

Stronger Futures for all young Victorians – Discussion Paper

Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education (PRACE)

1. ACE should be seen as an integral partner in the Youth Transitions System as not all young people will attend school. ACE providers need to therefore be funded at a sustainable level.
2. The current Skills Victoria funding model prevents the most disadvantaged young people from successfully reengaging and completing a qualification, as financially the education provider cannot afford to hold places for young people who are unable to attend regularly.

To illustrate these issues and the complex and multiple needs of the students accessing their accredited education and training in the ACE environment we have included a case study of one of our recent students. We feel that this is essential to make sense of the perspective the ACE sector brings to the current discussions on the needs of students in transition as they re-engage and are retained in education and training to complete recognised vocational skills.

Case study 1: Journey to re-engagement with education:

Mid 2009, a 16 year old girl, her 14 year old brother and her mother fled an abusive family life in QLD. They had no money or home and were afraid for their lives, if they were found. The girl's mother knew one person in Melbourne whose son happened to attend PRACE.

Having fled in the middle of the night from QLD she had no warm clothes. As they were living in their car, food consisted of the occasional take away. Refuges weren't an option for the family as they did not wish to be separated.

The 16 year old girl did not want to attend school as she had negative experiences in the past due to her circumstances. When she approached PRACE she presented as a very shy girl who hardly spoke. Her literacy and numeracy skills were poor and her confidence and self esteem were nonexistent from years of abuse.

Her attendance at PRACE was initially sporadic. She found it difficult to make friends and refused to put pen to paper. PRACE was able to give her warm clothes, breakfast and lunch and personal care items when she attended. Arrangements were made for family counselling and access to emergency accommodation for the family. The family were referred to other service providers and they started to build a new life here in Melbourne. PRACE were able to provide a learning environment that was safe and caring.

Small classes and having a youth worker in the classroom as well as a teacher, meant that the student was able to get the one on one help that she needed. Being able to speak openly about her situation helped her move forward emotionally. Knowing that she wasn't the only student with personal issues allowed her to feel less isolated.

When she wasn't able to attend PRACE because of her family's circumstances, we maintained contact with her. We spoke with her and her mother regularly via phone and we would meet up with her occasionally just to touch base. We coordinated meetings with her service providers to make sure that the family were not falling through 'cracks' and that we were all up to date with the situation so we could all provide the appropriate care.

Knowing that she wasn't going to get "kicked out" due to her absences allowed her to have a sense of belonging, and no matter what was going on in her personal life, she knew that PRACE was here

and she could pick up where she left off and continue to work towards positive educational outcomes. This was extremely important to her.

As her situation became more stable, she began to engage more often. As she became safer and, she became more comfortable in her learning environment, she was able to start making future plans and set realistic learning goals. She had found a non judgemental environment which would teach her to read, not make fun of her because she couldn't. She could learn at her pace and she wanted to learn.

This year, the same young girl has attended every day. She is completing her Intermediate Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). She is happy, communicative and is helping others to feel safe and comfortable here. She has achievable goals and plans for her future. She is looking forward to her work placement next term. She now loves learning.

1. Strengthening literacy & numeracy in the post-compulsory years

The strength of the ACE sector, especially for PRACE is that the core business is as a language & literacy provider. The development of these skills is embedded in all of our programs.

As noted in the case study above, ACE is often the re-engagement to education/ training 'sector of choice' for many young adult learners returning the education/ training after a period of disengagement. This is partly because of the links most ACE providers have with their local communities, and that with small groups in a non-confrontational community setting students have the confidence to actually walk through the front door and then to address their literacy issues. Case study 1, having not been at school since she was 14 would have found it difficult re-entering a secondary school environment to be placed at a year 9 level or to struggle in an age-appropriate class.

The ACE sector excels at the delivery of literacy and numeracy within our VCAL programs (include numbers of students from past 5 years to demonstrate this). The current levels of funding (\$10.01per student contact hour for Foundation VCAL and & \$10.38 per student contact hour for Intermediate VCAL students) have barely risen since 2004 when they were set at \$10.00 per student contact hour. PRACE has been exceptionally lucky that it has been able to recruit and keep a dedicated team to provide our VCAL program but it is more and more difficulty attracting VET teachers at the current rate of pay we are able to offer and we are increasingly concerned that the viability of the program will be threatened with the aging of our current core teaching staff.

In addition, for the majority of our students, regularly and/or extensive absences from school has impacted on their literacy and numeracy levels and after attending regularly at PRACE we find their literacy improves greatly and students are then able to engage in age appropriate learning. For some students though, it quickly becomes obvious that the student has an underlying, undiagnosed language or learning disability. All of our students are from low socio-economic backgrounds and cannot afford the necessary testing to diagnose such a language or learning disability which would significantly aid teachers in developing a tailored literacy learning program, while PRACE is unable to access the services of professionals such as Speech Pathologists for language assessments in the way schools can. Speech and Language assessments need resourcing and should be attached to the young person regardless of where they are accessing education. This is particularly critical in when there is the situation where they may well have not been engaged in a school for 3-4 years and missed any opportunity to be assessed.

2. Support for making informed education & training choices

As with Case Study 1: this 16 year old was unable to even consider her education and training choices with such a chaotic lifestyle. For her as with many of our students, the first step to having a vision of a career path is to first have a vision within yourself for a future.

Supporting the development of education & training pathways needs to be at the relevant point of their life stages. For this reason we are committed to ensuring the students have the tools and strategies to learn which leads to the young person seeing the value of setting some goals and a clear understanding of where to access that information when it becomes relevant. Past students, having built up strong personal relationships with the PRACE teaching and coordination staff regularly come back to visit and seek assistance with pathways information and PRACE continues to be committed to the Managed Individual Pathways Program instituted by ACFE with Youth Pathways Program funding.

This year, we have helped a young man work on a cover letter for a job and we have also spent time with a student from 2008 who needed help with courses and we were able arrange a meeting with the coordinator at Kangan. This student is now studying childcare.

Where students are ready to be making decisions about education and training choices education providers in the ACE sector have strong networks with other education sectors and employment opportunities. For PRACE this can be demonstrated through membership on INLLEN, links to Banyule Nillumbik LEN (COM on BOM of BNLLEN) and is a member of the Darebin Youth Network, Northern RYAN and ACE Plus network- a network of 7 local ACE providers. We also have a cross-referral relationship with Youth Connections, local JSAs and NMIT TAFE. PRACE coordinates well with other professional services – with the point of reference- the young person themselves.

3. Arrangements that support and encourage young people to complete qualifications

The flexibility of ACE has meant that young people have been able to complete their qualifications by 'coming and going' between accessing education and other personal issues in their lives such as having a baby, in being in hospital or detox, or accessing safer more secure housing. Students do return though to continue to work towards completing a qualification with PRACE they reengage with another ACE or provider to complete because they know and trust the system, as the support systems set in place at PRACE ensures attendance are up around 80%. This in turns enables the young people to become used to attending a program and to take risks with their learning, resulting in an overall positive learning experience. As discussed in more detail below (see section 5), the funding arrangements for ACE providers through Skills Victoria now jeopardizes the inherent flexibility ACE providers have been able to offer to this cohort and will result in a decline of qualifications being completed.

Furthermore, in relation to students who are 19, turning 20, and where the learner will obviously continue to need support to further their education and/or to be work ready, having to continually up-skill in order to access a paid training place achieving a full qualification at the intermediate level VCAL will disadvantage them. The fact that Intermediate VCAL is considered level 2 on the AQF, along with Senior VCAL, needs to be addressed.

4. Systems that assist students to move effectively between courses, institutions and sectors

PRACE has built strong networks throughout the Northern region so that each young person has the opportunity to be fully supported while they re engage back into education. Each student will participate in a work placement and we have built strong relationships with our employers. Industry

and TAFE tours are taken throughout the year and if a young person is interested in going to TAFE, we can take them to their interviews and introduce them to the coordinator and the student services department. Career expos are also important and are attended. The LLENs are also involved with helping our young people with career opportunities and we have a strong partnership with DEECD Northern region. We also participate in community projects such as Riding for the disabled and building a children's garden with Bunnings, which allows the students to have access to other employment opportunities that they may not have thought about.

We also connect them with other services that they may need such as CAMHS, Darebin Youth Services, Orygen (& Headspace), Youth Mental Health Services, Salvation Army, North East Housing and Catchment Youth Refuge, housing assistance, drug and alcohol counselling and family counselling and mediation if they need. This holistic approach and strong emphasis on pastoral care, allows for more positive educational outcomes.

5. Opportunities for young people to re-engage with education & training

There are two issues that need to be addressed in relation to opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training in relation to the Youth Transitions Paper and Adult Community Education.

The first is particularly in relation to the first Case Study we provided:

Going back to our case study 1 we allowed the reengagement process to occur in her time thus ensuring a more likely and positive outcome. This young girl had several significant barriers that she needed to overcome before she was able to fully reengage, however, by having our door open to her at all times she was able to feel comfortable to do what she could manage therefore building her confidence and motivation to continue to study.

Where the Youth Transitions systems is attempting to provide opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training our experience at PRACE is that the Skills Victoria funding arrangements works against this. The new funding arrangements under Skills Victoria means that in order to remain financially viable we can no longer have students enrolled who are not regular attendees. If this young girl had first come to us in 2010 displaying this behaviour we would have been forced to officially exit her from the VCAL program so we could replace her with another, more committed student so we could access the funding necessary to pay for the program. In exiting her from the program at this stage she would never have had to opportunity to fully engage with the program in the following year and achieve significant outcomes towards her Intermediate VCAL. In fact this year we have already been forced to exit a student who has had significant personal issues but mostly probably would have engaged more fully later in the year. She has now been placed back on the waiting list. Case Study 2 illustrates this issue:

Case Study 2:

A few weeks into 2010, a 16 year old girl came to us after not having been at school for 3 years. Her literacy and numeracy were poor and she previously had a drug and alcohol issue. She had been kicked out of home when she was 13 years old. She was seeing a drug and alcohol counsellor and was in emergency housing, with the goal of independent housing-

She indicated that she would like to reconnect with her mother. PRACE contacted Darebin Youth Services who organised a counsellor that would help her through the process. This student was doing well then she discovered that she was pregnant. We arranged for her to go to the Women's

Hospital for an information session and had a 'Best Interest Care plan' meeting with her support team.

Our student decided to terminate her pregnancy and her mother offered for her to go home to recuperate and reconnect.

Unfortunately, due to the funding formula imposed by the Department, we were not in a financial position to hold this student's place for her here at PRACE. We need to have our classes filled to keep the program viable. The only way she can return is if someone else leaves the program. The travesty of this situation is that we know by using the same model that we had used the previous year she could well have had the same positive outcomes and we could have reengaged this student back into education. We built the relationships and the support. We gained her trust and she wanted to be here and learn. Whilst we contacted Swinburne TAFE in Croydon and spoke with the pathways facilitator and they in turn have spoke to our student, unfortunately she continues to be disengaged and disadvantaged.

This student is not the only one in 2010 that has personal issues that may affect their participation. A summary of the Student cohort for this year, which is not unlike previous years, is made up of 16 young people aged between 16 and 19 years of age. Their issues include, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, teenage parenting, eating disorders, participation in criminal activity. Many have poor language, literacy and numeracy skills and have been disengaged from education for a lengthy period of time. Over half are disengaged from their families. The students are unemployed and suffer financial hardship.

We strongly believe that the government cannot achieve their goals in reengaging young people in education and training without a strong ACE sector that is appropriately funded to support disadvantaged young people to re-engage in education and training.

The second issue relates to the Youth Transitions Paper, although mentioning ACE appears to have an underlying assumption that schools are the best places for young people to be however for the young people who come to ACE this has not been the case. Of the 16 young people studying with us in 2010 all have had negative experiences at school and wont re-engage with schools, all of our students have multiple issues which means they are unable to keep up their schooling in a Secondary school setting. For example: A student with a chronic illness that had hospitalised her on and off for a period of 6 years, she had disconnected from school and friends. Although she attended the school program in the hospital and at times gone back to school, she wasn't at either place long enough to complete any significant educational outcomes. We were able to use Skype to give her fluidity with her studies and also allowed her to keep connected to friends. Finally, 12 students have left school prior to year 9 and are now 16 and 17 years old with significant literacy issues. Their age has now becomes a barrier to their academic pathway as they won't go back into the appropriate academic year level – however will come to an adult environment ACE – and be supported to re-engage with their learning and continue on with their learning and employment pathway.

Recommendations –

- Effective retention, re engagement and transitions for young people in Victoria to achieve their potential and access to employment requires an educational and training system that is flexible and responsive to the individual needs of the learner. This system needs to be resourced to ensure equitable and fair access for all irrespective of the learning environment the learner selects as the appropriate one for them.
- The Youth Transition system needs to be reflected in the Skills Victoria funding model for 15 – 19 year olds. At present young people are disadvantaged if they select ACE as their

preferred education provider for VCAL because the funding model does not provide sufficient resources to guarantee ongoing programs in the long term AND does not allow for the process of re-engaging disadvantaged young people which can at time be a lengthy process.

- It is essential that DEECD and DIIRD recognise ACE as a crucial provider and that the ACE sector be funded appropriately and sustainably to deliver to the most disadvantaged and disengaged Young People in Victoria. The departments need to consult with the sector at the provider level and give priority to the ACE sectors perception of education, training & employment pathways. Equity with other providers needs to be granted to ACE's role in this process.