A path to re-engagement

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

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2011

Contents

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CVCAL	Community VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning), delivered by a non-school provider in a community setting
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
FHSC	Frankston High Street Centre, operated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence
FMP	Frankston Mornington Peninsula (the combined local government areas of the City of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula Shire)
FMPLLEN	Frankston Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network
LGA	Local government area
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and further education
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational education and training
VRQA	Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority

Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's 2010 Community VCAL (CVCAL) program was tailored for young people aged 15 to 18 who had experienced barriers to education, often leading to expulsion or 'exiting' from mainstream schools. Located in Frankston, the program delivered the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning—a Years 11–12 certificate course which combines classroom tuition with vocational training and work placements—in a community setting rather than a school. The evaluation of its inaugural year found that, notwithstanding some challenges, the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program made a significant difference to the lives of most of its students.

Key points

- Students' demeanour improved markedly soon after their enrolment, Though student-centred and applied learning methods helped create a positive and responsive learning environment, by far the most significant factor was the emphasis placed on 'adult learning' principles (that is, treating students as young adults and allowing them to make choices about their learning).

- The attendance rate (79 per cent) and improvements in confidence among the students were very encouraging, particularly given the cohort's recent experience of disengagement and hardship.

- Academic outcomes were also encouraging, with 10 of 11 seniors (Year 12) graduating, and 12 of 14 intermediates (Year 11) progressing to their senior level (in 2011).

- Teaching the CVCAL demanded unique skills, commitment and passion: conventional teacher training did little to prepare teachers for this setting. Nevertheless the staff were held in very high regard by students and the parents/carers. In the absence of specialist wellbeing and literacy aides, the teachers at times struggled to cope with the students' complex needs.

- Staff experienced difficulties in their attempts to synchronise the VET, workplace training and classroom tuition components of the CVCAL. When these were not aligned, there was frustration and confusion for many students and it was hard to track their overall progress.

- The program would benefit greatly from access to more initial information about referred students' existing needs and the experiences that led to disengagement.

Background

The 2010 BSL-CVCAL program represented the first year of a fully accredited VCAL course provided by the Brotherhood of St Laurence at its Frankston High Street Centre (FHSC) for young people across the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region. It succeeded a 'Taster' pre–Community VCAL course provided in 2009. Fifteen of the Taster students re-enrolled for the 2010 program and others were referred by local schools.

All the students had faced barriers to education. The referral process revealed that important barriers included disengagement/truancy, family issues, low self-esteem, a poor academic record, carer responsibilities, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues and bullying. Also common, though not always apparent at enrolment, were low levels of literacy and numeracy, experiences of isolation or grief, and difficult relations with teachers.

Findings

Engagement

The program was in high demand. Its 25 places were always occupied, with 29 students enrolled at some point over the course of the year.

Table 1 Duration of enrolment

Length of time enrolled	No. of students
4 terms	20
3 terms	3
2 terms	3
1 term or less	3

At 79 per cent, attendance was very good. An estimated 15 per cent of absences were 'authorised': that is, they were considered justified following consultations with staff. While the overall figures were impressive for a group facing many obstacles, truancy during the school day was sometimes a problem.

Most of the students had reacted badly to the regimentation at mainstream schools and had very much resented being treated as children. Difficulties experienced in the home and in other personal relationships had exacerbated problems encountered in school. Disengagement from school was often a painful experience, and one that students themselves sometimes regretted.

Community VCAL students made important steps towards re-engagement. Improvements in students' demeanour can be attributed to the calm and responsive learning environment that emphasised 'adult learning' principles. Staff were held in high regard by students, and relations between students were, on the whole, very harmonious.

Parents/carers were impressed with the level of engagement and support extended to them and their dependants by the CVCAL staff. Many would appreciate more frequent updates about program activities and, at times, advice about support services.

CVCAL staff established mutually beneficial relations with local schools, as well as with the Southern Metropolitan Regional Office of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). Relations with community groups were strengthened through extracurricular and out-of-class learning activities, and vocational training arrangements.

Teaching and learning

Academic outcomes from the program were encouraging, with 10 of 11 seniors (Year 12) graduating, and 12 of 14 intermediates (Year 11) progressing to their senior level (in 2011). Progress in the vocational training components was also encouraging: all students were enrolled in at least one VET course; one gained an apprenticeship and five gained traineeships.

Student-centred and applied learning methods helped create a vibrant learning environment. However, what the students valued most was being treated as adults and allowed to make choices about their own learning. The low student–staff ratio mixed ability, single group learning also contributed to the learning experience.

Though numeric skills were reasonably strong across the cohort, literacy skills were weak. General confidence increased during the course; but this may also create unrealistic career expectations if the problem of poor literacy is not addressed.

Extracurricular and out-of-class learning activities were vital in reinforcing 'real world', 'hands-on' and 'adult learning' dimensions of the program.

The autonomy that is integral to adult learning had its downsides: students were sometimes rowdy and disruptive. The minimalist approach to rules governing student behaviour was mostly effective, but the over-use of mobile phones and MP3 players exposed some limitations.

Teaching the CVCAL demanded unique skills, commitment and passion: conventional training did little to prepare teachers for the setting. The teachers showed creativity, flexibility and empathy, which were greatly appreciated by the students, but without support from specialist wellbeing and literacy aides, they struggled at times to cope with the young people's complex needs. They would have benefited from having more information from the start about students' existing needs and experiences that had led to disengagement.

Perhaps of greatest concern were the difficulties experienced by staff in their attempts to coordinate and synchronise the VET, workplace training and classroom tuition components of the CVCAL. When these components were not closely aligned, there was significant frustration and confusion for many students, and it was hard to track their progress through different reporting systems.

Administration and support

The program complied with the standards set down by regulatory bodies, and its internal governance and reporting practices served it well. Procedures designed to facilitate formal interactions with schools operated effectively, though they relied heavily on the goodwill of individuals in each setting.

Although management was supportive, staff experienced considerable strain: workloads were high and staff worked much longer than their paid hours. Teachers were also isolated from their counterparts in conventional schools and hence had less access to professional development. Access to appropriate classrooms and information technology produced extra challenges in a community facility shared with other programs.

The supportive learning environment in 2010 was due largely to the commitment of staff. Expansion of the program will require measures to address greater teaching and administrative workloads for CVCAL staff and for referring schools.

Recommendations

Engagement

- Produce enrolment kits containing support services information and background material to enhance students' and parents' understanding of the program and other support services for young people.

- Incorporate into the syllabus the creation of a supporters' newsletter to keep families and others informed about the program's diverse activities.

Teaching and learning

- Hasten the introduction of a specialist wellbeing aide, as well as the planned remedial literacy program.

- Establish formal consultative relationships with the relevant TAFE institutions with a view to easing transitions from the CVCAL classroom to VET tuition.

- Use student feedback to build a knowledge base of the most suitable registered training organisations (RTOs).

- Explore the willingness of RTOs to provide 2–3 day trials or observer places in courses.

- Narrow the students' VET options in order to reduce the number of RTOs used and streamline liaison and administration.

- Negotiate more-limited use of mobile phones and MP3 players.

Administration and support

- Monitor staff wellbeing closely and provide frequent feedback and debriefings, as well as access to professional development.

- Increase staffing levels to cater for increased student numbers and provide 'time release' for teachers to attend professional development.

- Explore the potential for increased administrative support (data entry, filing, routine parent communications).

- Engage with schools to streamline the processes that link schools and the CVCAL provider.

- Nurture mutually supportive relations with other CVCAL and VCAL providers.

Conclusion

Despite many challenges—not least, catering for the students' complex needs—the BSL-CVCAL program in 2010 made a significant difference to the educational opportunities of almost all its students. Outcomes across a range of key indicators were encouraging, particularly in the context of the student group's recent experience of disengagement and hardship. The majority of parents/carers were effusive in their praise of the program, and reported marked improvements in their own relationships with the young people. The first year of operation indicated CVCAL can be a credible and effective option for re-engaging young people with education.

1 Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's CVCAL program represents an alternative delivery model for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The latter is a statewide Years 11–12 certificate course provided in many schools—as well as in some TAFEs and registered training organisations—which runs parallel to the Victorian Certificate of Education and complements traditional classroom tuition with practical, work-related training and experience.

Along with other 'community-based' VCAL programs, the BSL program conducted at the Frankston High Street Centre (FHSC) has a number of features that differentiate it from standard VCAL provision. Firstly, it is delivered outside the mainstream school system. Secondly, it is funded partly by referring schools passing on government Student Resource Package monies earmarked for individual students' education and welfare, and partly by grants from philanthropic organisations and from BSL reserves. Lastly, it caters for students who have been expelled or 'exited' from mainstream schooling, and/or who are deemed to be 'at risk'. The BSL model is also informed by a reflective learning ethos—supported by BSL research—that enables ongoing improvement in service delivery.

Typically, the young people attending CVCAL are severely disaffected with mainstream education, often due to personal and social factors, including family conflict, poor self-esteem, learning difficulties, substance abuse, homelessness and isolation, mental health issues, financial hardship, bullying and violence or abuse. The problem of disengagement, defined by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as (DEEWR) as not being not fully occupied in education or employment, and non-completion of secondary schooling is significant in Victoria, as well as throughout Australia. While overall retention rates in Victorian government schools have recently shown signs of improvement, these figures mask regional variations. The combined non-metropolitan regions' retention stands at 68.5 per cent, in contrast with the combined metropolitan regions' 87.7 per cent. Importantly, there are metropolitan sub-regions with rates as low as 65.2 per cent (DEECD 2010). The level of disengagement for Victorians aged 15–19 years in 2009 was 12.7 per cent. Though lower than the national figure of 16.4 per cent, this nonetheless points to a significant proportion of young people who are alienated from school and who potentially face limited opportunities in the labour market.

In 2009, the BSL gained full accreditation as a non-school senior secondary provider and offered a successful 'Taster' pre–Community VCAL course for 15 students (Myconos 2010). Providing a comprehensive VCAL program for 25 students presented a significant challenge. This evaluation assesses the extent to which the BSL met this challenge.

It should be noted that even though the BSL-CVCAL program is continuing into 2011 and 2012, this evaluation focuses on the first year of its operation. In addition, it does not assess funding arrangements and cost-effectiveness. Lastly, it does not set out to assess or critique the overall VCAL model. Nonetheless, it is likely that readers with an interest in refining the VCAL model—in all its delivery settings—will find some observations to be valuable.

The VCAL and the emergence of Community VCAL

A watershed in efforts to counter youth disengagement in Victoria was the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (2000), later dubbed the Kirby Report. The report highlighted many students' difficulties with the more academic Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and the need for more flexible approaches to strengthen links with

tertiary, training, and employment destinations. The Victorian Government's response was the creation of the VCAL. Trialled in 2002, and rolled out across the state and independent school sectors in 2004, the VCAL now offers Year 11 and 12 students an alternative to the VCE.

The VCAL involves practical or 'hands on' learning. It is designed to equip students with the skills, experience, knowledge and attitudes needed for employment, further education and effective community engagement. It is usually delivered by mainstream schools and entails student enrolment in VET courses, as well as work-experience placements with employers. The essential elements of the VCAL are outlined thus by the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority:

- an immediate and transparent emphasis on the 'real world' relevance of what is being learnt

- partnerships and connections with organisations and individuals in the community so students can demonstrate the relevance of their learning

- students being taught in a nurturing and holistic manner, which takes into account personal strengths, interests, goals and previous experiences

- an acknowledgement that part of the transition from school to work is being treated as an adult, and that moving students out of classrooms to learn also means helping them to make a shift to becoming more independent and responsible for their own learning. This means that goals and outcomes are negotiated with students and other stakeholders (VCAA 2006).

In practice, this translates into a certificate with accreditation on three levels: foundation, intermediate and senior. These cater for students of varying abilities, interests and stages of learning. Common to each level are the following curriculum strands:

- literacy and numeracy

- industry-specific training (VET)

- workplace skills

- personal development.

There is a growing consensus that the VCAL is now playing a vital role in mainstream education. Evaluations show that it has given students more input into their education, generated enthusiasm for work placement, eased frustrations associated with attending school five days a week, introduced fresh teaching and mentoring styles, and provided a clearer view of future employment options (Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004, pp. 4–5).

In 2010, VCAL enrolments had reached 19,175, an increase from 14,093 in 2007. There existed 429 VCAL providers, mostly secondary schools (VCAA 2007, 2011) . 'On Track' data from 2008 shows that 23.3 per cent of intermediate and senior level VCAL students went on to further education or training, while 65.8 per cent commenced apprenticeships, traineeships, or found employment (DEECD 2009). Significantly, related data reveals that more than 45 per cent of those who left school early would have remained if there had been vocational programs available to them (DEECD 2010).

Notwithstanding this growth in attendance, shortcomings in the VCAL model in a school setting became apparent (see Dumbrell 2004; Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004; Volkoff & Gibson 2009). School-based VCAL has had limited success in catering for students considered 'at risk'. Coppinger (2004) identified the following characteristics of this student cohort:

- consistent negative experience and/or perceptions of formal education

- consistent negative perceptions of their own academic abilities

- regular experiences of social conflict both within and outside the school environment

- inconsistencies in support, leadership and encouragement from parents/carers and other adults concerning the relationship between participation in education and future life options

- lack of recognition of actual abilities (i.e. non-academic), measurements too reliant on literacy-based communication

- lack of 'fun' at school, finding most things to be 'boring'

- discomfort with the formalities of the school environment, e.g. uniforms, classroom routines, discipline and inflexible start times.

Often linked with these characteristics are experiences such as homelessness, family trauma, poverty, mental health problems, low self-esteem and previous low educational achievement.

One response to the shortcomings of school-based VCAL was the emergence of Community VCAL (CVCAL). Important defining features of CVCAL are its physical separation from the mainstream school environment and the intention to engage with the most marginal students via flexible educational frameworks that emphasise improved confidence, self-esteem, adult learning principles and vocational skills (Volkoff & Gibson 2009, p. 23). Providers of CVCAL maintain relationships with nearby schools to the extent that referral and feedback processes are necessary, as are processes for transferring government funds earmarked for the students referred. Frequently, these administrative arrangements are prescribed by formal contracts that also outline the respective parties' ongoing responsibilities to each other and the student. At the time of writing, the Brotherhood of St Laurence was one of seventeen Community VCAL providers in Victoria.

2 Research design and methodology

This evaluation assesses the effectiveness of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program, on the basis of student attendance, academic attainments and skills acquisition, as well as on the program's capacity to engage students, their parents/carers and other key stakeholders. Though efficiency in governance and administration are also considered, program funding issues fall outside its scope.

In addition, the evaluation helps build a body of knowledge that will enable the BSL, educators, policy makers and the community sector to assess whether the CVCAL model is a viable re-engagement program for young people in danger of ending their education prematurely. Its recommendations will assist the development of best practice in the delivery of such programs.

Over 12 months the researcher engaged regularly with the CVCAL program. This involved attending internal and external advisory group meetings, site visits and video conferences with program staff. Interaction with the students and their parents/carers was limited mainly to formal interviews. This qualitative data was supplemented with quantitative data.[1]

Qualitative data

Interviews

April 2010: Interviews were conducted with 14 students who had completed the eight-week 'Taster' program (October–December 2009) and had featured in an evaluation of that course (Myconos 2010). These interviews helped to build a longitudinal knowledge base of their experiences. Also interviewed were the two classroom teachers who were embarking on their first CVCAL experience. Their views were important to the research because they enabled later assessment of how attitudes changed over time.

October 2010: Twenty-five students were interviewed: the abovementioned 2009 cohort, and those who had enrolled for the 2010 CVCAL without prior experience of the setting. The teachers were again interviewed, as were the FHSC manager and Education Programs Coordinator. The latter provided insight into issues of accountability and management of resources.

December 2010 – January 2011: Nine parents/carers were interviewed. All, as it happened, were female: mothers, stepmothers and grandmothers. The author chose to conduct phone interviews in order to minimise the inconvenience to interviewees, many of whom worked irregular hours. These interviews were also recorded—with the interviewees' consent—and later transcribed.

All student interviewees received a modest cash payment. Parents/carers received gift cards.

Ongoing interaction with staff and external consultations

Regular contact via video conferencing, advisory group meetings and site visits gave the researcher a greater understanding of the day-to-day concerns of those engaged in the program. It also benefited the staff, who gained access to interim research findings and, in some instances, to recommendations that led to improvements to the program. Semi-formal consultations with staff at referring schools and agencies, RTOs or support services provided insights about the concept of Community VCAL, education, youth disengagement and training in the Frankston Mornington

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1 The data collection plan is available from the author.

Peninsula region and beyond. In all, fifty formal (recorded and transcribed) interviews were conducted, along with eleven consultations.

Ethics

Following BSL protocol, the evaluation procedures were approved by the Research and Policy Centre's ethics committee. All interviewees were presented with a plain language statement and consent form which outlined the research aims as well as their rights of withdrawal and/or access to the final report. Shortened versions of these documents were read to the parents/carers during phone interviews.

Administrative data

The evaluation also entailed careful review of some key documents used in the establishment and administration of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program. These included the:

- Student Engagement Policy
- Admission and Enrolment Policy
- Assessment and Reporting Policy and Procedures
- Pathways Planning spreadsheet
- student attendance records
- progress reports to partner schools.

Quantitative data

Surveys and student records

A survey was conducted with 19 students in May 2010 to obtain a profile of the cohort. It included information about their personal and educational backgrounds and reasons for leaving mainstream schooling.

Internal attendance and enrolment records were consulted. Attainment data for classroom work conducted throughout the CVCAL was accessed after it had been made available to the BSL by the VCAA. Attainment data from the various RTOs (including TAFEs) was also accessed via those administering the CVCAL program.

Attendance calculation

The research tallied 1430 full-day equivalent *attendances* of the classroom tuition component of the CVCAL (RTO and workplace attendance was unverifiable). To calculate an attendance percentage, this was compared with the 1803 *actual enrolment/learning day opportunities*. We arrived at this (1803) figure after deducting 'late starts' (65), 'exits' (78), and 'curriculum days' (12) from the base number of potential full-day equivalent teaching opportunities (1958). These calculations also take into account the fluctuating numbers of students from week to week, and from term to term.

Underlying themes

The questions guiding the data collection and analysis focused on three closely related themes: engagement, teaching and learning, and administration and support.

- **Engagement**

This encompassed both informal and formal interactions. Informal engagement refers to the subjective aspects of relations between individuals and the program. Here the feelings and impressions about all aspects of the program were sought from students, parents/carers and staff. Formal engagement refers to the interaction between the program and other stakeholders in the wider community.

- **Teaching and learning**

This category included the curriculum, assessment and approaches to teaching. Also explored were the most suitable student–teacher ratio, applied and adult learning principles, mixed ability learning, teaching materials, the use of extracurricular and out-of-class learning activities, and the learning experience with RTOs during the VET component of the program.

- **Administration and support**

This included procedures, protocols, resource and workforce management, as well as compliance with regulatory standards and student wellbeing. It also sheds light on the organisational and procedural aspects of the VET component.

Limitations of the first-year evaluation

In the VCAL model, students experience three learning environments simultaneously: at the provider's premises, at the RTO and at a work placement. The researcher did not have the opportunity to interview employers who had provided workplace experience. A better understanding of how young people fared in this setting would have been desirable.

The researcher did not always have access to the entire student cohort. Nonetheless, 80 per cent of the potential interviews were conducted. Various constraints meant that only around half of the parents/carers were available for interviews. Lastly, just 19 of the 29 students responded to the student survey; as a result, the data set was incomplete.

About the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region

The BSL-CVCAL program catered mainly for youth from two local government areas, the City of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula Shire. Located south-east of Melbourne, the FMP region includes residential, industrial and agricultural areas. Of its 270,000 people, 26 per cent are under 19, making the region relatively young by state standards. Table 2.1 provides a glimpse of the socioeconomic character of the region (FMPLLEN 2010, p. 5):

Table 2.1   Unemployment, Frankston and Mornington Peninsula

Unemployment	Frankston		Mornington Peninsula	
Unemployed, all ages	3450	6.1%	2785	4.7%
Unemployed, aged 15–19 years	683	15.4%	581	11.7%

The DEECD's Student Family Occupation (SFO) profile data shows that 22 per cent of FMP families fall into category D (machine operators, hospitality workers, assistants, labourers and

related workers), with a further 13 per cent not in employment (category N). This 36 per cent D–N combination is high by state standards (FMPLLEN 2010, pp. 4–8).

The City of Frankston is unusual due to the variation within the municipality: Frankston North is in the most disadvantaged 10 per cent of Melbourne suburbs, while Frankston South is in the least disadvantaged 15 per cent. Similarly, the Mornington Peninsula Shire contains Hastings, in the most disadvantaged 10 per cent, and Mt Eliza in the least disadvantaged. Relative to the broader Melbourne metropolitan area, youth in the FMP are subject to greater levels of recognised risk factors: school disengagement, substance abuse, antisocial behaviour, family conflict, homelessness and abuse (FMPLLEN 2010, p. 8).

These factors manifest in below-average educational outcomes, and particularly in low school retention rates (the FMP ranks fourth of the five DEECD metropolitan regions). Residents of Frankston, in particular, leave school much earlier than those elsewhere in Melbourne, with 37 per cent leaving before reaching Year 11.

The qualifications gained by Frankston residents are more likely to be vocationally oriented (20 per cent compared with the Melbourne average of 14 per cent), with fewer attaining the bachelor degree level or higher (9 per cent compared with 20 per cent). Of all Frankston residents aged over 15 years, some 50 per cent have no formal qualifications, compared with 46 per cent for the wider metropolitan area (FMPLLEN 2010, p. 5).

The policy context

Historically, policies promoting vocational training have helped to minimise the impact of economic downturns on youth. Standout examples include the Victorian Government's 1990 legislation that enabled private providers to enter the VET system and offer accredited training, and the Commonwealth funding in 1996 that enabled VET programs to be introduced into schools. This had the effect of expanding vocational education to cater for those who might otherwise have left school early without acquiring relevant skills.

A key plank of the Rudd Labor government's Social Inclusion agenda was the Compact with Young Australians, which was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009. This was designed to provide young people with skills training, rather than have them unemployed during the economic downturn. The compact was to operate until December 2011 and to ensure that every young person under the age of 25 had access to a government-subsidised training place, subject to course availability and admission conditions. The government also introduced a target of 90 per cent completion of Year 12 or equivalent to be achieved by 2015 (COAG 2009).

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

In Victoria, legislation was introduced (August 2009) that raised the school leaving age from 16 to 17 and placed the onus on schools to track early school leavers and ensure they were either in employment or training, and complying with conditions laid out in the 'earn or learn' compact.

Up to the November 2010 election of the Victorian Liberal – National Coalition government, the state's approach to education was articulated in the DEECD's *Blueprint for education and early childhood development* (2008). It outlined schools' responsibilities in monitoring students' pathways until the completion of Year 12 or equivalent. A related policy document, the *School accountability and improvement framework*, listed three outcomes expected of government schools: improved student learning, enhanced student engagement and wellbeing, and successful transitions and pathways (DEECD 2011).

Recent state governments have committed significant funding to skills-related programs for young people. Notable initiatives have been the $15 million boost to VET in schools within the Skills Reform Package and the $32 million allocation to employers who oversee completion of apprenticeships or traineeships (Victorian Government 2009, 2010).

Both federal and state governments are providing cautious support for non-conventional vocational education programs such as Community VCAL. Victoria's Coalition government has earmarked $1 million to review alternative approaches to meet the needs of those unsuited to mainstream schooling, and to piloting flexible learning approaches. This came in the wake of statements signalling an intent to provide more autonomy to school principals contemplating the expulsion of students. Lastly, the new state government has expressed support for its predecessor's approach to disengaged youth and its 'Brighter Futures' initiative, continuing the latter under the name of Youth Partnerships to focus on a number of 'demonstration sites' located in specified local government areas.

Literature review

Literature on youth-related issues and policy in Australia and comparable countries spans multiple overlapping themes: financial and material support, recognition and inclusion, physical and mental wellbeing, the attainment of skills, transitions and work opportunities. Though each of these is relevant to this study, we limit ourselves to disengagement from education and alternatives to conventional schooling for 'at risk' young people.

Disengagement

Research on the causes of disengagement from education focuses on a number of related factors. For our purposes, these can be grouped into two broad categories: experiences of personal hardship within and beyond the family context, and the failure of the conventional educational system to cater for a diverse range of learning temperaments (Butler et al. 2005).

Most researchers acknowledge that there is no single defining set of characteristics of the 'disengaged'. Some have focused on hardship as the principal cause of disengagement. Such hardship varies in severity, and may be due to a lack of opportunity for community involvement, financial pressures, lack of transportation, low parental engagement with schooling, family poverty, violence and abuse, families with physical and mental illnesses and/or drug and alcohol problems, low levels of literacy and behavioural problems (Allen et al. 2005; Butler et al. 2005).

As Dwyer and colleagues (1998) point out, there is also an increased risk of disengagement for those who have the following profile indicators: government schooling, male, Indigenous, a rural background, low income, insecure residency, early and/or chronic truanting and low family expectations of academic achievement. Stokes, Turnbull and Black (2009) argue that, in contrast to most OECD countries, family background remains the most influential factor in student engagement and academic achievement in Australia.

Notwithstanding these 'at risk' indicators, many argue that there is no typical school leaver and that a variety of factors and attitudes can cause disengagement from school. This position holds that the relationships between risk factors and educational outcomes are too complex and not yet fully understood (Batten & Russell 1995; Zyngier 2005).

Some researchers emphasise diverse learning temperaments and how these can complicate the students' integration into mainstream education environments (Allen et al. 2005). Many of these learning temperaments can be correlated with some of the reasons young people provide for leaving school (Black 2004; Ganim & Frydenberg 2006; Lamb et al. 2004; MRPCETPV 2000; Teese 2002). These reasons include problematic relationships with teachers and typical school rules, a lack of perceived relevance and success in academic programs, and a desire to pursue vocational pathways.

Others suggest that the single most important factor in influencing a young person's decision to leave school is the undesirable school culture itself (Holden & Dwyer 1992; Zyngier & Gale 2003). This can manifest in a non-stimulating environment with no discernible relationship to the wider community or adult world, a lack of support and referral agencies to help young people cope with personal and academic hardship, and negative student–teacher relationships. From this perspective, many students leave because of a negative 'push' factor, rather than a 'pull' from a positive alternative to post-compulsory schooling.

Dwyer and colleagues (1998) expand on this theme by emphasising structural and educational issues over an individual's 'at risk' attributes. They argue that an alienating school environment and a culture which is not conducive to the student's needs are significant factors affecting the decision to disengage from schooling. Glasser (1986) and Prashnig (n.d.) reaffirm this by proposing that one of the primary reasons for learner disengagement is the restricted delivery methods used in conventional schools. This body of research suggests that the reasons for disengagement are not only personal attributes of 'at risk' students—important as they are—but also the underlying pedagogy and structure of mainstream education.

Though opinions diverge on the relative importance of personal and structural factors, there is a consensus on the following: disengagement from school is usually not due to one particular event, but is rather a process involving numerous factors at play in the realms of the family, the school and wider community contexts (Taylor 2009).

Overcoming educational disengagement

A significant body of research is concerned with mitigating the problem of early school leaving. In early research the tendency was to assign blame to the 'at risk' students and to focus on their shortcomings. This was dubbed the 'deficit' approach and originated in the United States. According to Zyngier and Gale (2005), it was psychological in orientation and rarely acknowledged cultural differences and other broader contexts. However, recent research has shifted to the question 'Whose problem is it?' There is now a greater acknowledgement of the structural factors which affect a young person's ability to engage with the education system (Black 2007). Consequently, the appropriate response is recast from a predominantly remedial, or indeed punitive, approach to a more holistic one. This is sometimes referred to as an 'ecological' approach (Butler et al. 2005; Dwyer et al.1998), where the focus is on the unmet or unfulfilled needs of the student, and on the interactions between individual students and their environments.

We can better understand this shift in theory by tracing the changes in pedagogy and praxis in post-compulsory education. The 'traditional pedagogical mode' (also known as the 'standard paradigm of learning') places emphasis and value upon transmissive and passive forms of learning (Hager 1996, 2000, 2001). Here learning entails stocking the mind with accumulated ideas which are often propositional (yes–no, either–or) and abstract. This learning is best expressed verbally or in writing and the value and acquisition of learning is of the mind and not of the body (Blake 2007).

The notion that people do not all learn the same way and according to the same formula (Allen et al. 2005; Sonbucher 1991) has steadily gained currency and has had a profound effect on teachers, students and the education system. Researchers have posited different learning styles (Honey & Mumford 1992) as well as multiple intelligences (Lazear 1991). Expanding on such themes, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) advocate a socially embedded human capital approach, which entails learning about social biographies, identities and self-realisation. This pedagogical approach, they argue, is more suitable for all young people, including those who are alienated or at risk of disengagement.

Blake (2006) observes that the 'at risk' label itself is often used in such a way as to mask the actual causes of disengagement. He argues that it is applied to students simply because they do not respond positively to traditional modes of learning. Indeed, many students come to attribute their problems to 'personal deficits' as these are perceived by others (Zyngier 2005). With traditional methods of pedagogy, there is little or no acknowledgement of different forms of learning such as kinesthetic and experiential methods, which are often the strengths and preferred ways of learning for students labeled 'at risk' (Dymke 2006).

Considering the educational context, Batten and Russell (1995) point out that teachers in mainstream school settings must cope with large classes, high curriculum demands and the pressure to produce quantifiable learning outcomes. Under such circumstances we should not be surprised if the retention of 'troublesome' students is not an overriding priority (Dwyer et al. 1998). But advocates of a shift to a more holistic approach to teaching and learning argue that such an approach must be implemented if we are to overcome the tendency to marginalise young people merely because their preferred learning styles put them at odds with traditional methods.

Applied learning

It is against this background that the VCAL model was conceived (Blake 2007). Its design was shaped by the abovementioned shifts in thinking about pedagogy, by similar initiatives in a few secondary schools and, importantly, by some of the principles that had underpinned the technical schools system that had been abandoned in Victoria in the late 1980s. The defining feature of the VCAL model was an emphasis on applied learning, and its rationale was informed by theories of experiential learning (Beard & Wilson 2006; Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). These perspectives privileged 'hands on' experience, time for observation and personal reflection, and new knowledge linked to the student's existing, practical world interests. The applied learning approach also draws upon the broader theories of adult learning (Knowles 1990; Mezirow 1991) and work-based learning (Billett 2002; Blake 2007; Boud & Solomon 2001).

Dymke (2006) describes the following characteristics of applied learning: classroom strategies develop students' strengths, while they proactively address weaknesses; there are links to real life experiences and learning is situated within the context of the broader community; expectations are clear and explicit and evidence of achievement is clear and measurable. Importantly, and at its most

basic, applied learning is concerned with 'starting where an individual is at', and with building problem-solving approaches through collaborations.

All this has not gone unchallenged, with some regarding the turn to applied learning within a VCAL framework with scepticism, seeing it as concerned more with technique and process than with content and substance. For sceptics, such programs are associated with trends in American society regarded as anti-intellectual and vocationalist (Kolb 1984).

Nonetheless, others have pointed to a growing consensus that pedagogy must enable students to become adaptable community builders, team workers, intellectually curious problem solvers, and independent, self-regulating and reflective learners (Priest 2008; Stokes, Turnbull & Black 2009). While conceding that revising pedagogy and curricula will not be the sole answer in tackling entrenched disadvantage, they believe that changing the learning experience can address many of the effects of disadvantage and help provide a way out of it (Stokes, Turnbull & Black 2009).

The international context

Programs that combine classroom-based and vocational learning—referred to in OECD research as 'dual systems'—are now commonplace in OECD countries, and particularly in Austria, France, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway. Reviewing these schemes across the OECD, Quintini, Martin and Martin (2007) point to some of their most important attributes. These include giving young people a good start in the labour market and helping to avoid the prolonged periods of early unemployment that can lead to more entrenched patterns of unemployment in later life. These programs have also been recognised as improving retention and completion rates for young people in school. While cautious in his assessment, Lamb notes that taking the dual system approach need not come at the expense of high attainments in, for instance, numeracy (Lamb 2008–9, p. 117).

However, while these VCAL-like programs overseas are increasingly assisting transitions for young people from school to work, their success is circumscribed by each country's economic outlook and the ever-changing needs and specialisations of industrial sectors (Quintini, Martin & Martin 2007, p. 13). Their effectiveness is also dependent on the standard of classroom education provided and on strong backing from community and industry. Moreover, they are still regarded as 'special programs' and are subject to unpredictable and intermittent financial support from government. All this suggests that even though such programs are popular, the challenges cannot be underestimated.

Importantly, most of the programs mentioned are failing to cater for the needs of the most disadvantaged and 'at risk' young people. Indeed, it is acknowledged that for this group more in-depth strategies are needed to deal with the multiple barriers and hardship faced (OECD 2010). It is against this background that we consider the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program.

3 The students and their backgrounds

Student and family profiles

The 2010 BSL-CVAL cohort comprised six males and 23 females, aged 16 to 18. Survey data, though incomplete, gave a good indication of the students' living arrangements: 3 lived with both parents; 5 with a parent and step-parent; 7 with the mother only; 3 with partners; and 1with friends.[2]

Survey data also provided insight into the occupational and educational backgrounds of parents. Using the DEECD's Student Family Occupation categories, the largest group of parents worked as machine operators, hospitality staff, assistants, laborers and related workers (10 responses); followed by tradesmen/women, clerks and skilled office, sales and service staff (5 responses). A small number were unemployed and there was a high number of 'unknown' occupation responses (12). Incomplete data on parents' educational attainment shows that 4 had left school before attaining Year 10, 5 by Year 11, and 2 at Year 12. The other 8 respondents did not know the educational attainments of their parents.

Barriers faced by CVCAL students

All students enrolled in the 2010 BSL-CVCAL had faced barriers to education. The referral and enrolment processes revealed some important barriers: disengagement/truancy, family issues, poor self-esteem, learning difficulties, substance abuse, carer responsibilities, homelessness, mental health issues, financial hardship, bullying and medical concerns. Also common, though not always apparent at enrolment, were low levels of literacy and numeracy, experiences of isolation or grief, and difficult relations with teachers. Some students had faced pregnancy, criminal behaviour, violence, abuse and trauma. Interviews with students provided insights into how some of these barriers were perceived. Importantly, many students faced multiple difficulties.

Beyond school

Many CVCAL students had experienced unstable and difficult home lives. Many belonged to family units with step-parents and some with aunts and uncles or grandparents as the principal carers. Some students lived in a single-parent household, with intermittent, sometimes distressing encounters with estranged parents. Other students were themselves parents, or were filling the role of principal carer for siblings when parents were experiencing difficulties.

Accommodation problems featured, with a number of students regularly 'couch surfing' or 'disappearing' for prolonged periods when in conflict with their families. One student, a young parent with no stable accommodation, had been known to sleep outdoors with her child. Students faced conflict in the home that was both dangerous and debilitating. One spoke of drug and alcohol-affected older siblings and of seeking refuge behind a locked bedroom door, while another spoke of the effect of her parents' quarrelling:

> Just the fighting between them … I used to cop it all because Mum used to be upset, and I used to cop it all. And then I'd go to school and I was like, 'Yeah, this is ****. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be at home, I don't want to be here, I don't want to be anywhere' … You'd just sit there and go, 'Hmm, where do I go out tonight? (female)

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2 See note about survey responses in Research design and methodology, pp. 5–6.

Tragedies also figured in the students' lives. One young woman had suffered severe trauma after a car accident involving her boyfriend: she had comforted him in the final minutes of his life. This event had a profound impact on the student, who had great difficulty recommencing her education.

School costs

A perennial concern for students and their parents/carers was how to cover the expenses associated with schooling. These expenses sometimes related to electives:

> You have to do six electives a year, but you didn't know there was a catch—each course costs $200 ... Just to do art it was $200 and you have to do it so you were paying $800 to $1000 … just to do your electives ... It's [tough] because we [three siblings] all have different interests and some courses are more expensive, like the computer courses, and both my brothers are really into them. (female)

Maintaining the school uniform also placed considerable financial strain on the families. This student's account is all the more relevant when one considers the importance many schools place on appearance:

> I didn't have a lock for my locker, people don't care at school, they just grab **** out of people's lockers ... and I lost like three jumpers in one year and so Mum didn't end up buying me another one because they just cost way too much. And even the pants, because the pants ripped, because I was always playing basketball at lunches ... everything there just costs heaps. (male)

The cost of education impacted in a variety of ways. One student felt keenly the absence of her mother who had to find full-time work that offered overtime. Some students had to assume responsibilities—such as working long hours in a family business or babysitting siblings—that undermined their education. The effect was fewer hours devoted to schoolwork, as well as physical exhaustion and/or distraction. One teacher spoke of the impact of commitments at home on learning:

> One of the girls was going, 'I don't have time to do any of that'. This is a girl who we know cares for her mum so, no, she doesn't [have time]. She goes home and she cares rather than goes home and plays basketball.

The school setting

Many barriers were specifically related to the mainstream school setting. Common among these were bullying, poor relations with teachers and authority figures in general, poor comprehension and low self-esteem. For many students, the typical school was oppressive.

> You walk in and you have to walk through these big gates. It's kind of like walking into a jail. You walk in and this depression just goes onto you, you're just, 'I don't want to be here'. (female)

Many experienced a sense of being jostled, controlled and harassed by teachers and other students. There was also great sensitivity to overcrowding:

> There are so many kids. There are too many people, and ... everyone gets in the way of everyone, there are just too many people ... I get distracted very, very easily, so there are so many distractions in the room, and—my whole learning just goes out the window and I just muck up. It's just too many distractions. (female)

> I just didn't like school. I didn't like it, I didn't like the environment, there was too many kids there and it was just so noisy. The kids could never get help because there was only one teacher in the class. (female)

Common grievances also included being ignored, and feeling lost and alienated. As one young woman expressed it: '[My school] was a place where anybody can become nobody'. This sentiment was echoed by a parent:

> [My son] got lost in that system because he was behind and … I think that a lot of the teachers at the high schools think, 'Well, he is behind, I will just help this one here that I know that is going to do good because I am going to achieve something out of that one', and they do get left behind.

Bullying on and off school premises, as well as via social media and email was also a common experience. It had a profound impact on the students' ability to engage in education. A few students had been subject to cruelty:

> My mum is terminally ill, it got ... around the whole school and sooner or later I'd be the one in the middle, 'Don't touch her. You could get that from her. Don't talk to her, or don't go near her, you can get this because her mum's got this'. (female)

> Most students … that I've known were picked on because of their parents, and that's not on. You can get bullied inside school, outside school, gang bashes outside school, just because people think that you're that person that's going to do everything wrong. (female)

Bullying also limited freedom of movement within the school grounds, where alliances and manoeuvring among groups resulted in a complex and often fraught existence. Some students were convinced that the ripple effect of bullying could end in tragedy:

> One of my very close friends who died in a car accident a couple of years ago, him and his mate ... were driving and drinking, they were on drugs and everything. That was only because they got bullied at school. He was terribly bullied at school ... and he got bashed quite a lot of times outside school. His house got egged and people would follow him home from school and smash up his bike or something. It's just horrible. (female)

A recurring theme in the accounts of disengagement was the far-reaching impact of a single conflict, particularly with a teacher. Indeed, it seemed that falling out with just one teacher often had the effect of poisoning relations with others. The students' views of teachers were often unflattering, which is not to say that the views were not well-considered:

> Some of the teachers were really mean and they were always angry ... but we can't really learn from them when they're constantly angry and I had a teacher that always talked about how much he hated teaching, so you can't really learn from someone who hates teaching. (male)

> If you're around people who want to be at school, it kind of makes you want to come to school ... we all hated going to school, it's like you don't actually want to be there because nobody wants to be there. (male)

Poor relations with teachers left many interviewees feeling they had been victimised, treated unfairly and even subject to unwarranted hostility.

> Some of them were rude … just really, really rude and I didn't like it at all. Like one teacher he was really, really mean. He told us all to go back to Frankston Station and like

> he said that I need help and I need medication and stuff … I went home crying to mum. It
> was that bad I felt insulted by it, really bad. (female)

Many students resented being treated as children. They railed against the strictures of mainstream
school, particularly when these were applied only to the students.

> I came home in tears because a teacher yelled at me and gave me detention because I
> needed to go to the toilet. I got a detention for needing to go to the toilet and I walked out
> of the class. I'm not a bad kid, I won't just walk out of class for no reason. (female)

Students were highly sensitised to questions of respect, fairness and double standards:

> I just didn't like the school at all … the teachers were made to look better than the students,
> they had different rules to us, they were allowed to do certain things that we weren't and I
> thought that was silly, like earrings and rings. Yeah, I just didn't like how the teachers
> treated a lot of the kids. (female)

Though students were often able to acknowledge their need for specialist support, and were aware
of how to locate such help, making contact was far from straightforward:

> We had counsellors at school and they were always booked up and you could never see
> them, I think they only had one or two. You've got to get out of class to do it so it makes it
> obvious and some people just don't want to go because they don't want people to know
> they're going there … Yeah, I think it's too difficult to see them … and she's only there for
> certain days, I think it was two days a week and those two days would be so blocked up like
> they didn't have enough access. (female)

Typically, the demeanour of the students interviewed was bright and responsive. Yet this often
masked ingrained problems of poor self-esteem and lack of confidence. This in itself should not
surprise. What does surprise is the reasoning some students employ to conceal these anxieties.
The following account was provided by a student who seemed at ease and self-assured:

> I keep telling myself I'm dumb. Like it's what I've been told since high school ... I [think],
> 'Yeah, I'm dumb. I can't do it'. Honestly, I think that's what it is. I don't even bother
> attempting [tasks] because I'm dumb so I don't want to fail even more, and make myself
> feel even more worse ... And teachers don't realise that. They just don't realise there's a
> reason why I don't do it, because I don't want to make myself feel even worse than what I
> feel now. (female)

It should be noted that this self-appraisal applied to the interviewee's current state, after ten months
in what she considered a far more accommodating community VCAL setting. This indicates that
even though talking about poor self-esteem is a positive sign, the problem itself is not so easily
resolved.

This brief survey of the barriers experienced by the 2010 BSL-VCAL students provides important
insights into the reasons for disengagement. These young people inhabit a complex and often
precarious life context with challenges beyond the school grounds. Their reactions may manifest in
acute anxiety, anger, fearfulness and depression. A staff member reflects on the complexity:

> The more we learn about them, the more we think there are a lot of deeper issues here that
> we will never fully comprehend. I am not ever going to say it is not part of our role but it is
> just that these processes are slow and long. You are trying to undo years and years and
> years of hurt, not just from school environments but home and all sorts of other things as

well, and we will never, ever know all the stuff that they have experienced and they will never tell us everything.

Summary

- The students' lives were complex and often unstable. The cohort ranked high in their experiences of many barriers to education.

- Difficulties experienced in the home and in other personal relationships often compounded difficulties encountered in school.

- When at mainstream schools, many students had experienced bullying, poor relations with teachers, learning difficulties and low self-esteem.

- Most had reacted badly to the regimentation associated with mainstream schools and very much resented being treated as children.

4 The CVCAL experience

The preceding section reviewed the students' experiences prior to joining the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program. What follows are the findings of quantitative and qualitative research that explored participation, attainments, levels of engagement, teaching and learning, and the administrative and support aspects of the program.

Participation and attainments

Twenty-five program places were filled throughout 2010. These places were occupied by 29 students who enrolled, however briefly, over the course of the year. Fifteen of these students had undertaken the 2009 pre–Community VCAL 'Taster' course.

Table 4.1   Duration of 2010 BSL-CVCAL enrolments

Length of time enrolled	No. of students
4 terms	20
3 terms	3
2 terms	3
1 term or less	3

The overall student attendance rate in 2010 was 79 per cent. Of the absences, 15 per cent were either 'authorised' or explicable: that is, consultations had taken place with staff ahead of the absence.[3] This result was very encouraging given the high levels of truancy and disengagement these students had experienced in the mainstream school setting.

Similarly, academic outcomes were encouraging: 10 of 11 seniors (Year 12) graduated, while 12 of 14 intermediates (Year 11) progressed to senior level in 2011.

In respect of vocational training, all students were enrolled in at least one VET course. One gained an apprenticeship and five gained traineeships. The students moved on to the following occupations and training activities:

- full-time apprenticeship as a chef

- full-time traineeship – Certificate II in Equestrian Racing

- full-time Diploma of Nursing (Div 2)

- Certificate III in Child Care

- Certificate III in Event Management

- full-time work as a kitchen hand / cook

- aged care (unconfirmed).

For a worksheet of current and planned VET activities, see Appendix.

Given the small numbers of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL cohort eligible for completion, we do not here compare completion rates with state VCAL rates. However, such a comparison would be useful in coming years.

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[3] For details of attendance calculation, see Research design and methodology, p. 5.

Engagement

In this section, we consider the informal and semi-formal relationships that developed during 2010. We first look at the subjective and emotional aspects of students, teachers and parents/carers' interactions with the program. This is followed by a review of the semi-formal interactions between the program and other institutions, such as partner schools and RTOs.

Interpersonal engagement

Initial impressions of the Frankston High Street Centre were very positive. Parents/carers and students spoke of their surprise at finding a facility they regarded as modern, pleasantly landscaped, relatively small and yet 'alive' with the activity associated with a range of community programs. Some, like this parent, spoke of an initial uncertainty:

> When we first went there ... it was a bit odd really, it was a bit strange. Completely different obviously to a school environment … they're very laid-back and just the whole centre's really a completely different environment to the school environment. I think it works really well. I think it's what a lot more of them need than [being] shoved in a class and expected to behave like children constantly.

Parents/carers reported that initial consultations with the coordinator and teachers were reassuring and the approach to enquiries and then the induction interviews exceeded expectations. Though some students were initially wary—regarding the program as a school for 'drop-outs'—all soon developed a close attachment to the learning environment.

> I found out everyone practically had the same problems I had; they couldn't cope at school because of dramas they were having there and then they got here and it was like it was a better environment for everyone. Yeah, everyone just fitted in. (female)

As the weeks passed, a sense of camaraderie developed and its intensity surprised staff. Prompted by the students, a fundraising effort was organised for a 'uniform': a BSL-CVCAL–branded 'hoodie' (sweatshirt) designed by the students. It was ironic that youths who had reacted badly to efforts by mainstream schools to impose a level of conformity were now eager to adopt a uniform of their own making.

Though it is 'applied learning' that defines the VCAL, students felt that being recognised as adults was of greater importance. Indeed, this was the key in establishing strong relations between all those associated with the program:

> It's more like you're friends with them, but they're also your teachers. You can have a conversation with them and you can tell them what's going on without worrying about what they're going to say about it, because you know it's going to be all friendly and stuff. (male)

> I liked how the teachers were just normal. We were treated like just normal colleagues or people they work with, not treated like we have to—I don't know how to explain it but it's just a whole different environment here. (female)

In practice, this involved allowing students to leave the classroom without seeking permission, smoke on the premises, have facial piercings and jewellery, and a more liberal—though problematic—approach to the use of mobile phones. Students remarked:

> It's a great school compared to normal school. I like coming here, and actually get up in the morning and I'm not like, 'Oh, I've got to go to school'. It's, 'Oh, I've *got* to go to school'. Have my cup of coffee and come to school. (male)

> In a way it's like a normal class, but when we go outside, we're just a group of friends hanging out. We'll all go our separate ways sometimes, but sometimes we'll just all sit down together and hang out, and it's just like chilling with a bunch of friends. It's not like this massive school where you have to deal with everybody in the school. (female)

Most interviewees expressed relief and optimism about their engagement with the CVCAL program. However, some also expressed feelings of failure and inadequacy at having left mainstream education. For example, one student responded:

> When I see them at school, I think,'Why did I stuff my life up?' Because I'm 18 now, so if I was still at school, I reckon I would've gotten my Ps [driver's licence] … and if I was still at school, I wouldn't feel so dumb. I'd feel more confident in my education ability. Because I just feel dumb being here, because I left school. It's not this place, but it's I just feel dumb because I'm in TAFE, not even in proper school. (female)

Another strategy to foster engagement was the creation of a student council which comprised the senior cohort and usually met fortnightly. It played a role in curriculum design, extracurricular activities and conveying students' feedback. Most students expressed support for this concept, though there was indifference and even criticism from some. Supporters valued the opportunity to air their opinions and to help shape their education. Some felt the 'senior council' label wrongly implied a separation between seniors and intermediates, while others felt that it did indeed reflect a hierarchy that privileged the seniors' interests.

In sum, the 2010 BSL-CVCAL setting was free of many tensions that students associated with mainstream schools. The program was characterised by a high degree of trust between staff and students. The two teachers commented on the differences in relationships:

> I think we have reached a really good place with the students … whereby they are the first ones to come and tell us if something is going on … I guess the difference is that you have a much closer relationship with these students. I can see how the students here would feel a lot safer and probably more willing to share than they would in a traditional school setting.

> I think it's really improved … I think they are also much more comfortable with each other as a group, and that becomes really obvious when we have new class members come in, just to remember how isolated, and insecure, all of our students were, and now how confident they are, and they're really happy, I think. And having the policy of having our office doors open all the time really helps as well, just to create no boundaries … [but] it's hard to go home and not think about it anymore, which I didn't expect. I don't think I expected that emotional exhaustion or connection, really.

Parents/carers were well satisfied with the engagement and inclusiveness. They were very attuned to the students' reactions:

> [It was] so much more relaxed and [the student] loved it. From the minute she walked in, she loved it. It wouldn't have mattered if I didn't like it, as long as she was comfortable there and they were nice to her and that's all that mattered.

> I knew it would suit [the student] right down to the ground … because it was a small little community, not many different classes happening and they were small groups and the teachers were all lovely down there. I had no problems.

The staff adopted a non-confrontational approach to engaging parents/carers and 'supportive friends'. In place of the conventional parent–teacher interviews—which most parents had in the past experienced as perfunctory 'bad news' meetings—an information evening was held featuring displays of the students' work and then informal discussions between parents/carers, students and teachers. A meal was prepared and served by the students. Most parents/carers liked this approach, though others felt that the event 'dragged on'.

Such events fostered closer relations with parents/carers, in turn giving them the confidence to discuss appropriate responses to students' special needs.

> At the parents' evening, I actually felt that they really did know [my daughter], as opposed to just being another name on the list of children that they've got in their group. They … were singing her praises and were really pleased that she's become more confident, and that was nice to hear… Teachers before have always just turned around and said—oh, she's so quiet. Yeah, we know she's quiet, but?

Another event which helped instil confidence in the program was a graduation dinner for families and friends. This was well attended (some families even changed holiday plans) and included presentations of certificates and awards.

Routine communications included an interaction log, text messaging and regular phone calls. However, parents/carers indicated a need for more regular feedback on the progress made in the classroom and on the various activities. Many favoured an electronic newsletter:

> We want to know how the kids are doing during the year. We don't want to hear at the end of the year what they've been doing. It's not so much about attendance or anything like that, it's about just a little bit of a brief outcome of what they're doing ... even if it's just on the internet. Get the kids to put the newsletter together. (female)

Institutional and community engagement

When considering institutional and community relationships it is important to note that the BSL had previously entered into partnerships with Skills Plus (2006) and the Peninsula Training and Employment Program (2007) to provide a CVCAL program in the FMP region. In both instances, the BSL managed the VET aspect of the CVCAL programs and its partners managed the overall administration. These initiatives did not meet expectations and underscored the complexity of providing an education program to cater for disengaged young people.

Throughout 2010, the BSL-CVCAL program staff strengthened relationships with local feeder schools (where students are 'enrolled' in the state system and then referred to the BSL-CVCAL). From the 2009 pre-CVCAL 'Taster' course there was a close relationship with Carrum Downs Secondary College. The staff also strengthened relations with other schools, notably McClelland College and Frankston High School. Representatives from these three schools, as well as from Mt Eliza Secondary College, joined the program's external advisory group.

In terms of interaction and cooperation, the school representatives revealed a high level of support for the program's aims and management. Tangible expressions of this support were exchange visits between feeder school teachers and CVCAL staff, and one school's hiring of FHSC facilities for its own VCAL-related training and for a student cafe. Schools invited BSL-CVCAL staff to participate in regional professional development events. This interaction resulted in the program staff playing active roles in the Peninsula VCAL network, and in creating a local CVCAL sub-group.

The program was well regarded by the DEECD Southern Metropolitan Regional Office. Collaboration was ongoing in relation to student referrals, special needs assessment, and funding for student welfare programs. Beyond these routine interactions, staff of the BSL-CVCAL worked with those at the regional office to plan a series of three professional development workshops for teachers at government schools throughout the FMP region, to share the lessons learnt in a CVCAL setting (about student disengagement, alternative learning options and careers planning). Lastly, the program coordinator was a contributor to DEECD events such as its Careers Framework Forum, and its Wellbeing Division round table on youth at risk. She also contributed to similar initiatives staged by the Department of Planning and Community Development, and the Department of Human Services.

Relations with those at RTOs and at the nearby TAFE were good, though the 2010 BSL-CVCAL staff experienced frustration at the reluctance of some TAFEs and RTOs to share information about student attendance or progress. From one staff member:

> I tried to set those [meetings] up at the start of the year and the TAFEs [said], 'Oh we can't sit down with every single school and talk about their individual kids', so there was a bit of resistance there, just from time commitment from their end.

As the year progressed, students, teachers and those in management roles in the BSL-CVCAL program developed closer relations with the wider community. This was inevitable given that an integral and compulsory feature of the certificate is a work placement that complements the vocational training. Connections with local businesses (notably Bunnings, Kmart, hospitals, aged-care providers, day-care centres, golf courses) were gradually strengthened as the pathways coordinator sought appropriate placements for students. Engagement developed on a number of other fronts, with frequent social and formal visits from the Frankston City Council, Frankston Youth Resource Centre, Headspace, Southern Adult Mental Health Services, community and further education providers, Menzies (youth support agency), and the FMP Local Learning and Education Network (whose Executive Officer also sits on the program's external advisory group).

Summary

- Disengagement from school is a complex experience and one that students themselves often regretted.

- Students' demeanour improved soon after their arrival, and this can be attributed to the calm and responsive learning environment that emphasised adult learning principles. Staff were held in high regard by students. Relations between students were, on the whole, friendly.

- Parents/carers were impressed with the level of engagement and support extended to them and their dependants by the CVCAL staff.

- CVCAL staff established mutually beneficial relations with local schools, as well as with the DEECD Southern Metropolitan Region Office. Relations with the community in general improved, with extracurricular activities, out-of-class learning and vocational training driving this engagement.

Teaching and learning

The hallmarks of an effective VCAL program are an emphasis on student-centred learning, as well as on applied and adult learning principles. Student-centred learning occurs best when the student's needs, abilities, interests and learning styles shape the teacher's agenda. It also requires mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate curriculum, be flexible and 'start where the learners are'. Teaching with applied learning in mind means emphasising practicality and relevance to the outside world, and making connections with real life experiences. In this section we assess the extent to which the 2010 BSL-CVCAL exhibited these features.

Curriculum

The VCAL is a Years 11 and 12 course and is accredited on three levels: foundation, intermediate and senior. Though the 2010 BSL-CVCAL catered for students at all levels, the emphasis was on intermediate and senior levels. There are four compulsory VCAL curriculum strands: literacy and numeracy, industry specific training (the VET component), workplace skills and personal development. The normal course duration is 1000 hours over two years, and students must complete 10 units (VCAL specific units, VCE units, 100 hours VET training or 'Further education units') related to the four curriculum strands. In effect, VCAL students are involved concurrently in three quite distinct educational processes: classroom learning, vocational training and work placement.

The VCAL is synonymous with 'integrated teaching'—teaching across the strands and then, for the purposes of assessment, identifying the outcomes before mapping them against each strand. An example of integrated teaching was a series of student-led activities linked to the Personal Development and Work-related Skills strands. Student teams planned and organised: mosaic artworks, independently sourcing donated and discounted materials; a Race Around Frankston, which passed the various youth services in the area, culminating in a presentation at the Frankston Youth Resource Centre; a Healthy Lunches day; and a School Jumpers project (tied to a fundraising Trivia Night).

Literacy studies included writing for practical purposes (brochures, fact sheets), writing for public debate (focusing on gender stereotypes) and reading activities, which included analysis of advertising. A typical project involved viewing a movie and then writing a review, ahead of discussion of the social issues connected to the Personal Development strand. Numeracy skills were improved through a study of the media. This began with research into advertising, product placement and then pricing during an excursion to a supermarket. One teacher commented on this approach:

> A lot of the personal development stuff needs to be a negotiated curriculum and it needs to be things that the students have created for themselves. So you really become a facilitator in helping them run activities or helping them plan for events … that's actually something, educational theory–wise, that you would do with high order–thinking kids. So you're actually doing that with kids who I wouldn't consider to be high order–thinking, yet you're asking them to do things that actually require quite a great degree of self-motivation and self-reliance.

The range of activities was broad and also included students' participation in the BSL Community Service Leadership Project, designing and arranging Zumba (dance) and yoga classes for BSL staff and clients, organising a Coffee Club for BSL staff and community members (e.g. socially isolated

seniors' walking group), and preparing healthy food for refugee children and families attending the BSL Homework Club at High Street.

The downside of this flexible approach was also evident, particularly as it played out in the classroom. Indeed, according to one teacher this resulted in a disjointed and frustrating teaching environment.

> It is more things that happen on the fly like … a student just gets up and goes to make themselves a cup of coffee. Well, that takes you know it can be 15 to 20 minutes and they kind of wander back in when they feel like it. I guess that is a part of what the program is trying to offer in that we're sort of flexible and that we're able to negotiate with kids and they take responsibility for their own learning and that sort of thing. I guess in a purely academic sense that doesn't promote the best work environment as such so, yes, that is probably something that we could—but then you tighten that up and then you become essentially what these kids have come from. So it is a really fine line between making them feel like this is an alternative setting versus actually making their learning a priority.

As noted, integrated teaching meant that out-of-class learning and extracurricular activities have became an integral part of the program. These activities—and the community engagement they entailed—were very beneficial, and the informal links that emerged have the potential to further enhance learning, training and broader organisational outcomes. Importantly, students seemed to be well aware of the learning process:

> The group that I'm doing for the community project is Coffee Club. Instead of writing down what you would need to do a Coffee Club, we're actually going to run a Coffee Club … And we get to make the coffees ourselves, and we're going to learn, instead of nutting out how we're going to do it on paper, we've done the paper, then we get to apply it. (female)

A similar awareness was evident concerning student-led activities—in this instance, the mosaic artwork project:

> I had to organise a project for a class to do, a class to run … for three or four weeks. And I was doing all the ringing around, all that stuff, and I'm more confident ringing up someone now. So I got skills out of it … we had to organise to get all the donations, ring them up, organise the wood, organise the sheet of how to do it … And then I personally had to learn how to do it as well, so I could teach the class. So I had to go home and do extra work at home … I had to find a way to smash tiles safely, clearly I've got to think. (female)

The teachers agreed that conventional teacher training did not equip them to teach using an integrated approach. Indeed, as one teacher noted, 'Everything they taught us to do at uni doesn't work basically with these kids'. The following reveals the adjustments CVCAL teachers must make, as well as their sense of satisfaction:

> I was for a while starting to miss traditional teaching, and teaching about things that I love, and things that I want to communicate, but having seen how the project's worked out, this has been far more important than any sort of self-indulgent lesson I could teach them about history or geography, because everything that they've learnt in this project is about people skills and work-related skills and everything from OH&S requirements of the building, and making jumpers, to financial planning, and communicating with a lot of people.

Catering for needs and learning styles

In the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program, team-teaching was employed. Typically, lessons were conducted with both teachers present and with a single group of students, though small group work was used occasionally. In addition, a social work student was also present in the classroom as a volunteer aide for three days per week during an eight-week placement. In dealing with the diverse needs and learning styles, teachers attempted to normalise the notion of 'difference'. This exercise, which also had the effect of countering poor self-esteem, was then linked to other aspects of the curriculum, such as personal development. One teacher's approach to difference is recounted here:

> A lot of the kids in the class have this idea that they're dumb, they have just consistently been rejected by schools and been in classes where they've had no attention or they've had long periods away from school, so they all have this really negative idea about themselves as being dumb or being unable to do things … So the first thing that I did with them was … a psychological assessment of different intelligences and a lot of the kids showed up as being kinesthetic learners so we do a lot of moving around, a lot of activities that involve them standing up and moving … and then a lot of the kids were also visual learners, which means that they don't necessarily learn by writing. So we do mind maps and we do structured work.

There were times, however, when more structure was appropriate, as with the teaching of literacy and numeracy:

> With literacy I found that sometimes the best work for them is 'Read this poem, answer these questions' … it is almost a primary school module of two comprehension questions, an explanation question, a thinking question and a creative question … They love structure. They love [prescribed] 'questions-and-answers' … [This] allows them to work at their own pace so they don't feel like they're falling behind or for the weaker students they are not feeling *that* person is up to question six and *I* am only up to question two.

An unexpected finding was the enthusiasm many, if not most, students showed for maths. This was another area where more and not less structure was deemed appropriate:

> They love [maths] and they want to do more … I don't know [why]. I don't know if it's [because] there's one right answer and they can come in and they can work their way through these answers and they can finish that class knowing that they got there in the end and they can see it on a piece of paper and it's all really defined. I think it's about achieving that goal in one session.

This, as the teacher pointed out, was incongruous, given that teaching and learning maths often relies heavily on formal worksheets and the students remaining sedentary. It is worth dwelling on the attitudes to numeracy and literacy teaching, and on this curious aspect of the learning dynamics. The following were typical of the responses to questions about attitudes to maths:

> I like it because I'm so good at it, and it just—it absorbs me when I'm doing maths. I can sit down and just have my earphones in my iPod and just do it, and all I'm thinking about is maths and nothing else. It just takes my mind off everything. (male)

> I love maths, it is kind of nerdy but whenever it is maths I am kind of like 'Nobody talk to me', I get really excited. It is kind of weird but I always have. (female)

A clue to this enthusiasm may lie in the integrated and applied approach taken by the teachers, and the way they have adapted their teaching to suit the specific cohort. Two students presented contrasting comments:

> I've never liked maths [at school]. But this numeracy is good though because it's more the outside world whereas at school … I didn't see the point in it ... whereas this stuff … They [CVCAL teachers] use proper examples, like doing your grocery shopping, working out a budget for the week and how much you should spend and put towards bills. Because I've been living out of home for a while and I've had to do all this stuff myself, I've got the hang of this maths. (female)

> I have always kind of liked maths … we did our credit rating, that was interesting and … yes, this is going to help you definitely because you know if you get into debt then you can't buy a house and you can't get a car and insurance, all the rest of it. (female)

Students were also asked about their contrasting attitudes to learning numeracy and literacy, and this too provided some interesting insights for teaching in an applied learning setting and within the VCAL framework.

> Numeracy is kind of hands-on and there's not really much writing down. Literacy we get to choose what we want to do, they'll ask us what we want to learn about and they'll kind of tie maths and literacy into that. Watching movies and then doing questions about it, that's our literacy. So it's not like full-on reading out of a book and doing it like that. We're actually watching something and then doing the questions and learning from that … I hate reading. So just being able to watch something, and answering the questions while you're watching it, is kind of easier than reading it and having to remember what page to go to and what page the answer is on and everything. (female)

These responses suggest that the VCAL strand incorporating maths can be regarded as a useful point of engagement. It seems that learning maths was popular because students could work at their own pace without having to perform in front of others, and the outcomes of the tasks were easily identified as 'right' or 'wrong'. In addition, as the applied learning dynamic necessarily involves problem solving, even the more or less sedentary process of learning maths can be a fruitful way of engaging students.

In contrast, literacy can place demands on students that cause discomfort. Aside from the difficulties experienced when learning the technical aspects of literacy—grammar, spelling, punctuation—students of the CVCAL program expressed frustration when asked to grapple with the abstraction involved in analysis, critique, argumentation and logic. This resistance was no doubt exacerbated by low self-esteem and the lack of prior literacy skills among students. A response from one student highlighted the tensions experienced:

> I don't mind maths … because once you get started on it you know what you're doing, so you can just keep going. With literacy and that, the questions change, it all changes as you go. Like with math, you figure out your formula for the first one … and you just go to the next one, do the same thing but different numbers … you're just on a roll. You just keep going. [But literacy] ... it's like it changes. It's just different. I can't spell really good either, I don't like reading, so that might be why I don't like literacy. But I don't know, it changes all the time … It's so different. You always have to use your mind, like think about it really hard. (female)

It is difficult to assess the program's impact on the critical area of literacy. Although one teacher remarked that she had 'seen an improvement in their literacy across the year [and that] they have certainly gotten better', staff recognised that this improvement was from a very low base and that that this aspect of the students' development would need to be targeted. This problem is likely to be

shared with VCAL programs in mainstream schools; but without access to remedial programs or integration aides, it is all the more pressing in the CVCAL setting.

Teaching the group required considerable creativity and improvisation. This was appreciated by the students:

> [The teacher] made it so that we learn through different ways. We might learn through music, or we might learn through art, or we might learn through cooking or we might learn through just writing or reading, or we might learn through pie graphs. So she's integrated it all into the course work, so that everybody gets the opportunity to learn how they, how their personality is … It's good because you're not learning the same way all the time … At school you just sit there and you read and you write, whereas here she's got us up moving around and learning through watching stuff on the projector and stuff, so it's different. (female)

Teacher workloads are discussed elsewhere in this report. Suffice to say there was a strong consensus among students and staff in favour of additional support for teachers. The needs were so diverse that teachers felt incapable of responding adequately to all teaching and welfare demands. Virtually all students expressed positive views about the contribution of the volunteer student welfare aide who was on hand for a number of weeks. When questioned on the role of an aide, one student said:

> I reckon that's what we need, a teacher's aide, because there's a couple of kids in the class that are struggling and I reckon it would be good. There's one girl that struggles so much and I reckon it would be good if she had an aide. Not just her, but an aide in the classroom that would sit there and go around helping everyone. But it would be better if we had an aide just to help the ones that are always struggling, instead of always pulling the teachers away. (female)

Asked whether a prospective aide for 2011 ought to be a specialist—in, say, literacy and numeracy—or a generalist who could provide welfare advice, most students and staff expressed a preference for the latter. This was in spite of the problems with poor literacy. Perhaps it signals the need of many students for emotional support:

> I just reckon we should have someone like [aide's name] again, because that was good having someone there that wasn't a teacher, or wasn't in charge of you like your mum. Someone different, someone trustworthy. She was trustworthy. (female)

Classroom dynamics

Lessons were usually conducted with both teachers present and with a single group of around 20 students. Due to absences—students engaged in VET training, work placements, authorised and/or unauthorised absence—rarely did the number of students in the CVCAL classroom exceed this number. Nonetheless, this group had diverse skills, abilities, experiences and temperaments.

These variations posed challenges for those teaching the mixed group. Some students found the attendant noise and activity distracting. Some felt that the (common) tasks were at times too easy, while others found them too hard and expressed frustration with those difficulties.

Nevertheless, mixed group learning had its advantages. Principal among these was the extent to which some students assisted others experiencing difficulties. These students came to understand their own learning processes and how to articulate the thinking that led to the 'correct answer':

> It's good to help someone else understand something that I'm good at, to make them better at it too … because I'll do it without even thinking about how I'm doing it. [Helping others] helps me get things, like [even] if the work is something I haven't done before or I don't understand, it helps me understand even more teaching it to someone else too. Even though I've done it, it's like doing it all over again to get it stuck into my head. (male)

Teachers were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of this approach and, as the following student's account shows, made adjustments when necessary during the mixed group lessons:

> Sometimes if the work's too hard, you'll just tell [the teachers] and they'll find something easier for you to do, but it's the same thing. So it's put in a different way so it's easier for you to do it. If it's too easy, they'll give you something harder, like they'll fix it up so it kind of makes it harder for you to do, but it's all based on the same stuff. (female)

One of the most contentious issues was the overuse of MP3 players and mobile phones. Many young people used MP3 players to filter external distractions and to aid concentration. One teacher reflected:

> This is a group of kids who have never had silence. They are a non-silent generation. They are the High Five generation, the Wiggles generation, so they have had music. Then they have gone into having their own music. They have got computers, TVs in their own rooms. This is not a silent generation. So the idea that in order to focus they actually need to have noise … It is not me, but I can see how that happens.

Students confirmed this: one female student suggested that 'It kind of makes me concentrate a little bit more as well like knowing that there is no-one talking to me' and a male student said that 'It calms me down, and help[s] me concentrate more on my work rather than hearing the background noises and what's going on'. Other students, however, were opposed to the use of MP3 players and favoured limitations.

> Oh my god they are so annoying, especially when you're on a table, you've got one person there, one there, one there and they've all got it on different and do you know how distracting that is? I'm serious, it does my head in. And then when the whole classroom is quiet, half the kids have iPods and you can hear [noise], it's like … (female)

Not surprisingly, teachers had misgivings about the use of these devices.

> It can't be healthy. I don't think it's really impacting their learning in a negative way all the time, but I think when you have a really high noise level in the classroom, and then you've got your iPod on top of that, and then you are trying to concentrate on something in front of you, and you are putting yourself in this noise box … to sort of be alone for a minute, you are maybe not getting the best learning experience.

In relation to mobile phones, teachers' attitudes were unequivocal. In spite of requests, many students simply could not resist the urge to text or call acquaintances during the lessons. This abuse of an privilege caused tension in the classroom. According to one teacher, a failure to set limits on mobile phone use would have long-term ramifications:

> I think we are setting them up for failure in the workplace, because in apprenticeships and traineeships ... you just wouldn't be allowed to be on Facebook or texting or have your phone out every other second to check what your friend has said or done or whatever. I think they need to disappear from the classroom. I think we need to be quite strict on it, which hasn't really been set up this year, so that has been difficult.

As the year progressed the use of mobile phones was restricted and a stricter regime was planned for 2011. It remains to be seen how students will respond, given that autonomy is so highly valued. Notwithstanding the need to curb use, it is important to note that some students do have a legitimate need to use mobile phones due to their family responsibilities:

> I don't like not having my phone on me, my dad has epilepsy, and if he has fits, he calls me, and I don't like not having my phone. I have to have my phone on me all the time. And [the CVCAL teacher] didn't understand that, and she thought that I was just making it up. So when I got home I got my dad to call her and say 'She does need her phone with her all the time', and she just didn't understand. (female)

This overview suggests that the classroom setting was in some respects quite casual, yet one in which students with complex needs and temperaments received assistance and guidance of a high standard. The relaxed nature of the interactions and the rapport established were consistent with the 'adult learning' principles mentioned earlier. One student commented:

> Oh yeah, the teachers are all right. The teachers, they're like relaxed language, they don't swear or nothing, they're not like that, but they can talk to us. Whereas you get the other teachers and they're like, 'Write this down. Do this.' Whereas with [our teachers] they're actually like 'Okay guys, now how can we do this?' and they'll actually talk to us about it, rather than going, 'Okay, we're doing this today'. They're like 'This is how we're going to do this, do you like how we're doing this?' and if you don't understand, then they'll come to the people that don't understand. They'll put us all on a table or something, and they'll sit down with us, and they make sure we understand before they actually walk away. (female)

Applied learning

Student were strongly in favour of an education that was practical and provided them with the 'real world' skills for paid employment. The following response is indicative of the cohort's attitude to applied learning, particularly as it took place in the CVCAL classroom setting.

> I think it's really good. Like I said, everything is so hands on but then at school everything is out of a book and I'm better doing work hands on than reading out of a book. Out of a book I just get distracted and really bored but hands on it's like it's there, you can see it and it's just easier. (female)

Students are introduced to applied learning through two VCAL strands: the classroom-based 'Work-related skills' and the VET component known as 'Industry-specific skills'. In the 'Industry-specific skills' strand students undertake a minimum of 100 hours of training at an RTO, often a TAFE. Typically, VCAL students—whether in mainstream schools or community settings—seek training in certificate courses that are between levels 2 and 4. The trades and/or vocations attracting the most attention from the 2010 BSL-CVCAL students included aged care, hospitality, carpentry, children's services, retail and youth work (see Appendix for a worksheet list).

Although students undertook this VET component on one day each week alongside the classroom tuition, CVCAL teachers and providers had no direct involvement. The third educational component, the 'work placement', ideally takes place for another one day per week in a business, service or industry setting that complements the student's vocational training. This too does not directly involve the CVCAL teachers.

Compared with a mainstream school setting, the 2010 BSL-CVCAL students were given a great deal of assistance, firstly in identifying and enrolling in a suitable VET course, and secondly in securing an appropriate work placement. This unusual level of assistance was necessary due to the cohort's high needs, but it created considerably more work and stress for staff.

Even for young people who do not face extra barriers, choosing a career path is a complex and often worrying exercise. This complexity is magnified when the student has poor literacy, low self-esteem, a resistance to formal, teacher-led and 'book-heavy' tuition, and a limited capacity to deal with unfamiliar settings and people. Among the CVAL students negotiating the VET component, these problems manifested in much indecision, confusion and hesitation. For many, the search for training options was itself daunting and confusing:

> It's just all over the place, so it is a bit hard to find it, but I'll get there … I wouldn't understand half of the things, like the courses that you do … Yeah, I don't think I would have understood it if I'd done it by myself. (female)

There was a 'culture shock' as students whose (re)engagement with education was still quite tenuous encountered learning environments which were quite foreign and intimidating:

> I haven't been to that [RTO] yet because I was scared last week … I was scared to go, I was just scared to go. Yeah, it was really scary and I was sitting like, should I go? I was that scared, I made myself sick and I just didn't go. (female)

> [It's] a bit confusing. I was semi-comfortable. I was all right for a bit and then it started being weird but I try and build myself back up to staying there and doing everything. … You get left on your own the whole time. The only time you ever get to talk to the teacher is if you actually go find them and ask them to come and look at your stuff. Here [at FHSC] you get so much attention and when you need help you get it. There, you're fighting for it with everyone else. (female)

In the absence of Taster courses or introductory programs in most RTOs, student indecision in turn placed demands on the BSL-CVCAL staff. The teachers explained:

> They really want to do this course but then they just never go; and we are like, 'Well can we put you in another course?' Then they go, 'No, we will do it', and they are still not going. So the training thing is an administrative nightmare too because we don't say no to them really—like if they say, 'I'm miserable on this course', we are not going to say, 'Well suck it up', because ... they might stop attending school.

> My main concern is that the kids don't go, which I'm sure happens all the time. A lot of them don't like their courses. I think there's a lot of pressure on 16-year-olds to choose a career in VCAL. It's like saying, 'You don't fit with VCE so we'll put you in VCAL and you choose a career for the rest of your life', and they find that really overwhelming. They always think they've made the wrong choice or they're not going to like it in a while and it's really hard to explain to them that it doesn't have to be their job forever. So I think they place a lot of pressure on themselves and then, if they don't like it, decide not to go and hope we don't find out.

This is not to say all the experiences were negative: some students adjusted to settings that were initially uncomfortable:

> [The TAFE] is massive compared to a school, so I was worried. It was really good. It was really straightforward and to the point … you went in there and you did your work and you

went out. It wasn't like school where teachers were constantly telling you what to do and stuff like that. They set you work and you do it and you leave. (male)

The point is that the VET component of a CVCAL program makes demands on students who are sometimes those least equipped to deal with them.

Among the challenges faced by young people seeking training or employment in the FMP region is its remoteness: parts of the Mornington Peninsula are 80 kilometres from the CBD. Most RTOs are closer to Frankston, and there is only one TAFE and one university in the region. This poses problems: access to appropriate RTOs; and covering travel costs. The following interviewee's account is all the more noteworthy if we recall that many students are too young for a driver's licence.

> I paid for the course and stuff, then I went for about four weeks, and … travelling to and from the city every day, I was leaving at 6 o'clock in the morning, getting into South Yarra at about 7.30 to 8.00 am, then getting something to eat, catching the Sandringham Line to Windsor, and then walking. And I'd get there just on 9 o'clock. And then we didn't finish until 4.30 pm, so I'd have to walk to Windsor, catch a train from Windsor to South Yarra, and then get the train back to Frankston, and then the bus back home. And after a month, it just got too much. It was costing me $50 a week, and there's food and stuff as well, so it was just too much. (female)

In addition to some anxiety and logistical problems, some students struggled to adjust to the teacher-led tuition that is often used at RTOs. In contrast to the CVCAL setting, the tuition is often very formal, and the curriculum prescribed and designed for adults. Not surprisingly, young people with limited literacy and numeracy skills experienced difficulties:

> Because it's worded differently, they're using bigger words, and it's like I don't know what that word is, and I have to keep going back to the dictionary … It's taking me extra time to do it, because I'm so confused … it's the same as what I've done, but it's just so different, like the way they've worded it, the way they've used the words. So I'll read a sentence and I'll understand two words in the whole sentence. (female)

One interviewee spoke of the difficulties she had adjusting to the very formal and unfamiliar teaching styles in the VET sector. She had previously rejected the mainstream approach to teaching and learning that involved homework.

> Even other students didn't understand it. One of the other ladies, she was 24 or something. She didn't understand the work … And then I go up, 'Can I have help [trainer]? I don't really understand any of the work'. 'No, you have to do it yourself. You should understand how to do your work'.

> [The trainer] gave us a book this thick [gestures] with all these pages of just writing, and she'd give us another little book that would have questions, and that would be one week's homework, and we'd get two of those books every week. I had homework from [the CVCAL] too because I wasn't there on the Monday, so it was like, 'How am I supposed to do all this'? (female)

The CVCAL's pathways planning coordinator commented on the effect of the lack of skills among RTO trainers for dealing with young people who have faced significant barriers and whose connection to education is tenuous:

> It's too much work. And the reading, and writing, requirements of VET are really intense and the students don't expect to have these big books, and I think that we have to be really careful next year with the trainers that we engage with, and the training organisations, because a lot of training organisations aren't prepared to deal with the kinds of students that we have, and the trainers aren't actually trained to deal with the students that we have. So it's not their fault. It's difficult for everyone in the room because the trainers don't have the right kind of preparation before they go in, and then the kids see someone new, who doesn't know what they are doing, and they have a field day with it. And then they end up feeling that they've almost been robbed a little bit of their VET certificate because it hasn't been what they expected.

Not only are many trainers ill-equipped to cater for (formerly) disengaged young people, but it seems that there is little institutional commitment to the support needed, particularly for remedial skills tuition. It is assumed that the students come with the requisite literacy and numeracy skills; and if they do not, the institution accepts no responsibility for the outcome. Moreover, there were no processes for feedback or interaction between VET trainers and the 'classroom' educators at the FHSC.

In addition, CVCAL staff could be left in the dark at a critical time, with ramifications not only for the students' education, but also for their welfare. Teachers remarked on this concern:

> Rarely would we get an attendance report. We don't know when they are attending except when they tell us, so it is hard to kind of let go … because if they don't get 100 hours up at the end of the year they don't pass Year 11 or 12 … and we have two that are at serious risk of that.

> I have called some people's VET coordinators, or teachers, because I haven't heard anything at all, and you can only assume that's a good thing sometimes, but sometimes it can be really frustrating, because when you do call it can sometimes be seen as an imposition, because on those days, they are not your students, they are somebody else's.

One parent's account of a dispute with her daughter's RTO reveals the communication problems inherent in a system that separates the providers of VCAL and of vocational training and that places great demands on a casualised workforce of VET trainers.

> When it come to assessment time, [the VET trainer] said to her, 'I'm failing you on this, this and this because you weren't here and I didn't even know if you were coming back', and I'm like, what?, you can't do that to her. I said the Brotherhood knew everything [about the daughter's illness], it was meant to be passed on ... [She] got really upset about it actually. She suffers from migraines and the arthritis now as well ... I hit the roof with this woman and I rang her and I said, 'What's going on?'. She said, 'Well, I'm only employed three days a week', and apparently [the student] was meant to go see her two, three times over the placement and she hasn't seen her 'cos it didn't work with her days.

Ideally, RTOs should have processes to assist their students as they contemplate further training, but they seldom do. Consequently, a coordinated approach with the CVCAL provider—enhancing case management, pathway advice, transition assistance—is lacking. For CVCAL students this increases the risk of what might be regarded as a 'secondary disengagement'.

Workplace learning

In the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program, difficulties also emerged in arranging the employer-based workplace learning component. Indeed, many employers were ambivalent hosts. According to one

teacher, some treated the student as a 'young person, rather than an employee' and others were reluctant to act as volunteer hosts for students for just one day a week. Many employers were deterred by workplace insurance and duty of care concerns. It soon became apparent that the best learning outcomes were gained when the workplace component was a formal apprenticeship or traineeship, when the employer is legally bound to provide training and to treat the student as an employee. One staff member felt that employers were more willing to accept a VCAL apprentice or trainee because they regarded an undefined placement as 'a bit wishy-washy and vague'.

As with the VET training, the BSL-CVCAL staff were unable to monitor their students' work placement progress or even to verify attendance. Some employers resisted interaction, with the prevailing attitudes described by one teacher: 'Employers can be guarded about their workplace, and don't really want teachers (like me!) coming into their world'. All this was exacerbated by the students' uncertainty and anxiety. This caused much shifting of preferences and that, in turn, made it difficult to manage complementary or synchronised VCAL learning components. This apparent lack of adequate VCAL processes for liaison between the various educators (classroom teachers, trainers or employers) limited the potential gains from applied learning.

Assessment

A characteristic of the VCAL model is the flexibility afforded teachers in the assessment process. Typically, teachers do not follow a prescribed, strand by strand review of the student's performance. Rather, they teach units that are relevant to multiple strands and then identify and map outcomes. This was very evident in the assessment process used in the program. The approach was explained by a teacher:

> You assess in different ways. You try and assess oral presentations. You assess them one on one, rather than in front of a whole group, or you try to have it so they can make up that assessment in other ways. So when I am talking to them in class I will say, 'Explain to me how you did that', and without them even knowing I am assessing that they know that process. And they go, 'I did this and then I worked that out in brackets and then I multiplied that', and I go, 'That's great'.
>
> …
>
> It is not like being in a traditional school where you say, 'Hand up your assignments at the front as you leave', and you walk out with a pile of thirty stapled assignments. That is just not going to happen. So you do more rolling assessment, you assess them orally, you find different ways that they can meet an outcome and you give them every opportunity to do so.

Though there are no VCAA assessment sheets or exams, the teachers complied with VCAA requirements for proof of student attainment, often keeping photographs of a student's work or of group work folios. According to teachers, this approach to assessment enabled them to better tailor lessons to the students' needs and temperaments, while ensuring progress was made.

> So some students who have achieved really highly, and have really pushed themselves this year, have done those learning outcomes in a myriad of different ways, whereas other students may have just done that learning outcome in two different ways … they can choose to do things in different ways.

Although assessment of a mixed group of intermediate and senior students with differing abilities presented challenges, it seems that the benefits outweighed costs:

> The thing is, for intermediates and seniors, sometimes the assessment criteria is different, that's why the seniors have more tasks like the senior meetings and the senior board …

> Sometimes the intermediates end up doing senior work, and then if they achieve it then they've achieved a senior level and if they don't they're at the intermediate level.

Assessment of the VET component, however, was out of the hands of those overseeing the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program. They had very little access to formal reporting of the students' progress and, since the training was provided by different organisations and at different times, attainment information was received intermittently and via the student.

Relationships and expectations

The effectiveness of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL was due in large part to the intimate setting and close relationships between teacher and learner. Typically, both teachers were present in the classroom, while the average number of students in attendance was around 20. Students clearly valued the close attention of teachers:

> When I was at school there was 25 kids in the classroom, I would put my hand up and I would never get any help, but here you put your hand up and the teacher comes straight away and will sit with you until you know how to do it ... that's what's good about it. (female)

> You get more time with the teachers, because there are two, three teachers to the whole class. At other places like at school where there's one teacher to the whole class and you can't really—if you don't understand anything—you can't really have them explain it to you properly because there are other kids in the class who need it, too. (male)

Lastly, we consider the question of expectations and standards. A feature of CVCAL is the autonomy and respect afforded to students. Teachers were asked whether a commitment to this principle affected teaching standards and learning outcomes—whether, in other words, there was a trade-off. A response from one teacher is illuminating:

> Yeah, definitely … in terms of effective learning versus their sense of self and their establishing self-confidence and their re-engagement, you are definitely trading off between those two things. You get less done in an academic sense, because you're trading off on all the other things that are going on.

The same interviewee felt that a compromise was possible:

> I think that we could probably be still a really positive place to re-engage students but still do that in possibly a more structured kind of way, where we are still friendly, we are still not those things that disengaged them in the first place, but that we still have expectations. I think it is okay to have high expectations for kids. I think that they rise to those expectations if they know what they are and they are feasibly able to be met.

Summary

- Student-centred and applied learning principles helped to create a vibrant learning environment; however, the most significant factor was the emphasis placed on 'adult learning' principles.

- Out-of-class learning and extra-curricular activities reinforced 'real world', 'hands-on' and 'adult learning' dimensions of the program.

- Students were reasonably confident about maths, while literacy skills remained weak.

- Confidence levels increased among students; but this may also create unrealistic career expectations if the problem of poor literacy is not addressed.

- Integrated teaching with low student–staff ratios, and mixed ability, single group learning combined to produce a positive learning environment.

- Teaching the CVCAL demanded special skills and great commitment: conventional teacher training did little to prepare teachers for this setting. There was an urgent need for specialist assistance in the form of wellbeing and literacy aides.

- The negotiation and autonomy that is integral to adult learning settings had its downsides: students were sometimes too boisterous and disruptive. The overuse of mobile phones and MP3 players was a source of tension between students and teachers.

- Staff had difficulty in synchronising the VET, workplace training and classroom tuition components of the CVCAL. When these were not aligned, there resulted a dislocation between the student and the CVCAL setting, as well as significant frustration and confusion for many students.

Administration and support

In this section, we focus on governance issues, student wellbeing, enrolling and exiting, resources and facilities, transition support, staff support and wellbeing.

Governance, reporting, accountability

The 2010 BSL-CVCAL program was guided by external and internal advisory groups. The external advisory group comprised representatives of partner schools, the DEECD Southern Metropolitan Regional Office, the FMP Local Learning and Employment Network, senior BSL management and the author of this evaluation. The internal advisory group consisted of BSL staff from the FHSC and Community Services, the registered training organisation, Information Technology, and the Research and Policy Centre. As the program matured, the external advisory group meetings were less frequent and a mid-semester report was produced to update partner schools on student attendance, enrolment and wellbeing, curriculum and advocacy.

Day-to-day management of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL was the responsibility of the Education Programs Coordinator and the FHSC manager, who also had wider responsibilities. On-campus operations were governed by Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority regulations. The VRQA accredits and monitors all 'non-school senior secondary providers', with standards regarding principles, student learning outcomes, student welfare, student records and results, teaching and learning, governance and probity. To comply with these standards, the BSL-CVCAL staff referred to working policy documents, including:

- a Student Engagement Policy

- an Assessment and Reporting Policy & Procedures

- an Admission and Enrolment Policy.

Contracts with partner schools (at time of writing these are with Carrum Downs Secondary College and Frankston High School) are in place. These schools remain, in the eyes of the DEECD, the central enrolment institutions for the students, and the conduit through which state funding for each student is transferred to the BSL. The contracts are detailed documents that prescribe all aspects of the relationship with the BSL and its CVCAL provision.

In spite of the contracts and policy documents, there were teething problems. BSL-CVCAL staff were puzzled by the delays in schools completing data entry of the CVCAL students' VET and

other unit enrolments, since schools were provided with funding for such administrative purposes. Delayed processing can potentially delay the students' 'eligibility reports' which are required before the VCAA will issue VCAL certificates. The FHSC now produces reports from a tailor-made database: these will be forwarded to schools in the hope of reducing delays.

Student wellbeing

The reporting and monitoring of student wellbeing, as well as the maintenance of individual learning plans, were carried out using the customised database. This database mapped the students' VET pathways, attendance, areas of interest and specific learning and welfare needs. Student incident reports were maintained alongside records of interventions, referrals and appointments. If incidents or issues were deemed 'severe', the reports were forwarded to the referring partner school. All these reports were regarded as important markers in the assessment of students' wellbeing.

While reporting standards and the commitment to student wellbeing were high, the program lacked specialised welfare assistance (plans are under way to employ a dedicated part-time wellbeing officer). The teachers spoke of how demanding the issues were and of how ill-equipped they felt:

> I didn't realise it would be so difficult, and I guess I didn't realise it would involve so much social work ... we're maybe doing the students a disservice by not having a social worker in our program, because we can try and deal with all of these issues and problems as best we can, but at the end of the day we're not fully trained to do so.

Parents/carers were asked whether they would benefit from more direct access to specialised assistance and whether the program might be used to connect them to such services. Some parents/carers saw merit in such links:

> Most definitely. I would have liked to have had [help], and I know [the teacher] tried but she couldn't get the information … I would have liked more of the family, bringing the broken family together somewhere—we could have gone to have some counselling and help with [the student] and his dad and his partner. Maybe someone that can help us through talking to young teenagers about alcohol, fits and all of that type of thing … and I think more of a link with the family to help us to get through, to understand him, as well as for him to understand that he is coming to his family, that he needs to respect it and work on it.

Throughout 2010, several measures were used to address students' wellbeing. These included teachers attending professional development events, including Berry Street's Calmer Classrooms training dealing with challenging behaviours, mental health first aid training, the DEECD Southern Youth Commitment Conference and BSL Practice Policy and Research workshops. The program also made use of a volunteer social work student on placement from the University of Melbourne who was on hand in Term 1 to monitor and interact with students. Many students benefited from her presence. One student explained:

> Well, I was pregnant and then I lost the baby and … she was so understanding and she'd talk to me and she'd talk a bit about drugs too, even though she wasn't a drug and alcohol worker ... And it made me feel more comfortable, because I didn't have to talk to all these different people, I'd just talk to her, the one person. (female)

In addition, some students were referred to, and then consulted, local services such as Frankston Headspace, Peninsula Health and Peninsula Youth Connections (the last is operated at the FHSC

by the BSL in collaboration with Taskforce). Students were often taken by teachers to initial appointments with these external agencies.

Notwithstanding the imminent recruitment of a wellbeing officer, significant challenges remain, notably the shortage of local youth-oriented mental health and drug and alcohol services, as well as youth-friendly general practitioners.

One of the most pressing concerns in the FMP region is the use of illicit drugs by young people. The extent of drug use among the 2010 BSL-CVCAL students was difficult to gauge, though staff were attuned to its potential impact. The social work student on placement worked alongside the staff in their attempts to address the issue of drug taking. One student interviewee reflected on the contrasting approaches to dealing with this issue:

> Teachers [at school] wouldn't even let us talk about drugs … She [the social work student] was an alright teacher for talking about it: if you needed to talk to someone about drugs, you talk to her. She'll just say to you what's bad, what's good, what isn't, what you shouldn't, what you should. Basically what you shouldn't. You shouldn't do drugs at all. Unless it's prescription. (male)

In addition, there is the vexed issue of smoking. Student autonomy was a key to engagement; and the right to smoke on the premises (in open areas) was a manifestation of this approach. Students regarded permission to smoke as a prized freedom and many thought it was one of the most important points of difference between CVCAL and the mainstream education they had rejected. Yet it is difficult to reconcile the program's stated aim of improving wellbeing with no active deterrence to smoking..

A related issue is the lack of physical activity. This is a limitation of the VCAL curriculum itself, though mainstream schools can compensate by providing students with supplementary programs, facilities and equipment. The 2010 BSL-CVCAL staff introduced in Term 3 a ten-week extra-curricular fitness program including personal training, boxing/kick boxing, Zumba dancing and yoga. This was particularly important given that so many of the students were unable to afford gym membership fees and other costs associated with participation in sport.

Many students suffered from poor nutrition and unhealthy eating habits. In response, staff trialled a 'breakfast club' but on a very modest scale: indeed, some students were not aware of its existence. Such a program is sorely needed and, as one of the teachers indicated, is on the agenda for the future:

> I think that having a really solid breakfast club … would be really important, because these kids don't eat all day, at all. So if we had breakfast there, and it was a real breakfast that they had to sit down and actually eat, I think that would change the way that their brains work and they function in the morning … It would just be a nice way to sit down together and start the day, I think, because something a lot of these kids are missing is that idea of eating around a table with a group of people, which is quite important.

An important aspect of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL was the classroom rules. The program's minimalist approach entailed the use of just two touchstone rules: 'no distracting others' and 'no bullying or abuse'. Students responded positively to this regime:

> I think because there's not as many rules it's easier to follow the ones there is. (female)

> It's definitely better than behaviour in schools, so it must be working. It's not like school here, no one's mucking around, calling people names and stuff like that … So it seems to be working. (female)

Most students were sensitive to the problem of bullying:

> I reckon that they've done the right choice by just having those … rules because if anyone bullies anyone then they will be straight out, so I reckon they made it nice and clear to everyone that they're the … rules and if anyone does any of them then they're going to have a talk to and sort things out or they're just going to be kicked out straightaway which I reckon is fair, because usually at high school [bullies] get suspended and then they come back … Here they've actually made it strict and if you do one thing wrong then you're out completely ... I reckon it is good. (female)

Although teachers also favoured this minimalist approach, they were more attuned to its shortcomings, particularly relating to inattention and, on occasion, disrespectful behaviour:

> I still very much abide by those two rules but I think we've actually tightened things up from the beginning of the year just because those things were such a distraction—students were constantly on mobiles, constantly listening to iPods. I felt like I was talking to a brick wall because everybody else was consumed in whatever else was going on, with students sending messages to each other across the classroom and things, and to me that's just not on … [Thinking about] casting the net wider than just bullying, it becomes sort of about respect. So bullying is about having a lack of respect for somebody else. I think that lack of respect could have widened to teachers and other people and … those distractions showed me a lack of respect.

An indicator of students' attitudes and wellbeing is attendance. At 79 per cent overall, the attendance was a positive outcome, particularly considering the students' backgrounds and their deep ambivalence towards education. Nonetheless, arriving late or leaving early was common for some students and this became a problem. A planned (negotiated) timetabling change will alter the working day and it is hoped that more convenient hours (9.30 am – 3.30 pm) will mitigate such absences.

Enrolling and exiting

Parents/carers found that arranging for young people to transition from mainstream schools to the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program was a straightforward process. For the most part they spoke well of the assistance and advice they received at the referring school; and they spoke very highly of those at the BSL who fielded their initial questions and who then handled the enrolment. The Admission and Enrolment Policy identifies the circumstances that warrant a referral to the CVCAL program and the associated procedures that referring schools and agencies must follow (students are sometimes referred by community service organisations, Centrelink or the youth justice system). The policy states:

> The decision to refer a student to a Community VCAL program can only be made when:
> - all other avenues to retain the student in school have been explored; and
> - referral to Community VCAL is in the student's best interests; and
> - a Community VCAL program can appropriately meet the needs of the student; and
> - the enrolling school has sought information about, and is satisfied with, the quality of the Community VCAL program; and
> - the school has liaised with the DEECD Regional Office about the best option for the student.

From the perspective of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program, essential eligibility criteria also included proof that the student faced at least two 'risk factors' and that they had a relationship with a parent or guardian-like figure.

In relation to referrals and enrolments, the main challenge for the program was a lack of prior knowledge or background information about the prospective student. Though the referral form was also used to collect data on risk factors—it is modelled on DEECD and Youth Connections documents—it was not always possible to glean from the student or their parent/carer all the relevant information. For example, information about a medical condition or learning disability must be provided voluntarily and is often withheld by students, parents/carers or referring agencies. As one staff member explained:

> We can't ask medical information and we can't ask about learning disabilities and all of that kind of stuff if they don't belong to you … if they don't tell you, you don't know and that sort of thing has been a bit of a gripe and the teachers would like to know all of that sort of stuff but there is no way of forcing a kid to tell you and you can't get the information from schools so you know you usually find out in term 4 that this kid has got a learning disability and you are like, 'Oh, I wish I had known that'.

Similarly, the student's literacy and numeracy skills are not revealed during the enrolment process. Early attempts to test students on commencement failed because students reacted (and performed) badly. As one staff member noted, this was partly because the test format was inappropriate and also because students were wary of a test that might shame them. BSL-CVCAL staff improvised to overcome skill gaps. For one student, the staff resorted to a volunteer integration aide:

> Because he couldn't really read or write, we really called around and we used our networks quite well and said, 'Who is the specialist for literacy for these kind of kids and this kind of age group?'

Though these measures had some success, it is doubtful whether such ad hoc arrangements can serve the program in the future. These problems have repercussions for the students' later engagement with VET, where RTOs are not prepared to assess for, let alone remedy, basic literacy and numeracy needs or learning disabilities.

The Student Engagement Policy provides for the suspension, expulsion and exiting of students. These guidelines include obligations and procedures prior to suspension, as well as grounds for suspension and/or expulsion. In the course of 2010, five students 'exited', though none was suspended or expelled. Those who exited received written notice, as did the referring school or agency. For those re-entering the mainstream setting, the transition was handled in close collaboration with the school.

Resources and facilities

By and large, the resources and facilities made available to the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program were very good. The main classroom, meeting rooms, auditorium and IT lab are clean, modern and comfortable. The grounds of the FHSC are pleasantly landscaped and there are many spaces where students and staff can congregate and relax.

The commercial kitchen is a feature of the centre, and it provides those training in hospitality with an exceptional training environment. However, interviewees were critical of the IT network's capacity and its slow internet service. Another inconvenience was competition for space: the CVCAL program had to vie for space with other programs, and required the coordinator to book

essential rooms, the auditorium and other facilities far in advance. This at times created tension between the various programs. A more permanent and stable arrangement would enable students and teachers in the CVCAL program to create a distinct learning space with its own ambience.

Art supplies were provided without extra costs to the students, and the program absorbed all the costs associated with excursions and off-site activity. Given the flexible teaching in a CVCAL setting, there is no urgent need for prescribed course texts, though access to a greater variety of reference material would be desirable. That one teacher felt the need to provide such texts by using her own municipal library card is testimony to this need.

Transition support

In the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program, the challenges associated with the VET were addressed through the use of the following DEECD procedures and protocols: Individual Learning Plans, Managed Individual Pathway Plans and Individual Vocational Plans (refer to Appendix for a outline of the pathways progress of 23 of the students). These were maintained with reference to the database mapping the students' VET backgrounds, attendance, decisions, areas of interest and specific learning and welfare needs. In addition, transition support was provided in the form of a weekly study group for those who had entered further training. Students in full-time work and study were contacted regularly and given the opportunity to reassess their support needs, while those looking for work were also contacted regularly. All such contacts were recorded on the student database. Lastly, a Facebook page was created to enable past and current students to share their transition experiences.

Nevertheless, providing adequate transition support was a daunting challenge for staff. Compounding the problems caused by the separation of CVCAL students from their classroom teacher was the sheer volume of administrative work needed to maintain support. In the words of one staff member:

> The paperwork for TAFE and VET is just absolutely insane ... it really is a lot of data entry and it's a lot of administrative work, doing the enrolments online or printing them off, a lot of codes and they [students] couldn't do it themselves.

Staff support

Catering for young people with histories of disengagement was taxing and time-consuming. To provide a positive and therapeutic learning environment, teachers were required to be, at once, outstanding classroom teachers, career advisers, case managers, welfare officers and confidants. They devoted considerable time and energy to liaising with students, VET providers, employers, schools, job service providers, welfare organisations and parents/carers. They managed often intense relationships with students, while attempting to maintain appropriate boundaries. Moreover, the teachers were isolated from the mainstream teaching fraternity. Thus it was telling to learn from students and parents/carers that the 2010 BSL-CVCAL staff were held in very high regard.

For its part, the BSL and its FHSC lacked the range of professional resources found at mainstream schools. It did, however, provide teachers with professional development, as well as the opportunity to air concerns at the internal advisory group meetings and sundry consultations with the coordinator. To this extent, management was very supportive.

Nonetheless, staff did experience stress and vulnerability, particularly when pastoral care demands became overwhelming:

> I think sometimes [students] find it hard to determine the boundaries, but it's not their fault, it's the way that the structure here has been developed. It's hard sometimes when they tell us such personal information, and we try and help them out with things that definitely go way beyond the role of the teacher ... So I have definitely had situations where I found student behaviour to be really disrespectful and upsetting, and I've had a few times where I've just broken down after school, but at the end of the day, it's nothing personal, it's not them trying to upset me or anything, it's usually a much bigger issue that's manifested in that way, because they feel comfortable expressing themselves to me now, because I've let them do that, and opened that up to them.

> I find that I go home and I can't stop thinking about them and it's hard mentally to switch off. Even if I don't want to think about it, I think about it. The issues that some of the students face are just above and beyond anything that I could have expected … but I'm not quite sure how to deal with it … I know how to deal with it structurally, but I don't know how to deal with it emotionally.

All things considered, those teaching and overseeing the 2010 BSL-CVCAL were remunerated for far fewer hours than they worked. The following account from a teacher indicates the hours:

> I'm here most days sort of quarter past eight, eight-thirty [am]. I'm usually here for the full eight hours, and then I'd go home and usually spend two hours planning each night, and on the holidays—last holidays I took a break, but the holidays before I spent most days planning.

Lastly, a word on staffing: while the 2010 BSL-CVCAL's teaching component was adequate for the enrolment capacity of 25, there was need for a suitably qualified wellbeing officer. At the time of writing, this vacancy was being filled. Plans were also in place to employ two more registered teachers to help cater for projected increases.

Summary

- The BSL-CVCAL program complied with the standards set down by regulatory bodies. Its internal governance and reporting practices served it well. Procedures for formal interactions with schools operated effectively.

- The program would benefit if, at the time of school referral, it had more access to information about the students' needs and the experiences that led to disengagement.

- Students and parents/carers were very satisfied with the procedures and the approach taken by staff to initial inquiries and enrolment.

- In the absence of a specialist wellbeing aide, the program had a limited capacity to address complex student needs.

- The minimalist approach to rules governing student behaviour proved effective: however, the over-use of mobile phones and MP3 players exposed some limitations.

- Most facilities were of a high standard but competition with other BSL programs for access to rooms sometimes created a degree of tension.

- Though management was supportive, staff experienced considerable strain: workloads were high and staff worked longer than the paid hours. Teachers also experienced isolation from their counterparts in conventional school settings and had less regular access to collegial support and professional development.

5 Outcomes and conclusions

As noted, the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program produced very good levels of attendance and VCAL certificate attainment, as well as encouraging transitions to VET, apprenticeships and traineeships. Also of importance were the less tangible or quantifiable 'soft' skills attained by the students. These included increased confidence, changed expectations or aspirations and new outlooks. There are a number of examples of how soft skills were developed. Students made much of the benefits of the out-of-class activities that placed them in unfamiliar situations.

> We actually had a day where we were able to walk into Frankston and look for people that [make] jumpers and talk to them about the jumpers. We also had to walk around and get donations for the trivia night, so we had to talk to the people about getting donations … I would never be able to do it a year ago. (female)

Others spoke of improved confidence and public-speaking skills resulting from presentations to the class:

> I feel more confident when I talk in front of a group of people. Before I could never get in front of a group of people and talk in front of them, but now here with the teachers it's good, if they know you're scared to get up in front of a big group of people, they'll only make you get up in front of seven people and it's not as bad as getting up in front of 20 people, so it's good when they do that. (female)

A striking response came from a student who remarked on changes to her overall disposition and outlook:

> I am not what I used to be at high school, getting into trouble and mucking around. I actually do my work. I get it finished … I just feel like I've got a whole new personality inside me, which is good. I feel like a whole new person. (female)

Interviews with parents/carers also featured positive responses. A parent spoke of the transformation of another student:

> To see what she's become now is the best result any parent can ask for compared to what she was before, yes. I mean, she was getting sent home all the time, she was smoking. She doesn't smoke cigarettes any more ... she's making more mature choices. The program ... has just been fantastic and [the female staff] are just the best chicks in the world … They've made my daughter a human.

Some changes to the students' soft skills were more subtle. One parent noted what she felt were her daughter's improved maturity and motivation:

> She knows more what she wants to do now. She's more goal orientated than she was—she'd lost interest at the other school … Yeah, maturity too. She's probably matured a little bit. She wants to go to Chisholm next year and she's going to do all that, so I don't know, she just doesn't want to stay home. She wants to do something herself, so that's good.

There is evidence suggesting that some parents benefited as much from the program as did students. The following response is a reminder of the effects disengagement has on parents/carers, families and all those closely associated with the students:

> I think the school has been fantastic for [my daughter] and they've been fantastic for me too because it's given me a bit of peace of mind, encouraging me that things will get better,

things can get better … you're not going to be stuck in this spiral that gets out of control, there's different things that can help … which is marvellous, and I think maybe the way you do [teaching] is a lot better than what mainstreams schools do, I'm not too sure, I don't know how everything works but it's very uplifting actually, very uplifting.

Though not all parents/carers could be interviewed, most were effusive in their praise of the program. The following reflection reveals something of the parents' initial doubts and how these slowly dissipated.

At the beginning, I really wasn't sure what to expect to be honest with you and I was just, well, whatever she gets out of it is fine … I just thought it was going to be a lot more like school and she was going to have just as many problems as she'd already had ... And when we went along to meet [the coordinator] at the High Street Centre I had real doubts, and was thinking—I think she's coming out of a school environment where she can probably cope still, into having more problems. Because I was imagining her being with all sorts of kids that were having real behavioural problems and were having to come out of school. And she didn't have to come out of school. But that proved completely wrong, and I'm more than willing to admit that.

Ultimately, the 2010 BSL-CVCAL program provided very effective wrap-around support for students with complex needs. In terms of engagement, the program succeeded not only in rekindling students' interest in education, but also in establishing important links with schools and the community. Importantly, it also succeeded in gaining the confidence of parents/carers.

The approach taken to teaching and learning was effective, to the extent that students engaged with the curriculum, became willing tutors of their peers and developed skills through participation in a number of cross-disciplinary, out-of-class and 'real world' activities. Adult and applied learning principles guided instruction and were a key to engagement, as were the skill and commitment of the teachers. Of more concern was the gap between learning on campus and learning in RTOs or at workplaces.

The requisite protocols, policies, student wellbeing/transition guidelines and formal agreements functioned well. Staff were conscious of responsibilities for overall student wellbeing and performed well in spite of limited resources. A note of caution should be recorded here: pressure on staff is considerable, and although professional development and other support are provided, these may not be enough to prevent 'burn out'.

Some general conclusions follow. Alhough most would agree that in education 'one size does not fit all' and that many young people are ill-suited to mainstream schooling, it is important to note aspects of mainstream education that are denied those who disengage from it. Some student interviewees expressed regret at having left the mainstream, mentioning the loss of friends, access to activities such as music and sport, and even the uniform code. We might add to this the loss of a broader curriculum that encourages critical thinking and an appreciation of the arts.

Also of importance in this evaluation is an awareness of limitations and constraints relating to the program, the CVCAL concept and the VCAL model itself. The 2010 BSL-CVCAL program's primary aim was to re-engage students using a modified approach to VCAL, a statewide program usually delivered in well-resourced schools. This program sought to engage those regarded as 'too difficult' for the mainstream in a facility with relatively modest resources. Any judgements on program effectiveness should therefore be tempered by a reminder of the scale and difficulty of the undertaking.

Lastly, a reflection on the students. It was evident that their CVCAL experience had prompted them to reflect on many aspects of education: indeed, this 'disadvantaged' cohort may have devoted more time to contemplating questions of pedagogy and youth support than have many young people in more stable settings. With varying eloquence, and with quirky styles, they often conveyed quite profound thoughts. This evaluation ends with one such contribution:

Interviewer: What advice would you give to those running schools?

Student: It needs to be about the kids, it needs to be about the kids. It needs to be about the kids. It needs to be about the kids ... it needs to be brought back to the kids and what they need, even if they're the most worst behaved kids ever, still, you need to work on them and work on them because they will get somewhere, definitely.

Interviewer: Well, thank you, again ...

Student: No, too easy. Remember, it's all about the kids.

Appendix Student pathways planning

Pathways progress of 23 of the BSL-CVCAL students was mapped in the following worksheet.

Training 2010	Work-related experience 2010	Pathway 2011
Certificate II Hospitality (Kitchen Operations, KO)	MasterChef competition	Certificate III Commercial Cookery Apprenticeship
Certificate II Hospitality (KO), Certificate II in Retail	Part-time work at Red Rooster	Event management Certificate III at Chisholm
Certificate III Aged Care, Certificate II Hospitality		Children's Services or Aged Care onsite at BSL in 2011?
Certificate III Children's Services, Certificate II Retail	Childcare work placement Moonlit Sanctuary Pearcedale Conservation Park	Full-time work
Certificate III Children's Services, Certificate II Retail	Childcare work placement, Part-time work at McDonalds	Childcare course incomplete. Next Skills Plus not until Feb 2011
Certificate II Hospitality		Aged Care Traineeship through Selmar (RTO)
Certificate in General Education for Adults		Wants to do carpentry apprenticeship
Certificate II Hospitality (KO), Certificate II in Business Administration	MasterChef competition, Traineeship at motel	Certificate III Commercial Cookery Apprenticeship
Certificate II Building & Construction, Certificate II Hospitality	Bricklaying 'taster' course	Bricklaying 8-week course, leading to Certificate III Bricklaying apprenticeship at Holmesglen
Certificate III Children's Services, Certificate II Hospitality	Childcare work placement, Volunteer at BSL Homework Club, Part-time work at Bi-Lo supermarket	Business Administration traineeship through Selmar
Certificate II Retail, Certificate II Hospitality	Part-time work at Bi-Lo supermarket, Volunteer at BSL Homework Club, Landscaping and horticulture 'taster' courses	Certificate II Horticulture (Landscape) at Chisholm
Certificate III Aged Care, Certificate II Hospitality	Work placement at Central Park Aged Care	Nursing / aged care work
Certificate III Children Services, Certificate II Retail		Hairdressing apprenticeship
Certificate II Carpentry (pre-apprenticeship)	Bricklaying 'taster' course	Fitness traineeship, Smart Connections
Certificate III Electrotechnology Engineering traineeship, Certificate II Hospitality	LSC traineeship, incomplete	Certificate III Retail traineeship at Repco with Selmar
Certificate IV Youth Work, Certificate II Hospitality		Senior VCAL
Certificate III in Aged Care, Certificate II in Hospitality	Aged care work placement	Senior VCAL Certificate III in Health Services Assistant?
Certificate II Baking, Certificate II Hospitality	Work experience at op shop, Belvedere Community Centre cake decorating course	Complete Certificate II Retail Baking, Possible Certificate III traineeship
Certificate II Hospitality		Children's Services traineeship
Certificate II Hairdressing (incomplete), Certificate II Hospitality		Certificate II Music Industry, Senior VCAL
Certificate II Retail		Business Administration traineeship through Selmar
Certificate II Hospitality (Commercial Cookery)	Peninsula Private Hospital apprenticeship	Continue apprenticeship, Senior VCAL
Certificate IV Youth Work, Certificate II Retail	Volunteer work at Portsea Camp, Part-time work at McDonalds	Diploma of Nursing (Div 2) at Chisholm

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