

Working together

A report on the Youth Collaboration Trial

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The Youth Collaboration Trial (YCT), also known as the Learning and Earning Project, operated from June 2013 to December 2014 in Frankston, Craigieburn and the western suburbs of Melbourne. The YCT demonstrated a model of service integration designed to ensure that young people aged 15–24 are prepared for, and able to sustain, employment. Through collaboration with a range of partners, YCT aimed to link employment, education and training services such as Youth Connections and Job Services Australia providers, using existing government funding.

This summary outlines the key findings of the evaluation of the YCT, which included interviews with 14 key stakeholders and analysis of participant data.

Collaborative approaches help join up service silos

Fragmentation and a piecemeal approach have been identified as key challenges facing youth services (Bond 2010; Rose & Atkins 2006). This results in service silos, with separate services for learning, training, employment, and other needs such as health and housing, each with distinct entry points and rules determining who receives assistance and in what form. Collaboration is often promoted as the answer to this fragmentation.

The YCT evaluation examined staff and working group members' experience of collaboration. YCT was described by two interviewees as a 'safety net' to ensure young people did not fall into gaps between services. Some viewed collaboration as a means of 'joining up' silos, describing collaboration between services as 'best practice.' For example, one interviewee observed:

I think the service system or education/employment system can be segregated at times and complex ... collaboration can make sense of that complexity to a certain degree and make sense to the young people going through it... more understanding of each other's businesses is best practice.

Collaboration was also perceived by some interviewees to have an efficiency dividend. While not a substitute for adequate resourcing, it helped organisations avoid duplication and use scarce resources more efficiently.

The table below summarises five benefits of collaboration described by interviewees:

Five benefits of collaboration
Helping youth services make sense of a complex system
Improving communication and building understanding and relationships between providers
Avoiding duplication or offering competing services, and making more efficient use of scarce resources
Being able to offer an array of services that address young people's broader needs. As one interviewee said: 'no agency can be all things to all people'
Ensuring no client 'falls through gaps' in the system.

Harnessing local organisations helps to address young people's varied needs

YCT aimed to tailor services to the needs of the individual, and represented an important first step to getting young people get back on track. A YCT staff member explained:

The thing that the trial has done has been to work individually with young people to advocate for them and help them navigate the system. Just having a stronger advocate for the individual needs of the young person and making the service fit the needs of the young person rather than the other way around. That's the thing that has been a bit different.

A YCT staff member described the trial as 'harnessing the goodwill of communities'. Local organisations made valuable contributions to YCT:

- Working groups represented a key forum for collaboration in the trial. Each site's working group comprised 5–10 local youth agencies described as 'key players' in the area, including government agencies, education, training and employment providers, community and volunteer services.
- 280 referrals were made into YCT by EET providers, local government, local learning and

employment networks and other social, health and community organisations.

- 181 referrals were made by YCT to other organisations.
- 27 organisations made major contributions to the trial, in the form of services, programs, referrals and in-kind support. Many others contributed by providing industry tasters and information sessions.

These diverse contributions benefited the 374 young people who participated in YCT. Only 25 per cent had completed Year 12 or VCAL Senior level and only 23 per cent held a Certificate III or higher. Through their participation in the trial:

- 100 per cent (n = 374) of the young people received career guidance and developed a learning plan that outlines the steps to achieve their learning and employment goals
- 85 per cent (n = 245) participated in training or work experience¹.

Working together helps services to mitigate the impacts of policy and funding changes

Interviewees stressed that collaboration was especially important because of the major changes occurring in youth services and the broader policy environment. These changes include the de-funding of Youth Connections and the School Business Community Partnership Brokers program and the impact on Local Learning and Employment Networks, the de-funding of Local Employment Coordinators, changes to the Victorian Training Guarantee and the anticipated re-tender of Job Services Australia contracts.

One of the lessons from YCT is that it takes time to build the strong relationships that are needed to harness existing community resources. It is more difficult to build momentum or achieve a sustained approach with changing collaborators. Another lesson is the importance of working with those organisations that are less likely to be affected by the vagaries of federal and state government funding. Working closely with local government was particularly important, given their wide range of resources and longstanding community and service networks.

Collaborative initiatives begun during YCT continue in 2015

While the trial was time limited, it has had a lasting impact in embedding and formalising coordination

efforts. Collaboration continues in 2015, with both the Craigieburn and Frankston working groups continuing in some form. The YCT site coordinator role has been absorbed into the coordinator role in the BSL's Youth Transitions Program, which enables continuity of effort and the retention of networks and relationships developed through the trial. Additionally, several collaborative initiatives continue, such as Frankston Job Club operated by Frankston Volunteer Resource Centre and an enhanced version of the Youth Transitions Program. Melton City Council also continues to make in kind contributions to support collaboration.

References

- Bond, S. 2010, *Integrated service delivery for young people: a literature review*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.
- Rose, J & Atkins, C 2006, *Who's carrying the can: a report into youth services gaps in Victoria*, Victorian Council of Social Service & Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne.

About the project

YCT was funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and made possible through the contribution of working group members and a range of other organisations. This evaluation was approved by the BSL Human Research Ethics Committee.

Other relevant Brotherhood publications

- George Myconos 2014, *Lessons from a flexible learning program: the Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL education program for young people 2010–2013*.
- Eve Bodsworth 2014, *Pathways that work: lessons from the Youth Employment Project in Caroline Springs*.

For other Brotherhood publications see <www.bsl.org.au/Publications>.

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¹ Information on participation in training and work experience was available for 289 participants.