

# Push and pull



Increasing  
student  
engagement  
in Developing  
Independence

The stage 1 evaluation of the  
Skills for Independence pilot

Lisa Conley

2018



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <[www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au)>.

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## Abbreviations

AT	Advantaged Thinking
BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CP	Child protection
COP	Community of Practice
CSO	Community service organisation
DET	Department of Education and Training (Victoria)
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria)
DI	Developing Independence
DJR	Department of Justice and Regulation (Victoria)
EFYF	Education First Youth Foyers
OOHC	Out-of-home care
RTO	Registered training organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
YJ	Youth justice

## Summary

Skills for Independence is the name of a pilot in which the Certificate I in Developing Independence (DI) is being delivered across four sites in Victoria as a novel approach to increase engagement in education, job training and aspiration-building for young people. This stage 1 evaluation reports on student engagement and the implementation of DI. The pilot serves young people aged 15 to 25 who have experienced a youth justice (YJ) or child protection (CP) order. For this evaluation, the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre conducted qualitative interviews with DI delivery staff to identify the mechanisms and conditions which enable a young person who has experienced a youth justice or child protection order to successfully progress through DI.

Many service-connected<sup>1</sup> young people do not have the same multitude of supports that family-connected young people typically have which assist their transition to adulthood. These resources can include emotional, social, financial, material and informational supports in accessing quality housing, education and training, and a sustainable career. Young people who have experienced a youth justice or child protection order have higher rates of school disengagement than their peers who are not service-connected (te Riele & Rosaur 2015).

## Investing in young people's aspirations

Many youth services focus on responding to a young person's crises and, as such, do not adequately invest in the young person's future aspirations. Recent research shows alternative schooling should offer a curriculum that includes wellbeing and draws from a young person's strengths (Myconos 2018). DI fills the gap for those experiencing a youth justice or child protection order by building their capacity to recognise and explore their aspirations, investing in their skills for goal-setting and expanding their social networks. This is done by utilising an Advantaged Thinking approach which is grounded in capabilities theory. It focuses on what young people can be in the future, instead of simply working on deficits, to help service-connected young people transition into adulthood.

## Assessing the Skills for Independence pilot

This evaluation focuses primarily on qualitative data assessing engagement and implementation of DI in the Skills for Independence (SFI) pilot. Quantitative findings include completion rates and other metrics of participation such as opportunities taken and early exits. The SFI pilot is still underway, so these data will continue to change as more students enrol.

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<sup>1</sup> Service-connected refers to someone who relies upon government-funded programs or the community services system for a range of social supports (DHS 2011).

At October 2018, 37 young people were participating in DI (this includes pre-enrolment phase, pending, progressing, or completing DI) across the four sites. Nineteen young people had exited the program early, meaning a total of 56 young people were exposed to DI through the SFI pilot.

**Table S1 Snapshot of DI progress (October 2017 to October 2018)**

	In Pre-enrolment/ pending	Progressing through DI	Completed DI	Inactive (participation on hold)	Subtotal engaged in DI*	Early exits	Total introduced to DI <sup>#</sup>
Broadmeadows	3	7	2	1	13	13	26
Dandenong	0	5	0	0	5	5	10
Geelong	3	4	3	1	11	1	12
Warrnambool	3	5	0	0	8	0	8
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>56</b>

Notes: \*Includes pre-enrolled, pending, progressing, completed and inactive.

# Includes all engaged plus early exits.

Qualitative analysis demonstrates that adaptations are needed to deliver DI successfully and enhance the program for young people in these settings. We found two key mechanisms<sup>2</sup> impacting DI implementation. These are outlined below, and summarised in Table 1.2.

### Adapting the enrolment process

One mechanism discovered in this evaluation is an **alienating institutional enrolment process** that reduces the likelihood of enrolment, or delays the process, for young people in this cohort.

This alienating process is created by the requirements for enrolment, including:

- completing a language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) assessment
- providing identification documents
- having a parent/guardian complete a form at the training institution.

For young people in this pilot (including those who live in foster care or other housing arrangements, who experience unreliable guardianship, or who have gaps in their literacy and numeracy), these enrolment conditions place additional barriers to participation. They foreground the young people’s challenges and contribute to a sense

<sup>2</sup> A mechanism is defined as an underlying entity, process or structure that generates outcomes of interest (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). Mechanisms are not always clearly seen or observable.

of alienation. This had the impact of reducing or ending young people's motivation to enrol in DI.

### Creating a sense of connection

The second mechanism is a **sense of connection** that can positively impact young people who face challenges to engaging in DI. Establishing positive, enabling relationships with coaches and trainers is particularly important for young people in this cohort. Their challenges vary from unstable housing to unreliable communication channels, which make it difficult to attend sessions regularly. Many young people miss sessions or need to reschedule due to court proceedings or housing and personal needs. These challenges act as push factors, pushing young people away from DI engagement.

The Advantaged Thinking (AT)<sup>3</sup> approach and the structure of DI support young people and make possible a sense of connection by creating a nurturing learning environment. Pull factors grounded in the AT approach motivate the young person and foster a sense of belonging in several ways. For example, focusing on the young person's strengths and validating their interests builds trust between them and the coaches who are supporting their future aspirations. The relationship between the coach<sup>4</sup> and young person is key to facilitating the young person's growth and in DI its tone is guided by constant reminders that the ways we talk about young people, understand them, work with them and invest in them should be non-judgemental and positive. Additionally, when coaches and trainers are flexible enough to make themselves accessible to the young person despite missed sessions (i.e. open to dropping in as well as scheduled appointments), this shows the young person that their deliverers are persistent and will respond to the challenges they are facing. These are just some of the conditions set by AT that function to create a sense of connection. Through the sense of connection, a virtuous cycle feedback loop is created between the young person feeling support and increasing their engagement.

Other pull factors that attract young people to participate in DI include having access to creative opportunities that stem from their own interests. This requires funding (introduced as brokerage) and ample time for the coach/trainer to organise individualised, meaningful outings.

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<sup>3</sup> Advantaged Thinking is a practice approach conceptualised by UK Foyer Foundation innovator, Colin Falconer, to change the way services think about and respond to young people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion (Falconer 2009). It represents a shift away from a welfare or deficit based approach to an enabling one that invests in young people's potential.

<sup>4</sup> For this evaluation report, DI trainers and DI coaches will be referred to as simply 'coaches' and 'trainers'. In some instances, they are also referred to as 'deliverers'.

**Table S2 Summary of findings and mechanisms<sup>5</sup>**

Problem identified	Program conditions and mechanism	Actions
<p>Institutional barriers discourage some young people from enrolling in education in this context. Barriers include a language, literacy and numeracy assessment; onerous forms; procuring required identification; and procuring parent or guardian signatures in person.</p>	<p>Administrative requirements focusing on student’s challenges activated a mechanism of <b>alienating institutional enrolment processes</b>. In this context, decreased or delayed enrolments were the outcome.</p>	<p>Enrolment barriers were reduced by adapting the LLN to be an observational tool. Other workarounds reduced paperwork and ID requirements. This reduced the alienating effects of the enrolment process and made young people more likely to enrol and maintain motivation as they waited for identification documents.</p> <p><b>Recommendations:</b></p> <p>Continue to streamline the TAFE/RTO enrolment process and formalise the observational LLN across training institutions. Consider creating alternative forms of identification for young people with YJ and DHHS.</p>
<p>Young people on youth justice or child protection orders in dispersed settings experience push factors that make attending appointments difficult. These include unstable housing or legal proceedings that interfere with their sessions. Lack of reliable communication methods makes rescheduling difficult.</p>	<p>Recognising student capabilities and creating a nurturing DI environment activated a mechanism of <b>sense of connection</b> that countered the push factors. In this context, increased engagement was the outcome.</p>	<p>Staff who can be flexible in scheduling and follow-up create a nurturing DI environment and can be accessible for young people in dispersed settings. Brokerage was introduced to pay for opportunities that explore the young person’s interests, increasing the pull factors for participation. Additionally, a resource list of opportunities was created for deliverers.</p> <p><b>Recommendations:</b></p> <p>Increase coaches’ and trainers’ hours of availability to young people to further build a sense of connection. Extend the overall program completion time to 6–12 months in recognition of challenges which prolong the program delivery time.</p>

<sup>5</sup> To connect causes with effects, we utilise the adaptive evaluation approach that identifies program mechanisms. These mechanisms are only activated for certain people in specific social and cultural contexts. Expressed as a formula, C + M = O where C represents context (social and cultural conditions), M represents mechanisms, and O represents the outcomes.

# 1 Introducing DI and Skills for Independence

The Skills for Independence (SFI) pilot is an initiative to introduce the Certificate I in Developing Independence (DI) to young people with current or recent experience of child protection or youth justice orders.

## DI model

The Certificate I in Developing Independence is an accredited, foundational level course. It uses the Advantaged Thinking (AT) practice approach (Falconer 2009) to work with young people, introducing them to mainstream opportunities<sup>6</sup> and involving them in aspirational planning. In simplest terms, DI builds upon a young person's aspirations and seeks to fill the gaps that service-connected young people experience in OOHC and youth justice. The goals of DI include:

- building the capacity of young people to identify and develop their aspirations through mainstream opportunities
- developing young people's goal-setting and planning skills
- connecting young people with opportunities aligned with their goals.

An educator from TAFE or an RTO (DI trainer) works in collaboration with a youth development coach (DI coach) from a community organisation to coach the young person towards these program goals. This co-delivery model brings together the expertise of the coach in providing personal and living skills support, and the educational expertise of the trainer to ease young people's pathways into education.

The following subsections explain the key aspects of DI and define the concepts which will be discussed throughout this evaluation.

## Theoretical foundations of DI

DI is grounded in a combination of Advantaged Thinking and the capabilities approach. The main feature of AT is its focus on investing in the capabilities of the young person while avoiding deficit-thinking (Falconer 2009). The capabilities approach, as developed by Sen (1999, 2002) and Nussbaum (2011), asserts that every individual should have access to opportunities and the ability to develop themselves over the life course. Sen theorised that we should focus on enabling people to live a life they have reason to value instead of focusing on their limitations (1999). Similarly, Nussbaum framed the capabilities approach as an alternative to dominant models measuring 'quality of life'. She asks, 'What are people actually able to do and to be?' and 'What real opportunities are available to them?' For Nussbaum, a nation's real wealth lies in its people and

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<sup>6</sup> 'Opportunities' are activities in the local community, personalised for each student, that help build the skills, knowledge and networks to achieve their goals in life.

human development's main purpose should enable them to live balanced and healthy lives (Nussbaum 2011).

AT and the capabilities approach fill the gaps left by the deficit-based approaches many service-connected young people experience. In its *Case for change* report, DHS discussed the limitations young people facing social exclusion and marginalisation experience in the current service system. They acknowledged that services should place greater focus on young people's capacities and strengths to help them out of disadvantage (DHS 2011). The focus on what young people can be in the future, instead of simply working with their problems, is what sets DI apart from other case management approaches.

## Components of DI

### Mainstream opportunities

DI aims to promote capability expansion by investing in young people to explore their interests through 'mainstream opportunities'. Mainstream opportunities refer to opportunities available to the general community outside the service sector. The goal of these opportunities is to inspire the young person, explore their interests, introduce them to new possibilities and contacts, and build their life skills. Young people are connected with TAFEs, RTOs, local businesses, arts programs, gyms, schools or social communities. These can expand a young person's networks to provide sources of information and supports outside the service system and beyond the DI program. Ideas for opportunities should stem from the young person's interests and goals. Brokerage is provided to reduce financial barriers to accessing opportunities.

### Coaching relationship

DI acknowledges the skills young people already possess and helps them explore their aspirations through a coaching relationship. The supportive coaching relationship is key for setting a new standard of working between youth development coaches and DI trainers and the young people in the program. It is structured through face-to-face sessions and experiential activities to build the young person's confidence and sense of self-worth. Coaching within DI differs from case management in that the coach uses Advantaged Thinking approaches (active listening, open-ended questions, non-judgemental standpoints) to engage with the young person and place them in the 'driver's seat'. By contrast, the typical case manager leads the relationship, giving advice to the young person more directly. In this way, coaching in DI is complementary to the specialised support systems the young person is experiencing in OOHC and youth justice.

### Tools used in DI

The Learning Plan is a workbook the young person completes with their DI coach and trainer to explore their goals related to each of six life domains (see Table 1.1) (Buick &

Stearman 2014; Buick, Mallett & James 2014). For example, a young person interested in volunteering for a community organisation would work with the coach or trainer to plan and undertake an opportunity. They would then reflect upon the experience in the Civic Participation section of their Learning Plan. The goal of the reflection is to assist the young person to better understand the path they want to take and develop skills that can be applied in future life transitions. Students are not assessed on whether they achieve their goals within the timeframe of the DI qualification, but rather on how they set small and manageable goals, and develop an awareness of the potential barriers and enablers around them.

**Table 1.1 Life domains and corresponding DI program goals**

Life domain	Goal
Education	Creating a bridge to mainstream education for young people
Employment	Providing young people with access to real-world work experience and job opportunities
Housing & living skills	Assisting young people to access and sustain housing
Health & wellbeing	Supporting access, engagement in and development of skills to build positive physical, mental and emotional health
Social connections	Encouraging thriving relationships that support young people to achieve their goals
Civic participation	Facilitating young people to give back to their community and learn about rights and responsibilities of being an active citizen

Another tool provided to the young person is the Launch Pad. This spiral-bound calendar planner includes space for writing aspirations and reflecting on goal setting. It also includes an address book section intended for the collection of new, meaningful contacts the young person encounters through DI.

### Goal-setting and planning skills

Deliverers and the young person work together on service offers that correspond directly with the six life domains. For example, a young person working on the health and wellbeing life domain might be connected with headspace (National Youth Mental Health Association) if they tell their coach they would like to focus on mental health. The young person meets regularly with their DI coach and trainer to discuss their current skills that apply to any of the six service offers and work on setting a vision for each offer. Throughout this process, the young person identifies their aspirations, plans tasks and creates an action plan.

### Skills building sessions

DI also fills a significant gap in the current education and training system by providing a formal, supportive and accredited space for young people to develop core life management skills. These skills include dealing with conflict and stress, establishing stable relationships and knowing one's legal rights.

### Community of practice

The Brotherhood facilitates Community of Practice meetings with delivery partners. These meetings include professional development, group discussions and activities, and function as opportunities for continual improvement.

### Purpose of DI for young people experiencing youth justice or child protection orders

DET supports the Skills for Independence pilot to increase access to education and training for service-connected young people. To facilitate access, DET introduced the Skills First Youth Access Initiative fee waiver to serve young people who had ever been on child protection (CP) orders. This was later expanded to include young people who had experience of youth justice (YJ) orders. This tuition fee waiver is available to any young person under 22 years of age who has been, or is currently, on a CP or YJ order and wants to undertake government-subsidised, accredited training.<sup>7</sup> Skills for Independence is using DI in this new setting to reduce barriers and increase access to education and training for young people with experience on CP or YJ orders.

The Skills for Independence pilot provides an opportunity to trial DI with a cohort that experiences many challenges to accessing education. SFI aims to improve education engagement while developing student aspirations and capacities for future planning through DI. The core components of DI provide young people with tools to re-engage with education as it helps them to set goals, explore aspirations and access mainstream opportunities.

### Addressing education disengagement

Young people who have experienced a child protection or youth justice order are likely to have had disrupted schooling. A high proportion of these young people are not enrolled in schools, or are not attending (te Riele & Rosaur 2015). Bullying, mental health issues and perceptions that trainers refuse to accommodate their needs have been cited by young people as reasons for leaving school (McGinty et al. 2018). This is worrying because we know Australians who leave school before finishing year 12 experience social exclusion at

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<sup>7</sup> A Youth Justice Order can be for probation or supervision; can require attendance for associated programs; can require entry into a youth residential or youth justice centre; or could be a parole or a community correction order. A Child Protection Order refers to a final order made under a child welfare law or an intestacy law regarding the guardianship, custody or supervision of the child (Victorian Government 2014; DET 2016).

more than twice the rate of others who finish school (Brotherhood of St Laurence & Melbourne Institute 2017). This disengagement from education may lead to higher rates of unemployment and homelessness, in addition to increased dependence on welfare over time (DHHS 2016; Victorian Auditor-General 2014).

Recent qualitative research across Australia found flexible learning options and alternative schooling should offer a curriculum that suits a young person's abilities, strengths and aspirations while including wellbeing and relationship-building (Myconos 2018). In examining education pathways in England and Wales, Lanskey found that disciplinary agendas steered young people within the juvenile justice system into an 'educational shallow'. This educational shallow is the result of welfare activities of caring caseworkers conflicting with disciplinary agendas to create an environment 'where it is easy for young people to drift or to step out of education altogether' (Lanskey 2015, pp. 581). Youth justice and education agents, however, can shape the young person's disposition towards education by buoying the young person with support. DI's focus on filling gaps in the social, financial, practical and emotional support of young people on child protection and youth justice orders experience make it a promising alternative.

## Delivering Skills for Independence

Skills for Independence piloted delivery of the Certificate 1 in Developing Independence as a partnership between community service organisations (CSOs) and TAFEs/RTOs in 2017 and 2018 (see Table 1.2 for partners and funding organisations). This partnership aims to structure support in ways that empower young people to engage in education and training. It does so by connecting young people with youth development workers at community service organisations and educators at TAFEs or RTOs. DI is being delivered under DET funding across three sites in Victoria, with an additional site of Warrnambool<sup>8</sup> operating with DHHS funding.

**Table 1.2 Partners delivering DI in Skills for Independence pilot**

Site	Delivery partners	Funder
Hume/Broadmeadows	Banksia Gardens & Bendigo Kangan TAFE	DET
South Eastern Region/ Dandenong	Youth Support + Advocacy Service & Chisholm TAFE	DET
Greater Geelong	Barwon Child, Youth & Family & Diversitat	DET
Warrnambool	Brophy Family and Youth Services & South West TAFE	DHHS

<sup>8</sup> Though funded by DHHS and not targeting the YJ cohort, the Warrnambool site uses the same delivery modality as the other three sites in SFI. It is delivering DI 20 young people leaving care in Warrnambool. For these reasons, it is included in this evaluation.

## What's new in this DI pilot?

This section gives an overview of the new aspects of this SFI pilot, including the ways that DET, DHHS and DJR have worked in collaboration to facilitate the pilot. It also includes a timeline to visually map program establishment, milestones and adaptations to date.

## Key pilot features: Non-residential settings & CP and YJ cohorts

The Brotherhood has delivered DI in different settings and structures like the Education First Youth Foyers (Borlagdan & Keys 2015), homelessness and OOHC settings (Coddou & Borlagdan 2018, Hart, et. al. 2016, Myconos 2014). The Skills for Independence pilot was developed to trial the applicability of DI for young people who are currently on a YJ or CP order, or have experienced one in the past. The distinctive features of the pilot include:

### 1 Delivery in non-residential settings:

This pilot expanded the delivery of DI into settings that include drop-in centres and appointment-based centres. The Dandenong site offered an opportunity to forge new partnerships with DI, while the Brotherhood had existing partnerships with the other sites.<sup>9</sup>

### 2 New cohort

The Skills First Youth Access Initiative expanded DI to young people between 15 and 22 years of age who have experienced a child protection or youth justice order.

The young people eligible to join the Skills for Independence pilots are those who have been on, or are currently on, a youth justice or child protection order. DI was adapted for this cohort to increase education support services and provide flexibility to support young people in the difficult transition after care or justice orders.

## Collaboration between government departments

This pilot marked the first time the Brotherhood worked across the Department of Education and Training (DET), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Justice and Regulation (DJR) to deliver this program. This collaboration enabled the sharing of information about the Skills for Independence pilot and facilitated student enrolments. DET, DJR and DHHS collaborated in three main ways. First, each department provided case workers and youth justice workers with information about DI so they could refer young people in their care. Secondly, DET, DJR

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<sup>9</sup> The Brotherhood had an existing relationship with Banksia Gardens and Bendigo Kangan TAFE through partnerships delivering the Education First Youth Foyer and the Reconnect Program. Also, the Brotherhood has worked with Brophy Family and Youth Services in the past to deliver DI to young people in the Foyers and Transition to Work and worked with Barwon Child, Youth, and Families (BCYF) to embed the AT framework into the Better Futures Leaving Care model.

and DHHS connected at the Steering Committee meetings, where their representatives discussed implementation of the pilots with representatives from the deliverers and the Brotherhood. Lastly, over the course of the pilot, the departments discussed barriers at these meetings and addressed them through adaptations and stopgap measures. Each department played a different role in the collaborative partnership.

DET created an online referral form and guidebook for the Youth Access Initiative fee waiver and provided a phone number for interested young people to call and learn more about the fee waiver. A DET representative made himself available to make presentations to referral agencies about the program and the fee waiver. As an adaptation, DET began offering to sign the young person's DI enrolment forms if their parents could not.

DHHS helped identify the records of young people who had previously experienced a child protection order. Some young people who had moved homes frequently or could not remember their case worker's name could not provide evidence of a previous CP order. This revealed scope for DHHS to improve communication with the coach to make accessing these records easier.

DJR and the Brotherhood informally discussed best practices that CSOs like YSAS and Banksia could use to map DI to suit someone's parole transition plan or other order conditions. The Brotherhood developed key contacts with DJR employment pathway brokers to set up referral pathways. DJR also allowed young people to count participation in DI towards their community service hours. The Parkville College transition team was approached by the Brotherhood to add the Certificate I in DI to their transitional program offerings and it has now been included. DJR also considered a quarterly accountability measure to monitor uptake for the program along with referral numbers—something they might reconsider in future. In June 2018, a new Youth Control Order allowed some sentences to include educational elements, so increasing the uptake of DI for these orders could be part of the focus for the second stage. Providers also met with their local court contacts to let them know the Certificate I in DI was an option for sentencing. As an adaptation, representatives from DJR also began signing paperwork for the access initiative if the former DHHS or DJR worker could not be sourced for the young person.

### Timeline of partnerships and adaptations

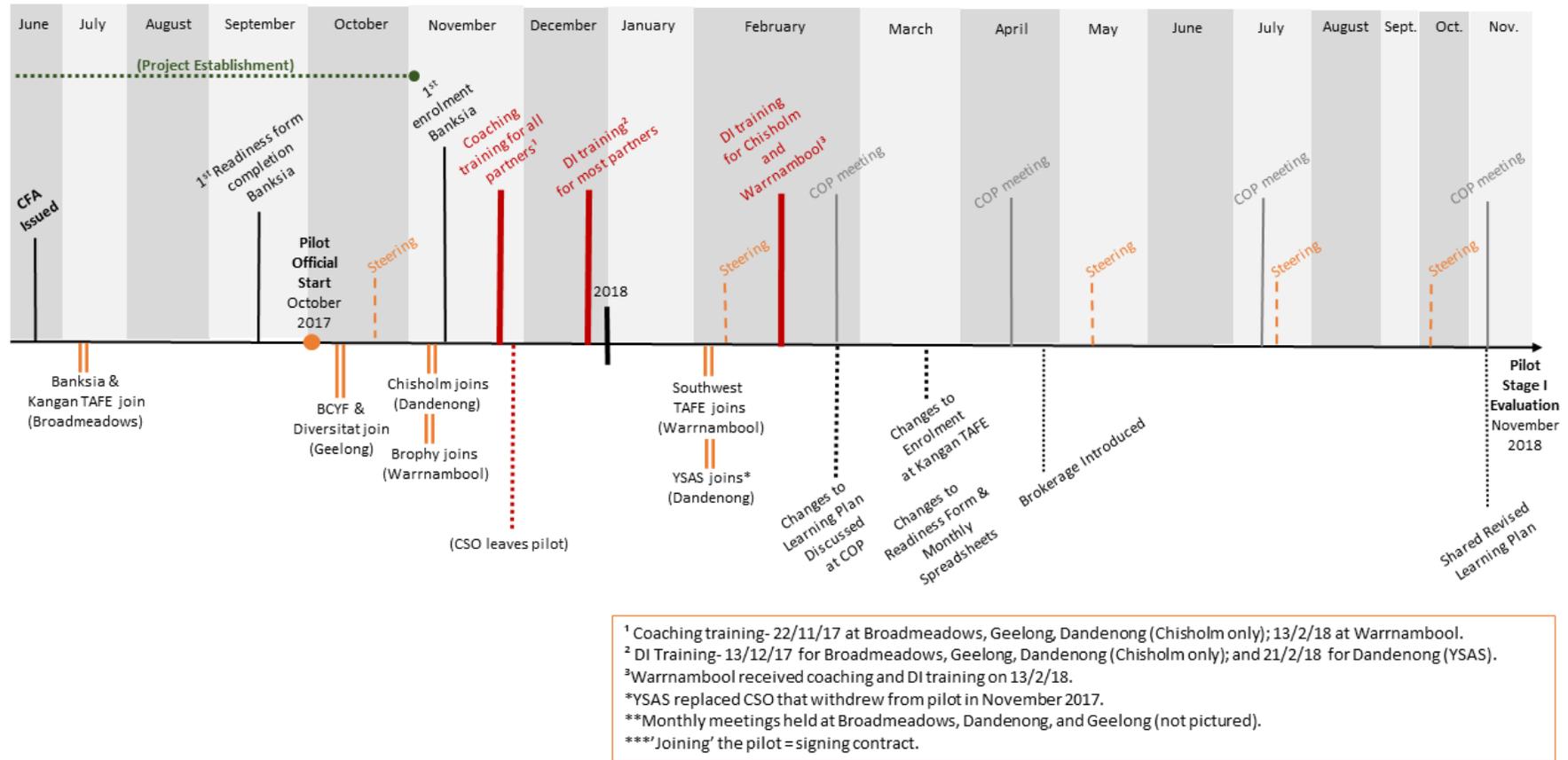
The following timeline (Figure 1.1) depicts the evolution of the pilot partnerships and adaptations. It includes the dates that CSOs and educational institutions signed their contracts to join the pilot and is helpful in estimating the time needed for future pilots. South West TAFE in Warrnambool and YSAS in Dandenong joined the pilot in February 2018, months later than their counterparts at the other sites. In Warrnambool, the contract negotiations between Brophy and South West TAFE took some time. In Dandenong, another provider was initially going to be the partner CSO but pulled out

and YSAS signed on to replace them. TAFE involvement was also delayed by the holidays.

Key adaptations and meetings are also included on the timeline to illustrate the Brotherhood's opportunities to provide feedback to partners and workshop ideas. Training included one coaching session and two DI sessions conducted by the Brotherhood and attended by most deliverers between November 2017 and February 2018. These sessions provided a baseline understanding of coaching and DI which was supplemented at Community of Practice meetings where all sites were invited.

This timeline indicates the length of time needed between joining the pilot, accessing training and enrolling young people in this specific pilot, but may not apply to other pilots. For example, the first readiness form and enrolment in Hume/Broadmeadows were completed almost five months after the deliverers joined the pilot.

Figure 1.1 Skills for Independence establishment and adaptation timeline, June 2017 to November 2018



## 2 Evaluation methodology

### Research design

Stage 1 of the Skills for Independence evaluation follows an ‘adaptive evaluation’ approach. This is a term the Brotherhood’s Research and Policy Centre uses to define our approach to evaluating innovative pilots (Hart unpub.), which blends elements of traditional research methodologies such as developmental evaluation, realist evaluation, action research and collaborative evaluation. Adaptive evaluation is useful for addressing complex social issues because it identifies mechanisms behind why things work in certain contexts. As researchers doing adaptive evaluation we follow the realist approach in asking, ‘What works in which circumstances and for whom?’ instead of simply ‘Did this work?’ (Pawson & Tilley 1997). This is done by studying interactions between the program and its environment. Too often, traditional program evaluation methodologies try to prove static theories of change at the expense of recognising program value and refinement. In this evaluation, we take student engagement in the program as an outcome and consider the contextual barriers or opportunities that might hinder that engagement, including the manner of program implementation.

### Research questions

For this evaluation, we seek to identify the mechanisms and conditions which enable a young person who has experienced a youth justice or child protection order to successfully progress through DI in the Skills for Independence pilot. Our analysis is guided by the following research questions:<sup>10</sup>

- How and under what conditions do young people engage with DI?
- How and under what conditions do young people with a youth justice or child protection order progress through the DI?
- How and under what conditions does DI integrate with services for young people with a youth justice or child protection order?

### Quantitative data

Descriptive statistics were analysed from data provided by delivery staff and students in the monthly reporting spreadsheets (n=25) and DI readiness forms (n=43).

The **monthly spreadsheets** were drafted by the Brotherhood and revised with feedback from the delivery partners. Each spreadsheet is password-protected and emailed to the Brotherhood after each monthly update. Deliverers at each site use the sheets to collect data tracking current status, milestones, opportunities and exit summaries. In the

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<sup>10</sup> For a copy of the full research schedule, please contact the author.

*current status* section, data on each young person's current progress, employment experience and education engagement is collected. In the *milestones* section, the young person is tracked from pre-enrolment engagement to completion. This includes dates for items such as readiness form completion and enrolment completion. Personal coaching sessions are similarly tracked across topic areas including self-esteem, living space and healthy lifestyle. The *opportunities* section collects data on each actual opportunity that was organised, the provider of the opportunity, the student's attendance and whether they sustained engagement with the opportunity. The *exit summaries* offer coaches the space to reflect on the young person's reasons for leaving DI. Exits are dated, and labelled as early exits or completions.

**DI readiness forms** are completed by the DI coach and/or trainer working with the young person. Coaches, referral contacts and sometimes trainers use the form to collect information from the young person. The young person can complete the form on their own, or can complete it with the coach in a more conversational way. The form was adapted by the Brotherhood and partners in March 2018 to be less intrusive about personal issues—while still giving the young person the option to share information about their YJ or CP order, their talents and dreams, their community involvement, work history and education/training. The coach and/or young person work to rate factors impacting education and training (ranging from financial situation and family support to access to education) on a scale of 'making it easy', 'neither easy nor difficult', or 'making it difficult'. The forms enable a young person to choose to disclose their challenges, including any legal orders or court appearances that might impact their participation in DI. The young person may leave sections unanswered if they wish to do so.

### Qualitative data

To provide in-depth information on the mechanisms and conditions driving implementation we conducted interviews with staff. The first round of interviews (n=21) included organisation managers and staff leading delivery of DI at the four sites from May to June 2018. Follow-up interviews were conducted with DI coaches and trainers (n=6) in July and August 2018 to discuss the program's progress, for a total of 27 interviews.

Evaluators provided participants with a consent document outlining the purpose of the evaluation before they agreed to participate. Participants were given the option to sign the consent form or give verbal consent (which was audio-recorded).

The interviews were roughly an hour in length and conducted primarily by phone, with one conducted in person at the request of the participant. Research questions covered topics of implementation, partnerships, barriers and successes. Audio files were transcribed and de-identified for confidentiality.

## Fieldwork

To flesh out the context in which DI was being implemented, the evaluator supplemented interviews with additional data from participant observation of Steering Committee meetings, two training meetings, two Community of Practice meetings and several operational meetings with the pilot site partners. Participant observation during monthly meetings and the COP provided the opportunity for the evaluator to ask questions. This created room to clarify statements delivery staff mentioned during their previous interviews. Afterwards the evaluator wrote short field notes (1–3 pages) to summarise the event and reflect on emerging themes. The evaluator utilised the **field notes** (n=8) as reference material to understand the context of meetings, training and partnerships across the sites.

## Analysis

For the **quantitative analysis**, the evaluator compiled data from the monthly spreadsheets and readiness forms to generate a profile of student characteristics and progress. This provides an overview of the young people who are pending enrolment, making progress, completing the DI and exiting early. To analyse the reasons for young people exiting DI early, the evaluator referred to the exit summaries of the monthly spreadsheets and tallied the corresponding reasons young people left the program. The evaluator tallied<sup>11</sup> the number of opportunities offered and taken up by the young people, again using the monthly spreadsheets. The readiness forms revealed the number of young people engaged in school when starting DI, the last time of school engagement for those who were disengaged, and their interests and hobbies.

For the **qualitative analysis**, NVivo 10 was used to code the interview transcripts based on topic codes<sup>12</sup> or concepts the evaluator knew they wanted to examine. The following topic codes were created first to reflect the areas of interest:

- components of the DI model
- attitudes about DI
- implementation
- organisation structure
- student engagement
- training.

After topic coding, the evaluator conducted theoretical coding to study underlying *mechanisms*. The evaluator did this by running single and combined queries for certain

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<sup>11</sup> The definitions of these measurement categories will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Each of the topic codes contain multiple sub-nodes that each examine a larger range of data. For example, the node *aspects of DI model* include a range of references from theoretical practice framework to relationships and opportunities.

nodes such as *barriers* or *barriers and referral pathways*. These queries were printed and hand-coded for the emergent or unexpected themes. Emergent themes stand out to evaluators in several ways, for example through repetition where a concept recurs across various interviews or through identifying similarities and differences across texts (Ryan & Bernard 2003).

In this evaluation a **mechanism** is defined as one of the underlying entities, processes, or structures which operate in particular contexts to generate outcomes of interest (Astbury & Leeuw 2010). A mechanism is not simply the program activity, nor is it a directly observable variable—though it does attempt to explain how variables interconnect. It is the thing which produces an effect and explains the logic behind how a program fits together. Astbury and Leeuw tell us that mechanisms are usually hidden; are sensitive to variations in context; and generate outcomes. For an adaptive evaluation, it is important to understand the process or structures that operate slightly out of view to explain what works and under what circumstances.

In addition to mechanisms, the **conditions** of the program were also analysed. Conditions are defined as the variables (social and cultural) that interrelate with mechanisms in ways that activate them. These social and cultural conditions form the context which includes things like pre-existing rules, norms, values and social relations. Tilley (2000) uses gunpowder as an example to illustrate the link between conditions and mechanisms in realist evaluation: gunpowder will only explode if it is properly dry, it is compact and there is enough of it. Like gunpowder, the social conditions and context must be just so in order to activate a potential causal mechanism in certain social programs.

## Limitations

Two managers were initially scheduled for first-round interviews but were unable to complete them due to leaving their organisation. At the time of the interviews, these managers had not yet been replaced. This limited the amount of data we received about organisational strategies.

One previously interviewed coach left their position and could not be reached for a follow-up interview in mid 2018. The process of hiring a replacement coach had not yet been complete. Another staff member who was initially interviewed was transferred within their organisation and declined a follow-up interview. This limited our ability to gauge how staff were adjusting to program delivery over time.

## 3 Quantitative findings: Who's engaging with DI?

### Student engagement in DI

DI is a process-driven approach, so while completions are important, other metrics of student engagement are also captured. These include data about building a young person's skills for goal-setting and future-planning, and exposing young people to mainstream opportunities.

Table 3.1 shows progress to October 2018 across the four sites. Key results include:

- There are 9 young people in the pre-enrolment/pending stage. This is defined as young people who have been in contact with coaches or trainers for meetings to build rapport but may not technically be enrolled. Pre-enrolment activities include working on the readiness form, attending outings and completing TAFE enrolment processes.
- Most of the young people participating in DI (21 of 37) are still progressing—defined as attending sessions. The young person's participation in sessions is often punctuated with long absences; and rescheduling issues extend the completion process.
- As of October 2018, 5 young people have completed DI: 2 from Broadmeadows and 3 from Geelong. Completions are defined as the young person having finished each course milestone (n=10), and each coaching session (n=11), and each action plan corresponding with the coaching sessions (n=11).
- Early exits are defined as young people who have told their coach or trainer they are quitting DI (n=19). It also includes those young people who deliverers say are unlikely to return, based solely on the young person ceasing contact with the coach or trainer.

**Table 3.1 Snapshot of DI progress (October 2017 to October 2018)**

	In Pre-enrolment/pending	Progressing through DI	Completed DI	Inactive (participation on hold)	Subtotal engaged in DI*	Early exits	Total introduced to DI#
Broadmeadows	3	7	2	1	13	13	26
Dandenong	0	5	0	0	5	5	10
Geelong	3	4	3	1	11	1	12
Warrnambool	3	5	0	0	8	0	8
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>56</b>

Notes: \*Includes pre-enrolled, pending, progressing, completed and inactive.

# Includes all engaged plus early exits.

Young people have dropped out of the Skills for Independence pilot early for four main reasons (Table 3.2). They have begun a job, begun school, ceased to communicate with their coach or trainer, or reoffended. Communication breakdown—seemingly the earliest indicator of ceasing the DI—impacted 6 of the 19 young people to exit early. It was consistently mentioned by the staff interviewed, with coaches describing the young people as ‘uncontactable’, ‘not showing up for sessions’ or ‘not answering their phones’.

**Table 3.2 Reasons for early exits from DI (October 2017 to October 2018)**

	To begin job	To begin school	Reoffended or on remand	Communication breakdown	Unknown reason*	Inactive (may re-enter later)#	Total early exits
Broadmeadows	3	1	2	5	2	2	13
Dandenong	1	0	0	1	3	0	5
Geelong	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Warrnambool	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>

Notes: \* This includes the young person simply quitting while still contactable, or exiting on completing community service hours, but not telling the coach why.

# Possible re-entry was defined by the youth development worker who said the young person told them they might return to complete DI in the future.

Opportunities are also a key component in the delivery of DI. These outings, excursions and community contacts are primarily organised by coaches with the young person, but trainers can also be involved. These are designed to build aspiration and motivation, increase social networks, and to expand the young person’s knowledge of the types of opportunities available. Thus far, the following opportunities<sup>13</sup> have been organised and attended by students in the three DET-affiliated sites:

- 22 opportunities in Hume/Broadmeadows (for 26 young people)
- 7 opportunities in Dandenong (for 10 young people)
- 18 opportunities in Geelong (for 12 young people).

At the time of writing, Warrnambool had not yet organised opportunities for the 8 young people in their program.<sup>14</sup>

Table 3.3 lists the types of opportunities that have been organised with students.

**Table 3.3 Opportunities taken by young people in SFI**

Visits to TAFE	Help with MYKI and public transport
Appointments with Transition to Work staff	Political rally
Visits to Foyer	Mental health appointments
Art photographer guest speaker	University Open Day
Career counselling	Computer and internet access
Menu planning/shopping/cooking	Visit to automotive training school
Eyeglasses replacement	Searches for work
Media course	Melbourne Aquarium visit
Interview practice sessions	Appointments with lawyers
Sound engineering studio visit	Job readiness programs
Learner’s permit/driving tests	Education pathway consultations
Personal training	Shopping, budgeting, dental hygiene outing
Schoolwork help	Volunteering

## Profile of participants in the SFI pilot

Data from the readiness forms was used to create an overview of the participants’ educational engagement, experience with either a YJ or CP order, and interests/hobbies. Since the young person may choose to leave some questions unanswered<sup>15</sup>, the

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<sup>13</sup>Opportunities were counted across the site, not tallied for each student. This means that one young person could have experienced multiple opportunities.

<sup>14</sup> One reason for this is the late sign-on of South West TAFE in February 2018. Another reason has been the difficulty in organising the outings for young people who live long distances from Brophy and South West TAFE.

<sup>15</sup> The Advantaged Thinking approach to readiness form completion is conducted in a conversational way instead of being administered like a typical enrolment questionnaire. Young people decide what and how much of their personal details will be disclosed.

information is incomplete. Additionally, information regarding whether a CP or YJ order was ‘previous’ or ‘current’ was not captured from nine young people across Broadmeadows, Geelong and Warrnambool. A question on status of their order was added when the readiness forms were revised in March 2018. With these limitations in mind, the information gleaned from the readiness forms still provides a useful glimpse of the general status of young people entering the program.

Table 3.4 addresses student engagement in school or training at the time of introduction to DI. This category includes all young people who have been introduced to the program, whether they are working on their pre-enrolment materials, are progressing or have exited the program early.

We can see that 38% of young people at Broadmeadows who completed readiness forms were engaged in school or training. This is likely to reflect the role the Gateway School plays as a referral partner (see Appendix for more discussion of referral sources). By contrast, in Dandenong, none of the participants were engaged in school or training. A closer look at their readiness forms reveal one young person in Dandenong was in custody; the others were working full time or stated they wanted to find a job or volunteer opportunity. In Geelong, 2 of 11 young people were engaged in school, and in Warrnambool only 1 of 8 was engaged in school upon introduction to DI. Half the young people in Geelong (4 of 8) stated they would like to find a job or volunteer opportunity, while two of three in Warrnambool stated they wanted the same.

**Table 3.4 Young people’s engagement in school/training at introduction to DI**

	Number engaged in school/training at introduction to DI	Number introduced to DI (includes pre-enrolment, pending & exits)
Broadmeadows	10	26
Dandenong	0	6
Geelong	2	11
Warrnambool	1	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>51</b>

Across all the young people, the median length of time they had been disengaged from school prior to DI was 2.5 years. This was calculated as a median instead of an average, to avoid skewing the small sample with the few young people who had been out of school for 4–6 years.

**Table 3.5 Median length of time students have been *disengaged* from school at introduction to DI**

Site	Length of disengagement from school
Broadmeadows	2 years
Dandenong	3 years
Geelong	2 years
Warrnambool	1 year

Table 3.6 displays the number and percentage of young people introduced to DI who are currently or were previously on an order, among those who answered these questions. The totals are not representative of young people enrolled in DI at the time of publication, for three reasons. First, some young people who completed readiness forms exited the program early. Secondly, some young people are participating in DI unofficially as they await identification documents (this is considered part of the pre-enrolment process). Lastly, as mentioned before, some earlier versions of the readiness form did not collect information on status of the order. We can see that at Broadmeadows, 80% of the participants were on a YJ order while 71% of Dandenong's participants had experienced a YJ order. In Geelong, 73% of young people were on a CP order and 100% of Warrnambool's young people were on a CP order.

**Table 3.6 Participants who have experienced CP or YJ orders**

Location	CP	YJ	Total
Broadmeadows	5 (20%)	20 (80%)	25
Dandenong	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	7
Geelong	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	11
Warrnambool	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>46</b>

There were similar numbers of young people on current orders and previous orders in both Broadmeadows and Geelong, but more young people on a current order in Dandenong (see Table 3.7). Warrnambool's readiness forms did not collect data on order status. The status of a young person's order provides context for their DI involvement. With a current YJ order, for example, the young person might have to attend court on dates that interfere with their DI sessions.

**Table 3.7 Status of current or previous YJ or CP Orders**

Site	Current order	Previous order	Total
Broadmeadows	10 (48%)	11 (52%)	21
Dandenong	5 (71%)	2 (29%)	7
Geelong	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7
Warrnambool	-	-	-
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>35</b>

When the young people introduced to DI through the SFI pilot were asked about their interests or hobbies, the most frequently mentioned were sports, followed by video/online gaming, with music and martial arts tied as third most popular (Table 3.8). These interests could inspire future opportunities or serve as catalysts for career exploration.

**Table 3.8 Participants' self-disclosed interests, ranked by frequency**

Leading interests/hobbies	
1	Sport (football, futsal, basketball, rugby)
2	Video games/online gaming
3	Music (hip hop, music festivals) Martial arts
4	TV/Netflix Gym/fitness Mechanics/repairs Volunteering

## 4 Qualitative findings: What's working and what adaptations have been made?

The evaluator discovered two distinct mechanisms that affected the program's effectiveness: alienating institutional enrolment processes that negatively impact student enrolments, and a sense of connection that positively impacts student engagement in DI.

For each finding, the problem impacting engagement is first discussed and evidence is provided with data from the field interviews. Then, the mechanisms and conditions impacting the problem are unpacked and analysed. Each finding section includes discussion of the adaptations that were made to address the problem. Finally, the evaluator makes recommendations for future adaptations.

### 1 Making institutional intake and enrolment processes less daunting will facilitate student enrolment

#### The problem: Technical enrolment barriers delay or prohibit student enrolment

The intake process was found to be daunting and time-intensive for young people recruited into DI, which prevented or delayed student enrolment. For example, TAFEs and RTOs require a Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) assessment. This assessment discouraged some of the cohort, particularly those who had previously disengaged from education. Additionally, the requirements to provide identification or signatures by guardians or parents were difficult for some young people to meet. These conditions discouraged or extended the DI enrolment process.

#### Mechanisms and conditions: Administrative requirements focusing on students' challenges lead to alienating institutional enrolment processes

The institutions' enrolment processes, particularly the LLN, focused attention on the student's challenges and ultimately led to young people disengaging from the program as they experienced a sense of alienation. Any young person concerned about or possessing negative associations with schooling experienced an enrolment process that focused on their gaps in literacy and numeracy and reinforced their challenges. Young people on YJ or CP orders who could not produce identification documents or who lacked reliable guardians to sign their forms were presented with a barrier at the start of their process—revealing an opportunity for TAFEs and RTOs to change policies to be more inclusive. If we think of these administrative requirements and the young person's personal challenges as conditions, the combination of them formed a mechanism of **alienating institutional enrolment processes** that reduced the young person's inclination to push through the barriers or extended the process as they overcame the

barriers. The effect of this was that young people were discouraged from enrolling in DI, or lost motivation due to delays in the enrolment process.

Available data<sup>16</sup> from the readiness forms shows that 25 young people said they were ‘not enrolled in education or training at the moment’. This echoes the trends found in the literature on school disengagement for young people with experience of CP or YJ orders. We can see that using an ‘exam-like’ enrolment process drew attention to gaps in their literacy or numeracy, creating a sense of dread that led to disengagement. A project leader at one CSO mentioned the LLN assessment made many young people anxious and brought up negative associations with schooling:

That has been identified as a really big barrier even for a lot of the young people that we’ve currently been trying to enrol, actually sitting down and **doing that test, which is really threatening**, but also quite difficult and requires a certain level of computer literacy as well. The TAFE educators are highlighting that it’s a really big barrier. They’re getting people to the point of being able to sit down and do that, but **as soon as that looks too much like schoolwork, the young people are then disengaging**.

**CSO Project Leader**

The existing LLN assessment runs contrary to AT because it draws attention to what the young person did not know or could not answer—making this first experience of DI a negative one. This, on top of other conditions, such as the challenges and stressors faced by the young people, increases their apprehension about re-engaging in education. The exam-style structure also misrepresents DI’s student-centred approach and its emphasis upon young people’s strengths and aspirations. The structure acts as an additional condition leading to the mechanism of alienation. These conditions (in this context) activated a mechanism that resulted in some young people disengaging at that point, never to return, while others had to be reassured by their coach that the process was not an accurate representation of DI and encouraged to stick with it.

Another institutional barrier for many young people was the requirement of identification documents or guardian signatures for the enrolment process. A DI trainer told us of difficulties helping one young person apply for an ID card, then realising they needed to also apply for a birth certificate:

Sometimes we have a hiccup and that process can take a while because, if the student is under 18, they can’t sign for themselves. You need to get a parent to sign. Sometimes they are very elusive or they don’t come with their ID. So we have to get a Unique Student Identifier Number. Anyone enrolling in a course across Victoria needs a USI number and you can get one of those using a

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<sup>16</sup> A few young people were uncertain how long they had been disengaged from school or left the questions related to education blank on their readiness forms. Eleven young people said they were enrolled in education/training and ‘sometimes’ or ‘regularly attending’.

Medicare card or birth certificate and **they don't have those things on them most of the time. So chasing that up can be quite an effort.**

**DI Trainer**

Finding acceptable documentation could delay the young person's participation by up to one month. Intake delays made it difficult to get young people excited to enrol and stay engaged in DI.

These burdensome enrolment processes at the TAFE or RTO resulted in young people leaving DI before enrolment was complete, or experiencing a delay in enrolment. Since young people must be enrolled at the TAFE or RTO to enrol in DI, this prevented them from participating or significantly delayed their participation. The following quote discusses the impact of these enrolment barriers on turning referrals into enrolments:

I think some of the hold-ups have been where we have got the referrals and we can't take them ... That's been our major problem. I think we had four referrals last week and there are definitely issues and **hold-ups with TAFE just because of the way that the enrolment processes go.** I think in time all that can be fixed.

**CSO Manager**

To address this alienating process, DI coaches and trainers recognised the need to engage the young person early and develop rapport to keep the young person interested in DI:

**The most important thing is just building a relationship with [the young person]** and trying to create opportunities that are really engaging. Don't start with the enrolment, maybe go back to the enrolment afterwards. Because I think that enrolment process, there are a lot of steps and I think sometimes we lose people in the process when there's so much work and stuff. The RIL [Recognition of Informal Learning], getting some form of ID to get a USI number, and getting the enrolment form and interview—it's a lot.

**DI Trainer**

The key lesson here is for TAFEs and RTOs seeking to increase access to diverse student populations. The enrolment barriers reveal an assumption in the education sector about the assessments all students should be able to complete and the ease of procuring identification documents and parent signatures. These assumptions do not consider the difficulties some young people might face when they have less stable housing and family relations, and uneven education histories. The institutional enrolment barriers prevented young people in OOHC and youth justice from fully engaging in DI. The adaptations made to be more inclusive helped increase participation in DI but, just as importantly, provided insights for TAFEs, RTOs and the broader education system on ways to improve access for a wide range of young people.

### Adaptations: Observational LLN assessments and other accommodations lessen enrolment burdens for this cohort

The Brotherhood and DI delivery partners learned of the barriers posed by the LLN assessment early in the pilot through regular conference calls and the Community of Practice meetings. Bendigo Kangan TAFE developed an observational assessment tool that focused instead on the young person's strengths. This allowed the young person to discuss their interests and skills, instead of calling attention to deficits as in the original LLN assessment. This impacted the young person in a positive way by building them up instead of focusing on their challenges, as the following quote illustrates:

I kind of watched [a young man] sit there and [the previous LLN] totally turned him off the whole idea of the DI—it was just too much for him. So yeah, they've since changed the LLN to [the observational LLN]—**I have seen that new LLN work beautifully, and it's just a totally different approach**; whereas obviously that LLN is needed in instances for other TAFE courses, it wasn't relevant to that one in DI. So ... again that's a positive kind of change.

**DI Coach**

The observational LLN tool functioned to reduce the alienating enrolment process which, in turn, kept the young person interested in DI by showing them the program planned to focus on what they can be, instead of what they are not. Kangan and Chisholm TAFEs have since also utilised the observational LLN tool but Diversitat<sup>17</sup> was unable to do this because it did not satisfy their RTO compliance.

The Brotherhood also revised the readiness forms with feedback received from deliverers in March 2018 to decrease the burden on young people. The new forms are shorter and inquire less directly about the young person's legal issues, drug use or mental health. Instead, they provide space for the young person to share any challenges they might want to work on, allowing the young person to choose what they disclose. This again had the effect of reducing the alienating aspects of the process because the young person could put forward the information of their choosing while introducing themselves to the program. Reducing the burden of the readiness form encouraged young people to complete the enrolment process instead of getting frustrated from the start and leaving DI.

### Recommendations: Continue to streamline the TAFE/RTO enrolment process and create alternative forms for identification for young people

TAFEs and RTOs should continue the work they are already doing to streamline the enrolment process for this cohort. This would have the effect of increasing the diversity of young people who can access their institution, particularly those on CP or YJ orders.

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<sup>17</sup> Diversitat used a third party online assessment but the evaluator sent a copy of Kangan's observational assessment for them to consider.

While identification documents may be necessary for enrolment, pilot partners should consider the procurement difficulties faced by young people in this cohort. TAFEs and RTOs could work with DHHS and YJ to explore alternative forms of identification. This could possibly be avoided by exploring ways that YJ and DHHS already identify the young people in their care, whether that is by case numbers or other records. Accepting alternative identification could reduce the alienating aspects of the process for young people with less access to standard identification.

## 2. Staff who can create a nurturing DI environment with young people will increase student engagement through a sense of connection

In this section, push and pull factors are used to frame young people's challenges and potential motivators for engaging in DI. They represent the conditions that lead to a mechanism of a **sense of connection** that increases student engagement. The notion of push and pull factors is used in economics to explain the dynamics that motivate consumers' purchasing decisions. The concept has also been used in marketing and in the social sciences to explain motivations for selecting travel destinations (Tsephe & Eyono Obono 2013) and to analyse long-term migration patterns. In this evaluation, push factors are defined as the things which push a young person away from engaging in DI (for example, lacking reliable communication or housing), whereas pull factors are defined as things that attract a young person to engage in DI (for example, feeling supported and validated in their passion and getting opportunities to explore their interests). This section discusses how staff use pull factors through the practice of Advantaged Thinking as conditions to create the mechanism of a sense of connection and thus increase student engagement.

### The problem: Young people on YJ or CP orders experience push factors that make attending appointments difficult

Young people on CP or YJ orders face numerous challenges that must be considered when aiming to increase their engagement in DI. Delivery staff explained that young people often present to their DI sessions in crisis, and are less likely to prioritise the DI program while they are facing homelessness, legal hearings or other challenges. These challenges result in young people frequently cancelling or rescheduling meetings. Rescheduling meetings is made more difficult if the young person lacks reliable phone or email access or if they wish to meet on days when their coach/trainer is not available. Without regular contact to build rapport and trust, or to experience the opportunities that build on their interests, the young person will find it difficult to engage in DI.

When deliverers were asked what keeps a young person from participating in DI, two recurring themes were housing instability or irregular contact. For example, one DI trainer responded that young people facing homelessness find it hard to focus on DI:

So one of the boys that we have ... has been homeless, got a house, [was] kicked out of home and now they've been evicted. And that's all in one month or a month and a half. So the **DI is of no significance to him and it's not even personal.**

**DI Trainer**

In this context, investing in DI might seem like a large commitment a young person is reluctant to make if they are uncertain where they might be living next.

Additionally, if a young person does not have regular access to a phone or email, they will find it hard to schedule or reschedule their sessions. Irregular communication is likely to result in extending the time between sessions as the logistics of meetings are worked out.

Attendance is definitely an issue, and **a lot of young people don't have phones**, or they have a phone and then they'll break it and then they'll get another phone, another number; so communicating with them can be challenging in some cases.

**DI Coach**

Both the housing instability and unreliable communication are push factors based in material needs. While not all those in the cohort have unstable housing, this is a common reality, particularly for young people just leaving detention.

We can see how more immediate pressures impact the young person's motivation to complete DI:

I think most young people going through the tough times are really about making some money and helping themselves with food and rent or helping themselves get out of a situation and to that, they need the money ... they were keen to start but once they caught on that it actually required them to come into appointments and sacrifice some time and **there wasn't really any sort of immediate reward**, I think for them, it changed their perception of it and it killed their motivation a little bit.

**DI Coach**

Previous comments show that implementing DI can be complicated by systemic barriers like institutional processes, the young person's challenges or limited communication methods. These can inadvertently create conditions which push young people away from participating in the program. Yet DI is structured with the goal of providing enabling opportunities across a range of life domains necessary for independence. The program's AT practice approach is built on a capabilities framework which places relationships and connections at its centre. Together, the DI program and the AT practice approach work to create conditions which nurture young people and help them build their lives more on their terms. The following pull factors illustrate how AT contributes to a nurturing DI environment.

### Mechanisms and conditions: Easy access to coaches and the nurturing environment created by AT approach lead to sense of connection

Coaches and trainers understand that young people are often pushed into short-term thinking so the pull for the young person must counteract this dynamic. Pull factors in this pilot include the young person having increased access to coaches and a nurturing DI environment<sup>18</sup> guided by AT principles. The nurturing DI environment results from trusting relationships between the young person and their coach/trainer and the meaningful opportunities made possible through DI's focus on experiential, aspirational goals. This approach requires the young person to have access to coaches who focus on their future. It also requires the opportunities offered to be engaging and inspired by the young person's interests. Through tapping into a young person's interests to organise outings and opportunities, coaches validate the young person and bolster their confidence. These conditions activate an overall sense of connection, a mechanism that supports young people's engagement in DI.

### Pull factor 1: Staff who can be flexible in scheduling and follow-up with young people build trust and motivation

The challenges that push young people with experiences in OOH and youth justice to cancel appointments require coaches to be as flexible as possible in their scheduling. Coaches also need to build rapport and trust even though they might not see the young person for a few weeks after an initial session. They must be able to offer young people opportunities that will engage them early and keep them motivated to return to sessions as they overcome various challenges. To do so, staff members require resources and practices that support them to invest more time in the critical, rapport-building pre-enrolment period so they can turn referrals into enrolments or maintain engagement with young people who are enrolled.

Some coaches have stated they shifted their schedules, with the support of their organisations, to accommodate meeting with the young people who needed to cancel or reschedule sessions. Being flexible allows young people to drop in. It also shows that the coach or trainer accepts the challenges the young person faces:

What we're trying to do at the moment is to create a bit of a timetable, so that each student has a particular time when they come and see me or [the DI trainer] after class. But I think that... half of them don't come at the time that they've said they'll come, and then I just kind of see them the next day. **I just have to be a bit flexible, I think, with that because I guess there's a lot going on in their lives** and they can't always make it in to school, so you've got to kind of work around it.

**DI Coach**

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<sup>18</sup> A nurturing DI environment is defined in this evaluation as one that assists young people to thrive, to feel welcome and to feel invested in by staff. The notion of thriving is adapted from the Brotherhood's health and wellbeing offer in the EFY Foyers (Rooney et. al 2014).

In addition to giving young people more access to their coach or trainer by increasing flexibility in scheduling, delivery staff can foster a nurturing environment by not giving up on the young person. One trainer spoke of his delivery partner's persistence, continuing to contact young people who miss sessions:

Some of them go for a little bit of a walkabout for a while and [the staff] let them just [re-engage with it] a little while later. I think [the DI coach] does send texts as well. He **makes phone calls but also just a little friendly text** can be maybe less confronting sometimes—just like, 'Hey, you weren't here Friday. Sorry we missed you. Hopefully, you're here Wednesday'.

**DI Trainer**

The AT approach encourages coaches and trainers to believe in young people and their capabilities instead of judging them in terms of compliance or attending appointments. It assumes the young person has good intentions, even if they must reschedule multiple sessions, as the coaching approach starts from a place closer to collegiality instead of the typical mentor–mentee relationship.

The notion that coaches are persistent in supporting the young people was common in the interviews. In his first interview, another DI coach addressed the challenge of starting the program with a young person, but then seeing the young person return to jail; he reflected, 'It was hard for the young person I think because they're not always ready to listen or ready to engage in the program space or mind frame'. A couple of months later, the coach said he learned about the importance of showing students he will be there for them no matter how many times they cancel or drop out. He periodically calls or texts to remind the young person they are not forgotten. He said many of the young people had unreliable relationships with adults in their past, so not giving up on the young person is all the more critical.

Being steadfast and receptive to the young person's concerns and interests requires the investment of time. Student engagement will be improved when coaches and trainers have more time to deliver DI on a weekly basis. Some staff discussed having only two days a week to manage what would typically be considered a full caseload within the youth worker sector. If staff have more hours to deliver DI, they increase access for young people. This is important for young people who do not live in a group setting, for whom many factors can keep them from turning up. One coach who had two days per week to devote to DI said:

**I definitely don't think that's enough time.** I guess most of the time when I've worked with young people or families in the past, a full-time caseload is somewhere between 10 and 15 clients. The expectation that we will be able to provide the DI to 20 young people over the 12-month period means—if you work out the EFT [staff time] and such things and if a lot of the young people seem to be taking far longer than the three months, more like the six months

mark—it's actually quite a full caseload which I think would mean that I would be having quite a lot more visits in one day.

**DI Coach**

There seems to be a disconnect between some educational institutions, managers and their staff in the understanding of DI as a program requiring time for proper implementation, particularly in the pre-enrolment period. The institutional processes and funding mechanisms to manage and support DI vary. The following quote illustrates the grey areas between what their managers will support as 'work hours' and what the institution will support:

Like we're on a bit of a timeline now, do you know what I mean? With trying to get kids through— yeah, so really I should have met with him two or three times and just hung out ... **my institute wouldn't see that as hours**, do you know what I mean? My boss would. But the institute probably wouldn't.

**DI Trainer**

This poses a challenge for trainers uncertain of how to count their hours, especially in the pre-enrolment phase where rapport building is the focus and they might not yet be working on the learning plan.

To summarise, staff who can be flexible to accommodate the young person show dedication and acceptance of the young person's challenges. Deliverers who persist in contacting the young person demonstrate they are not giving up on the young person despite the difficulties of rescheduling missed appointments. These conditions function within the context of these sites and for these young people to activate a sense of connection which has the outcome of increasing the young person's engagement in DI.

## **Pull factor 2: Creative opportunities that resonate with young people validate their interests and create a nurturing DI environment**

A main goal of DI is to connect the young person with opportunities which will connect them into mainstream society and build their desire to explore their aspirations. Sourcing opportunities has been difficult for deliverers who have had young people cancel previous scheduled outings. However, opportunities that stem from the young person's interests can build a young person's confidence and validate their interests, which is not only motivating but is also a step towards DI's other goals.

A great example of creating opportunities that draw on a young person's interests involves one pilot site where a young man expressed interest in cooking. Using the workbook as a guide, the coach and young person had conversations which helped him identify his interests, even though at first glance they were not directly related to education or employment. Together they planned an outing to buy ingredients for a recipe. The experience of making the list, buying the ingredients, following a recipe and producing baked goods boosted the young man's confidence. He is now exploring

becoming a pastry chef and has visited a TAFE to discuss their Certificate 4. Here, the coach discusses how the young person realised he wants to be a chef:

More through conversation and working through the workbook. All the information comes through conversation rather than sitting down and looking at the workbook and going, 'This is what we're doing'. You **have a chat and say, 'What are you interested in?'**

**DI Coach**

The young person even baked treats for one of the COP meetings. He was excited to tell everyone about his love of baking and happy to see them enjoying his recipe. He is now talking about opening his own bakery one day. Since this opportunity, the young person has been in regular contact with his coach and has been eagerly participating in other activities the CSO offers. His coach believes the chance to explore his passion has been vital in keeping the young person engaged:

The young boy who made the scones—he's here multiple times a week. He's enrolled in a couple of different programs. On Mondays, he cooks for the staff. And then others are involved in the outdoor rec. stuff that they do here ... like there's a choice of building their relationship with the centre and the people here already. So **they love this place** and they'll come and show up. They're like, '**Yeah. I'll be happy to show up for a program at [CSO] because I like it there.**'

**DI Trainer**

In addition to having the opportunity to explore his passion, the young person feels 'at home' at the CSO where he takes part in various programs. This suggests another potential pull effect—an organisation that offers multiple programs for young people who drop in. If young people feel 'at home' and attend other programs, making appointments with them is likely to be easier. Young people will then build rapport and feel connected with the organisation. This connection could pull them into DI if they seek to turn their intermittent engagement into a more tailored plan.

Organising creative opportunities requires time to find meaningful experiences and funds for planning the logistics. Brokerage has enabled organisations to source creative ideas that they could not afford previously. One CSO initially could not afford a sound-mixing opportunity for a young person, but after receiving brokerage, planned to revisit this opportunity.

While this brokerage is helpful, the process of researching and organising opportunities is time-consuming for staff working on DI just a couple of days a week:

It does **take time to do some research** on the internet about different kinds of things that the young person might want and then we might have to call or we might have to visit, we might have to try and negotiate times and prices. And all of those kind of things is **not something that I really have had time to do.**

**DI Coach**

This underlines the need for more investment in staff resourcing or working hours. Allocation of time for those implementing the DI is a critical factor in successful delivery.

This evaluation found that DI's AT practice approach enables coaches and trainers to offer opportunities that demonstrate respect and validation of the young person's interests, creating a nurturing environment. The nurturing DI environment generates pull factors that will make the young person feel accepted, invested in, cared about and motivated. Conversations between the deliverers and the young person as they explore the latter's interests and build skills through the structure of the learning plan build trust between them. Deliverers invest in the young people by accommodating and rescheduling appointments in ways that recognise the challenges that push them away from engagement. Coaches and trainers who have time to research and make arrangements can offer service-connected young people meaningful creative opportunities to explore their passions, motivating them to stay engaged in DI. These factors form the conditions of a nurturing DI environment. Taken together, these pull factors (conditions) facilitate the program mechanism—a **sense of connection**.

The outcome of this sense of connection is that young people will show up. Despite any challenges the young person might face, recognising and investing in their talents, interests and aspirations makes them feel they belong. These dynamics can keep young people engaged while they come to recognise the long-term benefits of completing DI and build their relationship with deliverers. In this way, the mechanism creates a feedback loop (a virtuous cycle) of increasing the young person's engagement, which increases their sense of connection, which in turn increases their engagement. The young person's participation might be interrupted from time to time, but they will stay connected.

### **Adaptations: Brokerage and ideas for opportunities**

The CSOs and the Brotherhood realised early in the pilot the importance of opportunities for engaging the young people in DI. Funding opportunities such as baking or music production required an adaptation to include brokerage to pay for supplies or studio time. The pilot introduced brokerage in April 2018, allowing coaches and trainers to engage young people early in the DI program. This had the effect of showing the young people that their interests were taken seriously. It also created a space for trust to be built between them and the coaches—as they saw an adult investing in them, organising meaningful opportunities and validating their interest by helping it become a reality. In summary, the brokerage adaptation furthered a sense of connection because it provided creative avenues that kept students engaged.

Another adaptation related to student opportunities was a resource list created by the Brotherhood and partner organisations. The COP meetings provided a space to workshop ideas for creative opportunities beyond standard case management services. The group generated a resource list that included offerings from CSOs, TAFEs and other community collaborators. This adaptation was meant to enable deliverers to invest in

creative opportunities that would connect young people to mainstream services and thus increase their engagement in the program. In this way the student opportunities list also helped generate the nurturing DI environment which contributes to a sense of connection. The resource list provided not only creative opportunities, but also the chance to introduce young people to supportive adults at neighbouring CSOs that were not directly delivering DI. This could result in broadening the young person's social networks by connecting them with others with whom to explore their interests, receive guidance and build skills.

The Brotherhood is currently finalising a website and smartphone app which will also bolster the coaches and trainers' opportunity resources. These will create space for sharing impromptu and creative opportunities and instructional materials. They will also encourage reflexive monitoring by staff through discussion thread features.

**Recommendations: Increase young people's access to coaches and trainers and extend the program completion time**

To increase young people's access to their coaches and trainers, and in turn student engagement, staff should have flexibility to reschedule numerous times to meet the young person. This flexibility would best be supported by having staff work full time rather than limited hours (for example, operating DI five days a week instead of two days).

The overall length of time for program delivery should also be expanded, from 3–6 months to 6–12 months. This takes into account the challenges faced by the cohort, which result in frequent session cancellations and rescheduling.

## Conclusion

This evaluation has discussed two findings in this first stage—one mechanism which negatively impacts student enrolment in DI and another that positively impacts student engagement by countering factors that push young people away from participating.

The first finding concerned institutional enrolment processes that acted as barriers for young people with experience of a CP or YJ order who had disengaged from school for some time. Barriers include a language, literacy and numeracy assessment; onerous forms; procuring required identification; and requiring in-person guardian/parent signatures. In discussing the findings through the lens of conditions and mechanisms, we found these conditions activated a mechanism of **alienating institutional enrolment processes**. This mechanism led to the outcome that young people were discouraged or delayed in their enrolment process.

The second finding focused on the young person's life difficulties (detention, homelessness, lack of reliable communication, etc.) which pushed them from engaging in the program. Pull factors such as increasing access to coaches and the nurturing environment of the AT approach in DI activated the mechanism of a **sense of connection**. This mechanism produced the positive outcome of increasing student engagement in DI.

In speaking with coaches and trainers, the evaluator discovered that adaptations made throughout the pilot have increased access to DI for young people who have experienced YJ or CP orders. These adaptations form the basis of recommendations that include continuing to streamline the TAFE/RTO enrolment process while possibly formalising the use of the observational LLN tool across TAFEs and RTOs and adopting alternative forms of identification for young people with DJR and DHHS. Another recommendation is to increase each young person's access to coaches and trainers through increasing staff time allocations and extending the overall program completion time to 6–12 months in recognition of the young person's challenges. These adaptations will increase student access and engagement in DI and further education.

## Appendix: Referral pathways

The information on referral sources listed on the readiness forms<sup>19</sup> shows that most young people entering DI are referred by internal programs at the partner CSOs or TAFEs/RTO. Youth justice teams and crime prevention programs offered by Banksia in Broadmeadows and YSAS in Dandenong are the primary source of student referrals (aided by the Gateway alternative school at Broadmeadows) at those two sites. In Geelong and Warrnambool, the internal child protection and service programs at BCYF and Brophy, respectively, provide the bulk of referrals. Referral sources are shown in Table A1 .

**Table A1 Referral sources for Skills for Independence**

<b>Broadmeadows</b> Banksia Gardens & Kangan TAFE	<b>Dandenong</b> Youth Support and Advocacy Service & Chisholm TAFE	<b>Geelong</b> Barwon Child, Youth and Family & Diversitat	<b>Warrnambool</b> Brophy Family and Youth Services & South West TAFE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadmeadows Youth Justice teams (DJR)</li> <li>• Crime Prevention Grant Program: Broadmeadows Youth Justice</li> <li>• Alliance (Magistrates Court)</li> <li>• Parkville College, Education Transitions Workers</li> <li>• Reconnect &amp; Transitions to Work</li> <li>• Gateway School</li> <li>• Youth Junction</li> <li>• Sunbury Police</li> <li>• Berry Street</li> <li>• Anglicare</li> <li>• Internal programs (various)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dandenong Youth Justice teams (DJR)</li> <li>• DJR (Dandenong) Employment Pathways Brokers</li> <li>• Internal referrals at YSAS: REVAL Day Program; Ignite and Pivot crime prevention programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geelong Youth Justice teams (DJR)</li> <li>• BCYF Alcohol &amp; Other Drug Services</li> <li>• Access Youth Supports (NDIS provider)</li> <li>• Better Futures Barwon</li> <li>• Horizon House</li> <li>• BCYF Youth Services</li> <li>• ERMHA</li> <li>• MacKillop Family Services</li> <li>• Stronger Families</li> <li>• Diversitat Youth Education</li> <li>• headspace</li> <li>• Self-referrals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DHHS</li> <li>• Brophy Foster, Leaving, or Kinship Care</li> <li>• Springboard</li> <li>• MacKillop Family Services</li> <li>• headspace</li> </ul>

Interviews with some coaches revealed that external referring agencies sometimes lacked information about how DI operates or misunderstood the eligibility criteria for

<sup>19</sup> Some referral sources were not provided on the readiness forms. Among those that provided the information, Banksia’s internal programs referred seven of 22 (additionally, five were external referrals from Gateway School and ten were from external YJ programs/contacts). YSAS in Dandenong referred two of three young people internally. In Geelong, BCYF had six of eight internal referrals while Brophy in Warrnambool listed three of three young people as internal referrals.

young people to join the program. One DI coach explained the confusion that resulted from her referral source not reading or fully understanding the eligibility criteria:

Initially there was a bit of confusion and **[the external referral source] didn't read the eligibility criteria** and he referred a lot of people, because he really liked the idea of the program, and then I was questioning whether or not some of the students were eligible and then he realised that he made a mistake.

**DI Coach**

In future, care should be taken to ensure that referral agencies know the eligibility requirements for participation in DI. This could be improved by having conversations directly with external referral partners about the eligibility requirements listed on all correspondence that is shared about DI. This would allow referral partners to ask questions and coaches to assess whether the criteria are fully understood.

The following section provides an overview of the programs offered at each site to support young people and bring them in the door. It is not an exhaustive description of all programs at each site.

## Broadmeadows

The availability of a youth justice worker connected to an internal program at Banksia has benefited the Broadmeadows site. A contact there has made warm introductions and facilitated conversations around DI that sprang from the young person's interests. Broadmeadows has also been using an alternative school, The Gateway School, as a source for referrals. This developed from the pre-existing relationship one coach from Banksia had with a school staff member.

Banksia Gardens Community Services host more than 30 groups and associations at their centre. Notably, they lead the Broadmeadows Community Youth Justice Alliance (BCYJA). The alliance, funded by DJR, offers a program for young people aged 10–24 living in Broadmeadows, aimed to prevent and intervene to reduce criminal activity while addressing the social challenges young people face. The CSO also offers programs such as Good People Act Now (GPAN) for those aged 16–30 to raise awareness of issues surrounding violence against women; and offers Respectful Relationship training to their youth groups. Additionally, Banksia runs the Youth Transitions Pilot Program, funded by the Brotherhood to support young people aged 15–25 from refugee and migrant backgrounds to build employment opportunities.

## Dandenong

The coach at YSAS works in an additional role for a program called Ignite that is a reliable source for referrals. YSAS's youth justice team and five outreach staff members form other key referral pathways. YSAS also uses referrals from their in-house REVAL program, a structured day program for young people aged 14–21 who experience drug

and alcohol issues, which supports them developing social, emotional and intellectual skills.

As a drop-in centre, YSAS offers a range of services to young people. One program, Youth Support Services is a voluntary service that operates separately from the legal process to support young people aged 10–17 years and their families and address youth justice problems before they become too serious. The site also offers REVAL Ink, a graphic design engagement program for those aged 12–24 years; and an Adventures Program for youth to learn coping skills while confronting adventures and challenges. YSAS Dandenong also offers Specialist Youth Drug and Alcohol Treatment; Youth Outreach; Home Based Withdrawal; Youth Drug and Alcohol Consultant; and Primary Health Service programs.

## Geelong

In Geelong, the Project Control Group for Better Futures Barwon brings together stakeholders who act as referral pathways into DI. Child Protection, Youth Justice, Kinship Care and Residential Care are represented. An operational group, the Leaving Care and Post Care Panel, also serves to connect young people with DI. The group contains team and practice leaders and program coordinators from the aforementioned sectors.

Barwon Child, Youth & Family (BCYF) offers services that spans early years to young adults for youth who have difficulty living at home. They also offer specialist intervention services for alcohol and drug use; torture and trauma counselling; and youth justice conferencing. BCYF offers two programs notable for young people in SFI: their Leaving Care program, which includes post-care and housing support and brokerage for financial assistance; and Springboard, which assists young people aged 16–21 who are transitioning from, or have already left, residential care, to re-engage with education, training or supported employment opportunities. Gordon TAFE is also very active in the area.

## Warrnambool

Brophy Foster Care and DHHS are the main referral sources in Warrnambool. Young people also drop in to Brophy to access Springboard funds for TAFE costs or housing and become involved in DI. The majority of these young people have already moved out of care and their case managers are typically the referral source. MacKillop Family Services is another avenue for referrals.

Brophy Family and Youth Services is a primary provider of youth and family services in south-west Victoria through foster care. It offers a range of health services, like headspace; accommodation and support services; education and training programs; and family services. Most notably, Brophy provides a Foyer for those aged 16–25 years, offering stable housing and individualised plans that will help young people on their

journey to independence. Brophy also offers Leaving Care and Post Care Support, intensive support programs for young people aged 16–18 and 16–21 respectively, who are preparing for their current order to end or whose order has ended. Both services provide assistance with independent living skills and brokerage for financial assistance.

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