



Pathways that work

Lessons from the
Youth Employment Project
in Caroline Springs

Eve Bodsworth

2012



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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

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Abbreviations

JSA Job Services Australia

MIPs Managed Individual Pathways

NWP New Workforce Partnerships

TAFE Technical and further education

VCAL Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

VET Vocational education and training

YEP Youth Employment Project

Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Youth Employment Project (YEP) is a place-based partnership project between industry, local government and community in Caroline Springs. The evaluation of this initiative in an outer Melbourne suburb has found that an integrated approach, incorporating individual support, hands-on training and tailored work opportunities, helps to achieve positive pathways for disengaged young people. Seventy per cent of the 84 participants achieved a pathway into paid work, further study or return to school.

Key points

- **'One size doesn't fit all'**. The key finding from this research is that young people disengaged from school or the labour market are not a homogeneous group. They have diverse aspirations, face varying levels of social exclusion and have very different reasons for leaving school. Individualised support is therefore critical.
- **Young people exiting the school system in Years 9 and 10 are particularly vulnerable to falling through policy 'gaps'**. This group faces particular challenges in the labour market due to their age, lack of skills, poor literacy and numeracy, and lack of a drivers licence. Policy reform is needed to create integrated pathways for this age-group to pursue relevant education and training.
- **The Youth Employment Project provided a structured yet flexible intervention** for the participants. The benefits of the approach included the provision of foundational skills combined with personalised advice and pathway planning. Participants undertook training in job searching and interview skills and obtained basic certificates in areas such as first aid, occupational health and safety and their Work Safe construction industry 'white card'.
- **The training provided 'hands-on', practical teaching and learning in a supportive but adult environment.** The curriculum included personal development, life skills, mental health awareness and financial literacy. It involved peer support, group activities, visits to TAFE and site tours of different workplaces.
- **Young people need an opportunity to 'try out' different employment and training options in real workplaces and adult educational environments.** They need sustained assistance to navigate pathways to training or employment as these pathways are not necessarily linear. Disadvantaged young people must be able to change their minds as they gain maturity and experience.
- **Young school leavers entering the workforce are vulnerable.** While many pre-employment programs focus on teaching participants how to meet employers' expectations, it became clear that many of the young people in the YEP who had previously done paid work were unaware of their rights as employees. The program therefore developed components to teach minimum employment conditions and awareness of workplace bullying as well as workplace expectations.
- **Strong local relationships** were essential to the outcomes achieved by the YEP. An understanding of the local area and effective engagement and coordination with local schools, specialist services and employers were crucial.

Background

The YEP involved a partnership between industry, local government and community in Caroline Springs and surrounding areas on Melbourne's metropolitan fringe. Key partners include Delfin Lend Lease, Naturform and Melton Shire. The creation of the YEP recognised that young people in this area faced a range of issues, including very large schools, limited public transport and lack of vocational education and training programs and a place for young people to access information and advice regarding employment, training and educational pathways.

YEP aimed to link disengaged young people directly with employers for short-term work experience placements which might lead to ongoing jobs or training for the young people while at the same time responding to local labour needs and skill shortages. The Brotherhood of St Laurence was contracted as the Project Coordinator to provide integrated case management support. The project was funded through the Victorian Government's New Workforce Partnerships from June 2010 to December 2011.

The initial strategy was to engage young people through forums which brought together representatives from industry, schools and the community, and then to offer industry taster programs, customised training and short-term work experience with YEP industry partners as well as other local employers. The aim was to place up to 40 young people aged 15 to 24 into 'sustainable jobs' as well as providing a larger number with work experience and an introduction to the world of work. In practice the YEP evolved over time to respond to the particular needs of the young people enrolled.

Evaluation findings

Participant profile

The young people involved in YEP were a diverse group facing a range of barriers to education, training and employment. Some had learning difficulties and many experienced family circumstances that included conflict, violence, housing crisis, parental ill health and low social capital.

It was anticipated that the young people accessing the program would be aged around 17 or 18 years. However, the program attracted a substantial number of 15 and 16-year-old disengaged learners. A total of 84 young people took part in YEP, with 57% aged under 18.

The majority of participants were male (63%); 79% were born in Australia; and English was the main language spoken by 89%. The largest group (51%) lived in Melton; 44% lived in Caroline Springs or nearby; and 5% came from other areas.

Participant outcomes

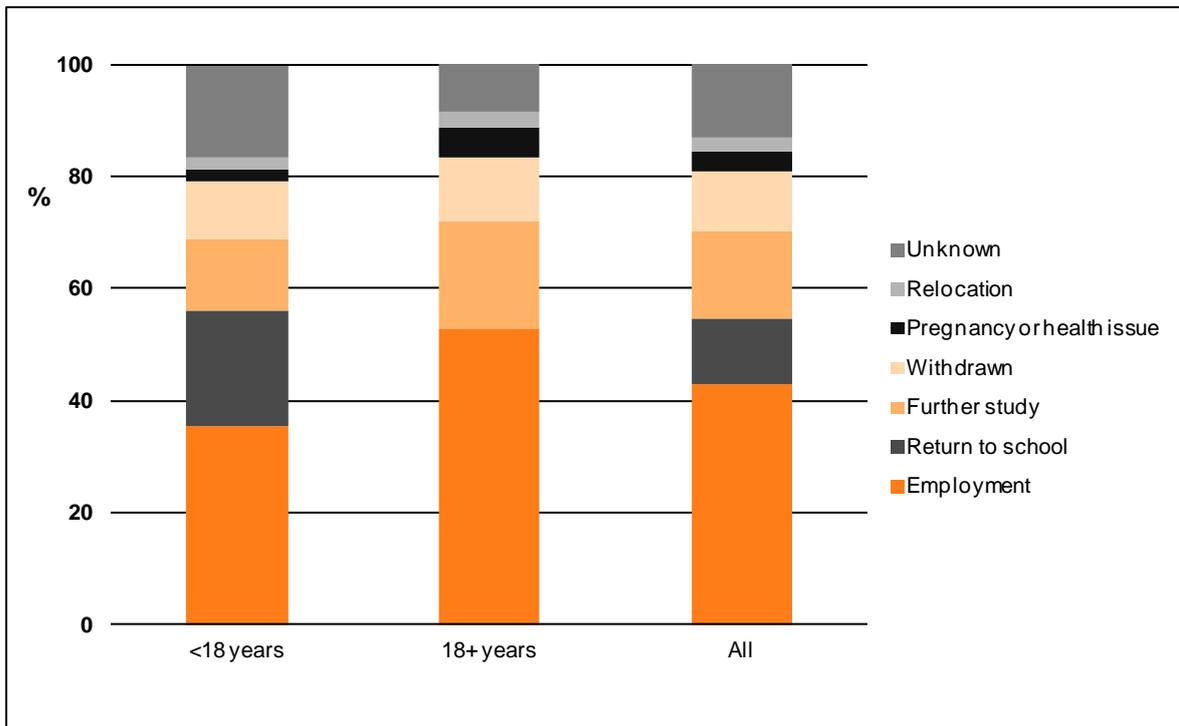
Overall, 70% of participants achieved a positive pathway: 43% were assisted into paid work; 12% returned to school and 15% commenced further study.

Figure 1 shows participant outcomes by age cohort: 69% of those aged under 18 years achieved a positive outcome, with 21% returning to school; 72% of those aged 18 years or older achieved a positive outcome, with 53% of this cohort obtaining paid work.

The cost per outcome of developing and delivering the YEP in a growth corridor area with limited existing resources for young people was \$7226, taking into account on-costs and organisational support costs. Economies of scale might be expected in expanding the program beyond a 'pilot'. Calculating the long-term social costs of failing to address youth disengagement was beyond the

scope of this evaluation; however the unit costs appear to represent a small investment with large gains for disadvantaged young people.

Figure 1 YEP participant pathways



The YEP approach

The flexible delivery model, comprising individual assistance and advice combined with group training and peer support, meant that the program did not take a ‘one size fits all’ approach, but adapted to meet the diverse needs of the participants.

The involvement of younger participants, aged 15 and 16 years, posed a significant challenge as many had poor literacy and numeracy and lacked either foundational and life skills or the vocational skills to be assisted into employment. YEP therefore evolved to respond to the specific needs of the large number of quite young school leavers (Year 9 and 10).

YEP staff played an important role in working with schools to build a supported pathway from school, providing opportunities to try ‘real work’ and giving individual guidance to navigate pathways into education or training. It was recognised that these young people were being failed by mainstream education: many struggled with learning difficulties or with the standard formal learning environment and wanted to be employed:

The program is seeing 15-year-olds coming in—wanting to *do* trades, they want to ‘do stuff’—they identify as visual learners, often with poor literacy and numeracy. The school system is not meeting their needs and they want out. *YEP worker*

The older cohort, who had been out of school for a while but were disconnected from training or work, benefited from individual support, career guidance (rather than pressure to apply for just any job) and a structured environment which helped with motivation, a daily routine and a pathway to work.

Flexible, individualised and integrated forms of assistance are critical elements of an effective approach. Some young people know what type of work they want, but cannot find work, whereas others are not sure of the opportunities available, or what they might be interested in and able to do.

Group learning appeared to also be important for all the participants, enabling them to develop friendships, build social connections and gain peer support.

Feedback from participants referred to the respect shown to them: trainers and YEP staff did not 'talk down' to participants but treated them as equals. One participant commented that, in contrast to the YEP, he felt that at school, 'The teachers give up on us; if we give up, the school gives up'.

For some participants, completion of the YEP course and referral to other certificate courses was a major achievement, having left school early and felt that they would never be able to engage in further education:

Yeah, I'm doing another course. I never thought I would do another course. I thought I would never get anywhere, but because I really wanted to do retail, they helped me find a course, and it's really good. *Crystal, YEP participant*

A case management approach was incorporated in the program to provide advice and referrals for each participant as well as to prepare an individual pathway into employment or further education and training. Participants were encouraged to develop action plans, based on their own aspirations and aptitudes. Goal-setting and future planning were incorporated into the training program, as well as into one-on-one sessions with the YEP coordinator and case manager.

[The program helped with] working out the steps to where you need to get to. If you want that job, how do you get there? You need other people to help you to get it. *Crystal, YEP participant*

The individual assistance took place concurrently with the group-based training and aspects of the two approaches were often integrated. For example, one component of training was attending a not-for-profit organisation specialising in career and transition services for young people in the western suburbs, part of which involved one-on-one vocational advice and assessment. A number of the participants talked about the value of receiving this kind of advice:

Like with the career people, if I hadn't done that I would never have applied to do a teaching course. On the same day they suggested it, I applied for it. It's online. I already started it. *Belinda, YEP participant*

The **work experience placements** took place over two weeks at the end of the training course. The YEP coordinator and case manager worked to arrange tailored placements for each participant, rather than the structured group work experience which had been planned. While the tailored approach was more time-consuming, it was necessary in order to provide meaningful experiences of employment for the young people, ideally leading to ongoing work.

The staff drew on their extensive knowledge of employers in the region and their relationships with local employer networks. They also engaged in reverse marketing of work experience candidates to find places to match participants' individual pathway plans.

While not all work experience placements led to employment, the opportunity to 'try out' different options in a 'hands on', real employment environment was just as important. This flexibility to try

different options appears to be absent from mainstream employment services, yet was valued by YEP staff, employers and participants alike.

The support provided after young people exited the program was also very important. Their pathways were varied and somewhat 'messy'. Transitions might involve starting in a job, moving into further short-term training and then looking for work, engaging in ongoing training or education or re-engaging with the mainstream school system. Some participants started employment or training and found it was not suitable or not what they had expected. Others found their casual jobs were not ongoing.

There was no clear linear pathway out of the YEP into work or education, but rather stops and starts, which necessitated ongoing support from the YEP staff:

One young woman who left school in Year 11, after the program she had aspirations to become a cabinet maker. She realised that she needed to finish Year 11. We discussed her options with her and created a 'mini-plan' so that she could return to school, finish Year 11 with recognition of the learning during the YEP and then go on to do a pre-app[renticeship]. She changed her mind and decided she wanted to be a landscaper. She had done some work experience with [a local landscaping business] through the YEP and they offered her an apprenticeship. *YEP coordinator*

Policy implications

Importance of flexible, individual support

The delivery of the YEP in a growth corridor area, with limited infrastructure and services for young people, indicates the effectiveness of better integrated and personalised approaches to address the multiple barriers often faced by young people disengaged from formal school and training. Seventy per cent of participants were assisted into paid work, training or back into education.

Young people cannot be considered as a homogeneous group—one size does not fit all. Policies designed to assist young people to participate in education, training, and employment must recognise the diverse barriers they face. Attention must also be paid to the programs available for younger students disengaging from the formal school system. At present, case management is only available to support disadvantaged young people who want to acquire Year 12 or an equivalent qualification (through Youth Connections) or who have been looking for work for at least six months (through Job Services Australia). The YEP has demonstrated the importance of a support program which links with schools to ensure young school leavers do not fall through the cracks.

Benefits of integrated 'hub' models

The YEP itself was run out of multiple locations in Caroline Springs including the Anglican church, the health centre, the library and the fire station. This created logistical challenges. More importantly, consistent with evidence on effective youth transitions elsewhere, the YEP has shown the importance of community-based 'hubs' that offer an accessible entry point for young people in new outer suburbs, with dedicated space for training, computers for job search and résumé writing, provision of advice, information and support.

Effective pathways for young school leavers

A proportion of young people will struggle in mainstream education. The complexity of pathways into vocational training and the precarious nature of low-skilled work necessitate alternative

options for early school leavers, including flexible forms of applied learning for those unable to be re-engaged into the mainstream schools. Chronological age does not determine the level or type of assistance needed.

Further development of effective alternative learning pathways, with appropriate teaching methods and adequate resources, will be critical in improving youth transitions, especially in the rapidly growing outer suburbs of Melbourne which lack community infrastructure for young people.

1 Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Youth Employment Project (YEP) is a place-based partnership project between industry, local government and community in Caroline Springs and surrounding areas. Key partners include Delfin Lend Lease, Naturform, Melton Shire and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The project's initial aims were to link disengaged young people directly with employers for short-term work experience placements which might lead to ongoing employment or training, while at the same time responding to local labour market needs and skill shortages. The Brotherhood of St Laurence was contracted to provide case management, support and pre-employment skills development, as well as specific vocational training as necessary. The project was funded through the Victorian Government's New Workforce Partnerships (NWP) program for the period June 2010 to December 2011.

The initial strategy of the project was to engage young people through forums which brought together representatives from industry, schools and the community and then to offer industry taster programs, customised training and short-term work experience placements with YEP industry partners as well as other local employers. The aim was to place up to 40 young people aged 15 to 24 living within Caroline Springs or surrounding areas into 'sustainable jobs' while providing a larger number with work experience and an introduction to the world of work.

While YEP has met some of these aims to date, it has also evolved over the 18 months it has been operating to respond to the specific needs of the young people in Caroline Springs and surrounding areas, notably the high number of very young school leavers who face particular challenges to achieving a successful transition to training and work. This evaluation report documents the model of service delivery developed by the YEP team over the period June 2010 to December 2011. It reports the outcomes achieved, including employment, training, education and other social outcomes. The report also considers the education, employment and training needs and barriers faced by many young people in the Caroline Springs and Melton areas and outlines the main lessons for future replication of the YEP approach.

Youth unemployment

Across the world, young people have been hard hit by the recent global economic crisis, with most OECD countries experiencing higher than usual youth unemployment rates. While Australia is among the best-performing countries with above-average employment rates, youth unemployment is still high in certain areas and is of concern (OECD 2010). Young workers, particularly those who experience disadvantage and are most marginalised from the labour market, may suffer 'scarring' caused by the long-term negative consequences of failure to find a first job (OECD 2010). More than one-quarter of young adults in Australia are not in full-time work or study, and the percentage of school leavers not fully engaged in education or work remains as high as in the recession of the early 1990s (Robinson et al. 2011).

Young people who are disengaged from school are likely to subsequently receive lower earnings and greater insecurity in employment, and may experience negative impacts on their present and future health and wellbeing (Lamb & Rice 2008). Students from Indigenous backgrounds, those with integration needs, low achievers, those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, children in families under stress and young people living in neighbourhoods of high poverty or in remote locations are particularly at risk of school disengagement (Lamb & Rice 2008). There is also

increasing concern about disengagement of young people aged 10–14 in the ‘middle years’ (Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2010). The barriers to finding and maintaining employment faced by disadvantaged young people are complex and often interrelated. Such barriers include lack of entry-level employment opportunities, negative employer attitudes, poverty, homelessness, low levels of formal education, poor literacy and numeracy, complex health needs and family breakdown (Cull 2011). While many face similar barriers, young people who are not in education, employment or training are not a homogeneous group. It is therefore important to distinguish between those who are ‘disengaged’, ‘undecided’ or ‘unable to find work’ (Centre for Social Justice and Local Government Association 2009). While the current Job Services Australia (JSA) model allows some flexibility in providing training and work experience opportunities and pre-vocational support, there is a need for more intensive and holistic case management and support for disadvantaged young people (Cull 2011).

Youth employment in Caroline Springs and surrounding area

Youth unemployment is higher in the western suburbs than other parts of Melbourne (Leadwest 2008). Further, when compared to their inner-city counterparts, young people on the urban fringe are more likely to disengage with secondary school early, less likely to engage with post-secondary education and are more likely to be engaged in employment than further education (YACVic 2004). However, some urban fringe localities face problems with the immediate and longer-term consequences of youth unemployment, particularly when combined with poor school completion rates and consequently lower educational opportunities (Marston et al. 2003).

While growth corridors such as Caroline Springs present some employment opportunities, linking young people with jobs requires vocational and non-vocational training and support and case management. In addition, matching jobs with young people must take into account the young people’s interests and other factors such as access to transport, distance to travel to work and preferences for part-time or full-time work.

The Brimbank/Melton Local Learning and Employment Network (2012) and the Western Melbourne Regional Development Australia Committee strategic plans signalled the need for local integrative initiatives that focus on the transition from school to work or further study (BMLLEN 2012; WMRDAC 2010). Prior to the YEP, the Brotherhood of St Laurence identified the following infrastructure and service gaps affecting young people in the Caroline Springs growth corridor:

- limited vocational education and training programs. The existing training programs including VET in Schools are, in the main, not directly connected with the skill shortages and employers.
- the lack of work experience opportunities that provide young people with an understanding of the ‘world of work’
- the lack of life skills programs
- the lack of employment and wellbeing services
- the lack of affordable space for the co-location of services for integrated assistance to young people
- no meeting places for young people to access information and advice on education, training and employment pathways.

The policy context

Several recent policy developments at federal and state levels impact on issues of youth unemployment and disengagement.

Compact with young Australians

In April 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a Compact with Young Australians to promote young people's participation in education and training, providing protection from the anticipated tighter labour market and ensuring they would have the qualifications needed to take up the jobs as the economy recovered (COAG 2009).

The Compact with Young Australians has three elements to promote skills acquisition and ensure young people are 'learning or earning':

- a **National Youth Participation Requirement** which requires all young people to participate in schooling (or an approved equivalent) to Year 10, and then participate full-time (at least 25 hours per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17.
- an **entitlement to an education or training place** for 15 to 24-year-olds to attain Year 12 or equivalent qualifications. (For 20 to 24-year-olds who already have a Year 12 or equivalent qualification, the entitlement is to a place that would result in a higher qualification.)
- **strengthened participation requirements for some types of income support.** The focus on learning or earning also applies to young people under the age of 21 who seek income support through Youth Allowance (Other) or the Family Tax Benefit Part A: if they do not have Year 12 or equivalent they must participate in education and training full-time, or participate in part-time study or training in combination with other approved activities, usually for at least 25 hours per week, until they attain such a qualification.

Recent federal government Budget measures

The 2011–12 Budget introduced changes to income support, whereby young unemployed people aged 21 will lose access to Newstart Allowance and remain on the lower Youth Allowance (a drop of \$43 per week). At the same time, the 'earn or learn' measures outlined above requiring young people without a Year 12 or equivalent qualification to engage in education, training or employment were extended to those under 22 (to take effect from 2012) (Australian Government 2011; Department of Human Services 2011).

Job Services Australia and young people

At present JSA providers attempt to refer young people into full-time education or training (or part-time education or training plus other activities) to achieve the 25 hours participation. From July 2012, providers will be required to provide a structured activity of up to 25 hours a week for 26 weeks to build life, study and employment skills and will be able to draw upon additional Employment Pathway Funds.

Concerns about the current employment services system for young people include:

- emphasis on compliance at the cost of engagement
- lack of capacity to provide holistic and intensive support
- case management inadequate to address barriers to employment and support job readiness

- lack of informed choice of JSA provider for young clients
- inadequate recognition of non-vocational outcomes in the funding model for JSAs
- the incentives created by the JSA funding model for providers to encourage jobseekers to take on full-time employment, while the more likely (and perhaps preferable) scenario for young people is a mix of learning and part-time employment. (See Rose et al. 2011 and Cull 2011 for more detailed discussion of Job Services Australia and young people.)

At present, young people cannot access case management through the JSA system until they have been looking for work for at least six months. Case management is also available to disadvantaged young people through the federal Youth Connections program, but only for those working towards gaining a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.

The current educational options for young people who are not in education, employment or training are re-integration into mainstream school including vocational education and training (VET) subjects, community-based Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), TAFE studies, courses provided by registered training organisations (RTOs) and Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programs (LLNP).

State government measures

In 2008, the Victorian Government introduced the New Workforce Partnerships (NWP) initiative, which built upon the successful Workforce Partnerships Program (WPP). The WPP aimed to boost workforce participation in Victoria, address skills requirements and assist disadvantaged people into employment. A key lesson from the WPP program was the importance of a targeted approach bringing together employers, employment support and community support services with a focus on local and regional partnerships to achieving sustainable employment outcomes for the most disadvantaged jobseekers.

In addition, in the same year the Victorian Government launched a discussion paper proposing a Vulnerable Youth Framework to ensure that supports and services were available for vulnerable young Victorians at the earliest point possible, focusing on early identification and intervention; engagement in education, training and employment; local planning for youth services; tailored responses to particular groups; and effective services staffed by capable people. In 2010, the government launched the policy framework resulting from its consultations, entitled *Positive pathways for Victoria's young people* (Department of Human Services 2010).

Concurrently, the Victorian Government funded a series of Better Youth Services Pilots (BYSP) which aimed to improve early identification of risk for vulnerable young people, collection of data and youth service delivery at the local level.

This initiative has been continued by the new Liberal–National state government in the form of Youth Partnerships. Youth Partnerships aims to build upon the lessons from the BYSP and to improve the collaboration between the education, youth and family support, justice, homelessness and mental health sectors in the delivery of services. The key goals of Youth Partnerships are to improve engagement in education and training, and to reduce the escalation of social, individual and behavioural problems for disengaged young people.

2 Youth Employment Project evaluation method

An evaluation of the YEP was proposed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) to ensure that the experience and outcomes of the project were documented. This evaluation was funded by the Brotherhood as no additional resources for evaluation work were available from NWP funds.

The YEP was developed as a partnership between industry, local government and community with industry as the lead partner through the Caroline Springs Joint Venture between Delfin Lend Lease, Naturform and Alex Fraser Recycling. The focus of the project was on employment pathways for young people experiencing disengagement or social exclusion in the Caroline Springs area. The application identified a range of skill and labour needs that might be addressed, covering green technologies, building and construction, landscaping, horticulture and environmental services. The industry partners would offer work experience and jobs in these fields to YEP participants. The project would provide customised training and work placements, an industry taster program, industry–school forums and mentoring. It would offer a line of sight for disengaged young people to job opportunities in the local community through an integrated service model.

The evaluation of the YEP explored the following questions:

- 1 What is the YEP service delivery model (and how has it changed over time)?
- 2 How effective is the YEP in producing employment, training, educational and other social outcomes for young people in the Caroline Springs area?
- 3 What are the young people’s pathways through the program?
 - a. Why and how are young people entering the program?
 - b. Where are they going when they exit the program, and why?
- 4 What are the needs of the young people accessing the YEP, and how does ‘place’ impact upon these needs?

Methodology

The evaluation involved examination of program documentation, semi-structured interviews with staff and external stakeholders and a focus group and interview with previous participants. Program outcomes were derived from aggregated intake and exit data collected by the YEP coordinator.

Interviews were conducted with the YEP coordinator and case manager. Further interviews were conducted with five key external stakeholders:

- the student transitions worker¹ and the assistant principal from a local secondary school
- the student transitions worker from another local secondary school
- the community development officer employed by the local housing developer
- the local Victoria Police youth resource officer (Senior Constable)
- a local employer.

A focus group was conducted with eight young participants and one young person was interviewed separately. All interviews were recorded and key passages were transcribed.

¹ The term ‘student transitions worker’ is used in this report to describe interviewees who assisted school students with their learning pathways and career plans.

The YEP evaluation received approval from the BSL Ethics Committee. The names of participants and some of their details have been changed to protect their privacy.

This evaluation is limited in scope as it does not track the longer term outcomes of the program and relies predominantly on the description of the program from the staff, stakeholders and participants, rather than direct observation.

3 Examining the YEP model

The YEP is a story of change and adaptation. It commenced based on a particular model but has evolved over time to adapt to the needs and interests of young people and referring agencies and the local labour market. The initial model involved engagement with young people and their parents and teachers through school-based forums. It was anticipated that the program would reach young people leaving school aged 17 to 18 as well as attracting young people who had already left school through referrals from local employment service providers.

It was intended that groups of young people would then participate in basic accredited pre-employment training including site visits to local landscaping and recycling businesses over a five to six-week period. They would then undertake structured work experience placements in various 'green jobs'. Concurrently with the training and work experience components, the young people would receive case management and assistance with individual pathway planning. They would then exit the program into employment in 'green jobs' or further education and training. The funding model was outcomes-based, in that it was designed to reward placement of young people into 'green' jobs of more than 30 hours per week.

While the broad structure remains, aspects of the YEP have changed over time. These changes are documented below.

Recruitment and engagement

The initial plan was to run five rounds of the program, one per quarter, starting in August 2010. As discussed above, the primary form of engagement envisaged in the initial model was large information forums hosted at local schools for young people and their parents. The first forum took place in a school auditorium and was advertised in the school newsletter, but attendance was low. As a result, the program coordinator began talking directly with teachers at several local high schools to raise awareness of the program and to discuss whether there might be students suitable for the program. Over time, other engagement and recruitment strategies emerged, including general letter-box drops of program flyers and advertisements in the local paper.

Relationships developed with other agencies including local Youth Connections providers and the Victoria Police also led to referrals. However there was some initial confusion about the role of the YEP and where it 'fitted' in relation to other mainstream services such as Job Services Australia. While it was hoped that local JSA providers would refer young unemployed people who were already disengaged from the school system, this did not eventuate to the level anticipated. It is likely that the competitive, outcomes-based JSA funding model limited the collaboration between the YEP and JSA providers, although there may be potential to develop some strategic relationships in future, given the new 'work experience' requirements under the 'earn or learn' policy framework.

Engagement with young people who were disengaged or disengaging but still enrolled in schools was more successful: teachers and school careers advisors such as Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) workers were enlisted to refer suitable young people to the program. However, it became apparent that communication with parents about the program and the processes involved was essential. This was particularly important for young people aged under 17, as it was necessary for those still in school to exit the school system before entering the YEP. As exiting required parental permission, it was important that parents were provided with clear information regarding the merits

of the YEP for their child. The decision to allow their child to exit school was also often difficult for parents due to normative expectations or stigma associated with certain pathways. One school worker commented that if it was decided through a case management process that a particular student was 'at risk' in relation to leaving school or progressing at school and would benefit from an alternative pathway such as the YEP, time was required for a discussion with parents.

It's very hard, even if kids are struggling at school and even if you've been telling the parents that there's a problem here, and we need to look at alternatives—parents don't really want to move, so it takes a lot of time to have those discussions and move towards making a decision. So to me it would be great if we knew what the dates are for the whole year, so we can plan towards [them]. If you miss the August intake, there will be another one in ... *Assistant principal, local secondary school.*

The same person also commented that it would be useful in future to have more formal information sessions for teachers and other school workers (such as student transitions workers) to provide details so they could better advise students and parents. It was suggested that information packs for parents and young people would also assist school staff in the process of consultation and decision making with students and their families. The school staff also commented that an outline of approximate intake dates would assist them to make decisions around the timing of school exits.

And the good thing was, as soon as we enrol them into it, someone from the program would ring the parent. But it would have been good if we'd had that information for ourselves—we just had a piece of paper that said 'job skills' etcetera, but we wanted the content of the program, so we could answer parents' questions. But they did a great job of following it up speaking to the parents. *Student transitions worker 2*

Despite some initial confusion about the program, the school staff also commented on the high level of communication and feedback they received from the YEP coordinator and worker:

But once it started, that feedback was fantastic. I've never had an outside source that doesn't need to be connected with the school be so good like that. They're separate things, an employment program and a school. They don't need to let us know anything that happens, but there was always contact about what was happening, who's attending, this student hasn't come for two weeks, you might need to re-engage with them. *Student transitions worker 2*

In addition to local schools, other referral sources included Melton Youth Connections and the local police youth resource officers. The YEP staff also created a program flyer and conducted a 'letterbox drop'. Overall, 44 per cent of referrals came through schools, 31 per cent through letterbox advertising, 15 per cent by word of mouth, 6 per cent via Youth Connections and 4 per cent through youth justice services.

Profile of participants

A total of 84 young people actively took part in the YEP by completing the training and receiving support. This took place over separate five intake rounds. An additional 20 young people expressed initial interest, but did not take part for a range of reasons. The demographic profile of the 84 young participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant profile

Indicator		%
Gender	Female	37
	Male	63
Age	15 yrs	19
	16 yrs	22
	17 yrs	0 7
	18 yrs	15
	19 yrs	10
	20+ yrs	11
Country of birth	Australia	79
	Overseas	21
Main language	English	89
	Other	11
Home suburb	Caroline Springs	44
	Melton	51
	Other	5
Total participants		84

The majority of participants were male (63%). This may reflect the fact that the initial focus of the program was ‘green’ jobs which were predominantly in male-dominated trades. While the program evolved to create work experience opportunities and pathways based on young people’s interests and aptitudes, there appeared to be a perception among school stakeholders that the emphasis was on ‘trades’.

Seventy-nine percent of participants were born in Australia; and English was the main language spoken by 89 per cent. This is somewhat higher than the general population in the Melton Shire, around 76 per cent of whom are Australian-born. While 2006 Census data for the Shire of Melton indicates that around 24.3 per cent of population spoke a non-English language at home (Shire of Melton 2012), the lower rate for the YEP group may reflect the age of the participants.

The largest group of participants (51%) came from Melton; 44 per cent came from Caroline Springs or surrounding suburbs; and 5 per cent came from other areas.

Initially it was anticipated that most of the young people accessing the program would be 17 or older. However the YEP ultimately attracted a substantial number of 15 and 16-year-olds (41% of the participants) who had already left school or who exited school to enter the program. The needs of these young people and the pathways realistically open to them created specific challenges for the program which are discussed separately below. While the referral and intake process for YEP cannot be used to quantify local needs, it does show that young people across a wide age range face challenges in transitioning from school to work.

Pre-employment / skills development

Form of delivery

The course offered was part of the Australian Apprenticeship Access program (‘Access program’), which provides disadvantaged jobseekers with pre-vocational training and other forms of assistance. Funding is provided by the federal government for ‘disadvantaged groups’ including those under 25 who have not completed Year 12. Access courses must be delivered by a registered

training organisation (RTO). The Access program generally covers occupational health and safety issues, customer service, teamwork, soft skills and job search over a five to six-week period and participants receive a statement of attainment.

Content

The content of the training modules was also adapted over time to address the needs of participants and issues which had arisen during earlier intakes. What evolved was a program focused on the pathways to employment or further education and training, presented within a holistic framework which included health, mental health, lifestyle and financial issues, as well as encouraging the young people to develop confidence and relationships with their peers.

The participants themselves highly valued receiving basic practical skills such as first aid certificates, White Cards for construction safety and training in occupational health and safety.

Youth will really love this course—you get so much out of it, like the certificates, first aid. Youth will love it, you've got it for life not just for now, but for the future. White card, first aid certificate, communications certificate, OH&S. *Becky*², *YEP participant*

One key component introduced to meet the needs of the young participants was an information session on mental health issues. A staff member from the local health service was invited to speak about how to recognise the symptoms of mental health problems and the different ways to receive information or assistance. It was reported that the participants responded well and a number of direct referrals were made to mental health practitioners after this session.

Further, although the YEP focus was to provide pre-employment training, it became apparent that enabling this cohort to become 'ready for work' would involve more than occupational health and safety information and assistance with job searching. A more holistic approach was taken to incorporate 'life skills' and elements based on building self-esteem and confidence.

Many of the young people were recognised to lack basic life skills: in particular, many who had not been attending school prior to the program faced difficulty in adjusting their sleeping patterns in order to arrive at the training by 9 am. It became apparent that these young people were used to staying up very late and sleeping in. They then struggled to stay alert during the day. In addition, participants were often lethargic and it was observed that they were bringing unhealthy snacks, energy drinks and other soft drinks with them to training. Sessions on healthy lifestyle habits and nutrition were introduced into the program as a response.

In addition, many of the young people lacked basic knowledge about finances, including how to get a tax file number, how to open a bank account and what it meant to be contributing to superannuation. They also lacked budgeting and money management skills. These issues were therefore incorporated into the training and a guest speaker was invited from the Brotherhood's financial inclusion programs.

Further, while pre-employment programs often focus on teaching participants how to meet employers' expectations, it became clear that many YEP participants were unaware of their rights as employees. Thus school leavers, particularly younger ones, who enter the workforce may be vulnerable to exploitation. The staff therefore developed components providing information about the rights of employees, minimum employment conditions and awareness of workplace bullying as

² Pseudonyms are used for YEP participants quoted throughout this report.

well as basic information about payslips. The staff also spoke of seeing advertisements recruiting young people for ‘casual traineeships’ and hearing young people describe their conditions as ‘permanent casual’—both employment relationships without legal status.

One young woman interviewed during the evaluation described her experience of employment prior to the YEP. She had left school before completing Year 10 and had obtained work with a local food retailer in the lead-up to Christmas. She worked full-time for three weeks before asking when she would be paid, only to be told by the owner of the small business that the period had been ‘training’ and it was unpaid.

On the other hand, it was clear that some components of general pre-vocational training programs were unnecessary for the young participants—particularly computer skills, as most of them had grown up using computers.

Learning environment

Like the form of delivery and the content, the approach to teaching and learning also changed over the course of the program. The program coordinator reported having begun with an ‘adult learning’ approach which placed significant responsibility upon the young people for their own participation. However, this approach was found to be ‘too tough’ for the initial participants and for the second intake, a more supportive, ‘touchy feely’ approach was used. The staff recognised, however, that this approach did not sufficiently prepare the young people for a transition into further training with other institutions, particularly those such as TAFE which operated as adult learning environments. By the third intake of students, the YEP staff felt that they had established an appropriate mix of support and structure, with independent learning and self-management, as a participant attested:

It was a really good environment, and an adult environment. They weren’t too strict on whether you come five minutes late, or you leave early. You can have breaks and ‘sickies’.
Grant, YEP participant

The training environment developed by the YEP seemed very important in keeping the participants engaged and also facilitating peer support and friendships. It was recognised that it was vital to have the ‘right’ trainer, who could relate to the young people. The YEP coordinator and case manager were also very involved during the training which meant that the participant to staff ratio was kept low, and they were able to develop relationships with the participants which in turn assisted the individual case management.

The program achieved attendance rates of over 85%, even with participants who had poor school attendance records. The high attendance rates are also significant given that the YEP operated outside the mainstream employment services system, without the threat of Centrelink payments being withheld or penalties being imposed. Instead, the program was based upon the establishment of mutual respect between participants and staff and the creation of an engaging curriculum which the young people both enjoyed and found relevant. It was important, however, that at the beginning of the program, the YEP staff worked with the group to establish clear and agreed expectations.

We let them know they have choices – but that they are then responsible for those choices.
A mind shift takes place. *YEP coordinator*

During the focus group, the past participants were asked whether the YEP was different from their experiences at school. The following responses, from the younger participants who had more

recently left school, including two 15-year-olds, indicate the extent to which they responded to the YEP learning environment and valued having choices in relation to their participation:

Nick: At school, I didn't use to stay til 3.30.

Darren: I'd just walk out.

Brendan: If I didn't like the class, I wouldn't go.

Nick: I'd just say I was sick, I'd go home.

Darren: When I came to this course I had 100 per cent attendance. At school it was 50 per cent or not even that.

Crystal: I was doing my certificate and so when that finished I didn't have to come back to the [Youth Employment] program if I didn't want to, but I still did.

Nick: We had a choice to come.

The YEP also recognised that the participants had different learning styles and needs. The program included skills development through hands-on activities that were enjoyable for participants. One later addition to the training program was a scuba diving lesson which incorporated elements of occupational health and safety training with the importance of teamwork and communication:

Brendan: Scuba diving was another good thing [about the program].

YEP coordinator: We combined OH&S and teamwork—because you need a buddy—and communication—underwater communication. It was fun but *it was a different way of learning.*

The course provided a structured environment in which participants could develop or redevelop habits associated with paid work, including establishing a daily routine, getting to class on time and calling the YEP coordinator in the case of illness. Again, it appeared that the effectiveness of these elements of the program resulted not from strict compliance measures but from providing encouragement and motivation, although the final comment by Belinda suggests a need for longer term support for some participants:

Interviewer: What were you doing before the program?

Belinda: Nothing.

Becky: Sitting at home.

Crystal: Sleeping in.

Interviewer: Were you looking for jobs?

Belinda: Well I have to, otherwise I don't get paid.

Becky: Your job network [provider] makes you.

Crystal: But we weren't as motivated. We always got up early for the course and stuff. But before that we all just like slept in—you know, whatever.

Belinda: But now I've gone back to my old ways. I miss, like you know, I think the group made me happier, and it had a structure, and now that I'm not doing it any more it's like, what's the point of getting up in the morning now? You just have to find new ways of getting up.

Other participants referred to the fact that trainers and YEP staff did not ‘talk down’ to them but treated them as equals. One person commented that in contrast to the YEP, at school ‘The teachers give up on us; if we give up, the school gives up’. For some participants, completion of the YEP and subsequent referral to other basic certificate courses was a major achievement, since they had left school early and assumed that they would never be able to engage in further education:

Yeah, I’m doing another course. I never thought I would do another course. I thought I would never get anywhere, but because I really wanted to do retail, they helped me find a course, and it’s really good. *Crystal*

Peer support and the group training environment

The accredited training took place in a small group environment. The small group size (averaging around 15 participants) enabled one-on-one assistance during the training, and the hands-on involvement of the YEP coordinator and case manager as well as the trainer further decreased the participant to staff ratio.

The young people also provided peer support, encouraged each other and formed friendships through the program. While the participants’ ages ranged from 15 to 25, this range was observed by YEP staff to have a positive effect, as older participants were able to provide support and advice to younger participants, and younger participants responded well to exposure to a more ‘adult’ group.

During the focus group with participants, the peer support and opportunity to develop friendships emerged as an important program element facilitating engagement as well as other social outcomes:

Becky: It’s good, we all come from the same background—so we all connected like one big happy family.

Crystal: That’s the best bit, coming to class, it was good we all connected.

Grant: Everyone was cool, you know?

Interviewer: Was that important, that you all got along with each other?

Chorus: Yes.

Becky: Otherwise, what’s the point of going if you can’t get along? It’s just going to be uncomfortable and we won’t go.

The friendships formed appeared to have longer-term outcomes for some participants. After one group finished their group training, a small number of participants, including one with significant health issues, started attending the local gym together, having been offered free sessions organised by the YEP.

While the age differences did not appear to have any negative impact upon the group dynamics and friendships, participants did have different skill levels and different levels of experience in looking for work. Many younger participants, particularly those who had recently left school, had limited knowledge about ‘the world of work’, whereas for those older participants who had been involved in job search training through the mainstream employment system some of the YEP content was repetitive:

Grant: I found that some stuff I’d done a lot of in the past, and that’s fine, I don’t expect to be exempted from it, but I think that maybe [with] some feedback, maybe at the start of the group, they *could see where everyone was at*, see what they’ve already done, and then they could split people into groups. Some people can work on résumés and confidence, and someone else—you could be doing other things. It would be good to have a laptop with the

internet at the fire station so that someone who's already done their cover letter and résumé maybe they can look for work when other people are doing other things. But I'm a lot older, so that's just me. I've probably done it through [my JSA provider] and I've done other courses similar to this in the past. Mainly with [my JSA provider] where you do a six-week course a bit like this, but maybe more intensive. But this course was really helpful.

Grant, YEP participant

Some of the lack of flexibility within the course modules could be resolved through more appropriate training facilities, as discussed below.

Training space

Due to the lack of a dedicated training space, the pre-vocational training was offered in a number of different locations around Caroline Springs, changing day to day. While this created some logistical challenges, including making sure participants had access to computers, it appeared that for the participants the change and variety meant that the training seemed less like school, keeping some of them more engaged. The value of incorporating different activities at different locations should be kept in mind for future replication of the program.

It was interesting, everything was always different. It wasn't just in one spot. So we were always moving, it wasn't just that one boring place where you zone out. *Becky, YEP participant*

I thought the program was good in that they give you a booklet at the start on the first day and you have a timetable for the five weeks, so I think that the organisation and everything was really good. You knew what was going to happen the next day ... It's good to know what's going to happen, you're not just rocking up and wondering what we're going to do today. We knew today we're going to be in the library, we're going to be at Sunshine, or the fire station. *Grant, YEP participant*

However, while the different locations provided variety and a point of difference from a school/classroom environment, the program suffered from the lack of a dedicated training space. The program office located in the local church was difficult to find and lacked signage. A number of stakeholders commented that the church location may have been a barrier for some potential participants and their parents. The lack of a customised training space also meant that more flexible delivery was difficult to achieve—for example allowing participants who had already covered some aspects of the course to use computers for job searching during those modules. A dedicated space with computers and training rooms would enable this to take place. It could also provide facilities for adjunct services such as a drop-in service for participants who had completed the program but wanted advice or to use computer facilities, and a foyer for potential participants to gain information regarding employment and training opportunities.

Individual pathway planning and support

A case management approach was incorporated in the YEP to provide advice and referrals for each participant as well as to prepare individual pathways into employment or further education and training. Participants were encouraged to develop action plans based on their own aspirations and aptitudes. Goal-setting and future planning were included in the training program as well as in one-on-one sessions with the YEP coordinator and case manager.

[The program helped with] working out the steps to where you need to get to. If you want that job, how do you get there? You need other people to help you to get it. *Crystal, YEP participant*

The individual assistance took place concurrently with the group-based training and aspects of the two approaches were integrated. For example, one component of training was attending a not-for-profit organisation specialising in career and transition services for young people in the western suburbs, part of which involved one-on-one vocational advice and assessment. A number of the participants talked about the value of receiving this kind of advice:

Like with the career people, if I hadn't done that I would never have applied to do a teaching course. On the same day they suggested it, I applied for it. It's online. I already started it. *Belinda, YEP participant*

From the beginning, participants were encouraged to engage in ongoing job searching and to attend interviews, assisted by the YEP coordinator and case manager. This assistance ranged from help with individual résumés to contacting potential employers and even taking participants to interviews if needed:

... It depends on the individual but what I see the YEP staff doing, they do everything they can to support those young people and get them where they're wanting to go, and the direction, if that means other types of training or education, and they will make those efforts individually. And they're trying to find those links for those kids too. *Student transitions worker 2*

One important aspect of the pathway planning facilitated by the YEP was the distinction between 'for now' and 'future' goals and aspirations. Instead of promoting either a 'work-first' approach which neglected the young people's future goals and career aspirations, or a long-term pathway into work focused on education and training which overlooked the young person's immediate needs and wishes, the YEP staff took a realistic approach, combining planning for short and long-term goals. This approach recognised that many young people will engage in different combinations of employment and study over time. Some participants wanted to find work immediately to gain financial independence while others needed immediate employment to make ends meet. These young people were encouraged to think about longer term aspirations and pathways while searching for work. Others had longer term goals but were concerned that taking on immediate employment which could support them financially (a 'survival job') could hinder these aspirations. The YEP coordinator and case manager assisted participants to create achievable plans for both the present and the future, for example considering how current employment and ongoing training could be combined so as to provide the young person with income while they took steps towards a longer term goal.

I found that, like I wanted to do an apprenticeship, that's why I came to this, and it helped me—things like [the YEP staff] touched on, like 'survival jobs'—even though you have a long-term goal to do something, like a career, in the meantime it's alright to have other jobs that get you by. And that's something that I've taken on board. Because I'd been unemployed for a while, but I just didn't want to get a job, because I wanted to get the job that I wanted ... You think that if you get any job, you might like the money, or you might just like end up not doing what you want to do, and it's like a barrier up in front of you. But I'm still keen to do an apprenticeship. *Grant, YEP participant*

Case management in some circumstances also involved referrals to mental health practitioners, discussions with teachers and principals about returning to school and support in dealing with other personal and family issues.

Work experience and placement

While initially the YEP aimed to provide site tours of key employers and offer work experience with those employers, and did so for the first two groups of participants, it became evident that a more flexible model of work experience and placement was required which suited the young people's interests, skills, aspirations and needs in order to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Further, while outcome payments were based on placements in 'green jobs' (including construction) of at least 30 hours per week, it became apparent that not all participants were interested in short- or long-term employment in these areas. Some participants needed a job 'for now' and for a number of participants part-time work was more suitable, due to health considerations, care responsibilities, or the need to combine employment with part-time training or further education.

The work experience placements took place over two weeks at the end of the training course. The YEP coordinator and case manager worked to arrange tailored placements for each participant (rather than the planned structured group work experience placements in green jobs). While the tailored approach was considerably more time-consuming, it was necessary in order to provide meaningful experiences of employment for the young people, ideally leading to ongoing work. The YEP coordinator and case manager were able to draw on their own extensive knowledge of employers in the region and their relationships with local networks. While not all work experience placements led to employment, the opportunity to 'try out' different options in a 'hands on', real employment environment was just as important. This flexibility to enable young people to try different options appears to be absent from mainstream employment services, yet was valued by YEP staff, participants and external stakeholders alike. One employer commented:

It's not about getting someone in and have the light bulb go off and they now love what they do in landscaping, but working out that this is an avenue that you really don't want to do is just as important. At that age if you don't want to go to school and you don't want to work in an office and be a professional and go to university, this is kind of the avenue that you're looking at ... You've got to give these kids an opportunity to find their feet—you can talk to them all you like, [give] lectures and show photos, and do bus tours, but you've got to get out and experience the rain and the cold and the wind and the heat and the dust and the mud and working with people who possibly can be raucous and loud—it's real life.

We've employed three [YEP participants] in total as labourers. One was put on as an apprentice. One that was put on as a labourer then hated it, and has left us to join the army, but in my eyes that's a success. He did it enough to know there were elements that he loved and I could see that joining the army would be a good outcome for him. *Manager, commercial landscaping business*

The first group's two-week work experience had been hosted by a local commercial landscaping business. While this structured work experience was excellent for young people interested in working in landscaping or related trades, offering an opportunity to work on different aspects of the business, the costs were unsustainable in the long term. Adding to the effective cost was the fact that the business had to 'create' work for the young people because participation in existing projects resulted in reduced commercial productivity.

Job search, job placement and post-placement support

Job placement

Finding job placements for YEP participants was a challenge. The initial plan had envisaged narrow pathways into work with a small number of employers; however this changed to better meet the diverse interests and aspirations of participants. This meant that the YEP coordinator and case manager became involved in reverse marketing of candidates to employers, while also organising the other components of the program and providing one-on-one case management and support. They found that building relationships with employers took time, even though both the YEP staff members had long histories of working in the employment and training sector in the western suburbs. Greater resources, time and planning for this important aspect of the program would be beneficial.

Post-placement support and pathways

Given that the pathways taken by the young people were varied and somewhat ‘messy’, the ongoing support provided after participants finished the program appeared to be particularly important. Their transitions variously involved starting employment, moving into further short-term training and then looking for work, engaging in ongoing training or education and returning to the mainstream school system. Some participants started employment or training and found it was not suitable or not what they had expected. Others found their casual jobs were not ongoing. There was no single, linear pathway out of the YEP into work or education but rather stops and starts which necessitated ongoing support and guidance from the YEP staff:

One young woman who left school in Year 11, after the program she had aspirations to become a cabinet maker. She realised that she needed to finish Year 11. We discussed her options with her and created a ‘mini-plan’ so that she could return to school, finish Year 11 with recognition of the learning during the YEP and then go on to do a pre-app[renticeship]. She changed her mind and decided she wanted to be a landscaper. She had done some work experience with [a local landscaping business] through the YEP and they offered her an apprenticeship. *YEP coordinator*

The participants particularly valued the ongoing support they received:

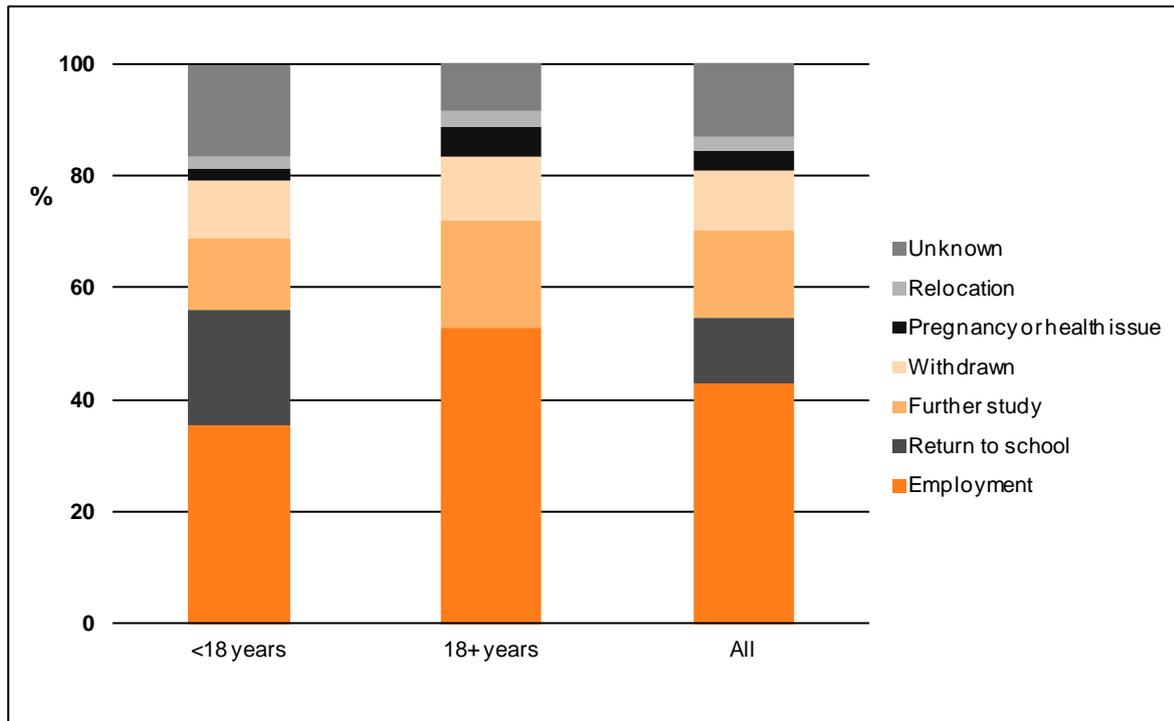
[The YEP staff member] does keep calling us and stuff. It’s not like, ‘You’ve finished the course so goodbye’. She wants to work with us individually. *Crystal*

[The YEP staff member] was really good, she’s given me a few calls since I left, to see how it’s going, suggest some jobs. She’s really good. I appreciate that from her—she wasn’t even our trainer if you know what I mean? ... She was the organiser. It’s good that she catches up with us. *Grant*

Project outcomes

Overall, 70 per cent of the YEP participants achieved a positive pathway: 43 per cent were assisted into paid work, 12 per cent returned to school and 15 per cent commenced further study.

Figure 1 shows participant outcomes by age cohort: 69 per cent of under 18-year-olds achieved a positive outcome, with 21 per cent returning to school; 72 per cent of those aged 18 years or older achieved a positive outcome, with 53 per cent of this cohort obtaining paid work.

Figure 1 YEP participant pathways

The YEP offered four key pathways for participants:

- employment pathways (into full-time or part-time work: ‘survival’ jobs and ‘career’ jobs)
- pathways into further education and training
- pathways back to school
- combined pathways—some participants engaged in both part-time work and ongoing study.

It is important to recognise the variety of beneficial pathways for young people, particularly for early school leavers. Given that early school leavers are more likely to face ongoing forms of disadvantage over the course of their lives, the opportunity to try ‘real work’ and then return to mainstream education is very valuable:

Even some of the kids referred to the YEP program got out, got a taste of work and realised that it wasn’t that easy—‘I don’t like this work’—and they’ve come back to school. I still see that as an outcome, but I don’t think that’s a formal outcome for [the program]. But it definitely should be. *Student transitions worker 1*

The opportunity to ‘try out’ various pathways is not always afforded to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. For young people who are not engaged in education or employment, there is often pressure to ‘earn or learn’ and to find a single vocational pathway—yet the young people in the YEP appeared to benefit from being given opportunities to try different options and support to change when a pathway did not turn out to be appropriate.

In addition to employment and educational outcomes, the YEP also helped its young participants to gain perspective about their futures, build confidence, try new activities and create realistic short

and long-term plans, and provided direct support to achieve them. Asked what the benefits of the program were, one participant responded:

Just thinking about where you want to be in the future, getting to know yourself. *Becky, participant*

The same young woman had also received indirect benefits which boosted her confidence:

You know what's really good about this program? I got a free gym membership for three months, and it really helps me a lot. It really motivates me; I'm so in love with gym right now. It's really good, it builds your confidence and everything, puts you out there. And people at gym, they work and stuff so they can help you get a job. It's good; it's opened up a new life.

Program cost

The cost per outcome of the YEP was \$7226, taking into account on-costs and organisational support costs. This represents the cost to develop and deliver the YEP in a growth corridor area with limited existing resources for young people. Economies of scale might be expected in expanding the program beyond a 'pilot'. Calculating the long-term social costs of failing to address youth disengagement was beyond the scope of this evaluation; however the unit costs appear to represent a small investment with large gains for disadvantaged young people.

Importance of local relationships

Relationships between the program coordinator, local agencies, local employers and local schools all played an important role in achieving successful outcomes:

You've got to have a champion who believes in the program and who is really proud of it. And be able to inspire and bring other people on board. There's a lot of fantastic programs but they need someone who can be there and really has that good interaction. Especially because this is a hard group of kids at times, and I think [the YEP coordinator] is really special for that. You can't just dump a program in and expect it to just work, and it takes time to get into that area, before you can establish. *Youth resource officer (Victoria Police)*

Maintaining communication with referring agencies, particularly schools, was also essential as this not only enabled a smoother, supported return to school for some participants, it also enhanced the confidence of the schools in the program and encouraged further referrals:

I think it's been great, the success rate has been great—all of our students who we referred got something out of it. Some went on to further study at VU [Victoria University]. I think the difference with this program was that [the YEP coordinator] really kept in contact with us and really kept us informed about our students, because we have an obligation—every month for six months to follow up with students to make sure they're engaged in something unless they're over 17. [The YEP coordinator] let us know about their attendance, had they got something, was she still working with them. *Student transitions worker 2*

Barriers to participation

In addition to issues relating to the program design and delivery and outcomes for participants, the YEP evaluation identified a number of structural challenges facing young people, and the failure of other services, policies or infrastructure to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth. Particular

challenges include those faced by younger early school leavers, access to transport, inappropriate training and the Jobs Services Australia system.

Needs of younger participants

The involvement of younger participants aged 15 and 16 in employment programs poses a significant challenge, both for the program staff and for policy makers. The YEP succeeded in assisting these young people to transition into further training, employment and return to school. The issue of younger students disengaging from the school system raises some important issues about how they will fare in the future labour market with minimal qualifications, and likely low literacy and numeracy. The stakeholders who were interviewed considered that the mainstream education system was not meeting the needs of these young people. They were often struggling with literacy and numeracy, needed a different style of learning environment and wanted to be in the workforce:

The program is seeing 15-year-olds coming in—wanting to *do* trades, they want to ‘*do stuff*’—they identify as visual learners, often with poor literacy and numeracy. The school system is not meeting their needs and they want out. *YEP worker*

The flexible, rolling intake dates for the YEP appeared to be important for one referring school, as they provided more opportunities for students who were marginalised within the school and at risk of disengaging to be referred to the program without ‘gaps’ being created in their pathways (for example, while waiting for the beginning of a TAFE semester).

Each referral from us is on an individual basis, when we do the pathway. If I can get that student into a program that’s skills-based, then that’s what I do. If I can’t ... like the course has been full and they’ve got to wait another eight weeks or whatever—then I’ve rung [the YEP] to see if they’ll take someone on ... If someone leaves school and they’ve got eight weeks to fill in, then it’s not good. We need them to be working on some level of motivation, keeping the routine going. *Student transitions worker 1*

One of the student transitions workers expressed concern about the lack of options available for these younger school leavers to continue to study basic maths and English while engaging in applied learning or part-time employment:

The problem we’ve got here, we’ve got nothing we can refer a kid to that offers Year 10 English and maths in a small group setting in a comfortable environment that’s conducive to their learning. For a portion of students, the school isn’t that setting. And then you’ve got kids who have had interrupted learning and then they come here, and it’s that snowball effect, if you haven’t got the basics. We need somewhere for these students. For a while that was the YEP, but to me that was a bit like putting the cart before the horse. Kids need skills before they can do that. I think that program is brilliant and I’ve referred a lot to it, but to address the needs of the youth in this area we need something where they can be in an environment where they can do English and maths ... If a kid wants to do a Cert[ificate] II in computer repairs, 16 is too young. *Student transitions worker 1*

Lack of a drivers licence, and a three-year wait until they could gain one, meant that some pathways were not open to these very early school leavers:

And for pre-app[renticeships], they need a drivers licence to get the work. The employers are looking for a licence. So for the TAFEs to get outcomes, they will try to meet the need of the employer, so age is a requirement ... So these younger kids fall into a gap. *Student transitions worker 1*

The YEP indicates that young school leavers need opportunities to ‘taste’ the work environment, and to be linked into a structured pathway outside the mainstream school system. This ‘pathway’ must also include ‘life’ skills such as those incorporated into the YEP. However, the YEP was not designed with the needs of these young school leavers in mind and it appeared that some schools were simply using the YEP as a way to provide support for students disengaging from school—even if these young people were not ready for direct employment *per se*.

The YEP was getting our [students in the] ‘too hard basket’. And I think that is a brilliant program but I think it should be at the end of another program. So maybe if they could do a pre-app[renticeship] and then at the end of the pre-app you’d move on to the youth employment preparation. That would be the perfect way for it to run. It’s skills-based, you learn how to use the tools, you learn some customer contact. Because the kids at that age just don’t have the skills ... if you are looking at kids coming out at Year 10 level, they won’t have the literacy and numeracy [for] competing against other kids that might [have them]. *Student transitions worker 2*

However, not all young people at risk of disengaging have the same interests, face the same barriers, or have the same reasons for leaving school. One teacher identified the need for a program providing a supported pathway to TAFE, rather than employment or an apprenticeship. The YEP did fulfil this function for a number of students, particularly in individual pathway planning and support; however, future replications of the program could formally offer a TAFE ‘taster’ as an alternative to the work experience component, for young people wanting to move into an adult learning environment but requiring support and confidence to do so:

We’ve had two students come back to school ... we have kids at risk who are aiming for [something other than a trade]. It may be that their expectations are unrealistic. They need to go into some sort of TAFE course, they’re just sitting here doing nothing, so they do need some sort of transition process to get them into something else, but there isn’t one. Unfortunately for those students, even if they stay here at the end of the year, they will not progress one bit. I would like to see these kids go into a program that gives them a taste of TAFE. Maybe one day a week, a short course, dip their feet in and slowly transition out—they’re too scared to take that step. *Student transitions worker 2*

Attention should also be paid to ‘early prevention’ through the engagement of younger students in mainstream schooling:

I think they need something, a stream in the education system for Year 8 and Year 9 kids where you can do some special education for them, like the outdoors stuff, life skills. Throw the concept of traditional education out a bit for that age group and try to see the bigger picture of keeping them positively engaged and interested, learning about their community.

Transport barriers

Many of the jobs available for young jobseekers with few skills are not located in Caroline Springs itself and therefore transport is required to travel to job interviews and work. Some locations offering employment in the surrounding area are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Employment locations and transport

Location	Employment opportunities	Travel time by car from Caroline Springs	Travel time by public transport from Caroline Springs
Melton South	New Delfin Toolern housing estate	24 minutes	1 hour and 35 minutes (to Melton South Station*).
Laverton North	Warehouse transport hub	20 minutes	1 hour and 35 minutes
Watergardens	Large shopping mall	15 minutes	45 minutes

*Employees would then need to be picked up and driven to the estate as there is no public transport.

The poor local public transport services compounded the need for young jobseekers in Caroline Springs and the surrounding areas to have a drivers licence. As stated above, participants under 18 are ineligible to apply for a drivers licence and many over 18 struggle to gain the required 120 hours of practice and cannot afford driving lessons. Only 43% of YEP participants were old enough to have a drivers licence, and of these, only 44% had actually gained their licence.

Inappropriate training

Although training in general was not a focus of the evaluation, it became evident that the YEP staff were observing a sizeable number of young people entering the program who had previously received poor quality or inappropriate training – often at the behest of their JSA provider or as part of VET in school. These previous experiences not only impacted upon the young people’s interest in training, but also jeopardised their eligibility for subsidised training in the future under the Victorian Training Guarantee. Although this issue has been partially addressed by the state government’s decision to make subsidised training is available for all young people under 20 regardless of previous accredited training, young people aged over 20 remain eligible only for subsidised training for certificate courses higher than their previous certificate. For example, a young person over the age of 20 who had previously received a Certificate III would be ineligible to receive a subsidy to enrol in a further Certificate III course, including a traineeship. This is particularly problematic for young school leavers and those facing various forms of disadvantage, since young people are likely to try a number of pathways before finding something which is suitable or holds their interest. It is of even more concern given the anecdotal evidence of poor quality training being provided, especially by private training operators.

Such anecdotal evidence included a young man who wanted to become a cabinet maker but had been strongly encouraged by his JSA provider to enrol in a Certificate II course in Business Administration. Another example involved a young woman who was enrolled in a Certificate III in Business Administration at the time she commenced the YEP, yet it became apparent to the YEP staff that her literacy and communication skills were unlikely to be at a Certificate III standard. In this case the YEP staff approached the private RTO for a copy of the training plan but the organisation refused. The ‘on the job’ training for the young woman involved sitting in the corner of the training organisation’s office completing her workbook.

Similarly, while school-based apprenticeships offer young people an opportunity for applied learning while remaining in school, these are often a conducted at a Certificate III level which could mean that they would then be ineligible for a further subsidised Certificate III place such as a traineeship once they turn 20. The unintended consequence of providing Certificate III level courses as part of school-based apprenticeships is that this may lock young people out of

subsequent traineeships or other training which might offer a more sustainable pathway into employment, or provide an opportunity to change career direction.

Job Services Australia

While the participants' experiences of mainstream employment service providers was also not the focus of this evaluation, a number of the older focus group participants had been or were currently engaged with a JSA provider. It became apparent that the assistance they had received was focused narrowly on job search skills and a 'work-first' approach, rather than guidance and advice regarding appropriate pathways.

I only got a CV when I went to an employment agency. I had to do every day six applications and they would help you with your résumé. *Belinda, YEP participant*

They say the more résumés the better, the more you send out the better, you get a higher chance of call back. *Grant, YEP participant*

Policy implications

Importance of flexible, individual support

The delivery of the YEP has indicated the effectiveness of better integrated and personalised approaches to address the multiple barriers often faced by young people disengaged from formal school and training. Seventy per cent of participants were assisted into paid work, training or back into education.

These young people cannot be considered as a homogeneous group—one size does not fit all. They may have varying learning difficulties, a range of barriers to participation in education or training, or family circumstances that may include conflict, violence, housing crisis, parental ill health and low social capital. Therefore policy responses which allow for flexibility and an individualised response are necessary. In addition to the different barriers faced by young people, different assistance, support and resources are required depending on why a young person who is not in education, training or employment has left school; and whether they want to work but need guidance about their options or want to work but lack job search skills or need additional support to link up with employment opportunities in the area.

Benefits of integrated 'hub' models

The YEP itself was run out of multiple locations in Caroline Springs including the Anglican church, health centre, library and fire station. This created some logistical challenges. More importantly, consistent with emerging evidence on effective youth transitions elsewhere, the experience from YEP showed the importance of community-based 'hub' models that offer an accessible entry point for young people in new outer suburban areas, with dedicated spaces for training, computer access for job search and résumé writing and provision of advice, information and support. This space and service could also provide links with and referrals to local health, welfare, education and training organisations.

Effective pathways for young school leavers

The issue of younger students disengaging from the formal school system is of concern and requires policy attention in relation to alternative educational opportunities, the appropriateness of

employment services to meet the needs of this cohort and the appropriateness of adult vocational training environments.

The complexity of the vocational training system and the precarious nature of low-skilled work necessitate programs offering support and guidance for early school leavers to navigate these transitions. Early school leavers may also require flexible forms of applied learning which can be undertaken alongside employment and which also incorporate literacy, numeracy and 'life skills'.

Further development of effective alternative learning pathways, with appropriate teaching methods and adequate resources, will be critical in improving youth transitions, especially in the rapidly growing outer suburbs of Melbourne, which lack community infrastructure for young people.

The findings from the Caroline Springs Youth Employment project show the benefits of better integrated approaches that offer flexibility, personal support and a suite of learning opportunities including 'life skills' within a stable, accessible, local setting.

Planning places for young people

The YEP experience also points to the need to take into account the varied pathways for young people when planning for new communities. In addition to planning youth 'hubs', access to public transport is crucial for young jobseekers and others without access to private vehicles.

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