



# Finding that spark

## What works to achieve effective employment services for young people? Report from the evaluation of the Transition to Work Community of Practice

Sharon Bond and Deborah Keys | 2020

**'It's just our job to find their talent or that spark that they didn't even realise. Once we find that passion or that spark, you can't hold them back.'**

(Manager of a TtW CoP service)

The Transitions to Work (TtW) Community of Practice (CoP) is convened by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) with 11 members that collectively deliver TtW services for 15–24 year olds at 13 sites around Australia. The TtW CoP member organisations deliver a common, evidence-informed model that can be adapted in place to offer quality services for young people that improve their education, training and employment outcomes. The model seeks to empower and equip young people with the skills and opportunities to engage in work that they have reason to value. It also aligns these outcomes to business and local economic development needs.

The TtW COP was established to drive and enhance outcomes by supporting the effective national implementation of an evolving fidelity model which is grounded in collaboration at local and national levels. The model is intended to have a multiplier effect over time—improving service performance and practice, so as to increase outcomes for young people beyond what member services could achieve alone.

This 2019 evaluation of the TtW CoP focuses on the sharing of innovation and iterative learning from research and practice to improve education and employment outcomes for young people through service delivery. The next stage of the evaluation will focus on the broader ambition of the model to effect systems change.

### Key points

- **Services that followed the TtW CoP model closely were more likely to meet or surpass government targets for 12-week education/employment outcomes** than services with less fidelity to the model.
- **Two core concepts stepped out in practice—Advantaged Thinking and harnessing community investment—drove successful outcomes.** Seven components delivering these approaches were identified as key to effecting strong outcomes:
  - a convening component – BSL as an enabling organisation
  - model components – a four-phase model and activating employers
  - practice components – the Deal, exploration, inspiration and goal setting, group work, and work skills and tasters.
- **An enabling organisation raises organisational quality and performance** while ensuring evidence-informed, ongoing development of the model, a focus on place, and fidelity to the core approaches and components of the model.

**'What the Brotherhood does as the lead agency is gives us so much depth that we wouldn't have as a little not-for-profit ... To actually have a best practice model hand-delivered to us ... that's just worth volumes for us. And just the professional development for us as a team is amazing. As far as the forums and coming together as a whole, the value of being able to share information across other organisations, I don't think you can put value on that.'**

(Manager of a TtW CoP service)

## Background

The TtW CoP brings together TtW providers across Australia to drive the implementation and evolution of a fidelity service model for youth employment that achieves sustainable and meaningful employment outcomes for young people. The CoP provides a context to drive high performance in organisations. It was designed to address a key gap in existing government policy and interventions, notably in the way the problem of youth unemployment is framed, how the response is commissioned, and how service design and practice give effect to the framing of the problem.

The TtW CoP addresses this gap through an innovative model that is grounded in evidence-based practice.

## Theory of change

This evaluation is informed by the theory of change shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the intended impact of the service model on young people's outcomes.

**Figure 1** TtW CoP theory of change



## The research

This evaluation explores the value of the TtW CoP model for young people and the TtW service providers that coproduce the model with support from the TtW CoP convenor (BSL). It also outlines some broad implications for reform. Guided by the realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley 1997) it seeks to identify not only which elements of the TtW CoP model work but also how they work and in what circumstances.

This is a mixed method evaluation that triangulates qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources. It includes case studies at three TtW CoP services: VPG in Far North Queensland, Gen Z Employment on the Gold Coast and Colony 47 in southern Tasmania. These involved interviews and focus groups with young people, staff and local employers working with TtW. Scans were conducted to provide additional data on the demographics and training and employment opportunities in each area.

A partnerships and opportunities survey was conducted with all TtW CoP services. Additionally, bi-annual surveys were run with TtW participants to check what supports they had received and whether their experience of the program was consistent with the Advantaged Thinking approach. Outcomes data from the Employment Services System database was also analysed.

### **Fidelity to Advantaged Thinking and harnessing community investment produced better outcomes for young people**

Capabilities theory informs the two core practice approaches of the TtW CoP model: Advantaged Thinking and harnessing community investment. The evaluation found that these two core practice approaches were critical to achieving good education and employment outcomes for young people.

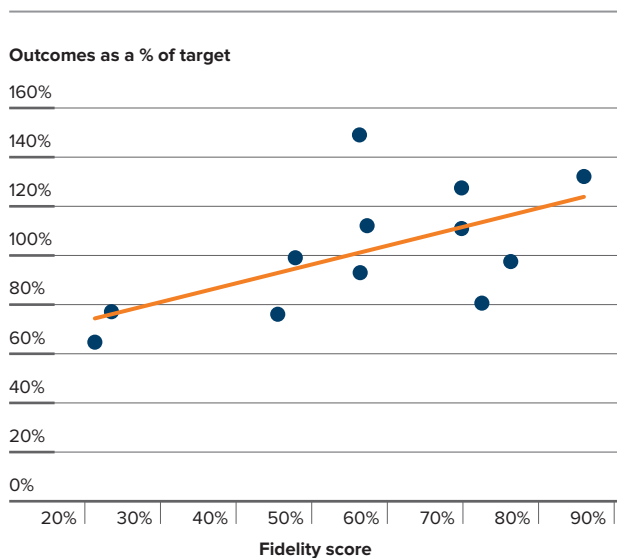
Quantitative survey analysis indicated that there was a strong and statistically significant correlation (Pearsons .597; Sig: .04 two-tailed test) between the degree to which services were faithful to the model and their outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

A fidelity measure was constructed by adding four equally weighted items for each service. These items recorded respectively the fraction of young participants who reported a strong experience of Advantaged Thinking (raw score up to 1); the fraction who received at least 8 of the 10 TtW core activities (raw score up to 1); the number of partnerships achieved expressed as a proportion of an urban or rural benchmark (with a maximum score of 1); and whether there was a Community Investment Committee (raw score 1) or not (raw score 0). The total out of 4 was then converted to a percentage.

<sup>1</sup> Note that one service was an extreme outlier and omitted from this analysis

Figure 2 shows the fidelity measure for each service plotted against that service's 12-week education and or employment outcomes as a percentage of the government outcomes targets. The trend line (shown in orange) indicates the positive relationship between fidelity and outcomes.

**Figure 2 Outcomes (as % of target) plotted against model fidelity**



### Advantaged Thinking

The Advantaged Thinking approach was developed by Colin Falconer in the United Kingdom in 2009. Rather than focusing on the problems faced by young people experiencing disadvantage, it uses individual young people's skills and aspirations as the starting point for career goals; provides the structural opportunities and resources needed to achieve these goals; requires staff and young people to sign the Deal, which fosters a culture of reciprocity rather than obligation; and includes the Campaign, which promotes young people as valuable citizens who can contribute in their community.

BSL administers and analyses bi-annual voluntary surveys of participants at all TtW CoP sites. Each survey gathers young people's views on their experience of the service. The survey includes a series of statements which describe the types of experiences expected when an Advantaged Thinking way of working is delivered. Young people are asked to respond on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The survey also asks young people whether they have undertaken activities that are core to the model.

Some 673 young people who had been at a TtW CoP service for two months or more responded to the August 2019 survey. The vast majority of young people (84 per cent average over 19 questions) indicated they had experienced the Advantaged Thinking approach as outlined in the survey questions and almost all written comments were positive. This signals that most young people were experiencing Advantaged Thinking at their services.

### Harnessing community investment

While this evaluation focuses on service delivery, it is clear that services alone cannot deliver solutions to youth unemployment. The TtW CoP response stems from the premise that society more broadly, especially business and industry, can play an important role in efforts to address the problem (Brown et. al. 2017; BSL 2019). A whole of community effort is required to drive job opportunities and address community infrastructure needs and policy reform. A multisector response, whereby sectors share expertise and experience, is the most effective way to shape solutions to youth employment issues and build Australia's workforce and productivity.

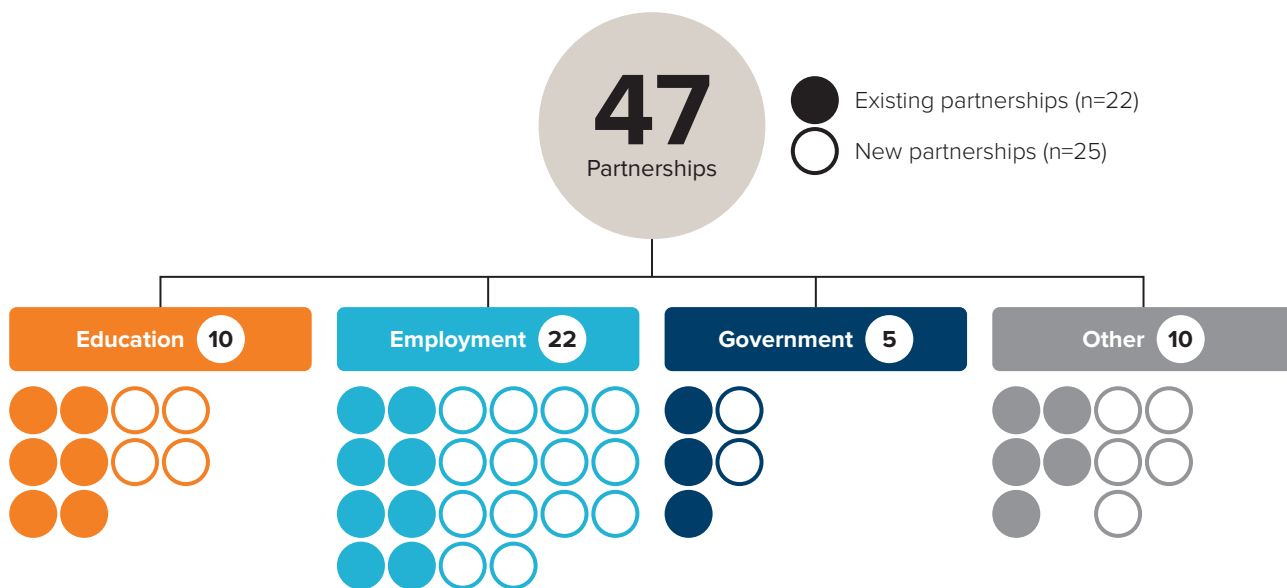
The TtW CoP model includes the following elements to harness community investment:

- local Community Investment Committees (CICs) that provide a mechanism for key sectors in a community to leverage networks and collaborate to address youth unemployment. This links the 'supply-side' organisations supporting young people with employer-led, 'demand-side' interventions. They focus on systems change at the national level and access to opportunities at the local level
- activating employers to drive investment in the young people's skills and capabilities by co-designing entry-level work pathways that align young people's aspirations and interests with business needs, and transform the way that employment services and employers work together
- an enabling organisation (i.e. BSL), which provides leadership to build the capacity of local organisations and communities to collaborate and leverage the expertise of the providers
- governance and working groups such as the National Employer Reference Group that provide guidance, expertise and access to networks and opportunities that support CICs to deliver on community solutions, and draw local knowledge up and strengthen approaches at a national level
- youth participation platforms to enable young people to share their experiences in navigating employment systems and contribute to local and national decision making to ensure actions and strategies are fit for purpose.

Eleven of the 13 TtW CoP services completed a survey in February 2019 to quantify the degree to which community investment was being harnessed through partnerships and the establishment of Community Investment Committees to improve service delivery.

**Figure 3 TtW CoP partnerships**

**The typical TtW service**  
 Harnessing community, maximising opportunity



The survey found that the median number of partnerships across the TtW services was 47, comprising 22 existing partnerships prior to their delivery of TtW and 25 new partnerships. There were twice as many partnerships with employers as with any other sector (Figure 3).

In addition, as of November 2019, six of the services had an operational Community Investment Committee (CIC) or equivalent, two were developing CICs, two previously operational CICs were in hiatus and a further three services had no CIC.

CICs met at least quarterly, with up to 22 members representing a broad range of stakeholders including employers. They discussed the issues affecting employment, acted as champions for youth employment in their communities, participated in advocacy and contributed to the National Youth Employment Reference Group.

**Seven key components contributed to good outcomes**

Advantaged Thinking and harnessing community investment approaches translate into seven key components that facilitate good outcomes.

Qualitative analysis of interviews and surveys conducted with providers and young people identified one convening component, two model components and four practice components that were each key to achieving outcomes.

**Convening component**

1 BSL as an enabling organisation (not a 'prime provider')<sup>2</sup> convened the CoP which is an investment in collaborative innovation. It built trust and collaboration between services that have committed to a shared model, service improvement and context-specific 'good practice'. BSL brings a form of 'network capital', which is the ability to bring together and maximise the capital of other services.

BSL undertook the following important functions: multilevel training, from frontline staff to leaders; practice consultancy; troubleshooting; resources for service delivery; opportunities for practice reflection; action research to inform program development; and joint advocacy.

<sup>2</sup> The approach is quite distinct from a 'prime provider' which might involve managing sub-providers. Rather, BSL delivers a program while collaborating with other providers to build their capacity.

## Model components

- 2 A four-phase model provided a structure for the delivery of key components of the model while being sufficiently nimble to adapt to individual participants and place-specific contexts. This combination of flexibility and structure enabled services to work together towards effective practice and to evolve on the basis of collective learnings.
- 3 Using Advantaged Thinking, which promotes the benefits of employing young people, activated employers to join the campaign to address youth unemployment and offer employment opportunities.

## Practice components

- 4 The Deal, as a non-punitive agreement between the service and young people, engendered reciprocity and mutual accountability and enabled young people to make progress with support from their coaches.
- 5 Exploration, inspiration and goal setting empowered young people to take up appropriate study and employment opportunities aligned with their goals, supported by workers' belief in their ability to succeed.
- 6 Group work reduced young people's social anxiety, and built their confidence, engagement with the program and commitment to progress their career objectives.
- 7 Work skills and tasters provided young people with the 'know-how' and networks to seize career opportunities and navigate their learning and work lives.<sup>3</sup>

## Implications

Findings from this study point to the key shifts in the framing of ideas, assumptions and service model components necessary for effective youth employment policy and program delivery. They have implications for driving systemic change in the youth employment ecosystem.

## Social change

- Activate employers in the campaign to address youth employment and promote young people as capable community assets and valuable employees.

## Policy change

- Reframe mutual obligation as reciprocity, in which young people and service staff are of equal value and mutually accountable in the pursuit of jointly agreed career goals.
- Trial collaborative commissioning in other contexts to further test its potential in enabling traditionally competitive agencies to co-produce effective service responses while retaining autonomy.
- Promote the mutual advantage of Communities of Practice to services and governments. Collective and evidence-based advocacy gives services a strategic advantage over those working outside Communities of Practice; and liaising with a collective is more efficient for government.

## Structural change

- Balance the policy and service delivery focus on the individual aspirations and responsibilities of young people with an equivalent focus on the external institutional and material conditions and experiences available to them. For example, training, group-based career development and real world opportunities.
- Harness local resources through cross-sectoral partnerships that maximise the opportunities for young people, for example, Community Investment Committees.

## Practice reform

- Activate young people through trusting and supportive relationships with coaches and the pursuit of personally meaningful career goals, rather than negative, punitive approaches which are out of step with psychological theory.
- Maximise the capacity of service providers through Communities of Practice that pool their resources and collaborate to improve their practice.





## Service delivery

- Equip young people to manage their employment and education paths throughout their working lives by providing substantive careers development in schools, and for those who miss out, a TtW-like service.

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<sup>3</sup> More information about these components and the mechanisms they trigger to produce outcomes may be found in the table on pages 6–7 and in the full report.

**Figure 4** Components that make a difference: Summary of evaluation findings

 <b>Component</b>	 <b>Context</b>	 <b>Mechanism</b>	 <b>Outcome</b>
<b>Convening component</b>			
<p><b>An enabling organisation convened the CoP as an investment in collaborative innovation</b></p>	<p>BSL as an enabling organisation (not a prime provider) convened the CoP with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— voluntary participation by members who have autonomy through individual contracts with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment.</li> <li>— regular meetings of staff from all sites targeted to different roles, to share expertise and build service capacity.</li> <li>— sharing of commercial in-confidence data and monitoring and evaluation data among members for the purpose of collective practice improvement.</li> <li>— shared commitment to a common model whose fidelity is supported through regular training sessions, consultancy and trouble-shooting.</li> </ul> <p>The CoP Convenor is seen by its members to be offering a valuable resource to support rather than police fidelity.</p>	<p>CoP members report they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— are inspired and energised through the sharing of experience as part of a larger Community of Practice.</li> <li>— develop a sense of collegiality, trust and shared commitment to improving services for young people.</li> <li>— feel supported and resourced to deliver the model.</li> <li>— experience an authorising environment that supports innovation.</li> </ul>	<p>New approaches are trialled and promoted, both in the community sector and to government.</p> <p>Service-to-service collaboration occurs independently of BSL.</p> <p>CoP members further develop their practice and the model to suit their local context.</p> <p>CoP members are equipped to undertake program and policy advocacy.</p>





**Component**



**Context**



**Mechanism**



**Outcome**

**Model components**

**An evidence-informed four-phase model**

A balance between the prescriptive nature of a phased approach and the flexibility to develop creative and context-appropriate ways to deliver the core activities of each phase. Processes and systems are designed around the phases and their core activities.

Structured phases can work as a check that all the core activities are being delivered and provide a framework to plan individually tailored pathways through the program. The phases provide a common language for knowledge sharing among services, and training purposes.

Core activities of each phase are delivered and young people receive a tailored response. TtW program is able to be delivered in various contexts. Services work together towards effective practice.

**Activating employers**

Services:  
— have strong community connections.  
Staff:  
— use Advantaged Thinking to promote young people’s potential.  
— focus on the benefits for employers.

Employers:  
— recognise the benefits of working with young people.  
— develop confidence to provide opportunities.

Employers:  
— offer opportunities.  
— further the campaign to address youth unemployment.  
Young people:  
— have increased access to networks and opportunities.

**Practice components**

**The Deal**

The Deal is understood as working together toward a common goal rather than as a tool for compliance, and is kept ‘live’ throughout the four phases.

A culture of reciprocity is formed in which young people feel accountable to themselves and staff, and know that the staff are accountable to them.

Young people make progress with their plans with sufficient support from their coaches.

**Exploration, inspiration & goalsetting (Phase 1)**

Coaches and young people:  
— develop caring, trusting relationships, within an Advantaged Thinking framework.  
— demonstrate the belief that young people can succeed, and have that expectation.

Young people:  
— feel empowered and have a sense of agency or choice.  
— imagine possible futures of value to them and feel motivated to pursue them.

Young people:  
— feel positive about their futures and step out of their comfort zones to pursue goals.  
— seek out and take up opportunities (social, training, work) aligned with their goals.

**Group Work (Phase 1)**

Provision of a shared, welcoming space (e.g. with computers to encourage spending time at the service) and low-pressure interaction with coaches and peers.

Social anxiety is reduced and confidence builds. Young people feel connected to their peers.

Young people commit to attend and engage with TtW and exhibit greater readiness to progress their career objectives.

**Work skills and tasters/experiences (Phase 2 & 3)**

Coaching and group work. Established networks maximising learning and work opportunities.

Young people gain know-how (cultural capital).

Young people are better able to navigate their learning and work lives.

## References

Brown, D, James, S, Mallett, S, McTiernan N, Orchard, N & Cull, E 2017, *Transition to Work Community of Practice: practice guide*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

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## Authors

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## For further information

The full report *Finding that spark: what works to achieve effective employment services for young people?* by Sharon Bond and Deborah Keys may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

For more information about the TtW CoP see <https://www.ttwcommunity.com.au/>

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see <http://www.bsl.org.au/research/publications/>

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