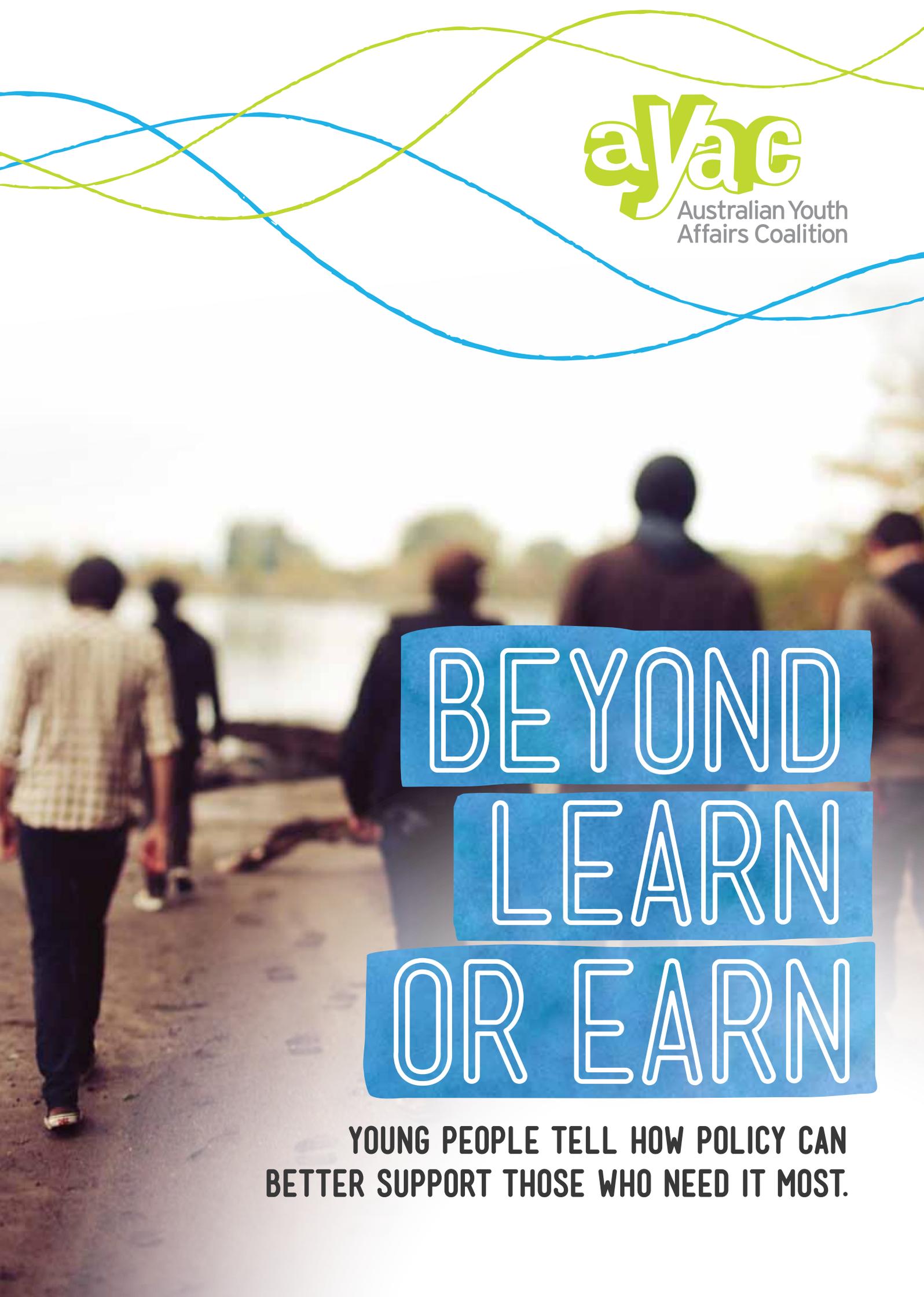




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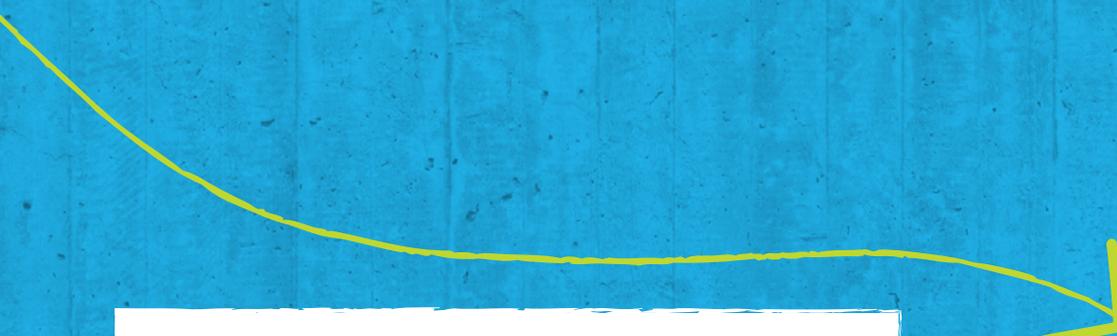


BEYOND

LEARN

OR EARN

**YOUNG PEOPLE TELL HOW POLICY CAN
BETTER SUPPORT THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST.**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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November 2012

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Beyond Learn or Earn:
Young people tell how policy can better support those who need it most

Author: Natalie Lammas

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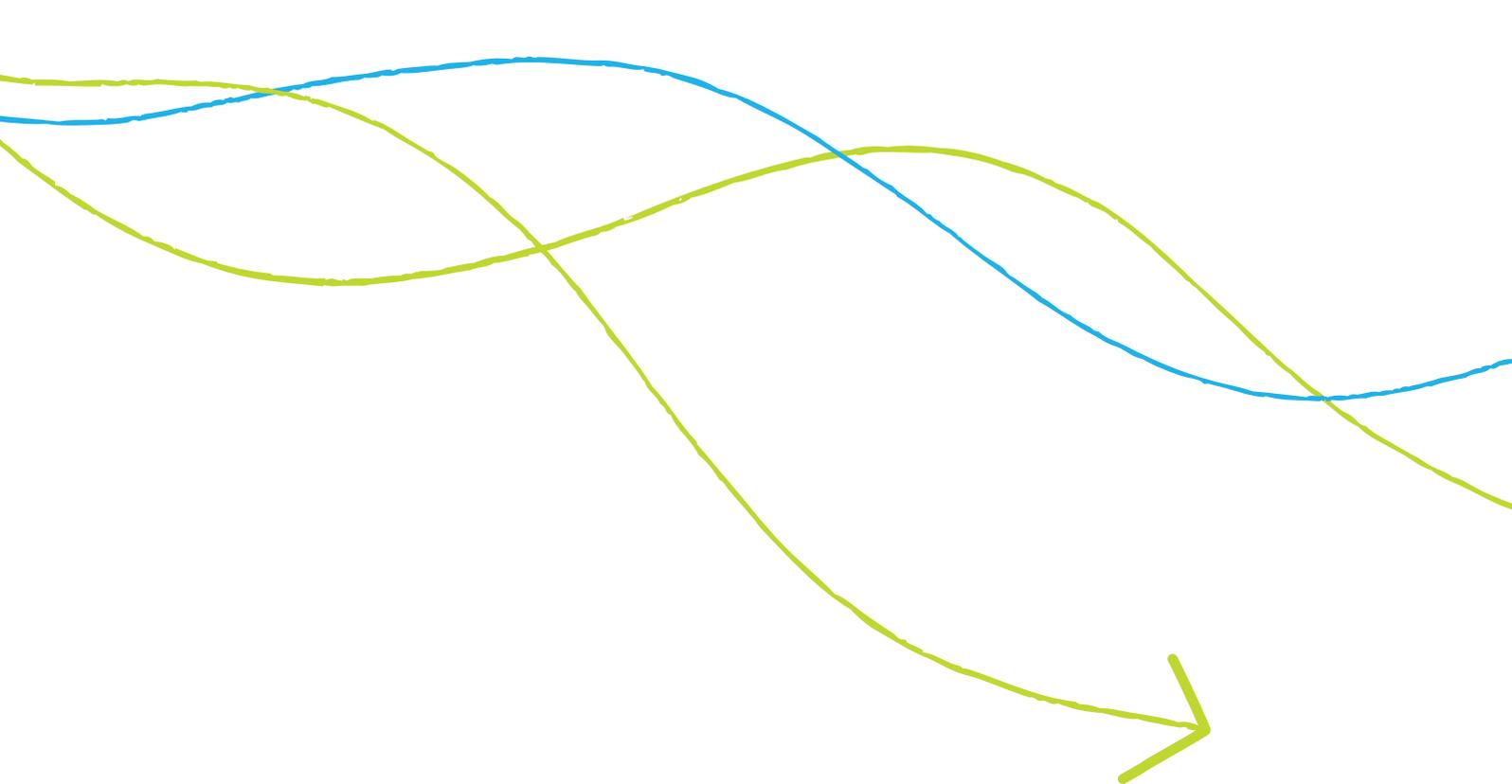
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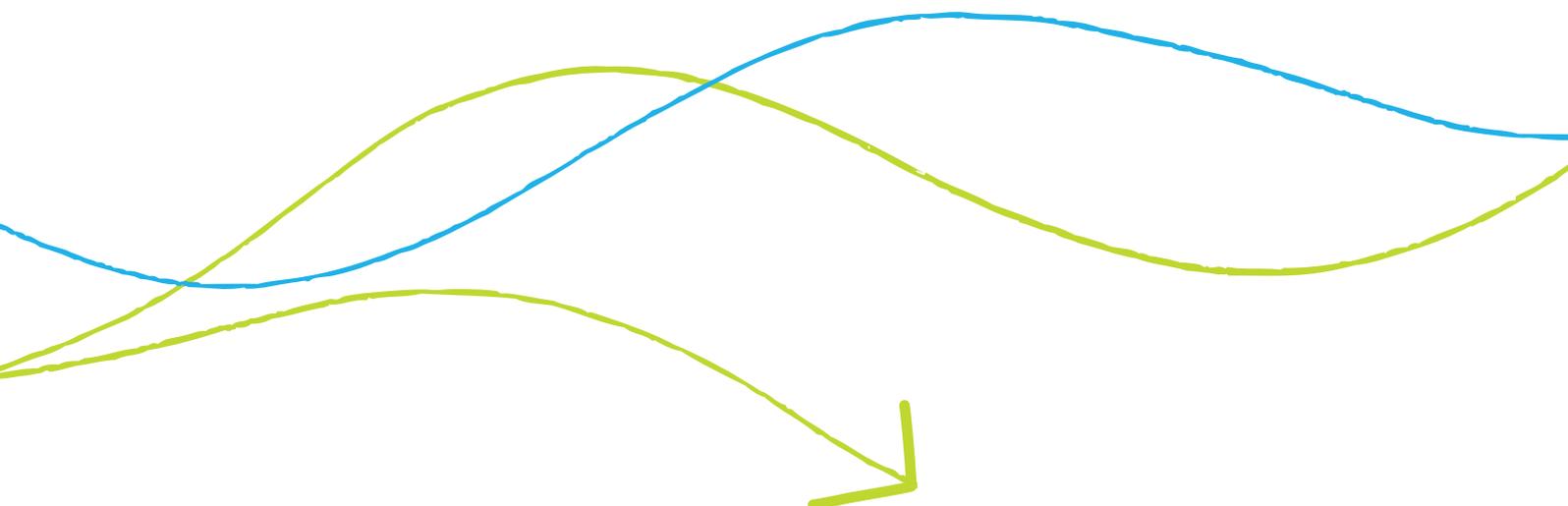
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BEYOND LEARN OR EARN

AYAC'S VISION IS FOR AUSTRALIA IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE ARE INFORMED, EMPOWERED, ENCOURAGED AND SUPPORTED TO PARTICIPATE IN ALL DECISIONS ABOUT ISSUES THAT AFFECT THEM.



ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN YOUTH AFFAIRS COALITION

**THE AUSTRALIAN YOUTH AFFAIRS COALITION (AYAC) IS AUSTRALIA'S
NON-GOVERNMENT YOUTH AFFAIRS PEAK BODY, WHICH SEEKS TO REPRESENT
YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 12-25 AND THE SECTOR THAT SUPPORTS THEM.**

AYAC BOASTS A GROWING MEMBERSHIP OF STATE AND TERRITORY YOUTH PEAK BODIES, NATIONAL YOUTH ORGANISATIONS, RESEARCHERS, POLICY MAKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES, WHO ARE ALL PASSIONATE ABOUT CREATING AN AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY THAT SUPPORTS AND PROMOTES THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

AYAC AIMS TO:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia;
- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights and provides justice for all;
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia at both a national and an international level;
- Promote the elimination of poverty and promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged;
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society and to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society;

- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to governments and the broader community;
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field.

AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure that they have access to mechanisms which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

More information about AYAC and its work can be found at www.ayac.org.au

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED
IS SUPPORT, NOT COERCION.
THEY NEED HIGHLY
TARGETED SOLUTIONS.**



CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY STRONGLY ADVOCATES THAT YOUNG PEOPLE FINISH YEAR 12, THEN MOVE FROM SCHOOL TO FURTHER TRAINING AND/OR TO PAID EMPLOYMENT.

TO COMBAT HIGH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND POOR OUTCOMES FOR THOSE WITH LOWER LEVELS OF EDUCATION, THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED THE LEARN OR EARN PROGRAM.

UNDER LEARN OR EARN, YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE NOT FINISHED YEAR 12 MUST BE IN EDUCATION OR TRAINING TO RECEIVE INCOME SUPPORT PAYMENTS.

This study highlights the human impact and common experience of the Learn or Earn initiative and lets young people themselves tell their own experience of Learn or Earn.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE DISENGAGE

The reasons young people disengage are varied and complex and show why engaging in education may be difficult or not the highest priority for young people not attending school at a particular time.

In this study, the young people who struggled the most to engage in learning or earning were facing the most serious and significant barriers to engagement – often leaving both home and school to escape violence, leaving school as a result of bullying and harassment from other students, mental ill-health and social problems, chronically low self-confidence and a lack of family support.

Systemic issues within the conventional education system – a perception of schools as authoritarian systems, a lack of support when it comes to helping young people with their wellbeing and self esteem, a lack of support for their own learning needs, an unqualified bias towards academic success, and a lack of focus on the creative or vocational subjects that build the skills many young people really want and need – also act as barriers to engagement with learning.

BEYOND LEARN OR EARN

The Learn or Earn initiative – to engage young people in education or employment – is a positive goal but cannot work without a recognition that unmet individual needs act as barriers to young people's engagement in learning and employment. The Learn or Earn approach will fail for those who are most disadvantaged unless it can address the complex needs and circumstances of this vulnerable group of young people.

This report finds the Learn or Earn policy approach too limiting. School retention is one approach to raising young people's educational and workforce attainment, but not the only one. Learn or Earn unfairly shifts the onus of achieving this onto the individual young person by reducing their financial support rather providing adequate and sustained assistance.

This report shows that policy makers need to rethink what counts as a 'positive outcome' for the lowest achievers and the most disadvantaged. The best outcome for those most at risk of disengagement needs to be expanded beyond work and learning to focus on young people's broader personal and social wellbeing.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

What young people need is support, not coercion. They need highly targeted solutions.

Accessible, alternative schooling models and flexible, person-centred approach may be the only approaches that really work for the most disadvantaged early school leavers who are excluded from conventional education. These young people learn best through non-threatening, supportive, flexible, "hands on" approaches to learning.

All government programs – especially Centrelink and Job Services Australia – must be genuinely youth-friendly and ensure they are focused on the specific needs of highly disadvantaged job seekers.

Finally, an integrated and well-funded youth service system that offers young people intensive, tailored, flexible and long-term provision of support via a caring, relationship-based approach is critical to address the complex and unique barriers to engagement that marginalised young people face.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LEARN OR EARN

SUPPORT THE GONSKI REVIEW

→ Governments should refocus attention and funding to disadvantaged students who need it most.

REDEFINE SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

→ Policy makers should expand the Learn or Earn agenda beyond work and learning to focus on young people's broader wellbeing, and offer alternative routes that do not necessarily include completion of Year 12 for the most disengaged young people.

INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE

→ Governments should consult directly with young people as primary consumers of education and key stakeholders to discuss the issues they face in the development and implementation of policies and programs designed to help them finish Year 12 or find work.

EDUCATION

ADDRESS REASONS YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVE SCHOOL

→ Policies that aim to encourage education and workforce participation should focus on the often significant personal and systemic causes of early school leaving.

ENCOURAGE NON-LINEAR PATHWAYS

→ Detours to educational attainment should be supported as necessary and inevitable for some young people.

INCREASE FUNDING TO ALTERNATIVE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS

→ Non-threatening, supportive, flexible, "hands on" approaches to learning are the most effective in helping vulnerable young people to remain engaged in their learning. Governments should create

a national system of second-chance opportunities for early school leavers to complete their schooling in ways that suit them best.

A WHOLE-OF-SCHOOL APPROACH

→ Conventional schooling should offer academic and wellbeing support within schools by up-skilling school teachers and also providing additional wellbeing support workers for the most disadvantaged students.

A VARIED AND FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM

→ The conventional school system should provide a greater emphasis on applied skills, practical learning, employability and life skills in secondary education curricula.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

IMPROVE INCOME SUPPORT

→ Young people on low incomes are entitled to income support payments that reflect real living costs so that they can afford life's essentials – like food, rent, health, education, transport and clothing.

ENSURE THAT ALL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS ARE GENUINELY YOUTH-FRIENDLY

→ JSA providers and Centrelink services should be considerate of the specific needs of highly disadvantaged young job-seekers and improve online and offline access to appropriately trained JSA & Centrelink staff.

STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF CENTRELINK AND JSA STAFF

→ The Australian Government should ensure that Centrelink customer service officers and JSA staff working directly with the most disengaged school leavers have the training, interest, interpersonal skills and expertise in working with vulnerable young people. This includes Centrelink outreach

staff to build connection and rapport with young people in local youth services.

RELEVANT TRAINING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

→ The Australian Government should ensure JSA providers offer young people assistance to find meaningful work or access training that they are genuinely interested in. JSA providers should be rewarded when they help young people gain positive social or non-vocational outcomes.

INCREASED COLLABORATION

→ JSA providers and Centrelink should work collaboratively with other specialised youth service providers or youth programs when it becomes evident that a young person's needs are not being adequately met by programs available within their organisation.

YOUTH SERVICES

FUND YOUTH WORKERS

→ Governments should draw on successful flexible, community-based models of support that place young people's needs at the centre to support disadvantaged young people.

A COHERENT, INTEGRATED YOUTH SERVICE SYSTEM

→ All programs that directly work with unemployed early school leavers should be prioritised and properly funded. They must offer intensive, tailored, flexible and long-term provision that addresses the complex and specific barriers to engagement via a caring relationship-based approach.

EVALUATION OF LOCAL PROGRAMS

→ Further investment into evaluation of aspects of non-government programs that provide positive outcomes for young people who are disadvantaged is needed, and the feasibility of incorporation into other programs and mainstream school systems.

INTRODUCTION

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT YOUNG AUSTRALIANS HAVE ADEQUATE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEAD PRODUCTIVE AND FULFILLING LIVES. FRUSTRATED BY HIGH RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT, YOUNG PEOPLE GENUINELY QUESTION WHETHER THERE IS SUFFICIENT COMMITMENT TO THE REQUIRED INVESTMENT IN THEIR POTENTIAL.

WITHOUT BASIC EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT, YOUNG AUSTRALIANS WILL NOT BE ADEQUATELY EQUIPPED TO COPE WITH THE DEMANDS BEING MADE OF THEM IN THIS CENTURY.

In 2009, in an effort to address the significant levels of disengagement and high unemployment among young Australians, the Australian Government introduced their Learn or Earn program. Under Learn or Earn, it is mandatory for all young people to participate in schooling (or equivalent) until they complete Year 10; and for young people who have completed Year 10 to participate in full-time education, training or employment or a combination until age 17.¹ Anyone under the age of 20 without Year 12 (or the vocational equivalent) will have to be in education or training in order to receive Youth Allowance.² In 2012, Learn or Earn was expanded to include measures that saw 21 year olds lose access to Newstart to remain on the much lower Youth Allowance. This payment cut was said to offer young people an incentive to stay in education.³

Policy-makers recognise that the key to improving Australia's overall outcomes in transitions is to improve the outcomes of the lowest achievers and the most disadvantaged.⁴ The Compact with Young Australians comprises a range of measures under the Australian Government's National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions to strengthen the education, training opportunities and support for young people.⁵ With the Compact set to expire in 2013, an assessment of the effects of Learn or Earn on the most disengaged young people is due.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In undertaking this research project, AYAC sought to highlight the human impact of the Australian Government's education policies and let young people themselves tell their own experience of employment and educational participation and attainment, and overall, of their experience of Learn or Earn. AYAC wanted to investigate whether Learn or Earn helps or hinders unemployed young people to overcome the barriers to employment.

This research aims to ensure that government policies are informed by a current evidence base underpinned by the ideas and lived experiences of young people.

This study examines what works to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged young people. The key questions asked are:

- What contributes to young people leaving school before they complete Year 12?
- What impact is the Learn or Earn policy having to genuinely help the most disengaged and disadvantaged young people to (re)engage with study or work?
- What do young people who drop out of high school actually need to make a successful transition to independence?

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN AUSTRALIA

WHILE AUSTRALIA IS AMONG THE BEST PERFORMING COUNTRIES WITH ABOVE-AVERAGE EMPLOYMENT RATES, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IS STILL RISING⁶ AND WILL BE A MAJOR CONCERN FOR AUSTRALIAN POLICYMAKERS. IT CAN CERTAINLY BE SAID THAT YOUNG PEOPLE, BOTH IN AUSTRALIA AND INTERNATIONALLY, EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANT DISADVANTAGE IN THE GLOBAL LABOUR MARKET.⁷

THE NUMBERS

The unemployment rate of young people (15 to 24 years) in August 2012 was 11.6 per cent, and the teenage (15 to 19 years) unemployment rate was 16.6 per cent.⁸ This is three times higher than the general unemployment rate of 5.1 per cent.⁹ Australia's 15 to 19 year olds have slightly higher rates of long-term unemployment (1.0%) than the OECD average (0.9%), but lower rates than for the United Kingdom (2.7%) and the United States (1.2%).¹⁰

While there has been improvement on previous years, the rate has not returned to levels prior to the global economic downturn.¹¹ One quarter of older teenagers (18 to 19 years) are not in full-time study or work. One quarter of all young adults (20 to 24 years) are not in full-time study or work.¹² Most of those young adults are in part-time work, some are unemployed, and some have left the labour force entirely.¹³

In 2011, while most young people (15 to 24 years) were fully engaged in a combination of education, training or work, 19 per cent were not.¹⁴ Of those who are not fully engaged, around half did not complete Year 12.¹⁵ More than 50,000 young people nationwide each year are likely to be unemployed, out of the labour market or employed in insecure casual positions with little access to training or opportunities for advancement.¹⁶

WHY ARE SO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE UNEMPLOYED?

Unemployment and disengagement from education in Australia is not evenly spread among the youth population in Australia. There are a number of factors that discourage and can create barriers to young people's engagement in learning and work.

'YOUTH': A DISADVANTAGE

Young people entering the labour market have always been at a relative disadvantage due to their inexperience, which makes them relatively less attractive to employers than older, more experienced adults.¹⁷ Some young people, many Indigenous, lack the most basic work skills and qualifications they need to succeed in a career. Youth wage rates, training wages, the low availability of apprenticeships, and the ease at which young people can be dismissed from work all reduce the opportunities for the young to find and maintain work in the current labour market.¹⁸

THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The state of the labour market has a strong impact on unemployment rates. Global downturns such as the Global Financial Crisis in 2009 had a disproportionate effect on young people.¹⁹ While the unemployment rate across the whole population decreased after 2009, the youth unemployment rate did not and

the global economic recovery has not helped young people.²⁰ Times of economic uncertainty and an insecure labour market makes youth employment more sensitive to economic cycles than for older workers. Where there are slowdowns in hiring, it is young inexperienced workers that are more likely to be laid off.²¹ Also, broader changes to the global labour market that favour more short-term, casual and precarious forms of employment place young people at a disadvantage.²² These systemic changes require radically new ways of preparing young people for the world of work.

POVERTY AND OTHER KINDS OF DISADVANTAGE

Students from lower-income households are less likely to engage in full-time study or paid work when compared to students from higher income households, and those in metropolitan areas tend to have greater access to work than those in regional, remote and isolated communities.²³ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds also have disproportionately high rates of early school leaving.²⁴ Young people from high-income backgrounds with strong social supports will most often have greater 'choice' and flexibility over study and work than those from lower income backgrounds.²⁵

OTHER LEVELS OF DISADVANTAGE:

- *Remoteness* – young people who do not live in capital cities are less likely to be working or learning full-time. They face limited employment opportunities and are constrained by the type of work available, the lack of support services to help them find work, and the lack of public transport to get them to work.²⁶
- *English language proficiency* – newly arrived young people experience additional language and cultural competency barriers as well as trauma due to refugee experiences, and are more likely to be unemployed.
- *Indigenous heritage* – young Aboriginal people face well-known barriers to employment due to cultural issues, family & community dysfunction, low language, literacy and numeracy levels, and experiences of racism and discrimination when trying to find work. They also experience much higher rates of early school leaving than their non-Indigenous peers.²⁷
- *Resources and infrastructure* – young people who do not have a driver's licence and access to computers, and who have limited finances to pay for public transport and training courses are markedly disadvantaged in the labour market.
- *Disability* – Young people with disability are less likely to be fully engaged in work than other young Australians (although this indicator varies with the degree and type of disability).²⁸

THE FIRST YEARS OUT OF SCHOOL

If the first post-school year is spent in a positive way – in structured training, full-time work or study – it is likely that young people will end up in full-time work later on.²⁹ However, for those whose main activity in their first post-school year is working solely part-time, or being unemployed, or being outside the labour force altogether, only a minority will subsequently make it into full-time work.³⁰

YOUNG PEOPLE NOT FINISHING SCHOOL

Early school leaving – leaving school before completing Year 12 – is often seen as a problem both by policy makers and by parents, despite this being the norm a couple of generations ago. School completion is viewed as a major policy objective in Australia, with considerable

emphasis at both federal and state government levels on increasing school retention.³¹ In Australia, around 21 per cent of young people do not complete secondary school.³² While over the past decade this figure has gradually decreased (from 29 per cent in 2001),³³ more Australian students leave school at the age of 16 than in most other OECD countries.³⁴

Of concern, again, is that young people from a background of disadvantage – those who stand to gain most from school completion in terms of improved financial and life outcomes – are over represented in high school dropout rates.³⁵ Again, the factors that have the most impact on completing Year 12 are:

- low socioeconomic status;
- Indigenous heritage;
- English language proficiency;
- disability;
- school remoteness.³⁶

COSTS OF NOT COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL

In Australia, much of the focus of policy rhetoric has been on ensuring that young people finish school in order to improve their employment outcomes. Early school leaving is considered by policy makers to be a key barrier, which may affect young people in the job market, and Year 12 attainment is recognised as providing pathways into further education and into the workforce.³⁷ Research shows that people who do not complete Year 12 are much more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment or to remain outside the labour force in the first seven years after leaving school, than those who completed high school.³⁸

Yet, there are many other economic and social costs. Much research has shown that, based on various indicators, early school leavers are generally worse off than others in later life.³⁹ Young people who fail to complete Year 12 are more likely to work in casual or part time positions, and have a reduced income over their life span.⁴⁰ There is also a strong correlation between early school leaving and poor health.⁴¹ Leaving high school early can affect family relationships, child development, criminal behaviour and other social outcomes, so these impacts have a reinforcing nature that can lead to entrenched disadvantage.⁴² From an

economic perspective, the costs to the country are high, including lower revenues to the gross national income and higher demands on social security and the national health budget.⁴³

However, there is one caveat to the traditional view that early school leaving leads to inevitable disadvantage. A recent study found that once adjustments were made to take into account individual traits of young people (such as literacy, numeracy, attitudes and socio-economic background), school non-completers did not fare much worse than school completers in their long-term labour market prospects.⁴⁴ While statistically, early school leavers have an increased risk of unemployment, lower earnings and lower labour force participation rates, it is not strictly leaving school that is the core issue – as many non-academically oriented young people may still find decent work – but the factors that contribute to a young person dropping out.⁴⁵ It may be that early school leavers who fare poorly following school are the ones who are not well placed to enter the workforce quickly, due to their specific vulnerabilities and barriers.

THE AUSTRALIAN POLICY CONTEXT FOR 'LEARN OR EARN'

FROM THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S PERSPECTIVE, YOUNG PEOPLE WITH POOR EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE UNEMPLOYMENT, POOR HEALTH AND CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, THUS CREATING BURDENS ON THEMSELVES, THEIR FAMILIES AND AUSTRALIA AS A WHOLE.⁴⁶

The broad policy approach in Australia, as in most developed nations, has been to improve the productive economic participation of their young people, either through skills development or work. Increasing educational 'participation', 'completion' and 'attainment' rates has been a key youth policy objective of the Australian Government.

IN JULY 2009, THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS (COAG) RELEASED THE NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP ON YOUTH ATTAINMENT AND TRANSITIONS⁴⁷ (THE NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP) WHICH SET AS ITS AIM, "TO INCREASE THE EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND ATTAINMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND TO IMPROVE THEIR TRANSITION TO POST SCHOOL EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT THROUGH IMMEDIATE, CONCERTED ACTION SUPPORTED BY BROADER LONG TERM REFORM."⁴⁸

This agreement is commonly referred to as the Learn or Earn program.

The ambitious targets of the National Partnership were to:

- raise the Year 12 attainment rate to 90% by 2015;
- ensure all young people participate in Year 9-10; and
- increase the proportion of young people aged 15-25 participating in post-school education, training or employment.

To reach the targets, COAG has calculated that 92,527 additional young people need to achieve the Year 12 or equivalent qualification.⁴⁹

One of the initiatives established by COAG to support these measures is the *Compact with Young Australians* (the Compact),⁵⁰ which grants an entitlement to an education or training place, mandates a National Youth Participation Requirement for all young people until 17 years, and Learn or Earn training participation requirements for young people on income support payments.

The *National Youth Participation Requirement* – under the Compact, the National Participation Requirement requires that all young people:

- complete Year 10; and
- once they have completed Year 10 they must participate full-time (for 25 hours a week) in education, training or employment until they turn 17 years of age.

The National Partnership, including the Compact, is due to expire at the end of 2013.

THE LEARN OR EARN- EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS INITIATIVE

Learn or Earn requires all young people aged 17 to 21 who are claiming Youth Allowance (or whose parents are claiming Family Tax Benefit Part A) and who have not completed Year 12 or an equivalent qualification to:

- participate in education and training full-time; or
- participate (for 25 hours a week) in part-time study or training, in combination with other approved activities, until they attain Year 12 or an equivalent Certificate II level qualification.

Suitable "approved activities" include:

- voluntary work;
- paid employment;
- and involvement with Youth Connections, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program, and the Australian Apprenticeships Access Program.

There are exemptions for some young people, for example due to a disability, homelessness, drug and alcohol issues, family dysfunction, juvenile justice issues or mental health illness.

From July 2012, new measures mean that young unemployed people aged 21 who would normally be on the Newstart Allowance must now remain on Youth Allowance⁵¹ – which is a payment drop of \$43 per week.⁵² At the same time, the Learn or Earn measures requiring young people without a Year 12 or equivalent qualification to engage in education, training or employment were extended to those under 22 years.⁵³

Also, since 2012, teenage parents in 10 disadvantaged areas without Year 12 or equivalent qualifications are now placed on participation plans to complete Year 12 or equivalent in order to be eligible for income support.⁵⁴ There is now also a greater requirement on all disengaged young parents under 23 years of age who have been on income support for one year or more to plan a return to work.⁵⁵

LEARN OR EARN IS THE FIRST POLICY THAT LINKS YOUTH ALLOWANCE ELIGIBILITY TO FULL TIME WORK OR STUDY. THE GOVERNMENT SEES THE KEY TO IMPROVING AUSTRALIA'S OVERALL TRANSITION OUTCOMES IS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES AMONG THE LOWEST ACHIEVERS AND THE MOST DISADVANTAGED.⁵⁶

The focus of this study is on the set of policies that come under the Compact that relate specifically to early school leavers, namely: Learn or Earn.

METHODOLOGY

INTERVIEWS

This research draws primarily on responses to face-to-face structured interviews with young people affected by Learn or Earn. We interviewed 27 highly disadvantaged early school leavers across all Australian states and territories aged between 18 and 25 years.

AYAC established an expert reference group who were frequently consulted throughout the development of the project. They advised on all aspects of the research aims and methodology, ethical concerns and consultation processes. AYAC's Learn or Earn project reference group comprised two expert young people, three specialist academics and two community service program managers.

Young people were contacted through AYAC's networks – AYAC's Learn or Earn project reference group, state youth sector peak bodies, youth services, teen parents groups, and alternative schools.

The interviews encouraged young people to reflect on their experiences of study, training, and work as well as their experiences of receiving government payments and being subject to compliance mechanisms.

One-hour interviews were conducted by AYAC staff, and officers from state & territory youth peak bodies and members of AYAC's wider network. Interviews took place on-site where youth and job-search programs were delivered. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Confidentiality was assured and identifying data was protected.

Before proceeding with the interview, young people signed a consent form attesting that they were advised of their rights as a voluntary participant. All interviewees received a \$40 voucher from the retail outlet of their choice as a thank you for their participation.

All young people's names in this report are pseudonyms.

YOUTH WORKER SURVEY

AYAC also conducted an in-depth online survey of 159 youth workers from all states and territories to examine the perspectives of service providers on current non-financial supports and youth support services. This was distributed to a large network of peak bodies, service providers and youth organisations.

LEARN OR EARN - A SNAPSHOT OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO SHARED THEIR STORY

Young people interviewed were among the most highly disadvantaged school leavers – most were receiving welfare payments, some were single parents, some were Indigenous, many were in alternative learning programs, some had disabilities, some were regional, some lived in public housing or in supported community accommodation.

Interviews with 27 young people explored their perspectives on the following issues:

- why they left school early and their experience of school;
- barriers they faced in learning or earning;
- experiences of looking for paid work;
- experiences of receiving income support payments;
- supports that helped them overcome barriers to learning or earning.

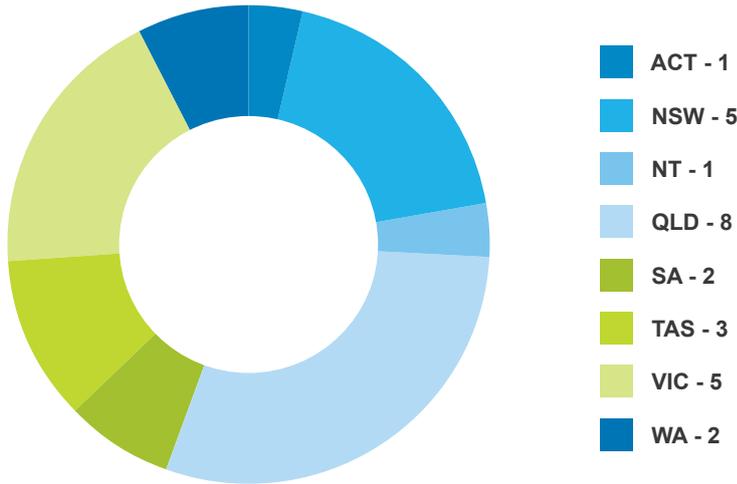
This study is split into five areas of young people's experiences:

- schooling;
- work;
- income support payments and Centrelink;
- non-government support services;
- prospects for the future.

Each section presents the young people's experiences with additional findings from the youth worker survey. The study provides discussion of the findings of each topic area and provides implications for policy.

DEMOGRAPHICS

AYAC INTERVIEWED 27 YOUNG PEOPLE FROM EACH STATE AND TERRITORY IN AUSTRALIA: 11 YOUNG MEN AND 16 YOUNG WOMEN.



ALL 27 INTERVIEWEES LEFT SCHOOL BEFORE THEY COMPLETED YEAR 12.

25 OF THE 27 WERE RECEIVING SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENTS - PRIMARILY YOUTH ALLOWANCE (OTHER) AND NEWSTART, BUT SEVERAL WERE RECEIVING THE PARENTING PAYMENT (SINGLE) OR DISABILITY PAYMENTS.

22 of the young people were from low-income families, 4 were from middle-income families, and 1 young person was from a high-income family.

6 of the young people had spent significant periods in their childhood and adolescence living in regional Australia.

In total, 7 of the young people were from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background. Additionally, 4 young people had Indigenous heritage.

The activities of the young people following leaving high school were varied. The activities included:

- Periods of neither working nor studying;
- short courses at TAFE or other vocational institutions;

- full time study for their Year 12 equivalent;
- studying at a flexible learning centre;
- part-time work;
- work for the dole program.

None of the young people we spoke to were currently in full-time work.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SCHOOLING

WE SPOKE TO 27 YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL, WHY THEY LEFT AND WHAT COULD HAVE KEPT THEM THERE LONGER. EACH HAD A UNIQUE STORY TO TELL.

REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL

"I don't think it was a decision, it just happened." (Joseph)⁵⁷

All the young people had left mainstream schools, mostly at the end of Year 10 or 11. When asked how they would rate their overall school experience on a scale of 1 to 10, their average score was 4.5, with a third giving a rating of 3 or under,⁵⁸ thus indicating a deep dissatisfaction with their experience of conventional schooling.

MOST OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE SPOKE OF DIFFICULTIES BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL THAT MADE ATTENDANCE AND LEARNING MOSTLY IMPOSSIBLE.

The primary difficulties are outlined here.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

"School was difficult to go to because I didn't have stuff like textbooks and uniforms and stuff and like if you didn't have a uniform you'd get detention and stuff like that." (Cass)

The majority of the young people had low-income backgrounds, with many from a single parent home where the parent had either worked in a low-paid job or who was dependent on welfare payments. Some young people said that not being able to meet basic education costs like transport,

school uniforms, excursions and textbooks made it difficult to even attend classes throughout their entire schooling. For some of these young people, school was not a main priority as they had to assume additional responsibilities of supporting other family members experiencing mental or physical health problems.

HEALTH ISSUES

"I had cysts on my ovaries, but it caused a lot of pain so I was often sick. I was back and forth between doctors and hospitals and it was just when I was starting high school. So my first year, Year 8, I was probably there three weeks out of the whole year and missed it all." (Cass)

A third of the young people reported serious health conditions that drastically inhibited their ability to attend school. They suffered from a range of debilitating mental and physical health stressors that included post-traumatic stress disorder, ADHD, clinical depression, paranoid schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, unspecified learning disorders, ovarian cysts, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, and lymphoblastic leukaemia. Years of schooling were lost to those students with the most serious conditions.

UNSTABLE HOME LIVES

The impacts of family difficulties on engagement with education were particularly evident.

"The teachers shouldn't judge students. Their parents are junkies and they expect them to focus in school while

when you go home you see your mum shoot up. I couldn't do that. That's what they don't understand." (Andy)

Problems at home and a lack of family support proved a critical factor in young people's educational engagement with problematic family dynamics a considerable barrier to their long-term engagement with schooling. Many young people had left school early or were currently struggling to remain in education due to continuing family dysfunction.

"I went through domestic violence as a kid as well in the house, so I was not only having to deal with family life, I was having to deal with school life and there was really no escape for me." (Jasmine)

FAMILY CONFLICT, CHILD ABUSE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, GENERATIONAL DISENGAGEMENT, CARING RESPONSIBILITIES, NEGLECT, PARENTAL DRUG ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WERE ALL SERIOUS PROBLEMS THAT STOPPED YOUNG PEOPLE FROM BEING ABLE TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AT SCHOOL.

Several students had either one or both parents struggling with ongoing mental or physical ill-health. Most of the young people came from struggling single parent families.

In the most serious cases, four young people had left both home and school to escape the difficulties with their families. One young person, Ashley, wanted to leave home due to family tensions but lacked the financial ability to make the move. A few of the young people experienced frequent moves throughout their childhood and teenage years resulting in social difficulties from constantly having to cope with new situations. Finishing Year 12 was not seen as a priority for those young people who were battling with conflict and dysfunction at home, as academic achievement was the last thing on their minds. School support for those suffering in these circumstances was rare.

"We lost our house and became homeless, the whole family, we, my Mum, and my sister got taken by the Department because my sister said my mum was abusing her, which wasn't true. I was like going off and getting drunk and doing stupid things, I didn't know what other way to deal with it." (Janine)

HOMELESSNESS

"I didn't know where I was going to be sleeping each night, which made it really, really hard, so yeah I couldn't finish Year 12. I could barely focus, let alone do the rest of school. I had no idea where I was going to be and had no one like looking out for me, so yeah I just got really lost. It was really 'life' things that made high school really hard." (Janine)

Several young people had experienced primary homelessness in their teenage years.

Sally left home after extended periods of conflict with her stepmother, staying in shelters and living on the streets, while also using morphine and speed. Andy left home because his mother was addicted to marijuana and spent many months living in abandoned houses and couch surfing before entering a supported accommodation service.

On the day of his interview, Stanley had just become homeless again following several years of homelessness in his earlier teens.

"Everything's so difficult. Using small backpacks and I carry three changes of clothes and I had a lot of socks but yeah

waking up this morning and waking up for a shower and you don't even have a towel. Like, it's just...you need a lot of support!" (Stanley)

CONFLICT WITH TEACHERS AND OTHER STUDENTS

Most young people disengaged from school when they were unable to form sustainable relationships with peers, adults or the institution. Many moved from school to school, with one young person having moved through six high schools in four years.

A third of the young people mentioned instances of bullying while at school. Poor quality relationships between teachers and students meant that most young people felt a lack of connectedness and belonging, and received insufficient support to address issues such as bullying. Central to the problem was a lack of mutual respect.

"If you was behind or you were seen to be doing not well to their expectations they'd just tell you to leave." (Charles)

"Not being able to come back to school comfortably because teachers give a hard time and rebuke your lack of presence, leaving you nowhere to come back to." (Joseph)

"The teachers don't care. I think I had a sense, a feeling, that they really didn't have time to address the concerns of the individuals in the classroom." (Stanley)

Young people struggled with the authoritarianism and the rigid set of rules imposed by their high schools. Many complained of being misunderstood by educators and treated poorly due to their difficult backgrounds. Young people were more often blamed for their difficult behaviour, rather than helped.

"They knew that my home life wasn't the best but they sort of, they just didn't really do much about it, like they just kind of like just ticked all their boxes. Like yeah, 'we've done all that we have to do', and because I wasn't a perfect student, because I didn't fit into their perfect student box, like they just treated me like crap really." (Sally)

Cass wished that there had been more support services within her school to help people dealing with drug use, abuse at home or financial problems. Some schools offered

specialist help to disengaged young people, but it often had the effect of pathologising rather than genuinely assisting the student. In Amanda's school, counselling was available but she often felt as though she was being treated like a "naughty person".

Bullying, assault and harassment by other students was a common story. Some reported severe bullying that went unaddressed by school authorities, often due to the stigma of mental illness, poverty, race, or from being in out-of-home care.

"I felt like I'd let things get to me. It just felt like it had gotten too far. I couldn't, it felt like I'd lost the motivation. I just felt scared." (Kristie)

Jasmine had been sexually assaulted by another student, which led to her dropping out of school entirely.

"Well, the reason I dropped out of school was because I was sexually assaulted by a guy at school and nothing was really done about that. I went to the police and that's as far as it went. Teachers were absolute, you know, just rude people." (Jasmine)

EDUCATION NEVER A PRIORITY

"My attitude at school was like a reflection of what was going on at home." (Sally)

Young people's perceptions of the relevance of what they are taught at school for the outside world, particularly the world of paid employment, strongly impacted their desire to stay at school. In the final analysis, most young people did not see the value in staying at school or the relevance of education to them.

"My school had not taught me any value in education itself. I didn't understand the essence of education. If there weren't a law that prevented me leaving until Year 10, I would've left in Year 7. I made up my mind in Year 7 to walk away and dreaded every day until I left." (Stanley)

CONVENTIONAL BIAS OF SCHOOLS TOWARDS ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

The standard model of conventional schooling – focusing mainly on academic studies ending in a ranked assessment score and university entry – was unappealing to all of the young people.

The bias towards academic pathways with limited access to vocational pathways was a primary reason the students who could not fit within the standard curriculum dropped out of school.

"I just didn't have that in me and I just didn't really want to waste another year sitting at a desk or something like that when I could just go working." (Noel)

"I thought - it's not the path I want to go. I want to go to TAFE, not Year 12." (Alistair)

Conventional schooling was not the best learning environment for most of the young people, if the school had failed to provide young person-centred learning and a flexible and relevant education. There seemed to be a need for more pre-vocational courses to give young people a 'second chance' at education after experiencing illness, academic failure, homelessness or some other issue.

"School is not for everybody and making people stay in the situation when they're not going to like it is just, you know, it's ridiculous." (Jasmine)

NOT FINISHING SCHOOL- ANY REGRETS?

The early school leavers in this study had typically left school because of negative experiences at school or in their home life, rather than because they had an inviting job or training course to go to. Nonetheless, now having moved on from school, some young people expressed regret for leaving.

Joseph spoke about the losses he experiences due to leaving school early.

"I missed out on a big part of what would be normal childhood and missing out on normal social interaction and all these sort of different things. It left me with quite a large social disorder."

Boris, a young Indigenous man, talked about the importance of education.

"All my life I was brought up with everyone always being like, 'make sure you finish school. You're not going to get nowhere in life if you don't have grade 10 behind you'." (Boris)

"I think what I really needed was to be physically separated from my family

and put into a lot more stricter one, like a government run boarding house because you go to school quite literally. I wish there was somebody like that around for me because I needed that education, no matter how hard it was for me to receive it, I needed it. I need it today." (Stanley)

However, when asked whether they would like to go back, most said they would not be interested in re-engaging. Where schools are not learner-centred, young people are not likely to return. Anna's response was typical.

"I only ever had one teacher that actually said I'm a very smart person and he would teach me a different way. They just need to find the way that I learn and then I can learn a lot but no other teacher ever put that effort in. Like I said, only one teacher's ever put the effort in so I didn't really learn. I don't think schools teach in a proper way that goes for every kid. They just teach for the main line of children."

ALTERNATIVE OR FLEXIBLE LEARNING

"If it wasn't for this school and its services I'd probably be in jail or dead." (Gary)

A third of the young people were undertaking alternative education programs in flexi-learning centres, informal creative arts colleges, Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges or in prerequisite university preparation courses.

Alternative learning programs – also known as 'second-chance education', 're-engagement programs', 'flexi schools' or 'flexible learning options' – cater for young people who, for complex reasons, fall outside conventional education. They are characterised by a high ratio of staff to young people, holistic one-to-one support and small group work.⁵⁹ Often, a multi-disciplinary team of educators, social workers and counsellors work with small cohorts of young people.⁶⁰ Many of the young people considered the program their last chance at gaining an education.

All the young people involved in alternative schooling raved about their experience. Young people loved the flexibility of this

environment that stood in stark contrast to the rigidity of conventional high school. These flexible learning programs saw young people as resourceful individuals with a lot of untapped potential, rather than as troublemakers or underachievers. Imogen described her flexible learning centre as based on respect rather than an extensive set of rules.

"The structures are completely different. You're more independent, they treat you like an adult. It's just the way education should be, if you ask me. I want to learn here, it's not forced onto you."

Flexibility was a cornerstone of the programs. Some students were able to negotiate their hours, school days and subjects, and most learning programs were able to cater to individual circumstances and interests.

"I've been here I've probably done more work here in the short time I've been here than in my mainstream school. There's no deadline, they don't say if it's not in by this date you're going to fail sort of thing, there's no stress about that. It's 'take your time, if you need help I'm here'. That's amazing, that's what a lot of kids need." (Gary)

In particular, very basic skills are taught and self-confidence is developed as well as their resilience to dealing with problems and barriers to participation.

"Some people come here and they are just unable to communicate with anyone and they're just angry or something and then by the time they leave they may've done, not one piece of assessment, but they've got a part time or full time job and they're a lot happier as a person or they're feeling better and the fact that's not measured is sad." (Cass)

Young people needed educators to offer them moral support and encouragement, and to see the different potential in them not limited to their academic capability. Young people in this study had access to mentors and people who believed in them. The young people responded positively to outreach services offered, particularly the individual care and concern that educators showed them when it came to additional support needs. The staff's willingness to meet young people at home, school or a public place, and the ability to contact the

educator by text or email or face to face without an appointment was noted by the young people.

"Like there are some things they obviously can't help you with but if say, just an example, there's abuse going on at home and you tell them about it here they'll phone the police. They'll organise for you to stay in a place and they'll look after you to make sure you won't come into harm's way, sort of thing." (Joseph)

"The fact that the workers here they want to help you. They all care about you and they've got backgrounds in social training. They understand the fact that we aren't all robots that go through the system the same way. Some of us are having a hard time or some of us work through things differently, so just even the fact that they teach differently, or are trained differently." (Cass)

There was a sense among the young people who studied in flexible learning programs of a new-found sense of belonging. The common perspective is well summarised by Gary.

"The environment - it's a community. Everyone respects each other and everyone looks out for each other. At mainstream school, everyone's out for themselves pretty much."

WHERE DISENGAGED YOUNG PEOPLE ARE OFFERED MORE DIVERSE RANGE OF PROGRAMS WITH APPLIED AND VOCATIONAL STUDIES OR AREAS IN WHICH THE YOUNG PEOPLE ALREADY KNEW THEY HAD STRENGTHS - SUCH AS THE CREATIVE ARTS - THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON STUDENT RE-ENGAGEMENT.

"What's great is going at your own pace with school work, and having creative and practical subjects such as cooking." (Ashley)

"I've always like, back in my head, I've always seen, I've always loved music, I've always loved and wanted to learn piano and I always wanted to do these things and I never have. I started learning to play guitar in high school but that didn't work out because I'm an idiot and I didn't do it properly and shit happens. I screwed up again, back then, but that's in the past so yes now I definitely yeah, I feel like I can really go forward with this." (Joseph)

WHAT YOUTH WORKERS SAY

In total 159 workers, including youth workers, social workers, mental health workers, teachers, careers counsellors, employment consultants, psychologists, researchers, and policy officers gave us their first-hand perspectives on the biggest issues facing disengaged young people. "Youth workers" (as they will be referred to herein) highlighted a number of issues that are facing young people disengaged from education or employment. The top issues they identified were:

- family breakdown and a lack of family support;
- mental health including depression, self-harm and suicide, anger, anxiety, learning difficulties;
- homelessness and limited access to safe and affordable housing;
- drugs and alcohol abuse and self medication issues;
- conventional education systems failing to meet the needs of disengaged students;
- poor coping skills and low self-esteem.

A majority of youth workers indicated that the 'mainstream education system' was one of the biggest issues facing disengaged young people. They highlighted the inability of the current conventional school system to re-engage disengaged or disadvantaged young people. This was largely due to the inability of schools and teachers to meet the specific individualised needs of young people who are already disengaged for multiple reasons.

"Young people need to be able to learn in different ways, not just sitting at a desk being talked to but to get up and view the world and then relate their learning to the world they will live in." (Youth worker)

"There is not a focus on their learning from an emotional level but academic level. With most young people who have lived through trauma they don't have the same skill set as those who are nurtured and cared for in a loving environment." (Youth worker)

Current conventional school systems that focus on university entrance neglect the learning and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged students. Many youth workers commented that were that schools do not have the resources to invest time and genuine care in supporting at-risk young people, as the classroom model is set to rigid standards and does not allow for flexibility. The common approach of schools seemed to be 'get rid' of difficult or struggling students and 'make it another school's problem'.

"Teachers tell too many students that they should give up because they can't pass anyway - students will give up when they are told to - it's one thing they actually obey. Our education system doesn't recognise the multiple intelligences, so students who don't fit the mould will disengage." (Youth worker)

"Most programs are unable to deal with all the issues - they can usually deal with the education or wellbeing, not both. Programs also need to be long term - workers need to build relationships with clients and this takes time." (Youth worker)

"We have noticed that young people are coming into care younger and younger and are more and more damaged at a young age (8-9 years old), however the alternative programs still only allow 12+ young people to enrol. By this stage it is too late and our young people have been disengaged for too long and have lost the desire to learn." (Youth worker)

"If we want to get a young person to TAFE we will wake them up in the mornings and then pick them up and transport them to their course." (Youth worker)

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SCHOOLING

• WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED •

"These kids aren't getting help. It's as simple as asking a kid, what's wrong? It's as simple as that, it doesn't take rocket science. I've come from a family where I've seen the three youngest siblings all drop out of school, like discontinuing because of things that are going on at home and because they were acting out at school and they were getting told off and put into detention rather than someone actually asking them, 'What's wrong? Why can't you focus? What's going on at home?'"
(Janine)

From the interviews of young people and the survey of youth workers a number of needs were identified:

A WHOLE-OF-SCHOOL APPROACH OFFERING ACADEMIC AND WELLBEING SUPPORT WITHIN SCHOOLS

Both young people and youth workers believed there was a significant need to invest in high quality wellbeing support for all young people, but in particular, for disadvantaged young people on a one-to-one basis. Young people need both *academic support*: classes, tutoring or coaching that is tailored to the young person's particular language, literacy or numeracy needs; and *wellbeing support*: schools need to deal with any underlying difficulties within school or home life that might act as barriers to engagement, including effectively identifying and dealing with instances of bullying as well as assisting young people where there are indications of abuse, neglect, substance abuse and mental illness.

The most disengaged young people require ongoing case management that takes a holistic approach to the student's life. Both academic and wellbeing support require a whole-of-school approach to care for young people experiencing hardship that must involve teachers, students, parents and external providers.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULT ROLE MODELS

The importance of one-to-one relationships with adult role models in schools and the impact on levels of engagement cannot be underestimated. Young people in this study thrived from the encouragement and support from educators and other school personnel who genuinely understood the issues and difficulties these young people face in conforming to the structure and culture of conventional schools. Young people need to be given repeated opportunities to build positive, trusting relationships with teachers and other adult role models that are based on mutual trust, respect and care. Young people with significant attachment issues need a sustained period to build these positive relationships; it cannot happen overnight. However, when damaged young people finally feel safe, respected, cared about and understood, they can eventually feel supported enough to explore their options for a future that is fulfilling to them on their own terms.

BETTER TRAINING FOR TEACHERS IN CONVENTIONAL SCHOOLS

Mainstream teachers need to have the skills and knowledge required to meet the needs of the least engaged students including those with learning and behaviour difficulties. Young people need a positive and safe school environment, active support with their learning and behaviour difficulties and awareness among their teachers of the issues that reduced their engagement and retention. Professional development of school staff can play a crucial role in assisting the development of young people's confidence, non-academic wellbeing and their sense of belonging. Of course, this kind of training must be affordable for the school and within the capacity of already-overworked teachers.

TAILORED AND FLEXIBLE APPROACHES

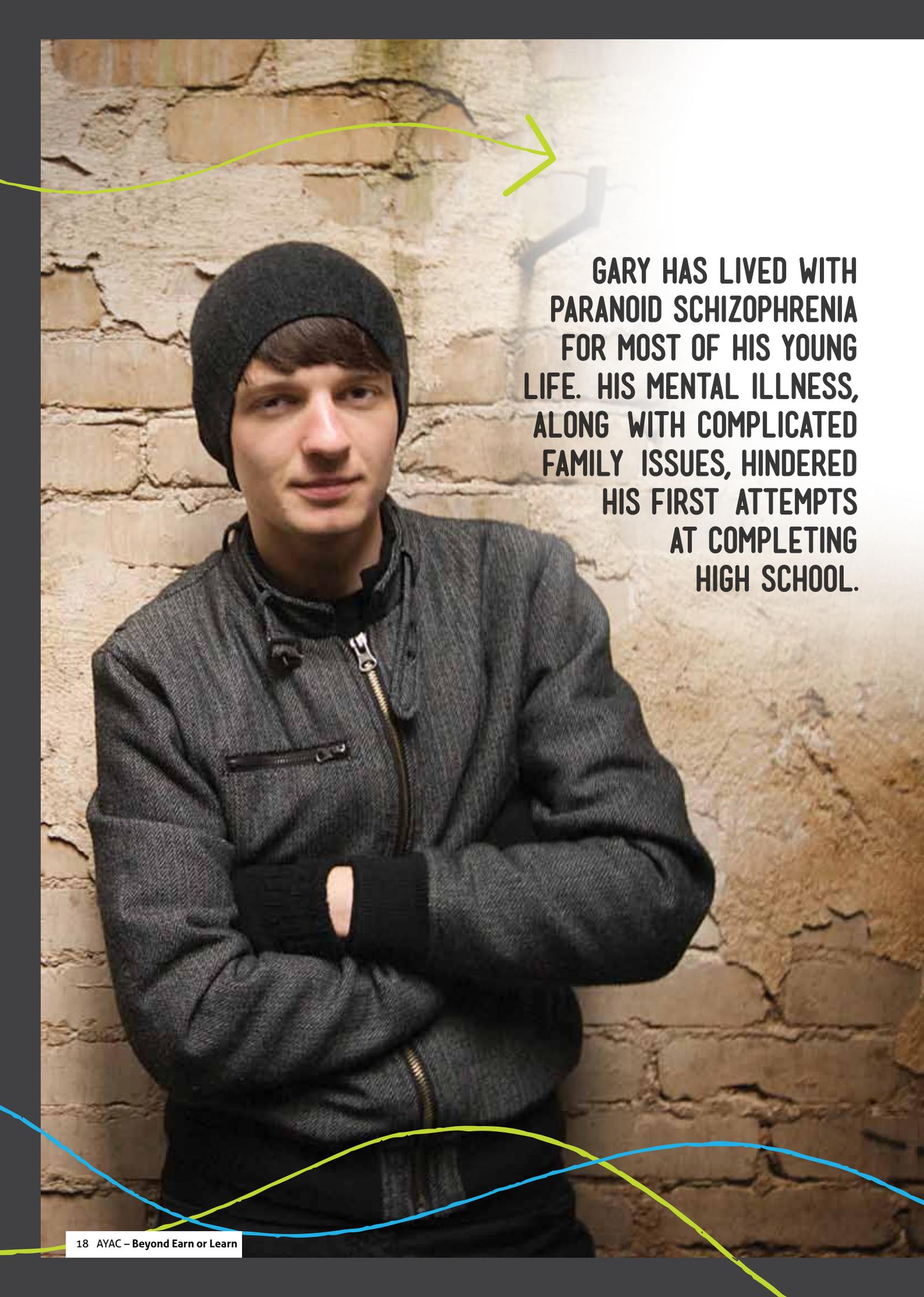
Support and programs that directly work with unemployed early school leavers must offer tailored and flexible rather than one-size-fits-all or broad-brush service provision. Young people have particular histories and particular barriers that, quite understandably, keep them from focusing on their schooling. A focus on personal growth can lead to re-engagement with education as participants gain a sense of the future and see a place for themselves in it.

A VARIED AND FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM

Young people who enjoy school and find what they are learning interesting are less likely to drop out than are those who hate school and find what it offers boring. Disengaged young people - if they are to ever feel inspired to continue their senior schooling - need a range of curriculum choices that match their strengths and interests. Focusing on young people's strengths and skills gives them a sense of purpose and routine in their life. Most young people are located in schools where the dominant pathway is university study. But for a large group of young people who end up as early school leavers, there needs to be a greater emphasis on applied skills, practical learning, employability and life skills in secondary education curricula.

MORE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Policy-makers should acknowledge the diverse learning styles and particular learning difficulties facing disadvantaged young people, and should provide sufficient flexible learning programs that complement or provide alternatives to conventional schooling. For young people excluded from formal schooling, the way to re-energise them about education may only be through alternative education programs. Young people like teaching and learning that is 'hands on' and focuses upon basic skills in a supportive but adult environment. There needs to be a high ratio of staff to young people and a learning environment that is very different from formal schooling. Young people need a good initial assessment with realistic, measurable and motivating targets.



**GARY HAS LIVED WITH
PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIA
FOR MOST OF HIS YOUNG
LIFE. HIS MENTAL ILLNESS,
ALONG WITH COMPLICATED
FAMILY ISSUES, HINDERED
HIS FIRST ATTEMPTS
AT COMPLETING
HIGH SCHOOL.**

CASE STUDY

GARY'S STORY

AGE: 20

HOUSING:

Living with his father

EDUCATION / EMPLOYMENT:

Student at flexible learning centre

PRIMARY INCOME:

Youth Allowance

HIS STRUGGLE WITH HIS ANGER MANAGEMENT SAW HIM FREQUENTLY LAND IN DETENTION AFTER TEMPER LOSS - THE SCHOOL WAS UNAWARE OF HIS CONDITION. THE FREQUENT DETENTIONS AND THE LACK OF SYMPATHY AND SUPPORT OFFERED BY HIS TEACHERS AND PEERS CAUSED GARY TO GROW HOSTILE TOWARDS HIS SCHOOLING AND LOSE INTEREST IN STUDY.

"If the teachers back at my old school actually helped instead of just saying go to the detention room... it would've made it easier. I was always in detention and getting suspended just because I'd get pissed off that I couldn't do the work and the teacher wouldn't help me."

Gary was finally expelled in Year 11 after a confrontation with a fellow student ended violently. He left school and worked a series of casual cash-in-hand jobs – as a butcher and trolley pusher – along with a factory worker position he was connected to through a job agency. Although he has experienced these successes, he says he has strong doubts about his ability to enter the paid workforce.

Now in his third year of study at a flexible learning centre, Gary is expecting to graduate with his Year 12 equivalent qualification halfway through 2013. He credits the centre, which also offers strong support and counselling services, for turning his life around and re-engaging him in education.

"I was going downhill for a while with a lot of outside problems. If it wasn't for this school and its services I'd probably be in gaol or dead. If it wasn't for these types of services that are willing to help people in my situation it could've been a lot worse, so I'm lucky that I'm still here... This school has changed my life dramatically in every way possible."

The flexible learning centre has helped Gary create a flexible learning program which suits his learning style, interest and pace, allowing him to complete his study without experiencing the stress that caused him to disengage with high school in the first place. The school also provides a place where he can socialise, play the drums and help combat the mental health problems that intensify when he is alone at home.

He is wholly dependent on Youth Allowance as his sole income, which he uses to pay for his transport, board, food and a fortnightly pouch of tobacco. Although he expresses disappointment at missed social opportunities due to his limited income and his inability to buy more than the basic necessities, Gary is grateful to be receiving income support as it allows him to attend school. However, he finds it hard to negotiate the Centrelink system and fill out the required paperwork.

GARY HAS HIGH HOPES FOR THE FUTURE, INCLUDING COMPLETING YEAR 12, WITH PLANS TO RELEASE AN ALBUM WITH HIS BAND AND FIND WORK AS A BOILERMAKER'S APPRENTICE.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND PAID WORK

THE 27 YOUNG PEOPLE OUTLINED THEIR POST-SCHOOL EXPERIENCES. SOME WERE MOVING FORWARD WHILE MANY WERE STRUGGLING.

When rating their experiences of looking for and starting out in paid work on a scale of 1 to 10, the scores were mixed, with some rating their experiences as low as 1, several rating it a 5, with a few as high as 9 or 10. Some of the young people had experienced periods of paid work but only two had done full-time work. Around half had experience in very casual, short-term or part-time work. Frequently this was in hospitality (cafes, fast food outlets) babysitting, warehouse work, cleaning, call centres, or supermarket stock work, and mostly it was part-time and short-term and, for some, only for trial periods.

Many of the experiences of the young people highlight the pitfalls of the youth labour market. In particular, the availability of full-time work for early school leavers, the availability of on-the-job training and the question of what constitutes 'fair' wages and hours for young people.

MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO POOR EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

The young people spoke about a number of factors that affected their ability to secure appropriate and stable employment. These included:

- lack of education;
- lack of skills and experience;
- lack of work-readiness;
- lack of support in writing resumes, applying for jobs and interview preparation;
- cost of transport to interviews;
- encouragement often lacking from parents or significant adults;
- no drivers license or access to a car;
- unhelpful job-search agencies;
- discrimination against young people in the labour market;
- low wages and poor conditions;
- distractions at work due to unmet safety, housing and food needs.

FIRST-TIME EXPERIENCES OF PAID WORK

Some young people spoke of difficulties within workplaces related to shifts and wage levels. Two interviewees had been offered mechanical apprenticeships but one was paid too little to live on. These young people felt that they were not taught but instead, exploited.

"I think apprenticeships themselves are pretty shit. I mean yeah you've got a trade and you get more money but \$1 an hour is just bullshit, like you're getting the same amount as I'm on Centrelink." (Charles)

Noel worked in a casual role for three months, but received no pay during that time, with the employer claiming it was 'training'. Some young people experienced the pitfalls of precarious contract-based employment.

"Then I worked for six or seven months at making furniture, stacking the shelves with furniture, helping out customers and stuff. Which was good and it was a pretty simple job but they just cut my hours and I was just like 'fuck this'. Because it was casual work it went from five days to three days to two days to one day, to four hours and I was like 'fuck this!'" (Andy)

Most of the young people said that they dearly wanted to work and were aware that their path to independence required ongoing decent work. The notion that all young people who do not work are simple 'dole-bludgers' was not borne out by the interviews.

"I've worked since I was like 15. As soon as I pretty much hear about something I'm like, cause when I was 14 I got a job at Hungry Jacks and I was just like, make money! I was like, make more and more but you can't really, if mum needs money." (David)

Casey, a young Aboriginal woman said that she thought it was particular a misconception that Indigenous young people do not want to work.

"A lot of people put us down you know, think that we all bludge off the dole, and we all don't wanna work but there are Aboriginal lawyers, and doctors and Aboriginal everything out there and I'm a qualified Aboriginal health worker and I feel proud and deadly to say that. I am qualified, and feel proud of saying the 'Aboriginal' first!" (Casey)

DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING OR KEEPING A JOB

Young people were often discouraged from entering the labour market due to their youth and lack of skills making few employers willing to hire them. Charles' experience is typical.

"Yeah we'll take your resume and call you back and after going to the same places for a few weeks putting resumes in over and over and just the same thing it kind of just, I got over it and I just couldn't be bothered trying to find work. A lot of the time it's just you feel that it's not worth it because there's no one to really give you a go" (Charles)

Several young people lost jobs due to behavioural problems – either they did not turn up to work, or had an argument with a customer or staff member, or were generally not committed to the job. Some of the young people felt that they were not wanted or valued by their employer, and either quit or stopped turning up to work.

While most were willing to work, some young people had experienced something unpleasant in that workplace or found that they were unsuitable for the job. Often, their lack of social skills or mental health difficulties meant that they not well matched to roles where they were expected to interact with customers.

"I did a two week trial at a butchers. I got fired for not smiling (how weird's that?) because I wasn't smiling to customers. How can you smile when you're chopping dead animals all day?" (Andy)

Job-search agencies, in particular, need more awareness and support for young people with disabilities (especially mental health issues), and need to work more closely with the employer and inform them about the young person's special needs. Often, their employability skills are minimal or non-existent. Of the young people who had actively tried to get work, many felt they were not prepared to enter into the work force, yet school education was not right for them either.

EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES

The young people needed a lot of structure and support to overcome their lack of self-discipline and self-confidence and to allow them to properly take on responsibility and make a commitment to a role. The most helpful job-search agencies were the ones that provided more than just a facility for job searching or opportunities to seek work or further training.

"I reckon if the people at... whatever job search provider drives you to a whole bunch of job sites or whatever, and says, 'come here for an interview, bring your resume' and stuff, that would be good. Instead of, 'we have this job - go on the internet and apply for it.'" (Andy)

For young people with multiple barriers, the best employment services provide that extra support in helping the young person reach their employment goals and give them confidence that they can actually succeed in a job.

Charles appreciated the extra effort from staff at his Job Services Australia (JSA) provider:

"They do everything they can to make you want to have a job and they are probably the helpful, beautiful people that I've probably recommend to go to, to find a job. Like my job provider, Tim - when I went for my interview I didn't have a licence. I'd lost it. He actually picked me up and took me and yeah they will go out of their way, they'll help and if you need overalls, boots and that for work, they'll actually supply that... They want to help."

Most of the young people, however, recounted negative experiences with government job-search agencies, where they felt they were treated as incapable and 'just another number'. Many young people said that their personal preferences were not seen as relevant when directed to apply for jobs or do training. Without proper understanding of each young person's individual circumstances, the chances that staff would find suitable employment to fit the interests and needs of the young job-seeker were doubtful at best.

Young people did not have the opportunity to express their preferences for what kind of work they wanted and JSA providers routinely sent their young clients to jobs that were not suited to them.

"Like every appointment I'd turn up to would be a five minute appointment and she'd say 'right you've turned up, I'll put down that you turned up and you can leave now.'" (Jasmine)

When *Jasmine* explained that she wanted to become a teacher one day, the response from her caseworker was that, "because I have a mental illness it's never going to happen".

BY DISCOURAGING VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM SETTING GOALS AND EXPRESSING DREAMS, POORLY TRAINED STAFF CAN BE GUILTY OF CREATING ADDITIONAL BARRIERS.

All of the young people who had registered with a JSA provider vented frustrations and dissatisfaction at their caseworker's lack of interest in their needs. *Anna's* was a typical response:

"They are stupid, they're the worst. I swear I hardly know anyone's that's ever gotten a job from those things, ever. I've been with them for years and they've never gotten me a job. My worker abused me for not finding a job and being lazy and stuff like that. I'm not good enough and I was just dealing with homelessness and all the stuff that was going on and it really made me feel bad you know because I wanted to get a job so bad, but she was meant to be here to help me and I thought that was what was happening but she just made me feel worthless just because I hadn't found a job yet!" (Anna)

Young people were often encouraged by employment service providers to participate in training in areas that they were not interested in or programs that they consider not to be relevant to their future employment. Overall, JSA

providers did not offer young people much meaningful help. The overall attitude of the interviewees was that JSA providers were just 'ticking a box' that a service had been offered but actually had no real interest in providing genuine help.

WHAT YOUTH WORKERS SAY

We asked youth workers to comment on how effectively Jobs Services Australia (JSA) and Youth Connections assist young people to reengage with study or work.

JOBS SERVICES AUSTRALIA

JSA is the Australian Government's main employment service available to young people and others looking for work in Australia.⁶¹ JSA provides job-seekers receiving income support payments, including young people, with flexible support to assist them with finding sustainable employment. The focus of JSA is on the most disadvantaged job seekers to help them overcome their barriers to employment and to obtain necessary job skills. When an eligible young person registers with JSA for assistance, they are assessed and classified into four streams.⁶² Stream 1 job-seekers are the most job-ready, while Stream 4 job seekers face the most complex barriers to employment.

Young people under the Learn or Earn program are classified into Streams 2 - 4. A young person in one of these streams must negotiate an employment plan with agreed activities such as training, work experience or job searching, in order to meet their participation requirements to remain eligible for income support. After 12 months, the young person is required to undertake a mandated amount of work experience.

In our survey, 62 per cent of youth workers commented on JSA and many indicated that the JSA system was not helpful for the most disadvantaged young people. The survey revealed that due to the high-volume nature of the program, JSA providers pay the most attention to young people who need a limited amount of assistance and who are the most compliant and motivated job seekers, rather than those young people who are experiencing high levels of disengagement and least likely to achieve successful job placements.

Like the young people in this study, youth workers reported that young people's interests and goals are not taken into account. In many cases, young people often go to the youth service to discuss ways of receiving job assistance that were not covered by the JSA provider.

"The JSA providers in town are not youth-friendly. For example, the youth are confused once they leave their appointment with the provider. I found myself explaining the appointment and expectations to the youth." (Youth worker)

The success of JSA seems to vary widely from agency to agency. The main criticism arose when Stream 4 young people were not matched with an appropriate JSA provider that employed qualified and expert workers, able to deal with complex needs.

IF THERE ARE STRUCTURAL AND PERSONAL BARRIERS TO STUDYING OR WORKING, THE YOUNG PERSON WILL DISENGAGE FROM ANY PLACEMENT THEY ARE OFFERED IF THOSE BARRIERS HAVE NOT BEEN ADDRESSED FIRST.

"It is my opinion that these services are not best positioned to support young people who are disengaged, for a number of reasons. JSA services are generally staffed with people who are not trained to work with young people who are disengaged, and so often they are not equipped to provide adequate support to the young person in regards to concerns with housing, their mental health, family relationship breakdown, AOD use, family and domestic violence, legal issues, etc. This is support that can be offered through programs that are staffed with qualified youth workers." (Youth worker)

Where the JSA provider is a for-profit organisation, the contractual arrangements of the employment service will conflict with the needs of young people. An emphasis on ratings and targets – placing young people in training or jobs in exchange for payments – reduces the time and money spent on each individual young person and limits the extent to which assistance can be tailored. Administrative pressures often make it impossible for JSA providers to be able to have the amount of time required to provide the intensive and holistic supports required by disengaged, highly vulnerable young people.

"JSA is not effective for severely disengaged youth due to its inability to be flexible and do outreach work." (Youth worker)

Moreover, the JSA program's inability to adequately recognise or measure non-vocational outcomes – such as a young person undertaking counselling, securing accommodation, or ensuring a health condition is stabilised – misses the importance of measuring beneficial social outcomes for these young people. And it is these outcomes that ultimately help young people re-engage in positive ways.

YOUTH CONNECTIONS

Youth Connections is a flexible, specialised Australian Government funded program that supports early school leavers or young people at risk of leaving school early. The initiative helps them continue with or resume their education by addressing the barriers to their engagement in education, so they can attain Year 12 or an equivalent qualification.⁶³ Youth Connections employs a mix of individual case management, group assistance mentoring, advocacy and referrals to external support services.⁶⁴

In total, 62 percent of youth workers surveyed commented on Youth Connections and, on the whole, the view was that this program is better than JSA at catering to the needs of highly disengaged young people. Praise was given to the intensive support given to young people, addressing the barriers that have led to young people disengaging, as well as individual support and group work activities to build skills and confidence. Youth Connections services also include individual advocacy and referral to specialist services, and an outreach component which helps the program connect with the most severely disengaged.

However, there was some criticism of the fly-in-fly-out approach of Youth Connections services in regional and remote areas.

"It's a good idea but the workers need to be on the ground in communities for longer. Some youth workers are just doing day visits. I honestly think that the funding should be given to the local community organisations to create local jobs and better pathways. I believe that the Youth Connections programs and workers need to be working out of the local youth services in remote communities." (Youth worker)

Youth Connections could also do better at connecting young people to learning at various points in their schooling, rather than solely in the late teenage years.

"There is no point in waiting until all barriers have been removed - young people are learning every minute of every day, and so it is better to guide them from the beginning." (Youth worker)

YOUNG PEOPLE AND PAID WORK

• WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED •

THIS STUDY QUESTIONS WHETHER THE JSA PROGRAM IS ADEQUATELY ASSISTING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE DISENGAGED FROM WORK OR STUDY. FROM THE INTERVIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE SURVEY OF YOUTH WORKERS A NUMBER OF NEEDS WERE IDENTIFIED.

INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people have valuable ideas and expertise about what works for them as young people and service users. To be effective in working with young people, JSA programs must involve young people in designing services and systems to ensure that they are youth-friendly and youth-focused. Young people need real opportunities to participate in all evaluations of the JSA system and to be empowered to provide ongoing feedback regarding their experiences with JSA providers.

CASEWORK SUPPORT

Changes should be made to the standardised high-volume, low-margin nature of the JSA program that serves as a perverse incentive to ignore the complex needs of the most disadvantaged job seekers.⁶⁵ It is essential that in-depth assessments are conducted to understand their particular circumstances and barriers to employment, leading to sustained, intensive and holistic casework. JSA providers should employ staff who are skilled at youth work and follow best-practice principle when working with young people.

A YOUTH-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

Young people need a relaxed, welcoming and accessible environment where they can connect with other young job-seekers. A youth-friendly environment creates a sense of belonging to a place, group and community, and fosters connection with other young people. These spaces make young people feel that other people that believe in them and support their dreams and goals. They are empowering to young people and convey the message that they are valued, respected and that their needs and concerns matter.

RELEVANT AND INTERESTING TRAINING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

On average, clients in jobs matched closely to client preferences remain in them almost twice as long as those in other jobs.⁶⁶ It is important that young people are assisted to find work or access training that they are interested in and which they find meaningful.

GREATER RECOGNITION OF SOCIAL AND NON-VOCATIONAL OUTCOMES

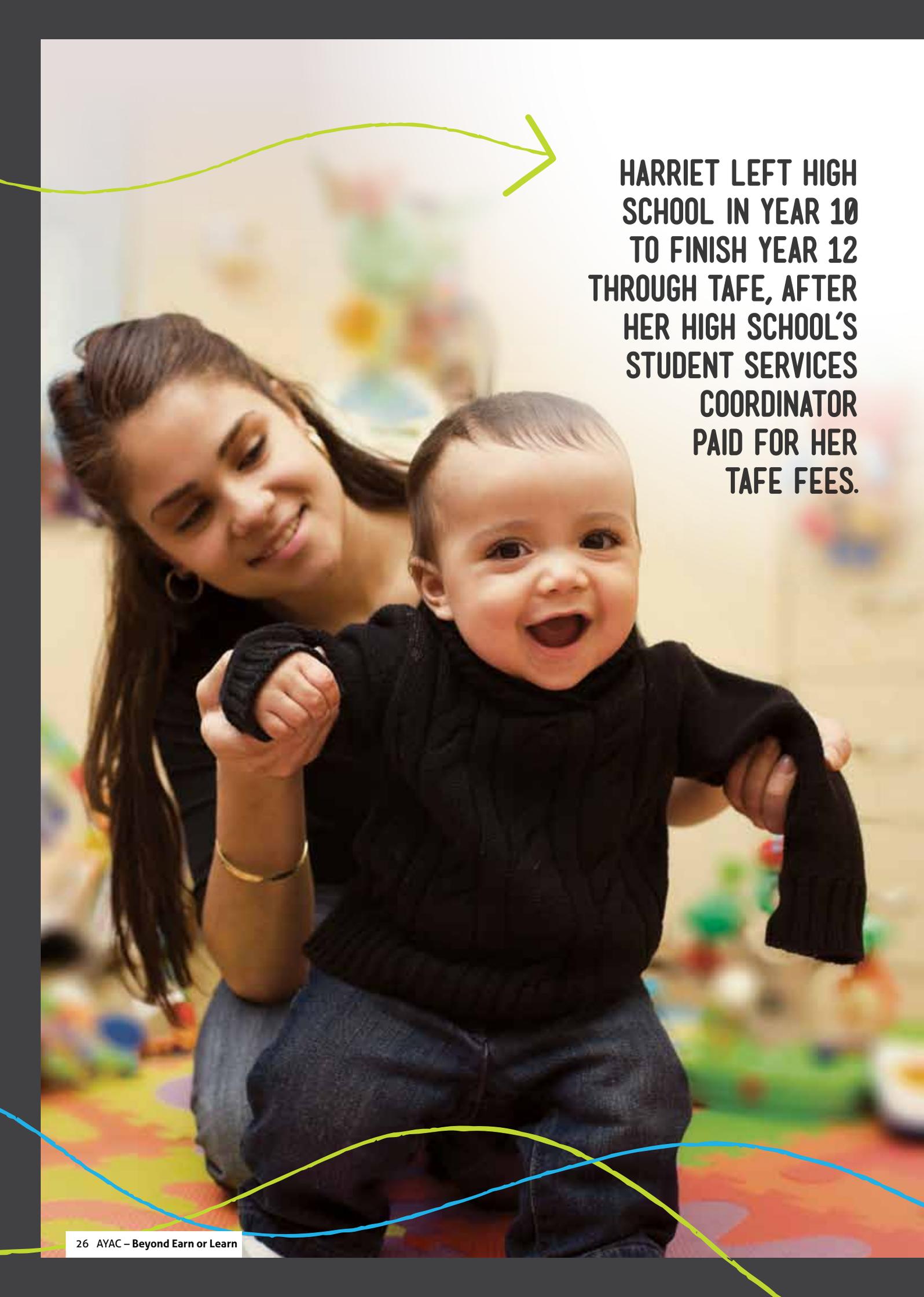
JSA funding contracts should recognise and financially reward providers for the achievement of social outcomes for disengaged young people, such as finding stable accommodation, entering counselling or completing language training. Social outcomes are critical steps in the pathway to achieving sustainable employment.⁶⁷

WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH OTHER SERVICES

JSA providers should be encouraged to work collaboratively with other specialised youth service providers or youth programs such as Youth Connections when it becomes evident that a young person's needs are not being adequately met by programs available from the JSA provider.



YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE VALUABLE IDEAS AND EXPERTISE ABOUT WHAT WORKS FOR THEM AS YOUNG PEOPLE AND SERVICE USERS. TO BE EFFECTIVE IN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, JSA PROGRAMS MUST INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE IN DESIGNING SERVICES AND SYSTEMS TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE YOUTH-FRIENDLY AND YOUTH-FOCUSED.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black top and a gold bracelet, is smiling and holding a baby. The baby is wearing a black sweater and dark pants, and is looking towards the camera with a happy expression. The background is a brightly lit playroom with colorful toys on the floor. A green arrow points from the top left towards the text on the right. A blue and green wavy line is at the bottom of the page.

HARRIET LEFT HIGH SCHOOL IN YEAR 10 TO FINISH YEAR 12 THROUGH TAFE, AFTER HER HIGH SCHOOL'S STUDENT SERVICES COORDINATOR PAID FOR HER TAFE FEES.

CASE STUDY

HARRIET'S STORY

AGE: 20

HOUSING:

Living with her mother and her daughter

EDUCATION / EMPLOYMENT:

Full-time parent

PRIMARY INCOME:

Sole parenting payment and baby bonus.

HARRIET DID NOT ENJOY HER TIME AT HIGH SCHOOL, DUE TO POOR TEACHING AND INACTION AGAINST SCHOOL BULLIES WHO HARASSED HER. TO COPE, HARRIET AND HER FRIENDS FREQUENTLY ABUSED ALCOHOL DURING SCHOOL TIMES - A PATTERN THAT PERSISTED AFTER SHE MOVED ON TO TAFE.

"I went to TAFE for about a week but because it was the one around the corner and all my mates were coming back to school and were drinking and doing what we were doing, so I would come here at recess and I wouldn't go back."

Since leaving TAFE, Harriet's life has included drug abuse, domestic violence and homelessness. Although she worked a few jobs and had some stable accommodation over that period, it wasn't until she fell pregnant that she began to reorder her priorities and make some life changes. Becoming a parent for the first time was the critical shift.

Now renting and living with her mother and her daughter, Harriet is fully dependent on the sole parenting payment and the baby bonus. Despite regular parenting payments, her finances are still tight; Harriet is ineligible for the full parental allowance because the child's father does not appear on the baby's birth certificate.

"I don't spend any money on myself. I spend everything on the baby and then there's no money left over."

She is critical of the volatility in her welfare payments and the administrative hurdles she has encountered with Centrelink.

"Your payment is always getting cut off, you know, you get reduced payments for reasons that you can't help. Getting onto the parenting payment was a bitch. It took me two months to get onto parenting payments."

She has had similar negative experiences with job agencies, finding their job search assistance ineffective.

"I had to go there but they were a joke, so I just never showed up. It was easier to find a job on my own because they don't know what they're doing."

However, Harriet's experiences with community support services have not been entirely negative. She credits a number of services, including a youth counselling service and a local youth centre as having a positive and balancing effect on her life. Although she had to stop attending the counselling service after turning 18, she still drops in at the youth centre to relax and socialise with friends.

IN THE FUTURE, HARRIET HOPES TO INCREASE HER INCOME ENOUGH TO BEGIN SENDING HER BABY TO CHILDCARE FOR TWO DAYS A WEEK - USING THIS TIME TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION AT TAFE OR A UNIVERSITY BRIDGING COURSE. SHE DOES NOT WANT TO BE ON WELFARE PAYMENTS FOR THE REST OF HER LIFE, AND WOULD LIKE TO GO TRAVELLING WHEN HER BABY IS A BIT OLDER.

As a single mother, Harriet is critical of the Australian Government's proposal to cut payments to young single parents who do not attend work or school for 25 hours a week after their child has turned one. She says that for many single young mothers like her, childcare is simply not affordable, even with the Commonwealth rebate. She is also concerned that her child will not be developed enough at that age to attend day care – and believes that three years old is a more realistic age.

YOUNG PEOPLE, INCOME SUPPORT AND CENTRELINK

RECEIVING WELFARE PAYMENTS

OF THE 27 YOUNG PEOPLE INTERVIEWED, 25 WERE RECEIVING EITHER YOUTH ALLOWANCE, NEWSTART, SOLE PARENTING PAYMENT AND/OR DISABILITY SUPPORT PAYMENTS. OVERALL, YOUNG PEOPLE WERE GRATEFUL TO RECEIVE WELFARE PAYMENTS TO ASSIST THEM WITH THE BASICS.

Young people understood why income support policies should encourage work and study. The idea of mutual obligations – the traditional ‘carrot and stick’ model – had some value for them in ensuring that young people set goals and reached them.

On the other hand, when asked how they would rate their experience of receiving income support payments and their experience of Centrelink on a scale of 1 - 10, 17 young people gave a rating below 5 and only four young people gave a rating of above 7, thus indicating deep frustration with the system and Centrelink services in general.

Most young people found being on payments “pretty tough” and that their payment covered only the bare minimum to live day-to-day. Karl found his Youth Allowance payment wholly inadequate as it was, “not even enough to have your own rental place so without youth organisations it’s kind of impossible to be anywhere but on the streets.”

There was little money for leisure:

“not unless you give up eating” (Anna).

For several of the young people, Youth Allowance did not even cover the basics.

“Well, I don’t eat nearly enough as I should because I can’t afford food. It’s really, like my uncle pressures me about saving, ‘You know, you’ve got to start saving even if it’s just \$50 a fortnight and keep it in the bank, and I just cannot do that because that’s \$50 that I need to live on. I just feel so useless on Youth Allowance.” (Kirstie)

For all the young people who lived independently of their families, welfare payments were simply not enough to save up towards a sustainable or independent lifestyle.

“Like I’ll always run out before I get paid when it’s like a whole week before I get paid, it’s like that every few payments. It’ll usually be if I’ve had to spend money on something that I don’t usually, like doctor’s visits where I have to get out a few scripts and stuff like that, that’s when it will run out before I get paid again.” (Janine)

Payments were also not always sufficient where family members were reliant on the young person’s payment. Many young people had parents who were unemployed or unable to work due to disability. For Noel, the pressure of supporting his single mother was an additional burden to his own physical and learning disability.

“Mum’s not doing any work anymore but she is just trying to better herself, but she has a few, like, anger and stress problems that she is struggling to deal with.”

A lack of adequate income support meant that some young people’s educational goals were thwarted. Kristie broke down in tears during her interview as she shared that her dream of becoming a beautician could not be realised as she could not afford the up-front private tuition fees that were now due.

“Well, I have a \$4,000 course at this other college and it has to be paid within the next 10 weeks and I have no job. I have a \$400 income every fortnight. I don’t know, see, I feel like I can’t last very long with anything, the stress just gets so hard. I’m going to go and talk to them tomorrow and I’m going to pull out because I can’t afford it!”

ATTITUDES TOWARDS PAYMENTS

It was not the preference of most of the young people to be dependent on income support payments. Charles’ view was typical.

"If Centrelink wasn't there it'd be harder, yeah, but at the same time, no one's really proud of being on Centrelink. I'd much rather be working."

Some thought the welfare system was fostering a negative dependency in young people. Stanley pointed out that payments might be counterproductive.

"I honestly don't even want Centrelink's money. I've seen it ruin more people than it helps. To give somebody who is homeless and uneducated all the money they're supposed to live on for two weeks at once isn't too bright, really."

Others expressed that receiving welfare payments felt to them like a personal failure.

"I want to be my own person, I don't really want their money. Like, I want to do shit for myself." (David)

Reliance on welfare payments can be a demeaning experience that leads to a loss of self-confidence and hope for a successful transition to independence. Kirstie described her first applying for Youth Allowance as a traumatic moment:

"I felt like I sold my soul the day that I got it. I feel like they own me."

CRITICISMS OF CENTRELINK SERVICES

Centrelink was the young people's main connection to the participation support system, yet, for most interviewees, their experience of customer service within Centrelink was frustrating and unhelpful. Charles summarised the general sentiment.

"The payment itself is useful but Centrelink is just useless, it's shit. But I need it because I can't live without it."

Recurring administrative issues for the young people included:

- not knowing which payment category they fell under, or not understanding why they were receiving a certain type of payment over another;
- a lack of support in negotiating with the system, particularly for those with low language and literacy skills;

- payments being cut off for unclear reasons or because they were not studying at an accredited institution recognised by Centrelink;
- difficulty in obtaining official identification papers and related documentation;
- not having a permanent address - most problematic for the homeless or those in transitional housing;
- failing to update the Centrelink database so that clients had to give staff the same information multiple times;
- long waiting times at the Centrelink office and also on the helpline with most waiting on hold for over an hour;
- difficulty in navigating the over-complicated Centrelink website and e-services;
- delay in payments and cancellation of payments if study load, or other circumstances changed without the young person updating Centrelink.

The young people were frequently critical of the contact they had with Centrelink staff about their entitlements and, in particular, were frustrated at contradictory advice, rude staff and unexpected payment cuts. The young people typically found the system confusing and did not have the eligibility criteria explained to them in a way they understood. This suggests an area for improved communication. For those with mental illness, in particular, the expectations of staff and a lack of understanding of mental health issues compounded the challenges those young people faced.

"You're just another case, it's like hurry up kind of thing, get this over and done with." (Boris)

Once again, the young people's experience of Centrelink reflected their experience overall of:

"being stacked in the systematic one-solution-fits-all kind of approach." (Stanley)

Many complained generally about the attitude of Centrelink customer service officers as judgmental, intimidating or unhelpful. Poor communication skills and negativity by some Centrelink staff contributed to difficulties in establishing rapport. Anna described the workers as, "zombies...they have no passion" and many felt Centrelink offices were uncomfortable and unwelcoming.

"Yeah I'm really scared to talk to Centrelink. Like, my uncle's been saying 'why don't you go in and ask them to subsidise some of the fees for my college?' I'm scared they'll say 'oh no you're in debt for this, this and this' like they scare the crap out of me. I can't even go into the office because I know that they'll have something to say." (Kirstie)

Some young people were consequently reluctant to disclose relevant information, sometimes leading to inaccurate assessment and difficulties handling problematic cases.

Negative experiences and long waiting times meant that some young people were reluctant to deal with Centrelink directly. Instead, they would go elsewhere, particularly to workers in youth agencies, for assistance and to sort out mistakes with the administration of Youth Allowance and Newstart.

Problematically, young people are not guaranteed to see an officer who understands the specific issues related to young people and youth services. And youth workers may not be able to contact Centrelink officers with greater expertise in youth payments to sort out problems for their clients.

If such advice or criticism is taken into consideration, situations like the one described by Amanda, would be resolved and job search services would be more effective.

"In regards to homeless young people, they need to deal with their personal problems before they can actually get into work and I feel that job networks and Centrelink, they need to know that people can't work if they've got mental illnesses that aren't resolved, full stop, and that's where I think they go wrong with a lot of young people. Because in this day and age, like there is thousands of homeless young people on the street every night and they don't deserve to be."

YOUNG PEOPLE, INCOME SUPPORT AND CENTRELINK

• WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED •

FROM THE INTERVIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE SURVEY OF YOUTH WORKERS
A NUMBER OF NEEDS WERE IDENTIFIED.

STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF CENTRELINK STAFF TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE

Centrelink officers who deal directly with the most marginalised young people need high-level interpersonal skills to develop rapport with young early school leavers and job seekers. A warm and a positive attitude and a willingness to listen and understand the complexity of the young people's lives is essential to properly engage disadvantaged young people and accurately assess and motivate them to seek further training or work. Centrelink should ensure that customer service officers who work with young people's cases have an interest in working with young people and have sound knowledge of the youth labour market, relevant employment training options, and youth services so they can provide practical assistance. Centrelink should provide ongoing training and skill development to customer service officers who express interest in the delivery of Youth Allowance.

REDESIGN THE WEBSITE, E-SERVICES, LETTERS, FORMS AND WRITTEN MATERIALS

Young people should be directly engaged in the redevelopment of online communication systems and the redesign of information so that young people can more effectively contact Centrelink and navigate the system.

ENABLE GREATER FACE TO FACE CONTACT TIME

Young people with the highest needs require greater on-site contact with staff who can devote maximum time and resources. Centrelink staff should conduct risk-based assessments to identify young people with multiple non-vocational barriers and then stream the most vulnerable job seekers to longer interviews.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE CENTRELINK YOUTH AND STUDENT TELEPHONE LINE

When young people contact Centrelink by phone they should be diverted to the dedicated Centrelink Youth and Student for more accurate advice and information. And when young people need to telephone the Centrelink call centre, waiting times must be reduced so that young people with limited incomes are not spending necessary funds on a large mobile phone bills.

IMPROVE AND INCREASE OUT-SERVICING ARRANGEMENTS WITH YOUTH SERVICES

Centrelink customer service officers should visit local youth services and flexible learning centres on a weekly basis to improve young people's access to Centrelink services.

EXPAND ACCESS TO INDEPENDENT ADVICE AND HELP WITH CENTRELINK PROBLEMS

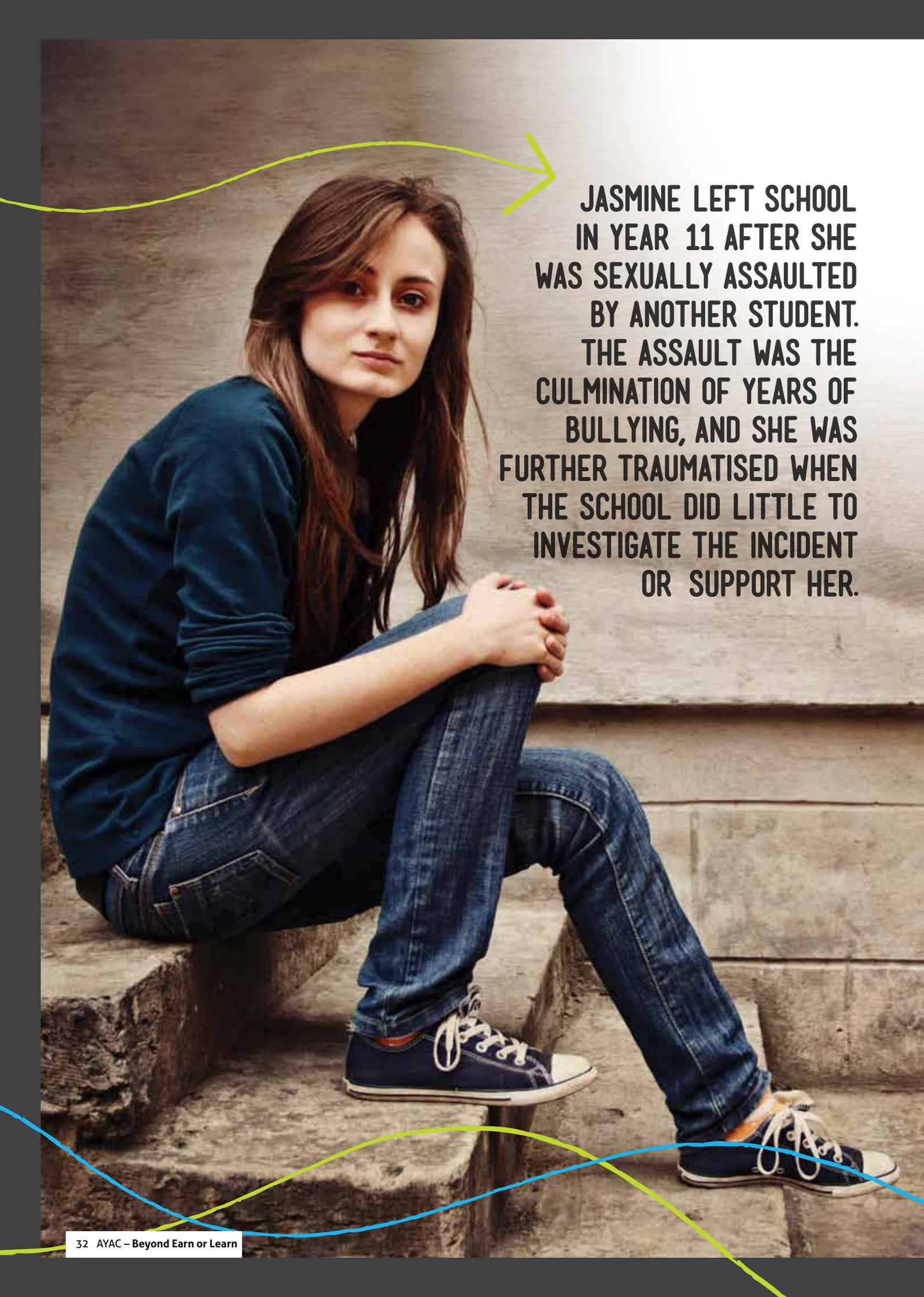
A network of specialist social security advice and advocacy services should exist throughout Australia enabling young job seekers to receive independent advice and to empower them to challenge Centrelink decisions where necessary.

BETTER INTEGRATION WITH EXTERNAL SERVICES

Centrelink customer service centres that engage young job seekers on Youth Allowance should be closely linked to services that provide links to employers and real employment opportunities such as community-based 'hub' models that offer an accessible entry point for young people with dedicated spaces for training, job search and information and support. Centrelink staff could also provide links with and referrals to local health, welfare, education and training organisations.

“IF CENTRELINK WASN’T THERE IT’D BE HARDER, YEAH, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, NO ONE’S REALLY PROUD OF BEING ON CENTRELINK. I’D MUCH RATHER BE WORKING.”





**JASMINE LEFT SCHOOL
IN YEAR 11 AFTER SHE
WAS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED
BY ANOTHER STUDENT.
THE ASSAULT WAS THE
CULMINATION OF YEARS OF
BULLYING, AND SHE WAS
FURTHER TRAUMATISED WHEN
THE SCHOOL DID LITTLE TO
INVESTIGATE THE INCIDENT
OR SUPPORT HER.**

CASE STUDY

JASMINE'S STORY

AGE: 18

HOUSING:

Living with a friend's family

EDUCATION / EMPLOYMENT:

Part-time student

PRIMARY INCOME:

Disability support pension

SINCE LEAVING SCHOOL, JASMINE HAS HAD SEVERAL RETAIL JOBS, BUT HAS BEEN UNSUCCESSFUL IN FINDING STABLE EMPLOYMENT BECAUSE OF HER MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND INSTANCES OF ABUSE AT WORK. AT ONE CAFE, HER EMPLOYER MADE UNWELCOME SEXUAL ADVANCES TOWARDS HER.

Although she is keen to complete Year 12, Jasmine is unclear about the alternative pathways available to her.

"I'm a bit confused about how to go to TAFE and do Year 12... I asked them and they said the only TAFE that does it is 10 km from my place and I'm like, 'Is that all the information you can give me?' and they're like, 'Yeah, that's it'. So I don't know if that's just theory subjects as well or if it's actually doing what I want to do to get my HSC."

Jasmine remains haunted by past experiences of bullying and domestic abuse. During childhood, Jasmine was the victim of both schoolyard bullying and domestic abuse, which created a stressful environment throughout her developing years. She withdrew from her peers and fell behind at school. This left her with a deep feeling of inadequacy. Recently, she has been diagnosed with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD, which have also undermined her ability to find paid work.

According to Jasmine, the employment and support services she has linked up with since leaving school have been insensitive to her mental health concerns. One worker at a job-search agency kicked her out and refused to see her again after Jasmine suffered an episode during a consultation. She has been passed between several job agencies and grown doubtful of their ability or interest in assisting her to find work.

"Every appointment I'd turn up to would be a five minute appointment and she'd say, 'Right you've turned up. I'll put down that you turned up and you can leave now'. That was my appointments with them."

While looking for work, she's been fully reliant on a disability support payment and is critical of Centrelink. She recently experienced volatile increases and decreases in her payments, without notice, subjecting her to unnecessary stress and unpredictability.

Jasmine is now studying visual art at a local community service that provides free creative arts courses to early school leavers. This course, along with Headspace, has been the most helpful support she has accessed. Her course has provided her with a sense of stability and routine, while giving her a valued creative outlet.

JASMINE HOPES TO FOLLOW HER PASSION FOR MUSIC AND OVERCOME HER MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES TO BECOME A HIGH SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHER. UNTIL THEN, SHE IS HOPING TO FIND A STABLE JOB.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND NON-GOVERNMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE LIVES OF DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE WHO FACE COMPLEX ISSUES. IN THIS STUDY, YOUNG PEOPLE RESPONDED MUCH MORE POSITIVELY TOWARDS LOCAL YOUTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES COMPARED TO GOVERNMENT-RUN SERVICES OR ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS CENTRELINK OR JSA.

SUPPORT FROM COMMUNITY YOUTH SERVICES

Young people spoke warmly of the individual moral and social support they received from youth workers in generalist youth services.

"I wasn't leaving my room at all...but it was just having a youth worker come and see me every day, get me out and about instead of isolating myself, and having someone to talk to who I know is not going to be judgmental." (Karl)

The caring attitude of staff was deeply valued. Young people want to feel a sense of willingness to help and genuine compassion from staff, trusting that the youth workers genuinely want to help them rather than be:

"workers who are only getting paid to do their work" (Andy)

While practical help with financial assistance, food, housing, health care was essential, the support they needed most were the relationships based on care and love from trained workers. For young people with a background of abuse and neglect, care relationships act as a powerful catalyst to face and overcome life's challenges.

"The staff have made all the difference. I suppose when I look back and I realise, initially it took me a couple of years before I could walk through these doors even though I knew they were here. I saw them as the people I related to as authority and I struggled to follow any kind of authority and so I saw these people as my teachers, police officers, family, so I stayed away from them. I just hung out on the steps at the front. But one thing they did have back then was pastoral care workers and people who'd just come out and have a chat. It was their job to have a chat to you and like they were real people. Eventually they got me into the services and did a world of good. Somebody who cared. And then I volunteered at this place for a couple of years." (Stanley)

In some cases, young people who maintained an ongoing relationship with their youth workers became volunteers at the service they had received help from, in an effort to 'give back' and assist other young people in similar situations. No young person expressed any appreciation or desire to reconnect with the government-run job services.

IMPROVEMENTS TO COMMUNITY YOUTH SERVICES

Young people often went through several services before finding one that could actually help them. *Janine* spoke about this in the context of homelessness.

"There are so many people that need housing. Like emergency housing is usually six weeks and transitional housing might be a few months to a year, but you still got to get moved around and if you don't find a transitional house, it's more refuges and more refuges and yeah, so there are so many people that need it so they have to get people out to get people in. Even though I'm in this refuge I know that I'm going to be thrown around to many different refuges for a while. That's what happens."

When asked whether community services required improvement, some young people voices a general concern that services should treat each person on an individual basis.

"We need to be responded to. As in they need to listen us more. We're not the same, everyone's different. Everyone has different goals and those differences need to be heard." (Gary)

As Alistair commented, they just want to be treated as "just normal" young people, no different to anyone else.

In regional areas of Australia, an increasing concern was voiced by a few young people around the number of services that were closing down.

"There's a big lack of help for disadvantaged children whether they're 10 years old or going to Year 12. I see my brother...and I see the same thing happening." (Janine)

The most disadvantaged young people who face long-term challenges with little family support rely quite heavily on vulnerable community youth services. Youth services are routinely de-funded during political transitions, yet without availability and sustainability, many of the gains made by marginalised young people are lost.

WHAT YOUTH WORKERS SAY

The majority of youth workers surveyed suggested that the best approaches for young people disengaged from education or employment are those that encourage engagement to help develop practical skills, confidence and self-esteem, and provide them with a sense of belonging. These can range from creative programs, mentor-based programs, education or practical skills-based learning programs. Initiatives that aim to address education and employment needs should allow other factors to be addressed first if basics like food and shelter are an issue. Again, the long-term presence of these essential programs and services is vital.

When asked whether there were sufficient supports for disengaged young people to re-engage with work or study, of 128 responses, the majority of youth workers (68%) said "no".

"It would be nice to say there are enough supports - I think that the right people are doing the right things generally, but we know that there are not enough mental health services to support our youth and we also know that there are some very marginalised people who may not be getting the support they need. We know that self esteem is the key to good health and that having a voice, being heard and having a purpose and being influential are core ingredients of self esteem." (Youth worker)

Those who believed that there are sufficient programs did, however, indicate that resources could be used better and more efficiently. While there may be sufficient programs, young people and their families often lack awareness of the existence of programs that could help. This is particularly so when it comes to preventative and early intervention support.

"A preventative approach is required to ensure all families with children are aware of this information to ensure informed decisions are made and info is readily available when required. Just like workers families are more likely to become confused as to what to do and who to turn to in situations where their child wishes to leave school early." (Youth worker)

And many of the most successful programs are not funded adequately, being either under-funded or dependent on short-term funding rounds.

Most, if not all, youth workers said that only the most intensive and holistic supports will work for disengaged and highly vulnerable young people.

"Most programs are unable to deal with all the issues - they can usually deal with education or wellbeing, not both. Programs also need to be long term - workers need to build relationships with clients and this takes time." (Youth worker)

"I find that often there is just so much going on for the young person that they do not know where to start and just having somewhere to guide them through the process can be very helpful." (Youth worker)

The importance of sustained relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults is vital in programs that assist young people disengaged from school or work. Young people from these backgrounds need continued adult contact – the kind of relationships that build trust and depth and understanding and don't require the young person to tell their story to multiple workers.

"Those in the system that go above and beyond to make a difference in the lives of young people. These people call the child in their own time and catch up with them out of hours to see that they're doing okay. People's lives do not stop after business hours are over." (Youth worker)

Support services that begin with in-depth assessments to cater to the individual needs of at risk young people were rated highly. Intensive casework that is flexible and tailored is central to the most successful approaches, involving young people in the discussion from the start about how the problem can be addressed.

"Ongoing long term support that can be adapted as the young person develops or that can respond to crisis or slow progress. Flexibility is key, the young. People we work with have complex and varied challenges, one size of service delivery does not fit all and service providers struggle when only funded to do so or limits by their ability to innovate or collaborate." (Youth worker)

Some of the most successful programs focus on strengths and skills, and trying to reconnect young people with other young people with similar interests, giving them a sense of purpose and routine in their life. Sports and creative art and music programs are a way to engage young people by using a strengths-based approach that focuses on what the young person is good at to help them their confidence and self-esteem.

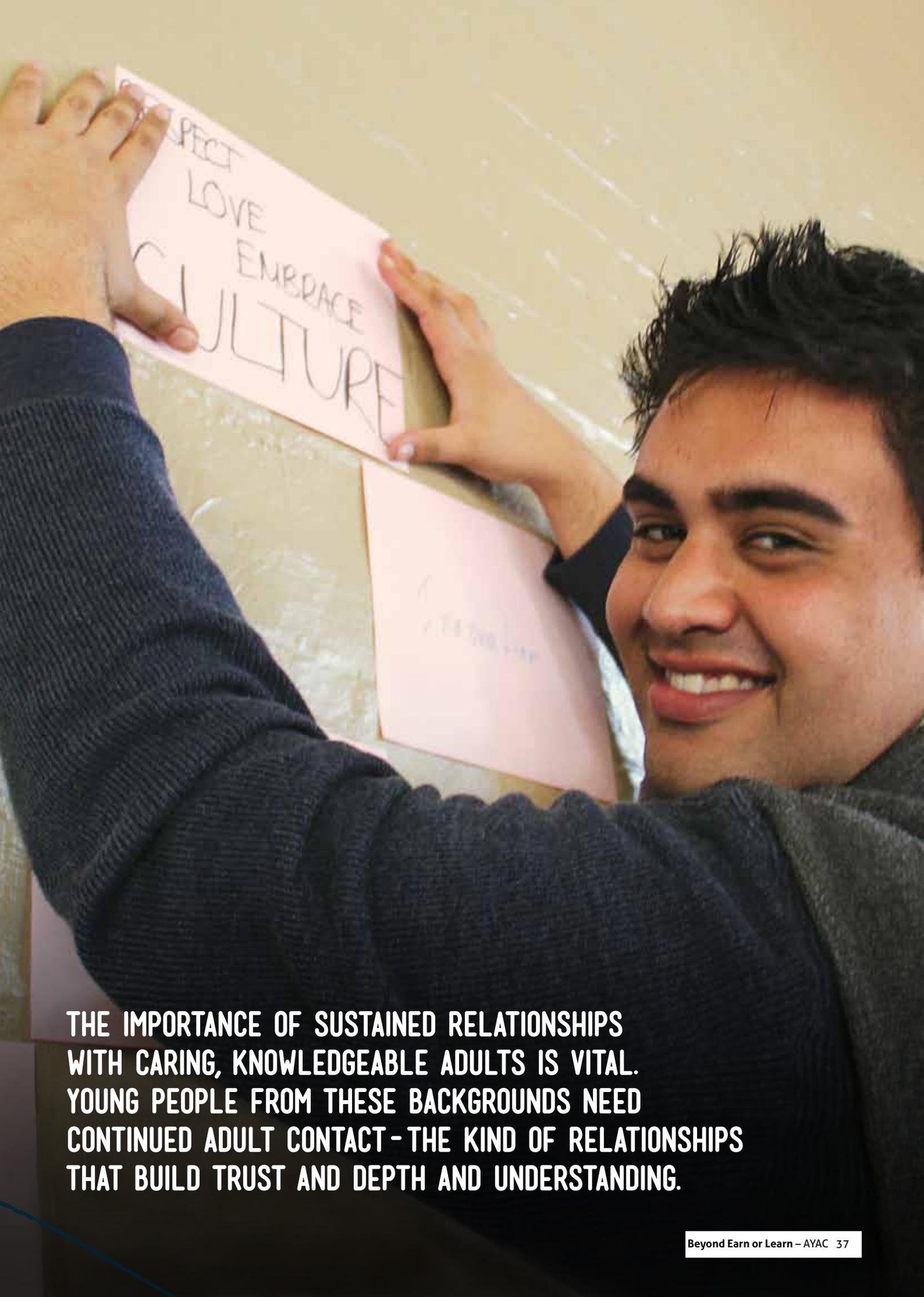
YOUNG PEOPLE AND NON-GOVERNMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

• WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED •

THE RESEARCH INDICATED A NUMBER OF BEST-PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR YOUTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES THAT WORK TO SUPPORT THE MOST VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE.

IN BRIEF, YOUNG PEOPLE NEED:

- programs that place young people's needs at the centre, rather than targets or quotas;
- environments that are youth friendly as well as visible and accessible;
- sustained and ongoing support to young people who need stable relationships;
- a caring relationship-based approach;
- staff with specialised expertise in working with young people and knowledge of the youth sector;
- structured programs that offer individualised assessment and flexible interventions as each young person experiences different barriers and different reasons as to why they have left school and are not in education, training or employment;
- services that are culturally sensitive and appropriate to the specific barriers faced by Indigenous and CALD young people and that provide appropriate and adequate supports.



THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARING, KNOWLEDGEABLE ADULTS IS VITAL. YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THESE BACKGROUNDS NEED CONTINUED ADULT CONTACT - THE KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS THAT BUILD TRUST AND DEPTH AND UNDERSTANDING.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FUTURE

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE EXPECT OR WANT

WHEN ASKED TO RATE HOW THEY FELT ABOUT THE FUTURE ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10, 11 OF THE 27 YOUNG PEOPLE INTERVIEWED GAVE A RATING OF 5 OR LOWER.

Five of the young people felt very distressed and fearful about their future. However, four young people felt genuinely hopeful about the future. The most hopeful interviewees were single parents who had a parent or a sibling to support them. Having a small child had reconnected these young parents with their own families giving them a stronger sense of connectedness, support and optimism. Most young people, however, were blasé about their future prospects. The focus was much more on their present worries than about what could or would happen in the medium to long-term future.

It was evident that those who felt positive about their future also had positive experiences with youth support services and were currently working collaboratively on their employability skills and education. Five young people had gone back to the service to volunteer and continue an ongoing relationship with that worker or service provider because they knew how important and life-changing the support service was for them. For *Jocelyn*, this was very much the case.

"Because I grew up with youth workers and they actually changed what I wanted to be. I used to want to be a schoolteacher... until I saw what they done and stuff and it just drew me to go and do what they do because I'd understand what some of the kids would be coming from. Like some workers they go, 'I know where you're coming from' but they actually haven't been through what you're going through whereas I can say, 'I do know'."

Many young people expressed that building self-confidence was a key factor in overcoming many of their problems. When asked what contributed to having a positive feeling about the future, *Anna* said that it was the particular experience with a caring Centrelink caseworker that had helped her feel a sense of self-worth.

"Just like showing kids that they actually mean something and aren't worthless, because like one person can change someone's life, like that Centrelink lady, she changed my life. She didn't have to, but she went out of her way for me. I want to go out of my way for other young people, you know, and actually make something of themselves because like I said I don't know where I'd be if I wasn't doing the course now."

Having adequate support networks and "just knowing where I want to go" (*Karl*) helped create optimism and hope. On the other hand, almost half of the young people interviewed felt that their future was likely to be as unstable as their present. *Joseph* voiced this sentiment well.

"In the next 5 or 10 years, honestly, I'd just like to be alive. Honestly, I am not good with the future. I have never thought about it...so I tend to more live in the now rather than the future and the past, because the past sucks and the future is scary, so I'll stay right here thanks."

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DAMAGING PAST EXPERIENCES SAID THEY COULD NOT 'SEE' THEIR FUTURE OR KNOW WHAT THEY WANTED TO BECOME. THE UNKNOWN FOR WAS SCARY OR UNSTABLE RATHER THAN BRIGHT AND EXCITING.

For others, their pessimism came from having had no experience of another life other than the one they were currently living. When asked what she thought about the future, *Amanda* focused on her current financial realities.

"I know for a fact I could never buy my own house, I could never rent my own house, I can't afford it."

THE NEAR FUTURE

Most of the young people who were engaged in some sort of study or planned to engage in further study felt mostly positive. Studying symbolised a new opportunity or door to another kind of life.

"Everybody's like 'what do you want to do?' I don't know. I figure I'll go on to uni and hopefully find something I like and try and make a career of it." (Caleb)

Plans for further education gave the most disengaged young people a sense of motivation and hope.

"All I really look at when I look at my future is to at least have a job and be living independently." (Caleb)

Unlike the aspirations of more affluent young people, the interviewees were uncomplicated in their goal-setting.

"Realistically speaking, I would like to have a full time job. Have my own place and a family and whatnot, that's pretty much it. I want the simple life really. I don't want anything fancy." (Gary)

FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PROSPECTS

Young people who hoped to go onto further study based their decision on practical realities.

"Because you get more qualifications and stuff and hopefully having a place to call your home." (Jocelyn)

Yet many of the young people in this study were well aware that they may well be entrenched in a cycle of poverty and would continue to face formidable social and psychological barriers. Many shared *Amanda's* view below.

"It depends on the day, it really, really does. I can feel like nah, I'm not going to achieve anything and I'm just going to be a welfare person all my life. Other times I'm like, determined to get out of the cycle of welfare because my mum was on welfare and my nanna's on welfare and my sister's on welfare."

When asked whether they wanted to pursue further study, most young people said that they knew they needed to equip themselves to get a decent job and move off welfare dependency. *Jocelyn* was determined to continue study.

"Because I've always wanted to do it, because no one else in my family has done it. And I'm going to be the first in my family."

WHAT IS A 'POSITIVE OUTCOME' FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The majority of youth workers surveyed believed that a 'positive outcome' for marginalised and disengaged young people could be defined in any number of ways, and what counts as 'success' is unique to each young person. Positive outcomes may mean: the development of creative and practical life skills, developing a sense of self-worth, building positive relationships, a commitment to study or employment, a desire to want to achieve their own goals, that they attended class, when they feel involved and included in the community, to name a few. A positive outcome can be anything that is a step towards their individual goals and life aspirations, where they can recognise and define the positive changes in themselves or that they can see what they want in life and start aiming towards it.

"The students I have worked with are in different places so this is hard to answer. Outcomes for young people I have supported can be the fact they are alive today, they made it to class, no-one hurt them last night, they had breakfast, they passed a basic test, they were able to borrow a sports uniform, they had bus fare today..." (Youth worker)

ALTHOUGH MANY YOUNG PEOPLE CONVEYED A LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN THEIR FUTURES, THERE REMAINS - NONETHELESS - HOPE. FOR VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE, A BETTER FUTURE STARTS WITH A FEW SMALL STEPS FORWARD.

CONCLUSION

FACTORS COMPOUNDING DISADVANTAGE

A VAST BODY OF RESEARCH CONFIRMS THE VALUE OF SCHOOL COMPLETION. BUT THIS STUDY, LIKE MOST AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH, REVEALS A SIGNIFICANT LEVEL OF DISSATISFACTION AND FRUSTRATION AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE CONCERNING THEIR SCHOOLING AND LEVEL OF SUPPORTS RECEIVED.

However, the greatest concerns must centre on the most vulnerable students, who not only lag far behind in academic attainment, but in the most basic life skills. In this study, the young people who struggled the most to engage in learning or earning were facing the most serious and significant barriers to engagement – often leaving both home and school to escape violence, leaving school as a result of bullying and harassment from other students, mental ill-health and social problems, chronically low self-confidence and a lack of family support.

While policymakers use income support and mutual obligations like Learn or Earn that require young people to participate in job-search, job-placement or training activities to maximise their chances in the labour market, this study shows that even though young people themselves appreciate their welfare payments and understand that you 'can't get something for nothing', the policy imperative that underpins Learn or Earn, does not match the aspirations, or support the often-complex needs, of many disadvantaged young people.

Systemic issues within the conventional education system – the perception of schools as authoritarian systems, the lack of support when it comes to helping young people with their wellbeing and self esteem, the lack of support for their own learning needs, the unqualified bias towards academic success, and the lack of focus on the creative or vocational subjects that build the skills many young people really want and need – all act as barriers to engagement with learning and make completing Year 12 a near impossibility for a large cohort of young people as they face a vast array of complex personal issues.

Promoting Year 12 retention and fostering greater levels of participation in education is a valid goal, however, one-size-fits-all policies fail to match the diverse needs of each individual young person. This study shows that the current Learn or Earn program is not working for the most highly marginalised and socially excluded. Too many young people are still on the outside looking in.

RETHINKING 'SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS'

Australia needs to rethink the measures used to indicate whether transitions have been positive or successful for some young people. For young people who lag behind the conventional school system, these measures must also take into account young people's multiple activities and focus on a broader concept – young people's wellbeing.⁶⁸ Many of the 20% or so of young people who leave school before Year 12⁶⁹ may have very good reasons why education is not the best place for them. Some of the young people in this study left school because Year 12 was not going to lead them to the kind of work they were interested in. Most were pushed out of education due to dissatisfaction with school or painful life circumstances.

For the most marginalised young people, completing Year 12 might not be a valid path for them, where alternative pathways might lead to better outcomes. Positive outcomes for the young adults in our study included volunteering at a youth service, securing permanent housing or developing their creative art skills. 'Work or study' does not seem the most appropriate indicator of a 'successful' transition for these young people at this stage of their lives.



WHILE THE DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING ARE REAL, THE ANSWER IS TO ADDRESS THE REASONS THAT LEAD STUDENTS TO LEAVE SCHOOL EARLY, AND PROVIDE ADEQUATE SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS THAT LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES FOR THOSE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DISENGAGE DESPITE SUCH IN-SCHOOL ARRANGEMENTS.

NON-LINEAR PATHWAYS AND PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

The Learn or Earn program is strongly oriented towards the concept of a linear trajectory⁷⁰ through school, leading to further or higher education and then on to work and adulthood. The aim is to keep young people on linear pathways to finish Year 12 regardless of their social circumstances, prioritising standardised policies that don't work. This study indicates that Year 12 retention as a goal has its limitations and that Learn or Earn diverts attention away from the actual deficits of current conventional schooling and away from the more difficult task of delivering high quality education for all young people.

A better approach is to offer young people multiple 'detours'⁷¹ from a rigid and linear schooling pathway. These detours would be considered successful if the young person could use that time to gain self-esteem, access non-vocational support or whatever would help them address the barriers in their individual context. Detours could mean a educationally disengaged young person engages with youth services and a specialist alternative education centre or vocational training. Once the needs of the young person are met during their time away from school, the system should offer them alternative routes back into education.⁷² Given the results of this study, detours and non-linear pathways to educational attainment should not be seen as a problem to be prevented, but rather as necessary and indeed inevitable for some young people, and more productive than being forced to stay in school.

AYAC's research, based on the first-hand experiences of young people and youth workers, shows that local, intensive, and highly flexible community-based models of education and support are the most effective in helping young people to remain engaged in their learning. Approaches built around the needs of the disengaged young person make the biggest difference in their lives. These sorts of initiatives have the ability to validate a young person's own self-belief, build practical life skills, form more solid relationships and support networks and create a long-lasting sense of independence. However, this study also indicates that these models are far too

rare. However, if our most vulnerable young people are to succeed, there needs to be this kind of long-term involvement in a young person's life that deals with their individual and changing needs.

It is also clear, however, that the Australian Government is genuinely interested in reassessing current approaches to addressing disadvantage amongst school aged students. The 2011 Gonski Review of school funding concluded that a "significant shift is required in the way all governments provide funding to address educational disadvantage" citing the failure of many existing programs to identify and address individual student needs.⁷³ The Gonski Review concluded that attention and funding must be directed to those disadvantaged students who need it most – and AYAC agrees. Efforts to increase Year 12 attainment need to focus on disadvantaged groups who face the greatest challenges and have the greatest needs for support. The general will of the Australian Government to improve employment outcomes for young people is to be applauded, but a concentrated focus on barriers is required.

This report offers some recommendations on how this should occur.

HOW CAN AUSTRALIA IMPROVE YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING OR EARNING?

RECOMMENDATIONS

LEARN OR EARN



Support the Gonski Review

Governments should refocus attention and funding to disadvantaged students who need it most.



Redefine successful outcomes

Policy makers should expand the Learn or Earn agenda beyond work and learning to focus on young people's broader wellbeing, and offer alternative routes that do not necessarily include completion of Year 12 for the most disengaged young people.



Involve young people

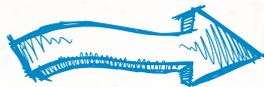
Governments should consult directly with young people as primary consumers of education and key stakeholders to discuss the issues they face in the development and implementation of policies and programs designed to help them finish Year 12 or find work.

EDUCATION



Address reasons young people leave school

Policies that aim to encourage education and workforce participation should focus on the often significant personal and systemic causes of early school leaving.



Encourage non-linear pathways

Detours to educational attainment should be supported as necessary and inevitable for some young people.



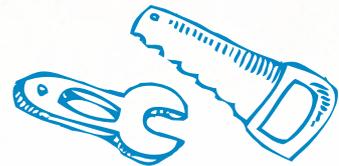
Increase funding to alternative and flexible learning options

Non-threatening, supportive, flexible, "hands on" approaches to learning are the most effective in helping vulnerable young people to remain engaged in their learning. Governments should create a national system of second-chance opportunities for early school leavers to complete their schooling in ways that suit them best.



A whole-of-school approach

Conventional schooling should offer academic and wellbeing support within schools by up-skilling school teachers and also providing additional wellbeing support workers for the most disadvantaged students.



A varied and flexible curriculum

The conventional school system should provide a greater emphasis on applied skills, practical learning, employability and life skills in secondary education curricula.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT



Improve income support

Young people on low incomes are entitled to income support payments that reflect real living costs so that they can afford life's essentials – like food, rent, health, education, transport and clothing.



Ensure that all government programs are genuinely youth-friendly

JSA providers and Centrelink services should be considerate of the specific needs of highly disadvantaged young job-seekers and improve online and offline access to appropriately trained JSA & Centrelink staff.



Strengthen the capacity of Centrelink and JSA staff

The Australian Government should ensure that Centrelink customer service officers and JSA staff working directly with the most disengaged school leavers have the training, interest, interpersonal skills and expertise in working with vulnerable young people. This includes Centrelink outreach staff to build connection and rapport with young people in local youth services.



Relevant training and work experience

The Australian Government should ensure JSA providers offer young people assistance to find meaningful work or access training that they are genuinely interested in. JSA providers should be rewarded when they help young people gain positive social or non-vocational outcomes.



Increased collaboration

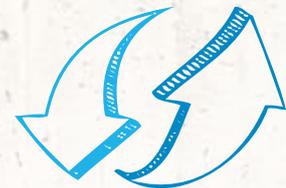
JSA providers and Centrelink should work collaboratively with other specialised youth service providers or youth programs when it becomes evident that a young person's needs are not being adequately met by programs available within their organisation.

YOUTH SERVICES



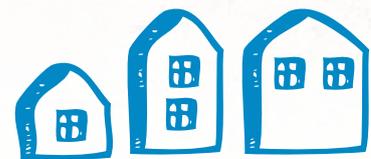
Fund youth workers

Governments should draw on successful flexible, community-based models of support that place young people's needs at the centre to support disadvantaged young people.



A coherent, integrated youth service system

All programs that directly work with unemployed early school leavers should be prioritised and properly funded. They must offer intensive, tailored, flexible and long-term provision that addresses the complex and specific barriers to engagement via a caring relationship-based approach.

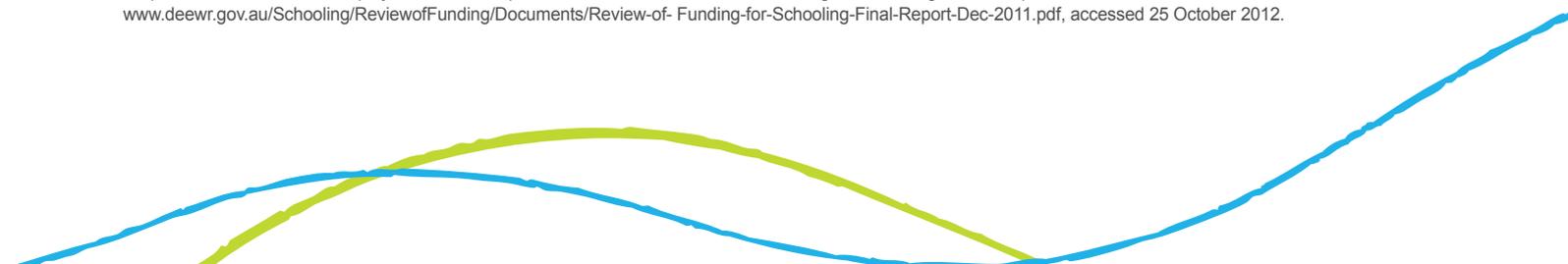


Evaluation of local programs

Further investment into evaluation of aspects of non-government programs that provide positive outcomes for young people who are disadvantaged is needed, and the feasibility of incorporation into other programs and mainstream school systems.

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