

Building relationships for better outcomes

Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation: Stage 2

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This research constitutes the second part of a three-stage evaluation of the Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) program. PYC is the local expression of a program funded by the Australian Government to assist young people at risk of disengaging from education and training. Operating in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region south-east of Melbourne, PYC includes intensive case management, outreach and re-engagement activities for young people, and seeks to build the capacity of local youth services.

Key points

- **Overall, young people’s needs were addressed effectively through the intensive case management approach.** The majority of participants—84.5 per cent—achieved at least one kind of outcome, and at follow-up, 72.5 per cent were engaged in education. The program approach was particularly beneficial for young people facing mental health issues/stressors, interpersonal issues and learning issues. Young people with unstable family and financial contexts and risky behaviours also benefited, but faced greater ongoing challenges. The difficulties faced by young people from unstable contexts were echoed at a broader level by the finding that young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more severely disengaged from education, and achieved fewer outcomes.
- **Complex and intersecting relationships exist between young people’s characteristics, backgrounds, barriers to education, and the outcomes they achieve.** The findings from this research demonstrated the complexity and diversity of issues faced by young people disengaging from education and training. Relationships were found between demographic characteristics (such as age, gender and area socioeconomic disadvantage), barriers faced, and outcomes achieved, illustrating the necessity for programs to provide integrated and holistic services which can be adapted and individualised to fit the needs of young people negotiating varied pathways through education and service structures.
- **Young people particularly valued the relational aspects of the PYC program.** The young people interviewed and surveyed were positive in their assessment of the program and the benefits they derived from participation (Figure 1). They identified the following as strengths of the program: friendliness, personal support, encouragement, informality, flexibility, persistence and enjoyment. By far the most prominent message from young people was that the individualised and personal support they received through the relationship with their case manager was a vital factor in their successful engagement with the program.
- **Gains made from PYC participation appeared to be sustained, in the face of ongoing challenges.** Most of the young people followed up after exit were engaged in work or study. However, they faced ongoing challenges around housing and finances, as well as mental health and self-esteem.
- **Disengagement from school left a powerfully negative impression on young people, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement.** Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these earlier experiences on young people’s self-esteem and confidence. The systemic issues underlying these experiences will be considered in Stage 3 of the PYC evaluation.

Background

Peninsula Youth Connections commenced in January 2010, part of a national program funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Operated in partnership by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce Community Agency, PYC provides regular and intensive case management for up to two years for young people, ranging from those who are at high risk of disengaging from school to those who have long been disengaged. Recruitment occurs via direct referral and re-engagement activities, often delivered with other agency partners. Through hosting and participating in events and committees, and conducting research, PYC also seeks to support and build regional youth service capacity.

The research

This stage of the evaluation focuses on the experience of the program from young people’s perspectives, and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What concerns do young people present to PYC with, and how do individual barriers affect their progress through education, their engagement with the service and their outcomes?
- How is the PYC model experienced by young people, and is it successful in meeting their needs?
- How do young people fare after exiting the program? Are outcomes sustainable, and what ongoing challenges do young people face?

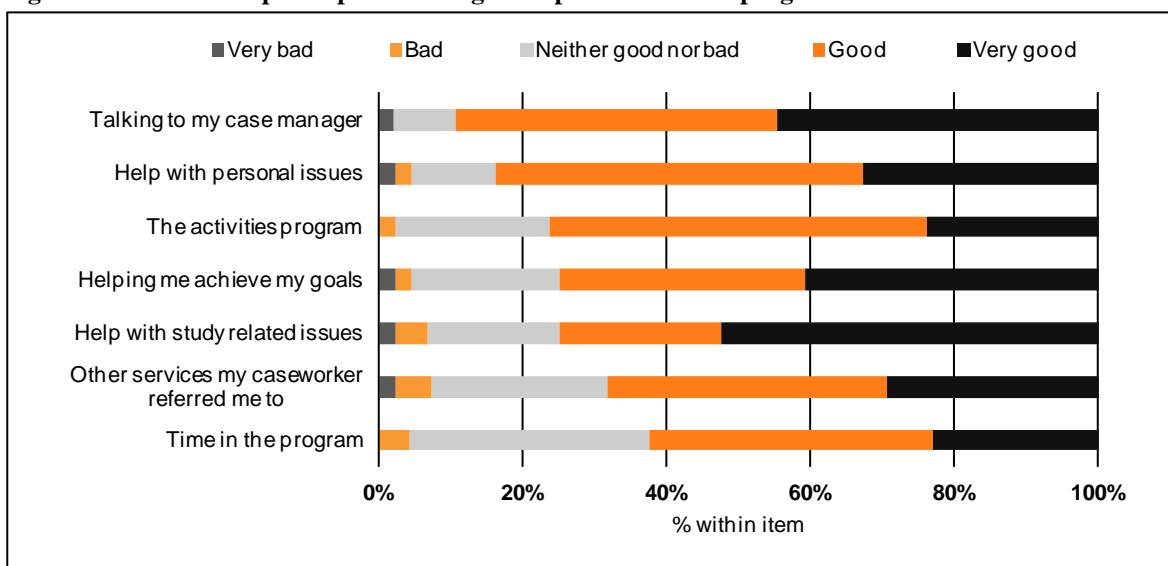
Qualitative data were gathered from consultations with 16 young people who had participated in PYC and 9 PYC staff members. Quantitative data on 228 PYC participants who exited from January 2011 to March 2012 were taken from the program management information system and referrals database. Fifty-two former participants contributed additional quantitative data through a purpose-designed follow-up survey.

There was an almost even split of girls and boys in the participant group, who came largely from suburbs of high socioeconomic disadvantage in the FMP region. The program was seeing an increasing number of Indigenous young people, following the employment of a dedicated Indigenous case manager.

Positive engagements with young people

Overall, the results of the evaluation indicated that PYC is successfully connecting with young people in the FMP region who are disengaging from education and training. The young people consulted rated the program highly (see Figure 1), spoke positively about their experiences with PYC and placed a particularly high value on the relationships they had formed with their case managers. Participants often framed the positive effects of the program in terms of social reconnection, re-establishment of routine, and building confidence and self-esteem. Analysis of outcome data from the program management information system confirmed the overall achievements of the program’s activities, indicating that the majority of participants were benefitting from PYC.

Figure 1 Former PYC participants’ ratings of aspects within the program



Note: n=52

Providing individualised support to young people facing multiple intersecting challenges

Looking in more detail at the types of barriers faced by young people entering PYC yielded some contrasts in the ways benefits were achieved by different groups. Five broad groups of barriers were identified: unstable contexts, risky behaviours, learning issues, mental health/stressors and interpersonal issues.

PYC was particularly effective in assisting young people who faced barriers in the form of mental health issues, difficult life events and interpersonal issues, including bullying (Figure 2). Young people with risky behaviours including substance use, juvenile justice infringements and anger management issues, as well as young people from unstable contexts marked by financial and housing instability and family conflict, benefited from the program as well, but also faced considerable continuing challenges. The impacts of family difficulties on engagement with education were particularly evident.

The complex findings which were produced by differentiating between participants based on barriers, engagement and outcomes reflected the highly diverse experiences and needs represented in the PYC caseload, and showed the need for a holistic, integrated and intensive case management approach.

Addressing a continuum of needs

The Youth Connections model specifies three levels of connection with education and training, and requires that

providers enrol a distribution of young people at all three connection levels based on predetermined quotas:

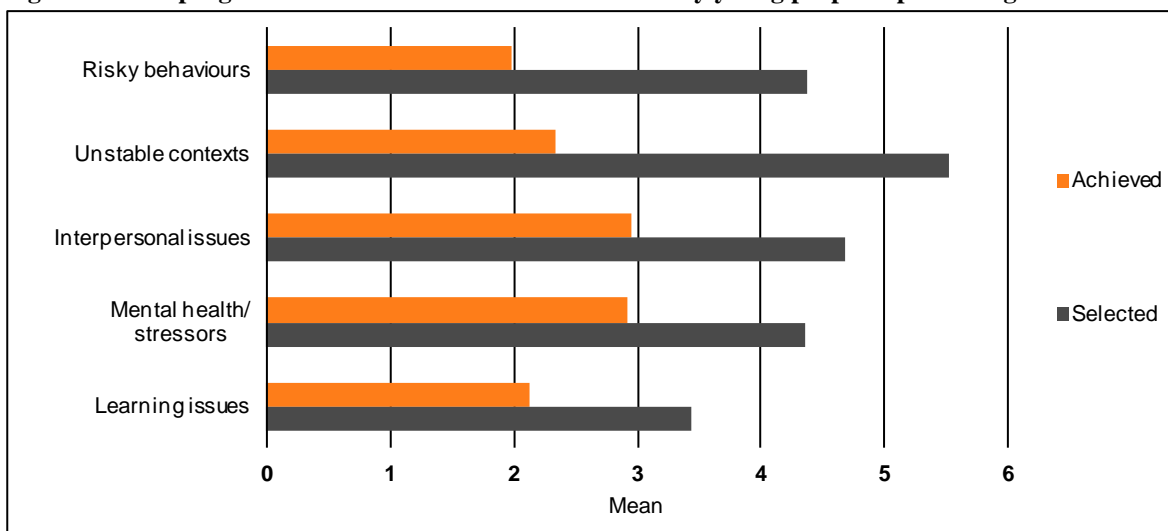
- Type 1: At risk of disengagement (20%)
- Type 2a: Imminent risk or recently disengaged (30%)
- Type 2b: Severely disengaged (50%).

At 14%, PYC was seeing somewhat fewer Type 1 participants than the program guidelines quota. Youth Connections differed from previous similar programs in placing increased emphasis on more severely disengaged young people, and in Victoria, the percentage of funding allocated to Type 1 case management is lower than the standard. PYC staff commented on the high demand for services from severely disengaged young people in the region, but also felt that preventive services for students at risk for engagement were necessary. Outcomes were similar among the three connection levels, indicating that PYC was successfully tailoring services to meet the needs of young people at differing levels of connection with education.

Engaging young people through informal, flexible modes of service delivery

The young people interviewed spoke favourably about the informality and flexibility of the case management approach. Many referred to their case manager as 'more like a friend' and contrasted the comfort with which they were able to interact with case managers with less successful previous interactions in which they had felt constrained or confused by more formality.

Figure 2 Mean progressive outcomes selected and achieved by young people experiencing different barriers



Features of the flexible program approach included:

- The ability for young people to contact case managers in person, by phone, email or text, and without a formal appointment
- Case managers' willingness to meet young people at home, school or a public place
- Enrolment durations long enough to build strong relationships, accommodate young people's changing needs and readiness to engage, and the opportunity to enrol multiple times.

Young people's pathways after PYC

The majority of young people who were followed up three months after exit from PYC had maintained some form of outcome (Table 1).

Table 1 Former PYC participants' activities three months after exiting the program

Activity	%
Currently working	36.5%
Currently studying	72.5%
Either studying or working	78.8%

n=52

These young people were often juggling the demands of multiple roles. They nominated social connections with friends as some of the most satisfying elements in their lives; however they frequently did not have the time or opportunity to participate in many activities other than work and study. Even given the positive outcomes many had achieved, ongoing material hardships were common, as well as continuing difficulties with self-esteem, confidence and mental health.

Speaking to young people about their time in mainstream school, it was evident that disengagement had left a powerfully negative impression on many, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement. Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these experiences on young people's self-esteem and confidence. The underlying systemic issues that this highlights will be considered in the next stage of this evaluation.

Next steps

Overall, the evaluation results affirmed the appropriateness and effectiveness of PYC's service delivery in meeting the needs of young people in the FMP region at risk of disengagement from education. However, Stage 2 relied on information collected from PYC staff members and from those former participants who were contactable and who volunteered to

participate. A broader perspective on the function of PYC in the region is required to formulate recommendations and policy implications, and this will be achieved by the third stage of evaluation.

Stage 3 of the evaluation is currently underway, and includes assessment of PYC's efforts to strengthen community partnerships to respond to the needs of young people who have disengaged from education or are at risk of doing so. The key content areas are:

- young people's experiences interacting with mainstream schools and with other services
- PYC's method of delivering Type 3 (outreach and re-engagement) and Type 4 (strengthening services) activities
- the alignment of PYC with other services in the region, including schools and the national Partnership Brokers
- potential gaps or areas of duplication in the regional services environment.

Data from interviews and focus groups with PYC staff and external stakeholders will be analysed to yield a report focusing on the broader systemic and policy implications of the combined PYC evaluation findings.

About the project

This evaluation has been undertaken with the support of Peninsula Youth Connections partners, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce, and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

For further information

The full report, *Building relationships for better outcomes* (PDF file, 1 MB) by Anna Barrett, may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website. Other research publications are available at <www.bsl.org.au/publications.aspx>.

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