

Stronger Futures for all Young Victorians: Discussion paper on the youth transitions system

Melbourne Citymission Submission June 2010

Melbourne Citymission (MCM) works at the 'tail end' of disadvantage. This means we work with individuals, families and communities who face barriers to participating in education, work and community life. Many also struggle to find and maintain safe, affordable housing.

Melbourne Citymission delivers a suite of employment, education and training (EET) services which seek to provide people who are experiencing disadvantage, who are vulnerable to exclusion or who are already isolated from support networks such as families, schools or community groups, individually tailored transitions towards social and economic independence. While our EET services span a range of population groups, including disengaged adults, newly arrived migrants and refugees, people with a disability and women exiting prison, we have a particular focus on disadvantaged or disengaged youth.

MCM believes that providing services and programs that equip young people with the necessary skills and confidence to pursue further education and training can help break cycles of disadvantage and dislocation and can prevent a pathway into long term unemployment and exclusion.

Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the post-compulsory years

Melbourne Citymission (MCM) believes monitoring literacy and numeracy education in schools and devising follow up programs and strategies for those failing to meet key benchmarks is crucial to strengthening overall literacy and numeracy standards and to facilitating participation in further education and training. However, Melbourne Citymission would like to focus its comments on the issue of strengthening the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in the post-compulsory years.

Those who leave school early, have interrupted or disjointed participation in school, or who, for a variety of reasons have not reached key benchmarks within the school system, need an alternative means of accessing and acquiring literacy and numeracy skills. While formally embedding standards within foundational and vocational curriculum will capture some of those who missed out on obtaining these critical skills in the school system, many others will not have the confidence or inclination to participate in further education or training precisely because of their poor literacy and/or numeracy attainment at school, or because they are experiencing the same barriers to participation that prevented them from acquiring the skills in the first place. These barriers include both personal barriers such as family breakdown, cultural differences, experiences of violence, neglect or trauma, low levels of formal education, complex health needs related to mental illness, physical or cognitive disability and substance abuse, as well as structural barriers such as intergenerational poverty, lack of affordable housing, and homelessness, poor public transport and community infrastructure, lack of employment

opportunities and employer attitudes. Many young people experience several of these barriers simultaneously and they are often due to factors outside their control.

Many disadvantaged young people not only lack the vocational skills and experience necessary to gain employment, but also lack the social and personal skills required to participate in education, work and community life. Many young people disconnected from employment, education or training need assistance to get to a point where they are ready to look for work or undertake further education or training before engaging in specific training and work experience programs.

In addition to formal literacy and numeracy programs with embedded standards and links to accredited qualifications, MCM believes that literacy and numeracy skills should be delivered through more informal mechanisms and programs. Our experience in delivering support programs to young job seekers has uncovered a need for targeted pre-vocational programs which address literacy and numeracy skills as a precursor to students engaging in more formal education and training settings. Many disadvantaged and disengaged young people do not have the skills or confidence to participate in formal education programs and consequently are reluctant to engage in further education or training places or 'drop out' before completing their assessments. Providing interactive and practical programs in informal learning settings can give young people the skills and confidence to re-engage with more formal, mainstream learning environments.

Melbourne Citymission has developed a pre-vocational program entitled *Return to Learn*, which is an innovative group numeracy and literacy program which aims to build the confidence of severely disengaged young people to re-engage with education, employment or training. The program is modelled on our successful *Wheels* program incorporating an emphasis on practical and experiential learning: life skills, vocational pathway planning, employability skills (transferable to classroom), some accredited training/certificates, industry and TAFE visits and practical driving lessons and driver theory. The program aims to build young people's knowledge about potential learning pathways and to develop interests and aspirations for their future. Literacy and numeracy skills will be incorporated into all the programs activities, including practical activities such as driving lessons, as well as in assisting students to complete both accredited and non accredited training through interactive and experiential learning techniques. Attaining some certificates or completing training units can provide young people with a sense of achievement, and for some, their first acknowledged experience of success. This in turn can also support a young person to develop confidence in taking the next step on their pathway either to further training or to employment.

The driving component of this program also provides a key source of incentive for young people to engage. Driving is a particularly desirable skill amongst many young people and something that many from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot afford to learn. As such, driving lessons provide an incentive for many young people who otherwise might not be willing to participate, while also building their literacy, numeracy and life skills and providing them with case management, support and advice about other aspects of their lives.

The program is also modelled on a holistic service delivery approach and incorporates family centred case management. This approach recognises that young people do not exist in isolation from their

families and broader social support networks and therefore addresses issues that involve the wider family structure as well as a young person's individual needs. This model incorporates:

- Liaising with the young person to identify parent, family or significant adult and seek approval to work within a family centred approach to develop a pathway plan
- Providing case management to address the personal skills development needs of the young person to assist them to re-engage with education and training options and to develop a pathway plan
- Supporting and resourcing families and significant adults to understand vocational pathway options and steps towards re-engagement
- Working with the family to identify barriers ,opportunities, responsibilities and entitlements such as financial assistance
- Support the young person and family to re-engage in education settings

While families play a critical role in supporting and protecting young people's health, wellbeing and capabilities, they can also provide barriers to young people's participation in employment, education and training. These barriers can include a wide spectrum of issues such as family breakdown, divorce, substance abuse or violence, insufficient financial or spatial resources to support all members of a family and / or attitudinal factors stemming from a lack of understanding about the value or worth of particular education or career pathways. For examples, families from newly arrived migrant communities or those experiencing intergenerational poverty, often have very little experience of education and training structures and how they relate to employment opportunities and pathways. MCM has successfully trialled a family centred approach in its Horn of Africa Pathways Program, which demonstrated that facilitating awareness and understanding of apprenticeships and traineeship pathways for young people from Horn of Africa and their families was a key part in improving participation and employment rates of young people from these communities.¹

Melbourne Citymission believes that funding pre-vocational programs such as MCM's *Return to Learn* encourages young people to engage and allows them to build skills gradually, without the threat of failure. This will help build the literacy and numeracy skills of the most disadvantaged and disengaged and prepare them for more successful engagement with education, training and employment.

Support for making informed education and training choices

Melbourne Citymission believes that supporting young people to make informed choices about their future education, training and employment options is a vital part of the youth transitions system. MCM agrees that early school leavers are disproportionately affected by the generally limited range of career services targeted at students in years 7-9 and believes that careers information, advice and counselling are an important component of school curriculum and should be provided *throughout* secondary school, to ensure all students, including those who leave school early, are informed about their options.

Careers curriculum however, needs to focus on building flexible options and equipping young people with the skills and capacity to access more detailed information and advice beyond the school

¹ MCM Research and Social Policy Unit, *Horn of Africa Pathways Program Evaluation Report*, November 2007

environment, as their career aspirations develop and change. While the provision of careers curriculum throughout secondary school will ensure that groups such as early school leavers will have some access to careers advice, the provision of this advice at junior levels is not a sufficient mechanism on its own to ensure this group has access to this information. Extending careers services beyond the school environment is essential if career development services are to be made available to *all* young Victorians.

MCM believes that community sector organisations involved in providing case management, pathway planning and support to young people are best placed to deliver career support services outside the school environment. Funding community organisations to deliver a range of pre-vocational services that assist in connecting the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people to education, training and employment pathways is the best way to ensure that these young people are not missing out on the advice and support that they need. In particular, young people that have left school early, those who are experiencing intergenerational poverty or unemployment, those who are have psychological illnesses or learning difficulties, who are homeless and/or those from refugee or newly arrived backgrounds, need specific targeted services that are able to assist them to navigate through the range of barriers they may be experiencing. Generalist advice will often not be relevant to those experiencing significant disadvantage. Targeted and holistic services however, can provide those from disadvantaged backgrounds with choices and aspirations for their future.

MCM has some concerns about requiring students to develop a career plan as part of their senior curriculum. These concerns relate to placing students under too much pressure to make decisions about their future at too young an age. It is important that students are able to explore a range of possible career paths without feeling like they are locked in to a specific pathway or that they have failed or will be disadvantaged if they change their minds. Narrowing career options at a young age could also pose conflicts with policy mechanisms encouraging lifelong learning and an economy which necessitates a number of career changes over a lifetime. MCM believes that students should be given the skills and confidence to develop flexible career plans that equip them to engage with different types of employment over their life spans.

MCM believes that career development services also need to extend beyond the provision of information, advice and counselling. Recent research has shown that young people benefit from “*a range of different programs that include experiences in informal and applied learning scenarios, community partnerships and information settings and that they rely on their social capital and in particular their family networks to construct their own career narrative and more practically to access information, employment and work experience*”.² Pre-employment and pre-vocational programs such as those run by Melbourne Citymission, incorporate a number of career development or career education components, including; virtual work experience, work placements, industry information sessions and visits, as well as a range of life skills programs. These programs allow young people to gain an understanding of what is involved not only in particular industries or professions, but also knowledge about what is involved in the world of work or study. Some young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be the first in their family to engage with the workplace or to participate in further

² Broadbent, Cacciattolo and Papadopolous, *Building a Career: An Evaluation of a Careers and Transitions Pilot in Inner City Melbourne*, May 2010, Victoria University

education or training. Developing young people's knowledge and understanding of what is expected in these environments builds confidence and willingness to engage with a range of options and possibilities that they previously thought were unobtainable.

Our experience also tells us that families are also an essential component of careers development for young people. Not only do family members provide an important source of information and access to work experience or employment opportunities, but they play an important role in encouraging and supporting young people to develop their own career plan. Recent research undertaken by Victoria University found that parents and carers were overwhelmingly identified by young people in the school transition phase as their most valuable source of career information³. Providing services that help young people remain connected to their families and enable families to engage with and support the choices of their dependents, can facilitate broader social engagement and participation for these young people and can help break cycles of disadvantage and dislocation.

Arrangements that support and encourage young people to complete qualifications

Melbourne Citymission believes that learning support programs such as homework clubs and tutoring programs are important mechanisms for lifting school completion rates, particularly for those at risk of disengaging from school or from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs are typically run outside school premises, with volunteers providing one-on-one tutoring and help with homework and general learning skills. Research has shown that "students from disadvantaged background need more support to help them re-engage with learning, to overcome personal, family and environmental barriers to participation and to strengthen their achievement".⁴

Melbourne Citymission has run a number of learning support programs across Victoria at both primary and secondary school level with positive results for students⁵. Evaluations of our programs has show that providing such support outside the school environment "helps children catch up with their peers, and creates opportunities for students who do not thrive in classroom settings, or who lack confidence, to experience success".⁶ Our evidence has shown that one of the key outcomes of learning support programs is not just improving participants learning skills, but also, building their confidence and reigniting their interest in learning. Research shows that this is a decisive step in improving academic outcomes; "once students feel a desire to learn, all else follows: improved literacy and numeracy, positive changes in problematic behaviour, increased self organisation, and even willingness to tackle difficult subjects".⁷

³ Broadbent, R., *Braybrook Maidstone Youth Partnership Student Engagement and Transitions Pilot*, Victoria University, December 2009.

⁴ Pate and Bond, *Partnering to Learn: The role of community organisations in supporting disadvantaged students*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Melbourne Citymission, February 2010, p.15

⁵ Pate, A. *Learning Support Programs - A Chance to Experience Success*, Melbourne Citymission, September 2008.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.17

⁷ Ellen Koshland in Black, *Beyond the Classroom: Building New School Networks*, State of Victoria (DEECD) and The Foundation for Young Australians, 2008, p.39

MCM believes that Learning Support Programs are a low cost mechanism that could make a significant contribution to increasing school completion rates. Lack of a policy or funding framework for these programs means that they are only sporadically available and even where they are available, are not sustainable. MCM recommends that governments recognise learning support programs within educational policy frameworks and provide the necessary resources and infrastructure for governments, schools and community sector organisations to work in partnership to provide sustained, integrated and wide spread support.

Programs such as Melbourne Citymission's *Return to Learn*, outlined earlier in this submission, will also assist in improving participation and completion rates, both within the school and VET sector. Again, encouraging young people to develop a career path based on interest and gradually building the necessary foundational skills before enrolling them in formal courses is more likely to result in successful and long term engagement and increased course completion rates. Such programs need ongoing and sustainable funding to deliver effective programs that are able to target the most disadvantaged in our community. Funding community organisations to deliver pre-vocational programs would assist young people's take up and completion of qualifications within the VET sector.

While community organisations such as Melbourne Citymission play an important role in delivering pre-vocational and pre-employment support programs outside the school environment, we also believe that creating partnerships between schools, governments, industry and community organisations is imperative to support and encourage young people to complete their schooling. Such partnerships provide students with diverse opportunities, networks, role models and alternative learning settings, as well as access to services and support. These networks are particularly critical in disadvantaged areas, where both schools and families often lack the resources to provide students with these experiences. While such partnerships do exist, in order for them to be effective and sustainable, they need to be systematically resourced and funded.

New transparency and accountability arrangements in Victorian schools such as the Victorian Student Number, have the potential to assist in tracking and monitoring those students who are at risk of leaving school early, however, there needs to be clear guidelines about accountability and responsibility to ensure that when these students are identified, they are provided with appropriate support. It is also critical that this support is not just provided to assist students to stay within the school environment, but is also extended to support those who do leave school, to ensure that they are linked in with other education and employment options. This requires more than tracking students to an exit point, but rather linking them in with appropriate community and industry networks, providing genuine pathway alternatives and following up on their support needs throughout this transition period.

These monitoring and tracking mechanisms could also provide valuable insight into patterns of early school leaving which could assist in developing early intervention and prevention strategies. Given the high concentration of early school leavers in particular low SES communities, identifying the needs of particular communities and targeting specific resources to meet these needs could also assist in lifting completion rates. We would however, reiterate the concerns expressed by many in the public domain around the need for protecting the privacy of individuals and their families and ensuring such data is not used for punitive measures.

Melbourne Citymission also believes that the recent reforms to the Victorian Vocational Education and Training sector will do nothing to enhance VET completions and could in fact hinder enrolment and completion rates. New eligibility criteria that require students to 'upgrade' their qualification level in order to be eligible for a government supported place once they turn 20, poses a number of major impediments to young people's engagement with vocational education and training. We believe that developing a career path necessary involves some trial and error, both in terms of study and workforce experience and setting a cut off at the age of 20, does not allow young people sufficient time to explore different options. Students who do gain an entry level qualification are not always in a position to enrol in a higher level qualification, particularly if they are looking to enrol in an entirely different field. This is particularly the case for those with learning difficulties or other non vocational barriers that make participation difficult. A requirement to upgrade qualification levels can serve to impede young people's confidence and willingness to continue to engage with the education sector, as the following comments from case workers demonstrate⁸;

I think the new rules don't give young people an opportunity to try new areas. I know they've got 'til 20, but that's just not that long. A classic example is you get a lot of young women leaving school who want to do hairdressing. So they do their Cert II and maybe even start work somewhere but have a really bad experience and then disengage from study for awhile. When they do come back, when we can convince them to try something else, that studying can get them a better job, they will have to pay to do another course. For lots of people this will just put them off from trying anything else, because they've already had a bad experience and they won't want to pay and are not confident enough or ready to do a Cert III or whatever. I wouldn't have paid at that age to do a course that I wasn't sure about.
Youth Connections Case Worker

I've heard of lots of caseworkers saying that they would advise someone to drop out of a course rather than trying to complete it if they didn't like it, to drop out before they finish so that they will still be eligible for a government place if they want to go back and do something else. I don't think that youth workers should be put in a position where they are having to give advice like that. I wouldn't like to give that advice, but to be honest, I don't know what I'd advise. When someone decides they want to do a course, they really have to experience it before they know if they like it or not. I think it's important for them to go through that process and try stuff out, try out courses and jobs and it can help them work out what they really want to do. But if they have to pay a whole heap to do another course, it might put them off from coming back, from trying again...
Melbourne Citymission Youth worker

Young people are in effect, being discouraged from gaining entry level qualifications, in the fear that this will impinge on their future career and training options if they wish to change direction. Rather than increasing completion rates, this is likely to further reduce completion and participation rates.

⁸ Cited in Melbourne Citymission, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services' *Securing Jobs for Your Future – Skills for Victoria Implementation Review Submission 2010*

Opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training

Melbourne Citymission believes that Youth Connections will play a critical role in assisting those at risk of disengaging and those who have disengaged from school to (re) engage in education and training, and in coordinating services in their regions. MCM believes that it is critical that Youth Connections can link with and recognise informal education and training programs such as those delivered by community sector organisations, as outlined elsewhere in this submission.

Informal education and training support services delivered by community sector organisations such as Melbourne Citymission provide the missing link in re-engaging those who have disconnected from school by building their confidence, their skill base and their aspirations, at the same time as dealing with non vocational barriers such as health, housing and income. Placing young people in approved alternative learning settings is not always an appropriate or effective response. For example, many Adult and Community Education providers which deliver a range of year 12 equivalent programs, are not appropriate environments for young people and can serve to further alienate them from the world of study.

Melbourne Citymission believes that recognising and funding youth specific, pre-vocational programs within the youth transitions service system will equip young people with the necessary skills and confidence to pursue more formal further education and training. Such programs can help break cycles of disadvantage and dislocation and can prevent a pathway into long term unemployment and exclusion but need to be funded and recognised within the policy and service framework if they are to be widely implemented and sustainable.