

Re-engagement, training and beyond

Evaluating the second year of a Community VCAL education program for young people

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The evaluation of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's 2011 Community VCAL (BSL-CVCAL) education program located in Frankston, Victoria, shows that the CVCAL model can have a profoundly positive impact on 'at risk' young people.

In 2011 this program offered the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)—a years 11–12 senior secondary school certificate—in a community setting to around fifty young people who had disengaged from conventional education and had, in many cases, experienced significant hardship beyond the school setting. The evaluation also points to several important challenges facing those overseeing the BSL-CVCAL program, as well as those looking to promote or replicate such programs.

Key points

Impact: The number of graduations (14 of a possible 17) was high and, as in the previous year, attendance and engagement measures were promising (40 students maintained at least 70% attendance). Vocational training, apprenticeship and traineeship commencements were also promising, yet students' capacity to complete their vocational training was uneven. This was partly due to difficulties in adjusting to what was, for many, an alien VET environment. It is clear that such formal results tell only a partial story of attainments. The program's value cannot be fully understood without reference to the informal outcomes that emerged: students' improved outlooks, confidence, renewed interest in education, and improved emotional wellbeing.

Scale: A successful inaugural year (2010) led to the expansion of the program in mid 2011. This was prompted by the previous year's promising results and a consequent increase in philanthropic support. Many students took time to adjust to higher numbers, as did

the staff who had little time to prepare for daunting teaching and/or wellbeing support duties. Although the program stabilised, the experience provided a cautionary reminder of the fragility of relationships in such settings, of the importance of stability, and also of the difficulties in catering for complex needs when resources are limited.

Scope: The program continued to supplement the provision of the highly valued years 11–12 VCAL with wellbeing support for students who were experiencing considerable hardship. An important lesson from the 2011 experience was that the BSL needs to better prepare students for life beyond the program. There is also a need to consider how to assist former students who wish to maintain links with the program.

Ethos and expectations: The expansion of the program and the consequent increase in the range of student needs highlighted the need for more clarity about expectations, priorities and the principles that inform the program. Direction on how to strike a balance between providing wellbeing support and pursuing high academic outcomes will enable staff to better deal with often very difficult circumstances. Similarly, a better understanding of students' expectations will help set behavioural boundaries, as well as to clarify students' entitlements.

Findings

Student engagement and wellbeing

Among the students' most pressing needs on entering the program were sustained and effective pastoral support, stability, respect and safety. Students reflected on the way their outlooks subsequently changed: typically from being 'constantly angry' to being more content. Students also developed great respect for program staff. Many spoke of the program as a 'family'.

The students' needs were complex and did not always become apparent until well after commencement. In responding to problems including excessive drug and alcohol consumption, staff were stretched to their limits. Hence, effective and specialist wellbeing assistance, within a supportive, non-judgemental setting, is essential to meeting such needs.

There is a growing realisation that resilience building is integral to the program—particularly for the younger (intermediate) students—and that this may be a necessary precondition for academic success. Thus, resilience building may at times need to take precedence over progression through the VCAL curriculum and assessment.

Teaching and learning

Staff and students reported improvement in literacy and numeracy levels. Peer support was a feature of the program, as was a pedagogy informed by 'adult' and 'applied' learning principles, as well as integrated learning and negotiation.

Formal attainments do not convey the full story of what students gain from participation, or the extent to which these are related to informal outcomes such as improved confidence and the capacity to plan and make decisions.

Staff found it difficult to develop their teaching skills because the distinctive nature of their work meant there were no obvious professional standards against which to measure their performance. Curriculum development and professional development are both essential, but can only be achieved if time and resources are available.

Team teaching can be challenging in any context, let alone in one concerned with high-needs students. The unconventional setting made it even more difficult for staff in the CVCAL to come to terms with teaching in pairs and the need to reconcile differing temperaments, philosophies, expectations and teaching styles.

Vocational pathways: applied learning, post-program support

Vocational education and training (VET) posed significant challenges, particularly for the younger students. They had difficulty adjusting to VET's emphasis on self-reliance within a trainer-centred learning context, removed from the BSL setting. This led CVCAL staff to believe that time would be better spent on intensive literacy or numeracy education, and/or in apprenticeships or traineeships in preferred occupations, than on low-level certificate courses with registered training organisations.

The students' lack of readiness for VET, and training providers' inability to adequately cater for the young people's needs, meant that CVCAL staff engaged in time-consuming consultations with students to find the most suitable and realistic training options.

The collaboration between staff at the BSL-CVCAL and those at training organisations improved in 2011, though closer collaboration is necessary to ensure students' overall wellbeing is monitored and their learning needs are met in both settings.

On completion of the VCAL, students need intensive preparation for their search for work. Catering for former students who have yet to find work or suitable further training is thus a looming issue, but also poses organisational and resource allocation challenges.

Workforce issues

Although the staff were committed, enthusiastic and proud of their students' progress, they nevertheless experienced the program as a 'pressure cooker'. Interviewees called for an enhanced staff induction process, as nothing they had read or heard prior to commencement—or during their teacher training—had prepared them for the intense pastoral care demands associated with the program.

Compared with 2010, there was greater staff specialisation, with roles assigned to those most adept at meeting students' specific needs in relation to careers guidance and VET coordination.

The presence of a wellbeing officer had a very positive impact on the program, with student feedback overwhelmingly positive. In many respects the wellbeing officer insulated staff from much stress, although there were limits to the officer's capacity to absorb tensions.

Regular meetings about curriculum development and wellbeing, and for one-on-one supervision, were

introduced. These helped to improve morale and staff wellbeing. However, more support for staff is needed, and this may entail access to specialist external counselling where appropriate.

Administration

The contractual, financial and administrative aspects of relations with partner schools were very complex. Funding arrangements within the DEECD Student Resource Package framework, and the facilitation of payments by partner schools, requires constant attention and recalibration.

Improvements were made to the intake process, though there remains scope for improved 'triage' at the time of enrolment, particularly with regard to identifying the students' social, emotional and physical needs, as well as their literacy and numeracy abilities.

Enrolment of new students now involves an orientation week and a new students' kit, containing letters of introduction and information on housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, and sexual abuse support services.

Program design and challenges

The decision to double the size of the program in mid 2011 was testament to its effectiveness in 2010. However, the expansion presented students, teaching and wellbeing staff, the coordinator and centre management with challenges relating to scale and scope.

An important step in clarifying the focus of the program was taken when the course coordinator finalised the program's future strategy. However, further consultation is needed to clarify expectations of all stakeholders.

Recommendations

Student needs and wellbeing

1. Expand the role of the wellbeing officer to enable more in-house training of teachers on matters relating to welfare support, as well as a more strategic, long-term approach to meeting the students' wellbeing needs.
2. Clarify the scope of the program's services as they relate to former students, and allocate resources accordingly.

Linkages

3. Increase on-site support for the coordinator so as to bolster formal links with partner schools, the regional DEECD office, training organisations, community support networks, parents/carers, and outreach efforts.
4. Enter into discussions with the DEECD—at regional or state level—to find ways of streamlining funding and contractual processes linking the BSL to the DEECD and to explore new funding arrangements that might result in access to 'equity funding' for high-needs students.
5. Build closer relationships with training organisations—particularly TAFEs—in order to improve enrolment, wellbeing, and learning outcomes for CVCAL students undertaking VET subjects. This could build on existing efforts to tailor VET programs specifically for the CVCAL cohort.

Administration

6. Review the intake, enrolment and referral processes so that prospective students' needs and capabilities can be more accurately assessed; and so that practical issues such as eligibility for concession cards can be identified before they hinder student progress.
7. Explore ways to streamline the administrative processes relating to contracts with schools and the handling of the Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS) data. Request permission from the DEECD for BSL control of the VASS data entry.
8. Clarify protocols that guide teachers when they encounter unacceptable behaviours or 'critical incidents'.

Workforce

9. Provide access to skilled, professional debriefing and counselling for staff who are under sustained pressure to cater for complex student needs.
10. Ensure a thorough induction for new teaching staff. Provide a more gradual introduction to teaching and a period in which new employees are briefed about students' needs and backgrounds.
11. To increase staff retention, give greater priority to curriculum and professional development and to career advancement opportunities within the wider BSL.

Conclusion

The 2011 BSL-CVCAL program represented an ambitious phase in the BSL's attempt to cater for the needs of 'at risk' young people in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region. The program experienced some difficulties in coming to grips with growth and catering for up to fifty students. Nonetheless, formal and informal attainments showed that the program is providing a valuable service in a region of significant disadvantage. There remains the challenge of adjusting the program to better align with demand, the needs of students and staff, and the expectations of it.

About the project

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is one of a handful of CVCAL providers in Victoria (at time of writing there existed just twelve across the state). The 2011 BSL-CVCAL program (with its fifty students) represented the second full year provision of VCAL by the BSL. It had evolved from a Taster version in 2009 (catering for fifteen students).

For further information

The full report, *Re-engagement, training and beyond* (PDF file, 367 KB) by George Myconos may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx.

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