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Youth Engagement Program

Evaluation Summary



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Introduction

yourtown's Youth Engagement Program (YEP) is a youth support service designed to assist young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, from mainstream schooling to re-connect with the community, learning and work. The program has a dual focus: supporting young people struggling to stay at school, and supporting existing early school leavers to make a successful transition to other training or education. **yourtown** delivers YEP in the Redlands, Logan and Ipswich areas of Greater Brisbane.

This summary presents the key findings of **yourtown's** internal evaluation of YEP, undertaken in 2015.

Key Points

- ▶ Disengagement from school is a process that occurs over a long period of time. Early indicators of disengagement include lack of participation in class or other school activities, increased absenteeism, disruptive behaviour and low achievement.
- ▶ For some students, the end point of the disengagement process is early school leaving.
- ▶ YEP works with students who are close to or have already reached this end point.
- ▶ Young people who leave school early are more likely to become unemployed, have low earnings, receive welfare support, have poorer physical and mental health, higher crime rates, and lower levels of connectedness to community than those who complete their education.
- ▶ YEP provides a range of support for young people including mentoring, one-on-one tutoring, group literacy and numeracy programs, life skills and employability workshops, group programs to enhance social-emotional skills and promote personal development, and a Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways.
- ▶ The evaluation showed that many young people who entered the program with low levels of self-esteem, high levels of psychological

distress, poor engagement with school, and poor relationships with school staff, reported significant improvement after participation. Most young people reported improved confidence to learn and personal development, had clearer plans for the future, and had been supported to overcome a range of barriers to education, including learning difficulties, mental health and behaviour problems.

Rationale for YEP

Early school leaving is associated with a range of negative outcomes across the lifespan. Young people who leave school early are more likely to become unemployed, have low earnings, receive welfare support, have poorer physical and mental health, higher crime rates, and lower levels of connectedness to community than those who complete their education.⁴ Moreover, when these young people

Why do young people leave school early?

Leaving school early is the end point in a long process of disengagement from education and there are lots of different pathways. Some students have been motivated in the past, but some have always struggled at school. Some are disruptive in class, but others are quiet.

Risk factors for early school leaving include problems at home, living in a disadvantaged or remote community, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, lack of connection with peers and teachers, low self-esteem, chronic illness and poor mental health.¹ Low achievement can be both a cause and a consequence of disengagement. Most young people who don't finish school have experienced multiple challenges and have complex needs.²

Young people who completed our survey told us that the main barriers to staying at school were having trouble learning, not believing in themselves, having trouble controlling their behaviour at school, and anxiety or depression.

School factors such as school policies, teaching practices and student-teacher relationships are also important influences on student engagement.³

have families of their own they are less able to support their children's education, contributing to intergenerational disadvantage. Disrupting this cycle of educational failure is central to **yourtown's** strategic objective of breaking cycles of socio-economic disadvantage more broadly.

The YEP service model is a scaled down version of Youth Connections, which was funded by the Australian Government between 2010 and 2014. An evaluation of Youth Connections completed by **yourtown** in 2011 showed positive results. Hence, when government funding for Youth Connections ceased, **yourtown** made the decision to self-fund the continuation of a similar service in the same locations.

The YEP service model

YEP operates in the Redlands, Logan and Ipswich areas of Greater Brisbane. Young people enter the program through referrals from schools, other community service organisations, or when they or their parents/carers directly approach **yourtown** for assistance.

The target client group includes young people aged from 14 to 17 who have left school early, who are identified as at imminent risk of leaving school early, or who are attending school, but disengaged from learning and the school environment. During 2015, 416 young people had at least one direct contact with YEP and the program worked with students from 29 different schools.

The program provides five different interventions, and young people may participate in one or more, depending on their need. The interventions are:

► Case management

Case management support addresses social welfare issues contributing to disengagement from education by supporting young people with issues as diverse as low literacy, anger management, physical health, mental health and homelessness.

► Mentoring

Mentoring supports young people through a process of ongoing goal setting and review. Qualified youth workers use the Coaching Young People for Success (CYPS) evidence-based

program as a tool and guide, but content and delivery is flexible to meet the needs of the young people enrolled.

► Fresh Start

The Fresh Start group program combines literacy and numeracy education with art, music, personal development and life skills training. Fresh Start aims to equip young people to re-engage with mainstream school, but recognises that a transition to TAFE or other community programs is a better alternative for some young people. Participants are supported by qualified educators and youth workers.

► Foundation Skills Program

Foundation skills are the core skills needed to successfully participate in work and life: reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and learning, as well as employability skills such as problem solving, teamwork and digital literacy. Participants explore different industries, jobs and conditions, talk to industry experts, learn interview and job search skills, and complete a Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways.

► Tutoring

Individual literacy and numeracy tutoring is provided to young people who lack the capacity to participate in a group program such as Fresh Start or the Foundation Skills Program, or who need additional assistance over and above that provided by a group program. Tutoring aims to increase confidence to learn, as well as skills, so that young people are better able to engage in regular education.

► School re-engagement program

The school re-engagement program is an early intervention service aiming to repair connections between young people, their peers and their education provider in the early stages of the disengagement process. Group programs at school address issues such as bullying, anger management and resilience.

The YEP evaluation

The primary purpose of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which YEP is contributing to improved outcomes for young people. We investigated some aspects of implementation and practice as a secondary issue. Findings are being used to inform planning for future delivery of the service.

The evaluation used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected between July and December 2015 by way of:

- ▶ Administrative participation and client data
- ▶ Participants' self-report of self-esteem and psychological distress before and after participation
- ▶ An end-of-year survey of participants
- ▶ Interviews with three young people who had exited the program
- ▶ Interviews with seven support staff from schools involved with the program.

Limitations of the evaluation

Approximately one third of eligible participants completed the self-esteem and psychological distress scales, and just over half completed the end of year survey, providing a sample of approximately 60 for each instrument.

For analysis involving the whole sample, this is an adequate sample size, but it was not large enough for us to investigate whether outcomes varied for different interventions, or different groups of young people (eg. males vs females, different ages). We were also unable to account for each young person's level of participation in the program.

The evaluation sample did not represent participants in all interventions, with school re-engagement being over-represented across all instruments. For example, the self-esteem measure was completed by 39 participants in school re-engagement programs but by only five receiving case management.

It is also important to be aware that:

- ▶ self-report data is not always reliable or objective
- ▶ the views of those who completed the instruments may not be representative of everyone who participated in the program
- ▶ our methods do not show that the program caused any observed change in outcomes – it's possible that change was caused by other factors or occurred due to the passage of time.

Findings

Overview

The evaluation found that school stakeholders and young people valued the program, that it addressed identified needs, and that it effectively enrolled young people experiencing multiple barriers to education.

We found that females reported greater barriers to education, lower self-esteem and higher psychological distress than males, but males outnumbered females two to one as YEP participants.

Participation data indicated that simply engaging young people in the program may be the biggest challenge. Some young people had extensive contact with the service over a long period of time, but many had only one or two contacts. We were unable to say whether this was due to inappropriate referrals, the challenging nature of the target client group or something else.

On average, young people who entered the program with low levels of self-esteem, high levels of psychological distress, poor engagement with school and poor relationships with school staff, reported significant improvement after participation in the program. Most young people reported improved confidence to learn and personal development, and had clearer plans for the future after working with YEP. They also reported that YEP effectively helped them overcome a range of barriers to education, including learning difficulties, mental health and behavioural problems.

Data also showed that some young people benefited more from the program than others. In particular, young people who reported more difficulties on our measured outcomes on entry to the program made the greatest gains, but even within these groups, some young people reported substantial change while others reported little or no change.

Is the program effectively accessing and engaging the target client group?

To answer this question, we looked at the number of contacts young people had with YEP, characteristics of participants and young people's satisfaction with the program.

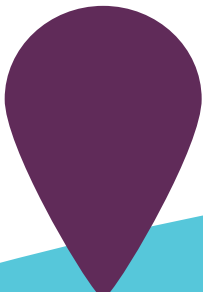
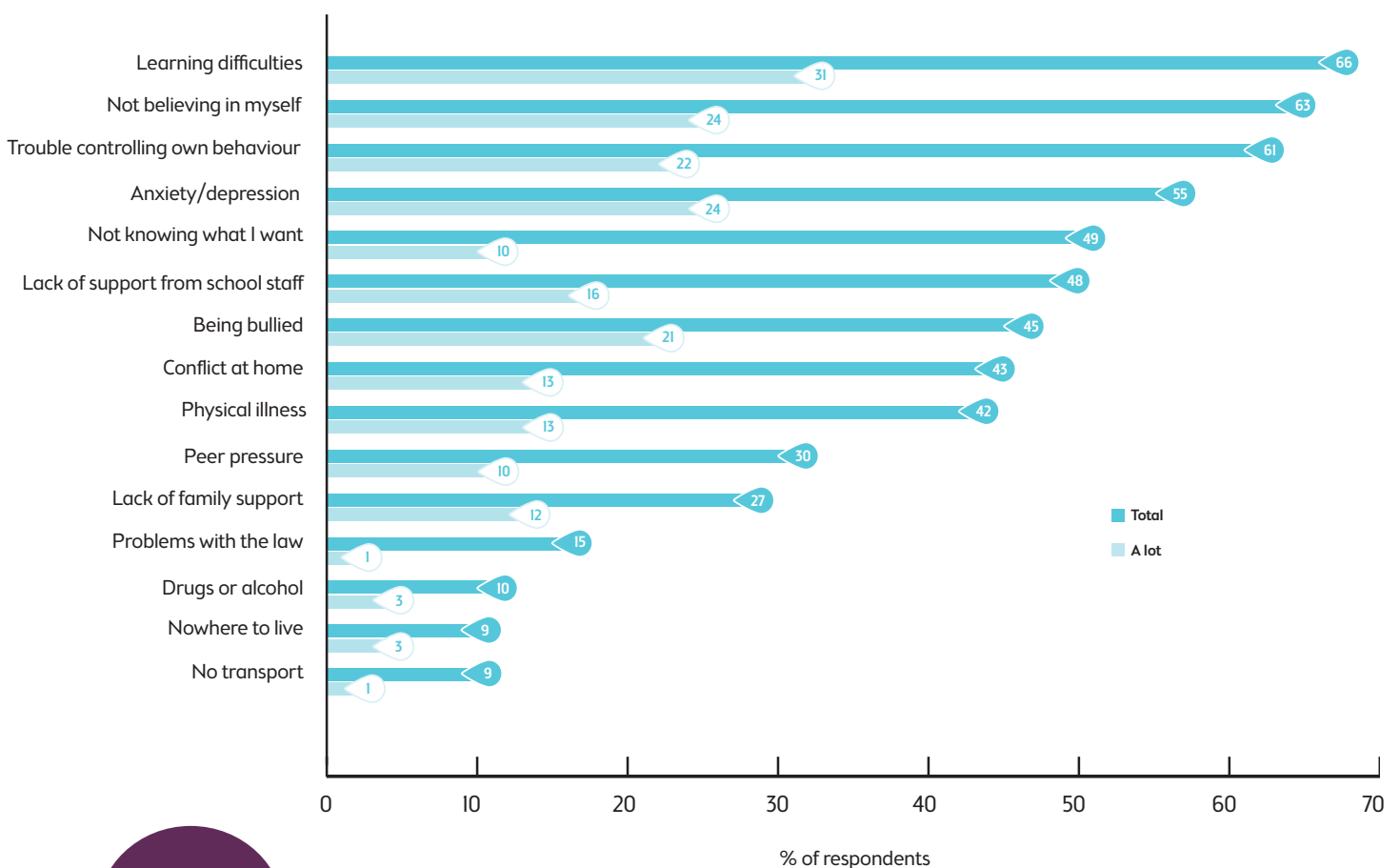
YEP successfully enrolled high needs young people, who reported experiencing a range of barriers to education. Twenty per cent of

participants were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background and 7% were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Figure I presents the percentage of participants who reported each barrier to be a problem for them, and the subset who reported it to be 'a lot' of a problem. Problems located within the individual, for example learning difficulties, low self-esteem, trouble controlling own behaviour, and anxiety and/or depression, were the most common. Some barriers, for example 'not knowing what I want', were an issue for a large number of participants, but a lot of a problem for a relatively small percentage.

In contrast to the literature, which suggests family problems as a major contributor to disengagement, only 13% of participants reported family conflict as a lot of problem and only 12% reported a lack of family support for education.

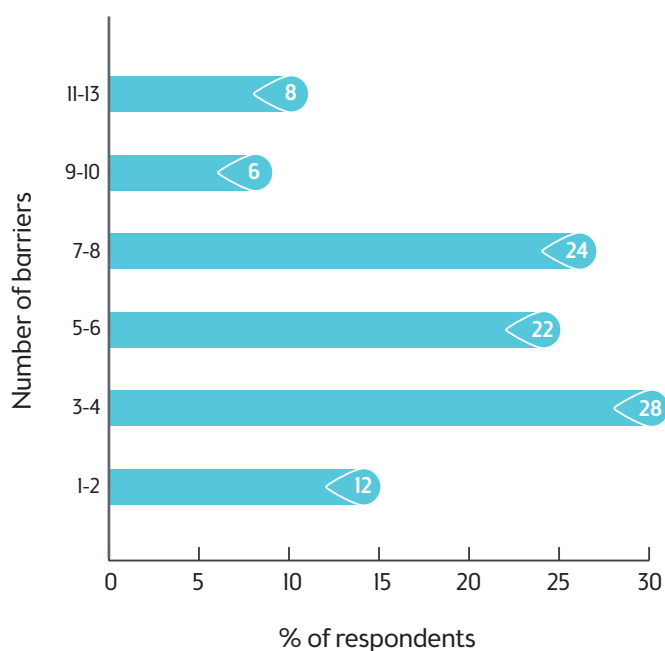
Figure I. Percentage of survey respondents who reported experiencing each barrier to education: total and percentage who reported it to be 'a lot' of a problem. N=67.



As shown in Figure 2, 88% of participants reported experiencing three or more barriers to education. Females reported significantly more barriers than males, with an average of seven barriers in comparison to an average of five for males.

Given that males outnumbered females participating in YEP by two to one, the greater level of need reported by females may suggest a need to actively seek female referrals. We note that females are more likely to experience internalising behaviour problems, while males are more likely to experience externalising behaviour problems. Consequently, disengaged female students may be more likely to go unnoticed, because they sit quietly and are not troublesome for teachers.

Figure 2. Percentage of survey respondents who reported experiencing multiple barriers to education. N=67.



Did YEP successfully engage young people?

We found that a small number of young people had extensive contact with the program (as many as 40 contacts in less than a year), while approximately 20% had no more than three contacts.

The highest average number of contacts was for the Certificate II in Foundation Skills, probably because this course provides a concrete and important outcome in the form of two points towards a Queensland Certificate of Education (high school qualification awarded at the end of Year 12).

Engaging young people in interventions such as tutoring was very challenging, and many young people left the program after only a few contacts. This may reflect difficulty engaging and motivating young people, inappropriate referrals, errors in recording participation, the nature of the interventions or something else. We suggest that the nature of the target client group (young people who have already demonstrated disengagement from their education) makes building trusting relationships and facilitating change an extremely lengthy and difficult process. Our interactions with young people while collecting evaluation data suggested that some had enrolled as a result of pressure from parents and schools, a perception that YEP was a way to 'get out of class', or a lack of alternative options, rather than a genuine desire to re-engage with learning.

Were participants satisfied with the program?

Most young people who completed the survey were satisfied with the program:

- ▶ 94% would recommend **yourtown** to others in their situation
- ▶ 94% felt respected and supported
- ▶ 88% said it was worth the effort it took to do it
- ▶ 80% said they learnt a lot from participating
- ▶ 74% gained a sense of achievement.

Is YEP contributing to improved outcomes for young people?

We assessed outcomes for young people in four broad areas:

- ▶ Social-emotional wellbeing
- ▶ Engagement with education
- ▶ Personal development
- ▶ Literacy and numeracy skills.

Social-emotional wellbeing

On average, young people who entered the program with low self-esteem and/or high psychological distress reported statistically significant improvements after participation in YEP. The extent of improvement varied greatly - some young people reported high levels of change, but around 50% reported little or no change. We also found that females reported higher levels of distress and lower levels of self-esteem than males.

Engagement with education

High school students reported behavioural engagement with learning through four survey items: I finish homework and assignments on time, I pay attention during class, I'm organised with schoolwork and I can get myself to do schoolwork when I need to. Participant reports showed a statistically significant increase in behavioural engagement, with students who reported the lowest engagement to begin with showing the greatest improvement. Again, the extent of improvement varied widely.

Of those students who reported truanting, skipping classes or arriving late prior to YEP, around 50% reported that they did this less often after participating in YEP.

Many young people reported more positive feelings about school after the program:

- ▶ Eight out of 18 young people who rarely enjoyed learning reported an improvement
- ▶ Fourteen out of 18 young people who rarely felt good about going to school reported an improvement
- ▶ Nine out of 17 young people who rarely felt like they belonged at school reported an improvement.

More than 75% of respondents to the survey reported increased confidence that they could learn well and finish school if they worked hard. Somewhat fewer, 55-60%, were more confident about asking teachers for help and participating in class.

On average, student reports showed a statistically significant improvement in students' relationships with school staff. Improvement was greatest for those who had the poorest relationships on entry to the program and for those who had more contact with YEP.

Personal development

For the four most common barriers to education (learning difficulties, not believing in myself, trouble controlling my behaviour, anxiety/depression), around 80% of young people who experienced the barrier reported that YEP helped them address the issue. Approximately one in three reported that YEP helped 'a lot'.

In terms of personal growth, 80% of respondents reported that they had learnt a lot about themselves, felt proud of their achievement and had achieved things they thought they couldn't do. 65% reported that they were better at making good decisions.

We also asked young people about their future:

- ▶ 81% of respondents felt more positive about the future after YEP
- ▶ 72% of respondents reported having a clearer plan for the future
- ▶ 80% of respondents who were in high school reported that they intended to complete Year 12.

Literacy and numeracy skills

Young people who participated in Fresh Start, Foundation Skills or tutoring completed a literacy and numeracy assessment on entry to the program, and again on completion of the program. Assessments used the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), the national reference for assessing performance in core skills such as literacy and numeracy. Levels range from pre-Level 1 to Level 5, with Level 3 regarded as the minimum required to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work.⁵

Just under 50% of participants completed both assessments, with program drop out appearing to account for this to some extent. We found that approximately 80% of participants who started the program at pre-Level 1 or Level 1 improved by at least one level, but only 25% of those who started at Level 2 or higher improved. It's important to note that the sample size for this comparison was small: data were only available for 18 young people who started at pre-Level 1 or Level 1 literacy, and 15 young people who started at pre-Level 1 or Level 1 numeracy.

Nevertheless, these results were consistent with comments made by a number of school staff and young people who reported that the literacy and numeracy work in Fresh Start was targeted at too low a level. We are currently considering whether this reflects a need for clearer referral criteria so that only young people with the lowest literacy and numeracy levels enrol in Fresh Start, Foundation Skills and tutoring, or whether we need to review program content to ensure it meets the needs of all students.

Recommendations for implementation and delivery of YEP

Evaluation of the service model and its implementation was not the focus of the evaluation, but feedback from school staff and young people indicated a number of factors that are important for success. The following points are being considered as we develop plans for future program delivery.

- ▶ Some young people improved more than others. This could be linked to characteristics of the young person (such as readiness to change), family or school environment, intervention in which they participated, intensity of support received and more. Holistic assessment on entry to the program and continued collection of outcomes data could help ensure that each young person receives the holistic support that is most appropriate for their needs.
- ▶ Early intervention activities, such as YEP's school re-engagement program, may be suited to younger students just starting high school. YEP typically works with students in Year 9 and above.
- ▶ Outcomes for young people may be enhanced by working more closely with schools, both in terms of communicating more closely about individual students and collaborating to design and plan programs.
- ▶ It's important that schools and YEP have the same goals for each participant – whether to complete Year 12 or transition to alternative education and training. This is particularly important to ensure a smooth transition for students when they complete Fresh Start.

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