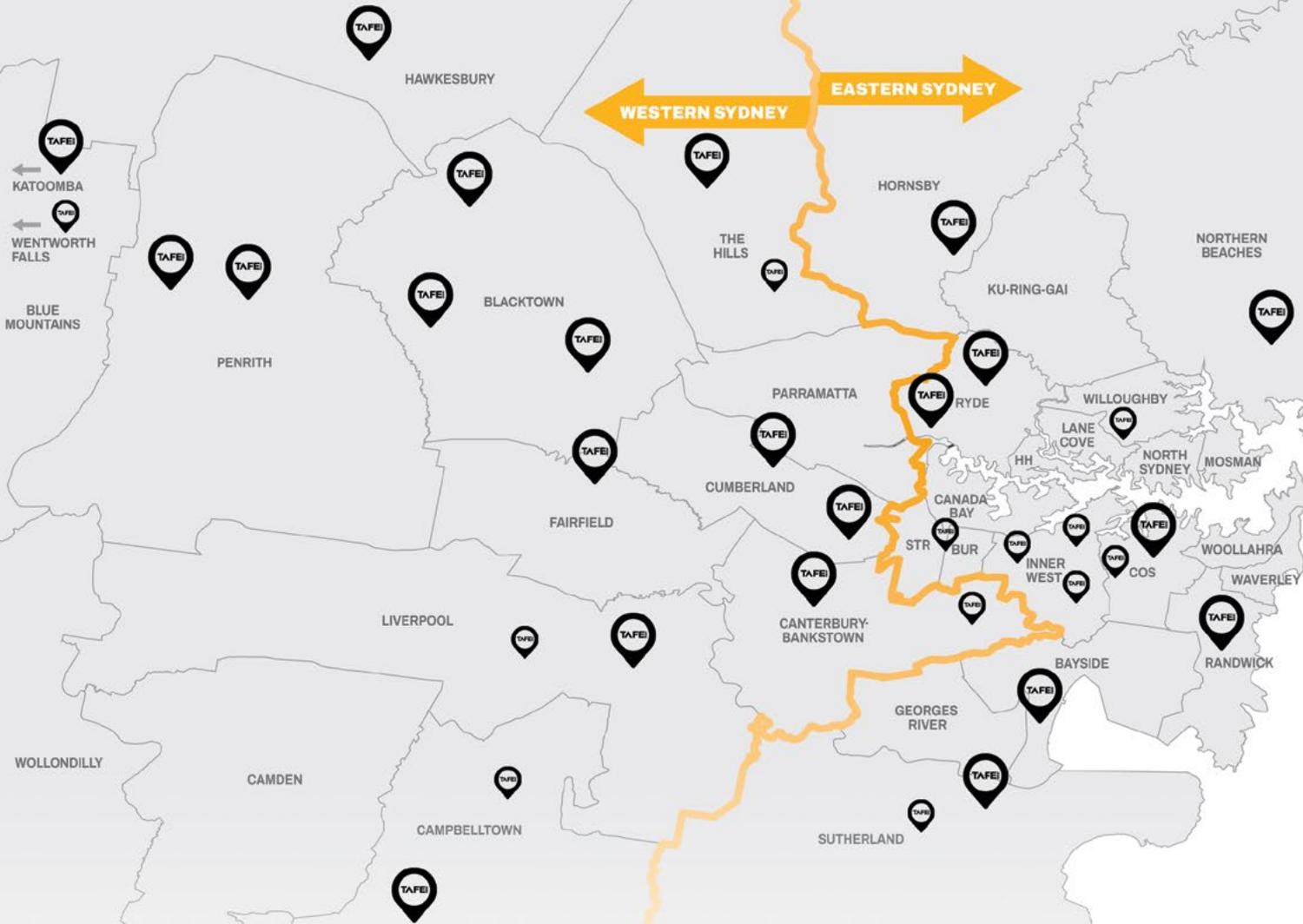
BREAKING TRADE BARRIERS

Ashleigh is building her future in automotive through a school-based apprenticeship. “I kind of grew up around it. My dad works in automotive and I was always playing with tools,” she says. “I wanted to turn that into a career.”

Through CathWest, she’s balancing her HSC with hands-on training, gaining real skills in a live workshop environment.

In a traditionally male-dominated field, Ashleigh is focused on opening doors for others. “I really hope more women enter the industry so we can show up the boys,” she jokes. “Girls can do everything.”

Sydney TAFE Campuses



TAFE campuses across metropolitan Sydney are unevenly distributed. There are clear concentrations in the inner city and Inner West, and a strong westward spine along the M4 through Granville, Blacktown and Penrith, reaching into the Blue Mountains. This reflects historic industry patterns and population growth, with major hubs sitting inside Western Sydney's employment corridors.

But the gaps are obvious. Wetherill Park is a major campus serving Fairfield LGA, yet it is poorly connected to public transport. That matters. A well-placed campus in Cabramatta or Fairfield, close to rail, would open

the door for one of Sydney's most disadvantaged communities.

Further south, the absence is stark. Camden and Wollondilly have no TAFE infrastructure at all. Yet Wollondilly has some of the highest vocational participation rates in the state – around 40%. People want training. They just have to travel too far to get it.

This is fixable. New facilities in growth areas like Wilton and Oran Park would bring infrastructure closer to where people live, and better align TAFE with Western Sydney's rapid growth.

Recommendations



BOOST VET IN SCHOOLS

The NSW Government should expand trade-focused high schools and high-quality VET-in-schools programs, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, aligned with Western Sydney's priority industries.

- › Year 12 completion is important but does not guarantee strong transitions into work or further study, particularly for students pursuing hands-on careers.
- › High-quality VET pathways let students build practical skills while completing school.
- › This requires stronger partnerships between schools, training providers and employers.
- › Every public secondary school in Western Sydney should have a trained careers adviser.



MORE TRADE FOCUSED HIGH SCHOOLS

Purpose-built trade high schools are rare in Western Sydney. Most vocational pathways run through VET courses embedded in comprehensive schools rather than standalone campuses.

A standout example is the Vocational Innovation Centre at Seven Hills High School, where students from more than 20 local schools access industry-standard facilities and training. They complete their HSC while preparing

for apprenticeships, traineeships and other career pathways. Courses cover construction, engineering, logistics, community services, and aviation foundations: a strong model for a future trade-focused school.

Independent schools, such as the Anglican Technical College Western Sydney, also offer trade-oriented programs, combining classroom learning with on-the-job apprenticeship experience for senior students.



SUPERCHARGE TAFE CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE

The Commonwealth and NSW Governments should expand TAFE Centres of Excellence in Western Sydney to scale industry-aligned training and address workforce shortages in high-demand sectors.

- Existing centres in Penrith, Wetherill Park and Meadowbank provide a strong foundation, but expansion is needed in North West and South West Sydney.
- New centres in Liverpool and Campbelltown could support healthcare, nursing and construction workforce pipelines.
- Enable co-location and shared facilities across TAFE, universities and RTOs, and support clear pathways from diplomas to degrees.

A MODEL THAT WORKS

Through the National Skills Agreement, governments are establishing TAFE Centres of Excellence across Australia. Western Sydney already hosts centres in Penrith, Wetherill Park and Meadowbank, but the model can go further.

Tonsley TAFE in South Australia shows what's possible. It brings training, industry and trade unions together in one location, giving students direct access to real workplaces, equipment and employers.

Completion rates have risen as students benefit from hands-on learning and strong industry mentorship. Collaboration with employers has

also created a pipeline of work-ready graduates to fill critical skills gaps.

Tonsley's success highlights the benefits of co-location, shared facilities and cross-sector collaboration a blueprint that Western Sydney could adapt to rapidly scale training and meet local workforce demand.





NEEDS-BASED VET FUNDING

The Commonwealth and NSW Governments should develop a needs-based funding model for vocational education and training. This would offer top-up support to providers that deliver strong outcomes for disadvantaged learners, including TAFE, community colleges, specialist assistance schools and private RTOs.

- Many high-performing VET providers operate under capped funding and short-term contracts, limiting growth and certainty.
- Expand access to funded places in high-demand regions like Western Sydney, introduce needs-based loadings and ensure funding reflects outcomes, not provider type.
- This would enable TAFE, community colleges and private RTOs to scale delivery and respond to local workforce needs.



AEROTROPOLIS APPRENTICESHIPS

The Commonwealth and NSW Governments should establish a dedicated Aerotropolis Apprenticeships program, alongside a permanent VET facility and trade-focused high school at Bradfield.

- Scale apprenticeships in high-demand, future-ready industries including construction, aviation, aerospace, advanced manufacturing, logistics and digital.
- Strengthen work-integrated learning and simplify processes for SMEs, backed by targeted incentives.
- Improve completion rates and increase participation of women in trades.
- Create a direct pipeline from school to employment in emerging industries through a permanent VET hub and trade-focused high school.



FUTURE SKILLS WESTERN SYDNEY

The Commonwealth and NSW Governments should establish Future Skills Western Sydney, a regional coordination body to ensure training supply matches real labour market demand.

- Western Sydney currently lacks a clear mechanism to coordinate skills planning across sectors.
- Bring together government, training providers, industry and regional organisations in a single, focused forum.
- Deliver shared workforce data, align training with growth, coordinate major investments and strengthen industry partnerships.



UNLOCK MIGRANT SKILLS FAST

The Commonwealth Government should reform Australia’s skills recognition system to help address skills shortages by better utilising the overseas qualifications and experience of talented migrants.

- Establish a national framework for recognising overseas qualifications.
- Reduce duplication and streamline assessment processes.
- Fund targeted bridging programs.
- Create Migrant Employment Pathway Hubs with employer connections.

BUILDING MIGRANT PATHWAYS INTO WORK

CASE STUDY

Macquarie Community College is an organisation quietly driving education and employment in Western Sydney by connecting skills, people and opportunity.

For Asraa Al Saadi, a qualified medical doctor from Romania, that connection changed everything. She arrived with strong skills but no pathway into work. Like many skilled migrants, she spent years applying online with little success, her experience under-recognised and under-utilised.

Through Macquarie Community College and its links to local networks, Asraa joined the Blacktown Employment Accelerator, a place-based initiative bringing employers, educators and job seekers together. Real conversations replaced dead-end applications, and practical pathways replaced frustration.

Asraa recalls: “A miracle happened to me that day”.

Today, she works with NSW Health Pathology at Westmead, completing her pathology collector training and building a long-term career close to home.



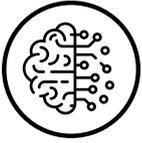
RESEARCH SHOWS:

Around 44% of permanent migrants have under-utilised skills¹⁴

Many arrived through the skilled migration program

Billions in productivity are lost nationally each year due to this under-utilisation

¹⁴ Deloitte Access Economics, as cited in SSI's Activate Australia's Skills report (2024)



DIGITAL INCLUSION: EQUIP EVERY WESTERN SYDNEY LEARNER

The Commonwealth, NSW and local governments should invest in place-based digital access and support, so students and training providers in Western Sydney can fully participate in modern education, training and work.

- Expand Western Sydney study hubs, libraries and community centres with devices, reliable Wi-Fi and digital skills support.
- Upgrade shared learning spaces in libraries, council buildings, TAFEs, universities and community colleges, removing limits on Wi-Fi and data usage.
- Provide embedded technical support through schools, TAFEs and libraries for students without home IT support.
- Deliver dedicated First Nations digital literacy programs covering device use, online learning platforms, cyber safety and pathways into further training or work.

BRIDGING THE WESTERN SYDNEY DIGITAL DIVIDE

Digital access is essential for education, workforce readiness and social participation. Research from the Centre for Western Sydney shows many students lack devices, reliable internet and digital skills, putting them at risk of falling behind.¹⁵

A survey of 445 NSW educators highlights stark inequities:

- Only 28% of students from low-income backgrounds and 19% of asylum seeker and refugee students have adequate digital access.
- Just 31% of students in Western Sydney have devices for home learning, compared with nearly 60% elsewhere in Sydney.

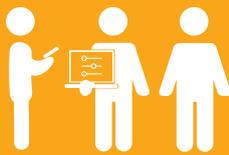
Digital inclusion is vital for First Nations students, many of whom rely on mobile data, which is costly and unreliable. Limited access undermines homework, exam preparation and progression into further study and employment.

Without sustained, place-based action, these gaps will reinforce inequality and limit educational and workforce opportunities.

¹⁵ Digital Equity & Education | Centre for Western Sydney (2024)

The Geography of Digital Equity

LEVELS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION AMONG STUDENTS IN NSW SCHOOLS



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
24%	41%	28%

STUDENTS RECEIVING ADEQUATE TECHNICAL SUPPORT AT HOME



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
10%	24%	5%

LEVELS OF ADEQUATE DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG STUDENTS



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
28%	47%	19%

ACCESS TO ADEQUATE DIGITAL DEVICES FOR LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT HOME



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
32%	59%	39%

ACCESS TO BROADBAND INTERNET AT HOME



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
35%	49%	32%

RELIANCE ON MOBILE PHONES ONLY TO COMPLETE EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AT HOME



Western Sydney	Eastern Sydney	Regional NSW
37%	17%	25%

Source: Centre for Western Sydney (Digital Equity & Education, 2024)

UNIVERSITIES

6 KEY INSIGHTS



DEMAND FOR UNIVERSITY IS SOARING IN WESTERN SYDNEY

The number of places needed in the region is set to nearly double by 2050, driven by population growth and rising aspiration.



WESTERN SYDNEY NEEDS MORE COMMONWEALTH SUPPORTED PLACES (CSPS)

If participation is to keep pace with population growth, more government-funded university places must be directed to Western Sydney. This is vital to support workforce needs.



THE REGION'S WORKFORCE WILL NEED FAR MORE GRADUATES

Industries driving Western Sydney's future are expanding including healthcare, education, technology and clean energy.



ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY REMAINS UNEVEN

Many Western Sydney students are the first in their family to attend university. More campuses closer to where people live are needed to improve access.



FUNDING TO UNIVERSITIES IS NOT KEEPING UP WITH GROWTH

Commonwealth funding is not aligned with where demand is strongest, including fast-growing regions like Western Sydney. Changes to international student settings have cut revenue.



UNIVERSITIES HELP POWER LOCAL CITIES

Campuses bring students, knowledge and economic activity into Western Sydney centres. International students bring global and cultural links that help the region grow.

Aspiration In Western Sydney Is Growing. Universities Must Too.

AS WESTERN SYDNEY'S POPULATION SOARS, DEMAND FOR UNIVERSITY PLACES IS FORECAST TO NEARLY DOUBLE BY 2050. THIS IS BEING DRIVEN BY POPULATION GROWTH, RISING ASPIRATION AND THE INCREASING NEED FOR HIGHLY SKILLED KNOWLEDGE WORKERS.

A report by Deloitte Access Economics forecasts that annual demand for higher education in Western Sydney will rise from 144,000 today to 264,000 by 2050. That's an 84% increase – the system will need to accommodate roughly 120,000 additional students in less than 25 years.¹⁶

Western Sydney's economy is changing. Amid megatrends like an aging population, climate change and AI, employment is forecast to grow 48% by 2050, with the fastest growth in roles requiring higher education and specialised expertise.

Many of these jobs will arise in already expanding sectors – healthcare, education, technology, engineering, advanced manufacturing, logistics and clean energy – creating strong demand for graduates with both technical knowledge and practical skills.

Meeting future workforce needs requires urgent planning today. University participation in Western Sydney is rising. But access remains uneven, and the capacity of the system to expand is shaped by national funding settings. Ensuring Western Sydney has enough university places, campuses and learning opportunities is vital if the region is to fully realise its potential.

¹⁶ *Future Jobs, Future Skills* | Deloitte Australia



A REGION OF RISING ASPIRATION

Demand for university education is being driven not just by population and jobs growth, but by rising aspiration across Western Sydney, particularly among first-in-family students and migrant communities. A younger population and strong family expectations around education are boosting participation, with more students seeing university as an achievable and essential pathway.

This shift is already visible. Degree attainment is rising in Parramatta and the Hills, and is now spreading to Liverpool, Blacktown and the North West and South West growth corridors, as new industries take shape around Bradfield and the Aerotropolis.

ACCESS REMAINS A CHALLENGE

Western Sydney students face specific challenges. Many balance study with part-time work, family responsibilities or caring duties. For others, simply getting to university is difficult due to limited public transport. Historically, many campuses have been located far from where students live, with commutes stretching up to several hours. A one-hour train journey from Liverpool to Sydney is typical.

That is why continued expansion of university opportunities within Western Sydney through satellite campuses, study hubs and innovative programs is so important. As participation grows, local study options will increasingly determine whether aspiration turns into achievement.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IS CRITICAL

Australia asks a lot of its universities: educate the next generation, drive research and innovation, support industry, and contribute to national productivity. Over the past decade, the financial environment has grown increasingly difficult.

Universities rely heavily on student enrolments for revenue, with roughly two-thirds of income coming from domestic and international students. Funding for Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) has fallen by around 6% per student in real terms since 2017.¹⁷ Meanwhile enrolments continue to grow.

Without additional, targeted financial support, universities in Western Sydney will struggle to expand capacity to meet local demand.

CRISIS AND REFORM PRESSURES

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities. A collapse in international student numbers – which had helped subsidise domestic places combined with funding freezes from 2017, placed universities under severe financial pressure. While international education has since rebounded, policy changes including higher visa fees and soft caps on commencements are reducing universities' revenue predictability and ability to plan.

Domestic funding reforms, including the Job Ready Graduates package from 2021, created misalignments between funded places and student demand. For example, in 2024, around 16,000 domestic student places were delivered without Commonwealth subsidy, forcing some universities to subsidise them. Meanwhile, funding for at least 17,000 places went unused nationally in other locations.¹⁸

These distortions force universities to either expand without funding or turn students away in high-demand areas through higher ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) requirements, directly undermining the Commonwealth's equity agenda.

TOWARDS MANAGED GROWTH

Today, the Commonwealth has recognised the need to correct this imbalance. A new funding approach, Managed Growth, reintroduces planning regularity, as recommended by the Australian Universities Accord.

A proposed new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) will independently oversee the allocation of CSPs across the university system. This will link funding more closely to national skills needs, demographic trends and participation goals.

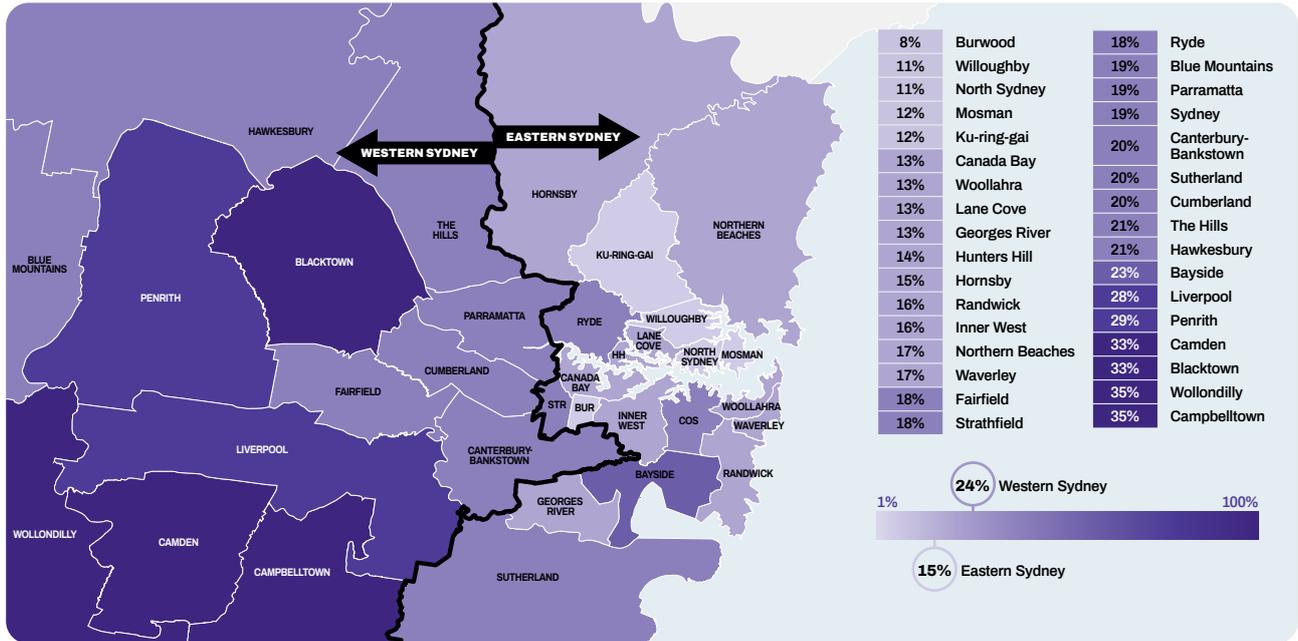
While realigning funded places with demand under Managed Growth is welcome, capping enrolments by institution rather than setting an overall funding envelope risks stranded growth in smaller universities and higher entry thresholds at high-demand campuses. Early signs of this are already visible in 2026.

ATEC will make it easier for students to move between university and VET, and support Needs-Based Funding to help universities enrol and retain students from lower-income backgrounds. This "Gonski-style" approach recognises that some students need extra support, helping reach the national 2050 target of 80% of the workforce with a TAFE or university qualification.

¹⁷ Universities Australia, *Critical Challenges in Australia's University Sector (2025)*

¹⁸ Department of Education (Cth), *Higher Education Statistics Collection (2023–2024)*; Universities Australia, *Pre-Budget Submission 2024–25*.

GROWTH IN RESIDENTS WITH A DEGREE 2016-2021

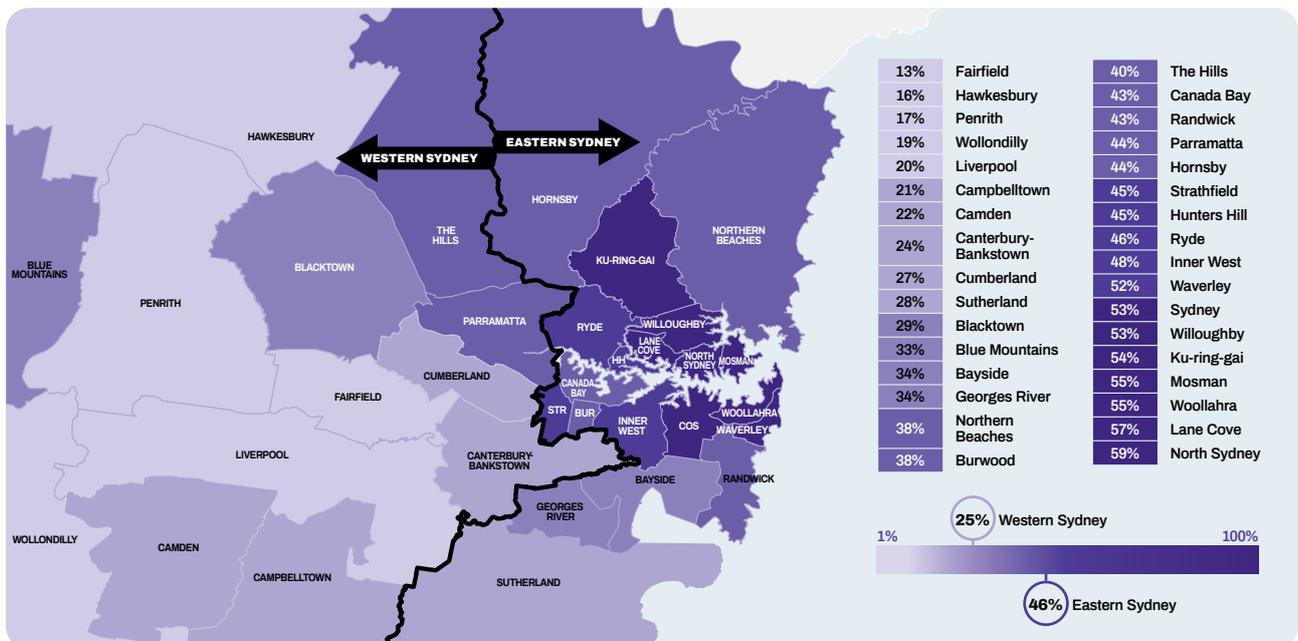


Source: Centre for Western Sydney

GROWTH IN WESTERN SYDNEY DEGREES

Between 2016 and 2021, the number of degree-qualified residents grew by 24% across the region, with Camden, Blacktown, Wollondilly and Campbelltown LGAs exceeding 30%. This reflects both population growth and increased participation, signalling a shift toward a more highly skilled workforce.

PROPORTION OF RESIDENTS WITH A DEGREE BY LGA



Source: Centre for Western Sydney

EAST-WEST GAP REMAINS

Western Sydney LGAs such as Fairfield, Penrith and Wollondilly have relatively low shares of degree holders, while eastern LGAs like North Sydney and Woollahra exceed 50%. This reflects the concentration of high-skilled jobs and reinforces broader inequalities in opportunity across the city.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Over the past two decades, universities have increasingly relied on international students to help fund teaching, research and campus infrastructure alongside Commonwealth support.

Today, international education is one of NSW's most valuable exports. Each student contributes around \$30,000–\$40,000 a year in tuition, alongside spending on housing, food and transport. In total, international students generate around \$9 billion in economic activity and support tens of thousands of jobs, according to a 2024 Business NSW report commissioned by Study NSW.¹⁹

They also play a vital role in the workforce, particularly in sectors like hospitality, retail and transport, while making

a significant contribution to graduate pipelines in fields such as IT and engineering. International fee revenue underpins a substantial share of university research and helps sustain the broader education system.

In Western Sydney, their impact is visible on the ground, activating local centres, supporting businesses and strengthening community life. Many study and live within established diaspora communities, and those who stay contribute to the skilled workforce. Those who return home maintain long-term trade, research and cultural links.

International students don't just study here. They help build the economy, the workforce and Western Sydney's place in the world.

¹⁹ Business NSW, *Economic and Social Contributions of International Students to NSW* (September 2025)

CASE STUDY

NURSE TRAINING IN PARRAMATTA

The University of New England is training nurses in the communities where they're needed most.

After more than a decade delivering online education in Western Sydney, its first purpose-built nursing simulation lab anchors a new Sydney Metro campus in Parramatta.

The facility includes seven simulation beds supporting up to 28 students per session, with capacity to expand alongside growing demand.

"This is more than just a new lab it's a sense of

belonging and permanency," says UNE academic Ida Twist. "Having our own space gives us autonomy to deliver what we need, when we need it."

The campus supports students balancing study with work and family, offering extended hours and strong academic support. Many are already working locally in aged care and health services.

By embedding training in Parramatta and strengthening ties with health providers, UNE is building a more sustainable nursing workforce for Western Sydney.



How University Funding Has Evolved

BEFORE 2012

- › Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) allocated to universities under the Higher Education Support Act.
- › Universities decide who is admitted; government sets funding cap for each institution.
- › Student contribution bands determine how much students pay versus the government subsidy, depending on course type.

2012→ 2017

DEMAND DRIVEN SYSTEM

- › Universities could enrol unlimited students and decide admissions.
- › Goal to increase equity and participation.

2017→ 2021

FREEZES TO FUNDING

- › Demand-driven funding ceases.
- › Funding frozen at 2017 levels, limiting universities' ability to expand.

2021→ 2025

JOB READY GRADUATES

- › Introduced major changes to student contribution bands.
- › Commonwealth investment in higher education reduces significantly.

2026 ONWARDS

MANAGED GROWTH

- › Commonwealth sets enrolment caps, universities manage admissions.
- › Growth aligned to population and workforce needs.
- › Supports needs-based funding.

Key Terms

Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC)

A national body to plan how many university places Australia needs, where they should be located, and how they align with population growth and skills demand. At publication, legislation to create ATEC is before Parliament.

Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP)

A government-funded university place where the cost is shared between the student and the Commonwealth. The number of CSPs at each university largely determines how many domestic students can enrol.

Managed Growth Funding (MGF)

A new approach where the Commonwealth, through ATEC, tightly controls how many student places each university can offer. The aim is to align growth with workforce demand and equity priorities.

Needs-Based Funding (NBF)

Additional funding to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping universities improve access and completion rates.

A Region Of University Cities

Universities don't just educate students – they build cities. In Boston, Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology anchor innovation districts. In the United Kingdom, cities like Manchester and Sheffield have revitalised by attracting students, investment and cultural activity.

For decades, most Australian universities were located in major metropolitan centres. That model began to change in the 1990s thanks to Western Sydney University.

It pioneered a network of campuses at major sites in Parramatta, Liverpool, Bankstown, Campbelltown and Penrith.

The idea was simple but powerful: access to education improves when universities are located close to where people live. Today, more institutions are embracing this approach. This is the next stage in the Western Sydney model: creating a region of university cities.

PARRAMATTA

Higher education is woven into the city's fabric with Western Sydney University, University of New England, Charles Sturt University, Swinburne University of Technology and UNSW all having a presence. The University of Sydney has recently announced a Parramatta campus of its Sydney Conservatorium of Music. These developments complement Parramatta's status as a major employment centre, as well as new transport and cultural infrastructure such as Powerhouse Parramatta. The city is rapidly evolving into a centre where students, creatives, businesses and residents can live, study, work and socialise in close proximity.



Image Credit: Sally Tsoutas

LIVERPOOL

Liverpool is shaping a cradle-to-PhD education hub for South West Sydney. A major vertical campus and life sciences facility for the University of Wollongong is due in the CBD by 2028. Other institutions, including UNSW, Western Sydney University, the University of Notre Dame Australia, TAFE NSW and the Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research all have expansion goals. Complementary investments include the UNSW Study Hub and Special Entertainment Precinct. The Liverpool Innovation Precinct brings together major stakeholders to integrate university infrastructure with broader city development.



Image Credit: Built

BLACKTOWN

The newly opened Australian Catholic University nursing campus brings students into a city centre that previously saw tens of thousands commuting elsewhere. Early activity is already stimulating local commerce and urban life, with expectations that student presence will grow, catalysing cafes, community spaces and leisure activity.



WESTMEAD

Health and medical training has anchored Westmead for decades, with the University of Sydney establishing programs for doctors and dentists nearly 50 years ago. This has expanded across multiple disciplines, supported by new transport links, major hospitals and a growing network of medical research institutes.



DEALS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Coordinated public investment is needed as universities expand in suburban centres. City Deals offer one route to fund major campus projects. In Perth, an \$853 million partnership between the Commonwealth, WA Government and Edith Cowan University has relocated its law and business schools, bringing more than 10,000 students and staff into the CBD.²⁰

Universities in Western Sydney are also exploring partnerships with local councils both to enhance student offerings and formalise their economic and social contribution. The UK's "Civic University" model shows how universities can strategically support local workforce planning and economic development.²¹

STUDY HUBS

Suburban University Study Hubs are a welcome addition to Western Sydney, bringing study spaces and support services closer to home in places like Fairfield, Mount Druitt–Emerton, Macquarie Fields and Liverpool. But they are not a substitute for a real campus. Hubs support students. Campuses create graduates, jobs and economic activity at scale. As Western Sydney grows, it needs both: local access through study hubs, and serious investment in university campuses that can power the region's future.

²⁰ Perth City Deal | City of Perth

²¹ See for example, Universities UK, *Universities' civic role: an explainer*



Recommendations



INCREASE COMMONWEALTH SUPPORTED PLACES IN WESTERN SYDNEY

The Commonwealth Government should significantly increase Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for universities in Western Sydney. Growth plans as set by ATEC should reflect regional population projections, workforce needs and equity objectives, ensuring new places are additional rather than reallocations.

MORE PLACES FOR WESTERN SYDNEY

Western Sydney is one of Australia's fastest-growing regions, with demand for university places expected to nearly double by 2050. Its rapidly evolving economy requires more highly skilled graduates. Current CSP allocations do not match this growth, limiting access and driving higher entry (ATAR) requirements.

MORE PLACES FOR EACH UNIVERSITY IN WESTERN SYDNEY WOULD:

- › Expand local student access, reducing travel and supporting participation.
- › Support the region's significant equity needs through additional Needs Based Funding.
- › Align graduate supply with workforce shortages in high-demand sectors.
- › Reinforce financial sustainability of all universities while protecting smaller institutions.

Increasing CSPs in Western Sydney aligns with the Australian Universities Accord, Managed Growth and Needs Based Funding reforms. All Sydney basin universities have capacity to expand.



REBUILD INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COMPETITIVENESS

The Commonwealth Government should restore a stable, welcoming framework for international students with competitive visa costs and lifted caps enabling universities to grow sustainably and Western Sydney to remain a global education leader.

- > Reform student visa fees to remain internationally competitive
- > Lift soft caps on international student commencements to allow growth aligned with demand and campus capacity
- > Support targeted enrolments in Western Sydney campuses, including Parramatta, Liverpool, Blacktown and surrounding centres.



VISA REFORM TO SUPPORT GROWTH

International students are vital to Australia's economy, culture and civic life. They support local businesses, activate campuses and city centres. However, recent policy changes threaten Australia's competitiveness as a study destination, limiting Western Sydney's potential as a region of universities.

- > **STUDENT VISA FEES HAVE RISEN TO \$2,000, AMONG THE HIGHEST GLOBALLY**
- > **TEMPORARY GRADUATE VISA FEES HAVE DOUBLED FROM \$2,300 TO \$4,600**

These increases risk slowing growth, reducing diversity, and limiting the social and economic benefits Western Sydney gains from international education. Maintaining competitive, predictable visa frameworks is critical to securing the region's future as a global education destination.

Australia	United Kingdom	New Zealand	United States	Canada
\$2,000	\$932 (£490)	\$343 (NZ\$375)	\$277 (US\$185)	\$168 (CAD\$150)
				

* Approximate conversions

²² ICEF Monitor, Analysis of International Visa Fee Competitiveness (2024)



UNIVERSITY-COUNCIL ACCORDS

Western Sydney councils should sign Accords with local universities, formalising partnerships to enhance student experience and local education, business and community outcomes.

- › Connect students to local arts, culture, dining and entertainment.
- › Align university programs with emerging industry and workforce needs.
- › Expand adult education and lifelong learning opportunities.
- › Strengthen research partnerships, entrepreneurship, and innovation with local businesses.



EXPAND STUDENT HOUSING SUPPLY

The NSW Government should reform planning and investment frameworks to increase the supply of student housing near university campuses in Western Sydney, supporting domestic and international enrolments while easing broader rental pressures.

- › Fast-track student housing projects valued at \$200 million+ through amended Investment Delivery Authority guidelines, similar to hotel development thresholds.
- › Recognise university-owned and managed student accommodation as an affordable housing asset class, enabling access to development incentives, planning bonuses and broader social benefits.
- › Encourage universities to partner with government and the private sector to align housing supply with student demand.

STUDENT ACCOMMODATION AND HOUSING PRESSURES IN WESTERN SYDNEY

Students in Western Sydney live in a mix of arrangements: with family, in the private rental market, in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), or in university-owned housing. Limited dedicated student accommodation contributes to pressure on local rental markets, particularly near campuses.

University-managed housing offers a substantially cheaper alternative to private PBSA, easing competition with low-income households and providing more accessible options for students.

Recognising these properties within affordable housing frameworks could unlock incentives to expand while delivering social benefits to the broader community.

CONNECTED TO LIVERPOOL

Transferring from the University of Wollongong's Illawarra campus to UOW Liverpool proved a great decision for Dhruv, a Bachelor of Nursing student who wanted to study closer to home in Macquarie Fields.

"The best thing about this campus is how supportive the staff are. They explain everything clearly, and genuinely want students to understand and feel confident," he says.

Orientation day immediately created a sense of connection and belonging, setting the tone for the supportive environment Dhruv enjoys. He describes UOW Liverpool as "a place where you feel included, supported and encouraged to do your best every day".

Looking ahead, Dhruv is determined to make a positive impact. "My aspiration is to help people in need and give back to the community by providing safe and compassionate care."

He plans to start as a graduate nurse, before specialising in a field where he can strengthen his skills and help address the region's future healthcare needs.



FROM STUDY TO STARTUP

For Joseph Zhu, studying in Western Sydney didn't just lead to a qualification, it sparked a company.

While completing medical placements at Liverpool Hospital through UNSW, Joseph saw firsthand the gap between clinical care and what patients could access at home. One case stayed with him: an older patient delayed seeking help because she lived alone and didn't want to burden her family.

"I could see my mum or grandma doing the same thing," Joseph says.

That experience inspired him to combine medicine and computer science studies to launch Everywhere Health, a medtech startup developing a smartwatch-compatible monitor for earlier, patient-initiated diagnosis of heart conditions.

Joseph's journey shows the power of place-based education. Studying and training in South West

Sydney exposed real problems, real patients and real opportunities, turning learning into innovation with tangible community impact.

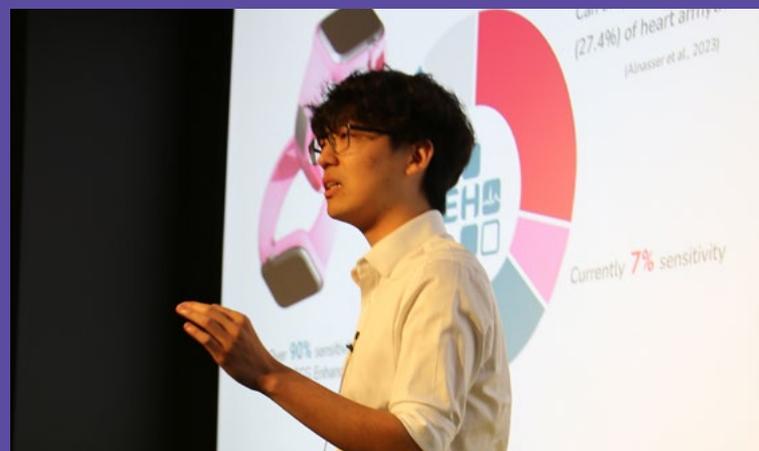




Image Credit: Sally Tsoutas

GATEWAY TO BELONG

Rifah moved from Bangladesh to Australia mid-Year 11. Without Australian results or digitised school records, proving her academic ability for university seemed impossible.

A teacher at Kingswood High School encouraged her to apply to UNSW through the Gateway Admission Pathway. Rifah compiled her preliminary results, documented her rankings and gathered teacher recommendations.

“I wanted to show not only my performance, but my growth. Receiving a conditional offer to UNSW through Gateway became my turning point my chance to prove I belonged here.”

Finishing high school was challenging. Working to support her family, Rifah studied independently after long school days, joining libraries to access past HSC papers.

At UNSW, the \$10,000 Advantage Award and

\$1,000 Gateway Award were life-changing. As a Permanent Resident ineligible for HECS or Youth Allowance, Rifah funds her own degree entirely as she puts it, “‘Aussie enough’ to not be an international student, but too ‘immigrant’ to access all the privileges of a domestic student”.



DIGITAL DRIVES SUCCESS

Chris Long began studying at Western Sydney University’s Nirimba campus while working overnight shifts. When COVID moved classes online, flexibility helped him combine study with work.

However, challenges emerged: unreliable internet, phone cramming during commutes, limited quiet space, and isolation from a campus community. “I could watch the lectures, but it didn’t always stick like in person,” Chris reflects.

Like many Western Sydney students, Chris was financially independent from a young age. Devices, internet access and software were things he often funded himself, prioritising essentials like food and rent first.

While university labs and public Wi-Fi help, the gap is wider for students without family support.

Chris’s experience shows digital learning is powerful, but not always inclusive. As AI and online delivery expand, access to devices, reliable connectivity and shared study spaces is essential for genuine equality of opportunity.





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