Tom and I have been asked to speak about the Solid Pathways program. What this program is about, fundamentally, are possibilities. Philosophers like possibilities. One reason that philosophers like possibilities is that without them, things don’t change. We have to be able to imagine the possibility of a better future to make it happen. The other reason philosophers like possibilities is because they are interesting, kooky objects. They seem to be nothing – my eating a merely possible ice cream is no fun at all – and yet something has to be possible first for it to happen. So maybe possibilities are real after all?

Let’s run with this line of thought. What we want students in this program to realise is that the kinds of academic and career pathways they are encountering when they come to UQ are real possibilities for them. Each of you right now and on account of your individual merits is on track to go to University and going to University is a completely transformative experience. Going to University opens up the entire world to you. This program is, therefore, not so much about closing the gap but preventing a gap from opening. Our aim in this program is to keep you on that pathway to university, by helping you to develop the academic skills to excel at school and make the transition to University as seamless as possible.

There is no other program like Solid Pathways. The ability to think clearly and constructively, to understand the nature of argument and explanation (and to know the difference between the two), to know how to frame the right questions, to organise your thoughts within a rational framework and be able to express them with clarity and objectivity, is a skill set that translates into success in every field of inquiry and employment. There is no other program currently of this scale. We have 500 students in the pilot
phase of this program. There is no other program that involves such a close partnership between every level of the education sector, government, families, and community organisations.

We have everybody we need in this room to make this program a success and we thank all of you for being involved -- the Minister for Education, Training and Employment (the Honorable John-Paul Langbroek), Elders like Aunty Valda, the Vice Chancellor and senior executives of The University of Queensland, the Assistant Director Generals, Education Queensland, our friends from Metro region (including the Metropolitan Curriculum Manager, Laurelle Woollett and Regional Director, Chris Rider), our wonderful teachers (Ms Kersland, Mr Malezer, Mr Cassidy, Mr Cupitt), UQ philosophers and critical thinking gurus (Peter Ellerton and Dominic Hyde), our writer-in-residence (Angelina Hurley), our project and executive officers (Leanne Ford, Karen Lea, and Cate Carter). Every faculty of this university and some of our major research institutes are in the throes of constructing fantastic activities that will challenge the students during our experience days and camps planned for this year. Most importantly, we have here you students in Solid Pathways and your families, because at the end of the day it is you who will make this program what it is. Stay focused on your studies and your goals. You have your notebooks. Write down your big ideas (or little ones), your stories, your observations, the questions you want answers to. The most important skill you can acquire from this program is the art of inquiry, but it takes practice, attention and imagination to acquire this skill. I have no doubt that you are up for the challenges ahead. It’s an honour to be here today to celebrate the start of your bright futures.
We would like to tell you about some of the feedback that we are receiving from parents, schools and the students to illustrate the power of Solid Pathways.

One principal wrote to the team to let them know how one of the young men from her school had changed. She wrote, “Such and such is a very clever young man but I believe he is at serious risk of disengaging from school. ……….During the two Solid Pathways lessons he has participated in, I have watched his ‘face change’. He becomes animated and his eyes become brighter (it is difficult to explain). He is engaged the whole time and really enjoys the tasks and participating. It is an absolute joy to watch. He is the first there and he is logged on ready to go before I get there. He is never usually ready for anything. I am excited by what I have seen so far and look forward to seeing how he goes for the rest of the year.”

A mother has called me and emailed me a number of times over the last two months to check that her daughter is still in the program, and to find out when it would begin this year. So anxious was she that her child should continue when she moved school, that the school contact teacher has been in touch with us several times and each time she mentions that the student is so excited about Solid Pathways.

At the experience day, held last December a number of parents spoke to us about the benefits of the program and commented that they were not aware that their child had the potential to attend university. The experience day gave families and schools the opportunity to celebrate their children’s “cleverness”, with so many remarks clustered around this concept.

One young man was spotted during his time with the Shakespeare Ensemble, as a promising young actor and subsequently was chosen to be
part on the next Digi Youth Arts production. He has been busily rehearsing over the school holidays. Although he never saw himself as an actor, he has accepted the challenge willingly. His mum tells me that his career goals have changed and that he wants to be an engineer, although he loves science and has selected an OP pathway that will give him choice at the end of year 12.

Solid Pathways is giving the senior students the opportunity to reflect on career pathways and to think carefully about subject choices and opportunities to improve their results. Although we only had one student take up the UQ Enhanced Writer’s Course during the summer vacation, he has raised the bar on his expectations for himself, for the field of study he now intends to take, but one of the best things is he has discovered a love of writing. His words to me were, “I have always liked writing, but I didn’t know I was so good at it, and this week I have become so much better at it.”

Solid Pathways gives kids the opportunity to know they are good learners and a way to be even better learners.