



Re-engagement, training and beyond

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

George Myconos

2012



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

Dr George Myconos is a Senior Researcher in the Through School to Work team of the Research and Policy Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence

This report is one of a series on the BSL-Community VCAL program in Frankston. Earlier reports, also available on the Brotherhood's website, include:

G Myconos 2011, *A path to re-engagement: evaluating the first year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*

G Myconos 2010, *A taste for learning: evaluating a pre-Community VCAL program*

Published by

Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Vic. 3065
Australia
ABN 24 603 467 024
Tel: (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au

ISBN 978-1-921623-37-0

© Brotherhood of St Laurence 2012

Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism, or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of this paper may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	v
Summary and recommendations	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 Methodology	3
3 Context	5
Policy	5
Youth employment trends	6
Youth engagement	6
Training	6
About the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region	6
4 Engagement and wellbeing	8
Engagement	8
Wellbeing	12
5 Teaching and learning	16
6 Attainments	20
7 Vocational pathways and post program support	23
8 Workforce issues	28
9 Administration	30
Relations with partner schools	31
10 Program design and challenges	33
11 Conclusion	36
References	37

Acknowledgements

A number of people made invaluable contributions to this report. Particular thanks go to Cate Baird, the Brotherhood's CVCAL program coordinator through 2011, as well as to the staff and students of the program who were engaging and thoughtful participants throughout. I am also grateful to Joseph Borlagdan, Michael Horn, Emily Duizend and Sally James for their feedback, and especially to Deborah Patterson for her meticulous editing.

Abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CVCAL	Community VCAL, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning delivered by a non-school provider in a community setting, while linked to partner schools
DEECD	Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
FMP	Frankston Mornington Peninsula (the combined local government areas of the City of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula Shire)
TAFE	(An institute of) technical and further education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VET	Vocational education and training

*'I was always the black sheep at school and
came here and I bleached my fur'*

BSL-CVCAL student

Summary and recommendations

The evaluation of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's 'Community VCAL' (BSL-CVCAL) education program located in Frankston, Victoria, shows that the model can have a profoundly positive impact on 'at risk' young people. In 2011 the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)—a years 11–12 senior secondary school certificate—was offered in a community setting to around fifty young people who had disengaged from conventional education and had, in many cases, suffered significant hardship beyond the school setting. The evaluation also points to several important challenges facing those overseeing the BSL-CVCAL program, as well as those looking to promote or replicate such programs.

Key points

Impact: The number of graduations (14 of a possible 17) was high and, as in the previous year, attendance and engagement measures were promising (40 students maintained at least 70% attendance). Vocational training, apprenticeship and traineeship commencements were also promising, yet students' capacity to complete their vocational training was uneven. This was partly due to difficulties in adjusting to a somewhat alien environment. It is clear that such formal results tell only a partial story of attainments. The program's value cannot be fully understood without reference to the informal outcomes that emerged: students' improved outlooks, confidence, renewed interest in education, and improved emotional wellbeing.

Scale: A successful inaugural year (2010) and the availability of increased philanthropic support prompted an expansion of the program in mid 2011. Many existing students took time to adjust to higher numbers, as did the staff, who had little time to prepare for their daunting teaching and/or wellbeing support duties. Although the program stabilised, the experience provided a cautionary reminder of the fragility of relationships in such settings, of the importance of stability, and also of the difficulties in catering for complex needs when resources are limited.

Scope: The program continued to supplement the provision of the highly valued years 11–12 VCAL with wellbeing support for students who were experiencing considerable hardship. An important lesson from the 2011 experience was the need to better prepare students for life beyond the program. There is also a need to consider how to assist former students who wish to maintain links with the program.

Ethos and expectations: The expansion of the program and the consequent increase in the range of student needs highlighted the necessity for more clarity about expectations, priorities and the principles that inform the program. Direction on how to strike a balance between providing wellbeing support and pursuing high academic outcomes will enable staff to better deal with difficult circumstances. Similarly, a better understanding of students' expectations will help to set behavioural boundaries, as well as to clarify students' entitlements.

Findings

Student engagement and wellbeing

Among the students' most pressing needs on entering the program were sustained and effective pastoral support, stability, respect and safety. Students reflected on the way their outlooks had subsequently changed: typically from being 'constantly angry' to being more content. Students also developed great respect for program staff. Many spoke of the program as a 'family'.

The students' needs were complex and did not always become apparent until well after commencement. In responding to problems including excessive drug and alcohol consumption, the staff were stretched to their limits. Effective and specialist wellbeing assistance, within a supportive, non-judgemental setting, is essential to meeting such needs.

There is a growing realisation that resilience building is integral to the program—particularly for the younger (intermediate) students—and that this may be a necessary precondition for academic success. Thus, resilience building may at times need to take precedence over progression through the VCAL curriculum and assessment.

Teaching and learning

Staff and students reported improvement in literacy and numeracy levels. Peer support was a feature of the program, as was a pedagogy informed by 'adult' and 'applied' learning principles, as well as integrated learning and negotiation.

Formal attainments do not convey the full story of what students gained from participation, or the extent to which these were related to informal outcomes such as improved confidence and the capacity to plan and make decisions.

Staff found it difficult to hone their teaching skills because the distinctive nature of the work meant there was no obvious standard against which to measure their performance. Curriculum development and professional development are both essential, but can only be achieved if time and resources are available.

Team teaching can be challenging in any context, let alone in one concerned with high-needs students. The unconventional setting made it even more difficult for the CVCAL staff to come to terms with teaching in pairs and the need to reconcile differing temperaments, philosophies, expectations and teaching styles.

Vocational pathways: applied learning, post-program support

Vocational education and training (VET) posed significant challenges, particularly for the younger students. They had difficulty adjusting to VET's emphasis on self-reliance within a trainer-centred learning context, removed from the BSL setting. This led CVCAL staff to believe that time would be better spent on intensive literacy or numeracy education, and/or in apprenticeships or traineeships in preferred occupations, than on low-level certificate courses conducted by registered training organisations.

The students' lack of readiness for VET and some training providers' inability to adequately cater for the young people's needs meant that staff engaged in time-consuming consultations with students to find the most suitable and realistic training options.

The collaboration between staff at the BSL-CVCAL and those at training organisations improved in 2011, though closer collaboration is necessary to ensure students' overall wellbeing is monitored and their learning needs are met in both settings.

On completion of the VCAL, students need intensive preparation for their search for work. Catering for former students who have yet to find work or suitable further training is thus a looming issue, which also poses organisational and resource allocation challenges.

Workforce issues

Although the staff were committed, enthusiastic and proud of their students' progress, they nevertheless experienced the program as a 'pressure cooker'. Interviewees called for an enhanced staff induction process, as nothing they had read or heard prior to commencement—or during their teacher training—had prepared them for the intensive pastoral care demands associated with the program.

Compared with 2010, there was greater staff specialisation, with roles assigned to those most adept at meeting students' specific needs in relation to careers guidance and VET coordination.

The presence of a wellbeing officer had a very positive impact, with student feedback overwhelmingly positive. In many respects the wellbeing officer insulated staff from stress, although there were limits to the officer's capacity to absorb tensions.

Regular meetings about curriculum development and wellbeing, and for one-on-one supervision, were introduced. These helped to improve morale. However, more support for staff is needed, and this may entail access to external counselling where appropriate.

Administration

The contractual, financial and administrative aspects of relations with partner schools were very complex. Funding arrangements within the Student Resource Package framework of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), and the facilitation of payments by partner schools, require constant attention and recalibration.

Improvements were made to the intake process, though there remains scope for improved 'triage' at the time of enrolment, particularly with regard to identifying the students' social, emotional and physical needs as well as their literacy and numeracy abilities.

Enrolment of new students now involves an orientation week and a new students' kit containing a letter of introduction and information on housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, and sexual abuse support services.

Program design and challenges

The decision to double the size of the program in mid 2011 was testament to its effectiveness in 2010. However, the expansion presented students, teaching and wellbeing staff, the coordinator and centre management with challenges relating to scale and scope.

An important step in clarifying the focus of the program was taken when the course coordinator finalised the program's future strategy. However, further consultation is needed to clarify expectations of all stakeholders.

Recommendations

Student needs and wellbeing

- 1 Expand the role of the wellbeing officer to enable more in-house training of teachers on matters of wellbeing support, as well as a more strategic, long-term approach to meeting the students' wellbeing needs.
- 2 Clarify the scope of the program's services as these relate to former students and then allocate resources accordingly.

Linkages

- 3 Increase on-site support for the coordinator so as to bolster formal links with partner schools, the regional DEECD office, training organisations, community support networks, parents/carers, and outreach efforts.
- 4 Enter into discussions with the DEECD—at regional or state level—to find ways of streamlining funding and contractual processes linking the BSL to the DEECD and to explore new funding arrangements that might result in access to ‘equity funding’ for high-needs students.
- 5 Build closer relationships with training organisations—particularly TAFEs—in order to improve enrolment, wellbeing and learning outcomes for CVCAL students undertaking VET subjects. This may build on existing efforts to tailor VET programs specifically for the CVCAL cohort.

Administration

- 6 Review the intake, enrolment and referral processes so that prospective students’ needs and capabilities can be more accurately assessed; and so that practical issues such as eligibility for concession cards can be identified before they hinder student progress.
- 7 Explore ways to streamline the administrative processes relating to contracts with schools and the handling of the Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS) data. Request permission from the DEECD for BSL control of the VASS data entry.
- 8 Clarify protocols that guide teachers when they encounter unacceptable behaviour or ‘critical incidents’.

Workforce

- 9 Provide access to skilled, professional debriefing and counselling for staff who are under sustained pressure to cater for complex student needs.
- 10 Ensure a thorough induction for new teaching staff. Provide a more gradual introduction to teaching and a period in which new employees are briefed about students’ needs and backgrounds.
- 11 To increase staff retention, give greater priority to curriculum and professional development, and to career advancement opportunities across the BSL.

Conclusion

The 2011 BSL-CVCAL program represented an ambitious phase in the BSL’s attempt to cater for the needs of ‘at risk’ young people in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region. The program experienced some difficulties in coming to grips with growth and catering for up to fifty students. Nonetheless, formal and informal attainments showed that the program is providing a valuable service in a region of significant disadvantage. There remains the challenge of adjusting the program to better align with demand, the needs of students and staff, and wider expectations.

1 Introduction

This report focuses on the Brotherhood of St Laurence's 'Community VCAL' alternative education program located in the Victorian suburb of Frankston. It considers the program's evolution, reflects on 'best practice' in re-engagement programs, and assesses the progress of the BSL-CVCAL program towards that ideal. Importantly, the report is part of an ongoing evaluation process that will, ultimately, consider the significance, efficacy, and viability of the CVCAL model itself (Myconos 2010, 2011).

Now in its eighth year, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) qualification is an established feature of the senior secondary school curriculum in Victoria. It is offered mainly by state secondary schools, but also by independent schools, TAFE institutions and community organisations. An alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education, which remains the more likely path to a tertiary education, the VCAL was designed to cater for those students who were less inclined towards an 'academic' pathway. As a vocationally oriented certificate it entails a practical, 'hands on', and 'adult learning' approach, and includes a component of formal vocational training with a registered training organisation and work experience placement with employers (VCAA 2006). This component is then credited to the VCAL attainment.

Although it is a years 11–12 certificate, it is taught at three levels—foundation, intermediate and senior—aligned to levels of capability. Common to all levels are the following curriculum skills strands: literacy and numeracy, industry-specific training (VET), workplace skills, and personal development. Steadily increasing enrolments testify to the VCAL's popularity, rising from 14,093 in 2007 to 21,350 in 2011 (VCAA 2007, 2011).

In spite of its growth, *school-based* VCAL has not proved to be a panacea for the problems of disengagement and the growing number of students deemed to be 'at risk' (see Dumbrell 2004; Ryan, Brooks & Hooley 2004; Volkoff & Gibson 2009). These are young people who often experience difficulties within and beyond the school setting. Barriers to learning within school include low regard for one's own abilities, experiences of bullying, truancy and/or suspension, low expectations and limited support or encouragement from adults, and learning disorders, as well as resistance to the formalities of school life. The difficulties beyond school also vary in severity, and include homelessness, substance abuse, family trauma, poverty, mental health problems, violence, and criminality.

About the CVCAL

CVCAL sits alongside other community-based initiatives designed to encourage young people to remain engaged in education (for others, see Appendix 3 in Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011). The BSL is one of a handful of CVCAL providers (at time of writing there existed just twelve across the state). It is important to note the distinguishing features of CVCAL in the VCAL provider landscape. Firstly, there are differences in the source of funding and the formal relationships between conventional schools and the CVCAL provider. CVCAL providers enter into formal contractual agreements with partner schools, and hence the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), to provide the VCAL course to students referred by the schools. In return, the schools redirect a portion of the government funding earmarked for students to the provider (in reality, this amount is insufficient to meet the needs of the students, so CVCAL providers must supplement it with funds from other sources). Secondly, CVCAL is delivered and

administered at a remove from the school setting. Lastly, CVCAL providers cater for students who have been expelled or ‘exited’ from conventional schools and/or who are deemed to be ‘at risk’. The BSL-CVCAL program serves as an alternative to conventional secondary schooling in the FMP region for young people who have disengaged from the mainstream and are in danger of disengaging from education altogether.

The 2011 program represented the second full year of VCAL provided by the BSL, following a Taster version in 2009. Table 1.1 shows the program’s changing profile (note that the expansion in 2011 occurred mid-year and was prompted in part by the availability of increased philanthropic support).

Table 1.1 Program growth

Year	Students	Staff
2009 (Taster/‘pre-VCAL’)	15 (6 male, 9 female)	Trainer (0.8 EFT)
		Coordinator (1.0 EFT)
		Volunteer aide
		Part-time arts tutor (0.2 EFT)
2010 (VCAL)	25 (8 male, 17 female)	2 registered teachers (1.0 and 0.6 EFT)
		Coordinator (1.0 EFT)
		Volunteer aide
		Part-time arts tutor (0.2 EFT)
2011 (VCAL)	49, including a term 2 influx of 25 (29 male, 20 female)	4 registered teachers (2 at 1.0 EFT; 2 at 0.8 EFT)
		Qualified wellbeing officer (0.6 EFT)
		Coordinator (1.0 EFT)
		Administrative assistance (0.4 EFT)
		Volunteer aide

Aims

This report presents an evaluation of the 2011 BSL-CVCAL operations. It considers the lessons learnt during 2011 about the program’s impact, the scale and scope of services, and the effect these have—and ought to have—on the program’s ethos and expectations. The following questions are addressed:

- What did the program achieve?
- How did the program cope with growth?
- What can be said about the principles and expectations that informed the program?
- What kind of support should the program provide to students?

It assesses key areas including engagement and wellbeing, teaching and learning, attainments, vocational pathways and post program support, workforce issues, administration and program design and challenges.

2 Methodology

To gauge the effectiveness of the BSL's 2011 CVCAL program, this evaluation relies on in-depth interviews with students and BSL staff, as well as on fieldwork notes and student progress and attainment data.

Interviews

Fourteen interviews of 60 to 90 minutes' duration were conducted with staff, including six repeat interviews. Two rounds of staff interviews were conducted, the first in June, towards the end of term two, and the second in November, just weeks before the completion of the school year. The schedule enabled interviewees to comment on the changes they had observed by the year's end. The most important of these changes was the doubling of enrolments. The earlier round also provided an opportunity to capture the views of the outgoing coordinator, who had helped establish the program in 2009 and continued as coordinator until mid 2011).

Twenty-three young people were interviewed, with questions tailored for the three distinct cohorts.

Former students

Six interviews were conducted with students who had either graduated in 2010 or exited in early 2011. Three had experienced the inaugural year of VCAL provision by the BSL, as well as the Taster pre-CVCAL in 2009. Former students were able to shed light on issues such as pathways and post-program support for employment and training.

Senior students

Nine interviews were conducted with senior students, most of whom were undertaking their second year of the VCAL and the equivalent of year 12 of secondary schooling. Also among them were students who had completed the Taster course in 2009 and progressed to the VCAL. These young people were well placed to reflect on the effectiveness of the program and on the impact of the sudden influx of new students in term two. They were also well placed to reflect on change—to the program components such as wellbeing, pedagogy and vocational training, as well as to their own outlooks—over a considerable period.

New students

Eight interviews were conducted with students among the twenty-five who had commenced in term two. This cohort included some young people who had recently been expelled or exited from local schools and others who had long since left conventional schooling, and who had been referred to the BSL by youth support agencies. From these interviews came accounts not only of recent experiences in schools, but of living in very precarious and difficult circumstances, when neither in education or training.

Field notes

Throughout 2011 the author had weekly semi-formal consultations with the BSL-CVCAL coordinator. These discussions helped clarify aspects of the program that were in flux and were not easily captured in the two rounds of formal interviews. The evaluation also makes use of data gathered during sundry meetings and forums, including consultations with workers in the VET

system, with key staff at Chisholm Institute of TAFE in Frankston, and with staff overseeing other CVCAL programs across Victoria.

Statistical data

The qualitative data is supplemented with information from the program's student records database. This database provided important information about:

- attendance, including authorised and unauthorised absences
- total days of enrolment across each school term
- non-completions
- vocational training progress and VET certificate completions
- traineeship and apprenticeships commenced
- VCAL certificates conferred and graduations to the next year level
- barriers to education.

The reader should treat with caution the data on 'barriers faced' (see Table 3.1), because this is gleaned from the student and/or their parent/carer at enrolment. Program staff are not in a position to verify these claims, and many students experience fluctuating and multiple barriers. The data on vocational training (Tables 5.4 and 5.5) is also imprecise due to the students' intermittent training experiences.

Variations and limitations

Given that only twelve months had elapsed since the 2010 evaluation (Myconos 2011), it was not necessary to revisit the causes of the students' disengagement from conventional schooling. The current report shifts emphasis from the students' backgrounds to their 2011 experiences, as well as their future needs.

Recent BSL reports have provided extensive reviews of literature on youth disengagement, its causes and the positive role of applied and adult learning approaches in promoting engagement (Myconos 2010, 2011; Bond 2011). In place of such a review, interspersed through this report are references to selected scans and evaluations that point to 'best practice' in re-engagement programs.

Although most of the former students maintained contact with teachers and peers (via Facebook or occasional visits), it was difficult to arrange interviews with them all. A more complete picture of the post-program support required would have emerged had more than six former students been consulted. Limited resources also meant that parents/carers were not interviewed (see Myconos 2010, 2011 for earlier views of parents/carers).

Ethics

The evaluation procedures were approved by the Research and Policy Centre ethics committee. All interviewees were presented with a plain language statement and consent form which outlined the research aims as well as their rights to confidentiality and anonymity and to access to the final report. Following BSL convention, interviewees also received a small cash payment.

3 Context

Policy

A key plank of the federal Labor government's Social Inclusion agenda has been the Compact with Young Australians (endorsed by the states in 2009 and due to end in 2013). Designed to provide young people with skills training and to improve their chances of employment during the economic downturn, the compact ensures that eligible young people person aged under 25 can access government-subsidised training places. The government also introduced a target of 90 per cent completion of Year 12 or equivalent, to be achieved by 2015 (Victoria's target is 92.6%) (COAG 2009).

Under this arrangement, it is mandatory for all young people to participate in schooling (or an approved equivalent) until they complete Year 10; and for young people who complete Year 10 to participate full-time (at least 25 hours a week) in education, training, employment or a combination of these until age 17. Education and training is now 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 is expected to be in education or training in order to receive such benefits.

At time of writing, the federal government is finalising a response to the Review of Funding for Schooling (2011). Although this report does not single out re-engagement programs, it does emphasise the importance of addressing educational disadvantage, and any subsequent reforms are likely to change the 'alternative' education landscape.

In Victoria, legislation was introduced in 2009 to raise the school leaving age from 16 to 17. The onus was placed on schools to track early school leavers and ensure they were in either employment or training, and complying with conditions laid out in the 'earn or learn' compact. Until the November 2010 election of the Liberal–National Coalition government, the state's approach to education was articulated by the DEECD's *Blueprint for education and early childhood development* (2008). This 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).

The Victorian Liberal–National Party Coalition government has supported the 2008 Blueprint. It has also continued support for the Vulnerable Youth Framework. This includes the Youth Partnerships initiative (piloted in seven local government areas, one of which is Frankston), which features innovative, place-based programs aimed at improving early intervention and referral systems for 'at risk' young people.

Successive state governments have committed significant funds 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). However, while allocating \$1.2 billion for the VET sector in its 2012 Budget, the state government also outlined cuts of \$100 million and other measures that translated into approximately \$300 million in lost revenue for training providers. This followed substantial cuts in late 2011, with the greatest impact felt in TAFE institutions.

The Coalition government has expressed cautious support for re-engagement programs such as Community VCAL. It has earmarked \$1 million to review alternatives to conventional schooling, and to piloting flexible learning approaches. However, its decision in mid-2011 to reduce funding to VCAL (with cuts amounting to \$12 million) prompted widespread criticism. In June 2012 the DEECD launched a set of guidelines and online resources to help schools identify re-engagement programs for students unsuited to the mainstream setting (DEECD 2012). To this extent, the state government has lent greater legitimacy to re-engagement programs such as the BSL-CVCAL.

Youth employment trends

The 2008 global financial crisis had a severe impact on young Australians, and the unfolding economic crises have exacerbated this effect. Between February 2008 and December 2011, the number of jobs held by 15–19 year olds declined by 92,000 (ABS 2012). More than 18,500 teenagers lost their jobs in December 2011: this accounted for over 60 per cent of all jobs lost in the month. The teenage unemployment rate climbed to 17.3 per cent (from 16.3 per cent in December 2010 and 13.6 per cent in December 2008). The sectors that catered most for full-time work for young people (e.g. construction and retail) were those most vulnerable to economic changes. The proportion of young people aged 15–19 years who were engaged in precarious and casualised work also rose sharply to 21 per cent (ABS 2011).

Youth engagement

‘Disengagement’ is defined by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) as ‘not being fully occupied in education or employment, and non-completion of secondary schooling’. It is a significant problem throughout Australia. The level of disengagement for Victorians aged 15–19 years in 2009 was 12.7 per cent; and though this is lower than the national figure of 16.4 per cent, it indicates a significant proportion of young people who are alienated from school and who potentially face limited opportunities in the labour market (FYA 2010). Early school leavers were less likely to be engaged in further study or full employment; and the percentage of these who were not in the labour force, were seeking employment or were in part-time work only was more than double that of Year 12 completers (57% of those leaving at Year 10 or below, 47% of Year 11 leavers, 25% of Year 12 completers) (FYA 2010, p. 20).

Training

The Victorian Training Guarantee and the federal Skills for Sustainable Growth strategy—both of which aim to fast-track young Australians into training and apprenticeships—are pillars in the respective governments’ approaches to stimulating economic growth. Victoria has seen a significant increase in the numbers of 15–19 year olds participating in VET. By 2009 this figure had surpassed 120,000, an increase of 44 per cent over the previous ten years (Skills Victoria 2009, p. 8). Importantly, educators and policy makers now look to skills acquisition—via flexible learning options and VET—to re-engage those who have rejected conventional schooling.

About the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region

Although Frankston is only 40 km south-east of Melbourne, the wider Mornington Peninsula region extends a further 80 km to the south. Demographically, the region is relatively young, with 24.6 per cent of its 270,000 people under 19. There are large pockets of severe disadvantage, with Frankston North and Hastings in the most disadvantaged 10 per cent of Melbourne suburbs.

Relative to the 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. The region has below-average educational outcomes, and particularly low school retention rates (the FMP ranks fourth of the five DEECD metropolitan regions). Residents of Frankston itself leave school earlier than do those elsewhere in Melbourne, with 37 per cent leaving before reaching Year 11. At the time of writing, 2011 ABS data on the region's youth unemployment had not been released, so we rely here on the 2006 data, with Frankston's at over 15 per cent and the MP region's, 12 per cent (FMPLLEN 2011, p. 9).

The region ranks higher than the state average on a number of indicators: bullying (44.7%), victims of crime (24%), and psychological distress (16.2%) (DEECD 2010a). Homelessness is a growing concern throughout Victoria (with an estimated 3900 homeless 12–18 year olds); and the FMP region reflects the pattern, with around 20 per cent of its homeless people in the 12–19 years group (CHP 2012; FMPLLEN 2011, p. 8).

The BSL-CVCAL program operates in this context, one notable for policies struggling to mitigate disengagement among young people and relying heavily on vocational training, as well as for deteriorating labour market conditions for young people in the FMP region.

4 Engagement and wellbeing

Research into re-engagement programs emphasises the provision of a student-centred, flexible and negotiable program (Atelier 2007). The ideal arrangement appears to be one that operates in ‘an open and democratic manner that would invite participation by marginalised young people and their families’ (Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011). A holistic approach to wellbeing is also identified as a key to program success. This means not only adopting adult learning principles, but also ensuring the students are not stigmatised through their association with the program, and that the program’s status is not diminished in the eyes of students, parents, staff and the wider community (te Riele 2012). Indeed, the program should endeavour to give young people and their families a voice, foster positive relationships at school and in the broader life of the young person, and broaden the horizons of young people by facilitating interaction with a range of community groups (Atelier 2007). Evaluations also find that to gain the confidence of students the program must not only foster relationships based on mutual respect but also help to address—directly, or through the referral to support services—the personal, family, or peer issues that hindered engagement in the first instance.

Research also highlights measures that are necessary if wellbeing needs are to be met and programs to be effective. A recurring theme is that the reasons for disengagement are complex—personal, societal, and systemic—and that re-engagement hinges on the availability of specialised case management. This entails providing personalised support at times of acute need, and consistent support in overcoming hardship in general (Atelier 2007). One assessment lays out a number of measures and preconditions for success, including ‘intensive support through guidance, counselling, monitoring and follow-up’, ‘taking a client sensitive approach to well-being’, ‘developing beneficial relationships within the community, the hubbing of services, and providing whole community or familial intervention’ (Davies 2011, pp. v–vi).

Engagement

This section looks at how well the 2011 BSL-CVCAL program was able to build rapport with students, to put them at ease, and spark their interest in learning. The 2010 program evaluation showed that students’ disengagement from conventional education involved a complex interplay of issues prompted by experiences within and beyond the school setting. For most students this had been a difficult and frustrating period that they often looked back on with regret. The 2010 evaluation also showed that on entering a program that was, in their eyes, more relaxed, secure, adult-oriented and tailored to their needs, the students’ outlooks improved markedly. Although the present evaluation confirms these findings, the 2011 experience revealed aspects of engagement that were not apparent in the previous year.

Relationships

A successful inaugural year (2010) and the availability of increased philanthropic support prompted the expansion of the program in mid 2011. The arrival of twenty-five new students and four new staff in term two unsettled the stable and close relations between the continuing students and staff. Staff were aware that the students who had commenced in the previous year, and who had benefited greatly from close interactions, would react negatively to the incoming and at times disruptive students. This was a valid concern given that many students in 2010 had reported that overcrowding, noise and anxiety about bullying were key factors in their disengagement from conventional schooling. Staff were concerned also because many of the new students presented

with acute needs, having disengaged from school earlier in their lives and then experienced severe hardship in the interim.

The expansion of the program prompted the staff—particularly those in their second year in the CVCAL—to reassess their roles, relationships with students and expectations as these related to engagement and wellbeing. For one, this meant learning how to ‘let go’:

... this year was a real challenge, of starting to let go and realise that you don't need to be everything for every student and that in some ways when you provide too much you do create a little bit of dependency and also a sense of entitlement ... I faced a lot of negative feedback from the existing class about the change in my relationship with them.

New staff commented on the apparent differences between the new and the now ‘senior’ (2010) cohorts, and how this complicated the process of engagement. Staff observed—perhaps counter-intuitively—more behavioural problems among the senior students.¹ In follow up interviews conducted later in the year, however, staff remarked that their initial fears of tension between the cohorts had been overstated.

Due to difficult encounters with authority figures in conventional schools, youth services and at home, newer students were reluctant to trust others. Staff felt that it was because these students had normalised fraught and often harrowing experiences, that their stories emerged piecemeal, and only when they chose. As the year progressed, communication with students improved and a clearer picture of needs emerged. These needs ranged from critical to more mundane. For example, some did not have access to their birth certificates or to Health Care Cards, or lacked the money to afford public transport. Without these, students were unable to enrol in government-subsidised VET courses, gain concessions for public transport or other services, and have easy access to the program itself if travelling considerable distances.

Working within these limitations, staff were aware of the importance of a welcoming and secure setting, if young people were to benefit from the program. For one interviewee providing such a setting meant:

creat[ing] an orderly atmosphere ... [one] that they all feel quite safe within really quickly ... Just making sure it feels like it has a sense of pattern and consistency and has a little bit of space for building relationships and not ... really pushing as hard with academic outcomes as we do towards the end of the year.

In spite of this approach the program was unable to accommodate all students, with three being ‘exited’ by mid-year (prompted by threatening behaviour and involvement in the sale of drugs). For the coordinator the decision to exit a student was not taken lightly, given the realisation that these students had all but exhausted their educational and support options prior to arrival.

A related aspect of student engagement—and one that was less noticeable in the previous year—was the students’ sensitivity about being judged by their appearance alone. Female students in particular spoke of the pressure applied by peers within conventional schools to conform to ideals of feminine beauty:

[At the CVCAL] hardly any of us wear [much] make-up, and even little things like that, the stereotype things, and we don't have it here. I don't know, it's hard to explain in words. I

¹ The ‘senior’ cohort did include a few new students to the program, and so the ‘senior/intermediate’ and ‘existing/new’ pairs did not exactly correspond.

love this place ... [At school] there's pressure to conform, whereas here, you yourself dress how you want to dress, and you speak how you want to speak, and you're respected for it. (senior/female)

There's no people here that judge you. You can just sort of tell they don't read you, like when you walk in the door, they don't just eye you up and down. (new/female)

For students, this had been a vexed issue in schools where dress and jewellery codes were enforced. One student spoke of her conflict with school authorities over her face stud and piercing, which led to her leaving school.

Yeah, well you go to school to learn. It doesn't matter what you look like or who you are in your face, it doesn't matter. It's how you learn not what you look like, that's what I always said to them. Like 'Dude, how is this affecting how I learn?' (senior/female)

Of particular importance to those students who had experienced difficulties in conventional schools—and hardship beyond the school setting—was knowing that adult figures cared for them, were attentive and treated them fairly. It is striking how often, and with what conviction, students spoke of these relational issues, especially when reflecting on the way they were treated by BSL-CVCAL staff.

I think it's just because they actually care about you ... The teachers get a connection with you, and get to know you. They ask how your family is, or boyfriend, and girlfriend. (senior/female)

As indicated, students in alternative settings often develop a deep affection for their teachers. It is clear that a teacher's manner in the classroom or during incidental encounters can have a significant impact:

[Teachers here] are just friendly, and they don't treat you as if they're like teaching you ... I feel like it's like a friend teaching you sort of thing ... We're all really close to our teachers and stuff, and I treat them as friends and they treat me as friends, and I learn from that. (new/male)

I think it's just the confidence they have. When you look at [the teacher], she's always up there, smiling, and always so happy ... If you walk in in a shit mood and you see them happy, it just makes you happy instantly. (senior/female)

However, this can have a downside for teachers, who bear a heavy emotional and professional workload. The effects of this burden are discussed in the Workforce issues section.

Belonging

Responses from both the older cohort and the new arrivals resonated strongly with the findings of the previous year. When asked to reflect on engagement, students emphasised the importance of a welcoming, secure, non-judgemental and supportive environment. The following references to security were typical of many expressed in 2010 and 2011:

It is just like home and you know everyone. Everyone is just nice to you and it is nothing like high school. It has really helped me with my anxiety as well because now I can catch a bus by myself and I know the area quite well now so I can just walk to school by myself. (new/female)

I just like coming in here, honestly. I don't know, I feel safer here than I do at my own house. It's just that I feel more support around me, in a way. (senior/female)

This evaluation compared the views of new, second-year (senior) and former students. A feature of responses from those who had been enrolled the longest was the frequent use of the term ‘family’ to refer to their relationships at the BSL-CVCAL. This is suggestive of a deep longing for connection and group identity. The following quotes were typical of many:

Family is probably one word to sum it up. We all understand that we all come from different backgrounds. We’re all treated fairly, and we all have respect for each other. I don’t know how to explain it, but being here feels like you’re coming home ... [and] the teachers, they’re kind of like your mum and dad, in a way. There’s no bullying and no enemies. (senior/female)

I’d come back if I could. I would. I’d redo my whole schooling here. I’d do it all again. I loved it ... because we could trust our teachers as much as we could our friends. We could trust each other with everything ... You could trust everybody—we’re all like family here. (former student/female)

The notion of family was also invoked by students who had arrived mid-year and who were looking back on their relatively brief engagement with the program.

I felt we built up a family ... because we all know that like we’ve all had trouble at school and we’ve been not accepted in society and stuff like that, and so we all feel at home here. We can all count on each other if something’s gone wrong. If someone’s upset, no one walks past. (new/male)

Another expression of the importance of belonging was the way students referred to their experiences of hardship as the basis for a sense of togetherness within the CVCAL setting:

... when you come here, we all know we’ve left school, we’ve had trouble at school, and that’s the first thing we all have in common ... I think that helps us, and probably here, we’re all pretty confident, especially the senior class. We all kind of just go up to the younger kids, and say, ‘How’re you going? What’ve you been doing?’ (senior/female)

Other evaluations have shown how young people yearn to be treated as adults and to play supportive roles in relation to peers. Indeed, this is critical to engagement. The students’ contribution was enhanced by ongoing consultation with, and participation of, a senior student council, consisting of fifteen students who met monthly and who helped staff tailor the program to the students’ needs.

In concluding this review of students’ accounts of engagement within the BSL-CVCAL setting, it is worth noting their own awareness of the changes they had undergone. Students reflected on having changed from being ‘constantly angry’ to being relatively contented. Again, the following comments were typical:

I’ve changed so much ... I am a happy personality. I am just more independent. I am more onto things. I’m more stable, and I don’t know, I feel I can actually do stuff without someone being there for me. It’s helping me out a lot. (new/male)

What is clear from this—and other research into re-engagement programs—is that effective engagement is premised on the establishment of strong and mutual respectful relationships, as well as a sense of togetherness.

Wellbeing

From term two, the 2011 program catered for the wellbeing needs of a larger and more diverse cohort. Indeed, some of the new students had been disengaged for a prolonged period, and had little recent experience of a stable institutional environment such as a school, and in many cases had experienced intense levels of disengagement and hardship. Table 3.1 lists the barriers faced by students, indicating the range of their needs. (Note: the data below is imprecise, as it is gleaned at enrolment and from the student and/or their parent/carer. Importantly, half of the 2011 cohort had reported their barriers in the previous year, at the time of their enrolment, so the comparison is between two separate intakes of just 25 students).

Table 4.1 Barriers faced by two student intake groups

	2010 intake	2011 intake
History of truancy and suspension	23	17
Mental health	15	12
Literacy/numeracy issues	9	18
Family issues	15	11
Bullying and alienation	4	17
Low self-esteem	8	11
Unable to participate in education	6	11
Financial issues	5	8
Academic issues	6	6
Substance abuse	6	3
Homelessness	3	5
Carer responsibilities	3	3
Medical condition	3	1
History of criminal behaviour	1	2
Disability	0	1
Total reported barriers	107	126

Obstacles

Notwithstanding the appointment of a wellbeing officer from term two, most staff felt overwhelmed—particularly in the early weeks of their employment—by the severe barriers presented. The staff were convinced that the pastoral care demands of the work extended far beyond those expected of teachers in conventional settings. They struggled to support the students, some of whom were homeless, and others whose consumption of both legal and illicit drugs was approaching dangerous levels. Staff felt they dealt with wellbeing ‘spot fires’, rather than with students’ underlying needs. They often felt unable to provide meaningful follow-up support or to develop effective programs. Sadly, there were attempted suicides by students, which caused great distress throughout the program community. The experience prompted one staff member to remark that ‘just surviving is a major struggle for some [students]’.

Systemic and bureaucratic barriers exacerbated these difficulties. Partner schools were limited in their capacity to assist, as some had no prior connection with the students other than acting as administrative conduits for the transfer of government funds to the BSL-CVCAL program. Consequently, they were reluctant to respond when the prospect of a student's return to the mainstream was mooted. Indeed, few referring schools were prepared to re-enrol a student familiar to them, let alone take on students they had not sighted.

Practical difficulties arose in securing for the students the identification needed to gain student concessions or to enrol in a TAFE course, subsidised or otherwise. Such identification requires the formal approval of a school, and this was not always possible within the timeframes of the BSL-CVCAL program.

Staff were acutely aware that support services throughout the FMP were stretched to their limits and could not always provide the back-up care that was needed. This lack of wider support was particularly evident when staff grappled with three cases of youth homelessness and the region's emergency housing services were unable to assist. It was also evident in the difficulties experienced in gaining emergency consultations with the region's mental health support services.

Responses

Though not a panacea, the arrival of the wellbeing officer did have an immediate impact. It meant that wellbeing issues were dealt with more systematically by an experienced and qualified person. Students were impressed with the support subsequently offered, which was often subtle. One student noted the importance of an understated presence, while another student spoke of the benefits of having a specialist with knowledge of the services available beyond the BSL-CVCAL program:

...when I was having trouble at home, [she] was talking to me ... [she's] lovely, she really is ... you can talk to her about anything you want, virtually anything you want.
(senior/female)

She's good at finding the help we need outside of school, possibly with alcohol, or drug abuse, anything like that, or even sexual harassment ... she can help you with that, and you can tell her, and she's not going to look at you funny... She says, 'I know other people who've gone through this, and they've made it through as well, so what's going to stop you from doing that', and that gives me a little bit of a boost. (senior/female)

The new wellbeing regime also had a ripple effect. Interviewees described the burden they had earlier carried when lending support to fellow students who experienced personal difficulties.

There's a girl at the moment who a few of us are a bit worried about ... it was pressure, because we literally couldn't think straight, because [we're thinking]: 'Where is she? She should be here. What's she up to?', and we weren't thinking of getting our work done ... because we're quite tight as friends. We do get distracted very easily with outside problems and barriers. (senior/female)

The wellbeing officer, working with other staff, also increased the students' awareness of the support services housed within the BSL's High Street Centre. Students spoke of the changes they noticed in their capacity to cope with the barriers that had once been so debilitating:

I feel like a human being again. I just thought it was just me and I [felt] like everyone's looking at me, but now ... I look like a different person. I don't have all these thoughts on my mind. (new/male)

They also spoke of the struggle for stability and about the program's overall positive effect on their lives.

...all this stuff happened, and my dad kicked me out of my house ... I felt my life [was] down. So I started just drinking, going to parties, don't care about my life ... I was going to start ... harder drugs. Then I came here, I slowed down. It was going so fast, all the drinking and all this. I wasted half my life. I forgot most of my school work. Now [I've] all this support from everywhere and my head's kind of clear. (new/male)

I get anxiety and ... Here they sort of understand it more. At that other school if I like cracked it and went mental or something, then I would get in trouble, but here they understand that ... I'm not doing it on purpose or anything, it's because I can't really cope with what's happening. (new/male)

There was strong agreement among staff about the need to grow the program's capacity to deal with wellbeing issues. Staff also expressed the need for clearer wellbeing guidelines and processes that would assist them to deal with problems such as absenteeism, substance abuse, and disruptive or threatening behaviour.

Another important step in improving the wellbeing regime was the introduction of student wellbeing meetings and staff debriefs. These provided an opportunity for staff to share information, plan and offer mutual support.

Staff felt that progress was made towards two important goals: firstly, building the students' resilience through ongoing and well-crafted wellbeing programs (e.g. healthy eating and conflict management); and secondly, providing in-house training for teaching staff on how to identify and help address students' most pressing needs. In addition, those overseeing the program were mindful of the need to identify external professional development resources in areas such as mental health 'triage', as well as support services relevant to the students.

Reflections and change

Looking back at the 2011 BSL-CVCAL program, staff reflected on their experiences and on changes they thought were necessary. Staff felt that improvements in student wellbeing were evident, and that the overall picture was positive. They felt that most students had become more settled, with the most significant changes apparent among the senior students:

They are a lot more comfortable talking about those issues now ... it took [some of] them two years to begin to feel ready to deal with them.

Some staff cautioned against adopting a 'deficit' approach, one that dwelt too much on the students' incapacities and not enough on their strengths and potential. They felt that not all students were 'crippled' by hardship, and that some behaviours and attitudes should be put down to mischievousness, laziness and 'acting out'. Indeed, a concern was raised about the dangers of pampering the students, particularly in relation to their obligations for the vocational training component of the program. The concern related to students' reluctance to engage with training organisations beyond the confines of the BSL-CVCAL program. Opinions were divided on this point, with some believing that the program should monitor the students' commitment and, if necessary, find alternatives before overall progress through the VCAL was compromised.

When looking to the future, staff were conscious of building students' resilience on a foundation of respectful adult-adult relationships. The notion of resilience recurred throughout discussions on

wellbeing, with staff noting the importance of early intervention to address the psycho-social dimensions of students' experiences. Some staff members felt that such early intervention—especially for the younger, intermediate VCAL cohort—was an area of the program in need of attention.

An enhanced approach to student wellbeing would involve a deeper understanding of the students' backgrounds, needs and experiences. In practical terms this would entail gaining access to quite sensitive information about a student's background prior to or at the time of enrolment. While staff were aware of the privacy concerns which limited information sharing between schools, support or referring agencies, and the BSL, they were adamant that such information would enhance their capacity to address wellbeing needs.

Staff also recognised the importance of integrating wellbeing into every aspect of the BSL-CVCAL program: by providing responsive and immediate specialised support, a healthy environment and an appropriate curriculum. Progress was made throughout 2011 to integrate physical wellbeing into the curriculum through electives featuring personal training (including martial arts, dance and yoga), cooking and nutrition.

There remained contentious issues within the 2011 BSL-CVCAL program: perennial concerns were students' (off-premises) consumption of illicit drugs, excessive smoking near the classrooms, limited operating space within a facility designed to accommodate multiple programs and external hirers, and the absence of basic exercise equipment such as basketball hoops. Finally, staff were also aware of the need to deepen links with community and support networks within the region and beyond. While steps were taken throughout 2011 to address this issue, it was recognised that more could be done by promoting social functions and graduation ceremonies, and jointly staging careers nights involving local agencies, businesses and training organisations.

Such interactions would also entail greater ongoing engagement with families, with the aim of conveying to them the students' progress and significant incidents. For example, progress and 'incident reports' might be sent to parents more frequently, but conveyed in a style that was positive and non-stigmatising. The value of such communications cannot be underestimated, given that such students have in the past received very little positive recognition.

5 Teaching and learning

Research shows that effective teaching and learning in re-engagement settings relies on effective engagement and wellbeing strategies. These would include a secure and welcoming learning environment in which teaching is based on respectful interaction and the principles associated with adult learning (Mills & McGregor 2010; te Riele 2012). Effective teaching and learning programs take account of the students' past negative experiences of learning in the conventional setting (Davies 2011). Key here is an intimate learning environment with a relatively small student population: Wilson, Stemp and McGinty (2011) suggest that 100 students is the maximum. This has been found to enable the 'development of a cohesive inner-school community and the fostering of personalised relationships between staff and students' (Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011, p. 37). That said, te Riele reminds us that having high expectations of students is important, so long as scaffolding support is in place (te Riele 2012).

An appropriate curriculum is also essential. It should be flexible, negotiable and culturally responsive: it should 'speak' to the students' real world experiences, and be 'hands on' in that it is designed to assist the students in skills acquisition and preparation for work (Davies 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011). According to one assessment this means incorporating 'a variety of learning "subjects and topics" that acknowledge and respond to the interests and aspirations of the young people but that have "learning" rather than "fun" as their focus' (Atelier 2007, p. 6).

Flexibility is seen as imperative, with the best approach to teaching one that is attuned to the students' individual needs, and includes specialised assistance where needed (te Riele 2012). At a minimum this should manifest in supplementary literacy and numeracy tuition, but might also extend to catering for learning difficulties such as dyslexia (Atelier 2007; Davies 2011; Mills & McGregor 2010).

The literature also highlights the importance of adequate resources, such as well-equipped buildings that cater for vocational training, high-standard IT resources, projectors and electronic whiteboards, as well as transport. The last is important because it allows out-of-class learning opportunities (Davies 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011).

By the end of the 2010 school year the BSL had learnt that keys to effective learning in a CVCAL or 'alternative' setting were 'student-centred' teaching, a commitment to negotiation, applied and adult learning principles, and out-of-classroom and extracurricular learning opportunities. It was also evident that effective results come from team teaching of an integrated curriculum—that is, enabling teachers to teach across topics, themes and units—in a setting with low student-staff ratios, and geared towards mixed ability and group learning.

These ingredients were again present in 2011, although the expansion of the program meant not only a sudden influx of new students but also new staff who required time to acclimatise. Existing staff also experienced a period of adjustment to the increased student numbers. Not surprisingly, this impacted on teaching and learning.

Team teaching

In 2011 teachers found it difficult to adjust to team teaching in a setting where many students had learning difficulties, pressing wellbeing needs, and associated behavioural problems. Teachers often struggled to reconcile their varying styles of engagement and approaches to content, classroom management, and assessment. This is unsurprising given that three of the six staff

commenced at the time of the influx of twenty-five new students (term two), and only one of the three existing teachers had more than twelve months experience with high-needs students in a CVCAL setting. In a teaching environment that bore little resemblance to that for which they had been trained, these teachers found it difficult to hone skills as there were no clear standards to measure success. Indeed, they wrestled with contending impulses: whether to teach primarily to re-engage or teach to attain the highest possible outcomes.

Curriculum and integrated teaching

The VCAL curriculum consists of four strands and provides for students at foundation, intermediate and senior levels. These strands are designed to cater for students of varying abilities and to provide a broad learning experience with a vocational component. The strands are:

- literacy and numeracy
- industry-specific training (VET)
- workplace skills
- personal development.

Within these strands are units, ten of which must be completed to gain a certificate. In 2011 this curriculum was broadened for the CVCAL students to include four electives—music, photography and art, cooking and nutrition and personal training. While the curriculum framework is flexible, teachers in the CVCAL context had difficulty adapting content for students of such diverse needs and capabilities. Although such difficulties might be attributable in part to the teachers' lack of experience with VCAL itself, interviewees spoke of the lack of suitable material available online to VCAL teachers across the state.

Time was needed to develop tailor-made units for CVCAL students; however this time was not available in mid-2011 when staff welcomed new students and oriented themselves in their new surrounds. Thus, building a store of CVCAL units with associated lesson plans remains a priority.

Staff recognised the need to teach across the abovementioned strands. The aim was first and foremost to engage the students and then to identify the learning outcomes linked to the relevant strands. One example of such teaching in 2011 was a walking tour of Frankston, with students using compasses while mapping and measuring their routes and identifying and recording landmarks as well as the potential hazards to workers. Ultimately, the students produced a rudimentary map for use by others. Another example was a BSL-CVCAL-led student forum that brought together students from other alternative learning settings, teachers and students from conventional schools, Job Service Australia providers, and the region's traffic ombudsman. Such projects proved excellent initiatives that built confidence and practical 'hands-on' skills. Nonetheless, staff commented on the need to create stronger connections between vocational and classroom learning and other program activities.

Lastly, integrated teaching was practised through the use of suitable online learning programs in the computer lab and main classroom. However, the chance to fully realise the potential of online learning was limited by a slow network with limited storage space for students.

Assessment

Although offering an integrated curriculum resulted in a more inclusive and engaging learning environment, it also made assessment more complicated. Teachers unfamiliar with the VCAL had

difficulty discerning which learning outcomes had been achieved, and whether they linked to the abovementioned strands. The assessment difficulty was exacerbated by the wide range of student abilities and temperaments. Nonetheless, interviewees were quite optimistic that better time management and greater experience would lead to a more consistent and methodical approach.

Learning

Staff spoke often of the difficulties in determining ‘realistic’ expectations. Some teachers—particularly those less accustomed to catering for students with very high needs—were focused on achieving benchmarks within the curriculum and with maximising formal attainments. Others were more attuned to the limitations of students who had had little schooling for the past two or three years and who were dealing with personal crises that affected their ability to meet the requirements of a year 11 or 12 curriculum. According to staff interviewees, a key to engaging learners was consistency—in curriculum, timetabling, routines and assistance. Interviewees spoke of the difficulty in providing this consistency, particularly when adjusting to a very wide range of capabilities and learning dispositions.

In the VCAL context nowhere was the difficulty of meeting different needs more evident than in finding suitable vocational training for the students. Indeed, it was clear to staff that many (mostly intermediate) students were simply too immature and lacked the basic skills needed to undertake vocational training off site, especially with institutions that were unable to provide a tailored, ‘negotiable’ curriculum. This lack of readiness was evident in routine classroom learning. Many of the new intermediate students had very poor skills and were ill-prepared to learn and to engage effectively. Indeed, there was some concern that some students might not cope at all with the demands of VCAL.

Nonetheless, many students responded positively when asked whether they had noticed improvements in their learning. Many commented on their improved numeric and literacy skills, indicating the importance of incremental and supported learning:

I was never really good at maths, but I was getting better, a lot better ... I just reckon like they’re giving me harder sheets, like you go up and up and it is challenging ... then they teach you, they sit down with you and show you exactly what to do and then you know it and go up again. It’s just like steps. It’s a step up ... so you know—and most of the stuff we do relates to the stuff that we did beforehand. (new/male)

Yeah, my maths is way better. I was absolutely crap at maths ... and I come here and they taught me in let’s say baby steps. They like do it bit by bit, not just chuck a sum on the board [and say], ‘Do that’. They teach us bit by bit, so we actually get it and can use those skills outside of school. (senior/female)

These comments suggest that the scaffolding necessary to help students progress was in place. Other students talked of a new-found enthusiasm for writing:

I actually like to write now. I used to hate writing. Well, [now] I’m a pretty good writer, but I used to hate it so much, and now, it’s just, ‘Oh yeah, cool, let’s do this’, all happy and stuff, so yeah, it’s pretty cool. (senior/female)

We are reminded once more of how engagement, respectful relationships, attentive teachers and a sense of belonging are entwined. This student describes the changes he experienced:

... at the other school, I didn't really want to put my hand up ... in case I was wrong or something. But here it doesn't really matter ... Here it's the same people every day and you start to feel comfortable with them and you don't feel so insecure about your thoughts or whatever, you can just say what you mean and stuff. And the teachers don't just dismiss you ... they hear what you have to say. (new/male)

Peer support, mixed learning, and classroom dynamics

Key to the learning process throughout 2011—as in the preceding year—was peer support. Over time, the students came to expect, and willingly provide, such support, and this was a much valued feature of the learning environment. This dynamic is illustrated by one student thus:

I was falling behind but ... I had like three people [help] because they were all finished, and I got my work done and it was really good. They were like kind of teachers but they were really smart shooters at the same time ... [I was told] 'If you get help, you need to help others' ... and it was like, 'Alright', that's good because I mostly need help, and then when it did happen I was like, 'Wow, this is good, I like this.' So when I did my English work, I got to help all the other students because I'm kind of good at English. (senior/female)

Interviewees spoke of the differences that became apparent between the cohorts: the senior and intermediate; the new and existing. Each had their distinctive needs and posed specific challenges to teachers.

Many among the 2010 cohort—now mostly at senior level—did not react well to the sudden expansion of the program. They initially regarded newer students as interlopers who disrupted, or damaged, close and valued relations with staff. Interestingly, newer students when interviewed were largely oblivious to these tensions.

Another key message from interviews was the need for teachers to be accessible and responsive to students' requests for assistance. This underscores the importance of team teaching of small groups, and it also resonates with many students' grievances with conventional schooling where they had felt ignored, crowded out and adrift. Similarly, the experiences of peer support resonate strongly with the issue of belonging raised earlier in discussion about engagement.

6 Attainments

This section provides a snapshot of the formal student attainments in the 2011 BSL-CVCAL program. Table 5.1 shows the numbers of students at each level who ‘graduated’—that is, progressed to the next year level or attained the VCAL certificate after completing the senior level (some students are excluded from this data because they commenced mid-year).

Table 6.1 Graduations and exits

Level	Enrolments	Graduations	Exited students and reason
Senior	17	14	1 (returned to New Zealand)
Intermediate	29	21	6 (1 working; 2 apprenticeships; 1 CGEA*; 2 unknown)
Foundation	3	2	1 (TAFE Work Ed program)
Total	49	37	8

* Certificate in General Education for Adults

Table 5.2 shows a continuation of the trend set in the previous year when students’ attendance averaged 79 per cent. Given their negative experiences of education, and the barriers many students encountered prior to and during their enrolment in the BSL-CVCAL, the results for 2011 were good. These statistics are calculated separately based on authorised or unauthorised absences.²

Table 6.2 Attendance

(%)	Calculated with authorised absences	Calculated with unauthorised absences
90–100	21	10
80–90	10	7
70–80	9	10
60–70	4	9
50–60	1	6
40–50	2	3
30–40	0	0
20–30	0	0
10–20	1	1

Assessing the level of engagement is difficult, although one indicator is the duration of a student’s continuing presence over the school year. Table 5.3 shows the length of connection with the program across the four terms.

Table 6.3 Duration of enrolment

No. of days	No. of students
80 (the maximum possible, across 4 terms)	23
50–60 (3 terms)	22
20–30 (2 terms)	4

Tables 5.4 and 5.5 show the breadth of the training activities undertaken in 2011, as well as the progress made towards certificates. It should be noted that, due to the fluid nature of training arrangements, and students’ varying readiness for VET, the figures below do not align with total enrolments and should be treated with caution. While on the one hand the training undertaken indicates a range of vocational preferences, it also reflects a high incidence of interrupted and incomplete training.

² Authorised absences occur frequently, particularly when students must attend court, counselling or treatment for physical or psychological needs, care for siblings and/or parents, or otherwise attend to pressing needs.

Table 6.4 Vocational training: levels and progress

Level of training undertaken	No. of students
Certificate III	11
Certificate II	18
Taster courses (foundation level)	17
<hr/>	
Total certificates completed	28
Total in progress	12
<hr/>	
Apprenticeships commenced	18
Traineeships commenced	15

Table 6.5 Vocational training: type

VET and School-based apprenticeships/traineeships undertaken	No. of students
TAFE Taster	16
Certificate III in Business Administration	9
Certificate II in Retail and Retail Bakery	4
Certificate II in Music Industry	3
Certificate III in Aged Care	3
Certificate II in Building and Construction	3
Certificate III in Fitness	2
Certificate II in Information Technology	2
Certificate II in Conservation Land Management	2
Certificate II in Animal Studies RSPCA	2
Certificate II in Horticulture (Landscape)	1
Certificate III in Warehouse	1
Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery)	1

It is worth noting here the psychological boost that vocational learning provided for students. The following response shows students' awareness of the importance of formal credentials.

I have grown up heaps and I have got lots of certificates so I know that when I do get a job ... like the other day I was looking at my certificates and I have like heaps of certificates and I was doing my résumé and my résumé has got all of this stuff on it, not because of stuff I have done out of here because of stuff I have done through here. (senior/female)

Informal attainments

The above statistics provide a partial account of the attainments of students in 2011. A more complete picture takes into account the informal and perhaps intangible outcomes. Moreover, it is important to note the crucial link between informal and formal attainments, and the role of the former in enabling students to realise the latter. To a large degree, informal attainments refer to students' improved sense of self-worth and confidence. They are particularly noteworthy given the difficulties many students had encountered before and during their BSL-CVCAL experience.

Both staff and students noted marked improvements in the students' commitment as the year progressed. During interviews, students often spoke of their growing confidence and what they felt was maturity, with the following comments typical:

[I was] Probably a back-of-the-room person, now I am at the front of the room and I don't care if I get in front of the class and talk to the whole class. At the start of last year I wouldn't have done it but now it is like, yeah. (senior/female)

Well it's very hard to describe, but it made me more mature and more aware of how I approach things, so I don't just say things out loud or say something stupid. I think about what I say before I say it so I don't offend anyone or make anyone feel bad. (senior/female)

Along with confidence and maturity came a certain focus and increased motivation. Students spoke of a change in personality as well as the ability to identify achievements and goals:

Well, I haven't been playing up like I was when I left high school. I have an education that I actually have now that I didn't before, which feels good, because I don't feel like an idiot. And just things I know that I've learnt, and I think like I'm more ready to leave school now ... I've got a pathway that I didn't have and that I wouldn't have got if I was going to [my old school]. (senior/male)

I think I've become a different person since coming here. I know that sounds heartfelt and all that. But yeah, I think I've become more 'in the know' of what I want to do, because at high school, I just thought, oh yeah, I'll just do this and do that, and whatever, but here, I have a straight mindset of what I want to do and how I want to do it and when and where. (senior/female)

These quotes remind us once more that informal attainments such as growing confidence, awareness and maturity—however defined—are necessarily a part of any assessment of progress in the VCAL and in education more broadly.

7 Vocational pathways and post program support

Research highlights the importance of learning in real world work environments and of experiences that help nurture relations beyond the school setting. The success of such an approach depends upon ongoing and comprehensive career advice and transition planning (te Riele 2012). One review cautions against a complete disassociation from conventional settings such as schools. Rather, the emphasis should be on retaining young people in a *broadened* approach to conventional learning, one that is more likely to lead to accredited training an/or employment (Atelier 2007). Davies (2011) identifies added measures that would increase the chances of success: using intermediate labour market approaches, integrating work-based learning programs with other supports, and establishing connections with community and other institutions. This points to the importance of coherent, complementary processes that enable learning in both alternative senior secondary and vocational training settings (Holdsworth 2011).

Pathways

Pathways planning remains in many ways the most challenging aspect of the program. As in the inaugural year, it was difficult in 2011 to synchronise the VET and classroom tuition components of the VCAL program. The VET component is the part of the VCAL certificate that requires students to undertake either vocational training, an apprenticeship or a traineeship, which is then credited to the VCAL attainment.

The alignment of the various components of the VCAL program is important. In some cases non-alignment results in non-completion of the certificate even for students who have attended and satisfied the requirements of the classroom component, since completion is premised on a minimum of 90 hours of VET training for intermediate and senior students in each year of the program.

There were three dimensions to the VET component: identifying a vocational pathway which appealed to the student, locating an affordable and accessible training provider, and encouraging students to attend and engage productively with the training. These posed significant challenges throughout 2011, even after the employment of additional staff.

Obstacles

The importance of society-wide factors became evident as they combined with individual students' responses that affected progress through the training phase of the certificate. Many young people were vulnerable to the effects of multiple and cumulative disadvantage within the home, neighbourhood, region or wider society. For students, this often manifested in homelessness, physical and/or mental illnesses, below-average literacy and/or numeracy, drug and alcohol problems, unplanned pregnancies, disinterest in or even hostility to education, and antisocial behaviours.

These factors and the associated tensions impacted directly on the CVCAL program's capacity to realise the potential of its VET component. Difficulties which arose for the students included:

- limited ability to comprehend and negotiate a complex, privatised, consumer-driven training sector
- poor literacy and numeracy skills that meant students were ill-equipped to cope with the shift to 'book-heavy' tuition

- very limited capacity to cover associated costs of travel to the training institutions (which, in many instances, were accessible only through multiple public transport connections) and of protective clothing for courses such as construction and horticulture
- discomfort, reticence and at times acute anxiety about undertaking training in an unfamiliar and intimidating setting. Often, this training was provided by VET trainers who were ill-equipped to cater for these students' needs.

The following interviewee responses illustrate the difficulties in just two of these areas, anxiety and remote access:

I actually did the whole test you do in TAFE and I got in, but then I was too scared to actually go and do TAFE because of my anxiety ... I haven't actually been to TAFE.
(new/female)

I was doing bricklaying. I didn't really get my certificate because I'd wake up at five—no, earlier than that, 4.30—of a morning just to get there [by 8 am] because it takes ... two hours from Frankston train station to Holmesglen ... I was supposed to do that for four months or something and I couldn't cope. (former/male)

All these factors resulted in a student cohort that was—at least in relation to its VET choices—very dependent on the BSL staff for guidance. Students' indecision affected not only their choice of vocation and the associated training pathway, but also their conception of a good outcome. All this affirmed what has emerged in research into vocational pathways for early school leavers: the journey through VET has many 'u-turns' and false starts.

These challenges became more daunting after the term two expansion of the BSL-CVCAL program. Staff were placed under considerable pressure, with up to fifty students now needing to be linked to a training organisation. There was a tension between catering for the wide range of student preferences, and taking a manageable cost/time effective approach to VET over the year. Monitoring and adjusting multiple training organisation engagements also imposed a significant administrative burden on the BSL staff. Greater choice for students necessarily meant complex dealings with more training organisations.

Overseeing these relationships was complicated not only by some students' hesitancy and precarious circumstances but also by the uneven quality of training. Within the VCAL timeframes, a student's withdrawal because of substandard training, an unexpected lapse in the training organisation's data entry of results, or organisational problems can all have serious ramifications for the completion of the certificate.

Responses

In relation to pathway planning and VET coordination, a number of direct and indirect hurdles presented themselves. As the year progressed, steps were taken to ensure students enrolled in suitable VET courses and that they continued to accumulate the required training hours. Among the steps taken were:

- accommodating at the BSL High Street Centre an external training organisation accustomed to training disadvantaged early school leavers
- arranging with a TAFE to provide a mixed trades 'taster' course (at Certificate II level, teaching cabinet making, brick laying and carpentry skills) for all the BSL-CVCAL students not otherwise engaged in training

- a greater emphasis on School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, which provided both paid employment and credits towards the certificate
- adjusting staffing duties to give more attention to VET coordination, career guidance and pathway support.

Late- and post-program support

As the year progressed, post-program support emerged as an important consideration. Such support is bound to play a more central role in the program over coming years. Staff and students spoke of the need to devote considerable time to preparing students for the search for work once they leave the CVCAL and to helping them adjust to a routine without the program's support services.

Many senior students were reticent to leave the program, and many who had either graduated or who prematurely 'exited' the program felt a strong connection to staff and other students. Many continued to visit the premises and to maintain their connection via a Facebook page and the program's BSL website. It seems that ongoing difficulties after departure often led students back to a familiar support network.

Former students spoke of various difficulties, many of which related to their experiences with Job Services Australia providers. Dealing simultaneously with the providers and Centrelink often proved dispiriting and costly:

Job Network ... is just horrible because all they're doing is changing their rules. I've got [some] work, but I'm still meant to be ... in the job agency looking for work from nine to three on Mondays all day, even though I'm already working and getting cut off from benefits. Why do I have to do that? ... why do I have to keep looking for another twenty jobs a fortnight? (former/female)

I applied for forty jobs in two weeks and that was like my standard thing and they're like, 'OK, next week you've still got to bring in another twenty jobs'. And I'm like, 'How many places do you think I can apply for jobs at if I haven't got a job out of forty jobs?' So that's got hard. (former/female)

Students who had found employment—often poorly paid, short-term and casual jobs in the retail and service sectors—also spoke of the impact of their wages on their income support benefits:

because I'm only on Centrelink really, you're only allowed to earn \$62 a fortnight or something, and I earn more than that. But actually I earn less than what I was getting with the Youth Allowance, so it's all mucked up and confusing. (former/female)

Former students also spoke of the difficulty of finding and keeping a job when relying on public transport (most did not have drivers licences or access to cars). They contended not only with the high costs of travel to distant jobs but also with irregular hours, precarious employment and exploitation:

I had one trial job and he had me on for three days and he said he'd call me back if he needed me and he didn't call me back at all ... [it was at] a little Greek restaurant...he puts girls on and then he pushes them off and brings another girl on ... I got cash in hand. Just \$10 for the day ... I don't have any WorkCover. I cut myself with a knife one day from cutting the meat because we have to cut all the hard bits out of the meat and I don't get covered for it if I cut my finger off. (former/female)

Former students spoke of feeling adrift, of boredom and of the shock they experienced when no longer a part of the CVCAL program:

getting thrown out into the big world was a bit of a shock ... I always worked, I did all my training and stuff and still finished my course and I was like, oh God what do I do now? ... *and I was planning it* [italics added], I had it all in line ... and then it all just fell apart because it doesn't work that easy ... I'm 19 now I'm lost. I couldn't wait to grow up and now I'm like, oh God, things are getting harder. Thought they were they were only going to get easier once I left school, yeah. (former/female)

As the following response attests, staff were under no illusions as to the difficulties faced by former students:

[Some students] are more successful than others, but overall it's been a pretty sad tale I think. And there aren't a lot of job opportunities in Frankston and in the whole region we're pretty under-resourced ... I think that this is where it becomes really difficult ... we can be really successful in terms of building resilience and building positive relationships and having strong academic outcomes for the young people, but they get to the end of the program and it can be really disheartening and quite scary once they're out.

It is clear from these responses that there exist needs that were largely unanticipated when the program commenced in 2010. It became evident in early 2011 that preparing the students for the post-program experiences of searching for employment, dealing with bureaucracy, isolation, higher levels of training and, indeed, building self-reliance and resilience, ought to be a priority, and that this should be incorporated in program development.

To this end, the 2011 program included a series of pathway planning workshops running over several weeks in term four. Students enquired into continuing vocational training and career pathways, contacted prospective employers and created a kit that included their own résumés and references, as well as literature on employers' legal responsibilities. Staff noted a marked difference in the attitudes of students who were prompted to focus on their post-program planning. For their part, senior students who were approaching the end of their certificate regarded the pathways preparation as both useful and necessary.

The form of future pathway and post-program support was the subject of much discussion in interviews with staff and students. Interviewees pointed to essential elements of effective post-program support:

- maintaining individualised pathway plans that entail regular contacts with employers, apprenticeship centres and other employment services
- regular contact with the student for a period of months following their departure
- engagement with parents/guardians, existing and prospective employers, JSA providers and training organisations, each involving attendance by CVCAL staff at the relevant locales
- early planning that provides for flexibility and diverse career and vocation options
- access to BSL facilities to former students for a period following departure.

All these provisions have significant resourcing implications, so the question arises: what might reasonably be expected of the program and its staff in assisting senior students prepare for life beyond the program and in assisting former students?

Collaboration with training providers

The larger number of registered training organisations engaged for BSL-CVCAL students in 2011, and the attendant problems of coordination and data entry, meant that delays were experienced in the training organisations' submission of students' Statements of Attainment to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. At the time of writing the BSL-CVCAL program staff had no oversight of progress; and on occasions a student's attainment of the VCAL was jeopardised. Monitoring of partner organisations' compliance was time-consuming yet necessary to ensure students' accreditation was officially recorded at the relevant statutory authority.

This and many of the challenges raised in this section are systemic: that is, they are beyond the capacity of the BSL staff to alter, at least in the short term. Improving relationships with training providers is vital, although there are limits to what can be changed, given that CVCAL providers straddle two quite distinct systems—secondary education and the adult training system.

Nonetheless, 2011 saw a number of attempts to build bridges between training organisations, particularly with Chisholm Institute of TAFE. Discussions helped to identify problems as well as possible improvements. Organisational changes which will be needed over coming years if CVCAL providers—and all programs that rely on vocational training as part of their re-engagement strategies for young people—are to realise their full potential include:

- more collaboration in case management between schools and training organisations
- overcoming bureaucratic and cultural obstacles such as absence of ID, etc., and students' unease with the VET settings
- better information sharing: database management, record-keeping, protocols and resources that equip the training organisations to better adjust to high-needs student
- up-skilling of trainers and teachers to be proactive when pastoral care and welfare issues arise
- targeted professional development that enables collaboration between those working in CVCAL and those in VET
- more flexible programs (pre-vocational learning and taster courses) and course design in TAFEs for younger high-needs students.

8 Workforce issues

Another important prerequisite for success identified in the literature is skilled and highly qualified staff (te Riele 2012). For Wilson, Stemp and McGinty (2011) the ideal teaching staff would be:

highly qualified professionals with experience in working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They would have the necessary skills to identify the strengths that each student brings to the educational setting and would [ensure] each young person reached their full potential (pp. 37–8).

A theme running through all analyses of program design and, indeed, of service provision in re-engagement programs is the importance of support for these staff (Mills & McGregor 2010). Best practice here means teaching staff are supported by other specialists such as wellbeing officers and guidance counsellors. It also entails a working environment in which mutual respect, an appreciation of diverse skills and knowledge, and a shared commitment to the ethos of the program are evident (te Riele 2012). Importantly, research cautions against unrealistic expectations of staff, particularly as this relates to multi-skilling. While a holistic approach to teaching and student wellbeing is important, it is wrong to expect individuals to have the expertise needed to deal competently with the full range of very complex needs. Aside from the question of duty of care, there is a risk of diluting the available ‘discipline specific expertise’ (Brechman-Toussaint et al. 2010).

The 2010 experience meant that the existing staff were well attuned to the pressures associated with the work and the need for flexibility in a very intense, evolving educational setting. They expressed pride in their teaching and in their involvement in the program: indeed, they were pleased to be working at the cutting edge of their profession, and in a program that was gaining prominence.

In spite of the camaraderie, staff members continued to experience considerable stress in what one of them called a ‘give-all program’. The intensity stemmed from the closeness of relationships formed with students. Low student–teacher ratios meant more emotional involvement: as one staff member remarked, these are not ‘watered-down relationships’. In addition there were difficult and time-consuming pastoral care expectations, complex teaching dynamics, training and pathways guidance responsibilities, advocacy duties, and crisis management where specialised support was often lacking. Problems were exacerbated by the sudden increase of student and staff numbers in term two of 2011, leaving new staff in particular with little time to prepare curriculum or to acquaint themselves with colleagues or the demands of high-needs students.

All this made burn-out and high staff turnover an ever-present concern. When considered alongside the fact that the program is community based—with uncertain funding—this meant the capacity to recruit experienced and highly qualified teachers was diminished. This is by no means to pass judgement on those employed in the BSL-CVCAL program: rather, it suggests that the mix of staff was such that there was insufficient mentoring in what was, after all, an extraordinary setting.

Staff who commenced mid-year felt that they had undergone a ‘baptism of fire’ following a hasty induction. Although they did note improvement as they acclimatised and as management took steps to ease them into their new environment, the overall experience was very intense. It is well summed up by one interviewee: ‘There’s nowhere to hide; nowhere to think or to take stock. It’s a pressure cooker, but it’s falling into place’.

Most interviewees commented on the need for staff in both teaching or coordination roles to set boundaries and avoid taking on non-core duties. This applied particularly to those staff dealing

with VET coordination and careers guidance. Teachers agreed on the importance of more clearly defined roles and responsibilities regarding the wellbeing and counselling needs of the students. Thus, in contrast to the multi-skilling of the previous year's approach to teaching, a greater emphasis came to be placed on specialisation.

By contrast, the role played by the wellbeing officer extended beyond student support to helping improve information exchange and referral processes. Interviewees believed that role should be further integrated with other aspects of the program such as planning, enrolment, staff induction, professional development and even curriculum development. One interviewee summed up the importance of this wellbeing role thus:

My God, I don't know what we did without [the wellbeing officer]. It's crazy to think that we were running around trying to teach, trying to act as wellbeing officers; it was just far too much.

As the year unfolded other steps were taken to ensure staff were not overwhelmed. The most telling measures were the introduction of more regular staff and student wellbeing meetings, curriculum planning meetings, one-on-one staff supervision meetings, and some involvement for the wellbeing officer in planning and staff support. Interviewees reported that these eased the stress and improved morale.

Lastly, a consideration of workforce issues needs to acknowledge that teachers in the BSL-CVCAL setting are cognisant of how their experience within the 'flexible learning' sector may adversely affect their long-term career prospects. There is concern about security of employment at the BSL—the existence of the program is contingent on ongoing support from philanthropic funding sources—as well as concern about career advancement and being trapped in a professional 'dead-end'. One interviewee described her mixed emotions thus:

I know this program's amazing and people who work in VCAL will recognise that the [CVCAL] is a really forward-thinking initiative, but if I'm applying to work in different places, I don't know if they'll recognise VCAL ... I don't know how my skill set would go in a different setting ... When you come in you feel like this is a really vibrant space and you can be ... creative and you get to work with the most challenging young people and it feels like you're doing so much. But ... what feels like a huge step forward ... for us might actually look like a step backwards on paper.

This is understandable given that it is very difficult to convey to others what the work entails, and that very little status is attached to teaching youth in an alternative setting.

9 Administration

Reviews of successful re-engagement programs refer to the importance of legitimacy in the eyes of regulatory bodies: that is, the program must be properly incorporated, and have protocols that ensure accountability and monitoring (Atelier 2007). Evaluations also comment on the governance structures necessary if best practice is to be achieved. Of importance here is an integrated approach that sees internal and external advisory groups working in tandem, and internal procedures (in relation to funding, staff wellbeing and administration) that achieve staff ‘buy-in’ (Brechman-Toussaint et al. 2010).

Compliance and records management

Consultations throughout 2011 with government agencies (e.g. the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority) confirmed to staff that the program was meeting the required standards. The program was also well regarded by the DEECD Southern Region Office. Bedrock policies—such as the Admission and Enrolment Policy, the Student Engagement Policy—were in place, and periodically reviewed. Rudimentary Individual Learning Plans, Managed Individual Pathway Plans and Individual Vocational Plans were also maintained, as were progress reports for partner schools. A significant advance on 2010 was the creation of a more comprehensive database mapping the students’ educational history, wellbeing needs, attendance, educational and training, progress, and completions, as well as their employment experience as either trainees or apprentices.

Enrolment

It was the coordinator’s responsibility to field referral enquiries from schools, welfare agencies, and individuals. Throughout 2011 enquiries increased markedly, and the coordinator devoted much time to providing support and referral advice, and to contacting other programs for those young people who could not be accommodated. Even though nearby schools continued to refer the most students, there was an increase in ‘self-referrals’ from individuals who had learnt of the program from friends and other support networks. The increasing demand for places posed challenges.

An important concern for those overseeing the BSL-CVCAL in 2011 was the limited ‘triage’ to ascertain a young person’s readiness for the program. Initial discussions with applicants served to build trust, as well as to provide an assessment of whether the applicant was suited. The reliance on self-appraisal and the reluctance by some to divulge important (often sensitive) information meant that the program often lacked accurate data about students’ backgrounds and needs.

The prospective student’s literacy or numeracy skills could not easily be assessed; nor could the impact of experiences such as homelessness, mental health issues, poverty, medical conditions, substance abuse and addiction. Awareness of these issues often emerged gradually over subsequent weeks, posing challenges for teachers and also for those allocating resources and/or shaping the program’s strategic direction. This problem was acute in the weeks following the arrival of twenty-five new students in term two.

Staff interviewees spoke of the need to improve the intake process, but also of the pitfalls: if, for example, changes to procedures entailed higher entrance standards, then the program risked excluding young people who were most in need. On the other hand, without an assessment process the program faced the challenge of assisting students for whom it was ill-equipped.

Measures were taken to mitigate these problems for 2012. The most important of these were the commencement of interviews for the coming year's enrolments in late 2011, and an orientation week held in December for prospective students. Together, these allowed more time to gather background information about prospective students, as well as a more welcoming introduction for students and parents/guardians to the program, the staff and the facility. New students were also provided with a kit containing basic program information, as well as information on housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, and sexual abuse support services.

Relations with partner schools

The expanded 2011 program involved formal relations with eight partner schools from the DEECD Southern Metropolitan Region:

- Carrum Downs Secondary College (20 student referrals)
- Westernport Secondary College (13)
- McClelland College (10)
- Mornington Secondary College (3)
- Patterson River Secondary College (2)
- Frankston High School (1)
- Mt Eliza Secondary College (1)
- Monterey Secondary College (1)

These partnerships are integral to the CVCAL model and operate on multiple levels: referral, funding, and accountability.

Contracts and funding

All obligations and conditions pertaining to the provision of the VCAL to young people are contained in formal contracts entered into by CVCAL providers and the referring schools. The contracts identify each student referred to CVCAL (they must be linked to a government school) and also preserve a requisite number of places for 'back-filling' in the event of students leaving the CVCAL program. Importantly, the contracts outline the funding arrangements, featuring the government's Student Resource Package (SRP) allocation that must be forwarded to the CVCAL provider. This allocation covers much, but by no means all, of the costs of the student's education and vocational training while enrolled in the CVCAL program. Although contracts can be amended, both parties aim to finalise them before 30 April, a key date in the DEECD's timetable for settling enrolment figures.

Drafting and maintaining these contracts becomes a complex and time-consuming exercise, particularly for those overseeing programs that are as large the BSL-CVCAL. Delays have a serious impact on the program's resources, as DEECD funding via the SRP is calculated *pro rata* and decreases as time elapses. The 2011 program was hamstrung by delays in finalising its enrolments and, hence, in confirming contracts with schools. This, in turn, had negative funding implications. Such delays were largely unavoidable due to the cohort catered for, many of whom experienced unstable personal and social conditions and were not in a position to commit to the program months in advance.

Many of the students enrolled by the program were not ‘on the radars’ of schools, other referring agencies, or the BSL until the school year had commenced. These circumstances led to prolonged and often sensitive contract renegotiations with partner schools, which were themselves often overburdened by administrative workloads. The responsibility for such contract maintenance and renegotiations fell to the BSL-CVCAL program coordinator.

Student referrals and accountability

Students are referred to the BSL-CVCAL by schools, community support agencies and, at times, the youth justice system. Typically, BSL-CVCAL students had been enrolled at a local school and when relations there deteriorated the students were referred by that school. With the expansion of the program, potential CVCAL students were considered from further afield. Many of those considered were not known at local schools, and for a relationship to be established with the BSL that young person had to first be formally linked to a school in the region. Thus, the BSL prevailed on local schools, and the DEECD Southern Region Office, to accommodate ‘unknown’ young people and to facilitate the transfer of government funds.

In addition to the administrative burden of finding students an appropriate place within the system, there was also ambiguity relating to accountability. With the student enrolled concurrently in two educational sectors, BSL-CVCAL staff were uncertain about duty of care standards and responsibilities. Although the BSL-CVCAL program complied with requirements for student welfare policies, there was uncertainty about how BSL and partner school policies should fit together. Interviewees raised such concerns: ‘Where does the duty of care begin and end?’ ‘In a semi-adult environment, what constitutes “the school grounds”?’ These questions take on particular significance when schools have little more than an administrative link with the student, and especially with the prospect of further growth in hybrid re-engagement programs.

In addition to maintaining contracts and complementary standards, the BSL-CVCAL program was also burdened with an unwieldy data entry arrangement with schools. Like all CVCAL providers, the BSL program must rely on its contracted partner schools to enter data onto the DEECD Victorian Assessment Software System (VASS) so that credit for the unit completion and training within the VCAL can be recorded. This is not a seamless process and on occasions delays in entering the BSL-CVCAL students’ VASS data jeopardised the conferring of certificates. The vexed question remains whether responsibility for this task should reside with the BSL-CVCAL or the partner schools.

The 2011 BSL-CVCAL experience with partner schools was more complex than in the previous year, due mainly to the increased scale of its operations. There was more ongoing contact with, and dependence on, partner schools. There was also more consultation and engagement with the DEECD Southern Region Office on all matters relating to enrolments, funding, entitlements and obligations. The program also collaborated with the Region Office to stage a professional development workshop for educators and youth support agencies across the region. The burden for maintaining collaborative and effective relations with DEECD stakeholders usually fell to the program coordinator, and it was apparent that the time and resources needed to attend to these duties were not always available.

10 Program design and challenges

Research has identified the key principles informing governance, teaching, wellbeing and the overall approach to service provision. Leadership is another key ingredient, as are strategic planning and a shared commitment to the goals and long-term vision for a program (Brechman-Toussaint et al. 2010; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011). Closely associated with clarity in planning, goal setting and vision is consensus on what constitutes success (te Riele 2012). This means identifying the formal and informal, short and long-term indicators of success, and having the necessary data collection processes (Atelier 2007). Also required is access to a substantial knowledge base that informs not only the program design and operation but also the approach to evaluation, assessment of efficacy and advocacy (Brechman-Toussaint et al. 2010).

One review highlights the importance of effective communication and shared understandings on a vertical plane: that is, between staff on site and higher management and auspice bodies. It also emphasises staff involvement in strategic planning as well as program development and adaptation. All this is essential if staff are to realise their potential, and if students are to achieve strong educational, training, and vocational outcomes (Brechman-Toussaint et al. 2010).

Outreach is also essential if programs are to connect with disengaged and marginalised students. Davies (2011) identifies four important outreach strategies: providing easily accessible information, bringing learning to the learner, targeting high-needs groups, and establishing lasting, meaningful relationships. Assessments suggest that there should also be a strong connection to the local community as well as complementary outreach activities. These are essential if the program is to build legitimacy, foster strong ties with schools, training and employment organisations, and welfare agencies, and if it is to better facilitate the exchange of human and material resources (Atelier 2007; Holdsworth 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011).

With the BSL-CVCAL program still in its formative stages, questions of scale (the optimum number of students), scope (the breadth of support), ethos and expectations (guiding principles), and impact (gauging effectiveness) all remain under constant consideration.

Scale

The expansion in 2011 occurred quite suddenly, and at a time when processes, structures and relationships were in flux. It confronted many—mainly senior—students with aspects of education that they had experienced and rejected in the mainstream system: the distractions, high noise levels, and little access to teachers. One student reflected on the new setting, and the adjustment, thus:

it's too loud. You can't sit down and work, because there are just so many kids, and it's crazy. You can't work ... I didn't really like it when the new class came in, because all the focus had to be spread out and shared around. But I think it's worked out better now. We've all had our say ... and now it's all worked out, we're good. (senior/female)

The expansion disrupted settled relationships and served as a reminder of the importance of stability, security and routine to those who have experienced severe disengagement. Most interviewees—staff and students—felt that relations stabilised over time as barriers between the existing and new cohorts dissolved. Nonetheless, important lessons were learnt that should inform program design in coming years:

- Within such programs intense relationships are formed and a kind of territorialism may result when settings are disrupted. Negative reactions to change can hinder efforts to educate and to build overall resilience.
- The time needed to adjust processes and resources to accommodate the needs of an increased number of disengaged young people should not be underestimated.
- When contemplating significant change, care must be taken to help all concerned to acclimatise to the new. This applies equally to preparing students and to assisting new staff to adjust to their new environments.

Scope

The program continued to combine well the provision of the highly valued years 11–12 VCAL with wellbeing support. And yet both dimensions may need to be enhanced and extended. Teaching and learning requires greater specialised assistance (e.g. literacy and numeracy aides), more appropriate curriculum and relevant teaching materials. Similarly, wellbeing support should be extended to include post-program support for former students. Lastly, the program's success largely relies on the extent to which it complements other services in the region, and so enhancing these links deserves higher priority.

Ethos and expectations

The VCAL course offers a very effective framework, and its CVCAL incarnation seems well suited for those most in need. The VCAL delivered in a community setting enables a practical, hands-on and adult learning approach, with a high degree of flexibility. However, this flexibility has its limits. Some staff pondered whether the VCAL is appropriate for young people who are severely disadvantaged, whether by situational barriers or by low literacy or numeracy skills.

Much rests on the ability of the BSL-CVCAL management to reconcile the expectations of all those engaged in the program (a strategic plan for 2012–2013 is now in place). This is no easy task given complex and often contending interests. In addition to differing approaches to teaching, there may be conflicting organisational views about the relative status of the various BSL programs located in the same facility. Similarly, aligning expectations of the Centre management with the wider organisation can also be complicated. Beyond the program setting, there is a need to ensure that the expectations of the regulatory bodies, the DEECD and partner schools, also align with those of the BSL. Lastly, there is the need to ensure that the expectations of the students, as well as of the staff, are clearly enunciated and in alignment. This relates particularly to expectations of behaviour, attendance, commitment, participation, care and respect.

Impact

The ongoing assessment of the program's outcomes and overall effectiveness is reliant on clear and shared expectations. This, in turn, is linked to a shared understanding of what constitutes success. In broad terms there is a tendency among policy-makers, education authorities, and funders to judge education programs using formal measures: graduations, literacy and numeracy, attendance, and vocational training certificate or module completions. However, 'effectiveness' for re-engagement programs such as the CVCAL remains an ill-defined concept, and it cannot be expressed solely in terms of completed VCAL units or VET certificates, or attendance rates.

The challenge ahead for those overseeing the BSL-CVCAL is to identify the attainments that are not quantifiable, yet may prove to be fundamental to progression towards more formal attainments.

Indeed, staff agreed on the need to take the focus off the academic at times, and to concentrate on providing stability, security and a calm learning environment. These, it was thought, should also be considered in any assessment of outcomes, particularly for students who are experiencing turmoil elsewhere in their lives.

Beyond the existing ‘at exit’ attainments, there is a need to identify post-exit medium and long-term outcomes, many of which are less quantifiable. Post-exit indicators might include those listed in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 Indices to gauge medium and long term outcomes

Formal	Informal
Further education or training	Stability
Employment/income	Resilience
Literacy/numeracy skills	Disposition
Financial literacy	Participation and quality of civic life
Housing status	Social skills
Substance abuse	Physical and mental wellbeing
Criminal behaviour	Family relations
Access to services	Social and parenting skills

The absence of a more nuanced conception of outcomes and effectiveness impacts on the program on various levels. One staff member commented on how the lack of better ways to measure outcomes impacted on her self-perception and effectiveness. Indeed, it had a deeply unnerving impact: ‘Does anyone even notice I’m here?’ It is possible that such concerns may manifest in program drift. On another level, the absence of a clearly articulated conception of effectiveness may also affect the program’s legitimacy in the eyes of regulatory bodies, the DEECD and, indeed, the wider community.

11 Conclusion

The CVCAL model is distinctive because it is situated at the intersection of key sectors and institutions: mainstream schools; community-based education providers; private registered training organisations and TAFEs; and community youth support networks. It also operates at the intersection of education and employment. The model is evolving rapidly as organisations in the various sectors search for the most effective approach to assisting some of Victoria's most vulnerable young people.

The formal and informal attainments of the students demonstrate that the program is providing an invaluable service in a region of significant disadvantage. The challenges it faces are imposing, with continuing effectiveness reliant on how well the abovementioned sectors and their associated systems are able to accommodate the needs of the CVCAL model of provision and, by extension, the needs of students.

The 2011 BSL-CVCAL program represented an ambitious new phase in the BSL's attempt to cater for the needs of 'at risk' young people in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region. Though undoubtedly successful, there remains the challenge of adjusting the program to better align with the demand throughout the region, with the needs of its students and staff, with the available resources and with wider expectations.

References

- Atelier Learning Solutions 2007, *Lessons for all: final report of the evaluation of the Innovative Community Action Networks*, commissioned by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services, Adelaide, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/files/links/Lessons_for_All_Atelier_f.pdf>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011, *Employee earnings, benefits and trade union membership, Australia, August 2010*, Cat. no. 6310.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2012, *Labour force, Australia July 2012*, Table 14 Labour force status by sex, persons aged 15–19, Seasonally adjusted, Cat. no. 6202.0, ABS, Canberra.
- Bond, S 2011, *Overcoming barriers to education: Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation stage 1 report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., <http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/Bond_Overcoming_barriers_to_education_Peninsula_Youth_Connections_stage_1_report_2011.pdf>.
- Brechman-Toussaint, M & Kogler, E 2010, *Review of international and national integrated service models for young people in the preadolescent and adolescent years: benefits, barriers and enablers*, ARACY, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/Review_of_international_and_national_integrated_service_models.pdf>.
- Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) 2012, *Homelessness in Victoria: youth homelessness*, [Collingwood, Vic.], viewed 7 September 2012, <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/chp_youth_homelessness.pdf>.
- Copping, B 2004, *The Seymour / Mitchell North community based Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning report*, Central Ranges Local Learning and Employment Network, Seymour, Vic.
- Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2009, *National partnership agreement on youth attainment and transitions*, COAG, [Canberra], viewed 6 March 2010, <http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-07-02/docs/NP_youth_attainment_transitions.pdf>.
- Davies, M, Lamb, S & Doecke, E 2011, *Strategic review of effective re-engagement models for disengaged learners*, prepared for the Victorian DEECD by the Centre for Research on Education Systems, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, the University of Melbourne, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.skills.vic.gov.au/Pages/skills_corporate/providers/training-organisations/disengaged-learners-report.aspx>.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) 2010a, *Adolescent community profile*, City of Frankston 2010, <<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/govrel/Policy/children/adolescentprofiles/lgaprofiles/frankston.pdf>>.
- 2010b, *The On Track survey 2010: Frankston Mornington Peninsula LLEN*, LLEN report, Melbourne.
- 2010c, *Pathways to re-engagement through flexible learning options: a policy direction for consultation*, DEECD, Melbourne, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/stuman/wellbeing/Re-engagement_Pathways_Apr2010.pdf>.
- 2011, *School accountability and improvement framework*, DEECD, Melbourne, viewed 8 June 2011, <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schoolimprovement/accountability/default.htm>>.
- 2012, *Re-engagement programs*, DEECD, Melbourne, <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/reengagement/default.htm>>.
- Dumbrell, T 2004, *Resourcing vocational education and training in Australia*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.
- Foundation for Young Australians 2011, *How young people are faring 2011*, Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne.

- Frankston Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network (FMPLLEN) 2011, *FMPLLEN environmental scan*, FMPLLEN, Mornington, Vic., viewed 28 August 2012, <http://fmpllen.com.au/?page_id=42>.
- Holdsworth, R 2011, *Learning choices national scan: results and analysis 1 July 2011*, Dusseldorp Skills Foundation, viewed 28 August 2012, <<http://www.learningchoices.org.au/research.html>>.
- Mills, M & McGregor, G 2010, *Re-engaging students in education: success factors in alternative schools*, Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, Mile End, Qld, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.learningchoices.org.au/assets//2011/07/yanq_report_final-art_press_compress.pdf>.
- Myconos, G 2010, *A taste for learning: evaluating a pre-Community VCAL program*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., <http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/Myconos_Taste_for_learning_pre-CVCAL_evaluation_2010.pdf>.
- Myconos, G 2011, *A path to re-engagement: evaluating the first year of a Community VCAL education program for young people*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., <http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/Myconos_Path_to_re-engagement_CommunityVCAL_evaluation_2011.pdf>.
- Review of Funding for Schooling 2011, *Review of Funding for Schooling: final report*, (D Gonski, Chair) DEEWR, Canberra, viewed 28 August 2012, <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Documents/Review-of-Funding-for-Schooling-Final-Report-Dec-2011.pdf>>.
- Rowe, P & Savelsberg, H 2010, 'How are young people's experiences of "home" affecting their engagement with schooling and community?', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 36–42.
- Ryan, M, Brooks, J & Hooley, N 2004, *Evaluation of the initial statewide implementation of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)*, Victoria University, Footscray, Vic.
- Skills Victoria 2009, *Victoria's vocational education & training statistics: a pocket guide 2009 edition*, Skills Victoria, Melbourne, <<http://www.skills.vic.gov.au/Documents/Publications/Brochures%20and%20Fact%20Sheets/Pocket-Guide.pdf>>.
- te Riele, K 2012, *Learning Choices: a map for the future*, for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, <<http://www.learningchoices.org.au/research.html>>.
- Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) 2011, *2011–12 State Budget analysis*, VCOSS, Melbourne, viewed 28 August 2012, <<http://www.vcooss.org.au/what-we-do/state-budget/2011-12Analysis.php>>.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2006, *Applied learning*, VCAA, Melbourne, viewed 12 February 2010, <<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vcal/Publications/Publications/infosheets.html>>.
- 2007, *Senior secondary certificate statistical information 2007: section 5—Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)*, VCAA, Melbourne, viewed 20 June 2011, <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/statistics/2007/section5/Section_5_2007.pdf>.
- 2011, *Senior secondary certificate statistical information 2011: section 5—Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)*, VCAA, Melbourne, viewed 8 June 2011, <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vcaa/vce/statistics/2011/section5/Section5_11.pdf>.
- Victorian Government 2009, *2009–10 Victorian Budget overview*, Government of Victoria, Melbourne, viewed 3 June 2011, <[www.budget.vic.gov.au/CA25755B0004CE3B/WebObj/BudgetOverview/\\$File/BudgetOverview.pdf](http://www.budget.vic.gov.au/CA25755B0004CE3B/WebObj/BudgetOverview/$File/BudgetOverview.pdf)>.
- Volkoff, V & Gibson, L 2009, *Review of accountabilities and funding of Community VCAL programs*, Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne.
- Wilson, K, Stemp, K & McGinty, S 2011, 'Re-engaging young people with education and training: what are the alternatives', *Youth Studies Australia* (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies), vol. 30, no. 4, viewed 28 August 2012, <http://www.acys.info/ysa/issues/v.30_n.4_2011/papers/re-engaging_young_people_with_education_and_training>.