



## **Disadvantaged young people:**

- senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities**

**A research project of the Victorian TAFE Association  
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## Executive Summary

This research project investigated the realities and challenges for Victoria's 12 TAFEs and 4 dual sector Universities in providing young people from disadvantaged circumstances with a learning environment and support services to enable them to successfully re-engage with education.

The report is based on information collected through quantitative and qualitative data collection processes conducted with TAFEs and dual sector Universities in 2015.

The research illustrates many of the challenges and rewards of working with disadvantaged young people with complex needs, including disabilities and mental health issues, who are completing their VCAL or VCE in a non-traditional senior secondary environment.<sup>1</sup> More specifically it looks at young people completing their VCAL and to a lesser extent their VCE in a Victorian TAFE or dual sector University setting.

It reveals unique insights and issues from practitioners and it highlights the conditions considered necessary by those in the field to re-engage students and support them successfully in learning.

The research draws attention to some issues that may be overlooked or under-valued when looking from a broader perspective; and it confirms many of the things that are documented by other research, reviews and reports into the important areas of disengagement and reengagement of young people in education.

It reinforces the need to address issues that continue to jeopardise the capacity of non-school providers to support government policy objectives of increased participation and attainment levels for all young people, especially those suffering disadvantage.

Importantly, it demonstrates that despite the myriad challenges presented by the majority of young people entering a TAFE or dual sector University to complete their senior school certificate, the research tells a story of hope, hard work, adaptability and innovation on the part of TAFE and the dual sector Universities to meet students' needs.

The picture that emerges is not doom and gloom. Most young people participating in these settings are making positive steps in their personal and educational lives, and achieving recognition for their efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper does not generally consider students in VETIS or School Based Apprenticeship (SBA), and no attempt is made to understand whether these cohorts of young people who have chosen a non-traditional (i.e. not traditional academic) pathway at a secondary school and/or fulltime in a non-school setting have similar issues.

## Key messages

A number of key messages emerge from the research:

- Increasing numbers of early school leavers are completing their senior school certificates in TAFEs and dual sector Universities year on year.
- Young people coming into TAFEs and dual sector Universities have a range of complex needs. Their challenging learning backgrounds and behaviour can compete with and complicate their re-engagement with education and they require resource intensive support.
- The current and growing challenge of re-engaging disengaged young people to complete their senior school certification has been in large part transferred to TAFE and dual sector Universities without the corresponding funds to meet the needs of the young people.
- These are growing issues that need to be recognized and properly addressed by policy makers to ensure the diverse needs of different students are reflected in funding and policy decisions.
- There are differences and anomalies between the funding for young people completing their VCAL or VCE at a school through the Schools Resource Package (SRP) and for those completing the same course in a TAFE or dual sector University under the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG) funding.
- There is no dodging the issue of funding: if these young people had stayed at school they would be better funded for their learning needs. Funding for disadvantaged young people in TAFE has been eroded over the last five years and more. But the funding for similar young people in school settings has increased.
- Concerns raised about the inadequacy of Victorian Training Guarantee funding to meet the real cost of engaging young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling need to be further investigated and addressed.
- Funding disparities are materially affecting the learning outcomes of students. In particular, students with a disability are having their choices about senior secondary education in an alternative setting compromised by funding differences and anomalies.
- Victoria has been recognised as a leader in school funding reform in Australia and the first jurisdiction to introduce needs based funding allocation to schools. What has not been recognised is that this needs based funding unfairly stops at the school gate.
- The capacity and capability of teachers and trainers is under stress. Many teachers and trainers have not been well prepared for the sorts of challenges they now face in their classrooms and workshops.

- Many staff are regularly going well beyond their normal teaching duties and generously giving of their own discretionary time to assist students in need.
- There is a real need for specialist support in the classroom and access to more high quality professional development.

## **Conclusions**

This report provides an evidence base for challenging the existing differences and anomalies in student funding between schools and TAFE/dual sector Universities offering senior secondary qualifications in Victoria; and the need for new offerings in professional development to better enable TAFE teachers to cope with the challenging cohorts they now face.

Taking the cues from this research, the Brack's Review of Government School Funding and the Victorian VET Funding Review that pointed to inequities and problems with young people undertaking senior school certification in TAFEs or dual sector Universities, there is a definite need for policy makers to move towards a more equitable approach to funding young people re-engaging with education, wherever they choose to learn.

Ultimately if governments and society will the ends – all young people actively participating in education and attaining levels of achievement that put them on a pathway to successful adulthood; then they must also will the means – the appropriate resourcing and the same access to resources regardless of their educational setting.

## Project Background

This research project investigated the realities and challenges for TAFEs and dual sector Universities in providing young people from disadvantaged circumstances with learning environments and support services to enable them to re-engage with education.

Over 80,000 young people in Australia leave school early rather than complete their senior secondary studies because school no longer meets their needs or staying at school has become too difficult. For some young people this means looking for work in an exceptionally challenging employment market whilst others choose to complete their senior secondary certificate in a non-school setting. There is a wealth of evidence that shows disengagement from education can have lifelong implications for young people in terms of their health, wellbeing and future employment opportunities.

The Bracks Review<sup>2</sup> into Government School Funding in Victoria, reported that some 10,000 young people drop out of school each year. While *“Victorian students generally feel motivated, engaged and positive throughout their primary years, as students’ [sic] progress through secondary school there is a decline in student morale and confidence in their academic ability, and also a decline in positive attitudes towards school and teachers.”*

The impact of early school leaving and the non-completion of this important foundational qualification on young people is well documented. Young people who do not complete their senior secondary certificate are much more likely to experience bouts of unemployment and under-employment, have a much reduced capacity for financial earnings and are much more likely to suffer ill health.

Victoria’s TAFEs and dual sector Universities are well regarded as public providers of vocational education and training (VET) for entry level qualifications, workforce development and industry accreditation. While this is most of their work, TAFEs and dual sector Universities are also instrumental in their provision of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

TAFEs and dual sector Universities have historically played an important role in the provision of VCE to mature age students by creating an adult learning environment for people wishing to return to study. More recently with the introduction of VCAL in 2008, and the growth of VET in Schools this role has extended to providers of alternative education to young people disengaged from school.

All Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities are registered with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) as approved senior secondary providers and deliver senior secondary qualifications. All offer VCAL as a course of study at foundation, intermediate and senior levels, and these providers make up the majority of non-school senior secondary providers in Victoria.

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<sup>2</sup> Bracks Review of Government School Funding, Greater Returns on Investment in Education, Government Schools Funding Review Final Report December 2015 p.51

In September 2016 the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) released a report about how early school leavers aged between 15-19 years who had not completed secondary school are changing from public to private providers.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding this reported shift is for VET certificate qualifications rather than the VCE or VCAL, it does add weight to the evidence of young people seeking alternative courses and educational settings. It supports the need for policy settings and funding decisions that address post-compulsory learning in non-school settings and in courses best delivered in non-school settings i.e. TAFE and other VET providers.

Young people with challenging learning backgrounds and behaviour tend to gravitate towards communities and professions that accept them. Alternative senior secondary settings such as TAFEs and dual sector Universities have consistently attracted young people who have struggled in school, have experienced disrupted learning for a variety of reasons and are from low socio-economic status families.

For many young people VET is characterised as a ‘last chance’ or ‘second chance’ at engaging with learning; as a means to gain a foothold in the employment market and develop oneself into a confident learner.

Data from a student enrolment survey conducted as part of this project in 2015 indicated that there were 5,744 young people completing a senior secondary certificate in TAFEs and dual sector Universities in Victoria. Of these 3,068 were enrolled in a VCAL certificate and 2,676 were enrolled in VCE.<sup>4</sup> Of the students enrolled in a senior secondary certificate 56% were male and 44% were female. Of these students 2.7% identified as indigenous and 25% disclosed that they had a disability upon enrolment. Assuming the enrolment trends of young people into these courses are holding true then it could be assumed that these figures would have continued to increase in 2016.

Beyond the ordinary challenges of growing up, it is estimated more than 25% of young people have experienced a mental health disorder in the last 12 months. This equates to 750,000 young people in Australia today. Mental health issues and early school leaving are closely linked. There are strong correlations between school connectedness, social connectedness and mental wellbeing, each reinforcing the likelihood of completing school and achieving high levels of academic success.<sup>5</sup> Young people who experience mental illness are less likely to finish their Senior Secondary Certificate in a traditional academically focused school setting. Many have experienced disrupted learning through limited school attendance and continue to navigate complex personal circumstances.

It is estimated that over fifty percent of early school leavers continue with some form of secondary or vocational education in non-school settings such as TAFEs or dual sector

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<sup>3</sup> *Shedding light: Private ‘for profit’ training providers and young early school leavers* Mykonos, G., Clarke, K., and Te Reile, K., NCVER September 2016

<sup>4</sup> The VCE figure includes VCE via VET in Schools (VETiS)

<sup>5</sup> Bond, Lyndal et al. 2007 Social and School Connectedness in Early Secondary School as Predictors of Late Teenage Substance Use, Mental Health, and Academic Outcomes, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 40, Issue 4, 357.e9 - 357.e18

Universities.<sup>6</sup> This strong conversion rate to further study for early school leavers has been attributed to a ‘mandating of participation’ for young people who have not completed year 12 or risk losing their Youth Allowance, and a challenging youth employment market. This has led to more young people with complex needs attending TAFE or dual sector Universities to complete their senior secondary studies.

It must be said that not all students undertaking their VCAL in an alternative setting do so because they are disadvantaged and or disengaged from school. The information relating to VCAL courses offered by TAFEs and dual sector Universities offer an attractive alternative learning setting for those who make a positive choice to pursue their senior secondary certificate in a non-school setting. Students making this choice will do so for a range of positive reasons including seeking an alternative to VCE for those not wanting to go to university, wanting a more adult learning environment, better pathways to work based learning and future employment, and access to specialised teachers and trainers. Notwithstanding however, even those who make a positive choice can still be disadvantaged by issues such as cost, time and distance.

As noted earlier re-engaging in learning at TAFE or a dual sector University for disengaged and disadvantaged students is often presented as a ‘second chance’ or in some cases a ‘last chance’ to complete their formal learning. This kind of characterisation and language is not always helpful as it lends itself to a negative rather than positive interpretation. The mindset and language used to frame and underpin policy directions for these young people needs to recognise their disadvantage but not perpetuate it.

The research in this document indicates that TAFE and dual sector University providers and their staff use much more positive language about the re-engagement of young people that is connected to understanding their issues, creating a safe place to learn, building trust and a creating bright future.

## Research Methodology

The research project comprised two phases. The first phase involved the collection of quantitative data from all 12 TAFEs and 4 dual sector Universities in Victoria. The data collected identified the number of young people (under 21 years of age) who were completing either a VCAL or VCE qualification. The quantitative survey identified the gender of these students, their self-disclosed disabilities at enrolment and indigeneity (*Attachment 1 Student Enrolment Data*).

The second phase was to collect qualitative data by conducting focus groups with five TAFE providers and two dual sector Universities. Each focus group was asked to consider a set of questions around issues related to the young people completing their senior certificate in these settings, including challenges faced by the young people, changes in this cohort over time, what strategies work for engaging disadvantaged young people, and what could be improved (*Attachment 2 Focus Group Questionnaire*).

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<sup>6</sup> On Track Data 2015.

A total of 40 TAFE staff participated in the focus groups. They included teachers/practitioners, support staff, specialist staff, youth transition team leaders, and coordinators. Their individual experience working in TAFEs, dual sector Universities, and/or with young people in education settings ranged from 6 months to 20 plus years.

In response to the issues raised in the focus groups, particularly around funding, the research drew on the Bracks Review of Government School Funding in Victoria conducted in 2015. This was mainly for comparative purposes as the Bracks Review addresses needs based models of funding for disadvantaged young people. The cohort of young people considered by this research, and the nature of the support and services they require (regardless of their education setting) are predominantly disadvantaged.

## **Key Findings – What the focus groups told us**

Despite the myriad challenges presented by the majority of young people entering a TAFE or dual sector University to complete their senior school certificate, the focus groups tell a story of hope, hard work, adaptability and innovation on the part of TAFE and the dual sector Universities to meet student needs.

The picture that emerges is not doom and gloom. Most young people participating in these settings are making positive steps in their personal and educational lives, and achieving recognition for their efforts.

But it is a picture that demands the attention of policy makers to issues of funding and resourcing for young people in non-school settings; and the complexity of the personal, familial and social issues these young people bring with them to TAFE or dual sector Universities.

“It all comes back to money...” the words of one participant echoed the thoughts of many. Everything is linked to the appropriate funding for students to enable them to make positive choices about re-engagement; and for course provision that includes funding to build staff capability and capacity.

The issues and stories related by the participants are not isolated examples, they are the norm. Time and again across all focus groups participants reiterated and confirmed the same or similar experiences.

## **The key thematic threads**

A number of thematic threads emerged from the focus groups and research.

- Providing alternative learning settings for disengaged, disadvantaged young people and other students choosing an adult learning environment is a present and future challenge for TAFE and dual sector Universities. It is a growing issue that needs to be recognized and properly addressed to ensure the diverse needs of different students are reflected in funding and policy decisions.

- Funding for disadvantaged young people in TAFE has been eroded over the last five years and more. But the funding for similar young people in school settings has increased.<sup>7</sup> There are differences in funding and funding anomalies between students completing VCE or VCAL in a non-school/TAFE setting even though the TAFEs and dual sector Universities are approved senior secondary providers offering the same courses.
- The Bracks Review applauds Victoria as a leader in school funding reform in Australia and the first jurisdiction to introduce needs based funding allocation to schools. What the Bracks Review did not recognise is that the needs based funding stops at the school gate, to the detriment of those at TAFEs and dual-sector Universities.
- The young people coming into TAFE and dual sector Universities to complete their senior school certificates have a range of complex needs. Their challenging learning backgrounds and behaviour can compete with and complicate their re-engagement with education and they require intensive support.
- The capacity and capability of TAFE and dual-sector University teachers who work with these young people is under stress. There is a real need for specialist support in the classroom and access to more high quality professional development (PD). The VET Development Centre (VDC) does deliver PD events on how educators can deal with challenging behaviour in the classroom and on the issue of mental health. The VDC reports that it is the Learn Locals (ACE), TAFEs and Secondary School teachers that have particularly requested this type of PD.<sup>8</sup>
- Structural and policy changes have driven increased enrolments in this area. A key driver of increasing enrolments is federal, state and territory government policy aimed at increasing educational attainments through the use of learner subsidies. However the problem of keeping young people in learning has been transferred to TAFE and dual sector Universities without the corresponding funds to meet the needs of the young people.

***“These young people need hope...” (Focus Group Participant)***

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<sup>7</sup> In 2015, close to \$198 million of equity (Socioeconomic disadvantage funding (SES) funding was delivered to schools to assist with meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. Social disadvantage funding rates in 2016 at Secondary Level 1 ranged from \$514 to \$4,100 and at Level 2 from \$258 to \$2,050. The Brack’s Review indicates that schools will be receiving considerably more equity funding in 2016 relative to 2015. Since the Student Resource Package (SRP) was introduced in 2005, funding per student has grown by 3.9 per cent per year on average to around \$9,662 in 2015. Compared to funding projections based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI), this growth represents a real funding increase in the schools system of \$1,524 per student. At \$1,523 (sic) per student, around \$3.7 billion has been added to school funding in real terms since 2005

<sup>8</sup> All relevant PD is conducted under the topic *Teaching and Learning Strategies*. The topics each year for the PD program are selected from the feedback evaluations completed by course attendees. Stakeholders are also surveyed about PD, and consultations are held with the Government and industry consultants/presenters. The relevant and specific presenters in a particular topic are then asked to develop the program to be delivered.

The first group of questions to the focus groups related to the general issues facing the young people undertaking their senior school certificates in TAFE and dual sector Universities (including those related to mental health) the particular needs of this cohort, whether and how things have changed over the last 2-3 years, and more broadly changes over the last 10 years.

Focus group participants reported that from their experience the majority of young people entering TAFE and dual sector Universities to complete their senior school certificate are predominantly early school leavers who are disadvantaged, disengaged and distrustful.

Young people with challenging learning backgrounds and behaviour tend to gravitate towards communities and professions that accept them. But when they arrive, it is often with multiple problems that can individually and/or collectively form significant barriers to successfully re-engaging with learning.

When asked about the main problems affecting the young people and their learning capacity - anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol problems topped the list.

Other issues such as low self-esteem, chaotic personal lives, sexuality issues, bullying, disengagement from school, loss of trust, disrupted learning and gaps in their learning, language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills that are well below expected levels, poor social and communication skills, and familial and financial stress were included in the long tail of the problems presented.

Overwhelmingly participants spoke about the need to provide wrap around services to the young people, and that initially providing formal learning towards a qualification often has to take second place to enabling them to overcome the personal, social and financial impediments to their learning.

Examples of providing the young people with food, a place to sleep, a calm environment or positive adult role models were cited to illustrate the base from which many of the young people are coming from to complete their senior school certificate.

***“It’s hard, often they are dealing with adult issues personally, at home or outside, but they don’t have the adult skills .... so everything becomes a crisis” (Focus Group Participant)***

First and foremost amongst the responses to dealing with these complex issues, people spoke about the need to build trust with the young people and to create a safe place to learn. The establishment of trust was seen as key to developing strong relationships from which to build their confidence to re-engage and to stay engaged with learning.

***“Sometimes it can take months before they take off their hoodie or can look at you” (Focus Group Participant)***

Participants also spoke about the need for professional counselling support and the capacity to access support services immediately or within a short time frame. This is not always possible, nor likely, when counselling services and youth workers are often spread thinly

across TAFEs and dual sector Universities, and the funding for these services has been cut or eroded over time.

In 2012 the Napthine Government announced funding cuts that the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) estimated would cost their members around \$290 million per year, an amount confirmed by the Napthine Government at the time. The VTA subsequently revealed that \$170 million of those cuts were for ‘full service provider’ funding including a wide range of student services such as support for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, and support for disadvantaged students.<sup>9</sup>

***“Two years ago we had a team of twelve now it’s down to just one – me...”*** (Focus Group Participant)

People indicated that it was not unusual for young people to have to wait weeks to see a counsellor unless it was an emergency, and that staff had to work even harder at keeping them involved as wait times could precipitate their decision to disengage again.

***“We try to use Headspace but usually there is a 3 – 4 week wait...”*** (Focus Group Participant)

Many of the young people live precarious lives and this is acknowledged by the teaching and support staff through their focus on providing them with a safe, protected learning environment; connections with support services both in and outside the learning environment; and the opportunity to engage with adults who respect their effort, and who are interested in them and their success.

Transition assistance was repeatedly raised as a significant issue for this cohort. Where once there was access to Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) funding now there is little or no funding for pathways planning for these students in TAFE and dual sector Universities where they arrive with no learning or transition plan from school and are in need of intensive support.

The Student Resource Package (SRP) currently provides MIPs funding to ensure all students in Years 10 to 12 (in schools) are provided with an individual Career Action Plan and associated career development support. Currently, all schools with Years 10 to 12 enrolments receive a base amount of funding and schools with a high concentration of disadvantage receive a greater allocation of funding at \$537 per student.

The Bracks Review reported evidence that demonstrates that young people who leave school early and access the VTG market showed higher non completion rates when compared with their Year 12 completing peers. It also noted that access to MIPs or similar

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<sup>9</sup> Full service provider funding covered expenditure on ‘the full spectrum of student services and facilities, statutory obligations (and) specific requirements as public entities’. Community service obligations (CSOs) were traditionally met with this funding and included a wide range of student services such as support for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, and support for disadvantaged students, child support including support for young parents, and welfare support.

funding to Years 10 to 12 students completing their senior schooling in a TAFE or dual sector University could assist in raising completion rates.<sup>10</sup>

Anecdotal evidence from focus groups supports this observation. Participants pointed out that while not all students will come to TAFE or dual sector Universities for their senior secondary certificates with specific issues of disadvantage, many of them are young, and they need help and support in transitioning to a new adult learning environment. To keep them engaged, further assistance is also needed at additional threshold transition points such as disengaged to engaged, school to TAFE, VCAL to Certificate level, or homeless to stable accommodation.

When asked to estimate the time it takes to successfully transition students the answer was “as long as it takes”.

All these things can offer the hope young people need but they come at a cost.

Focus group participants frequently and consistently expressed concerns about the inadequacy of Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG) funding to meet the real cost of engaging young people who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling, in contrast to funding under the SRP, which they would have received had the young person remained at school.<sup>11</sup> They also spoke about the inconsistency of support for young people in non-school settings that limits their access to linked support services and appropriate counselling services, and means long waits for specialist support services. Inadequate funding also constrains teacher/trainer access to professional learning to help them deal with the complex needs of these young people.

There is no dodging the issue of funding.

One participant revealed that “all of our (youth) departments run at a loss to the institute at a cost of around \$600,000 a year”. Many of the participants raised the issues of a lack of parity with SRP funding in schools for the same or similar students; and the lack of access to the same disability funding for students in TAFE and dual sector Universities compared to that available in schools.

But TAFEs and dual sector Universities have endeavoured to overcome this and not make inadequate funding a deal breaker. The courses, structures and support systems offered are, as much as possible, still centered on the needs of young people, and many of TAFE and dual-sector University staff give generously of their allotted and discretionary time to ensure the young people have every chance of success.

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<sup>10</sup> Funding lines linked to disadvantage contained in the SRP include funding for Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs). SRP Funding Guidelines  
[http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/finance/The%20SRP%20Guide\\_2016%20Revised%20Guide.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/finance/The%20SRP%20Guide_2016%20Revised%20Guide.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> The objective of the SRP is to ensure that all students attending government schools in Victoria have access to a level of resources which enables them to achieve a high standard of learning, and to extend their involvement in education or training beyond the compulsory years. The design of the SRP aligns resourcing to the individual learning needs of the student.

Across the focus group participants there was a wealth of experience. Their individual experience working in VET and/or with young people in education settings, particularly TAFE or dual sector University settings, ranged from 6 months to 20 plus years. This enabled them to bring a historical perspective that gave a sense of the change that has led to the current situation.

It was generally thought that many of the issues related to early school leaving (such as those previously cited – low self-esteem, chaotic personal lives, sexuality issues, bullying, disengagement from school, loss of trust, disrupted learning and gaps in their learning, LLN skills well below expected levels, poor social and communication skills, and familial and financial stress) had not changed over the last 10 years. Rather, participants felt that there are now more young people with these issues presenting at TAFE and the funding to assist them has progressively been eroded or has disappeared altogether.

***“We used to get \$9.70 (per student contact hour), plus a regional loading and youth funding like VCAL coordination. Now we get \$7.50 (per student contact hour)...all the services have support programs...and the loadings they’re gone...” (Focus Group Participant)***

In the past early school leavers may at best have gone into employment or at worst have been lost into a world of unemployment and/or welfare dependency. Policy shifts around the Youth Allowance have amounted to a ‘mandating of participation’ in education and training for young people up to and including 17 years of age and for those who have not completed Year 12. Consequently more young people are seeking to enrol in TAFE and other VET providers.

There is an increasing expectation that TAFE and dual sector Universities will be able to take early school leavers and help them. But as one participant indicated “We can’t be expected to do in 12 months what schools have been unable to do in 12 years”.

Over the last 2-3 years it is evident that some behaviour has changed significantly in young people. Participants noted a rise in young people who are not just school refusers but society refusers, young people who are angrier, more aggressive, who use physical violence against themselves, and threatening behaviour towards other students, teachers and staff. Participants felt much of this can be attributed to the marked rise in drug and alcohol use and abuse.

Related to this are issues of mental health. Students presenting with anxiety, depression and the full spectrum of mental health conditions are more prevalent. There are also increasing numbers of students with physical disabilities seeking to continue their learning in TAFE or dual sector Universities.

Young people are not so much academically challenged to complete a secondary school certificate but the nature of their chaotic lives means they have more impediments to participating.

These changes in the student cohort have had flow on effects for teachers and support staff. There is a rising awareness of the need for staff to have a range of skills necessary to

support these students; and an increasing need for staff to be provided with professional learning in order to be able to cope with the challenging issues and behaviour in their work settings.

## What TAFE and dual sector Universities do to support young people

The second group of questions for the focus groups concerned the strategies teachers, specialist staff and support staff employ to assist the young people to re-engage and stay engaged.

Again participants across all focus groups identified similar approaches based primarily around creating a positive learning environment. They frequently described strategies to assist young people to explore the reasons underpinning their disengagement, helping them to feel valued and respected, and setting boundaries.

Some lamented that they used to be able to tailor programs to meet the needs of young people when funding was more generous and realistic.

TAFEs and dual sector Universities provide direct delivery of the VCAL as a full time activity. Regardless of the difficulties, it can be argued the TAFE model for VCAL delivery works better than that in schools, as the students are treated/organised as one group (often a smaller group than a school setting), in less formal, more adult settings, allowing the learning and support services to be better contextualised. In the words of one public servant consulted for this project *“this is the model that has the potential to be expanded”*.

Many participants described activities that adapted the curriculum to the students rather than the students to the curriculum.

***“They’re not like other kids.....they are very different to the regular school goers  
...otherwise they would be in schools” (Focus Group Participant)***

Examples were cited of where it was evident that young people were not eating well or not getting enough to eat, teachers and support staff created opportunities within the day and within the classroom activities such as a breakfast club to start the day and cooking in classes and feeding the students.

Other strategies such as bringing in a wide variety of speakers who could focus on specific issues closely related to the needs of the young people; holding Beyond Blue days and How Are You days; or taking students out to experience different activities new to them and engaging with new networks, were all attributed to helping to build an environment of openness and trust.

Some people spoke of simple things such as being outside the classroom to say hello and welcome the students in or celebrating and building on small successes.

Participants also talked about specific initiatives and programs that different TAFEs and dual sector Universities had adapted, designed and developed for the students. These included the Flexible Learning Options (FLO) program, Kickstart, the Bubble, Young Mum’s programs, Youth Foyers, a Koorie unit, technical education centres, sport centred programs, and online

self-help and mental health phone apps around coping skills. All of these initiatives necessitate being creative within very tight budgets as one team leader put it:

***“Whenever a new idea comes up I have to think how am I going to fund it? Where can I borrow the dollars from?”*** (Focus Group Participant)

***“We are scrutinising every dollar to see how far we can stretch it...”*** (Same Focus Group Participant)

The focus groups agreed that there are two highly effective strategies for working with these cohorts. The first is the capacity to have a youth worker in the classroom to work alongside the teacher/trainer. This enabled the teacher/trainer to concentrate more on the learning needs of the young people while knowing that students who needed other kinds of support were being listened to and helped by professionals.

Second is more access to counsellors on campuses and available to students when they need them. It was felt that both students and teachers benefitted more from *‘skilled individuals – not just teachers with a bit of PD’*. Participants consistently reported that access to these services - vital especially in times of crisis – had suffered from funding cuts. Counselling services were reported as constantly oversubscribed *‘every single day’* and there were long waits for appointments even when student needs were more immediate. One dual sector University participant raised the issue of young students having to use the university support service counsellors. They commented that *‘these people were not used to dealing with very young students and were not well prepared to assist them.’*

Allied to these activities is the need to be effectively connected to the other services in the community and to work collaboratively with them to achieve the wrap around support for the students.

When asked ‘What doesn’t work’ with this cohort the replies were quite explicit about trying to do this work on the ‘cheap’, large classes that remind them of school, too many people ‘on their case’, and teachers expected to be pseudo welfare workers.

## **What does all this mean for staff?**

The third and final set of questions concerned the staff involved with these young people and how they are supported to work with the challenges they present. The range of situations a teacher will have to handle will definitely involve establishing a safe learning setting and dealing with a wide range of disadvantaged young people, some who have mental health issues or other physical disabilities. They will also likely include supporting other staff, learner support beyond the classroom and interactions with external agencies.

It is evident from the focus groups that the staff are integral to the success of the young people and that they assume great responsibilities in being so. They agreed that the teachers and trainers have not been prepared for the sorts of challenges they now face in their classrooms and workshops, and that they all need help to achieve the best outcomes for the students.

Teachers and trainers are under stress. People spoke of trainers in the trades areas who indicated that *'they hadn't signed up for this kind of student'* and who did not know how (and some of whom were not willing) to deal with the behaviour they faced. Teachers questioned where their expertise finished and the need for support staff started. Many felt they were being asked to step beyond their professional boundaries and questioned whether they were at risk of causing more harm than good.

Some indicated the staff turnover in their VCAL unit was high as a result of stress and that even support staff were leaving the industry as a result of being constantly over stretched and spread 'thinly' across multiple sites.

Disengaged students tend to attach themselves to teachers but teachers are not always prepared for this type of relationship nor are they confident about turning that attachment into engagement, retention and outcomes.

***"We need PD for teachers about working with young people and how to help to keep them on their pathway". (Focus Group Participant)***

Participants focused on the need for staff to have the strong support of specialist staff, youth workers and counsellors in and out of the classroom in order to deal with these issues.

The participants in one of the focus groups described a 'typical' couple of weeks in their institute that included:

- A young man wielding a knife in class with the intent to harm himself. This required calling security, calling an ambulance, hospitalization and follow up visits by the staff;
- 3 young people requiring medical support after suffering seizures;
- An angry and violent student responding in a physically violent way to property and staff; requiring security staff and police to deal with the problem and to help staff who were under prepared to deal with these events;
- A sexual assault;
- Several self-harm incidents and a suicide attempt on campus;
- A student suffering from domestic violence; and
- Homelessness and an unexpected pregnancy.

Responses to these kinds of issues were characterized as being more intervention than prevention and staff felt ill prepared for this.

Participants reported that stress levels among some staff were high and that team leaders and coordinators had to be vigilant about checking the mental and physical health of the staff regularly in order to prevent staff burn out. They held concerns for the long-term mental health and wellbeing of the teaching staff.

Clearly changes in the student cohort have had flow on effects for teachers and support staff. There is a rising awareness of the need for staff to have the range of skills necessary to support these students; and to be able to cope themselves with the challenging issues and behaviour in their work settings.

Participants spoke about the importance of everything from the need for mental health first aid courses for staff to the need for high level professional development with units on psychology and support strategies to enable teachers to get a deeper understanding of the issues and to deal with the situations they encounter.

Allied to this is the increasing pressure on counsellors and support staff as services have disappeared. The loss of experienced staff within the TAFE and dual sector Universities systems as a result of funding cuts, has led in some cases to reliance on younger inexperienced staff, or on sessional staff who are limited in their time and capacity to develop the trusting relationships that the young people need as a pre-requisite to re-engagement.

***“(the) casual staff are doing a good job but they are not paid to do the extras”*** (Focus Group Participant)

Participants spoke about the importance of the teacher to the young people and that the teachers/trainers really had to like working with young people and want to work with them.

It was indicated by a number of participants that the focus of professional development (PD) in TAFE and dual sector Universities has been on policy changes and compliance. While these were important in a dynamic environment it meant that professional development budgets were running out before they got to the real issues that were of day-to-day relevance to the staff. It was felt by some that teachers were slipping backwards from the lack of funding to support professional development, and that the onus is on the staff to ‘keep up’ with their own professional learning.

***“We have a \$1M PD budget per year for 800 staff, but it’s not much when you take out the compliance stuff there is not much left for other things”.*** (Focus Group Participant)

In the absence of specialist staff, participants spoke about working as a team, talking to each other and relying on each other for support in order to lessen the stresses of the daily events.

The stress on teachers and staff is not just related to working directly with young people. It also comes from having to try to manage the budget and its consequences. One person said *“There is no funding for disabilities in TAFE, we have one student with a hearing disability and they cost more than 6 times my available budget.”*

Another told of the stress of having to return a student with a disability to the school setting because unlike school, TAFE is not funded to provide the student with the necessary assistance in the classroom. Students with a disability in a school setting are eligible under the Program for Students with Disabilities Management System (PSD) to receive funding for

schools to make reasonable adjustments for their learning needs including classroom support.<sup>12</sup>

This teacher was at once feeling stressed and disappointed at the inability to access the resources available to the student in a school<sup>13</sup> but not in a TAFE; and ill prepared for the stress of dealing with the distressed student and her disgruntled parents. This disparity in the disability funding meant the difference between a positive outcome for the student and significant stress for the student, the family and the teacher.

There is also the issue of non-disclosure. Often young people don't disclose specific issues that may declare themselves later in the year, particularly those related to mental health. This puts an added stress and pressure on staff to get the appropriate assistance and support for the young person outside of the existing planned and budgeted course activities.

### **And finally what if...**

The final question to the focus groups was "If you could introduce one new initiative for this group of learners what would it be?" The responses from participants focused on the theme that 'everything old was new again'. They spoke about having full time youth workers and specialist support staff back in classes again, being adequately funded to provide the services the young people need, funding that recognizes the need for effective professional development, professional development that focuses on working with younger people, consistent funding not one-off band aid grants, increased capacity to 'bend' the rules, and direct funding for disabilities. Many things that had degraded over time and were now more necessary than ever.

### **Further Observations**

This research reveals unique insights and issues from practitioners about the results of young people completing their VCAL or VCE in the non-traditional senior secondary environment of TAFE or dual sector Universities.

It draws attention to some issues that may be overlooked or under-valued when looking from a broader perspective; and it confirms many of the things that are documented by other research, reviews and reports into the important areas of disengagement and reengagement of young people in education.

It highlights the conditions considered necessary by those in the field to re-engage students and support them successfully in learning.

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<sup>12</sup> PSD funding is not available to students with a disability who choose to complete their Senior School Certificate in a TAFE or dual sector. In 2015, the Government provided schools with \$640 million to assist schools to meet these obligations. Funding is provided for several purposes – including for base and per student funding for specialist settings, Program for Students with a Disability (PSD) supplementary funding, programmatic funding such as the Language Support Program, and funding for PSD assessment, administration and management services.

It reinforces the need to address issues that continue to jeopardise the capacity of non-school providers to support government policy objectives of increased participation and attainment levels for all young people, especially those suffering disadvantage.

It demonstrates that the current and growing challenge of re-engaging disengaged young people to complete their senior school certification has been in large part transferred to TAFE and dual sector Universities without the corresponding funds to meet the needs of the young people.

There are differences and anomalies between the funding for young people completing their VCAL or VCE at a school and for those completing the same course in a TAFE or dual sector University. The base funding for students at schools is paid through the Schools Resource Package (SRP) and the base VET funding for TAFE is paid through the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG).

The current level of base or quantum funding applied to all school based students through the SRP is between \$8,063 and \$9,662.<sup>14</sup> The base or quantum funding for students completing their senior school certificate in TAFE or dual sector Universities under the VTG is currently between \$7500 and \$8,250.<sup>15</sup>

While these amounts may be comparable, the SRP unlike the VTG operates on a quantum plus loadings formula which means schools are able to add significantly to their base rate funding through a range of additional loadings that are not available in non-school settings. For students in schools there are additional loadings attributable to disadvantage, geographic location, disability (PSD), Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs), re-engagement and English as an additional language.<sup>16</sup>

For example there are 6 levels of support under the Program for Students with Disability Management System (PSD) funding ranging from Level 1 (\$6,793) through to Level 6 (\$51,850). This support is applied depending on a number of factors and is individualized but not available to young people in non-school settings.

The 'value' of the SRP to schools is further enhanced through a form of 'cost shifting' where students complete part of their senior school certificate in an alternative setting e.g. TAFE and/or Structured Workplace Learning (SWL). In these cases, the school receives the full SRP funding plus loadings for a student who is effectively only 3 or 3.5 days in the school. This is compared, for example, to a TAFE that is delivering a minimum 4.5 days or fulltime provision to students and receiving less funding.

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<sup>14</sup> Information supplied by the Victorian Department of Education indicates that the per student rate applied to all students as a foundation in 2016 is \$8,063. However the Brack's Government School Funding Review reports the per student funding in 2015 was \$9,662.

<sup>15</sup> The base funding of \$7500 (\$7.50 per SCH x 1000 hrs) plus for 2016/17 a 10% loading for VCAL students through the Reconnect Grants Program. The Program provides an additional \$6 million in subsidy loadings of 10% for early school leavers aged 15 – 19 in any VCAL course.

<sup>16</sup> The Brack's Review cautions against using the SRP model as a resource standard because it has flaws but is of interest to this project as it is currently the standard by which resources are applied to the needs of young people.

Many TAFEs and dual sector Universities find themselves in the position of cross-subsidising VCAL courses, or treating them as loss leaders, in the future expectation (hope) of students continuing on to further enrolments. Neither of these approaches does the institution nor the students any favours as a sustainable way forward, nor should they be expected to build their alternative offerings to young people on this basis.

If young people, for whatever reason, are actively choosing or find themselves in a non-school setting to complete their senior school education, these settings need to be able to offer positive and well-resourced alternatives that are at least as good as what they would receive in a school setting.

If we agree that young people are entitled to a level of resourcing that will best ensure their chances of success then there is an argument to be made that all young people completing their VCAL or VCE have the same entitlement whether they are in a school or non-school setting. If the SRP plus loadings is the basis for funding young people in school settings then a comparable quantum and equitable targeted assistance through applicable loadings should be provided to all young people regardless of where they are enrolled.

It is further evident from this research that a dedicated team of teachers working with young people and, who want to work with young people have the best chance of creating the necessary environment for young people to flourish and achieve success. A 'permanent' team of teachers rather than the use of sessional staff with this cohort of students is more likely to work more effectively and be prepared to provide the often extra and discretionary time needed by the young people. It is also evident from the focus groups that continuity of staff is necessary to build trust and a safe learning environment both critical conditions for reengaging disengaged young people.

Planning for the real cost of resourcing the needs of the young people can be made more tenuous and difficult by the fact that although the TAFEs and dual sector Universities, as a rule, assess the young people before they enrol, the real extent of a student's disadvantage often becomes apparent after enrolment, at which time the extra (often unfunded) services need to be added.

The behaviour that young people are presenting (personal, medical, familial, social or a mixture of all) have contributed to their disengagement from school. They continue into the new TAFE or dual sector University setting – they don't go away and they remain barriers to learning that must be addressed.

Therefore, there needs to be broad access to professional learning for all staff working with young people with multiple learning issues and/or challenging behaviour. The focus groups revealed that some staff suggest they didn't sign up for these types of students and have neither the patience nor the tolerance to work with them. However while equipping staff better to deal with these situations through professional development it is necessary to be mindful that we can't turn teachers into social workers, we still need teachers/trainers to fulfill their principal role.

The VET Development Centre (VDC) currently provides professional learning in areas directly related to the needs identified in this research. But the findings of this research may well be a pointer to the need for further development and design of products and services suited to this purpose. Questions pertinent for the VDC might be: “What form of future professional development would support the needs of teachers working in this increasingly challenging environment?” or “What form of professional learning would support teachers at threshold transition points for these cohorts of students”?

The SRP and additional loadings available in schools are, in part, to enable teacher professional learning and to provide specialist personnel to work with teachers to assist with meeting the needs of disadvantaged and/or disabled students. Many of the comments from the focus groups spoke to the need for extra funding to extend the often very limited services of youth workers and other specialist personnel available to young people in their courses.

There is also a need for TAFE and dual sector Universities to work closely and collaboratively with local service providers to ensure services and personnel are being used effectively.

A further insight into this area was the observation that the student counsellors in dual sector Universities are not used to working with the age group of students typically in a VCAL course, and are sometimes not willing to work with these young people. It was suggested by participants in the focus groups that dual sector Universities may need to consider having youth specific counsellors in their student support/counselling units.

Finally, this research does not generally consider students in VET in schools (VETis) or School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT’s). But it would be an interesting comparison to see if students in these courses come to them with similar levels of disadvantage, if not, why not; and if so, what learning strategies and resources are available to the schools and training providers to provide pathways to success.

## **In Conclusion**

This report provides an evidence base for challenging the existing differences and anomalies in student funding between schools and TAFE/dual sector Universities offering senior secondary qualifications in Victoria; and the need for new offerings in professional development to better enable TAFE teachers to cope with the challenging cohorts they now face.

If we take our cues from this research, the Bracks Review of Government School Funding and the VET Funding Review, all of which point to inequities and problems with young people undertaking senior school certification in TAFEs or dual sector Universities, there is a definite need to move towards a more equitable approach to funding young people re-engaging with education, wherever they choose to learn.

Ultimately if governments and society will the ends – that all young people actively participate in education and attain levels of achievement that put them on a pathway to

successful adulthood; then they must also will the means – the appropriate resourcing and the same access to resources be provided regardless of their educational setting.

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*Shedding light: Private ‘for profit’ training providers and young early school leavers. Mykonos G., Clarke, K., and te Reile, K., NCVET 2016*

Attachment 1 Student Enrolment Data

Attachment 2 Focus Group Questionnaire

## Extract from the VDC Professional Development Calendar 2016

### TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

- Accessible learning – Supporting students with disabilities
- Addressing specific learning disorders in the classroom
- Emerging trends in learning
- Identify and deal with learner mental health issues
- Introduction to mental health in the learning environment
- Practical strategies to activate learning
- Student centred instructional design – Redesigning courseware
- Supporting student productivity in the digital age
- Teaching strategies for challenging behaviours

## Attachment 1 Student Enrolment Survey

2015 Students Enrolled	VCE <20 yoa	VCE Female	VCE Male	VCE Indigenous	VCE Disability	VCAL <20 yoa	VCAL Female	VCAL Male	VCAL Indigenous	VCAL Disability
Bendigo TAFE	0	0	0	0	0	228	100	128	10	39 (17%)
Box Hill Institute	121	71	50	0	15 (12%)	270	143	127	1	41 (15%)
Chisholm Institute	220	127	93	3	18 (8%)	642*	271	371	22	40 (6%)
Federation Uni	0	0	0	0	0	294	118	176	12	43 (14%)
Federation Training	43	33	11	3	6 (13.9%)	201	101	100	24	27 (13.4%)
Gordon Institute	1,698 *	653	1,045	25	301* (17.7%)	195	49	146	6	35 (17.9%)
Holmesglen Inst	0	0	0	0	0	372	127	245	3	40 (10.7%)
Kangan Institute	149	91	58	2	14 (9.4%)	351	184	167	13	25 (7.1%)
Melbourne Poly	0	0	0	0	0	241	83	158	10	17 (7.5%)
South West Inst	65	28	37	5	5 (7.6%)	113	57	56	6	21 (18.5%)
Victoria Polytechnic	102	46	56	1	7 (6.8%)	0	0	0	0	0
William Angliss	0	0	0	0	0	17	4	6	0	7*(41%)
Wodonga TAFE	0	0	0	0	0	77	33	44	7	16 (20.7%)
CAE (Box Hill)	278	175	103	5	50 (17.9%)	67	24	43	1	13 (19.4%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2676 (*63.4%)</b>	<b>1224</b>	<b>1453</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>416 (*72.3%)</b>	<b>3068 (*21%)</b>	<b>1297</b>	<b>1771</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>357 (364)* (11.8%)</b>

\*Gordon figures include VETiS students hence inflated figure  
 Indigenous/Disabled are included in the total number of students  
 Indigenous/Disabled not specifically identified by gender  
 Specific disability not identified – not able to identify number with mental health issues.

## Attachment 2 Round table Discussions - Guiding questions

**What are the services TAFEs offer to young people seeking to complete their senior secondary qualifications in a TAFE environment.**

- **Introductions**
- **Icebreaker – how do they feel about working with young people?**

Questions	Notes
What are the general issues young people are facing when undertaking their SS in TAFE?	Keeping this broad – 2 items from each participants
What are the particular needs of this cohort compared to the rest of the student body?	
How does mental health impact on this group of learners? What types of mental health issues do students present with?	
Has this changed over time?	Immediate past 2-3 years Longer serving staff – 10 years? What have you seen?
What are some of the strategies in place to help this group of young people complete their studies?	Can you share an example of a student story that exemplifies the strategies that you have implemented and the outcome achieved? Follow up questions
What are some of the strategies that work?	
What doesn't work? And why?	
Who is doing this work?	
How are staff supported to do this work?	
What other support would you like to see put in place to support staff	
What other support would you like to see put in place to support students	
If you could introduce one new initiative for this group of learners what would it be?	

**Focus Group Participants**

- Bendigo Kangan Institute of TAFE
- Federation Training
- Federation University
- Gordon Institute of TAFE
- Holmesglen Institute of TAFE
- Swinburne University
- Wodonga Institute of TAFE

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Contributors:

Pam Jonas, Nita Schultz, Jo van Son

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