

case study

HUNTER TAFE SKILLS FOR TOMORROW PROGRAM



Putting the jigsaw together:

Innovative learning engagement programs in Australia

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Please note: All individual names are pseudonyms.

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Visiting the Skills for Tomorrow program at the Blue Haven Community Centre, some of its distinctive features are immediately obvious. It does not look and feel like a school or a TAFE campus, but like a friendly and spruce neighbourhood centre: surrounded by sports fields, a large car park (indication of an area poorly serviced by public transport) and streets with detached bungalows and established gardens. Signs on the outside of the building give an indication of the various services offered here: LEAP (Local Employment Access Project), the Blue Haven Dolphin Cottage 'school as community centre' (SCC) and Barayi Gandu (Darkinjung meaning 'food garden'). It feels like the program and students are part of the community here. On the other side of the footpath, a handful of toddlers are playing in and around a canopied sandpit. The childcare centre provides a key service, since all the students are young mothers. Their shared identity is also important, as student Pippa says: "it's just specific for younger mums, which I absolutely love".



A multipurpose meeting space is turned into a 'classroom' with desks and a whiteboard on wheels. Nearby are a kitchen, offices and meeting spaces that are used by staff from other services as well, providing a low threshold for students to get to know them. By the end of class on Wednesday the teacher and mentor stack the chairs, fold up the desks and put them away. Skills for Tomorrow uses the space only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. This reinforces the notion that Skills for Tomorrow is a portable program, and leaves the impression that the program has only a fleeting presence: temporary and as a visitor. At the same time, however, it is clear that staff and students are very welcome and even seem to be the main presence in the Centre for these two days of the week. They bring the Centre alive, with talk and laughter in the classroom; their children playing in the childcare centre; and the young mums and their children having their lunch breaks on the lawn outside.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	6
ABOUT SKILLS FOR TOMORROW: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW	7
Context	7
Students	8
Program governance and aims	10
Staff	11
Timetable and Curriculum	11
Facilities	12
Key dimensions	12
VALUED OUTCOMES	15
Valuable credentials	15
Social wellbeing	16
Belonging	17
Personal wellbeing	18
Life skills	18
ACTIONS	20
Soft entry	20
Strong support mechanisms	21
Quality relationships	23
Relevant and engaging curriculum	24
Program reflexivity	25
Strategic partnerships	25

PRINCIPLES	27
Strength based	27
Enabling	28
Intergenerational	28
Program fitting in with life	29
Scaffolding and portability	29
CONDITIONS	30
Legislation	30
Inter-agency partnership	31
Being part of larger organisation	31
The right staff	32
Similar students & small group	32
Ability to be flexible	33
Physical facilities	33
Transport	34
SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES	35
1) The long-term vision of the program	35
2) The scaffolding (or 'soft entry') approach	35
3) The portability of the program	36
4) The collaboration between many, often large, organisations	36
5) The intergenerational approach	36
ENDNOTES	37

INTRODUCTION

This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof ity te Riele, Dr Dorothy Bottrell and Dr Vicky Plows from The Victoria Institute at Victoria University, for the project Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia. The project was majority-funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and also supported by Dusseldorp Skills Forum and by The Victoria Institute through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Network.

The research project explored options for marginalised young people to complete secondary schooling (Year 9-12 or equivalent) through innovative, flexible and/or alternative learning programs.

PHASE 1—investigated the provision and diversity of such programs across Australia, with the results (listing over 850 sites) available through the Dusseldorp Forum website¹.

PHASE 2—analysed publicly available documentation from about 20 programs to generate insight in how they work and the outcomes they achieve. Short vignettes of each program are also on the Dusseldorp Forum website².

PHASE 3—involved more in-depth research with eight of those 'vignette' sites. For each program one member of the research team collected additional documentation and spent 3-4 days on-site to observe activities and interview staff, students, community stakeholders and, where possible, graduates³.

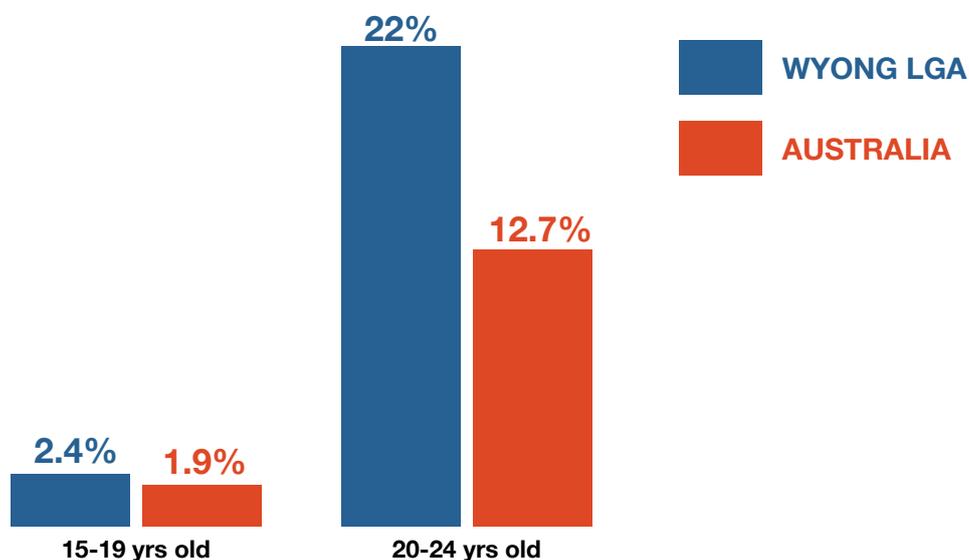
For this case study of the Skills for Tomorrow program, fieldwork was conducted in August 2013. The researcher was on-site for the two days the program operates per week at the Blue Haven Community Centre and also visited one of the TAFE campuses that is part of Stage 2 of the program. Interviews were conducted with six staff members, five students and three community stakeholders.

ABOUT SKILLS FOR TOMORROW: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Context

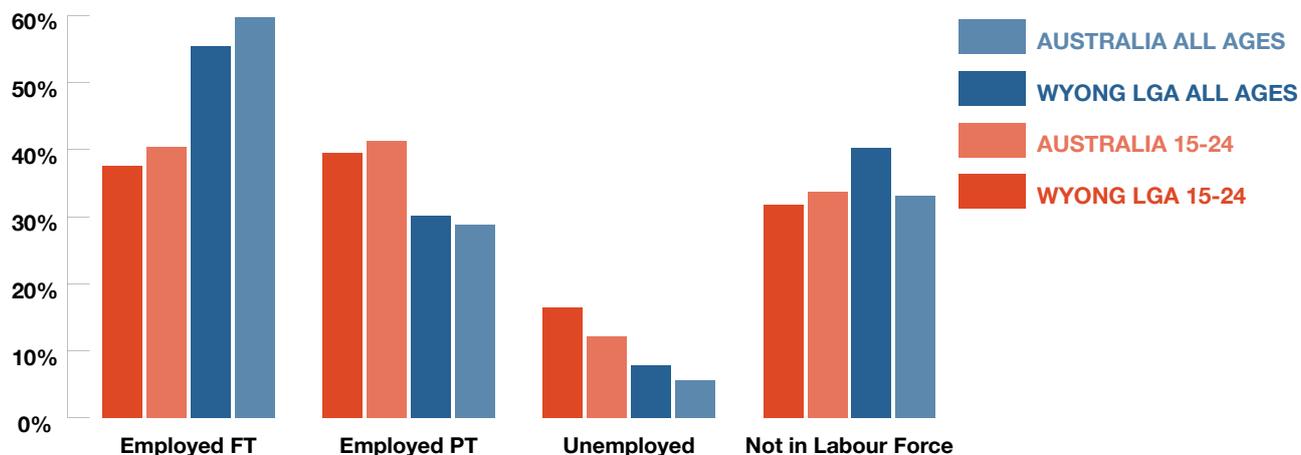
The Central Coast of New South Wales lies between Sydney and Newcastle. The northern part of the Central coast is Wyong Shire local government area (LGA), made up of the towns of Wyong and a collection of smaller towns around Tuggerah, Budgewoi and Munmorah Lakes and along the coast. The total population is about 150,000. The Wyong LGA has a slightly larger proportion of Indigenous people than the Australian average, especially in the teenage age group (6.2% versus 4.2%)⁴. Since Skills for Tomorrow is aimed at young mothers, it is interesting to note that the proportion of young women who have given birth to one or more children is higher in the Wyong LGA than nationally, especially among the 20-24 year old age group (see Figure 1⁵).

Figure 1: Females who have given birth to 1 or more children, % of age group (2011)



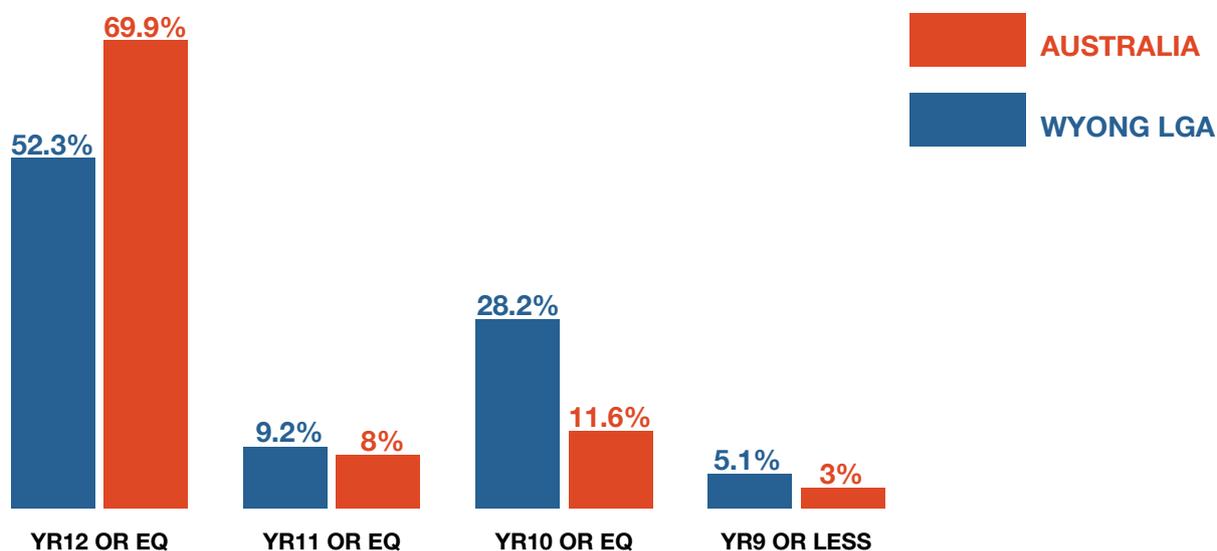
Many people in the Central Coast region commute to work in Sydney or Newcastle⁶. The local economy has an emphasis on service industries (aged care and children's services as well as hospitality and tourism). In addition there is some manufacturing and construction – the latter especially in housing due to the rapidly growing population. There are major hospitals in Wyong and Gosford as well as several private hospitals and a large number of retirement and aged-care facilities⁷. Despite the opportunities these industries provide, the labour market situation in the Wyong LGA is worse than the Australian average, with substantially higher youth unemployment (16.4% compared to 12.1% nationally, see figure 2⁸).

Figure 2: Labour force status, percentage of age group (2011)



The Wyong LGA is relatively well-served by education institutions. Newcastle University has a significant campus at Ourimbah. Hunter TAFE has campuses at Ourimbah (co-located with the University and Central Coast Community College, with over 8000 enrolments), Wyong and also in Gosford on the southern half of the Central Coast region. There are more than 90 primary and secondary schools⁹. Year 12 completion is much lower among young people in the Wyong LGA than nationally (see Figure 3¹⁰).

Figure 3: Highest year of school completed, percentage of 20-24 year olds (2011)



Students

Skills for Tomorrow is a program developed specifically for young mothers, as part of the Federal Government’s Teenage Parent Measure. During 2012-2013, four cohorts participated: three at Blue Haven and one at The Entrance, with a total of almost 50 students. Cohort 4 at Blue Haven in Semester 2 in 2013 had 11 students aged 19-23: One student with two children (one almost 2 years old and one almost 4 years old), two students were pregnant with their 2nd child, and the others all had one child aged between 11 months and 4 years. Their previous educational attainment varied considerably. At one end a student explained: “I went to Year 9, but I only completed Year 8. [...] I hated school”. At the other extreme, another

student had her first child at the end of Year 11, and used childcare for her daughter so she herself could complete Year 12:

I was pregnant throughout the whole of Year 11, so I had my daughter when I went back to Year 12. [...] A lot of people say ‘oh you shouldn’t have sent her [to day-care] at that age’, but I felt that my education was more important at the time, and to have her in day-care, than for me not to have that education and to get it later.

Since then, this student completed a Certificate III in Accounting. Although she seemed to be overqualified for the course, she found it interesting and looked forward to Tuesdays and Wednesdays to come to class.

Several students travelled from 15-35 kilometres away. For example:

- A student came from The Entrance (C on map), where a program was run in 2012 but has not been repeated. She drove her children south to Forrester’s Beach (D) for their childcare centre, then back up north to Blue Haven (B) for her own class.
- Another student travelled from Narara (A), where the local High School has a ‘young mums’ program, but she is a bit older (23) so that did not suit her.

Figure 4: Map illustrating student travel distances to the program



One student was of New Zealand/Pacifica background, three students were of Aboriginal background, and the others were Caucasian. All of the young mothers had grown up in socially disadvantaged families and most had experienced a sense of isolation, especially since they had their child¹¹.

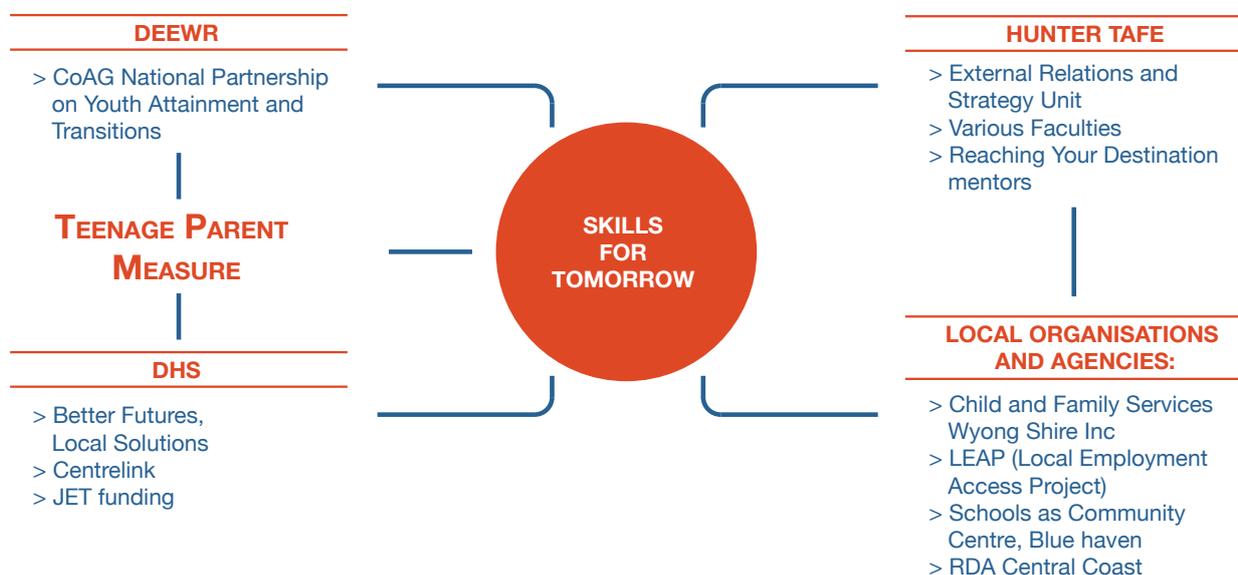
Program governance and aims

Skills for Tomorrow was set up in 2012 in response to the Federal Government’s *Teenage Parent Measure*. The Measure is affiliated with the *CoAG National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions* (which has targets for increasing the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent credentials for young Australians) and the federal *Better Futures, Local Solutions* initiative (which provides direct funding to other local services - such as LEAP (Local Employment Access Project) which support Skills for Tomorrow). The aim of Skills for Tomorrow is to offer young mothers the opportunity to gain a foundation qualification (Certificate II as mandated by the *Teenage Parent Measure*) as well as additional vocational credentials while offering high quality childcare for their children. The program is delivered by Hunter TAFE in partnership with several government, non-government and community organisations, including:

- The federal Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR; which became the Department of Education in late 2013) – overseeing the implementation of the CoAG National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions. A regional DEEWR staff member helped develop the Skills for Tomorrow program.
- The federal Department of Human Services (DHS) and Centrelink – overseeing the parenting payment and Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Child Care Fee Assistance program, and referring young mums to Skills for Tomorrow as well as other local ‘young parents’ program.
- Local agencies such as Child and Family Services Wyong Shire Inc; LEAP; Regional Development Australia (RDA) Central Coast, and Schools as Community Centre, Blue Haven. These agencies support Skills for Tomorrow with resources and provision of relevant services.

The partnerships between many organisations are a defining characteristic of Skills for Tomorrow – and they are quite complex. Figure 4 is an attempt to schematically capture the key players.

Figure 5: A simplified overview of key partnerships supporting Skills for Tomorrow



The main location for Skills for Tomorrow is Wyong shire, chosen as one of the ten sites nationally for the *Better Futures, Local Solutions* initiative and the *Teenage Parent Measure* due to its socioeconomic disadvantage and high teenage pregnancy rate. However, the program is designed to be portable, so may be offered at other locations where there is interest. A cohort is planned for Charlestown, which is north of Wyong but still in the region covered by Hunter TAFE.

Staff

The program does not have any full-time staff. Instead, several people work part-time or as part of their overall workload on the program, all as employees of Hunter TAFE. The teacher is employed on a part-time basis and supported by a full-time Head Teacher. Her main role is to teach the core curriculum during Stage 1 and to support the students with their (re-)engagement with formal education. In addition, staff from several Hunter TAFE Faculties run classes on the main TAFE campuses for the group in Stage 2. These TAFE teachers may work with the students for a single workshop (such as Barista) or over several weeks. The teachers and additional programs are all introduced to the cohort at the beginning of the program.

The program coordinator is employed for (on average) 6 hours per week. She has been able to be flexible with her workload, spending more time to get the program going in the first few weeks. For both the teacher and coordinator, cohort 4 was their first Skills for Tomorrow group. The two female mentors (one on Tuesday and one on Wednesday) are employed through the *Reaching Your Destination* program in Hunter TAFE. Both mentors also work with other TAFE programs and cohorts, and have worked with previous Skills for Tomorrow cohorts. Their role is to connect with relevant services for individual students, especially childcare but also housing, counselling, and transport. The overall project manager is part of the Hunter Institute of TAFE 'External Relations and Strategy Unit'. She designed and set up the Skills for Tomorrow program in close collaboration with a regional DEEWR staff member.

Timetable and Curriculum

Skills for Tomorrow is offered in two stages over 18 weeks plus a long term follow-up mentoring stage. Stage 1 offers the core curriculum at the local Community Centre for 10 weeks, with childcare on site for the students' children. Students attend two days per week from 9am to 1.45pm, and usually the program focuses on one module on Tuesdays and the other on Wednesdays. The core qualification for the first three cohorts was the Certificate II in Skill for Work and Training, but for cohort 4 the program swapped to the Certificate II in Community Services. Both qualifications are nationally recognised, meet the requirements of the *Teenage Parent Measure*, and offer flexibility to be tailored to student needs and interests.

Stage 2 offers several 'taster' modules that count as electives towards the core Certificate II qualification. Some may also count towards a Certificate III in fields such as Children's Services, Health Services and Hospitality. The modules are chosen in response to local labour market demand, suitability to work-life balance for young parents, and student interest. During Stage 2 students still attend on the same two days, but the times may vary depending on the TAFE timetable. Students are assisted to access high quality early childhood services, to replace the childcare service at the community centre. Throughout both stages student engagement and wellbeing is supported by the *Reaching Your Destination* mentors and inter-agency work by program partners (such as LEAP) and other local agencies. The support by the *Reaching Your Destination* mentors continues formally for up to three years after students complete Skills for Tomorrow, focusing on maintaining community connections and offering support for transitions into work or further study.

Facilities

Portability is a key characteristic of Skills for Tomorrow: it is not attached to 'bricks and mortar'. The main part of the program (Stage 1) is offered on site at an existing community centre, in partnership with local agencies and using a local childcare facility. In addition, parts of the program (during Stage 2) are provided through Hunter TAFE on its campuses. This local place-based (rather than specific 'space' based) focus is vital to the aim of Skills for Tomorrow to reduce isolation and connect young mothers to their community.

For a community centre to be a suitable location for Stage 1 it needs to have quality childcare on site as well as be used by a range of other local services and agencies that may be useful for the students and program. Cost is also relevant. At Blue Haven Community Centre the cost for the classroom space is covered by LEAP. Since the space at this centre is used for a variety of purposes, the furniture is easily moveable and wall decorations are fairly generic. The teacher brings a trolley with the necessary materials, including laptops, every week. Off the main space are three small offices (one in permanent use with desks and computers by LEAP; the others can be booked by various services); a small kitchen (separated by a childproof gate); and a store room. A big glass door leads to an outdoor veranda overlooking the sports fields.



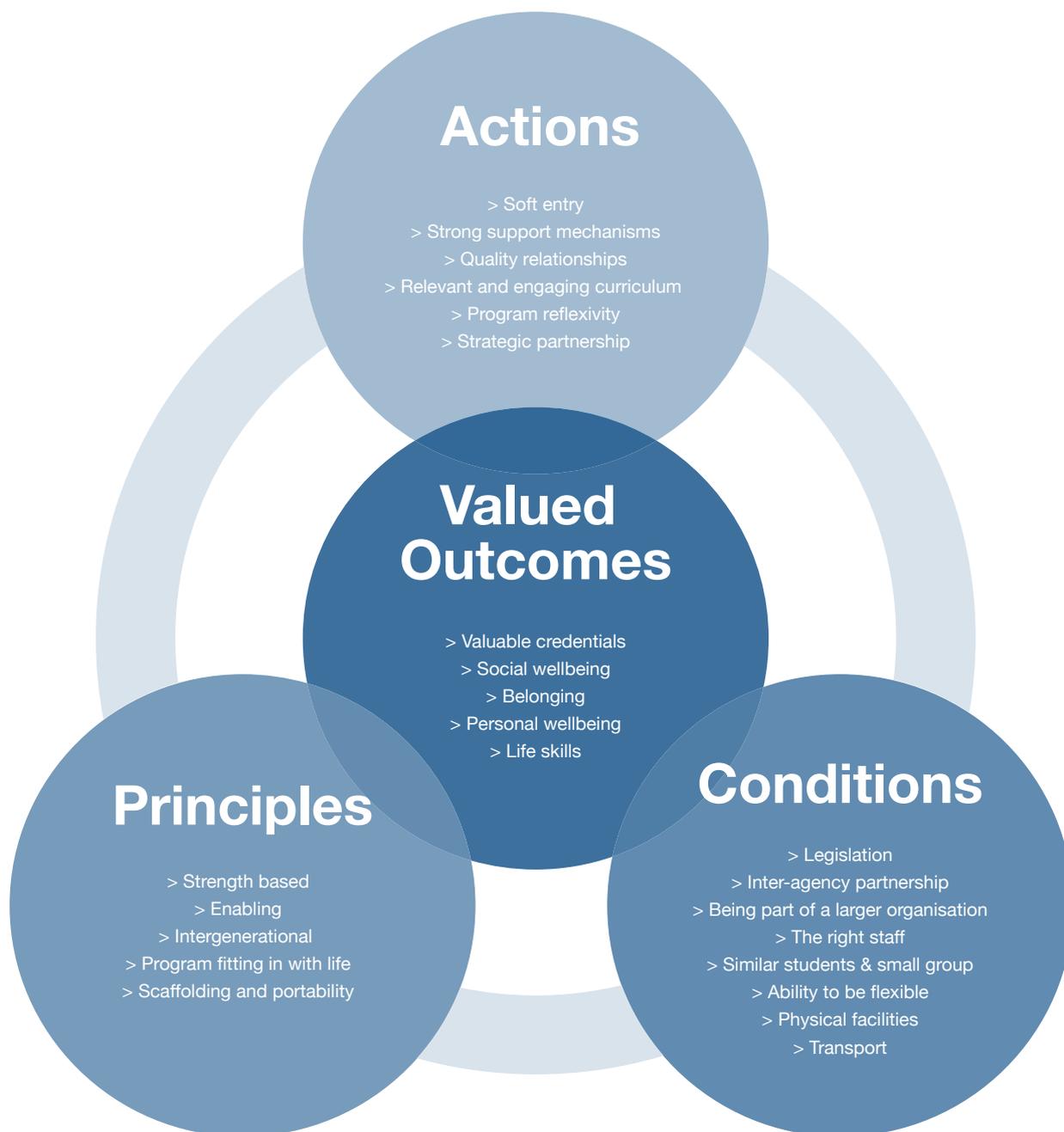
This building also houses the childcare centre and the 'Blue Haven Dolphin Cottage' for the Central Coast Schools as Community Centres program. For Stage 2, Skills for Tomorrow runs from the Wyong and Ourimbah TAFE campuses, using mainstream TAFE facilities. Some of this simply is not portable (such as the Barista equipment) but the purposeful intention is to familiarise the students with these TAFE environments – within the comfort of their cohort and with ongoing access to their Skills for Tomorrow coordinator and mentors – in order to reduce any barriers they may have for continuing on to further study at TAFE.

Key dimensions

The remainder of this case study will report on four key dimensions of the work of alternative or flexible learning programs: Valued Outcomes, Actions, Principles and Conditions. These dimensions are interrelated, which means some specific aspects (eg. curriculum) may appear in several sections.

Figure 5 schematically represents the dimensions.

Figure 6: Key dimensions – Skills for Tomorrow



Note: This model was developed by Kitty te Riele as Chief Investigator of the project team. Use permitted for non-commercial purposes and with attribution to Kitty te Riele and this report (see page 2 for citation guidance)

These dimensions address aspects that are of relevance across alternative or flexible learning programs for marginalised young people. The specific detail within each dimension varies for each program and case study. The dimensions are:

- Valued outcomes: this addresses outcomes from the program that count as ‘success’ in the perspectives of key stakeholders: students, staff, community members and graduates. Evidence is provided for achieving those outcomes, based on interviews, fieldwork observations, and program documentation.

- Actions: this dimension refers to the actions carried out through the program that support the achievement of the valued outcomes. This offers practical insights in how successes are realised.
- Principles: underpinning the program's practices are principles that produce a foundation for actions. These principles together form the (implicit or explicit) philosophy or vision of the program.
- Conditions: this dimension includes various conditions that enable or hinder people in a program to act on its principles and achieve valued outcomes.

The report concludes by summing up the most noteworthy characteristics of the Skills for Tomorrow program that help to make it successful.

VALUED OUTCOMES

Rather than pre-determining what counts as success, this section is based on the perspectives of key stakeholders. For Skills for Tomorrow, valued outcomes include valuable credentials; social wellbeing (such as breaking the poverty cycle and countering stigma); personal wellbeing; and life skills.



Valuable credentials

Given its genesis in the federal government's *Teenage Parent Measure*, it is not surprising that the actual credential the students are working towards is perceived as a key outcome. It is very clear, however, that this is not simply about meeting legislated requirements of achieving a Certificate II. The credential is valuable for two reasons: first for being a stepping stone that can actually lead to work or further study, and second for giving students a sense of achievement and pride.

The first purpose of the credential is summed up by one of the staff, Jocelyn: "This program was about setting them up so they've got all the tools they need, and skills and ability to continue on to further study and/or employment". Val (community stakeholder) emphasises that this "toolkit" includes "competencies that are relevant to the local labour market". Several of the students have specific career pathways in mind. For example, Maddie wants to do the Assistant In Nursing course at TAFE, Dynah is interested in becoming an Indigenous case worker, and Pippa and Taliah would like to work as domestic violence support workers. They didn't necessarily have these careers in mind when they started the program – the program also helped them to find out about possible careers and clarify their interests. Taliah shows her commitment to her long term goal:

I don't want to go to university just yet because my daughter is too young still and I don't want to leave her for that long. [But ...] I'd like to gain as much experience, do any bridge course I can in the meantime and then go to uni when I get the chance. [...] I'm just looking to grab any opportunity at the moment towards what I want to be.

Not all students have such a clear career goal and motivation, but the hope is that “if they like it and if they are successful they may choose then to go on and do something else” (Teresa, community stakeholder). Course completion, of a Certificate II as well as vocational Certificate III pre-vocational units, so far is 92% (cohort 1, 2012), 100% (cohort 2, 2012), 75% (cohort 3, 2013) and 91% (cohort 4, 2013)¹². From the two 2012 cohorts, 62% of graduates are enrolled in further study, such as a Certificate III in Health Services. One 2012 graduate commented “I can now go for what I have always wanted”.¹³

Second, the credential is valued because it generates pride for the students – all of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds and most of whom have not experienced much educational success previously. Maddie sums it up: “I’m just looking forward to graduating and just getting that certificate underneath my belt and be proud that I actually finished something. That’s just what I’m excited for”.

Val, a community stakeholder, remembers the graduation of one of the 2012 cohorts as an “eye opener” for her. She realised these students had never had a Year 12 formal, and to “celebrate their milestone” was so important for them: “Everybody had a child and their boyfriends were there, their mum and dads were there, they had grown and they were proud of what they’d achieved”.

Social wellbeing

A distinctive aspect of Skills for Tomorrow is that it treats the students’ children not as a barrier to be addressed (eg. by providing childcare so the mums can get on with their study) but as a core part of the program. The first component of the valued outcome of social wellbeing is that the program aims to help break the generational cycle of poverty. As Dionne (staff) explains, many young people in the local area come from “backgrounds where their parents were on a benefit and they’ve grown up in that environment and it tends to be a cycle where kids grow up and then their kids are on benefits”. Addressing this has been built into the design of Skills for Tomorrow, by ensuring the program not only leads to a credential for the mothers but also engages their children “in structured play, quality childcare, so that by the time they get to Kindergarten and Year 1 they’ve already had some engagement in education. So it’s about stopping the cycle” (Jocelyn, staff). This is working for Dynah’s son, who attends the childcare centre at Blue Haven Community Centre for Stage 1. She says he loves it and has made friends: “He wasn’t very good with other kids and stuff. But then I started here and he’s got all these other kids around him and it’s so much better for him as well”. Pippa is very aware that the future of her son relies on her, and this is a major motivation for her to engage with the program:

I wanted to work so I can bring Mervin up [...]. Because I grew up in a very – not poor, but we were always struggling. Mum still worked, but she only worked very casual jobs, because she had four kids, so she wasn’t working that much. [...] So in the way of helping Mervin, I think it will help him in the future if I do get a job or something out of it.

This leads to the second component of social wellbeing: countering stigma and negative stereotypes about young (single) mothers. Pippa states: “I just didn’t want to be one of the mums that don’t ever work or anything like that”. Some staff and community stakeholders make this aim even more overtly. Jocelyn (staff) talks about “changing the perception of how the community feels about the young women” and Teresa (community stakeholder) says the program “breaks down a bit of that stigma”. The participation requirement of the *Teenage Parent Measure* in some ways appeals to such stigmatisation of young parents, but for Skills for Tomorrow it also helps to address this. Shirley (staff) explains:

It definitely adds to the community because it also portrays young parents in a more positive light. I think we need to look at the fact that information about this is put out more through the media.

But just even the local community are aware that this is happening I think, rather than the terrible stereotypes that exist about young parents. They can see that they're actually out there and trying to do the right thing, the best thing for themselves and for their children.

The contributions the students make to the community are part of this. Dionne (staff) sees the community benefiting from Skills for Tomorrow because as a result “you have less people on a benefit”. Another staff member, Selena, suggests volunteering as a community benefit that is actively promoted through the program: “one girl is already going to be starting volunteer work next week, not with a volunteer agency but just off her own bat looking after an old man in his home”.

Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging of the students with the broader community is also a social outcome. Jocelyn (staff) and Val and Teresa (community stakeholders) argue that the young mums have been disconnected and marginalised, and that connecting them with the community and a wide range of community activities is therefore an important outcome. For example, Teresa made sure that students felt invited and welcome to attend a “family fun day” in the local area.

Belonging within the community of the program itself is the final element of social outcomes that is valued, not just by staff and community members but also by students. Maddie, Pippa and Taliah all talk about the importance of the friendships with the other students. They connect on Facebook but also in ‘actual life’ as friends for each other (“we went out to one of the RSLs”, Pippa) and for their children (“they have play dates”, Val, community). Selena (staff) sees the “camaraderie” among the students as a major outcome because “a lot of them have been isolated but they’re building up relationships with the other mums”. As an example, just before lunch on the Tuesday a student calls everyone to come into the childcare centre to sing ‘happy birthday’ for her daughter who has turned 4. She has brought cupcakes to share and the students and their children all move on to a grassy area outside to enjoy their cakes and celebrate.



Students explain they enjoy having “a decent conversation” because “I’m so used to talking baby all the time” (Taliah). The story of one of the students in an earlier cohort has already become legendary:

I think it was about week eight, one of the young girls had her second baby and three days after giving birth [...] she’s back in that classroom with the three day old baby, we’re all having a turn, we were all nursing this baby and it was like she’s connected. (Val, community)

The student explains that “This is where I belong. I couldn’t wait to show everyone!”¹⁴. For Dynah, this sense of belonging is not just a valued outcome in itself, but also contributed to her motivation to engage and learn:

Everyone's nice and you get along with everyone. I didn't finish school and I was never interested in it and I always said, "I'm not going to study anything if I'm not interested in it, because there's no point". But I look forward to coming every day that I have to come. It's just a different thing and you meet new people and you're learning.

Personal wellbeing

Social wellbeing and belonging are connected with personal wellbeing, especially in terms of confidence building. Staff members Jocelyn and Dionne and community stakeholder Val all value improved self confidence as an outcome. Dionne explains:

A lot of the girls come into the program feeling like "Oh I'll never be a nurse" or "I'll never be a teacher" or "I'll never be this because I have kids now and I can never get into that course because I left school". So this gives them the education and the confidence so that they can actually fulfil their goals. They can feel like they're providing for their children and they're not just sitting at home waiting for something to happen to them, they're actually taking proactive steps to do something.

For several of the students, what undermines their personal wellbeing is associated with what Dionne refers to as "just sitting at home". The students say they "needed something that was mentally stimulating" (Taliah) and that "I was bored, I didn't want to do nothing with my days" (Susan). Maddie puts it evocatively: "I was just sitting at home twiddling my thumbs and staring at four walls".

Life skills

The final valued outcome is the attainment of a range of life skills. For Shirley (staff) and Val and Teresa (community stakeholders) helping the students with their parenting is especially relevant. This desired outcome influenced the choice of curriculum activities to include, as Val explains:

Life skills that really give them a great toolkit for being a great mum. So things like the first aid certificate, preparing food, hygiene, how to communicate, managing projects like those kind of things. They were out of the training packages, they were relevant to the labour market, but they also provide skill sets for being a great parent.

Dionne (staff) suggests problem-solving as another valuable life skill. For Maddie (student) an outcome she feels she has already achieved is "just time management. That's a big one because I'm not an early morning person. Time management, I suck at that but you learn how to. [...] Getting up, getting Dixon organised, getting myself organised, dropping him at school and then being here by a certain time myself".



ACTIONS

To achieve these valued outcomes, Skills for Tomorrow uses a range of actions that are familiar from across many alternative and flexible learning programs – although each of these is given its own shape within the program – such as strong support mechanisms, quality relationships, an engaging curriculum, modelling and student input. In addition three sets of actions are somewhat more distinctive about Skills for Tomorrow: the ‘soft entry’ approach, program reflexivity and strategic partnerships.



Soft entry

Skills for Tomorrow was purposefully designed with a scaffolded approach, or what Jocelyn (staff) refers to as a “soft entry”, in two regards: the provisions around childcare and the supported introduction to local TAFE campuses. As a program for young mums it is not surprising that childcare was an important consideration. For the first ten weeks students can access the crèche on site at the community centre. Having their children so close helps lower the threshold for some of them:

For at least two of the parents, this is their first use of childcare [...] and that can be quite anxious making for them and they’ve been nervous about the fact that they’re not there to meet their [children’s] needs, but the fact that it’s right next door makes a big difference. (Shirley, staff)

Unusually for young parent programs, however, this childcare provision is transitional: it is used as a stepping stone to introduce the students and their children to formal and high quality childcare but “it’s not there forever” (Teresa, community stakeholder). Rather, the program works with the students to choose ongoing childcare that suits them for Stage 2 and beyond. Val (community stakeholder) explains:

We needed to allow them to bring their children to class for the first ten weeks, that’s how we got them in the front door. But working with them to understand why we then needed to let that go and it wasn’t a funding thing, that was by design, that was very much by design.

The reason for “why we then needed to let that go” is to enable the young mums to engage with ongoing (part-time) study or work by supporting them to access childcare options that endure beyond the life of the Skills for Tomorrow program. When students rely on family to help look after their child, staff ask: “how

sustainable is that family member? If you got a job three days a week, could that family member do that for you three days a week?” (Jocelyn). For example Dynah (student) had counted on her mother to look after her son for Stage 2, but when that became doubtful Skills for Tomorrow staff helped her: “They’ve started sorting it early, so no one’s left in the lurch without day care”.

Breaking the program into two stages also supports the second element of the ‘soft entry’ approach.

For Stage 1 the program is located at a community centre but in Stage 2 many of the classes are offered at two of the local TAFE campuses.

So first term they usually just solely spend out in the community and then second term they slowly transition into on-campus [...] integrating with other students there so they get a feel for what it’s like to be there, what sort of things they may learn if they went to different courses there, and it just means they’re familiar with the campus before they even start, and they have people to support them and help them while they’re there so they don’t feel lost. (Dionne, staff)

The idea is that Stage 1 offers the students “a bit more of a friendly environment” (Teresa, community stakeholder) and Stage 2 gently introduces them to TAFE with support from Skills for Tomorrow staff and peers. This scaffolding approach prepares students for the possibility of continuing their study at TAFE: “when they undertake training at the end of the program, they’ve already been to that campus, they know how to get there, they know what it looks like” (Jocelyn, staff). The program takes students to the Wyong and Ourimbah TAFE campuses of Hunter TAFE because “they’d be the campuses they’re most likely to be attending if they were continuing in any of these areas” (Shirley).



Strong support mechanisms

The ‘soft entry’ approach actively supports students – in addition, Skills for Tomorrow also draws on several other strong support mechanisms: for practical support, learning support and support for the future. Practical support can apply to simple things like “help them fill out their paperwork” (Jocelyn, staff) and “personal issues, childcare, housing, financial type issues” (Dionne, staff). Dionne gives an example of a student in a similar program who had been kicked out of home “so we had to work very quickly to contact local agencies and authorities and try and find somewhere that she could stay with her children”. Transport support is important because, apart from the train line between Sydney and Newcastle, the Central Coast is poorly served by public transport¹⁵. Skills for Tomorrow helps students by providing “taxi vouchers or petrol vouchers in order to get here [...] or to get them to the campus” (Shirley, staff). Dynah (student) explains “Mum normally drives me every day” but when she needed a taxi voucher “it’s so good to have that benefit to get here. They just want you to be here and do your thing”. Taliah (student) says the mentors and coordinator “just offer that little bit of extra support and I think it takes a bit of pressure off the teacher as well”.

The teachers, on the other hand, provide most of the learning support. This is obvious from observing the class in a week when students have their first assessment task: a role play as a community service worker, with a peer acting as the client on their first visit. In preparation the teacher offers students ample opportunity to practise their role plays and sits with each pair to provide individual feedback. The next day, when the role play assessment occurs, the teacher goes through the task step-by-step, gives tips to help them pass (“slow down, don’t talk too fast”) and reminds them of the criteria. After they have completed their role play, the teacher congratulates them all on passing “because I know many of you were quite anxious” and reinforces some of the key learnings from the task one more time. In her interview the teacher points out that the use of repetition is a conscious strategy to support students’ learning: “I think it’s really helped just going over it and over it”. She also uses open questioning, running with students’ comments and questions, and cutting material down into bite size chunks. The support for learning is appreciated by students in the class.

Once you leave school you forget how to study and the best thing about coming back in here was learning all the studying and just having that support. [...] The teachers don’t dumb it down but they narrow it down so we all understand what they’re talking about. (Maddie)

The final element of strong support mechanisms is in relation to support for the students’ future. This long term approach is a central component of Skills for Tomorrow. Jocelyn (staff) explains she has seen programs where “you pick them up and put them in a program, and then where to when the program’s finished?”. Instead, in Skills for Tomorrow:

We try to maintain that momentum and try to keep them. So the secret is you can’t run your program and then have a gap before the next activity. We try to transition them from this program into the next enrolment cycle, and we maintain support and contact, case management with them until we get them there. (Jocelyn, staff)

This is partly implemented through ongoing case management by *Reaching Your Destination* mentors, who can work with the young mums for up to three years following Skills for Tomorrow, and partly through the curriculum that leads into specific study or work opportunities (see further below). Staff also provide information for students about local work and volunteering opportunities. As students develop specific career interests (such as Indigenous case worker or domestic violence support worker) staff give advice on relevant courses and activities to help them get there.



Quality relationships

The quality of the relationships among the staff and students is crucial to the success of the program. Staff work to build this: the teacher by using small group work and team building exercises, and allowing time to deviate from the lesson plan when students bring up issues that are personally important; the coordinator by contacting all the students weekly for the first few weeks; and the mentors by simply sitting on one of the couches and being easily available for the students all day.

For the first two days of the program, a workshop with various creative and fun activities was held specifically aimed at “bringing the group together as a team” (Jocelyn, staff). Pippa (student) explains this was a valuable approach:

I think that the program that we did for the first week was really good, because it all loosened us up a bit. We all got to know each other because of that. Because if we went all straight into work and it was just silence and we were working, it might have not been as easy to connect with each other, because we were just sitting there writing, or whatever it might be. But with that program, we all had to interact together, so that's how we all got to know each other.

Good peer relations are evident with students helping each other. For example, the teacher told the class after the role play assignment that she noticed that the student in the pair who played the client was so supportive of the student being assessed, asking a question if that student got a bit stuck. Maddie (student) says “we all support each other so when someone's feeling down we perk them back up and if we're behind in work then they help catch up”.

For students, the empathy and care shown by staff is a crucial element of quality relationships. Pippa (student) illustrates this in some detail:

They're just really understanding. Me and one of the girls were actually talking about it the other day, that they actually really care. You can tell when someone's like, 'Oh, how are you going?' but they don't really care. But those teachers, especially [names], they will ask you. I told them things that happened two weeks ago and they remember to this day, which I think is really nice [...] Then just little things, like they remember your son's name, or the kid's name. They say, 'Oh, how's Mervin going?' instead of, 'How's what's his name?'. So it's just little things like that that actually you think, these teachers are really nice and they really care.

Small gestures count, such as allowing students to answer a phone call in class and writing a message on the board to announce “it's a girl” in a speech bubble, when one of the students who is pregnant has found out the gender of her baby. The good atmosphere in the class is obvious for anyone who walks in. Shirley (staff) and Pippa (student) put it down to mutual respect, and Dynah (student) explains:

You get treated like an adult. In the community it's like, 'Oh, you're a young mum' and people look down on you because they weren't 16 or 17 when they had their children. But here it's not like that. You get treated as if you're an adult, even though we can do stupid things sometimes. We're still young.

This respect and adult treatment is demonstrated through the invitation of student input. Such input occurs within the constraints of a short duration: two days a week over only 18 weeks. For the program design, the choice of units was influenced by young parents: “We went to DHS [Department of Human Services] and we interviewed parents and we asked them what they wanted. They wanted things like Barista” (Jocelyn, staff). At a day-to-day level, students have a choice of topics that are of most interest to them as the focus for certain assessment tasks.

Relevant and engaging curriculum

The curriculum for Skills for Tomorrow has been purposefully designed to be relevant for students, both immediately and for their future. Staff explain that the content is often directly related to life experiences of the students and their children: “I’m seeing those light bulb moments that’s going, ‘Hey, that’s me’” (Selena, staff). As Dionne (staff) explains, Skills for Tomorrow “just subtly includes” personally relevant content such as assessing “how you feel about yourself, [and] self esteem building”. Maddie, Taliah and Dynah all say the course has helped them to become less judgemental and more understanding of others. Dynah demonstrates the reflexive skills she has developed:

When I first started I was very negative and I used to judge people heaps, way too much. Now [staff member] is like, ‘No, you can’t judge people like that. You have to have an open mind. You don’t know what they’ve been through’. I think to myself now, I can’t judge that person walking down the street, or whatever, because I don’t know what’s happened to her. Like, well, I’m not a skinny girl, but fat people, they might have problems for why they’re overweight, and skinny people for the same reasons. But even junkies, they might have their reasons to why they use drugs. Not that I’d agree with it, but you don’t have to agree with everything.

The formal course content about local services can also be of direct relevance: “there have been some questions for their own personal needs that have been able to be met through the group. Questions about their children’s speech development for example, or behaviour management, or relationship issues” (Shirley, staff). Apart from benefit to themselves and their own children, students are also helping others, as Taliah illustrates:

I had a few friends say ‘Financially I’m struggling, I know you’re learning about this, is there anything you can tell me?’ and I was like ‘Oh yeah, there’s this service and there’s that service’ and then I’ll come into class and brag and be like ‘I’ve put my studies to good use today!’

This pride in having genuinely useful knowledge is also evident when a small group of students comes back to class late after lunch. They talk excitedly about meeting a young mum outside the Centre who wanted to find out if there is a young parents’ group. They are pretty chuffed with themselves for having been able to give her advice.

For the students’ future, the curriculum has been tailored to match local employment needs and jobs with flexible working arrangements, in order to increase chances that students will be able to find suitable work. Jocelyn (staff) puts forward that “47 per cent of employers value communication skills and interpersonal skills above vocational skills” and that the Certificate II provides a foundation by developing those “soft skills”. The vocational modules students undertake during Stage 2 on the TAFE campuses have also been carefully chosen, as Shirley (staff) explains:

The idea is to give the young women not only their Certificate II level qualification so they can apply for other courses at TAFE, but also to give them tasters in areas that would have the likelihood of leading to employment on the Central Coast particularly, so welfare/community services is a big growth area, children’s services, tourism and hospitality, aged care. Those four areas I think are listed as the major areas of growth for employment on the Central Coast.

Dynah (student) was attracted by the Barista unit because “we have a big coffee machine at work at the servo [service station] and stuff, so it fits in with work”. For Susan (student) the inclusion of several taster modules is useful because “it gives us all a feel of the different pathways we can take”. In a more informal way, modelling is used to highlight future possibilities for students. For example, through *Reaching Your*

Destination, the program “has mentors working for us who were single parents, who went through and completed community services at TAFE” (Jocelyn, staff).

Apart from being relevant and interesting, the curriculum also is engaging. This makes a major contribution to students’ commitment and learning:

The program was really good to start off with and it all got us, I think, coming back. We thought, ‘oh, this is really good, the teachers are really good, so let’s come back the next week’. Because some of the other girls, I know that they said, ‘oh, if it was going to be lame’, for lack of a better word, then they probably wouldn’t have come back. (Pippa, student)

Shirley (staff) and Teresa (community stakeholder) have noticed that the students are keen and positive and Shirley puts this down to “they can see that it’s actually quite enjoyable”. Taliah (student) says that this helps her to really learn: “Sometimes you learn and it just goes straight out the ear but this course I’m definitely learning a lot”.

Program reflexivity

Learning is not restricted to the students – staff and community partners demonstrate reflexivity and a willingness to learn and adapt the program to better meet its aims. The program has only had four cohorts over two years and so is quite new. Jocelyn (staff) acknowledges: “We know that there’s lots of things that we have to deal with that we haven’t even worked out strategies for”. Dionne (staff) suggests the staff are already “learning what not to do and how to improve things, so every time we do it, we slowly get better at it anyway”. She gives the example of making sure they address personal issues in the students’ lives early on, before it gets out of hand. Community stakeholder Teresa says one of the best things about the program is the willingness of everyone to work together to address problems:

It’s really good to think though that even though there were some rocky times, stuff hasn’t been brushed under the carpet. We have all sat down together, we have all tried to work out, ‘look, what wasn’t working, what can happen differently?’. And the fact is people have actually taken up the ball and run with it and it is happening differently and you don’t always get that. With any organisation, but particularly with government or big non-government organisations, the wheels move exceedingly slowly sometimes and to be able to change quite quickly is I think quite commendable.

Reflexivity and a commitment to improvement thus are exercised not only by individual key staff members but also through the partnership with other organisations.

Strategic partnerships

The collaboration of many and large partners on Skills for Tomorrow is a defining characteristic, and the final category of actions that the program undertakes to achieve its outcomes. At its most basic, this involves the provision of information about other services and referral of young mums. Staff mention job service providers (Shirley), UnitingCare Burnside Early Family Options (Shirley; also Teresa, community stakeholder), a “Learning to Read” program for children (Selena) and family activities (Dionne). Skills for Tomorrow works with several other agencies whose services may be necessary to help young mums before they are ready to join the program. For example, this could include a program that “would be dealing with any drug or alcohol” (Jocelyn, staff) or “a supported playgroup, they’re going to deal with your domestic violence” (Val, community stakeholder).

However, the collaboration goes further than such referrals and is, according to Teresa (community stakeholder), “a true partnership”. The initial design as well as ongoing operation and development of the program is premised on collaboration between people from many organisations (see Figure 4 earlier in this report). Some partners provide financial support for Skills for Tomorrow. For example, Jocelyn (staff) explains:

We have a partnership with a local community group LEAP [Local Employment Access Project] who actually pay for the room hire, so that doesn't come out of our budget now. Currently what comes out of the budget that we get from the federal government is the crèche, the training, transport, and some support. But people like Wyong Child and Family Services are funded to provide mentoring and support and transition parents into childcare, so they're already funded for that. So what we do is we try to utilise that partnership.

The location of the overall Project Manager in the ‘External Relations and Strategy Unit’ of Hunter TAFE facilitates this focus on partnerships. In addition, for the day-to-day running, the role of the program coordinator is to liaise with staff from the childcare provider and TAFE Faculties and to act as a “sort of a ‘communication hub’ person” (Shirley, staff).

PRINCIPLES

The outcomes that are valued and actions taken within Skills for Tomorrow are underpinned by several principles. These principles are discernable mostly in comments from staff and community. Some are explicitly formulated in interviews; others were determined through our analysis of the data.



Strength based

Staff feel very strongly that young mothers should be seen as capable and the program is based on “recognising that they’ve got strengths” (Shirley, staff). Val, a community stakeholder, suggests that the students feel “the stigma” of being a young mother. It is therefore important to be accepting and indicate to students that it is OK to be a young mum. Jocelyn (staff) staunchly objects to views that these students should not or cannot be engaged in study and work: “Every parent we’ve had participate in Skills for Tomorrow, has wanted to be engaged in a project. We’re working mums, why can’t they be?”. This is made explicit to the young mums themselves so that they end up “feeling that they can actually do something, that having a child at a young age doesn’t necessarily prevent them from being able to do all of the things that other people their age are doing” (Dionne, staff). In particular, Skills for Tomorrow has a philosophy that their experience as mothers has provided the students with valuable strengths that they can draw on. Jocelyn (staff) explains:

All along the way [Skills for Tomorrow] recognises existing skills that they don’t feel they have, they feel that they’ve left school at Year 9 or Year 10, and ‘what would I know, and my literacy is not that good’. Yet they’ve been parents and they’ve gained skills, and then they start to realise that ‘oh, actually I’m actually half way through this unit, because I do this every day at home with my child’.

A specific example is the career path of becoming a domestic violence case worker that several of the students aspire to. Dionne (staff) agrees that this has been part of the life experience of some students and that “a lot of them who have come out of it positively I guess, feel like they have a lot to offer in that instance and they’d like to support other women going through that”. This reflects Pippa’s experience: “I suffered from domestic violence, so I want to be a counsellor. Because I went to see a counsellor when I moved back here and she was just absolutely wonderful”.

Enabling

The next major principle is that the program is planned to be enabling. For Teresa (community stakeholder) this means it is of high quality:

They're learning just the same as other people would be learning, they still have to meet certain competencies [...]. That to me is important because it's not treating people like we're going to give people a lesser thing, it's just doing it in a different way. But you still end up with the same bit of paper that you would end up with should you perhaps have done it some other way.

Another community stakeholder, Val, agrees: “it’s about not just giving them a generic Cert II that is irrelevant so that we can tick a box and that doesn’t contribute to their lifelong learning or their lifelong objectives”. Rather, being enabling also means leading to a credential that is actually useful. This is achieved mainly through the choice of modules that are relevant to the local labour market (also see the section on curriculum under ‘Actions’). Val explains: “we chose the vocational competencies in areas that are relevant to the labour market, but also suitable for part time employment, which is obviously conducive to young parents”. Jocelyn (staff) adds that achieving a Certificate II “empowers the young women and that motivates them and engages them and makes them realise that they’ve got a future”. In addition, practical barriers (especially childcare) have to be addressed. The philosophy of the program is that childcare provision needs to be sustainable and enable participation in study or work for the longer term. Val justifies this principle:

We could have listened to everybody and said ‘no, let’s let them keep their children forever’. But how do you then engage the mums in lifelong learning if they don’t have the capacity to then go to TAFE? If we left them after 18 weeks and then they went back home and they had no childcare arrangements in place, how are they ever going to participate in anything?

Moreover, enabling the students means not solving issues for them but rather supporting them to develop the skills to solve problems themselves. Val again: “They didn’t know how to go about finding quality childcare [...] it was about unlocking all of the things that are out there to support mums”. Dionne agrees that rather than “take over for them” the idea is to develop students’ skills so they themselves are “able to overcome those barriers that are going to prevent them from continuing on in the course and then further in work”.

Intergenerational

Thirdly, Skills for Tomorrow is underpinned by the vision that it is “bigger than the mums, it’s [also about] their children” (Jocelyn, staff) – that is, by an intergenerational approach. The most explicit advocate for this principle is Val. In particular, she promotes high quality childcare provision for the benefit of both the young mums and their children:

If I had to push anything it would be that engagement of the children’s children into the wider early childhood education. [...] not just saying ‘ please enrol your children in day care’, but it is about educating them on the early learning framework and why it’s important to engage their children in that framework. [...] We’ve ticked a box for our teen mums, we’ve given them a Cert II, but the legacy here is that we can engage their children and hopefully they won’t disengage, they will start their schooling in the best possible place that they can.

Selena agrees that “the higher the education that they get then the better chances for their children holistically looking at it, for them to follow on in mum’s footsteps”. This principle is connected with the valued outcome of breaking the cycle of poverty, as outlined earlier in this report.

Program fitting in with life

A further principle is that the program will attempt to fit in with students' lives, rather than students being expected to fit in with the program. Dionne says there is “a lot more of an understanding” that an assignment might be late because, for example, their child was ill. She also explains that staff use text messaging rather than phone calls when they need to contact students, because it is cheaper for students (“they might not have credit to listen to the voicemail”) and less intrusive (“you can text them without disturbing them in class, or they're at a doctor's appointment or whatever”). As another example, Selena (staff) states that “work at home [...] is not a requirement of this course” because students have enough to keep them busy in their life outside the program: not only their children but (for several of them) also part-time jobs. This approach is illustrated by an exchange between the teacher and students on the Wednesday that classes were observed. After students completed their role play assignment, the teacher reminds them they also have to hand in a written reflection on their role play experience the following week. One student says she just needs to type it up. The teacher responds that she can do that if she wants to, but that hand-written is fine. She also tells students there will be time to work on the reflection in class in Tuesday, so not to worry if they do not get it finished.

Scaffolding and portability

Finally, there are some more practical principles in relation to the use of scaffolding and the portability of the program. The first connects to the important action of a ‘soft entry’ approach as Jocelyn explains: “Everything about the project was about a scaffold approach, so we wanted also our organisation to be seen as a soft entry”. She links this with the transition approach between Stages 1 and 2 and to offering a program that has “achievable milestones” rather than a part time Year 12 program that may take several years.

The portability is also a key principle: “it's a portable program, so it runs where we need it to” and that means that it needs to be able to adapt to “the current group of students, the skills and abilities, what they're interested in, and what the opportunities are in the LGA” (Jocelyn, staff).

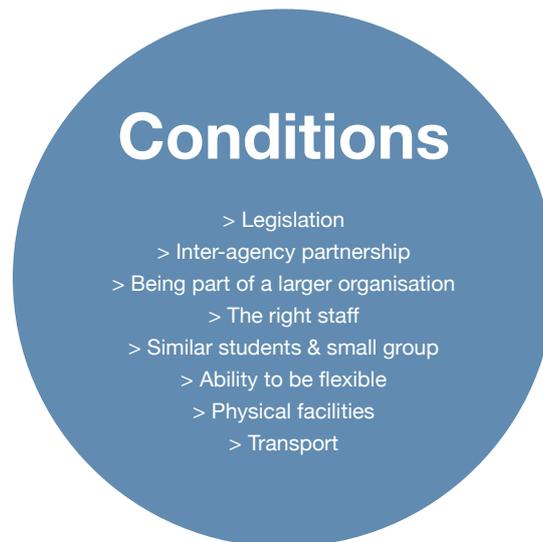


Portability is made visible through the use of community centres. At Blue Haven Community Centre, a multipurpose meeting space is turned into a classroom with desks in a U-shape, a whiteboard on wheels and a trolley with laptops and materials.

For Val (community stakeholder), the portability is connected with both need and the availability of suitable local partners: “we will continue to analyse the data and see where that need is and tap in into existing networks and resources and if we can run it in there we will”.

CONDITIONS

Several conditions enable (and/or constrain) the ability of Skills for Tomorrow to undertake the actions outlined above, in order to meet the outcomes that are valued within the program. Some of these conditions are similar to conditions for other alternative learning programs, but others are specific to Skills for Tomorrow, such as the legislative context of the program.



Legislation

As explained earlier in this report, Skills for Tomorrow was set up in the context of the federal government's *Teenage Parent Measure*. This legislation thus is an enabler of the program. Val (community stakeholder) explains this firstly in terms of providing the impetus:

The legislation had changed to say that single and teen parents in a certain geographic location, which happened to be Wyong LGA, had to be working toward achieving a Year 12 or equivalent. So that was the baseline for us to get moving for that.

On an ongoing basis, she sees the legislation as a “trigger as to why it works” because it provides “the incentive is that it’s part of their plan with their parenting payment”. This is certainly how it worked for Dynah: “Centrelink said to me if I don’t do something like that, my payments will be cut off. I was like, ‘oh, okay’. I wasn’t really that keen”. Despite her initial reluctance, she ended up finding the program enjoyable and useful both for herself and her son.

Staff member Jocelyn, however, is concerned that using the legislation as coercion could be counterproductive. She argues “you can’t tell them they have to be here” and that instead “all the language we use is you’ve been selected to participate in this program”. This reflects Taliah’s experience whose caseworker suggested she apply for the program and who was pleased that “they called me up and told me I could do it. I was straight in”. As a result Taliah’s initial response to the program was much more positive than Dynah’s, although ultimately both of them were pleased to be part of Skills for Tomorrow.

Inter-agency partnership

The partnership between several organisations supports Skills for Tomorrow financially, by pooling various bits of funding each already has to work with this group of young people. This was built into the design from the start: “so the project was about linking community providers who were funded to deliver components of what the young parents needed, and getting them to work collaboratively together” (Jocelyn, staff). As a result Jocelyn suggests they reduce “duplication” and can “strategically apply the funding”. For Val (community stakeholder) this also means the program is more sustainable. As an example, Skills for Tomorrow helps the young mums access JET funding: Jobs, Education and Training Child Care Fee Assistance that is provided through Centrelink for parents engaged in work or study as part of their participation plan¹⁶. Childcare therefore only costs the students “\$1 an hour, as opposed to the normal rate” (Jocelyn, staff). The normal rate is around \$100 per day¹⁷. Dynah was pleased to find out that she could access this funding: “through JET I can get it cheaper”.

The other aspect of inter-agency collaboration that supports the program is to have the ‘right mix’ of partners. Jocelyn recommends that:

You must have key stakeholders from all that have, brings a mixture of things to the table. If everybody’s all empathy, touchy, feely and mollycoddling, we’re not going to get anywhere. [...] It needs to be complemented by someone who can still actualise and get the outcomes and will document it for you. [...] So I think that the reason why the project has worked so well and we’ve been able to develop an effective model, is because of everybody’s qualities, because of the mix of the stakeholders.

Teresa (community stakeholder) points out that this “has taken a lot of work for us all” and also requires “real goodwill all around to make that work”. A specific problem can be if a partner sees their service as “their monopoly” rather than working collaboratively (Val, community stakeholder). Teresa and Val also suggest that across the mix of partners it is useful to be “talking the same language and that is about participation in education” (Val). On the other hand, Val worries about competition from other young parent programs: “I had these fears. Martin Luther King says ‘I had a dream’. I had a nightmare. I had a nightmare that people were just going to start fighting over all these teen and single parents”. In other words, inter-agency partnership is not necessarily a panacea – it can work to support or hinder a program, depending on the quality of the collaboration.

Being part of larger organisation

The main organisation behind Skills for Tomorrow is Hunter TAFE. Being part of such a large organisation offers specific benefits. Hunter TAFE offers other similar programs, especially for jobseekers, which provides wider organisational knowledge about what works and gives Skills for Tomorrow access to services such as *Reaching Your Destination* (mentoring) or subsidies for TAFE enrolment fees for single parents (following a successful tender for funding by Hunter TAFE¹⁸). Having critical mass is also useful, as Jocelyn (staff) explains:

Our Reaching Your Destination model has over 500 referrals, and so I guess the difference between how we work in our projects is that we’ve got the caseload. So we’re looking at the caseload and we’re developing a strategy. We’re going ‘I’ve got 35 teen parents, let’s have an info session’.

With many different people applying to study at TAFE, staff can direct them to suitable courses such as Skills for Tomorrow, rather than offering a course and just waiting to “see who enrolls” (Jocelyn).

The right staff

The people who work in a program are central to its success. As Susan (student) puts it: “obviously to have good supportive teachers, and not just to throw anyone into the role”. For Skills for Tomorrow, characteristics of the ‘right’ staff include being “kind-hearted” (Susan), having “empathy” without being “too motherly” (Jocelyn, staff) and being “fairly flexible and understanding” (Shirley, staff). Taliah (student) suggests:

You don't want someone to come in who, not so much thinks that they're better, but gives off that vibe: 'I'm the teacher and this is how it is'. I think it's important to have someone that comes in on the same level as the girls.

For Susan (student) having the right staff is important because “if you don't have good staff, you're not motivated to come”. The staff for Stage 1 have been appointed with this in mind, but for the staff on the main TAFE campuses (whose core workload is not for Skills for Tomorrow but for mainstream vocational courses) this condition means that “you really have to educate your educators” (Jocelyn, staff).

A coordinator in addition to teaching staff is also an enabler, *both for day-to-day liaison and for regular contact with the students in the first few weeks*: “if you didn't put in a whole lot effort to get them here, just getting them here in the first place and spending all that time connecting with them [...] then it wouldn't happen” (Shirley). This indicates that a high level of commitment and perseverance are also desirable staff attributes.

Similar students & small group

For Maddie, Pippa and Dynah (students) being in a group with similar young women makes Skills for Tomorrow more attractive, because the other students “can relate to you because they have children” (Dynah). Pippa gives two examples of people who are different, as a contrast to the similarities in Skills for Tomorrow:

I did a TAFE course at Wyong TAFE and, I mean, they're all lovely people, but they're all 30 and up, which is fine, but I didn't really connect with anyone. I felt very out of place. [...]

My other girlfriends that are the same age as me, that I went to school with, they don't have kids, they don't know what I'm going through. They still live at home, so when I say I'm having money issues, they're like, 'What are you having money issues for? You're on Centrelink'. It's like, 'yes, but half of it goes to rent, the other half goes to bills'. They don't really get it, but these girls do.

In other words it is both their age and being a mother that sets these students apart from other people and provides a bond within Skills for Tomorrow. Dynah had been worried about going to TAFE because “I didn't want to get tangled up with the wrong people again” and therefore found it reassuring that the other students are also young mums. In addition, it helps that the program is quite small – with about 10-15 students in each cohort. Maddie had experienced another young parents program with 30 students, and found “because there were so many girls everyone was in different places in their work and it was just confusing”. The teacher suggests the small class size also helps to build cohesion and belonging within the group.

Ability to be flexible

Skills for Tomorrow uses a curriculum that enables flexibility, both within the core units and through electives that allow for including the vocational taster units. For the first three cohorts, this curriculum was the Certificate II in Skills for Work and Training and for cohort 4 they changed to the Certificate II in Community Services. The latter has proven especially useful for integrating self-reflection “without it taking away from time to do other things that you would have to do if you were doing a different course” (Teresa, community stakeholder). Within the day-to-day functioning of the program, staff are able to be flexible: to respond to questions or issues as they occur and to include content that is of interest and relevance for the students. The use of community centres and a variety of existing TAFE facilities, rather than being tied to a specific site, also brings with it a lot of scope for flexibility.

The legislative requirements, however, can be a constraint. Jocelyn (staff) suggests that “government funding that comes through, that’s really locked in to this minimum Certificate II, in some instances can disadvantage a young person from gaining employment” because once someone already has a Certificate II qualification “the employer can’t employ them as a new entrant trainee”. She would like to have the flexibility to use the funding to offer either less or more than a Certificate II. For some young people less, and instead focus on developing the necessary “soft skills and the interpersonal skills to even be employed”. For other young people more because “around 85 per cent of young people who have a Cert III are better equipped to gain employment, as opposed to 25 per cent who gain employment at a Cert II level”.

Physical facilities

Although Skills for Tomorrow is not tied to a specific building, as it is a portable program, finding the right physical facilities is important: “the environment is important so you’ve got to find the right space” (Jocelyn, staff). The main elements are having “that onsite childcare” (Shirley, staff) and having other services working out of the same site to enable easy interaction and referral (Teresa, community stakeholder).

Growing the program therefore relies on “basic stuff around the venue” (Teresa). Stage 1 being in the community rather than in the formal TAFE environment is also considered important because it is “more comfortable” (Taliah, student) and there isn’t “the pressure of an on-campus learning environment where there is sort of a higher expectation of them” (Dionne, staff).



Transport

Finally, a condition that is inhibiting for the program is transport: “public transport isn’t great, so that’s been an issue and a lot of the girls don’t drive” (Dionne, staff) or “don’t have a car” (Pippa, student). For Stage 2, getting to the TAFE campuses can also be “a bit of a hassle” (Pippa, student). To get to Blue Haven Community Centre Dynah says: “Mum drives me. Well, I drive - I put my L plates on the car”. This problem could be addressed by finding a different site for Stage 1 that is better serviced by transport, or by more funding for taxi vouchers, petrol vouchers and minibus-hire. Since all the students are of driving age (this cohort is aged between 19 and 23) building on support for gaining their driving license may also be useful¹⁹.

SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The core of each case study report (including this one) focuses on four dimensions that emerged from analysis of all the vignettes and case studies. The starting point is the *outcomes* that are valued and achieved by alternative learning programs. In order to achieve these outcomes, specific work is done and *actions* are taken. Underpinning the aims (valued outcomes) and approach (actions) we can discern *principles* that inform each program. Finally, certain (external and internal) *conditions* help or hinder the actions and the achievement of outcomes.

This framework is effective for understanding ‘what works and why’ and resonates with practitioners in alternative learning programs. It helps to highlight commonalities across programs but also permits sensitivity to distinctive features. Some aspects of central significance to a program may be relevant across more than one dimension. A drawback of our framework is that, by discussing these aspects under several headings, this importance may have been concealed. This final section, therefore, sums up the most noteworthy characteristics of the program that help to make it successful.

For Skills for Tomorrow, the following features are particularly remarkable:

1) The long-term vision of the program. Skills for Tomorrow is not only an 18 week program that delivers a Certificate II and meets legislative requirements, but also very much concerned with the students’ future upon completion. This is evident in the substantial commitment of offering access to the *Reaching Your Destination* mentors for three years, to maintain the connection and the momentum initiated by the Skills for Tomorrow program. Moreover, the program is firmly focused on genuine opportunities for employment. The curriculum has been shaped based on information about local skill shortages in fields that offer working conditions suitable for young (mostly single) mothers. For example, across the Central Coast there is an urgent need for aged care workers, and working hours in the aged care sector can be flexible to suit employees who are parents. The fact that the curriculum is obviously and genuinely useful also enhances the engagement of students. As a result of these practices, the program is much more likely to lead to positive long-term outcomes for the students as well as the local community.

2) The scaffolding (or ‘soft entry’) approach. This means Skills for Tomorrow meets students where they are at but utilizes that as a stepping stone rather than an end point. This is most evident in the transition from on-site childcare to formal childcare in the community, as well as the transition from classes in the community centre to classes on a major TAFE campus. It also informs the setting of achievable milestones through the curriculum; and the approach to developing positive relationships from the start, through a two-day team building workshop and investment of time and effort in regularly contacting students. Importantly, scaffolding does not denote a deficit approach to the students. The combination of high support and high expectations is supplemented by a recognition of the strengths, skills and formal and informal knowledge that the students bring to the course, by virtue of their experience as mothers.

3) The portability of the program. This is an unusual feature that makes Skills for Tomorrow more equitable, because it can go to locations that have a cluster of potential students, rather than students from across the region having to travel to one central location. Transport is a major problem on the Central Coast. It is impossible for this to be completely solved by the portability of the program (some travel is still required from students) but it is very much alleviated. Moreover, using community centres as the site for Stage 1 of the program facilitates connecting students to their local community. Not being tied to a specific building also makes the program more sustainable, with less funding required for infrastructure and maintenance.

4) The collaboration between many, often large, organisations. Inter-agency partnership is something of a catchcry for alternative learning programs. It is also widely acknowledged that making that flourish is not straightforward. At Skills for Tomorrow, successful collaboration is enabled by a commitment to employ staff in coordinating roles (the overall Project Manager and program coordinator) and by the goodwill and expertise of a diverse mix of people from various organisations. The pooling of funding dispersed over many agencies supports the sustainability of the program. Genuine collaboration is also evident within Hunter TAFE, itself a large and diverse organisation – using its critical mass to benefit the program despite the sometimes differing aims and agendas across Faculties and divisions.

5) The intergenerational approach. This is a feature specific to being a young parents program. Skills for Tomorrow does not only intend to improve opportunities for the students, but also for their children. Educating the students about childcare options and early learning principles, together with supporting access to high quality childcare options, is likely to significantly enrich the life experience of their children. The impact on the students' children indicates the program has the potential to set off a ripple effect far beyond the attainment of a Certificate II by the young mums and to contribute to breaking generational cycles of poverty.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/>
- ² <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/case-studies/>
- ³ This phase of the research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE13-038) and permission was given by each of the programs. All programs agreed to be named.
- ⁴ ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- ⁵ ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- ⁶ Central Coast Regional Strategy: <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/en-au/planningyourregion/regionalstrategies/centralcoastregion.aspx>
- ⁷ Staff and community interviews as well as Central Coast Regional Strategy: <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/en-au/planningyourregion/regionalstrategies/centralcoastregion.aspx>
- ⁸ ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- ⁹ Staff and community interviews and <http://www.wyongshire.org/facilities/schools.html>
- ¹⁰ ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- ¹¹ Staff interviews
- ¹² Communication from staff plus TAFE NSW Hunter Institute (2012). Skills for Tomorrow. Submission to the 2012 TAFE NSW Innovation and Excellence Awards.
- ¹³ TAFE NSW Hunter Institute (2012). Skills for Tomorrow video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm1cGph8bY&feature=youtu.be>
- ¹⁴ TAFE NSW Hunter Institute (2012). Skills for Tomorrow. Submission to the 2012 TAFE NSW Innovation and Excellence Awards
- ¹⁵ Central Coast Regional Strategy: <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/en-au/planningyourregion/regionalstrategies/centralcoastregion.aspx>
- ¹⁶ See: <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/jobs-education-and-training-child-care-fee-assistance>
- ¹⁷ For example see: <http://www.goodstart.org.au/GoodStart/media/GoodStart/PDFs/January-2014-Fee-Increase-By-Centre-By-Age.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Based on information from interviews
- ¹⁹ For example see: <http://www.skys.org.au/skys-youth/l2p>

