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Stepping stones: TAFE and ACE program development for early school leavers

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Executive summary

The adult and community education (ACE) sector and technical and further education (TAFE) institutes are providing programs for young people that re-connect them with education. This report suggests that these programs and settings are considered effective pathways for some young people who have left school early, sometimes before completing Year 10.

This research uses a case study methodology, investigating the features of six individual programs delivered in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia that contribute to providing effective re-entry points for young people. Nearly 90 students and their teachers are interviewed to gain the insights presented in this report.

Students are attracted to the programs by key interrelated features, such as the quality of relationships between students and staff; flexibility in the mode of delivery, choice of study areas and opportunities for personal autonomy.

Teachers' student-centred approaches to learning, for example self-paced learning, are important. Flexible delivery and timetabling allow students to balance study, work and other interests.

On completion of their initial program, students have the opportunity to utilise extensive links and pathways to uncover opportunities to continue their education. However, moving to higher level courses often depends on advice and advocacy by program staff. Therefore, it is important to ensure students have advice about, and access to, the next steps in education.

There are personal issues, such as living arrangements and finances, that can hold a student back. For students who require some structure and discipline, course flexibility is only helpful if clear boundaries and expectations are provided. The programs are, therefore, not a 'one size fits all' answer.

It is suggested that re-entry through the adult and community sector and TAFE institutes will become increasingly important to young people wishing to continue their education after leaving school early because of the programs and settings they provide as an alternative for this group. Important aspects of this approach include integrating youth services with these programs so that the group is supported cohesively, and adopting a systemic approach to brokering education pathways for this group at the local level.

Finally, it is noted that policy formulation would benefit from a longitudinal study of early school leavers who have re-engaged through these TAFE and ACE programs.

Introduction

TAFE helps you target what you want to do, not what you have to do. (TAFE student)

Background and policy context

The young people targeted in this study are the 'early school leavers' and 'alienated youth' described by longitudinal studies as the group most likely to experience long-term disadvantage in the labour market (Lamb, Long & Malley 1998). Developing more effective post-compulsory education and training programs is a strong policy direction (Kirby 2000; Queensland Government 2002), driven by the need to build a more efficient and accessible system of transition through education into employment for young people (Report from the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001). The development of accessible, flexible and relevant post-compulsory education programs should be informed by the experiences of those who participate in them; these programs can then be a successful re-entry option for young people who have become disconnected from the education system.

It is now recognised that the traditional school-based post-compulsory education model does not work for all students (Australian Centre for Equity through Education/National Schools Network 1999). 'Out of school' is a recognised, if not sanctioned, status for youth, including young people under the age of 16 (Stokes 2000). Many previous studies have identified, categorised and characterised 'non-participants' in formal education and training in terms of family background, socio-economic status, geographical location and many other dimensions (Teese et al. 2000).

This report's focus reflects a subtle policy shift in Western countries over the last decade. Policy has moved from identifying and categorising discrete characteristics or behaviours of young people (such as early school-leaving, homelessness or drug abuse), to a more holistic approach that sees how these factors inter-connect and affect each other. More recently, there has been a recognition that educational outcomes could be enhanced by taking a more integrated approach to problems of educational participation (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001). A key element in this thinking is the concept of the 'enabling state', which will devolve service provision from the bureaucracy to the community (Botsman & Latham 2001; Bligh 2000). The Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001), which involved extensive consultation with communities, young people and governments across Australia, supports this approach. The report recommends the integration of youth programs and services so that at the community, state and federal levels, young people's pathways are supported more cohesively than they are at present.

Purpose of the research

This research investigates the experiences of young people who are re-entering education in the technical and further education (TAFE) and adult and community education (ACE) systems. It focuses particularly on the needs of youth whose educational pathways have been disrupted, and examines case studies of successful re-entry programs. The research was conducted at six sites

across three states—New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia—and involved interviewing young people participating in re-entry programs and staff who delivered the training.

The report is also based on an extensive literature review relating to the issue of re-entry to post-compulsory education and training. This potentially very broad topic is beyond the scope of this report and, for this reason, the review was limited to looking at *successful* re-entry. Even so, the available research evidence spans a number of related research areas, including early school leaving and barriers to effective participation in education. It reviews current research on the role and effectiveness of TAFE and ACE providers in supporting young people's educational participation. It also encompasses new directions, such as cross-sectoral approaches, that are being taken to address the needs of young people whose educational pathways are disrupted.

Each educational program is described in detail in the case studies, which are presented in appendix A. In addition, the report documents the way in which the students themselves view education in relation to their broader life concerns and future goals, as well as recording objective elements of successful programs.

Literature review

When this report was in its early stages, it was expected that research on successful re-entry experiences and programs would focus on VET courses in TAFE institutes. The target group seemed to be young people aged between 17 and 21, who were in the second year of a VET course and getting a 'second chance' to further their education through a vocational or applied education course. However, when educational providers in the TAFE sector were contacted, it was revealed that students in their re-entry programs were almost universally in a younger age group. They were accessing re-entry programs in TAFE and ACE in order to undertake an initial certificate that would then give them entry to a particular vocational area in TAFE.

Thus, the focus of the literature review changed, and it was discovered that disrupted educational pathways for the 13 to 16-year-old group of young people is an under-researched area. Certainly, systematic studies of early school leaving (Teese et al. 2000) are available. But these do not address the area of successful *re-entry*. Studies of vocational education and training also tend to focus on a different group of youth. In general, these studies focus exclusively on young people who are either undertaking VET training in Years 11 and 12 of secondary school, or have successfully completed school and gone onto further vocational education and training at TAFE.

There is a small but interesting body of literature that bears directly on the issues discussed in this report, including the following studies of the broader context, or climate:

✧ the fact that young people are making decisions about education

✧ the 'push' and 'pull' factors in decisions by young people to leave school early

✧ the barriers to effective re-entry

✧ the elements that support young people to stay in education

✧ successful models of re-entry.

There is, however, a vast body of work on the reasons for early school leaving, the need to re-engage young people in some form of education or training, and the culture of support needed to do this. The majority of the literature focuses on the need to re-engage young people in the schooling system, while very little focuses specifically on TAFE or ACE. This literature review explores these different areas and indicates the gaps in previous studies and the need for further research.

Context

It is important to understand the context and the climate in which young people and their families are making decisions about education. Researchers in many Western countries acknowledge that the transition from school to further education, training or employment is an extremely complex process (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000; Côté 2000; Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Schneider & Stevenson 1999). Young people have to negotiate the complexities of changing meanings of education and work and yet 'their understanding of the situation is limited to an individualistic framework which ultimately does not offer a basis for comprehending their situation within the larger picture'

(Dwyer & Wyn 1998). There is a strong focus in the literature on the impact of social and economic change on young people's transitions from secondary education to further education, training or a form of employment.

The literature drawing on the concept of young people at risk is well-known (Beck 1992; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Giddens 1991; Dwyer, Harwood & Tyler 1998). Commonly, these authors argue that the transition from youth to adulthood, which was once a predictable path, has become much more uncertain, with few guidelines or rules to follow. Why, then, has it become more difficult, and what has changed?

> A quarter of a century ago, there had been clearly defined markers of the transition from youth to adulthood: leaving home, buying a house, finishing school, starting work, marriage and starting a family. Today the social structures which accompanied these transitions have changed considerably—employment has lost its permanence, moving from full time to part time or contractual work; relationships are less formal; housing and mortgages, in the context of an uncertain income for the long term future, is not a consideration for many young adults.
>
> (Dwyer, Harwood & Tyler 1998, p.33)

Beck (1992) argues that in 'risk societies' young people face a more precarious position than the previous generation did. He cites the collapse of the youth labour market, the higher demand for specialist skills and the need to increasingly depend upon the family for support as key elements of this change. Difficulties can occur when the young person is aware of the 'disintegration of traditions' and begins searching for solutions on their own (Heggen 1998). Furlong and Cartmel (1997) argue that, as a consequence, young people believe they have complete responsibility for their outcomes, with a lack of community support. The young person may very well feel 'alone', and how well or how badly they perform in this altered, dynamic existence is seen as an individual experience.

However, Wyn and White (1997) suggest that young people's sense of individual responsibility needs to be placed in context. They argue that:

> ... the playing out of agency is always undertaken within the context of particular structural settings and parameters. What gives any particular instance of agency its social content is the institutional and cultural framework within which it is exercised.   (Wyn & White 1997, p.20)

However, they argue, there has been a tendency to deny the influence of economic, social and political structures which has resulted in young people struggling to understand their current context more fully.

This theme has been taken up by Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) to explore the choices that young people in the United Kingdom are making after they leave secondary school. Their research shows that there is a mis-match between the market-oriented educational policies and the broader life priorities of young people. Agency, according to Wyn and White (1997), is about knowledge, power and the ability to activate resources. Social divisions and inequalities can effectively limit the impact to which individuals and groups have access to these aspects of agency. This, of course, is not to conclude that young people are utterly trapped by these structural features. However, in understanding young people's capacity to negotiate their futures, this context must be considered. Wyn and White challenge the traditional understanding of youth, recommending that it be viewed as a social process, with the young person actively engaging in this process, not separate or excluded from it.

This literature reflects a conscious attempt by researchers to acknowledge that many of the elements that affect young people's lives have changed over the last quarter of a century. Some elements have changed dramatically (for example, work practices and labour markets), while others have been relatively resistant to change (such as educational institutions). These are important characteristics of the climate and context in which young people are making decisions and experiencing their schooling.

Early school leaving

As transitions from school into the labour market have become more problematic, the literature about transitions has increased in volume. Smyth et al. (2000) use the term 'navigating transitions' to recognise young people's active participation in these processes. McIntyre et al. (1999) and Kirby (2000) also take up this concept, in a challenge to the older notion of linear pathways from school to work. The implication of this transition is that school is the prior experience to work. Many researchers now acknowledge that it is normative for work and school to be co-experiences (Smyth et al. 2000; Wyn & White 1997; Dwyer 1996a) and they challenge the tendency to overlook the extent to which both study and work are part of many young people's lives, even while they are at secondary school. The literature assists in the understanding of many overlapping issues associated with young people trying to re-engage with education and training after leaving school early or having a disrupted pathway.

Increasingly, studies show that there is no typical school leaver (Dwyer 1996a, 1996b) and that young people leave school for a number of reasons. Other researchers (for example, Teese et al. 2000; Freeland et al. 2000; McFadden & Munns 2000; Smyth et al. 2000) emphasise that young people have diverse needs and that there has been a shift towards recognising the multidimensionality of their lives. This has enabled a conceptual shift from a deficit approach to addressing young people's unmet needs, to recognising the diversity in their experiences (Dwyer et al. 1998; Stokes 2000).

Smyth et al. (2000) have made a significant contribution to this conceptual shift. They have demonstrated how policies that are based solely on notions of individual responsibility need to be balanced by an understanding of the ways in which institutions themselves fail young people. This dilemma is also discussed at length by Dwyer et al. (1998), in a study of young people's decisions about staying on or leaving school.

Smyth et al. (2000) argue that early school leaving is socially constructed, and emphasise that it is a product of the institutions, systems and culture(s) we create and sustain. They base much of this conceptual framework on Fine's work, who argues that early school leaving relies upon 'moral boundaries of deservedness that thread research and policy' (Fine 1994, p.74). The underlying assumption of this approach is that the 'deserving' gets looked after while others can be neglected. The argument builds upon the understanding that it is the young person who is responsible for their plight rather than systemic or cultural influences. In other words, it is the young person who is in deficit, not the system.

Smyth et al. (2000) use the term 'navigating transitions' to define young people's capacity to act. The term is purposefully used as it assigns youth some sense of agency. It implies that they are to some degree involved in a process of self-determination, albeit constrained by 'parental authority, and their location in a terrain marked by social class, gender, sexuality and race' (Smyth et al. 2000, p.33). Similarly, McIntyre et al. (1999) and Kirby (2000) refer to 'negotiating transitions', of the complexity involved, and of the need to support the process of leaving school. Implicit within this discussion is challenging the concept of a linear pathway from school to employment and fulfilling 'adult' responsibilities. This literature is also critical of the notion that the experience of youth can be homogenised or generalised upon (Smyth et al. 2000; Wyn & White 1997; Dwyer 1996a).

In this tradition, McFadden and Munns (2000) concentrate on 'second-chance education', which is particularly important in terms of the 're-engaging process'. Their work is built on the premise that students react to the form rather than the substance of schooling. McFadden and Munns follow the earlier work of 'resistance theorists', including Willis (1977), who argue that even if students are not aware of it, they are resisting the essential outcome of the structuring of society; namely, oppressive social relations.

McFadden and Munns (2000) also argue that for early school leavers there is a moment where educational rejection occurs and students make, or reflect upon making, a rational choice to turn

their backs on education and its promises of social mobility and economic advantage. However, the moment is really the culmination of a process, more than a precise point in time. But the moment of rejection is viewed as point of cultural fracture, where the notion of education is seen as 'unfinished business' as opposed to a 'closed or completed' episode.

It is this concept of education as unfinished business that allows for the possibility of young people being convinced to give education and/or training another go. It is also this concept which encourages the thinking around the form of education provided and how this can be changed to suit the needs of young people more directly. McFadden and Munns describe what goes wrong in school for young people and what encourages them to take up these 'resistant positions'. Furthermore, they analyse where they are on a continuum of resistance, as this will determine what strategies need to be put into place to encourage this very important re-engagement or second chance (2000, p.63). They suggest that the following elements are 'conditions of resistance' for young people:

✧ powerlessness: in particular domestic circumstances such as homelessness and lack of parental support

✧ feeling powerless: when troubles become endemic and structured into their lives; for example, drug use, loss of friendship groups and alcohol and abuse

✧ school is not working for me: for a mixture of reasons including a level of instability in their personal lives, young people are unable to keep up with the study and there is little flexibility within the school program to cater for this diversity of need

✧ rejection of an unequal educational experience: often teachers express their expectations and students get too far behind to feel able to do much

✧ cultural support: often it was said, 'that schools failed them, just as their families had in terms of care and support' (McFadden & Munns 2000, p.62).

McFadden and Munns found that schools in particular were thought of by students as 'institutions that lacked the capacity to support people other than those who already had family support' (2000, p.70). They also found that when teachers were offering students a second chance at accessing education, 'the greatest barrier to access and success is students' experience of their first chance' (2000, p.73). McFadden and Munns concluded from their research that students:

> ... want a solid base from which to build a more satisfying and productive life. They want to reconnect with education as a socially supportive institution and to ameliorate their sense of personal and cultural fracture. They want to prove to themselves and to others that they can 'do it', i.e. return to education and succeed. (2000, p.71)

The themes of connection and engagement are also taken up in the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce report (2001). While early school leavers are not the target as such, this report focuses on the integration of young people into the community and their engagement in meaningful education and employment. The report identifies many of the background factors that contribute to early school leaving, such as disengagement, marginalisation, poverty and alienation. The report acknowledges the problem of early school leaving, stating that:

> In many cases young people drop out of the school system before the compulsory school leaving age without any follow-up or access to specialised assistance aimed at encouraging or supporting re-entry to either school or training. Some school systems do not report publicly on issues such as absenteeism or exclusion. Moreover, existing funding structures appear to create an incentive for schools to exclude difficult students and to retain resources, which would otherwise be allocated to them.
> (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001, p.63)

The report recommends a number of measures that would possibly have the effect of preventing early school leaving, including early recognition of problems through 'early response plans' in

schools (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001, p.85). These responses are, however, presented as the solution to very broad problems that are not specified, but are described as 'at risk'. Despite the fact that 90 of the 2147 respondents had left school by Year 10, the report does not specifically address re-entry to education or training in its recommendations or examples of good practice.

Barriers to effective re-entry

'Second-chance' education has now become a recognised process. One approach to this is to understand how students react to the form rather than the content of schooling (McFadden & Munns 2000). McFadden and Munns have undertaken research on the effects of the experience of educational failure and rejection for young people. They argue that rather than being closed or completed, education is regarded as unfinished business by many youth. This approach invites educators to think about the kinds of identities that students acquire in schools and to consider the consequences of experiencing failure at school.

When young people do seek to re-enter educational institutions—which society holds up as everyone's right to access, regardless of background and circumstance—then providers need to be aware of these students' previous educational experience and ongoing needs. According to McFadden (1995), their previous educational experiences have helped to construct student identities that they then find difficult to change.

> In a world where there is a widely held belief in the utility of life-long learning, the true test for equity provision is how the education system copes with the hopes and desires of people for whom education has previously been experienced as a failure. An awareness of the role of previous schooling with its emotional consequences for students, the construction of educational identity, might help to ensure a fairer distribution of educational success.
>
> (McFadden 1995, p.57)

The literature on barriers to effective re-entry has some common themes. Many of these relate to the culture of support provided by the institution to do things differently, to be flexible, and take into account the personal circumstances of the young person as well as their academic/training requirements. Unwelcoming work cultures, a rigid focus on academic outcomes, funding being dependent on narrow outcomes measures and a limited curricula are just a few of the well-documented barriers to re-entry for young people (Australian Centre for Equity through Education/National Schools Network 1999; Hixson & Tinzmann 1990).

Batten and Russell (1995) argue that schools have a choice: they can make re-entry difficult or easy. The culture of some schools has been defined as inhospitable or uncomfortable and, as such, sets up obstacles to students returning (Kirby 2000, p.93). Holden and Dwyer (1992) reinforce this theme and explore the way in which school cultures can be barriers or facilitators to re-entry for young people. Her interviews with young people reveal the extent to which school itself can be the 'push factor' in their decisions to leave. The obstacles to re-entry that she discovered in 1992 are still relevant today. They include:

✧ lack of support within the school to cater for difficulties, for example young women with children

✧ inadequate financial support

✧ relevance, or lack of, in terms of the subject material being offered

(Holden & Dwyer 1992, p.22).

Similarly, the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme report on *Underage school leaving* (1997) creates four categories to assist in understanding some of the barriers young people face when returning to education. These are:

✧ the personal: includes financial as well as the need for a more adult environment after recent/different life experiences

✧ the school: includes negative reactions from staff, limited subject choices and limited support in general for their circumstances

✧ peers: finding a place to belong, if you have left and returned

✧ access: difficulties in getting into TAFE and ACE courses.

Returning to, and engaging at, TAFE and ACE

There is little material that discusses re-entry specifically in relation to TAFE or ACE, but what is available contributes some valuable findings.

The difficulties or obstacles for early school leavers accessing TAFE appear initially to focus on structural issues:

✧ age limitations

✧ entry requirements (for example, completion of Year 10 or equivalent)

✧ increasing standards (NCVER 2000) resulting in reduced access for the 15 to 19-year-old age group (Stokes 2000)

✧ lack of formalised links between schools and TAFE and other service providers (McIntyre et al. 1999)

✧ limited support structures within TAFE to assist young people in other than their academic studies (McIntyre et al. 1999)

✧ the apparent domination of short-term courses for the 15 to 19-year-old cohort (Kirby 2000; Stokes 2000; also see Phan 2000)

✧ financial barriers, up-front fees (Kirby 2000).

In addition, there is evidence (for example, the recent growth in certificate levels 1 and 2 courses and teenage enrolments) that the compensatory role of TAFE has grown, but that middle-level skills training has not increased significantly (Phan 2000; Kirby 2000). The role of 'enabling' courses may be questionable:

> ... as it is now recognised that some students from disadvantaged or marginalised groups tend to move from one enabling course to the other and do not progress onto a higher level of education or training program or achieve job advancement. (Phan 2000, p.1)

Phan is careful not to dismiss these courses in terms of their potential value for young people. However, it was established that those students who left school before the completion of Year 9 were the least likely to enrol in a course at a higher level, compared to those who had left school after completing Year 10 and/or Year 11. Phan (2000) looks at why this particular 'cohort' has such a strong tendency to either enrol in the same course or be reluctant to undertake courses at a higher level. There is also the question of access and cultural issues in relation to the learning environment for this group of students, as well as their own often negative attitude to schooling. McFadden argues that 'what often goes unrecognised in students' struggle to succeed in "Access Programs" is the battle they must wage against their own previous experience of education and their identities as learners' (1995, p.56).

A 2001 study by Bradshaw et al. discusses the factors that made ACE a positive learning experience for students. From a study of 38 ACE programs in Victoria, they found that young people re-engaged in education when provided with a safe learning environment which allowed them to 'find or reclaim successful selves and strong positive voices' (Bradshaw et al. 2001, p.9). The authors

conclude that ACE programs provide an adult setting that is less institutional than a school, with a more relaxed atmosphere. Because of this extra freedom, students must also take responsibility for managing their learning.

One of the key areas that is identified in the literature is the need for processes which enable young people to move from one level and area in their education to another. There is criticism that some TAFE and ACE courses trap students in an 'enabling course roundabout' from which they find it hard to break away.

A culture of support

As discussed, evidence shows that when young people successfully complete courses or modules, they are then given the confidence to construct or reclaim 'successful selves' or identities, which will sustain them in the next stage. Many studies focus on pedagogical styles that enhance learning opportunities for students. They look at constructing processes and developing content that are relevant to young people and that accommodate their personal lives and individual needs. Walker (1993) has developed the idea of a 'cultural strategy' to help construct possibilities for change in young people with disrupted school lives. This strategy uses curriculum and pedagogy to challenge ways of thinking on every level—social, cultural and academic. Walker argues that a teaching paradigm that allows for positive and democratic teacher–student, student–student relations is crucial to the construction of a successful strategy for change. A possible example of this teaching paradigm is found in the following five essential principles of program design for working with at-risk youth.

The programs should aim to:

✧ connect to student's culture or context. Programs are to be relevant to the young person's life and linked to the goals of that young person

✧ operate within a climate of adult learning. Participants want to be acknowledged as the young adults they see themselves as

✧ be flexible to accommodate individual needs. The emphasis will be on meeting the young person's unmet needs, for example: homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency or literacy requirements

✧ have enthusiastic, flexible program staff that relate well to students. Resources must be provided to sustain these committed staff as too often there are too few staff involved and they burn out

✧ connect to broader community agency networks. Interactive and seamless arrangements with community-based support agencies are best placed to provide for the diversity of levels of alienation and other problems associated with this group of young people (St Ledger & Ward 1998, p.96).

St Ledger and Ward conclude by emphasising:

> ... how important it is for program staff to consciously plan to address personal needs such as self-worth and other welfare issues if they are to successfully engage and sustain these disaffected youth in education and training programs. (1998, p.97)

It is more difficult to establish from the literature if there are also issues which relate to the culture of the educational setting and whether it is open to the needs of youth; for example, showing a preparedness to be flexible in program delivery. However, on the surface, it could appear as if early school leavers would be catered for more fully in a TAFE setting. When the needs of these young people are highlighted in terms of preferred teaching and learning styles then:

> ... immediately what comes to mind is the TAFE structure with its smaller classes, practical vocational curriculum delivered in manageable learning modules, the 'space' in the timetable

> which allows students time to reflect on their learning, and teachers who carry the cultural
> capital of having worked in the trade. (Smyth et al. 2000, p.237)

Thus it is important to establish if this is the experience of the 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers cohort, or that of the young people who have successfully completed Year 12 and are using TAFE as a stepping stone to university or further training. The distinction is of the utmost importance.

The literature also cautions against taking too rosy a view of TAFE or ACE as the answer for disaffiliated youth. They are not always welcome in this environment that has traditionally served older (adult) learners. There is evident concern in some quarters that the 'problem students' are being shuffled onto TAFE and ACE. From the point of view of young people with disrupted educational pathways, a further challenge is Year 12 completers now taking up places in TAFE that previously served the needs of early school leavers.

> In the period following post compulsory schooling, where TAFE may be expected to pick up
> many of the early school leavers, this has often not been the case. As participation rates in
> TAFE have risen, so have the entry standards. Year 12 and adult re-entry students now often
> take places that once would have provided pathways for early leavers.
> (Lamb, Long & Malley 1998, cited in NCVER 2000)

Stokes notes that the 'on-the-ground workers' with early school leavers were keen to dismiss unrealistic views by young people that TAFE was easily accessible and a strong alternative after leaving school.

> TAFEs in fact generally did not want to enrol young people under the age of 18. Further the
> TAFE environment was not seen by some of the workers as particularly welcoming or
> supportive of the young people. (Stokes 2000, p.16)

McIntyre et al. (1999) ask the question: are all institutions willing to become attuned to the needs of early school leavers? Dwyer et al. (1998) foreshadowed the concern that 'neither the schools nor the VET sector really want these young people'. St Ledger and Ward (1998) concur, suggesting that schools don't want to become the place for all at-risk students, and TAFE institutes are in a similar category. According to McIntyre et al. (1999) TAFE staff didn't see themselves as having:

> ... a direct brief to cater for early school leavers. They felt they (the school leavers) still needed
> guided control at a location other than TAFE where they can make the transition to
> adulthood. (McIntyre et al. 1999, cited in NCVER 2000, p.6)

McIntyre et al. (1999) respond to this situation by suggesting that TAFE and VET providers be encouraged to assist early school leavers and TAFE be urged to make vocational places more accessible, especially in the pre-apprenticeship area. Smyth et al. (2000) continue, recommending the need to examine ways to more substantially tap into the TAFE system, perhaps even blurring the edges on the transition from school to TAFE via credit transfer arrangements.

Cross-sectoral collaborative approaches to effective re-entry

There are suggestions that the lines between TAFE and secondary school could become a little more blurred, assisting movement between the two. Terms such as 'seamless' links between educational providers are increasingly used to manage the diversity of educational experiences in a positive way.

Who is to take responsibility for re-entry? In Scandinavia there is a model whereby local government takes responsibility for mentoring young people and brokering links between the different educational providers, to suit young people's needs. Currently, the experience in Australia is fragmented and unsystematic from the young people's point of view.

Through the literature a number of areas have been identified that need further exploration and analysis. McFadden and Munns (2000) explore the conditions of resistance experienced by young people and the support and strategies that are necessary to re-engage young people in education. St Ledger and Ward (1998) further this work with their five essential principles of program design for working with at-risk young people. Meanwhile Phan (2000) questions the role of enabling courses that allow some at-risk young people to move from one 'enabling' course to another but not move to higher level courses.

The recommendations from McIntyre et al. are particularly relevant to providing assistance for early leavers. Their second recommendation, which is 'manage early leaving', argues:

> ... for a system or range of strategies in place to support the young person when they leave school. These support processes are to be 'seamlessly' linked with other service providers and agencies supporting young people in their community.   (McIntyre et al. 1999, p.89)

The suggestion is to look at the Scandinavian model where local government provides a community base for such services and employs community mentors and career counsellors.

The addition of case management and youth counselling is highly recommended. McIntyre et al.'s third recommendation, 'facilitate returning to school', is based on the understanding that there is a need to improve links with TAFE in this area. A possible strategy would be to establish closer links with TAFE and the school curriculum and qualifications. The idea is to support the broadening of options for those who have recently experienced schooling as a negative experience. This point is supported by Williamson and Marsh, who state that 'there is a need for better school links with TAFE to create viable alternatives for early leavers, broadening their horizons, and establishing expanded opportunities' (1998, p.55).

The fifth principle in St Ledger and Ward's work, discussed above, receives a great deal of support in current literature. In NCVER's *Research at a glance—Early school leavers and VET* the summary of key issues states:

> The key to achieving positive change, especially at the local level, is the way in which sectors, institutions and organisations and agencies work together to assist young people to prepare for and make their transition to the world of work and adulthood.   (NCVER 2000)

McIntyre et al. comment that at present 'the negotiation of transition is not presently helped by a lack of clearly delineated pathways for early leavers, and finding a pathway was found to be more a culmination of factors than a conscious decision' (1999, p.85). There was seen to be a need for:

> ... greater integration of learning and experience under a protective umbrella so that these otherwise fragmented experiences might appear and be experienced by young people as a more coherent set of options, and less a 'cracked mosaic' of possibilities.
>   (McIntyre et al. 1999, p.85)

This concern is echoed in other reports. For example, 'a lot is going on but it is fragmented, disparate and often provider or area specific' (NCVER 2000).

McIntyre et al. (1999) divided their 40 early school leavers into two groups: 'the positive leavers' (who generally made the transition on their own) and 'the negative leavers', categories based on Dwyer's (1996a) earlier work. They recommend that the 'negative leavers' require extensive assistance from school, parents, service providers and TAFE. The overriding conclusion from the literature review and interviews was that the integration of services to assist early school leavers in making the transition to work and adult life must be improved.

Two examples of more integrated approaches to service delivery are provided by the literature:

> *Whittlesea Youth Commitment pilot program* supported by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the Victorian Education Department … [aims] to help all young people complete Year 12 or the equivalent. It involves almost 30 partner organisations, including local government, schools

and providers, employers, job network brokers, family service agencies and an area consultative committee. (cited in NCVER 2000, p.7)

The Bridge—a community partnership: The Brotherhood of St Laurence is working with Karingal
Park Secondary College on a model of assistance for young people who leave school early.
The project involves one-on-one and ongoing case management by a project officer who
establishes a relationship with the young people prior to their leaving school, and who
continues this support into post-school activities from within the community.

(Kirby 2000, p.132).

Instead of going overseas to look for further initiatives, it is important and timely to consider a
Victorian Government program initiated in 2001. The government accepted the Kirby report's
(2000) recommendation that a statewide pattern of local planning networks consisting of relevant
education and training providers, industry and other agencies should be developed and nurtured. It
emphasised the benefits to be gained by a local, co-operative approach to planning. This included
community renewal and strengthening, minimising duplication and wasteful competition,
acknowledging community and industry-shared responsibility, and ownership of post-compulsory
education and training.

Thus the Local Learning and Employment Network was created, and its role is to:

✧ identify gaps in the provision of education and training locally

✧ plan the development and delivery of educational programs for young people which will assist
in meeting the targets for better completion rates and employment outcomes

✧ take a strategic approach to developing pathways for local young people, especially those at risk
of dropping out

✧ monitor these pathways and outcomes to ensure they are beneficial to young people

✧ advise the new Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission on the needs of young
people in their area (http://www.llen.vic.gov.au/llen/).

In Victoria, in particular, the response to the Kirby report demonstrates a significant capacity to act
on the need for more collaborative, cross-sectoral approaches to provide supported pathways for
young people in a statewide, formalised network. This aims to significantly reduce the barriers
which obstruct young people's access to (and/or return to) education and training and to highlight
broader issues of access.

Key messages from the literature review

The literature has revealed a number of areas that require further exploration and analysis, and
identified some significant gaps. There is a lack of research providing evidence on the factors that
enhance young people's successful participation in re-entry programs. In particular, more needs to
be known about young people experiencing both personal and institutional resistance to re-entry,
and the support and strategies necessary to re-engage them in education.

Systematic longitudinal research should also be undertaken on the ways in which enabling courses
can lead to higher level courses. From these areas of the literature, key questions have been
identified to direct the research. These questions centre on the reasons for early school leaving, the
culture of support needed to re-engage the young people, and whether students are moving from
enabling courses to higher level courses.

Key questions deriving from the literature

✧ What are the reasons for early school leaving?

✧ What are the key elements in cultures of support that successfully re-engage young people in
education?

✧ What practices support young people to move from enabling courses to higher level courses?

✧ What are the particular aspects of the programs that facilitate and help young people return to, and remain in, education?

✧ What do young people say about their motivations for, and experiences of, re-entry to education?

✧ What do their teachers say about these students?

Methodology

The key question that this research addresses is: What are the particular aspects of the programs that facilitate and help young people return to, and remain in, education?

The project was designed to:

✧ generate new knowledge about the quality of successful re-entry experiences for young people with disrupted educational pathways

✧ contribute directly to the development of effective school-to-work pathways for young people through a collaborative research partnership with the participating organisations.

Approach

The research design is based on a case study approach. This approach is consistent with the aim of providing contextual, in-depth information about participants' experiences and attitudes. Case studies can be analysed to generate complex information about the relationships between attitudes, structures and social groups. They are especially relevant for helping generate knowledge about numerically small but socially significant groups who require policies and programs to meet their needs. This report places a particular emphasis on documenting the elements that participants themselves define as contributing to successful outcomes. Group interviews were conducted at each site with young people who had enrolled in the course as a re-entry strategy. Individual interviews were conducted with their teachers (see appendices B and C for interview schedules).

Interviews with participants were transcribed and coded to identify particular themes. This involved a three-step process, which is described by Neuman (2000). Interview data were firstly coded according to commonly mentioned issues, concerns and perceptions (for example, 'the teachers make me feel like I belong there'). Next, these were categorised according to broader themes (for example, 'quality of relationships between teachers and students'). The final stage involved a process of checking these themes against the literature. This allowed for a refinement of the themes (for example, 'the importance of quality of relationships in the learning environment').

The research partnership involved several points of contact over time. This allowed both feedback of the findings to relevant TAFE and ACE staff, and the gathering of data on the destinations of students.

Research sites

Six educational sites were chosen to provide coverage of three states and both TAFE and ACE providers. Group interviews were conducted with a total of 89 young people and with teachers and administrative staff at each of the six sites. The group interviews had between two and four participants each. Between eight and 22 young people were interviewed in each course. In some cases the entire cohort was chosen; in others, a selection of young people were interviewed depending on the size and availability of the cohort. Each of the group interviews lasted

approximately one hour, depending on the number in the group and the length of the responses. In general, participants were very willing to share their stories and answer questions.

Interviews were held in a venue that was familiar to the participants, with researchers attending during their regular class times. In the more flexible programs without regular class times, researchers visited the venue for the day and spoke to students as they attended. Interviews with staff were conducted out of class time.

Partnership protocols

Developing partnerships with teachers in TAFE and ACE organisations has been a feature of the project. Early in the project, advice from TAFE partners changed the focus of the research from 'under 21-year-olds currently enrolled in a VET course and in their second year of study at TAFE', to 'young people undertaking certificates in their first year of re-entry'. TAFE and ACE teachers suggested that it would be very difficult to identify second-year students who had disrupted pathways. They argued that greater value would be gained from research on young people returning to study in their first year. This, in turn, lead to refining the research questions to make them appropriate to this age group.

The partnership arrangement provided a mechanism for returning the research findings directly to each of the programs as a basis for improving their delivery. In each of the sites, feedback from the interviews provided an opportunity to reflect on practice. In some instances, changes were made to improve programs; in others, research confirmed directions already undertaken. This confirmation was important for staff working with students who had a history of failure and for whom traditional teaching methods and practices were not effective.

The form of collaborative partnership negotiated with researchers at each site has varied according to local need and circumstances. All on-site researchers have had the responsibility of arranging interviews with students and other relevant staff, and have been invited to participate as research collaborators. However, this has not been possible in all cases owing to the workloads of most TAFE and ACE staff, and because of the nature of their contracts.

The on-site partners have been involved in extensive discussions about the preliminary findings with the research team from the Youth Research Centre. The feedback has generally been considered and, in at least one case (Wangaratta), the program has been redesigned to take the findings into account. This has involved broadening the program to allow even greater flexibility for young people.

Participants

A total of 158 students were attending the six programs, 89 of whom were interviewed in the groups.

Victoria

✧ Box Hill Institute of TAFE: Growth and Pathways Program

✧ South West TAFE , Warrnambool, Portland and Hamilton campuses: Youth Stream of the Certificate in General Education for Adults

✧ Swinburne TAFE, Prahran campus: Victorian Certificate in Education

✧ Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education (The Centre), Wangaratta, ACE: Youth at Risk Have Other Options

New South Wales

✧ TAFE—SouthWestern Sydney Institute Outreach Miller College: Maximising Innovative Strategies and Skills for Young People (Certificate of General Educational Achievement Equivalent)

South Australia

✧ Regency Institute of TAFE, Regency and Salisbury Campuses: Introductory Vocational Education Certificate (IVEC)

Limitations of the study

The methodology on which this study is based provides a relatively detailed documentation of the six sites, but caution should be exercised in making generalisations. As the case studies show, each site is operating with particular groups of students, and has its own history and context. Nonetheless, the range of case studies has allowed the researchers to extract common themes and issues. For example, a common element that contributed positively to young people's re-entry experience was that courses were 'relevant' to them. The way in which 'relevance' was interpreted and implemented by each site varied; however, it can be established as a significant element in successful re-entry programs.

There were other features of the study that were limiting. In particular, the constraints on the partners working in the TAFE and ACE sectors meant that they were not in a position to participate as actively in the research process as was hoped. For example, it would have been preferable if the teachers could have played a more active role in interpreting the data and documenting institutional supports and barriers for effective re-entry.

Findings and discussion

TAFE teachers are more understanding if you have a problem and will be more lenient if you
have a reason.   (TAFE student)

Characteristics of the sample

The characteristics of the sample are described in table 1. The key characteristics are discussed
under the headings of school leaving, accommodation, income support and work.

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

	No. of participants	Female	Male
Gender			
female	35		
male	54		
Cultural background			
culturally and linguistically diverse	15		
other	74		
Location			
Metropolitan	55		
Regional/rural	34		
Age		**Female**	**Male**
16 and under	41	14	27
17	28	9	19
18 and above	20	11	9
Left school			
prior to Year 9	12		
Year 9	30		
Year 10	34		
Year 11 and after	13		
Economic circumstances			
in paid work	23		
not in paid work	66		
living at parents' home	74		
living independently	15		
receiving income support	55		
no income support	34		
Total participants	**89**		

Note: Totals that amount to 5 and under are not reported and are collapsed into broader categories to ensure the
privacy of participants.

School leaving

One of the distinctive features of the sample is that the majority (85%) left school before completing Year 10, and thus before becoming eligible to enter a VET course through the more conventional secondary school pathway. For them, the TAFE or ACE courses that they have undertaken represent a unique opportunity to re-start their education. It should be noted that boys were over-represented in the students leaving at Year 9 or before. Over half the boys in the sample had left in Year 9 or before, while only a quarter of the girls had left at that time. The percentage of boys leaving in Year 9 or before in both metropolitan and regional and rural areas was very similar (a little over 50%). There was a greater difference regarding location for girls leaving at Year 9 or before. In fact, 33% of girls in rural or regional areas left in Year 9 or before, while 22% of girls in metropolitan areas left at that time.

Accommodation

Just over 70% of the young people in this sample were living at home: 76% of boys and 66% of girls. Less than 30% of the sample was not living at their parents' home at the time of the interview. Overall, 71% of students in the metropolitan area and 76% of rural and regional young people were living at home. In addition, 71% of boys living in a metropolitan area and 76% of boys living in a rural or regional area were living at home. By contrast, 55% of girls in metropolitan areas were living at home, compared to 83% of girls in a rural or regional area.

Income support

All but 3% of these young people received income support. The vast majority of the sample still relied on some parental support to study, whether they were living at, or away from, home. None of the young people interviewed had dependents of their own.

Work

Data revealed that 33% of boys worked, while only 16% of girls were employed. Nearly all of those in employment worked less than 20 hours per week.

The main themes

Analysis of the main themes to emerge from interviews and focus groups with participants revealed common themes. These are discussed below. The researchers were surprised at the extent of agreement across the sample, given the diversity of age, background and context of the students involved.

Participants' reasons for leaving secondary school

The majority (over 70%) of students gave school-related factors as their reason to leave. In other words, they identified the 'push factor' of negative experiences of school, rather than the 'pull factor' of other options, as their reason for leaving school. The precipitating events included being expelled for fighting with teachers, suspensions for smoking, fights with other students and bitchiness, the work being too difficult, and problems with rules and uniforms. In addition, 15% of the young people had left school to take up jobs that they thought would lead to a career, and soon discovered that these jobs were not ongoing for a range of reasons. They then decided that they needed to return to education. A smaller number had left primarily because of unstable living situations and factors unrelated to school, which made attending school impossible.

Factors facilitating participation in education

Three areas emerged as the key features to facilitate these young people's participation in education:

✧ the quality of relationships with staff

✧ pathways and accessibility

✧ flexibility, choice and autonomy

These are interrelated elements that have significance at every phase of students' participation—from the point where they make first contact with the institution, through their involvement in the course to its completion, and the uptake of the next stage in their education.

Quality of relationships

The quality of relationships that students had with TAFE or ACE staff was of prime importance. This cannot be overstated, because these young people are often attempting to access education after experiences of failure or exclusion. Positive attitudes of staff to students at the point of entry are a significant facilitator. Even where access is automatic, an interview on the point of entry can generate a sense of inclusiveness. As one student commented: 'I was surprised she just wanted a chat, to sort of see that it was me who wanted to do the course rather than my mum or worker'. Once entry has been gained and the young person is participating in the course, teacher's attitudes are all-important. Students also appreciated having an identified contact person (a teacher or co-ordinator) with whom they could talk through problems.

Many students compared their experiences with staff in TAFE or ACE with secondary school. There was common agreement that TAFE was 'the opposite experience to school'. The following assessment is typical: 'the teachers are heaps better, kinder, more interested, take time not just sit at the desk'. Typical comments from students included:

✧ They're nice teachers.

✧ We are allowed to do things that you're not allowed to at school.

✧ It is easier going.

✧ There is no pressure to get the work done in a certain time and the brain isn't going thump, thump, thump trying to think. You can talk to the teacher more freely and talk about things outside school.

✧ TAFE is not as stereotyped as school, it is welcoming and you can talk to anyone.

Accessibility and pathways

This area covers a wide range of elements, including physical accessibility (transport, location) as well as ease of entry, options in the event of failure, and the next steps. Apart from automatic entry to programs, students also appreciated the provision of educational pathways. For example, some students did not satisfy the entry requirements for the Introductory Vocational Education Certificate (South Australia), in terms of literacy skills. However, these students were encouraged to move 'sideways' to a literacy course, which then assisted them to subsequently get into the certificate course.

In many of the courses, students were offered a number of options that facilitated their involvement in further study. Some examples are the TAFE 'tasters' (which are undertaken on the basis of four in a year, one each term) at Warrnambool and the electives at Box Hill. These

arrangements effectively offer students some 'room to move'. Another example is the offering of a mid-year or even a term entry point so that students do not have to wait until February the next year to get started.

A major feature of all programs and courses offered by TAFE and ACE in the research sample is the extensive links and pathways available for their students. For example, students can undertake the Certificate in General Education for Adults for Year 10, and then be linked to the Victorian Certificate of Education either back in a school or at TAFE. The nature of the pathways depended strongly on local students' preferences. For example, it was likely that young people at The Centre in Wangaratta would stay on because it catered for their needs, and some of them would require more time before they were ready to move on.

Pathways through education and training are facilitated through the development of skills and confidence in the young people themselves. The programs visited all played a significant role in improving students' basic study skills. Young people at Outreach, Miller College in Sydney, for example, said that they were likely to remain there, gaining the skills and confidence to eventually take up other options. For many students, the vocational aspects of the courses were less important than gaining study skills and the confidence to try learning something that really mattered to them. As one young man commented: 'this course helped me to study; I didn't know how to'.

The need for literacy, numeracy and basic study skills was particularly important for the boys in this sample. There was an over-representation of boys in the pre-Year 10 and Year 10 equivalent courses. Over half had left school in Year 9 or before, as opposed to a quarter of the girls. A significant number of boys was having to re-enter education with a lower level of academic and social maturity than girls. This needed to be reflected in the structure and content of the courses aimed at pre-Year 10 and Year 10 completion. Some of these courses were including sporting, music and drama activities as well as excursions to meet the needs of the participants. It was also acknowledged that further exploration of the learning needs and styles of boys would be very relevant.

Technical and further eduction or ACE was not a short-term 'fill-in' for these students. If they had left prior to completing Year 9, they still had a significant part of their education to complete outside the school environment. For these students, staff acknowledging the amount of time and effort required to complete their studies helped them to feel both accepted and motivated about the task ahead.

An element of educational pathways that is seldom explored is the need to set boundaries. Students in the survey made a point of mentioning that they liked flexibility, but also needed clear messages about the limits and expectations required of them.

There were few exceptions to the strong support for students' educational pathways. One such exception was at Box Hill TAFE, where a 16-year-old had finished certificates 2 and 3 in automotive as part of his Growth and Pathways course and wanted to proceed to certificate 4. However, because of his age, the student was told he had to wait until he was 18. The program staff were advocating for him but were not hopeful that he would be allowed to undertake the next stage.

While a lack of recognition of prior learning can be a barrier to an educational pathway, this was not mentioned by the young people interviewed. This may be because 70% of students in the sample had left school in Years 9 or 10, and so had come to TAFE or ACE either directly from school or soon after leaving it. A few had jobs for a short time but these were not included in their present qualifications. All had to start at the beginning of their courses and complete the entire course.

Flexibility, choice and autonomy

Students universally acknowledged 'flexible' approaches to education that allowed them to participate 'in their own way' and they overwhelmingly appreciated flexibility and understanding from their teachers. These positive features could be summed up as 'being treated as adults'. There were many elements of the programs that contributed to flexibility, student choice and the experience of autonomy.

Timetabling

For some students, the fact that classes were held three or four days a week, for defined blocks of time such as three or four hours, was a factor in enabling them to balance study, work and other interests. The contact time in the groups with a teacher enabled the young people to complete the courses, while the set class times gave them a structure and boundaries for participation.

Student-centred approaches

Technical and further education and ACE accommodated young people who were working as well as studying. Approximately 70% of students had no work, while the 30% that were employed worked from one or two hours up to 30 hours per week. Students managed to work outside class attendance requirements, with most courses approximately 20 hours per week. The young people mentioned the difference between school and TAFE in regard to balancing work and study. Late attendance at school due to work commitments had caused problems for some students. However, at TAFE, there were no punitive measures such as detentions and late passes if students were late as a result of night-time employment. Provision was made in an informal manner in most of the courses. It was recognised by teachers and tutors that outside issues would impact on students.

Some students commented that teachers were flexible about assignments being submitted late, as long as there was a reason. One teacher said that she would rather young people stayed in the course and had somewhere to belong, even if they could not complete much of the work. When the course was content and teacher directed—for example, in the Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Education—there was less room for students to miss work and time. In fact, assessment for these programs was more formal.

Balancing a modular structure with group-devised work

The type of course, subject content and delivery played an important part in how flexible the course was for students. Most of the courses had a balance between self-paced modules and group-devised work. In the courses with a modular approach where students worked at their own pace, there was flexibility for them to be absent and then continue with their work on returning. Modules allow students to progress at their own pace and be assessed according to each unit. This meant that students were able to achieve success in incremental stages, and to complete modules before they moved on to the next stage. This was seen as much more achievable than facing an examination at the end of the year.

While the modular structure enabled students to work individually and at their own pace, it was also important that the courses had group work and activities as well. This enabled students to learn to work with others and be part of a group, developing skills such as teamwork, negotiation and conflict resolution. The types of activities included: adventure-based team building programs, excursions, recreation, arts-based programs—including drama productions and group writing projects (newsletters)—and multimedia activities such as radio programs.

Assessment

Some of the Year 10 programs were based more on social skills and actual attendance, with little or no formal assessment. Students continued at these programs until they felt ready for more formal study. In the courses with modules, assessment was also individual, and depended on students simply completing a module. If the young person was not successful, they could repeat the module.

Payment of fees

Some courses did not require students to pay fees. Of the fee-paying courses, those that had flexible payment methods—such as paying by instalment—were greatly appreciated by students. As one student typically commented: 'Once I missed an instalment and that was okay, they just wrote to me, no drama'.

Class size

Flexible teaching approaches were facilitated by the fact that classes were usually smaller than in the average secondary school. As one student commented: 'TAFE is better, more interesting and smaller classes, more choices'. Smaller classes and doing 'individual work' was seen as a positive by many students. The recognition of different learning styles may have contributed to the observation by some young people that student behaviour at TAFE was better than at secondary school, and that there were 'no smart arses, no trouble makers, I could get on with it'.

Being treated like adults

Flexibility extended to tolerating behaviour such as smoking. The fact that students could take breaks from class to smoke was mentioned repeatedly: 'I like the different age groups and being allowed to smoke'. The range in ages meant that many young people felt that they were being treated like adults: 'I am not treated like a kid here; all the teachers are first-name basis, there are no pressures and it is up to me to do the work'.

Few young people mentioned problems at TAFE or ACE. However, those who did pointed out that they were not being asked to work hard enough: 'It wasn't demanding enough of me'.

Sources of support

Course co-ordinators and teachers were overwhelmingly the main source of support for students. When students had concerns about any aspect of their course, these were the people that they contacted first. For example, interviews with young people indicate that in Wangaratta it was the co-ordinator and the teacher who provided the main sources of support for the students in the Youth at Risk Have Other Options course.

Student services did not feature significantly. The interviewers noted that despite visible and extensive advertising (for example, at the Introductory Vocational Education Certificate in Adelaide), students did not mention using student services. The tendency to seek support from teachers and co-ordinators may be attributed to the holistic approach taken by teaching staff. For example, a teacher commented that students are 'nurtured and listened to' and had the impression that 'no-one has listened to them before'. Other sources of support within TAFE/ACE are other students. For example, a group of Samoan students at Outreach at Miller College formed a support group based on their cultural ties.

Young people who were case managed sought support from their case managers, from whom they could access bus and clothing vouchers and assistance with payment of fees if necessary. The majority, however, was living at home and reported being very well supported by their families, some of whom were very involved. For example, one mother provided the transport for her

daughter to and from TAFE and ended up doing the course as well. However, a significant number of girls (45%) in metropolitan areas in the sample lived away from home. Although the girls did not mention this issue, the level of accommodation and other support needed may nonetheless be a barrier to participation.

Co-ordination between TAFE providers and non-TAFE providers

Gaining re-entry to education through TAFE or ACE was achieved through family, friends or school contacts. Friends were the major source of information about TAFE and provided the main contact. Mothers or siblings were the next biggest source of information and helped with enrolment at TAFE. Some mothers and siblings had themselves completed, or were enrolled in, courses. Other young people had heard about TAFE and been referred by their school counsellor or careers counsellor, while others had help from community agencies, Jobs Pathways Program workers and youth clubs. In most cases, young people had been provided with, or found, information at the agencies or schools, and had then enrolled themselves after an interview or conversation with a TAFE co-ordinator or careers counsellor. A few mentioned that ACE workers had presented information at their school, but, for most students, information had been accessed through brochures.

Technical and further education co-ordinators and teachers were a contact point for young people wanting to return to school after being at TAFE. Some of these students had left school in difficult circumstances, which meant that they needed an advocate to gain re-entry to school. In the words of one of the interviewees: 'The co-ordinator is helping me get back to school or if not school to another course in TAFE. She rings up for me. The principal at one school denied me access but the co-ordinator is still trying'.

Barriers to effective participation

Despite the positive features of their programs, some young people nonetheless experienced difficulties. The interviews revealed that young people's personal circumstances have a significant impact. Other barriers include the very elements of courses that appeal to other students, such as greater flexibility and responsibility.

Lifestyle

If young people are using drugs then their capacity to contribute is obviously impaired. Some students still struggle with the boundaries imposed, however flexible, and have problems with any kind of authority. For these students, generic study and social skills were the most important elements of their courses. For example, in one program staff and students stressed the importance of 'intangibles' such as social skills and the ability to concentrate. Some were accessing TAFE after being in detention, while others studied to help keep them out of detention.

Flexibility

For a couple of students, too much flexibility was a problem. One student explained:

> I want to go back to school, it is easier there. At TAFE if you don't want to do it you don't have to so I take too many days off. School is restrictive and keeps me on track. I think I can handle the restrictions now I have grown up a bit and have something to achieve.

Access

Transport for some students was a difficulty in terms of the cost and time it took them to get to TAFE; indeed, some were travelling four hours a day, as they were generally too young to drive.

Payment of fees

Fees were also an obstacle for a small group of students. If their parents couldn't support them and they had no case manager, it was difficult to find the money. One young man sold his Walkman to pay his fees. In some courses, no fees applied.

Timetabling

Timetabling proved difficult for some students, as there needed to be a decent break between classes (for example, time to smoke and see friends). However, too much time between classes also caused problems. If there was a long break—for example several hours, with classes timetabled at the beginning and end of the day—students would not attend both classes.

Young people's experiences

> I was surprised, it was everything I wanted. (TAFE student)

The majority of young people were convinced that they would be entering a 'more friendly' environment where they would be treated more like adults. They hoped and expected that it would be different from school. The friendliness and openness of the teachers was not a widely held expectation, however, but this was commented on. Some had no expectations and were surprised at how much TAFE suited them. For some it was a 'culture shock' that they really were left to fulfil responsibilities without teachers 'hassling' them. Comments made included 'I have to make my own decisions' and 'I can go to the toilet without having to ask! I knew it would be different as you are around older people'. For one young person she thought it would be the same as school and was 'shocked at the difference and so glad I decided to go there'. Another thought 'it was going to be hard and they would have to do a lot of work, but it is not like that at all'.

In terms of structure and content, many students weren't at all clear about what they would actually do in the course; this seemed to evolve as they proceeded.

In many ways expectations were fulfilled as students completed courses, gained confidence and started to see a pathway for themselves. Those who chose to leave school and go to TAFE saw it as a valuable stepping stone either back into school or onto other courses within TAFE. This was a surprise to a few who felt the course was probably going to be short and not lead anywhere, whereas now they felt empowered with new goals and a path to follow.

Young people's plans and aspirations

> I want to get what I need to reach the next step. (ACE student)

Most young people had a clearly defined goal, although there were some who said that they had 'not a clue' about their future. Having goals and aspirations were important in motivating them to continue participating in courses. A common response was:

> I want to finish this course, I think about lots of things, not sure which one to concentrate on (in terms of the next step). It is going to be my life, and I want it to be good so it (the decision) needs to be right.

Most goals were directed towards achieving a 'happy life' as they envisaged it. Gaining a qualification and/or skills was seen as assisting them in this process, and most were very keen to

pass the course they were currently enrolled in: 'finishing it, gaining a certificate, showing everyone I can do it, this is what I want to do'.

Education was very much seen as the gateway to better options and, for many, this meant further study: 'I'll probably go back to school or try and get into uni'. Some made mention of achieving a 'permanent, lifelong stable job', whereas others said they were hoping to be flexible: 'I'd like to work for myself and see how it goes'. Family was also seen as a major priority: 'I want my family to be okay'. Often students envisaged a future where they could 'get a job, buy a house, marry and have a few kids, give or take'. The emphasis was on doing 'something I enjoy' while also allowing for 'helping mum pay off stuff' or 'just to sort out problems and get my own home'.

The particular course in which students were enrolled reflected different expectations. For those enrolled in Year 10 equivalent courses, just finishing the course and possibly getting to Years 11 and 12 was a long-term goal. This could then lead to a particular vocational area; for example, hairdressing, building, or some sort of apprenticeship. The young people in less vocationally oriented Year 11 courses were focused on completing Years 11 and 12 and then going to university.

Destinations: Are the young people moving on?

As all courses were catering for a range of different students and circumstances, it is difficult to draw a definitive answer as to whether the young people are moving on. First, it depends on the type of course. If the course was catering for young people with problems beyond everyday levels of difficulty, and was at a pre-Year 10 level, then it may take most students longer than a year to complete the course and move on. The case studies revealed that in courses catering for young people who had worked through personal and circumstantial problems and were at a post-Year 10 level, greater numbers moved directly on to the next level of education.

Second, progress depends on the young people themselves. While support was available in all courses, some students required intensive assistance for problems such as drug use, homelessness and family difficulties that had an impact on their capacity to engage with education. For staff working with this group, there was an acknowledgement that completion was a long-term possible outcome. However, it was admitted that success was often based on just keeping students engaged and working on their self-esteem, self-confidence, and conflict resolution skills. Table 2 provides a summary of the destinations of the young people in the six programs.

Table 2: Destinations (n=158)

Destination	Percentage of students
Same course	20
Other TAFE/ACE course	24
Pre-apprenticeship/apprenticeship/apprenticeship traineeship	15
School	5
Employment full time and part time	20
Other	8
Unknown	8

These destinations show that students are either staying in education or training of some sort or finding employment, either full- or part-time. Few young people were leaving to face unemployment, detention, or an unknown destination. For most young people in this cohort, it is the support available that provides them with a secure foothold in education so that they can take the next step in their educational pathway.

Teachers' perspectives

Because of the high level of need among the students and the skills required to work with them, many of the teachers said it was difficult to find suitable staff. A number of the teachers commented that people came to TAFE to teach adults and did not want, or were not suitable, to teach in the youth areas.

Teachers tended to take an holistic approach to these students. They felt it was beneficial for young people to attend courses, even if they did not complete all the work, because attending a course meant that they were connected with adults to whom they could turn if they were in trouble.

One teacher mentioned having worked with a team of teachers for a number of years across different courses. This had given her the opportunity and time to develop a shared philosophy and strategy for working with at-risk youth. Another spoke of the need for professional development for staff in ways to work with at-risk students, and to develop an understanding of their needs and how to make the teaching relevant to them.

Conclusions and implications

The findings have a number of implications for research and policy relating to the structured re-entry of young people into education and training. Inevitably, the research process provides insights into new questions and issues relevant to the concerns that motivated the research in the first place. This report has supported the findings of previous studies but has raised some new issues. It concludes that successful re-entry programs are 'student-centred' and relevant to young people's lives. It also shows that re-entry remains a 'vacuum' in Australian youth and education policy, and identifies areas for further research that will support stronger policy formation in this area. In addition, this report provides evidence that focusing on re-entry programs may be one of the elements in new educational policies that cater specifically to the needs of boys and young men.

In order to make the link with the research questions as direct as possible, a guide to the relationship between the research questions and meaning of the answers for policy and research is provided.

Research questions and meaning of the answers

What are the reasons for early school leaving?

The research findings of this project are consistent with previous studies which note that there are many and diverse reasons why individuals do not complete secondary school. It is usual for some factors or circumstances to coincide to make early school leaving an option. Negative experiences of school are the most frequently mentioned of these factors and, within educational settings, there are pressures to exclude students who do not conform. What may be more important is that, as the evidence from available literature suggests, *a small but significant group of young people will continue to experience disrupted pathways in their schooling.*

The current social and economic climate makes it likely that for some young people uninterrupted completion of secondary school will not be possible, even if this is a policy imperative. Given that individual choice is an expectation, the pattern for a significant minority will be that they choose to be 'out of school' during their secondary years. This is sometimes a positive choice for young people, and may be appropriate to their circumstances at the time. However, more often, students leave school for negative reasons associated with academic failure and behavioural problems in the school setting. The problem for both groups of students is that neither policies nor educational programs facilitate re-entry to secondary school.

What are the key elements in cultures of support that successfully re-engage young people in education?

There are two key elements in cultures of support that contribute to successful re-engagement of young people in education. These are consistent with the findings reported by St Ledger and Ward (1998) and Bradshaw et al. (2001).

- ✧ The most crucial element is that programs are relevant to the young person's life and are linked to their individual goals. This involves being responsive to the individual needs of the students, understanding their desire for self-worth (being treated as an adult), as well as recognising and accommodating problems such as drug addiction or homelessness. The ways in which this 'responsive' element is practised will vary, because it involves the capacity to be flexible and to employ adult learning principles. The effect of this responsiveness to young people's needs is that they are more likely to find or reclaim successful selves and to develop confidence in their own capacity to further their education.

- ✧ The second element is recognising the connection between the program and broader community networks and support agencies. It is often this connection that facilitates the initial contact for re-engagement. This approach is being favoured in current policy documents and reports such as Kirby (2000) and the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001).

The young people who participated in this study were often refugees from educational experiences that left them feeling powerless, rejected, failed and excluded. Re-entry programs must, of necessity, address the negative effects of these experiences, to give students confidence in their own ability to succeed and provide a level of support and skills that will enable them to do so.

What practices support young people to move from enabling courses to higher level courses?

When young people entered a TAFE or ACE course, they were often not aware how to make the next step. Moving to higher level courses often depended on the advice and advocacy of the staff involved. For example, some students who completed Year 10 were able to return to their school to complete Years 11 and 12, despite having left because of conflicts or other difficulties. This was achieved by an advocate supporting the student and facilitating re-engagement with the school. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that students have access to the next steps in their further education, rather than enlisting them in preliminary courses that do not lead anywhere. Findings in this report support Phan's caution that students may simply go from one enabling course to another (Phan 2000). *Responsibility for each young person's educational pathway must be established at the local level.* This practice is advocated in a number of current reports, including the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001) and Queensland Government (2002). If a young person leaves school early, they need professional support to re-enter another institution. The factors that facilitate moving to higher level courses are not well known, and warrant further research.

What are the particular aspects of the programs that facilitate and help young people return to, and remain in, education?

The research found that TAFE and ACE programs are realistic settings in which to offer young people a second chance to further their education. These findings are consistent with previous research, including that by McFadden and Munns (2000) and St Ledger and Ward (1998). In particular, these programs offer:

- ✧ manageable-sized programs (modules) balanced with group-devised work in which students who have had a history of educational failure can experience success and develop both academic and personal skills

- ✧ minimal or no entry requirements

- ✧ accessible location (near public transport routes)

- ✧ a learning pace that suits the needs of students

- ✧ relevant content (for example, linking literacy and numeracy to radio broadcasting)

- ✧ building personal and life skills

◇ small class sizes (for example, approximately 15 students per class)

◇ opportunities for one-to-one tuition if needed

◇ flexible timetabling

◇ attention to individual needs (for example, having a youth worker on site to deal with personal problems and crises)

◇ an adult setting in which they are treated with respect

◇ a new educational pathway, with further options.

What do young people say about their motivations for, and experiences of, re-entry to education?

The young people in this study believed that their futures would be improved if they had a good education. They all placed a high value on gaining educational credentials, and hence their motivation for re-entry was to complete secondary education and undertake further education or, in some cases, higher education. Some had clearly defined goals, and were aware of the qualifications they would need to reach their goals. For others, finishing Year 12 was a long-term goal with no clear expectations beyond that.

The young people's experiences were overwhelmingly positive, and some were surprised at how enjoyable their course had been and how well they had done. The relief of being able to *participate in education in an adult environment* was a common theme. In their responses to questions about what they liked about their learning environment, it was striking that many mentioned the lack of humiliating procedures (such as having to ask if they can go to the toilet) that they had experienced in secondary schools. Students felt positive about having to make their own decisions (about attending classes) and about the reasonable pace of learning.

What do teachers say about these students?

There has been little research conducted on the approaches, experiences and attitudes of teachers involved in re-entry programs. However, their views were consistent with the literature on effective re-entry programs. For example, the teachers who participated in our study talked about seeing the young people's educational needs as part of their whole life and were trying to structure courses that took into account all these competing needs. These included drug use, homelessness, family and other relationships, literacy, and numeracy.

Additional resources may need to be provided in order to meet the special needs of teachers. Staff in the TAFE and ACE systems who work with re-entry youth would benefit from in-depth professional development to provide them with additional skills, knowledge and practices to help enhance students' success. This would be particularly relevant for staff who wish to use areas such as the media and arts-based programs to engage the interest of students.

Implications

These findings have more general implications for policy and research on the issue of structured re-entry into education for young people with disrupted pathways.

A policy vacuum or a policy priority?

The report has identified re-entry to education as a significant policy area. Despite this, the literature review revealed a relatively small collection of research that focuses specifically on the

issue of structured re-entry. The paucity of this research base reflects a broader policy vacuum with regard to early school leaving.

Over a decade ago, the absence of effective policy on early school leaving provided the motivation for the Youth Research Centre's study of early school leavers (Holden & Dwyer 1992). This policy gap, in itself, constitutes a significant barrier for early school leavers, their families and educational programs that aim to meet their needs. Current youth and education policy (such as Kirby 2000; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Taskforce 2001) seems to give scant attention to the specific issue of re-entry to education, pursuing a decade-old policy of continuous educational participation to Year 12 (Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991). This committee, chaired by Finn, articulated new policy frameworks and goals, including the goal that 95% of 19-year-olds would participate in post-compulsory education and training by the year 2001 (Dwyer & Wyn 1998).

In the subsequent decade, the policy directions have not changed noticeably. The circumstances of young people and their families have, however. In 2002 and beyond, young people are more likely to take a pro-active approach to their education, including the positive decision to leave school before completing Year 12. This trend is noted in the United Kingdom by Raffo and Reeves (2000) and Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000). This means that youth and education policies will need to take account of the small but significant group of young people whose educational pathways are interrupted while they are at school. Leaving school early is, in part, a problem because returning to education is so difficult. Given that higher proportions of young men than young women are accessing these courses, re-entry may be a significant policy response to the problem of boys' under-achievement in the school system.

The TAFE and ACE systems will become increasingly important to young people who want to re-connect with education. This is due to the following factors.

✧ There is often nowhere else for these young people to go.

✧ Their needs for student-centred learning approaches and a more adult learning environment are most likely to be met at TAFE or ACE.

✧ The TAFE and ACE systems have developed innovative and relevant ways to deliver the curriculum.

A more systematic approach

This report identifies TAFE and ACE programs that are meeting the needs of young people to re-enter education. However, it is clear that there is not a systematic approach across TAFE and ACE to address the special needs of these young people. In most cases, successful programs depended on the goodwill and personal qualities of staff, rather than being fully acknowledged by the wider institution. Some evidence was found that re-entry youth were not always welcomed by individual staff or the institution as a whole.

This report has identified a number of elements, consistent with previous studies, that clearly facilitate successful re-entry. These elements add to an increasing evidence base on how educational pathways that have been discontinued can be re-activated and thus could form the basis for a more effective approach to re-entry within and across institutions.

A more systematic research base

After drawing on the key elements of successful re-entry provided by the case studies, the next step would be to design further research to provide a more systematic database on the longer term outcomes of re-entry programs. In particular, policy formation would benefit from a longitudinal study of early school leavers who are now accessing TAFE and ACE. This would provide essential information such as:

♦ What is the level of support that young people need over time? Is there an increasing rate of return as young people gain confidence and skills?

♦ Given that students are often studying part time, it can take several years to complete a single year of study (such as Year 10). What length of time is taken for the young people to move from enabling to vocational courses and employment?

♦ What models of inter-agency collaboration are most effective in enhancing the outcomes for young people who have disrupted educational pathways?

This report has identified a number of areas that would warrant further study.

♦ How do pre-Year 10 and Year 10 equivalent courses cater for the different learning styles of boys and girls?

♦ What is the role of innovative programs, such as those based on the arts or the media, in engaging early school leavers in education and training?

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Appendix A: Case studies

The following short case studies describe specific programs and courses offered by TAFE and ACE providers that cater specifically to the needs of students who are re-entering education.

TAFE NSW—South Western Sydney Institute, Outreach, Miller College

Maximising Innovative Strategies and Skills for Young People

The course is run by Outreach at the Green Valley Youth Centre, Miller.

Brief description of course and local area

Miller is located in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. One of the first housing estate areas in Sydney, the area has high intergenerational unemployment.

The course was originally set up as a partnership between TAFE and Community 2168, a local project which brings together residents, business, government and community organisations to improve services, facilities and opportunities for people in the 2168 postcode area of south-western Sydney. Outreach has worked closely with juvenile justice, refuges, Mission Australia, Well-being in the Valley, Liverpool City council and the local representatives of Centrelink, housing and health. This has played a vital part in integrating the young people into the community, some of them for the first time.

The Certificate in General Education for Adults Year 10 equivalent course is provided at the Youth Centre. Students graduate with a Year 10 certificate on completion of the 18-month course. There is also a preparatory course (pre-Year 10) that is part of the Maximising Innovative Strategies and Skills for Young People program. It operates within a youth-friendly environment where the students are provided with meals throughout the day.

Clientele

The clientele are at-risk young people aged between 15 and 21. These include early school leavers and juvenile justice clients. Young Indigenous people access the program through the youth centre. A high proportion of clients are from Polynesian and Lebanese cultural groups, and a smaller proportion are from Anglo-Australian backgrounds.

Curriculum and approach to education

Currently there are 15 students enrolled in the class. Attendance varies between nine and 15 young people every day. The course is operating two strands, two days a week, with a Year 10 group and a pre-Year 10 group. The Year 10 course has developed in response to the demand from students who completed the pre-Year 10 course at Outreach and then either returned to school or

articulated on to Year 10 in TAFE, but who found that the more formal environment of TAFE did not work for them.

The curriculum is based on modules, is flexible and self-paced and allows the young people to progress through the modules at their own speed. The course also involves group-devised work that enables the young people to develop skills in teamwork, conflict resolution and building self-esteem.

Literacy and numeracy are delivered in a way that is relevant to students, and curriculum materials are based on practical experiences. For example, a rock-climbing excursion will lead to course work on that topic. Staff work with the aspirations of the young people (for example to be a broadcaster or to work in a band), developing literacy and numeracy tasks that relate to occupations and jobs to which they aspire. As part of the program, students had a mock radio station and formed a band where they wrote their own lyrics and songs.

Teachers and youth workers are available to help students with their study and the young people are able to enter and exit the program as required.

Entry requirements

Students gain entry to the program after interview and assessment. The process assesses their commitment as well as their literacy levels. The enrolment procedure is completed when they show they are serious about attending. Young people from the age of 15 years are accepted into the program.

The location of the program near public housing helps to ensure that young people will attend. The program runs from 10.00 a.m. until 2.00 p.m. at the youth centre. Youth workers promote it to youth in the area, with other referrals coming from juvenile justice and schools.

Schools in the area have also shown an interest in the program; however, the first priority is to provide an educational option for those young people who are not connected to any agency or institution.

Staff at some of the local schools have suggested that their students could attend the youth centre course for one day a week, and the remaining four days at school. A few students have been catered for in this way, usually combining practical trades modules for one or two days with school attendance. This has worked well with the metals course. There is close liaison between centre staff and school counsellors about the individual programs.

Completion and non-completion

On completion of the course, students receive a Year 10 certificate/equivalent. Students who do not complete can repeat the course and stay as long as they need to become ready to move on. The students enrolled in the pre-Year 10 course gain entry to the Year 10 course.

The next step for graduates

This is a recent program and young people can now do both pre-Year 10 and Year 10 at the youth centre. In past programs, students have either moved on to a youth-specific course for Year 10 at TAFE, found employment, or gone back to school. The youth workers have helped negotiate for students who have wanted to return to school. Often they have left school in difficult circumstances, and need someone to advocate to allow them to return.

Accessibility

The course can be accessed by bus, as it is located in the centre of Miller with all other services and the shopping centre. It has been reported to youth workers that some parents will not send their children to the youth centre because they have to first pass through an active drug-dealing area. There are no fees associated with the course, which is funded by TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute.

Supportive environment

A key element in the success of re-entry programs is the extent to which the host institution provides a supportive environment for students and the program itself. The youth centre that 'houses' the course is a friendly setting but located in a street environment that has a significant drug trade. Students are banned from dealing or taking drugs for the time they are at the program or the youth centre during the daytime, but workers commented that there is no-one available at night to provide a program for the young people.

The workers and students try to develop positive images of young people in the community. Drama has been used by some programs to help with this. For example, students were recently involved in a drama presentation for the New South Wales Attorney General's department which was received very positively.

Support for students

The essence of this program is that youth workers are paid to be present during class time and are therefore well known to students. They are able to deal with crisis situations during class hours and are then available during the 'drop-in' hours. In addition, they can be contacted at other times outside the youth centre on a one-to-one basis. Although counselling is available through TAFE, much of the important groundwork dealing with life issues is provided by youth workers out of class hours, again on a one-to-one basis.

The workers and co-ordinator of the program are always there to talk through any issues that the young people may have. The ongoing support is provided as an integral and expected part of the program. This support ranges from basics such as providing food throughout the day, to career and lifestyle planning, and talking about any life issues that may be of concern to students.

Support for staff

Staff support for each other is an important part of the program. Debriefing happens at an informal level among the group of teachers and youth workers located at the youth centre. Teacher meetings occur each semester to talk through program issues and structure.

Destinations

There are varied destinations for students, depending on the particular issues impacting on their lives. While the destinations might not be termed a successful outcome in regard to completion of a certificate, in most cases they reflect a significant improvement in self-esteem, confidence and willingness to take responsibility for actions. While some have been able to move to TAFE to start certificate courses, others are continuing with Year 10, or have left the course owing to lifestyle issues impacting on their ability to attend.

Swinburne TAFE, Victoria

Victorian Certificate of Education Unit 1 Year 11

Brief description of course and local area

This particular course operates out of Swinburne TAFE's Prahran campus, an inner metropolitan area, which is generally middle class and quite a 'trendy' area of Melbourne.

The course offers the Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Education. The subjects offered are English, art, information technology, psychology, Maths general, and media. Most of the students do four subjects.

Clientele

The course caters for anyone who is 15 years and older. It is designed for early school leavers but the course is not youth specific. The people accessing the course have left school early, undertaken apprenticeships that haven't proved successful, are employed or have completed Year 10 (Certificate in General Education for Adults) at other TAFE institutes and campuses. The majority have successfully completed the Year 10 Certificate in General Education for Adults at Swinburne TAFE and then moved to the Victorian Certificate of Education Year 11.

Curriculum and approach

The course delivery is flexible. Teachers are on a first-name basis with students, who are treated as individuals and are encouraged to develop a relationship with teachers. Teachers work to help students succeed and build on personal skills and develop self-confidence. Students are seen as a whole person, so that other life issues such as accommodation and family can be talked through in class.

Entry requirements

The students have an interview with the co-ordinator prior to starting the course. The course has doubled in size since last year and the co-ordinator tries to fit in students if they are not currently enrolled in a school. If they are still at school, the co-ordinator encourages them to stay there.

Completion and non-completion

Students are credited with the Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Education subjects that they complete, and this contributes to the achievement of the entire certificate. They can repeat the course if they fail or do not complete it.

Next steps

In general, students go on to Year 12 at the same campus. The course is not vocationally oriented, although some go on to the childcare course. Some find jobs or look for work after Year 11. The co-ordinator is available during and after classes to talk about options for the future, and most young people would take advantage of this service before deciding what to do.

Accessibility

Some students were travelling for approximately one and a half hours to the course by public transport, while others lived close by and could walk.

Supportive environment

The course is designed to be supportive of students. The teachers work as a team. They have a background in delivering the Certificate in General Education for Adults courses, and so have experience in teaching young people who have been marginalised by the traditional education

system. Staff commented that it is difficult to recruit teachers who want to work in the course. Many TAFE teachers regard the younger students as 'too hard' and don't want to work with them. It was suggested that the TAFE teacher culture is based on expertise in working only with adults.

Support for students

There is a half-hour, one-to-one tuition service available for every student once a week. If a person is struggling, the co-ordinator takes them personally to meet the study support tutors. Other support classes are also being developed; for example, writing for success, which focuses on the structure of how to write rather than the content.

Support for staff

New teachers are encouraged to debrief with the more experienced teachers. Sometimes they feel uncomfortable doing this; however, staff are encouraged to socialise and relax together on a regular basis.

Destinations

Most of the students (16) preferred to stay with what was familiar and so continue to Year 12 at the same TAFE. The rest left for either full- or part-time work in the retail and media areas.

Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education Inc. (The Centre), Wangaratta ACE, Victoria

Youth at Risk Have Other Options

Brief description of course and local area

Wangaratta is a regional centre located 237 km north-east of Melbourne. Wangaratta, like other regional centres, faces the issue of providing opportunity and employment for young people in the area. Recent local industry changes have highlighted this concern.

In 1999 The Centre was awarded a national Practitioner Research Project by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium. The project was a 'Literacy for Youth' research paper and it was used to evaluate the Centre's Youth at Risk Have Other Options program.

As a result The Centre, in conjunction with Swinburne University–TAFE, was awarded another project in 2000. This was the Adult Literacy Innovative Project funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), which was utilised to create a youth curriculum aligned to the outcomes of the Certificate in General Education for Adults.

The project produced a 'youth-friendly' curriculum resource for teachers in the ACE and TAFE sectors in 2000 named 'Risk It'. During first semester 2001, the curriculum was trialled in The Centre's Youth at Risk Have Other Options program and at Swinburne TAFE. In 2001 there were 35 students enrolled in the options program at The Centre.

Clientele

The course provides an alternative education option for young people for whom mainstream education is no longer viable, facilitated by teachers and youth workers.

The young people who attend the options program are aged between 13 and 20, although an exemption is required from the Department of Education and Training prior to age 15. The clientele for the course comes from schools, the Department of Human Services and Juvenile Justice and a few from the supported housing service.

Approach

The modules for the curriculum cover a range of areas of relevance to young people, integrating literacy and numeracy. The course encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning through developing learning and study skills. This involves a flexible program which uses self-paced learning and recognises intrinsic outcomes. For example, high levels of attendance, improved motivation and participation, and completing part of the course are seen as outcomes. In this way, the course is based on 'moving the goal posts so that all the young people can achieve success'. The content of the course focuses on areas of life, work, and creative and expressive skills.

Entry requirements

There are no entry requirements other than students needing an educational setting alternative to school.

Completion and non-completion

The students receive a Year 10 equivalent certificate (statement of attainment) on completion of the course. They are allowed to repeat the course until they are ready to move on to another setting.

Next steps

The Youth at Risk Have Other Options course leads to the Victorian Certificate of Education at the Centre. This is not a full Victorian Certificate of Education (Foundation English and Foundation Maths) but a stepping stone to give students greater self-esteem and confidence. The course can also lead to the Year 10 Certificate in General Education for Adults at TAFE. The youth facilitators in the course and the co-ordinator of the options program and the Victorian Certificate of Education all talk to the young people about directions and possibilities. Some of the options program participants stay in the course for more than a year.

Accessibility

Some young people travel a considerable distance to access the course while some are based in the town. This is the only course of its kind available in the area. There has been interest in the course from Myrtleford and Albury/Wodonga as no such programs are available in these areas.

Supportive of students

The Centre fosters a sense of belonging in students. When some students had tried to undertake courses at the local TAFE on previous occasions, they didn't feel like they belonged. The Centre gives the young people space and time to work through problems and issues while remaining in a course where they have support to develop their social skills in a safe learning environment. The Centre sees itself as providing a bridge from school to TAFE.

The course is always presented by two teachers in the classroom. This has been a necessary support, both for the young people and staff. Students sometimes require one-to-one staff contact to work through problems.

A counsellor is now provided for students on a part-time basis. It is hoped that as the young people begin to know and trust the counsellor, teaching staff will be able to refer them to her as she has expertise in working through youth-related issues.

Support for staff

There is a counsellor employed to debrief staff as well as students. Some of the staff have been involved in research projects that developed a youth-friendly curriculum for the Certificate in General Education for Adults at Year 10. At this stage there is still a tendency for teaching to be based on classroom learning rather than project/contextual learning. The staff work as a team but are still developing how they will deliver a more contextual program. When one of the team leaves, there are difficulties finding youth-friendly teachers who are able to engage students.

Destinations

The largest group of students has stayed with the program for another year. This is often the case as the young people are not ready to move on from the environment in which they feel safe. For those that can move on, the majority moves to a different course at The Centre and so still remains in familiar surroundings with support. These courses include the Victorian Certificate of Education (Year 11) and the Certificate in General Education for Adults. Other destinations include looking for work, moving on to TAFE, looking after children, moving out of the area, or returning to school.

South West TAFE: Warrnambool, Portland and Hamilton, Victoria

Certificate in General Education for Adults Youth Stream

Brief description of course and local area

Warrnambool is a regional centre situated 263 km west of Melbourne. Historically a rich dairy area, the challenges of economic restructuring are now impacting upon the young people in this rural community.

Housed in the General Education Department of South West TAFE, the youth stream of the Certificate in General Education for Adults is a one-year course, involving 16 hours per week, and a variety of subjects. Students do trade 'tasters', one per term, for four hours per week, completing four in the year (examples include hospitality and horticulture). They undertake a recreation subject for three hours per week, requiring the students to initiate a group program that has a community element. 'Life skills' are taught for four hours per week, which involves work placement preparation, workplace visits, computer skills, art and music, putting together resumes and searching the internet. Students also do work experience for one day a week for nine weeks and then for a two-week block. The group stays together and has the same timetable. In 2001 there were ten students enrolled in the youth stream of the Certificate in General Education for Adults at Warrnambool.

Clientele

The course caters for 15 to 19-year-olds, most of whom have low literacy skills and are marginalised youth with some form of disrupted educational pathway. Most left school early or were asked to leave.

Approach

Staff felt that their students needed a more flexible program because 'reading and writing is not the arena they generally achieve in'. The cohort in general does not meet the learning outcomes set out in the Certificate in General Education for Adults and more work may need to be done to find a good 'fit' between students' learning needs and the type of accredited course offered.

Entry requirements

Students are interviewed prior to enrolment. The program accepts students who wish to enrol aged between 15 and 19. Young students who are motivated and confident and have good literacy and numeracy skills are often steered towards the mainstream Certificate in General Education for Adults where learning is more traditionally classroom based.

Completion and non-completion

Upon completion of the youth stream of the Certificate in General Education for Adults, students will get a certificate at the appropriate level from South West TAFE. If students do not complete the learning outcomes, they must move on to another course, training or employment. Students who do not complete may be awarded a Certificate in General Education for Adults Statement of Attainment.

Next steps

The co-ordinator of the youth stream assists them to gain information about other options. The careers counsellor at South West TAFE is also available to assist students. The young people can move on to pre-apprenticeship courses, mainstream Certificate in General Education for Adults, Victorian Certificate of Education, employment or the Certificate of Work Education. The institute also has strong links with Job Placement, Employment and Training, employment agencies, youth agencies and counselling services.

Access

South West TAFE is the only TAFE in the region that offers this course. Local public transport is almost non-existent, and it would be difficult for students outside the city of Warrnambool to access it on their own. The course is also offered at Portland and Hamilton to facilitate access for young people.

Supportive of young people

The General Education Department where this project is housed has a supportive environment. The team of staff who work on the program are interested in the whole person rather than outcomes alone. 'We talk daily and can discuss and support individual students as we all have contact with the same people', say staff. The team has invited the Centre for Adolescent Health from the University of Melbourne to run a professional development day for staff (sessional staff will be paid to attend) on adolescent development, risk and resilience and how staff can better communicate with young people. TAFE has also employed a person to track where young people go and to undertake the Managed Individual Pathways program (a Victorian Education

Department initiative). It is felt that these initiatives will result in better institutional support for young people.

A pathways co-ordinator has been appointed specifically to support young people. In addition, there is a student counsellor, a careers counsellor and a study skill centre to assist individual students. If they are case managed, students will often look to their own workers to assist with housing or finance issues. Staff suggested that South West TAFE management could be more supportive of the special requirements that are needed to engage these young people. Space is also a premium, and at times both the classroom and recreational elements of the program feel cramped.

Support for staff

The teachers who make up the team feel very supported by each other, and are organising their own professional development program to assist in improving their understanding of young people and to develop more appropriate teaching styles. Staff are examining the youth-specific curriculum used at the Wangaratta ACE, as they feel they could develop a more appropriate program than the Certificate in General Education for Adults. They would like a curriculum which supports the real and valuable achievements of these students, which they define as the 'intangibles': staying in a room for 30 minutes, working in a group, considering others, being on time, showing initiative, developing confidence and developing problem-solving skills.

Destinations

The majority of the 2001 Youth Project Group has gone on to pre-apprenticeships, study at TAFE or part-time work. A few have traineeships or full-time work.

Box Hill TAFE, Victoria

Growth and Pathways Program

Brief description of course and local area

Box Hill TAFE is situated approximately 12 km east of the city of Melbourne in a reasonably affluent suburb.

The Growth and Pathways Program is run by the Centre for Vocational Access and Education at Box Hill TAFE. It consists of a core of subjects (Maths, communication, skills and career planning) as well as three or six electives delivered by staff from relevant teaching centres such as multimedia or automotive studies. The electives can be undertaken at different campuses at Box Hill. The course is full time for 12 months if students take six electives, or six months part time with only three electives. In 2001 there were 43 students enrolled in the program.

Clientele

The program caters for young people who have left school early as a result of various problems: learning, social, and family difficulties. Generally these students are deemed 'at risk' of not connecting with any education system. Many of them have been asked to leave school and are described as having behavioural problems. They are generally aged between 15 and 17.

Approach

The course is described as 'evolving'. The electives on offer have changed, as they were not suiting the needs of students. For example, drawing was dropped as it was deemed too abstract and instead a mixed-media unit was created as a replacement. This is also designed to have three

discrete projects so that it is more achievable. The staff sometimes find students difficult and the work stressful. There is a great emphasis on getting the right teachers to teach these young people. According to one staff member, 'to put someone (a teacher) in there who doesn't want to be there would be a disaster and has been'. Finding the right staff who are prepared to stay is one of the biggest difficulties.

Entry requirements

Students are accepted after an interview. The interview looks at a wide range of skills that the student will need to bring to the course. These include evidence of academic and vocational skills, social and emotional support, workplace experience, identification of learning strategies that they use, as well as recreation and community connections. The main idea of the interview is to establish a learning plan that the students can use over their time at the institute. The student is also required to demonstrate their desire to improve through studying in the program. Students aged between 15 and 18 years old are accepted into the program.

Completion and non-completion

Students get a certificate of completion for the Growth and Pathways course from Box Hill Institute of TAFE and recognition of the modules they have completed, as well as for subjects such as automotive studies and hairdressing which are credited and nationally recognised. If they do not complete the course they receive a Certificate of Participation. The TAFE institute is reluctant to let anyone repeat the course, so students are really only allowed one attempt.

Next steps

Teachers in the Growth and Pathways course assist students in making decisions about where to go next. There is also a careers counsellor, but she works on a different site and many seem not to access her because she is not familiar. It is estimated that 90% of students link up to an educational pathway by the end of the program. This may be back to school, on to the Victorian Certificate of Education with a difference (offered at Box Hill), Certificate in General Education for Adults, pre-apprenticeship, going on to a level 2 or 3 certificate course, or gaining employment. For the Certificate in General Education for Adults and some other certificate courses, however, there are still age restrictions of 18.

Accessibility

Most students seemed to take public transport; for some, it took over an hour on the train and bus to complete their journey.

Supportive of students

A youth unit has been set up at Box Hill TAFE to better cater for this cohort. 'It is a huge task changing the attitudes of teachers, it is asking a lot, but over the last 12 months it has improved a lot.' One difficulty is that the course becomes rather fragmented, as the three electives may all be offered at different campuses of Box Hill, and thus the group doesn't have the opportunity to bond with each other. Each student virtually has a unique timetable.

Supportive of teachers

Despite the existence of the youth unit, staff are also fairly fragmented, and have relatively small amounts of time together. It is not unusual for teachers to feel stressed and frustrated because of the group work with students. There is a perception amongst staff that it is difficult for them to be supportive of students with limited resources, 'even though the CEO [chief executive officer] is

very supportive'. A teacher's forum has been held to explore issues involved for teaching this group of students and how to better support staff.

All staff have been encouraged to read the Kirby report (2000) and Box Hill TAFE will receive funding from the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training for the Managed Individual Pathways program. This will encourage cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly between schools and TAFE. There is also a sense that 'there is a growing awareness of the need for TAFE to have to do something, I mean where will these kids go otherwise, Kirby has done us a favour with his review'.

There is an expressed need for a trained psychologist/educational counsellor to provide regular debriefing sessions for staff. Funding is being provided for staff to attend a local conference on student transitions, and a professional development program has been run by the Australian Drug Foundation on adult learning principles and creative teaching.

Changes to the Growth and Pathways course for 2002

Box Hill Institute has recently been accepted to be part of the pilot for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, which has been designed with the needs of young people in Years 11 and 12 in mind. It is a new qualification based upon applied learning.

The Growth and Pathways program has been changed to fit the foundations-level Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. The students will be taking on English, maths, personal development and work education, including work experience and a range of vocational electives. The Building Department is developing an integrated project with carpentry, welding and sheet metal teachers sharing resources.

As part of this process there has been standardised literacy testing on each under-18 student applying for courses up to Year 11. All of these students have had a detailed entry profile created. This trial is expected to continue and expand across the whole institute in all areas where students who are under 18 are accepted.

A range of new projects exists and the number of staff within the youth unit will increase to six. The youth unit will be working with staff across the institute developing appropriate curricula, inservicing staff and, in general, providing support.

The institute's involvement in the pilot of VCAL is an example of the commitment it has to improving outcomes for youth.

Destinations

From a total of 43 students in the Growth and Pathways program, the following is an indication of their destinations. The majority has gone on to further study, pre-apprenticeships and employment. A much smaller number has continued on to apprenticeships, while a few are unemployed or have left home and are no longer in contact.

Salisbury TAFE, Salisbury and Regency Campus, South Australia

Introductory Vocational Education Certificate

Brief description of course and local area

Salisbury is 25 km north of Adelaide, forming the boundary between industry and more agricultural regions. Regency is 10 km north-west of Adelaide. Both areas are described as industrial, with a low socio-economic background population. There is high unemployment in both regions.

The Introductory Vocational Education Certificate offers both general education subjects as well as vocational education modules. The emphasis is on general language and numeracy competencies as well as information to assist in making informed vocational choices. It is designed to prepare students educationally and vocationally to 'move on'. The course aims to provide students with the skills, knowledge and self-confidence to make informed choices about further education or employment pathways. It is a bridging course for future TAFE enrolment, although this entry point is not automatic. The certificate is not specifically designed to cater for young people under the age of 18. The course is for one semester. In 2001 there were 240 students enrolled in the certificate at both Regency and Salisbury campuses.

Clientele

The course caters for people from 15 to 60 years old. Within this age group is a large number of young people aged 15 to 19 years old enrolled in the course. These young people have included the following groups: early school leavers, youth 'at risk', long-term unemployed, anyone wishing to upgrade literacy or numeracy skills, someone looking for a career change, single parents, Indigenous students and young people with non-English speaking backgrounds.

Approach

Although the Introductory Vocational Education Certificate was not specifically designed for youth, the young students enrolled find some advantages in the way the course is structured. One advantage which the students refer to is the capacity for them to work at their own pace. They work individually completing modules and like the fact that they are not pressured to be at the same level as everyone else. The curriculum is not youth specific. There is one program offered for all ages of students.

The TAFE institute offers an adult environment that some of the young people have difficulty adapting to. As one staff member commented, 'some claim they want to get into an adult learning environment but they lose their way, TAFE is not the soft option they hoped for'.

Entry requirements

Students are required to satisfy a 'set of entry competencies'. This is to ensure that students selected will be able to reach the required exit standards and achieve their desired pathways within the total hours prescribed. Skills must be demonstrated in maths, language and communication (reading, writing, oral), independent learning, science and computing, as well as demonstrating a commitment to personal development via study. Students who do not reach the required level are encouraged to do a pre-Introductory Vocational Education Certificate course in literacy and numeracy—a Certificate in Preparatory Education. Students must be over the age of 15 years.

Completion and non-completion

On completion of the course, students receive an Introductory Vocational Education Certificate. If they do not complete the modules they can try again next semester, but they must pay another semester's fees.

Next steps

The Introductory Vocational Education Certificate is definitely a bridging course. The co-ordinators of the course will assist in suggesting future pathways post-Introductory Vocational Education Certificate and students do get some credits for participating in the vocational courses. Students who complete the course have a number of options. They can return to school, look for employment or do other courses at TAFE (such as a childcare certificate or aged-care certificate). Students also look at study and work pathways in two of the modules they do: career planning and job-seeking skills. Students found these modules and the assistance from staff extremely helpful.

However, there are bureaucratic barriers for students to move on to the next step. For some who complete the course at age 16, they are unable to enter certificate 3 courses until they are 18.

Accessibility

The Introductory Vocational Education Certificate is offered at ten TAFE sites in South Australia. This meant that travel was necessary and, for the younger students, this inevitably involved using public transport. Because of this, some travelled for one and a half hours each way to attend the course.

Supportive of students

Staff will follow up on students who are not attending regularly or are having other problems. Welfare and counselling services, as well as a pre-literacy course, exist in the wider institution, but they are meant to be outside the Introductory Vocational Education Certificate course rather than part of it.

Supportive of staff

Some professional development is provided for staff. The program has had a stable team of staff for the past five years. However, the casualisation of staff through contracts rather than ongoing employment is having negative effects on morale and some staff are looking elsewhere for more reliable employment, where they feel 'valued by the system'.

Destinations

The Introductory Vocational Education Certificate has provided an indication of destinations for only one of their classes. As a representative sample, however, it provides a strong indication of the possibilities opened up to students after completing the course. These include courses in office administration, metal fabrication and community service. Others have returned to school or gone into employment.

Appendix B: Interview questions for TAFE and ACE staff

1. Name of the course

2. Who does it cater for: Age group, early school leavers, at risk, etc.

3. Where do they come from? For example schools, ACE, other TAFEs, Job Placement, Employment and Training

4. What does the course consist of? For example Work Placement, Skills Training, Literacy & Numeracy.

5. What expectations are there of the young people? For example for work, training, or returning to school.

6. Where does the course link too? How do they move on to further courses?

7. Is the culture of TAFE/ACE supportive of at-risk young people and young people in general? How?

8. What support services are available for staff and young people?

9. Are there any unmet needs for staff and young people?

10. What barriers are there for young people in general to participating in the course? For example lifestyle implications.

11. Are there any barriers placed on young people by the course or the institution?

12. What facilitators are there for young people to participate in the courses?

13. Any other comments?

Appendix C: Interview schedule— Young people

A. Background:

Age: _____ Gender: _____ Indigenous: _____
Non-English speaking background:_____ Other: _____
Year Level that you left school: ___
Where was last school located: _____
Living at home: _____
Work (including hours): _____
Dependents: _____
Income support: _____

B. Pathways to TAFE:

1. Why left school? Did you ask for help, or seek assistance from anyone?
2. What options were available when you left school?
3. How did you find out about this TAFE option?
4. What were the things that enabled you to get to TAFE (supports)?
5. Were there any people or organisations that helped you to get into a TAFE course?
6. What were your expectations of TAFE?

C. Experiences of TAFE:

1. Have you studied at TAFE before, when and what were you studying?
2. What are you enrolled in now?
3. What level? (Certificate, Certificate in General Education for Adults, Victorian Certificate of Education , Year 10)
4. What do you do, for example work placement, skill based?
5. What would you change about your current course if you could?
6. What level are you planning to continue to?
7. Have you had any help with co-ordination across courses in TAFE or to other courses/options?
8. Does TAFE do things better/worse than school? If so, what?
9. What/how could TAFE be improved?
10. Are there fees associated with this course?
11. What limitations are there in your situation? For example transport.

D. Priorities now and in the future:

1. What are your priorities now?
2. What do you think that you will be doing in five years' time?

Stepping stones: TAFE and ACE program development for early school leavers