



A taste for learning

Evaluating
a pre-Community VCAL program

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Abbreviations

CVCAL	Community VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning delivered in a community setting)
FHSC	Frankston High Street Centre operated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VET	Vocational education and training
VIT	Victorian Institute of Teaching

Summary and challenges

This report evaluates the pre-Community VCAL ‘Taster’ course, provided at the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Frankston High Street Centre (FHSC) over eight weeks between October and December 2009. The course was offered to 16 students who had become disengaged from mainstream schooling. We conclude that even though the Taster initiative was, in the words of the centre manager, ‘a much bigger project than ... any of us anticipated’, it should be regarded as a success. Indeed, a strong case can be made for its continuation as a bridging, or ‘feeder’, course for each year’s Community VCAL program at the FHSC.

The Taster course engaged young people who were seriously disaffected with mainstream secondary school education, and who were facing their transition to adulthood without having acquired important skills. It provided valuable literacy, numeracy, vocational and social skills tuition, as well as the experience these students needed to make judgments about continuing vocational or further education.

Listed below are the main findings, along with some of the challenges facing the BSL in future initiatives of this kind.

Outcomes

- Given the students’ previous disengagement from mainstream educational settings, the educational outcomes attained from the Taster course were very good. Eleven students were awarded the Certificate II in Community Service (3 were ineligible); and overall group attendance was 77 per cent (including late entrants).
- Of the 16 participants, 15 enrolled for the 2010 FHSC Community VCAL course, with many opting for VET training in areas such as hospitality, nursing, child care, social work and protective care.
- When questioned about attitudinal change, students also reported increased confidence, motivation, positive outlooks and understanding of, and respect for, others.

Relations with and between students

- The Taster course appealed to students mainly because of its less regimented approach to education, the emphasis staff placed on nurturing close relations, and because students enjoyed more autonomy—within agreed parameters—than is generally permitted in mainstream schooling. They benefited from more immediate feedback from teachers, and from the opportunity to bond with one another in what they regarded as a safe and secure environment.
- Students enjoyed being treated as ‘adults’, and felt that such treatment broke down barriers to learning. They responded well to the low student–teacher ratio, and also to the presence of a counsellor. Many students were effusive in their praise of staff.
- **Challenge:** A key ingredient in the success of the 2009 Taster initiative was the low student–teacher ratio. This resulted in an intimate teaching and learning environment where all participants related well. The challenge ahead is to reproduce the positive aspects of small group interaction when enrolments far exceed the relatively small numbers of 2009.

Relations with parents and schools

- There was support among staff for greater involvement of parents and guardians, though not necessarily for their physical presence. Staff were mindful of the need to balance the positive aspects of such a presence with the students' sensitivities.
- Relations with the course's main partner (and feeder) schools—McClelland College and Carrum Downs Secondary College—are healthy. The course coordinator and others worked hard to cultivate these relations; at a time when the Centre's standing as an educator was not yet established, and when government guidelines for providers were under review.
- **Challenge:** The FHSC relies heavily on referring schools making accurate judgments about the suitability of students for the community VCAL path. There seems to be a lingering belief in some schools that community VCAL is a convenient repository for troublesome students. If future initiatives of this kind are to realise their potential, this attitude must be countered through closer relations with referring schools and youth focused agencies.
- **Challenge:** Good relations with schools in the region are essential if future government funding earmarked for Community VCAL providers is to be secured in a timely and efficient manner. Presently, government funding for each VCAL student is received by the referring school and then passed on to CVCAL providers. Clear lines of communication, professionalism, and mutual understanding between schools and the FHSC are essential if this system is to work efficiently.

Internal structures

- A minimalist approach to rules governing student behaviour was adopted and this was popular and effective. Students responded well to the use of two touchstone principles (no bullying or harassment, and no distracting others from learning). Nonetheless, the Taster course benefited from a degree of good fortune. Given that the teachers¹ were not accredited by the Victorian Institute of Teaching, and had little or no experience in teaching 'at risk' adolescents, it was fortunate that they did not confront situations requiring skills beyond their capacity.
- **Challenge:** A major challenge is to establish procedures that enable staff to first identify, and then respond to, undiagnosed special needs (poor nutrition, substance abuse, reading or speech difficulties, behavioural problems, etc.). Professional development becomes a high priority, particularly in those areas concerned with responding to special needs and circumstances.
- **Challenge:** To all intents and purposes, the FHSC is now a school. It must adhere to the same stringent standards that apply to all public and independent schools. Given staffing and funding limitations, accountability and compliance with the Victorian Registrations and Qualifications Authority regulatory regime represents a significant and labour-intensive undertaking.

¹ A note on terminology: throughout this report those who taught the Taster course will be referred to as 'teachers', in spite of the fact that only the course coordinator was a qualified and VIT-accredited teacher. Strictly speaking, those who did the bulk of the teaching were BSL Registered Training Organisation 'trainers', as well as aides with little formal teaching experience. We opt for the generic term because students made no distinction, using the word 'teacher' in responses to interview questions.

- The coordinator's handling of career advice and post course transitions was exceptional. She assisted students in their search for appropriate training/VET options for 2010, and for employment. However, this aspect of student welfare was very taxing, and effective only to the extent that it could be accommodated within an already heavy workload.
- **Challenge:** Providing adequate assistance and guidance for post-CVCAL transitions (2010–11) will be a significant burden. When enrolments exceed the modest number of 2009, this assistance may be beyond the capacity of the coordinator.

Pedagogy

- Feedback on pedagogy showed a high level of student satisfaction with the approach to teaching and to assessment. It also revealed a strong commitment from the staff to the principles of 'adult' and 'hands on-' learning. A relaxed and non-hierarchical environment led to good learning outcomes. Students responded well to the use of excursions, as well as to the teaching methods used during the art and hospitality training components.
- **Challenge:** It is apparent that teaching in this environment is very demanding, and that key to future success will be highly qualified and motivated teachers. The unconventional nature of the course may make recruitment of such teachers difficult. During the Taster course, as much rested on the teachers' temperaments and personal dispositions as it did on their skills and experience. This may pose problems in preparation and delivery of the CVCAL given that the classroom teachers must also be, at least in part, competent workplace trainers and welfare officers—a combination that may be rare.

When you have an opportunity in your face like this, grab it straight away and try something new, because you never know what's going to come out of it; and yes, never give up.

To be honest, I can't wait till I come back. So I just thought, this whole environment, it's friendly, I just thought ... just everything. I don't know ... I can't explain it.

Reflections from students

Introduction

A significant number of teenagers find mainstream schooling to be a disheartening and oppressive experience. For many it is too inflexible and does not cater adequately for their learning styles. Many experience it as impersonal, highly regimented and lacking in support. Disrupted family lives, economic disadvantage, peer pressure, depression, and substance abuse can also play a role in undermining motivation and the ability to learn. Resistance to mainstream schooling often becomes a factor in student disengagement from education in general, which, in turn, puts many at risk of suffering hardship in later life.

A perennial concern for policymakers, educators, parents and the broader community is to find ways of engaging with 'at risk' youth. Of particular concern are the often poor educational outcomes among students from areas of high social disadvantage, and the rising numbers of youth who leave school without the skills needed to join, and to realise their potential in, the workforce.

Since the mid 1980s, policy in Victoria has been shaped by debates canvassing responses to youth disengagement and vocational training in the immediate post-compulsory phase of education. A watershed in policy formation was the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria, later dubbed the 'Kirby Report' (DEET 2000). The Review's brief was to review the needs of young people in post-compulsory education and training, and to review the provision of all related programs and services. These programs were to be considered against a background of dramatic social and economic change and the imperatives of a now globalised Australian economy.

The Kirby Report highlighted the difficulties many students had with the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and the need for more flexible approaches to strengthening links with tertiary, training, and employment destinations. The Victorian Government's response to this call for greater flexibility was the creation of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). First trialled in 2002, and then formally established across the state and independent school sectors in 2004, the VCAL now offers year 11 and 12 students a learning alternative to VCE.

A feature of the VCAL is its emphasis on 'practical' or 'hands on' learning. The VCAL equips students with not only the skills, but also the experience, knowledge and attitudes needed for employment, further education, and active participation in their communities. It is delivered through partnerships between VCAL providers (secondary schools, TAFEs and other adult community education providers), Local Learning and Employment Networks, employers and community groups. As stated by the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, the VCAL approach to applied learning necessarily entails:

- an immediate and transparent emphasis on the relevance of what is being learnt to the 'real world'
- partnerships and connections with organisations and individuals in the community so students can demonstrate the relevance of their learnings
- students being taught in a nurturing and holistic manner, which takes into account personal strengths, interests, goals and previous experiences
- an acknowledgement that part of the transition from school to work is being treated as an adult, and that moving students out of classrooms to learn also means helping them to make a shift to becoming more independent and responsible for

their own learning. This means that goals and outcomes are negotiated with students and other stakeholders.(VCAA 2006).

In practice this translates into a certificate running alongside the VCE, with accreditation on three levels: foundation, intermediate, and senior. These cater for students of different abilities and interests. Common to each level are the following curriculum areas:

- literacy and numeracy
- industry specific training: (Vocational Education Training, or VET)
- workplace skills
- personal development.

Thus, in addition to the skills normally associated with mainstream education, this certificate is designed to provide practical work-related experience and the opportunity to build the personal skills—including teamwork, leadership and communication and enhanced self-esteem—which are important for life and work.

Evaluations of the VCAL have been very favourable (Dumbrell 2004; Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004). Though there have been problems—e.g. inconsistent quality assurance, lack of funding, and poor accountability on the part of some providers (Volkoff & Gibson 2009, p.28)—the consensus is that the VCAL is playing an important role in Victoria’s educational setting. It has given disengaged students more input, generated enthusiasm for work placement, eased the frustrations associated with attending school five days a week, introduced students to fresh teaching and mentoring styles, and provided students with a clearer view of future employment opportunities (Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004, pp.4–5). It has enhanced confidence and motivation, increased commitment to learning and helped develop problem solving, leadership and teamwork skills.

The VCAL is now well established and is growing. By mid 2009, enrolments had reached 17,249. Up to early January 2008, VCAL students were serviced by 423 providers, 16 more than the previous reporting period (VCAA 2010). The 2008 On Track data shows that 23.3 per cent of intermediate and senior level VCAL students went on to further education or training, while 65.8 per cent commenced apprenticeships, traineeships, or found employment. Ultimately, 89 per cent of VCAL students were engaged either in further education, training, or work (enrolments for CVCAL are not yet differentiated from VCAL) (DEECD 2009c).

In spite of this success, the VCAL—and particularly, school-based VCAL—has had less success in catering for the needs of a senior secondary school cohort deemed to be ‘at risk’. A recent review of a CVCAL initiative identified the following characteristics of this cohort (Coppinger 2003, p.23):

- consistent negative experience and/or perceptions of formal education
- consistent negative perceptions of their own academic abilities
- regular experiences of social conflict both within and outside the school environment
- inconsistencies in support, leadership and encouragement by parents, other significant adults and education professionals about the relationship between participation in education and future life options

- lack of recognition of actual abilities (i.e. non-academic), measurements too reliant on literacy-based communication
- lack of ‘fun’ at school, finding most things to be ‘boring’
- discomfort with the formalities of the school environment, e.g. uniforms, classroom routines, discipline and inflexibility about start times.

This cohort includes young people who may have experienced homelessness, family trauma, poverty, mental health problems, low self-esteem, previous low educational achievement, and who may have developed behaviour issues within the mainstream school setting.

Other reviews have pointed to aspects of VCAL that had limited its effectiveness, particularly for the above cohort. These related to difficulties some teachers had in accommodating the principles of adult vocational education alongside conventional teacher-centred, classroom-based pedagogies. In addition, many schools and teachers were not equipped to make full use of community-wide networks and services, e.g. the Local Learning and Employment Networks (Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004, p.6).

Community VCAL

Consequently, the CVCAL was tailored for young people who are disengaged from school and who have reacted badly to education in that setting. Offered to 15–21 year olds, this program is delivered in community settings, with nearby schools playing a referral and supporting role for the external provider. The schools channel the necessary funds to the provider, and enter into formal agreements outlining funding arrangements, responsibilities and the respective parties’ duty of care.

The features of CVCAL are its complete separation from the mainstream schooling environment, an emphasis on flexibility in curriculum delivery, and the recognition of students as autonomous and capable agents within the learning environment. Its aim is to engage with this marginalised cohort via flexible and welcoming educational frameworks where motivation, self-esteem and skills can be developed (Volkoff & Gibson 2009, p.23).

The Brotherhood of St Laurence as a provider of CVCAL

In recent years, the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) has helped provide vocational training for school-age youth. It entered into partnerships with ‘Skills Plus’ (2006) and the Peninsula Training and Employment Program (2007) to provide a CVCAL program at the Furniture Works establishment in Kananook. In both instances, the BSL managed the VET aspect of the CVCAL programs (i.e. the ‘industry specific’ skills component), and its partners managed the overall administration. Ultimately, both initiatives were discontinued, following troubled relations between partners, and poor results in both student enrolments and completion. This experience prompted the BSL to re-evaluate its approach to CVCAL.

It is in this context that the BSL sought, and was granted, accreditation by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to become a CVCAL provider in its own right. A number of organisational hurdles delayed the proposed commencement of its CVCAL program, and it has just now commenced (in February 2010). The program is located at the BSL’s Frankston High Street Centre, and is an addition to the Centre’s suite of youth-oriented services in the region.

The pre-Community VCAL 'Taster' course

The subject of this evaluation is an eight-week course conducted between October and December 2009. Dubbed the 'Taster', this pre-CVCAL course was tailored for those of senior secondary school age who were alienated from mainstream schooling, and who were considering the CVCAL option in 2010. The Taster course incorporated the VET subject, Certificate II in Community Services Work, as well as retail and hospitality training units. To comply with statewide regulatory standards, the course curriculum was also designed to cover the essential components of the VCAL: 'literacy and numeracy', 'industry specific (VET)', work related', and 'personal development'. The course had 16 enrolments, students from the Mornington Peninsula area who were referred to the program either by local schools, Centrelink, community agencies or the BSL's Youth Pathways Team.

The Taster course represents an important milestone in the BSL's efforts to establish itself as a CVCAL provider. It benefits from the experiences of the abovementioned partnerships of 2006–07. Importantly, it was as much an introduction to CVCAL for the BSL as it is for the students who enrolled in it. As the Taster was both a stand-alone course, and a forerunner to the 2010 CVCAL program, this report necessarily serves multiple functions.

Aims of this report

This report has four fundamental aims:

- assess the 2009 Taster course
- on the basis of this assessment provide guidance to those planning to make the Taster course available in 2010
- provide guidelines for those designing the full 2010 CVCAL program
- provide the basis for an evaluation of the full 2010 CVCAL program

Ultimately, it is intended that this report will act as a resource for those looking to provide the flexible learning approaches needed by disadvantaged young people in the broader Australian community.

Methodology

The research design is informed by an interpretive approach that values the personal and educational experiences of the young people. It seeks to identify motives and expectations, and the extent to which the latter were realised. The research method consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and the BSL staff who designed and delivered the program.

Empirical data was also utilised: enrolment and attendance statistics from the FHSC; and academic results from the BSL Registered Training Organisation (which was responsible for providing the training component of the course).

Semi-structured interviews with students and staff

Interviews were conducted with 14 of the 16 students enrolled in the 2009 Taster course. Nine females and five males aged between 15 and 17 participated. Though from diverse backgrounds all were considered to be 'at risk' or 'disengaged' by their schools of origin or referring agency. Interviews were conducted one week after the course had ended and the recorded conversations were transcribed soon after.

Interviews were also conducted with staff who fulfilled various managerial, coordinating, and teaching roles for the Taster course. Among them was one RTO certified trainer, a trainee counsellor on placement from private institute of education, and a trainer engaged to teach art and cookery.

The manager of the FHSC was also interviewed because of her knowledge of the BSL's earlier forays into CVCAL alongside Skills Plus and the Peninsula Training and Employment Program, and her role in the design and management of the Taster course.

Interview questions

Questions of students and staff related to the following themes: engagement, structure, pedagogy, and outcomes. While responses about specific aspects of the course were sought, these questions were used mainly as prompts for quite wide-ranging discussion. Interviews were thus semi-structured and in-depth, and allowed interviewees freedom to share their experiences in a relaxed and familiar setting.

Student interview themes

Engagement: seeking students' views on their motives for enrolling, perceptions about levels of inclusion, respect and support, the atmosphere of the learning environment, and comments on relations with staff and fellow students

Structure: rules, procedures, and resources of the program

Pedagogy: teaching styles, the curriculum, and modes of assessment

Outcomes: results, and change of attitudes and outlooks

Staff interview themes

Engagement: seeking staff views on relationship building, the atmosphere of the learning/teaching environment, and relations with parents

Structure: organisational, procedural, and material aspects of the course, and on formal relations with schools and other stakeholders

Pedagogy: teaching philosophies and methods, the curriculum and modes of assessment

Outcomes: what constitutes success for such programs, and the Taster course's effectiveness

Other data

Empirical data was also gathered on a number of key indicators, including student enrolments, attendance, and retention; and assessment outcomes.

The data originated from the BSL Registered Training Organisation (responsible for overseeing the Taster's VET subject, 'Certificate II in Community Service Work'), and the Frankston High Street Centre (responsible for providing the abovementioned CVCAL skills components).

Project stages

The main stages in design of the methodology and the evaluation process were as follows:

1. Consultations with BSL community services staff, and with those employed in the provision and oversight of the Taster course
2. Preparation and submission of ethics applications
3. Preparations for interviews (distribution of consent and information documents, and questions drafted)
4. Interviews conducted with students and staff at Frankston High Street Centre
5. Transcripts analysed
6. Other data collected
7. Report drafted
8. Consultation on draft report
9. Distribution of final report

Limitations of the method

The Taster course lasted just eight weeks, so data gathered from interviews and other sources can provide only a limited understanding of the long-term effectiveness of such a course. Time constraints also meant that important stakeholders—school careers counsellors, VCAL coordinators, parents, and those overseeing the VET component of the course—were not interviewed. We might anticipate that these stakeholders would contribute insights into the students' motives for enrolling (or not enrolling), attitudinal changes, and progress in gaining workplace skills. Moreover, the absence of these perspectives is significant because they would have provided an arm's length view of the course and the setting from which it was delivered.

A significant omission from the report is a comprehensive literature review, though there is a section that provides the policy context in which the Taster emerged. An evaluation of a 'mature' BSL-CVCAL program starting in 2010—scheduled for later in that year—will feature such a

review. This will help the reader to better understand the debates, terminology, and issues associated with the rise of vocational education for school-aged youth. It will also point to the gaps in thinking about the theory and practice of such initiatives.

Finally, as the Taster course was a truncated version of a Community VCAL program, we have not covered in depth features that are ordinarily associated with the latter. These include:

- compliance with government standards
- formal agreements (e.g. Memoranda of Understanding) with partner schools
- relationships with referring organisations and the relevant Registered Training Organisation
- funding and management
- staff recruitment and professional development
- curriculum development
- longitudinal assessments of student outcomes

Nevertheless, given that the designers of the Taster course set out to replicate aspects of community VCAL programs, we will scrutinise the Taster using many of the criteria that would also apply to community VCAL programs. This means focusing on formal and informal relationships between all participants, student attitudes, procedures and protocols, teaching styles and standards, as well as outcomes.

Policy context

This section draws on existing BSL research to provide a snapshot of today's policy landscape and the conditions that have given rise to VCAL, community VCAL and its variants such as the Taster course. It notes the issues that have been central to debates about vocational education, various watersheds in policymaking, and the state of current government policy. It concludes with an overview of the existing vocational education landscape as it relates to school-aged youth.

The global financial crisis of early 2009 intensified the policy push for young people to stay at school until they completed Year 12 (or equivalent) and to undergo further training. Unemployment rates for 15 to 19-year-olds not in education and looking for full-time work rose from 11.3 per cent in June 2008 to 29.3 per cent in Victoria by June 2009 (ABS 2009). The number of unemployed young people receiving the Youth Allowance rose from 65,000 to 85,000 in the year to July (Colebatch 2009). More recent data (Robinson & Lamb 2009, pp.15–18) suggests that low-skilled young people bore the brunt of this downturn as employers retained skilled staff—albeit on reduced hours—in preference to taking on young people with minimal experience and/or skills.

Vocational learning has in the past been promoted as one means of countering the impact of such trends on youth. One such policy response was the Victorian ALP government's legislation (1990) allowing private training providers to enter the VET system and offer accredited training (McPhee 2008, p.3). In 1996 Commonwealth funding enabled VET programs to be introduced into schools, with the effect of expanding vocational education further to cater for those who might otherwise have left school early without acquiring relevant skills. (As noted earlier, this led to the introduction in 2004 of VCAL and, subsequently, of Community VCAL).

The Rudd government's first year in office featured its 'Education Revolution', a key of its 'Social Inclusion' agenda. In July 2009, the Prime Minister, with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), announced a new 'Compact with Young Australians'. This was to provide young people with skills training, rather than have them unemployed during the economic downturn (Gillard 2009; Taylor 2009).

The Compact—to be offered until the end of December 2011—is designed to ensure every young person under the age of 25 has a guaranteed education or training place (subject to admission requirements and course availability). It has also brought forward the target of 90 per cent of young people completing Year 12 (or equivalent) from 2020 to 2015. The federal government claims the Compact will provide up to 135,000 young people with higher qualifications.

Under the Compact, it is mandatory for all young people to participate in schooling (or an approved equivalent) until they complete Year 10; and for young people who have completed Year 10 to participate in either full-time (at least 25 hours a week) education, training or employment or a combination until age 17. In January 2010, education and training became a precondition for obtaining Youth Allowance or Family Tax Benefit Part A (for the young person). Anyone under the age of 20 without Year 12 or equivalent must now be in education or training in order to receive the Allowance.

The Youth Compact is being delivered by the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, and began operation in January 2010. It features four programs that are relevant to vocational learning for youth:

- National Career Development program (incorporating Youth Pathways, Youthlinx, Connections and Mentor Marketplace, Local Learning and Employment Networks, Learning Communities Network, and involving, in Victoria, VCAL and Community VCAL)
- Youth Connections program
- Maximising Engagement, Attainment and Successful Transitions program
- School Business Community Partnership Brokers program

(Though the Compact was generally well received, there are serious reservations about the withdrawal of income support for unemployed young people).

Another important aspect of the July 2009 COAG agreement was a broader plan to reform the Vocational Education and Training system. This plan includes the following:

- developing models for a national regulatory body
- ensuring the apprenticeship system is responsive to the needs of individuals and enterprises
- increasing the level of investment in nationally accredited training
- providing timely, relevant and easy to navigate information to individuals and enterprises
- ensuring the training system is responsive to the needs of individuals, business and industry.

The 2009–10 federal Budget allocation for reforms that bear on education, vocational education and training (up to 2012) comprises:

- \$62.1b for schools
- \$3.8b for apprenticeship places and trainees
- \$437m for improved access to universities.

In Victoria, proposed legislation (introduced August 2009) raises the school leaving age from 16 to 17 and gives schools the responsibility for tracking early school leavers to ensure they are in employment or training as part of the abovementioned ‘earn or learn’ Compact. The DEECD *Blueprint for education and early childhood development* (2008) drives implementation of policy and increases school responsibility for monitoring young people’s pathways until they complete year 12 or equivalent. DEECD’s School Accountability and Improvement Framework articulates three outcomes expected of government schools: improved student learning, enhanced student engagement and wellbeing, and successful transitions and pathways. A range of tools are available to schools to assist them to support students in their transitions.

The Victorian Government’s 2009–10 budget included a significant allocation for funding VET in schools (\$15.2m). Its Skills Reform package included \$25m to extend the employer bonus payments program for completion of apprenticeships and traineeships. Exemptions from tuition fees were provided for young people facing difficult circumstances and/or financial hardship.

It should be noted that while there have been measures to make TAFE places more available for young people under the Skills for Victoria policy, there have been large increases in some TAFE fees from 2009. Concessions for Health Care Card holders, which have allowed eligible students to pay \$55 per annum for courses, are also to be removed. A \$4m per annum loan scheme, VET FEE-

HELP, will be introduced, but this is in effect a debt scheme which largely shifts the cost burden from the government to the student (Taylor & Gee 2010).

There are now various qualifications available to young people who are not intending to progress directly to university. At the classroom level, there is a shift to applied and problem-based pedagogies, though this development is still quite ad hoc. At present, young Victorians who wish to pursue vocational studies have a range of options: they can opt to complete their senior school qualifications (via VCAL) at a secondary school in the newly established trades training wings (under construction in all 2,650 government secondary schools); at an Australian Technical College (currently 24, Commonwealth-funded); or a Technical Education Centre (currently 4, state-funded).

Increasingly, both federal and state governments are providing cautious support for non-conventional vocational education programs such as Community VCAL. In September 2009, the DEECD convened a CVCAL Forum where existing and potential CVCAL providers, along with representatives from secondary schools, the department, and the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority considered the most pressing issues for providers, consumers, and regulators. This forum coincided with the release by the DEECD of the *Future directions for Community VCAL programs* (DEECD 2009d), and the creation of new CVCAL guidelines, to come into effect in 2010 (DEECD 2009b).

This is the background against which the BSL Frankston High Street Centre's pre-Community VCAL 'Taster' course should be considered. Alternative approaches to education, particularly those relating to vocational education, are rapidly expanding; and there exists a political environment—at both state and federal levels—which is conducive to such programs.

Data on enrolment and attendance

Records of the Taster course were maintained by staff at the Frankston High Street Centre and the BSL's Registered Training Organisation. The latter provided the principal trainer and the workbooks used throughout the course. The Registered Training Organisation also collated and ratified the results. The records show the following numerical results:

Enrolment

- 16 students participated in the Taster course in 2009 (between 12 October and 3 December)
- 1 exited in the sixth week to return to his secondary school
- 3 students joined the program well after the start (1 in week 4, and the others in week 6)
- 15 of the 16 students returned in 2010 and commenced the BSL Community VCAL Course (these included the student who had left the course to rejoin his secondary school)

Attendance

- 2 students attended each of the course's 31 days, with 2 others attending all but one day. (Note that the course was conducted between Mondays and Thursdays)
- Overall group attendance was 77 per cent: this is considered a positive result given that 4 students were not available for long periods. (It is worth noting that the student who exited to return to his secondary school had a near perfect attendance record through the time of his enrolment)

Results

Records of the BSL Registered Training Organisation show that:

- 11 of the 16 students were granted the Certificate II in Community Services
- 3 were late enrolments and for this reason could not be considered for the Certificate
- 1 student failed to attain the standards needed for the Certificate (due mainly to absence through illness)
- 1 student withdrew from the course

Note: students who did not complete the course were issued with a statement of attainment. This enabled them to apply for credit transfers should they choose to continue this qualification.

Findings from interviews with staff and students

Engagement

In this section we consider the participants' Taster experience. The aim is to learn about students' attitudes to mainstream schooling, and how it differed from their Taster experience. Students were asked about the ambience of the Centre, and about how they were treated by staff and by fellow students. They also reflected on how these factors impacted on their capacity to learn. For their part, staff commented on the setting, and on whether it was conducive to teaching and learning. They also commented on their informal relationships with students, parents, and other important stakeholders.

Relations with and between students

For students, one of the most distinctive—and attractive—features of the Taster course was that it was delivered outside the mainstream school environment. Those who delivered the Taster course adopted an approach to educator–student relations that was less hierarchical and rigid. This is not to say that rules governing behaviour, and expectations about students' responsibilities, were absent (see p.18). However, a relatively relaxed approach to relations between staff and students did create a more appealing learning environment. The following were typical of the responses to questions about mainstream schooling:

At my school, if you had problems with teachers and stuff, they didn't really care because there were so many other students, so they couldn't really give everyone else an opinion. (Female)

Some of the teachers were alright, some of them were really easy to talk to and get along with while you were learning. But other teachers were just—they didn't really treat you equally. They looked down at you. And they would pick at every single little thing, like they take things very seriously. They just didn't really like me. (Male)

School is a very depressing place I think ... the whole like 'you're the kids, we're the adults' [aspect]. (Female)

It is evident that the students regarded the Taster setting, and its staff, in a different light from those at their schools of origin. The following is indicative of how students felt about student–teacher relations at the FHSC.

The teachers will go up to you at lunchtime and say, 'How are you going?' and stuff, so you can just have conversations with them. They're more like friends and stuff than like people who tell you off. [Here] ... everyone was treated fairly ... they respected us and they didn't seem to judge. (Female)

These responses indicated a strong desire among students to be treated respectfully and 'as adults'. Students spoke of the absence of condescension, and of the effort staff devoted to student engagement. It was clear that staff associated with the Taster were attuned to these sensitivities. The following comments from staff who had worked in schools indicate their unease with what they experienced in a mainstream setting.

When you're a teacher ... you have to have this boundary ... 'Don't smile at them until Easter' was one of the things that we were always told in school, and 'They shouldn't be

calling you by your first name'. What a load of bullshit. They're just people and we're people as well, and talking to them about your life is not a ... secret.

Whereas in schools it's like there's rules for us, 'cause we're the teachers and there's different rules for you, 'cause you're the students and we will talk to you in a different way and we will treat you differently and we will treat you like you are less, you are absolutely less powerful than what I am. So it's ... a *power over* relationship, rather than a *power with* [italics added] and this is very much about power with, so we're walking alongside together, rather than I'm telling you how you're going to do it.

Throughout the Taster course, staff devoted a great deal of effort to fostering relations premised on trust, tolerance and mutual respect. Yet this process was not always easy. There were frustrations and some unsettling encounters with students intent on testing the teachers' patience. This dynamic was explained by one teacher thus:

I'd be lying if I said it was easy and it just happened straight away, but it is something that I think happens over time with consistency, with I guess friendly persistence. Not pushing it too hard. I remember constantly trying to show it by example. The way you interact with one student, all the others are going to see it. So you're never directly dealing just with one student in the classroom setting, everything you do has its ramifications.

Students' views on how the setting's ambience and relations with staff affected learning were instructive. They reflected on the peaceful environment, the attractive landscaping, the Centre's proximity to the beach, and the freedom they were permitted (lunches on the foreshore on hot days were common). They also appreciated being spoken to in a friendly and respectful manner by reception staff and other employees. The following responses were indicative:

If [the environment is] mean you don't want to learn, and you just like, if it's not a good environment, you're just not happy. If it's a good environment you're happy, bad environment you're not happy. (Female)

It's more calm, [with] teachers not screaming at you to sit down ... I was just more comfortable and happy to be there. At school I was never happy to be there. I'd zone out, put my headphone in and just not do anything, refuse to work and stuff. Here I actually did work and didn't have my iPod in. (Male)

Well we actually do work, unlike the other places I've been at. There's always a teacher around, always, and they always help you [and] it's quiet, no distractions around, it's better. (Female)

Staff were also asked to reflect on how the Taster's environment, and its distinctive approach to educator–student engagement, affected students' ability to learn. As the following responses attest, they too saw great benefits in providing a secure and welcoming setting, based on relatively intimate relations and high levels of student autonomy.

I think just being in an environment which is ... not just physically but emotionally and psychologically, safe for them so they can learn to open up and communicate on that level without feeling threatened or that they've done something wrong and defensive.

They felt really valued being here, which is why they kept coming back. They felt nurtured and cared for and we're actually giving them real learning experiences. It wasn't some Mickey Mouse show, we're actually teaching them things that they were interested in, which said to them, 'We think you're worth doing this'.

On the whole, educator–student relations were very positive. It is important to note also that the Taster approach to learning—marked by its separation from the mainstream secondary school setting—had the effect of freeing students from the negative aspects of peer pressure. Below are some of the students’ observations about Taster’s uniqueness in this regard:

Like at [high] school there’s a lot of pressure to impress at school. Everyone’s trying to impress everyone, whereas here no-one really bothered. They’re all like, ‘Yeah, this is me, get over it’. I like that. (Female)

Your mates [at high school] annoy the crap out of you and you get in trouble a lot; here you can actually do your work. (Female)

Everyone’s really nice to each other, everyone gets along really well and it’s really good because there’s not very much drama in the classroom or anything, so it’s really good and relaxed. It’s easy to do work because people aren’t arguing so that makes it simple to do your work. At first, we ... all stuck to our own little group but as classes went on, we all got to know each other really well and people you didn’t think you would like, we got to know them and they turned out to be really alright. We all became friends, just like one big group of friends in the end. (Male)

Relations with parents, schools and other stakeholders

Though developing positive relations with and between students was important, those overseeing the Taster initiative were also mindful of the need to engage the students’ parents and guardians.

We found cautious support for closer relations with parents, though not necessarily for their presence while teaching was in progress. Staff felt that encouraging closer relations with parents needs to be done with consideration of the students’ needs and sensitivities. The following responses by staff indicate that relations with parents and guardians are still in flux.

Having parents in the classroom when you’re 14 and 15 is really embarrassing. There’s no way these kids will want their parents to come into the classroom and be a class helper. So ‘involvement’ for me means, not necessarily being here, on the site, but us helping those parents become more educated about the systems and about how kids can get into education, training, employment.

I’d make calls and stuff every now and then, and we try not to call when something bad happens. We call when something good happens ... So if someone’s done really well, then I call home, and the parents are always like, ‘Oh, what?’, you know, like they’re waiting for the kid to do something awful, and they really appreciate it when you say, ‘Oh, we love having so-and-so in class and he did such a good job with’ whatever it was that was specifically really great.

Positive relations with local schools were central to the success of the program. The following gives some indication of how person-to-person contact was made:

[Schools received] weekly attendance ... reports which were fun for me to write, so at the bottom I would say, ‘So-and-so did this this week and then we did this and she seems to be responding well to this’. It was a bit of work, but not much, considering that the schools loved it. We got emails all the time saying, ‘Oh we love these’. They never usually hear from people and they go, ‘What are my kids doing? They could be doing anything’. So we gave them that kind of regular contact and emails between and phone calls and meetings.

Relations with external stakeholders, including government departments and agencies, were mixed. Though relations with key figures at the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority were close and beneficial, the same could not be said of interaction with some sections of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Though the following does not refer directly to the Taster course, it is worth mentioning because it reveals some of the obstacles faced by staff:

I went to a [department] briefing about Community VCAL a couple of weeks ago ... and we were treated quite poorly. We were even spoken to quite poorly. It was because of the bad experiences that they've had with Community VCAL providers who've made millions and millions of dollars doing the wrong thing, [but] people like us who are trying to work with these really hard-to-work-with kids and slogging it out, you know, it's frigging exhausting, and we're talked to quite poorly or we're, I don't know, we're not trusted or something, which isn't great. But I've heard that before, but I'd just never really experienced it.

Viewed from an altogether different vantage point, the Taster initiative struck a positive chord with residents in the immediate vicinity of the Frankston High Street Centre. Commenting on the ambience of the Centre and on how residents reacted to students, the Centre manager had this to say:

I think it's great. I talk to [residents] as they come through, 'cause it's a thoroughfare, so people walk up and down here all the time ... A lot of elderly people [were] a bit nervous and a bit concerned about having young people here, but they've said they love it because it fits in, it's not a noisy place. We don't have people screaming and running around, like a traditional schoolyard I guess.

Structure

This section focuses on the organisational, procedural, and material aspects of the Taster course. It looks at the formal means of engaging students and staff, and at the facilities that were used. Of particular importance are the views of staff on formal relations with referring agencies and schools, aspects of staffing and course management, and on the resources at their disposal.

Organisation

Crucial to the success of the Taster initiative—and any community VCAL initiative—are strong relations with nearby secondary schools. Student success in the Taster program rests in some part on the referral process and the match between the students' needs and the program. If effective referral processes are in place, then only those students that are suited to this approach to education are referred. Moreover, good relations with schools are necessary to ensure that government funding needed to cover future students will be made available.

It should be noted that: the success of a more elaborate CVCAL program would rely heavily on clear lines of communication and effective processes that ensure this funding flows to the FHSC. Normally, a CVCAL provider receives DEECD funding from the school where the student was most recently enrolled. In this way the funding follows the student from the secondary school to the provider after the school has made the referral. This becomes more complicated in the event of a referral from an external agency (e.g. Centrelink) that has no link to the education system. In this instance, the provider is required to arrange the student's enrolment—as an administrative exercise only, but involving a formal contract—at any 'local school. Without this enrolment, no government funds can be made available for the student's participation in the CVCAL program. This enrolment-for-funding process sometimes involves the intervention of the DEECD Regional Office, particularly when a student has no local links or background or when schools are reticent to assume the administrative burden. All this underscores the importance of maintaining close relations with all schools in the region, as well as the effort required by FHSC staff to ensure government funds are secured in the future.

Formal relations between the Taster providers and local schools—in particular the program's 'partner' schools, McClelland College, and Carrum Downs Secondary College—are in good health. Memoranda of understanding are in place that clearly establish each party's obligations, responsibilities, and procedures to follow. Informal relations are cooperative and there is a good rapport between the coordinator of the FHSC Taster course and her counterparts at each school. However, as noted above, much time and effort is devoted to nurturing these relationships, and they can never be taken for granted. The following comment indicates the demands placed on the staff and how problems can arise, in this case due to entrenched attitudes to vocational education:

I spent quite a bit of time talking with the schools last year about the fact that we wanted to make sure there was a really good process in place so that when the kids came to us, the school had done a lot to talk with them and work with them on whether this was really a good option for them. And they agreed and took it all on board, but in reality what they did was ... just refer the kids that they didn't want anything to do with anymore and it wasn't appropriate for some of those kids to come into a Community VCAL. We did have to go back to them and say, 'Look, remember we talked about that' ... I think it is an educative process to help schools understand that there is something that they need to be doing before they just decide that they should move onto here ... I think it is ... also very much connected to sort of the view ... that people have about Community VCAL, that it's where the 'dumb' kids basically go.

Adjusting to a unique student cohort also requires staff who possess particular skills and attributes. Staff were asked to reflect on lessons learnt during the Taster program: their responses suggest that great care must be taken when employing, training, and assigning staff:

Being open and caring can only take you so far ... I think there should be professional development for all staff in almost every workplace, but particularly in one where you're dealing with at risk youth. To this extent, I'd say more professional development [is needed re] conflict management, counselling skills, identifying ... behavioural or physical or psychological issues.

I think the biggest thing we learnt from the Taster was that we had a student counsellor here, and it was just so amazing to have him on board, because we knew that they have issues, but the kind of wellbeing issues that they did have, we couldn't have anticipated, and they're so diverse ... some of them probably need to be tested for certain things but have slipped through the cracks and haven't had that before, or they need drug and alcohol counselling, or they need some kind of other counselling.

Vital to any such initiative is case management and, in particular, support for transition into further employment or training. Government requirements are clear. It is mandatory for government schools and Community VCAL providers to have in place a Managed Individual Pathways framework which entails an individualised career action plan for each year 10–12 student. This involves working with students to identify career goals, preferences, skill sets, and connections with networks that may facilitate transition to work or further education. In a school setting, there is, typically, a MIP coordinator and a 'pathways team' responsible for ensuring that this process runs smoothly. Where schools are partnered with CVCAL providers, both parties cooperate to maintain the MIP and this entails formal agreement and negotiation of responsibilities.

Given that the Taster was not a CVCAL course, and the FHSC was not, then, a CVCAL provider, these processes were not followed. However, those overseeing the Taster were very mindful of the need for MIP-style guidance and did go some way to providing transitions management, through a semi formal process handled more or less exclusively by the course coordinator (a qualified careers counsellor). The transitions process commenced at the midway point of the course, at the time of the first student and course appraisal. The coordinator's objective was to find suitable places for students at a TAFE or similar training organisation. These placements would then feature as the students' 2010 CVCAL VET component (one consideration here was whether the student was more suited to a school-based traineeship, where they would also be eligible for the 'Schools-based Trainee' benefit).

The coordinator's intervention involved providing advice and support for students with grievances against employers (e.g. for one being underpaid), and working with the unemployed students to ensure their résumés and cover letters were kept updated. The coordinator also facilitated transition back to school for a male student who opted to recommence VCE. This entailed monitoring the student after his departure to ensure that earlier negative behaviours did not recur. She also played a crucial role in securing a hospitality traineeship for a young male student at a nearby hospital. These transition responsibilities extended to assisting five female students in their attempts to secure trainee nursing placements, by helping the students find suitable clothing for interviews, and driving them to their interviews with the training organisation, long after the Taster course had ended.

It should be noted that the Taster cohort of students—considered to be 'at risk'—would be likely to have needs that make pathways guidance a more daunting and complex undertaking than is generally the case in mainstream schools.

Procedures

The above raises important considerations relating to student welfare. Of importance are not only the skills possessed by the teacher/coordinator, or the staffing levels, but whether guidelines and mechanisms are in place so that staff can identify and respond to the needs of students and problems that arise. One teacher reflected on this aspect of the Taster initiative and found room for improvement.

Considering the complexity of the issues that students do face or that might occur in the classroom, there should be more detailed approaches on how to address certain issues if they arise, which should be in the form of a policy or procedure manual.

I think there should be something formal put in place where you had all staff members sitting down together and discussing issues. That would be helpful because there was no—well at least nothing that I was involved in—staff meetings of that nature.

There is a need for procedures that focus on educational development, as well as those that help identify and address physical and psychological problems. Verbal and non-verbal learning disorders have various causes (genetic, developmental, and environmental) and can manifest in frustration, inattention, or inability to recognise words/letters, to speak fluently, or to hear. Where students have experienced considerable disruption—and, in extreme cases, the effects of substance abuse and violence—the need for such systematic monitoring is all the more pressing.

The rules that governed student behaviour were an important topic in interviews. The Taster's designers and those who had day-to-day oversight of the program adopted a minimalist—yet 'zero tolerance'—approach featuring just two rules: no abuse or bullying; and no behaviour that distracted others from learning.

The rationale for having only two rules was that the students would be likely to reject a more complex and structured environment, one that resembled a mainstream school setting. The Taster approach aimed to encourage self-responsibility and ownership of the learning environment, and to build trust between students and staff. Here is how staff described the approach to rules:

[We] just come up with two simple ones and make them understand why they are important and then just work with those two things. Because we can't be a school, I mean, it's definitely not a school, so they can't, we can't have the kind of rules that we would have at school. That distinction has to be really clear with the kids, because they hated school, so they're not going to want to come here if it's like school.

The students responded positively to this approach. This suggests that many young adults—particularly those considered 'at risk'—are accepting of boundaries, but not when applied in a highly regimented manner, as is often the case in secondary schools. The following feedback is indicative of Taster students' views on the rules that applied:

There's only like two big main rules: there's no harassment and no distracting other people learning, which I think people should know that already. So for me it was like because I have no tolerance on bullying and stuff and most people came here because they are little bullies or had problems with other people, and when they put that out there everyone was like, 'Yeah, we agree with that', and we all understood. There was a no tolerance thing to it. So it was good. (Female)

Everyone was pretty good from the start, but like sometimes comments came in, like racist comments, and someone would mention, 'Oh, you're not allowed to do that', and then everyone learnt and now it never comes up. No-one ever does it now. (Female)

Tolerance, trust, and autonomy were key ingredients in maintaining a harmonious learning environment. The minimalist approach to rules not only served to minimise bad behaviour, it also lowered students' resistance to learning. Its effects were described thus:

I reckon they had guidelines, but not strict rules, which I think is where most kids at school go wrong. I like how, if you needed to go to the toilet, you didn't have to put your hand up and say, 'Can I go to the toilet?' You were just allowed to go to the toilet. You could even drink in class. I think that was good, because that's half people's problems, I think. Lose track in class, get bored, or whatever, because they need food or they don't feel well and the teacher won't let them do anything. Whereas here, it was just, it was a really laidback environment, but you knew at the same time if you didn't do your work you'd have to cop the consequences. (Female)

This minimalist approach to governing behaviour did not, however, receive unqualified support. Two students suggested that even though this relaxed approach was effective, it was open to abuse to the extent that it led to problems with punctuality.

Material considerations

This section ends with a brief account of the material aspects of the Taster initiative. It was evident that the Taster program was well resourced. This applied to the provision of whiteboards, computers and televisions as well as ample supplies for the arts component of the course. Staff and students were particularly impressed with the fully appointed, commercial standard kitchen that was at their disposal. Nonetheless, teachers' concerns relating to access and the suitability of some rooms should be noted:

The tricky part is that we're not in a school, so we don't have the kind of things that schools have. I mean, we have something close, but even just the IT lab is a separate room to our training room, so if I wanted to book both I have to pay for both and it cuts into my budget quite a lot.

Moving from room to room, you store the art materials in one place, you lose 15 minutes at the start, 15 minutes at the end cleaning up and packing up all the time. So that's a problem, ... It's difficult to run art classes in multiple rooms.

Though not directly related to the delivery of the Taster course, the issue of security bears mentioning. The FHSC was burgled on two occasions within a relatively short time span, and suffered the loss of valuable equipment. The burglaries occurred when construction and building alterations were taking place, and when processes governing access and after hours key allocation were under review. Nevertheless, students and staff of the Taster course considered the facility to be very safe, if not always secure.

Pedagogy

The focus now is on the philosophies and practices that informed the Taster course. Here, we reflect on participants' views on teaching methods and styles, course content, and on the modes of assessment. We rely on three subheadings—methods, curriculum, and assessment—to help order the feedback.

Method

Interviewees were asked to comment on the teaching methods used for the Taster course, and how they differed from a conventional learning environment. Staff were very aware of the need to differentiate between hands-on training and mainstream teaching; which they saw as classroom-based, teacher-centred, and involving high student–teacher ratios. The following statement captures the philosophical underpinning of the approach adopted for the Taster course.

I guess with mainstream education ... a student is seen as just a means to an end or a product [that] can fit certain output [but CVCAL is] almost bucking the trend so to speak and going back to a more community-focused, person, individual-focused, empowering, holistic approach where we see them as the experts of their own lives and we've got a skill to help teach them ... this empowers the individual as a whole—sort of connects them back into the community—and it's a bit more grassroots mixed with practical skills required for work.

As noted in the earlier section on engagement, students had very strong views about mainstream education. Here they contrast it with what they encountered during the Taster course.

At school just nobody cared. Here they actually want you to do your best ... and they keep going till you hit the standards and stuff. At school it was just rough because there's so many problems, and for me at school I didn't really like getting told what to do as much and here they get your opinion on how you want to do stuff and your better way of learning. (Female)

[Here] you could learn without having a teacher behind your back telling you 'You have to do this, you have to do that'. You could just work. All of the questions we have to answer we pretty much answered as a group. The teacher's out the front asking the question and we'd pretty much have a mini-discussion on every question and someone would put their hand up and answer it, and if that was right, someone else could add on to it. Everybody got it. So we weren't waiting for anybody riding behind because they haven't got the question yet—we all got it at the same time. (Male)

It was good because if you didn't know something then they would explain it, and if they didn't think someone got it and no-one wanted to put their hand up and say, 'I don't get it', then they were able to read that someone didn't get it and they just explained it without someone getting embarrassed for not knowing. [Teachers at school] just don't pay attention to everyone, they just do what they're there to do, and don't worry about anything past what they have to do. (Male)

There is no doubt that small class sizes played a key role in fostering close relations between teachers and students. This, in turn, resulted in students who were more receptive and eager to learn. The importance of class size is underscored by the following student observations:

It's heaps different. These teachers, it's like they have more time for you. They can explain things better than what the teachers at high school do and I think that's only because it's smaller classes. (Female)

They're more interested in getting stuff done and they're more relaxed about it. They explain stuff better, because it's a smaller group so they can explain it to you if you don't understand, one on one. It's really good like that. (Male)

Teachers and teaching aides were acutely aware of the need to adapt to changing circumstances and to the diverse range of student needs. As is apparent from the following responses, teachers opted for a flexible, less prescriptive or rigid approach to teaching:

You have different students, they come from different backgrounds, they have different needs, you can't always use a carbon copy each and every time. You need to see what works with these people ... What experiences and situations or backgrounds do they come from where they can bring in their experiences and skills?

We tried to integrate everything. So it would be learning, do a bit of theory on something, go out and see it in practice, come back, reflect on it, and then do a bit more theory. So just trying to match them both up, integrating everything. And ultimately ... I think it was very important to always [ask] how is that applicable or how can I use that or demonstrate it immediately?

Students responded well to this approach to teaching. They remarked on the importance of variety (more on this aspect follows) and the allowance for different learning styles. This student's account was typical:

[The teacher] was good, he used to mix up the classes a lot, like PowerPoints, and then he'd do reading stuff, so it was good because everyone learns differently so he did it to help everyone out, so it was good, yeah it was good ... it was well done because everybody was learning the way that they learnt. (Female)

Curriculum

A typical Community VCAL timetable comprises the components of 'literacy and numeracy', 'personal development', 'work-related skills', and VET. In this Taster pilot initiative—of just eight weeks duration—teachers were unable to provide all of these in the usual measure. The curriculum was weighted mainly towards the personal development and workplace skills components. This adjustment was unforeseen, but enabled teachers to focus attention on the requirements of the Certificate II in Community Services (workplace skills). On reflection, according to the coordinator, this was also a good outcome, given that in a normal VCAL program personal development is the predominant stream, and students' familiarity with it would prepare them well for when they commence that certificate.

Staff also felt that the emphasis placed on workbook-based learning enabled them to cover much of the literacy and numeracy component, even if only indirectly. In addition, there was intermittent, yet intensive, one-to-one tuition by the coordinator. This tuition ensured students acquired some resume and cover letter writing skills, and that their resumes were regularly updated. Some of this tuition was ad hoc and provided out of school hours, though more often it proceeded in class while the main group was focused elsewhere. The course also incorporated three visits from guest teachers who taught aspects of retail skills units.

In the eight weeks, the following topic headings were used to guide learning:

- occupational health and safety
- working with others

- following an organisation's policies
- an organisation's procedures and programs
- preparing for work in the community services industry
- communicating with clients
- support community resources
- orientation to mental health work
- identifying and addressing specific client needs
- introduction to alcohol and other drugs work
- supporting the activities of existing groups.

In essence, the intention was to lead students through a curriculum designed to develop skills and to provide them with knowledge of unfamiliar people and environments. Teachers made use of excursions—notably to aged care facilities, a disability care centre, and a youth substance abuse service—and then used these experiences as reference points in subsequent classroom teaching. The importance of this approach was underscored by staff:

They can enjoy learning and we really try to involve activities that they find appealing or that they like, where they will still learn the same skills, but we do it in a way where we can apply it to real life situations ... just making, showing them that learning is something that you can apply to everyday life. It's not just some abstract thing that you learn and then get a certificate and then you forget everything. And that's what you can also do in this program, it's quite flexible in that way.

I did try to mix [things] up with group activities and visiting external agencies ... I could only do that to a certain degree with how much that related to the units that we were doing. So I felt I was a bit hindered in that sense, that I would have liked to see a bit more external assessment or things outside of the classroom just because that really worked with the students. They ... prefer to learn in a more hands on approach, in a more practically applicable way.

One staff member commented on the effectiveness of the visits to outside welfare and care agencies, and recounted the change in behaviours and attitudes following a visit to a disability care Centre:

Before they learnt the disability and homeless elements they were cracking jokes ... about the disabled persons or homeless. They were using some words which I can't describe now, but after learning those elements they got more respect for the homeless people and the disabled people, which is really good. [So] when they're going outside on the street they won't discriminate or they won't bully with those sorts of people, they've got a respect.

This was affirmed by one (male) student who thought the standout lessons were 'about disabled people and learning about treating them with respect, the whole course was treating people with respect and equally, how you can help people less fortunate'.

Assessment

Students of the Taster course were assessed through a combination of workbook entries, oral responses to questions, and classroom interactions. The students progressed through a series of workbooks (supplied by the BSL Registered Training Organisation) which were submitted once the group had covered a relevant theme. The students and teacher progressed as one through the

content, and though this meant that some students had to wait for others to catch up, this did not pose a serious problem. Two students thought the standard of assessment could have been more challenging, though most felt it was appropriate. The overwhelming consensus was that the emphasis on group learning was effective. The comment below bears this out:

Like at school they wouldn't give you a second choice of doing something. Once you had done it, that was it, and if you failed or passed that's what the outcome would be, but here they would help you so you would get, you would benefit from it. They wouldn't just let you slip back and not get noticed. So they were trying to do as much as they can to help us all and, yeah, everyone was doing really well. (Female)

Importantly, staff made clear their high expectations of students. In doing so they were attempting to counter a lingering preconception in education circles and among many parents that VCAL is an inferior certificate to the Victorian Certificate of Education. This sentiment was expressed thus:

Here we're aiming a lot higher and we said to the kids, 'We want you to get as good, if not better, education than if you were doing VCE ... We are going to push you really hard'.

This approach produced solid learning outcomes, with 11 of the 16 satisfying the BSL Registered Training Organisation, and Australian Quality Training Framework, requirements for the Certificate II in Community Service (3 were ineligible because of late commencement, or early withdrawal). Given the students' previous disengagement from mainstream educational settings, these outcomes were very good.

Outcomes

This final section surveys the participants' views on the overall significance of their Taster course experience. We consider what participants had to say about changes to their self-esteem, confidence, skill sets and prospects as a result of participating in the Taster course.

One teacher reflected on the main outcomes and benefits of the course, as well as on its effect on him as an educator:

I'd say receiving formal qualifications [for students]—that always helps in the workplace. But I'm not saying that is the only, the most significant or the only important one. With that ... would be an improvement in communication skills, whether it be for interview skills or practising for interviews, to interacting with other students or with staff. I guess a sense of belonging and a sense of identity with a group, that helps in many ways as well.

This shouldn't have [been a surprise] but ... to actually go to a place like this and see ... is a viable alternative way of educating at risk youth that actually has observable and positive outcomes at the end. That was encouraging.

For their part, students expressed overwhelming support for the course. It is clear that they benefited from it and from the environment in which it was based. These benefits varied, with some students thankful for its role as a circuit breaker during difficult times in their lives. This shows the importance of maintaining links with those students disaffected with mainstream education, and of using programs designed with their needs in mind. The following responses affirm the importance of the Taster course in this regard:

Well, back then I just wanted to leave [education]. I wanted to go do my own thing, but then ... I would have had no qualifications and stuff, so I was kind of really confused back then.

But now everything's going all good because I've got my qualifications, I'm getting my school passes and it's just going to help me with what I want to do in the future. (Female)

[Before] just everything was happening. I was getting kicked out of home, which I'm not anymore, and all this stuff was just over me, like a massive cloud of bad stuff that was happening and friends were all fighting and we all just dropped out and now we're all best mates again. (Female)

Others dwelt on the opportunities the course presented, the positive experience of re-engagement with education, and the insights they gained about interactions with others:

It's given me options for what I want to do instead of me being stuck and not being able to do anything ... I've learnt to work with others a lot more and stuff, because I used to separate myself from everybody else because I used to think if I do it all myself it will just help myself, but I realise that other people can help me. So I've let people in and let them help me instead of going, 'I'm always right.' So that helps me a lot. (Female)

I didn't learn that much at high school; I learnt more in eight weeks than I have in three years. (Male)

[I gained] motivation to do something with my life, get somewhere, find out what I actually want to do with my life; and I've found out what I want to do, so that's good; yeah just wanting to get out of bed in the morning. (Female)

The above indicates that the Taster course had a very positive effect on both students and teachers. The qualification gained (Certificate II in Community Service) was valued by the students and was likely to be a significant asset as they pursued future employment. This was certainly the case for several students who intended to train in nursing and aged care, and for one pursuing a career in youth work and protective care. It should be noted that this certificate represented for all students their first formal education award or certificate.

Many outcomes were less tangible, but no less important, including increased self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and greater respect for others. Importantly, the Taster course also provided students with adult mentors at a time when they were at considerable risk. Finally, a noteworthy outcome of this course was the extent to which staff were reassured about the potential of alternative forms of education and, indeed, of all young people.

Conclusions

The Taster course succeeded in developing in students a desire to learn and, for many, to continue their education. Though brief, the course provided students with social, vocational, numeracy and literacy skills that they would have likely missed out on had they not participated. Student feedback indicated a high level of satisfaction in the course. It is telling that 15 of the 16 students who enrolled in 2009 re-enrolled for the BSL's Community VCAL course commencing in 2010 at the Frankston High Street Centre.

Those enrolled in the Taster course thrived in a setting that was removed from a mainstream school. The Taster approach was one in which teacher–student relationships were relatively intimate, and premised on mutual respect. Students responded well to this approach and benefited from more immediate feedback from teachers, and from the opportunity to bond with one another in what was regarded as a well-appointed, comfortable and welcoming environment. The Taster facilities and the FHSC setting in general were free of the distractions and pressures students associated with mainstream school life, and for these reasons were conducive to learning.

In relation to pedagogy, the principles of ‘adult-’ and ‘hands on-’ learning were applied with great effect. This was made possible not only by the low student–teacher ratio, the presence of a teacher’s aide, and non-hierarchical relations, but also highly motivated and committed staff. Indeed, it is significant that staff reported a high level of satisfaction in their accomplishments.

The student group proceeded as one through content designed to (a) engage students with the wider society and promote vocational skills, and (b) develop practical social skills. Excursions were important and were used as reference points during in-class learning. Students also responded positively to the cooking and art components of the course. Assessment was by written and oral response, and students were very satisfied with this approach. Most students felt that the content and the approach to teaching were suitably demanding. Importantly, staff maintained high expectations of students, and in doing so challenged a lingering view that such courses are inferior to those found in mainstream schools.

A minimalist yet zero tolerance approach to rules governing student behaviour also proved to be both popular and effective. Students responded well to the use of two touchstone principles (no bullying/harassment, and no distracting others from learning), preferring this approach to what they regarded as the rigid, punitive, and often confusing regimes they had experienced in their mainstream school. From the perspective of the teachers, this approach was easy to administer and also produced very positive outcomes. Ultimately, students indicated a high level of satisfaction in the course outcomes—primary among these was a formal qualification, the Certificate II in Community Service—which included increased confidence, motivation, a more positive outlook, respect for and understanding of others.

It was apparent, however, that the administration of the Taster was a daunting undertaking. For example, the formal and informal relations between the FHSC and its ‘feeder’ schools needed to be constantly nurtured. At present, these relations are in good health and this bodes well for the future. Nonetheless, attending to these and the increasing accountability demands prescribed by government—e.g. those relating to student transitions—is labour-intensive. There is also a need for more systematic methods of monitoring students’ progress, as well as for more professional development and assistance for staff to better respond to the needs of an ‘at risk’ student cohort.

As an alternative to mainstream schooling, the Taster course provided an important means by which disengaged and often disaffected youth could take ‘time out’, while benefiting from valuable literacy, numeracy and vocational skills tuition. To this extent, it fulfilled its purpose to engage with young people who were facing their transition to adulthood without having acquired important skills. The Taster also succeeded in its purpose of providing a valuable bridge between school and the CVCAL. It gave students an insight into the world of vocational education and training, and an opportunity to reassess their approach to learning, as well as their approach to acquiring the skills needed for work or further study.

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