

Tracking success

Student stories from Five Islands Secondary College



At **Five Islands Secondary College** in Port Kembla, New South Wales, students in the **Big Picture Academy** structure their learning around personal interests, which they pursue both inside school and outside on internships with mentors in the community.

A range of students with different learning styles and with varied interests are attracted to the Big Picture design for learning because it affords them opportunities that are not available to them in mainstream schools.

They are pursuing projects in a range of areas including environmental activism, permaculture, audio engineering, event management, filmmaking, visual design, hairdressing, sport and sustainability.

Regular learning on internships and short courses outside school stimulates ideas for future careers,

builds students' networks, and equips them with skills and qualifications while still at school.

This results in young people who are a step ahead upon graduation, and confident in their choice of the next steps in life whether it be in employment, further training or university.

The advent of the **International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC)**, has allowed Big Picture graduates to fully demonstrate their knowledge, skills, qualities and experiences acquired throughout their schooling and to allow non-ATAR entry to one or more of the 17 universities around Australia that accept the IBPLC.

The Big Picture design for learning supports young people to structure their own learning pathways and to find their purpose and personal best.

Amelia

After the Black Summer bushfires of January 2020, Amelia was concerned about the long term effects on the environment, in particular on the South Coast of New South Wales.

Having read an article on the ABC News website about how Australia's native bees were among the hidden casualties of the fires, Amelia set about tracking the existence and health of native bee colonies on the South Coast as part of a Citizen Science Project.

Knowing that honey bees are already under threat from the Varroa virus, she realised that native bees could become an important alternative to honey bees for pollination and food production.

For her Senior Project, Amelia is writing a thesis about how human activity impacts native bee habitats, and she is contributing to interactive maps that show where colonies can be found.

She has been in the Big Picture Academy for four years and enjoys learning in a small school such as FISC.

"Here I can structure my own day with routines suited to the way my brain works."

After she graduates from FISC, Amelia plans to study Wildlife and Conservation Biology at La Trobe University.



**Year 12 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

**Interests:
Native bee habitats,
environmental conservation**

**Senior Project:
The Anthropogenic Effects
on Native Bees on the South
Coast**

**Future Pathway:
Bachelor of Wildlife and
Conservation Biology at
La Trobe University**

Tyler

Tyler is passionate about supporting inclusivity of people in the LGBTQIA+ community. Recently he noticed a gap in hairdressing services for young LGBTQIA+ people. In Tyler's experience, it can be hard to find a comfortable environment in which to ask for a hairstyle that reflects the gender they are, especially when salons and barbershops are clearly divided along traditional gender lines.

Tyler undertook a Social Action project to help young LGBTQIA+ people to obtain **gender-affirming haircuts** for \$20 at a community festival designed to celebrate and support LGBTQIA+ young people. The money Tyler raised was then given to Rainbow South Coast.

Tyler got in contact with the festival organiser to successfully pitch his idea to run a stall offering haircuts. He then made a list of several local hairdressers and phoned them all to explain his idea and to recruit two hairdressers for the stall. He also assisted to obtain sponsorship for the hairdressers involved.

The stall was very successful with twenty young people registering to have a gender-affirming haircut.

"Every human being deserves the same amount of equality and respect no matter the colour, gender, sexual preference or race"

Tyler took plenty of photos of the stylists in action and the cuts of the day and is now putting together a How-To Guide for hairdressers.



**Year 12 student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

**Interests:
advocacy for LGBTQIA+
young people in the Illawarra**

**Social Action Project:
Gender-affirming haircuts**

Phoenix

Phoenix is passionate about theatre production, in particular the behind-the-scenes side of staging live events.

Earlier in the year, he staged a highly successful event called **'Raise The Volume'** featuring young bands, youth market stalls, and free food. It is fondly remembered by his school mates and the promotional posters that he produced can still be spotted around town!

For the past 5 months, he has been learning through an internship at a local comedy and musical venue and working as a stage manager at a the Cronulla Jazz Festival in southern Sydney.

Phoenix is also passionate about advocating for young people on the South Coast. As a member of the Young Mayors forum at Wollongong Council, he has been busy preparing for and staging an exposition for high school students called **'Living for the Future'**. Designed to inform young people about all the services available to them once they leave school, such as Head Space, Legal Aid, Youth Services, libraries and car maintenance, the exposition visits a range of high schools in the Wollongong area.

Phoenix is extending his advocacy for young people to the schooling experience. For his Senior Project he is producing a thesis around how school and curriculum can be improved so as to be safer and more inclusive for LGBTIQ+ students.

"I am using the skills I learnt in Big Picture to help improve my community as well as using my skills and knowledge to obtain my goals of working in theatre."

Phoenix's goal after to school is to undertake a diploma in Live Production and Technical Services at TAFE.



**Year 12 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:

**Theatre production, event
management, youth advocacy**

Outlearning:

**Young Mayors forum,
Raise the Volume event
Living for the Future Expo,
Cronulla Jazz Festival**

Senior Project:

**Improving the safety and
inclusion of LGBTIQ+
students in school**

Future Pathway:

**Live Production and Technical
Services at TAFE**

Mikaela

Mikaela is a talented and athletic student whose two main passions are for sport and the ocean.

She competes in many sports including surfing, swimming, soccer, rugby league, discus throwing, shot put, long jumping and javelin. She regularly represents her school at Zone and Regional levels for athletics, at the State Cup for soccer and the South Coast Regional Surfing titles (where she and a peer placed first in 2024).

Having grown up living and surfing at the beach, and travelling to different marine environments with her family, Mikaela has a keen interest in all things to do with the sea. Recent school projects she has completed include: Grey nurse sharks in Bushranger Bay Marine Park, migration patterns of the local seal colony off Martin Island in Port Kembla, threats to the coral reefs and marine life of the Great Barrier Reef, the history of wrecks, the impacts of tourism on Fijian culture.

"Big Picture has gotten me to talk to new people for primary research in projects I have worked on. I can now talk to adults more freely since I have had to step outside my comfort zone."

Mikaela volunteers for **Clean Up Australia** and **Dune Care** to help preserve the coastal environments where she lives, and is also studying the HSC elective **Marine Studies**.

Mikaela enjoys hands-on, practical learning and is currently doing a **Certificate II in Construction at ITeC Illawarra**. Here, she can learn the mathematical skills and reasoning that she requires for her course work and apply this to the practical products that she constructs and exhibits back at school.

The Big Picture design for learning allows her to tailor her Personal Learning Plan to investigate aspects of the people, places, environments, histories and issues she encounters on her travels with family. It also means that her sporting pursuits, construction coursework, and overseas travels are factored into her curriculum and she is not required to 'make up time' when she misses school for these.

"The best bit about Big Picture is that I have the freedom to learn about what I want and not have work planned for me that I'm not interested in."

Mikaela plans to complete a qualification in Construction when she finishes Year 12 and her ultimate dream is to live on a farm in the country in a house that she has built for her family.



**Year 11 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:

**Surfing, marine environments,
athletics, soccer, rugby league,
travel, carpentry**

Out-Learning:

**Certificate II in Construction
at ITEC,
Maritime course with TAFE
YES+,
Pool Lifeguard training,
Yr 12 Marine Studies,
Duke of Edinburgh Awards,**

Volunteering:

Clean Up Australia, Dune Care

Future Pathway:

Construction apprenticeship

Zelda

Zelda has had a passion for music for as long as they can remember. They love exploring music production, performance and playing bass guitar and piano.

During a short course in **Music Production with TAFE YES+** Zelda was impressed by the teacher, Alister Wright, from the band Cloud Control. He provided Zelda with great insights into music production that still resonate with them.

For their Year 12 Senior Project, Zelda is exploring the ways in which music is used in film to tell the story and to elicit an emotional response from the audience.

Another key interest of Zelda's is permaculture and every week they work in the school's permaculture garden. Zelda enjoys hands-on learning and feels that this helps them to memorise facts and to 'get it into my brain.' In the garden they have learnt about sustainability of the earth and the organisms it supports, microclimates, mulching, no-dig garden beds, garden design and strategies for planting according to a plant's needs for sun or water, as well as the geological and Aboriginal history of the local land.

"I love the concept of gardening alongside the Earth instead of working against it. The knowledge we acquire and use in permaculture benefits not just us, but everybody around us and the plants themselves."

Other projects that Zelda has explored include: an investigation into the accident at Chernobyl, the effects of climate change on endangered animals, the environmental impact of sending people into space, and a study of the impact of human activity on whales.

They are particularly proud of completing a **Summer Masterclass at the University of Wollongong** in which they studied the world through the lens of the chemical, earth and life sciences and gained 6 credit points at the University.

"I have noticed an ocean full of changes in myself since joining Big Picture. My communication skills have improved drastically, I am more motivated to learn, I have emotionally matured, my relationships are less dramatic, I am physically and mentally healthier, and I have even voluntarily completed academic courses outside of school hours."

Zelda's dream is to become a music producer or sound engineer, and to sustain themselves with food they have grown in their own permaculture garden.



**Year 12 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:
Music, sound design,
permaculture gardening

Outlearning:
Courses in Music Production
and Animal Care with TAFE
YES+,
Summer Masterclass in
Science at the University of
Wollongong

Senior Project:
How is music used in film
to impact the audience's
emotional response?

Future Pathway:
To study music and sound
design at university

Phoenix

Phoenix has a love of filmmaking, both the directing side of it, and the critical analysis.

Last term, she did a study on the representation of teenage girls in film, where she watched 25 films including *Ginger Snaps*, *Lady Bird* and *The Virgin Suicides* and wrote a 12-page thesis titled: **'Capturing Adolescence – Exploring Teenage Girlhood in Cinema'**.

Phoenix taught herself to direct and edit short films and then conceptualised, storyboarded, directed, shot and edited three short films featuring her friends as they explore their own girlhood and femininity.

To learn more about the art of filmmaking, Phoenix is currently attending a **Screen and Media course with TAFE YES+**.

When she was in Year 10, she explored her creative side in the field of Flower Arranging. She completed a **Floristry course with TAFE YES+** and undertook an internship with a local florist where she learnt to create such arrangements as posey-boxes, button-holes, bouquets and crowns.

Some other projects that Phoenix has completed since joining the Big Picture Academy in Year 9 include include:

- Children's art therapy
- The impact of art produced by artificial intelligence
- How media scares us
- The power and history of music in video games
- The life cycle of a star
- How fashion has evolved and creating an identifiable era.

"The BP Design is helping me get more experience and confidence to do the things I love. By encouraging me to reach out to people of my own accord, and by offering opportunities to help round out my projects to meet all the learning goals, I feel a lot more prepared to step into the real world and strive for what I want!"

Phoenix's dream is to travel to Ireland and to study film at the university level. Oh, and to star in a Wes Anderson film!



**Year 11 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:

**Filmmaking, music, fashion,
photography, visual art**

Outlearning:

**Floristry course with TAFE
YES+,
Screen and Media course with
TAFE YES+**

Mainstream subjects:

**Visual Art, HSIE, Society &
Culture**

Current Project:

Are bio-pics ethical?

Saff

Saff has many passions in the creative and performing arts. They are currently studying **HSC Drama** (while in Year 11), taking a contemporary dance class, and learning about film directing.

Saff joined the Big Picture Academy at FISC in order to have more academic freedom, to explore their creative passions and build ideas about a career.

Last year Saff had the opportunity to do a **TAFE course about makeup artistry** and discovered that it was not as fulfilling an area as they had expected, which is an important experience to have at a young age when considering future pathways.

Currently they are exploring the styles, legacies and craft of different film directors. They plan to shadow an experienced director in the small independent filmmaking sector in Australia to learn about the health of the local film industry and why supporting homegrown cinema is important.

"Big Picture has given me a new perspective on education and how beautiful and fulfilling learning can actually be."

The supportive advisory environment in the Big Picture Academy has enabled Saff, a natural introvert, to develop social confidence and to cultivate strong independent learning skills.

One of Saff's initiatives has been to run a **podcast called 'Power Hour'** for Wollongong Youth Services about finding ways to embolden and support young people.

"I'm the most determined I've ever felt in my life to do what I love. It's given me strength, purpose and something to work towards."

Saff's goal is to pursue multiple creative passions that will inspire and leave a positive impact on others, whether that be through film, acting, dance or the simple act of selling perfume!



**Year 11 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:
**Filmmaking, performing
arts, makeup artistry,
contemporary dance**

Outlearning:
**'Power Hour' podcast for
Wollongong Youth Services,
Makeup course at TAFE,
Yr 12 HSC Drama**

Future Pathway:
Creative and Performing Arts

Asher

Asher is a keen member of the permaculture classroom and the Five Islands' community.

Inspired by Craig Reucassel's iconic TV series: 'The War on Waste', Asher set out to reimagine his school's waste management. Towards the end of 2023, with the help of fellow students, Asher conducted an audit of the school's landfill waste stream. His investigation identified 2 key problems:

- Roughly 50% of the school's landfill waste stream could be composted
- 50 drink containers (bottles and cans) are discarded daily or approx \$1000-worth each year

Motivated to change this, Asher ran a competition fundraiser across the 10 Big Picture advisories to see who could collect the most drink containers. In just 3 weeks, his initiative titled '**Quench for Cash**' raised over \$100. The project involved Asher travelling via bus to the container exchange station each afternoon, sometimes with as many as 150 bottles and cans. Asher believes that this campaign highlighted the transformative power of small individual efforts.

Asher is now focused on introducing composting into the school's waste stream. He has successfully acquired a donation of wheelie bins from the recycling service Remondis, and is actively collaborating with the canteen staff at his school to compost their waste.

As part of his outlearning, Asher works at a local business called **Zig Zag Hub** where his duties include website development and the creation of online courses.

He is also writing his thesis about how student-autonomy in educational designs such as Big Picture helps to cultivate youth action and a global mentality.

"Waste reduction initiatives aren't just about recycling, they are about fostering a culture of mindfulness and responsibility, and recognising that our small individual efforts can lead to significant change"

Asher plans to continue his involvement with community gardening, and he hopes to study software development at university after graduating from high school.



**Year 12 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

Interests:

**Technology, entrepreneurship,
sustainability, permaculture**

Outlearning:

**Working in the permaculture
garden at FISC,
Attending Zig Zab Hub to
develop skills in online course
development and website
design,
Summer Masterclass in
Engineering at the University
of Wollongong,
TAFE courses in robotics and
horticulture**

Advocacy:

**Quench for Cash – a student-
led action for sustainability**

Future Pathway:

**Studying Software
Development at University**

Enya

Enya joined the Big Picture Academy at FISC in Year 9 because she relished the opportunity to explore her interests in depth and to learn both inside and outside the classroom.

Her main passion is politics, in particular international politics and feminism. She is a member of the **Young Greens** party in the Illawarra, and an active member of the school's **Student Representative Council** where she has helped to run events including Harmony Day, and the annual ANZAC Day ceremony.

"Big Picture has given me the self-motivation and direction that I need to thrive in any situation, and when there are roadblocks in the way I am able to reach out to a number of different supports to help navigate them."

Some of the projects Enya has undertaken include:

- Women in religion
- What makes a well-written female character?
- Misogyny in superhero comics and films
- Did the MeToo movement impact the workplace?
- Propaganda in modern media
- Social and political effects of World War Two
- Treatment of women in film
- Which social and political system best fits modern society?
- Ethics of greyhound racing
- Are zoos ethical?

She has also learnt how to create and edit videos and posters to present and disseminate her learning.

Enya believes that her project work has helped her to develop research skills including finding reliable sources of information and being able to distinguish bias from objective facts. She has also developed as a writer.

"I feel most proud of my evolution as a writer and a critical thinker. I can see my growth, not just in the way I write but the information I include and the ideas I present in my writing."

She is currently exploring post school pathways including how to apply for an International Student Scholarship to study International Relations in China or Korea.

Her ultimate dream is to become a diplomat and to work in international politics.



**Year 11 Student
Big Picture Academy at Five
Islands Secondary College**

**Interests:
International politics and
feminism**

**Outlearning:
HSIE, Society & Culture,
Preliminary Legal Studies in
the mainstream**

**Advocacy:
Member of the Young Greens,
and the School Representative
Council**

**Future Pathway:
A scholarship to study
international politics in Korea
or China.**