Successes and challenges in re-engagement

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

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Aims and background

The Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL (CVCAL) program is designed to encourage young people to remain engaged in education through the provision of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning in a non-school setting. It caters for students in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula region who have left mainstream schooling prematurely—often through expulsion—and/or those who are deemed to be 'at risk'. This report provides a condensed evaluation of the 2012 program. It ranges across key areas of its operations, and is part of an ongoing assessment of the program's approach to catering for the needs of young people in the region. The 2012 program represented the third full year of VCAL provided by the BSL, following a 'Taster' version in late 2009 (see Table 4, which shows the program's growth, as well as previous evaluations, Myconos 2010, 2011, 2012.

The findings in this evaluation are based on formal interviews conducted in October 2012. Interviewees included fourteen current intermediate and senior students, and five former students. Interviews were conducted with nine staff, as well as with a former coordinator who had left the program mid-year. Findings from interviews were supplemented with data collected from the program records, as well as fieldwork conducted throughout the year.

Summary

In contrast to previous years, the 2012 CVCAL experience was for staff and students quite turbulent, particularly up to mid-year. For a time, the development of key policies, protocols and initiatives stalled; and this loss of momentum can be linked to the departure of staff at key moments. By year's end, the program had stabilised and the much-needed strengthening of the program's foundations resumed, though not before the impact had been felt in the shape of reduced student attendance and engagement. While students were conscious of these problems, they were nevertheless effusive in their praise of staff and the program. They were also eager to assert the worth of this 'second chance' program and the profound changes it had made to their lives. Ultimately, this report affirms the effectiveness and value of the program, but does so while noting the difficulties experienced in 2012 and signalling some important challenges ahead.

Key points

- **Program ethos:** A strong commitment to the program by staff and students can be further enhanced with a clearer articulation of the program's vision, mission, and definition of success. This is easier said than done, given that the program consists of three fundamental components—education, vocational training, and wellbeing—and that each comes with its own set of practices, priorities, expectations and professional cultures.

- **Effectiveness:** The formal outcomes—attendance, graduations, training certificates completed—showed the program did not achieve the previous year's success. However, assessments of overall effectiveness

must incorporate the feedback from students which showed that the program continued to enable positive transformations in young people whose link with education had been either tenuous or non-existent.

- **Need for stability:** Supportive relationships have been the cornerstone of the program since its inception. Interviewees affirmed that the program continues to provide a secure, welcoming and ultimately transformative environment. Nonetheless, disruptions to these relationships—caused often by staff turnover—impacted on the program, and this resulted in reduced attendance, a number of student exits and a deterioration in academic and training outcomes.

- **Workforce:** Morale was high and commitment strong, though staff turnover contributed to a loss of momentum in the development of key procedures, protocols and initiatives. Unsettled staff arrangements were both the cause and symptom of setbacks, and for this reason continuing support for staff—and particularly for the coordinator—is imperative.

- **Wellbeing:** Addressing the wellbeing needs of students continues to be an over-riding imperative. Students speak positively about the program's attention to their needs and the profound difference this has made. Meeting such needs remains a challenge because they are often very complex and have symptoms that manifest in unexpected ways.

- **Pedagogy:** The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning provided in this community setting proved an effective vehicle for engaging students who had left mainstream education prematurely. It provides a breadth of learning and is flexible. Yet teachers need time to learn how to fully realise the certificate's potential; and this requires ongoing curriculum development and integrated teaching.

- **Vocational training:** A vital component of the VCAL is formal vocational training. Progress in this respect was sometimes hampered by students' unsettled circumstances and consequent indecision, as well as by complex and sometimes disappointing relations with registered training organisations. Efforts to introduce a new framework that facilitates progress through VET and that promotes collaboration with training organisations are underway.

- **Transitions:** Greater emphasis is now placed on transitions support, and this has included catering for the needs of former students. While there is a consensus on the need to assist former students—whose continuing presence is a mark of the program's importance—there is also a need to avoid overdependence on a program with finite resources. The scope of this support and how it is to be administered is under consideration, and a new framework imminent.

Recommendations

Program ethos

- Build on efforts now underway to clarify the program's focus. Ensure that that understanding is clearly conveyed in key documents, as well as verbally in those settings where prospective staff and students are introduced to the program. There is a need to more clearly articulate what constitutes success; and this definition should feature in recruitment and induction processes for staff.

Relationships and wellbeing

- Put in place processes that strengthen relations with parents and carers, as well as linkages with the agencies and youth support networks throughout the community. Explore the possibility of having external agencies work periodically from the Frankston High Street Centre.

- Build on initiatives currently underway to refine the new intake procedure, and to manage the way in which the program caters for former students.

- Put in place processes that further enhance staff capacity to deal effectively with wellbeing emergencies, particularly those occurring out of hours.

- Explore ways of more fully integrating wellbeing issues and themes into the VCAL curriculum.

- Monitor students' online interactions with the program, and create a framework that records this engagement as a form of attendance.

Training and transitions

- Build on current efforts to provide more structure facilitating VET enrolments and participation and ensuring training organisations are not only cognisant of the CVCAL cohort's needs but also willing to adjust their approach to training accordingly. Promote on-site training by registered training organisations where possible.

Workforce and governance

- Adjust work schedules to ensure that all staff are able to attend CVCAL team meetings.

- Ensure the coordinator is provided with ongoing and high-level administrative support and with other resources that might promote collaboration with other services within and beyond the centre.

- Ensure that regular meetings are held for the purposes of supervision, debriefing and peer support. Ensure also that specialised external supervision is made available to the wellbeing officer and the coordinator and, if requested, to all staff.

- Modify the role of the internal advisory group so that it provides more immediate, specialised advice.

- Provide adequate resources to manage the new database designed to provide real-time information about attendance, VET and VCAL module progress, vocational training attendance and overall progress.

Findings

Program ethos

> *What is it that we're going to do? What is it that we can do? What do we know we can do? What are we going to strive to do?* (Teacher)

Students and staff of the BSL's 2012 CVCAL had a strong awareness of the program's importance and of their involvement in an initiative they regard as unique. The ongoing challenge facing the BSL is to articulate an ethos that reconciles the contending demands of the program's three overlapping parts: education, vocational training and wellbeing. Creating a guiding ethos of this kind is complicated, as some of the most pressing issues become evident over time and also change according to the students' sometimes unforeseen needs. A strong consensus on the program's ethos reduces the risk of confusion about scope (what to provide to whom), scale (how many students), expectations, what constitutes success, appropriate resource allocation and policies/procedures.

Relationships and wellbeing

> *It's good to have someone to talk to and get problems off my chest about being down, being sad. [Now] my anger's better and my drinking habit's cut down heaps—I quit for 8 months, and also quit drugs ... I've become a better person, more helpful to people ... I don't swear and argue with people as much as I used to.*
> (Male student with history of violence, alcohol/drug abuse and attempted suicide)

> *Coming into school moody and all that. I used to go to [the wellbeing officer] and talk to her about problems at home and that. She talked me [through] it, saying what to do ... so I did those things, and it [led] me to be a better person.* (Male student)

Since its commencement as a Taster in 2009, the program has had strong and supportive relationships as its cornerstone. As in previous evaluations, students spoke of the profound changes they experienced when freed of the negative aspects of mainstream schooling. They dwelt on the importance of safety, security, acceptance, and respect. Their testimonies remove any doubt that stable, secure, welcoming relationships and environments are the pre-conditions to learning and improved wellbeing. It is no surprise that the loss of staff in late 2011 and in 2012 had an impact on many students' willingness and capacity to engage with the program. This meant a reduction in attendance, particularly in terms two and three and, in turn, increasingly disruptive behaviour by a small number of students. Staff turnover also limited efforts to build routine interaction with parents, carers and youth support agencies in the wider community.

Working with the available resources, wellbeing support focused on regular counselling and referrals to other agencies, and did not entail in-depth case management and treatment. Because of the unpredictable wellbeing demands—many approaching crisis level and occurring outside the program's operating hours—the program by necessity catered for needs in an ad hoc manner, and this made planning difficult.

Teaching and learning

> *Here, they praise you for helping each other, like [for] taking initiative to work with one another ... they praise us because we actually learn to[get] along and work as a team. Getting help is the biggest highlight here ... making me feel I'm not by myself with the work; having help helps me with knowing that I can get somewhere in life and get further with my education than ever.* (Female student)

Students spoke in very positive terms about the teachers' ability to respond, engage and teach effectively, and to create a collaborative environment that empowered the learner. Typically, students reported having made significant progress, even in areas they liked least (e.g. numeracy, literacy). These findings show that

the best learning occurs when teachers and aides work together, when they consider the learning experience from the perspective of the student, and when the student feels safe, secure, and valued.

The 2012 experience confirmed that the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning offers an effective curriculum framework for alternative education programs of this kind. Nonetheless, the course flexibility is not always utilised because teachers must take time to familiarise themselves with demands of their students, and thus to hone their skills. Similarly, it is important that teachers do not become too 'subject' or 'certificate' focused, and are reassured that progress in the certificate is possible while moving at the learner's pace.

As the year progressed, students and their teachers warmed to online learning—which assisted in all but the numeracy component—and to utilising the Wikispace platform. The effectiveness of this approach soon became apparent, as it enabled students to catch up with work after disruptions to their learning. This is particularly important given that many students' disengagement from mainstream schools is triggered by an inability to progress at the same rate as their peers.

For all the promise of online learning, the limited capacity of the Centre's IT infrastructure, along with an overhaul of the BSL computer network, proved disruptive, and not only frustrated users but also limited the effectiveness of teaching and learning. (Subsequent to the collection of evaluation data, a concerted attempt has been made to deal with such limitations.)

Effectiveness

> *What's most important? I could say the VCAL certificate, but it's not. It's my confidence, my personality. Cos if I didn't come to the Brotherhood three years ago I don't know where I would have been ... I had no options, doing nothing. Whoever decided to put this VCAL program here ... that's the person I want to say 'Thank you so much ... cos you made me grow as a person ... to get where I am now, successful and with a job, wanting to go further, knowing where I want to go, and planning my steps'.* (Former student now employed as an apprentice)

> *I'm more considerate ... I used to be kind of a bully ... got here and saw that everyone's different [but] like a little family ... Without this program I wouldn't be where I am; without this program I would probably be on the street and probably being bad ... not listening to anyone. Just so glad I came here.* (Former student now employed as a trainee)

The 2012 program was hindered by unanticipated problems that impacted on the collection, entry and retrieval of student records. Among these problems were the departure of key staff and a troubled organisation-wide switch to new IT infrastructure. The latter, in particular, severely limited storage and access to data. For these reasons an accurate assessment of program effectiveness for 2012 only emerged some time after the end of the school year.

Furthermore, even though the formal educational outcomes noted below (Table 1 and Figure 1) should be regarded as the principal indicators of success, they provide a limited assessment of the program's worth. Rather, as shown in previous evaluations, a successful CVCAL experience should be thought of as a process featuring many small steps, sometimes forward, sometimes back. Seemingly minimal or fleeting change—be it in attendance, behaviour, lived experience, outlook or prospects—may constitute a successful step in this process, but one that is difficult to measure.

When interviewed, students spoke of having a 'head-start' on others in mainstream schools, of gaining confidence, empathy, opportunities, acceptance, networks and a broader understanding of what they can achieve. Their responses prompt us to regard these informal outcomes as essential pre-conditions for the attainment of the quantifiable and formal outcomes such as credits, module completion in VET and graduation in VCAL.

**Table 1 CVCAL participation, progress and attainments, 2012**

	Intermediate	%	Senior	%	Total	% of cohort
Enrolments	28		39		67	
Completions	5	18	13	33	18	27
Total non-completions	23	82	26	67	49	73

Table 2 provides some insight into the reasons for non-completion. Key indicators here are whether or not students completed VCAL units, or the required number hours of vocational training stipulated within the VCAL framework.

Table 2 VCAL unit and VET hour non-completions, 2012

Reason for non-completion	Intermediate	%	Senior	%	Total	% of cohort
Non-completions due to non-attainment of VET hours	7	25	5	12	12	18
Non-completions: VCAL units attempted but insufficient attainment of VET and VCAL outcomes	8	28.5	14	36	22	33
Non-completions: no VCAL units or hours attained	8	28.5	7	18	15	22

Figure 1 CVCAL formal outcomes, 2012
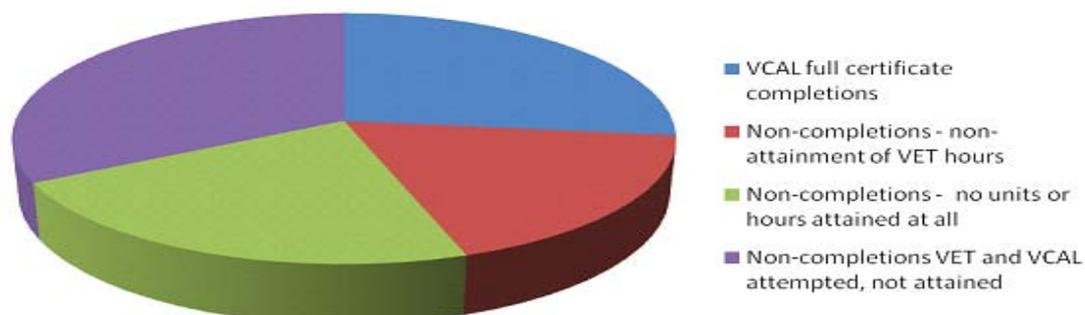
Enrolments fluctuated throughout the year, with 67 students commencing the VCAL at some point: 55 students were present at the beginning of 2012, and 42 were enrolled at year's end. The number of students who exited (17) was higher than in previous years (8 in 2011). In some instances the exit was a good outcome, particularly when students were referred to more suitable programs, or when they gained employment.

Eighteen students attained 100 per cent unit completion for class-based work, making them eligible either to progress to senior level, or to graduate with a VCAL certificate. The latter occurs once the relevant registered training organisation confirms through its 'letter of attainment' that the student has met the VCAL's VET requirements.

Table 3 shows a record of quite low attendance, with only four students attending for at least 80 per cent of the school year.

Table 3 Attendance

% attendance	No. of students
80–100	4
60–80	19
40–60	19
20–40	16
< 20	9

A number of students enrolled only to leave soon after. Six students had such fleeting involvement with the program, attending less than sixteen days. This kind of rapid turnover should be taken into account when considering the attendance figures.

Training and transitions

Students spoke of their training outcomes in terms not only of certificates gained, or of apprenticeships and traineeships commenced, but also of opportunities presented, access to networks, and experience gained in the workplace. This is another reminder that the notion of 'outcomes' is very complex.

The formal vocational training component of the program continued to pose challenges. These stemmed mainly from students' indecision and instability, uneven standards of service from training organisations, and sometimes fraught relations between trainers and individuals. Given that students are required to complete 100 hours of formal training in each of two years in the program, there is a pressing need to meet this challenge.

Throughout 2012, program staff devoted considerable time to creating a more effective approach to the formal vocational education component of the VCAL and to transitions in general. This featured more on-site vocational training, and encouraging students to progress through the certificate by means of an apprenticeship or traineeship (credited to the VCAL). The benefits of the latter include remuneration—however modest—for the student, and the prospect of a transition that does not rely solely on completing the certificate. The vocational courses most often chosen by students were in the fields of warehouse and distribution, hospitality and food handling, retail, information and technology, and business or business administration.

Preparations are also under way to modify the training component so that delays and u-turns are minimised, and that students' engagement with the program extends more regularly across five days of each week.

It was apparent that the very difficult prevailing labour market conditions increased former students' reliance on the program. Former students need help and this should be accommodated by the BSL; but there is uncertainty about the scope of the assistance, when and how it should be provided. Though they see the need to assist former students, the staff also believe it is important to wean young people off the program. Moves to implement a Transitional Wellbeing Support Strategy are welcomed because this will give some order to interactions with former students, and will provide the basis for more targeted assistance.

In sum, and as in previous years, the major strength of the program in 2012 was its ability to provide a transformative environment for young people, many of whom were at educational and wellbeing crossroads. This is premised on strong, supportive and respectful relationships; and the effort and skill needed to build these relationships should be recognised in any calculation of effectiveness. Finally, effectiveness should also be assessed with context in mind, since the students' backgrounds, experiences and concerns vary greatly and are not always easy to comprehend.

Workforce and governance

> *It can be really difficult ... but I still feel really lucky, quite honoured and privileged to be doing this job ... [and] that they've let me into their lives.* (Teacher)

Workforce

Notwithstanding the loss of some key staff in early-mid 2012, morale was high and commitment to the program strong. Staff turnover was both a cause and a symptom of the program's shortcomings: it meant the loss of knowledge and experience, and delays in updating policies, protocols, curricula and skills. Most importantly, it meant disruption to delicate and often intense relationships with students.

Recalling the importance in such alternative programs of combining education, training and wellbeing, it is perhaps not surprising that newer staff members in 2012 sometimes struggled to reconcile what they had been trained to do—be it teaching, working in youth support, or advising on vocational training and careers—with the realities of their day-to-day experiences with students.

Staff reported that the recruitment process adopted by the BSL worked well, though more effective induction would include a more gradual introduction for those new to working with high-needs young people.

The importance of skills development and support for staff was underscored throughout 2012. It was evident that the access to, and frequency of, professional development events was adequate. However, there remains the challenge of balancing the development of specialised skills with equipping all staff with the skills needed to deal with general education, wellbeing and training needs. Staff supervision, a process of staff debriefing, and student wellbeing meetings were utilised, although for a period of months in early 2012 this overall framework was disrupted.

Table 4 provides an overview of the program's growth since 2009[1]. The staffing numbers shown are for those positions budgeted for and filled, and do not indicate mid-year fluctuations. This is relevant, because in reality the 2012 program operated without a coordinator for much of the year.

Table 4 Program growth and staffing levels

Year	Staff	Students
2009 (Taster)	Trainer (0.8 EFT) Coordinator (1.0 EFT) Volunteer aide Part-time arts tutor (0.2 EFT)	15 (6 male, 9 female)
2010	2 registered teachers (1.0 and 0.6 EFT) Coordinator (1.0 EFT) Volunteer aide Part-time arts tutor (0.2 EFT)	25 (8 male, 17 female)
2011	4 registered teachers (2 at 1.0 EFT; 2 at 0.8 EFT) Qualified wellbeing officer (0.6 EFT) Coordinator (1.0 EFT) Administrative assistant (0.4 EFT) Volunteer aide	49, including a term 2 influx of 25 (29 male, 20 female)
2012	4 registered teachers (2 at 1.0 EFT; 2 at 0.8 EFT) Qualified wellbeing officer (0.6 EFT) Youth Projects Officer (0.6 EFT) Coordinator (1.0 EFT) Administrative assistant (0.4 EFT) Education Support Officer (0.5 EFT)	67, including about 17 transient students (38 male, 29 female)

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[1] The 2009 short course served as a Taster for the fully accredited provision that followed.

Governance

The 2012 experience reinforced the fact that the coordinator oversees a program that straddles three components—education, vocational training and wellbeing—and must do so within a very intense and dynamic environment. Thus, the role of coordinator is complex and demanding. Less active involvement by the internal and external advisory groups, and problems in accessing administrative support, all impacted on the coordinator's capacity to effectively fulfil the role. As a result, efforts to further develop adequate protocols and procedures, as well as stronger relationships with partner schools and youth related support agencies throughout the community, were delayed.

Up to mid 2012, efforts to create and/or update much needed policies and protocols were faltering, so steps to address this problem were put in place. Important protocols being developed apply to:

- a two-part intake/enrolment process separating wellbeing and educational aspects of the interview

- more formal relations with training organisations through the use of the High Street Education Program –VET Student Engagement Agreement. This enables BSL expectations to be more clearly conveyed to the training organisation

- assistance in transitions for existing and former students via a Transitional Wellbeing Strategy

- clearer expectations and the setting of boundaries for students and staff through a Rights and Responsibilities Agreement.

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