Refereed Conference Paper

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Youth Education Centre - Partnerships in Practice

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Youth Education Centre (YEC) is a multi-campus public school providing educational and training services in South Australia for young people in secure care and outreach programs for disconnected youth within the broader community. It is part of the federally funded Partnerships Outreach Education Model (POEMs) initiative project identifying what works for young people who, for a variety of reasons, are not accessing traditional schooling options. The project has been extended as part of the South Australian government’s Social Inclusion reference of School Retention. The hypothesis being tested is that 

*a broader connectedness* between government and non-government agencies, industry, church, sporting clubs and community members provides real partnerships, and achievable, supported pathways for disconnected young people.

The fabric meshing these interagency partnerships is education and training, based on learning plans developed and shared by participating agencies.

Our challenge is to engage disconnected young people in education and then support them through the transitional labour market phase from education to employment.

We have developed a model (referred to as the Virtual School, due to its many locations) that increases the retention of disconnected young people by providing positive education, training and life outcomes in partnerships with a range of agencies and strategic alliances. It includes:

- Re-connecting disconnected young people with their learning
- Valuing current educational learning experiences in all settings and providing accreditation within existing structures
- Connecting services working with disconnected young people in order to provide linked up effective service responses with long-term individualised support and a diverse range of learning and employment opportunities
- Developing and implementing strategic partnerships with industries to provide real and supported employment pathways
- Identifying policies and practices, which currently contribute to disconnectedness and become involved in a policy shaping process.

Our focus is to work in partnership with a range of government and non-government agencies and industries at a transition time for those youth most disconnected from the community. This transitional state for our youth was represented by ‘churning or revolving doors’, lack of access to services, education and employment and social exclusion. Due to the multiplicity of needs of disconnected young people, this group experiences a range of other life transitions such as home to homelessness, juvenile detention to community, adding to the complexity of this transitional labour market phase. In his discussion of transitional labour markets, Schmid describes our cohort accurately when he says

“and young people who do not get the chance to demonstrate their capacities, skills and ingenuity will sooner or later revolt, or they will (at best) become politically apathetic or (at worst) criminal.”
Our research findings about support structures and practices needed during this transitional labour market phase closely align with the work cited by Schmid in this article.

Context
The context for our pilot project is summarised in the following quote from the ‘Summary Report from the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001’ - “…our urgent attention is needed to address the complex disadvantage facing those who are already disconnected from family, social or school networks. Unfortunately our responses are typically delivered by a fragmented service network, which does not organise effectively around young people’s needs. While the problems these young people face are deeply interconnected, our responses are simply not joined up.” The report refers to the way forward as “…a vision where we all work in partnership to enable young people to achieve their goals and aspirations. This is a challenge for all sectors of our community.”

Our work has been extended via the South Australian government’s Social Inclusion initiative of School Retention. In their publication, Making Connections, which outlines the School Retention reference, the Social Inclusion Unit states that in implementing this strategy, they aim to

- “Connect young people with their own futures through responsive education and the right to learning opportunities;
- Connect services and policies from across government so that they serve young people better; and
- Connect with young people’s lives in the broadest sense so that young people in turn feel connected with the community.”

This highlights the similar philosophy underpinning both federal and state government initiatives in this area.

Other relevant research about our target group is cited in the Homel Report, which refers to intervention at key transition points – high stress, high vulnerability, low support and high opportunity. Our work focuses on the transition of disconnected young people moving from secure or alternative care, from primary to secondary school, at a point prior to ‘entering the Juvenile Justice’ system or when moving from the juvenile justice to the adult correctional system. It is based on the need for a diverse range of interventions so that young people can access developmentally appropriate interventions. We were reminded relatively early in our action research that there is not a lineal pathway through the different aspects of intervention. Each young person requires an articulated, individualised, intensively supported and coordinated case management plan that is regularly monitored and adjusted to meet his or her current priorities, so that future options are not lost and second generational effects are minimised. Within the POEMs Pilot and the School Retention initiative, there is regular reference to Learning Plans that are developed
with the young person and all key stakeholders. The plan establishes a pathway through community, school and beyond, addressing issues before and as they arise at a range of transition points, thereby providing a tool of case management.

Furthermore Schmid stated that “...high and persistent long-term unemployment as one of the main causes of social exclusion requires institutional arrangements, especially active labour market policies, that reduce the inflow into and speed up the outflow out of long-term unemployment back into employment. To implement this strategy, special attention has to be given to the modernisation of public and private employment services and networks that foster co-operation among key factors at the local and regional level.”

Schmid adds “‘Social exclusion’ in the narrow sense refers not necessarily to the fact of having little chances on the labour market or being unemployed. It relates to the personal reaction of discouragingly withdrawing from the labour market. ..........This is the reason why social exclusion is most dangerous for young people who never had the chance to prove their capabilities. In addition, enforced social exclusion in one dimension, here from participation in the labour market, leads often to marginalisation and exclusion in other dimensions – such as in cultural life, in a decent economic prosperity or in the political arena. Successful adjustment to critical events depends on several factors: on the way people perceive the change, on the supportive environment, and on individual characteristics.”

**Target Group**
The Virtual School target group is young people aged 13 – 19 years, who have become disconnected from mainstream education; families; community; peers and community learning environments. The group includes young people with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Inability to access mainstream pathways
- Very limited literacy and numeracy skills
- Currently serving detention orders
- Have involvement in the Juvenile Justice System
- Are under ‘Guardianship Of the Minister’ order
- Current clients of Children, Youth and Family Services
- Are marginalised in terms of resources and support networks.

This target group is very transient and comes in contact with a number of government and non-government agencies through a variety of ways. These include court directed orders such as Community Service Orders or conditions as part of their early release from detention, alternative sentencing options such as Family Conferencing, voluntarily accessing programs to gain skills of a vocational or lifeskills nature and through chronic non-attendance or accessing services in the health or welfare arena. These ‘windows of opportunity’ allow agencies to engage, develop Learning Plans and offer programs and case management for these young
people. Although not wanting to access traditional learning pathways or institutions, most of these young people display a willingness to engage with some form of productive education or developmental activity providing they perceive it meets their needs and expectations.

**The Virtual School Model**
The Virtual School encompasses some twenty sites within metropolitan Adelaide across a range of government, non-government agencies and businesses/industries. Our key partners are Children Youth and Family Services (CYFS), a government organisation, and Service to Youth Council (SYC), a non-government organisation. Other partners include Salvation Army, Eastside SA Incorporated, Centrelink, Adelaide Community Development Employment Program, Bridgestone Australia, CMV Truck Sales, KFC, Cummins and RED Australia. These partners provide referral points, deliver programs and are training venues. YEC plays the role of ‘front office’ for the Virtual School in terms of enrolment, auspicing, accreditation and data collection. Virtual School staff meet each term sharing resources, strategies and programs. This same group assists in the development of policies and procedures surrounding the Virtual School.

The educational program within the Virtual School is based on the Employment Skills Training (EST) Certificate 1, which meets the needs of these disconnected young people as it has a vocational focus underpinned with literacy and numeracy and is self-directed in terms of delivery mode and assessment procedures. The certificate is within their ability range, has a practical focus and provides the success and positive experiences these young people so desperately need with their learning. Accreditation is via auspicing arrangements Youth Education Centre has with Regency Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and provides the educational currency and pathway to programs, training and the world of work for these young people. To reinforce achievement and celebrate success all participating young people are presented with a ‘Statement of Attainment’ immediately following the completion of individual modules. On completion of the designated hours of training and work they receive the complete EST Certificate 1.

As most of these young people’s lives are in a state of continual flux, the Virtual School allows for the ongoing change in their lives and consequently meets their needs. A prerequisite for all students enrolling in the Virtual School is that they develop a Learning Plan in consultation with the current key person working with them. This plan identifies whether or not there is a need for the young person to be involved in one or more of the Virtual School programs and helps identify what multi-agency support is required. Programs developed to meet the diverse needs of our target group within the Virtual School include:

- **Secure Care Education and Lifeskills.** Education and Children, Youth and Family Services staff jointly deliver the Employment Skills Training Certificate 1 within the two juvenile detention centres as part of the core education program.
Using this certificate aligns the young person with the same currency of education used in pathway options upon their release.

- **General Education Course.** This is a literacy/numeracy rich program providing re-engagement programs for disconnected youth who cannot and will not, for a variety of reasons, access mainstream education. In collaboration with CYFS we have expanded the program delivery to include two sites in order to increase options and improve accessibility.

- **Short Courses.** These courses are of 3 – 5 days in duration and run for forty weeks of the year. The majority are nationally and state accredited and delivered at various sites across the Adelaide metropolitan and country areas. The programs include car, motor bike, forklift and skid steer licensing, hair and beauty, KFC retail training, Aboriginal art, viticulture, web site production, café skills, tyre fitting, puppetry, welding, car detailing and supporting babies needs.

- **Partner Delivered Programs.** These accredited educational programs are delivered across the Virtual School sites that are located within key partnership agencies and have qualified Certificate IV Workplace Assessors. Programs delivered include Independent Living Skills, Behaviour Management, Personal Health and Hygiene and computing.

- **Engagement programs.** These programs, 1-5 days in duration, have engagement as their primary focus. They include camps, rock climbing, sporting events, industry and educational tours, leisure activities and bushwalking.

- **Mobile Training Units.** YEC developed and constructed a mobile tyre fitting training unit, sponsored by Bridgestone Australia who provide work placements and the auspicing arrangements for industry accredited training. With the assistance of RED Australia a forklift was purchased and reconditioned by young people as part of a work program. This is currently being mobilised and will deliver similar outreach training programs. These training programs demonstrate the collaboration and sponsorship that industries have projected into accredited training programs.

- **Transition Opportunities Through Employment Mentoring (TOTEM).** We are developing a database of 60 employers committed to offering disconnected young people the opportunity to do work shadowing, work experience and possibly gain full or part time employment. Employers will each nominate a workplace mentor trained by the major partners Service to Youth Council (SYC), Children, Youth and Family Services and Youth Education Centre, who will be directly responsible in supporting the young person during the workday. SYC will provide community based trained mentors for the students outside of work hours.

- **Counselling and Advocacy.** All young people have access to counselling and youth worker support in terms of health, advocacy, accommodation, drug and alcohol and other emergencies. They are directed to specialist or professional support where required. Where young people require intensive support for job interviews and other activities they are provided an advocate.
• **Taste of TAFE.** One day a week young people have the opportunity to work on the Employment Skills Training Certificate (EST) 1 and the Introduction to Vocational Education Certificate 2 within a TAFE campus. The program helps to allay fears of tertiary education, gives first hand experience of adult learning environments and provides pathways for students having completed the EST certificate.

• **Building Links.** This program involves groups of students working four days each week with a private building contractor and YEC staff to renovate South Australian Housing Trust homes. The students gain first hand experience of working with trades people and achieving industry set standards. The program includes Structured Work Placements and provides students with the opportunity to gain Certificate 1 in Construction. This will also offer dual accreditation through the SA Certificate of Education (SACE).

This model was evaluated by Miles-Morgan as part of the external evaluation of the Partnerships Outreach Education Model Pilot. In their report they stated ‘The YEC appears to be succeeding in a very difficult and ambitious task. They have developed a new and innovative model of education and service provision, which appears, on initial indications to be quite successful in engaging and retaining highly at-risk youth in educational and vocational pathways. The service model relies on extensive community partnerships and linkages, without which it could not succeed. The programme is managing to engage a client population who have already demonstrated little interest in conventional educational options.’

**Action Research Findings**
Within our action research, we have identified the **critical components** of our project as coordination, partnerships, systems response for multi and cross agency collaboration, information sharing by professionals, specialised funding arrangements for agencies, processes, skilled facilitators, responding to young people and structures. Our action research findings closely parallel the findings of Schmid re the four criteria (C1 – C4) for ‘good’ transitional labour markets. He states that these are empowerment; sustainable employment and income; flexible coordination and co-operation.

In this paper we will discuss our action research findings under Schmid’s four factors, although not in the same order. Our overwhelming finding is that partnerships are essential for this target group during this transitional phase, but require coordination, a key factor for success.

**Empowerment**
Schmid described empowerment as the criteria in which “they empower individuals faced with critical life events; the challenge is to increase the capacity of individuals to cope with the (new) risks of social life……..(C1=Empowerment).”
Many of our target group have had negative life, educational and vocational experiences resulting in low self-esteem. To empower our disconnected youth to successfully move out of this transitional phase, they need to experience success in meaningful educational, vocational and life experiences to improve their personal capacity. Within our action research, our findings show that an intensively supportive and success-oriented environment underpins our ‘partnerships culture’. In true partnerships there is genuine support of each other (all partners) celebrating success. It is vital for our cohort to celebrate ‘genuine’ milestones, not ‘created’ milestones and as such we provide a curriculum in which these successes can be genuinely acknowledged.

It is critical that we recognise and facilitate education in its broadest sense. This holistic approach must focus on the individual’s needs and link them with service and support agencies that assist them in achieving their goals. There is much research that articulates the vital components of successful education for disconnected youth. These include:

- Young people experiencing success
- Teaching for relevance
- The importance of the relationship between the learner and the teacher/facilitator
- Empowering young people to access mainstream curriculum by addressing their literacy and numeracy needs
- Providing curriculum that acknowledges and addresses personal development needs
- Providing community based learning
- Providing resiliency-building experiences.

Disconnected youth have a multiplicity of needs and therefore require a ‘Holistic/Systems/Wrap Around’ approach. For these young people, the majority of their education or learning experiences is often not delivered by ‘educational staff’ or takes place outside the classroom setting. We therefore need to “think education, not schools”. Within our project, partnerships have been critical in supporting this more flexible approach to education for the target group and thereby providing broader opportunities and greater chance of prevention. Virtual School staff build on and complement the work of educational staff by the accreditation of learning experiences they currently provide at their site. They also address all of the components of successful education as outlined above. All of these learning experiences occur within a Learning Plan, providing direction, structured support, evaluation and tracking. This demands true partnerships in service provision. In order to enhance protective factors and reduce risk factors it is vital that we address needs such as health and welfare as part of the Learning Plans.
The range of programs enhances protective factors by maintaining disconnected young people’s links with education, training, community and support agencies. This is achieved by:

- Providing services where the young people are located
- Providing relevant education
- Acknowledging what these young people are already achieving
- Using appropriate, flexible delivery methods and language
- Involving young people in the whole process
- Providing clear pathways and plans
- Providing opportunities to gain industry recognised skills
- Providing ‘corridors and webs of support’.

These links provide joined up services and support for disconnected young people and assists with their transition back into accredited education. Although the pilot has education (in its broadest sense) as the focal point, re-engagement with peers, community and family also play a major role. In doing so, it aims to provide these young people with resilience, skills for ‘lifelong learning’, access to health and welfare services and workplace participation.

*Appropriate staffing* is a key component of the transition into education and a critical element of empowering disconnected youth. Our pilot uses a wide range of facilitators including teachers, TAFE lecturers, staff from within the Virtual School such as our major partner Children, Youth and Family Services (eg youth workers, hourly paid facilitators), non-government agencies such as Service to Youth Council, private providers, industry personnel and hourly paid instructors. Prior to employing staff, we spend time talking with potential facilitators, providing an understanding of the context and clear expectations about code of practice. These facilitators must have the knowledge, empathy, delivery skills and social beliefs to work effectively with this target group. They must be as interested in the person as they are in the passing on of skills and knowledge.

Disconnected young people appreciate some consistency in their lives and really value a significant adult who is constant and that they can trust and respect. Where possible, we attempt to maintain continuity of staff and have them deliver across multiple programs to maintain this vital contact. Our students appear willing to take risks with their learning, knowing they are in a ‘safe learning environment’ that provides positive, reinforcing support in many aspects of their education. Having highly skilled, flexible and empathetic staff has proved extremely successful and resulted in students fast becoming acquainted with their teacher/trainer and feeling sufficiently ‘safe’ to share any of their learning gaps. Valued learning time is maximised due to this productive relationship between the teacher and students.

When working with Indigenous youth, our experience is that critical to the success of the programs is the involvement of Indigenous personnel in developing, delivering, supporting and celebrating the program. This was evident in targeted Indigenous
programs that resulted in positive outcomes of increasing cultural knowledge, work experience and paid employment as a direct result of involvement and commitment by the Indigenous community facilitators. Delivering programs in both rural and remote regions highlighted the unique difficulties facing Indigenous youth attempting to make successful transitions into education and employment. This area requires further research from an Indigenous perspective in order to better understand and address the specific needs of Indigenous youth during this transitional labour market phase.

A Supportive and Success-Oriented Learning Environment is another critical component of empowerment of disconnected youth. As a staff we debrief regularly and ensure that we are ‘kid friendly’ but consistent in our approach without ‘watering down our expectations and hopes for our young people’. We also check with any new student as to whether or not they have issues with any current young people to ensure we are not introducing students with existing conflicts and asking them to work together in a confined space. This is very important when working with young people in the Juvenile Justice System. Service providers referring young people often provide this information that is critical to the smooth and safe running of programs.

Celebration of success is a key factor in a young persons transition and to promote this we have assemblies to celebrate student successes at the end of each term. Within secure care these assemblies are run by the Student Representative Councils and include celebration of academic achievements and other successes (e.g. completion of a Country Fire Service course, performances by students). Within the community, we bring together young people from all participating agencies and present academic certificates and other successes (eg regular voluntary attendance at programs). Students and staff from the General Education program provide a barbecue lunch for all participants. Fun activities are provided for students to enjoy on this important day. Where possible, a speaker of note to the students attends and presents the certificates, with a student responding on behalf of their peers. At some of the recent assemblies participants have brought along family members and caregivers who often comment very favourably about such positive experiences.

Youth Voice is valued and promoted within our learning environments. The Virtual School provides a supportive, positive, reinforcing and inclusive environment that promotes self worth, leadership and celebrates success, all supporting empowerment. All students have a voice in the running of the school, are represented on governing (school) council, assist in generating a youth friendly environment and play a leadership role in all functions.

Responding to disconnected young people’s voice has been a critical component of our project in order to provide relevant and appropriate programs. Young people’s involvement at committee levels has evolved with the project. Although not directly represented on boards, their current involvement is probably more appropriate for
this target group. Within the secure care setting there are active Student Representative Councils who have impacted greatly on the timetable structure and the curriculum offerings. There is also student representation on the Governing Council for Youth Education Centre. These young people quickly become active and valued members of the council and represent their peers in a very strong manner.

Programs and curriculum provided are based on needs identified by the young people, service providers within the Virtual School, mainstream schools, parent feedback, market forces and industry and government predictions regarding future skill needs. To ensure the environment provided is comfortable and safe, there is ongoing frank discussion and feedback within the Virtual School. Recommendations that have been acted upon by the Virtual School and reflects Youth Voice, include:

- A multi-disciplinary approach and ‘one-stop shop’ at the Flexicentre as far as possible. This includes weekly visits from Youth Connect (Centrelink) and JPET. Other agencies working with the target group also visit and work one-to-one with the students (e.g. court ordered anger management or drug counseling programs)
- The provision of food for young people undertaking courses
- Transport to and from courses, where possible. This has required changes to our funding model, which have been approved by Department of Education and Children’s Services as a result of discussions based on our action research and outcomes achieved. CYFS also provide this transport as part of their programs
- Increasing the number of facilitators who can teach high demand vocational courses such as drivers’ licence and tyre fitting
- Changes to curriculum offerings both within secure care and in the community run programs.

Co-operation and Flexible Coordination

Schmid described:

- Flexible coordination as the criteria in which “they establish a new balance between centralised regulations and self-organisation by delegating more decision-making power to individuals or local agencies in order to adjust to individual needs and local circumstances; the challenge is to save money by spending at the right time and at the right place (C3=flexible Coordination)”
- Cooperation as the criteria which “supports existing or stimulate evolving local networks and public-private-partnerships of implementation; the challenge is to use potential synergies by linking resources; just to leave it to the local public employment service is not enough (C4=Co-operation)”

Learning from the lessons of the past, the project has developed a partnership approach with a range of government agencies (state and federal), non-government agencies and businesses in order to provide a diverse and coordinated range of services. Professor Richard Catalano in his work about ‘Communities that Care’ refers to the
need for an operating system, not a program. He states that there is a need for a set of values within the community members. These are:
- Optimism – a genuine belief that change is possible and ongoing
- Persistence – take the time and effort and ensure that this happens across political agendas
- Collaboration – across sectoral lines, taking small successful steps with truly committed people
- Action-orientation – plan what we want to achieve and then do it, including changing the way we currently work.

These sets of values have provided the underpinning foundation for our genuine partnerships.

Initially we developed partnerships with the key personnel of the major partners, sharing the Virtual School concept and gauging their interest, enthusiasm and commitment. This provided the platform from which to develop partnerships with the service providers and start work at the operational level. This first stage of partnerships building was critical in that it allowed the Virtual School to be part of the organisation’s operations and provided contact points to share successes of service providers and students.

The establishment of partnerships can initially be frustrating as it takes time for staff from other agencies to develop and commit to a shared model, implement common strategies and continue their core business in addition to now accrediting the young person’s work. Our pilot was also asking service providers to:
- Use a Learning Plan that can be shared with colleagues from a range of agencies
- Share their staff, skills, knowledge and resources across agencies.

The project was asking this of some agencies who had been or were competing for similar funding. On reflection, this was an enormous challenge, although all of these aspects have been achieved to varying degrees.

The accreditation of current programs within partner agencies required staff to be trained and supported in looking at their current offerings and aligning them, where possible, within the Employment Skills Training Certificate 1. This collaborative process has resulted in the formal accreditation of many current learning experiences delivered by partners within the Virtual School.

Ongoing dialogue, evaluation and feedback are vital components of partnerships. Members of the Virtual School meet once a term to share successes, monitor progress and jointly problem solve. This has facilitated a deeper understanding of each agency’s culture and contributed to the development of a common language to engage in dialogue. It is now an extremely powerful group of agencies that have a shared vision, willingly share resources and expertise, jointly apply for funding and
acknowledge each agency’s area of expertise. This promotes individual responsibility and recognition within a truly collaborative group.

Ways that we have managed to build and maintain the relationships required for effective partnerships include:

- Working collaboratively and honestly with each other. This is important both within the lead agency and across agencies.
- Sharing leadership of programs across all key partner agencies
- Taking the time to make the partnerships work – value them and be prepared to coordinate them. This includes the ongoing monitoring and maintenance of relationships.
- Visiting the partners on their own turf to ensure there is an understanding of where and how they operate – understand the context
- Establishing regular meetings and sharing tasks so that everyone is accountable to each other. Clear and precise minutes of all meetings are shared in a timely manner.
- Acknowledging and valuing the background of each of the partners, including the changing nature of the people involved – being prepared to go back over old ground to ensure everyone understands the project and feels valued and empowered to participate
- Starting small and getting the operations working – don’t worry about the bigger scenario – become functional and then use the working model to impact on practice at a higher level
- Providing ongoing and immediate support for all staff. It has also been important to collaboratively engage in immediate and critical evaluation of issues that arise.
- Actively promoting joint tendering for other projects
- Publicising shared and individual successes within agency newsletters and magazines. For example, CYFS, have regular articles in the bi-monthly magazine.
- Regularly attending cross-agency meetings to talk about the model and keep all partners well informed.

Using a ‘risk and protective factors’ approach requires a network of collaborative local agencies working towards agreed and identified goals and outcomes. These include:

- Identifying, locating and engaging with disconnected young people
- Providing outreach education models that suit disconnected young people
- Providing ‘linked up services’ that meet disconnected young people’s needs
- Recognising, accrediting, recording and tracking all ‘life education’ activities
- Establishing ‘Learning Plans’ for disconnected young people
- Breaking down the ‘silo’ mentality that exists across government departments and agencies
• Providing workplace training, work shadowing, work experience and industry visits
• Providing intensive support, well-defined pathways and ‘support corridors’ for young people.

Due to the success of our federal pilot project, the state government has extended our funding through its School Retention reference. This has been a significant event for two reasons:
• it has increased our funding and allowed us to undertake initiatives that were identified as critical to our project’s success
• it has endorsed our work which means that all state government agencies who are our partners now have social inclusion, and hence aspects of our pilot project, as part of their core business. This endorsement at the strategic level has added significantly to the endorsement at the operational level and is a significant step that we are now building on.

In summary, a true partnership approach has resulted in:
• Government and some non-government agencies including this work as part of their core business and strategic plans
• Key partners across both government and non-government sectors successfully applying for and receiving consortium based funding
• Changes to Youth Education Centre’s funding model
• Service providers having a better understanding of the roles and functions of agencies working with disconnected young people
• The provision of a broader range of agencies that can be accessed by the target group
• Improved and ongoing communication between agencies
• A higher level of service perspective and accountability
• The development at a ‘local level’ of infrastructure that promotes agencies working together in a more productive manner
• Provision of community based skills programs eg the Country Fire Service (CFS) in the delivery of the Certificate 1 in Fire Fighting, which allows disconnected youth to join a local CFS and hence experience and become a valued member of their community. This has been extended into sports programs involving refugee and indigenous groups.

In order to recognise, accredit or provide a diverse range of education, training and life options that meet the diverse needs in disconnected youths’ circumstances, experiences, abilities and aptitudes, Central Coordination is essential. The Virtual School requires project management and coordination of a high degree. Central coordination of all sectors of the project is crucial in maintaining the quality, momentum, focus and collaborative nature of the model. The Project Manager and a School Services Officer (who undertakes the clerical role) undertake this central coordination. This coordination role includes:
• Having a central point of contact or ‘front office’ for all aspect of the Virtual School
• Having an overall understanding of the many aspects of the project and able to implement and monitor each of these aspects – this ensures that links can be made between partners and opportunities explored
• Having a working understanding of the role, strategic directions, culture and operations of all partner agencies including areas of people, risk, financial and records management
• An ability to ensure partners’ current program offerings are accredited by working with our partners and coordinating staff training
• Coordinating the provision of a range of vocational training and engagement activities
• Working with employers to access work experience, work placement, work shadowing, traineeships or jobs
• Working with government and non-government agencies to provide a ‘joined up service’ for 52 weeks of the year. This includes agencies thinking about their role in a different way and how each agency can complement and share each others programs/resources rather than duplicating or competing with each other
• Providing opportunities for partners to have regular meetings/forums to share resources, jointly problem solve and continue to work on improved aspects of true ‘joined up service’
• Data recording, maintenance and analysis
• Developing social capital at a range of levels and hence increasing community capacity
• Coordination and maintenance of accreditation standards and auspicing arrangements
• Exploring opportunities that enhance the ‘curriculum offerings’ and outcomes.

*Shared Processes and Structures* are critical in order to have joined up services and a planned and coordinated approach. These underpin the functioning of the Virtual School model so that it can meet the needs of disconnected young people. These processes and structures include:

- A Virtual School Working Party that meets each term to develop, review and monitor processes as well as considering new initiatives
- Management and coordination of the ‘Schedule’ arrangements between Regency TAFE and delivery sites
- Maintenance surrounding quality control of delivery, recording and assessment procedures for the Employment Skills Training Certificate
- The establishment, recording and monitoring of an education outcomes and case management database that is accessible to all participating service providers
On-going development and sharing of resource materials across all Virtual School sites
Up-skilling, training and accreditation of all Virtual School staff so they can deliver and accredit appropriate training to the required standard
Learning Plans that ensure services are coordinated, efficient and avoid the young person having to repeat their story
The provision of mentors for the intensive support these young people need when accessing personal, educational and vocational pathways
The location and maintenance of a central data coordination point. All Virtual School participants are enrolled at Youth Education Centre where hard copies of all Learning Plans and educational achievements are recorded on the school’s database. This allows access by students for future reference.

Case management plays a vital role in the successful transition of our young people. Although the current education and case management data can only be accessed in hard copy form, it is planned for this to be available electronically in the near future. Both DECS and CYFS are exploring different options in order to develop a model that will be student focussed and controlled whilst maintaining confidentiality and accessibility.

*Intake and Exit Procedures* at critical transition points for young people in these partnerships are important processes between agencies. The majority of the target group are very visible, disconnected and appear within the Juvenile Justice System. The project has many referral points for these young people within its partnerships network.

One of our biggest challenges is the identification of the hidden disconnected young people. In order to identify and locate these hidden youth the project has developed links with key agencies that these young people may access on a voluntary and involuntary basis. Not all of these young people have entered the youth justice arena and so it is important to identify other points of contact such as Centrelinks’ Youth Connect program, targeted mainstream schools and DECS’ Social Inclusion and Wellbeing teams. This allows the project to identify those young people who may be at risk of offending or isolating themselves from all forms of educational and support programs.

The intake process has clear guidelines and agreed target group criteria accepted by all partners. All participants develop individual Learning Plans and are linked to a case manager or support person. The general course intake interview and assessment is based on the learning plan format. With the young people accessing short courses and programs delivered across Virtual School sites, their learning plans are developed at the local level. Where a young person cannot be immediately accommodated they are linked with one or more of the support agencies. The project
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flexibility, networking and numerous partnership support and service options cater for the needs of most young people.

As part of the Intake and Exit Procedures, it is critical to have clear achievable pathways into education, training and employment, gain the young persons confidence and maintain involvement. It is therefore vital the pilot provides:

- Real and achievable goals
- Relevant and meaningful programs
- Clear and structured pathways
- Intensive and on-going support.

The Virtual School has established links with employer bodies, training organisations, community groups, mainstream and alternative education bodies to provide corridors of support for young people wanting to pursue chosen pathways. This varies from Open Access education for young people wanting to pursue the South Australian Certificate of Education to employer-based mentors providing intensive support within the worksite or young refugees wanting to link with community based soccer clubs. Young people are very keen to involve themselves with the pilot when they realise the programs they’re involved in are achievable, provide outcomes on completion and values their achievements.

It is essential for young people to feel a sense of control over their exit from the program. Although intensively supported and structured, they must feel in control and have the knowledge and confidence they can return should they wish. This ‘snakes and ladders’ approach is essential for disconnected young people with very transient and erratic lifestyles and demands coordinated linked up services for this to happen in a positive environment.

**Sustainable Employment and Income**

Schmid described this criteria as “they support transitions back to the ‘regular’ labour market …to ‘make transitions pay’ for keeping or increasing employability (C2= Sustainable Employment and Income)”

The programs delivered within the Virtual School are approved activities by Centrelink, and hence allow young people to continue with their financial assistance whilst attending the Virtual School.

Our initial work focussed on partnerships with government and non-government organisations with an emphasis on education and coordination. Due to our success, we have expanded to the employment arena and are seeking industry-based partnerships to extend our collaborative work in this area. Some of our current work includes:

- Mobile training units auspiced through industry partners (referred to above)
• Transition Opportunities Through Employment Mentoring – TOTEM – referred to above
• Targeted Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) program
• National trial of the New Apprenticeships Access Program (NAAP).

The young people we work with are predominately male. For this reason, and acknowledging labour market indicators, we decided to select the automotive industry as one of our key training options. The project has designed and constructed a Mobile Tyre Fitting Unit that delivers industry-accredited training auspiced through Bridgestone Australia. The program can be delivered wherever there is a perceived need and provides a doorway into the automotive industry. We have successfully run these programs in the metropolitan and rural areas, including the Indigenous community of Yalata. The program also delivered two Indigenous specific Tyre Fitting training pilots in Elizabeth and Salisbury as part of a joint project involving the Office of the North. Twenty-six young people participated and all completed the course, which included Basic First Aid, Forklift Operators Licence and Tyre Fitting and Repair Certificate 1. Bridgestone Australia provided work placements and approximately 50% of participants are currently in some form of employment. Three young men from Igawata, a remote Indigenous community in the north of South Australia, attended the course and have used their training to make operational new tyre fitting equipment the community had purchased but did not have the skills to operate.

The Transition Opportunities Through Employment Mentoring project targets youth who are experiencing a range of barriers making it difficult for them to undertake education, training and employment or participate in the community in a meaningful way. Within the workplaces, we are asking workplace mentors to help these young people to:
• Prepare for entering the workplace
• Gain structured support during their work experience placement
• Develop necessary employment skills and positive work ethic
• Build confidence and self-esteem.

Service to Youth Council, Youth Education Centre and Children, Youth and Family Services successfully tendered for a targeted JPET program, called Juvenile Justice JPET (referred to as Triple JPET). The Special Needs Juvenile Justice JPET program relies on strong collaborations and partnerships with all aspects of the Juvenile Justice System ensuring that young people will transition smoothly once nearing completion of Juvenile Justice obligations into further social and economic participation.

Triple JPET works with young people with an offending history to address barriers to social and community involvement as well as barriers to participation in training,
education and employment. The aim of the program is to address young people’s personal circumstances and increase their opportunities through:

- Initial information provision in relation to Triple JPET
- Initial assessment as soon as referral is made and/or young person is ready
- Intensive case plans involving all partnering organisations
- Delivery of Activity, Education and Participation Model with emphasis on meeting Juvenile Justice young peoples’ specific needs including managing emotions, victim awareness, substance misuse support, challenging offending behaviours and legal awareness
- Counselling
- Referral
- Advocacy
- Personal Support
- Outreach to elements of the Juvenile Justice System and other stakeholders, engaging young people in familiar settings.

This has been a significant initiative as traditionally our young people find it difficult to access these services without corridors of support.

A very recent initiative is the NAAP trials that are happening in South Australia. Students who were part of the POEMs initiative could not also be enrolled in NAAP programs due to the existing guidelines. Department of Education, Science and Training agreed to set up a trial whereby the students could be dual enrolled for four weeks and hence receive support from POEMs staff while they began a NAAP program. DEST also agreed to provide additional funding to provide targeted NAAP programs for POEMs students. All NAAP programs must deliver accredited training so that the skills can be transferable into a New Apprenticeship. Payments are made after outcomes are achieved and maintained for thirteen weeks and reported on the NAAP Information System. Work experience is up to one quarter of the entire program time. The first NAAP trial is about to happen in the southern metropolitan region with Coles-Myer providing traineeships. We are looking forward to the success of this trial in an effort to expand this real, sustainable pathway for our target group.

Outcomes to Date
The Virtual School model has evolved over the past two years from a general education course involving several students into a multi-faceted outreach program delivering accredited training and educational programs to several hundred students across 20 sites. Outcomes to date for the Virtual School include:

- Developing and implementing accredited education and training programs across a range of service sites
- Maintaining disconnected young people’s links with education
- Increasing community capacity within our partnership spheres, thus enhancing services to these disconnected young people
• Developing close working relationships with other agencies and service providers leading to on-site delivery and support for disconnected young people
• Working with conflicting state and commonwealth protocols surrounding disconnected youth and having some positive outcomes eg NAAP
• Changed funding, including staffing, models for Youth Education Centre which acknowledge the partnership work
• Close working relationships with the state and federal governments – we are regularly asked to provide data, anecdotes, information re our project
• Assisting young people to maintain vital links with services, families, education and peers to avoid isolation and its consequences
• Providing sufficient positive outcomes for our partners to want to embed the program within their strategic plans
• Promoting interest from non-participating agencies wanting to be actively involved in the project
• Re-engaging disconnected young people with community based programs eg. Soccer clubs
• Developing strong working relationships with government and non-government organisations
• Seeking and fostering on-going industry sponsorship to ensure sustainability of programs
• Designing and implementing programs that complement participating service agency strategies
• Reducing duplication of services across agencies
• Bridging gaps that disconnected young people continually fall through.

Along with these outcomes the Virtual School has celebrated a number of successful milestones along its journey. These include:
• Disconnected young people completing the EST Certificate 1 and beginning the IVEC Certificate 2
• Young people returning to mainstream education
• Young people gaining traineeships and employment
• Delivery of accredited modules by Virtual School partner agencies
• Accreditation of programs delivered by CYFS staff in secure care
• Innovative processes implemented by managers in partner agencies to release staff to accredit their current programs
• Involvement of young people in a number of launches and forums where they have spoken on behalf of their peers
• Accreditation of many service providers in Certificate IV Workplace Assessor.
• Partnerships with industries as pathways for accreditation and work experience
• Changes to Youth Education Centre funding and staffing models
• Private organisations offering sponsorship and support
• Changes to policies eg NAAP trial.
Ongoing anecdotal evidence has shown that the young people involved in the pilot project are:

- Displaying less frustration and disillusionment
- Staying on task for longer periods
- Seeking greater assistance through the support networks
- Achieving personal outcomes in terms of substance abuse and personal well-being
- Wanting to actively access educational based programs
- Gaining far more confidence and self esteem
- Willing to take risks and deal with anger.

As part of the POEMs trial, tracking has been focussed on young people attending the Flexicentre General Education course. Outcomes from this group show that:

- 54% of our students gain employment, return to school, attend TAFE or attend other educational programs
- 55% of students with a history of offending who attended the Flexicentre General Program in the last 2½ years have not re-offended. A further 33% of students have reduced their patterns of offending while attending the Flexicentre.

Further data will be available through our current work with both the POEMs and Social Inclusion initiatives.

All of these outcomes are summarised in the Miles-Morgan external evaluation commissioned by DEST. In this evaluation, Miles-Morgan stated ‘This project has clearly made some remarkable accomplishments in a very short time, for such an ambitious model of service provision. These include, but are not limited to:

The enormous ‘reach’ of the Virtual School, which has provided individualised, accredited education and training to hundreds of young people, in locations within their own communities by outreaching educational services;

Significant in-roads towards breaking down the ‘silo’ mentality of service provision and creating truly ‘joined up services through a steady process of negotiation and cooperation;

Working from a strong evidence base, which has helped them to operationalise the ‘rhetoric’ about how to service marginalised young people effectively, in a powerful and ethical way;

Engaging a very high risk group of young people in education and training, through respectful and individualised service delivery; and

Working steadily towards sustainability, which is highly likely to be achieved given the substantial amount of support from partner agencies and State Government divisions such as the Social Inclusion Unit.’

Summary
In summary, our action research has contributed to the identification of issues and provides us with the opportunity to take the next leap forward to enable pilot
projects such as ours to truly demonstrate that Social Inclusion is the way forward for our disconnected youth. This can be achieved by a systemic and integrated approach to policy development in a stable framework over an extended timeframe. It will contribute to preventative and enabling policies at all government levels that facilitate bridges across agencies and industries thereby maximising life opportunities and outcomes for disconnected youth by providing a successful transitional labour market phase from education to employment.

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2 Summary Report from the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001 pg 8
3 S.A Social Inclusion Unit 2004 Making the Connections pg 7
4 Homel, Ross et al 1997 Pathways to Prevention – Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia 1997
7 DEST June 2004, The Evaluation of the Partnership Outreach Education Model (POEM) Pilot Supporting young people through their life, learning and work transitions Volume II pg 271
11 Catalano, Richard 2003 Using Prevention Science to Guide Positive Youth Development in Communities: Communities That Care
13 DEST June 2004, The Evaluation of the Partnership Outreach Education Model (POEM) Pilot Supporting young people through their life, learning and work transitions Volume II pg 290