



# Developing Independence

Evaluating an educational initiative for young people facing homelessness

Pilots 1 and 2

George Myconos

2014



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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

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## Terms and abbreviations

BSL Brotherhood of St Laurence

CRIL Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning

DI Certificate 1 in Developing Independence, a certificate course developed for those either at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness

ILP Individual Learning Plan

Pilot 1 Developing Independence course when the trainer and students worked together via computer tablets and telephone. Students remained in their existing housing arrangements

Pilot 2 Developing Independence course when delivered in the Education First Youth Foyer on the grounds of the Holmesglen TAFE, Glen Waverley, Melbourne

## Summary

In 2012 the Brotherhood of St Laurence received funding from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Fund to develop, pilot and evaluate a foundation level Certificate 1 in Developing Independence (DI) for young people aged 16–25 who were at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. While applicable to a wide range of vulnerable young people disengaged from or marginally engaged in education, the course was specifically developed as a key component of an innovative learning and supported accommodation program in Victoria known as Education First Youth Foyers. Relatively new to Australia, foyers provide secure accommodation for those facing homelessness, as well as links to vocational training, careers guidance and other supports.<sup>1</sup>

The DI certificate is informed by a strengths-based approach, featuring units of competency and an overall pedagogy designed to assist students to build on existing skills and capabilities. It is designed to support and encourage students to develop a personal vision and plan for the future, and to assist them to negotiate personal and systemic barriers to gaining secure housing and a sustainable livelihood. In so doing it aims to mitigate the risk of future homelessness.

### Purpose of the evaluation

This report presents the key findings of a process evaluation of two distinct pilots of the DI course. The DI certificate course was designed to assist vulnerable young people, especially those at risk of homelessness, to (re)engage in education, training and employment. The first pilot was trialled with 11 young people recruited via homelessness services, and was conducted as an e-learning program using tablet computers with support provided via telephone; the second involved 30 young people and was delivered by the staff at the new foyer on the Holmesglen TAFE campus.

The evaluation of the two pilots was intended to provide independent evidence which would inform the continuing development of the course, including mode of delivery, content, timing and place of delivery. The course design and implementation was intentionally developed as an iterative multiphase process overseen by both a steering committee and an expert advisory committee.

The research questions the evaluation set out to address were:

- What progress can young people make using such variations of the DI model?
- How can such programs effect change in multiple areas?
- What issues need to be considered when attempting to replicate the DI model?
- What recommendations can be made to providers and policy-makers in relation to providing this or a modified version of the certificate?

(Note: an outcomes evaluation will be undertaken following finalisation of course design and implementation).

### The two pilots – characteristics

The first pilot of the course was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence from September to December 2012. Eleven young people were recruited through homelessness agencies. The course

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the foyer concept, and on the initiative led by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Hanover with funding from the Victorian Government, see <<http://www.hanover.org.au/youth-foyers-making-a-difference/>> and <<http://www.bsl.org.au/Services/Young-people/Support-for-school-leavers/Youth-Foyers.aspx>>.

was mainly delivered through the medium of tablet computers and phone interactions with the trainer. The course content was tailored to the experiences and capabilities and life circumstances of each student.

The second pilot was undertaken from June to August 2013 and delivered through collaboration between Holmesglen TAFE, the BSL and Hanover Welfare Services at the site of the new foyer on the TAFE's Waverley campus. A TAFE employed trainer delivered the course, together with the Foyer Youth development workers. Thirty students were recruited from the Foyer. The course content was structured and organised around each student's individual learning plan.

To help assess what might be the most effective future model, each pilot comprised distinct course features and modes of implementation. The pilots differed from each other in terms of flexibility of content, approaches to student-staff interaction, institutional settings and students' time commitment. In contrasting these features, the evaluation sheds light on the optimal conditions for course design and delivery in the future.

The evaluation shows that in order to fully realise the course's considerable potential, future providers must ensure well-resourced, stable institutional frameworks are in place in the chosen setting prior to commencement. They must also be willing to use the flexibility inherent in the course to cater for divergent student needs and capabilities and to adopt a measured approach to the use of new online modes of delivery.

## Key findings

### Outcomes and perceived benefits

- Pilot 1 achieved moderate completion rates, with 4 of its 11 students completing the whole course, and 7 completing one component. This pilot experienced drop-out due to a combination of factors, the most important being difficulty in maintaining contact with young people living in very unstable circumstances and experiencing significant hardship. Another factor was its disconnected 'remote' mode of delivery (computer tablets and telephone) and the trainer's consequent inability to connect with students at times of personal crisis.
- Pilot 2 achieved better completion rates, with 21 of the 30 students completing the course and 9 achieving partial completion. This reflected a supportive institutional framework and more face-to-face engagement between the students, the trainer and Foyer support workers.
- Formal outcomes, as expressed in full or partial course completions, provide only a limited account of the program's overall potential. Students showed development in diverse areas, including personal wellbeing.
- Students in both pilots reported improved levels of motivation and confidence in their goal setting. Trainers and support staff reported great potential in the course's approach to students' appraisal of their own skills and to helping students clarify goals through Individual Learning Plans.

## Course design, preparation and flexibility

- While most DI students had low levels of educational attainment, their capacity, skills and experiences varied. The course design and mode of delivery had to be significantly adjusted to accommodate this diversity. The flexibility of the DI course was a feature in its success with students.
- Use of an online platform via tablet computers for course delivery in Pilot 1 was hampered by operational issues. This negatively impacted on student engagement and efficient course delivery.
- As a result of lessons learnt in Pilot 1, Pilot 2 trialled more limited approaches to online learning and incorporated more structured framework, content and implementation of the Individual Learning Plan
- Ongoing refinement of the course material, and particularly of the Individual Learning Plan, was carried out throughout Pilot 2 to improve its coherence and its appeal to students. The ILP is very important, particularly if the potential of the Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning is to be realised.
- The initiative relied on a foundation level course incorporating a range of life skills and confidence-building elements. For most interviewees across both pilots, this provided an appropriate curriculum framework. For a few, however, the course level was too rudimentary; whilst others found it to some extent intrusive, in so far as it touched on sensitive aspects of personal development and experiences.

## Online delivery

- Relying on unfamiliar online learning technologies proved fraught, particularly during Pilot 1: devices, server arrangements, websites, platforms, staff/student access codes and associated teaching methods were not thoroughly tried and tested prior to use, and this contributed to a level of disengagement.
- While there is no doubt that new communications media can enhance the educational experience, the DI experience suggests that such technologies should play a complementary role to guided face-to-face engagement.

## Recommendations

### Flexibility

- Ensure that the Individual Learning Plans accommodate a wide range of student needs, including personal issues, pre-existing educational attainments and differing skill sets.
- Assess the appropriate pedagogical balance between face-to-face and 'remote' (online) interaction prior to commencement of the course. The ways in which the Individual Learning Plan and accompanying course material are fashioned and utilised should reflect the approach chosen.
- Unless substantially more time is devoted to modifications, and/or familiarising staff and students with its use, abandon the online platform design specifically for the DI. Consider using more accessible online sites (e.g. Wiki, Basecamp, Yammer or Google Groups) designed for the sharing of information by members of a given community.

### Institutional support

- Ensure a stable and DI-friendly institutional framework—comprising enrolment procedures, staff hand-over procedures, practice guides, staff induction kits, reporting and ongoing assessment systems—is in place prior to commencement.
- Establish a review process that enables staff and students to carry out real-time refinements to documentation and supporting course materials, without compromising the overall ethos of the course.
- In recognition of the distinctive nature of the course, and of the needs of its student cohort, ensure that DI trainers and support staff receive ample training prior to its commencement.

### Assessment and data collection

- Implement a progressive outcomes assessment regime that identifies the gains students make over time in both ‘soft skills’ and tangible formal outcomes. This should take account of progressive change, changes apparent at completion and changes apparent at a given post-program point in time.

For all the difficulties encountered, findings suggest that the DI can play a vital role within a foyer context by enhancing a young person’s capacity to engage in further education and employment. It can do so by developing a variety of life skills; and this, in turn, is likely to open up a greater array of opportunities than were previously available.



# 1 Introduction

In 2012 the Brotherhood of St Laurence was funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Fund to develop, pilot and evaluate the foundation skills level Certificate 1 in Developing Independence (DI), designed for young people aged 16–25 who either were at risk of, or were experiencing, homelessness. This course was specifically developed in response to the identified need for an accredited, multidimensional, introductory program for young people participating in community youth support programs. In particular it was developed for use in three new Education First Youth Foyers based in Victoria—integrated student accommodation and learning centres for young people who are homeless or at risk. Relatively new to Australia, but well established in the United Kingdom and Europe, Foyers are designed to provide not only secure accommodation for those facing or experiencing homelessness, but also links to vocational training, careers guidance and other supports, usually for up to two years. The DI initiative coincided with the establishment of Education First Youth Foyers in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria (a process led by Hanover Welfare Services and BSL, in collaboration with the Victorian Government).

The need for a dedicated course to re-engage young people who have disengaged from education, employment and training has been highlighted in research into similar Australian, British and European initiatives (Altena 2010; Mawhinney-Rhoads 2006; Sinatra 2012). These studies emphasised the need for foundational programs that assist young people to develop the confidence and capabilities required to successfully re-engage with education, training and employment. Such programs would address the students' personal issues, establish their personal vision and goals, and recognise and develop the capabilities required for successful re-engagement.

A multiphase, iterative process based on an action research approach was implemented in the development of the DI. This process has been managed by a team led by BSL in collaboration with Hanover Welfare Services, and with oversight from a small steering committee. Course design, content and approaches to mode of delivery have been guided by an advisory committee comprising representatives from the VET sector and the not-for-profit sector. As a product of a process evaluation, this report provides a narrative of events, as well as observations of key components and the contrasting approaches in each setting. It highlights the main issues that prompted changes to the intended model of DI and that will likely shape its future development. This is of particular importance given its imminent introduction to other TAFE settings in 2014 and beyond.

## The pilot settings and student cohorts

Two pilot programs were developed to trial DI with distinct cohorts of young people who were homeless or at risk.<sup>2</sup> The pilots differed in content and modes and timing of delivery, thus providing the project teams and advisory committee with the opportunity to consider the optimum approach.

The evaluation focuses on these pilot programs undertaken between late 2012 and late 2013. Together, the pilots involved 41 students. Table 1.1 provides a profile of each pilot, showing all the contrasting features.

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<sup>2</sup> The evaluation sample is of cohorts one and two of the Education First Foyer's three initial intakes. Cohort three students had not sufficiently progressed through the DI to warrant inclusion.

**Table 1.1 Features of Developing Independence pilot programs**

Features	Pilot 1 (Sept–Dec 2012)	Pilot 2 (Jun–Aug 2013)
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preceded by extensive consultations. The BSL takes the lead in course design and accreditation</li> <li>• Acquisition and trial of tablet computers and IP services</li> <li>• Design and trial of web platform</li> <li>• Trainer-managed referrals from support agencies and enrolments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proceeded concurrently with the establishment of an Education First Foyer and its intake process</li> <li>• Gradual, systematic referral and enrolments process under the auspices of Hanover and Holmesglen TAFE.</li> </ul>
Institutional setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devolved, with arms-length support from the BSL as course provider</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situated within a new, well-appointed facility, with comprehensive but evolving operational framework</li> <li>• Coexisting with TAFE systems and procedures</li> </ul>
Cohort size and needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eleven young people from dispersed locations</li> <li>• Experiencing, or at immediate risk of, homelessness</li> <li>• Relatively low levels of educational attainment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thirty students in situ at the foyer</li> <li>• Experiencing, or at immediate risk of, homelessness</li> <li>• Mixed levels of educational attainment</li> </ul>
Mode of delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One trainer facilitating e-portfolio work via tablets, web platform and, ultimately, phone.</li> <li>• Minimal face-to-face interaction, with most communications occurring out of business hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One trainer with the assistance of multiple Foyer support workers.</li> <li>• Mostly face-to-face, classroom-based interaction in a TAFE/Foyer setting.</li> </ul>

## Multiphase course development

### Evidence of need: research and stakeholder consultation

According to the ABS (2012), the number of people who were homeless on census night in 2011 was 105,237. The 2011 Census also revealed that the rates of homelessness had risen substantially across most of Australia since 2006, with a 20 per cent rise in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Tasmania. It indicated that 60 per cent of people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 35 years, with most of Australia’s homeless young people (12–18 years) living in severely crowded dwellings (56%) or in supported accommodation (28%). There was also a notable rise in the number of young people living temporarily in unfamiliar dwellings, with 14% of those aged 19–24 engaged in ‘couch surfing’.

Previous research into the problem of youth homelessness has shown that viable solutions involve more than the provision of emergency shelter and material relief (Altena et al. 2010; AIHW 2012b; Brechman-Toussaint & Kogler 2010; Sinatra & Eschenauer 2012). Research has underscored the value of accredited, introductory and, above all, flexible programs that help young people to

address diverse personal issues, establish their personal vision and goals, and develop the capabilities required to successfully re-engage with education, training and employment (Ellis et al. 2008; Goldman & La Castra 2000; James 2005; Maillet & O'Brien 2009; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahlner 2006). Research has also pointed to the tendency towards the problem of 'churn': frustrating, seemingly endless and often futile vocational training. This is more likely to affect people who have moved frequently due to homelessness or institutionalisation (Bowman & Lawlor 2010; Roberts & Wignall 2010).

In conceptualising the DI—and the youth foyer model—the BSL and Hanover Welfare Services also considered extensive literature reviews on homeless young people and associated services (Black & Gronda 2011; Buddelmeyer 2012; FaHCSIA 2012; McKenzie 2012; Urbis 2009; VAGO 2013). Subsequent to this scoping research the BSL and Hanover consulted extensively with community and industry organisations, including Holmesglen and Kangan Institutes of TAFE, Berry Street, St. Luke's, Melbourne City Mission, The Ladder, the Real Estate Institute of Victoria, Whitelion, St Kilda Youth Services, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., Youth Express, the Careers Education Association of Victoria, Jobs Australia, Anglicare Western Australia, and Youth Transitions Frankston and Mornington Peninsula.

Concurrent consultations were undertaken with young people, especially those participating in the BSL's education program in Frankston designed to reconnect them with education through the years 11 and 12 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. A focus group with these students took place in December 2011 in order to gain a better understanding of how and why young people might become homeless, their particular needs, and how best to re-engage those who have experienced disrupted education, unstable life circumstances and severe hardship.

This research, and related consultations, identified a gap in the available accredited training courses. Existing foundation and entry-level courses were not designed—in terms of either content or mode of delivery—to re-engage highly disadvantaged and disengaged young people in education and training. Furthermore, they are not sufficiently flexible in their place or mode of delivery or their timeframe, to address the needs of the DI target population. Indeed, the existing courses assume that all young people already have a vision for their futures, as well as the base level of confidence and skills needed to pursue such a vision.

### **Initial course development**

With the assistance of an advisory group, a project manager considered the existing accredited foundation level courses, VET and senior secondary certificates, and other 'life skills' programs provided by the community sector for those looking to re-engage with education and training. The data collected and subsequently analysed formed the basis of a course framework tailored for flexible delivery. This framework was refined for the purposes of formal accreditation. The design canvassed paper-based, face-to-face and online delivery options, with the accredited model—which was to be the first iteration of the DI—tending strongly towards online delivery. Collaboration with online platform designers ensued to create a web interface that was integral to provision in both pilots.

### **Pilot 1**

The first pilot was conducted by the BSL's registered training organisation using a qualified VET trainer under the overall supervision of a project manager. It took place between September 2012 and December 2013 prior to the establishment of the first Education First Youth Foyer. Eleven

young people known to housing support agencies to be living in very precarious circumstances were enrolled. The main purpose of this pilot was to test the efficacy of the broad content areas and to discern the potential of online learning using tablet computers with support by the trainer via telephone.

### **Refinement of materials**

Soon after the completion of Pilot 1, the first Education First Youth Foyer was established. This was the setting for Pilot 2. Using preliminary findings from Pilot 1, the course content, mode and timing of delivery were all refined, with emphasis on the use of an updated and more comprehensive Individual Learning Plan.

### **Pilot 2**

The second pilot was conducted at the Foyer on the Glen Waverley campus of Holmesglen TAFE in Melbourne's east. The DI served as a mandatory course for young people accepted into the Foyer as student residents. A qualified VET trainer (employed by the TAFE), in conjunction with Foyer staff, provided the DI to 30 student residents.

An important function of this pilot was to test its efficacy and compatibility with the Foyer's wider operations.

### **Ongoing development of materials and processes**

The lessons learnt in the preceding phases are to inform ongoing improvements and innovation, particularly in view of the future provision of the DI in other foyers on TAFE campuses. These changes will likely involve materials and processes mentioned in this evaluation, as well as materials in development. These will include the Individual Learning Plan, assessment templates, elective toolkits, practice guides and a trainer manual. Importantly, the development will also involve changes to processes that maximise compatibility between DI course, foyer and TAFE systems and procedures.

### **Course description**

Within the broader Australian Qualifications Framework, the DI is situated at Certificate Level 1. The function of this level of courses is to 'qualify individuals with basic functioning knowledge and skills to undertake work, further learning and community involvement'. Given that many members of the target cohort had experienced disrupted formal education, the course design presents opportunities to improve students' confidence, their sense of self-worth and community engagement.

The Education First Youth Foyers offer their student residents a program that includes four components. These are:

- 1 Developing Independence, with a Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning
- 2 Individual Learning Plan, tailored to each student's capacity, interests and educational goals
- 3 Community and/or collaborative projects
- 4 Post – Developing Independence transitional support

## Developing Independence – competencies

Successful attainment of the DI certificate requires completion of the following five units of competency.<sup>3</sup> Project documentation elaborates on the requirements:

- 1 **Create personal vision:** where the student is required to establish and develop plans for realising their personal vision. This involves identifying personal vision and planning for acquiring personal belongings, establishing stable relationships, accessing independent, secure and safe accommodation, education and training, and gaining employment.
- 2 **Build personal competence:** where the student is required to build the capacity to engage as an effective member of the community. This involves assessing self-esteem, identifying ways of developing healthier lifestyles, assessing personal presentation, planning for personal safety, dealing with change, advocating for themselves, planning for maintaining their own living space and investigating options for addressing personal problems.
- 3 **Develop social competence:** where the student works on areas related to social competence. This includes dealing with others, obtaining assistance from others, sharing personal belongings and communal facilities, helping others and participating in groups and the community.
- 4 **Develop personal language, literacy and numeracy skills:** where the student develops a plan to support their personal vision; one that helps to identify and meet goals related to language, literacy, and numeracy, employment, education and training, and/or community participation.
- 5 **Deal with conflict and stress:** where the student is required to deal with conflict and stress personally and with others. This includes recognising the signs and identifying strategies for dealing with conflict and stress.

In addition, following a guided assessment of their prior ‘informal learning’, student residents are required to ‘Apply informal learning to enhance personal and/or employment capabilities’. To meet this requirement the student residents choose an activity, project or initiative that they may undertake within one of the following parameters:

- narrow range of highly familiar and predictable contexts
- range of familiar and predictable contexts
- range of contexts with some unfamiliar or unpredictable aspects
- range of contexts, most of which involve a number of unfamiliar and/or unpredictable aspects

The DI course was also designed with flexible delivery in mind. Accordingly, the possible methods open to the trainer were one-on-one mentoring and/or coaching arrangements, small and large group engagement, online delivery, delivery in community and work settings, and integration of delivery with other forms of coaching, mentoring and wellbeing support.

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<sup>3</sup> Units of competency describe the skills and knowledge required by a person to work effectively in their industry area. They have been defined and developed by industry and are nationally recognised.

## 2 Methodology

### Design principles

This process evaluation of two implementation pilots is intended to inform the development and refinement of course content, modes of delivery, and processes used in future provision of the DI course. The approach employed uses as its touchstone the program logic provided by those designing and implementing the course (see Appendix 1). The approach to evaluation incorporates the following activities:

- stakeholder input to the evaluation design
- approval by a registered ethics approval committee
- interactive consultations with key stakeholders on operations and achievements
- primary data collection on inputs, outputs and outcomes
- learnings conveyed to inform changes to service delivery and operations.

A detailed account of the issues guiding data collection is contained in the data collection plan (appendix 2). In its broadest terms the process evaluation is guided by the following questions:

- What is happening?
- What is being delivered?
- Are we on the right track?
- What needs to be changed?

The research design is informed by an interpretive approach that values highly the personal and educational experiences of the young participants, as well as the insights of front-line employees who delivered the course. The evaluation sets out to address these specific research questions:

- What progress can young people make using such variations of the DI model?
- How can such programs effect change in multiple areas?
- What issues are at play when attempting to replicate the model in other Foyers?
- What recommendations can be made to providers and policy-makers in relation to providing this, or a modified version, of the certificate?

### Methodological components

This evaluation included semi-structured interviews with students and trainers, and consultations with course developers and key stakeholders, as well as document analysis.

#### Semi-structured interviews

##### Interviewee recruitment

**Pilot 1 students:** Four of the 11 students who participated in Pilot 1 were interviewed (2 males; 2 females). Students were approached directly by the researcher who was provided access to student

contact details. Those interviews were conducted in public places (fast-food outlets and cafes) between September 2012 and February 2013.

**Pilot 1 staff:** The sole Pilot 1 trainer was interviewed in late February, a few weeks after that pilot's conclusion.

**Pilot 2 students:** Ten of a possible 30 Pilot 2 students were interviewed (4 males; 6 females), and these interviews took place in September 2013 at the Education First Foyer in which they resided. Interviews of Pilot 2 students were arranged and scheduled with the assistance of Foyer staff who selected what they regarded as a representative sample.

**Pilot 2 staff:** The sole Pilot 2 trainer was interviewed, as were two Foyer support workers. The latter were part of a team of Foyer staff who worked in tandem with the trainer to help students progress through the course's learning plan.

### Interview analysis

The questions asked of the participants in both pilots were informed by the data collection plan (Appendix 2). Those asked of students were linked to the following themes:

- student background and their referral/introduction to the DI
- student expectations
- course processes and design
- the pace of learning
- the use of online learning and information technology
- the course's components: CRIL and its units of competency, and the ILP
- student relations with the TAFE (Pilot 2)
- perceptions of progress and outcomes.

Variations on the above themes were also covered in interviews with trainers in both pilots and with the Foyer staff. In addition, these employees were questioned on:

- the support provided by the auspice body, including technical support for the online learning component (mainly Pilot 1)
- the suitability of the course for the target cohort
- processes and documentation
- assessment and the approach to discerning progress.

### Consultations

Analysis of interviews and the project documentation was supplemented with field notes taken during consultations with various stakeholders who were not directly linked to course delivery. These include the designer of the course and a BSL program manager who oversaw modifications to course material as it proceeded.

### Document analysis

The evaluation entailed examination of project documentation. Included were course accreditation documents, course descriptions, designs and proposals for the online learning platform and associated set-up documentation, as well as various iterations of the learning plans.

The evaluation draws on available attainment results, including data on enrolments and formal attainments from each pilot. These revealed partial, full and non-completion of the course.

### Limitations

The course was delivered in two very different settings, by different organisations and trainers, and several months apart. Each context presented significant challenges, and these also affected the evaluation. For example, a relatively low number of Pilot 1 students were interviewed because many could not be reached (for reasons such as serious illness or because they were victims of physical abuse, criminal proceedings or eviction).

In Pilot 2, because of the staged entry of student residents into the Foyer, some interviewees' experience of the course extended to barely half the required 180 hours, while others had completed the course or were close to doing so. For this reason, the fourth stage of the course—the pathways-oriented 'Post – Developing Independence' transitional support—does not feature in the report.

Lastly, the researcher relied heavily on staff at the Foyer to select and then provide access to Pilot 2 students. While this assistance helped to overcome a logistical challenge, it is possible that the evaluation was denied a truer representation of the student cohort. Because of these variables, judgements on overall effectiveness are provisional.

### Ethics

The evaluation procedures were approved by the BSL Human Research Ethics Committee which is registered with the National Health and Medical Research Council and works to that council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. All interviewees were presented with a plain language statement and consent form which outlined the research aims as well as their rights to confidentiality and anonymity and to access to the final report. Following BSL convention, the young people interviewed received a small cash payment.



## 3 Pilot 1 findings

### Context

The DI in Pilot 1 was delivered primarily via tablet computers—provided free of charge to the students—and with the use of a tailor-made e-portfolio platform and website. This decision was based largely on a growing awareness of the potential of online technology to improve access to programs, provide education and vocational training, and to strengthen social inclusion for homeless people (Woelfer & Hendry 2009, 2011, 2012).

The commencement of this pilot was preceded by lengthy consultations with specialists on the design, creation and testing of an online platform that would serve as the course's principal site of engagement. This period also saw the trialling of tablet computers and the selection of a suitable internet service provider. All this was the basis of a mode of engagement characterised not by conventional face-to-face engagement, but by online interaction facilitated by a trainer, and at a purpose built website and online platform for storage and exchange of material.

The pilot was conducted by the BSL with young people who were dispersed across the Melbourne metropolitan area. Most of the 11 students enrolled were either experiencing homelessness, or were at imminent risk of homelessness. They also had quite low levels of educational attainment.

### First steps

Recruitment of students for Pilot 1 was to some extent ad hoc, involving contact with agencies supporting very vulnerable young people. It is likely that this process resulted in the enrolment of students who were not ideally suited to the course. The Pilot 1 trainer observed:

we have ended up with some students who, right from the outset, were just incapable of actually completing

This comment suggests that the DI, designed ostensibly for a range of vulnerable young people, may in fact be suited to a narrower cohort than envisaged by its designers. Key factors at play here were students' minimal existing educational attainments, commitments to other activities or even employment, and personal hardship. The latter concerns came to pose a particular challenge to the Pilot 1 delivery of the DI, with reasons given for drop-out including serious illness and hospitalisation, the experience of domestic violence, imprisonment and unanticipated eviction.

In the preparatory stages of Pilot 1, relatively little time was devoted to the trainer's induction. This meant that his understanding of the course's aims, its structure, and mode of delivery evolved slowly. To this extent preparation for Pilot 1 was inadequate.

Other factors—mostly unforeseen—also contributed to a rocky start for Pilot 1: the departure of senior staff overseeing the pilot and a consequent lapse in communication with the designers of the online platform. While the trainer succeeded in building a rapport with his DI students, his capacity to adapt the course to meet their needs was compromised, particularly in these initial stages. The trainer was tested mostly by the students' quite pressing needs. He reflected:

Some of these stories have taken me by surprise. Look, I have worked in, you know, as a counsellor in a church context where I have heard some awful stuff, but some of these stories at their age are heart-breaking; it is heart-breaking (Pilot 1 trainer).

## Online interaction

Delays in establishing a stable technological environment combined with the above-mentioned enrolment and staff induction issues to complicate delivery of the course, at least in terms of the intended mode and timeframe. So too did the students' varying levels of computer literacy. The Pilot 1 trainer observed, 'to give them a tablet and believing that they know how the tablet actually works, I found quite flawed'. Exacerbating these issues were minor problems such as students opting to use their own, often unreliable, email accounts in preference to those provided, and poor internet coverage in regions where some students resided.

Soon after commencement it became apparent that the online platform was of little use to the Pilot 1 students, and they were left to interact directly with the trainer. This meant little or no group interaction and, it would seem, resulted in a degree of confusion. The students' hesitancy was compounded by the decision not to have student meetings for instruction in using the technology or for discussion about collaboration in general. As one student commented:

Yeah, I thought we were going to have like a meeting where I got to meet like all the other people doing the tablet course. And it was my understanding from the beginning of the course that we would be talking a lot more with everyone else that was in the course ... I'd thought there'd be a little bit more connection with everyone else that was doing the course (Pilot 1 female student).

This observation highlights an expectation of, and the need for, face-to-face interaction in learning environments. It serves as a reminder of the pitfalls of an overreliance on computer-mediated learning, particularly when catering for young people living in unstable or challenging circumstances. This experience also confirms research findings emphasising the importance of substantial up-front investment in training and support for teachers/trainers in web-based learning environments, and of initial technical support for students learning how to use the devices and e-portfolio platforms (Miller & O'Neill 2011).

Nevertheless, some Pilot 1 students did find the use of tablet devices beneficial as they were able to progress through the course at times of their own choosing, albeit in direct contact with the trainer and not via the online platform. This was the case for two students who found employment soon after commencing the DI, and who were able to continue the course outside business hours rather than drop out. However, given the summer heat and long, sometimes difficult working hours (one as a panel beater), these students were only able to muster the energy needed to address each task in the late evening. At that time access to the Pilot 1 trainer was intermittent at best. This posed problems for all concerned, not least for the trainer:

[The] students' timeframes are totally different to mine. You know, I have grown up and worked in a workforce where you worked a nine to five day. Working with this cohort, it starts at four to eleven, kind of thing. Most of them if you ring them early in the morning they are still in bed. (Pilot 1 trainer)

This observation touches on the recurring issues for Pilot 1. One was the capacity of the trainer who was trained to teach mainly in face-to-face settings to deliver a new course via an untried method. Another concerns the diversity of the cohort and the provider's limited capacity to support the trainer in his attempts to cater for all students' needs and circumstances.

Computer-mediated interaction was also less effective than hoped during Pilot 1 because students were unable to gain clarification about tasks when most needed. Again, this points to some

limitations of online learning when divorced from face-to-face interaction. The trainer's comments convey some of these limitations, particularly as they impact on pedagogy:

I think people grow in direct proportion to the level of relationship that they have with the other students and with the person who is facilitating the course. It was much more difficult to create that sense of relationship—for me it was much more difficult. I ended up resorting, rather than using the tablets, to the phone. I believe that e-learning has its place but I see e-learning as a support mechanism, not *the* mechanism. (Pilot 1 trainer)

One stark example of how an overreliance on online interaction can fail the student was when a student was evicted from his temporary abode and was forced to endure days of real uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, this compromised the student–trainer relationship and led to non-completion.

Pilot 1 was ambitious in its chosen approach to student interaction. For the young participants it fell short of expectations because it lacked an effective means of bonding the student cohort. The importance of combining the physical with the 'virtual' was made evident, and this has been noted in research into how information technologies were used elsewhere to mitigate homelessness. While acknowledging the great potential of such technologies connecting homeless young people to support agencies, such research stresses the importance of a common physical setting from which web-based interactions can be facilitated (Woelfer & Hendry 2009, 2011, 2012).

The Pilot 1 experience has also resonated with research exploring assumptions about young people's computer literacy. Focusing on the extent to which those living on the street or in youth shelters accessed and used such technology, Karabanow and Naylor (2010) noted that many street youth surveyed reported using computers on a daily basis (at libraries, shelters, or at 'learning and employment centres'), but not all were literate in the use of such technologies. Access alone does not guarantee meaningful interaction, and these findings were affirmed by the DI Pilot 1 experience.

Previous BSL research on online learning has also emphasised the importance of tailoring the learning environment to clients' diverse needs, circumstances, and abilities (Simons 2013, Myconos 2013). This Pilot 1 experience, alongside such research, provides a cautionary note against an overreliance on new communication technologies, and the assumption that students/clients will acquire the requisite skills without substantial face-to-face support.

## Teaching and learning

### Component 1: Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning (CRIL)

Pilot 1 students reacted positively to the way they were assessed for the CRIL. This core component was designed to elicit from students, and to help them recognise, the informal skills they had acquired previously, and to then use that information as the raw material needed to build confidence and strategies leading towards stability and employment.

Students' responses to this aspect of the DI suggest that the strengths-based approach underpinning the CRIL, as well as the entire course, resonated with students:

I liked it when people asked me those questions because ... it reminds me about what I'm capable of doing ... Which is good for me because sometimes I forget and I underestimate myself and then, when I just think about some of the things that I've done, I remember that I'm actually capable of doing a lot more than what I thought I was (Pilot 1 female student).- [the CRIL] gave us a perspective of where we want to go ... when we first started we didn't

know what the hell we wanted to do, but now ... after doing some research I know what I want to do [business admin]. For the meantime I want to save up and get a car (Pilot 1 female student).

Just talking about it can bring up more ideas as well. You come up with ideas about things like you never even knew you wanted to do. (Pilot 1 male student)

These statements point to the importance during Pilot 1 of encouragement, helping students to clarify aims and to explore their potential with the assistance of a DI trainer and fellow students. They underscore the value of strategies that help students navigate the immediate future, as well as the importance of providing the means to enhance their sense of empowerment, planning, and goal setting.

For his part, the Pilot 1 trainer reflected on the CRIL as a stage in the course that required him to delve quite deeply into the students' backgrounds, and then helped him to establish realistic expectations.

I think that [the CRIL] is a great initiative. That gave me some insights into the students' backgrounds ... I have heard some amazing like deep, you know, the recognition for informal learning and then the ongoing information that has unfolded out of that and how deep that has actually got ... what I am actually identifying [now] is how to classify success.

This comment suggests that the CRIL did indeed play an effective role in Pilot 1. However, given the Pilot 1 experiences of interaction via online media, it is likely that the CRIL alone could not meet the educational needs of the students, particularly those who have experienced quite severe hardship.

## Component 2: the Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

Used as a guide for students for almost two-thirds of the course, the ILP was to help students establish educational, personal, and career goals. The plan was intended to familiarise students with relevant courses, services, and networks that might help them reach their goals.

Little can be said of the ILP in an account of the Pilot 1 experience of the DI course. This is because the commitment to online delivery ultimately came at the cost of developing the ILP documentation, which remained in draft form.

In the absence of an ILP the Pilot 1 trainer improvised, adapting the course requirements according to the level of access—online or by phone—possible with each student. This arrangement led to ad hoc and personalised interactions where the trainer emphasised trust-building and encouragement. Students responded positively to this:

[The trainer] was really good because I didn't feel like he was being condescending at all. And I have a really big issue with that. Like I can't deal with a lot of teachers. I mean I didn't finish mainstream high school, because one of my biggest problems was feeling like every teacher was being condescending and kind of putting themselves above me ... And what I liked about the course was that no-one made me feel like that at all. (Pilot 1 female student)

The importance of such an approach cannot be overstated, given that real or perceived belittling by teachers is a major contributing factor to disengagement (Myconos 2011, 2012). These views

reflect not only the resentment many students feel, but cannot always articulate, about social inequality, but also a rejection of conventional modes of education where ‘chalk and talk’ prevails.

### Component 3: Collaborative activities

Some attempts were made to foster collaboration among the students, but they faltered: not only did the physical distance between students militate against collaboration, but so too did technical problems with the online platform and tablet computers. In addition, Pilot 1 students were dealing with the reality of homelessness with minimal institutional support, at least from the Pilot 1 provider. Under these conditions the trainer assessed the students for the relevant competencies on the basis of submitted work, and on the basis of extended telephone or email dialogue. This arrangement was not anticipated, and was less than ideal.

### Outcomes and perceived benefits

As noted very little time has elapsed since the initial trials of the DI, and so we are denied information about post-program outcomes. Apart from two students who attributed gaining employment to the course, the main recorded ‘hard’ outcomes are in the form of whole course and/or unit of competency completions. Attainment rates for Pilot 1 show that all those who enrolled completed the CRIL, and that most subsequently proceeded through the course’s five areas of learning.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 3.1 Pilot 1 enrolments and completions**

Enrolments	Partial completion (CRIL only)	Full completion (CRIL+)
11	7	4

Of the seven Pilot 1 students who failed to complete, two dropped out of the course after finding employment, two were hospitalised, one was imprisoned and one was evicted from their place of residence.

Although the following views were not typical, some Pilot 1 students credited the course with producing quite surprising outcomes. When asked whether they were pleased to have participated in the course, one of a pair of students responded:

Well, we both got jobs, for one ... it made us more motivated, because if we want to get where we want to be in the future, then we have to save up money for a start; move out of home ... we need money to do that. (Pilot 1 female student)

When pressed about making such a strong causal link between the DI and their positive employment outcome, the interviewees elaborated:

Well, I kinda think that if I didn’t do it I wouldn’t have had the confidence and the knowledge to get a job on my own. (Pilot 1 male student)

It’s given me a broad perspective. I’ve got a job out of it [fast food outlet]. I know where I want to be in life; I know what I want to do. (Pilot 1 female student, cited above)

<sup>4</sup> Create personal vision; build personal competence; develop social competence; develop personal language, literacy and numeracy skills; deal with conflict and stress.

While difficult to quantify, improved confidence was a recurring theme in students' feedback, and its importance cannot be overstated. And, surprisingly, in Pilot 1 the mere possession of tablet computers appeared to enhance some students' confidence:

my confidence went up ... I could always use [the tablet] if I wanted to learn something, or do something ... being able to use it to talk to people on Facebook opened up a whole new area for me like suddenly just talking to more of my friends more often ... whereas before I didn't, because I didn't have a phone for a very long time. I couldn't really do that. (Pilot 1 female student)

So, even though online delivery via tablet computers and a dedicated web platform posed its challenges, there were benefits. The above comment lends weight to research findings that link digital and social inclusion, and goes some way to explaining the importance to young people of social connectedness and the ways in which relatively simple innovations—technological and programmatic—can improve one's sense of wellbeing (Woelfer & Hendry 2009, 2011, 2012).

## Lessons from Pilot 1

The Pilot 1 experience provided those preparing the DI's second incarnation with a number of lessons. These can be distilled into the following key points:

- Testing untried systems prior to implementation is imperative.
- Engaging hard-to-reach and highly vulnerable young people is possible, but much relies on building strong interpersonal relations and on providing institutional support.
- Engagement is most effective when multiple modes of interaction are employed.
- Effective induction of staff is imperative.
- Young people are receptive to training that helps them identify and appreciate their skills, and identify goals and pathways to attaining those goals.

## 4 Pilot 2 findings

### Context

Beginning in June 2013, Pilot 2 was located at the newly established Education First Foyer on the campus of the Holmesglen TAFE. The DI was an integral part of the Foyer's intake process and involved the very first group of young residents, all of whom had been facing homelessness. At the time of interviewing, 30 students had enrolled in the DI. Among them were a few with relatively high educational attainments (senior secondary and even ongoing tertiary) and this was a contrasting feature of the two pilots. Also, since Pilot 2 took place within purpose-built educational and residential facilities, a far greater emphasis was placed on face-to-face interaction.

### First steps

Compared with Pilot 1, the recruitment of students for Pilot 2 was more systematic. This was due largely to the advance planning for the Foyer—much of which proceeded with the assistance of Hanover Welfare Services and Holmesglen TAFE staff—and to the fact that prospective residents were obliged to undertake a component of the DI (the Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning, or CRIL) as a condition of their acceptance into the Foyer.

The Foyer's intake process almost certainly played an important role in preparing those who progressed to the DI to undertake the course. Indeed, by the time the Pilot 2 students commenced the DI they had undergone a comprehensive, multi-stage process comprising the TAFE and support agencies' referrals, Foyer 'Initial Fit' and 'Initial Readiness', and 'Group Activity' assessments. To varying degrees each of these required the prospective DI student to reflect on issues that would later feature in the DI course: goals, aspirations, planning, life skills. Thus, Foyer readiness also implied DI readiness.

The Pilot 2 student cohort was diverse. Among those interviewed were a newly arrived refugee, still coming to grips with the English language; a young person with service sector management experience; a second-year university student majoring in human rights; another studying to be a lab technician; several students enrolled in VCE, VCAL<sup>5</sup> and TAFE courses; and others employed casually in retail, hospitality and elsewhere. Perhaps the only common factors were the experience of homelessness or precarious housing, and age.

This pilot was overseen by a principal trainer—employed jointly by the TAFE and the Foyer—who worked in tandem with Foyer support workers. Although all the Pilot 2 staff were inducted as part of the establishment of the Foyer—and were thus familiar with the DI and its aims—there were at times difficulties establishing effective lines of communication between the TAFE-based trainer, the Foyer student residents and the youth support workers. One obstacle to better communication was the differing working schedules of the trainer and the support workers. Indeed, the main challenges facing those preparing for Pilot 2 included how to provide the course within overlapping institutional settings: the TAFE, with its established processes, staffing arrangements, compliance frameworks and culture; and a stand-alone facility such as an Education First Foyer with its own, often different, workday schedules and arrangements.

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<sup>5</sup> The senior secondary, years 11–12 certificates: the Victorian Certificate of Education, and its 'applied' counterpart, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

## Online interaction

Mindful of the problems encountered in Pilot 1, those participating in the Foyer-based Pilot 2 modified the online learning and communication framework. The decision was made to use laptops, not tablet computers, and to rely less on online interaction. Students accessed network technology situated at the Foyer (with internet provided by the TAFE), and engaged face-to-face with peers, the trainer and Foyer support staff. Over time, the reliance on online interaction diminished even more than anticipated.

Though laptops were distributed to Pilot 2 students, they were supplementary rather than integral aids to learning. The change was also prompted by the students' reticence to engage with the online platform. Though design issues had been addressed just before Pilot 2, the students balked at using the platform and its website, favouring instead a more face-to-face, small-group based, approach to learning. The Pilot 2 trainer recounted this episode:

I asked 'Has anybody had a go [using the DI website]?' And they said 'Oh yeah, we just looked at it' and I said 'Is it because it is too difficult?' They said 'No, we would much rather come and do something with other people' ... They would rather do something with somebody and so that is interesting that they feel like there is more to be gained and perhaps it feels easier as well. To come and do some activities and participate in something rather than have to sort of go on your own bat and go onto this online component.

When asked about their preferences in relation to online learning, many Pilot 2 students said that they would prefer to first engage in classroom interaction before turning to a device to exchange ideas. The following observation shows a student's preference for face-to-face learning, a view that was echoed by many others:

... you can't really learn everything from a computer and you can't absorb it. Things get into my head better if someone is speaking it, rather than me just reading it all, and [it helps] to have other people around me learning the same thing. And it's easier to pay attention as well because it's so easy for me to get distracted when I'm just in my room trying to do my homework. Then I end up on YouTube watching cat videos or something for two hours. (Pilot 2 female student)

Whereas the main obstacles to the effective use of online technology during Pilot 1 were technical, it seems that adjustments in Pilot 2 were prompted by issues of pedagogy and the capacity to offer an alternative, more personal mode of interaction. This pilot was thus able to strike a balance between the virtual and the physical.

## Teaching and learning

### Component 1: Certificate of Recognition of Informal Learning (CRIL)

The Pilot 2 trainer concurred with her Pilot 1 counterpart, pointing to the opportunity provided by the CRIL—which was a precondition for acceptance as a Foyer resident—to build relationships within the learning environment. She described the CRIL as

very powerful ... [and] the young people often walk away feeling quite buoyant because, all of a sudden, it has been summarised. Perhaps they have been told by their sort of standardised education experience that they are failing, that they are not good enough. They are walking away with this 'Well, actually I have got quite a body of experience'.



A few students in Pilot 2 experienced the CRIL as a somewhat perfunctory process, and this may have compromised its effectiveness. Extenuating circumstances should be noted here, including the complex organisational challenges encountered when establishing the Foyer within the grounds and administrative framework of the TAFE. Another complication was the new and constantly evolving Foyer intake process. Given that the CRIL was a component of the intake process, modifications impacted on the timing of the course. An unanticipated spike in DI enrolments also meant that Pilot 2 staff were not always able to devote the time needed to realise the full potential of the CRIL.

However, most Pilot 2 interviewees felt that the CRIL produced the foundation for the remainder of the course. Pilot 2 students observed that the CRIL helped build a solid relationship in which the trainer was able to better appreciate the young person's experiences, skills and potential. Some felt that without an effective CRIL subsequent course components would have been superficial 'tick box' exercises. A DI student who was also undertaking tertiary education observed:

[the CRIL] was definitely beneficial for people in [the Foyer] with these backgrounds ... life skills come before academic skills and to acknowledge that, it sort of gives them something to work off—some skills that they already have that they can work into some other part of life, that they can base those on—instead of just assuming they have no skills because they don't have any qualifications, which isn't really fair for a lot of people who have been through homelessness at the age of sixteen and they haven't really had a chance yet. (Pilot 2 female student)

Not only do these views endorse the CRIL, but they point to the interplay between life skills education, applied learning and academic skills development. They also underscore the point that the DI course (and the Foyer itself) involved young people with diverse backgrounds, attributes and interests.

## Component 2: the Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

The ILP also played a vital role in Pilot 2, with the plan's later incarnations in particular—following amendments made by a BSL program manager in consultation with the TAFE trainer and Foyer staff—providing a comprehensive roadmap for the remainder of the course. In practice, an ILP workbook enabled the Foyer staff to work in tandem with the DI trainer to assist students' progression.

The ILP engaged Pilot 2 students with six key themes, or 'offers': education, career development, positive health, positive relationships, community engagement and independent living. Students' responses to prompts relating to each of these themes were recorded in the ILP; and these in turn were used in classroom discussions to broaden understanding, exchange experiences and hone strategies.

Interviewees were asked about the ILP's design, coherence, suitability and capacity to stimulate. Students liked its design and particularly the way it provided multiple starting points—an important feature given rolling enrolments. To this extent the ILP provided a framework to engage those who were part of a small community in flux. Pilot 2 students also saw merit in the way the ILP provided a guide to consider their present and future situations in a positive and productive light:

[It's] focused ... around future motives and what's going to help motivate you to achieve those goals rather than dwelling on things that have happened and I think that's sort of looking up instead of looking back ... It stops people from thinking about the trauma or the negative situations that have made them end up in a place like this and it starts making

them think about things that they want to achieve and things they want to do that's positive and could end them up in success or things like that. (Pilot 2 male student)

Though the majority of those interviewed in Pilot 2 gave positive feedback about the ILP, some pointed to shortcomings. Two students were concerned with what they felt were negative assumptions underlying some ILP prompts. In particular, they were sensitive to being characterised as 'tragic victims', lacking agency. The sentiment was expressed thus:

It's like this place expects us to be completely messed up beyond belief and so that's why my learning plan goes for five minutes because [the support worker] just pretty much opens up my book and goes 'Have you experienced family violence?' And I say 'No'. And the only questions after that are 'How do you get through this? What references do you have to overcome this and this, and this?' It's like the learning plan is expecting the worst of me. (Pilot 2 female student)

Similarly, two Pilot 2 students expressed resistance to questions that they felt were too close to the bone, and that assumed they would be willing to disclose raw and painful experiences. They commented on the number of questions that dwelt too long on things that had not gone well in their lives. Questions that delved into a student's personal disposition were not accepted uncritically. One student felt that even the questions phrased positively drew attention to presumed shortcomings in the student's personality.

Notwithstanding the positive response to the CRIL—designed as it was to identify and recognise informal learning 'attainments'—some students felt that ILP discussion and activities did not always give due regard to the life skills they had gained before entry into the Foyer. These skills included the ability to budget, to undertake complicated dealings with bureaucracies, to navigate difficult challenges, and to maintain complex and supportive relationships within their immediate or extended networks.

Given the diverse range of student experiences and backgrounds, it is perhaps no surprise that some felt that the ILP underestimated their abilities and aspirations. When asked how the plan might be improved in this respect, one Pilot 2 female student offered the following:

Maybe if it was increments of difficulty so that some people who were capable of more could choose to do more and then that would be recognised as a higher qualification or something. A Cert. 2 instead of a Cert. 1 or something like that. It [needs to be] not just a theoretical learning skills thing, [but] the practical application of those skills as well.

In terms of the ILP's flexibility, those teaching in Pilot 2 felt that it enabled them to adopt a personalised approach. They were thus able to better tailor the course material to fit each student's needs and pace of learning. Staff came to see the plan less as a blueprint, and more as an aid: as one trainer noted, 'I think it is important not to be beholden to the learning plan ... it is just a tool to facilitate organic conversation'. Staff were aware that both the format and the content of the ILP were evolving and that ongoing adjustments were necessary in this developmental stage.

Some of it's very useful ... 'Character strengths' and 'learning styles' has been really useful with some of my young people, because they didn't identify their learning strengths whatsoever ... I think they found that looking at it from that perspective helpful ... I just think in parts it still feels like it's a work in progress. (Pilot 2 youth worker)

The need for ongoing modification may suggest that life skills development within a very compartmentalised, competency-based VET framework may be difficult. For more immediate and

practical purposes, the above comments show that the plan is, and perhaps should be, a living document that changes according to the learner's needs. Importantly, the overall ethos of the ILP resonates, with one student observing:

... this is the first time I've been in any type of education or course that involves making independence such, you know, recognised. Like, people would just think independence is, you know, nothing, but putting it in a course and saying it is something, that's what makes this course so unique. Like, my first time doing this course and I'm still like, whoa, they're actually saying this course is actually important. People have to take this course ... It's a unique experience for sure. (Pilot 2 male student)

Lastly, Pilot 2 staff noted that frequent interruptions meant that they were unable to progress through the plan at the desired pace. These interruptions were often caused by other pressing issues (e.g. the need to attend to urgent student welfare matters). Consequently, keeping to the overall course schedule via the ILP was not always possible. Importantly, interruptions at times led to some confusion among students over the timeline for completing the course.

### Component 3: Collaborative activities

Challenges specific to the Foyer context also proved problematic for the 'collaborative activities' component of DI. These included the hectic activity involved in establishing the Foyer, which inevitably affected trainers and support staff; attending to Foyer-TAFE administrative problems; and the need to allow time for the student residents to acclimatise to their new environment. For these reasons those overseeing the DI during Pilot 2 made running adjustments to this component.

Changes resulted in group collaboration being contained within a classroom setting, using what came to be known as 'the DI sessions'. Provided on the TAFE campus in the evening mid-week, these made it possible for the Pilot 2 trainer to explore further the ideas recorded in the ILP by students in conjunction with their Foyer support worker. This modification served a number of purposes. According to the trainer,

I have actually kept [the sessions] pretty much free of what you would call standard writing and reading kind of tasks. They really are more about brainstorming, talent sharing, developing and sharing ideas with your peers in a safe, facilitated space ... In doing it this way where we run a six-week cycle of sessions and then we start again, if you miss one, or you move into the Foyer midway through a cycle, you can join in anytime and complete the six sessions.

One student commented on the flexibility afforded by the sessions, and her comments also bring to mind the importance of accommodating rolling enrolments and a cohort in constant flux:

I think it's good that it's sort of got a cyclic nature because it's basically one to six or so weeks of different topics. And if you're coming in, like if you've moved in in week three, you could start that week and then after week six, you do the one and the two, so you could come in and start at any point and it will just rotate back around to the things that you had missed. So it was good in that respect that people can just start as soon as they come. (Pilot 2 female student)

Overall, the Pilot 2 trainer was able to adapt so that pedagogical coherence was maintained, in spite of significant challenges. Feedback suggests that the various components of the course, from the CRIL, the ILP and these DI sessions, were effectively linked.

## Outcomes and perceived benefits

As in Pilot 1, all students in Pilot 2 completed the CRIL; however, a much greater proportion proceeded to complete the course’s five areas of learning. This was no doubt due to the fact that the Pilot 2 students benefited from the Foyer’s wrap-around support, support that was absent in Pilot 1.

**Table 4.1 Pilot 2 enrolments and completions**

Enrolments	Partial completion (CRIL only)	Full completion (CRIL+)
30	9	21

Of the nine Pilot 2 students who failed to complete the course, five exited the Foyer mid-course, while four did not engage with the course beyond the CRIL/Foyer intake, or did not submit the required amount of work within the course timeframe.

Pilot 2 students valued intangible, informal and even ephemeral outcomes. These included the opportunity to develop coherent goals, to ‘take the first step’, become motivated, learn how to develop and adopt a plan, learn about the significance of independence, enjoy security and stability, and develop social skills. Such views were expressed even by those who had found fault with the course design and delivery. The following account from one student is illustrative:

... once somebody speaks out about what they’re going to do in the future, it gets you thinking ... about what you’re going to get in the future, what you’ve got to do to get it. So all these thoughts get into your head in this class [and] like, it always does. (Pilot 2 male student)

Others spoke of how the course had enabled them to plan, and how that had in turn enabled them to build relationships and face future challenges with more confidence. Asked what he saw emerging from the course, a student for whom English was a second language responded (in faltering English):

This course has helped me to be strong. So you can use strength for many things in life, for education, to be strong. Strong—which means relationships with your friends, you have to be strong, and in life there’s some challenges where you’ll have to be strong. (Pilot 2 male student)

The importance of being able to identify and set goals was also a recurring theme in interviews. While the identification of one’s goals may be an unusual outcome category—particularly given that the realisation of a goal cannot be guaranteed—students saw this as integral to their DI experience. Some students spoke enthusiastically about progress:

I think it’s important to have a goal or many goals for that matter. It’s good to have ambition. It’s good to really try and visualise what you want out of your life because, you know ... who is [it] that said we only live one life? You might as well make the most of it. (Pilot 2 female student)

Many of the outcomes cited here—as well as in the Pilot 1 experience—relate to progressive change and a transformation of ‘outlook’, as well as an expansion of what seems possible. This, it should be noted, is affirmed by a growing recognition that homeless and disadvantaged learners require ‘soft entry’ options (e.g. drama, building self-confidence and personal goal setting) that can act as stepping stones toward more vocational objectives.

## 5 Conclusion

The principal concern of this report has been an evaluation of the DI course in two settings from September 2012 and continuing into mid 2013. The findings shed light not only on the potential of the next incarnation of the DI course but also on the pitfalls that might confront those planning to provide the course elsewhere. Its findings are also of importance to those looking to utilise such foundation level courses to address the needs of disadvantaged groups.

From participant feedback and attainment data it is clear that the initiative experienced difficulties, some of which might have been anticipated. These related particularly to the ambitious use of online technologies as the principal mode of delivery (Pilot 1), and trialling an innovative program in a new institutional setting that was only gradually taking shape (Pilot 2). Importantly, it was evident that the difficulties prompted reflection that informed ongoing evolution of the course. This responsiveness is manifest in:

- a more measured approach to the use of online learning and associated technologies
- the acknowledgement of the importance of face-to-face interactions
- the provision of more interpersonal and institutional support for students
- ongoing improvements to program documentation.

For all the difficulties encountered, feedback also suggests that a course of this kind can play a vital complementary role to initiatives such as Education First Foyers that are aimed at mitigating homelessness and enhancing a young person's capacity to engage in further education and employment. The course can do this by enhancing students' capacity to play an active role in decision-making about their education, employment, and housing. It can do so also by developing a variety of life skills; and this, in turn, may open up a greater array of opportunities than were previously available.

## Appendix A Developing Independence project logic

Subject and context	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people 16–24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness</li> <li>• Engaging in learning opportunity from an individual learner perspective</li> <li>• Impact on the learner to move into a positive learning space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certificate 1 in Developing Independence</li> <li>• E-portfolio</li> <li>• Tablet technology</li> <li>• Trainer facilitation using technology</li> <li>• Community involvement in community projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three pilot programs run by BSL, Holmesglen TAFE and Kangan TAFE</li> <li>• One-on-one interviews</li> <li>• Development of individual assessment tools</li> <li>• Online engagement to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track progress</li> <li>• Communicate with others</li> <li>• Reflect on goals set and the learning journey</li> <li>• Receive support from trainer</li> <li>• Gather evidence</li> <li>• Use of community project to link participants together</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Assessment completed as part of the community project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certificate 1 in Developing Independence added to the scope of registration for three training providers, with all AQTF compliance requirements met</li> <li>• Trainers at each site identified and prepared to deliver training</li> <li>• Development of individual assessment tasks that can be used as examples in the final handbook</li> <li>• Tablets and the e-portfolio being used to gather evidence of work</li> <li>• Tablets used by learners to develop ICT skills</li> <li>• Online environment used to communicate with others</li> <li>• Community projects identified and completed as part of a group activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each young person is able to articulate a positive learning and employment pathway</li> <li>• Each young person has contributed to a community project</li> <li>• Assessment tasks agreed at the beginning of the course have been assessed effectively</li> <li>• The tablet and e-portfolio technology has been an effective way of engaging young people</li> <li>• The trainers have been able to facilitate the delivery methodology</li> <li>• Online engagement</li> <li>• Facilitating the development and completion of small community projects</li> <li>• Effective transition out of support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The young people have engaged in ongoing education and employment opportunities</li> <li>• 60% of the participants have been able to improve their living arrangements</li> <li>• Interviews with young people indicate that 70% see themselves as socially included</li> <li>• Three more RTOs have the course in their scope for registration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Certificate I in Developing Independence is seen as an enabling course to engage young people in learning opportunities</li> </ul>
				<b>Outcomes and impact re. program development</b>		
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation that informs program improvement</li> <li>• Modified design of replicable model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The course is used to transition young people into Youth foyers</li> <li>• The community sector embraces the YF model for a range of contexts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The YF model is embraced by governments around Australia to mitigate homelessness while providing essential skills to young people</li> </ul>

## Appendix B Developing Independence evaluation: data collection plan 2012–13

<b>PURPOSE</b>		
This evaluation is of the delivery of the Cert 1 Developing Independence component that will form an integral part of the Youth Foyer model for young people. The qualification (180 nominal hours) will complement other services provided in the foyers to young people aged 16–24 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The evaluation will primarily be concerned with gauging the progress that individual students have made over the duration of the course; how the program effected change; the delivery model; and its capacity to be replicated across youth foyers and in other settings.		
<b>FOCUS</b>	<b>INFORMATION SOUGHT</b>	<b>DATA SOURCE</b>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	<b>Indicators, attainments and progress</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrolments, attendance/engagement and absenteeism, graduations</li> <li>• Skills developed and competencies gained</li> <li>• Soft skills, confidence levels, fluency, readiness for further training or work, barriers</li> <li>• Vocational training, employment and other destination</li> <li>• Efficacy of the online component and a reliance on IT in general to stimulate re-engagement and interest</li> <li>• Replication potential</li> </ul>	Students (e-portfolios, interviews) Trainers, coordinator Course assessment data Intake records Online interaction records
	<b>Teaching and learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How were the principles (i.e. the stated pedagogical approach) implemented and what lessons were learnt for wider application?</li> <li>• What was learnt about the most effective methods of teaching in this ‘high needs’ environment?</li> <li>• What problems and challenges were encountered in the trainer–learner relationships?</li> <li>• What complementary support programs were used and/or required?</li> <li>• How was the online component delivered and how effective was the IT support in general?</li> <li>• What challenges were encountered in the individualised assessment process and what can be learnt from these? (from trainer and student perspectives)</li> <li>• What issues were identified relating to recognition of prior learning?</li> <li>• How flexible was the curriculum and how did this manifest?</li> <li>• What judgements can be made about distance, one-to-one and small group learning, and on peer support?</li> </ul>	Students (e-portfolios, interviews) Trainers, coordinator Desktop/secondary research
<b>Scope and delivery</b>	<b>Engagement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were the reasons for enrolment and continuing barriers to learning e.g. access and affordability</li> <li>• How did the students regard the environment, relations with peers and staff?</li> <li>• How did they contrast the learning experience with others they had known?</li> <li>• Were there integration issues with the IT and with the online component in general?</li> <li>• What judgements can be made about the processes for monitoring and identifying wellbeing needs, pastoral care, external assistance, challenges and standards?</li> <li>• Were the referrals appropriate and was intake conducted considering individual needs?</li> </ul>	
	<b>Vocational education and pathway support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What support was needed, and provided, for students approaching completion?</li> </ul>	
<b>Ethos</b>	<b>Workforce issues and administration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How teacher-friendly was the course and did the trainer receive the necessary support?</li> <li>• What skills were necessary for the delivery, and what was learnt about delivery in other settings?</li> <li>• How effective were measures in place to record student details, attendance and attainment records?</li> <li>• What were the issues around AQTF compliance (if any) particularly in developing individual assessment tools?</li> </ul>	Trainers, coordinator Desktop/secondary research
	<b>Principles and program design</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the principles and expectations that inform program design, and are these appropriate?</li> <li>• What are the theories/philosophies that underpin the approach to education and support, and in what sense is that approach unique?</li> <li>• Is there a clear sense of the cohort for whom this program is designed?</li> <li>• What are the short, medium, and long-term objectives? Are they clearly articulated in a strategy that is ‘owned’ by the learning ‘community’?</li> </ul>	

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