



UNSW STEP UP: Playconomics Outreach Program 2026 High School Deployment

“This immersive online game challenges students to develop their economics, business and financial skills. It also allows them to apply their skills and knowledge to an authentic challenge”

- Principal Leader of a participating high school

STEP UP: Playconomics Outreach Program is an award-winning outreach education program led by Isabella Dobrescu and Alberto Motta (Professors of Economics at the University of New South Wales - UNSW) and conducted by LionsHeart Studios on behalf of the UNSW School of Economics.

Having enrolled nearly 7,000 students from more than 100 high schools since 2022, the aim of the program is to provide kids the opportunity to further their economic and financial literacy by engaging with **Playconomics** – a rich and academically rigorous online learning environment, comprising an immersive videogame and custom learning management platform with complete learning materials, engaging short activities, detailed AI feedback and real-time progress tracking.

Now in its 5th year, the program is showing strong benefits:

- 23% to 40% higher learning gains, with harder topics associated with larger knowledge boosts;
- 74% of students gain high confidence in their economics reasoning, and 64% in maths skills;
- 11% more students consider going to university;
- 126% more growth in UNSW enrolments from STEP UP schools than from similar non-STEP schools;
- excellent performance of students from STEP UP schools in their 1st year at UNSW.

Importantly, it has also created a genuine collaboration between UNSW and participating high schools, stemming from our shared goal of increasing students’ economic and financial literacy.

Designed to have minimum impact on school staff and resources, the program supports teachers in the delivery of curriculum-aligned content, with resources matching high school syllabus outcomes and an interactive tool that has been thoroughly developed, tested and found to significantly improve student learning outcomes.

Participating students can compete against peers in their school and around the country, for leaderboard glory, UNSW Advanced Placement (AP) and a UNSW Digital Badge, housing their program scores and AP credit.

Please find further information below re:

- What is Playconomics?
- Who is LionsHeart Studios?
- What will be involved?
- How does participating provide a UNSW Advanced Placement?
- UNSW Digital Badge
- Do students have to participate?
- What is the level of school resources and support required?
- How about students’ digital safety?
- Key external partners

For any queries, please feel free to contact us at step-up@unsw.edu.au.

Isabella Dobrescu

Professor | Head of School

School of Economics | UNSW Business School

University of New South Wales | Sydney 2052



What is Playconomics?

Playconomics is an award-winning course based on a videogame, a first worldwide and a core part of several undergraduate and postgraduate UNSW courses in Economics, Business, Engineering and Medicine.

The STEP UP version of Playconomics teaches Principles of Economics by allowing students to explore economic models at their own pace and learn about economics by experiencing it.

Besides its teaching capabilities (tested through extensive lab and field research – see [here](#)), Playconomics also has the potential to increase overall literacy (language, maths, financial skills), planning, analytics, decision-making, governance, emotional intelligence and peer learning, having engaged since 2022 thousands of high school students across many year levels and subject areas.

Who is LionsHeart Studios?

LionsHeart Studios is an award-winning Ed-tech company developing (undergraduate and postgraduate) university courses that use the theory of gameplay to boost student engagement and improve academic performance.

Its flagship platform - Playconomics - empowers educators to deliver digital learning experiences in Economics and Business, Engineering and Medicine that lead to better learner outcomes. More than 70,000 students have successfully taken LionsHeart courses at UNSW, University of Monash, University of Queensland, and University of Adelaide, as well as in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

LionsHeart was established in 2014 by Isabella Dobrescu and Alberto Motta (UNSW Professors of Economics) and spun out of UNSW's Gamification Research Group. Since then, it won prestigious national and international awards, including

- *Australian Government Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning*,
- *Gold Medal in Social Sciences at the 'Reimagine Education' International Awards* organised by Wharton School (the #1 Business School worldwide), and
- *Australian Financial Review Award for Teaching & Learning Excellence*.

What will be involved?

Participating in STEP UP involves providing *free access* to Playconomics for all high school students (and any staff). Engaging with Playconomics should not take more than approx. 30min/week, unless the students choose so. Participation in this program is entirely voluntary.

During the program, we might also administer online surveys to see how students and teachers felt about the program. The answers will inform how the outreach team can best support everybody as the program unfolds and allow us to evaluate the program impacts.

How does participating provide a UNSW Advanced Placement?

The progress students make in Playconomics will be recognised as university course credit by UNSW School of Economics.

More specifically, should a student that completed STEP UP decide to join UNSW and take ECON1101 Microeconomics, their Playconomics high school progress could count for up to 45% of their university course grade without having to repeat the Playconomics assessments in this course if they do them during the STEP UP outreach program.

UNSW Digital Badge

We are currently investigating the option for UNSW to issue official, digitally verifiable badges to students who actively participate in Playconomics and successfully complete the STEP UP program



that would be recognised as part of the university application process.

Do students have to participate?

Participation in this program is entirely voluntary.

From our own experience, however, creating communities of learners has a very positive impact on students' educational attainment and on their self-realisation and beliefs in current and future achievements. Hence, it is only by engaging as many students as possible that we can truly evaluate the initiative and find pathways to involve more schools and students in the future.

Our objective is to harness the gaming prowess that young generations already have to help high school students further develop their aptitudes. Additionally, we aim to bridge the gap between high school and university, improve confidence within the economics subjects and encourage university-level attainment within schools.

What is the level of school resources and support required?

The program has been designed to have minimum impact on high school staff and resources.

Because Playconomics and all additional (optional) resources (i.e., ebook/game manual, quizzes/quests, educational videos) are online, this learning tool can be easily used both in and out of class, with or without any assistance from the teaching or support staff.

Lionsheart Studios will be fully responsible for the delivery of the course.

How about students' digital safety?

To gain access to Playconomics, students will have to register for a playconomics.com account so that they maintain their progress. As part of the registration process, they will be asked for their STEP UP class ID code (that will be provided by their teacher) and for an email address (that will become their username). This email address will be only visible to their teachers and only used by UNSW to deliver the STEP UP digital badges.

To minimise all opportunities for any third party (including ourselves) to contact the student directly, students will also be automatically assigned a randomly generated display name and student number (e.g., z1234567). Please note that these credentials are entirely non-functional, having the sole purpose of allowing students to participate in the STEP UP program (and be visible on the leaderboards) without using any personal details.

Finally, data generated during the program will only be used to ensure its successful deployment and to evaluate its impact and will only be looked at in anonymised format. Specifically, (i) a broad summary of the program progress and survey information, that does not identify any participating schools and students, might be shared with the Reserve Bank of Australia, NSW Department of Education, and other education bodies, and (ii) individual fully-anonymized data might be shared and used for university secondary research purposes to evaluate the program effects, subject to all required Research Ethics and Compliance approvals being obtained.

Key external partners

We will be collaborating with the Reserve Bank of Australia's Public Education Program and the NSW Department of Education so that the rollout of Playconomics complements and enhance other efforts to support confidence, engagement and learning outcomes in economics and business.