

Re-engaging with Learning: Early School Leavers and VET

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Introduction

Considerable research has been carried out over the past few years concerning early school leavers, and young people 'at risk' of leaving school after the age of compulsory schooling is reached, but before Year 12. These young people have found the secondary school environment unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons.

Many have low levels of achievement by the middle years of schooling; many have low self-esteem and are discouraged and disconnected from school. Many have life issues that impact on their ability to fit in to school and many have problems learning. All these factors contribute to undermine their school experience and often manifest as difficult behaviour (DETYA, 2001). The school and the student become disconnected which is a strong motivation for leaving or being asked to leave.

These students choose to leave school even though they know that education and training have the potential to increase their chances of getting better jobs in the future. Some make successful transitions to work or vocational training but many find the going tough. Research shows that many students who leave school without completing Year 12 earn less and are more likely to experience unemployment over time. They are also less likely to return to study (ANTA, 2000). Consequently there has been a concerted effort to encourage young people to return to, or to remain in, school.

Going back into a school environment is unappealing to most of these students. For this reason many choose to enter TAFE. Thus from 1999-2001 Box Hill Institute has experienced a 37% increase in enrolments of 15-19 year olds. Of these, 67% of students are in the 15-17 year old age group.

TAFE has traditionally been an adult learning environment and the surge in young students has required some re-thinking in order to accommodate their needs. Over the last three years it has become apparent that these students do not just fit into existing classes. The programs the young people enrolled in do not meet their learning needs and would need to be reviewed. Thus a research project was undertaken at Box Hill Institute to investigate:

- Why these young people were leaving school and choosing TAFE.
- What they wanted from TAFE.
- What needed to be done to meet those expectations for successful outcomes.

Research Methodology

The research employed a variety of methodologies:

1. A *Curriculum Reference Group* consisting of teachers from the Growth and Pathways (GAP), Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA), Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and Youth Unit programs was convened.
2. Institute stakeholders were consulted including:
 - Vocational teachers from Automotive, Art & Technology, Plumbing, Hospitality, Animal Studies and Electrical
 - Generalist teachers from Health & Community Services, Vocational Access and Education (VAE) and the Youth Uni.
 - Youth Unit staff including the Managing Individual Pathways Coordinator, the GAP Coordinator and the Youth Unit Coordinator
 - Student Activities and Recreation Committee (SARC)
 - Specialist staff from Student Support Services, including the Student Support Services Coordinator
 - The Institute Schools Liaison Officer
 - Students from the full-time GAP program
 - Centre Managers from areas delivering the GAP program
3. Desktop research was undertaken into current Australian and international issues and practices concerning the specialised areas of youth 'at risk', youth returning to study and early school leavers
4. Investigation was made into programs being delivered by other TAFE and ACE providers including Wodonga Institute of TAFE, Swinburne Institute of TAFE, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, and the Donvale Living and Learning Centre.
5. Internal Data was analysed.

Findings

The findings of our investigation concurred with those of research previously undertaken in Australia and overseas. It highlighted a range of reasons for these students leaving school and coming to TAFE, including literacy and numeracy issues, low self-esteem, disconnection from peers and teachers, feeling that teachers did not respect them, teaching methods, hostile school environment, limited curriculum options and restrictive time tables that hindered their choices. The young people were not so much disconnected from learning as disconnected from school. They were discouraged and lacking in confidence as learners.

Why TAFE?

If school is no longer an option there are not too many other places in which students can continue their education. Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers are accessible but their numbers are usually severely restricted and pathways into other courses are not always available. TAFE is seen as a last chance option.

However, the decision of these students to come to TAFE is based more on their disconnection from the school system than on a clear-eyed view of what TAFE has to offer. TAFE is seen as a way back into education but there is still also an old view of TAFE, shared by many parents and teachers, that if a young person is not performing well academically at school they should learn a trade. In this view, TAFE provides 'hands on' education with an emphasis on practical application and so is more suited to the student who is less academically inclined.

Our research established that the young students coming to TAFE seek practical support with negotiating with government agencies. They want employment advice and opportunities for personal development. Many have to struggle with literacy and numeracy or family problems that leave them feeling inadequate and lacking in confidence. Some develop coping mechanisms that are destructive or hinder their ability to learn. They want flexible pathways into education, employment and training so they can continue their education, along with individual support that will help them to deal with personal issues and enable them to develop self-discipline and reliability. They want an ability to handle problems arising from substance abuse or difficult family situations and need positive and supportive relationships with other students and teachers, a sense of belonging and a cooperative as opposed to competitive learning environment.

TAFE is attractive because it offers an adult learning environment that encourages mutual respect between teacher and student. It offers flexible pathways and a variety of vocational and curriculum options. There is a culture of life-long learning and the modular nature of many courses allows students to work at their own pace. There are individual and flexible learning plans for students. Students gain credit for work successfully completed even if the whole course is not finished. TAFE has the facilities to support students, practically, emotionally and educationally through student support and counselling services.

Meeting the Challenge

The challenge for Box Hill TAFE was to offer a learning experience that would re-engage these discouraged learners and achieve positive outcomes for them. Our investigation indicated that they needed new approaches as well as more focussed programs and practices. We needed to develop the features of a learning environment that supported a whole person approach.

A whole person approach

The whole person approach is not just about making these students more employable or filling in the gaps in their education. It looks at all the person's needs and works to address them in an integrated way.

Implementing this approach required classes to have low student-teacher ratios, allowing more time per student and encouraging the development of good relationships between students and teachers that would enable these students to ask

for and receive help more often. The type of learning was important also. Students needed to be engaged in active learning to sustain and stimulate interest.

In addition, access to student support services needed to be improved and these services needed to be integrated with vocational programs. The students are generally not confident enough to make appointments with Student Support Services, especially if they are unfamiliar with the staff involved.

Teachers and Teaching

The young people are challenging to teach. Many staff felt isolated and alone in working with them. They sought professional development in the areas of young people and young people 'at risk'. It was important to provide support and encourage the establishment of a community of practice among staff committed to teaching young people.

Content

We needed to review the content of some programs as some vocational modules were not at the appropriate level for the students or the delivery was too regimented. Issues of literacy and numeracy also needed to be dealt with in the context of the vocational module rather than separately. Students needed the theory of subjects linked closely to the practical skills. It was essential to give them the opportunity to succeed and achieve so they could reframe their identities as 'successful learners'. Interaction with the broader community was also needed to give practical experience and build confidence and a sense of belonging.

Framework and Pathways

Because of the erratic schooling of many students, flexible structures were required that would allow them to learn and progress in ways that suited their needs. The great strength of the CGEA is its flexibility, which incorporates literacy and numeracy but still allows for diverging pathways to be accommodated. The ability to combine CGEA and some VCE units keeps options open for young people.

In the vocational area new foundation modules were needed and clear curriculum relationships established between them and further vocational education. The objective was to establish a flexible framework that would provide multiple exit and entry points along the qualification pathway. The nomination of Box Hill Institute as a Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) trial site contributed to this flexibility.

Beyond TAFE

TAFE is not suitable for everyone. Some students have problems that may be better served by other, smaller providers. By building collaborative relationships with community providers and outside agencies, TAFE can assist these young people to establish alternative pathways that can lead back to TAFE at a more appropriate time.

Outcomes

As our programs and structure mature we hope to improve the outcomes for all students in this area. At present 80% of the students in our 2001 intake are continuing

in education or have gained employment in 2002. Our target is success for all students.

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