Learning Choices:
A Map for the Future

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For Dusseldorp Skills Forum

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Executive Summary

For over 20 years the Dusseldorp Skills Forum has focused on innovative educational pathways to engage young people in learning. This report has been commissioned to provide an overview of the field of alternative education provision in Australia, the multitude of inclusive and flexible learning programs and initiatives that DSF refers to as *Learning Choices*. The report draws together the data and key findings of available research nationally, and identifies the recognised gaps in knowledge that can inform a future research agenda.

The report acknowledges that terminology is contentious, but has chosen to use the terms Learning Choices programs, disenfranchised youth and conventional schooling. As background, an overview of relevant policy in relation to raising educational attainment and provision of Learning Choices programs is provided. Despite a shared national policy agenda, this demonstrates some differences in policy between the states and territories.

The core of the report is based on analysis of the data collected in the national survey of Learning Choices programs (administered by Dusseldorp Skills Forum during 2011), evaluation and annual reports from individual programs, and relevant research reports. The key findings include:

- **Numbers**: the Learning Choices National Scan captured over 400 programs in 1200 locations nationally, working with 33,000 young people during 2011. The actual number of Learning Choices programs, and of young people attending these programs, is higher since the National Scan has not captured all programs in Australia.

- **Outcomes**: program reports provide data in relation to attendance, academic achievement, destinations, non-academic achievement and stakeholder satisfaction. Overall programs outline improvements for these types of outcomes based on young people's previous achievements and experiences, if not relative to state averages. However, the quality of outcomes data varies. Research points to limitations on the ability of programs to achieve positive outcomes as well as limitations related to the measurement of outcomes.

- **Structures**: the vast majority of Learning Choices programs are relatively small, which research suggests enables successful provision. A small majority are full time and a small majority run over a full year or longer. Results from the Learning Choices National Scan show almost all programs are part of a local, state or national network. It is likely non-networked programs are underrepresented in the Scan. Learning Choices programs are organised in a variety of different ways, especially in terms of their relation to conventional schooling. Cross-sectoral and interagency collaborations are considered valuable in the research reports. Funding problems are reported to be a barrier to the quality and sustainability of programs both in program and in research reports.

- **Mission**: about 60% of programs in the Learning Choices National Scan target a broad range of young people, while about 40% have a more specialised purpose. The majority of program reports demonstrate an aim to adapt their approach to meet student needs, rather than aiming to change the young person him or herself. Nevertheless, the research warns against the danger of a deficit approach in the aims or mission of a school.

- **Curriculum**: The Learning Choices National Scan shows that most programs offer accredited course options. Common aspects include practical and applied learning, individual learning plans and integrated/project approaches. The research agrees all of these are important but suggest the quality of

implementation varies. The vast majority of programs offer a wide range of activities, including enabling activities, co-curricular activities and activities that connect with the local community. The research mainly comments on enabling activities, noting these are important but not sufficient.

- **Staffing**: Learning Choices programs have relatively high levels of staffing with high staff-student ratios. Research provides evidence this contributes to program success partly because it enables positive relationships between staff and students that are seen as essential. Many programs employ a variety of staff, not just teachers but also youth workers and counsellors. Staff are recognised as being very committed and hard-working. The research suggests professional development needs to be a priority, to support collaboration between a range of staff as well as supporting the high workload.

Major gaps in knowledge that need addressing are listed in section 4 of the report, in relation to the themes of numbers, outcomes, structures, mission, curriculum and staffing. Appendix 2 provides an annotated bibliography of selected, useful research reports and Appendix 3 provides a list of recent and current related research projects.

1.   Introduction

1.1   Purpose of the report

Dusseldorp Skills Forum has commissioned this report to provide a comprehensive picture of the Learning Choices sector, to pull together the existing research and evidence, summarise the data and findings that are available, and identify the gaps in knowledge.

A wide variety of 'alternative' (Learning Choices) educational programs have been developed in Australia aimed at (re-)engaging young people with education. Some of these grew out of interest in progressive and democratic approaches to education while others responded to policy pressures to enable more young people to complete school. However, alternative education in Australia is fragmented both as a sector of educational practice and as a field of research. This means we have only limited knowledge about the range of programs that exist.

What we do know is that Learning Choices programs offer vital pathways to enable young people to remain in school or to return to complete their education. There is clear evidence for the need such Learning Choices programs address. Retention to Year 12 has stabilised at around 75% since the mid-1990s (ABS, 2010). The retention rate for Indigenous young people continues to lag well behind at only 45% (Purdie and Buckley, 2010). The OECD provides comparative data for what it calls upper secondary attainment. The secondary school drop out rate is given as 14.7% for Australia compared to 12.9% for the OECD and 11% for the European Union (OECD, 2009). More than 16% of 15-19 year olds in Australia are not fully engaged and nearly a quarter of 20 to 24 year-olds: that is not in full time education or full time work (FYA, 2010, p.5; p.22). The concern grows when considering those 15-24 year olds who completed Year 10 or below: almost 57% are not fully engaged in the year after leaving school (FYA, 2010, p.21). Early school leaving has been linked to increased likelihood of unemployment, underemployment, crime and ill-health (AIG and DSF, 2007; BCA, 2003; FYA, 2010).

The policy response has been to negotiate a national agreement on youth attainment and transitions: the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. As part of this, the Australian Federal, State and Territory governments agreed to a target to raise the Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rate to 90% by 2015 (CoAG, 2009, p.7). Achieving this target will require many young people who traditionally have left formal education 'early', for whatever reason, to remain in or return to education. Learning Choices programs play an important role in enabling these young people to attain Year 12 or equivalent qualifications and thereby assist governments to meet their target. Knowledge about the contribution Learning Choices programs make to engaging young people with education and helping them attain credentials is imperative.

For the past decade Dusseldorp Skills Forum has built connections among Learning Choices programs through its Learning Choices expos in 2004 and 2006 and its Learning Choices website: www.learningchoices.org.au. In 2011, Dusseldorp Skills Forum further developed this by conducting a national survey of Learning Choices programs and initiatives. The 'Learning Choices National Scan' used the definition of "those programs/schools that cater for young people at risk of not completing their education". More than 400 individual entries were made by the end of the survey period. Although inevitably not all relevant programs are included, this is the most comprehensive database of Learning Choices programs currently available.

This report draws on data from the National Scan, supplemented with reports from individual programs (see Appendix 1) and existing research publications (see Appendix 2 for a selected annotated bibliography) to provide an overview of alternative education provision in Australia.

1.2   Terminology

A variety of terms are used in program and research reports in this field – and these terms are subject to some controversy and disagreement (eg. see Connor, 2006; De Jong, 2006; Mills and McGregor, 2010). Related to this, definitions of the sector are complex. As argued in the US context by Aron and Zweig (2003, pp.20-21):

> There is no commonly-accepted, or commonly-understood, definition of what constitutes "alternative education". In part this reflects the newness of the field (at least as an area that is attracting widespread and mainstream interest), the variety of environments and contexts in which alternative education programming has evolved, and the many sub-groups of vulnerable youth who might benefit from some type of alternative education, broadly defined.

Any choice of terms is subject to critique, but in the end a choice must be made, in order to be able to write about these programs. Recognising these limitations this report uses the following terms:

- Learning Choices Programs
- Disenfranchised youth
- Conventional schooling

Learning Choices Programs

Terms used in reports by and about programs include alternative education, second chance education, re-engagement programs, flexi schools or flexible learning options, community-based programs, and non-traditional or unconventional programs. A criticism of some of these terms is that they can be seen to reinforce the status of such programs as on the margin of the education system. Dusseldorp Skills Forum therefore uses 'Learning Choices' as a more positive term. While in reality, for many young people these programs are less an active choice than a last chance (see Spierings, 2003), the experience of alternative programs demonstrates that with proper support such programs can indeed become schools of choice. Moreover, the term Learning Choices indicates that education systems need to provide a range of suitable choices to all young people. Learning Choices programs are often characterised by a shared philosophy of providing enfranchising socially inclusive educational pathways for young people who, for complex reasons, are outside conventional education.

Mills and McGregor (2010) found in their Queensland study that some programs wish to be named and legitimised as schools while others strongly objected to that label. Even the term 'program' has been criticised, because this may imply a lack of permanency - allowing governments to re-allocate funding from one program to another in ways which would not be accepted for schools. Nevertheless, the latter concern is not easily solved through a change in terminology.

Disenfranchised youth

Similarly, many different terms are used for the young people served by such programs: disengaged, vulnerable, alienated, disadvantaged, and 'at risk' youth. A critique of some of these terms is that they can be seen to blame the young people themselves for their lack of success in conventional schools. Alternative suggested terms are disenfranchised or marginalised youth (Te Riele, 2006a). This report uses 'disenfranchised' to indicate that the causes for young people's difficulty in conventional schooling largely lie outside of them – disenfranchisement is done to them by factors within schooling and society more broadly, rather than by themselves. A concern is that any term that combines an adjective and noun can be seen to label and stigmatise young people. A descriptive

phrase such as "young people who have been disenfranchised from education and learning" can counter this, but is too unwieldy to use repeatedly. The report therefore uses 'disenfranchised youth' as a shorthand.

Conventional schooling

Finally, the term 'mainstream' (as the flipside of 'alternative' or Learning Choices programs) is also challenged. As Connell (1994, p.137) argued "The very concept of 'mainstream' must be called into question, as it suggests reasoned consensus". Rather, mainstream schools are those that conform closely to the dominant, standard image of schooling. Similarly, Slee (2011, p.12, original emphasis) challenges the term 'regular' schools, because it is "code for the implied *normal school*. It follows that there must be *normal or regular students* for whom these schools exist. And, as the logic proceeds, there are other children who are not normal, regular, or valid". The report therefore uses the term 'conventional' schooling.

2.   Policy

Before discussing the findings about Learning Choices programs, it is useful to gain an overview of relevant policy in Australia. In the past few years federal, state and territory governments have changed the requirements around compulsory schooling and participation for young people. In relation to this, they have also established policies relating to the provision of alternative (Learning Choices) educational pathways. These policies impact on the practices of Learning Choices programs and also increase the significance of such programs for attaining policy targets and meeting the needs of disenfranchised young people.

2.1   National Policy

The National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions was negotiated between the Australian Federal, State and Territory governments through the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG) in 2009. As part of this, all governments agreed to a target to raise the Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rate from 83.5% in 2009 to 90% by 2015 (CoAG, 2009, p.7)[1]. The relevant 'performance benchmark' (CoAG, 2009, p.14) clarifies the 90% target as "the proportion of young people aged 20-24 who have attained Year 12 or a Certificate II or above". Year 12 leads to the standard senior secondary certificate. Certificate II is a vocational qualification, predominantly provided by state-run Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges and some private 'registered training organisations'.

To achieve this major new target, three related policies have been agreed to:

1. A new minimum requirement for young people to complete junior secondary school (Year 10, usually at age 15 or 16). The new agreement involves a shift from a simple age-based requirement to a combination of attainment and age.
2. A 'learn or earn' policy, which requires young people to be in full-time schooling, recognised training or paid employment (or a mix of these) until they turn 17.
3. Restrictions on access to welfare benefits for young people under age 21, if they have not yet attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.

It is worth noting that although the second policy above is for a 'participation' requirement, the common public impression is that it is now compulsory to stay in school until age 17. This is especially evident in New South Wales, where the state policy refers to 'the new school leaving age' (NSW DET, 2009), but also applies to the other states and territories.

The federal government refers to this set of policies as a *Compact with young Australians*. In return for the Year 10 completion requirement, 'learn or earn' participation requirement and welfare benefit restrictions outlined above, the federal government pledges "an entitlement to an education or training place" (DEEWR, 2011). In practice, this means is that the *Compact* promises young people a government-subsidised study or training place as long as a place is available and subject to admission requirements.

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[1] The 2009 attainment rate is higher (at 83.5%) than the more commonly used retention rate (76%). There are two reasons for this: it is calculated for an older age group (20-24, instead of those progressing directly from Year 7/8 who get to Year 12 at age 17 or 18), and it includes also the completion of 'equivalent' vocational certificates by young people who have left school before Year 12. In real terms, it has been calculated that to meet the CoAG 90% target 92,527 additional young people will need to achieve Year 12 or equivalent between 2009 and 2015 (CoAG, 2009, p.20).

For the majority of young people who already complete Year 12 or an equivalent (almost 84%) this may not matter very much. The remaining minority of young people who traditionally have left formal education 'early', for whatever reason, will put the CoAG target and associated policies to the test. For these young people, Learning Choices programs are likely to play an important role.

This has been recognised through the Youth Connections program funded as part of the CoAG agreement. This program is "available to eligible young people who are at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education, and/or family and the community" (DEEWR, 2010, p.11) and provided regionally by organisations who were awarded the tender by DEEWR. One of the key strategies is that:

> Youth Connections Providers must ensure that at risk young people have access to education or training through an alternative learning facility. This should be through an appropriate facility that already exists in the region or through a facility established by the Provider. Where no appropriate alternative learning facility exists, Providers must establish a facility. (DEEWR, 2010, p.12).

Youth Connections therefore is a vital part of the Learning Choices landscape. Learning Choices programs may be offered by Youth Connections providers or may work closely with the Youth Connections provider in their region.

In addition to Youth Connections, the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions has also set up School Business Community Partnership Brokers, referred to as Partnership Brokers in short. These aim to foster a strategic, whole of community approach by building partnerships between and among schools, business and industry, parents and families and community groups to support student engagement and improve education and transition outcomes. Learning Choices programs are key stakeholders that Partnership Brokers would be expected to work with. One specific initiative is that some Partnership Brokers have developed service directories that include Learning Choices programs as part of establishing local networks.

Preceding the CoAG policies and of ongoing relevance for supporting Learning Choices programs is the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together — Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004* (Australian Government, 2011). This legislation allocates targeted funding to special schools and special assistance schools. Special Schools provide special programs or special activities for students with disabilities. Special Assistance Schools primarily catering for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. The latter is of most relevance to Learning Choices programs. State and Territory Education ministers must recognise a non-government Learning Choices program as a special assistance school, giving them access to this support. Once recognised, the Learning Choices program receives maximum SES funding (70 per cent of the relevant Average Government School Recurrent Costs amount) without regard to an SES score (DEEWR, 2012).

2.2   State and Territory Policy

Through the CoAG agreement, all states and territories have agreed not only to the 90% target but also to the set of three policies outlined above (the *Compact with young Australians*). Nevertheless, there are some minor differences between states and territories, especially in relation to procedures for implementing the policies and in relation to alternative education provision. This section provides a snapshot of the requirements in each State and Territory, as well as an indication of their policies in relation to Learning Choices provision.

ACT Snapshot

- A young person under age 17 who has not yet completed Year 10: For youth who indicate an intention to leave, responsibility rests with schools to complete a 'High School student Re-engagement/transition checklist' and to assist the young person with the transition to another school, college or approved education provider. Approved education providers are Registered Training Organisations that enable a young person to complete year 10 or 12 or undertake a vocational education and training course.

- A young person under age 17 who has completed Year 10: For this group the default expectation is to remain in education, however, the young person or their parent may apply for an Approval Statement (to undertake work related training, join the workforce or a combination of work /training/education) or even an Exemption Certificate for full or partial exemption from the participation requirement.

The ACT Youth Commitment requires all agencies that serve young people to the age of 17 to commit to ensuring that no young person is lost from education, training or employment (ACT DET, 2011). The Re-engaging Youth Leadership Group within the Education and Training Directorate (ETD) is responsible for alternative pathways. For example, the Tuggeranong Re-engaging Youth Network Board (RYNB) reports to this group, and has a key aim "to identify and communicate current pathways for the re- engagement of young people and future pathway opportunities" (ACT Government, 2011c).

NSW Snapshot

- A young person under age 17 who has not yet completed Year 10: Leaving school is a collaborative process between the student, the parent/caregiver, the school and the local TAFE whereby it is determined if it is in the student's best interest to transfer to TAFE for a Year 10 equivalent program. If all parties agree, then an approval form is completed by the school principal and the TAFE Institute director. It is also possible for the young person to take up an apprenticeship (or traineeship). This requires the principal to issue a Certificate of Exemption from Enrolment (NSW DET, 2009).

- A young person under age 17 who has completed Year 10: The school principal needs to ensure there are appropriate systems and procedures in place for supporting students in deciding which participation pathway to follow if they decide to leave school. Students who choose full-time work may be asked to provide a letter from their employer to the principal that confirms their employment (NSW DET, 2009).

In relation to Learning Choice programs, the Links to Learning program provides fixed-term grants to non-government community organisations to assist them in working with young people aged 12-24 who have left or are at risk of leaving school (NSW DEC, 2011). Learning Choices programs have been able to get recognition as special assistance schools (see national policy above). More recently, the NSW Board of Studies has added the option for schools to register as a "Board Endorsed Alternative Education Program". This provision enables a minority of young people to meet the new completion and participation requirements through an alternative program (NSW Board of Studies, 2011, p.10). Young people can also complete the Year 10 equivalent through an approved Learning Choices program at TAFE (approved in exceptional circumstances), or participate in one of the Government funded Youth Connections programs.

NT Snapshot

- A young person under age 17 who has not yet completed Year 10: In the Northern Territory, there is no clear procedure for students under the age of 17 who wish to leave school before completing Year 10, except obtaining approval to provide home education.

- A young person under age 17 who has completed Year 10: After completing Year 10, young people must complete a Notification of Arrangements form (NT DET, 2011a). The responsibility lies with the parent/guardian to ensure the form is completed and sent to the school or local Division. They need to get the training provider or employer to complete their details and indicate the hours per week the young person will be engaged in work or training. The Northern Territory also offers a 'Beyond School Guarantee Referral Service' for young people who need "assistance with pathways to employment, education or training choices in the first two years after leaving school" (NT DET, 2011b). Providers of approved training programs and employers are expected to ensure the young person has completed Year 10 before accepting them for training or employment.

Supports for Learning Choices related initiatives in the Northern Territory include:

- Personal Learning Plan as part of the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET) to assists students in planning for their future (NT Office of Youth Affairs, 2010).
- The Alice Springs Youth Hub, which includes "an alternative education program for young people who have difficulty engaging in school" (NT Government, 2011) provided by the Edmund Rice Education Australia's national Youth+ initiative.
- Regional Youth Education Coordination Project that focuses on disengaged youth in 13 remote communities in Central Australia (NT Office of Youth Affairs, 2010).
- Training for Remote Youth provides structured training and learning experiences that prepares youth for employment in the community or re-engages them in further learning (NT Office of Youth Affairs, 2010).
- The Northern Territory Open Education Centre (NTOEC) may act as a 'de facto' Learning Choices program for some students (NTOEC, 2011).
- The Indigenous Response Program (NT DET, 2011c) provides access to Vocational Education and Training (VET) that meets the specific needs of Indigenous clients and is delivered on site in communities. This is not an alternative to meet the participation requirements, as it is offered only to Indigenous people who are at least 17 years of age.

QLD Snapshot

- A young person under 16, with or without Year 10: Queensland refers to a compulsory school age *until* the young person turns 16 or completes Year 10, whichever comes first. It appears that exemptions and Learning Choice Options are not available to youth under 16 years, who must remain in school during the compulsory school age. In Queensland, the Senior Phase Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF) preceded the CoAG agreement by several years and as a result there are some differences with other states.

- A young person between 16 -17, with or without year 10: enters the compulsory participation age whereby they must remain in a full-time combination of education/training/employment (25 hrs week) until 17 years; unless full-time employment or an apprenticeship is obtained. Senior Education and Training (SET) Planning is used to assist students to identify appropriate education and training

pathways (Education Queensland, 2011b). The Principal is required to open a learning account for students with the Queensland Studies Authority so that a young person can work towards a Certificate of Education if he/she wants to. The compulsory participation age ends when the young person gains a Senior Certificate, Certificate III or Certificate IV; or has participated in eligible options for 2 years; or turns 17 (Education Queensland, 2007, 2011a)

In relation to recognising Learning Choices programs as special assistance schools, the Queensland government uses these criteria for an accredited non-state school (Education Queensland, 2010):

- has been established specifically and solely for the purpose of catering for young people who are not engaged in education, VET or work;
- has facilities, staffing structures and operational models that support education services for young people to re-engage in sustainable educational pathways;
- enrols only students who are not engaged in education, VET or work;
- enrols students mainly through a referral process (e.g. other schools, juvenile justice system, child protection agency, community agencies, etc);
- has a flexible and specific educational program designed to re-engage and maintain students in an accredited education pathway;
- has active links with community agencies and educational providers which assist 'at risk' youth;
- does not charge tuition fees.

Learning Choices programs funded by the government to support young people who are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged include (Education Queensland, 2011b):

- Access to Pathways
- Flexible Learning Services
- Youth Support Coordinators
- the Queensland Community Mentoring Program
- Positive Learning Centres
- Get Set for Work

SA Snapshot

- A young person under 16, with or without Year 10: In South Australia, the compulsory school age is until age 16. The parent/guardian of a young person under age 16 can complete a request for 'Exemption from school enrolment/attendance and education enrolment/participation' that the school can approve (SA DECD, 2011a, b).

- A young person between 16 -17, with or without year 10: Between the ages of 16-17, young people must participate in an approved learning program or apply for an exemption to participate in full time employment, unless they have already completed the Year 12 SACE or an equivalent qualification. Responsibility lies with the student's school to negotiate an approved learning program using the EDSAS (reporting system) to create a Compulsory Education Age (CEA) record (SA DECD, 2011c, d). For an exemption, the school initiates a counselling process to discuss the student's circumstances and the quality of the employment opportunity in terms of any training component and its relevance to the student's future career aspirations. The school principal must endorse the exemption form and forward it to the Director, School and District Operations (SA DECD, 2011b, d).

In relation to Learning Choices programs, in 2005 South Australia set up Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs) which from 2007 onwards also included Flexible Learning Options (FLO). This is the most systematic, state-wide approach to Learning Choices provision in Australia so far. ICANs are supported at state level but operate locally through a management committee that "collaborates to develop local solutions to meet the particular needs of identified disengaged young people in their region" (SA DECS, 2011, p.4). Flexible Learning Options is an enrolment strategy whereby the activities undertaken by the young person may include "part-time schooling; learning at an independent centre located off a school campus; a TAFE course, a course provided by a non-government organisation and structured workplace learning" (SA DECS, 2011, p.4). Responsibility for students remains with the local government school, even when they leave to attend FLO activities elsewhere, but practical support for the young person is provided through a case manager.

TAS Snapshot

- A young person under 16, with or without Year 10: In Tasmania, all young people are required to be enrolled in a school or home-educated until the end of the year in which they turn 16 with or without completing Year 10 (Department of Education Tasmania, 2011a). Parents can apply for 'dispensation' to the Secretary of the Department of Education through their local school for medical reasons.

- A young person between 16 -17, with or without Year 10: For Year 10 students the responsibility lies with the school principal who must lodge a participation record with the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority (TQA) identifying the student's intended destination for the following year. Leading up to this, government schools use a pathway planning process for each student, supported by Pathway Planning Officers. However, the responsibility for ensuring the plan is implemented lies with the parent/guardian (Department of Education Tasmania, 2011b, c).

In terms of Learning Choices programs, Innovative Flexible Education Grants are used to provide initiatives that support flexible learning for secondary students. Grants are made to partnerships of non-government organisations with government schools for three years "to support new ideas worth exploring or existing programs which could provide evidence to show they work" (Department of Education Tasmania, 2011d). The consultation paper for *the Agenda for Children and Young People* (Tasmania DPC, 2010) proposes to examine the concept of extended schools, and to "develop an understanding that education can occur in a range of settings and through a variety of delivery mechanisms for young people who are excluded or absenting themselves from school".

VIC Snapshot

- A young person under age 17 who has not yet completed Year 10: An exemption authorised by the Regional Director is required. This is done through completing a 'School Exit Form' (DEECD, 2011a, b). Permission may be granted for undertaking an apprenticeship or to complete Year 10 or equivalent in a non-school setting. These young people should also have a formal exit interview with a careers practitioner and complete the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) information and individual Career Action Plans (pathway plans) documentation.

- A young person under age 17 who has completed Year 10: Exit interviews and the 'School Exit Form' also apply to young people under age 17 who have completed Year 10. Schools are required to record destinations of Year 10-12 exit students through CASES 21 (the integrated school administration and finance software system used in Victorian Government Schools) for transmission to DEECD following the February Census (DEECD, 2011a, b).

In relation to Learning Choices programs, the Victorian government has been working towards a policy framework that is intended to provide a strengthened, consistent and coordinated approach (DEECD, 2010). Four tiers of flexible learning options have been proposed (KPMG, 2009):

1. Differentiated provision of education (within mainstream schools)
2. Targeted initiatives (for prevention of disengagement)
3. Flexible learning options within school settings
4. Flexible learning options in separate or off-site settings

This report is the starting point for ongoing policy development that has not yet been resolved. A DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Roundtable was held in 2011 on the topic of 'disengaged youth'. More recently, Youth Partnerships Pilots have been established that are aimed at "strengthening collaboration and consistency in service provision to young people, to improve engagement with education and training, leading to an increase in the completion of Year 12 or equivalent and reducing the escalation of problems for individual young people" (DEECD, 2012).

WA Snapshot

- A young person under 16, with or without Year 10: Western Australia, like Queensland, created youth participation legislation some years before the CoAG agreement. As such any young person under 16 years is within the compulsory school age and is expected to stay at school or be registered for home schooling until they turn 16.

- A young person between 16 -17, with or without Year 10: Young people under age 17, whether they have completed Year 10 or not, should have an individual pathway plan (WA DET 2007, 2011). A pathway refers to a course or combination of courses to be accessed by a student in fulfilling the legal requirement of full-time participation. A 'Notice of Arrangements' form as well as either an 'Application to Participate in a Combination of Options' form or 'Application to Participate in Full-time Employment' form needs to be completed by the parent/carer. The Participation Manager in the local district education office has authority to approve this (WA DET 2007, 2011). Unique to WA, responsibility is placed on employers, who are not allowed to employ compulsory-aged students in the year in which they turn 16 or 17 years of age on a full-time or part-time basis without prior approval, if the employment forms part of a pathway option other than full-time school (WA DET, 2007).

Learning Choices programs in WA are organised in two ways:

1. Engagement programs are for young people in Year 11 and 12, and aim to enable them to better access further education, training and / or employment by developing "awareness, skills, knowledge and personal attributes" (WA DET, 2011b).

2. Community based courses are for young people of compulsory school age who have disengaged from schooling and need an alternative opportunity "to develop their literacy, numeracy, social and life skills in a safe and secure environment that is comfortable for them and conducive to learning" (WA DES, 2011, p.1).

WA also has Curriculum and Re-Engagement (CARE) schools that specifically cater for young people disenfranchised from mainstream schools (eg. BPEA, 2011; CTEC, 2010).

Generally, across all states and territories, there is little knowledge about how these various procedures work 'on the ground' and the impact they have on supporting successful transitions. Further research is needed to document the enactment and effects of these policies.

3.   Findings

The aim of this report is to map existing knowledge about Learning Choices programs in Australia, in order to inform further research as well as policy and practice. Therefore, the analysis of findings has used two strategies:

- Establishing factual data - what do we know from the Learning Choices National Scan and the additional program reports? (see Appendix 1 for the list of reports);
- Synthesis of existing research - what are the key findings as well as indications of gaps in knowledge from recent major research reports? (see Appendix 2 for an annotated bibliography of selected reports and the reference list for all sources).

This section discusses the results of each of these strategies in relation to six topic areas that are relevant to understanding Learning Choices provision:

- Numbers
- Outcomes
- Structures
- Mission
- Curriculum
- Staffing

3.1   Numbers

Data

As outlined in section 1.2, terminology in this sector is contested and definitions of the sector are complex. Estimating the number of Learning Choices programs and students is, therefore, not straightforward. Overall, the responses to the Learning Choices National Scan add up to 61,000 young people in over 400 programs in almost 2000 locations nationally. However, two specific contributions to the Learning Choices National Scan require further consideration: Adult and Community Education (ACE) in Victoria with 10000 students in 320 locations and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) with 19175 students in 430 locations. Without a doubt these both offer choices for learning to young people: ACE (as well as TAFE across Australia) gives young people the option of studying for vocational certificates, traineeships and apprenticeships within a more adult, post-school environment. VCAL (as well as senior secondary VET in School (VETiS) pathways in other states and territories) offer an alternative to the traditional academic Year 11 and 12 curriculum. VCAL and VETiS demonstrate how school systems have responded to the dramatic rise in retention to Year 12 during the 1990s and the resulting broadened student population by offering more inclusive curricular approaches. Both ACE/TAFE and VCAL/VETiS enable many young people to remain in education by offering vocational learning options that lead to credentials that are in many (although not all) ways equivalent to more traditional Year 12 qualifications.

The remarkable success of ACE/TAFE and VCAL/VETiS is worth noting. They provide inspiration for how innovative educational initiatives can take hold and become so widespread they are part of conventional educational provision. For example, both Myconos (2011, p.2) and YacVic (2011, p.6) suggest VCAL plays an

important role in catering for many students within conventional education. The ACE Learn Local website makes clear that "Learn Local education and training is for everyone", rather than catering specifically for disenfranchised young people. Including not only VCAL and ACE but also VETiS and TAFE nationally would increase the number of locations and young people manyfold. Such inclusivity and reach is good for young Australians, but also reinforces these programs' more mainstream nature. For this reason, this report does not include ACE/TAFE and VCAL/VETiS as entire, large programs within the notion of Learning Choices programs.

For this report, Learning Choices programs are those that are (as yet) not mainstream and are aimed particularly at disenfranchised young people who are not well served by more conventional schooling. This includes those aspects of ACE/TAFE and VCAL/ VETiS that explicitly aim to cater for young people who are unlikely to complete their schooling in conventional settings. In the ACE and TAFE sector that includes alternative Year 10 and Year 12 programs, such as the Certificate in General Education for Adults and the Tertiary Preparation Certificate. In VCAL/VETiS that includes Community VCAL programs as well as other specific Learning Choices programs that draw on VCAL or VETiS for their curriculum.

Using the scope as outlined above, the results from the Learning Choices National Scan point to:

- 33,000 young people
- in over 400 programs
- in 1200 locations nationally.

In addition, another 4100 young people were on waiting lists to enrol in programs (see Holdsworth, 2011). This data highlights that Learning Choices programs cater for large numbers of young people and play an important role in educational provision in Australia.

Moreover, the actual number of Learning Choices programs, and of young people attending these programs, undoubtedly is much higher than is evident from the results of the National Scan. For example, the Scan has an underrepresentation of programs from New South Wales, from programs that operate within the government sector, and from un-networked programs. It is safe to state that *tens of thousands of young people in hundreds of programs across Australia* are engaged in flexible and alternative learning initiatives as part of the Learning Choices sector.

Synthesis of research

Key findings
Research in this field has tended to focus on relatively small numbers of Learning Choices programs, and thus can shed little additional light on the number of programs and students nationally. However, several authors do point to the high demand for the sites they researched, with waiting lists a common feature (eg. Beck, 2010; Hands on Learning, 2010; Mills an McGregor, 2010; Myconos, 2011; Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland, 2011). In addition, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YacVic, 2011) argues there is demand for more inclusive learning options in rural and regional areas. Also in Victoria, the DEECD (2011c) points out "13%, or almost 50,000, 15-19 year olds are not engaged full time in education, training or employment" as a broad indication of young people who are disengaged and potentially in need of support.

Gaps in knowledge
Mills and McGregor (2010, p.9) suggest the need for a "thorough mapping of the existing educational services available to young people and the pathways and curricula they provide". In 2012, a research project is

commencing that will attempt to comprehensively map programs across the ACT (project 5 in Appendix 3) and nationally (project 12 in Appendix 3). The latter will build on the Learning Choices National Scan and provide initial findings by early 2013. So far, however, there is no further knowledge about numbers from existing research projects.

The Learning Choices National Scan offers the best data to date about the number of Learning Choices programs and students in Australia. However, this Scan does not capture all programs. As Holdsworth (2011, p.4) notes in his analysis of the Scan data, response to the invitation to contribute "may be affected by the degree of networking, of information and contacts within various states and territories". As a result there continues to be a clear gap in knowledge about the number of programs and young people in this sector.

In relation to the broad definition, vocational and community programs that aim to (re-)engage young people (similar to VCAL and ACE) could arguably also be counted from other States and Territories. For example, most jurisdictions now offer the opportunity to complete Year 11 and 12 with predominantly vocational options, although outside Victoria these lead to the same Year 12 certificate rather than a separate one. It would be useful for future research to explore which programs from various States serve a similar purpose in engaging young people with education and the number of students involved. This would give a more accurate picture of the Learning Choices provision across Australia, based on the broad definition.

In relation to the narrow definition, more research also is needed. As noted by Holdsworth (2011, see above) non-networked 'single' programs are likely to be under-represented. In addition, most TAFE and ACE colleges have Year 10 and Year 12 equivalent programs (such as the Certificate in General and Vocational Education and the Tertiary Preparation Certificate). Only a few of these are included in the National Scan. Finally, many conventional schools have Learning Choices initiatives within them. Some of these are captured in the scan through organisations that provide such programs within schools. Other initiatives, however, are likely to be funded within state departments or through the National Partnership on Low Socio-Economic School Communities.

In addition, more research is needed to analyse the number of programs and young people in relation to background characteristics, such as:

- System/affiliation of programs (such as government, independent or Catholic school system, as well as naming specific networks they belong to);
- Urban, suburban, regional and rural provision (see also YacVic, 2011);
- Provision of single-gender programs (Holdsworth, 2011);
- Gender of participants (Holdsworth, 2011) ; De Jong and Griffiths (2006) and Wyn, Stokes and Tyler, (2004) point to an over-representation of boys;
- Age of participants (Holdsworth, 2011); Beck (2010) and NEYON (2010) point to a lack of provision for young people under age 15;
- Participants' characteristics in terms of conditions associated with disadvantage, including Indigeneity, disability, language background, socioeconomic status, level of prior educational attainment, and geographic isolation (Hargreaves, 2011), and accommodation and income support (Wyn et al, 2004).

3.2   Outcomes

Data

The outcomes of programs were not addressed in the Learning Choices National Scan, beyond whether the programs offered credentials (see 3.5 below). Outcomes are referred to in almost all program reports, but with great variation in the amount of detail and strength of evidence provided. The subheadings below group the types of outcomes that were most commonly reported by programs: attendance, academic achievement, destinations, non-academic achievement and stakeholder satisfaction. The first three of these are of particular relevance to the national policy agenda around raising educational attainment (see section 2). The latter two cover 'softer' and less tangible outcomes that are highly valued by programs and provide indications of wellbeing and engagement.

Attendance
Attendance is listed as an important, basic outcome by several programs. Reported attendance rates vary from 40% to over 90%. Several Learning Choices programs note that their students have a chequered attendance history. Some programs use this history to explain why attendance rates are lower than in conventional schools as well as to point to their 'added value': ie. the improvement in students' attendance, even if it is not yet perfect. For example, a 'stand alone' program[2] had an average student attendance rate in 2010 of 83% and contends: "Referral information from students' previous schools indicates high levels of truancy and school refusal. These figures show a significant improvement for the majority of students".

Programs also point out that a single average attendance rate does not capture the diversity of their student population. Some of their students have more difficult life circumstances that may lead to very low attendance, affecting the average figure. The report for a 'stand alone' program explains that an individual student's attendance also may vary from term to term or even week to week:

> *Students enrolled at [X program] come to the school with very complex backgrounds and experience a range of issues which impact seriously on their capacity to engage with the education process. Individual attendance can be inconsistent according to the events occurring in their lives at the time.*

Therefore, although attendance is seen as an important outcome, measuring it is complex. Nevertheless, some programs report outstanding successes, not only turning around previously poor attendance but achieving better results than conventional schools. One 'stand alone' registered school program highlights that attendance rates are consistently above regional and State averages. Another 'integrated' program[3] (within a conventional school) notes that compared to their previous school attendance, students in the program had:

> *an average increase of 29 more school days per student, effectively attending school 6 weeks more than they had in either of the previous two terms.*

Keeping in mind the mixed quality of the data, and the concerns raised regarding measuring attendance, many Learning Choices programs report significant gains in attendance by young people.

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[2] See section 3.3 for an explanation of 'stand alone' programs
[3] See section 3.3 for an explanation of 'integrated' programs

Academic achievement

A small number of programs include Year 9 level education, which means their students fall within the NAPLAN cohort. A few reports offer detailed information about the performance of their students in NAPLAN, which highlights the struggle of their students with literacy and numeracy. For example in one 'stand alone' program between 36-64% of students met the minimum standards on the various tests (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy) - compared to the State average of between 89-94%. The reports did not provide (and probably did not have access to) their students' Year 7 NAPLAN results, so that it is unclear to what extent these programs had been able to improve students' literacy and numeracy, as measured by NAPLAN. Data on literacy and numeracy based on other measurements was not provided in the reports.

Year 10 level education was very common across the programs. In New South Wales Year 10 has traditionally involved standardised state-wide testing for the award of a formal School Certificate[4]. Several of the accredited schools in NSW provided detailed School Certificate results in their annual reports. Table 1 shows the proportion of students who achieved at or above the minimum level (Band 3-6) for the three Learning Choices programs (all stand alone accredited schools) that provided such data, as well as the NSW state average.

Table 1: School Certificate results

	English	Mathematics	Science	History	Geography
Program A	100%	64%	91%	27%	45%
Program B	50%	20%	45%	25%	25%
Program C	90%	63%	75%	43%	48%
NSW average	95%	83%	92%	80%	84%

As with NAPLAN, these results highlight that overall students in Learning Choices programs achieve at significantly lower levels than the state average. This is to some extent the definition of these Learning Choices programs: they cater for students for whom conventional schooling has not worked well.

Only a few programs give information about the achievements by their students in Year 12 exams and this indicates only a few achieve highly enough to gain entry to university, although in two 'stand alone' programs several students achieved above the state average in certain subject areas and one student won a prestigious scholarship to attend university.

Destinations

Post-school destination surveys are fairly commonly used according to the reports by Learning Choices programs, usually within the first year after students have left. For programs that offer no or only low level credentials, a common destination is to other Learning Choices programs, educational transition programs, or pre-employment programs.

Table 2 provides the results for two 'stand alone' programs (one for Year 10 students and one for Year 12 students), as well as for ICAN Flexible Learning Options (mostly 'stand alone'), and for the six 'affiliated'[5] ACE/TAFE programs investigated by Wyn et al (2004). Although the data for these sources does not include exactly the same categories, it is striking that a substantial proportion of young people re-enrol in the same course or program in the following year, except for the Year 12 graduates. The group for whom destinations are 'unknown' or 'other' is significant across all three examples.

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[4] This has been abolished from 2012 onwards.
[5] See section 3.3 for an explanation of 'affiliated' programs

Table 2: Post-program destinations

Destination	Stand alone program, Year 10	Stand alone program, Year 12	ICAN FLO (ICAN, 2010)	ACE / TAFE (Wyn et al, 2004)
Returned to enrol in the same course / program	36%	1%	56%	20%
Other alternative education options	4%	-	-	-
Conventional schooling	16%	-	10%	5%
Pre-vocational training	14%	-	-	-
TAFE/private RTO/training/apprenticeship	-	38%	1%	39%
University	-	23%	-	-
Pre-employment programs	11%	-	-	-
Employment (ft or pt)	3%	21%	3%	20%
Unemployed	1%	2%	7%	-
Unknown / left / other	14%	14%	20%	16%

Based on all the program reports, common 'learning' destinations mentioned are Year 11 or 12 in conventional schools and Certificate II and III level courses at TAFE, ACE or a private RTO. In other words, the Learning Choices programs can act as a pathway back into a relatively conventional educational option. The reports do not provide data on the outcomes of their graduates in these further education options.

Transition into employment is a common outcome for programs offering higher level qualifications (year 12 and Certificate III and up), with reports indicating between 20-40% of graduates move on to a job. Some programs also list the number of graduates who are seeking work or are unemployed. On the positive side, one 'integrated' program with a vocational focus demonstrates the much lower experience of unemployment among its graduates compared to young Australians generally. Other programs that provide this data indicate between 1-25% of graduates are seeking work at the time of their destination survey. There is not enough information to suggest what causes this variation.

Non-academic achievement
The overwhelming majority of non-academic outcomes mentioned in the program reports relate to social and emotional wellbeing, especially improved confidence and self esteem. Some 'stand alone' and 'integrated' Learning Choices programs are mostly aimed at improving wellbeing. The evaluation for one such 'integrated', short-term program found that 100% of the graduates agreed the program had increased their confidence. For some programs and some students, this wellbeing went a step further, including addressing mental health difficulties. For example students in a 'stand alone' program:

> *talked about learning skills to manage anxiety in the program then transferring this to peers and to workplaces.*

Improved attitudes and motivation were also seen as valuable outcomes. The evaluation of the same 'stand alone' program found some young people

> *talked about regaining their enjoyment of learning, and their motivation to do well in the world.*

Although many Learning Choices programs engage in art and sports activities, only the reports for two 'stand alone' registered school program address these areas in terms of outcomes. In relation to sport, they mention students taking part in certain competitions; being selected for regional, state or national teams; and winning medals. In terms of art, they highlight exhibitions and community activities as relevant outcomes.

Stakeholder satisfaction

Several program reports include results from surveys the Learning Choices program conducted with various stakeholders. In addition, other reports draw on more incidental feedback, for example letters to the Learning Choices program. Most of the reported stakeholder satisfaction relates to students and to parents/carers. The evaluation of one 'stand alone' program provides several short quotes from students, including:

I've done more work here than in the last 3 years of school.

I'm most proud of getting my Certificate II and completing the course. I didn't think I would ever achieve this. I now feel excited and confident about my future.

They identified qualities in me that I never recognised before.

Some programs conduct more formal surveys and indicate the number of students who agreed with survey statements, for example in this 'stand alone' program:

The teachers try to help me with my studies.	*41 agreed, 1 disagreed and 4 didn't know.*
I find my lessons enjoyable.	*28 agreed and 15 disagreed. 2 didn't know.*
I find my lessons challenging.	*20 agreed but 20 disagreed and 5 didn't know.*

The reported feedback from parents/carers to Learning Choices programs mostly indicates a sense of relief that their son or daughter has found a place where they are supported and staff care about them.

Synthesis of research

Key findings

Like the program reports, the research discusses a range of valuable outcomes, including improved attendance and completion rates; academic achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy; transition to post-school destinations; and the "less tangible or quantifiable 'soft' skills" (Myconos, 2011, p.41) such as increased confidence, engagement and aspirations.

Characteristics of programs that lead to valuable outcomes as identified in research are discussed in relation to sections 3.3 (structures), 3.4 (mission), 3.5 (curriculum) and 3.5 (staffing) of this report. When research is quoted in relation to factors that contribute to 'successful', 'positive' or 'effective' programs, that refers to the spectrum of outcomes in relation to attendance, academic and non-academic achievement, destinations and stakeholder satisfaction, unless specified otherwise. The exception is the report by Lamb and Rice (2008), which defines success largely in relation to reducing early school leaving enhancing school completion.

Limitations on the ability of programs to achieve positive outcomes are recognised. In relation to the Schools First awards, Simons (2011, p.5) notes that:

Successful outcomes for a school starting from a low base, in terms of student performance or levels of student engagement, may be quite different from the successful outcomes of schools that are already high performing.

In addition, Myconos (2011) points to the difficult circumstances in which Learning Choices programs operate, often having relatively low resources to work with young people whose prior experience with schooling has

been unsuccessful. He argues that "any judgements on program effectiveness should therefore be tempered by a reminder of the scale and difficulty of the undertaking" (Myconos, 2011, p.42).

Limitations related to the measurement of outcomes are also discussed. It may take considerable time for programs to display effects (Black et al, 2010; Lamb and Rice, 2008). Interventions may be complex (Black et al, 2010) so that some programs may demonstrate limited impact for reasons other than the quality of the program, such as finances and context (Lamb and Rice, 2008). Of more concern is the risk that internally conducted evaluations may be "eager to justify their provision" and "methodologically flawed" (Black et al, 2010, p.12).

Other research flags some concerns about the actual outcomes, such as in relation to graduate destinations (Mills and McGregor, 2010; Wyn et al, 2004) and the risk that good attendance does not necessarily lead to improved learning (Connor, 2006). Wyn et al (2004) express apprehension about programs not moving beyond improving soft skills (such as self esteem) to enabling completion of credentials. They caution that some students appear to move from one enabling course to another, rather then using enabling courses as a stepping stone to higher level qualifications. De Jong and Griffiths (2006, p.38) warn that "poorly constructed and poorly resourced AEPs [alternative education programs] can potentially have poor outcomes for students and may even place the safety of students and staff at risk".

Gaps in knowledge
A powerful message about the need for better outcomes data comes from the final report of the Review of funding for schooling (Gonski, 2011). Exploring the funding arrangements for disadvantaged schools and students generally (ie. not specifically for Learning Choices programs) the report notes that "more should be known about the impact of Australian Government targeted funding for disadvantaged students and schools on improved outcomes" (Gonski, 2011, p.135). The report (p.135) identifies as a problem that:

> Although there are set objectives and guidelines around the use of funds, very limited data are required of state and territory governments and the non-government school sector on the impact funding is having on the educational outcomes of targeted students.

In relation to extended service programs generally, Black et al (2010) also critique the lack of monitoring and appropriate measurement of success. Similarly, although most Learning Choices programs have specific objectives (see 3.4 below) they do not necessarily gather or provide strong evidence on the extent to which these objectives are achieved. Lamb and Rice (2008, p.41) suggest that implementing programs requires not only "careful planning and design, but also careful evaluation". This involves deciding what outcomes are expected from various initiatives and using a variety of both quantitative and qualitative measures, such as achievement data, stakeholder satisfaction, data on attendance and absences, and teacher reports on behaviour and progress. Lamb and Rice (2008) and Black et al (2010) agree that it is valuable to gather data at several intervals, rather than at one point in time. Black et al (2010) also recommend the use of action research.

Two resources have been developed as part of the ICAN approach in South Australia. First, to enable programs to provide literacy and numeracy support that is appropriate to students' needs, ICAN has worked with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) "to develop an engaging new online literacy and numeracy assessment tool called 'Compass'" (ICAN, 2010). Learning Choices and inclusive programs can purchase a license to use this through the ACER website. When used at repeated intervals (as recommended by Lamb and Rice, see above) this tool can also provide data on how students' achievement changes over time while in the program.

Second, ICAN has developed a tool to capture the somewhat elusive but highly desired outcome of student engagement. As ICAN (2010, p.15) explains:

> Successfully measuring student engagement has been a challenge for educators throughout the world. There is certainly no nationally, nor internationally agreed and validated measurement instrument that can be applied to provide baseline or progression data in relation to measuring student engagement in learning.

In response, ICAN has developed the 'ICAN Engagement Matrix' measuring engagement in learning through three domains: wellbeing, relationships and involvement in learning. The matrix has been made available to all DECS teachers in South Australia (not just in ICAN) supported by professional development.

In addition, a research project in Queensland is developing a new portfolio based assessment model for disenfranchised students seeking to re-enter education, in collaboration with Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre (EREA-FLC, see project 2, appendix 3).

For the ICAN matrix and Compass tool research is needed on their implementation and impact in South Australia. For both these ICAN tools and the EREA_FLC tool, research is needed to assess their potential as measurement tools across inclusive education settings.

In addition, the research (explicitly or implicitly) points to several other areas where more information is needed, related to outcomes:

- Improved data on the pre-existing disadvantage and barriers to education of students, including longitudinal quantitative data tracking students' absenteeism and attendance from Year 1 onwards, including qualitative data on the reasons for absences (Connor, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011).
- Compare schools on how well they seem to 'hold' students and determine which school practices contribute to that, including the impact of school culture and relationships between staff and students on student engagement in learning (Connor, 2006; Mills and McGregor, 2010).
- Gather evidence of the commitment young people make to Learning Choices programs and their goals and motivations (for example both Mills and McGregor, 2010, and Wyn et al, 2004, note several students are travelling long hours in order to attend the program, and many young people have high aspirations that motivate them).
- Specifically for children in care, establish a centre of excellence to collate evidence about improving educational outcomes, including outcomes from educational support plans (Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland, 2011).
- Better tracking of young people after they leave programs, over a longer period, to establish destinations, as well as success in those destinations (esp. further learning and the labour market) for young people who did / did not complete the program, and the length of time it takes to achieve positive destinations (Beck, 2010; ICAN, 2010; Mills and McGregor, 2010; Wyn et al, 2004).
- More detail about the unemployment experience of graduates (eg. in terms of duration and at several intervals following graduation) and of the differences between programs that have few/many graduates who are unemployed.
- Further knowledge about strategies to provide disadvantaged learners with access to and completion of higher-level VET qualifications (Hargreaves, 2011; Wyn et al, 2004).

The remainder of this report needs to be read with the limitations of the evidence about outcomes in mind.

3.3   Structures

Data

Size

The Learning Choices National Scan provides data about the number of students within programs. Out of the 400 programs that entered details for the number of students, almost three-quarters were relatively small - under 50 students (see Figure 1 below). Of those, 165 programs (or 40% of all entries) had fewer than 20 students enrolled at the commencement of a program.
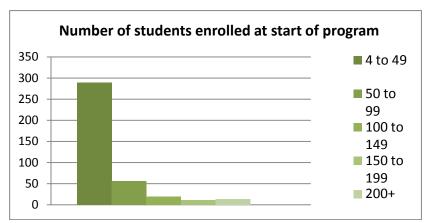

Figure 1: Program population size - at commencement

The vast majority of Learning Choices programs are relatively small, although some (especially in ACE/TAFE colleges) have a substantial number of students enrolled.

Time

In the Learning Choices National Scan, 58% of programs are full time or close to full time. Some programs that run for four days per week are considered full time. One fairly large, 'stand alone' accredited school program explains the choice to offer a full time program in a four-day week so:

> *students can pursue employment opportunities, reduce travelling time or complete family commitments in 1 extra day per week while still receiving a full time education.*

On the other hand, about 23% of programs run for one day per week or less. These may run as 'integrated' programs within conventional schools, taking students out of their regular classes and into a separate program within the school. One such program notes that they make use of the entire day, so that:

> *recess and lunch are also an integral part of the program and provide many incidental learning opportunities.*

About 60% of programs run over a full year or longer. Of these 38% were full time or four days per week, while 12% ran for one day per week or less. This indicates a sizeable proportion of programs that are similar to conventional schooling in that they are (almost) full time and long term. At the other end of the spectrum, about 7% of programs run for 10 weeks or less, and 13% run between 11-20 weeks, within two school terms in most states.

Networks and connections
In the Learning Choices National Scan, 35% of responses form part of a state network. In addition, 24% are part of a local network and 25% belong to a national network. Networks of Learning Choices programs include Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN), the Beacon Program, Big Picture Education Australia and New Zealand, Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth+, and Hands On Learning.

In terms of the connections of Learning Choices programs with conventional schooling, the program reports highlight three main groups:

1. stand alone program: organisationally independent as well as being located on a site separate from conventional education. These programs are often accredited as schools in their own right and tend to have their own identity, for example as senior colleges or 'special schools'.
2. organisational affiliation on a separate location: these programs maintain a separate identity through their location - on a special site within their host institution or on a completely separate location. However, they fall under the umbrella of their host (such as a TAFE or ACE college) including shared policies, professional development and (usually) funding.
3. integrated: operating within conventional schooling. This includes programs of fundamental whole school change for all students as well as programs that withdraw selected students from their usual schooling for part of their school week to participate in the program.

Funding
The issue of funding was not addressed in the Learning Choices National Scan, but is referred to in several program reports. For accredited schools the bulk of funding comes from federal and state governments. For affiliated and integrated programs, most funding usually comes from the conventional school or TAFE/ACE institution with which they work. Additional sources of funding for all types of Learning Choices Programs include awards such as the NAB Schools First award (which has been won by several Learning Choices programs); special government projects such as the previous Boys' Lighthouse project or current National Partnerships on Low SES School Communities; and philanthropic foundations.

Program reports also highlight that funding is a barrier to the quality and sustainability of programs. First, the amount of funding is considered insufficient, partly because Learning Choices Programs tend to have higher costs than conventional schooling, which are related to the provision of additional services (housing, health, welfare, breakfast programs), the need for transport for students coming from a larger geographic area, the lower student-staff ratio and (for many) their small size and turnover of students. Second, the use of a single official census date for allocating government funding to accredited schools is of concern, since that does not reflect the fluctuating numbers throughout the program's duration. As one program notes:

> *The timing of funding cycles is irrelevant to these students, who come when THEY are ready, not when the system is, so at any given time we can have around 30 students for whom we receive no funds at all.*

While the population size at conventional schools tends to be fairly stable, the students population in Learning Choices Programs tends to be characterised by unpredictability. Young people may arrive and leave throughout the year, or may not be able to attend every day. As a result, the number of students on the census date may bear little resemblance to the actual number of young people served by a program.

Synthesis of research

Key findings
In relation to the size of programs, both Connor (2006) and Lamb and Rice (2008) suggest small size is an aspect of successful provision. This can either mean small programs, or smaller sub-structures (such as mini-schools) within larger programs. These enable building trust and a sense of belonging among students. Myconos (2011, p.33) argues that "the effectiveness of the 2010 BSL-CVCAL [Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL program] was due in large part to the intimate setting and close relationships between teacher and learner" (also see section 3.5 on staffing). For conventional schools (that are the focus of the report by Lamb and Rice) there is evidence that such a "more familial-based approach" (Lamb and Rice, 2008, p.21) to grouping students can reduce early school leaving.

There are few research findings in relation to the time aspect of programs. Mills and McGregor (2010) point out that the flexibility inherent in many Learning Choices programs means that daily attendance on site is not necessarily required. Lamb and Rice (2008) argue that interventions need to be ongoing and offer long-term support for students in order to sustain positive outcomes over time. On a different note, Wyn et al (2004) suggest it is useful for programs to offer flexibility in terms of the timing of when students can enrol.

Research also points to the variety of ways in which Learning Choices programs are organised. De Jong and Griffiths (2006) map a continuum of alternative education programs based on their relationship to conventional schooling, ranging from withdrawal to part of school. In its report for the Victorian government, KPMG (2009) recommends four tiers of education provision of young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school: differentiated provision (within a region, with schools having different emphases and offerings in order to cater for a wide range of young people within that region); targeted initiatives (as an add-on to schooling, eg. through outreach, tutoring or case management); flexible learning options within school settings (short term intensive placements); and flexible learning options within community settings (on a longer term basis).

For programs that are part of TAFE or ACE, Wyn et al (2004) warn that barriers to access include age limitations, minimum requirements for previous education, and financial barriers. Beck (2010) and NEYON (2010) suggest provision for students under age 15 is generally scarce while YacVic (2011) points to transport and income as particular barriers to access for young people in rural and regional Australia.

The importance of strong cross-sectoral and interagency collaborations is confirmed by research (Connor, 2006; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011; Lamb and Rice, 2008; Wyn, Stokes and Tyler, 2004; YacVic, 2011) not just for enhancing the success of programs but also for enabling young people to locate and gain access to programs in the first place (Wyn et al, 2004; YacVic, 2011). Extended service schooling (which is built around interagency collaboration) has been shown to improve young people's engagement in schooling and wellbeing (Black et al, 2010).

In South Australia, the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN) approach encourages a variety of stakeholders to come together in the local ICAN management Committee. Common members of these committees are local state schools and the local state education office (DECS Regional), as well as local business, the local government association, Centrelink, police and various non-government organisations (ICAN, 2010, p.11). In Victoria, Lamb and Rice (2008) point out that Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and Regional Youth Commitments were valued by conventional schools. Nationally, the Schools First awards program aims to encourage strong school-community partnerships. Several Learning Choices programs have been winners of these awards, alongside more conventional schools. Its evaluation (Simons, 2010) points to five interdependent aspects of successful partnerships:

- flexibility of the award funding;
- strategic planning for partnership expansion;
- formalised structured and processes of communication;
- strategies for sustainability;
- capacity for the partnership to be replicated in other settings.

In addition, Black et al (2010) suggest effective partnerships have common values and goals; mutual trust and respect; shared terminology; adequate resources including time and human capital; and an emphasis on enhancing student outcomes.

However, there is recognition that coordination of services across organisations with different priorities and cultures can be challenging (Black et al, 2010; Connor, 2006; Myconos, 2010; YacVic, 2011). Moreover, De Jong and Griffiths point to the risk that the connection between conventional schools and Learning Choices programs can become one-sided, with schools simply using inclusive programs as "'dumping grounds' for 'problem' youths" (p 32). In relation to 'stand alone' and 'affiliated but separate' programs, a concern in the literature is that by having separate programs that remove young people from conventional schooling, their marginalisation is reinforced (De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Zyngier and Gale, 2003).

Appropriate funding is seen as crucial not only in the reports from programs but also in the research. In particular, the sustainability of programs is linked to reliable and sufficient funding (Black et al, 2010; Connor, 2006; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Mills and McGregor, 2010; YacVic, 2011). The specific needs of students as well as the benefit of high levels of staffing (also see 3.5 below) mean that the cost per student is likely to be higher than in conventional schooling (Connor, 2006; Owen, 2004). Other specific concerns relate to the insecure nature of funding sources, use of a single census date for establishing the number of students for who the program will receive funding, inequities in funding between programs and regions, and the implications of a program being defined as a school or not (Hands on Learning, 2010; Mills and McGregor, 2010, Te Riele, 2008).

There is a sense of wastage when effective programs are discontinued due to lack of funding (see Beck, 2010; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Hands on Learning, 2010). Many young people in Learning Choices programs consider the program their last chance at gaining an education (eg. Mills and McGregor, 2010; Te Riele, 2006b). Therefore, resourcing Learning Choices programs is a cost-saving policy. King (1999) estimates the lifetime cost to Australia at $74,000 per early school leaver, made up of both direct monetary costs and social costs. Adding this up, "the overall cost to Australia of one year's early school-leavers is an estimated $2.6 billion" (King, 1999, p.1). Providing inclusive programs so all young people can gain school credentials is important for both economic and social reasons; and for both the individual and the broader society. The Business Council of Australia (BCA, 2003) uses economic modelling to shown that if 50 per cent of 2003 early school leavers completed Year 12 (for which Learning Choices programs are a key strategy), GDP would increase by $1.8 billion by 2020. This is both because individual living standards and productivity would improve and because welfare, crime and ill-health costs would reduce. Similarly, King (1999, p.1) concluded that:

> reducing the number of early school-leavers would be a very sound investment for the individuals concerned, for government, and for the country as a whole. Just on the basis of the monetary costs, it would yield an estimated 12.5 per cent rate of return.

Since these sources are quite old and both the policy and economic environments have changed dramatically, new research is necessary to update these findings. An example of a powerful way of representing the economic

benefits of investing in early school leavers completing school (and further education) is provided by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) in the US.

The recent final report of the Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski, 2011) does not specifically address Learning Choices programs, but does discuss funding for educational disadvantage more generally. The report points out that the data is incomplete and varies between jurisdictions. Despite these limitations, the report concludes that for students from low socio-economic backgrounds "the available funding is spread too thinly", with an average of only $426 extra funding per student per year (Gonski, 2011, p.132).

Gaps in knowledge
The most crucial gap in knowledge is in relation to funding. At the overall national level, the Gonski report (2011, pp.135-136) sums it up as follows:

> It is difficult to determine what is spent on disadvantaged students and schools at a national level due to complex and varied funding arrangements at the state and territory level. This difficulty is compounded by differences in how students are defined for funding purposes. [..]
> The difficulties in collecting nationally consistent data on the disadvantaged student groups has flow-on effects to determining the funding needs of these students. [..]
> The lack of robust, nationally comparable data on funding for disadvantaged students and its impact on improving educational outcomes is a significant concern. If Australia is to achieve greater equity in educational outcomes across its schooling system, these data will be paramount in ensuring funding is directed to where it is needed most, and improvements can be measured and strengthened over time.

Better national data would provide a baseline for comparison for Learning Choices programs. In addition, for Learning Choices programs there are several other specific aspects related to funding that require further research:

- The amount, sources and security of funding in a variety of types of Learning Choices programs.
- The cost of educating students in a variety of types of Learning Choices programs.
- The cost of these young people missing out on completing their secondary education if no Learning Choices program were available for them.
- The economic benefit of young people increasing their educational attainment.
- The impact of various models on the sustainability and quality of programs, including exploring the definition of what constitutes a school, and implication of these definitions for funding (Mills and McGregor, 2010).

In relation to the other aspects of structure, further research would be useful on:

- For part-time and short-term programs, exploring what young people are engaged with in the rest of their time (eg. work or other education) (Holdsworth, 2011).
- The impact of time spent in a program as well as of duration of program on outcomes for students, including longer-term outcomes.
- The extent to which programs that operate less time per week or for shorter duration may act as preventative approaches, maintaining students engaged in or connected to conventional schooling (Holdsworth, 2011).
- Mapping of the various networks and connections that a variety of types of Learning Choices programs draw on, and the challenges and benefits of these networks and connections (including Youth

Connections, School Business Community Partnership brokers as well as smaller networks such as LLENs).

- The collaboration between Learning Choices programs and other educational institutions (especially RTOs and referring schools) (Myconos, 2011).
- Exemplars of successful cross-sectoral and interagency collaboration that provide insight in how to establish such strong partnerships.

Moreover, there is limited evidence about how different organisational set-ups (eg. stand alone, affiliated or integrated) are related not only to structural aspects (such as size, networks/connections and funding arrangements) but also mission, curriculum, staffing and outcomes. The data in this report can only give some glimpses of such differences - where possible examples are identified as relating to stand alone, affiliated or integrated programs. However, a larger collection of data is necessary to enable teasing out differences between these organisational types.

3.4   Mission

Data

Target group
The Learning Choices National Scan provided programs with 13 options for identifying their target group(s). Two of the options were: 'at risk of not completing education' and 'early school leaver'. Exploring the scan data demonstrates that one or both of these were ticked by 95% of programs. This is not entirely surprising, since the Learning Choices National Scan used the definition of "those programs/schools that cater for young people at risk of not completing their education". Nevertheless, the results for this question reinforce the programs' shared mission of providing education opportunities for young people who may otherwise miss out. In some ways, this is the closest we come to a definition of Learning Choices programs. Beyond this commonality, the scan results indicated two groups of programs in terms of who the programs cater for.

The first group consisted of about 60% of programs that aim to cater for a wide range of young people (as evidenced by ticking most of the 13 options provided) indicating a relatively inclusive approach. Some examples of how such programs describe the young people they are aimed at in their own documentation include:

- Program "*caters for post-compulsory, continuing and re-entry students from diverse backgrounds*".
- Program "*offers an inclusive and non-discriminating learning community to young people, who for a variety of reasons, are marginalized from mainstream education. Students are enrolled from both genders, from a variety of language, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, with particular sensitivity to Indigenous culture, and from backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage*".

The second group (about 40%) consists of programs that seem to have a more specialised purpose, targeting one or two specific groups of young people. The major ones are listed in the table below.

Table 3: Target groups in more 'specialised' programs

Target group	Number of programs	Proportion (of specialised programs) [6]
Indigenous background	83	50%
Mental Health and/or disability	41	25%
Juvenile Justice	36	22%
Refugee and/or recent migrant and/or non-English Speaking background	23	14%
Pregnant and parenting	18	11%
Homeless youth	18	11%

Aims and values

The program reports (see Appendix 1) highlight as a commonality across the majority of programs that they aim to adapt their approach to respond to student needs, rather than aiming to change the young person him or herself. Most combine both academic and well-being goals, but the emphasis varies. One 'stand alone' program explains that it:

> *invests significant resources in their social, emotional and physical wellbeing [which is necessary] before students will engage in any meaningful or systematic way with learning.*

Programs such as these aim to address the well-being needs of their students as a foundation for being able to achieve academic aims. Other programs describe these various aims as being integrated through a holistic overall purpose or a "blended service delivery model" (and 'affiliated' program).

Some programs explicitly focus on student strengths and social justice, for example:

> *[program] takes a student centred and strength-based approach to address the complex life issues that impact upon a successful engagement with learning. Through this innovative approach, the voices of young people are instrumental in addressing the barriers, and their re-engagement in accredited learning and strengthened positive participation in community is built around individual strengths and interests.* (ICAN, 2010)

> *a clear commitment to social justice and stands in solidarity with disadvantaged people of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds* [a network of 'stand alone' programs]

One specific set of programs aimed at whole school change indicated it also aimed to model innovation and change as inspiration for conventional schooling. At the other end of the spectrum, a small number of the programs were aimed at remediation or 'fixing' the young person, with relatively less attention to broader social issues. These small numbers may indicate a gap in the available program documentation for this report rather than reflecting that either of these aims are actually uncommon.

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[6] The numbers add up to more than 100% because several programs have two specific target groups.

Synthesis of research

Key findings
The research points to two key findings: that the mission of a program should be clearly articulated and suited to the young people in the program; and that this mission should avoid a deficit view of young people and instead be based on a positive culture.

In relation to clarity, Simons (2011, p.29) points out that "well-chosen objectives can assist in guiding and marshalling otherwise disconnected resources from schools and community partnerships into effective initiatives" and Porter (2000, p.62) recommends that the target group, aims and objectives should be "clearly and specifically articulated to determine the model and direction of the school". This supports the development of a shared vision (De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Te Riele, 2011b; Zyngier and Gale, 2003), which should be sensitive to the specific context of the program (Lamb and Rice, 2008, p.38). The report on 'Re-engaging our kids' prepared by KPMG (2009, p.3, italics added) for the Victorian government refers to a "*continuum* of provision options (within schools and other settings) catering to the *differentiated needs* of children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school". This means that Learning Choices programs must have the flexibility to be "responsive to the needs and aspirations of the young people who choose to go there" (Mills and McGregor, 2010, p.10). Wyn et al (2004) similarly point out that relevance (to the young person's life and goals) is a crucial element. Lamb and Rice (2008) argue that developing and maintaining a shared vision should be built on a constructive view that builds on young people's strengths.

This leads to the second point, in relation to a concern in the research about the danger of a deficit approach in the aims or mission of a school (Mills and McGregor, 2010; Te Riele, 2007; Zyngier and Gale, 2003). While few of the program reports included for this analysis had an obvious deficit approach, and some explicitly countered it, vigilance against this remains valuable. In relation to the programs within conventional schools that Zyngier and Gale (2003) investigated, they were alarmed that the majority was focused on remediation and deficit explanations were prevalent. They noted that students saw participation in alternative programs offered within schools as leading to stigmatisation, and YacVic (2011, p.19) suggest this is also a problem in small rural and regional towns "where there is less anonymity for young people". Warning bells ring when programs refer to young people as "troubled adolescents" or as "students who cannot fit the 'mainstream' school structure and culture" - or when teachers define their role as one of "saving" young people (Te Riele, 2011b, p.65). Such views can (usually unwittingly) sabotage a constructive approach to providing inclusive Learning Choices. Connor (2006) similarly expresses concern about lowered expectations for students. Teachers may lower their expectations with good intentions, because they see well-being as more crucial than learning. Yet, such actions by the teacher simply reinforce any perceived deficits (Gale and Densmore, 2000) - students who are never asked to complete challenging tasks never get the chance to learn to do them. Lamb and Rice (2008) provide evidence that students are more likely to disengage and even drop put when expectations are low and programs not stimulating. Wyn et al (2004) express concern that marginalized youth are not always made welcome by individual staff or institutional cultures in TAFE and ACE settings that have traditionally served older learners. Finally, De Jong and Griffiths (2006) are concerned that the over-representation of young males and of students from minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds in Learning Choices programs may inadvertently make conventional schools less tolerant of difference and less inclusive.

The research emphasises the importance of schools focusing on changing conditions rather than on the perceived problems of young people or their families. In particular, research points to the importance of not only the beliefs of individual teachers but also the whole school culture (Lamb and Rice, 2008; Te Riele, 2006b). A starting point suggested by Zyngier and Gale (2003, p.1) is "to take account of students' own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling and what changes schools and teachers themselves might need to

consider". Wyn et al (2004) add that a culture of support needs to respond to the young person's personal circumstances as well as their educational requirements, and have a climate of adult learning. Students themselves should be involved in identifying their needs (Hargreaves, 2011).

In their analysis of 'effective strategies to increase school completion' Lamb and Rice (2008, p.14) point out that the highest impact is achieved when schools combine specific quality interventions with a strong and supportive school culture. Several elements of such a culture go to the heart of countering a deficit approach: a 'commitment to success for all', 'high expectations' and a 'climate of challenging and stimulating teaching' (p.16). Connor (2006) also points to high academic standards and expectations as a feature of successful programs. However, high expectations without scaffolding support may "result in problems that are labelled as behavioural difficulties" (DETYA, 2001, in Connor, 2006, p.26). To make a program work well for all students requires the right balance between high expectations and challenging teaching across the board, with flexible, individual support (Lamb and Rice, 2008). These elements can be seen as facilitating a mission of 'success for all' in conventional schools as well as inclusive Learning Choices programs.

Gaps in knowledge
The literature is clear on both the need for a clear, shared mission and for that mission being constructive and strength-based. The main gap in knowledge that would be useful for research to address is exploring the ways such a mission gets enacted in programs, especially given the difficulties of developing a shared vision under conditions of insecurity, high workload and high staff turnover (see 3.6 below). Further research is needed on the key elements of school culture that impact positively on student engagement in education (Mills and McGregor, 2010; Wyn et al, 2004). In relation to the evidence from Lamb and Rice (2008) on effective strategies in conventional schools, it would be useful to commission research that explores the impact of these strategies around school culture in Learning Choices programs.

Supporting the suggestion by Zyngier and Gale (2003) to start with students' reasons for disengagement, both Wyn et al (2004 and Beck (2010) point to the need for more information from young people's perspectives on their experiences of disengagement and their access to educational (re-entry) options. In addition, Mills and McGregor (2010) argue more also needs to be known about the views of disengaged young people who are no longer involved in any formal education.

Holdsworth (2011, p.7) also notes that is it unclear from the results of the Learning Choices National Scan what causes the risk and exclusion experienced by young people in Learning Choices programs; and that the Scan "is generally not picking up students who are making a positive or assertive choice for an alternative". In other words, rather than perceiving Learning Choices programs as carrying stigma or being 'second best', more research is needed to uncover programs that are actively chosen by young people as their preferred education provider.

3.5   Curriculum

Data

Formal Curriculum
The Learning Choices National Scan shows that most programs offer credentials, as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Types of credentials offered by programs (Learning Choices National Scan)

Type of credential	Proportion (of total)
None	14%
Low level credentials (Year 10, VET statement of attainment and/or VET Certificate I)	16%
Higher level credentials (Year 11/12 and/or Certificate II/III/IV)	70%

Within such formal curriculum, the program reports highlight that three aspects are common:

- The inclusion of practical and applied learning: practical projects (eg. building facilities such as a shed or garden beds for their school), work experience and Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects.
- The use of individual learning plans: based on the young person's interests and learning goals and usually developed with the support of program staff.
- Integrated or project approaches: either in addition to, or replacing more conventional subject-based approaches. Syllabus outcomes from a range of conventional subjects, such as mathematics, English, and metalwork, are achieved in an integrated manner.

Activities

The Learning Choices National Scan shows that the most common activities (offered by about 80% of programs) are life skills and literacy and numeracy. Also very common (about 60%) are computer/IT skills, mentoring, and job-seeking. The vast majority of programs offer a wide range of activities. The National Scan offered 15 options, with programs able to tick more than one. These options can be clustered into 6 sets of activity types:

1. literacy and numeracy, English language, and homework support;
2. mentoring and job-seeking;
3. life skills and parenting;
4. culture, visual arts, and music / theatre / performance;
5. outdoor education and environmental;
6. computer/IT skills and digital/media skills.

Almost one-third of the programs offered activities across all of the six sets above, and another 40% offered activities across 4 or 5 of those 6 sets. Only 5% of programs were so specialised they offered activities from a single set.

In addition, the program reports highlight three types of curricular activities that are commonly offered:

- Enabling activities (necessary to help young people complete credentialed learning): in particular, almost all Learning Choices programs emphasise literacy and numeracy as core basic learning for their students, and many also see mentoring and pastoral care activities as necessary for supporting students.
- Co-curricular activities (offered for their inherent value in addition to any credentialed learning): popular co-curricular activities include cultural activities (such as Indigenous Dance and Art), driving instruction, and outdoor adventure and camps.
- Activities that make explicit connections with the local community: through service learning, with teams of young people working on projects for the community, and through sport.

Synthesis of research

Key findings

In terms of the formal curriculum, the research generally agrees with the usefulness of providing recognised credentials and with the strategies of practical and applied learning, individual learning plans and integrated or project approaches that the program reports highlight as being common in Learning Choices programs.

ICAN (2010) explicitly states that it is essential that student learning in Flexible Learning Options programs is accredited. Both Lamb and Rice (2008) and De Jong and Griffiths (2006) suggest a broad range of accredited curriculum is needed, catering for diverse interests and strengths and enabling choice. The challenge for Learning Choices programs, according to Connor (2006, p.30) is "making learning attractive, while ensuring that students emerge with valued credentials".

Several reports indicate students appreciated applied and 'hands on' learning that provided relevant skills (Connor, 2006; Myconos, 2011; Mills and McGregor, 2010; Zyngier and Gale, 2003). Offering VET options is also linked to improved student outcomes and school completion (Lamb and Rice, 2008). A concern about applied learning is that "levels of intellectual engagement with the work varied" (Mills and McGregor, 2010, p.11) and that these approaches need to be challenging and stimulating (Lamb and Rice, 2008; Zyngier and Gale, 2003). Connor (2006, p.20) also notes the risk that the vocational 'stream' will continue to have lower status than the academic one, thereby "excluding some students from higher status subjects, future learning pathways, employment, income and social status".

Individual learning plans are a key component of ICAN (2010), while in Victoria Lamb and Rice (2008) point to the usefulness of the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPS) scheme for improving student engagement and raising completions. However, they also point out that the implementation and success of MIPS varies widely between schools. Similarly, the Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland (2011, p.11) points out that the individual Education Support Plan (ESP) "has the potential of being an effective support device, but the current implementation of the ESP is inadequate". For programs within TAFE and ACE, Wyn et al (2004, p.26) suggest the use of modules that "allow students to progress at their own pace" is useful. The research evidence suggests that individual learning plans are a worthwhile strategy, as long as they are implemented well.

Integrated and project approaches are also seen as effective for engaging students with the formal curriculum (Lamb and Rice, 2008; Myconos, 2011) although they may be hard to adjust to for teachers (Myconos, 2011).

In relation to the range of activities offered by Learning Choices programs, the research comments mainly on the role of enabling activities.

Unsurprisingly, there is general consensus on the importance of support for improving literacy and numeracy skills. Such support should be provided as early as possible (Lamb and Rice, 2008) and works best when embedded within authentic contexts where literacy and numeracy skills are used (Connor, 2006; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011). Wyn et al (2004) agree that literacy, numeracy and study skills are important but they express concern that young people may become trapped in enabling courses, moving from one to another without gaining high level, recognised credentials. Zyngier and Gale (2003) were also concerned that while programs were highly socially supportive of students this was not balanced with providing intellectually challenging material.

Similarly, there is also general consensus that pastoral care is a necessary foundation for many students. In the context of the Schools First awards, Simons (2010, p.229) points to "the importance of removing barriers to learning by providing complementary forms of support for the personal development of students". Welfare support, on-site access to a range of agencies, and activities to develop life skills and resilience can be essential before students are able to engage with learning (Connor, 2006; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011; Lamb and Rice, 2008; YacVic, 2011). Mills and McGregor (2010, p.9) suggest that the sites they visited "had a strong resemblance to what has been termed 'full service schools'" (also see Black et al, 2010).

Gaps in knowledge

While most programs in the Learning Choices National Scan as well as in the specific program reports indicate they offer accredited courses, more information is needed about the numbers of students within programs who take up these options (Holdsworth, 2011). In relation to concerns about low level and enabling programs, further research is also needed about the extent to which young people take part in (or move on to) accredited courses at a level that provides substantial access to further study or employment (Holdsworth, 2011; Wyn et al, 2004).

Both Holdsworth (2011) and Wyn et al (2004) point to the need for more explorations of how the curriculum is delivered, for example in terms of teaching approaches and adjustment to learning styles of different groups such as boys and girls. In general, insights in pedagogy are difficult to gauge from survey results and documentation, requiring observational studies. Programs that take a whole-school-change approach to curriculum are also worth exploring in more detail (Holdsworth, 2011) and may provide inspiration for reform in conventional schooling.

3.6   Staffing

Data

The issue of staffing was not addressed in the Learning Choices National Scan, but is referred to in several program reports. First, student-staff ratios that are mentioned in program reports are between 5:1 and 15:1. Several reports assert that a central key to their success is small student-staff ratios, in order to provide individualised support and build good relationships. For example, one report for a 'affiliated' program argues that:

> *The effectiveness of the [program] was due in large part to the intimate setting and close relationships between teacher and learner.*

Second, many of the Learning Choices programs employ not only qualified teachers (a requirement for programs offering accredited education) but also a range of different staff, such as teacher's aides, school counsellors, youth workers and Aboriginal support workers. In addition to paid staff, volunteers from local business, the community and tertiary institutions support the work of Learning Choices programs and contribute to the amount of individual attention young people can receive. For example, a report for a different affiliated program points out that:

> *Community volunteers have been involved in a range of responsibilities including guiding governance, mentoring teachers and students and running the breakfast program.*

Programs also rely on local businesses to mentor students, provide work experience, and act as guest speakers or 'guest teachers'.

Third, several reports explicitly recognise that staff tend to work above and beyond the call of duty. The annual reports for a network of 'stand alone' programs highlight that staff are:

> *a highly qualified, experienced and generous group of professionals who consistently contributes more than would otherwise be expected both within the classroom and beyond.*

Several programs point to the collegiality and collaboration among staff that sustains this high workload.

Synthesis of research

Key findings
The research strongly supports the use of high staff-student ratios and small class sizes (Connor, 2006; De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011; Lamb and Rice, 2008; Mills and McGregor, 2010; Myconos, 2011; Wyn et al, 2004). Lamb and Rice provide evidence of the positive impact of smaller class sizes on school completion, especially for students from lower SES backgrounds and students who are 'at risk'. High staff-student ratios support more positive staff/student relationships (Connor, 2006; Mills and McGregor, 2010).

The research similarly emphasises the central importance of this relational dimension of schooling for engaging young people. De Jong and Griffiths (2006, p.35) argue that "relationship-building is an essential aspect of effective AEPs" (Alternative Education Programs). This also applies to catering for disengaged students in conventional schools (Lamb and Rice, 2010) and in vocational education and training (Hargreaves, 2011). Such positive relationships require mutual respect and trust (Connor, 2006; Lamb and Rice, 2010) as well as a genuine interest in the student and reducing the emphasis on teachers' power and authority (De Jong and Griffiths, 2006; Wyn et al, 2004). To facilitate young people accessing education, especially after previous experiences of failure or exclusion, Wyn et al (2004) highlight the importance of positive attitudes by staff right at the point of entry. Mills and McGregor (2010, p.11) point out that "relationships that were part of the broader environment in the school/centre were also reflected in the teaching/learning relationship within the various curricula offered at the sites' and thus had a direct flow on benefit for young people's engagement with learning.

The quality of staff is therefore vital to the success of inclusive approaches to schooling. Connor (2006, p.29) refers to the struggle of "finding, holding and supporting 'the right staff'". This includes not only teachers, but also social workers, counsellors, and health professionals (Connor, 2006; Myconos, 2011), especially in the context of the extended service provision in many Learning Choices programs (see Black et al, 2010). Quality careers advisors are seen as especially important by both Hargreaves (2011) and Lamb and Rice (2008). Professional development is necessary to ensure staff have the requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes. Black et al (2010) point out that collaborating with colleagues from different professional backgrounds itself requires training and support. Primary teaching practices can also be helpful for secondary teachers to learn about (Connor, 2006).

Professional development and support is also needed to help staff cope with the high workload, although Myconos (2011) warns this may not be enough to prevent burn out. There is recognition that work in these settings is demanding and can be stressful for staff (Connor, 2006; Mills and McGregor, 2010; Myconos, 2011; Wyn et al, 2004). When programs provide a holistic or extended service, this "can impose additional burdens on school staff which distracts them from their core educational responsibilities" (Black et al, 2010, p.14). Mills and McGregor (2010, p.11) highlight that the difficult conditions and lack of job security "are likely to impact upon

the long term viability of workers' engagement in the sites". This is of concern not only for the welfare of these staff but also for the engagement of students, given the importance of the quality of the relationships between staff and students as outlined above. Despite such conditions, staff are highly committed "to the differences that they believed they and the schools were making to the lives of students" (Mills and McGregor, 2010, p.11) and doing "more than 'go the extra yard'" (Connor, 2006, p.32).

Gaps in knowledge
Further research is particularly needed in relation to two aspects of staffing. First, more knowledge is necessary about useful approaches to the professional learning needs of staff and ways of ensuring staff are appropriately trained (Connor, 2006; Lamb and Rice, 2008). Second, research needs to explore the working conditions in Learning Choices programs and their impact on attracting and retaining high quality staff (Mills and McGregor, 2010; Myconos, 2011).

4. Recommendations

These recommendations focus on the gaps in knowledge identified in section 2 and 3, to suggest major areas for further research. Not included here are more minor suggestions for further research that are mentioned in section 3.

For several recommendations, one or more existing research projects (see Appendix 3) are already partly addressing the need for research. This existing research mostly does not cover the entire recommendation, for example having a somewhat different focus or limited scope in terms of geography or participants. However, further research could be commissioned that leverages off these existing projects. The projects are mentioned in brackets after recommendations, identified by their number as listed in Appendix 3.

Policy

Recommendation 1
Analysis of how national, state and territory policies work and are enacted 'on the ground' as well as of the impacts they have on young people's engagement, attainment and transitions.

Numbers

Recommendation 2
A thorough mapping of existing Learning Choices programs available to young people around Australia, in order to gain a more accurate insight into the number of programs and young people in the Learning Choices sector. [project 5; project 12; project 13]

Recommendation 3
Analyse the number of programs and young people in relation to background characteristics of programs (such as system/affiliation and geographic location) and of young people (such as gender, age, and conditions of disadvantage). [project 12; project 13]

Outcomes

Recommendation 4
Develop appropriate measures and evaluation strategies for gaining improved data in relation to outcomes. [project 2; project 3; project 4; project 6; project 7; project 11; project 13]

Recommendation 5
Conduct comparative research between programs to gain better insight in successful strategies, in relation to different project types and purposes. [project 12; project 13; project 14; project 15]

Recommendation 6
Evaluate the implementation and impact of the ICAN Compass tool and Engagement Matrix in South Australia, and the portfolio assessment approach in Edmund Rice Foundation Flexible Learning Centre - and their potential as measurement tools for outcomes across inclusive education settings. [project 2]

Recommendation 7
Gather longitudinal data tracking post-program destinations and experiences. [project 18]

Structures

Recommendation 8
Collect nationally consistent data on the amount, sources and security of funding for and cost of various types of Learning Choices programs

Recommendation 9
Collect national data on the cost of not offering Learning Choices options and the economic benefits of young people raising their educational attainment through Learning Choices programs. [project 17]

Recommendation 10
Map the various networks and connections that a variety of types of Learning Choices programs draw on and the challenges and benefits of these networks and connections (including Youth Connections and School Business Community Partnership brokers as well as state-specific networks such as LLENs and organisation-specific networks such as Edmund Rice Education Australia - Flexible Learning Centres and Big Picture Education Australia)

Recommendation 11
Gather evidence about how different organisational set-ups (eg. stand alone, affiliated or integrated) are related not only to structural aspects (such as size, networks/connections and funding arrangements) but also to mission, curriculum, staffing and outcomes. [project 12; project 13]

Mission

Recommendation 12
Exploring the ways in which a shared mission gets enacted in programs, especially given the difficulties of developing a shared vision under conditions of insecurity, high workload and high staff turnover.

Recommendation 13
Further research on the key elements of school culture that impact positively on student engagement in education in the specific context of Learning Choices programs.

Recommendation 14
Investigate Learning Choices programs that are actively chosen by young people as their preferred education provider.

Recommendation 15
Gather evidence about young people's own perspectives on the purposes of completing education in general and Learning Choices programs specifically. [project 4; project 8; project 9; project 10; project 12; project 14, project 15; project 16]

Curriculum

Recommendation 16
Investigate the numbers of students within programs who take up accredited course options within Learning Choices programs.

Recommendation 17
Investigate how the curriculum is delivered, for example in terms of teaching approaches and adjustment to learning styles of different groups. [project 1; project 4; project 7; project 11]

Staffing

Recommendation 18
Investigate useful approaches to the professional learning needs of staff and ways of ensuring staff are appropriately trained.

Recommendation 19
Investigate the working conditions in Learning Choices programs and their impact on attracting and retaining high quality staff.

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Appendix 2

Annotated Bibliography of selected useful research and evaluation reports

Beck, E. with McNally, J. (2010). *Report on educational disengagement of young people U15 in the Northern Region.* **Melbourne: Combined Northern Region Youth Connections Consortia.**

Data
- Northern Melbourne region (Victoria)
- Statistics from the Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System (YATMIS) database
- Surveys of Youth Connection Consortia
- Phone/ Internet interviews with relevant professionals.

Focus
- Young people disengaging from education who were under 15 years old

Key Findings
- Significant numbers of young people under the age of 15 are leaving mainstream settings, but the lack of formal tracking of this age group makes substantiation of the actual extent of the issue difficult.
- Re-engaging young people back into schools by case workers is difficult, due to either schools refusing to accept disengaged young people or the young people not wanting to return to a school.
- There was variation in definitions of 'alternative education settings' among professionals surveyed/interviewed, including teaching units and integration units (short term intervention for students with behavioral issues) and alternative schools (more long term and holistic).
- Five teaching/integration units and five alternative schools were identified in the region, as well as a short-term 'circuit breaker' program offered through the Distance Education Centre Victoria.
- Demand for these was high, and most had waiting lists.
- Services were limited and often excluded young people under the age of 15, with many programs restricted to youth 15 and older (such as VCAL, ACE and some community programs) either by policy or by common practice.
- Three alternative programs that had ceased due to funding were considered valuable and successful. Professionals also suggested there was a need for more "hands on programs", parental support initiatives, and alternative education settings for young people under the age of 15.

Implications for further research
- Better exit and tracking data.
- Information from young people's perspective on the experiences of disengagement and their access to educational options.

Black, R., Lemon, B. and Walsh, L. (2010). *Literature review and background research for the National Collaboration Project: Extended Service School Model*. **Melbourne: FYA.**

Data
- National and international
- Analysis of Australian and international literature and examples of practice

Focus
- Extended service delivery in education.
- Particular focus on models of provision that aim to facilitate the delivery of services to children and young people at risk of not engaging in education or making a successful transition to schooling, further education and training and participation in the wider community.
- The transferability of international experience into the Australian context.

Key Findings
- Underlying premises of extended service schooling:
  - A significant proportion of young people have complex social, health, emotional and cultural needs associated with social exclusion and disadvantage;
  - These needs must be met before schooling can be effective;
  - These needs cannot be met in isolation or by institutions or agencies acting alone;
  - Conventional school systems are failing to meet these needs;
  - Schools cannot ensure a quality education for young people without specialist service delivery and support.
- There is great variation in the range of actual services offered, but core services include:
  - Literacy and numeracy programs;
  - Open access to school and community facilities;
  - Individual case management and referral services;
  - Recreational activities and vocational learning;
  - Online learning options.
- Given the variety in extended service provision, there are different ways of classifying them:
  - School-based (ease of access, reduced stigma, more integrated) or school-linked (encourages non-educational viewpoints, more inclusive of school leavers);
  - Full service (whole school change and transforming communities) or extended practice (as an 'add on' to normal practice). There is debate about which is better;
  - Central steering or local entrepreneurship. A balance is needed between flexibility at the local level and support through a central, coherent policy.
- Challenges for extended service schooling:
  - Lack of monitoring and appropriate measurement of success;
  - Adequate resourcing for professional development, staffing, infrastructure, transport;
  - Professional development to support a shift in working practices;
  - Interagency collaboration;
  - Leadership and governance.
- Effective extended service schools require the cooperation and involvement of children, young people and families.

Implications for further research
- More rigorous analysis of extended service practice, including through action research.

Connor, J. (2006). *What's Mainstream? Conventional and unconventional learning in Logan.* **Sydney: Dusseldorp Skills Forum**

Data
- Logan region (Queensland)
- Interviews and questionnaire with students, teachers, program coordinators and school principals
- 5 high schools, 5 flexible learning centres and a TAFE Institute

Focus
- The dynamics between 'mainstream' provision and 'alternative' settings in schools, TAFE, and community agencies.
- Innovative programs and strategies designed to meet the needs of 'at risk' students.

Key Findings
- Both schools and flexible learning centres are making considerable efforts to meet the personal and learning needs of students and to keep them engaged in education or training.
- The boundaries between mainstream schools and flexible learning centres are blurring, with flexible learning centres mirroring many of the aspects of curriculum provision in schools as well as several schools offering alternative options for alienated students within the school.
- Flexible learning centres differ from schools mainly in having the flexibility to provide individually tailored learning programs which are not locked into age-grade structures.
- Both schools and flexible learning centres have a mixed student population, including 'disaffected' as well as highly engaged students, but the former are more common in flexible learning centres.
- Characteristics of successful programs include:
  - positive school climate and relationships;
  - engaging and relevant curriculum;
  - small class sizes and smaller units (such as mini-schools) within the school;
  - the 'right' staff;
  - high academic expectations combined with high levels of learning support;
  - administrative autonomy;
  - reliable and sufficient funding.
- Challenges involve
  - keeping 'alternative and mainstream' connected;
  - balancing social and personal outcomes with learning and achieving valued credentials.

Implications for further research
- Gather, disaggregate and conduct co-variant analysis on data re. absenteeism and attendance, tracking students from Year 1 onwards and exploring reasons for absenteeism
- Compare schools on how well they seem to 'hold' students and determine which school practices contribute to that
- Explore how to address the professional learning needs of staff in a planned, concerted and deep way.

De Jong, T. and Griffiths, C. (2006). The role of alternative education programs in meeting the needs of adolescent students with challenging behaviour: characteristics of best practice. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling* **16 (1) 29-40**

Data
- Nation-wide
- Survey of 52 programs including 16 Alternative Education Programs

Focus
- Best practice in addressing student behaviour issues.
- Characteristics of successful Alternative Education Programs (AEPs), especially official 'behaviour' units/schools established by various education jurisdictions.

Key Findings
- Different types of AEPs exist, esp. in terms of structure and connection to a conventional school.
- The case against AEPs:
  - focus on students' 'deficits' that need 'curing' - and fear that young people will be 'contaminated' by antisocial behaviour of other students;
  - used as 'dumping grounds' so that conventional schools become increasingly intolerant of difference and less inclusive;
  - poor sustainability due to under-resourcing and low status.
- The case for AEPs:
  - help young people for whom the transition to secondary school was problematic;
  - flexibility and ability to tailor to individual student needs and for cultural diversity;
  - access special funding;
  - close collaboration with parents/carers and with a range of agencies;
  - staff who can build strong relationships with students.
- Organisation and partnership aspects that support quality AEPs:
  - holistic or 'wrap around' delivery, taking into account interdependent environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors;
  - collaborate with parents, community and other agencies;
  - shared vision.
- Pastoral care aspects that support quality AEPs:
  - relationship building, mentoring and role-modelling;
  - high staff to student ratio and high quality staff;
  - provide sense of purpose in supportive and safe learning environment, that views behaviour management as an educative process;
  - proactive approach and case management.
- Curriculum and pedagogy aspects that support quality AEPs:
  - flexible and negotiable learning programs that are responsive to student needs and enable students to take ownership;
  - plan for future pathways;
  - include literacy and numeracy as well as life skills and skills for resiliency.

Hargreaves, J. (2011). *Vocational training and social inclusion - at a glance*. **Adelaide: NCVER**

Data
- Nation-wide
- Statistics from the NCVER VET Provider collection 2006-2010 and NCVER Student Outcomes Survey 2006-2010

Focus
- Students from disadvantaged groups in vocational training (not only young people).
- Implications for social inclusion.

Key Findings
- Between 2006-2010 the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups participating in and completing training increased.
- Disadvantaged groups included in the report are:
    - Indigenous students;
    - Students with a disability;
    - Students who speak a language other than English at home;
    - Students from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds;
    - Students whose highest level of educational attainment is less than Year 12;
    - Students from remote and very remote areas.
- Outcomes:
    - Proportion of subjects passed improved for all groups between 2006-2010, but is below the average for all groups except students from remote and very remote areas;
    - Proportion of graduates who improved their employment circumstances decreased by 3.8% for students from most disadvantaged groups (and by 4.4% for all graduates).
- Factors leading to positive outcomes:
    - An integrated partnership approach;
    - Career guidance;
    - Retention strategies (see below).
- Specific practices that foster persistence and improve outcomes include:
    - Building self-worth;
    - Establishing goals;
    - Extensive student support services;
    - Close relationships with committed staff;
    - Involve 'at risk' individuals in identifying their own needs;
    - Delivery that includes small classes, less regimentation, and flexibility;
    - No-formal and embedded approaches to teaching generic, literacy and numeracy skills;
    - Respect for the learning needs and skill capacities of the individual.

Implications for further research
- Improved data-gathering processes by VET providers about disadvantage and education barriers.
- Further knowledge about strategies to provide disadvantaged learners with access to and completion of higher-level VET qualifications.

ICAN (2010). *Progress report*. **Adelaide: Department of Education and Children's Services.**

Data
- South Australia
- Enrolment statistics, destination survey, policy analysis and case studies of students, staff and parents

Focus
- Document progress in the implementation of Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs) across the state.
- ICAN focuses on the most significantly disengaged young people, those young people who have left school, sometimes in the primary school years, and those who have not attended school often for some years (despite still being under the age of compulsory education).

Key Findings
- Since the beginning of 2005, almost 9000 participants have been supported through ICAN school and community partnerships.
- In term 3, 2010, there were 79 Flexible Learning Option (FLO) schools and 2355 FLO students.
- In 2010 it is anticipated that up to 3500 students will be supported through ICAN (up to 525 Indigenous; 875 with a disability; and another 200 with English as a second language /refugee background).
- Nearly 70% successful re-engagement in learning and/ or earning pathways.
- Across the state the apparent retention rate is 79.5%, the highest in 15 years. ICAN has certainly played a part in contributing to the systemic changes that have provided these results.
- For each FLO enrolment in a secondary school, the student attracts $6,810 per annum for a secondary school student. This funding is used by schools to broker the required individual case management service provision and flexible learning supports.
- Additional funding of $100,000 is available for developing 'joined up' innovative programs at the local ICAN community level. The focus is on sharing good practice with schools and community partners to better engage and retain all young people.
- The most common curriculum options in FLO are SACE (Year 11 and 12) and other South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability programs.
- 70% of 2009 FLO students were engaged in learning or earning in term 1 2010; this includes 56% who continued with FLO enrolment.
- Mentoring programs are being expanded as part of ICAN.
- ICAN has been involved in four new initiatives: Compass (an online literacy and numeracy assessment tool); the ICAN Engagement Matrix (measuring student's engagement in learning, under the domains of *Wellbeing*, *Relationships* and *Involvement in Learning*); the *Epod* (an electronic resource for the capturing the course content of the SACE Personal Learning Plan-PLP); and an Australia wide trial of the UK based not.school.com initiative.

Implications for further research
- Gather data on longer term destinations, beyond re-enrolment in FLO.
- Explore the implementation and impact of the new initiatives: Compass, the Engagement matrix, Epod and not.school.com.

Lamb, S. and Rice, S. (2008). *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report*. **Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development**

Data
- Victoria plus national/international literature
- Review of the national and international literature on school completion and early leaving was conducted to identify strategies that address key risk factors for early leaving
- Interviews with staff in 25 state secondary schools in Victoria that had better-than-expected student completion rates or that were recognised as working innovatively to engage students

Focus
- Successful intervention strategies that work to improve student engagement and increase rates of school completion.

Key Findings
- Central to improving school engagement & completion for 'at risk' students was a combination of targeted student-focused and school-wide strategies, underpinned by a supportive school culture.
- Elements of school culture:
  - shared vision;
  - high expectations of staff and students;
  - flexibility and responsiveness to individual student needs;
  - commitment to success for all students;
  - drive for continuous improvement.
- Targeted strategies:
  - student-focused, eg. mentoring; careers guidance; family outreach; case management; targeted skill development among low achievers; targeted financial support;
  - school-wide, eg. team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care; early literacy and numeracy intervention; pathways planning; broad curriculum with strong VET options; smaller class sizes; high expectations on behaviour and attendance.
- The most effective programs do the following:
  - foster connectedness between students, parents, school and community;
  - increase the trust placed in students;
  - provide tasks for students with immediate, tangible benefits;
  - make spaces within schools and curricula for diverse student needs;
  - address poor achievement;
  - address students' practical personal obstacles to staying at school.
- The most effective programs adopt the following principles:
  - early intervention is best;
  - ensure interventions are sustained;
  - adopt multifaceted approaches;
  - context sensitivity in selecting/adjusting strategies;
  - supportive school culture.

Implications for further research
- Explore how these findings based on mainstream schools apply to Learning Choices programs.
- Develop a guide to assist schools in implementing appropriate strategies and monitoring impact.
- Review staffing of careers counselling to ensure staff are appropriately trained.

Mills, M. and McGregor, G. (2010) *Re-Engaging Students in Education: Success Factors in Alternative Schools*. **Brisbane: Youth Affairs Network Queensland.**

Data
- South East Queensland
- Interviews with students and staff
- 5 'alternative school' sites (pseudonyms used for sites)

Focus
- Explore how alternative schools attempt to meet the needs of young people disengaged from the mainstream schooling sector.
- Sites that seek to provide the young people accessing their services with a personally meaningful education, rather than aiming to return them to a mainstream school.

Key Findings
- For many young people, the alternative schools meet not only their academic needs, but also their social and emotional needs; the sites resembled 'full service schools'.
- Ages of students ranged from early teens to early twenties.
- Many sites had waiting lists - although knowledge about these sites and other similar options was not widely available to education authorities.
- Attendance was voluntary and staff rejected punitive approaches to behaviour management.
- Smaller schools and class sizes were considered important by students.
- The curriculum included both traditional Queensland Studies Authority subjects and vocational certificates and workplace experience.
- Teacher/student relationships and the teaching strategies that flowed from that were central to engaging students with learning.
- Students exhibited a strong work ethic and had a renewed enthusiasm for learning.
- Pathways beyond the school were not always clear, esp. for sites that did not offer programs beyond Year 10.
- Staff were highly committed despite difficult conditions such as job insecurity and low salaries.
- Funding was insecure, and not aligned with the needs of students and ethos of sites.

Implications for further research
- A thorough mapping of the existing educational services available to young people and the pathways and curricula they provide needs to be commissioned.
- Further research needs to occur on disengaged young people who are no longer receiving any formal education and on their perspectives on effective schooling.
- Longitudinal research on student behaviours inflexible learning centres and the ways in which staff respond to them, in order to inform practices in mainstream schools.
- Investigate the impact of school culture and relationships between staff and students on student engagement in schooling processes.
- Longitudinal research exploring the destinations of young people attending these centres.
- Explore the working conditions (professional development, salary structures, job security) in the sector and their impact on attracting and retaining high quality staff.
- Explore definition of what constitutes a school, and implication of definitions for funding.

Myconos, G. (2011). *A path to re-engagement. Evaluating the first year of a Community VCAL education program for young people.* **Fitzroy (Vic): Brotherhood of St Laurence**

Data
- Frankston (Victoria)
- Interviews with students, staff and parents/carers
- 1 site, a community VCAL program at the Brotherhood of St Laurence Frankston High Street Centre

Focus
- Evaluation of the community VCAL program at the Brotherhood of St Laurence Frankston High Street Centre.

Key Findings
- The program led to improvements in engagement and confidence.
- Attendance was 79%, but there was some truancy during the day .
- 12 of 14 Year 11 students moved on to Year 12, and 10 of 11 Year 12 students graduated.
- All students were enrolled in at least one VET course.
- Factors leading to success include:
  - adult learning principles, that allowed students to make choices about their learning;
  - student centred and applied learning methods;
  - harmonious relations between staff and students;
  - low student-staff ratio, mixed ability, single group learning;
  - extracurricular and out-of-class learning activities.
- Challenges include:
  - Balancing improvement with realistic career expectations;
  - Lack of training for teachers to prepare for this setting;
  - High workload and limited professional development;
  - Lack of specialist wellbeing and literacy aides;
  - Synchronising VET, workplace training and classroom teaching components;
  - Lack of information about referred students' needs and experiences.

Implications for further research
- Investigate the collaboration between Learning Choices programs and other educational institutions, especially referring schools and also RTOs for students both while in the program and as future pathway.
- Explore the work conditions for staff in Learning Choices programs, including preparation for the Learning Choices setting, workload, and professional development.

Simons, R. (2010). *First interim report of Schools First: Evaluation of the 2009 awards. Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation.* **Available: http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/6**

Data
- National
- Interviews with 53 out of 88 award winners from 2009

Focus
- The Schools First Awards Program.
- Effectiveness of the program in providing financial recognition of success in establishing effective school-community and financial support to build stronger school-community partnerships.

Key Findings
- Nature of the contribution made by Schools First to the Award winning partnerships:
  - flexibility that the models of funding gave to partnerships;
  - encouragement to think and plan strategically for partnership growth and expansion;
  - establishing formalised structured and processes of communication;
  - developing and implementing strategies for sustainability;
  - demonstrate capacity for the partnership to be replicated in other settings.
- Types of partnership objectives that are contributing to successful outcomes for students:
  - improved learning outcomes;
  - development of workplace skills;
  - promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health and wellbeing;
  - social and emotional support for students and families;
  - children's readiness for school.
- Well-chosen objectives can assist in guiding and marshalling otherwise disconnected resources from schools and community partners into effective initiatives in many different situations and circumstances across Australia.
- Characteristics of highly effective school-community partnerships:
  - An identified need or opportunity that the partnership is set up to address;
  - Mission to improve student outcomes;
  - Strong, committed leadership;
  - Shared decision-making;
  - Clear roles and responsibilities;
  - A structured and well-organised program;
  - Frequent and effective communication;
  - Regular monitoring and review;
  - Tangible results;
  - Sustainability.

Working Group on Education for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland (2011). *Education matters. A call for action to improve educational participation, retention and attainment for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in Queensland.* **Available: http://www.ereflc.org.au/docs/EducationMattersReport.pdf**

Data
- Queensland
- Synthesis of relevant reports and research
- Case studies of individual children and young people

Focus
- Highlight the nature and scope of educational needs of children and young people in out-of-home care (both primary school and secondary school aged children).
- Outline the resources and actions that are required to move the few examples of good practice towards more sustainable solutions.

Key Findings
- Reasons why children and young people in care are disengaged from education:
  - instability in school, problems at school (bullying, needing access to additional support) and limited educational attendance (truanting, suspension/exclusion);
  - poorer academic performance (low NAPLAN scores, repeating grades);
  - behavioural, learning and intellectual difficulties;
  - Financial and other barriers to accessing further/higher education.
- Current system responses:
  - educational support plans (detailing educational, social or behavioural goals and desired outcomes) - but lack of funding and high workload mean that in practice these plans are not developed and implemented properly;
  - flexible education programs (Positive Learning Centres, Flexible Learning Services [state and non-state]) - there is a lack of suitable flexible learning options;
  - skilled support personnel (focused on improving success in education) - several programs employ such staff.
- While there are pockets of good practice and good outcomes, there is a lack of sustainable solutions that improve educational success for all children and young people in care.

Implications for further research
- Establish a centre of excellence for education for children in care, to collate evidence about improving educational outcomes and disseminate knowledge about effective strategies.
- Evaluation of the operation and outcomes from educational support plans.

Wyn, J., Stokes, H. and Tyler, D. (2004). *Stepping stones. TAFE and ACE program development for early school leavers***. Adelaide: NCVER**

Data
- Victoria, NSW, South Australia
- Interviews with 89 students, plus staff
- 4 TAFE/ACE sites in Victoria, 1 in NSW, 1 in South Australia

Focus
- The experiences of young people who are re-entering education in TAFE and ACE systems.
- The needs of young people whose educational pathways have been disrupted.
- Successful re-entry programs.

Key Findings
- Factors facilitating participation in education:
  - The quality of relationships with staff;
  - Accessibility and availability of further pathways;
  - Flexibility, choice and autonomy in structures, discipline and curriculum.
- Barriers to effective participation:
  - Too little or too much flexibility;
  - Practicalities: transport, fees, timetabling.
- Destinations: 20% returned to same course, 24% to other TAFE/ACE course, 20% to PT or FT work.
- Caution: students may simply go from one enabling course to another.
- Key elements of culture of support:
  - Relevant to the young person's life and linked to their individual goals;
  - Connection with broader community networks and support agencies.
- TAFE/ACE programs are realistic settings for offering a second chance for education. However, re-entry youth are not always welcomed by some staff or by the institution as a whole.

Implications for further research
- Develop a more systematic database on longer term outcomes of re-entry programs.
- Longitudinal study of early school leavers accessing TAFE/ACE for re-entry:
  - level of support young people need over time;
  - length of time taken to move from enabling to vocational courses and employment;
  - effective models of inter-agency collaboration.
- How do pre-Year 10 and Year 10 equivalent courses cater for the different learning styles of boys and girls?
- What is the role of innovative programs, such as in the arts or the media, in engaging early school leavers in education and training?

YacVic (2011). *Innovative learning options and the rural youth sector*. Melbourne: Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and Victorian Rural Youth Services

Data
- Victoria (rural and regional areas)
- Online survey of 127 community and youth workers

Focus
- Rurality and the role of community sector in assisting young people in non-traditional areas of education.
- The particular demand for innovative learning models in rural areas and the roles played by community organisations and youth services in supporting these.

Key Findings
- Community and youth services play a key role in brokerage, communication, advocacy and counselling re. options for education for young people.
- Workers were enthusiastic about innovative education programs and desired to see them better supported and extended through rural areas.
- Barriers to accessing non-traditional forms of education for young people in rural and regional areas:
  - Transport / geographic isolation / Limited options available locally for young people;
  - Transport / geographic isolation for staff re. accessing professional development;
  - Low income;
  - Broader need for personal support;
  - Limited resources and time for support services / lack of sustainable funding;
  - Problems of communication between schools, services, employers, families and wider community.
- Pressing issues for innovative education in rural areas:
  - Need for early intervention;
  - Affordability of education and training models;
  - Need for innovative learning to be strongly integrated with other areas of support;
  - Need to address stigma that can surround alternative forms of education, especially in smaller communities.

Implications for further research
- Use a 'rural proofing' approach to asses the impact of policies on young people in rural areas.

Zyngier, D. and Gale, T. (2003). *Non-Traditional and Non-systemic Educational Programs in Frankston Mornington Peninsula Secondary Schools.* **Melbourne: Faculty of Education, Monash University.**

Data
- Frankston / Mornington Peninsula (Victoria)
- Surveys in 12 government schools, 15 teacher interviews in 7 of those schools, 15 students (in 3 focus groups) in 3 schools

Focus
- Non-traditional (ie. learning experiences not necessarily linked to traditional school curricula) and non-systemic (ie. devised, adapted and/or adopted by the school rather than mandated by the system) school-based programs.

Key Findings
- The literature review suggests as characteristics of successful alternative programs [and extent to which programs in the project exhibited these characteristics]:
- Mainstream and relevant, not focused on remediation and not based on withdrawal of selected students [in contrast, most programs in the project were focused on remediating basic skills and withdrew students as selected by teachers];
- Both socially supportive and intellectually demanding [in contrast, most programs were very socially supportive but not intellectually demanding];
- Selection and training of participating teachers is crucial [most teachers in the programs were specially or self-selected and had specific relevant training];
- Actively involve and connect to students' world and community [many programs offered work experience or connected students to their own community].
- The survey identified 45 programs in the 12 schools:
- Over half were focused on helping students fit in with school expectations (student well-being, behaviour modification and life skills);
- In almost 70% student entry was determined by teachers.
- Teacher views:
- Prevalence of deficit explanations for the need for alternative programs (eg. students lack basic skills, can't meet academic requirements, have unacceptable behaviour) - but a small number of teachers focused on lack of relevance/importance of school and school work for students;
- Most teachers focused on skill development and vocational experiences - but some focused more on changing their own teaching practice.
- Student views:
- About one-third name school as explanation for their disengagement (eg. school is boring) - but most attributed their problems to themselves;
- Unhappy with absence of intellectually challenging work; with stigma of alternative programs; and with teacher-directed 'busy work';
- Valued programs that offered workplace experience and opportunity to make meaningful contributions to their community, partly because in these situations they were recognised as young adults.
- Recommendations for successful programs:
- Take account of students' own reasons for being disengaged from schooling;
- Consider the need for changes in schools and teachers themselves, including involving students in decision making and including intellectually challenging material.

Appendix 3

Recent and Current Related Research Projects

Several relevant research projects have recently been conducted or are currently being conducted. These will provide additional evidence about the availability and diversity of Learning Choices programs, factors that support program success and sustainability, opportunities for Learning Choices-style innovation and reform in conventional schooling, and ways of improving social equity in and through education. These projects will need to be considered when a further national research agenda is being determined. A list of projects is provided below, more or less in chronological order. *Please note*: it is likely this list is incomplete. Please send information about other relevant projects to Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

1. ***Re-Engaging Disadvantaged Youth Through Science***
   ARC Linkage Project
   James Cook University (administering organisation)
   Partner Organisation Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network
   Dr David Lake, A/Prof Sue McGinty, A/Prof Neil Anderson, A/Prof Glenn Dawes, Prof Nola Alloway, Dr P Ainsworth, Mr Dale Murray
   Project Summary
   17000 youth have become disconnected from the education system across Australia. The project will provide a model to reengage these youth by providing relevant scientific content where students actively interact with peers in widely dispersed locations. The groups of students will engage in investigative projects where their performances are able to extend beyond traditional literacy-based assessment techniques. Investigations of body image will be used as a vehicle to integrate academic teaching, promoting good health and well-being within a social values framework to develop citizenship and social awareness with scientific skills. The research will help us understand the factors required to reengage at-risk youth with their community.
   Start Date: 2006
   Expected Finish Date: 2012

2. ***Sustainable Selves: A New Assessment Model for Marginalised Secondary Students***.
   ARC Linkage Project
   Queensland University Technology (administering organisation)
   Partner Organisations Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network and Brisbane City Council
   Prof Alan Luke, Prof Val Klenowski, Prof Philip Graham, Dr Andy Brader
   Project Summary
   Adolescents who have left schooling present a major challenge to Australian social, economic and educational policy. Disengaged youth are more likely to experience social, health and psychological risks, poverty and cultural marginalisation. The project develops an innovative model to assess the skills, knowledge and resources of marginalised students seeking to reenter education. An authentic portfolio approach to assessment will be piloted and implemented at Queensland's largest provider of reentry programs, Edmund Rice Foundation Flexible Learning Centre, supported by the Brisbane City Council.
   See: http://www.ici.qut.edu.au/projects/linkages/sustainableselves.jsp
   Start Date: 2008
   Expected Finish Date: 2012

3. ***Evaluation of the Brimbank Young Men's Project***
   Centre for Multicultural Youth project
   University of Melbourne
   Dr Malcolm Turnbull, Dr Helen Stokes
   Project Summary
   The BYMP is an outreach initiative of the Centre for Multicultural Youth, a two year pilot program funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. It targets young men of African background who are disengaged from education, employment and training, have had contact with police, or are experiencing other difficulties with settlement. The program has a pre-Pathways focus and seeks to reconnect the participants to CMY (and partners) as a preliminary to reconnecting to education, training, counselling or supports. The project examines factors influencing the target group's disengagement, assesses program outcomes, strengths and constraints.
   See: http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/yrc/research/projects/Brimbank_Young_Men.html
   Start Date: 2010
   Expected Finish Date: 2011

4. ***The Secondary Engagement Evaluation Project in Low SES Schools***
   Western Australia Department of Education project
   Murdoch University
   Prof Barry Down, with Dr Kathryn Choules
   Project Summary
   This research identifies, describes and explains the policies and practices implemented at Yule Brook College, Thornlie SHS and Manjimup SHS that appear to be making a difference in terms of student engagement in low SES school communities.
   Start Date: 2010
   Expected Finish Date: 2011

5. ***Flexible Learning options/centres in the ACT***
   ACT Department of Education and Training project
   University of Queensland and Griffith University, Qld
   Prof Martin Mills, Dr Glenda McGregor
   Project Summary
   This project will investigate the provision of alternative education in the ACT. By 'alternative' we mean schools/centres/options that are run differently from, or independently of, mainstream schools.
   Start Date: 2010
   Expected Finish Date: 2012

6. ***Pursuing equity in high poverty rural schools: improving learning through rich accountabilities***
   Queensland Department of Education and Training Project
   The University of Queensland (administering organisation)
   Prof Bob Lingard, Prof Marie Brennan, Dr Lew Zipin, Prof Peter Renshaw, Prof Martin Mills
   Project Summary
   Poor performance of students in schools located in high poverty communities is a pressing educational problem for Australia, with educational disadvantage in poor rural communities in particular demanding amelioration. The evidence suggests the equity and quality of schooling outcomes are centrally important to the nation's economic future, the strength of Australian democracy, social inclusion and a unified nation. In strengthening policy and practice knowledge about educative usage of performance data and the development of rich forms of accountability, the research will advance the academic

literature and provide an evidence base for success of the national partnership on low socio-economic status schools.

See: http://www.uq.edu.au/uqresearchers/researcher/lingardrl.html?uv_category=prj&prj=1910484

Start Date: 2010

Expected Finish Date: 2015

7. ***Curriculum innovation and Big Picture Learning***

Origin Energy funded project, Big Picture Education Australia, Murdoch University, Sydney University, The University of Tasmania and Melbourne University

Mr Chris Bonnor, Prof Barry Down, A/Prof Deb Hayes, Mr Neil Day

Project Summary

This research will investigate the implementation of the model across a range of Australian sites with the aim of describing the experiences of those involved BPEA schools, and assessing early stage effects of the model. This research will be of interest to policy makers, education system personnel, school leaders, teachers and others committed to highly quality equitable outcomes in public schools. BPEA Australia is committed to monitoring and tracking student outcomes over time, including their post-school pathways and outcomes. This initial research plan will establish the protocols for this long-term data collection process.

See: http://www.bigpicture.org.au/bpea-undertakes-major-research-project

Start Date: 2011

Expected Finish Date: 2013

8. ***Young people and arts practice: impact, evaluation, and the third space. Identifying a better way forward.***

ARC Linkage project

Murdoch University (administering organisation)

Partner Organisation Big Hart Incorporated

Dr Peter Wright, Prof Bradley Haseman, Prof Barry Down, Mr Scott Rankin, Mr Michael White

Project Summary

This research reveals effective ways of developing young people's creative responses to unknown futures in fragile communities. Through this project, the impact and conditions enabling these responses will be better understood, strengthening enablers and minimising constraints on this work.

Start Date: 2011

Expected Finish Date: 2012

9. ***Getting a job: vocationalism, identity formation and schooling in communities at disadvantage***

ARC Linkage project

Murdoch University (administering organisation)

Partner Organisations Bridging the Gap Inc, Challenger Institute of Technology, City of Rockingham, Kwinana Industries Council, Seton Catholic College, South West Group, Town of Kwinana, Tranby College, Western Australian Department of Education

Prof Barry Down, Prof John Smyth

This research will use young people's stories to investigate the barriers and obstacles to getting a job, and from their vantage point, identify the educational, policy and practice contexts that need to be created and more widely sustained in order to assist their career aspirations and life chances.

Start Date: 2011

Expected Finish Date: 2013

10. ***Young people's narratives of socio-economic disadvantage and educational opportunities in contexts of place-based interventions***
ARC Discovery Project
University of Ballarat
Prof John Smyth
Project Summary
Society and individuals suffer when young people from disadvantaged areas become disengaged from school. This project will inform educational policy by generating knowledge from young people about the resources they use to make educational decisions.
See: http://crnballarat.com/elements/element-2/projects/project-what-it-means-to-be-a-young-person-in-a-regional-community-experiencing-the-effects-of-social-and-economic-disadvantage/
Start Date: 2011
Expected Finish Date: 2013

11. ***Investing in our disadvantaged youth: new school-wide approaches to understanding and improving school engagement and social connectedness***
ARC Linkage Project
University of Queensland (administering organisation)
Partner Organisation Queensland Department of Education and Training
A/Prof Annemaree Carroll, Prof Robyn M Gillies, A/Prof Christina van Kraayenoord, Mrs Julie M Bower
Project Summary
This project will be the first to test a model of social connectedness to explain the contribution of social exclusion to long-term disadvantage of youths. The outcomes will be a sustainable professional learning program for school staff nationally and internationally and a school-based approach to promote the healthy development of Australian youths.
See: http://www.uq.edu.au/uqresearchers/researcher/carrolla.html?uv_category=prj&prj=1912305
Start Date: 2011
Expected Finish Date: 2014

12. ***Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia***
Ian Potter Foundation project
Victoria University (administering organisation)
A/Prof Kitty te Riele
Project Summary
This project explores 'alternative' education options for marginalised young people through 'innovative learning engagement' or 'flexible learning' programs. Despite the promise offered by such programs, both their practice and research on them have been fragmented. Our Australia-wide research will address this weakness by answering 'who gets what?' as well as 'what works and why?'. Funding will be used to 1) investigate access to alternative flexible programs across Australia, 2) analyse the diversity of programs, 3) analyse outcomes from promising 'good practice' programs, and 4) develop and share implications and resources for enhancing successful educational provision for marginalised young people.
See: http://www.vu.edu.au/victoria-institute-for-education-diversity-and-lifelong-learning/research-projects
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2014

13. ***Building futures for young Australians at risk: a coordinated measurement framework and data archive***
ARC Linkage Project
University of Melbourne (administering organisation)
Partner Organisations Beacon Foundation, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Hands On Learning Australia, Social Ventures Australia Limited, The Foundation for Young Australians
Prof Johanna Wyn, Mr Gavan McCarthy, Ms Johanna Scott, Dr Lucas Walsh
Project Summary:
This project will build a national data base of evidence about and for programs that address the needs of the 16 per cent of young Australians currently at risk of school non-completion. It will generate important knowledge for program improvement and sustainability and coordination of evidence across diverse and fragmented programs.
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015

14. ***Marginalised students: enhancing life choices through engaging educational policies and practices***
ARC Linkage Project
University of Queensland (administering organisation)
Partner Organisation the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland
Prof Martin Mills, Dr Glenda McGregor
Project Summary
This project explores the provision of existing alternative/flexible learning pathways in Queensland for young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling. It seeks to assess educational principles and practices that work in such sites so as to develop a framework of educational 'best practice' that may inform this sector.
See: http://www.uq.edu.au/uqresearchers/researcher/millsmd.html?uv_category=prj&prj=1912720
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015

15. ***School retention through alternative schooling: towards a socially just approach to education***
ARC Discovery Project
The University of Queensland (administering organisation)
Prof Martin Mills, Dr Glenda McGregor, A/Prof Deb Hayes, A/Prof Kitty te Riele
Project Summary
This project is concerned with how mainstream schools may become more socially just and inclusive of all young people through an analysis of alternative schools specifically designed for this purpose. Such a concern is critical for lifting school retention rates of marginalised young people and improving practices in all schools.
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015

16. ***Capacitating student aspirations in classrooms and communities in a high poverty region***
ARC Discovery Project
Victoria University (administering organisation)
Dr Lew Zipin, Prof Marie Brennan, Prof Trevor Gale, Dr Sam Sellar
Project Summary
This project studies the aspirations of students in a disadvantaged area, as cultural resources for completing school, accessing higher education and realising desirable futures. It will produce new

concepts and research methods for increasing social equity by working closely with students and families, and making links between schools and communities.
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015

17. ***We can't afford not to: supporting young people within their families and communities from early adolescence to early adulthood***
ARC Linkage Grant
UNSW (administering organisation)
Partner Organisations DEEWR and The Foundation for Young Australians
Dr Kristy Muir, A/Prof Jocelyn Craig, Ms Fiona Yule, Dr Lucas Walsh
Project Summary:
This project aims to address the problem of young people not in education or work. It will identify solutions about what, how and when families, communities and governments can most effectively support young people with different risk factors to remain or become fully socially and economically engaged from early adolescence to adulthood.
See: http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/research-areas-and-strengths/we-can-t-afford-not-to-supporting-young-people-within-their-families-and-communities-from-early-adolescence-to-early-adulthood-283.html
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015

18. ***Education in Low SES, Diverse and Under-represented Communities***
Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program
Victoria University, Melbourne University, Edith Cowan University
Prof Roger Slee, Prof Richard Teese, Prof Stephen Lamb, A/Prof Kitty te Riele and others
Project summary:
This research focuses on improving education outcomes for students from low SES, diverse and under-represented backgrounds. Specific projects include:
'Educational journeys in Melbourne's west' and 'Educational alternatives in Melbourne's west'.
Start Date: 2012
Expected Finish Date: 2015