



Lessons from a flexible learning program

The Brotherhood of St Laurence
Community VCAL education program
for young people 2010–2013

George Myconos

2014



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.

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This report is one of a series on the BSL-Community VCAL program in Frankston. Earlier reports, also available on the Brotherhood's website, include:

G Myconos 2013, *Successes and challenges in re-engagement: evaluating the third year of a Community VCAL education program*

G Myconos 2012, *Re-engagement, training and beyond: evaluating the second year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*

G Myconos 2011, *A path to re-engagement: evaluating the first year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*

G Myconos 2010, *A taste for learning: evaluating a pre-Community VCAL program*

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Abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CGEA	Certificate in General Education for Adults
CVCAL	Community Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, delivered by a non-school provider in a community setting
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
FHSC	Frankston High Street Centre, operated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence
FMP	Frankston Mornington Peninsula (the combined local government areas of the City of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula Shire)
RTO	Registered training organisation
SBAT	School based apprenticeship or traineeship
TAFE	Technical and further education
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational education and training
VRQA	Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority

Summary

Background

The Brotherhood of St Laurence ‘Community VCAL’ education program for youth is a response to widespread concerns in Victoria about youth disengagement from secondary school education. Operating in Frankston in Melbourne’s south-east, the program delivers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning—a Years 11–12 certificate course which combines classroom tuition with vocational training and work placements—and provides wellbeing support, in a community setting rather than a school. Now in its fifth year, it represents one model in an array of ‘flexible learning’ re-engagement program interventions that have emerged across Australia in recent times.

While re-engagement interventions vary in their relationships to the government education and training systems, the qualifications offered and the extent of specialised support provided, they share a commitment to pedagogies based on inclusion and to providing a ‘second start’ for those whose education has been disrupted.

By definition, the CVCAL model entails arms-length, yet formal, relations with mainstream ‘partner’ schools and hence the state education system. This ensures that government funds follow the students to the non-school CVCAL provider. These links also ensure that the provider works within the same overall accountability framework that applies to schools. In 2013 the BSL’s CVCAL catered for around sixty students aged 15–18 years, integrating wellbeing and pathway support for its three cohorts: foundation, intermediate and senior.

Scope of this evaluation

Previous evaluations (Myconos 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) of the BSL-CVCAL have focused on key themes in each year’s program experience (outcomes, engagement and wellbeing, teaching and learning, pathways support and governance). This report combines findings from the program’s final process evaluation—for the 2013 school year—with summative assessments of prior learnings. In so doing this report:

- considers the 2013 program and the extent to which it confirmed previous years’ experiences
- distils the findings of the 2009–2013 evaluation period to present assessments of the model’s constituent parts
- offers a summative assessment of the CVCAL approach to re-engagement.

Key points from the evaluation of the 2013 BSL-CVCAL

The fourth year of the BSL-CVCAL saw the consolidation of an integrated approach to assisting young people through a combination of teaching, wellbeing and pathways support. This consolidation was evident in the development of key policies, protocols and practice guides, as well as the introduction of a pedagogy that privileged social and emotional learning. In 2013 the program had to cater for unanticipated demands and developments, and this impacted on staffing levels, staff–student relations and the delivery of the certificate and associated supports. Nevertheless, the program again enabled young people to gain skills, experience and qualifications that would otherwise have been denied.

Outcomes

- There was a 64% completion rate for eligible students in 2013: of the 58 students, 37 completed their certificate, or progressed to their final year.
- The average overall attendance on ‘school’ days was 57%. This reaches 84% when authorised and forewarned absences are allowed for.
- There was a strong relationship between formal and informal outcomes, where informal outcomes (e.g. improved confidence, motivation, outlook) seemed to combine to provide preconditions to attainment of formal outcomes.

Engagement and wellbeing

- Low self-esteem, relationship difficulties, anxiety, addiction, low motivation, anger issues and bullying were the most common barriers to education noted by students during the 2013 intake process.
- Many students reported sudden improvement in their attitudes to schooling and relationships, which they attributed to the welcoming and secure environment tailored to their needs.
- The program enhanced its wellbeing support through closer relations with external agencies.
- Measures taken by staff to reduce the presence on site of drug-affected students proved effective, while measures to discourage tobacco consumption were also taking effect.

Teaching and learning

- A holistic approach to learning—emphasising social and emotional learning—was formalised and has provided a much-needed guiding ethos for the program.
- The introduction of the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA) certificate for younger students helped them prepare for the Year 11–12 VCAL. The prescriptive nature of the CGEA suited some students but alienated others.
- Most student interviewees welcomed the expansion of the program’s online delivery, while affirming the need for personal interaction in the learning process.

Pathways

- Identifying suitable vocational pathways remained a key challenge, despite efforts to enhance career guidance, facilitate interaction with employers and trainers, and ensure contingencies were in place in the event of disrupted vocational training.

- Greater emphasis was placed on onsite vocational training, as well as on school based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs), and both proved effective. undertaking VET in a familiar setting helped ease anxiety and enhanced the learning experience.
- Former students continued to engage with the program and to call on staff for assistance in their often difficult post-CVCAL search for employment.

Governance and personnel

- An updated, comprehensive practice guide was put in place, and a review of all program policies and protocols undertaken. Staff awareness of these guidelines could be improved.
- An unanticipated level of staff turnover impacted negatively on student–staff relations, and also disrupted important routines (e.g. debriefs and staff meetings).

Overview of the 2010–2013 CVCAL experience

The 2013 CVCAL findings are here combined with findings from previous evaluations as they traced the program from its establishment through consolidation phases. The following can now be gleaned about the BSL-CVCAL approach to re-engagement:

- **Demand:** The BSL-CVCAL plays a key role in its region by responding to a growing number of young people who—for a range of reasons—are alienated from mainstream schooling.
- **Complexity:** The program lies at the intersection where learning, wellbeing, vocational training and employment needs converge. While providing a welcoming environment is vital, it is not in itself sufficient to cater for the young people’s needs.
- **Integration:** Reviving young people’s interest in education requires a range of measures—program-specific interventions, and partnerships with schools and other support services. A unifying ethos that embraces the complex interaction between learning, wellbeing and pathways needs informs the program’s work.
- **Outcomes:** Staff are aware of the need for a nuanced view of outcomes. They recognise that students’ progress occurs in non-linear and unexpected ways, in areas not always recognised by formal curriculum frameworks, and/or in forms that are difficult to quantify.
- **Passion:** Students develop a strong attachment to the program; and it attracts staff who are inspired in part by the opportunity to help a cohort of young people whose education is threatened by factors often beyond their control.
- **Uncertainty:** As the students’ needs are many and varied, a level of day-to-day uncertainty is normal; this tests the capacity of staff and students to maintain the strong relationships needed to make progress. Associated pressures can be mitigated through professional development, effective policies and protocols, and information sharing across the program’s components.

1 Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence’s ‘Community VCAL’ (BSL-CVCAL)¹ re-engagement program caters for young people in the City of Frankston and its surrounds (particularly the Mornington Peninsula) who have left mainstream schooling prematurely, be it through mutual agreement (i.e. through an ‘exiting’ process) or as a result of expulsion. The program delivers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning—a Years 11–12 certificate course which combines classroom tuition with vocational training and work placements—in a non-school, community setting. Importantly, the program incorporates wellbeing and pathways support for a cohort that includes many young people who have experienced severe hardship. This report focuses on the program—now in its fifth year—and assesses a range of elements in its approach to countering disengagement from education in a region of Victoria with pockets of severe disadvantage.

The program’s commencement in 2010 was prompted by a growing realisation that the task of re-engagement is often beyond the capacity of mainstream schools. This is especially so in the case of young people who have experienced significant barriers to continuing their education. The BSL-CVCAL program is also part of a wider trend across Australia: it is one of over 900 non-school based programs offering tailored curriculum and support to around 70,000 young people in more than 1200 locations (Te Riele 2014). To this extent it is part of a response within education that posits innovative ways of assisting those young people whose education may have faltered or, indeed, have all but ended.

Since its first ‘taster’ incarnation (in late 2009) a number of evaluations (Myconos 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) have been conducted to track changes and assess the program’s impact on its students. The most recent evaluation (Myconos 2013) concluded that in spite of many challenges the program provided students with the opportunity to achieve educational outcomes they would have thought highly unlikely prior to arrival. It also pointed to the vital importance of wellbeing support, and supportive relationships in general. Among its specific recommendations were:

- Refine and embed a unifying ethos, as well as clarifying the expectations of both students and staff.
- Build linkages that result in external wellbeing agencies interacting with students more frequently.
- Review and make more accessible the suite of program policies and protocols.
- Enhance pathways support and provide closer oversight of the vocational training component.
- Enhance professional development, as well as staff supervision, debriefing and peer support.

The findings of this evaluation show that progress was made in most of these areas, with mitigating circumstances accounting for lack of progress in others.

¹ The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is an alternative to the more academic Victorian Certificate of Education. CVCAL refers to VCAL provision by a community service organisation to school-enrolled students in a non-school setting. This entails partner schools redirecting a portion of the government allocation of funds to the CVCAL provider.

Aims

This report presents the findings from the 2013 process evaluation as well as summary findings from previous years' evaluations. The latter appear as 'prior' learnings at the head of each section. The research addresses the following specific questions:

- What did the 2013 program achieve, and what were the barriers and enablers to success?
- In what ways was the 2013 experience distinctive and to what extent did it confirm earlier trends?
- What general principles can be gleaned about the CVCAL model from this and previous evaluations?

Methodology

Design principles

Since 2011, a series of process evaluations have informed the development and refinement of the CVCAL model for the BSL. Previous evaluations have also conveyed the lessons learnt to a wider audience comprising educators and policy makers concerned with mitigating disengagement and enhancing educational prospects for young people. The approach to this 2013 evaluation incorporated the following activities:

- input from BSL management on the evaluation design
- formal and informal consultations with program staff on operations
- primary data collection on outcomes
- learnings conveyed periodically to program staff to inform changes to program delivery
- submission and subsequent approval of a research ethics proposal.

The research design is informed by an interpretive approach that values highly the personal and educational experiences of the young participants, as well as the insights of frontline and coordination staff.

Components

Semi-structured interviews

Students: Interviews were conducted in October 2013 with 15 of the 58 students who participated in that year (6 males, 9 females). Of these, 7 were at the introductory, 4 at the intermediate and 4 at the senior level. In addition, 3 former students were interviewed.²

Staff: Eight of the 10 staff were interviewed in October and November 2013. These included teachers, trainers, aides, wellbeing and pathways support officers, as well as those in coordination and management roles.

All efforts were made during the selection process to ensure that the interviewees formed a representative sample of the program community.

² In a break from convention, and after consultation with students, payments earmarked for individual interviewees were instead directed to a single fund that the program members subsequently used for activities benefiting all. This was to avoid competition among students for the payments.

Interview analysis

Students and staff alike were asked questions linked to the following themes:

Engagement and wellbeing

- Reasons for enrolment and continuing barriers to learning
- Impressions of the learning environment, relations with peers and staff and comparisons with mainstream schooling
- Identification of and catering for wellbeing needs

Teaching and learning

- Integration of wellbeing support with the prescribed VCAL curriculum, and the lessons learnt about teaching young people with 'high needs'
- Alignment of the VET, work placement and classroom components
- Challenges encountered in, and lessons learnt from, the assessment process

Vocational education and pathway support

- Assistance with the transition to and through VET, including careers advice and monitoring needs and progress at the vocational training providers and at workplaces
- Support required by students approaching completion and by former students

Formal and informal outcomes and expectations

- Enrolments, attendance and absenteeism
- Graduations, progress and other qualifications gained
- Enrolments and participation in vocational training, employment and other pathways
- Social and emotional capabilities, soft skills, readiness for further training or work

Questions relevant only to teachers, wellbeing and support staff, and the coordinator and Centre manager focused on the following themes:

Program design

- The appropriateness of the theories and principles underpinning the program's approach to education/support
- Clarity on the program's short, medium and long-term objectives

Governance

- The existence and relevance of policies (e.g. practice guides, wellbeing monitoring and referral, critical incidents, learning plans, intake processes, VET agreements and post-program support)
- Data collection systems (e.g. maintenance of student profile, attendance and attainment records)

Personnel

- Reconciling expectations with reality, adjusting to the environment, recruitment processes and comparisons with mainstream settings
- Staffing levels, access to aides and other relief, timetabling, professional development, support and career advancement

Partnerships

- Formal and informal links with other stakeholders: school partnerships and interactions, collaborations and referrals

Consultations and document analysis

Analysis of interviews was supplemented with field notes taken during consultations with various stakeholders who were not directly involved in course delivery. These included BSL head office staff engaged in modifying course material and creating the program's policies. Project documentation was also viewed, and included:

- the program operation manual
- the rights and responsibilities policy
- the referral, intake and enrolment form
- the intake and assessment rubric
- the alcohol and other drugs policy
- the individual education plan
- attainment and attendance data.

Limitations

Exclusions

A number of senior students had left the program prior to the interviews and so their views are underrepresented. Similarly, the views of the staff who departed prior to the interviews were excluded. Also not included was a small cohort of students who joined the BSL-CVCAL program in June after a nearby non-school provider of VCAL ceased operations. Although the cohort continued its VCAL with the BSL, it was not regarded—for the purposes of this evaluation—as a part of the program.

Statistics

While every effort was made to ensure the fidelity of the statistics cited, a small margin for error exists. Monitoring attendance off-site at training organisations, on non-school days, remains a challenge. Also, it is apparent that the departure of staff at key moments caused some difficulties in maintaining exact attendance and participation records.

Ethics

The evaluation procedures were approved by the BSL Research Ethics Committee. All interviewees were provided with a plain language statement about the study, and consent was sought for their participation. These documents outlined the research aims as well as the prospective participants' rights to confidentiality, anonymity and access to the final report.

Program profile

In 2013 the BSL-CVCAL catered for 58 young people (another 10 had fleeting contact with the program but were ineligible for assessment). As in previous years the students comprised those who had been referred by schools or, in some instances, by support agencies running programs such as Youth Connections.³ Table 1.1 shows the BSL-CVCAL participants, and how the program has grown and been adapted in recent years.

Table 1.1 Students and staff of BSL-CVCAL, 2009–2013

Year	Students	Staffing	Notes
2013	58 (30 male, 28 female)	2 registered teachers Qualified trainer Qualified wellbeing officer Pathways support officer Coordinator Administrative assistance Youth support officer 2 education support officers	Introduction of Social and Emotional Learning as a guiding ethos Introduction of a feeder certificate (CGEA) to better prepare young students for VCAL Increased online delivery
2012	67 (38 male, 29 female)	4 registered teachers Qualified wellbeing officer Youth projects officer Coordinator Administrative assistance Education support officer	Consolidation Introduction of a youth projects officer
2011	49 (29 male, 20 female)	4 registered teachers Qualified wellbeing officer Coordinator Administrative assistance Volunteer aide	Mid-year doubling of student numbers Introduction of specialised wellbeing and pathways support
2010	25 (8 male, 17 female)	2 registered teachers Coordinator Volunteer aide Part-time arts tutor	Consolidation
2009 (8 week Taster)	15 (6 male, 9 female)	Trainer Coordinator Volunteer aide Part-time arts tutor	Delivering a Certificate III course Preparation for VCAL provision

Student needs

Program data was provided showing information gathered from students during the 2013 intake process. Table 1.2 indicates the barriers—or ‘risk factors’—they had encountered, and that almost certainly had contributed to their negative experiences in mainstream schools. (The program’s wellbeing staff suspected that the data most likely understated the severity of the barriers encountered).

³ The Youth Connections initiative emerged out of the package of reforms constituting the 2009–2013 nationwide Compact with Young Australians. It comprises regional advisory services for young people who are most at risk of disengaging or have already disengaged from education, family and/or community. Service delivery features individualised case management.

Table 1.2 Risk factors reported by students on enrolment, 2013 (N = 68)

Risk factor	Descriptor	% of cohort
Low self-esteem	Feeling low, isolated or alone, with possible undiagnosed depression	69
Relationship difficulties	With family, friends, peers, teachers, partners or those in authority.	60
Anxiety	Feeling scared or fearful, possibly as a result of substance abuse, trauma or their environment	60
Addiction	To substances/alcohol, or to compulsions and habits	58
Low motivation	A lack of direction, feeling unsure and indifferent about the future	56
Anger issues	Feeling angry, lashing out, with an inability to control emotions	38
Bullying	Victim of bullying and harassment in school, work or family settings	35
Interrupted schooling	Unstable and inconsistent educational background, with prolonged periods of absenteeism, and/or a high number of schools attended	31
School 'refuser'	Psychologically unable to enter school grounds, or having no connection to school, fearful, anxious and about school	31
Learning difficulties	Diagnosed or undiagnosed, associated with developmental trauma and/or inconsistent schooling	29
Financial pressures	Consistent and pervasive financial pressures and experience of poverty	27
Depression	Diagnosed depression, feelings of isolation, loneliness and hopelessness	27
Family breakdown	Experiences of complicated and fraught separations/divorces, family crises, with DHS and/or police involvement	25
Conflict	Frequent involvement in conflicts and an inability to resolve issues	25
Unstable housing	Homelessness, couch surfing, or living on the streets; evictions and being excluded from the family home	13
Domestic violence	In the home, in relationships, as the victim and/or the perpetrator	12
High suspension/expulsion rate	Suspended and/or expelled multiple times from multiple schools	10

Note: This data was collected from the 68 students who enrolled. Only 58 were assessed at year's end.

While such mapping is inexact, a picture emerges of a cohort of young people who have experienced significant hardship. Notable patterns included:

- On average, students presented with 6 risk factors out of a possible 17.
- The most common risk factors were low self-esteem, relationship difficulties and anxiety.
- Of all the students, 16% had an existing external case worker, although in the opinion of those overseeing the intake process, many more required one.
- Of those students experiencing unstable housing, all were judged to be highly vulnerable to homelessness.
- Of all the students, 35% had experienced bullying and harassment.
- Of the group, 10% had been repeatedly suspended/ expelled from schools for behavioural issues.

These findings are consistent with data collected in previous years, and together indicate a good representation of the cohort of young people the program is designed to assist.

Curriculum framework

The foundation stone of the program was the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a senior secondary certificate offered by most schools as well as a growing number of TAFE institutions and community organisations. The VCAL is a popular alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education, which remains the more likely path to an ‘academic’ tertiary education.⁴ VCAL is taught at three levels—foundation, intermediate and senior—over a two-year period, with each level aligned to students’ readiness. Common to all levels are the following curriculum skills strands: literacy and numeracy, industry-specific training (VET), workplace skills, and personal development (VCAA 2013).

The 2013 BSL-CVCAL differed from previous years in that a VET-based Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA) was incorporated in the program, in place of the VCAL Foundation level. Increasingly, students who were too young for the VCAL intermediate and senior years had sought positions in the program. To satisfy what amounted to a new Year 10 cohort, the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA), incorporating literacy, numeracy and general education skills, was trialled as an alternative to the Foundation level VCAL because its highly structured nature was thought to be appropriate for those whose study skills were underdeveloped.

⁴ Enrolments in VCAL have steadily increased to 22,853 in 2013 (up from 14,000 in 2007 when comparable statistics were first gathered), with 443 institutions providing the certificate across Victoria (VCAA 2014).

2 Findings

Engagement and wellbeing

Prior learnings

- Young people have gravitated towards the BSL-CVCAL (and similar programs) because of their negative experiences of mainstream schools—factors include regimentation, overcrowding, poor relations with teachers and peers, and bullying—and because personal and social pressures beyond the school have exacerbated these problems.
- Their experience typically involves falling behind in classwork, and this in turn becomes a key antecedent to complete disassociation from mainstream schooling.
- When introduced to the smaller, more intimate BSL-CVCAL environment, students consistently describe a profound sense of relief, security and acceptance, and a changed attitude to learning.
- A welcoming environment is not sufficient, however: the importance of ongoing specialist wellbeing support for students, many of whom have experienced severe hardship beyond the school setting, must not be understated.

The 2013 experience: engagement and wellbeing

In common with their 2009–2012 predecessors, most of the 2013 cohort had backgrounds marked by instability and often severe hardship. Most had been ‘exited’ from school (i.e. they had consented to leaving), while some had been expelled. One of the least ambiguous findings of previous BSL-CVCAL evaluations was reaffirmed in this 2013 review: even those young people who are severely disaffected with mainstream education can experience a sudden, renewed interest in learning if the environment is conducive.

There was a strong recognition among staff in 2013 that a young person negotiating challenges within and/or beyond the school gate is unlikely to learn unless they feel safe, secure and accepted within a learning community. When these ingredients are in place, the students respond, as this interviewee’s comments attest:

[In] mainstream [school] it’s like—you feel so trapped ... that was my problem. I didn’t feel like I hadn’t an inch of freedom at all ... You feel like you’re in a tiny box. Here, this place is small, and it feels like I have a whole fricking planet to run on by myself. So, this place is just—I mean, if schools were like this, I can guarantee you’d have kids going to Year 12 constantly and they wouldn’t drop out unless they had a fair enough reason. (Senior female student)

While staff recognised the importance of such needs, they did experience difficulties in responding. Putting aside the problem of how to counter the cumulative impact of entrenched societal problems, the difficulties stemmed from having to reconcile the need to provide a stable environment that was conducive to steady progress through a curriculum with the need to provide rambunctious young people with latitude to make noise or even to use language that might be frowned upon in a mainstream setting. This challenge might be better expressed in the question: what price—in terms of noise, disruption and distractions—should be paid for a welcoming atmosphere?

In their interviews, 2013 teachers sometimes spoke of the challenges associated with building positive relations with students. As the setting lends itself to a level of intimacy not usually associated with schooling, teachers grappled with a kind of reticence to be open or convivial. This reticence was partly a conditioned outcome of a mainstream teaching culture favouring arms-length engagement, premised on the more-or-less unquestioned authority of the teacher. Also evident was that more intense involvement was at once the most rewarding and the most taxing aspect of their work, and one that they managed carefully.

You don't actually have to be in their pockets emotionally, you just have to give them a sense that you care about where they're up to and you know where they're up to in their school environment because they kind of link together. Some kids do and some kids don't want you to know what's going on at home. (Staff member)

As in previous evaluations, staff and students reiterated the importance of stability, consistency and trust in this process. One former student put it thus:

Like everyone comes from different places, different backgrounds, they've got different attitudes and all that but here it's like everyone's one and it was good because some people don't have something stable outside but this is something that's here everyday. It's—it's a word—it's a routine and routine is sort of stability. (Male, former student)

When disruptions occurred—as they did at times in 2013—the effect was a dip in morale, attendance and, ultimately, in academic progress. As one student noted, this was particularly evident later in the year for the senior cohort following the departure of key staff.

Well this year was pretty hard because we had a big switch-around in teachers ... it's hard because we create such a bond with our teachers because it is different to mainstream schooling. We get so close to them that when they leave it's probably just as hard for us as it is when they have to watch us leave and grow and it's hard both ways. (Senior female student)

Prior to 2013 the program had been challenged by the presence on site of students who appeared drug-affected. It was clear from both staff and student interviews that this problem was now not as acute, and that the protocols put in place were having a positive effect (see Governance section). However, the use of tobacco (on and off site) remains a vexed issue. While smoking on the Centre grounds remains for many students a cherished freedom and a means of bonding, some students (smokers and non-smokers alike) believed the practice was harmful and should be phased out. In 2013 smoking was restricted to designated areas: this was an acknowledgement of the need to end what might be regarded as a tacit endorsement.

More broadly, harmful practices were mitigated in 2013 through the gradual integration throughout all curricular and extra-curricular activities of the principles of 'social and emotional learning'. Such efforts were boosted by closer links to the local service of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, headspace Frankston—and the introduction of routine weekly visits from headspace counsellors. These measures were complemented by the installation of equipment enabling students to play basketball. This became very popular, attracting males and females alike.

Teaching and learning

Prior learnings

- Stable, secure and welcoming relationships are the preconditions to learning. The best learning occurs when the teacher is able to view the learning experience from the perspective of the student. ‘Starting where the student is’ and moving at the student’s pace, while still testing their limits, constitute the golden rules of teaching in the CVCAL setting. Enabling *progress* and *improvement* are the most important aims.
- The fact that staff and students consistently report improvement in student literacy and numeracy points to the effectiveness of this inclusive pedagogy, and one that is informed by ‘adult’ and ‘applied’ learning principles, integrated learning, negotiation and peer support.
- The VCAL framework provides for a breadth of learning, yet teachers need time to learn how to fully realise its potential for the purposes of re-engagement.
- Effective learning is aided by the use of online delivery; however this method cannot take the place of interpersonal and supportive relations.

The 2013 experience: teaching and learning

Teachers were very positive about their 2013 experience. Key themes affirmed in their interviews included the importance of responsiveness, which entailed being attuned and prepared to adjust to the students’ diverse learning styles and needs. The overall approach required was summed up by this staff interviewee:

There is something really significant in the attitude that a teacher brings to the student. If the student feels seen, in the true sense of being seen and cared about and respected ... it is that which is the beginning point of everything else that goes on. It’s that that enables the student to make the shift that they can’t make in a mainstream environment ... The fact that all of our staff behave that way to the students makes the difference, but if we have a teacher that isn’t like that ... it immediately undoes the capacity of the student to do the growing, to grow emotionally into a place where they can learn. (Program coordinator)

Providing this level of responsiveness stretched the teachers’ capacity to adapt and to utilise methods associated variously with education, psychology and social work, particularly when engaging young people who have experienced trauma. In related observations, students commented on the need to broaden learning to incorporate life skills, which in turn meant learning about personal safety, managing wellbeing issues and the assortment of challenges encountered by young people who may not live in well-resourced or stable accommodation. To this extent they strongly endorsed the program’s move towards promoting social and emotional learning.

As in previous years, much relied on stable relationships, as young people respond very negatively to unanticipated changes in relationships with trusted adults. It is not surprising that some students were affected negatively by staff turnover at key points in the 2013 school year. They—and their teachers—spoke often about the importance of trust, stability and responsiveness. Facilitated learning played a key role here, with the recognition too of the need to progress at a pace suited to the students’ capacity, and to use content that is relevant and of interest.

At [previous high school] there was either no work at all or work that was too hard for me to do. I’d get stuck on something and I couldn’t work at all. At CVCAL they just help you

over that. They don't want you to slack off. They keep you on track. If you need help with anything they either help you ... They're not ever getting angry. They're always calm and polite and nice to you. So you feel like you can talk to them and open up. Some people, if they have problems reading, they don't want to tell the teachers because they don't feel comfortable, but here you feel comfortable and you can tell them any problems you have.
(Male, former student)

In what has emerged as a refrain, students spoke of the way in which a lack of a response from, and trust in, a teacher, as well as a lack of relevance of the curriculum to the 'real world', could all combine to weaken students' ability to overcome setbacks. Reflecting on their pre-CVCAL schooling, students referred to their resignation and frustration after falling behind, and their reluctance to seek help for fear of being regarded as 'losers' by teachers or peers. This account from a hearing-impaired student is particularly telling:

Yeah, I was doing Year 10 ... [and] the teachers weren't really helpful. Like, you'd ask for help and then they wouldn't give it to you. They'd say, 'Oh, you can do it yourself' or 'I'll be around in a minute', but they'd never come round ... It's just that at that time I was going through lots of stuff ... I was falling behind, it got to the point where I wasn't able to catch up ... And nobody from the school would actually take the time to sit down with me and help me ... I lost a lot of confidence in myself to do the work. And I just sat there and thought, 'Well, what's the point of doing it if it's not going to get me anywhere'.
(Foundation level female student)

Students also commented on their preferred class size. Given the value they placed on intimacy and responsiveness it was no surprise that they preferred smaller class sizes; however, students did qualify their views by warning of problems in classes that have too few students. Some felt that in very small groups the contributions and interactions were too limited and this resulted in lethargy.

Some students were conscious of the trade-off between a classroom free of loud noise and distractions, and a lifeless and uninspiring learning environment. Others spoke of their frustrations with fellow students who lacked motivation and whose behaviour was disrespectful and disruptive. Some expressed little sympathy for peers who had fallen behind because of such behaviour, with these interviewees referring to the importance of personal responsibility, effort and motivation.

Catering for a younger cohort

The Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA) was introduced alongside the VCAL in 2013 as a basic VET certificate in order to make use of its foundation level literacy, numeracy and general education skills components. It was trialled as an alternative to the Foundation level VCAL because its highly structured nature was thought to be appropriate for those whose study skills were underdeveloped. It was to act as a feeder program into the VCAL component for those who were too young to begin formal vocational education. Indeed, staff were aware that many of the younger intermediate VCAL students (15–16 years old) had in previous years struggled to cope with the demands of VCAL, which entailed formal vocational training and workplace experience.

The CGEA was delivered initially by a qualified secondary teacher. Then, as a result of unexpected changes to availability, it was delivered by a qualified VET trainer who worked alongside the teachers catering for the majority of the BSL-CVCAL students. In contrast to previous years, the introduction of the CGEA necessarily meant the creation of distinct classes for the three different levels, with the CGEA pedagogy and assessment designed more for adult learners in vocational training settings, and less for young people who had struggled to progress to Year 10 level in mainstream secondary schooling.

In spite of the unexpected staff changes, the CGEA played an important role in the suite of program offerings. Like their VCAL counterparts, the CGEA students affirmed the importance of responsive and non-judgemental teachers and trainers:

If you don't get it, [the trainer] will come around and talk to you. I never got that in a mainstream school ... Like I'm not a really good speller and that, but since I've been going here, I don't know, I've just picked up on a real lot. (CGEA level, young male student)

From a teaching perspective the CGEA model had advantages and disadvantages. More often delivered to adults, it entails a far more prescriptive progression through the curriculum than does the VCAL, and provides less scope for flexibility in assessment of competencies than the VCAL. Surprisingly, given the acknowledged importance of flexibility in the process of re-engagement, this structure proved beneficial for some. The CGEA's incremental, delineated and task-driven approach suited those younger students who were more exuberant and animated. However, those who were shy and who lacked life skills (particularly time management skills), and who were unaccustomed to working in groups, struggled with a one-size-fits-all mode of delivery.

Distinct classes

As noted, the 2013 BSL-CVCAL program differed from its predecessors in that its three classes were self-contained. The CGEA, intermediate and senior VCAL classes were assigned teachers/trainers (and where appropriate, teaching aides and volunteers), and there was in 2013 relatively little classroom interaction between the cohorts. The advantage of this arrangement was that it enabled each teacher to build a rapport with their students. On the other hand, it meant less team teaching; and this proved an obstacle to learning when staff departed and students were required to establish relations with new teachers. For many this was unproblematic, but some reacted negatively when a trusted relationship ended unexpectedly. This is unsurprising given that many students had experienced poor relations with unsupportive, sometimes abusive adults: the loss of a well-liked, trusted teacher represented for some a kind of betrayal.

Staff changes impacted on learning through a dip in attendance and, for some students, an inability to keep up with the workload. Less emphasis on team teaching also denied teachers the benefit of mutual support and collaboration in developing teaching materials. This problem was eased through the appointment of highly motivated teaching aides and volunteers.

Online learning

Previous evaluations had showed that students were amenable to online learning. In response, the BSL-CVCAL collaborated in 2013 with St Kilda Youth Services and Media Saints to trial an online platform with its senior VCAL class.⁵ A feature of this trial was more convenient access to the program for those students travelling long distances from the semi-rural areas on the Mornington Peninsula, as well as to those who had caring and other responsibilities. Importantly, hours spent engaged with the VCAL tasks online would count towards students' outcomes.

Students' feedback on the 2013 trial of online learning was mixed. Those less enamoured with computer-based learning expressed frustration with unreliable systems and confusing website interfaces, isolation, the absence of a tangible record of their work, and the endless distractions offered by the web. On balance, however, students looked upon the platform as a useful tool. They were supportive for a range of reasons. For instance, those who were conscious of their poor

⁵ With the gradual roll-out of this online platform in 2014, the BSL is taking tentative steps in the use of online learning, aware that the computers and/or mobile devices are poor substitutes for face-to-face interactions with teachers and that not all young people are adept at using such technologies.

handwriting welcomed a medium that improved the appearance of their work. Others welcomed a secure means of storing work, and being able to access it when not on site. In addition, online access provided students who were faltering with an opportunity to stay in touch, make up lost ground, and do so at their own pace—outside the normal program hours. This is important given that many of the problems students had experienced in the mainstream were linked to the inability to keep pace with peers, and to subsequent feelings of frustration and resignation.

Social and emotional learning

An overhaul of the curriculum framework commenced in early 2013 with a view to privileging emotional and physical wellbeing. The ‘Trauma Informed Social and Emotional Learning Framework’⁶ was introduced, and is expected to sharpen the program’s guiding ethos and provide a set of touchstones for teachers as they prepare units of learning for the VCAL. The framework comprises components on self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness and relationship skills.

The need for this explicit framework was highlighted in previous evaluations. It was prompted by the realisation that conventional approaches to teaching, and to teacher training, did not adequately equip staff to meet the demands of a re-engagement setting. In particular, teaching staff often felt ill-equipped to teach young people the social and emotional resilience and self-awareness needed to engage effectively in senior secondary learning.

The overhaul was also prompted by the awareness that the VCAL curriculum represented only a skeleton on which a tailored approach might be built. In its standard form, the VCAL is not designed to cater for the learning and emotional needs of young people who have had profoundly negative experiences of education, and/or have faced formidable barriers to learning.

Lastly, the overhaul was an attempt to overcome what had become a perennial problem: the absence of a store of shared, appropriate and complementary teaching materials that reflected the accumulated experience of those who have taught in the program over the years.

For 2013, this overhaul complemented other activities such as the creation of a vegetable patch, a coffee club, numerous community engagement activities and a newsletter. All these enabled students to develop teamwork skills, initiative and self-confidence in dealing with members of the public, as well as a better understanding of workplace expectations.

Ultimately, the curriculum overhaul will result in a set of guidelines for all staff that ensures physical and mental health, social connectedness, financial literacy and ongoing positive engagement of education or training are promoted at every turn—in sum, a unified ethos.

In conjunction with the Social and Emotional Learning Framework, a number of methods and instruments emerged in 2013 that will help realise the VCAL’s potential. Among them was the above-mentioned online trial using wikis, blogs, smart-phones, apps and social media that provide opportunities for the students to negotiate and personalise their learning. Also now in use are Online Individual Education Plans (IEPs) which promote interactivity in the approach to learning. The IEPs help students to identify and pursue goals linked to the Personal Development and Work Related Skills components of the VCAL. Finally, a unit design tool is under development that requires all units of learning to incorporate practical, hands-on learning activities, the use of IT and, importantly, an emphasis on progress in literacy and numeracy.

⁶ This framework is informed by the Calmer Classrooms approach to teaching. The local adaptation attunes the staff to how neglect, trauma, and abuse impact on learning. It emphasises resilience building, stability and supportive relationships (CSCV 2007).

Vocational education and pathways support

Prior learnings

- Providing an opportunity to acquire vocational skills and to find a pathway to employment is of fundamental importance in the CVCAL approach to re-engagement. However, vocational training is not in itself a panacea.
- The training component of the program poses challenges in the form of students' lack of confidence, their hesitancy, the uneven standard of external vocational training, and training providers' limited capacity to cater for student needs.
- For some students, vocational training—especially in a classroom setting—can be as alienating as the mainstream secondary schooling they have earlier rejected or been excluded from.
- School based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs) are often considered by staff and students more suitable options because they provide exposure to a workplace culture, a modest income and increased chances of employment.
- Along with wellbeing support and teaching, pathways support represents a foundation stone of this model of re-engagement.
- The need for support extends beyond current students to those who continue to experience difficulty finding work or appropriate vocational training after leaving the program.

The 2013 experience: vocational education and pathways support

Formal vocational training is an integral part of the VCAL, irrespective of the provider setting or mode of delivery. Though the principles of applied learning are most prominent in the VCAL Work Related Skills and Industry Specific Skills strands, they also inform the Personal Development and Literacy and Numeracy strands. The BSL-CVCAL has ensured that the majority of its students achieved the required VET hours to progress through the certificate. It has done so either by placing the students with suitable training organisations or by helping them undertake a SBAT.

As in previous years, BSL-CVCAL staff helped its 2013 students choose their preferred vocational path and find the appropriate vocational training organisation, be it a TAFE or a private provider of VET. In 2013 the BSL's registered training organisation delivered a high proportion of this training. It also assisted students to secure their 'structured workplace learning' component.⁷

However, students' progress through VET is often faltering. This may be due to their indecision when selecting a career and training pathway; and this, in turn, is in most instances due to the instability students are experiencing in their lives. The BSL-CVCAL experience has consistently shown that the path through training is non-linear, and is characterised by tentativeness, u-turns and false starts. In the best of circumstances, career guidance is an inexact science, but it is even more so in the context of marginalised students with low self-esteem and complex wellbeing needs.

⁷ This component of the VCAL complements the training undertaken at the school/provider and is spread across the duration of the training program. It entails work experience with an employer operating in a field relevant to the student's formal VET training. The hours of attendance stipulated by the VCAA vary according to the student's VET course and field of study.

Given the program's modest resources it became apparent quite early that the range of vocational training it could arrange for students was limited. In 2013 a tension continued between offering a broad menu of training options to suit each student's preferences, and supporting students at each step through the notoriously complex VET system. The principal issue has been assisting students to identify and commit to one of the numerous private or public training organisations, many of which are located some distance from the Frankston Mornington Peninsula region. Progress has also been slowed at times by the uneven quality of training provided, and the difficulties many providers have in tailoring their training for the 15–19 year old 'at risk' cohort.

For these reasons the BSL-CVCAL staff devoted considerable time to finding an appropriate mix of training options, with a greater emphasis in 2013 on onsite training. This entailed engaging an external trainer and the BSL's own training organisation within the Centre facilities (e.g. using the commercial kitchen). This approach was especially helpful for those students who avoided long distance travel to unfamiliar and sometimes ill-equipped training settings.

The 2013 CVCAL program also featured a greater emphasis on SBATs, which proved quite effective in providing students with credits towards their VCAL, as well as some work-based experience and paid employment. Nonetheless, there remains some doubt about the long-term value of SBATs: reliance on them might risk locking the student into a career pathway prematurely, narrowing their medium-term educational options. Throughout 2013 the relative merits of stand-alone training and SBATs were weighed, with key considerations being each student's readiness to engage in classroom learning and their progress in gaining the training hours required for certificate completion.

Vocational pathways

In 2013 vocational training was not a requirement for the younger CGEA students. Nevertheless, those students were encouraged to discuss and contemplate career options much earlier than they would have otherwise. This was as a positive step for those who would proceed in 2014 to the intermediate level of VCAL; it might prevent the paralysis sometimes experienced by the older VCAL students.

The senior and intermediate students who were focused on specific pathways identified through their individual education plans pursued offsite training and/or SBATs throughout terms one and two in 2013. Those students who were undecided were required to participate in an onsite Certificate II level program focusing mainly on retail and hospitality. As the year progressed this was broadened to include the 'Kick start' program (for intermediate students), an onsite taster program featuring units from Vocational Preparation and Business Administration certificates. It also included a more elaborate hospitality course covering kitchen operations, coffee making, food handling, and basic work readiness preparation. Ultimately, the majority of the students undertook VET studies onsite as part of the Hospitality program, or externally through a Warehouse and Distribution SBAT.

Table 2.1 indicates the variety of VET activities undertaken throughout 2013 (completion rates and attendance rates appear in the Outcomes and Expectations section).

Table 2.1 VET activities undertaken in 2013

Course	% of students
Hospitality	38%
Warehouse and distribution	28%
Sport and recreation	9%
Equine/animal studies	7%
Conservation and land management	7%
Construction	4%
Beauty	2%
Technical production	2%
Not reported	3%

Former students

Lastly, it has become evident since 2009 that former BSL-CVCAL students continue to seek assistance long after their departure. This remained a challenge in 2013, particularly given limited resources. On the one hand, continuing interaction with former students provides the program staff with a morale-boosting reminder of the important part they play in helping the student confront a difficult period in their lives. Indeed, former students speak often of their affection for the program and their gratitude to those who showed faith in them. On the other hand, attempts to limit visits to convenient hours and appropriate purposes via a set of guidelines were largely frustrated because the former students' visits were often unannounced.

These visits were prompted by the ongoing need for assistance in searching for employment or navigating the often bewildering VET system, and for emotional support in times of hardship. Indeed, complicating the efforts to manage the assistance given to former students has been the urgency of their needs. According to one staff member, there seems no simple solution to this unplanned demand on program resources:

... so to have them coming back and thinking that they're going to gradually wean off us is not practical. They come back in crisis because we've always helped them in the past.

Also prompting requests for assistance have been the difficulties the former students report in dealing with staff they regard as unsympathetic and unhelpful in agencies such as Centrelink and Job Services Australia providers.

Personnel

Prior learnings

- The BSL CVCAL consistently attracts committed and enthusiastic personnel, be they teachers, youth workers, pathway support or ancillary staff.
- While the staff are committed, they often experience the program as a ‘pressure cooker’: nothing in their training has adequately prepared the teaching staff for work in this context.
- Teachers sometimes struggle to reconcile the expectations about outcomes they have imbibed from mainstream education, with the realities of a ‘high needs’ context such as the CVCAL. Similarly, the demand for specialised wellbeing support is unrelenting and challenging. Lastly, staff providing pathways support for young people face an array of challenges, given the increasingly difficult labour market.
- An effective CVCAL year is one that sees regular meetings for curriculum development, wellbeing briefings and one-on-one supervision. Success also entails maximising professional development opportunities, and using well-designed protocols and procedures. In combination, these measures can help to reduce staff turnover, one of the major challenges faced by the program.

The 2013 experience: personnel

Recruitment and support

When asked to reflect on their recruitment experience, staff felt that the BSL had conveyed to them in their interview an accurate description of the role, expectations and the working environment. Induction remained a vexed issue, however, with opinions divided about the efficacy of the approach taken. A valued aspect of the induction was a tour of the BSL’s operations beyond the Frankston site. This helped the new employees situate themselves within an organisation-wide endeavour to assist disadvantaged people. For some, however, the induction process remained at best a hazy recollection, and a process that was incomplete.

It is evident that the approach taken to professional development has steadily improved since 2010. Staff in 2013 received what they regarded as very useful training across a range of areas, covering mental health and substance abuse issues. However, providing the ‘time release’ needed to attend professional development required the use of ‘casual relief teachers’, some of whom struggled to establish a rapport with students. This difficulty arose not only because they had no existing relationships with the students, but also because they lacked the experience or skills needed to cater for a unique cohort.

Lastly, the program has since 2011 provided debriefing and professional supervision for staff, and particularly for the teachers and the wellbeing officer. The majority of those interviewed in 2013 were satisfied with the form and frequency of this support. However, the unexpected absence of the wellbeing officer and the loss of staff during the year disrupted the meeting schedule and compromised efforts to effectively share information on student wellbeing issues. In sum, most staff felt they worked in a supportive environment, with peers, management and the wider organisation looked upon favourably.

Continuity

A perennial challenge is maintaining continuity in staffing. In 2013 two experienced teachers departed before term two, and another midway through term three. The loss of skilled staff, and then the delay as replacements acclimatised, impacted on the program in a myriad ways. These include difficulties in retaining knowledge and in refining systems, protocols and teaching methods. Perhaps the most important impact was the disruption to staff–student relationships, most of which develop slowly and require much trust building.

It is worth noting the main factors behind staff turnover. Labour market imperatives play an important role to the extent that teachers employed in the not-for-profit community sector on relatively short contracts are compelled to continually search for more secure tenure and for employment in better-resourced educational settings. A related factor is the lack of professional status associated with teaching ‘difficult’ cohorts in non-mainstream re-engagement settings. Status in the profession generally accrues to those teaching high-achieving senior students in mainstream settings.

The BSL-CVCAL program also involved non-teaching staff, the most important of whom was the wellbeing officer. As noted, she fell ill in early 2013 and was absent for much of the year. During this time makeshift arrangements were put in place. On returning the wellbeing officer reflected on some of the difficulties encountered in the latter part of the year. A perennial concern for her was the sheer number of students seeking assistance for a range of difficulties—related to anxiety, conflicts involving family or friends, or substance abuse—and inadequate time to assist them. She lamented that in spite of the introduction of a wellbeing informed ethos, thinking about student wellbeing—considered broadly—had not yet informed content and curriculum to the extent needed.

Governance

Prior learnings

- The CVCAL model demands well-articulated protocols and procedures that help staff to negotiate a fluid and complex workplace, and that provide clear boundaries and obligations.
- A re-engagement program working in isolation is limited in its capacity to support young people with high learning and wellbeing needs. Partnerships with schools are essential, as are collaborations with vocational training organisations and youth support agencies.
- The strength of the CVCAL model lies in its ongoing, formal relations with partner schools and the state education system. A level of symbiosis exists between the ‘external’ CVCAL provider and the mainstream; and this mutual obligation contributes to achieving the ultimate goal of providing high quality education to young people of all backgrounds.
- The BSL-CVCAL relies heavily on partner schools making accurate judgments about a prospective student’s suitability for referral. Unanticipated wellbeing demands and/or learning needs make planning and resource allocation difficult.
- Careful screening at intake is essential to identify students’ social, emotional and physical needs, as well as their literacy and numeracy abilities.
- Efficient data collection also enables real-time monitoring of progress, and this informs short-term responses to students’ needs, and longer term program evaluation and development.

The 2013 experience: governance

Much progress was made in 2013 in reviewing and then implementing a new set of policies for the BSL-CVCAL program. These now provide guidance on ‘individual education planning’, rights and responsibilities, safe and appropriate use of ICT, attendance, attendance improvement, reportable incidents, injuries and hazards, mandatory reporting, transitional support, and school and VET partnerships. While the policies are constantly evolving, staff reported that even in their nascent form they provide stability and direction.

A challenge in previous years has been finding an appropriate response to the use of illicit drugs. A common scenario would see a student using drugs or alcohol off site and then attending classes or simply lingering on site while socialising with friends. Staff reported marked improvements in 2013 following the introduction of a zero-tolerance policy that provided clear steps aimed at removing from the premises anyone who was drug-affected. The staff interviewed were familiar with the new policy and with the measures to take once it was suspected that a student was affected. However, they also conceded that gauging a student’s impairment remains difficult and requires a degree of expertise not always at hand.

Policies and procedures relating to both student intake and exit are now well established. Intake documents incorporate a basic assessment rubric covering the student’s capacities in terms of relationship building, social skills, mental and physical health. The rubric also assesses the level of need in regard to alcohol and other drug dependency, as well as disabilities which might impact on cognitive or physical development. Much depends on this intake assessment and the involvement of the wellbeing officer in the preliminary mapping process. In 2013 the absence of the wellbeing officer affected the process. It also slowed the development of more thorough tracking of change in students’ needs. A comprehensive assessment process—now in place—not only takes into account a wider range of needs, but also is able to map change over time. This, in turn, is needed to provide a comprehensive assessment of program outcomes.

Perhaps most important of all is the ongoing development of a program practice guide. This not only consolidates the policies and procedures, but also shares the knowledge gained through successive program evaluations, and makes clear the links between the program and the wider government policy frameworks. Various iterations of this manual have existed for some time, yet it has only recently become a working document of practical use to staff.

Indeed, a cautionary note is in order: given the staff turnover, it cannot be assumed that staff will always be aware of, and hence adhere to, program policies. Better access to and awareness of policies, beginning at induction, are necessary, particularly in a program in which clear ‘boundaries’, expectations and responsibilities are imperative.

The students’ perspectives on governance were also sought during interviews. Specifically, they were asked to consider how the rules flowing from the above-mentioned policies impacted on their BSL-CVCAL experience. No clear consensus emerged: while some students objected to what they felt was an increasingly intrusive and controlling approach to behaviour management, others expressed frustration at the laxness of rules and the latitude given to students who were reluctant to contribute. This range of views points to the ongoing challenge of finding a balance between the obligation to provide a secure, ordered and well-managed setting, and the need to provide a learning experience free of the negative aspects of mainstream schooling, including rigidity, one-size-fits-all teaching and regimentation.

Partnerships

Success in the BSL-CVCAL requires close collaboration with partner schools, government agencies and the myriad organisations constituting the wider youth support network. In 2013 the BSL had formal engagements with five partner schools in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula region (a consolidation, and down from the previous year's nine). It commenced formal relations with one of these schools for the first time.⁸ The administrative obligations—mainly relating to funding transfers and student progress/profile data—are ongoing, and the process has improved over time, thanks to more resources allocated for administrative support by the BSL, as well to clearer departmental guidelines for both the referring schools and the re-engagement program providers.

Nevertheless, partnerships rely heavily on goodwill and rapport. An area of potential tension continues to be the appropriateness and suitability of student referrals. Indeed, those involved in re-engagement programs share the concern that schools may look upon them as repositories for troublesome students, rather than tailored programs catering for specific needs.⁹

Another issue raised in the 2013 interviews—and also mentioned in previous evaluations—was that more frequent interaction between BSL-CVCAL and mainstream school staff would be beneficial. There is a sense that the BSL-CVCAL program could benefit if it were more involved in routine consultations between government schools in the wider regional network. While BSL staff are invited to some school and department events, there is scope for even closer interaction, which could lead to coordinated responses to student wellbeing issues.

Beyond partner school relationships, 2013 saw progress in formalising relations with Water2All, a Dandenong employer that provided traineeships in warehousing tailored for BSL-CVCAL students: 11 students undertook work experience and training with Water2All, speaking highly of it. The BSL-CVCAL also benefited from a formal arrangement with WISE, a training organisation that specialised in traineeships in Business, Hospitality and Retail, and was attuned to BSL-CVCAL students' needs. Perhaps the most significant partnership building in 2013 was the formalising of a relationship with headspace Frankston, the local service of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation. Weekly visits to the BSL-CVCAL site by headspace workers enable more efficient and effective responses to students' issues, and provide invaluable support to the staff.

⁸ Partner schools in 2013 were Carrum Downs Secondary College, Patterson River Secondary College, Mt Eliza Secondary College, Mt Erin Secondary and McClelland Secondary College.

⁹ This is a refrain heard often by the author in forums where those in the re-engagement program community exchange views.

Outcomes and expectations

Prior learnings

- The CVCAL model has achieved strong learning outcomes, whether viewed in terms of unit completion, literacy and numeracy skills or progression through the certificate and training qualifications. These outcomes are all the more impressive if we consider the level of disengagement and the challenges faced by students on entry.
- Yet success cannot be expressed simply in terms of formal and quantifiable attainments.
- Students consistently report increased confidence, motivation, positive outlooks and understanding of, and respect for, others. Thus, building resilience and personal development becomes integral to the program and a precondition for academic success.
- Progress involves faltering steps and must be assessed with students' context in mind. At times, for example, intermittent attendance—after prolonged disassociation from school—should be regarded as a success, irrespective of the student's prospects of course completion.

The 2013 experience: outcomes and expectations

Context

Those working in the BSL-CVCAL—and, no doubt, in similar youth re-engagement programs—confront two realities. The first is that educators and educational providers are rightly judged on how well they deliver their curriculum and on their students' formal, quantifiable attainments. The second is that little progress can be made in these indicators unless and until students feel secure and supported. Consequently, an additional and unavoidable concern in the BSL-CVCAL has been with outcomes that are difficult to quantify and yet are the necessary preconditions for learning. With these comments in mind we consider the range of 2013 outcomes, divided below into two categories: formal (i.e. quantifiable) and informal (i.e. more abstract).

Formal outcomes

The BSL-CVCAL achieved a 64 per cent completion rate—understood as satisfying the requirements for the relevant certificate or to progress to the next level—for eligible students in 2013. Some students were ineligible due to a late start or a transition to other educational or vocational pathways. This meant that by year's end 37 of the 58 students completed their respective qualifications. Subsequently, the majority of CGEA and intermediate students would progress further along the VCAL route, and most seniors would progress to more intensive vocational training or to the search for employment. Overall, the 2013 completion rate was a marked improvement on 2012 (27%) and not far behind 2011 (75%), the two years with comparable numbers of students (Myconos 2012, 2011).

Table 2.2 Formal outcomes, CVCAL 2013

Status	CGEA/ Foundation	Intermediate	Senior	Total
Total enrolled in 2013	27	21	20	68
Total enrolled for complete program and assessable for qualification	27	17	14	58
Completed successfully	14	11	12	37
Completion percentage (of those who were assessable)	52%	65%	86%	64%
Did not complete successfully	13	10	8	31
Did not complete because:				
Exited	n.a.	4 (19%)	6 (30%)	
Not enough credits overall	n.a.	2	1	
Results under query/ dispute	n.a.	1	1	
Did not complete VET	n.a.	1	0	
Did not complete units before cut-off date	n.a.	2	0	

For a fuller understanding of these outcomes we should note the context, which is often determined by the instability in the students' lives. For instance, at the commencement of 2013, 20 students enrolled at the senior level, only for 6 to depart before participating in any meaningful way. In addition, the CGEA class experienced the departure of their teacher, and a very different approach to teaching by the replacement.

Attendance

The average cohort attendance (for onsite school days) was 57 per cent. Context is again needed for a fuller understanding. Typically, students in such programs are carrying burdens that many in mainstream schools would not encounter. These include caring responsibilities (for children, siblings or parents), illnesses and related attendance for specialist treatment (e.g. mental health or drug rehabilitation) and scheduled court appearances when facing charges or serving as witnesses. When forewarned of such problems the resulting absences are deemed 'authorised', and the attendance rate is recalibrated. When viewed in this way, the attendance for 2013 was 84 per cent.

Compared with the 2012 cohort attendance (below 50 per cent) improvements were achieved in 2013, particularly by term 2, with the average reaching 64 per cent. These improvements resulted from immediate and phone communication with students who had not arrived at school (or with their parents), as well as increased efforts to help precariously placed students to stabilise. Also of note in 2013 was the irregular attendance among the younger (CGEA) class. This was attributed largely to the unexpected change in teachers, and hence in teaching styles, as well as to the fact that this cohort's previous disengagement from education was more prolonged (at least 8 had experienced periods without schooling exceeding 6 months).

Informal outcomes

Interviews conducted in 2013 again prompted nuanced consideration of outcomes and attainments. In addition to the abovementioned formal outcomes (completions/graduations, attendance, etc) it is

clear that the less quantifiable outcomes (e.g. confidence, motivation and engagement) must also feature in any account of the program's results. Indeed, those working in the BSL-CVCAL place considerable weight on informal outcomes—more than their counterparts do in vocational training settings or in mainstream secondary schools.

Staff and students reiterated the importance of a student's sense of security and stability, physical and mental wellbeing, maturity, and capacity to trust and build relationships under adverse conditions, to avoid damaging relationships and behaviours and, in sum, to build resilience. For one staff member, this amounted to the student having to feel 'emotionally able before they can start to do academic style learning'.

There was little doubt among interviewees that formal and informal outcomes are closely related—and moreover, that the informal outcomes combine to provide preconditions to attainment of formal outcomes. The following statements from students refer to intangible outcomes, and highlight the complexity associated with assessing program effectiveness:

Well, I obviously haven't been freaking out. I've been a lot more relaxed and at home, my dad's happy now that I'm actually going to school ... and I'm better, so it's all good, and so is my mum. (Younger, female CGEA)

I'm able to express myself a lot easier with my writing. I don't have to feel embarrassed or ashamed that I've written about that. It's made me more open because they don't judge you here. (Senior, female student)

Finally, we can see also how some students are ambivalent when reflecting on their achievements and on the journeys they have taken across educational setting divides:

Well I'd say we all probably gain a lot more skills across everything. But our personalities probably get stronger and change. I mean we have more perspective on life being here, because kids come here who actually have serious problems and they come here for help and support because mainstream schooling can be too much for some people. I mean it was too much for me. I hated it. I absolutely loved school and I'd love to go back to a mainstream school. I miss wearing a uniform. I miss things that kids hate. But I mean, being here probably was the best thing I did for myself. (Senior, female student)

Conclusion

The 2013 BSL-CVCAL experience was in many respects a composite of the program's preceding years. Though it differed in minor ways, it affirmed previous lessons in a number of key areas:

- Mainstream schools—in their present form—seem unable to cater for a small minority of students who are themselves facing significant personal, social and economic challenges.
- Welcoming and respectful relationships, and follow-up wellbeing and pathways support, are of fundamental importance to a renewed interest in education.
- Committed educators and support staff can adapt in the most trying of circumstances to produce quite remarkable results.
- Even though for many young people the road through schooling has frequent u-turns and false starts, impressive progress and attainments are possible.

Interestingly, the establishment of the BSL-CVCAL has coincided with a proliferation of re-engagement programs across Australia. This may suggest that such programs are coming to

represent alternatives not only in isolation but as a (nascent) alternative sector in its own right, working alongside the mainstream secondary and vocational training systems. It is premature to say whether this is the case, given the disparate providers and the relative paucity of research. Nevertheless, it seems likely that these programs are developing innovative approaches to teaching, wellbeing, pathways support and welcoming learning environments, which may well be incorporated into mainstream settings.

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