

Rueben Visser

Aberfoyle Park High School

## It's a glass half-full SACE journey for Rueben

Rueben Visser is a self-confessed 'very unique human.' A love of languages and understanding all the intricacies around communicating with others is a common thread that runs throughout Rueben's student life - but it did not actually start off that way.

Nine years ago, Rueben and his family immigrated to Australia from South Africa, and at the time he spoke very little English, which led to him being teased at school. Through the tireless efforts of his mother and primary school teachers, Rueben began to master the English language with its many complexities.

As he progressed, he discovered a new-found ability and developed a love for languages. So much so that he won a national writing competition *Colour Your Classroom* in 2015, and recently participated in the United Nations Youth Australia Evatt Competition, Australia's premier debating and diplomacy competition.

Now, this confident, articulate, and expressive young man defines himself as a "HASS person" – someone keenly interested in the humanities, arts and social sciences.

AIF and Exploring Identities and Futures (EIF) are two new SACE subjects being developed and the initial pilot was run in selected schools this year, including Rueben's Aberfoyle Park High School. The subjects were tested in a live environment and have been designed to develop a student's unique potential, to allow them to build upon their knowledge, skills and capabilities by exploring their own identity and ways of solving a problem or exploring an idea.

Language became Rueben's artform of choice. He can communicate in three languages – Afrikaans, English and Spanish. He has now added conversational Japanese into the mix after completing the Activating Identities and Futures (AIF) subject.

"Being fully honest, I didn't know what to do at first. I ended up picking a few things, then would come up against roadblocks. Eventually I got to the strategy of using a mind map. I mapped all the subjects and things I liked, and then went into more detail. Then I came to languages, and my interest in Japanese language and why I liked it," said Rueben.

Ironically coming up against a problem seemed to help the process.

"So, in a way, the best thing was I hit a problem, bounced back, then hit another problem and bounced back and so on. Then I found these strategies to help me to get through it and it kind of unravelled the road. Then it became just a straight line for me, and it really opened up my experience to go into an area that I'm really passionate about," said Rueben.

It was important for Rueben to connect with learning methods that worked for him.

"My family is very different. Half my family is dyslexic, the other half isn't, so I learn slightly differently to everyone else in my family. I like listening, reading and seeing visuals. If I get that sense of multimodal, it really helps, and I can absorb information a lot faster."

To become conversationally fluent in Japanese in eight weeks, Rueben identified ways of learning that would help him to achieve his goal.

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“There’s different ways of learning and you have to learn in ways that entertain you. If it’s not fun, you are not going to learn. I tried to surround myself in as much Japanese as possible, and with as many levels of Japanese as possible. I talked to students studying Japanese, to exchange students from Japan, I talked to teachers at school teaching Japanese. I engaged with Japanese TV series and movies. With all these different people and I was just learning, talking and understanding the language. I think wherever your passion is, you can always find and connect with the community and build those relationships to help you succeed,” said Rueben.

Creating and connecting with a community was an important method Rueben used to achieve success. Support, invariably, works both ways.

“It starts with the community. I am very fortunate to have had so many people out there striving for me to be successful. My peers, they constantly push me, and I push them to do their best in their subjects. They’ll tell me, I have this test in chemistry, and I’ll be like, you can do this, I believe in you. Then I have my drama performance, so I’m like, hey, can you come and support me. The teachers and our school community are fantastic, they really want to see us succeed,” said Rueben.

Rueben was enthusiastic about being one of the first participants in the initial AIF pilot.

“I think the best way to describe AIF is opportunities in abundance. I think it is a subject where everyone can really just excel and learn. I know one person was doing something with their VET course, I was doing something with Japanese, someone else was disassembling and reassembling a car. So, I think the learning is just limitless, or limitless potential in the sense that you can do almost anything you wanted,” he enthused.

Rueben could see that the flexibility of the new subject meant it could be creatively adapted by each student, depending upon their own unique interests.

“AIF can be such an accommodating subject in a sense that if you’re a STEM person, great, you can do STEM. I know someone who did a project where they linked their mind to a computer and every time they blinked, the Flappy Bird would go up and down. It was incredible. He loved the STEM field. I love the language field. I love people and culture and connecting with them. So, for me, I was trying to be as conversationally fluent in Japanese as quickly as possible.

The new subject also challenged Rueben to develop a diverse range of skills and knowledge to complete all assessment requirements.

“I learnt so many different things and different skills. It wasn’t all just writing down notes and stuff. So, I was out talking to people in Japanese. I was exercising that communication, I was building my social skills, I was building my technology skills because I was recording and editing things. I was watching videos and absorbing information from blogs. I was being assessed by Japanese teachers, which was a very scary thing, but it was very fun. It was a great experience and really enriched my success in learning.”

Rueben could see how his other SACE subjects supported his learning with the new subject, and vice versa.

“It was refreshing, and a new subject that I enjoyed thoroughly. I also enjoy my other SACE subjects and I feel they really feed into AIF and really helped build the core of it, the base, the foundation. I use skills from my English and Spanish for language learning and acquiring language and understanding that kind of stuff. I use my skills from drama to speak and be comfortable with

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conversation and used my other subjects where I'm required to do multimodal stuff as a way to communicate myself and express my learning.

"It's important to do the SACE like it's building blocks that really establishes you going forward, post school. I think SACE is a really good way to establish a person either going into TAFE, tertiary education or the right employment. It builds the necessary skills to an acceptable degree. I think it also gives you the flexibility to advance into areas that you're really interested in, to really discover who you are with people who have similar interests."

Reuben's affinity with languages will continue, as AIF has helped him to see who he could be in the future.

"Most of the things I'm learning are transferable to future situations, especially with languages because after school I see myself going into law and business. Obviously, I love languages, I love speaking to different people and I think that if I go into international business that will really put me at an advantage because I know how to unpack language, understand language and move around that barrier."

Along the way, Reuben had to deal with the same sort of challenges that most SACE students dealt with every year and learn how to manage them.

"If there's no challenge as you travel along the road, there's no character built. Through my whole SACE journey, sometimes you get hit by ways of procrastination. I promise, everyone will get waves of procrastination. The best thing I can say is that there are times you will feel unmotivated. You are going to have times when you are blocked. When the grade you get back isn't what you wanted, and that could be really off-putting. But the great thing about SACE and the whole community that I have in my school is that they're very uplifting. The idea that you have a chance to do something and then have another chance to improve on it, that you can always get better, that there are staff and friends that push you to do your best, and constantly ask more of you in a good way."

That connection to community and sense of belonging is something that Reuben would encourage other SACE students to consider developing for themselves.

"Don't expect too much, and don't expect too little. Just understand the flow of it and go with it. The important thing is you can't do high school alone. There's so many other people going through exactly the same thing as you, and it's important to talk to them, talk to your family, talk to teachers. You'll see everyone's going through the same thing and it just gets better, and you'll love the experience. You will look back and think that was a great time," said Reuben.

He was quick to highlight the positives about secondary schooling.

"Honestly, high school is the first step into a very exciting and scary place to be. Scary good, not scary bad. It's an absolutely wonderful experience. It's a lot better than primary school, for those wondering. High school is just an experience where you truly start to find yourself and you find everyone else. You find out who you like being around. You start building those professional relationships and building those friendships that really matter."

His ideas about what learning and how to approach it now and into the future have been shaped by his experience of SACE and AIF.

"Initially being an immigrant kid, I had no idea what SACE was. I thought, what is this scary thing where they have us do exams and big thousand-word assignments. And although we do that, it's an experience, it's fun and I've really shaped my idea of what learning is through SACE. It's not just

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sitting down for hours on end learning content. It's finding ways to learn, finding ways to entertain yourself while doing subjects, the things you like doing and really advancing and excelling in the areas you like through creative learning. The ability to transfer skills with natural talent to any part of your life. There are so many examples in AIF, and I think a great thing about AIF is that it builds your persistence to get back up and continue."

Becoming a creative and agile thinker and to be able to activate what you know to cope in unfamiliar situations is a valuable lesson learnt.

"Success isn't found on the first strike. We watched a video from the Boost lady, and she was like, I hope your business fails the first time, and that was shocking. Then she explained how failure really leads to success and by hitting the roadblocks and coming back from it, builds persistence to do something you are passionate about," said Rueben.

"Because I feel in life and in high school, there are going to be roadblocks, You're going to hit something and not know how to go around it. Then you ask questions or strategise ways to get around it, whether that's a mind map, a detailed plan or a list of what you plan to get done, or counselling from people around you. It's anything that will help you to progress forward. I definitely think SACE has provided that to me in abundance."