

URBIS

EVALUATION OF THE AGENT C PROJECT

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agent C is a training program delivered by All Together Now that aims to enhance the confidence and capacity of young people to unpack and critically engage with divisive, hateful, and possibly violent conspiracy theories and fake news. All Together Now developed Agent C in 2021, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about an increasing prevalence of online conspiracy theories and fake news.

Agent C was developed from existing evidence of what works to build capability against fake news and conspiracy theories, with a focus on pre-bunking and inoculation theory. Agent C workshops were further refined through co-design with a group of interested young people. The Pilot of Agent C was delivered in 2021, after which Agent C adopted a predominantly school-based delivery model. Ultimately, 88% of all Agent C participants engaged with the project in schools.

Consumption of online misinformation is a substantial issue facing young people and the environments they interact with, notably schools. This Report found that Agent C has demonstrated success to date in addressing this issue, with key findings and recommendations outlined below. Agent C still holds greater potential to address issues of online misinformation among young people with greater maturity and reach, and even to practitioners who work closely with young people.

Reach	Agent C reached 1012 young people across 35 settings between January 2022 and June 2024 (41% above its intended target)	42% of participants engaged with Agent C in settings outside of Greater Sydney	Agent C prioritised cohorts at higher risk of engaging with harmful online narratives in the final year of the project
Implementation	Agent C content was evidence-based and constantly updated to respond to emerging trends	All school staff reported Agent C content was informative, and the vast majority would recommend Agent C to other teachers and schools	While participant engagement was generally high, opportunities were identified to increase engagement
Outcomes	77% of Agent C participants feel more confident in their ability to tell when something is fake news	76% feel more confident in their ability to tell when something is a conspiracy theory	Nearly all school staff felt Agent C had helped to address issues related to hateful or divisive misinformation at their school
72% of participant respondents have a better understanding of the media	72% learned new skills for talking to their friends and family about fake news and conspiracy theories		
Recommendations	Develop a variation of Agent C suitable for those that interact closely with young people susceptible to misinformation, such as school staff and youth workers.	Consider in-person delivery of Agent C.	
Set an expectation of school staff involvement in delivery of Agent C. To support this, develop and disseminate accompanying resources for school or service staff involved in delivery, including 'legacy resources' for reinforcement.	Explore opportunities for student input on examples of fake news/conspiracy theories that can be incorporated into Agent C training.		

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE AGENT C PROJECT

All Together Now developed the 'Agent C' project in 2021, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic bringing about an increasing prevalence of online conspiracy theories and fake news. Agent C is a training program that aims to enhance the confidence and capacity of young people to unpack and critically engage with divisive, hateful, and possibly violent conspiracy theories and fake news. It is intended that Agent C participants have stimulating conversations with their peers encouraging critical thinking, and increase agency and self-worth. More broadly, the project aims to enhance community resilience against hateful conspiracy theories and fake news.

Agent C was initially delivered as a Pilot project for young people aged 14-21 in NSW, drawing from existing evidence of what works to build capability against fake news and conspiracy theories. Agent C was further refined through co-design with a group of young people. The Agent C Pilot was delivered to young people interested in fake news and conspiracy theories, with some young people having been referred to participate due to engagement with online misinformation. Following the Pilot, All Together Now received interest for Agent C from schools, such that Agent C adopted a predominantly school-based delivery model.

Agent C is delivered via three online workshops:

1. Making sense of the fake news world: what, why and how?
2. Fake news and conspiracy theories: the connection to racism, power and privilege
3. Fake news and conspiracy theories: what can we do about them?

Agent C was funded by Multicultural NSW, and supported by project partner headspace Camperdown, and evaluation partner, Urbis.

1.2. THE EVALUATION

All Together Now appointed Urbis to provide evaluation advice and support for Agent C between 2021 and 2024. Over this time, Urbis has contributed to development of a project logic and evaluation framework, development of research instruments, data collection and analysis. Urbis has also contributed to three reports over this time:

- An evaluation of the 2021 Agent C Project Pilot (Pilot Report)¹
- An Interim Report developed for internal All Together Now use in June 2023, summarising findings from the participant survey January 2022 to June 2023
- A Final Report (this Report).

1.3. THIS REPORT

This Report summarises the Agent C project from 2021-2024 inclusive, building on findings from the Pilot and Interim Reports. This Report includes commentary on:

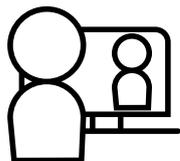
- The Agent C policy context and project design
- Implementation of Agent C, including project reach and transition of Agent C to predominantly school-based delivery
- Participant outcomes.

¹ Available at All Together Now's website: <https://alltogethernow.org.au/agent-c-case-study/>

This Report was informed by the following key data sources:



Review of Agent C project documents provided by All Together Now



Desktop review of research on fake news and conspiracy theories



Participant survey of n=299 participants, or 30% of all young people that participated in Agent C from January 2022 to June 2024



Survey of n=8 staff at schools that participated in Agent C



Interviews with n=3 school staff.

Limitations

This Report should be read noting the following limitations:

- **Selection bias:** participating in the evaluation of Agent C was voluntary for participants and school staff, meaning data collection only includes those that self-selected to participate. This precluded collection of a universal or representative sample. There may then be other opinions or reflections on Agent C that are not reflected in this Report.
- **Variances in survey administration:** the participant survey tended to be administered to participants at the conclusion of the third Agent C workshop. However, there were some instances where surveys were distributed earlier or later in the project, due to logistical factors or participant/school preferences. This may have caused some inconsistencies across the sample, i.e. some respondents may have had relatively more or less time to absorb or reflect on Agent C content.
- **Limited participant voice:** Urbis and All Together Now initially intended for this Report to include in-depth qualitative interviews with participants that had completed Agent C training, to supplement the participant survey. However, as Agent C transitioned to a predominantly school-based delivery model, unforeseen difficulties engaging with schools and students to drive participation in the evaluation emerged, and meant this was no longer feasible. It is acknowledged that participants would have provided a valuable perspective on Agent C through these proposed interviews. Participant voice in this Report is limited to the findings and open-ended responses of the participant survey. As a substitute activity, Urbis and All Together Now developed a school staff survey and conducted interviews with interested school staff members to seek their perspectives on Agent C delivery and outcomes for students.

2. THE AGENT C PROJECT

2.1. POLICY CONTEXT

Conspiracy theories and fake news

Agent C aims to equip young people with the tools to combat the misinformation and disinformation they encounter, particularly online. Misinformation and disinformation are related terms. Misinformation refers to false or misleading information, and disinformation refers to false information that is purposely spread to mislead people (Lazer et al., 2018).

Conspiracy theories and fake news are among the most prevalent forms of misinformation. Conspiracy theories are explanatory beliefs that see an event or political or social order as due to the purposeful manipulation of a small group (Guan et al., 2021). These theories may or may not be true (Douglas et al., 2019). Fake news refers to fictional news stories that are portrayed as authentic. Some definitions identify fake news as intentionally created to mislead readers and support certain agendas, and other definitions emphasise false information regardless of motive (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Kim et al., 2021).

Misinformation, particularly fake news and conspiracy theories, can pose harm to both an individual's psychological health, and to rationality, society and democracy and international relations more broadly (Carson & Wright, 2022; Oliver & Wood 204; van Prooijen 2018 in Guan et al., 2021). For example, research has found they can directly increase feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, and uncertainty for individuals. On a societal level, they can decrease trust in government and mechanisms for political engagement, contribute to discrimination and radicalisation, and exacerbate public health crises (Guan et al., 2021).

Conspiracy theories and fake news related risks are increasing

Fake news and conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. Instances of misinformation and disinformation have occurred alongside the development of media communications and technology (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). However, as technology has continued to develop, the nature of conspiracy theories and fake news has changed and associated risks increased (Posetti & Matthews, 2018).

Increasingly, social media is used as a main source of news and information, but social media lacks the journalistic standards of objectivity that can constrain misinformation (Lazer et al., 2018). Australia's concern about online misinformation and disinformation is amongst the highest in the world, but one in four Australians say social media is their main source of news, marking a 4% increase from 2023 to 2024 (Park et al., 2024). Additionally, emerging developments in artificial intelligence, such as deepfake technology, increase difficulty for consumers in discerning what is real and what is fake (Altoe et al., 2024). The increased prevalence of unreliable information further erodes trust and credibility in news sources (Lazer et al., 2018).

COVID-19 saw a rise in online conspiracy theories and fake news, intersecting with racism and far-right extremism

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant increase in engagement with fake news and conspiracy theories. The closing of borders, restrictions on freedom of movement and associated unemployment created a sense of isolation and instability for many, creating appropriate circumstances for fake news and conspiracy theories to spread (Waldek et al., 2021). The World Health Organisation labelled the trend an 'infodemic', describing an excess of information including false or misleading information contributing to confusion, mistrust and risk-taking behaviour (WHO, 2024).

The fake news and conspiracy theories being increasingly circulated at this time commonly targeted minoritised communities (Argentino, 2020; Carlin, 2021), and aligned with a rise in racism. In February 2020, more complaints were recorded under the Racial Discrimination Act than at any time over the preceding 12 months (AHRC, 2020). In 2020, 85% of Asian Australians reported at least one instance of discrimination (ANU in Walden, 2020), and incidents of antisemitism rose almost 42% over two years from 2021 (Bahr, 2023). Similarly, the Islamophobia Register Australia reported Muslims were blamed for COVID-19 spread, rule breaches, and vaccine rejection across this time, and faced double standards in lockdown law enforcement (Iner et al., 2023).

The fake news and conspiracy theories circulating at this time often supported themes such as pro-white identity, nationalism, and civil liberties, demonstrating their relationship with far right extremism (McNeil-Willson, 2020; Waldek et al., 2021). Efforts by far right groups to use fake news and conspiracy theories to

advance their narratives, aid recruitment, and induce violence and radicalisation were identified (Fakuade, 2023; McNeil-Willson, 2020).

Children and young people are particularly prone to engagement with fake news and conspiracy theories

Children and young people are increasingly vulnerable to fake news and conspiracy theories, and their related risks. Australian teenagers spend an average of 14 hours a week online (eSafety Commissioner, 2021), and the extent to which social media is their main news source is rising (Notley et al., 2023). Additionally, research has identified young people to be more likely to believe conspiracy theories than other cohorts (van Mulukom et al., 2022), due to their high exposure to online information, and because their maturity and cognitive capacities are still evolving (Howard et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the existing vulnerability of children and young people to fake news and conspiracy theories. During the 2021 lockdowns, young Australians made up just 14% of the workforce, but bore 55% of job losses (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Increased isolation, use of social media and time spent online was linked to a worsening in mental health (Bailey et al., 2022), with these conditions highlighted as increasing vulnerability to radicalisation for children and young people.

Agent C aims to support young people to critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories

It was in response to these trends that All Together Now developed the Agent C project, which aims to enhance the skills and confidence of young people to unpack and critically engage with conspiracy theories and fake news, including hateful and/ or far-right conspiracy theories and fake news, and the intersection of these with power, privilege and racism.

The design process of Agent C is described below.

2.2. PROJECT DESIGN

Agent C was developed based on ‘pre-bunking’ and inoculation theory research

In 2021, All Together Now developed a pilot for the Agent C project. The initial design and planning for Agent C was based on a literature scan that demonstrated ‘pre-bunking’ techniques and inoculation theory are effective methods for responding to fake news and conspiracy theories.

Pre-bunking refers to the process of pre-emptively warning and exposing people to weakened doses of misinformation to help cultivate ‘mental antibodies’ against fake news (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). The strategy is based in inoculation theory, the framework from social psychology that suggests it is possible to pre-emptively confer psychological resistance against persuasion attempts (Compton 2013; McGuire & Papageorgis 1961 in Roozenbeek et al., 2020). The process attempts to build ‘immunity’ to online misinformation, similarly to how inoculation works against a virus (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). Recent research from Harvard University found that participants became less susceptible to future exposure to common misinformation techniques following the intervention (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). This is supported by a recent review of interventions that found numerous inoculation-based interventions were effective in protecting people against misinformation (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

The evidence for the effectiveness of inoculation and pre-bunking strategies formed the basis of an initial Agent C Pilot project, undertaken between February to December 2021. The Pilot project was supported by Multicultural NSW under the COMPACT Program.

The design of Agent C was informed by an evidence review and co-design process

Following securing funding for the Agent C Pilot, All Together Now conducted a comprehensive literature review to further inform the project design, including the co-design process. The review looked at current evidence on the effectiveness of various strategies for countering misinformation, including techniques tested in classroom settings. Based on the evidence provided, the workshops delivered in Agent C employ an inoculation theory approach, as well as a variety of other research-based approaches including motivational interviewing techniques, fact-based correction, media literacy, decoding, and reimagining intergroup relations.

In May 2021, a three-hour co-design session was held via Zoom, to refine the development of each workshop. The co-design process was supported by informal partners including academics and co-design experts. The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, as well as project partner headspace Camperdown, provided advice and guidance regarding the draft training package and the co-design workshop scope, project and facilitation.

Twelve young people were recruited for participation via two partner headspace centres, and seven attended on the day. The session included a mix of co-design, collaborative and consultation methods. Participants were able to provide verbal and written feedback during the Zoom session, as well as via surveys. Their input was collected on a range of elements including language and relevancy of content, activities, and delivery style. The co-design session was then evaluated by Urbis, and the feedback was used by All Together Now to further develop Agent C.

The Agent C Pilot successfully achieved its intended outcomes

Overall, the Agent C Pilot:

- produced an evidence-based and co-designed training package with seven young people through a co-design workshop
- delivered 14 online training workshops for young people in August/September
- trained 39 young people in total, with 34 completing all workshops

The final Evaluation Report for the Agent C Pilot, developed by Urbis, found that it was a highly impactful project, successfully achieving all four of its intended outcomes through engaging delivery. In addition to its intended outcomes, it helped some participants better understand other peoples' views and perspectives.

Following the success of the Pilot phase, All Together Now secured further funding under the COMPACT Program to June 2024, and responded to interest for Agent C from other settings, most notably schools. The following Report assesses implementation and outcomes of the Agent C project over this time period, between January 2022 and June 2024.

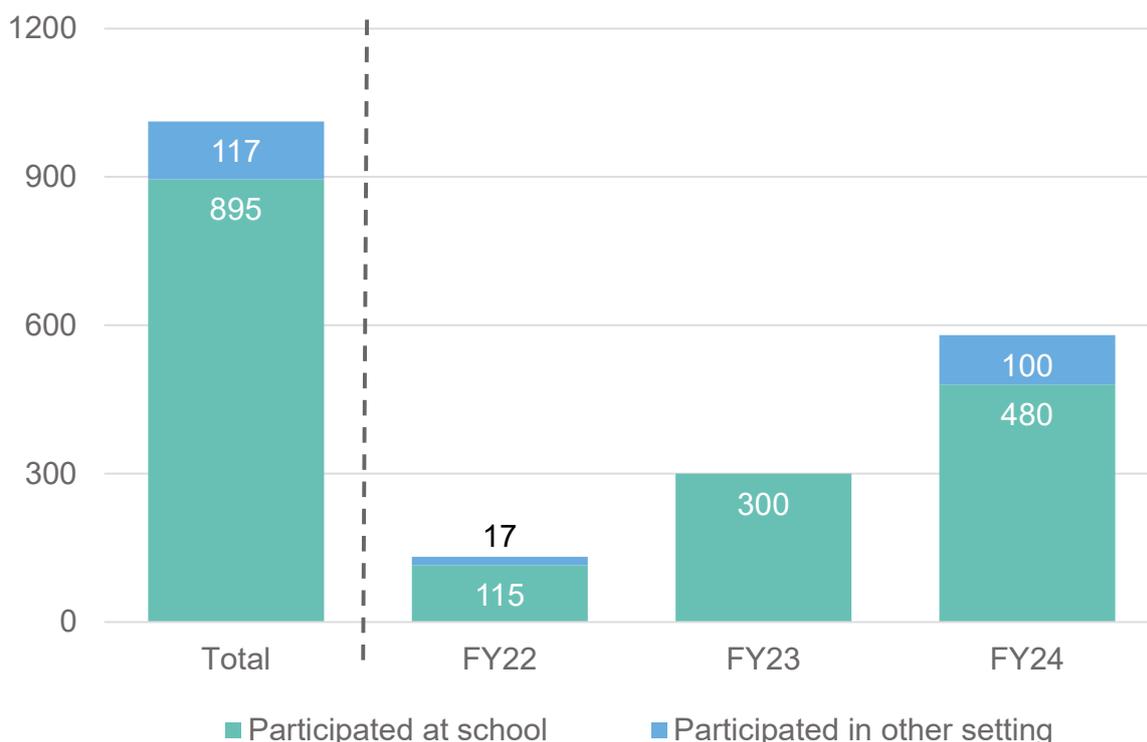
3. IMPLEMENTATION

3.1. PROJECT REACH

The Agent C project was delivered to over 1000 young people across more than 30 settings between January 2022 and June 2024.² Agent C’s reach has continued to grow year-on-year throughout the project, with the final year of the project to June 2024 reaching nearly double the number of participants (580) compared with the previous year (300). Notably, Agent C exceeded its delivery targets set under COMPACT Program funding between January 2022 and June 2024, overachieving its target of 720 participants by 292 people (or 41%).

Of those that participated, 88% of participants engaged with Agent C in NSW schools, while the remaining 12% were engaged through youth or disability service settings or public sessions (conducted in 2022).

Figure 1 – Young people that participated in Agent C by year

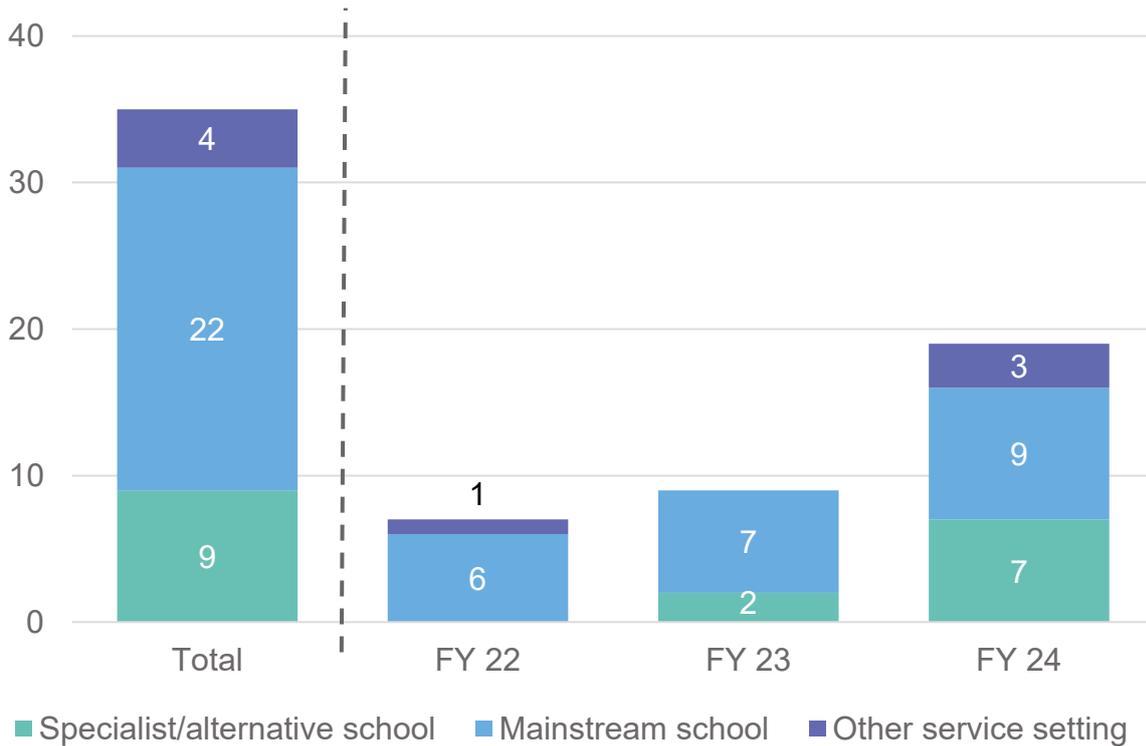


In the final year of the project, All Together Now staff prioritised enquiries about Agent C from specialist or alternative schools, having received an increased number of enquiries from these schools over the span of the project. These schools typically work with young people that are disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from education. All Together Now staff reported the enquiries received from these schools demonstrated these students were at high risk of engagement with misleading and potentially harmful online narratives and content. The decision was then made to prioritise these schools (and youth service settings where similar factors were present) to respond to the greater relative need for Agent C in these settings, and to maximise the social impact of the project.

This is reflected in the settings where Agent C was delivered. Agent C was delivered to seven specialist or alternative schools between July 2023 and June 2024, compared to just two in the 18 months prior.

² This is defined as participating in one or more Agent C workshops.

Figure 2 - Settings where participants engaged with Agent C by year



Agent C was also able to reach a statewide audience. More than two-in-five participants (or 42%) that engaged in Agent C did so in settings outside of Greater Sydney, while 57% participated in Greater Sydney (with a further 2% not categorisable). This reach was enabled by Agent C’s virtual delivery model and reflects the ubiquity of the issues Agent C aims to address across NSW.

The participant survey, which was completed by 30% of all Agent C participants (typically at the conclusion of the third Agent C workshop), provides some further insight into the profile of young people that participated in Agent C.

Attendance

Of the 299 respondents that completed both surveys, 66% attended three Agent C workshops, 15% attended two workshops and 17% attended one workshop – 2% recorded that they weren’t sure.

Profile of participants

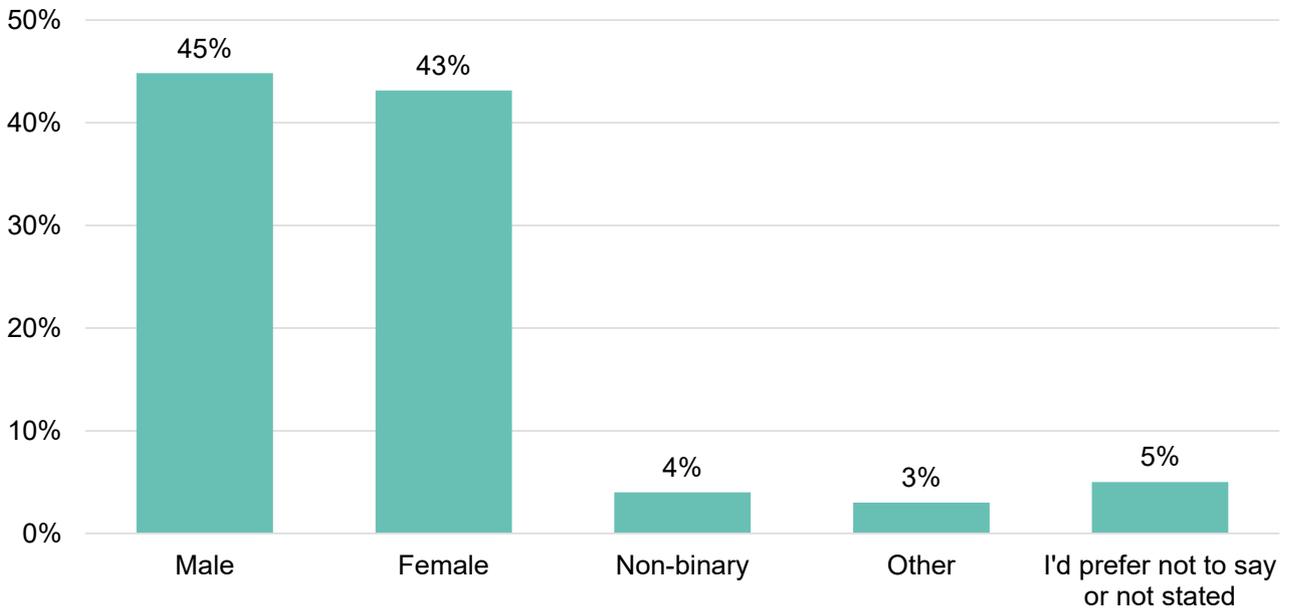
The profile of Agent C survey respondents is similar to the NSW population in many respects. The sample is nearly equally gender balanced, while a similar proportion of Agent C survey respondents reported speaking a language other than English at home (27%) relative to all people in NSW (30%) (ABS, 2021).

There were some differences with the NSW population with respect to location of respondents, explained further below. Similarly, there were a higher proportion of Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander respondents (9%) compared to the NSW population (3.4%) (ABS, 2022).

Gender

There were equal proportions of male and female respondents. This is likely to closely reflect all Agent C participants, as the project was largely delivered in co-educational school settings, or in non-gender specific youth service settings. A minority of survey respondents identified as non-binary, or another gender.

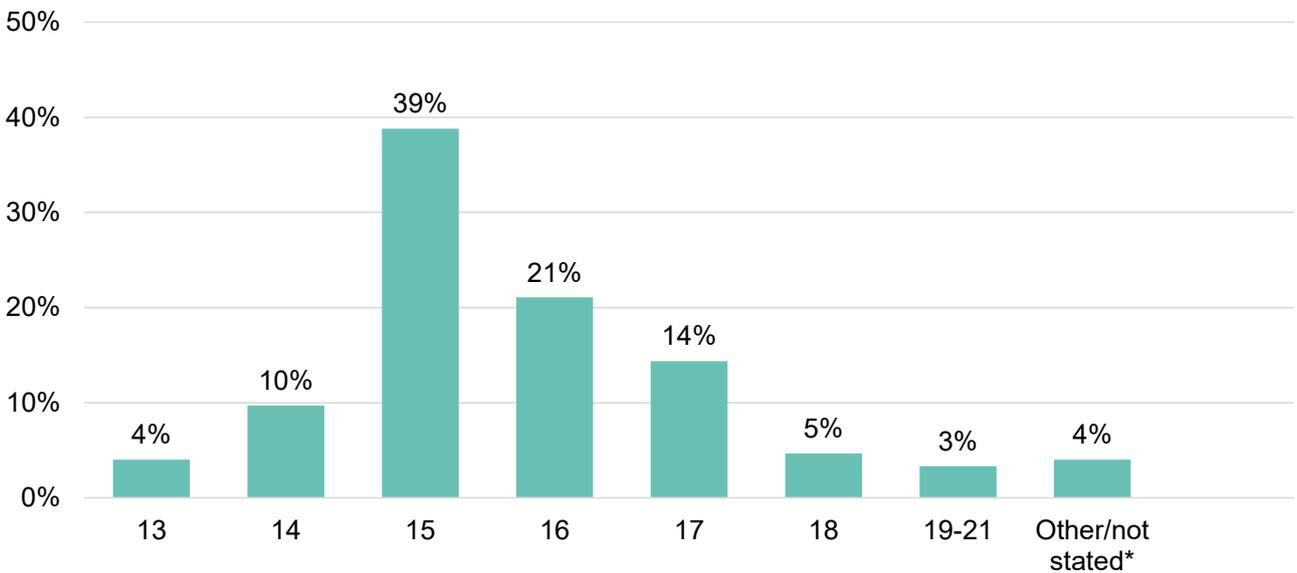
Figure 3 - Gender of participant survey respondents



Age

All respondents were in the age range of 13 to 28 years old. The vast majority of participants were aged 18 years or younger (93%). Of those aged 18 years or younger, the majority were aged 15 (39%).

Figure 4 - Age of participant survey respondents



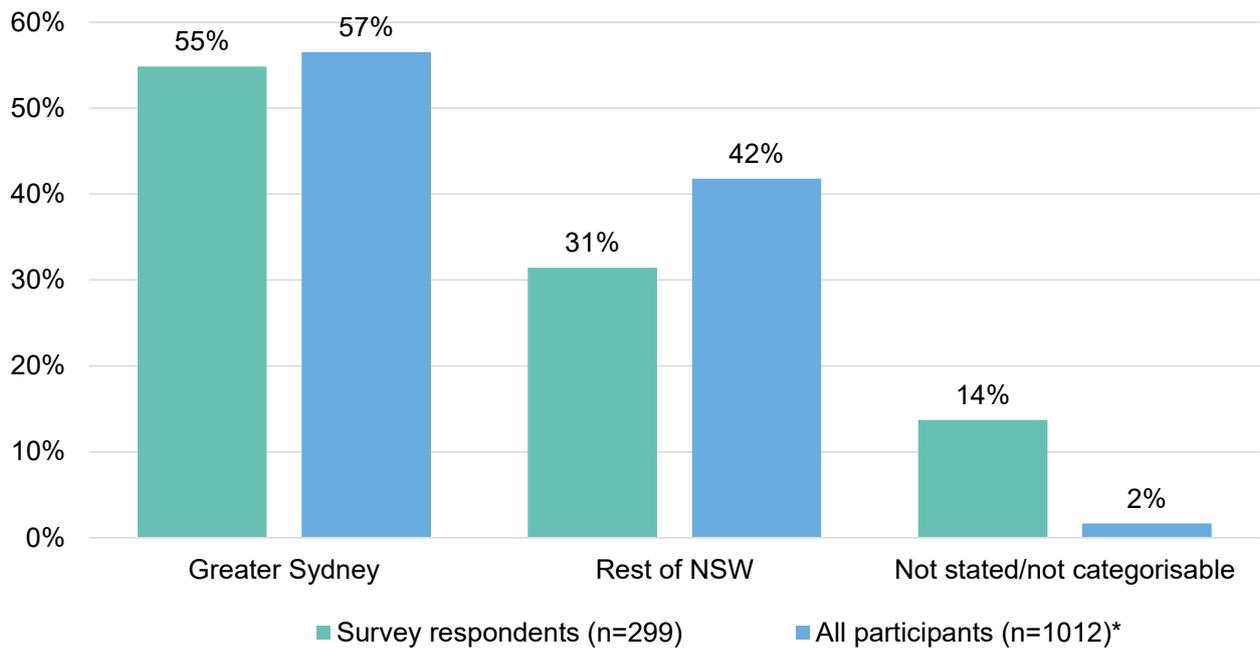
* Other/not stated included n=9 respondents (3%) that did not leave their age, and n=3 respondents (1%) who inputted age ranges outside the target Agent C age range, but whose responses indicated they participated in Agent C.

Location

The majority of survey respondents reported living in Greater Sydney (55%), aligning closely with what would be expected based on the settings where Agent C was delivered – 57% of all participants that engaged with Agent C did so in a setting located in Greater Sydney (i.e. their school was in Greater Sydney). However, the survey is slightly less representative for regional NSW respondents. While 31% of survey respondents reported living in regional areas of NSW, an estimated 42% of all participants engaged in Agent C did so in a regional setting. A sizeable minority of respondents (14%) preferred not to state their location in the survey, which may explain the discrepancy.

An estimated 66% of the NSW population live in Greater Sydney (NSW Government, 2020), compared with 57% of Agent C participants, indicating that Agent C reached a higher than proportionate number of participants across the rest of NSW.

Figure 5 - Location of Agent C participants

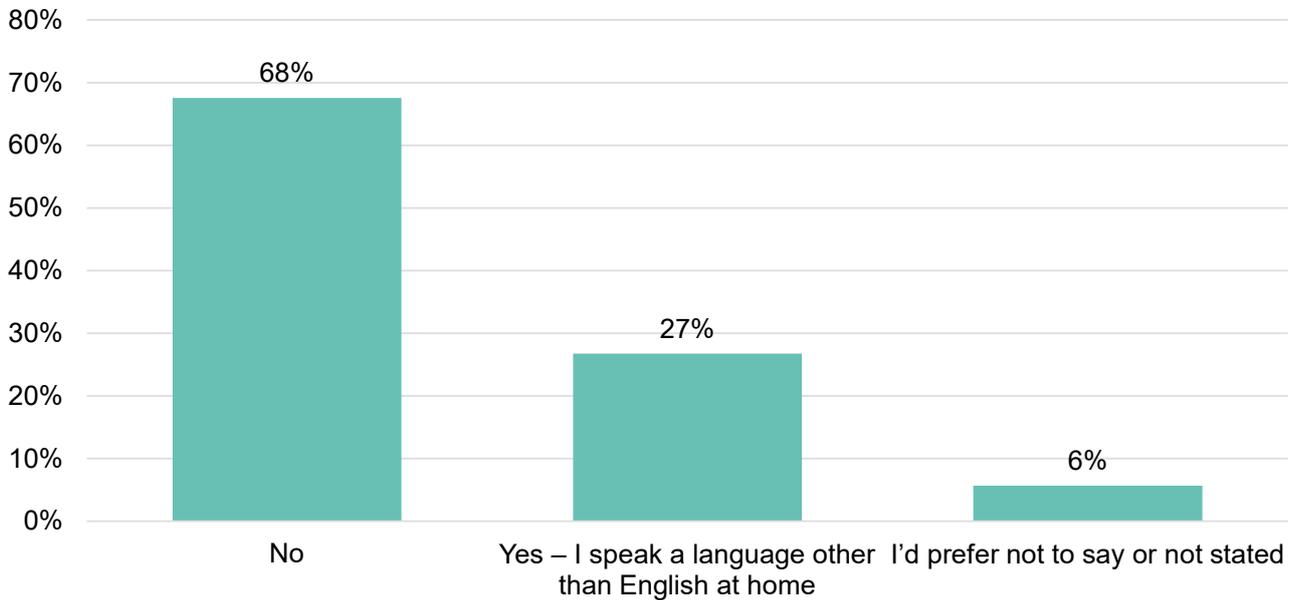


* Location of 'All participants' based on location of the setting where Agent C was delivered to them.

Cultural background

The majority of respondents (68%) spoke English only at home. Of those who spoke a language other than English at home (27%), the three most common languages recorded by multiple participants included Arabic (n=14), Mandarin (n=7) and Italian (n=6).

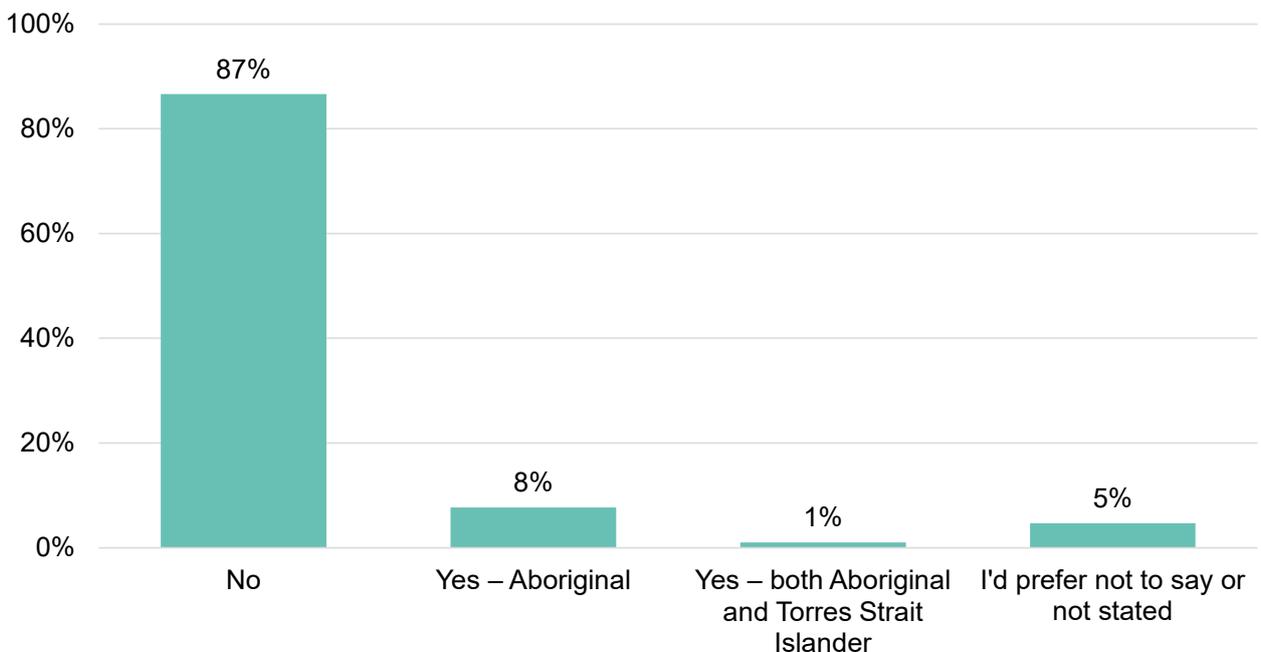
Figure 6 - Language spoken at home of participant survey respondents



Indigenous background

Almost one in ten respondents identified as Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander – 8% as Aboriginal, and 1% as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Figure 7 - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status of participant survey respondents



3.2. IMPLEMENTATION IN SCHOOLS & OTHER SETTINGS

Agent C received strong interest from schools

All Together Now received strong interest from schools to deliver Agent C training to their students. As noted above, to June 2024, 88% of all participants in Agent C engaged with the project in schools. All Together Now staff identified the attention from schools was a significant opportunity for Agent C, and supported the project to reach more young people who may not have otherwise chosen to participate.

All Together Now reported that the reasons for schools' enquiries about Agent C were diverse. School staff faced challenges such as problematic student comments or behaviours around issues such as race and misogyny. All Together Now reflected the latter became an increasingly common basis for enquiries from schools as the project went on, often citing student interest in misogynist social media influencers such as Andrew Tate. All school staff interviewed for this Report commented that student engagement with online misinformation had been a significant issue within their school, with issues such as COVID-19 misinformation being a concern.

However, not all schools reached out to address an issue in their school. All Together Now noted that some schools enquired about Agent C as a preventive measure, while others were interested in the training to upskill student media literacy.

"We (schools) really want these sorts of ideas. These programs make sense and we need them."
– School staff member

Agent C content was informative for students and staff

Agent C was not designed explicitly as a school-based project, but was suitable for young people of school age given the Pilot had been developed with and for young people aged 14-21. The evidence-based nature of Agent C content and co-design process with young people enabled the development of a relevant and informative training package. All Together Now reported ongoing investment in updating Agent C with new examples and to reflect emerging research. New examples of misinformation or disinformation, and new developments in technology such as AI, are continually incorporated into the project to ensure sessions remain relevant.

This is reflected in participant perceptions of the project, as a large majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Agent C workshop materials were useful (73%). Similarly, school staff surveyed reported unanimously (all n=8 respondents) that Agent C content was informative. Indeed, interviewed school staff reported that Agent C content had been informative not only for students but also for themselves, with some reporting they had since used concepts learned from Agent C to communicate with students. This indicates there may be an opportunity for targeted training for this group, as well as for young people.

Agent C's informative content supported achievement of positive outcomes for many participants, discussed further in Section 4.

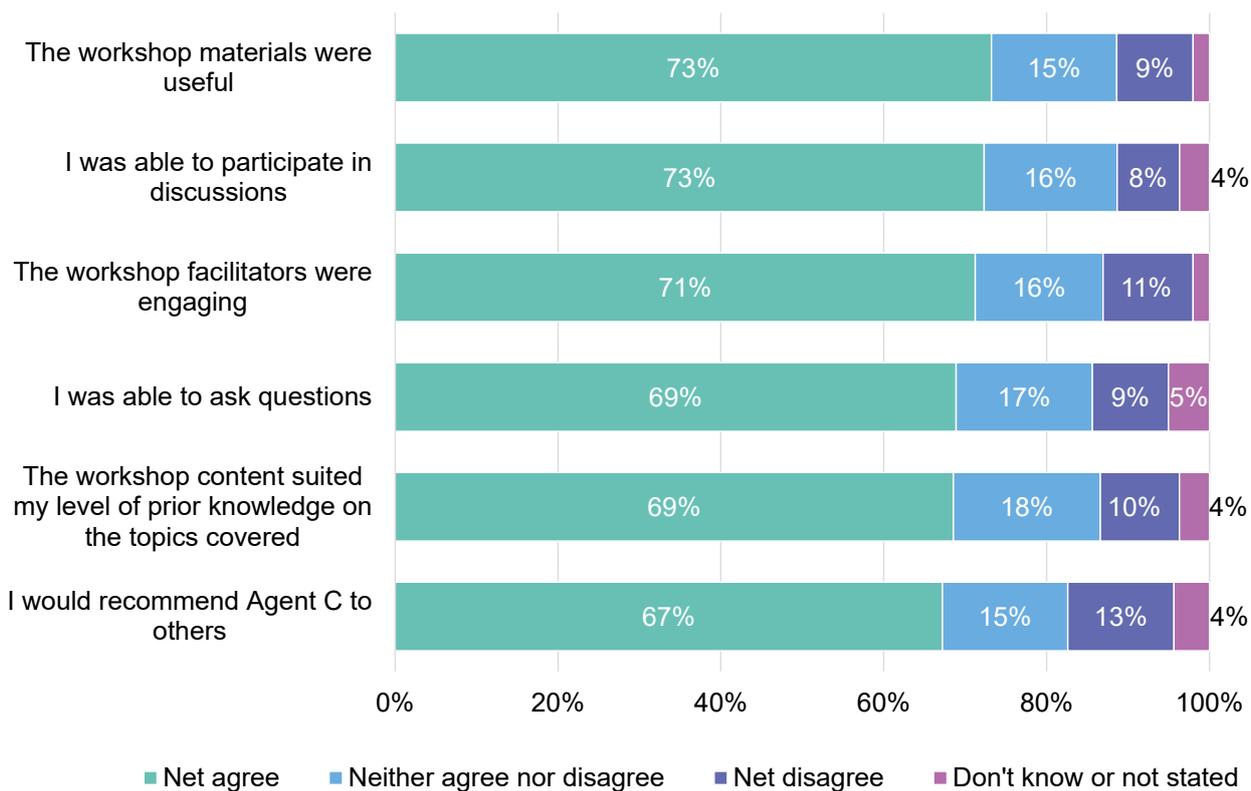
RECOMMENDATION

Develop a variation of Agent C suitable for those that interact closely with young people susceptible to misinformation, such as school staff and youth workers.

Participant engagement with Agent C is high

Feedback from survey respondents concerning Agent C's engagement was generally positive. Participants reported that Agent C was participatory – 73% agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to participate in discussions, and 69% agreed or strongly agreed they were able to ask questions. Similarly, 71% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop facilitators were engaging.

Figure 8 - Participant engagement with Agent C



This was also reflected in respondent qualitative responses. Generally, qualitative feedback concerning engagement showed participants had a positive experience across the workshops and were well engaged. Comments that no improvement were needed (15% of responses to this question) reflect this sentiment.

"I don't think it needs to be improved any more." – Participant (survey response)

Other comments made positive statements about aspects of the workshop or about the workshops in general (10% of responses to this question).

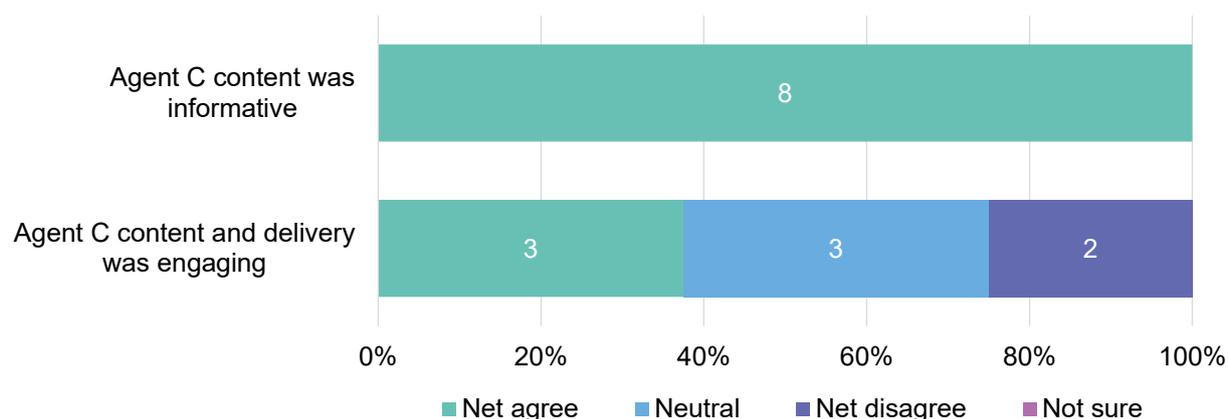
"I thought it was engaging and found myself taking notes on the key information I was learning." – Participant (survey response)

"It was great, we all had a lot of fun and I would recommend it to everyone!" – Participant (survey response)

There are opportunities to increase student engagement with Agent C, and better suit the school environment

Feedback from school staff and some participants indicate that there may be opportunities to further improve Agent C to better suit the school environment, particularly to increase engagement from young people. Contrasting the participant responses above, school staff survey respondents held mixed views on whether Agent C content and delivery was engaging. Less than half of staff respondents (n=3, of n=8 total) agreed or strongly agreed that Agent C content and delivery was engaging, while n=2 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.

Figure 9 - School staff perceptions of Agent C content and delivery



School staff interviewed elaborated that, while the content was informative and Agent C presenters were engaging and knowledgeable, the online delivery method used by the project did not always support student engagement. Some school staff observed their students had not interacted with and even disengaged from the training due to this.

All Together Now identified that resourcing disparities across schools may have contributed to engagement issues, with Agent C being most effective in classrooms where students have access to separate devices. This is so students can utilise the online workshop chat function to ask questions or make comments at any time to one of two Agent C facilitators. Agent C was still delivered to schools without access to individual student devices. However, All Together Now staff noted the delivery method used, which involved the training being delivered from a single screen to classrooms, may have been suboptimal for student engagement.

“It was a great informative program but we found the delivery method to be a little challenging.” – School staff member

In addition to All Together Now’s reflections above, school staff suggestions for improvement included shortening the length of the workshops, greater interactivity or student involvement, and using different examples. At least one school staff member also reported some technological issues that impacted Agent C delivery. All school staff interviewed reflected that an in-person delivery model would have been better-received by students – this was even acknowledged by school staff that reported the online delivery method had worked well. While there will be implications for project resourcing and reach, All Together Now should consider an in-person delivery model, even if only in select circumstances.

As noted above, Agent C still demonstrated evidence of successful engagement across all settings. All Together Now reported a key success factor was strong teacher/service leader engagement with the workshop, however this was not always present in each setting. All Together Now could consider development of accompanying resources for staff involved in delivery to follow along with the workshop and prompt participants when necessary. This could also extend to include legacy resources for reinforcement of Agent C concepts in the weeks and months following delivery of the third workshop, for example lesson plan ideas based on the concepts explored.

When asked how the workshops could be improved, participant survey respondents also provided a range of suggestions for improvement that aligned with school staff suggestions, with the most common responses suggesting more activities (15% of responses), more opportunity for interaction (10% of responses), or that the workshops be more engaging in general (9% of responses). For example, participants often suggested activities such as breakout rooms, group activities, or interactive tasks.

“I think having more group activities would help the group have more conversations with each other.” – Participant (survey response)

“Make the workshop more physical and active compared to sitting down and discussing.” – Participant (survey response)

Other suggestions for improvement provided in responses to this question included in-person delivery rather than online (8% of responses), shorter sessions (6% of responses), or longer or more frequent breaks (4% of responses).

RECOMMENDATION

Consider in-person delivery of Agent C.

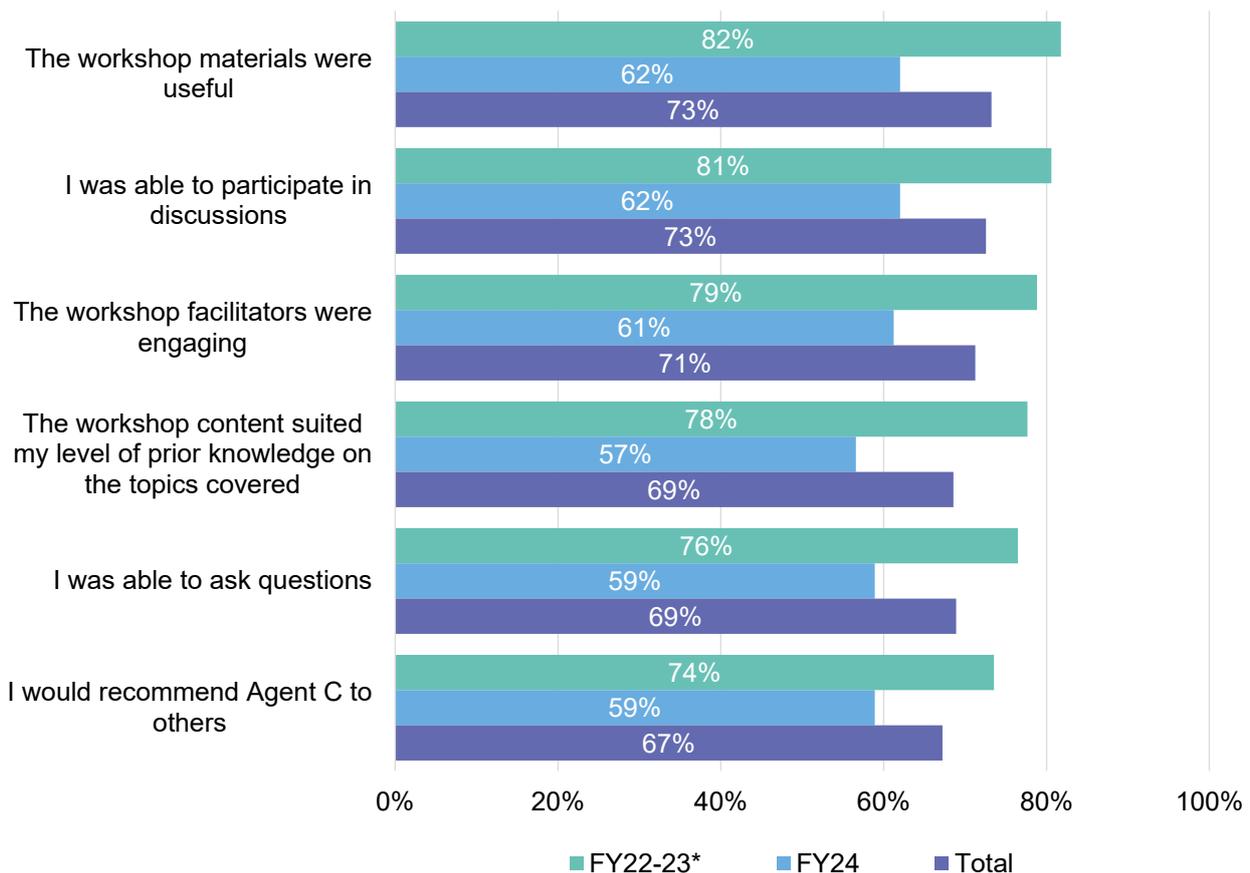
RECOMMENDATION

Set an expectation of school staff involvement in delivery of Agent C. To support this, develop and disseminate accompanying resources for school or service staff involved in delivery, including 'legacy resources' for reinforcement.

There were substantial differences in participant perceptions of Agent C over time

There were marked differences in participant perceptions of Agent C between the initial 18 months of the project, between January 2022 and June 2023, with the final year of the project between July 2023 and June 2024. Respondents that participated in the year ending June 2024 (FY24) reported much lower agreement across all statements regarding Agent C engagement and outcomes, relative to those that participated in January 2022 to June 2023 (FY22-23).

Figure 10 - Participant engagement with Agent C by year



*FY22-23 refers to the January 2022 to June 2023 period.

All Together Now staff reported the most significant change to Agent C across the two time periods were the school settings Agent C was delivered in. As noted above, Agent C was delivered to a higher proportion of specialist or alternative schools in FY24, with a relatively greater proportion of participants that school staff had identified as more prone to engaging with misleading and potentially harmful narratives and content. All Together Now reported tailoring Agent C based on prior consultation with each school to maximise engagement with the project for each participant cohort – strategies used included:

- Delivering Agent C on one screen instead of students using individual devices – this was sometimes due to limited school resources, and may have also impacted engagement as previously noted.

- Shortening workshop time
- Having more regular breaks and check-ins
- Simplifying or adapting content as necessary
- Adapting facilitation style
- Having a more conversational and open format to the workshop.

Despite these efforts, participant results in FY24 and feedback from school staff indicated Agent C still faced difficulties to retain participant engagement in some settings. A contributing factor to these lower results may have been that Agent C content wasn't suitable for certain cohorts, including in some specialist or alternative education settings. Reflecting this, the largest difference observed across the two time periods was respondent agreement with the statement 'the workshop content suited my level of prior knowledge on the topics covered', being a 21 percentage point difference across FY22-23 (78% agreed or strongly agreed) and FY24 (57%).

Indeed, All Together Now reported some schools and services did not complete all three Agent C workshops due to the project not being a great fit for students. One school staff member interviewed reported that while their students met the intended age profile for Agent C, this didn't necessarily align with their developmental age. This may indicate that Agent C content could be further simplified to support engagement from certain cohorts.

"If you had someone that was really interested in that subject and really wanting to engage (with Agent C), they would get so much out of it. It's just that our students weren't at that level." – School staff member

School staff provided suggestions for improvement to better engage all students, notably in-person delivery, and providing more tailored examples that held greater relevance to students. For example, one school staff member observed their students had the greatest engagement with Agent C when the facilitators used Donald Trump as an example to illustrate Agent C content. There may be an opportunity for All Together Now to expand the consultation process before Agent C is delivered, to learn about not only issues that staff face in the school (or other settings), but also to gauge from students which examples would be most interesting for them. This could support tailoring of examples for each setting and build interest among participants ahead of Agent C workshops.

This was also supported by participant respondent feedback, with 6% of responses for the question 'How could the Agent C workshops be improved?' suggesting specific content changes.

"The Agent C workshops could be improved by utilising conspiracy theories found in school settings so that students can relate to it more." – Participant (survey response)

"I would like a bit more insight to see fake news in websites." – Participant (survey response)

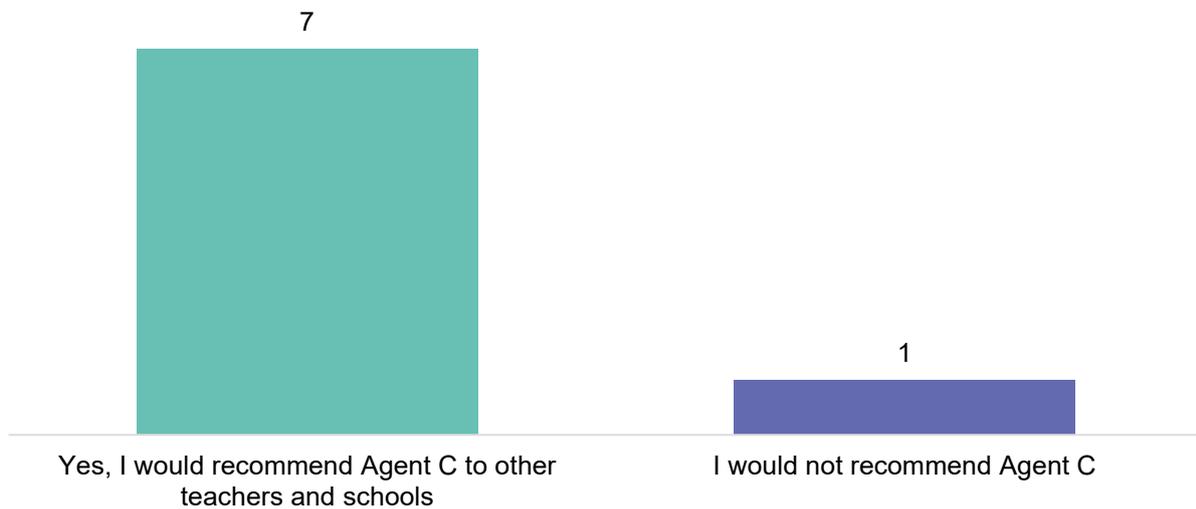
RECOMMENDATION

Explore opportunities for student input on examples of fake news/conspiracy theories that can be incorporated into Agent C training.

Most students and school staff would recommend Agent C

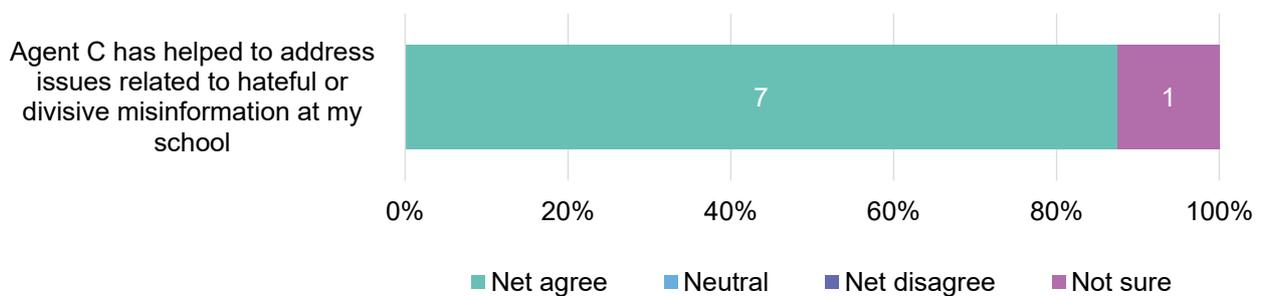
There was high endorsement of Agent C among those that participated in Agent C. As displayed above in Figure 10, two-thirds of participants (67%) would recommend Agent C to other young people. Among school staff, n=7 (out of n=8) respondents would recommend Agent C to other teachers and schools.

Figure 11 - School staff endorsement of Agent C



A key indicator of Agent C's utility was its impact at a whole-of-school level – nearly all school staff respondents (n=7 out of n=8) agreed or strongly agreed that Agent C had helped to address issues related to hateful or divisive misinformation at their school.

Figure 12 - School staff perception of whether Agent C helped to address issues at their school



Contrastingly, just n=2 school staff respondents (of n=8) reported that Agent C had exceeded their expectations – n=3 respondents reported Agent C had met their expectations, and n=3 reported Agent C had not met their expectations.

Figure 13 - School staff perceptions of whether Agent C met their expectations



All n=3 school staff that reported Agent C had not met their expectations cited delivery issues or improvements as the reason Agent C did not meet their expectations. This could be mitigated by implementing some of the adjustments to the project described earlier in this Report. Further, Urbis observed that some school staff interviewed reported challenges facing their students that were outside Agent C's scope, such as sharing of intimate images, which may help to explain why Agent C did not meet some school staff's expectations.

Broadly, the high endorsement for Agent C speaks to a training project which is well-regarded among those that have experienced it first-hand. Among school staff interviewed, even those that reported Agent C could have been better delivered to their students expressed interest in having Agent C be delivered to their students again in the future.

4. PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

4.1. METHOD

The participant outcomes outlined in the following section of this Report are based on the Agent C Project Logic, jointly developed by Urbis and All Together Now.

The following assessment of participant outcomes are based on the combined data from all valid participant surveys completed between January 2022 and June 2024 (n=299, or 30% of all participants) and responses from data collected with school staff. Participant responses were reviewed and some removed from consideration prior to analysis, with only valid responses included. Invalid responses included incomplete responses, those with crude language, or otherwise demonstrated evidence that they were not a serious response.

The participant survey included both closed and open-ended questions. Responses to all closed questions have been charted in Sections 3 and 4. Participants were asked four open-ended questions:

1. What's the biggest thing you learned during the Agent C workshops?
2. How have the Agent C workshops changed the way you feel about the world?
3. How have the Agent C workshops changed the way you feel about yourself?
4. How could the Agent C workshops be improved?

For each open-ended question, qualitative responses were coded to common themes that correlate to Agent C's intended outcomes. Some responses were coded to multiple themes. Responses are reported as a percentage of all responses received for their corresponding question, noting not all respondents answered each open-ended question. It should be noted that respondents who identified achievement of one particular outcome in an open-ended response may have also experienced other outcomes.

4.2. OUTCOMES

Participant survey responses demonstrate that Agent C has proven effective across all intended participant outcomes. In response to various statements regarding Agent C's effectiveness, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed to all statements. For nearly all statements, more than two-thirds of participants (67% or more) agreed or strongly agreed.

The strongest outcomes observed were around Agent C's effectiveness in empowering participants to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories (Outcome 3). Participants overwhelmingly indicated they felt more confident in their ability to tell when something is fake news (77%) and a conspiracy theory (76%). In open-ended questions, participants most commonly expressed that knowledge or techniques to challenge fake news and conspiracy theories were their most significant takeaway from Agent C. School staff also reported their students were more confident in recognising that something is fake news and/or a conspiracy theory (n=7 out of n=8).

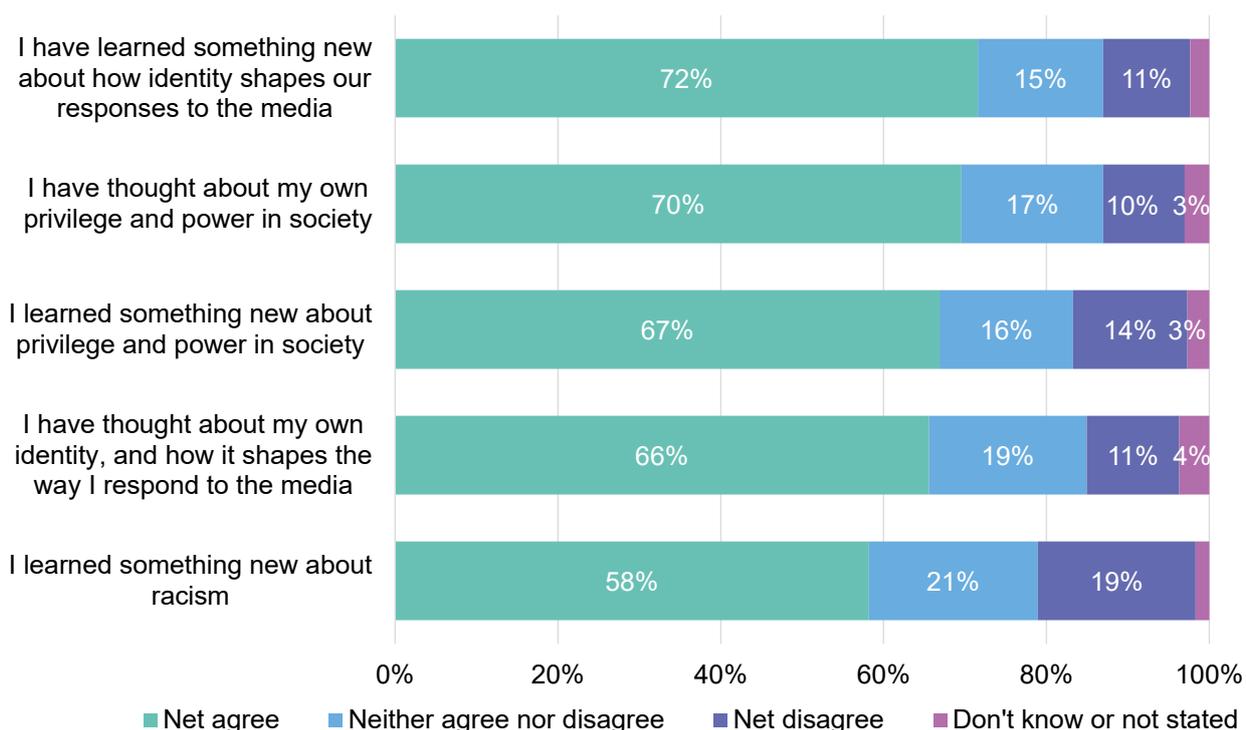
Outcome 1: Participants are equipped to reflect on their own identity, privilege and power

All Together Now drew from their expertise as an anti-racism organisation to incorporate content on identity, privilege and power in the Agent C syllabus. The content aimed to promote reflection from participants on their own identity, privilege and power, and how this impacted their responses to media.

Agent C has demonstrated success with respect to this outcome. A majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that through participating in the workshops they had learned something new about privilege and power in society (67%), and about how identity shapes our responses to the media (72%). Though still a majority, a lower proportion of participants (58%) reported they had learned something new about racism.

A majority of respondents also reported they had engaged in self-reflection as a result of participation. Two-thirds (66%) agreed or strongly agreed they had thought about their own identity and how it shapes the way they respond to the media, and 70% had thought about their own privilege and power in society.

Figure 14 - Participant perceptions of Agent C's impact (identity, privilege and power)



Qualitative feedback from participants demonstrated that participants reflected on their own identity, privilege and power. However, across all qualitative questions, participants spoke less to these concepts compared to those addressed in Outcomes 2 and 3. This aligns with the slightly lower average net agree across Outcome 1 quantitative questions (66%) compared to those of Outcome 2, regarding more critical engagement with media (70%), and Outcome 3, regarding critical engagement with fake news and conspiracy theories (74%).

Although not commonly identified, some participants spoke to themes of power and privilege in responses to open-ended questions. When asked how the workshops had changed the way they felt about themselves, some responses were related to participants reflecting on their own privilege and identity (8% of responses to this question). When asked what their biggest learning was, some participants raised learnings regarding the intersection between privilege, vulnerability or identity, and fake news or conspiracy theories (6% of responses to this question).

“Understanding how fake news targets and even villainises groups of people.” – Participant (survey response)

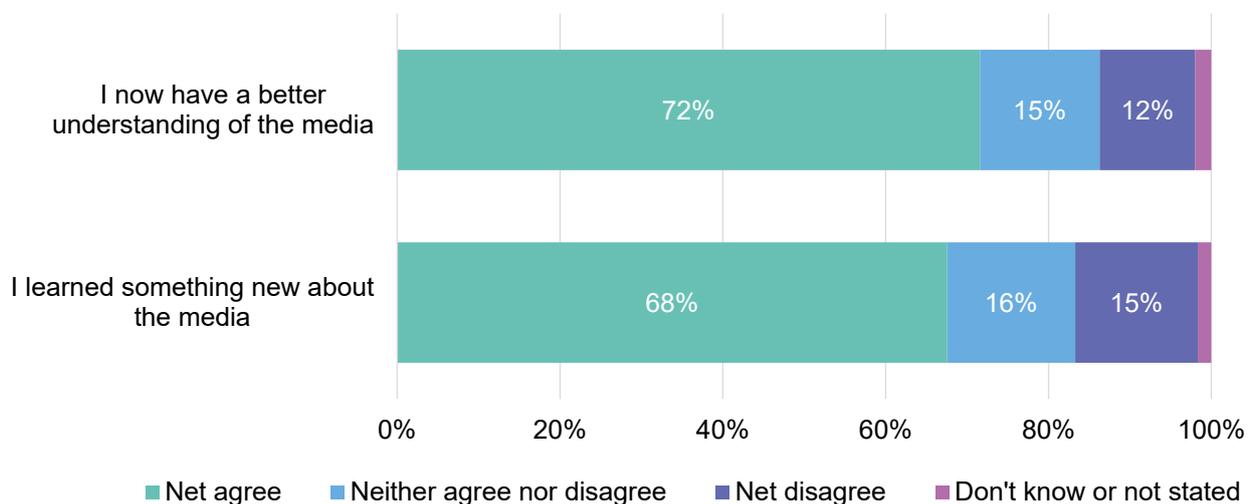
“How privilege and power affect our beliefs and ideologies.” – Participant (survey response)

Outcome 2: Participants are equipped to engage more critically with media

Agent C was built around the concept of improving young peoples' understanding of the media, with the aim that participants would engage with media more critically.

Agent C has demonstrated success with respect to this outcome, with 72% of participants reporting that they have a better understanding of the media following participation in Agent C, and 68% reporting they learned something new about the media.

Figure 15 - Participant perceptions of Agent C's impact (media)



Qualitative feedback reflects these findings, with participants reporting increased self-reflection in terms of how they critically engage. For example, when asked about their biggest learning, 5% of responses to this question indicated that participants were promoted to reflect on their own approach to understanding evidence or engaging online. Similarly, when asked what had changed about themselves, participants noted that they had self-reflected on how they perceive information or contribute online (6% of responses to this question).

"That I can be vulnerable to disinformation/misinformation online." – Participant (survey response)

"It made me reevaluate the way I chat in social media." – Participant (survey response)

Additionally, participants noted they had become more critical or sceptical of the world around them. For the question "how have the workshops changed the way you feel about the world?" this was one of the most common responses (11% of responses to this question).

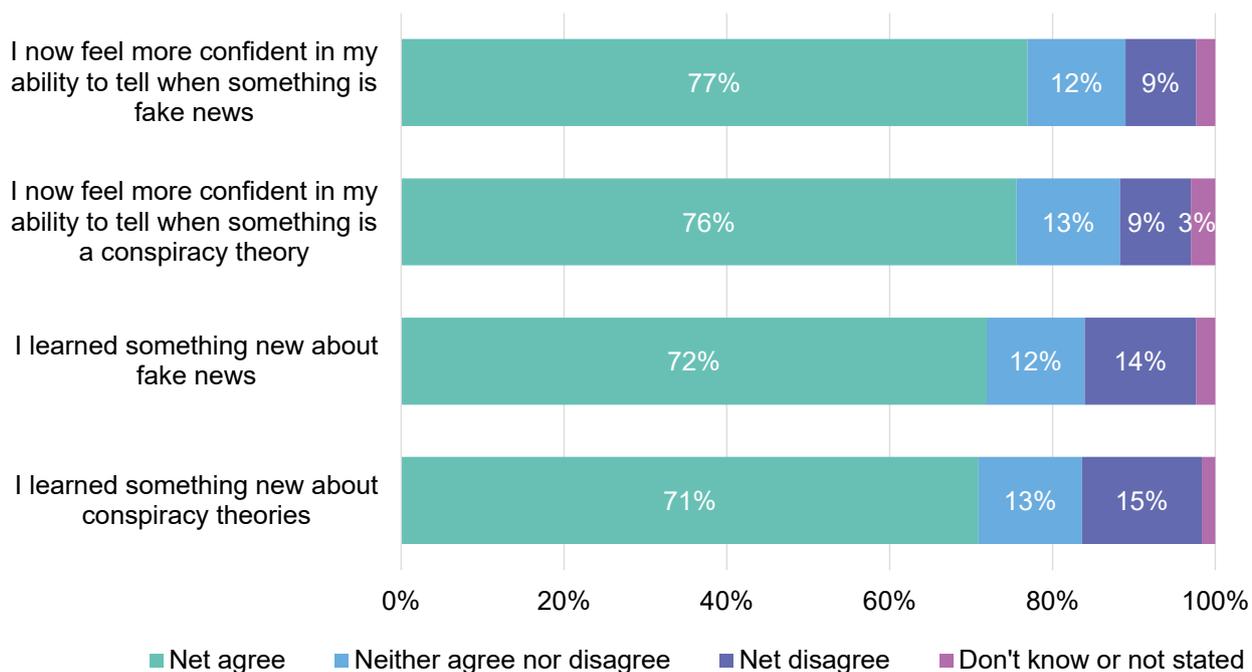
"I have also seen that not everyone is telling the truth when they share thing in the media and it has helped me to be wary of the world nowadays." – Participant (survey response)

Outcome 3: Participants are empowered to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories

Further to better equipping participants to critically engage with the media, Agent C aimed to empower young people to recognise fake news and conspiracy theories. Agent C has successfully empowered participants to recognise fake news and conspiracy theories. Almost eight out of ten participants reported they felt more confident in their ability to tell when something is fake news (77%), and to tell when something is a conspiracy theory (76%). Additionally, 72% of respondents felt they learned something new about fake news and 71% felt they learned something new about conspiracy theories.

For the collection of statements categorised to Outcome 3, respondents reported the highest average percentage of net agree (74%) compared to Outcomes 1 (66%), 2 (70%), and 4 (65%). This suggests that Agent C has been particularly effective in equipping participants to better recognise and respond to conspiracy theories and fake news.

Figure 16 - Participant perceptions of Agent C's impact (fake news and conspiracy theories)



This is reflected in qualitative survey responses. When asked what their biggest learning was, participants most commonly identified this was how to identify fake news or conspiracy theories (24%).

“The biggest thing I learned during the Agent C workshop was how to identify fake news or conspiracy theories in the media we use daily.” – Participant (survey response)

“How to recognize and evaluate to fake news and information.” – Participant (survey response)

Additionally, responses demonstrate that participants have been supported to develop the skills needed to critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories. For example, participants reported they had learnt the skills which would enable them to challenge fake news and conspiracy theories if they were to come across any in the future.

“(I have learned) about how to combat fake news and societal bias and issues that arise within the media.” – Participant (survey response)

Similarly, participants commonly reported an increased feeling of empowerment, security, confidence or hope due to the knowledge they had been equipped with. This was a particularly strong response when participants were asked how the workshops had changed the way they felt about themselves.

“I feel more ready and safe when browsing on the internet.” – Participant (survey response)

“They’ve made me feel more hopeful that we can help people realise the truth.” – Participant (survey response)

Although this outcome showed the strongest results compared with the other outcomes, there were a small number of participants who made broad statements about how they now perceive the world as untrustworthy or fake. A small proportion of these statements took on a cynical or negative tone. This raises the consideration that for some participants, Agent C elevated their scepticism about information they receive, but they were not necessarily empowered to critically engage – or at least not immediately following Agent C workshops.

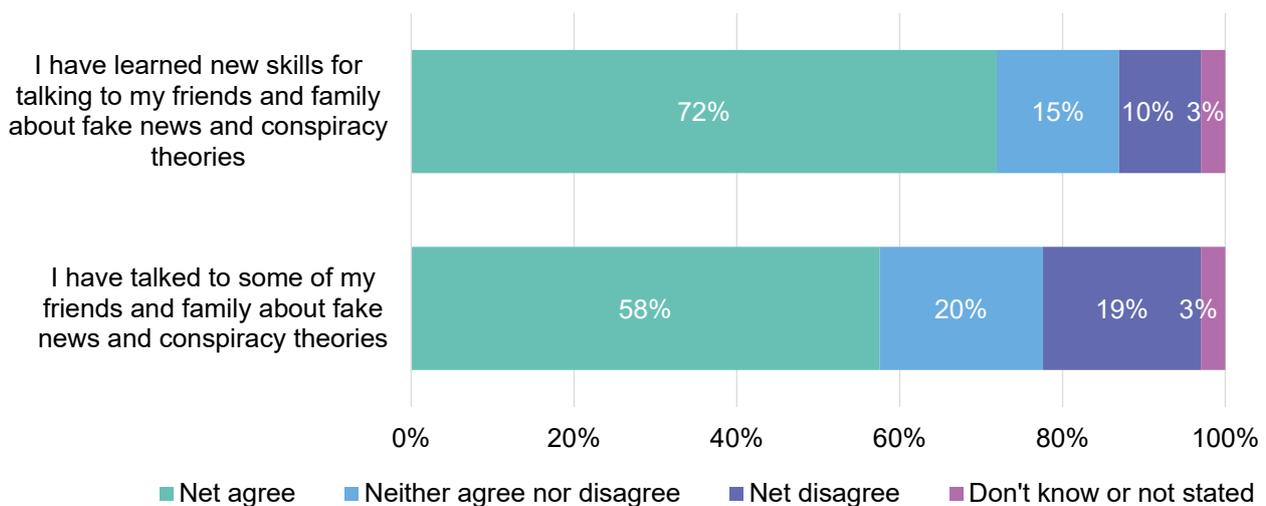
“I realised a lot of the world is filled with lies and things that are not real.” – Participant (survey response)

Outcome 4: Participants have conversations within their social networks about fake news and conspiracy theories

All Together Now wanted to increase the impact of Agent C by equipping young people with the skills and confidence to talk about their learnings with their friends and family.

Agent C has demonstrated success in achieving this outcome, however further insight is restricted by the timing of data collection. The vast majority of respondents (72%) reported they have learned new skills for talking to friends and family about fake news and conspiracy theories. Fewer, though still a majority, reported that they had had these discussions with family and friends (58%). The lower proportion of agreement for this statement is likely attributable to the timing of the survey occurring immediately following the third workshop, leaving limited opportunity for participants to have these conversations. There is the potential for increasing numbers of participants to have these conversations over time, as they further develop and have opportunity to explore the skills provided to them through Agent C. However, the timing of this survey limits further insight.

Figure 17 - Participant perceptions of Agent C's impact (talking to family and friends)



Although participants tended to agree less on whether they had talked to their friends and family about these topics, as above, the qualitative responses further suggest the potential for this number to eventually increase. When asked what their biggest learning was, the most common response to this question (24% of responses to this question) was learning how to communicate with others about conspiracy theories or fake news.

“(My biggest learning is) what the motivational interviewing techniques are and how to approach someone about conspiracy theories.” – Participant (survey response)

“(My biggest learning is) introducing ways to engage in conversations with people who have conflicting values and beliefs.” – Participant (survey response)

Similarly, when asked what the workshops had changed in how they felt about themselves, a few participants reported that they would change the way in which they interact with others in relation to conspiracy theories and fake news going forward.

“I am more aware how I approach people about their own conspiracy theories.” – Participant (survey response)

Additionally, some participants were able to demonstrate increased empathy for other people and increased understanding of others perspectives. When asked what had changed about themselves, and what had changed about the world, a small number of responses spoke to increased empathy and understanding (2% and 5% of given responses respectively).

“I now understand why people can have or gain certain opinions.” – Participant (survey response)

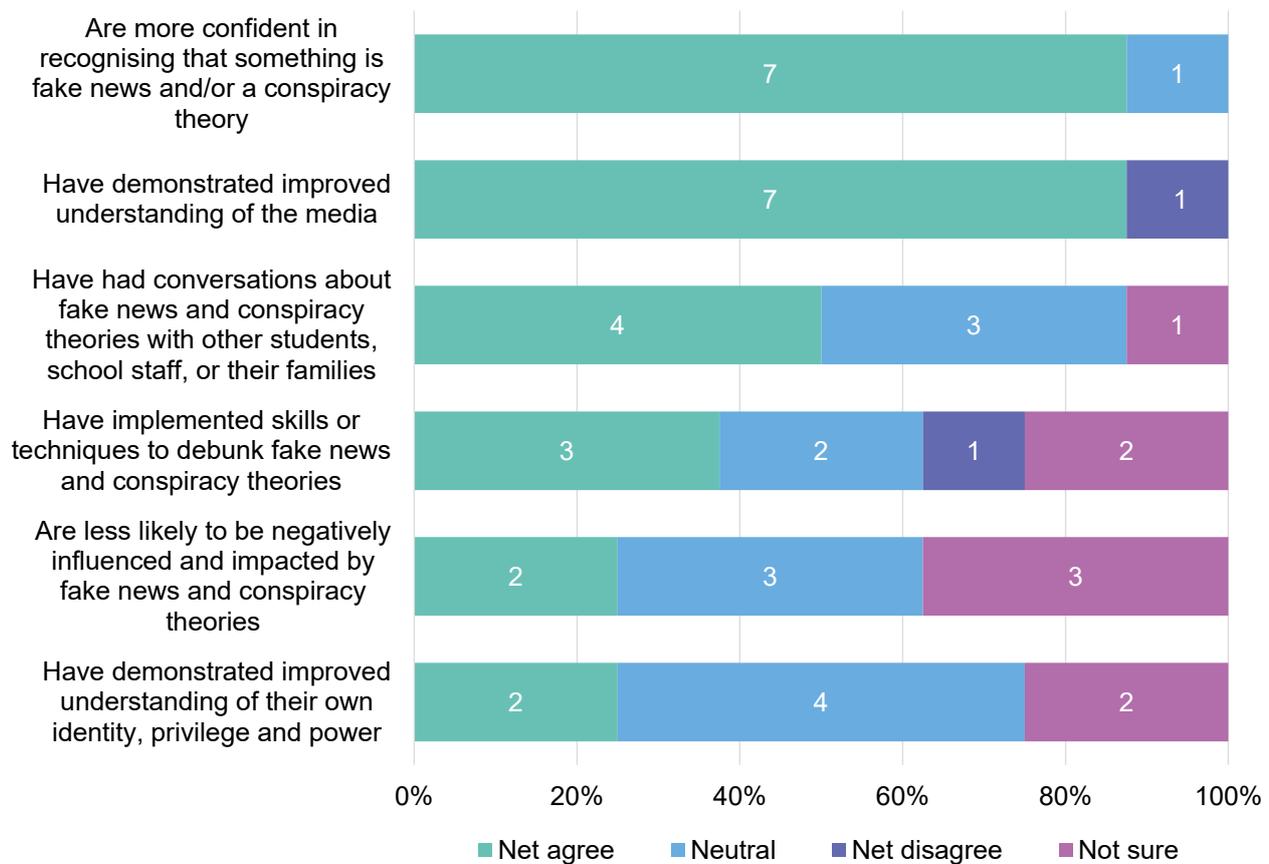
School staff reported strong outcomes for participants

School staff were also asked to report any outcomes they had observed for students that participated. As with the participant responses above, and echoed in interviews with school staff, school staff respondents most strongly identified that students were more confident in recognising that something is fake news and/or a conspiracy theory, and had demonstrated improved understanding of the media (both n=7 out of n=8 respondents).

“Our kids now investigate (the information they consume) that little bit more.” – School staff member

School staff were less certain on whether students had achieved other intended outcomes of Agent C, although these also reflect outcomes that may be more difficult for school staff to observe – for example, whether students have had conversations about or have implemented skills or techniques to debunk fake news and conspiracy theories.

Figure 18 - School staff reported outcomes for participants. Students that participated in Agent C...



5. CONCLUSIONS

Consumption of online misinformation is a substantial issue facing young people and the environments they interact with, such as schools. Agent C has demonstrated success to date in addressing this issue across multiple domains, including reach, outcomes, and project delivery.

Agent C reached over 1000 young people between January 2022 and June 2024, well in excess of its 720-person target. School staff and students reported Agent C content was informative, with workshop content built on established research and co-design with young people through the Agent C Pilot. This content was also frequently updated to include topical examples and respond to emerging trends, such as online misogyny.

Agent C also delivered on its intended outcomes for attendees. Among its intended outcomes, the project demonstrated its greatest effectiveness in equipping attendees to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories. The project was also highly effective in supporting participants to engage more critically with media. These strong results were achieved even amidst changes in delivery setting in the final year of the project, where potentially more complex cohorts at higher risk of engaging with harmful online narratives were prioritised.

There are still opportunities to further improve Agent C and increase engagement among participants. This Report has made three key recommendations to increase engagement with young people and in schools:

- Consider in-person delivery of Agent C.
- Set an expectation of school staff involvement in delivery of Agent C. To support this, develop and disseminate accompanying resources for school or service staff involved in delivery, including 'legacy resources' for reinforcement.
- Explore opportunities for student input on examples of fake news/conspiracy theories that can be incorporated into Agent C training.

Separately, this Report also made a fourth recommendation, to extend Agent C to include practitioners that work closely with young people.

Agent C has achieved many successes between 2021 and 2024, rapidly growing from a concept into a sought-after training resource for schools and young people across NSW. There are further opportunities for refinement of Agent C to augment engagement and outcomes. With further maturity and scale, Agent C holds even greater potential to address issues of online misinformation among young people.

6. DISCLAIMER

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This report has been prepared with due care and diligence by Urbis and the statements and opinions given by Urbis in this report are given in good faith and in the reasonable belief that they are correct and not misleading, subject to the limitations above.

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