

Pathways that work

Lessons from the Caroline Springs Youth Employment Project

Eve Bodsworth

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

Key points

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

Background

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

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

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

Evaluation findings

Participant profile

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

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

The majority of participants were male (63%); 79% were born in Australia; and English was the main

language spoken by 89%. The largest group (51%) lived in Melton; 44% lived in Caroline Springs or nearby; and 5% came from other areas.

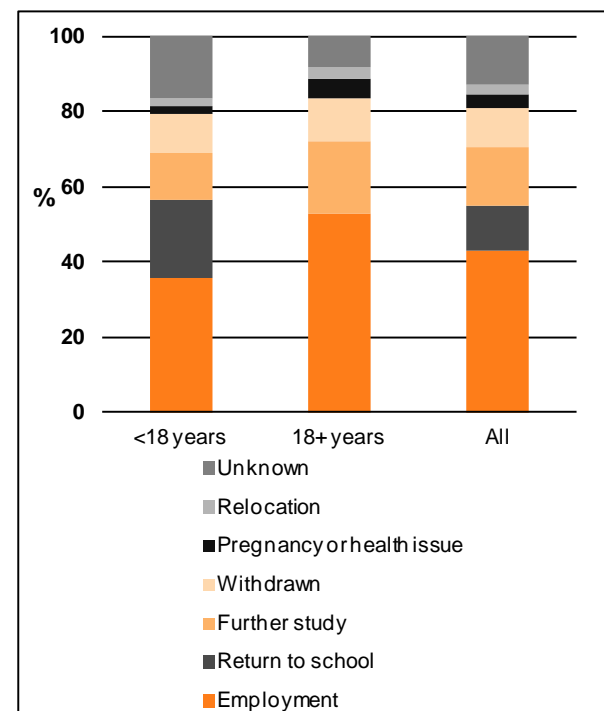
Participant outcomes

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

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

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

Figure 1 YEP participant pathways



The YEP approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While not all work experience placements led to employment, the opportunity to 'try out' different options in a 'hands on', real employment environment was just as important. This flexibility to try different options appears to be absent from mainstream employment services, yet was valued by YEP staff, employers and participants alike.

The support provided after young people exited the program was also very important. Their pathways were

varied and somewhat ‘messy’. Transitions might involve starting in a job, moving into further short-term training and then looking for work, engaging in ongoing training or education or re-engaging with the mainstream school system. Some participants started employment or training and found it was not suitable or not what they had expected. Others found their casual jobs were not ongoing.

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

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

Policy implications

Importance of flexible, individual support

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

Young people cannot be considered as a homogeneous group—one size does not fit all. Policies designed to assist young people to participate in education, training, and employment must recognise the diverse barriers they face. Attention must also be paid to the programs available for younger students disengaging from the formal school system. At present case management support is only available to support disadvantaged young people who want to acquire Year 12 or an equivalent qualification (through Youth Connections) or who have been looking for work for at least 6 months (through Job Services Australia). The YEP has demonstrated the importance of a support program which links with schools to ensure young school leavers do not fall through the cracks.

Benefits of integrated ‘hub’ models

The YEP itself was run out of multiple locations in Caroline Springs including the Anglican church, the

health centre, the library and the fire station. This created logistical challenges. More importantly, consistent with evidence on effective youth transitions elsewhere, the YEP has shown the importance of community-based ‘hubs’ that offer an accessible entry point for young people in new outer suburbs, with dedicated space for training, computers for job search and résumé writing, provision of advice, information and support.

Effective pathways for young school leavers

A proportion of young people will struggle in mainstream education. The complexity of pathways into vocational training and the precarious nature of low-skilled work necessitate alternative pathways for early school leavers, including flexible forms of applied learning for those unable to be re-engaged into the mainstream schools. Chronological age does not determine the level or type of assistance needed.

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

For further information

The full report by Eve Bodsworth, *Pathways that work: lessons from the Caroline Springs Youth Employment Project in Caroline Springs* (PDF file, 268 KB), may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see <www.bsl.org.au/Publications>.

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Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia
ABN 24 603 467 024
Phone: (03) 9483 1183
Web: www.bsl.org.au/research



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