

# **Youth Transition Support Initiative Formative Evaluation**

**By**  
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**Faculty of Education**  
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**for the Youth Transitions Division**  
**Office for Policy, Research and Innovation**  
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# 1 Acknowledgements

This report draws on opinions and experiences of many people involved in the Youth Transition Support Initiative, referred to as YTSI or the program throughout this report.

The authors, Bern Murphy, Helen Stokes and Fiona Taylor, would like to thank all those involved in this evaluation study. Many ideas and observations were offered throughout, on which this report is based. While the value of these discussions is noted, this report does not seek to be a comprehensive representation of them, and the views expressed are those of the authors, except where direct quotations are used. The quotes throughout the report are from the stakeholders interviewed, as indicated, although names and other identifying features of program participants have been de-identified.

Individual stakeholders or particular service providers of YTSI are not identified in the report unless relevant. In particular, we would like to thank the young people who participated in interviews, and we are grateful for the time and ideas they generously shared with us. Bronwen Heathfield, Manager, Youth Transition Support Initiative, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has been actively involved in the design and coordination of this project. We are grateful for her support and advice.

## **2 Executive Summary**

### **2.1 Background**

This evaluation was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to obtain information on the implementation phase of Youth Transition Support Initiative (YTSI) that started at the beginning of 2007. YTSI is aimed at 15-19 year olds who have disengaged from school prior to Year 12 or equivalent completion and are not currently engaged in training or employment. Each YTSI program employs the equivalent of two full time transition workers in 12 Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) areas across Victoria. The purpose of the initiative is to support young people through transition planning and personalised assistance to enable their re engagement with education, employment or training.

### **2.2 The Evaluation Process**

This report provides a formative evaluation of the implementation phase of the 4 year program. It does not provide impact evaluation, but rather examines how the programs have been initiated in the LLEN areas. The purpose of this report is to provide feedback to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regarding implementation issues including program models, community partnerships models, program processes, case management loads and engagement of young people. The report identifies both critical success factors and barriers to partnerships.

This evaluation aims to identify key learnings about the 'on the ground' practice to inform program delivery and to outline areas for program improvement. The recommendations may lead to changes to Program Guidelines including performance measures and service delivery methodology. This is the Final Report of the evaluation and builds on the findings of the Interim Report completed in June 2007.

In the first stage of the evaluation research findings were based on interviews with the 12 program sites including program managers from the auspicing organisations, YTSI transition workers and young participants. Interviews were also conducted with LLEN personnel and included a parent's perspective. The interviews for the Interim Report focused on set up of the programs and models, the role of the workers, their perceptions of partnerships and comments from the young people on the process so far. These reflected the initial stage of implementation: employment and induction of workers; and initial referral of young people.

The second round of interviews (for the Final Report) focused on connections and relationships with other organisations, employers and parents/carers. This included relevant agencies from the education, health and youth sectors.

### **2.3 Program Participants**

Most of the young people interviewed could identify something that wasn't working for them in their lives that, in their words, resulted in a period of time of 'not doing much' or 'going nowhere' or 'just sitting around'. Interestingly the notion that an education is necessary to secure employment is very common amongst these young people. Getting an education usually meant completing a TAFE course in VET or pre-apprenticeship training that would provide them with a qualification and skills for employment.

### **2.4 Program Processes and Practise**

The research revealed a range of program models but those that were working most successfully were where the workers and manager worked as a team and the workers had ongoing and accessible management support and appropriate supervision. The majority of organisations come from the welfare sector and have a history of working in their respective communities.

Program models were developed to suit the nature of the organisations and the experience of the transition workers. All include a management structure with two or more workers. Three organisations have two LLEN areas, and so have a larger team of workers and another layer of management. This appeared to work well in regard to a team approach and shared skills.

An outreach approach to locating and working with young people was evident in all areas and models were adapted to suit the organisation. Many had employed innovative ways to access young people and support their involvement in the initiative. In regional areas outreach to outlying areas was more challenging as a consequence of transport issues. Programs were exploring methods to better service the needs of young people in more isolated areas.

Identifying the appropriate target group is facilitated by effective referral procedures and existing networks within the organisations. The biggest difficulty for transition workers appears to be the ability to work with larger numbers of young people at any one time. For all programs young people from the high needs end of the spectrum are in greater numbers than low needs. In most cases this is a 4:1 ratio and therefore created tensions in meeting the prescribed case load of 80 participants per worker per year. Most felt it is too ambitious and detracts from the desired method of working with the target group.

The need to maintain an intensive case management approach with the target group was viewed as critical to the ability to successfully sustain the level of engagement required. Some young people required multiple attempts at engagement either because they were not suited to a particular program, didn't like it, changed their minds or other circumstances prevented their continuation. For transition workers this caused considerable dilemma of how many times should they attempt to place a young person in a program when their participation is erratic before giving up. Most felt the nature of the

program or their organisation meant they needed to persist regardless of the number of attempts. This caused tension for all programs.

## **2.5 Critical Success Factors**

In the early stages of YTSI, and as reflected in the Interim report, the initial work of establishing networks and partnerships and informing the sector of YTSI was time consuming but effective. In all cases there was an existing network of steering groups, reference groups and working parties and a shared commitment to addressing the needs of disadvantaged young people and early school leavers in their communities. Regions reported little difficulty in locating the target groups through a range of referral procedures and outreach work. Eight months into the program the focus is on enhancing existing partnerships and developing a level of collaboration which better serves the target group.

School partnerships are seen as important but frustrations with lack of flexibility and difficulty in successfully engaging young people back to the school environment remains.

All programs were able to build on existing community partnerships with agencies and those that had strong links with their LLEN were making better access to links with education and the business community through the LLEN networks.

The establishment and maintenance of sustainable partnerships has been enhanced by:

- Local history/local knowledge/previous provision of services in the area
- Co-location of services
- Development of mutually beneficial relationships/ reciprocity
- Having an education/welfare mix on networks that include YTSI managers/workers
- Passing on of partnership knowledge from management to workers on the ground
- Good will of workers generally and a commitment to making a difference for marginalised young people in their area.

All programs remain committed to working with marginalised young people and maintain a positive attitude to wanting to make a difference. An intensive case management approach to working with young people was common to programs and this inevitably results in difficulties in sustaining case loads. The early research indicated the welfare skill set and focus that transition workers have can result in reduced knowledge about educational contacts and processes.

## **2.6 Implementation Issues**

As mentioned above, the tension between attaining case loads and achieving successful outcomes remains a key issue for programs. Maintaining a case load with the majority of clients from the high needs end, and the time commitment required to effectively work with a young person with multiple and complex needs necessarily requires intensive case

management. Poor access to transport, high numbers of referrals for clients with disabilities and lack of suitable placements remain problematic.

Eligibility criteria were also an issue for programs. Referral of young people who did not meet the eligibility criteria, but would benefit from transition support included newly arrived refugee young people who are 19 or 20, as well as young people with a completed Year 12 or equivalent still facing significant barriers to participating in education, training or employment. Stakeholders felt more flexibility around eligibility is required for certain cases.

Accessibility and availability of courses or training options differs depending on location and is more of an issue in some areas than others. Familiarity and knowledge of the range of transition programs including Commonwealth and state programs is not consistent and many stakeholders raised the need for a common assessment and referral point.

The research identified the need to develop structures to better support young people to return to a formal learning setting including specific programs that focus on school readiness.

The current reporting framework does not reflect the intensity of assistance required to engage young people and many workers felt the outcomes as defined by DEECD are too restrictive and would like to see social and health outcomes included in the reporting process.

## **2.7 Summary**

The programs in the implementation phase of YTSI have combined a high level of enthusiasm in all programs with the effective use of networking and marketing building on existing links. Most tensions and difficulties are common to all programs and many are working towards addressing their needs in different ways. Programs are aware of the need to further develop their own evaluation process and are keen to keep improving their practice. Few programs have implemented a structured action research process although keeping accurate case notes is common to all. Sharing of good practice among all programs would assist this process. The need for providing regular and formal opportunities to share and develop good practice is a desired outcome for many.

Stakeholders commonly identified the value of providing intensive support for 15-19 year olds who are disengaged from any form of education training or employment. This development and fostering of supportive relationships sets YTSI apart from other similar initiatives and it is this support that is crucial to the ongoing participation of some in the target group.

While not a formal recommendation, the evaluators believe that YTSI meets a targeted need and recognise the potential in both further funding of YTSI and expansion into areas of need not currently serviced by the program.

### 3 Recommendations

The recommendations outlined below have been categorised into key areas of action and are discussed within the body of the report. Recommendations that remain relevant from the interim report have been included in the list. A full list of recommendations from the interim report is provided at Appendix 1.

#### Caseload Size and Composition

- **Recommendation 6 (page 33)**  
*That DEECD lowers the case load of 80 to 50 young people per transition worker, in order to include higher needs clients supported through a case management approach, and reflect the ratio of 80 percent high needs to 20 percent low needs clients.*

#### Program Guidelines

- **Recommendation 1 (page 22)**  
*That DEECD provides specific guidance to YTSI providers in relation to clients requiring multiple transitions and the expected number of attempted transitions appropriate for recording an outcome even when not considered a successful outcome.*
- **Recommendation 7 (page 34)**  
*That DEECD provides clarification to providers on access to the Youth Transition Support Initiative for young people who have disengaged from school for less than a six month period.*
- **Recommendation 6 (Interim Report)**  
*That access to YTSI be made available for some groups outside eligibility criteria, in particular refugees over the age of 19 and young people with a Year 12 or equivalent qualification who still face significant barriers to continuing in education, training or full time employment.*

#### Sustaining Outcomes

- **Recommendation 2 (page 28)**  
*That DEECD encourages and supports the development of more education and training options, including individual support, based on flexible partnerships between education and service providers.*
- **Recommendation 3 (page 28)**  
*That DEECD facilitates workshops in each of the 12 LLEN areas, outlining the role of Transition Support Workers, and better connecting providers of transition initiatives to relevant school personnel.*

- **Recommendation 4 (page 29)**  
*That DEECD enters into discussions with the Commonwealth and other state departments to consider ways to more effectively coordinate the efficient provision of services to support the transition from school of 15-19 year olds.*
- **Recommendation 8 (page 36)**  
*That DEECD continues to provide opportunities to showcase and share good practice between YTSI providers, including: sharing suggestions on engaging young people with complex needs; fostering effective community partnerships and participatory practices; provision of advice on accessing appropriate education and training opportunities for young people; and encouraging approaches to reflective practice.*
- **Recommendation 9 (page 36)**  
*That YTSI providers, together with DEECD, consider communication strategies to improve the capacity of providers to share best practices, resources and ideas which best service the needs of young people.*
- **Recommendation 10 (page 38)**  
*That DEECD provides information to YTSI providers on the availability of and options for developing accredited courses addressing the needs of young people who are re-entering an education and training pathway, and who have been out of education for a period of time.*
- **Recommendation 11 (page 38)**  
*That DEECD develops a set of guidelines for schools to support the process of re-engagement, based on models of good practice of early school leavers successfully returning to school (e.g. Corio Bay Secondary College).*

## **Reporting Framework**

- **Recommendation 5 (page 32)**  
*That DEECD recognises both through the Program Guidelines and the reporting framework that an intensive case management model is required for clients with high needs, which will necessarily involve more contact hours.*
- **Recommendation 8 (Interim Report)**  
*That the Department should work with the providers of YTSI to broaden the definition of outcomes in the reporting framework to include a focus on social outcomes for young people.*

## 4 Introduction

### 4.1 The Youth Transition Support Initiative

The Youth Transition Support Initiative (YTSI) operates within the Victorian Government's goals and targets for education and training as articulated in *Growing Victoria Together*. The understanding that education and training is seen as an investment in economic and social wellbeing is integral to this vision statement. The challenge is to better support young people in staying on at school, but if they have left school then they also need to be supported, to have the opportunity to re-engage with further education, training and employment.

The following Victorian Government targets are relevant to the program::

- By 2010, 90 percent of young people in Victoria will successfully complete year 12 or its educational equivalent
- The number of early school leavers who are unemployed after six months will decline.

As defined in the Program Guidelines, YTSI is aimed at improving the pathways and opportunities for young people disengaged from education and training. YTSI assists disengaged young people by providing access to a Transition Support Worker to help young people locate appropriate education, training and employment options and/or refer them to support services, including specialist youth services. Transition Support Workers provide personalised assistance to young people aged 15-19 who are not in education and training, not working full-time and do not have Year 12 or an equivalent qualification. The objective of the assistance is for disengaged young people to achieve a sustainable education, training or employment outcome.

YTSI is located in 12 LLEN areas in Victoria. In each of these areas two full time positions have been funded to provide specially tailored support and assistance to connect young people with suitable education, training and employment options. Each area is required to assist 160 young people annually. The different areas have developed different partnership models and case management models to assist young people.

This assistance will include addressing the barriers the young people face in regard to engaging in education, training or employment through:

- The development and implementation of individually appropriate transition plans and individualised case management
- Referral to specialist support services
- Assistance in skill development; counselling; mentoring; advocacy and mediation
- Assistance in accessing education, training and employment services.

Regular contact and guidance is provided to a young person once they have been placed into education, training or employment. The aim of this ongoing support is to assist the young person to retain the placement for a continuous six months.

## 4.2 The Research Context

An abundance of research outlines the many reasons why young people leave school early or remain in school but are disengaged from the learning process. For some, the process of disengagement begins as early as primary school or transition to secondary school. Dalton (2004) found this group of young people often face family problems, transience, mental health issues and a range of other barriers to formal schooling but that they are not necessarily students who do not want to, or cannot learn, though there are many who have significant learning problems.

It is unclear who has the responsibility for early school leavers in the community. Research regarding the issues associated with early school leaving is also well documented, and evidence of responses to the issue can be found at both Federal and State level (see Cole p.2004). The Grampians Education Partnership report of the Youth Options Guarantee Project 2006 also found a lack of a clearly mandated responsibility for 15-19 year olds, which has broader policy implications.

At the time of this report there was no organisation in Victoria that had specific responsibility to support 15-19 year olds who had disengaged from education or training and were not in employment, to re-engage in some form of education or training.

However, there are a range of Commonwealth and State initiatives targeting young people who leave school early without a significant pathway. These include YTSI; Connections; Youth Pathways; Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET); Regional Youth Commitments such as the Youth Options Guarantee; and Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs).

Cole (2004) also suggests a necessary shift in the individual responsibility of the poor choices made by young people who leave school early, to a focus of responsibility and accountability within the system. The development of the above initiatives are perhaps a response to this, and a recognition of the need to shift the responsibility of the young person to seek help or understand the network of services available to a more proactive approach, including outreach.

In 2001 the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Taskforce report acknowledged that:

*In many cases young people drop out of the school system early 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 (Wyn .J, Stokes. H. et al 2004).*

In recent years Victorian schools have been required to be more accountable for school attendance and retention issues and provide supported pathways for their students. There

is also a greater understanding and desire for services aimed at young people to work collaboratively. Findings from the Youth Options Guarantee Project (2006) found a huge diversity of accountability requirements of different education and training providers and that the expectations and accountabilities that apply to government secondary schools in relation to early school leavers are rigorous by comparison. The report recommended a review of accountabilities of education service providers to help strengthen outcomes for young people.

### **4.3 The Formative Evaluation**

To support the implementation of the Youth Transition Support Initiative, The Youth Research Centre at The University of Melbourne has been commissioned by DEECD to conduct a formative evaluation of the program that examines program implementation. The formative evaluation aims to identify key learnings about the on the ground practice to inform program delivery and to outline areas for program improvement. The recommendations from both the Interim and Final Reports may lead to changes to Program Guidelines including performance measures and service delivery methodology.

As requested by DEECD, both the Interim and the Final Reports provide advice on the following areas:

- Case load: size and composition
- Critical success factors with particular consideration of:
  - Qualifications and experience of transition support workers
  - Case management models
  - Outreach models (process for locating and engaging disengaged young people)
  - Establishment and maintenance of sustainable partnerships
- Sharing of good practice
- Implementation issues
- Reporting framework.

In the first round, site visits were conducted in the 12 areas and included interviews with program managers, transition support workers, LLEN personnel and young people. The Interim Report was delivered in June and included Recommendations (see Appendix 1) covering aspects of program development and issues related to the early establishment of partnerships.

Further site visits were conducted in the second half of the year and the interviews included a wider range of partners, including schools, ACE, TAFE, alternative providers, police and local service providers.

## 5 The Evaluation Process

The methodology uses qualitative research methods including an Action Research approach based in the twelve sites to generate data and used to generate reports for the formative stage of the Program. As part of the Action Research framework interviews with relevant stakeholders from providers and partnering agencies were conducted and analysed to form the basis of this report.

### 5.1 Site Visits

Details of interviews from the 9 providers in the first visit are listed in the table below:

Provider	LLEN Area	YTSI managers	YTSI workers	Young people	LLEN personnel	Parents
Barwon Youth	Smart Geelong Region	1	2	2		
Berry Street	BawBaw Latrobe	1	2	3	1	
Centacare	Highlands	1	2	4		
Cutting Edge	Goulburn Murray	1	2			
Djerriwarrah Employment and Education Services	Brimbank/Melton		2	4		1
St Lukes	Goldfields	1	2	4	1	
Taskforce Community Agency	Frankston Mornington Peninsula and South East	2	4	5	1	
Salvation Army	Inner Northern and Hume Whittlesea	1	4	4	1	
Western Workplace Learning	Maribyrnong Moonee Valley and WynBay	3	3	4		
Total interviews - 69		11	23	30	4	1

Interviews in the second round did not focus on localities but provided perspectives from key stakeholders. A total of 38 interviews were conducted as listed in the table below:

Organisation	No	Organisation	No
YTSI managers	6	School Assistant Principals	3

Transition support workers	8	School Welfare worker	1
LLEN	6	Parents	1
ACE providers	2	Neighbourhood Renewal	2
TAFE	1	Police	2
Centrelink	1	Young People	5

The first round interviews for the Interim Report focused on the set up of the programs and models, the role of the workers, their perceptions of partnerships and comments from the young people on the process so far. These interviews were reflective of the initial stage of implementation: employment and induction of workers; and initial referral of young people.

The second round of interviews for the Final Report focused on connections and relationships with other organisations, employers and parents/carers where possible. These interviews included the perceptions of ACE, TAFE, LLEN and Schools, their role in partnerships with YTSI and the potential re engagement of young people. Interviews with young people in the second round followed up on the same young people interviewed in the first round. This allowed the evaluator to capture the story of young people who had participated for longer than 4 months. In some cases the transition worker provided information about the young person if an interview was not possible.

Interviews in the first round were conducted face to face where the evaluator visited the locations of the transition support workers. The second round interviews were also conducted in person with the evaluator visiting the workplace of providers. To increase the number of interviews with partnering agencies some interviews were conducted over the phone.

## 6 Program Participants

### 6.1 The Target Group

Most of the young people interviewed could identify something that wasn't working for them in their lives that, in their words, resulted in a period of time of 'not doing much' or 'going nowhere' or 'just sitting around'. Research by McFadden (2000) has also found that young people often want to connect with education as a socially supportive institution and to reduce their sense of personal and cultural fracture. In some cases young people want to prove to themselves and others that they can 'do it', that is, return to education and succeed. The same could be said of young people in the program, as they saw the purpose of seeking support from YTSI as helping them get out of this situation and into doing something purposeful.

Many of the young people interviewed for this final report were interviewed three or four months earlier for the interim report so have been connected to the program for more than three months and some for six months. A common theme from these interviews is the desire to 'get an education' so that they could get their life back on track and eventually get a job that provides a stable income. Interestingly the notion that an education is necessary to secure employment is very common amongst these young people. Getting an education usually meant completing a TAFE course in VET or pre-apprenticeship training that would provide them with a qualification and skills for employment.

In addition, as information about, and the positive reputation of YTSI has increased, the level of peer and self-referral has also risen. If a young person has a positive experience they often want to get their peers involved to receive the same support.

### 6.2 Case Studies

The following case studies are typical examples of a young person in the program

#### Brian (age 17)

Brian left school before completing Year 9 because school was not relevant for him and he didn't see how it was going to help him. He spent a year at home, socialising with his wide network of friends and cousins. Brian felt it was too easy for him drop out of school because there were many others from his school who left early, including his older brother.

Once Brian became connected to YTSI with the aim of helping him develop a pathway, he claimed he was very keen to get out of his situation as he did not want to end up like his brother or older cousins. Brian feels he knows exactly what he wants to do (become a fencer) - and liaised with his transition worker to enrol in TAFE to obtain appropriate qualifications.

Brian claims he knows many people just like him who need to get out of their situation or 'they will end up sitting around doing nothing for years.' As a result, Brian tries to connect others to the transition program and stated that:

*'I've got her card in my wallet so I can give it to other people who need it.'*

#### Rita (age 16)

Rita is 16 years old and has been a participant in YTSI since April of 2007. Prior to this she was in Year 10 at an Islamic College. Her parents were experiencing severe financial difficulties which resulted in her having to leave school at the start of her Year 10. Rita was not keen to start at another school but wanted to complete her Year 10. Her mother contacted the local TAFE to see if they could help and she was given the contacts of the local YTSI.

The transition support worker discussed the possibilities of VCAL or a school based apprenticeship as an option within school. Possible and appropriate schools were identified and Rita was put on to a waiting list at a local girls' secondary school. In the meantime Rita and the worker investigated courses at the local TAFE because Rita expressed an interest in a small business course. Before any courses could be paid for, the family had to investigate their Centrelink entitlements. Rita was happy to do this independently but sought assistance where needed.

Rita enrolled at the local TAFE to do their Small Business certificate and completed part one in the course of a couple of months. During this time, she met regularly with her transition worker to look at long term options after TAFE. She was still keen to get her Year 10 or equivalent pass so they explored a local education provider. A meeting was arranged with the course coordinator to discuss Community VCAL and/ or CGEA. Rita was consequently offered a place on their CGEA course starting mid-July because they felt her literacy skills needed some attention before she started the VCAL.

Rita maintained contact with her worker during the term and regularly reported that she was having a great time! She said the people were great, she had made new friends and that the work was good but also challenging. The plan is for Rita to complete the CGEA program (possibly Dec 07) and then she is hoping to enrol in community VCAL course to get her Year 12 pass.

When interviewed Rita claimed that the regular contact, support and encouragement she received from the YTSI worker was very important to her. This support encouraged her to keep participating, allow her to have the confidence to ask for help when needed and eventually make new friends. Rita's parents are also very happy with the process.

## **7 Program Processes and Practise**

### **7.1 Program Models**

This evaluation revealed a range of program models. The models that were working most successfully were when the workers and manager worked as a team and the workers had ongoing and accessible management support and appropriate supervision. In these cases the manager often has a small caseload and plays a large part in the assessment process.

The range of models for case management/transition planning are very much dependant on the philosophy of the auspicing agency, generally designed to suit their existing frameworks. Varying practise around the use of brokerage funds is an example of this, where programs were using their funding in inventive ways to suit their clients and their own facilities.

The majority of programs had either two workers doing transition planning and a manager with no case load or two workers and a manager with a reduced case load. Most transition workers were co-located within the auspicing organisation although some were housed with the LLEN or part time in outer areas. This was working well across the programs and provided a greater level of support for the transition workers.

In three of the YTSI programs there is one organisation responsible for two areas. These organisations have more flexibility in the arrangement of their program model. They are able to have the four or five transition workers and a manager for both programs. This has a number of benefits. It encourages greater discussion of practice between program personnel and allows for breadth of experience in a number of work areas across the transition workers.

In all the programs the manager works closely with the transition workers and has a hands-on approach. Supportive management is seen as a key strength in supporting transition workers and often the source of supervision for workers.

### **7.2 Reflective Practice (Action Research)**

As outlined in the Program Guidelines, an Action Research approach was to be used in the formative evaluation process in the first year of the program. The Action Research process cycle has been described as a spiral in which each cycle increases the researcher's knowledge of the original question leading to a solution or new questions. The process encourages reflective practice within the organisations. For YTSI, the client and stakeholders' role in the Action Research process assists in the documentation of practice and the sharing of good practice. The aim is to further refine the process for the subsequent three years to inform program delivery. This corresponds with the suggested aims of any Action Research program or program, that are to bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice, and the practitioners better understanding of their practices (Cohen et al 2000).

Few programs have a formalised Action Research process. Most programs discussed a more informal process that involved reflection about practice at both the reference group and between workers and their managers. This would happen on a weekly or fortnightly basis for workers and managers. The aim of reflective practice is to build a culture of continuous improvements.

Modifications at an operational level have been made as a result of this informal Action Research approach. One example of this is the decision to provide fortnightly formal supervision to workers. This allows the opportunity to discuss particular clients, case loads, workload pressures and their own wellbeing. According to some transition workers formal supervision is beneficial and provides an extra layer of support.

The evaluation team in consultation with providers developed an impact tool for young people's perceptions of the program. This has been provided to the programs for their use (see Appendix 2) and incorporation into an overall evaluation framework.

### **7.3 Qualifications and Experience of Transition Workers**

Transition workers come from a range of backgrounds including youth work, disability, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health, education, social work, psychology, residential care and nursing. Often the workers had had experience in JPET programs, Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP) and child protection. Overall the predominant background of workers is in youth welfare with a lower number with a school education background. There is also a high incidence of workers being familiar with the location in which they are working including knowing local individuals and families.

In general it seemed that having workers in the program with experience of different sectors was beneficial. This allowed workers to swap knowledge about different sector protocols and also draw on a range of previous contacts and networks. Managers talked about the deliberate action of employing transition workers with varied backgrounds to provide a range of experiences and potential for shared expertise.

The ability to understand the needs of marginalised young people was a high priority in selecting staff.

The research revealed that transition workers are committed to working with the target age group, passionate about making a difference and frequently talked about 'loving the job'. Transition workers readily identified the many frustrations, disappointments and challenges associated with working with marginalised young people, however, the second round interviews revealed that job satisfaction amongst transition workers remains high. A compassionate workplace, support from colleagues, being appreciated by young people or family members and being part of small steps taken by a young person towards success were commonly identified as things that make their job enjoyable and satisfying.

Most continued to express concern about the high case load and the need to be as available as possible to their clients. Workers commented

*'I still love what I do but as numbers increase [caseload] it gets harder to provide the level of support I think they need. I still feel strongly about providing the right kind of engagement but you have to work really hard to engage and maintain a young person's interest in what they are doing, and particularly if they don't have great trust in the system, and many of them don't'*

*'At times you are incredibly frustrated and then you'll get this one young person who will make it all worthwhile.'*

When asked about the possibility of worker 'burnout', or overloading, many were aware of the risks and of the importance of fostering self-help, seeking organisational support and maintaining professional boundaries. One transition support worker commented

*'Well I do find myself thinking a lot about them [clients], but I am getting better at it. I can turn off at weekends'*

Transition workers generally view their position as different to previous employment and they view this difference as overwhelmingly positive. The intention is to support young people through a pathway rather than just reacting to their current situation was identified as a key component of this. As pointed out by one transition worker

*'I've worked in welfare for years and this job is better because it's more positive and more pro-active rather than reactive. It therefore doesn't get you down so much because you get to focus on what is or can work in their lives instead of just the problems'*

#### **7.4 Outreach Models**

Outreach is something the various agencies are good at because most often it is part of their core business. Locating and identifying the target group was viewed as the easy part, getting them to engage in an ongoing way as more difficult. No stakeholders doubted that the target group of 15-19 year olds existed in their community or that they needed assistance to establish appropriate pathways or connections to service providers. All acknowledged the introduction of YTSI was on the right track and definitely meeting a need in their area.

Apart from referrals from participating agencies including referrals through On Track Connect, Centrelink, schools and other service providers the programs were using a number of ways to identify and engage disengaged young people.

By far the most prevalent method of approaching young people who were identified as disengaged is a phone call to either the young person or sometimes a family member to arrange an initial meeting. These meetings take place at a young person's house, arranged

youth friendly venues such as a café or commonly a McDonald's store, or at the organisation itself. This mix is common to all programs as workers aim to hold meetings in places that most suit the young person. This remained so in the second round of interviews.

Outreach practices are therefore diverse and usually an extension of what the organisation or agency already does. Existing protocols regarding outreach applied to YTSI and differed between agencies. Safety of the young person, families and transition workers were key factors in designing strategies for outreach purposes. While programs differed in their approach, Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) procedures and maintaining both the safety of young people and workers was consistent to all.

#### **7.4.1 Regional Outreach**

Programs recognise the importance of meeting the needs of young people and often this meant going out to young people rather than expecting young people to come to them. All were familiar with outreach approaches and saw this as a necessary part of working with marginalised and disengaged young people. Programs in regional areas were able to source appropriate meeting places closer to where young people were located. However, outreach to outlying areas was more challenging as a consequence of transport issues and lack of suitable programs and services in the immediate area. In some cases not having easy accessibility to the transition workers also had an impact. Programs were exploring methods to better service the needs of young people in more isolated areas.

#### **7.5 Engagement with the Target Group**

It remains a priority for all programs to use strategies to effectively engage and work with young people in a sustainable way. Transition workers commented on the need to be both available and reliable for young people in order to gain their confidence and trust in the first place. Many acknowledged that the target group is likely to have had a patchy experience with schools and / or service providers along the way that had led to their disengagement in the first place. Young people themselves said being able to trust their worker was crucial to their ongoing commitment.

A common approach across all programs was helping young people to sort out financial issues in the first instance. This often involved clarifying payments with Centrelink, arranging for the appropriate youth allowance payments, making appointments and attending these meetings with the young person. Helping young people sort out Centrelink payments was very common amongst all programs.

## 7.6 Transition Planning

It became apparent, from the initial visit to programs, that the transition planning process is not linear. The Guidelines outline the process in four stages: identification, engagement, assessment, and service delivery (assistance and ongoing support). Many stakeholders could identify clients who were difficult to engage, or needed a great deal of support and therefore contact hours before any significant level of engagement could be established. Others go through multiple transitions before committing to any program. According to one transition worker:

*'Young people come to our service with a broad range of issues and we need to work out if education, training or employment is the right option and whether they're ready for it- we need to get smarter about how to connect them and sometimes this takes time and a number of shots at it. This needs to be better recognised in the recording of outcomes.'*

Following is an account from a transition support worker that describes the huge diversity in terms of transition pathways and the number of attempts made in the transition process.

*A 16 year old boy with low levels of education decides he wants to go to a learning centre. You go through the process of getting him in, he is disruptive, and after two weeks he gets thrown out, he then goes to TAFE and is disruptive again, so is thrown out. You can then end up on a pathway of going to meetings at the mental health services, anger management courses and the like. In the meantime you are exploring four different pathways and yet none of them are sustainable outcomes, for that young person, at that time. Or on the flip side, a young person came in, knew what he wanted to do, I called an alternative education provider they had a course starting the following day, got him in and he has been doing it for three months, he is happy.*

The following case study is also an example of a young person requiring multiple transitions but for different reasons. It outlines the level of involvement and guidance over an extended period that can be required to successfully engage a young person in the transition process. All correspondence and transport was facilitated and provided by the transition worker, and included liaising with Centrelink, family and relevant services. The scenario again highlights that transition work is not a linear pathway.

### Roy (age 16)

Roy first became involved in the program in March 2007. Prior to this he was in Year 10 and refusing to attend school. The MIPS coordinator made contact with the transition worker and a meeting was organised with Roy, his parents and the coordinator. At this stage Roy was quite unsure of himself and claimed he had no idea of what he wanted to do with his future.

Following the meeting the transition worker contacted Roy to arrange a personal meeting but he could not be contacted for some time. Connection was made with his mother to encourage Roy to make contact when he was ready to talk.

After some time Roy called and they had a number of meetings to explore the possibilities and determine his interests. Roy thought he may be interested building and construction. He looked into and applied for a building pre-apprenticeship at TAFE. While he attained an interview for the course he was then refused entry because he did not have a prospective employer. This information was not made clear at the time and led to unnecessary disappointment on his part.

Following this he applied for a position in building and construction with a job network provider. Roy went through the process including an interview and was successful with his application. Upon commencing this, Roy lasted two weeks and dropped out, citing a lack of interest. This was followed by an interest in an automotive course; however the course required a minimum Year 10 pass and Roy does not have this. The worker then organised for him to attend an information session at TAFE for a full automotive pre-apprenticeship. Roy never attended this session.

The transition worker called a meeting with Roy's parents with Roy present and went over the options available. At this stage Roy moved away from building and construction and expressed an interest in hairdressing. The transition worker provided Roy with information and helped to organise enrolment with a local training provider and an information session and interview was booked.

Two days later Roy called to inform his transition worker that he had again changed his mind. They met to talk about the need to make a commitment and discuss possible pathways for him. After this meeting Roy decided he might be interested in plumbing and put in an application to a local TAFE for a plumbing pre-apprenticeship starting in June.

Roy was accepted for a skills assessment and interview, but was informed that he was too young and to try again in 2008. Both Roy and the worker were very disappointed by this. Currently the transition worker is trying to maintain contact with him to hold his interest until the start of the year.

Cases like those above, raise the question of how long and how many times a worker should persist when trying to engage a client. This was a concern raised by many programs. However, this also raises a tension. Many workers also felt that ethically they could not give up on a young person or turn someone away because they are too difficult.

➤ ***Recommendation 1***

*That DEECD provides specific guidance to YTSI providers in relation to clients requiring multiple transitions and the expected number of attempted transitions appropriate for recording an outcome even when not considered a successful outcome.*

## 8 Critical Success Factors

### 8.1 Partnerships

The history of existing working relationships is a key strength. It was not uncommon for transition workers to have been members of network or reference groups in their previous roles in either youth work, JPET or job networks and they remain as members representing their YTSI role.

The advantages of this are the established personal relationships between individuals from various agencies and from a range of sectors. This is particularly the case in regional areas where knowledge of services and workers, and indeed families, is high and advantageous.

As the twelve LLEN regions were selected based on their relatively higher number of 15-19 year old early school leavers there is an associated range of existing programs and networks targeting young people. The existing desire by organisations to support marginalised young people in their area made it easier for the goals of YTSI to be communicated. Managers from the various providers were invariably members of steering groups, reference groups and relevant networks.

The early work of program organisers in both establishing networks and informing the sector about YTSI was time consuming but effective. Both formal and informal communication strategies were used to build up further networks.

### 8.2 Partnerships with the Education Sector

Over time, the gap between the youth sector understanding the role and limitations of education regarding early school leavers and vice versa has narrowed, with increased networking and evidence of some schools employing or engaging the youth sector more proactively, and the youth sector understanding the core business of schools. However, many feel there needs to be an ongoing dialogue and discussion to close this gap further.

One school Principal said

*'Education needs to understand other ways of working with young people and the youth sector needs to better understand the constraints schools are under. I feel the youth sector sometimes have expectations that need to be tested. Sometimes there is a feeling that schools have failed these kids and that the blame lies with school. There is a tendency to think that schools have unlimited capacity to integrate young people back in. We know it's more complicated than that.'*

The introduction of LLENs and resulting networks that bring the education, health and youth sector together has contributed to closing this gap and is viewed by many as an important driver in bringing people together. The notion of a joined up service delivery model can only happen when people from organisations meet and talk together. A

significant finding from the Youth Options Guarantee project in the Grampians and relevant to YTSI is that it requires time to develop quality partnerships. The way to develop a working model suited to a particular region is to go through a process of developing quality cross-sectoral relationships required to support the partnership.

Comments from workers in the youth sector reveal ongoing tensions between the sectors:

*'Sometimes we find ourselves still butting heads with what people are expecting, people's perceptions of welfare, misconceptions of youth and youth workers and having to continually justify what it is we do and why our role is effective – we don't ask teachers or health workers to explain themselves.'*

*'What is the schools' responsibility? Parents don't know, we don't know. I mean do schools have to find somewhere for students if they exit them before they turn 16 or is it the parent's job? Can schools say no to taking a student who lives in their school region? How is it that some schools can say no to taking kids?'*

While a few workers had education backgrounds there appeared to be a lack of knowledge among the workers in regard to:

- How schools function (making contact, who and how)
- Having contacts in a range of schools
- Information about how to assist young people to re-engage with schools
- Understanding of courses such as VCAL offered in schools, combined with accessing VET and TAFE
- Schools' responsibility to students who leave before school leaving age.

Having an understanding of how schools operate, their welfare structures and the tensions associated with maintaining enrolments and getting results is important for transition workers who are likely to be the liaison person with school personnel.

Even though the school system was seen by many as not able to cope with the needs of the target group, and, in some cases, not the ideal option, there was wide acknowledgement that if a young person can re-engage with school, it improved their chances of a successful pathway. For example some stakeholders believe the community values the experience of school more highly than alternative education programs and young people with longer periods at school are at an advantage when seeking later employment. As one transition support worker said:

*'Most kids don't want to ever go back to school but when they do you want it to be easier to connect kids into mainstream schools and generally it is not. Schools seem happy enough to give you kids but they don't usually want them back.'*

### **8.2.1 Partnerships with Schools**

Returning to mainstream schools is a choice for relatively fewer young people in the target group than you would expect, given that over half are either 15 or 16 and at or

below school leaving age. This could be both because school was a negative experience and they do not wish to return to that environment, or that re-enrolling in a school is more difficult than enrolling in a TAFE or ACE program.

Having effective partnerships with schools meant a range of things to different workers. Some claimed they had good partnerships with schools because they were familiar with individuals in schools or had met with the school counsellor to discuss YTSI. This does not necessarily equate to understanding school structures at the operational level or the requirements of reintegrating a young person into secondary education.

On the other hand, many stakeholders felt schools can have a limited understanding, or a lack of resources, required to support highly marginalised young people returning to school. Many welfare structures in schools include an individual learning program in place for a young person to ensure their reintegration is managed holistically. This is not always clearly understood by all teachers who have this young person in their class. In a secondary school, a young person may have up to eight teachers. This has potential to cause tensions in some areas.

Transition workers often expressed frustrations with school personnel being difficult to contact, waiting for lengthy periods for schools to return calls and schools not having the flexibility to engage young people in the target group. Having to wait until the start of the school year often meant young people were kept in a holding pattern. This lack of flexibility is a frustration for many.

Discussions with workers from the youth sector reveal a concern about the limitations schools have in their ability to engage and work with marginalised students. Many felt these have been longstanding, as reflected in one worker's comment:

*'We've prattled on about this issue ad nauseam for years, with no effect. We see the potential within this project [YTSI] to really address the issue of why 13 and 14 year olds leave school and what happens to them down the track. This is not an easy issue with one solution, but the answer is not letting them fall by the way side.'*

### **8.2.2 Partnerships with ACE and Alternative Education Settings**

Stakeholders readily concurred that to establish a successful pathway for young people who have disengaged from school early they need to be accepted into a learning environment where they can experience success and recommence a meaningful relationship with education and learning. Many are also quick to point out that for some this environment should not be a return to school but rather a more flexible learning environment that does not repeat what didn't work for them at school.

As one stakeholder commented:

*'Often these kids can't handle school and often schools can't handle them.'*

Settings such as ACE or other alternative learning programs were viewed as preferred settings. ACE can often provide either more flexibility for young people, smaller numbers, less formality including no uniform and are generally better targeted towards catering for individual needs. Stakeholders from this sector mentioned the importance of ensuring that a young person's 'second go' at education or training needs to be positive and reinforced the notion that non-success in the first instance can diminish a young person's confidence, motivation and therefore commitment. They were unanimous in recognising the vulnerability of young people who are re-engaging in education. The need to be flexible and not place unrealistic expectations on young people was seen as something schools are less able to do. School performance is usually tied to regular and continuous attendance that young people re-engaging with a learning environment may find difficult. Rolling enrolments, open door policies and freedom to come and go when you wish is not something available in schools.

This is a complex issue. On the one hand, attending a mainstream school holds greater status in the community than enrolment in alternative programs. At the same time stakeholders repeatedly acknowledged the need to provide flexible alternatives for young people who are returning to a learning setting.

In an evaluation of The Young Parents Access Project based at Corio Bay Secondary College, Shacklock et al (2006) found that students who attend school irregularly benefit from learning opportunities that do not require consistent classroom attendance. Secondly, the report stated that young people who have not recently experienced school settings prefer applied and adult approaches to learning over approaches based on assumed continuity of schooling. ACE programs on the other hand are better placed to facilitate this.

Some stakeholders thought that ACE providers are very good at engaging young people but less able to provide a pathway after completion. One stakeholder commented

*'ACE providers see their job to engage young people and they are generally very good at it. They don't however see their role as establishing a pathway for young people. So it means they keep young people occupied for a length of time or keep them off the streets!'*

Stakeholders acknowledge the need for a diversity of pathways for young people and that alternative settings can be a good option as they often provide applied learning settings. They see the disadvantage is that many alternative programs are short term interventions and don't lead to longer term successful outcomes. In one region at a meeting of service providers in the ACE sector, the stakeholders argued that for alternative programs to work more effectively with younger clients they need to start at an earlier age and engage them for longer than a six or twelve month period. However the funding model restricts this and results in both young people cycling through the ACE sector and potential unhelpful competition between providers. The added dilemma with this is that no-one is responsible for tracking this young person from program to program, which reduces the

likelihood of an effective pathway. In particular, this often applies to young people who disengaged from school in late primary or early secondary and have very low literacy skills. This target group forms a small, but significant cohort of YTSI clients and transition workers commonly reported this cohort as being very difficult to develop an effective transition plan for.

### **8.2.3 Partnerships with TAFE**

The common discussion regarding TAFE and YTSI centred around the need for more TAFE like options and the tensions between what TAFE can realistically provide to young people with complex needs. Stakeholders from the TAFE sector noted:

*‘Really the core business of TAFE is to provide an education service to adult learners. We have a VET mandate, including options to disengaged youth, but we don’t have the level of pastoral care required by many of these young people. We might not be the most appropriate environment and sometimes this is not recognised.’*

*‘Some TAFE teachers don’t have the skills to work with these young people and we can sometimes offer the welfare support. TAFE teachers are often sessional and their expertise is in their craft or trade and they don’t necessarily have the skills needed to work with difficult behaviour, these kids often end up in adult learning environments and they are not suited.’*

Many thought the expertise of TAFE staff is generally in delivering their craft and less so the welfare of young people. YTSI clients often need more support than TAFE can provide and TAFE teachers are often sessional workers and do not have time outside of delivering classes to engage with transition workers.

Stakeholders readily identified the value of offering a young person a course that provides applied learning opportunities that often have a ‘real world’ learning focus for the young person. They recognise that TAFE courses often provide this. However, combined with this, a young person returning to an education setting also needs to have their literacy, numeracy and pastoral care needs met and TAFE environments do not always have the resources to do this. Many see the worth in a young person being able to attend school part-time, while also attending a Registered Training Organisation such as TAFE and, where necessary, to have scheduled time off to manage complex individual personal issues.

The need for a range of flexible education, employment and training options also requires flexibility between partnering agencies and many believe it needs to happen at a systemic level.

➤ **Recommendation 2**

*That DEECD encourages and supports the development of more education and training options, including individual support, based on flexible partnerships between education and service providers.*

#### **8.2.4 Relationships with the LLEN**

Relationships between LLENs and programs were varied and often depended on the relationship the organisation itself had experienced with the LLEN in the past. Some organisations had limited involvement with the LLEN prior to YTSI, while others had a very strong partnership based on previous work with the LLEN. Regardless the LLEN is a key player in the overall networking of the initiative and have a longer history of working with schools and community partners from all sectors. While the LLEN are not service providers, many stakeholders claimed it would be beneficial to house YTSI with the LLEN. Stakeholders talked about the need for the lead agency [YTSI provider] to be networking properly and to foster that central delivery. LLENs, they believe, are well placed to facilitate this.

Many stakeholders raised the issue of confusion around the range of programs on offer for youth transition combined with a lack of coordination. They talked about the need to establish one point of connection or assessment which includes Commonwealth and State Government initiatives. This frustration is also experienced by parents and schools. Stakeholders from LLENs stated that

*‘When a parent says ‘I’ve heard about Youth Pathways, I’ve heard about alternative programs or the one-stop shop and I’m now hearing about the transition worker. What’s the best choice for me, who do I go to? Schools and teachers don’t necessarily know either and in some cases they are saying the same thing as the parent.’*

*‘It’s a matter of picking the right program for the right kid and knowing what’s out there. That’s the job of the LLEN, to know what programs are there and how they are running, their job is not service provision so it makes them independent and this is crucial.’*

Stakeholders also raised the need to communicate the maze of programs to schools and parents. They suggested a meeting of school personnel that includes Assistant Principal, Welfare Coordinator or Careers Counsellor, where relevant workers are introduced and information on what they do and how they can be contacted can be distributed. Some felt DEECD are well placed to provide this.

➤ **Recommendation 3**

*That DEECD facilitates workshops in each of the 12 LLEN areas, outlining the role of Transition Support Workers, and better connecting providers of transition initiatives to relevant school personnel.*

Some regions, particularly those with Regional Youth Commitments like the Youth Option Guarantee in the Highlands LLEN area and strong networks of service providers, are committed to connecting the sectors that provide services to the target group.

Stakeholders discussed the fragmentation of services to youth and the priority of creating a common referral and an independent body (such as the LLEN) to facilitate a single point of entry for assessment processes. This they claim would provide a much better use of resources and the best possible pathways for young people and prevent young people having to tell their story over and over.

Stakeholders raised the need to provide a better system of matching education services to the needs of the young person and that YTSI can facilitate this. Stakeholders commented:

*'There is much more emphasis on diagnosis and matching of needs to services in health, in education this doesn't happen.'*

*'Principles of integration are the best thing we have to maximise the resources available- the community doesn't care about who is delivering them, just that the service is being provided.'*

Some areas were moving towards consortium of stakeholders from the sector which aims to provide a real opportunity for more effective planning, resource use and sector advocacy. It also provides the potential for the young person to come to one place and *'be guided through the maze, rather than being left to find their own way.'*

➤ **Recommendation 4**

*That DEECD enters into discussions with the Commonwealth and other state departments to consider ways to more effectively coordinate the efficient provision of services to support the transition from school of 15-19 year olds.*

### **8.3 Partnerships with the Business Community**

Although employment is one of the outcomes to be achieved through YTSI, there were few if any direct partnerships between the transition workers, their organisations and the business community. Some programs mentioned that this was an area that they needed to develop. Many of the target group who have gained employment opportunities as part of their transition plan have done so on an individual level rather than through a relationship with a network in the business sector.

Given that many of the service providers have a background in the welfare sector their links with the local business community tend to be fairly limited. This is where their relationship with the LLEN is important. LLENs are able to make links with local businesses in the region.

On the other hand, it was not uncommon for stakeholders to point out that many in the target group are far from ready for employment and that many need a period of connecting with the community, participating in a routine and developing a sense of confidence before returning to either a learning or work environment.

#### **8.4 Improved Relationship with Centrelink**

At the start of the program, most areas commented on a sometimes problematic partnership with Centrelink. By the second round of interviews this had improved as key people within Centrelink became better informed and more aware of YTSI. Many commented that the communication between DEECD and Centrelink helped sort out some of the early difficulties.

Centrelink offices with a specialist youth officer were generally more accommodating and had a better understanding of the process. In all cases the referrals from Centrelink were increasing and for some service providers Centrelink provided the highest number of referrals.

Often an effective partnership with Centrelink was based on relationships between individuals brought about by regular contact with the transition worker. The risk is that this deteriorates if the worker shifts departments or locations within Centrelink. Nonetheless, effective communication with Centrelink is important to facilitate effective partnerships on the ground.

## 9 Implementation Issues

### 9.1 Case Management Models

As previously discussed, the nature of the organisations, the philosophy of the workers and the desire to make a difference means case management of young people generally has a welfare focus.

Stakeholders commonly raised the notion that effective and sustainable engagement requires intensive support of young people and requires a high level of engagement from transition workers to maintain their connection to the service. In many cases this includes providing transport, taking them to medical appointments, attending meetings with them or liaising with Centrelink – all very time consuming.

Added to this, workers felt six months was the absolute minimum time frame of support and in reality most will require be a much longer process. Naturally this causes concern around the role of the transition workers, particularly in relation to the sustainability of the welfare model approach in working with young people and creating a level of dependency that puts great pressure on transition workers. This is not to say that institutions are not mindful of this need, however, with workers often being better placed to provide the required ongoing individual ongoing through the program's case management model.

Research indicates common reasons for leaving school relate to both low satisfaction and low levels of achievement and often the reasons young people leave school in the first place are the very same barriers that make it difficult for a young person to return to school.

Transition supports workers commented that successes needed to happen early for young people who are prepared to give education or training a second chance. Transition workers recognise that these young people are often vulnerable to loss of confidence and motivation when early success is not achieved or acknowledged.

An evaluation of the Full Service Schooling (James et al 2001) reported that young people considered 'at-risk' needed to experience success to develop confidence in their abilities and that increased personal confidence came from a sense of accomplishment. Workers see their role to support young people to achieve this and provide encouragement to persist. The same could be said of young people who enter employment opportunities.

As articulated by one young person:

*'Fran [transition worker] will pop in for coffee [...] and call up sometimes. I wouldn't mind her keeping in touch. If I do it on my own I feel like I don't have anything to fall back on. I don't know what to do if I fail at something, having her makes it better.'*

## 9.2 Case Load Issues

Education is generally not based on a case management model. Transition workers can provide the welfare support needed to maintain a young person's confidence that teachers may not be in a position to provide. On the flip side however, there was concern amongst stakeholders that to maintain the level of support required to keep what Shacklock et al (2006) refers to as 'fragile learners' in the system, is increasingly more difficult as case loads increase.

### 9.2.1 Size of Case Load

Interviews with stakeholders revealed the case load of 80 young people per worker per year is commonly viewed as too high. Some stakeholders felt with a case load of 80 the role of the transition workers needs to move more as a transition broker rather than providing intensive case management. Transition workers themselves claim the high level of engagement is not the same thing as creating dependency and that in many cases it is necessary to keep young people involved. Many transition workers could cite stories of having to go to young people that need a high level of outreach because they believe the young person would not otherwise participate. While they see this as necessary, they also know that it increases pressure on both time commitment and reaching the target. This frustration was common to all transition workers and managers. As stated by some:

*'As people who are trained to work with youth, we know you get much better outcomes and be more sustainable when you can work with a young person properly. A case load of 80 makes it very difficult to do this and that's what contributes to 'burn out'.'*

*'I feel it can be a numbers game, you have to juggle all the time, it's always in the back of your mind- 'what am I up to as far as numbers go' – it shouldn't be like that.'*

*'I think to get proper outcomes, the model of YTSI needs to be one of intensive case management rather than a brokerage of sorts - the case load is too high for this.'*

Clearly there are tensions between maintaining the case load and achieving sustainable outcomes, transition workers overwhelmingly view the latter as the most important.

#### ➤ **Recommendation 5**

*That DEECD recognises both through the Program Guidelines and the reporting framework that an intensive case management model is required for clients with high needs, which will necessarily involve more contact hours.*

### 9.2.2 Composition of Case Load

Transition support workers overwhelmingly found that the ratio of high needs to low needs means that the case management process for the vast majority of young people is likely to be long and intensive. This is an indication that the program is reaching the target group and is necessary, but may mean that case load numbers of 160 per program/year is too high. Most felt a case load half that number would be more realistic, given the needs of many of the target group. The predominant view of transition support workers relates to the tensions between getting the numbers and achieving decent outcomes.

There is a wide disparity in the time commitment required for a high or multiple needs young person compared to a low needs young person. Most programs had a mix of 4 to 1 high to low needs. It is clear that programs do not shy away from young people with multiple needs. The very nature of the program and the expressed need in the community results in the majority of the target group also having complex needs that may be as yet unmet.

In one example a transition support worker described Bill, a client they had been involved with on and off for over four years.

#### Bill (age 17)

Bill has been through a number of programs without ever successfully completing any. He has a pattern of making a commitment, participating for a while then dropping out. At age 17, he has sole responsibility for parenting as the mother of his child has left the area. Early in the year Bill called into the service with his child looking for support. He was referred to YTSI and the transition worker helped to enrol Bill in a course and develop a transition plan for him. In one way Bill is low level needs as he was ready to enrol in a course and mature enough to meet the requirements independently. However other influences came into play and after a two month period Bill claimed he was struggling with the 'maths' and childcare was difficult. The transition workers are currently looking at how to best address Bill's issues and believe that he is most likely going to drop out of the course. In terms of the transition process Bill will go back to the assistance phase and his participation will not be recorded as a sustainable outcome.

On the one hand, the organisation recognises that changes for this young person are not going to happen overnight and there is a need to continue to support him. They also acknowledge that for a young person like Bill, involvement with YTSI gives him more chances to become connected to other relevant services, particularly in relation to his child and their needs.

#### ➤ **Recommendation 6**

*That DEECD lowers the case load of 80 to 50 young people per transition worker, in order to include higher needs clients supported through a case*

*management approach and reflect the ratio of 80 percent high needs to 20 percent low needs clients.*

### **9.3 Eligibility of Young People for the Program**

The findings of the Interim Report revealed a level of confusion in regard to eligibility of young people for the program. The YTSI Program Guidelines do not provide clear direction on how long young people need to be out of school prior to accessing YTSI. The implication contained that young people should be out of school for 6 months prior to starting with YTSI is viewed as too long, and acting earlier is seen as more proactive.

Providers are interpreting Program Guidelines flexibly. Some programs are attending exit meetings at schools; others are waiting the six months. Some say that Youth Pathways cannot provide the intensive assistance needed and that to leave them for six months would be to lose them for the future. Many felt that once someone as young as 15 had disengaged from school they need to be linked to some sort of training program or support network sooner than a six month period. A stakeholder commented

*‘Generally we find it easier to engage kids who have just recently left their school, rather than those who’ve been floating around for a while, but it’s very individual, some who’ve been out of education for a long time walk in with such conviction that they want to be there, to prove something to themselves or others.’*

➤ **Recommendation 7**

*That DEECD provides clarification to providers on access to the Youth Transition Support Initiative for young people who have disengaged from school for less than a six month period.*

Some workers mentioned a lack of clarity in regard to what is regarded as a sustainable outcome. Concerns regarding whether six months in a course that is only six months in duration is considered to be ‘transition’ rather than a sustainable outcome were raised.

Other concerns related to young people they felt the program should be working with but who weren’t eligible. This included under 15 and over 19 year olds, and those young people with Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, including those with low ENTER scores.

The Interim Report recommended that access to YTSI be made available for some groups outside eligibility criteria, in particular refugees over the age of 19 and young people with a Year 12 or equivalent qualification who still face significant barriers to continuing in education, training or full time employment. This need remains 8 months into the program.

➤ **Recommendation 6 (Interim Report)**

*That access to YTSI be made available for some groups outside eligibility criteria, in particular refugees over the age of 19 and young people with a*

*Year 12 or equivalent qualification who still face significant barriers to continuing in education, training or full time employment.*

#### **9.4 Role of Young People**

Initial discussions and service plans of the program indicated a desire to include young people in decision making based on the notion that participation in the process should enhance service outcomes. The Interim Report revealed that involvement of young people in the planning stages of YTSI was rare and seen as potentially useful but difficult to achieve in a purposeful way. The Report recommended that where possible YTSI programs should increase the participation of young people, and explore ways to include young people in reference groups or in advisory roles.

While YTSI service providers often have an open door policy and aim to be very available to young people, there were very few examples of formal procedures of engaging young people in the overall establishment or development of the initiative.

Feedback from young people was welcomed and seen as essential but usually anecdotal and informal. Representation of young people on reference groups, network meetings or steering groups was generally seen as not appropriate or a tokenistic way of involving young people.

Given that outreach is a significant component of all programs, network meetings are often centrally based and rely on young people coming to them. This is not to say that workers did see the value of youth participation, but, that feedback and input from young people happened in other ways.

Most programs encouraged written feedback from clients which mostly centred around their thoughts and levels of satisfaction of the service provided to them and less on the development of the program. As one worker commented:

*'We probably need to look at a different model of running a focus group of young people; we need to go to them. This could look like running a group at McDonalds.'*

One program that was working on the development of a set of guidelines for YTSI was cognisant of the need to gather youth feedback and consulting young people and their families as this was an existing component of the organisational framework. However, as one manager acknowledged:

*'From the partnership end there hasn't been involvement of young people. We have our guidelines on providing youth and family feedback to our different services, but there hasn't been involvement of young people in the interagency collaborations because we don't know how to do it. At the end of the year the team needs to bring together a focus group of young people to look at this.'*

## 9.5 Accessibility and Availability of Courses

The experience of the availability of courses varied from program to program, with some workers highlighting the difficulty in accessing courses for young people. This has been caused by a number of reasons including:

- Availability of suitable courses at their academic level
- Cost of courses
- Transport to courses/location of courses
- Course availability not matching the timing of marginalised young people, for example, specific starting dates at the beginning and middle of the year.

Service providers felt they were well placed to identify when they were not the right service and when to transfer a young person to another appropriate service. However, this relies heavily on the availability of referral options and in some areas there is a lack of services. Young people with disabilities or significant learning difficulties are an example of this. One transition worker described a high rate of referral of young people with disabilities and a lack of appropriate services to transfer them to:

*'I worked with one girl who left school in Year 6 and is now 15. She had been trying unsuccessfully to get back into a school for years but school was proving too difficult. I soon realised that this young person needed one on one for a period of time in order to successfully connect her to any program but that it was beyond the scope of what we can provide. What do you do with someone like this?'*

Another stakeholder claimed:

*'It may be common to think there are no programs to refer kids to when the LLEN will know about the maze of programs on offer, so the relationship between the LLEN and YTSI is very important.'*

➤ **Recommendation 8**

*That DEECD continues to provide opportunities to showcase and share good practice between YTSI providers, including: sharing suggestions on engaging young people with complex needs; fostering effective community partnerships and participatory practices; provision of advice on accessing appropriate education and training opportunities for young people; and encouraging approaches to reflective practice.*

➤ **Recommendation 9**

*That YTSI providers, together with DEECD, consider communication strategies to improve the capacity of providers to share best practices, resources and ideas which best service the needs of young people amongst each other.*

### 9.5.1 Problems with School Re-Engagement

The following case study outlines some of the difficulties associated with returning to school.

#### Marcus Age 15

Marcus has been out of school for over a year. He has been connected to YTSI since the start of the year and has tried short periods of employment, but lack of transport, his young age and unstable accommodation made it too difficult to sustain.

From the start, Marcus expressed an interest in wanting to return to the school he left half way through Year 9. His friends are still there, it is closer, and he wants to 'get more of an education'.

The school, who had set up things for him in the past, stated they want Marcus to show some form of commitment to learning or wanting to be at school before they take him back again. Marcus' transition support worker negotiated with the school and they are working towards Marcus returning to start at the school at the beginning of 2008. He enrolled in a CGEA program to demonstrate commitment and to facilitate his general school readiness.

During this period Marcus has changed his living situation a number of times, lived with friends or grandparents but is now living back with his mother. Marcus is the one who is most keen to return to the school for a second chance, even though he knows he has 'burnt some bridges' and left because he found school 'just not for me at the time'.

This case study raises some important issues about school. Firstly, for some young people school provides them with a peer group and even if school wasn't successful for them, it is where their friends are and that's what they want to remain connected to. Young people themselves are able to identify this, as is evident in the following comment from a young person:

*'I'm 16 and stopped at school in February. I haven't finished Year 10. Some schools had openings but I didn't handle the people in the school. I miss school kind of, I've been there to visit friends.'*

Secondly it highlights issues about the difficulty some transition workers have with helping young people to return to education in school settings. There are many barriers that make it harder for a young person to re-connect with secondary schools. For some having to purchase a school uniform or books is what prevents a return to school.

Many stakeholders talked about the need to help young people to be school-ready after a significant period of absences from school and to provide some sort of evidence to demonstrate commitment to school personnel. The concept of young people being re-

inducted to school was raised by many as a way to counteract their period of absence. As a worker outlined:

*'Apart from anything these kids need to develop a routine of sorts; many have had no routine about anything for sometime. This might include getting up at a particular time or having to be somewhere at a certain time. Meeting deadlines is often not part of their daily lives.'*

Many stakeholders mentioned the need for short courses which cater specifically to learn how to be a student again. This included attention to expectations and responsibilities, information about organisational structures and etiquette and reintroduction to learning. At a more specific level workers identified skills such as note-taking or listening, asking questions, presenting work, purposeful reading or establishing an effective routine. How to negotiate with a teacher, how to be a student, how to work with classmates, or how not to be angry were also identified and skills that would assist a young person to re-enter a formal learning environment. Transition workers believe that completing a course addressing general school readiness would assist the process of re-enrolment. Berry Street offers a Living Skills Program that currently offers support to their clients that may include aspects of community readiness of which returning to school may be a component. One program brokered delivery of a "life skills" program as part of their assistance package.

➤ **Recommendation 10**

*That DEECD provides information to YTSI providers on the availability of and options for developing accredited courses addressing the needs of young people re-entering an education and training pathway, who have been out of education for a period of time.*

➤ **Recommendation 11**

*That DEECD develops a set of guidelines for schools to support the process of re-engagement, based on models of good practice of early school leavers successfully returning to school (e.g. Corio Bay Secondary College).*

## **9.6 Complexity of Issues and Long Period of Engagement**

It was not unusual for workers to spend significant time with a young person without successfully engaging them into a transition activity or spend significant time spent trying to contact a young person. Many felt there needed to be some way to officially record attempts at contact and the explanations of why they were unsuccessful, because sometimes this could be very time consuming and result in no outcomes.

The following case study is an example of this dilemma:

Juanita (age 18)

Juanita first left school in Year 9 as a result of instability in her personal life and associated inability to meet the requirements of a structured environment like school. Since leaving school she suffered a range of mental health issues, including substance abuse and homelessness.

Juanita came into contact with YTSI through referral from a health service. At the time, her substance abuse was significant and the worker, who has a background in drug rehabilitation, worked with her to enter a detoxification program and move into a therapeutic community.

Juanita has a desire to return to school, (to 'get an education') and agreed to work towards this. Over a period of time and considerable contact (the worker spent over 60 hours with her) the plan is for Juanita to return to school at the start of 2008.

The transition worker in conjunction with the youth worker conducting ongoing interviews and meetings with the secondary school who have agreed to enrol her (it is not the school she left earlier). The meetings at the school include teachers and school welfare personnel who are looking at strategies to help support her re-engagement to a formal learning environment. The transition worker is an important part of this.

This case study reflects a young person with complex issues and hence the period of assessment and engagement is necessarily lengthy and delays the ultimate transition process. During this period, and with the assistance of the transition support worker, Juanita was able to address the issue of her homelessness, problematic drug use and the personal and physical risks she had been taking. She found stable accommodation, learnt about drug and alcohol addiction, received counselling and support and underwent a mental health assessment.

In terms of outcomes, Juanita's transition will be recorded as one outcome, that of returning to school. However, she is a young person with low levels of education, was homeless, drug addicted, taking sexual risks, self harming and experiencing serious mental health issues, all of which have been addressed in some way. For this young woman to successfully return to school is a remarkable outcome and involves intensive support. As the worker commented

*'We need to be able to capture all of the other social outcomes along the way.'*

Programs could readily identify young people with multiple and complex needs and describe how the recording process did not adequately acknowledge the level of input required in such cases.

### Julia (age 16)

Julia was first interviewed soon after becoming involved with YTSI. She left school during Year 8 after many absences resulting in an inability to keep up with the work. At school Julia experienced bullying from others, had few friends and disliked school. After leaving school Julia stayed at home for a year, often looking after a neighbour's child, and having little contact with others. In Julia's words 'I was sitting at home on my bum doing nothing'. Julia's parents wanted her to get a job but at only 15 and low self-confidence, this was very difficult.

Julia saw an advertisement in the local paper of YTSI and made contact. The transition worker worked with her to help build her confidence and explore her options. Julia enrolled in a learning centre to undertake a Year 10 completion at two days a week.

At the second interview Julia was still completing her Year 10 and reported that she was enjoying it because she liked the small class size of 20 and that 'you get to work at your own pace. At school I didn't have any friends but at this school I might not have friends but I can talk to the others' According to her transition support worker this is a very significant outcome as initially she was reluctant to leave the house or communicate with people.

Julia is interested in childcare in the future but wants to complete her Year 12 if she can. Six months down the track Julia is travelling very well and the people around her feel very confident she will follow a fruitful pathway.

The period of assessment and engagement for someone like Julia's is necessarily lengthy. To support her even to be able to leave the house, involved a high level of trust and regular contact with her transition support worker.

### **9.7 Measuring and Defining Outcomes for the Reporting Framework**

Many workers commented on the specific improvement in social outcomes that are not reflected in the Reporting Framework for YTSI. All acknowledged that they are more difficult to quantify or measure but are very important in the process. The workers described important social outcomes including:

- Increased ability to control anger
- Obtaining a driver's licence
- Effective coping strategies
- Better able to get along with others
- Improved communication skills
- Improved family relationships
- Improved self confidence
- Improved work behaviour skills
- Reduction in drug and alcohol usage
- Reduction in offending

- Ability to set personal goals
- Participation in voluntary work.

➤ ***Recommendation 8 (Interim Report)***

*That the Department should work with the providers of YTSI to broaden the definition of outcomes in the reporting framework to include a focus on social outcomes for young people.*

## **10 Conclusion**

While this evaluation is formative and does not include impact evaluation there is universal support for the worth of YTSI and clear opinion that the program is meeting an identified need in the community.

Stakeholders commonly identified the value of providing intensive support for 15-19 year olds who are disengaged from any form of education training or employment. This development and fostering of supportive relationships sets YTSI apart from other similar initiatives and it is this support that is crucial to the ongoing participation of some in the target group.

While not a formal recommendation, the evaluators believe that YTSI meets a targeted need and recognise the potential in both further funding of YTSI and expansion into areas of need not currently serviced by the program.

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## **Appendix 1: Recommendations from the Interim Report.**

- **Recommendation 1**  
*That where possible YTSI workers participate in network meetings and if workers are not involved that strategies be developed to effectively communicate and document information between the managers and the workers.*
- **Recommendation 2**  
*That the DoE could assist in the establishment of partnerships, if partnerships between YTSI and the LLEN were not well established.*
- **Recommendation 3**  
*For the DoE or LLEN to provide professional development for transition workers in regards to educational options for young people and school processes.*
- **Recommendation 4**  
*That the DoE consider providing funding for both transition workers and management to work as a team in YTSI*
- **Recommendation 5**  
*That the DoE lower the annual target of young people required for case management*
- **Recommendation 6**  
*That access to YTSI be made available for some groups outside eligibility criteria, in particular refugees over the age of 19 and young people with a Year 12 or equivalent qualification who still face significant barriers to continuing in education, training or full time employment.*
- **Recommendation 7**  
*That YTSI workers should place a focus on developing and maintaining ongoing working relationships with Centrelink personnel and that the DoE continue to liaise with Centrelink at a central level to facilitate partnerships*
- **Recommendation 8**  
*That the DoE should work with the providers of YTSI to broaden the definition of outcomes in the reporting framework to include a focus on social outcomes for young people*
- **Recommendation 9**  
*That where possible YTSI programs aim to increase the participation of young people, and explore ways to include young people in reference groups or in advisory roles.*
- **Recommendation 10**

*That DoE institute a more formal arrangement (twice yearly) in regard to sharing good practice in YTSI. This would need to allow for focussed discussion and networking between YTSI workers and managers to facilitate sharing of good practice and problem solving.*

➤ ***Recommendation 11***

*That the DoE explain access requirements to the school bus to YTSI workers and for the DoE to explore young people gaining access to the school bus for transport to education or training placements.*

## Appendix 2: Impact survey for young people

### YTSI: A SURVEY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF YTSIP

*You can choose to write your answers on or get your transition worker to talk you through it.*

**What did YTSI achieve?**

**We want to hear from you about what you did, but we also want to know how YTSIP worked and what difference it made to you.**

**Could you tell us as honestly and accurately as possible about these things?**

#### Part A: some background information:

Name

Age

Year level left school

#### Part B: Describing your experience:

**In YTSIP (tick the box):**

	Not at all	A little	Some	Quite a bit	Lots
a. I got to have a say about what I wanted in my transition plan					
b. I felt that I had choices.					
c. I felt respected.					
d. I found out information that became part of my transition plan					
e. I had enough meetings with the case manager to develop a transition plan					
f. I met the Youth transition worker in a place in which I felt comfortable					
g. The Youth transition worker did what they said they would.					
h. We discussed what I would need to be able to get into a course/training/job (circle)					
i. The Youth transition worker understood the things stopping me from getting into a course/training/job					

**Part C: Describing outcomes after a Transition Plan has been developed:**

**Because I was in YTSIP: (tick the box)**

	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Quite a bit</b>	<b>Lots</b>
a. I feel more confident about myself.					
b. I feel I was helped.					
c. I was listened to.					
d. I was given support and encouragement.					
e. I am more optimistic than I was.					
f. I have clearer goals now.					
g. I know what I'm doing next.					
h. I feel more confident about the future.					
i. I am more aware of services than I was.					
j. I have learned new things.					
k. I feel good about what I've done.					
l. I feel more ready to do a course/training/job and know where to find one (circle).					
m. I have set goals to help me do a course/training/get a job (circle).					
n. I have more skills and knowledge to help me get into a course/training/job (circle).					
o. I am able to communicate with others in ways which will help me achieve my goals.					
p. I have been referred to other agencies.					

**Part D: Describing outcomes during placement visits:**

**Because I was in YTSIP: (circle the number)**

	<b>Not al all</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Quite a bit</b>	<b>Lots</b>
a. I feel more confident.					
b. I feel I was helped.					
c. I was listened to.					
d. I was given support and encouragement.					
e. I am more optimistic than I was.					
f. I have clearer goals now.					
g. I know what I'm doing next.					
h. I feel better about myself and more confident about the future.					
i. I am more aware of services than I was.					
j. I have learned new things.					
k. I feel confident that I will stay in this course/training/job for at least 6 months.					