A path to re-engagement

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

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 and 12 certificate course which combines classroom tuition with vocational training and work placements—in a community setting rather than in a school. The evaluation of its inaugural year found that, notwithstanding some challenges, the program made a significant difference to the educational opportunities of most of its students.

Key points

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

- The attendance rate (79 per cent) and the improved confidence of 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 for young people across the Frankston Mornington Peninsula region. It succeeded a 'Taster' 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

	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. One student reflected on how she had changed:

> 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.

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. 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. The low student–staff ratio and mixed ability, single group learning also contributed to the learning experience. As one student explained:

> [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 …

However, what the students valued most was being treated as adults and allowed to make choices about their own learning:

> 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.

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. One student recalled:

> 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.

Another student noted the effect on her own attitude to learning:

> 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.

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. One of the teachers expressed concerns:

> 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.

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. The teachers described some of the difficulties:

> 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.

> 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.

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.

> 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 …

Teachers were also isolated from their counterparts in conventional schools and hence had less access to collegial support and 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 other 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 to streamline liaison and administration.

- Explore the possibility of work placements within the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

- 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 2010 BSL-CVCAL program made a marked difference to the educational opportunities of almost all its students. 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 alternative option for re-engaging young people with education.

About the project

The BSL-CVCAL program is being run over three years to model a flexible, supportive approach to education for young people facing multiple barriers. The present evaluation report focuses on its first year. Further reports are planned to document the program's development and achievements.

For further information

The full report, *A path to re-engagement: evaluating the first year of a Community VCAL education program for young people* (PDF file, 520 KB) by George Myconos, may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

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

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