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# Maribyrnong & Moonee Valley Local Learning and Employment Network

## Stronger Futures for all Young Victorians

### Introduction

This Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley Local Learning and Employment Network, M&MV LLEN acknowledges that this discussion paper on the youth transition system successfully highlights the key issues surrounding transitions from school to post-school destinations. The response below expands on the nature of some of the issues and explores strategies, particularly with respect to careers, literacy and school-further education partnerships.

The M&MV LLEN, recognises that many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience multiple barriers to learning. It is essential that these be addressed through differentiated pedagogy, flexible learning programs and an integrated support service system approach. This will assist young people to stay engaged in education and training, particularly to complete their secondary school certificate in school and then to make a successful transition to post school destinations.

We also stress the importance of acknowledging that low levels of literacy are a key factor in influencing disengagement and have worked to introduce high quality assessment procedures, supported by program implementation and evaluation. Without adequate resourcing the quality of these and other programs suffer in any sector, but more so in alternative settings. As literacy is so fundamental to ensuring consistent engagement in learning or employment, it must gain greater traction in policy and program development and subsequent resourcing.

### General Comments

#### **Links with strategies in primary and lower secondary schools.**

While the purpose of this paper is to focus on transitions from school to post-school destinations and should be viewed in conjunction with relevant strategic directions in P-10, the connections or plans for future connections with policy and practice for younger students should be explicit. It is difficult to comment on upper school transitions policy without making assumptions about the base on which it is building.

## Transition Points

Transition points at 15 (literacy and numeracy) and 19 (readiness for post-school education and work) are rightly important but the concept that 24 year olds will be on firm career paths is based on a transference of the past employment landscape to the future which is largely unknown. This is particularly true of young people who undertake tertiary study because often:

- Further study opens different horizons
- Combining work and study is a financial necessity
- Technology focussed studies can change considerably before the completion of a course.

Education is an important factor in economic policy but the 24 year old transition point suggests a policy approach that attempts ‘to colonise people’s futures for other’s agendas’<sup>1</sup> and does not reflect the realities of the future.

*The key transition point in the discussion paper is that at 19 years of age young people should have a strong basis for further education or employment and are successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. Having attained this, young people are well equipped to engage successfully in whatever the world of work in the future may hold.*

## Targeting Resources

The paper identifies the categories of young people most at risk of unsuccessful transitions while claiming that most young people are successful. Aggregated data paints this picture. Enumerated data reveals the schools, even the individuals, of greatest need. Where there are a very high proportion of disadvantaged young people concentrated in one setting there is the further disadvantage of paucity of peer and family role models. The group mind set is not sufficiently balanced on the side of achievement and aspiration. Students in this situation need more resourcing than those who are a small minority in other schools because both group and individual support is often required. Current resourcing models, both staffing and funding, tend to work on a per capita needs basis rather than taking into consideration the impact of a disadvantaged community. For example, a school in a community of 60% unemployment faces additional challenges when considering improved transitions. Economy of scale doesn’t apply in these circumstances. Many schools provide additional resources, including staffing, through ‘voluntary’ fees but in disadvantaged areas the funding on the basis of disadvantage is less than a school in an advantaged area would collect through fees.

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<sup>1</sup> Bateman D 2009

## **Literacy (and Numeracy)**

### **Questions:**

***What form should the Proposed Literacy and Numeracy standards take?***

***In what ways can the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills be strengthened in the post compulsory years?***

The discussion below focuses on literacy. The reasons for this is not to ignore the importance of numeracy, but rather the discussion points regarding literacy frequently overlap with numeracy, therefore many of the strategies will be similar.

The discussion paper rightly positions literacy (and numeracy) as the highest priority to ensure successful transitions of young people from school to post school options. Literacy is the most significant factor influencing poor outcomes and early school leaving in the education system. Fixing the literacy problem will have a significantly positive impact on the many other concerns regarding pathways. However, while literacy is considered as a cause of poor outcomes and therefore must be addressed through expert pedagogy, the underpinning reasons for low literacy must also be tackled.

*To do this with any degree of precision necessitates rigorous assessment of these causes.* Young people who experience learning difficulties, mental health concerns, family dysfunction, high levels of disadvantage, substance abuse or homelessness need different responses. These responses must address the underlying concern first.

*The issues faced by young people with learning difficulties need targeted support by specialists in the field. The strategies used should be evaluated, examining student progress and teacher effectiveness.*

### **Family Influence**

The discussion paper refers to various strategies under the 'National Partnerships on Low SES Communities' (page 20). All of these strategies are essential to support students from highly disadvantaged backgrounds. It is even more important that those organisations working in this area know what is being trialled, what the measurements are regarding effectiveness, how these will be evaluated and the level of support for each strategy. M&MV LLEN is working in a number of these areas and our work would benefit greatly from a keen understanding of the impact of these. In addition, we may add value to initiatives that are being rolled out by DEECD or be able to suggest other strategies that work well for at risk young people.

As is recognised in the paper, young people from families with high levels of disadvantage do not always gain the same level of family support throughout their time as a student as those from more advantaged backgrounds. Our research has shown a strong correlation between SES and GAT scores, where those from low SES often perform less well in the GAT. This is in spite of Principals stating that there are no plausible reasons why students from more disadvantaged backgrounds would not have similar distributions of learning abilities to those from more affluent backgrounds (Education Age: May, 2010). Victoria University, which caters to large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, stated recently that it has developed literacy programs in response to significant literacy concerns, at all levels of study across the further and higher education sectors.

However, while the issue of family support needs to continue throughout secondary school, it must be addressed much earlier than at secondary school. The 'vicious cycle' referred to on page 13 of the Discussion Paper starts well before young people are looking for work and often manifests itself in behavioural concerns, sometimes at primary school. By the time these young people enter senior secondary school, their pathways are severely restricted where too often it is suggested that school is inappropriate to the young person.

It is a severe indictment on the education system if a mainstream school setting doesn't suit a young person because their literacy levels are low. The alternatives are less likely to be successful.

The influence of family on the learning outcomes of young people is significant, but negative influences can be addressed through strong program design, supported by adequate resources. There is also a need to distinguish between negative parent influence and parent's inability to support their children's education.

Negative parent influence will affect a child's attitude to and attendance in school. The development of parent engagement strategies, linked to benefits, is essential to overcome this barrier.

Where parents feel unable to support their children in their school work, *provide a significant other adult to support young people (mentoring) and learning programs for parents – as partnerships with community agencies, either at school or in neighbourhood centres, while students are helped with homework, should be resourced.*

### **Standards**

Literacy is also positioned within the proposed National English Curriculum (ACARA). The literacy and numeracy standards need to explore the alignment with the assessment guidelines within the National Curriculum. The teaching of adult literacy has been the focus of the adult community education sector for many years. Their capacity to assess what they do could add value to assessment standards developed for secondary schools.

In order to measure progress and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies it is also important to have consistency and rigour in the measurement tools. Literacy assessment can measure any of the micro-skills within literacy (reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively). It is essential that the standards accurately describe what skills are being measured.

### **Steps in acquiring literacy (and numeracy) will include the following.**

- Effective literacy teaching requires:
  - a common and thorough understanding of what defines literacy,
  - that all teachers are responsible for the teaching of literacy and so need to develop strategies to address literacy concerns,
  - that it is not politicized
  - that strategies are evaluated and reviewed internally each year and externally every 4 years. Accountability is crucial to improving literacy levels.
- It is essential to accurately assess every young person's literacy levels every year – the same tools need to be used each year so that comparative assessment reflects progress. Use the Student Mapping Tool to map individual progress of both students' levels and teachers' ability to address concerns. Address issues as they arise with both. Ensure all teachers are aware of what

the assessment is actually assessing – reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening. Where young people are not progressing at what is considered ‘normal’ levels, further assessment is conducted to ascertain if there are learning difficulties. These young people need to have separate targeted support, again with progress mapped at least annually to ensure strategies are effective. A hit and miss method of diagnosing the reasons for a young person’s incapacity to learn is of great concern to teachers.

- Every teacher is a literacy teacher – a whole school approach to literacy pedagogy is developed with an appropriate professional development program, including plans to ensure that strategies to address possible literacy concerns in individual subjects are implemented by all teachers.
- In addition, the whole school approach to literacy needs to ensure that literacy is placed on the timetable as a subject, where it is explicitly taught, not always as part of an English curriculum.. Students are placed in classes that match their levels. For those at, or above their desired literacy levels, ‘thinking’ or learning skills are taught, using materials from other disciplines. All students have an understanding of why literacy is important.
- Those with significantly low level literacy skills are placed in very small groups of like students. Their other classes which include a broad cross section of abilities will engage these students in higher level learning skills and provide context for their learning.
- Provide additional support to families where young people are not making the gains they should. Measure the effectiveness of this support and change it where necessary.

If students get to senior years in secondary school and their literacy is low, there needs to be a much more focused approach to teaching literacy. School should not alienate these students and resort to sending them to attend TAFE, or to “go and try an apprenticeship”. Many of these students have experienced failure - their approach to learning is negative. Apprenticeships require good literacy and numeracy skills. TAFEs are not well equipped to cope with the wellbeing of these students. Many of these students have very poor organisational skills, attendance at TAFE often requires much higher levels of time management and organisation. Many of these students cannot cope with a ‘free range’ approach to education – absenteeism is of great concern. The best place for young people to learn is in school, but to cater to weaker students, schools need to offer programs of greater flexibility – a literacy/numeracy focused program, set in the context of student interests, perhaps part time, may provide the students with the skills they need to move successfully on to further learning or work.

## **Careers Planning**

### ***Questions :***

***Will a career plan strengthen young people’s engagement with education and their capacity to make informed study and career choices both during schooling and in subsequent education training and employment settings?***

***What other actions should be taken to ensure that sound career development services are available to all young Victorians?***

A mandated Career Plan is likely to encourage administrative compliance rather than address the issue of preparing young people for transitions from school to post school destinations. Most students view current career teaching/planning as an extra-curricular activity with little relationship to what they are doing in school or in their life<sup>2</sup>. Focussed career planning often only occurs when young people are faced with leaving school such as in the lead up to the tertiary admissions process. Even then choices are often made on the basis of ENTER scores rather than on preferred aspirations.

Research over the last ten years has consistently shown that teachers/schools rank no higher than 4<sup>th</sup> in the influences on students' career aspirations. Parents, siblings, friends, all have a greater influence, directly or indirectly. The wide range of strategies employed in schools including work experience, tertiary visits, and guest speakers is inefficient in that while each strategy has an impact on a small number of students no single one can be easily justified in terms of time and resources. 'Individual careers information is important, however it works best in a context where young people are empowered to build their own career narrative. In effect actively seeking information as opposed to being a passive recipient (is) the key to a successful careers journey for a young person'.<sup>3</sup>

Given the influence of family and friends on student aspirations those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are further disadvantaged by families who are least able to understand what the future is for their children and to support them in the development of aspirations appropriate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Successful strategies to redress this impediment include a variety of mentoring programs, be they matching a student with an adult or with another student. There is a range of such programs operating in schools, both in primary and secondary schools, but no policy that embeds their value, nor funding to cover co-ordination, training, travel and other expenses incurred by volunteer mentors. Mentoring programs developed by the Maribrynong & Moonee Valley LLEN focus specifically on broadening educational horizons and preparing for transitions. Discussions are underway with the LLEN, a school that has reviewed their career education strategies, the YMCA and Youth Connections to explore the development of a mentoring program that would extend to the early months after leaving school to enable a successful transition. However, the effectiveness of this and like programs are dependent on adequate resources to ensure high quality mentoring and evaluations occur.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century poses significant problems because the possibilities for 'work' are changing so rapidly that it is impossible to predict what employment will exist and what form it will take in five years time. The top 10 in-demand jobs in the USA in 2010 did not exist in 2004. Teachers are currently preparing students for jobs that don't exist and will use technologies that haven't been invented.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Broadbent, Cacciattolo and Papadopoulos. "Building a Career: An Evaluation of a Careers and Transition Program in Inner City Melbourne". 2010

<sup>3</sup> Broadbent, Cacciattolo and Papadopoulos. "Building a Career: An Evaluation of a Careers and Transition Program in Inner City Melbourne". 2010

<sup>4</sup> McLeod Scott, J.D., Ph.D "What do You Know – Shift Happens". UCEA Centre for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education. 2010

Currently Australian curriculum is temporally biased towards the past and the ways in which education explicitly addresses notions of a student's multiplicity of futures through curriculum is not widely addressed<sup>5</sup> and is not reflected in policy.

**The key question is not 'would a career plan assist young people in their transitions?' but 'what should career planning look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?'**

The following points should be considered:

- Planning based on current or traditional careers is unrealistic
- Plans should focus on developing the skills and confidence of young people to research their own career pathways and to deal with the fast-changing employment landscape as they move through it. (The proposal in this paper to ensure that all 15 year olds have adequate literacy and numeracy skills is a key starting point in skill development but not the whole answer.)
- Careers education as a skill set described in the dot point above, should be incorporated into all curriculum, from primary level onwards, rather than be separate from it.
- Strategies to redress the disadvantage of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds should be a focus. (Mentoring is a proven strategy to do this)
- Accountability measures that demonstrate outcomes rather than compliance with career education strategies

***Question: How can business/industry be more involved in assisting student's career choices?***

Local businesses and industry find it difficult to cope with the demands of providing opportunities to students in all sectors of education and training. There is no coordination strategy with regard to who is contacting employers to offer their services, whether that be for work place learning, site visits, part time work, work place assignments that met the needs of school curriculum, vocational training or work place practicums for students in tertiary institutes, employment programs etc.. To support industry to cope with these demands, this needs to be done by one organisation who's key function is to engage with employers. This organisation could then ensure a collaborative and coordinated approach by the education and training sectors in their demands on businesses and industries which in turn decreases the time spent in responding to requests and thus increases the time they have to spend with students from all sectors.

## **School to further education and training**

***Question: What other initiatives would improve school to tertiary education articulation and support young people to take advantage of the expansion of these sectors.***

Partnerships and relationships between schools and training or higher education institutes is an issue that is difficult to generalise about at a state or even at a metropolitan DEECD Regional level. Disadvantaged young people are less likely to make successful transitions to further education if travel is a factor not only because of the costs involved but also because they often lack the confidence to engage in unfamiliar settings. This is evident at school when VET programs that entail attendance at unfamiliar institutes without a familiar teacher are unsuccessful with some students. Local partnerships with TAFEs and Universities can contribute to addressing these problems.

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<sup>5</sup> Bateman D "Transforming teachers temporality: futures in curriculum practices." 2010

Working partnerships with local institutions whereby staff from a school and an institution/s cooperate in the development of school strategies to address identified issues have many benefits. Teachers in schools need to have the time to introduce students to unfamiliar settings, including staff who will be responsible for the teaching of the VET program, prior to their first lesson at the institution.

Increased breadth of curriculum, variety in delivery, experience in other settings, better understanding of further education and importantly closer relationships between the respective staffs all work to improve transitions after school. LLENs are often able to negotiate this more easily than schools themselves

This already happens to some extent with VET providers but universities too should not be seen merely as a source of tertiary places for school students but as valuable partners in the teaching and learning process.

There are examples of this working well in the Western suburbs with the Maribryngong & Moonee Valley LLEN SOC Partnership (Student Outcomes – Change Partnership). The LLEN has negotiated partnerships which include Victoria University who then works with school staff to conduct research, develop strategies and support individual schools to address specific issues the school has identified. These issues include engaging curriculum, absenteeism, expanding aspirations and careers education. Student teachers and student social workers under the supervision of University staff work in the schools to research, implement and evaluate appropriate strategies. The strengths of this lie in:

- The specifically local approach,
- The fact that the school chooses the focus aligned with its own Strategic Plan,
- That the LLEN is able to broker appropriate partners from Victoria University (and other sources)
- It benefits both school and university.
- Students become familiar with a wider range of staff
- It provides the school with enhanced knowledge of an action-research model of change, that can be transferred from school-wide initiatives to individual classrooms and pedagogy

On Track data suggests that in some schools a greater proportion of students succeed in getting tertiary places despite similar or perhaps lower VCE results. Further research is being undertaken to identify the reasons for this but it is possible that the school's relationship with the post-school institute is a factor. In addition, it will be important to examine school practices when students are making VTAC applications.

## **Youth Connections**

Youth Connections is a welcome addition to the delivery of on-the-ground services to disengaged young people as opposed to being another level of co-ordination or advice.

Anecdotally schools have welcomed the Youth Connections support provided to at risk students. However, the very small numbers of students which this service is required to support is disappointing. The additional funding received by schools who have large numbers of students from low SES backgrounds is insufficient to establish:

- flexible and engaging curriculum,
- provide students with role models so necessary for many to understand the importance of study and work,
- the engagement strategies to support parents in either valuing education or being able to upskill their own learning,
- provide case management counselling support to the most at risk
- ensure all agencies working with students are coordinated in their activities

In an LGA with several highly disadvantaged areas the designated capacity to deal with the proposed twenty students (across 2 LGAs - as in their contract) is not enough to support those in need of the service in even one school. Our work in this area demonstrates that young people who leave school without support and guidance frequently don't make a successful transition. A familiar person needs to support them. *The distribution of this resource over the state needs to be examined in light of high density needs areas. Again, in terms of value for money, mentoring provides an efficient means of support for high risk students and has the capacity to ensure that they complete school.*

In order to expand the number of students who can gain the support required to make a successful transition, the M&MV LLEN has established a partnership with Youth Connections, YMCA and a school to trial a program that uses mentoring to focus on keeping students engaged in school and supporting them in post school transitions. This approach will ensure continuity and stability in support beyond the school. Resourcing of this trial is a key issue for those involved. Youth Transitions Division will receive reports on the impact that such trials have on student outcomes.

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Submitted on behalf of the Committee of Management; M&MV LLEN  
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