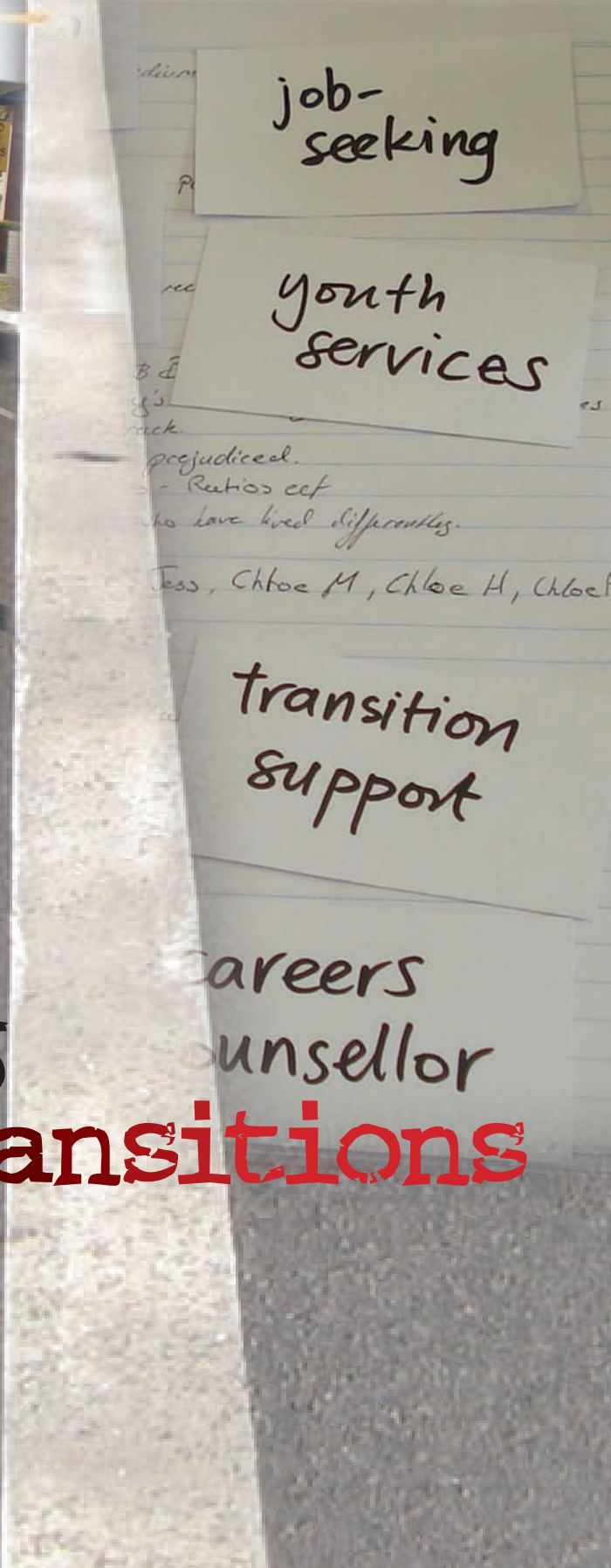




youth voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions



A joint publication by The Youth Collaboration



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Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions

Executive Summary

Background

Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions was designed to show how feedback from young people could lead to an improved understanding of the experiences of young people in their transition from schooling to working, while informing the development of transition programs and support services.

The project was developed and resourced through The Youth Collaboration, a broad coalition of not-for-profit youth policy and service delivery agencies, government departments and philanthropic organisations. This broad support base provided the platform for a cross-sector, community-wide approach to the project.

Research for the project was undertaken in Shepparton, Frankston and Braybrook/Maidstone in 2007. These communities were invited to take part in the action-research projects as they had commenced or were in the process of commencing youth-focused initiatives. They were also the location of Neighbourhood and Community Renewal¹ initiatives where the community was engaged and local governance structures were already in place. In addition, these were communities where the Government's Transition Support Initiative had already been introduced.

These initiatives provided the ideal platform for undertaking an action-research project focused on supporting the education, training and welfare of young people and their progress towards economic participation. Each community also contained a large population of disadvantaged young people experiencing difficulties in the transition from schooling to economic participation.

Research approach

The project is based on a peer research model that provides a platform for young people's voices to be heard. The key benefit of this approach is that young people are able to obtain the personal views and opinions of their peers, which may not be readily available to adults. Young people are also able to gain access to particular groups of young people that might otherwise be difficult to reach.

It should be recognised that this peer research project was a pilot project that was carried out under specific conditions. Given the limited scope of the project, its model is not yet fully developed nor sufficiently trialled to allow for replication

¹ Neighbourhood Renewal is a long-term commitment by the State Government to narrow the gap between disadvantaged communities and the rest of the State. For more information, go to <http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au>.

on a larger scale at this stage. The project, however, does point the way to the development of feasible models of feedback from young people that could inform program development and service delivery in future.

The approach also provided for some flexibility and autonomy around the implementation of the project at a local level. Results from the three project sites suggest that, where there is strong mentoring of and local support for youth researchers (including the provision of dedicated management support, an office location, and a sense of “belonging” to a particular agency), there is a stronger basis for conducting effective peer research. As an instance of local support, Braybrook’s Melbourne Citymission provided additional project funding, targeted recruitment to young people enrolled in their transition support programs and included youth researchers within their agency team.

The youth researchers at all three sites were able to work effectively with their peers to identify the obstacles existing in their personal lives that prevented them from making effective transitions to economic participation. They identified a wide range of external factors influencing student attitudes and their capacities to cope.

Researchers also obtained a clear understanding of some of the issues that young people who were still at school. In many cases, staff in schools and transition services were unaware of the wider circumstances surrounding the attitudes and behaviours of students and young people. As a result, students and other young people often lacked the support to deal with certain issues outside school, and the failure to address these external issues often resulted in behaviour which had a negative impact on student transitions.

A more fully-developed program of peer research into youth transition has the potential to contribute to and influence the way information about employment, education and training is provided and how services are delivered, so that more young people can successfully complete their secondary education while making a successful transition to economic independence.

Main findings

Among young people, knowledge of available local services is very limited. They are generally unaware of the various options that are available for obtaining transition support and services. This is exacerbated by the ways in which services are branded and identified by funding sources. Young people are confused by the names given to programs and services. Young people also indicated that they would prefer ongoing support relationships to assist with their transition. They would like a more personal form of assistance than that which is frequently available through short-term, ‘outcome-focused’, government-funded services.

Peer research also identified the need for more support services to be made available to young people at an earlier age, as problems for some young people emerged while they were still at primary school. There are relatively few

services available to support young people at an early age. Some schools are moving towards introducing pathways planning from Year 7 and this should be strongly encouraged across the entire school system. There is also a need for a corresponding investigation into transition-related support services from a similar age.

Parents, family members and (to a lesser extent) friends are consistently cited as important sources of help during the transition period. Young people in Braybrook were also very positive about the help they received from their teachers and schools. However, this was less prevalent among young people in Frankston, and even less so among those in Shepparton.

When asked who or what had been unhelpful in relation to their transition experiences, the majority of young people reported that they had not experienced a lack of helpfulness. Those that do report a lack of helpfulness focused either on their parents and family, or on their teachers and school.

The influence of location (as well as the experiences of family, community and school support) affects students differently as to whether or not to finish their studies. Research in three different communities has indicated that these factors combine to produce variable attitudes towards schooling among young people of the same age. Strategies designed to improve rates of completion or equivalent outcomes need to take into account the specific challenges associated with a particular location, while addressing issues such as differing levels of familial expectations and support, community attitudes and opinions, variations in scope of school program and staff awareness of a student's circumstances.

A significant number of students combine study and part-time employment. While this may be considered a positive mix of learning and earning, in many cases, it also results in time-management pressures for young people who have to juggle the demands of study and work. This appears to be an issue that particularly affects young women as a high proportion of them have part-time jobs. In this context, it is important to note that time management and maintaining a reasonable work-study balance are two of the things that students find most difficult to achieve.

Benefits for youth researchers

Involvement in the peer research provided the youth researchers with a much more comprehensive knowledge and awareness of their local youth transition services. Some researchers were able to use this knowledge to provide information on available transition support services to their friends.

Youth researchers have the potential to act as transition mentors to their peers by highlighting the range of transition support and services options that are available. Indeed, as a component of peer transition research, peer mentoring itself has considerable potential to become an invaluable support tool.

The project also enabled the researchers to develop interviewing and presentation skills, and provided them with opportunities to develop their confidence while applying their planning and time management skills.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Providing young people with a voice on youth transition issues is important, and the benefits of providing opportunities for a peer research approach should be noted and incorporated into youth transition programs wherever possible.
2. The key elements of an effective peer research approach include appropriate training and local promotion, reasonable remuneration, proactive local management, collaborative development of research tools and resources, and structured feedback for others to act on the findings.
3. Processes and mechanisms for government-wide and cross-sector responses should be developed to address the complex issues surrounding youth transitions. This research clearly shows that collaborative approaches produce better outcomes for young people in education and training. Providing improved support for young people to address the wide range of issues increases their capacity to remain in education and in employment.
4. The Regional Youth Commitments should incorporate peer research into youth transitions. Local Learning and Employment Networks would be well positioned to coordinate local peer research projects on behalf of Youth Commitment projects.
5. The feedback from young people indicates that there needs to be more active involvement from parents in the transition process, given their important role as a source of information and support to their children, and the high priority that young people place on this support.
6. Opportunities to adapt the peer research model to provide skill development and employment opportunities for young people through community enterprise models should be explored and supported.
7. Local and state government should explore ways to bring together and simplify access to the various youth and transition services within communities in order to improve access to information and services on transition for young people.
8. The potential for peer research should be incorporated into the content of relevant secondary school curriculum (such as VCAL programs), while further education and training programs should be explored.
9. The Youth Collaboration should develop a second-stage, peer research project capable of providing a platform and resources that will encourage adoption of a *Youth Voice* approach across communities and sectors.

Introduction

Youth transition support and services are funded by both State and Commonwealth governments and delivered through a variety of programs and sectors. In April 2001, the Brotherhood of St Laurence published *Negotiating the Maze: An Analysis of Employment Assistance for Young People*². The report sought to establish how well education training and employment systems met the needs of young people, what barriers existed to inhibit the pathways taken by young people, where there were gaps in programs, and how program development and delivery could be improved.

The report concluded that the systems contained major design weaknesses and were fragmented, with an overall lack of co-ordination and accountability for young people's needs. In addition, there were age and eligibility restrictions on programs that created barriers, limitations to the types of programs provided, obstacles for those trying to re-enter education and training, and a lack of support and assistance for young people trying to navigate through these arrangements. Programs and support services lacked clear links, limited participation for some young people, and could be difficult to access and understand.

If I knew about these places (like Melbourne Citymission and Frontyard) when I was 12, I think life would have been so much easier. I would have known that there were people out there that could help me, and I didn't have to hold it all in myself and keep it all in myself, and just get into more trouble.
(Case-study participant)

Negotiating the Maze pointed out the risks associated with early school leaving, noting that the risk of poverty for those without post-school qualifications is twice that of those who possess such qualifications. The single most important mechanism that helps young people to compete for employment is continued participation in education and training.

The Youth Collaboration project: Youth Voice

Following a 2005 VicHealth forum held on the themes of *Negotiating the Maze*, a number of agencies established The Youth Collaboration to jointly fund and focus on a project to help young people successfully navigate the education and employment systems.

The Youth Collaboration is a broad coalition of not-for-profit youth policy and service delivery agencies, government departments and philanthropic organizations.

² Dearn, L, *Negotiating the Maze: An Analysis of Employment Assistance for Young People*, 2001, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Victoria.

Members of the Collaboration include:

- » Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
- » Melbourne Citymission
- » Brotherhood of St Laurence
- » UnitingCare – Cutting Edge
- » Melbourne Community Foundation
- » Helen Macpherson Smith Trust
- » VicHealth
- » Neighbourhood Renewal, Department of Human Services
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Building on key themes explored in the VicHealth Forum, The Youth Collaboration developed and supported the concept of an action-research project designed to demonstrate whether the voice of young people can positively impact on transitions. The project *Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions* was designed to identify how feedback from young people can have a positive impact on transitions. Feedback on the experience of young people might potentially inform the development of transition programs and support services.

Using youth researchers, the trial project would provide opportunities for young people to assess and report on system failures and gaps so that providers can adapt and be more effective. Youth researchers would be coordinated and supported by existing local governance structures and site-based resources at a number of community locations. The intended outcome was that a better picture would be available of the experiences of young people navigating the transition support system.

The capacity of this large group of government departments, policy and service delivery agencies, and philanthropic organizations to cooperatively develop, plan and resource a project of this nature over several years provides an example of the kind of cross-sector and collaborative approach required to support improved outcomes for young people. The majority of the partners involved in The Youth Collaboration have continued to be involved in the development of the *Youth Voice* project from initial conception through to the completion of this first-phase, trial project.

This report documents the outcomes of the first phase of this innovative youth-led research project documenting young people's experiences of transition from school to economic independence. With the support of a number of funding partners, the project was implemented in three locations: Braybrook/Maidstone, Frankston and Shepparton.

Shepparton, Frankston and Braybrook/Maidstone were invited to participate in the action-research projects as these communities had commenced or were in the process of commencing youth-focused projects in their respective areas. These projects provided an ideal platform to undertake an action-research project focused on supporting the education, training and welfare of young people and their progress to economic participation. Each community contained a large population of disadvantaged young people experiencing difficulties in the transition from schooling to economic participation.

In addition, there were appropriate local governance structures in place. The *Youth Voice* peer research projects could build on two existing key site-based initiatives such as Neighbourhood Renewal and Community Renewal. Reflecting on the numbers of disadvantaged young people in each location, the Government had recently introduced the Transition Support Initiative in all three of these communities.

It was also expected that these locations would also provide valuable insights into different issues being experienced at the regional (Shepparton), outer metropolitan (Frankston) and inner metropolitan (Maidstone/Braybrook) areas of Victoria. Maidstone/Braybrook in particular was also expected to provide insights into issues experienced by youth from culturally- and linguistically-diverse communities.

A non-government organisation auspiced the action-research project in each community:

- » Melbourne Citymission, in Braybrook/Maidstone
- » UnitingCare – Cutting Edge, in Shepparton
- » Brotherhood of St Laurence, in Frankston.

A total of nine youth researchers aged between 15 and 19 were trained across these three sites to gather feedback from other young people on their experiences of transition pathways before and after they left school. The researchers undertook a short training program on various structured information-gathering techniques, including conducting surveys, coordinating focus groups and conducting interviews.

The information that they collected was analysed and used in presentations to inform local service providers about how they can be more responsive to young people's need to navigate service systems and access support programs. The experience of these youth researchers consulting with other young people about transition and support services is intended to contribute to analyses and recommendations on possible approaches to establishing ongoing youth feedback into the transition services system.

In the longer term, a more fully-developed program of peer research on youth transitions might have the potential to contribute to and influence the way information about employment, education and training is provided and how

services are delivered so that more young people can successfully complete their secondary education and make a successful transition to economic independence. This report provides useful indicative information for government on how young people access information and services regarding education, training and employment options.

The project will provide opportunities for young people to assess and report on system failures and gaps so that providers can adapt and be more effective.

Literature on youth peer research

Involvement of young people conducting peer research to improve services and programs is well established in international practice. Young people have successfully helped to frame research approaches, developed and implemented surveys, conducted interviews and focus groups, analysed collected data, and documented and presented findings.

Youth-led research provides opportunities for young people to develop and refine their own skills as well as enabling programs and organisations to understand whether they are meeting their goals and objectives.

Research activity in Australia, the United States and Canada has included young people at a variety of points in the research and evaluation process, including developing research projects, designing research questions, creating data-collection instruments, collecting information, analysing data, presenting findings, and making recommendations for change. The projects have included community mapping, evaluation of programs and services directed at youth, community-based strategic planning processes, education, advocacy, and social change projects such as the environment, health, and safety.³

Research also indicates that in best practice approaches, student voice has the potential to increase the involvement of historically disengaged and underachieving students⁴.

Good practice in training young people as social researchers to assist service improvement and program evaluation includes: ensuring organisational or community receptiveness to research led by young people; a strong action orientation as a research outcome; involvement of both stakeholders and young people in research design; and ensuring that adequate and appropriate training and support is provided to both the youth researchers and adults with whom they are working.

³ Moonee Valley Primary Care Partnership, *Youth Access Project, Final Report, 2002*; Earl, L, Torrance, N, Sutherland, S, Fullan, M & Ali, A, *Manitoba School Improvement Program: Final Evaluation Report, 2003*, Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

⁴ Mohamed, I & Wheeler W, *Broadening the Bounds of Youth Development: Youth as Engaged Citizens, 2001*, Chevy Chase, MD: The Innovation Center and the Ford Foundation.

Projects involving youth-led research must initially resolve whether the prime focus is:

- » to produce a high-quality final product that meets rigorous research and evaluation standards, or
- » to promote youth leadership and empowerment.

A strong evaluation or research focus requires quality evaluation/research design, data-collection protocols, timelines and deadlines, and the structure of reports. This usually requires providing relatively more adult structure to the work of young people. Professional evaluators may be introduced to give studies greater “credibility” to train youth in evaluation and research, or to ensure instruments and data collection and analysis procedures meet certain standards.⁵

On the other hand, more youth development-focused approaches tend to give priority to the development of youth leadership and skills. Here, youth are more likely to take the lead in projects, with older people playing a consulting role. Research timelines and methodological rigor, though always important, will tend to be secondary to creating positive experiences for youth to gain leadership skills.

This pilot project has generally adopted a stronger evaluation research focus over a youth development model, on the basis that the primary intended outcome of the project was to ensure that local agencies and government departments were provided with credible quality outcomes from the peer research.

Research process

Some evaluation methods lend themselves more easily to youth involvement. These include focus groups with other youth, peer interviews, and other field methods that help youth to learn and develop new skills. Once young people become skilled in these methods, they can begin to handle more complex research methodologies.

It is important that the trainee researchers understand the project and have the skills necessary to do the work. It is critical to break down the process of evaluation and research into concrete but manageable steps and to stay away from technical jargon

It also needs to be recognized that it is difficult to sustain youth commitment to research and evaluation and change. Sustainability needs to be cultivated through the capacity of the youth researchers to demonstrate value in what they do.

Young people need to be given evaluation and research roles that are appropriate to their level of development and expertise. For some, a gradual approach is successful, where young people are given initial, well-defined tasks before

⁵ Horsch, K, Little, P, Chase Smith, J, Goodyear, L & Harris, E, Harvard Family Research Project: Harvard Family Research Project, Number 1, February 2002.

gradually taking on more tasks, depending on their motivation, time and ability to do so independently. In other cases, youth involvement can take place in all of the tasks, but adults need to demonstrate more intensive involvement early on before gradually withdrawing to let young people take the lead.

Involving young people meaningfully in the research and evaluation process includes giving them the space to have a voice in decision-making and treating them as true “partners”, which can challenge adults to take on new roles themselves and to adapt the process to the needs and skills of the youth.⁶

The selection of youth researchers depends on their interests and the nature of the evaluation or research project, but diversity is essential to creating a youth-involved evaluation/research team. Ethnic, gender, income and educational diversity are all important considerations.



Some of our youth researchers

Sustaining youth involvement is a key challenge, given their existing commitments to studying, working and/or extracurricular activity. Adults involved in these projects must be prepared for this, and recognise that young people will participate with different levels of intensity at different times. Youth-involved research teams must be prepared for the “ebb and flow” of youth involvement.

A common motivator for involvement in research and evaluation is the ability to use research and evaluation as a vehicle for change. Young people need to see the results of their work in tangible, immediate and important ways. This can be achieved through either program changes or the fact that others were willing to listen and consider what the research has to say.⁷

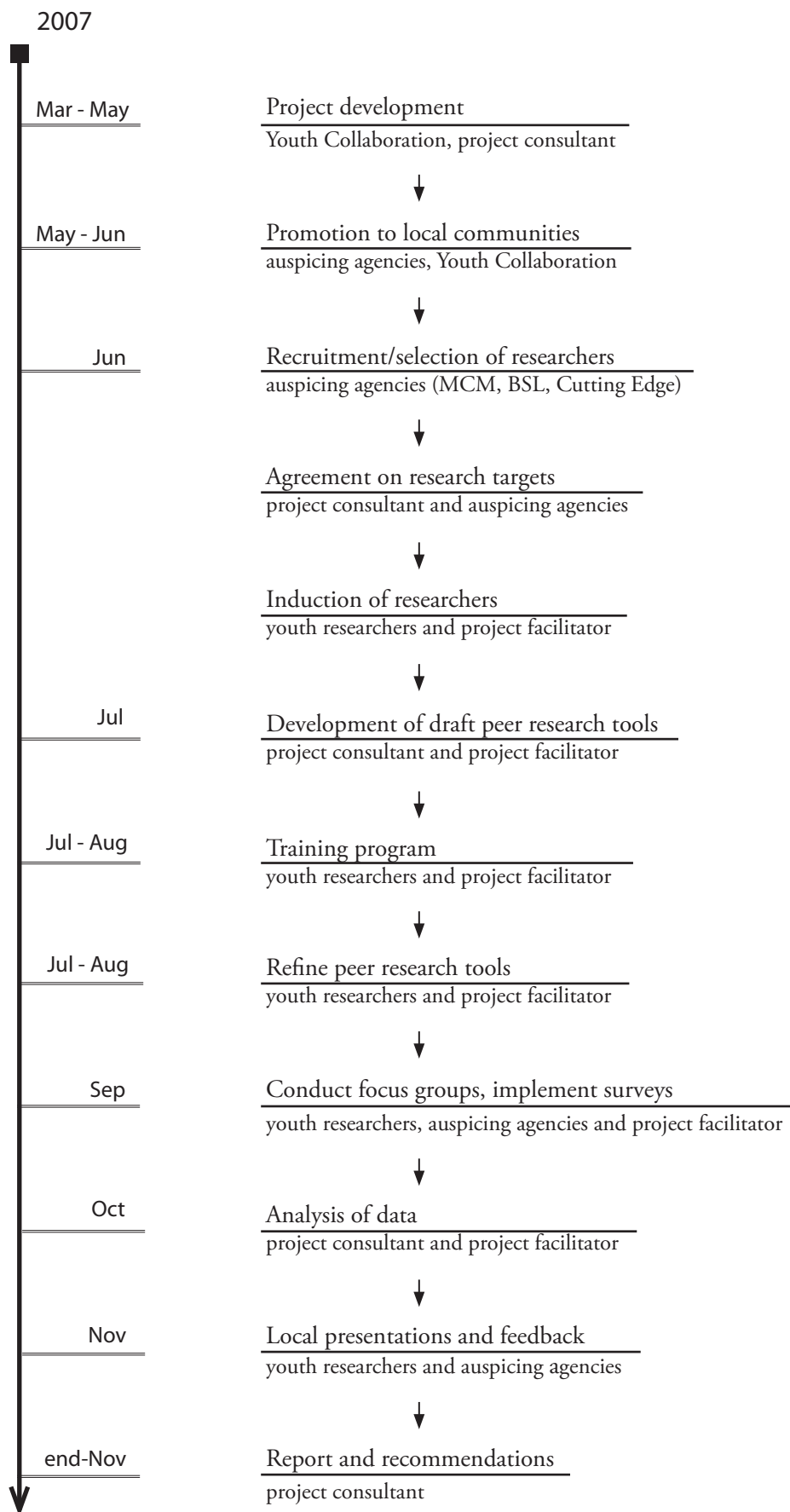
Providing young people with rewards and validation for their work helps to keep them involved. This validation can take the form of monetary compensation, a concrete product, utilisation of results, presentation of findings to various audiences, travel to present or collect data and work with others, and making an impact in the community. The opportunity to gain skills, both practical and personal, is also a form of compensation.

Experienced young people who have worked on research/evaluation projects can be encouraged to be involved as mentors to newer members of these projects.

⁶ Fielding, M & Rudduck, J, *The Transformative Potential of Student Voice: Confronting the Power Issues*, paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Exeter, England, 12-14 September 2002; Holdsworth, R (ed), *Student Action Teams: Implementing Productive Practices in Primary and Secondary Classrooms*, 2006, Connect, Melbourne.

⁷ Horsch et al, *op. cit.*

Outline of the project model



Recruitment of youth researchers

Recruitment of the youth researchers was managed locally by the three auspicing agencies: the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Frankston, Melbourne Citymission in Braybrook and UnitingCare – Cutting Edge in Shepparton.

The intention was to recruit three youth researchers aged between 15 and 19 in each location, in order to develop a small team to provide mutual support as well as cover for anticipated fluctuations in levels of participation over the course of the project.

Recruitment occurred either directly through other programs being delivered by the auspicing agency (as was the case in Braybrook), or through other services linked to the auspicing agency within a local partnership arrangement (as in Frankston). Candidates were interviewed in Frankston and Braybrook. Methods of recruitment, and the extent to which the researchers later identified with the local agency, had a subsequent impact on their motivation and levels of engagement in the research process.

The youth researchers were provided with payment by The Youth Collaboration through the local auspicing agency for their involvement in both training and research.

The profile of the youth research team of nine was predominantly female, aged between 16 and 19. Two were school students, two were employed in part-time jobs and the remainder were enrolled in a variety of education and training programs. Two of the three Braybrook researchers had African backgrounds.

	Location	Gender	Age	Work/study status
1	Braybrook	Female	19	Enrolled at Deakin University – Health
2	Braybrook	Female	18	Year 12 secondary college student
3	Braybrook	Female	16	Disengaged at 13, now re-enrolled VCAL
4	Frankston	Female	19	Studying at TAFE, Diploma of Conservation
5	Frankston	Female	19	Working part-time (finished year 12)
6	Frankston	Female	16	Year 11 secondary college student
7	Shepparton	Male	19	Employed in various P/T jobs
8	Shepparton	Female	18	Studying Cert III in Childcare
9	Shepparton	Female	18	Early school-leaver; returned to do Cert III at TAFE

The training program in peer research

Training provided for the youth researchers was brief and targeted due to the short timelines and the status of the project as an action-research trial project. The limited timeframe and resources available for training required continued support to be provided by the project facilitator, who worked across the three community locations. Local site managers in the auspicing organisations were also needed to play an active role in helping to train the youth researchers on the job.

Training was also constrained by the fact that two of the youth researchers in Frankston and Braybrook were enrolled as secondary students and, as such, had school commitments.

The researchers from the three locations came together for a one-day induction program, the major elements of which were the provision of background information to the project, introduction to research tools, simulation of pathways mapping, and developing relationships with the researchers in other locations.

The induction day was followed by two days of separate training for the teams of three researchers in each of Braybrook, Frankston and Shepparton.

The training content was based on:

- » reviewing local transition data at a community level
- » refining and redeveloping the research tools
- » planning the consultations
- » practising conducting interviews
- » working with groups.

Development of research strategy and tools

The project's research strategy was designed to capture comparable information from young people in the three separate communities, and was developed to determine perceived levels of support for young people, sources of assistance and knowledge of transition support services.

The research approach was based on surveys, focus groups and case studies. The approach was developed by the project consultant and included a proposal for using a visual representation mapping individual pathways that could be developed within the focus groups.

The initial design was that a common survey would be applied to young people participating in all three communities. Within the training process, the Braybrook youth researchers suggested modifications to the community survey, and further developed concept of pathways mapping through a coloured system of cards to represent 'destinations', 'diversions' and 'support' occurring in each person's transition.

Frankston youth researchers also reviewed the community survey and proposed the development of a separate school survey with a focus specifically on students still at school. The researchers played a significant role in shaping the structure of the school survey (with assistance from the project facilitator and project consultant) and the instrument was subsequently used in all three communities.

On the initiative of one youth researcher based in Frankston, the surveys were also posted on a MySpace website to enable further access by young people. More than a dozen survey responses were subsequently submitted electronically through this means.

Common research targets were established for the research teams and agreed upon with the local coordinators in Braybrook, Frankston and Shepparton. Each team would aim to have at least 90 surveys completed by the end of the research period, with at least half of these to be completed by young people who had already left school.

Each site would also aim to conduct a minimum of five focus group sessions where young people would complete “pathway maps”. It was expected that the focus groups should have between 6 and 12 people in each group. At least three of these focus groups would be held with young people who had already left school.

Follow-up interviews would be conducted with some focus group participants to identify some potential case studies. Each site would then document at least three case studies either in written form or through audio, video or still media.

Consultation process

Research was conducted at government secondary schools (two schools in each location), as well as community VCAL programs, and assorted youth programs. Focus groups were arranged and those consulted completed surveys as well as participating in exercises mapping their personal pathways.

The Braybrook researchers conducted focus groups with students at Sunshine College and Braybrook College. Young people out of school were contacted through the Melbourne Citymission WYPIN group, a VCAL group at Victoria University (Footscray City and Debney Park), and the WHEELS program (mainly consisting of disengaged young people).

Frankston researchers conducted student focus groups with Mt Erin Secondary School and Monterey Secondary College. Young people out of school were consulted through focus groups at Hip Cat Circus, two Community VCAL programs at the Brotherhood of St Laurence and at Skillsplus, Fresh (a council run Youth Resource Centre) and Cadets.

Shepparton researchers conducted student focus groups at Wanganui Secondary College and Shepparton High School. Focus groups were also held with young people involved in music events called Distortion, and the Goulburn Ovens TAFE (where two researchers attended CGEA classes).

Findings

Focus groups

Design of the focus groups was based around a pathway mapping activity to be completed by participating individuals. The pathway maps had the potential to uncover a more personal side of a young person's experiences than a survey allowed.

The pathway map tool was created for the *Youth Voice* Project, and was refined by the Youth Researchers during the induction and training sessions. The design allowed young people to visually represent their pathway experiences with a set of cards that indicate transition points and influences on their pathway. The model is flexible so that participants can either reflect on their pathway to date or extend the exercise to project their future path.

Blue destination cards represented defined transition outcomes such as course enrolments or employment outcomes. Pink diversion cards represented issues or barriers encountered along the way such as problems with parents, falling behind. Yellow support cards represented sources of assistance that helped such as a friend's advice or a service such as Centrelink.

Pathways mapping proved to be an activity that captured the attention of students in spite of occasional low literacy and poor concentration levels. There were 110 pathway maps completed across the three sites, with more maps completed by females at all sites.

Activities conducted in focus groups identified a wide range of external factors influencing student attitudes and capacities to cope. Researchers obtained a much better understanding of the issues that some students faced at school. Staff in schools and transition services appeared comparatively unaware of the wider circumstances affecting the attitudes and behaviour of students and young people. As a result, students and other young people often lacked support dealing with issues outside school, and the failure to address these external issues resulted in behaviour which had a negative impact on student transitions.

One youth researcher commented:

The pathways would be helpful for teachers to know where the student is at or if the student needs help to get on track. I don't know about the surveys, but the pathway (maps) were really good. I had a lot of feedback from teachers saying they were really good. It'll help them know if a student is wagging, then the pathway map could help to know why.



A *Youth Voice* participant and his pathway map

Focus groups and pathways mapping activity indicated that high among the reasons for young people leaving school (other than having completed Year 12), prior disengagement was a key factor. The three most common cluster of factors in pathways maps influencing early leaving were wagging school (65), boredom (60) and falling behind in school work (51). It suggested that these young people were not sufficiently engaged in school programs and activity to maintain their interest.

Completed pathway maps frequently contained many “diversion” cards. On the other hand, there were at least six maps that contain no yellow “support” cards at all. Some of the maps displayed a cluster of serious issues, such as crime, homelessness and problems with drugs. Examples of these complex maps indicated that some young people were facing multiple serious issues with minimal support.

Problems for some young people emerged while they were still at primary school. Disengagement that is evident by the time students were in their final years of secondary school had its roots in experiences occurring both in and out of school years during their earlier years.

Young people also indicated that they were seeking ongoing support relationships to assist with their transition. They preferred a more personal form of assistance than that which is frequently available through short-term, ‘outcome focused’, government-funded services. Case study interviews with individuals selected from those completing pathways maps indicated that receiving personal help from someone with rapport was considered to be the best form of assistance. As a case-study participant noted:

You need to personally know the person, and know what their problems are to the full level, so that you can help them...because being unemployed, not going to school or having trouble at school is a really hard place! So you need someone that’s empathetic, that has empathy for the people that are in this situation, not just getting numbers through the doors.

Analysis of the pathways maps also revealed trends that vary according to the location of young people. Among young people from Braybrook there was a higher incidence of noting “problems at home” as one of the factors diverting them from a smooth transition. This may be due to intergenerational tensions around gender role and education expectations in a community with a high percentage of people from CALD and refugee backgrounds.

School was viewed more positively as a source of support in Braybrook, while experiences with family were more problematic. Parents and friends rated more highly in Frankston and Shepparton as a source of support, but schoolteachers, while still helpful, were not rated as highly as they were among young people in Braybrook.

Frankston participants in focus groups were more likely than their counterparts to record “problems with teachers”, “bullying” and “suspension” as a cluster of school-related factors that had an impact on their pathway. Shepparton participants recorded the highest incidence of “parent’s divorce/separation” having a diversionary impact on their pathways.

Strongest sources of “support” for young people in the three communities:

- Braybrook:*
1. **Teacher’s help**
 2. Friend’s advice and parents’ advice (equal second)
 3. Centrelink
 4. Help with job-seeking
 5. Youth services
- Frankston:*
1. **Friend’s advice**
 2. Parent’s advice
 3. Teacher’s help
 4. Centrelink
 5. Help with job-seeking
- Shepparton:*
1. **Friend’s advice**
 2. Parent’s advice
 3. Teacher’s help
 4. Centrelink
 5. Careers counsellor + other help + help job-seeking (equal fifth)

Knowledge of available local services was very limited. The majority of young people, both in and out of school were generally unaware of the various options that are available for obtaining transition support and services. This was exacerbated by the ways in which services were branded and identified by funding sources.

Young people were confused by the names given to programs and services. Services using acronyms or based on complex concepts (examples are the Youth Transition Support Initiative or CTS) were not easily understood. On the other hand, a service such as Centrelink not only acted as a hub linking to other services, but the title fitted the function and made sense to those who used it. Centrelink acted as a link referring young people to other services.

Pathways mapping provided a high level of detail on young people’s individual pathways experience. On other hand, surveys provided the project with comparative information on the experiences of young people across different communities.

As a trial project, only a limited number of surveys were completed within a short time frame. In some cases samples were small, and the findings need to be considered with caution. However, aggregating data across the three communities provides some interesting trends and comparisons between these locations.

The youth researchers achieved 305 completed surveys, of which 174 were responses to the School survey, and a further 131 responses to the Community survey. Of the 131 responses to the Community survey, 36 were from students still at school, while the remainder (95) were from young people who had left school.

Survey responses

	School survey			Community survey			Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Braybrook	19	24	43	48	38	86	129
Frankston	24	20	44	16	17	33	77
Shepparton	39	48	87	8	4	12	99
Total			174			131	305

Young people responding to the survey were aged between 13 and 22. However, the average age of the school students surveyed was 16 years old, while those out of school had usually only recently left school and were undertaking a TAFE, VCAL or Adult Education provider-based course. More females than males were involved in the school survey, while more males were included in the out-of-school survey. Overall, a reasonably balanced number of males and females were surveyed, both collectively and at each location.

Mode of age of survey respondents

	School survey	Community survey
Braybrook	16 years old	18 years old
Frankston	16 years old	17 years old
Shepparton	16 years old	16 years old

Young people out of school

Young people still at school were more satisfied with their work or study situation than those who had left school. (Based on Braybrook data, comprising 35 in-school and 51 out-of-school responses.)

Satisfaction of young people still at school and out of school

(1 = least satisfied, 5 = most satisfied)

Braybrook			
	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	Total
Still at school	3.50	4.00	3.78
Out of school	3.33	3.64	3.57

The 95 young people who were no longer in school were asked to indicate the reasons why they had left. Most young people surveyed in Braybrook had completed Year 12 and were therefore no longer at school, as reflected in the higher average age of those responding at this location. However, in all three locations, young people indicated that “problems with teachers” was one of the most common reasons for leaving school.

In Frankston and Shepparton, “problems with teachers” was grouped with responses of “boredom”, “falling behind” and “don’t see the point”, suggesting that for these young people, both teacher relationships and program content and delivery might have been issues. (Again, it should be noted that response numbers were relatively small in these locations!)

“Problems at home” was a distinctive response from young people in Braybrook who had left school.

Young people were asked how satisfied they were with their current work or study situation. Males were more satisfied with their situation in Braybrook and Shepparton, but females were more satisfied than males in Frankston.

Satisfaction with current work or study

(1 = least satisfied, 5 = most satisfied)

		Rate	Male	Female
Frankston	33 people	3.7	3.25	3.94
Braybrook	86 people	3.6	3.64	3.51
Shepparton	12 people	3.9	4.0	3.75

Young women were more likely to be combining study and work than young men. Higher rates of part-time and casual employment were evident among young women in Frankston and in Braybrook, while higher rates of unemployment and job-seeking were evident among young men who were studying.

Seven young people who were not engaged in any study were surveyed. Three of these had casual employment, while the other four were either unemployed and/or job-seeking.

Asked who or what had been unhelpful regarding transition, the majority of young people reported that they had not experienced a lack of helpfulness. Those that did report a lack of helpfulness focused equally on either parents and family, or teachers and school.

Who or what has been unhelpful?

	Braybrook	Frankston	Shepparton	Total
No-one	33	2	5	40
Parents/family	8	5	1	14
Teachers/school	8	5	0	13
Friends	2	0	1	3
Job agencies	1	2	0	3
Centrelink	3	0	0	3
Myself	2	1	2	5
People at work	0	1	0	1
Other people	5	2	0	7
Other response	10	3	3	16
No answer	16	13	1	30
Total	88	34	13	

On the other hand, young people reported that help had been provided through a number of avenues, with significant differences across the three communities. Parents, family and (to a lesser extent) friends were consistently reported as a significant source of help in each community. Young people in Braybrook were also very positive about the help they received from their teachers and schools. However, this was less prevalent among young people in Frankston, and even less so among those in Shepparton.

The internet was a source of assistance to young people across all locations.

Who or what has helped you the most with information?

	Braybrook	Frankston	Shepparton
No-one/nothing	1	0	1
School	18	2	0
Schoolteachers	24	7	0
Parents/family	24	19	5
Friends	15	13	1
Internet	15	5	0
Myself	5	1	0
Employer	0	2	0

	Braybrook	Frankston	Shepparton
Job Network	4	1	0
Centrelink	0	1	1
Youth workers	4	0	0
A local agency	20	3	1
Other	12	6	2
No answer	4	3	2

Surveys confirmed the findings of the focus groups, which was that knowledge and awareness of transition support services was relatively low. Responses indicated that significant numbers of young people who had left school did not recognise the name of most local youth support services. Few young people were able to recognise more than two or three out of a list of more than a dozen local services.

The programs with higher recognition included programs linked to schools such as MIPs, Youth Pathways and community VCAL programs. JPET also had relatively high recognition in several communities.

Young people still at school

Students in Shepparton and Braybrook felt both relatively confident and well-supported in making decisions about their career pathways and transition. Students in Frankston felt much less confident and supported than their peers.

How confident and/or supported do you feel about making decisions about career pathways/transitions? (1 = least confident, 5 = most confident)

	Confident	Supported
Braybrook	3.46	3.62
Frankston	3.02	3.04
Shepparton	3.73	3.83

Students felt most supported by friends and family. Braybrook students rated family support slightly lower than students in the other two communities. Schools were rated as providing lower levels of support but still above the perceived levels of support from the wider community. Frankston students in particular considered community support for them to be at a low level.

Do you feel supported? (1 = least supported, 5 = most supported)

	By school	By friends	By family	By community
Braybrook	3.6	4.2	4.0	3.2
Frankston	3.5	4.2	4.3	2.7
Shepparton	3.8	4.3	4.3	3.4

A similar pattern was evident when students were asked whether their opinions were heard. Friends and family rated relatively highly (except in the case of Braybrook students for whom family rated at lower levels). Schools were rated at a lower level, while community was considered the least likely to hear their opinions. Frankston students in particular considered their community less likely to hear their opinion.

Do you feel like your opinions are heard?

(1 = least heard, 5 = strongly heard)

	By school	By friends	By family	By community
Braybrook	3.4	4.0	3.5	3.0
Frankston	3.0	4.0	4.0	2.5
Shepparton	3.3	4.1	4.2	2.8

Many senior school students combined school studies with part-time or casual employment. Rates of employment varied according to both location and gender. In Shepparton, 58% of surveyed students were employed, while in Frankston, the rate was 47%. In Braybrook, it was 35%.



Young people completing a *Youth Voice* survey

School students in employment

Age	Braybrook		Frankston		Shepparton	
	Number	Employed	Number	Employed	Number	Employed
15	N/A	N/A	10	4	26	15
16	22	8	17	10	41	21
17	12	4	11	4	18	13
18	9	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	43	15 (35%)	38	18 (47%)	85	49 (58%)

A higher percentage of young women combined school and work in Shepparton and Frankston than did young men. The majority of 16-year-old female students in these locations also worked part-time or casually. However, in Braybrook, relatively few females aged 16 or 17 also had employment. Many students noted that combining study and employment produced time management issues and caused stress through attempts to juggle the demands of studying and working.

Locations with higher levels of employment also had more students who were seeking jobs. In Shepparton, 40% of those who were not working were seeking employment. In Frankston, 24% of unemployed students were seeking employment, while it was 17% in Braybrook. These variations could be due to social and familial expectations as well as local job opportunities and the impact of peer role models with jobs.

In this context, it is important to note that students indicated that time management and balancing work with study were two of the things that they found most difficult to achieve. Maintaining motivation and concentration also featured in responses.

School students surveyed were asked whether they intended to complete Year 12. Other research has indicated that there is a powerful link between intention and subsequent school completion⁸. Students at Braybrook indicated a high level of intention to complete Year 12 (above the current Victorian average completion rate), while a quarter of Frankston students indicated an intention not to complete Year 12. Shepparton students reported a mid-range intention to complete Year 12.

Intending to complete Year 12

	All students	Not intending	%
Braybrook	42	4	9.5
Frankston	44	12	25.6
Shepparton	87	13	17.5

⁸ Ainley, J & McKenzie, P, *Schooling and Youth Participation in Education and Society*, paper presented at the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training Conference, Melbourne, 1 November 2007.

Students who indicated that they were not intending to complete Year 12 were asked the main reason for this, and their responses were categorised as either a “positive intention” (e.g. ‘going to TAFE’, ‘getting work’, ‘commencing an apprenticeship’) or a “negative intention” (e.g. ‘don’t like school’, ‘can’t be bothered’, ‘don’t like teachers’). The findings suggest that most of the high numbers of Frankston students who did not intend to complete Year 12 generally had a “positive intention” based on securing a job. In contrast, the majority of students who had similar intentions in Shepparton had a “negative intention” linked to their school experiences.

Reasons for not intending to complete

	TAFE	Work	App’ship	Other training	Negative	Unsure
Braybrook	2	1	-	1	-	1
Frankston	1	5	1	1	3	1
Shepparton	-	1	2	1	8	1

Students were asked who or what had been unhelpful in relation to planning their transition. It was significant that the majority of students considered that no one or nothing had been particularly unhelpful to them. Patterns evident in the responses were that, for Braybrook students, families were more often considered to be unhelpful, while a quite high percentage of Frankston students indicated that ‘school’ was unhelpful. Shepparton students, in particular, reported no experience of unhelpful behaviour.

Who or what has been unhelpful?

	Friends	Family	School	Other people	Me
Braybrook (42 students)	3	7	8	4	0
Frankston (44 students)	2	3	16	5	1
Shepparton (87 students)	1	5	13	5	3

Conclusions

I've learnt a lot about what kids have had to go through to get to the point they are at in their life, and how difficult it's been for some people. I think it sort of opened my eyes to how hard life can be for a lot of kids, and introduced me to ways that we can possibly help them. (Youth researcher)

1. This pilot project has demonstrated the value of research experience in youth transitions for youth researchers. Increased understanding and awareness of their own pathways and transition process, allied with the acquisition of new skills, have resulted in increased confidence and knowledge. Some have also realised the importance of remaining engaged in education and training, and, in the course of the project, have taken steps to enrol in further education programs.
2. Based on feedback received from some participants, there is a reasonable likelihood that these insights will, in many cases, be shared among the researchers' own peer groups.
3. Ongoing peer research within school pathways planning programs and related career and transition support services has the potential to create a pool of young transition 'mentors' with improved knowledge and understanding of pathways programs and support services. With appropriate and sufficient training, these young people could provide ongoing transition support assisting teaching and agency staff to an improved understanding of the circumstances surrounding young people. Feedback on the experience of young people as they progress from school to further education and employment should be a key input into the work of local collaborations aiming to improve school retention and transition arrangements, including the Local Learning and Employment Networks and the regional Youth Commitments.
4. The research case studies and focus groups indicate that young people are seeking on-going support relationships to assist with their transition. They are looking for a more personal form of assistance than that which is frequently available through short-term, 'outcome-focused', government-funded services.
5. Knowledge of available local services among 16- to 19-year-olds is very limited. The majority of young people, both in and out of school, are generally unaware of the various options that are available for obtaining transition support and services. This is exacerbated by the ways in which services are branded and identified by funding sources. Young people are confused by the names given to programs and services.

6. The influence of location (as well as the experiences of family, community and school support) affects students differently as to whether or not to finish their studies. Research in three different communities has indicated that these factors combine to produce variable attitudes towards schooling among young people of the same age. Strategies designed to improve rates of completion or equivalent outcomes need to take into account the specific challenges associated with a particular location, while addressing issues such as differing levels of familial expectations and support, community attitudes and opinions, variations in scope of school program and staff awareness of a student's circumstances.
7. A high proportion of school students combine study and part-time employment. They report significant pressures of time management in having to juggle studying and working. This is an issue that particularly affects young women, a high proportion of whom have part-time jobs (except in Braybrook). In this context, it is important to note that time management and maintaining a reasonable work-study balance are two of the things that students find most difficult to achieve, and which can impact on maintaining motivation and concentration. Part-time work provides important skills as well as preparation for transition into and experience of the "adult world", but it is also a potential problem for students who lack adequate support and sound time management skills.
8. Peer research identified a need for more support services to be available to younger people. Focus groups conducted under this project identified that problems for some young people emerged while they were still at primary school. Disengagement that is evident by the time students are in their final years of secondary school has its roots in experiences occurring both in and out of school during their earlier years.

Lessons from the peer research approach

- Varying approaches by the three local coordinating agencies had a significant impact on the experience of the youth researchers, and their capacity to implement the research strategy.
 - » In Braybrook, Melbourne Citymission contributed additional funds to the project, provided a dedicated part-time staff member to support the researchers, and recruited the researchers from programs being delivered through their own agency. As a result, this contributed to a strong sense of identity and role clarity among the Braybrook researchers who met the research targets and accessed a high percentage of disadvantaged school-leavers.
 - » In Frankston, researchers recruited by the Brotherhood of St Laurence through local community partnership networks were then provided part-time project support by a BSL coordinator involved

in managing multiple projects. This group functioned reasonably well, but did not identify as clearly with the auspicing agency as was the case in Braybrook.

» The Shepparton researchers were informally recruited through diverse networks, and had only a loose association with the *UnitingCare – Cutting Edge* agency. Researchers were required to manage themselves within a broad strategy plan.

- Strong identification with and support for youth researchers of the kind provided by the auspicing agency in Braybrook provides a strong basis for developing a viable peer research approach.
- With a tight timeframe available for this action-research project, relatively little upfront training was available to the youth researchers. Much of the training took place “on the job” as focus groups were arranged and conducted, and presentations organised, with both the project facilitator and local co-ordinators providing this support. It would have been beneficial for more detailed training in research approaches to be provided before the consultations commenced and that such training was recognised and accredited.
- More time should also have been set aside to provide youth researchers with greater input to the development of research tools, and to provide opportunities to participate more in the analyses of the findings. The value that they added to the research tools within the time available for this project suggests that they could have made a greater contribution had they had more opportunities to do so.
- As noted in the literature, levels of engagement and participation among the youth researchers fluctuated over the four-month period that they were involved. Some were constant and reliable, but, as was to be expected, others had to deal with personal issues and were less engaged at certain stages. For this reason, teams of researchers were required to provide mutual support and to maintain the project momentum throughout.
- To consult effectively with young people, researchers must work in partnership with program providers and schools in preparing for the research activity. The research process requires sufficient time for the purpose of the activities to be explained properly. Transition pathways are a complex field of research which requires some reflection on the part of young people being consulted. Planning for consultations should ensure that sufficient time is available to allow for clear explanation and clarification of the tasks involved.
- Consideration should be given to ways of providing on-hand welfare support for young people participating in the focus groups, as difficult personal issues affecting their pathways could be raised which youth researchers cannot be expected to resolve.
- As a result of the above, sound, committed and supportive local coordination and management is required for each research team.

- Finally, participants from culturally- and linguistically-diverse backgrounds in Braybrook found the survey difficult to understand. There were also some problems relating to explaining the project to focus groups in this location. In view of the high percentage of participants from non-English-speaking backgrounds in some communities, careful consideration should be given to developing a methodology that is suitable to participants in those communities.



Youth Voice participants from Shepparton

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Appendix

Appendix A: YOUTH VOICE PROJECT – SCHOOLS SURVEY

Individuals who complete the survey will not be identified

1. **Gender:** male female
2. **How old are you?** _____ years
3. **Suburb or postcode where you live now:** _____
4. **What language is spoken at home?** _____
5. **What year level are you in?** _____

Are you studying any of the following?

- VCE
- VCAL
- VET
- Apprenticeship
- Other _____

6. **Do you plan to finish Year 12?**
 Yes No

If you are not planning on finishing Year 12, what is the main reason?

7. **Do you have part-time/ casual work?**
 Yes No

If yes, how do you find working part-time/casually?
If no, are you looking for a part-time/casual job?

8. Do you feel supported?

(1 = least supported, 5 = most supported)

At school	1	2	3	4	5
By your friends	1	2	3	4	5
In your family	1	2	3	4	5
In the community	1	2	3	4	5

9. Do you feel like your opinions are heard?

(1 = least heard, 5 = strongly heard)

At school	1	2	3	4	5
By your friends	1	2	3	4	5
In your family	1	2	3	4	5
In the community	1	2	3	4	5

10. How confident do you feel making decisions about career pathways/ transitions?

(1 = least confident, 5 = most confident)

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

11. How supported do you feel about making decisions about career pathways/ transitions?

(1 = least supported, 5 = most supported)

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

12. Who or what would be helpful when it comes to making career decisions?

13. Where would you go to find out about study or work opportunities?
(for example; school, internet, Centrelink, library, TAFE)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

14. Who or what has helped you the most with information on what you could do to study / to train / or to work?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

15. Who or what has been unhelpful?

16. What is the most difficult thing about studying and/or working?

17. Have you tried to get into a course or an apprenticeship, or gone for a job recently?

Yes No

If “yes”, were you successful? Why?/ Why not?

18. Do you have a goal for the future?

Yes No

If yes, what help will you need to achieve it?

Thank you for being part of the Youth Voice Project.

Appendix B: YOUTH VOICE PROJECT – COMMUNITY SURVEY

Individuals who complete the survey will not be identified

1. **Gender:** male female

2. **How old are you?** _____ years

3. **Suburb or postcode where you live now:** _____

Pines resident Yes/ No

4. **What language is spoken at home?** _____

5. **What are you currently doing?**
(tick if they apply to you now)

Studying at:

Secondary school

TAFE

Adult & Community Ed

Private Training provider

University

Not in education

Other _____

If studying, what are you studying?

VCE

VCAL

TAFE course

Degree course

Other _____

Working:

Are you:

employed (casual)

employed (part-time)

employed (full-time)

- self-employed
- apprenticeship /traineeship
- unemployed
- job-seeking
- Other _____

If you are still at school answer this question. If no longer at school, go to question 7

6. If you are still at school, do you plan to finish Year 12?

- Yes No

If you are not planning on finishing Year 12, what would the main reason be?

If you have left school answer this question. If still at school, go to question 8

7. If you have left school, what was the main reason?

(tick all that apply)

- Finished year 12
- Problems at home
- Need money
- Homelessness
- Bullying
- Expelled
- Don't see the point
- Falling behind
- Poor health
- School work too hard
- Boredom
- Problems with teachers
- Wanted to work
- Got an apprentice/traineeship

- Wanted to go to TAFE
- Not enough support
- Hanging out with the wrong crowd
- Problems with drugs
- Other _____

8. How satisfied do you feel about your current work and/or study situation?
(1 = least satisfied, 5 = most satisfied)

1 2 3 4 5

9. Is there anything you would rather be doing in terms of education and employment?

If so, what is preventing you from achieving this?

10. Where would you go to find out about study or work opportunities?
(for example; school, internet, Centrelink, library, TAFE)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

11. Who or what has helped you the most with information on what you could do to study / to train / or to work?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

12. Who or what has been unhelpful?

13. What is the most difficult thing about studying and/or working?

14. Do you know of these local programs?

(tick those that you know)

- POEM (Pathways Outreach Education Model)
- Youth Pathways
- MIPS (Managed Individual Pathways)
- Community VCAL
- JPET
- Green Corps
- Career & Transitions Services (CTS)
- Job Network
- Work for the Dole
- New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS)
- Australian Apprenticeship Centres
- Career & Transitions Services (CTS)
- Skills Store
- Group Training Companies
- Community Renewal

15. Do you know of these local services?

(tick those that you know)

- SkillsPlus
- LINK Training

- Youth Futures - Mission Australia
- YES
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Frankston Mornington Peninsula LLEN
- (Local Learning and Employment Network)
- PVET (Peninsula Vocational Education and Training)
- VECCI (Victorian Employer’s Chamber of Commerce & Industry)
- PTEP (Peninsula Training and Employment Program)
- RICA (Regional Industry Career Advisors)
- Centrelink
- Salvation Army Employment Plus
- Taskforce YTSI (Youth Transition Support Initiative)

16. Have you tried to get into a course or an apprenticeship, or gone for a job recently?

Yes No

If “yes”, were you successful? Why?/ Why not?

17. Do you have a goal for the future?

Yes No

If yes, what help will you need to achieve it?

Thank you for being part of the Youth Voice Project.

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