

case study

ST LUKE'S EDUCATIONAL SERVICES UNIT (ESU)



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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On a main street within walking distance of Bendigo's town centre is the Youth Central building home to St Luke's Educational Services Unit (ESU). A sign on the window lists the range of teaching and learning programs available here: specialist teaching unit, outdoor education, music production, art and design, bike mechanics and carpentry. The main entrance door is next to a window display of CDs, hats, bags and jewellery made by enterprising staff and students. The door leads into a central area where staff and students gather at lunchtime. People move in and out of the adjoining kitchen, making lunch and sharing food. Someone is reading out questions from the quiz in the daily newspaper, others are talking and laughing. One day an ex-student pops in with her newborn baby, another day there is a barbeque for parents as well as the students. A remarkable feature of this program for highly vulnerable and marginalised young people is the quality of relationships between staff and students. Informal and inclusive, these lunch interactions reflect the family-like but professional atmosphere at this education program, summed up by Matt, one of the students, as simply "it's just a good place to be".



Away from the buzz of the central area two small rooms that provide a quiet and confidential space for the one to one teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy at the core of this program. A corridor leads to further purpose built spaces home to the activity-based programs in music and sound production, art and design, and recreation and outdoor education. A small courtyard at the back of the building offers seating in the summer and a large mural on the wall reading 'next stop change' indicates the intentions of this program for its students. The ESU is a referral service for students who have experienced significant disengagement and disruption to their education. Operating as a deemed enrolment program in partnership with a number of mainstream schools, the ESU motto is that "school may not be for everyone, but education is".

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INTRODUCTION

This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof Kitty 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 St Luke's Educational Services Unit, fieldwork was conducted in September 2013. The researcher was on-site for three days at St Luke's ESU in central Bendigo and also visited The Good Shed where students participate in carpentry, bike and small mechanics. Interviews were conducted with three staff members, four students, one graduate and two community stakeholders.

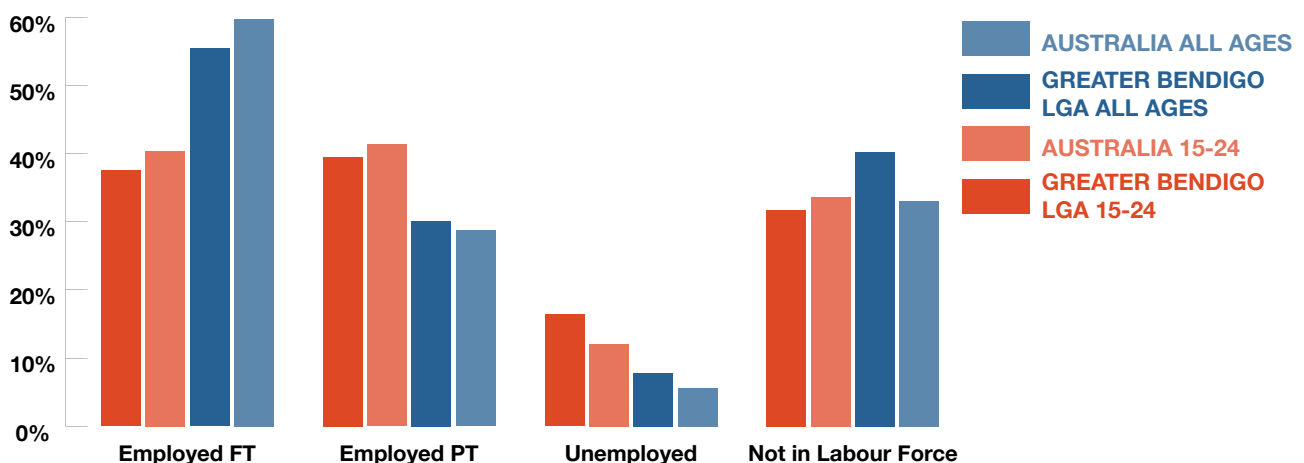
ABOUT ST LUKE'S EDUCATIONAL SERVICES UNIT: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Context

The Greater Bendigo local government area (LGA) of Victoria is located roughly 150km north-west of Melbourne. The total population is about 105,000 and is predicted to grow over the coming 20 years. It has a smaller proportion of Indigenous people than the Australian average (1.4% versus 2.5%)⁴. The Greater Bendigo LGA encompasses a number of small towns and rural localities and the large regional centre of Bendigo.

Greater Bendigo LGA residents are less likely to be unemployed in comparison to the Australian average with 5.2% unemployed across all ages compared to 5.6% nationally, and 10.6% for 15-24 year olds compared to 12.1% nationally. Residents of Greater Bendigo are, however, slightly more likely to work in part-time rather than full-time employment in comparison to the national average (32.7% compared to 28.7% for all ages, and 43.3% compared to 41.3% in the 15-24 group, see Figure 1⁵). More residents work in health care and social assistance than any other industry. Other popular employment sectors are retail trade and manufacturing.

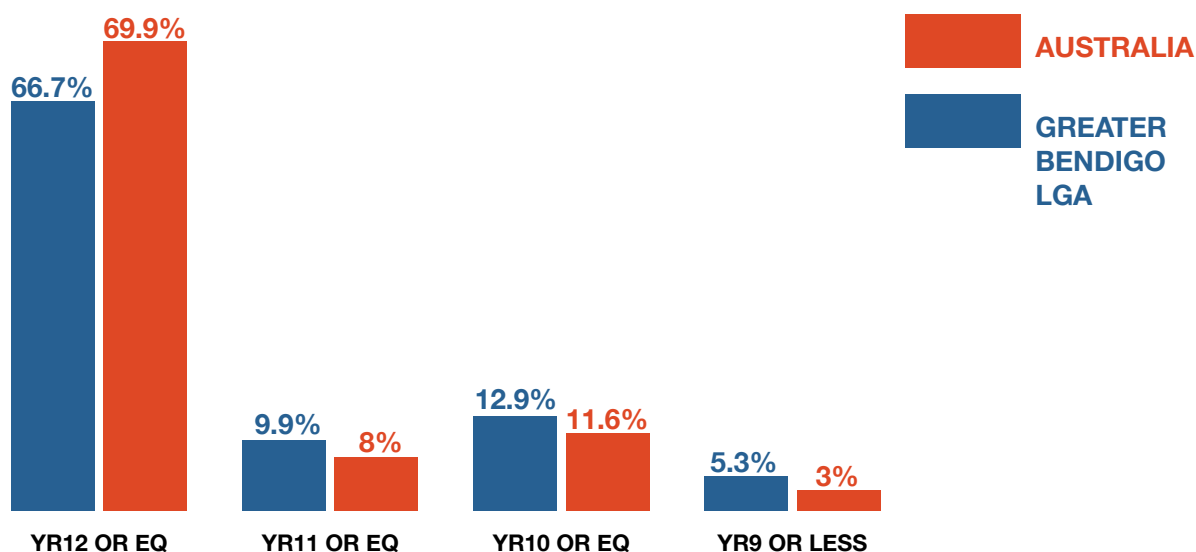
Figure 1: Labour force status, percentage of age group (2011)



The Greater Bendigo area has a number of dormitory suburbs where the majority of residents commute out to work. Other areas have large employment centres which attract a local workforce. Around 65% of employed Greater Bendigo residents work in Bendigo Central, Inner East, Inner North or Inner West⁶.

The Greater Bendigo LGA has around 45 primary schools and 10 secondary colleges, as well as TAFE (Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE) and university campuses (La Trobe University's Bendigo campus)⁷. At the secondary school level alternatives to mainstream schooling (supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood and Development (DEECD)) include: St Luke's Educational Services Unit, DOXA School Bendigo and NETschool Bendigo⁸. Year 12 completion is slightly lower among young people in the Greater Bendigo LGA than nationally (see Figure 2⁹).

Figure 2: Highest year of school completion, percentage of 20-24 year olds (2011)

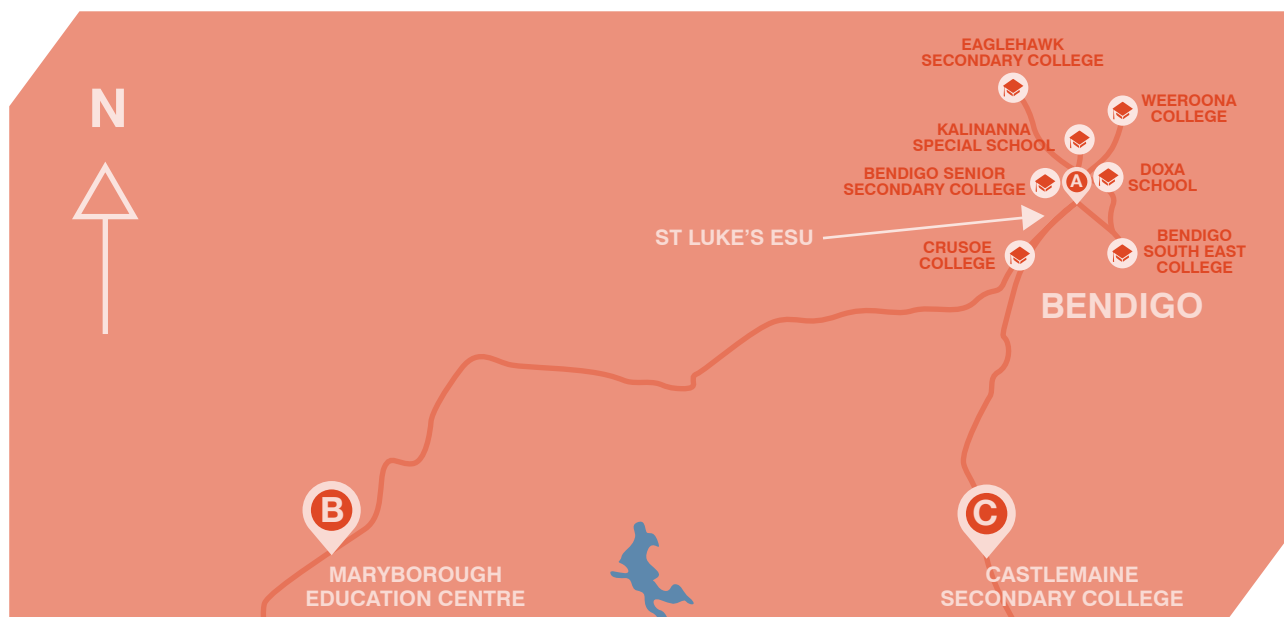


There is a focus at St Luke's ESU on literacy and numeracy teaching. Data collected in 2010 shows that a slightly lower percentage of Greater Bendigo Year 9 students, in comparison to Victoria, met national standards in reading (91% compared to 93%) and in writing (85% compared with 89%)¹⁰.

Program governance and aims

St Luke's ESU was set up in 2006 and is part of St Luke's Anglicare Bendigo, Child Youth and Family Services. It is a referral only re-engagement program designed specifically for young people aged 12-17 years who are unable to attend mainstream school. The program is based on a deemed enrolment scheme where young people remain enrolled at a mainstream school but attend one to one and small group teaching and learning programs off-campus at St Luke's ESU. In 2013, the ESU was working with nine schools in the Greater Bendigo area. The majority were within a short driving distance to St Luke's ESU, with only one school in Castlemaine a considerable distance away (see Figure 3 below). The program also operated an 'outreach' education model in Maryborough.

Figure 3: Map illustrating geographic spread of schools to St Luke's ESU 2013



The main aim of the program is to provide education opportunities that (re-)engage young people with learning and provide students with a “stepping stone back into mainstream education opportunities”¹¹. While acknowledging the barriers young people face, the focus of the program is not on these difficulties but rather on a strengths-based style of education¹². St Luke's ESU works on the principle that while school may not be for everyone, education is¹³.

St Luke's ESU runs most of its activities at its site in the Bendigo town centre and two further activities out of an industrial shed on the outskirts of Bendigo. In addition, St Luke's ESU also operates an 'outreach' education model in Maryborough for young people who have been expelled from school and have no other education options available. A teacher from the program, employed specifically for this role, travels to teach the students in Maryborough. The main focus of this case study is the program operating within Bendigo.

Students can attend St Luke's ESU for one to six years before returning to their enrolment school or moving into a pathway more suitable for them such as TAFE studies, apprenticeships or employment. Core funding is provided to St Luke's ESU by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) via the Student Resource Package. This enables schools to transfer funding for individual students to St Luke's ESU for educational services received at the program. In 2013, St Luke's ESU also received funds from the Department of Human Services and a number of philanthropic organisations¹⁴.

Students

St Luke's ESU has a maximum capacity of 50 enrolments. In 2013 there were around 45 enrolments at the ESU and nearly 75% were male. Just over half of all the students were aged between 13 and 14 years of age, just over a quarter aged 15 and just under a quarter aged 16. There were also a very small number of young people aged 17+ involved in the program. Many students referred to St Luke's ESU are living in out of home care, involved with statutory services and/or St Luke's Intensive Case Management System (ICMS). The main reasons for referral to St Luke's ESU are problematic behaviour (including inappropriate anti-social behaviour, extreme bullying and violence towards others), mental health issues, alcohol and drug use, and multiple suspensions, expulsion or disengagement. It is common for young people to arrive at St Luke's ESU with a lower level of numeracy, reading and writing in AusVELS (The Australian Curriculum in Victoria) than would be expected for their year level with many not having completed the expected school year level (or year level below) for their age.

Students at the program have experienced a high level of non-participation in education and significant disruption to their schooling. For some this has meant they have missed whole terms of school and being in and out of mainstream education for a number of years¹⁵. Matt (student) explains how such absences can be related to a challenging home life: “I had been moved in and out of a lots of carer’s houses and towns so school was kind of hard to get to, at one stage”. Not unexpectedly, students at St Luke’s ESU refer to their previous schooling experiences in negative terms such as a lack of friends, being bullied, not getting along with the teachers, schools wanting “rid of” them, feeling ignored by teachers and struggling with the work.

Staff

In 2013 St Luke’s ESU employed the equivalent of 10 full-time staff (4 full-time and 10 part-time). The multidisciplinary staff team includes the program manager, teachers, teaching support staff and program specialists. Six members of the staff team are teachers registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching. Program specialists hold qualifications and training in community services, outdoor recreation, visual arts, music industry and alcohol and drugs. Teaching support staff have education support certificates and/or St Luke’s in-house mandatory staff training. All but three staff members are co-located at the central site and share an open plan office. One teacher works off-campus in the outreach education program and two program specialists work in the industrial shed - but they also attend the central site at least once a week and have a space in the staff office. The current manager has led the delivery of the program since its inception in 2006.

Timetable and Curriculum

The program runs for 40 weeks per year. Each student has a personalised timetable and curriculum based on their Individual Education Plan (IEP) with a focus on the physical, personal and social learning domains of AusVELS. The IEP is a live document that articulates a student’s educational, social and behavioural needs and capabilities, and how St Luke’s ESU, together with the enrolling school and other support services, will share responsibility in addressing these¹⁶. The IEP is agreed with the Student Support Group (SSG) when a young person joins the ESU and updated at the end of every term. The SSG meets one to two times a term and includes the young person, their parent/carer, a representative of the enrolling school and DEECD regional office, nominated case worker, teaching staff and the manager of St Luke’s ESU.

Each day begins with a staff meeting to discuss the day ahead. The lead teacher is in charge of a complex diagram mapping the individual timetable of each student to staff members and program activities. Following this meeting, at 9.30am, students and families begin to arrive at St Luke’s ESU. The program is open to students until around 4.30-5.00pm. St Luke’s ESU runs the following programs at its site in the Bendigo town centre:

- Specialist Teaching Unit (STU) – one to one literacy and numeracy teaching;
- 180 Degrees – outdoor adventure activities and education for students and families;
- Real2Reel – music production, DJ equipment skills, instrument tuition, electronic projects and circuit breaking; and
- Smart Art – creative arts, craft, fashion and textiles and exhibitions

Two further programs operate out of an industrial shed on the outskirts of Bendigo:

- The Good Shed – mentoring carpentry and industrial skills program; and
- ‘OnYaBike’ – small mechanics and bike program

Every student has at least four hours of compulsory one to one literacy and numeracy teaching per week in the Specialist Teaching Unit (STU) plus involvement in group work electives from the music, outdoor, art, carpentry and mechanics programs, as well as time spent on learning life skills. The program also supports students to enrol in other educational opportunities including online registered Certificate courses eg. Food Handlers and White Card (for the construction industry) and certificates undertaken with local providers. As Gareth (graduate) explains, “the teachers were able to help me when I went to TAFE in my last two years of being here. So I’ve done my Certificate II and III in Community Services”.

Facilities

The main ESU building is in central Bendigo, part of Youth Central, a new St Luke’s coordinated hub opened in 2013. It is located near a TAFE campus, other flexible learning providers, youth organisations and Centrelink. Headspace (the national youth mental health foundation) runs a service from the same building.



St Luke’s ESU occupies a substantial part of the ground floor of this newly refurbished two storey building. It has its own entrance around the corner from the Youth Central reception area. Inside there are a number of individual learning spaces designed for young people to engage and learn without too much distraction. The walls are white and the spaces are tidy. There are, however, homely touches such as student artwork, colourful throws and a goldfish.

The entrance door leads into a multi-use central area. This area is used for the daily staff meeting, small group teaching, family engagement activities, lunchtime and informal interactions in between classes. In the centre of the room is a large table with chairs. Around one side are sofas with brightly coloured hand-knitted throws and a rocking chair. In the corner sits a desk, computer and printer. A white board on the wall lists daily activities and a noticeboard displays information leaflets and artwork. There is a window display next to the entrance door containing products made by staff and students (such as CDs, bags, and knitted hats) as well as items students can purchase as part of a rewards system.

Through this room, and visible through a large hatch in one of the walls, is a kitchen used by staff and students. The kitchen is stocked with food and equipment, including an onion and potato holder made by students in the carpentry program. Accessible through the kitchen is one of two small teaching rooms. Used for one to one work these rooms have a single computer, desk, chairs, a bean bag and shelves containing learning activities. Literacy and numeracy posters are on the walls.

A locked door off the main room leads to the staff open plan office. The Real2Reel music program and Smart Art program have custom designed spaces down the corridor. Professionally framed CDs produced by the Real2Reel students and programs and flyers from Smart Art Wearable Art events are displayed on the wall. The corridor also houses a laundry cupboard with a washing machine for students to use. At the end of the corridor is a room storing the outdoor education equipment as well as a small outdoor courtyard area with seating and a large mural reading 'next stop change' on the wall.



St Luke's ESU operates the carpentry and mechanics program from an industrial shed about a 15 minute drive away. The shed contains a number of bikes and small machines to work on plus carpentry materials, wood and equipment. There is a sofa in the far corner next to a wood burner.

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 4 schematically represents the dimensions.

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:

Figure 4: Key dimensions – St Luke’s Educational Services Unit



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)

- **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 St Luke’s Educational Services Unit 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 St Luke's Educational Services Unit, valued outcomes include re-engaging with learning; improved literacy and numeracy; life skills; better futures; emotional wellbeing; social participation; impact on families; and benefit to the community.



Re-engaging with Learning

Student re-engagement with learning is considered a core outcome of the program. The ability of the program to engage seriously disengaged young people is recognised by community member Kerry who comments that “no other school has been able to engage them as well so if this place wasn't here then we know that those kids would be at home”. Similarly, for staff, student attendance is an important indicator of success, as Lee expresses, “For a start they keep coming back - that's our main - that's our benchmark”. For students who have chosen or felt unable to attend school their decision to attend the program and get involved in learning is an important outcome:

It's about engagement back into learning. For a lot of these kids they've had traumatic backgrounds, they've had really disadvantaged backgrounds and for a whole range of different reasons they've disengaged from mainstream and lost their passion for learning. So it's all about getting them back involved with learning in all its guises whether it's academic or personal, social, physical, all sorts of different styles of learning. And really the first thing is getting them in and having them attend and engaging them so that they want to come along. (Dave, staff)

Such re-engagement also includes student pride in and enjoyment of their education. Felicity (staff) talks about success in terms of the student, who came to the program sober, completed three pages of work in mathematics, had a “smile” on his face and excitedly wanted to share his completed work with others. Staff are attentive to the fact that students are coming to the program with different academic levels and expectations, so while completing three pages of work is a success for one student it may not be for others. Felicity (staff) comments that “it is individual success that you've got to look at with each student, what one student will be successful in [for] another student that's a daily occurrence”.

Students cite improvements in the ability to engage with education. They talk about being able to “focus” better on their studies (Struan and Emma) and learning “a lot more” (Rhianna) since coming to the program. Gareth feels that learning is more relevant, that “they try and teach you stuff that you want to go into” and Struan has found that learning can be enjoyable: “well what I get out of it, I just like writing, you know. I like writing music and seeing how it all comes together”. Through experiences on the program students re-configure their relationship with education. This is apparent in the positive ways students talk about this program (which is very different to how they talk about schooling in the past). Emma describes the program and the teachers as “awesome” and Matt neatly states “this is definitely the best school I’ve ever been to, and I’ve been to a lot of schools”.



Improved Literacy and Numeracy

Students’ re-engagement with learning also relates to improvements in literacy and numeracy. Improvements in reading, writing and maths are valued by both staff and students. This is the core focus of the one to one teaching in the Specialist Teaching Unit (STU) but staff across programs in St Luke’s ESU are mindful of opportunities to develop reading and writing skills – whether through song writing, following a recipe or carpentry design. Dave (staff) articulates this in explaining the distinction and connection between the STU and other programs at St Luke’s ESU:

Yeah that’s right, that’s [the STU] more the literacy and numeracy more the academic side but not always in fact. That’s the nominal partition, that’s the way we categorise it but not necessarily. We’re all focusing on the same thing, we are just doing it a slightly different way.

While success in this area is measured through formal assessments and benchmarked to AusVELS and NAPLAN, it is also visible in tangible changes to a young person’s ability to complete necessary everyday tasks, for example:

There’s kids out there who are filling out forms and we get a lot of kids come back too. You see them in the street and go “Miss I’m halfway through filling in this Centrelink form I just don’t know how to fill this bottom bit in,” “Yep come in and see me.” And you look at it and they’ve done three quarters of the form where when they first got here they couldn’t even read the form or know what to do. (Felicity, staff)

Students also recognise their improvements in reading, writing and maths. As Emma comments “since I’ve started here again I’ve gotten better with my maths” and Gareth notes “they helped me get my literacy and numeracy up and that helped me get in employment”. Kerry (community stakeholder) recognises that while learning is done differently at St Luke’s ESU, students are learning at the appropriate benchmark:

It's always interesting to see their face because now that they are learning differently they don't necessarily put that towards "I am learning to the same standard that I would have in my old school, kind of thing". So they could still be learning to the VELS or AUSVELS of exactly where they should be, but because they are doing it so differently here they haven't necessarily taken that on board. So it's great for them to understand that "if I went to back to school right now, I still have the same knowledge. I wouldn't have to go in and having to learn at a grade four or five or six level. I'd be quite capable of sitting in there and learning".

Life Skills

A further important outcome of the program is that students develop valuable life skills and knowledge that enables them to navigate essential mainstream systems, such as education, health, housing, employment or welfare, the same as anyone else. Felicity (staff) explains that this is about interpersonal as well as practical skills, and about minimising the disadvantage some students face because they are not receiving this guidance elsewhere:

The kind of outcomes we want them to have are the interpersonal skills to be able to navigate life. The ability to simply open a letter when you get it and read through without freaking out and making a phone call to respond to that letter. To be able to deal with systems. You know, those life skills, again, that we take for granted.

Students are clear that the program supports them and others with developing practical life skills such as "budgeting, financial stuff, or independence, cooking and everything else" (Gareth, graduate) and in helping to "get you set up for when you get your own house, and they kind of tell you how to pay your bills properly and all that" (Struan, student). These outcomes are particularly important given that many students are living in out of home care and may be required to move to independent housing during or soon after leaving the program.

Better Futures

Related to the acquisition of interpersonal and practical life skills is the outcome of better futures. The program is viewed as a place where disadvantaged and disengaged young people can "make a go" of their lives (Gen, community stakeholder). Dave (staff) argues that success in the program is to "create a change in their lives and that's what we hope to do, hopefully instil a sense of self-worth and hope for the future". 'Better futures' is about young people seeing the future more positively and being able to access a more positive future.

Both staff and students see a transition into mainstream education and employment as a measure of success. This includes the acquisition of general communication skills valued in the workplace (Gareth, graduate) as well as specific industry skills such as "being able to do their own production, recording their own music" (Lee, staff) or mechanical/carpentry skills. Dave (staff) discusses what these transitions look like:

I suppose outcomes are measured in lots of different ways. We have the obvious ones which are pathways transitioning. So if they finish up their time here and they've moved into another educational program, whether that be VTEC [Vocational, Training & Employment Centre] or NETschool in Bendigo or into some other sort of apprenticeship traineeship or back to mainstream school, which happens as well quite a bit. So I feel I've done a reasonable job if the kid is going on to do further education of some sort or a vocational pathway, and that certainly happens.

When asked what they hope to get from participating in the program, the students aspire to be employed. They see the program as crucial in this as it can support them to access further education, write resumes, and find work experience. Students' occupational aspirations range from vague "something fun like helping people" (Matt) to multiple "motorbike mechanic or beautician or a nail technician" (Emma) to specific "childcare" (Rhianna). Gareth (graduate) sees his current employment (in the media industry) as directly related to his participation in the program: "If it wasn't for the Youth Resource I probably wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing today".

Emotional Wellbeing

Promoting a better future involves developing hope for the future. This connects to another core outcome of the program - fostering the emotional wellbeing of students. Staff argue the program works to improve the "self-belief", "self-worth" and "confidence" of the students and this is evidenced in students' references to being "happier" (Rhianna), making friends (Rhianna and Struan) and building up "self-esteem" (Emma) and "self-confidence" (Struan) at the program. Using the example of a student he is currently working with, Dave (staff) explains how the program can foster a sense of belonging for some students:

He has really struggled at mainstream schools and been thrown around as a lot of these kids have from school to school and moved towns and homes all the time. And so he just hasn't developed any sense of attachment to any of the schools or places he's been to. And so I think he's certainly developing that here.

The importance of this outcome is mirrored in the student's own comments when they talk about how the students that come here "feel nurtured" (Emma) and how "this would be the only place that will accept them pretty much" (Matt).

Staff and community members provide further examples of changes in student behaviour that indicate better emotional wellbeing including a reduction in student self-harm and drug use, not running away from home anymore, improvements in anger management, and in general, an ability to "make good decisions" (Lee, staff). Felicity (staff) gives an example of the value of this socio-emotional development for students:

Success is someone like the boy yesterday I went to Centrelink with and we waited 45 minutes to be served now that was a success because he sat for 45 minutes and waited so patiently [...] That's dealing with his anger management, so huge success but on whose scale?

A community stakeholder (from one of the mainstream schools) also values the changes she had witnessed to student emotional wellbeing – changes she feels would facilitate their transition back to mainstream education:

They will leave us [mainstream school] with very, very poor emotional intelligence and recognising their own emotions and the emotions of people are around them. But when they are here that is questioned all the time. They work on that all the time. [...] So the ones that have transitioned back to us they can now put into words how they're feeling. They can now have conversations with teachers instead of flipping out. Anxiety about school is reduced so they're not already coming with a heightened anxiety and ready to flip at any stage because now they have had positive experiences at school.

Students also note positive changes in other students' behaviours after they have been with the program a period of time. Struan (student) comments "you see them change if they stay here for like over a year or something, you can see them change and they get more work done, and get more stuff done".



Social Participation

Closely related to emotional wellbeing are social participation outcomes. Developing a "sense of community" within the program is important to staff and facilitating students' relationships with others is argued to be a "huge win" (Dave, staff). For students who have been suspended or excluded from previous schools often for violence towards others or extreme bullying this is a really important outcome. Kerry (community stakeholder) argues that when students re-engage with learning through St Luke's ESU they are also re-engaging with life more generally:

When it gets to that high point of complete disengagement from school then all of that social stuff drops out as well. [...] So to see these kids participating in community and sporting stuff is massive, because I know when [they] transition in here, they are disengaged from everything.

Social participation outcomes also include "challenging community perceptions about the young people" (Lee, staff). Kerry (community stakeholder) is clear about the program's success in this area from the positive reports received from local businesses who phone to say "you know those students we had trouble with in the past, they were in today and they were a completely different student".

Impact on Families

The impact on the families of students is two-fold. Firstly, changes related to previously discussed outcomes (re-engagement with learning and socio-emotional development) have a knock on positive impact on family life. This includes financial outcomes as illustrated through Emma's (student) experience:

Well, my family was struggling with me when I was at my old school because I was always getting suspended [...] so then dad would have to miss a day of work and then we'd have no money for food. But this school is like... they nip things in the bud before they happen so it doesn't affect everyone in your family, and since I've been coming here dad hasn't had any issues with missing work and that.

The impact on families also incorporates emotional aspects of family life as illustrated in comments from the community members about "how positive [the students'] social life and their family life is becoming" (Kerry) including, for example, a young person who before participating in the program "you couldn't look sideways

at her” but is now “half respectful to the people in the family and does try to get along, sometimes. So it’s a start” (Gen).

A second impact is the engagement of parents in their children’s education through “making schooling a positive experience for parents as well” and building up parental networks (Kerry, community stakeholder). Examples of success in this area include participating in an art class for mums, attending their child’s student support group, joining their child in a weekly cooking class, attending events to celebrate their child’s achievements, being involved in the Smart Art Wearable Art fashion show with their children and joining staff and students for lunch at St Luke’s ESU. As Dave (staff) comments “We always try and involve the parents and families as much as we can, for the children that have parents and families that are involved with their lives.”



Benefit to the Community

Finally, a number of examples above indicate that a further outcome of the program is the benefit to the partner school and to the community. This outcome is not articulated by the staff but is evident in the comments of a community member and a student respectively. Kerry (community stakeholder) talks about this explicitly in terms of St Luke’s ESU being able to engage young people for whom mainstream schooling currently is not an option. If the program was not successful in engaging that young person then educational resources would be spent on “doing home visits on a daily basis trying to get them out”. Another benefit to the community relates to the emotional intelligence students develop via the program that enables them, for example, to communicate better with staff in subsequent education and work settings. Finally, Gareth (graduate) suggests that the program is of benefit to the local community because:

It gets the kids involved who can’t go to mainstream school. Even if they come here for two hours or they come in for an hour, at least they’re coming in and doing something. They’re not walking around the streets and causing trouble, that’s probably the thing and it’s good for the community.

ACTIONS

To achieve these valued outcomes, St Luke's Educational Services Unit (ESU) 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. The sets of actions that are distinctive about St Luke's ESU include building trust and relationships, modelling behaviours and boundaries, strong support for life and learning, personalised curriculum, activity-based curriculum and fostering connections.



Building Trust and Relationships

Fundamental to achieving the program outcomes is the focus on building trust and relationships. This is argued to be a necessary pre-cursor to student re-engagement with learning:

I would say 80% of our work to begin with is social/emotional boundaries, working that out with kids, building a relationship. First and foremost number one priority is building a relationship, if you don't have that then forget it. (Felicity, staff)

The program staff achieve this by ensuring that there is time and space for staff to get to know the students. As one staff member comments “my role is to know as much as I can about every single student in the building” (Lee). When asked why the program worked for them, the students refer to staff taking the time to talk with and listen to them (often in comparison to feeling ignored in the mainstream). Emma sums this up:

Well I think the teachers. They're open to listen to you at any time... and yeah, just... you can actually talk to them. It's not like a normal school, there's not many kids that come here, so it makes it better to talk to them because they have more time for you.

The students also feel that their input into the program is valued. Gareth (graduate) commented that the manager “always likes to hear feedback from the kids and if we suggest something that needs to be done [staff name] will try and change it if she is able to”.

Matt (student) explains why the teachers taking time to talk and listen to the students is so important to developing a trusting relationship that enables learning to occur:

Because when they talk to you, you trust them, so a lot of the kids here can't really read and write properly which is half the reason they've never done any school work being too shy to ask, but here I guess they just ask.

Having trust in the teachers increased Struan's engagement and enjoyment of the program. He states "when I first came here I was kind of like I didn't really care or nothing and I had heaps of time off, but as soon as I got trust in them it started to be yeah, good".

Felicity (staff) argues that learning relationships are built within the privacy of the one to one work "that's all part of building the relationship is letting them know straight off that it's all confidential, their education is confidential". Staff purposefully create a friendly and informal learning environment seeking to reconfigure what education and teacher-student relations can be like for students. Dave (staff) explains that the program works to:

Take down those barriers to their participation and make them more comfortable with the idea of learning and that teachers and adults aren't there just to make your life difficult. That we can be fun, we can enjoy learning as much as they can.

This is visible in the playful banter exchanged between staff and students and acknowledged by Rhianna (student) who describes the staff as having "a sense of humour". Matt (student) believes the program is "a good place to be" because of the "environment, like all the happy people". He argues that this is important because the young people attending St Luke's ESU do not generally see a lot of "happy, smiley people". Gareth (graduate) describes how the ESU differs from the mainstream because of the different environment "it's not like in a classroom so you feel more relaxed and everything else."

Caring and Nurturing Practices

Integral to building relationships are strong caring and nurturing practices. The relatively small numbers of students and staff involved in the program combined with the good communication amongst the staff team and the one to one and very small group teaching means no one is ignored here. Gareth (graduate) explains how this works:

And everyone gets on well with the teachers and they all know, because it's such a small group of teachers, they all know if a teacher is away they all know where you're at and what you're doing. They are communicating. There's six teachers here and in a mainstream school there's 20. So they know where you're at, where you want to be.

Caring practices are valued by students for the support they provide to students "like they feel comfort here if they don't at home" (Emma) and include actions like providing food and drinks while learning: "if you're hungry they make you toast" (Rhianna); and breaks in learning: "you could have a break when you wanted to - they understood if you needed a break, you needed a break" (Gareth). Caring practices extend beyond the four walls of the program. The staff provide students with basics such as clothes or items for a house such as "making cushions and couch covers" and "going to op shops with him and saying 'Okay, let's pick up containers here and do this and that'" (Felicity, staff). This is done from personal funds and money from the sale of home-made items such as knitted hats. Staff also show care for the families of the students, for example, helping a long term carer access respite care for a student so that the family member can visit a relative on her birthday¹⁹.



These caring practices are also actions of respect towards young people. This involves, in Struan's (student) words, "something kind of like works with them, not pushing them around and telling them what to do". For Matt (student) it is important that the program is flexible and open to students, when the student is ready to engage because:

Like a lot of people do come in ready to get their life together, but that's the best thing about this place, so whenever you are ready to get your shit together you can come straight back. That's what I did, I left for about a year, didn't do anything just stealing stuff and what not to make money, and then when I came back here, I don't know, I stopped stealing, stopped doing anything wrong.

Being respectful extends to the assessment practices used to determine a student's level of ability and progress to avoid shaming a student. Staff use NAPLAN practice tests with the students but take the year level off: "we'll blank the year level out, we'll just call it A3 instead of Year 3 and things like that. We'll give them the maths, literacy, the writing, comprehension and everything and gauge from that" (Felicity, staff). Felicity goes on to say that if students ask what year level they are at, the staff would tell them but emphasise to the students the need to consider how much school they have missed and what they have achieved since coming to St Luke's ESU.

Modelling Behaviours and Boundaries

A further important action is the modelling of appropriate behaviours and boundaries by staff. For example, the daily action of sharing lunch with the students not only relates to relationship building and caring practices but is viewed by staff as an opportunity to model appropriate social interactions. Matt (student) reveals how getting to know the staff has led him to view them as role models:

Like a lot of the teachers have done some pretty cool stuff, like gone to weird schools and gone to other countries and what not; they're pretty cool people and I guess you would want to be like them a little bit.

Modelling behaviours and boundaries is also about creating a safe environment. Many students have experienced significant bullying (as 'victims' and/or 'perpetrators') at previous schools, but at St Luke's ESU the staff enforce clear boundaries around bullying behaviour. As Felicity (staff) says "we don't tolerate

any sort of bullying at all so negative comments are either dealt with by the kids to each other or we just deal with them 'cut it out, you know we don't have that here'". The staff do not, however, adopt a punitive approach to students' behaviour. As Struan (student) explains about the staff:

Well they're trying to support the kids that have been in trouble heaps, like they still come in, they don't kind of say to them, "Are you going to go out there and do the same thing?" They try and help them so they don't go out and do the same thing. So yeah, they don't really kick them out and if they be bad they try to help them more than kick them out or anything like that.

Rhianna (student) says that "[the staff] can have fun but at the same time they're being teachers and they are tough on you sometimes, but they're not always tough on you". Her comment indicates the balancing act of the staff as they seek to be friendly and build relations but to also enforce important behavioural boundaries and maintain a safe space.

Support for Life and Learning

There are a number of strong support mechanisms in place at St Luke's ESU including support for life and for learning. Support for life is most explicit in the life skills curriculum developed by program staff to meet the needs of the students and refers to the practical support provided to students outside of the curriculum. This ranges from supporting students to set up music performances in the community, to filling out important paperwork (such as for rental agreements, a learner's licence or welfare payments), to accompanying students to their work experience placement or to important appointments. Struan (student) explains why these actions matter:

They come with you too, and so if you've got interviews and meetings they will come with you and kind of support you ... they're kind of like with you and guiding you and helping... Especially when it seems as if you're going to be in a room for like seven hours on your own it's going to get a little stressed but if you're with someone they can calm you down and say, "you're going to be right soon".

The provision of this kind of support is reflective of a holistic approach to education. Formal education and other domains of life are considered inseparable. This includes, for example, engaging with parents. As Dave (staff) comments, "we want to really paint a picture of where our students are at, and how we can play a part in that, and sometimes that's about supporting parents".

A strong support for learning is at the heart of the one to one and very small group teaching model in operation at the program. All of the students and the graduates mentioned learning support as an important feature of the program. For the students this was often about being able to access help with their learning when needed. Emma describes this through a comparison with her previous school:

Well when you're in a lesson, for example like maths or English, a teacher will actually sit down with you and explain to you what happens, whereas at my old school they'd just hand you the sheet and tell you to do it.

Support for learning also comes in the form of being flexible in ways that mainstream schooling often cannot be. Gen (community stakeholder) gives the example of a young person who has difficulty sleeping at night and finds it hard to function. The program adapted the young person's timetabled hours so that she is able to come in later, which Gen feels "really helps". The staff also provide support for participation

through texting and phone calls to students and families. They chase up students who do not turn up when expected and, if appropriate, offer to collect students if transport or social anxiety is an issue.



Personalised Curriculum

Personalised curriculum is being used here as a shorthand to encapsulate a number of actions that ensure the curriculum is relevant and engaging to each student. These include personalisation, strengths framework, student-led and activity-based learning.

The model of teaching and learning at St Luke's ESU hinges on providing an engaging and personalised curriculum. Lee (staff) states "We've got to obviously have a quite different approach to each student, to each young person, which is why the individual planning for each student is vital". As explained earlier, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is created for and with each young person. The IEP is based on a student's needs, interests and strengths. Both staff and students see the curriculum as student-led rather than imposed by others:

It's about the kids who come here, it's not about the teachers. They work with the kids to see where they want to go in life. What they want help with. (Gareth, graduate)

It is focused around what's working for the student and it has to focus around what's working for the teacher in that sense too but usually if it's working for the student it's working for the teacher. (Felicity, staff)

Operating within a strengths-based approach (discussed in more detail under Principles), this action involves purposefully working with a student's capabilities:

Often in mainstream schools I think these kids who struggle they definitely have strengths but perhaps it's not in the academic sense or maybe even the social sense, and we just work on building their strengths. (Dave, staff)

Matt (student) says that "one of my favourite bits is you don't feel dumb here at all. Like, no matter how smart you are they've got work for you". His comment offers insight as to why a personalised and strengths-based curriculum is important for students who have experienced educational marginalisation. A personalised curriculum also involves challenging students in appropriate and supportive ways. For Gareth (graduate) this process is possible because of the one to one work and relationships:

It's done at your pace and what suits you best... They [teachers] pushed you to a degree, but they didn't push you to where it would be too hard for you to do it. Because they're only working with

one person per session they know your boundaries and they know how far they can push you, which I believe is amazing.

There are what Felicity (staff) refers to as “non-negotiable” aspects in the curriculum such as the literacy and numeracy and life skills elements but staff work creatively to teach this material in relevant and engaging ways. Literacy and numeracy skills are developed through cooking (reading recipes and measuring quantities) and through math-based games and puzzles designed by the staff. Staff use their knowledge of current issues in students’ lives such as bullying on social media or dealing with difficult people as the basis for reading and writing exercises²¹.

Felicity (staff) is clear about the need to develop an appropriate curriculum that suits a student’s present situation, prepares them for the future and is realistic about the time the program has with the student.

For example “you know you’ve got them for a certain amount of time so it’s the life skills. You teach them the basic numeracy/literacy to get them by because they’ve missed so much school”.

Dave (staff) offers an illustration of what personalised teaching looks like in practice when discussing a student of his:

He’s really good hands-on, so I’m just looking for another thing for him to keep going with and I thought perhaps the model aeroplane, the balsa wood and the paper wings and all the rest of it would be something. And I know that [staff member] had one in class with one of her students and it’s got great instructions, quite detailed so he’s got a lot of literacy or reading and comprehension involved and I don’t think it’s something he would be able to just look at and put together just by looking at the pieces. I think he’ll really need to follow these instructions closely. But I also know that he’ll be really keen to make it because he just loves that stuff.

The quote from Dave also illustrates that the program is underpinned by “a broader vision about providing activity-based programs for young people who had completely disengaged” (Lee, staff). Using activities to engage students in learning, so that they do not always realise they are learning, is described by Dave as “teaching by stealth in a way”. This is a key action because, as Kerry (community stakeholder) points out, there is “plenty of learning” going on “but it will be completely different to what they [the students] have experienced in the past”.

Recognising Achievements

St Luke’s ESU has in place various accountability processes to monitor and record the progress of students and to collect feedback on the program. These processes also provide space for another key action of the program – the recognition of student achievements. Speaking about the Student Support Group (SSG), Dave (staff) notes that it is:

A great chance to really congratulate students for what they’ve done and also discuss if there’s any barriers that we need to work around. But the thing I like about the SSG is often they really are a real boost to the kids. [...] I think that’s a real positive reinforcement of the things that they’ve done and achieved.

The programs at St Luke’s ESU are designed to provide students with a sense of pride and achievement²².

Certain objects are used to recognise student success. Within the carpentry program, a metal stamp 'Goodsheds Eaglehawk' is affixed to outstanding pieces of items that are a big achievement for the students²³. Within the outdoor education program certificates for completion detailing skills developed and displayed are given. Professionally mounted displays of the music written and produced by students and materials from public art events are a public display of the program's pride in the talents of the students.



Staff also provide positive re-enforcement to students through verbal and non-verbal actions. These may remain between the staff member and the student, for example, Emma (student) knows she has done well when she receives a “high five” accompanied by “good job”. Often, however, such recognition is shared publicly. Felicity (staff) explains:

We tend to go off and we tend to “Oh my god come down to [staff name]” and we interrupt other programs in a sense. It’s all about that moment and them basking in the glory. As I said even if it’s completing three pages of times tables which was prep level and you go down, you knock on the door and say “Excuse me [staff name], look at what he’s done”. And he’ll go “Wow that is unbelievable.”

Families are also invited into the program to share and celebrate in their children’s success:

We’ll have a debriefing session and celebrate what they’ve done. Yesterday we had the parents in for the kids that were on the ski trip and we just talked about what we did and the fact that they managed to get through really well socially and kids got to show them the pictures and how they improved with their skiing over the day. It was just a nice way to really celebrate what they’d done, so that was recognising that achievement. (Dave, staff)

Speaking metaphorically, Matt’s (student) comment that “if you do something good they always put it up on the fridge, they love it” captures nicely the action of shared pride and the family-like environment of the program. Struan (student) further explains the value of these actions:

The teachers build up your confidence and stuff. Like if you started off on something and you’re not too good at it, like to start off with, they will kind of help you through it and then you will probably get better and better, and they’ll tell you that you’re getting better, and build your confidence up more.

Lastly, the program also runs its own rewards system for students called ‘real bucks’. The real bucks currency can be deposited into a deposit box and/or used to buy items valued by the young people. Staff have carefully chosen the items to represent all students’ interests, so some items appeal to many students

whereas others may appeal to only one student. The items range from low value items such as chocolate bars for 20 real bucks (providing instant gratification) to high value items such as a bike for 1000 real bucks, which aim to aid the development of financial management skills. The sense of humour in the ESU is evident in the real bucks notes that feature headshots of the staff.



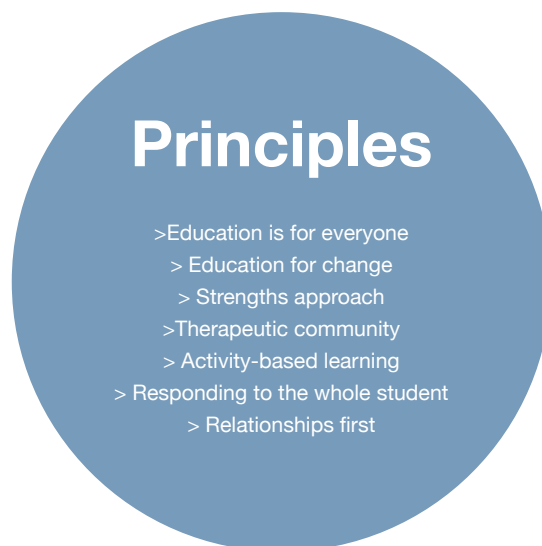
Maintaining Connections

A final important action is the way in which the program acts to maintain the connections between a young person and significant people and services in their lives. This occurs in part through the SSG (Student Support Group) process which is viewed as “a really important part of feeding back... to that young person’s broader network” (Dave, staff). But, as Dave goes on to say, the program staff are “really closely involved with the case workers, support workers, families” through parental engagement activities and through regular and friendly communication with staff at the students’ deemed enrolment schools. One community stakeholder (from a mainstream school) comments positively on this:

The whole team have their own regular email with us and we come in and have our support group meetings, but they are also on the phone or emailing us all the time just to say “he’s doing really well on this” or “go watch this on the weekend, this is what the kids are up to”. And as soon as the buildings were built they showed us through. They showed us what the kids would be doing, where the kids are all at. So they are always keeping us informed of what’s going on. I feel quite comfortable to walk in here at any time of the day and people will know who you are and where you’re from and the kids that you’ve got here. These communications are important for the careful transitioning of students out of the program and either back into their mainstream school or to other services.

PRINCIPLES

The outcomes that are valued and actions taken within St Luke's Educational Services Unit are underpinned by several principles. These principles are discernible mostly in comments from staff and community. Some are explicitly formulated in interviews; others were determined through our analysis of the data.



Education is for Everyone

The program is based on the fundamental principle that all young people have a right to education:

[Staff name] is constantly saying, and she'll say it to parents when they come in, that "we know school is not for everybody, but education is". So it's a matter of finding an education system that fits these kids. (Kerry, community stakeholder).

This principle is embedded in an understanding of educational disengagement as being primarily the result of exclusionary systems, structures and practices in mainstream schooling that do not work for, or suit the needs of, all young people. St Luke's ESU, therefore, operates from the principle that marginalised students can learn and have a right to learn. The focus is not on the student as a problem. Rather, the focus is on adapting education programs to find ones that work to engage and to create opportunities where all young people are able to learn. This principle is apparent in the personalised curriculum and the different opportunities and ways to learn within the ESU.

Education for Change

Enabling students to engage with education is, however, not enough. Staff also emphasise that once students are engaged, this learning should also be empowering as "it's all about 'is it effective in engaging and changing the lives of young people?'" (Lee, staff). In relation to this the staff show a strong commitment to supporting students to be able to make positive changes in their lives so that they have more information and skills to make better decisions and navigate systems outside of the school, such as finance, employment and housing. It also underpins the advocacy work that staff do for students to support them to navigate mainstream systems more successfully.

Strengths Approach

Related to the first two principles is a clear commitment by staff to a strengths approach in their teaching practices and social interactions with students which involves “working with their strengths” (Dave, staff) and not being “problem-focused” (Lee, staff). This belief in the value of a strengths approach as effective in building stronger relationships and better outcomes is a guiding principle of the ESU’s parent organisation St Luke’s Anglicare²⁴. St Luke’s ESU is designed to help students explore and develop their existing capabilities. St Luke’s ESU practice framework (2013) discusses strengths in terms of:

- ‘Doing’ (activity) Strengths (relate to activities that interest, engage and excite)
- ‘Learning’ Strengths (relate to learning styles, preferences and environments)
- ‘Relationship’ Strengths (relate to developing appropriate, effective and rewarding relationships with others)

This principle is particularly visible in the way the program operates to identify and recognise student strengths and achievements and in the way staff talk about the talents and skills of the students²⁵.

Therapeutic Community

Another major principle of the program, related to the strengths approach, is a commitment to “trying to create a therapeutic community for our young people that is safe, that is supportive” (Lee, staff). Informed by the Sanctuary Model of trauma-informed care and practice²⁶, this includes creating a physically, emotionally, socially and morally safe environment for students and for staff. Staff find ways to support students to have therapeutic conversations and express difficult emotions, for example, through song writing about bullying or art projects about the self. The program sets clear boundaries around violence and bullying behaviours. Staff demonstrate a belief in the capability of students and implement curriculums that support growth and change in students, for example literacy and numeracy skills that support young people leaving care. The interactions among staff as well as between staff and students serve to model behaviours that demonstrate a commitment to open communication, acceptance of difference and more democratic teaching and learning relationships.

Activity-Based Learning

St Luke’s ESU is underpinned by “a broader vision about providing activity-based programs for young people who had completely disengaged” (Lee, staff). This vision is apparent in the provision of hands-on learning activities through the music, art and design, outdoor education, and carpentry and bike mechanics program. It is also visible in the activities designed by staff to engage students in the life skills and literacy and numeracy teaching. More generally, activity-based learning as a principle or vision about making learning different for students who have previously had negative experiences of more traditional book and pen modes. As Dave (staff) explains, removing those barriers to participation involves re-defining what education is, which includes that “learning doesn’t necessarily have to be straight out of a book or a chalk and talk or being set the same task as everybody else”.

Responding to the Whole Student

A further principle evident at St Luke’s ESU is a commitment to responding to the students in the context of their whole life rather than treating their engagement with education as somehow compartmentalised from their wider life experiences and situations:

So often it is working through issues in their daily lives. And you can't deal with these kids as an isolated thing happening in here, you have to look at their whole existence really. And I think that's also what is one of the strengths of this whole unit is that we don't deal with them in isolation as a school student. We deal with them as a person, as a whole being with complex issues (Dave, staff).

This principle is apparent in the strong commitment to engaging with students' families and the provision of support for life as well as learning. It is also evident in the commitment of the program to get to know the student and understand their needs within their social context and the networks of other significant adults and services in their lives – such as parents, previous teachers, case managers and DHS workers.



Relationships First

The importance of building trust and developing relationships with the students was described as a fundamental action of the program. As a principle it can be articulated as a commitment to relationships as the “number one priority” (Felicity, staff). Dave (staff) notes that relationships and trust are necessary to create new learning experiences:

You've got to start somewhere and usually that somewhere is one on one and gaining the trust and improving your relationship with them to the point where they feel safe to trust you that okay I might be ready for group work now.

In Kerry's (community stakeholder) view:

The students wouldn't even recognise when they come here that a lot of the staff are teachers because they build such good relationships with them and in the past they haven't been able to do that with teachers. She also notes that the focus on building relationships is not as feasible in mainstream schools that are increasingly “data-driven”.

A commitment to prioritising relationships goes beyond the teacher-student learning relationship to also include the ways the program supports student relationships with their families; with their deemed enrolment school; and with their peers – all aimed at enhancing their social skills and participation.

CONDITIONS

Several conditions enable (and/or constrain) the ability of St Luke's Educational Services Unit 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 the context of St Luke's Educational Services Unit.



One to One and Very Small Group

The ability to provide one to one and very small group teaching and learning is a critical condition of the program's success. It is, as Dave (staff) says, "what this place was built on because a lot of these kids are so anxious and have such bad traumatic histories that group work can be hugely intimidating". The time and space invested in the one to one work enables students to re-engage with education and with others, contributing to both academic and social outcomes. Students also emphasise this condition, with Gareth (graduate) hoping that "for a person who came here I would like to see more teachers in the program so more kids can get the one on one help they need to succeed as much as I did from that". This condition underpins a number of core outcomes (re-engaging with learning, improved literacy and numeracy and emotional wellbeing) and actions (building trust and relationships, caring and nurturing practices and personalised curriculum).

Facilities

Having access to the right physical spaces supports the program to meet its outcomes. This includes the location of the majority of activities (except the carpentry and small mechanics) in one building. As Lee (staff) says "having that shared site really, both physically and conceptually, makes it easier for us to co-ordinate what we're doing" and thus what the students are doing. Within this building, the provision of both small private spaces for one to one teaching and learning as well as communal spaces for students, staff, family and community members to come together is necessary. Whilst Kerry (community stakeholder) notes the program has always engaged with parents, "it's been a lot easier now with these new buildings where they've got the space for parents to be". Having a well-located and designed kitchen that can serve as a hub for the program is also important in creating the nurturing environment. The geographical location of

the program, in central Bendigo close by to other youth, education, health and welfare services enables program staff to support students to access beneficial services.

The condition related to facilities also refers to adequate funding for material resources for the specialist programs such as musical and recording equipment, cooking ingredients and kitchen equipment, and arts and design, carpentry, mechanical and outdoor education materials. The program is innovative in this regard. Currently much of the food is provided through a FoodShare scheme, materials for the carpentry program are sourced from refuse yards or bought at low prices from shops that the program has built a relationship with and the carpentry program has made instruments for the music program. Sourcing appropriate teaching materials for the literacy and numeracy program is also essential, for example, being able to find “low level high interest books” that are relevant and age appropriate and that “didn’t insult” the students (Felicity, staff).



Stability and Innovation

Staff and community members highlight the importance of the program in providing stability to the young people. This includes being able to offer, for those that need it, a long term educational alternative as well as a stepping stone back into mainstream education. A community stakeholder (from one of the mainstream schools) explains why the availability of long term support through the program is important:

There’s other alternate settings we can send kids, but it’s only for a term, or it’s only for a semester. The anxiety that builds in those students heading towards the end of that time and then the behaviour problems that come from that are massive. So these students know that they won’t be transitioned back until they are ready so that could be after six months or it could be after three years. So that lowers the anxiety for them and their parents.

The program staff are something of a “constant” in the students’ lives (Felicity, staff) and arguably this is crucial for young people who have experienced a number of different case workers, educational settings and residential homes. To maintain stability, there needs to be a low staff turnover. The program manager who developed the program has been with it since its inception and a number of staff have been with the program for many years. The manager has put processes in place to support the retention of staff including attention to self-care, peer supervision, extended leave opportunities and fostering a collegial environment through daily staff meetings and social events, and encouraging staff to attend professional learning. The manager also encourages innovation. Lee (staff) explains how this has maintained his enthusiasm for working at the program:

I've been here a long time and anytime I start to go a bit stale and I've mentioned that to [manager name], she'll say "Well how do you want it to look? What's going to work? Change it, make it different, do something different."

The Right Staff

As the previous condition indicates, having the right staff is crucial to the success of this, and any, program. For the students, the program staff's experience, skills, attitude and behaviours are essential to their engagement in the program. Community members also acknowledge the skills of the program staff describing them as "specialist" (Kerry) and "unique" (Gen). Felicity (staff) argues that to be successful, staff need to have "a passion for these kids [...] you have to want to see past the swearing, the carrying on, and the bravado. You've got to understand that they come with a history".

Offering a range of learning activities and strong support to students with high and complex needs is important to achieving the academic and social outcomes associated with the program. This requires a diverse, multiprofessional and collegial staff team as reflected in the range of qualifications and backgrounds of the staff including: teaching, community services, outdoor recreation, visual arts, music industry and alcohol and drugs work. Felicity (staff) describes what it is like to be part of the team at St Luke's ESU: "These guys are amazing, amazing support here. I've never worked anywhere with a team that has everyone's back". Having daily staff meetings and a physical space that facilitates communication also fosters a supportive staff culture.

Policy and Partnerships

The operation of St Luke's ESU as a deemed enrolment program relies on the existence of state level education policy that supports this (eg. the ability for mainstream schools to move funds from the Student Resource Package to the program for services received for individual students). It also relies on developing and maintaining good partnerships with the deemed enrolment school. St Luke's ESU has strong accountability and monitoring processes to support this. Detailed documentation exists to clarify the nature of the relationship between the program and the school and the responsibilities of each. This condition is also about the ability of the program to develop and maintain a productive partnership with the deemed enrolment school to enable the careful transitioning of a student between the educational programs. This occurs, in part, through processes supported by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, such as the Student Support Group (SSG) and Individual Education Plan (IEP). It is also a product of the program staff and school staff having open lines of communication and valuing each other's work.

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 outcomes and 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 St Luke’s Educational Services Unit, the following features are particularly remarkable:

1) *Knowing the students.* Underpinned by the belief that ‘education is for everyone’, St Luke’s ESU adapts to suit the needs of the young people who attend the program. This means finding new ways to respond to new cohorts and new young people. The time invested in getting to know the students when they are first referred to the service allows staff to adapt the curriculum content and pedagogy to individual students. At St Luke’s ESU, there is a discernible attempt to change the way education is perceived and delivered so that students, who often experience multiple barriers to learning, can engage in learning that suits them and is relevant to them. This work is informed by the strengths approach. While common in the flexible learning and alternative education field, the commitment to the strengths approach across a range of domains at the ESU is a remarkable feature that shows in the way the students talk about their experience in the program; the way students are treated by staff; the way staff talk about and interact with students; students’ growth in confidence; the approach to involving students’ families; and staff interactions with each other. The acknowledgement of talents, of achievements and of approaching problems in a non-confrontational and compassionate way means that it is much more likely that the young people, who have previously been completely disengaged from education, will re-engage with learning and view teaching and learning differently.

2) *Sustainable model for one to one teaching.* Being small (in terms of student numbers) is a common feature of alternative education programs. It is often suggested that marginalised young people are able to learn better when in smaller groups. For St Luke’s ESU the development of a sustainable model of one to one and very small group teaching remains a remarkable feature. This teaching model is the cornerstone of how this program operates and how it manages to engage students who have experienced extensive disengagement from school. The one to one work is used as a foundation and ongoing process to build the necessary academic, social and emotional skills for students to engage in larger group work and to transition out of the program. The program has successfully run this model since 2006.

3) *More than a school.* St Luke's ESU is distinct for being much more than a school to the young people who attend the program. The education of a young person is approached within the context of his or her wider life – housing, family, health and friendships – and the young person is seen as more than just a student. Learning is viewed as a social, emotional and relational as well as cognitive process. This is evident in the focus on developing social behaviours and emotional strengths, and in the attention to emotional and social needs through the caring and nurturing practices. It is evident in the integration of life skills that are of relevance to the young person into their curriculum. These skills range from financial planning, to form filling, to navigating bureaucratic systems, to finding appropriate housing. The holistic approach to learning is reflected in the inclusion of parents and families in student learning and provision of learning opportunities for parents themselves. In this sense, the program is not merely about re-engaging students with mainstream education. The program is very much concerned with enabling a better future for the students both in terms of the future students perceive they can have (facilitating hope for change) and the future they can access (providing resources to support access to education, employment, health and welfare services and housing).

4) *Extent and stability of activity-based programs.* Using activity-based programs to engage young people in alternative learning programs is a common practice but the range of activities and program specialists available within St Luke's ESU is quite unique. Other alternative learning programs often need to bring in outside specialists to run specific programs, for example, around photography or outdoor educational experiences. At the ESU, delivering music, creative arts, carpentry, small engine mechanics and outdoor education alongside literacy and numeracy education within one program provides opportunities for learning that students may not get elsewhere. This broad range of activities serves as a hook to re-engage the students. Importantly, with the inclusion of a range of activities within a single program, the students can develop relationships and build trust with the ESU staff. Student progress can also be monitored and supported systematically across a stable staff team using a consistent strengths approach.

5) *Connections to mainstream schools.* St Luke's ESU has a very specific connection to the mainstream education system that other alternative providers may not, due to its status as a deemed enrolment program. Developing and maintaining a partnership with a number of mainstream schools is a significant feature. St Luke's ESU is positioned as both a stepping stone out of and back into mainstream schools while also offering students a long term alternative to mainstream schooling should they need it. St Luke's ESU offers a very different and alternative learning experience for students on the program but is mindful of connecting students to, and helping them to navigate, mainstream systems. The program therefore seeks to act as a bridge for marginalised young people to develop the confidence and skills needed to re-engage with education and society.

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 *ABS 2011 census, community profiles*
- ⁷ <http://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/>
- ⁸ *Greater Bendigo Youth Strategy 2013-2016*
- ⁹ *ABS 2011 census, community profiles*
- ¹⁰ *The State of Bendigo's Children Report, March 2011*
- ¹¹ *St Luke's ESU Practice Framework Presentation 2013*
- ¹² http://www.stlukes.org.au/Pages/Services/Young_People/Educational_Services_Unit.aspx
- ¹³ *St Luke's ESU promotional video 2013*
- ¹⁴ *St Luke's ESU promotional video 2013*
- ¹⁵ *Student interviews*
- ¹⁶ *DEECD* <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/participation/Pages/reengageplans.aspx>
- ¹⁷ *St Luke's ESU had previously been known as The Youth Resource Team*
- ¹⁸ *Fieldnotes*
- ¹⁹ *Fieldnotes*
- ²⁰ *Fieldnotes*
- ²¹ *Fieldnotes*
- ²² *St Luke's ESU Practice Framework Presentation 2013*
- ²³ *Fieldnotes*
- ²⁴ http://www.stlukes.org.au/Pages/About_Us/Who_we_are.aspx
- ²⁵ *Fieldnotes*
- ²⁶ <http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/sanctuary-model.php>

