



NOV 25 - APRIL 2026 SERVICE HIGHLIGHTS



- Top Areas of Study**
1. Health
 2. Education
 3. Society & Culture
 4. Management & Commerce

Something is changing on the Cassowary Coast.

The CCUC by VPG has become part of how our community lives, learns and looks at what's possible.



In under two years, the Cassowary Coast University Centre (CCUC) by VPG has gone from new initiative to an essential part of community life, becoming the region's direct connection to higher education and supporting students enrolled with institutions right across Australia to stay and study locally.

Today, 184 students have joined our local learning community, enrolled across 42 universities, TAFEs and registered training organisations, undertaking 128 different qualifications with institutions including James Cook University, CQUniversity, QUT, Griffith University, Deakin University and the University of Southern Queensland.

Nearly one in five of our students is aged 40-49, a reminder that the appetite for education on the Cassowary Coast extends well beyond Year 12.

Under one roof, students find peer connection, on-the-ground support, and opportunities to connect with local industry that keep careers - and people - anchored on the Cassowary Coast. The Centre's top areas of study - health, education, management and commerce, and society and culture - reflect both student aspiration and regional workforce demand, with students building qualifications in fields critical to the future of our communities.



Rylee Donald (centre) CCUC alumni - Engineers Australia President's Commendation

And the impact is already showing up on a national stage. Engineering graduate and CCUC alumni Rylee Donald received the Engineers Australia President's Commendation following completion of her Bachelor of Civil and Humanitarian Engineering through CQUniversity. Kate Mitterer was named National University Student of the Year by the Financial Advice Association of Australia and UniSuper, while continuing her studies at the Centre.



Kate Mitterer (centre) - National University Student of the Year - FAAA & UniSuper

Kate shared, "The Uni Hub is more than a study space. It is a community resource that creates opportunities and helps people in rural areas build a better tomorrow for themselves and their families. I am one example of what can happen when that support is available."

This is a proud moment for the Cassowary Coast, proof we're growing our own professionals who know this region, care about it, and lead on a national level.

Studying Side by Side

Mother & Daughter Studying Together Toward Their Dreams

A mother and daughter are studying side by side while building new pathways for their family and community right here on the Cassowary Coast. Mellissa is a mother of four, a business owner, and a community workshop facilitator. She is also in the final trimester of a Diploma of Community Welfare and Wellbeing through the University of New England. Her daughter Caitlin, 24, is in the final stages of a double degree in Arts and Law at James Cook University and is set to become the first person in their family to graduate with a university degree. Both are First Nations women shaping their studies around a shared commitment to community, culture, and regional opportunity. Both are doing it from Innisfail, supported at the CCUC by VPG that has become a second home for students across the region. They also share a home, a study routine, and according to Caitlin, something that makes all of it possible - "She's my best friend. We work, study, live together - it's hilarious to think about, but it works."

Mellissa: Returning to Study with Purpose

Mellissa first tried university straight out of high school. Life had other plans. Four children, a cleaning business, years of early mornings and long days - her own study was set aside so her family could come first. "She worked so hard for us. There were times she had multiple jobs going at once just to keep things stable. She did everything for her kids," said Caitlin. Now, with her children grown, she has returned to study with clarity and direction. Her Diploma is a pathway into a Bachelor of Social Work, a field she has chosen through lived experience and a deep understanding of the importance of culturally safe, community-based support. Her goal is to support families in her community through work that is grounded in lived experience and a clear understanding of the difference a compassionate, culturally connected support person can make. "She wants to be that person for others, especially Indigenous families," Caitlin says. Outside of study, Mellissa continues to contribute to her community, running workshops across the Cassowary Coast. She was recently commissioned by CCRC to lead a workshop as part of Mission Beach's CBD revitalisation events, with more than 140 people attending.

Caitlin: First in Her Family to Graduate University

Caitlin will be the first person in her family to complete a university degree. She began her studies on campus in Cairns before returning home to Innisfail as living costs increased, transitioning to external study while working most evenings. As the first in her family to attend university, she has navigated much of the journey independently - from enrolment and subject selection to accessing scholarships. "There was no one I could ask how to enrol in these subjects. I had to figure it all out by myself," said Caitlin. Her degree combines Arts and Law, majoring in Indigenous Studies. Originally intending to pursue a career in law, Caitlin completed internships in large city firms before returning home with a clearer sense of direction. "I felt disconnected there. Our regional communities deserve strong, culturally connected support - and that's where I want to be."



It's never too late. Mum has taught me that you can do a million things in your life, you don't have to choose just one. - Caitlin

As she approaches graduation, Caitlin is focused on applying her legal training, cultural understanding, and lived experience in ways that directly support community - through social services, advocacy, or related roles.

The CCUC: More Than a Study Space

Both Mellissa and Caitlin credit the Cassowary Coast University Centre for supporting their studies. For a household balancing work, study, and family life, having a consistent, local place to focus has made a big difference, Caitlin says. "I don't think we'd be able to do our study without the uni centre. Having that access - the quiet rooms, the Wi-Fi, the printing, the people who know us - has genuinely helped me and mum so much. Just having someone who gets it makes such a difference."

What They Hope Others Will Know

For anyone considering study - no matter their age or circumstances - Caitlin's message is simple. "No matter your circumstances, it is possible to study and build the life you want. There is support out there, you just have to take that first step." She also hopes people who feel like their moment has passed reconsider what's possible. "It's never too late. Mum has taught me that you can do a million things in your life, you don't have to choose just one." Mellissa is expected to complete her Diploma later this year, with plans to continue into a Bachelor of Social Work. Caitlin anticipates finishing her double degree by the end of 2026.

Students showing up For Each Other



The Kitchen Was Never Just for Toasties'

By nine o'clock on a Wednesday, the kitchen is buzzing. Student Development Coach Jade has the toastie maker going, the coffee machine is fired up, and students are pulling up around the bench - some straight from school drop-off, some regulars who are in every day, some who have the morning free before their afternoon shift. The conversation is easy. Assignments, placements, work, family life and everything in between.

Students who once arrived not knowing anyone have found their people. A study companion, a sounding board, someone who gets it because they're living it too. A mother returning to study sits alongside a recent school graduate, and they keep each other going. Different courses, different stages of life, but they show up for each other. They check in. They ask how the assignment went. On the days when motivation dips - and it does, for everyone - knowing someone is expecting you makes the difference between staying home and walking through the door.

Then the Pomodoros start. Twenty-five minutes of focused study, together in the same room. For students who've previously studied alone at kitchen tables (or in the back seat of a parked car!) - the quiet solidarity of working alongside someone else is something they didn't know they were missing until they found it.

Jade, a proud First Nations woman who has called Innisfail home her whole life, also holds a weekly First Nations Student Catch Up and Cuppa - a chance to connect, share and support one another over a cup of tea. No agenda. Students lead. Jade follows.

Higher education on the Cassowary Coast used to mean leaving. Now, for many, it means showing up on a Wednesday, pulling up a chair, and getting on with it, together.

Students Teaching Students

CCUC believes in building capability from within, recognising that the passion, enthusiasm and knowledge students bring with them is one of the Centre's greatest assets. In April, CCUC student, Kate put that belief into practice. She ran a LinkedIn workshop for students - in person at the Centre and streamed to students at the Tablelands University Centre in Atherton. Drawing on her own experience and the opportunities LinkedIn has opened for her, she walked students through building a strong profile, connecting with industry, and showing up professionally online - proving it's just as powerful for regional students as anyone else. It was the first peer-to-peer workshop at CCUC, with more on the horizon.



A community Backing It's Own



CGC Scholarship Winner, Jenna Snow with VPG Regional Uni Centre Coordinator Justin Brennan (left) & CGC FNQ Regional Manager Rhys Pope (right).

Industry Partnership Brings Financial Support to Regional Students

VPG and Civil Geotechnical Consultants (CGC) share a belief that strong regional communities are built by investing in local people. That commitment is funding four \$5,000 scholarships across VPG's Uni Centres, open to students across all fields of study, balancing work and family alongside their degree.

The first CCUC scholarship was awarded to Jenna Snow, a single mother of two, first in her family to attend university, studying a Bachelor of Health Science and Master of Occupational Therapy through Charles Darwin University. When her eldest son was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia, Jenna navigated months of hospital admissions and travel to Brisbane for specialist care, without stepping away from her degree. She later described her studies as a source of hope and purpose through that period.

Her goal is to establish a private occupational therapy practice on the Cassowary Coast, where access to allied health professionals remains critically limited. "The Cassowary Coast needs more allied health professionals, and I intend to be one of them. The first thing I'm doing is booking flights to Darwin for my placement. Studying regionally comes with costs that add up fast, and this support means I can focus on what I'm here to do."

VPG CEO Maryanne Tranter said the calibre of applications reflected the depth of talent emerging across the region. "These students are already making meaningful contributions to their families and communities. CGC's willingness to back students across all disciplines demonstrates a genuine commitment to local potential."

Building on the foundational support of the Australian Government and Cassowary Coast Regional Council, this marks CCUC's first major industry partnership. A second CCUC scholarship is still to be awarded in 2026.

Class of 2025

For regional students studying online means graduation can pass quietly. A result uploaded to a portal, a certificate arriving in the mail. In December, it looked different at CCUC. The room was full. Students, families, staff and council representatives gathered to celebrate thirteen graduates completing qualifications ranging from Certificate III through to bachelor's and master's degrees across science, education, allied health and communications.

Among them was Jake, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science through CQUniversity and has since moved into a Master of Research focused on emerging technology in agriculture and the mango industry. Maria completed an Undergraduate Certificate in Professional Writing and Publishing through Curtin University and is now working as a journalist with local independent newspaper The Observer. Emily graduated with a Master of Guidance and Counselling through James Cook University while balancing motherhood, part-time teaching and postgraduate study. She is now working as a guidance officer at a local school. Different pathways. Different stages of life. All building their futures on the Cassowary Coast.



Seeing University as possible

20 years running her own business & Nadine is still setting new goals. Completing her Cert IV in Accounting & Bookkeeping through Monarch Institute, right here at CCUC.



Changing who sees university as possible means showing up at every stage - in schools, in community, and at the national table - making sure that whenever someone is ready, the path is clear. - Justin, VPG Regional Uni Centre Coordinator



The Next Generation of Learners

With VPG's 25+ years of community relationships behind it, CCUC has been working closely with high schools in the region from day one - Good Counsel College, Tully State High School and Innisfail State College - each drawing on the Centre in their own way, from subject advice and course exploration through to building students' confidence as learners, the partnerships are being shaped around what each school and its students need most.

In March, CCUC staff visited Innisfail State College and delivered a study skills workshop to Year 11 and 12 students. The practical session covered how to study smarter, take effective notes and manage time without burning out. Students left with skills they could use immediately and, perhaps more importantly, a clearer picture of what's possible for them as learners. With a full program of engagement planned for the second half of 2026 - spanning career expos, parent information evenings, subject selection presentations and pathway planning - CCUC is ensuring that when local young people consider their future, further education is part of the picture - and staying home to pursue it is too.

Opening Doors to Higher Education

What do you wish you had known before starting further study? It's a question we put to our students - and the answers shaped a three-part workshop series designed to help the wider community take that first step. Timed around key dates in the Year 12 calendar, it was built with school graduates in mind. But the people who showed up told a different story. Attendance spanned a wider demographic than anticipated, telling us that the appetite for guidance around higher education on the Cassowary Coast extends well beyond Year 12 students and their families.

The three workshops covered the ground that often stops people before they start. The first demystified HELP schemes, government supports and the real costs of study, making clear that finances don't have to be the deciding factor. The second cut through the language of higher education, breaking down the acronyms, terminology and institutional differences that can make the system feel unfamiliar. The third opened the door even wider - showcasing entry pathways from VET and life experience through to preparation programs and special entry schemes. A Year 12 exam result is no longer the only way in.

In Partnership with JCU

Alongside the Preparing for Higher Education workshop series, CCUC welcomed JCU to deliver a Prep Information Session to prospective students in December - a fee-free pathway into a JCU bachelor's degree that requires no ATAR, right as Year 12 results were landing. For anyone who didn't get the score they hoped for, the door was still open.



National Collaboration in Action

In November, the Cassowary Coast had a seat at the national table. The VPG TCUC team travelled to Canberra for the National Regional University Study Hub Widening Participation Summit at the Australian National University, joining study hubs and universities from across Australia to share strategies and strengthen opportunities for students in regional and remote communities. The summit offered a chance to learn from hubs across the country, explore what's working in different regions, and bring fresh ideas back home. From innovative support models to new approaches in student engagement, the conversations sparked thinking about how CCUC can continue evolving to meet local needs.



Pictured: VPG Tablelands & Cassowary Coast Uni team attend National RUSH Widening Participation Summit in Canberra.

Building future's Without Leaving Home

Teacher in Training

Nikki, an Innisfail mother of two, is completing her Bachelor of Education (Secondary) through Curtin University while working as a Teacher Aide at Innisfail State College - part of a growing cohort of regional parents retraining and upskilling without leaving their community.

Before starting her degree, Nikki spent years working in aged and disability care - rewarding, but emotionally heavy. After becoming a mum, she was drawn to education, inspired by watching her daughter learn and grow. She enrolled in the Bachelor of Education when her eldest was one year old.

Originally aiming for primary teaching, placement quickly showed her where she fit best. Working in senior schooling at Innisfail State College alongside Year 11 and 12 students confirmed it. "Working in this role now, it's definitely the area I'm most suited to."

Nikki grew up in Innisfail, her partner's work is here, and her two daughters - aged two and four - are growing up here. Staying on the Cassowary Coast was never in question. What was in question was how to make university study work around all of it - two small children, a busy household, and limited space to think. "Before the university centre, I'd go for a drive in my car and jump in the back seat, get my laptop out and study."

Now she has a dedicated space to study away from home when she needs it. She has also participated in study skills workshops at the CCUC, picking up the Pomodoro technique, which she now uses in her own routine. She has also drawn on the knowledge of CCUC staff, particularly Justin, VPG Regional University Centre Coordinator, whose background in education has given her perspective and support beyond what she can access through her online degree alone. "He's just a wealth of information. Talking to him about all things education has been incredible."

Her Teacher Aide role is putting her degree into practice daily, building classroom experience and confidence. "I am constantly learning new ways to teach, manage time and behaviours."

When she graduates, she describes the kind of teacher she wants to be: kind, supportive, firm, and giving her best to every student. And she knows exactly where she wants to do it. "Innisfail State College has many opportunities for kids," she said. "Once I have completed my degree, I would love the opportunity to teach here."



Before the university centre, I'd go for a drive in my car and jump in the back seat, get my laptop out and study. - Nikki, CCUC Student



Wardsman on his Way to Paramedic

Cameron, an Innisfail local, is studying a Bachelor of Paramedic Science through CQUniversity while working at Innisfail Hospital, building the skills and experience to contribute to the region's health workforce. Before starting university, Cameron was already advocating for better local education access. In 2023, he served as a youth representative on the Cassowary Coast Regional Council Youth Advisory Committee, supporting calls for a Regional University Study Hub. The centre he helped champion is now supporting his own study journey, demonstrating the impact of locally driven solutions.

After finishing Year 12, Cameron took a gap year focused on work and community involvement. During this time, he connected with the Cassowary Coast University Centre, where staff supported him to explore his options and establish a clear pathway into university without leaving the region or his support networks. Now studying, Cameron works four days a week at Innisfail Hospital, with Fridays and weekends dedicated to study. CCUC's extended access hours allow him to fit study around his schedule, providing a space to focus and stay on track.

Alongside his studies, Cameron works as a wardsman across the theatre and emergency departments, gaining hands-on clinical experience with doctors and nurses. He is building toward his goal of becoming a paramedic, applying his learning directly in a hospital setting.



Take an Active Role In Shaping the Future of Our Community

At the Cassowary Coast University Centre, we are committed to providing the best possible education and support for our students. However, we can't do it alone. Working in partnership with industry and community, we can provide students with the resources, experiences, and connections they require to succeed.

We are deeply grateful for the support from the Australian Government and the Cassowary Coast Regional Council. However, to meet government expectations, local communities are asked to contribute 30% of the costs to sustain a Regional University Study Hub. To ensure the long-term success of the Cassowary Coast University Centre, we are actively seeking both in-kind and financial contributions. Your support is essential in helping us provide lasting educational opportunities for our community.

Explore our partnership packages and opportunities [here](#), or visit our [website](#) to make a donation online.

The CCUC is an initiative of VPG.

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