CASSOWARY COAST UNIVERSITY CENTRE

HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT BY VPG

MAY - NOVEMBER 2026 SERVICE HIGHLIGHTS

218 Students Registered

34 NEW Students

64% are the first in their family to study

31% of students are 18-24 years of age

12% of students identify as First Nations People

9% of students have a disability

82% of students are female

42% of students are parents

51% of students study full-time

Top Areas of Study

University

1. Health
2. Education
3. Society & Culture

A Different Story for regional students.

Finish Year 12. Pack your bags. Head off to university.

For generations of young people on the Cassowary Coast, that was often the path if university was on the cards. In a region with strong traditions in agriculture and trades, there were plenty of other pathways to pursue, too. And while studying online was possible, moving away was often what people pictured when they thought about going to university.

Now, as another group of Year 12 students prepare to finish school, that picture is changing. Just over two years since opening, the Cassowary Coast University Centre (CCUC) has celebrated its 200th registered student, with 218 students now part of its growing university community. As that community grows, so do our connections with local schools, universities and industry, helping make higher education a more visible and achievable option for people across the Cassowary Coast.

Right in the middle of that growing community is someone who knows the story particularly well. Our very own Student Development Coach, Jade. Not so long ago, she was one of those young people packing her bags for Townsville. The first in her family to pursue higher education, Jade grew up in Innisfail. But university wasn't quite what she'd imagined. Far from home and struggling to find her feet, she began questioning whether it was really for her.

"I felt so out of my depth, and I really doubted myself for a while," Jade recalls. Eventually, Jade found her way back to something she'd loved since childhood - reading and writing. She returned home, completed her Bachelor of Arts online and, with encouragement from a lecturer who recognised her potential, found herself pursuing postgraduate research.

Fast forward to 2026, and Jade has completed her Master of Philosophy through James Cook University and commenced a PhD. Her master's explored how regional students' experiences of university are represented in literature. Now her PhD takes that work further, exploring how sharing these stories might help others see university as an option for themselves, while encouraging universities to better understand and support regional students.

Alongside her full-time PhD studies, Jade works as a Student Development Coach at VPG, where the questions she's exploring through her research are closely connected to the experiences of the CCUC students she supports. It's a role that brings together her academic interests, personal experiences and the skills she's developed through her work at VPG.



"I know how important it is to feel like you belong at uni and to have someone in your corner. I like to think of myself as the cheerleader for our students, someone they feel comfortable coming to when things get tough," Jade says.

And in December, it'll be Jade's turn to be celebrated. She'll be donning a cap and gown as one of 15 CCUC students graduating in 2026, alongside students she's spent the year supporting.

Growing a future
On the Cassowary Coast



Where it all began! Deandra during her Year 10 work experience at Sugar Research Australia, organised through VPG.

Working in agriculture. Studying a degree. Growing a future at home.

We first met Deandra when she was in Year 10, spending a week at Sugar Research Australia through VPG's school work experience program.

We took her photograph, heard about what she'd been learning and wondered where life might take her.

Recently, we had the chance to catch up with Deandra again. Now 19, she's working in the agricultural industry and studying a Bachelor of Agriculture through CQUniversity, with support from the CCUC.

And we had the pleasure of taking her photograph once more. Growing up on her family's sugarcane farm in South Gordonvale, Deandra has always had a connection to agriculture. But her Year 10 placement at Sugar Research Australia opened her eyes to another side of the industry, where research and science are helping local growers improve the way they farm.

That interest stayed with her.

After finishing her Year 12 exams, Deandra took the initiative to arrange another week of work experience at Sugar Research Australia. A chance conversation on her final day led to a job opportunity with Cassowary Coast Reef Smart Farming - CANEGROWERS Innisfail.

Today, she's an Extension Support Officer, working on agricultural projects across the Cassowary Coast. From collecting soil and leaf samples to supporting crop trials and working directly with growers, she's gaining practical experience while building her knowledge through university study.

Deandra is also the first in her family to attend university. She's balancing full-time study with her growing career in agriculture, finding a routine that works for her.

With work bringing her into Innisfail each week, CCUC has become part of that routine, giving her somewhere to study, access to resources and people to turn to when she needs support.

"Agriculture is the backbone of pretty much everything at the end of the day," she says.

It's an industry she's passionate about, particularly the future of sugarcane farming and the challenges facing local growers. She hopes to use her experience and university qualifications to help improve the productivity and sustainability of the FNQ sugar industry, and would love to see more young people, especially women, consider careers in agriculture.

For us at VPG, it's been pretty special to reconnect with Deandra at this next stage of her journey. We first met her through school work experience, and now, a few years later, we're supporting her university studies through CCUC.

And it's exciting to see young people like Deandra building their skills, gaining qualifications and contributing to the industries that matter to our region, with opportunities to pursue their ambitions right here on the Cassowary Coast.

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Seeing University as possible



CC Careers Expo at ISC with CCUC Student Ambassadors

Bringing University Pathways into Schools

In June, CCUC partnered with Tully State High School to coordinate a careers expo for Year 11 students, bringing together local employers, tertiary education providers and our student ambassadors. This wasn't your typical careers expo. Think speed dating, but for career conversations. Every ten minutes, students moved to a new stall, meeting people from different industries, asking questions and discovering opportunities close to home.

Representatives from Cassowary Coast Regional Council, Tully Mill, Tully Support Centre and Australian Bananas were among those sharing their experiences. These are local employers, and they're places these students could one day work. Having someone from Tully Mill and a university student studying agriculture in the same room helps young people see how their interests could lead to a career locally.

In May, CCUC joined more than 1,000 high school students at the Cassowary Coast Careers Expo, organised by CCRC and Innisfail State College. Our student ambassadors were a highlight, sharing their experiences of studying engineering, education, nursing, psychology and agriculture. For a student interested in one of these pathways, hearing directly from someone who's already studying it brings university to life. They can ask questions, hear what it's really like and start picturing themselves following a similar path.

We also joined Good Counsel College's Year 10 Subject Selection Evening, helping students and families explore university options, entry pathways and local support as they considered their senior subject choices and what might come next.


Tully SHS Careers Expo





Making Sense of University



How do I get into uni? What if I don't have an ATAR? How much will it cost, and what financial support is available? These are common questions for people considering university, and CCUC has been helping local students and families find answers. In May, CCUC partnered with CQUniversity to host a STEPS information session, helping people explore alternative university entry pathways. A current STEPS student studying through CCUC also shared their firsthand experience. In October, CCUC delivered two free Financing Higher Education workshops, covering HECS-HELP, university costs, government financial support and budgeting. Staff also shared their experiences of managing study and financial commitments. Whether someone is exploring entry options, working out the costs or wondering where to start, our team will continue helping local people find answers and a university pathway that works for them.



Celebrating Excellence in VET

VPG proudly sponsored the VET Awards category at the 2026 BLA Aspire Awards, recognising vocational education and training achievements across FNQ. Regional Uni Centre Coordinator Justin had the tough job of helping judge the awards before taking to the stage to present them at the September ceremony.



Back at School, Sharing His Passion for Engineering

Having finished Year 12 in 2024, Will knows what it's like to be weighing up your options after school. Now studying a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) through the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ), he's able to pursue his interest in computer systems while continuing to live and work on the Cassowary Coast.

At this year's Cassowary Coast Careers Expo at Innisfail State College, Will joined the CCUC team as a student ambassador, running a hands-on engineering demonstration and sharing his experiences with local high school students.

For Will, it was a chance to share his enthusiasm for engineering and show younger students where an interest in technology could lead. "Engineering is such an interesting field, and I'd love to help other young people learn more about it and explore the opportunities available to them," he says.

Will's own interest in engineering grew from coding and experimenting with small computers. He's fascinated by how they work. "I just don't understand how they made a piece of silicon think, and I want to know how they did that," he says.

Since starting university in 2025, Will has been balancing part-time study with full-time work in the tech team at Harvey Norman. He regularly visits CCUC for a quiet place to study, to connect with other university students and to talk ideas through with our team.

Now he's sharing his experiences with younger students, showing them what studying university while staying close to home can look like.

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Culture, Community & Connection

Around 12% of students registered at CCUC identify as First Nations, studying across a range of fields and working towards their own goals and careers. We're committed to supporting First Nations students to pursue their university aspirations while staying connected to family, culture and community. Building relationships with local First Nations communities is an important part of that, and over the past six months, our team and students have had some wonderful opportunities to connect, celebrate and learn together.

NAIDOC Celebrations & Community Connections

Celebrating this year's NAIDOC Week theme, 50 Years of Deadly, our CCUC team and students joined communities across the Cassowary Coast to recognise and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, achievements and connections.

At Mamu Health's NAIDOC Community Fun Day at Warrina Lakes, two of our First Nations nursing students, Talah and Stephanie, joined Student Development Coach Jade to celebrate with community and share their experiences of studying through CQUniversity at the CCUC. With Talah in her first year and Stephanie in her second, it was also a lovely opportunity for the students to connect with one another and share experiences at different stages of their university journeys.

At Jumbun's NAIDOC Community Day, children gathered around the CCUC stall for a colouring activity that sparked conversations about their interests, strengths and the many possibilities ahead of them. It was a great opportunity to spend time with local families, share information about CCUC and join in the community celebrations.

The celebrations continued at Innisfail State School, Radiant Life College and Babinda State School, where our team joined students and staff in celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Through engagement activities and conversations, we encouraged children to explore their interests, discover their strengths and think about the possibilities ahead of them.

Also in July, Jade attended the opening of Mamu Health's new general health clinic in Innisfail, connecting with local health professionals and exploring opportunities for future collaboration to support education and career pathways.





First Nations CQU nursing students Talah & Stephanie with VPG Student Development Coach Jade at Mamu Health's NAIDOC Community Day



Babinda SS NAIDOC



Radiant Life College NAIDOC



Innisfal SS NAIDOC



Mamu Health Clinic Official Opening

Learning from First Nations Voices

For National Reconciliation Week, CCUC Student Development Coach Jade created a gallery at the Centre showcasing First Nations scholars and the contributions they've made across different fields. As a First Nations woman herself, Jade encouraged students to take a closer look at their stories and think about what reconciliation could mean in their own future careers, particularly in healthcare, education and community services.

The week also gave us the chance to celebrate one of our own students. Mellissa, a First Nations CCUC student, had her work featured in a Cassowary Coast Regional Council art exhibition, where she also facilitated hands-on kokedama workshops for the community. Jade and fellow CCUC students came along to support Mellissa and celebrate her creativity. It was a lovely reminder of the friendships and connections growing at the Centre, with students taking an interest in each other's lives and cheering each other on beyond their studies.

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Investing in Our Region's Future





Supporting the People Behind Our Local Schools

In September, CCUC partnered with Ed-LinQ to host a Support Staff Symposium. Thirty teacher aides, chaplains, youth workers and student wellbeing officers from schools across the Cassowary Coast filled the room for a day of professional learning, sharing ideas and connecting with peers. These are the people supporting students in our local schools every day. The symposium gave them time to learn from one another and explore where university study could take the experience they already have. CCUC Student Development Coach Jade shared pathways into teaching and how our Cassowary Coast and Tablelands University Centres can support staff interested in upskilling or gaining further qualifications. It's a partnership we're keen to build on, creating more opportunities for local education professionals to explore further study and career development.

A Voice in Regional Planning

CCUC now holds a permanent seat on CCRC's Economic Leadership Committee, with VPG Regional University Centre Coordinator Justin Brennan bringing a higher education perspective to discussions about the region's economic future. Justin has also been elected co-deputy chair alongside Patrick Bluett from Cassowary Coast Tourism. The committee meets every two months, bringing local government and industry together to discuss economic development, workforce needs and regional skills priorities. With a seat at the table, CCUC can contribute to conversations about how local university study connects with the region's workforce needs, while building stronger relationships with local industry.



In July, CCUC also presented to the Cassowary Coast Business Women's Network, sharing the Centre's services and university study options available locally. It was another wonderful opportunity to connect with local business leaders and raise awareness of how CCUC supports students across the region.

Learning from Study Hubs Across Australia

CCUC is one of 55 Regional University Study Hubs across Australia. Each one is part of its own community, run by people who know the region and the students in it, and no two look the same.

In July, our team attended the Study Hubs Australia Forum at the University of Technology Sydney as part of the Study Hubs in Place (SHIP) initiative. In August, we braved the cold and headed to Ballarat for the RUSH Network Symposium and the Rural, Regional and Remote Education Conference. At both events, we shared what's working at our centre, heard how other communities support their students and brought home ideas to try on the Cassowary Coast. We also had the chance to bring our local experience into national conversations about regional higher education.

Closer to home, CCUC worked with the Queensland RUSH Network to develop a statewide guide featuring all 21 study hub locations across Queensland. The guide helps university and vocational students find free study spaces and support across the state, while giving employers and education providers a resource to share with their networks.

Industry Backs Our Local Students

Innisfail nursing student Emily has received a $5,000 scholarship from Civil Geotechnical Consultants (CGC), becoming the second CCUC student to receive the award in 2026. Studying a Bachelor of Nursing through CQUniversity, Emily balances full-time study, clinical placements and work at Cairns Base Hospital. Her decision to pursue nursing was inspired by the compassionate care she received during her own experience with thyroid cancer as a teenager.The scholarship will help ease the financial pressures of study and unpaid placements as she works towards her goal of caring for people in her local community. And there's more good news. Following a successful first year, CGC has committed to continuing its partnership with VPG in 2027, providing another $10,000 in scholarship funding - $5,000 for a CCUC student and $5,000 for a Tablelands University Centre (TUC) student.



Emily, CGC Scholarship recipient and Bachelor of Nursing student with CQUniversity, pictured during her clinical placement on Magnetic Island.

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Building Our Regional Health Workforce



From Reception to Chief Sonographer

From starting out in reception at her family's medical imaging practice to becoming its Chief Sonographer, Sarah has built an impressive healthcare career right here in Innisfail. Along the way, she's raised a daughter, completed multiple university qualifications and become a mentor to aspiring sonographers. Now, she's studying a Master of Medical Ultrasound through CQUniversity at the CCUC, while helping train the next generation of healthcare professionals in a region where their skills are in high demand.

Working alongside the team at Rural Medical Imaging sparked Sarah's interest in pursuing her own qualifications. After becoming a mum in her early twenties, she completed a Bachelor of Nursing externally through James Cook University, travelling for intensive residential schools and completing clinical placements across the region while balancing work and family life. Once qualified as a registered nurse, she continued into postgraduate sonography studies through Charles Sturt University. That meant three days a week of supervised training at the practice, alongside shifts as a nurse at a local aged care facility.

Today, Sarah loves working with patients, building relationships and helping people find answers about their health. She's equally passionate about sharing her knowledge with others. With qualified sonographers difficult to recruit in regional communities, Rural Medical Imaging is helping develop the next generation of professionals. The practice currently has two student sonographers undertaking training or placement, and Sarah knows firsthand the difference a supportive supervisor can make. "It's nice to actually have the knowledge to be able to pass down and realise how much you know," she says.

Sarah continues to study alongside full-time work, helping manage the practice and raising her 13-year-old daughter. Asked how she manages everything, her answer is simple. "Just make it work." She's also quick to acknowledge the support of her husband, who has been her rock throughout the journey, particularly through the late nights and long hours of work and study.

Also part of making it work is having somewhere she can focus. Living 20 minutes outside Innisfail, Sarah often finds herself waiting in town while her daughter attends dance classes. Previously, that meant studying in the car or trying to concentrate at work, where interruptions are part of a busy medical practice. Now, she's started using the CCUC as her dedicated study space.

Sarah is passionate about encouraging others to recognise the career opportunities available in regional communities. "You can absolutely stay and do it here," she says. And when people tell her they don't think they're smart enough for university, her response is just as straightforward. "They teach you everything you need to know."

It's advice backed by her own experience, from a young mum beginning her career in reception to a highly skilled healthcare professional helping others enter the industry. And as she continues building her own qualifications and supporting aspiring sonographers, she's helping create a future where more people can pursue rewarding healthcare careers right here on the Cassowary Coast.

Making Room for a New Career

For four years, Leisa thought about going to university. With a business to run, two young children and a busy family life in Innisfail, it was a big decision. Now, she's studying a Bachelor of Occupational Therapy through James Cook University at the CCUC, building on eight years of experience as a remedial massage therapist.

Leisa has called the Cassowary Coast home since 2011, building strong connections through her work, her children's school and the local community. It's also where she hopes to put her new qualifications to work. "I've built that trust with my clients, and I want to have the knowledge to be able to help them more," she explains.

With a particular interest in hand therapy and rehabilitation, Leisa hopes to combine her experience in remedial massage with occupational therapy to support people recovering from injury and help them maintain their independence.

Making university work alongside her existing commitments takes planning. With two children aged eight and ten, a husband who works shifts and her own business to manage, Leisa travels to Townsville every fortnight for practical classes. Closer to home, the CCUC has become an important part of her study routine.

"When I am home, I have 500 distractions," she laughs. "Coming here allows me to say, hey, I'm switching off from mum mode right now. I don't get the distractions when I'm here. My brain can just focus." Having access to a dedicated study space means Leisa can make the most of the time she has available, whether that's a full day of university work or a few uninterrupted hours. She's also enjoyed connecting with other local students and having CCUC staff nearby to offer encouragement and advice.

For Leisa, pursuing occupational therapy is an opportunity to build on a career she loves, expand the support she can offer her clients and continue contributing to healthcare in the region she calls home. And along the way, she's showing her children that it's never too late to pursue something you're passionate about.



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Pictured: CCUC Coordinator Karina Messina with Tara Larsen, studying Medical Sonography with CQU.

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.
As a registered charity endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient, VPG will provide a donation receipt for your contributions.

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