

COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION UNIT



'I AM READY'
PARTNERSHIP
EVALUATION



FEDERATION UNIVERSITY GIPPSLAND COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION UNIT

SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

‘I AM READY’ PARTNERSHIP

PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT

1 February 2019 – 30 June 2020



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Collaborative Evaluation Unit (CEU), Federation University Gippsland, is an innovative initiative that aims to build evaluation capacity and expertise within Gippsland. As a local provider the CEU understands the value of listening to the community and can deliver timely and sustainable evaluations that are tailored to the needs of a wide variety of organisations.

The CEU is led by Associate Professor Joanne Porter. Joanne has led several successful research projects in conjunction with local industry partners. She has headed the development of the CEU and managed a number of evaluations.

The team that collaborated with the 'I Am Ready' Partnership to evaluate the 'I Am Ready' Program included:

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ABBREVIATIONS

AND	Australian Network on Disability
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CEU	Collaborative Evaluation Unit
DES	Disability Employment Services
DET	Department of Education and Training
LCHS	Latrobe Community Health Service
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
LLN	Language Literacy Numeracy
NDCO	National Disability Coordination Officer Program
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
SES	State Emergency Services
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
The Partnership	Baw Baw Latrobe LLEN, Gippsland East LLEN, South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN and Region 17National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO)
The Program	'I Am Ready' Program
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
Volunteers	Volunteer Support Staff



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'I Am Ready' Program was an innovative approach to engaging secondary school students with learning barriers, to think, plan and actively move towards employment and or further education and training. This summary has been divided into five sections which demonstrates the triangulation of the evaluation findings, highlights the key findings and includes; Reach of the program, Lessons learnt, Breaking down barriers, Building confidence and Bright future for participants and the Program.

REACH OF THE PROGRAM

The 'I Am Ready' Project Team targeted 40 schools in six local government areas across the Gippsland region in Victoria, with the objective of enrolling a minimum of 90 participants in the Program. The Team actively engaged with 33 schools, who supported the 89 students who enrolled in the Program. Of those, 75 completed the Program, 11 commenced, attending up to week four before withdrawing, while three did not start, stating that the Program was not suitable for them.

LESSONS LEARNT

There were a number of lessons learnt throughout the duration of the Program by Facilitators, the 'I Am Ready' Project Team, schools, parents, employers and the participants. It became evident that in order to deliver the Program successfully, it was necessary for the Facilitators to adopt a variety of teaching strategies, remaining flexible to the learning styles and needs of the participants. Facilitators and volunteers noted that a more detailed description of each of the participants learning barriers at the start of the Program would assist with session planning and delivery.

The evaluation identified that improving the communication strategy would greatly enhance the experience of all involved with the Program in the future. This should include ensuring participants fully understand the Program during the recruitment phase, educating the schools and parents about the benefits of the Program, providing regular updates to schools and parents, and enhancing facilitator and volunteer staff training. The participants suggested that the Program should cover electronic communication such as emails, texting and phone etiquette in more detail. Overall, the comments received about the level of communication during the Program were positive, *'I think there's nothing but positives from the way the programme was set up, we were kept informed, it was very well organised, the processes were great. Nothing slipped through the cracks. It was fantastic'* (Teacher).

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

It was identified that the 'I Am Ready' Program filled a gap that currently exists in mainstream education, where students with learning barriers often do not receive the level of support needed to make a successful transition from school to employment, further education or training. The Program provided participants with an opportunity to take part in a program specifically tailored to their learning needs and styles giving them the opportunity to learn the skills required to find employment or enrol in further education or training, *'It's definitely highlighted to me the shortfalls in secondary school education for students with disabilities or learning barriers for the resources to support that'* (Teacher). Teachers and parents alike were impressed with the participants' engagement in the Program as they demonstrated transferable skills outside of the Program, *'...these kids are so capable of doing so much, it's just getting out there'* (Teacher).

Employers involved in the Program responded positively to the experience with 88% stating that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the future. Employers found the participants to be

polite, prepared and open to receiving instructions while on work experience and subsequently a number secured part time employment. Getting to know individual participants who took part in the Program and undertook work experience enhanced the level of understanding all round, *'I think people actually having an understanding of her was probably one of the challenges, but as they got to know her, and that it became much easier'* (Parent).

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Throughout the Program there is clear evidence that the participants grew in confidence. The two most predominant words in the group activity in Workshop 2 'Reflections' were **confidence** and **improved self**. Stakeholders taking part in focus groups agreed that there was a dramatic change in participants confidence from the beginning of the Program to its conclusion which was also demonstrated at home, in school and in the work environment. The increase in confidence also translated to increased independence with many participants arranging their own travel to and from the Program and showing a desire to take part in the mock interview and work experience components.

The Program engendered a strong sense of belonging. Participants were a part of a group of like-minded individuals and that contributed to feelings of connectiveness and encouraged them to learn from each other, *'...she just likes being a part of something because as growing up through school, she was ostracised because she was different and I think it's being incorporated and everyone was the same'* (Parent).

The Program also contributed to employer confidence to host a participant from the 'I Am Ready' Program in the future. It highlighted the possibility of employing an individual with a learning barrier or disability and the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Parents were impressed with the visible changes to their children's attitudes towards the future, with many empowered to investigate the possibility of further education or employment. The school survey highlighted the positive changes in participant's attitudes towards the teachers, improved classroom behaviour and increased engagement and communication.

BRIGHT FUTURE FOR PARTICIPANTS AND THE PROGRAM

The benefits of the Program were noted by all stakeholders with many participants becoming self-reflective about their own development, *'It gets you ready for the workforce. They teach you a lot of skills that you need when you go for an interview and what skills you need when you're at work'* (participant). There are number of recommendations concerning the content of the Program being integrated into the school system with extension programs such as resume writing skills. It should be noted that 94% of the teachers involved in the Program agreed that they would highly recommend it. The benefits were visible with participants becoming more engaged and developing a social connection with the 'I Am Ready' Team, Facilitators and each other.

Many of the participants were visibly upset at the completion of the Program, however through social media many of them have continued to stay in touch with each other and have become firm friends. All five Facilitators indicated that they would be happy to be involved again in the Program ensuring the continued development of the content delivery, group activities, training of volunteers and participant engagement skills. The Program has demonstrated the positive impact of a work readiness program for participants with learning barriers in the Gippsland region. Further research and evaluation are required to ascertain the long-term impact on the employability of the participants in the future. The immediate impact on the increased confidence levels of the participants of the 'I Am Ready' Program is to be commended.



IMPACT

75

Young People Completed the Program



Feedback.... Changes in the Participants

SKILLS LEARNT



Dressing for Success:

'...they stood up straighter and with more confidence when they came out of the change room in their new clothes', and that it was a 'big step for their self-esteem'

Mock Interviews:

'Once students had done their interview, they were all feeling very proud of themselves which is fantastic.... I was very proud and quite overwhelmed, they had come such a long way in such a short period of time'.

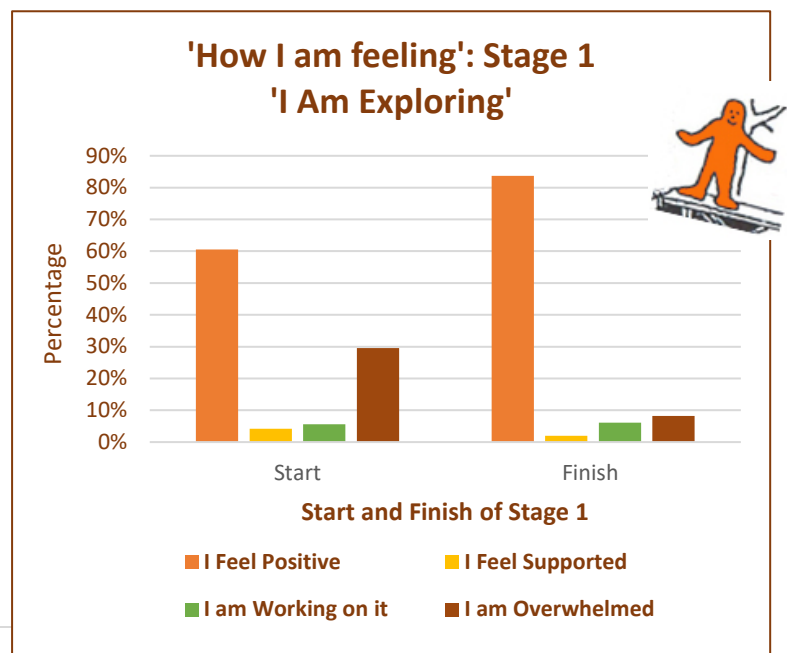
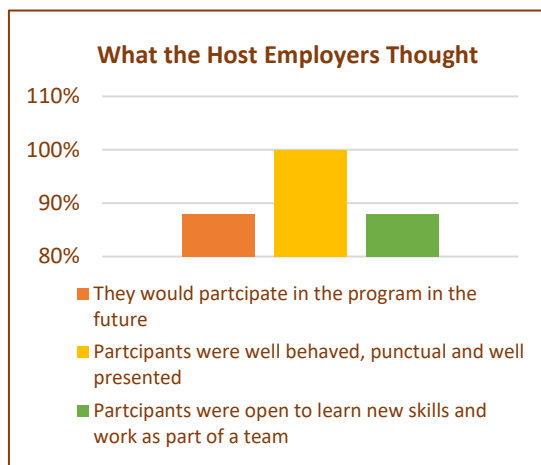


Figure 1: I Am Ready Program Impact Infographic



L to R: Bryce and Jasmine, participants, Rachael Murphy Program Co-ordinator and Andrea Evans-McCall, NDCO Officer, 'I Am Ready' Transition Forum, Sale 2020

***'I don't think you can beat a kid that's proud of what they've achieved.
That's pretty awesome' (Teacher)***



2. INTRODUCTION: 'I Am Ready' Program

2.1 PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The 'I Am Ready' Program designed by the 'I Am Ready' Partnership, was an innovative, strategic approach to support Gippsland secondary school students with the potential and ability to gain meaningful employment or enrol in further education but who lacked opportunity and faced barriers to gaining the skills and confidence necessary to make a successful transition. It offered work readiness skills and opportunities for supported work experience, '*making work real*' by '*creating a common language for work readiness across all stakeholders*'¹. Based on best practice, it fostered self-direction and empowerment, and challenged assumptions by talking the language of employability.

*'The young people are worthy of aspiration and are deserving of adequate resources to assist with employment.'*²

2.2 THE PARTNERSHIP

The 'I Am Ready' Partnership of Baw Baw Latrobe (LLEN), East Gippsland LLEN, South Gippsland Bass Coast (LLEN) and National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO) have a history of working together effectively to achieve significant and sustainable project outcomes.

With the Partnership already established, the Project Team was able to focus on strengthening and building new partnerships with employers and agencies operating in Gippsland to the benefit of the 'I Am Ready' Program and the Program's participants.

2.3 POLICY CONTEXT

The Partnership '*Case for Funding*' highlighted Department of Education and Training (DET) data that indicated only 38% of people with a disability completed year 12 or equivalent. People with a disability were also far less likely to move into employment or further education and more likely to move out of the workforce.

The '*Case for Funding*' identified a gap in government funded programs for the transition from school to work or further education for young people in both mainstream and specialist schools that experience a range of barriers. Existing programs, they found, did not address the specific needs of this cohort, resulting in an unacceptably high social and economic cost.

Advocating for policy change through innovative initiatives such as the 'I Am Ready' Program is an essential principal of the Partnership.

¹ *I Am Ready Partnership: The Case for Funding*, Gippsland's Local Learning and Employment Networks in partnership with National Disability Coordination Officer Program Region 17

² The 'I Am Ready' Partnership

2.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAM

The aim and objectives of the Program were set out in the '*Case for Funding*' as follows:

AIM

To enable young people with disabilities in Gippsland to obtain knowledge, skills and opportunities for real and lasting outcomes in employment, further education and training.

OBJECTIVES

- To motivate and empower participants to continue to engage with education and with a work readiness focus
- To engender in participants the confidence to pursue opportunities
- To deliver real and lasting employment outcomes for participants
- To develop sustainable program partnerships between community, services, employers and training organisations
- To provide a platform for stakeholders to work collaboratively in providing a holistic regional work readiness program that connects participants to employers and provides real exposure to the workplace
- To build a series of 'case studies of success' that will enhance the aspirations for young people with disabilities
- To promote the benefits to employers in employing young people with disabilities that flow through to case studies

2.5 GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

The Gippsland area in Victoria, Australia, is unique, covering 41,556 km², six local government areas, a population of 271,266 and no large regional centre. Access to services in rural and remote areas for people with learning barriers and disability is often inadequate which adds to the complexities of achieving successful transition from school to work or further education.

The Program was run at five locations covering the six local government areas (East Gippsland, Wellington, Latrobe, Baw Baw, South Gippsland and Bass Coast), and included Leongatha, Traralgon, Warragul, Bairnsdale and Sale (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Local Government Areas and Program Delivery Locations in Gippsland, Victoria

2.6 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The target number of participants was 90 students currently enrolled in mainstream and specialist schools in Years 10-12 across Gippsland. Two leaflets were designed, one for students and one for schools, and included an application form. These were distributed to all 40 secondary schools across Gippsland.

Prospective Program participants were recommended by schools and were individually interviewed to ascertain their suitability to take part. The selection criteria looked at two key aptitudes rather than 'classification' of disability. This allowed for a focus on participant's with barriers to employment, including, for example, low aspiration and disengagement as well as those with a disability. The two key aptitudes were:

- The capacity to work for eight hours per week unaided
- The capacity to engage with the Program.

2.7 PROGRAM GOVERNANCE

Governance for the Program was provided by the Partnership which included Baw Baw Latrobe LLEN, Gippsland East LLEN, South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN and Region 17 National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO). The Program was administered by Baw Baw Latrobe LLEN.

2.7 PROGRAM STAFF

A Program Coordinator and a Co-Coordinator oversaw the delivery of the Program. A Facilitator for each of the five sites was appointed along with volunteer support staff.

The Facilitator and volunteers were provided with one day of training, a Facilitator Guide, Workshop Lesson Plan and a copy of the Participant Workbook. They were also encouraged to complete a Reflection Journal during the Program.

2.8 PROGRAM DELIVERY

The structure of the Program was aimed at achieving a holistic approach to empower participants to aspire to and achieve work readiness by progressing through three stages:

Stage 1: 'I Am Exploring'

This stage focused on building confidence and exploring areas of interest for work experience. Running for one day per week for eight weeks, it delivered training in employability skills including:

- Communication
- Technology
- Self-management
- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Planning
- Initiative and enterprise
- Learning

Activities included team building, dressing for success, mock interviews, industry visits and Career Conversation Workshops for parents, carers and educators. Participants were provided with the 'I am Exploring' Workbook³ to facilitate learning and self-reflection.

Stage 2: 'I Am Becoming Ready'

This stage provided a bridge between developing employability skills and work experience by providing coordinated assistance in applying for and undertaking work experience, supported by an industry buddy. Stage 2 also ran for one day per week for eight weeks or in some cases, a one-week block of work experience. Participants were mentored in the workplace as well as being given time to reflect on their experience. The participants were provided with a Work Placement Workbook.

Employers and organisations taking part in the Program were offered training prior to the participants starting. Disability Awareness Webinars were delivered by the Australian Network on Disability (AND). This stage provided an opportunity for employers to realise and learn about the contribution of workers with learning barriers and disabilities and the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Stage 3: 'I Am Ready'

The final stage in the Program provided participants with the opportunity to attend sessions that included:

- Goal setting and career planning
- Resume writing delivered by TAFE Gippsland, Skills & Jobs Centre
- Healthy mindsets delivered by Headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation
- Post-school Transition supported by: Disability Employment Services (DES), National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) information delivered by Latrobe Community Health Services (LCHS), TAFE Gippsland, Skills & Jobs Centre, Federation University, Gippsland East Higher Education Study Hub, people with lived experience of disability, volunteer organisations, Headspace, employers and other local support services

Participants were also supported to pursue part-time employment, additional work experience, further training such as TAFE programs, school-based apprenticeships or structured workplace learning.

In addition, educator professional development was provided to local secondary schools and other educators with the aim of building the knowledge and skills of educators to support this cohort. Workshop content included:

- Thinking about work experience and employment differently
- Customised Employment
- Strength-based approach to the Discovery Model
- DES and NDIS Q & A panel - post school options
- Working with DES providers

³ The workbook was created by Andrea Evans-McCall, NDCO Region 17

Originally developed as a one-day face-to-face workshop, it was redesigned and delivered as a series of six 45-minute webinars. This was due to the impact of COVID-19 during March 2020. Workshops were designed and delivered by the NDCO and supported by the 'I Am Ready' staff. Workshops were attended by career advisors, specialist school staff, integration coordinators, VCAL staff, education support staff and others.



Stage 1 'I Am Exploring' Activities



3. LITERATURE REVIEW: EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH BARRIERS TO ASPIRE TOWARD AND ACHIEVE WORK READINESS

A literature review, ‘*Empowering People with Barriers to Aspire Toward and Achieve Work Readiness*’ has been completed.

Summary

The objective of the study was to review Australian programs that sought to empower people who experience barriers to employment to aspire toward and achieve work readiness. A total of five articles were assessed and their study type, aim, transition program, participants and key findings were reviewed.

It is important that Australia develop and validate its own transition programs due to this country’s unique legislation, funding models, and service provision requirements.

The study concluded:

This review supports that transition programs are an advantageous resource to empower people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness. Support provided within a school or community setting, for school age students or post school age participants, enable people with barriers to improve their academic, practical, and work-related skills (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), and to increase their confidence, self-respect, independence and social connectedness (Ashburner et al., 2018; Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). The use of mentors to guide a mentee’s transition from secondary school to post-school life can be extremely beneficial, with positive feedback from both mentors and mentees (Ashburner et al., 2018). The use of online platforms can enable people with access barriers or special needs to participate in transition programs, however, Ashburner et al. (2018) suggest that online delivery cannot compete with the benefits of face-to-face programs. Suggestions were also made to improve the availability of work-experience for people with barriers, and that transition programs should put greater emphasis on supporting students’ self-determination and independence, in addition to skill building (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). While some studies targeted only participants with ASD, it is acknowledged that the lessons and recommendations from these studies could be used to expand the reviewed transition program to include other people with barriers.

This study, and subsequent research regarding transition programs, is essential for the improvement of employment outcomes among people with barriers. Continuing improvement to these programs will contribute to empowering people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness, and to improve the employment outcomes for people with barriers in Australia.

For the full Literature Review see Appendix 1.



4. THE EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

4.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION AND CO-DESIGN

The approach of the CEU to this evaluation was informed by a participatory evaluation and co-design framework.

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

A participatory evaluation framework puts people from the community and those delivering the programs, projects and services at the centre of the evaluation. Participatory evaluation is a distinctive approach based on the following principals:

- That evaluation should be a co-designed, collaborative partnership through 360° stakeholder input including project participants and project funders;
- That integral to evaluation is an evaluation capacity-building focus within and across projects;
- That evaluation is a cyclical and iterative process embedded in projects from project design to program assessment;
- That evaluation adopts a learning, improvement and strengths-based approach;
- That evaluation supports innovation, accepting that projects will learn and evolve'
- That evaluation contributes to the creation of a culture of evaluation and evaluative thinking;
- That there is no one or preferred data collection method rather the most appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods will be tailored to the information needs of each project.

CO-DESIGN

Co-design is a process and approach that is about working with people to create 'interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives and will reflect their own values and goals'⁴. Co-design can be done in many ways but is about collaborative engagement that is bottom-up, creative, and enables a wide range of people to participate and importantly to steer decisions and outcomes. Co-design is not a consultation process but a partnership approach where 'end-users' actively define and shape strategies and outcomes. The role of the 'expert' is to facilitate this process.

4.2 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARTNERSHIP, PROGRAM TEAM AND STAKEHOLDERS

The participatory evaluation framework enabled collaboration between the CEU, the Partnership and stakeholders throughout the 'I Am Ready' Program evaluation. The Partnership and stakeholders participated in the co-design of the evaluation plan, provided input and insight into the process of the evaluation and the final report. Further, the Partnership and stakeholders took part in four workshops to enable capacity building during the evaluation.

4.3 THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The aim of the evaluation was to ascertain the impact of the 'I Am Ready' Program. The Program was designed to develop the employability skills of year 10, 11 and 12 students who have the potential and ability to gain meaningful employment or enrol in further education but who faced barriers to

⁴ VCOSS (2015). *Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*. V. C. o. S. Service. Melbourne.

gaining the skills and confidence needed to succeed. The Program needed to be responsive to the needs of all participants, partners, employers and the funders

4.4 EVALUATION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The CEU with the 'I Am Ready' Partnership co-developed the following evaluation objectives (Table 1).

1. Impact of the Program on participant confidence
<p>What was the impact of the Program on the confidence of the participants in seeking employment and or further education/training?</p> <p>Did the participants feel more confident in their ability to seek employment and or education/training as a result of participating in the Program?</p>
2. Impact of the Program on the employability of the participants
<p>What was the impact of the Program on the competence levels of the participants in seeking seek employment and or further education/training?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the participants employability competence levels progress?
3. Changes in Attitude
<p>How did the Program affect attitudes towards employability of the participants?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were the participant's attitudes affected by completing the 'I Am Ready' Program? • How were teacher attitudes affected by their connection with the 'I Am Ready' Program? • How were parent's attitudes affected by their child's involvement in the 'I Am Ready' Program? • How were employees/employers' attitudes affected by participating in the 'I Am Ready' Program?
4. Program Activities
<p>What aspects of the Program contributed to the development of employability /training skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the impact of the participant workbook in developing employability/training skills? • What was the impact of mock interviews in developing employability/training skills? • What was the impact of the work experience in developing employability/training skills? • What was the impact of other activities in developing employability/training skills?
5. Capacity Building
<p>What evaluation skills and techniques did the Partnership learn?</p> <p>How did the Program build evaluation capacity?</p>
6. Evaluation Objectives
<p>Did the Program achieve the desired process, outcome, impact and capacity building evaluation objectives?</p>

Table 1: Evaluation Research Questions

In conjunction with the evaluation objectives, consideration was given to the Partnership's Program funding evaluation objectives when designing data collection methods and analysis. The following is a list of the funding objectives;

- Engage a minimum of 90 participants
- Evaluate activity on participant's capacity to work and their workforce participation in each catchment area.
- Evaluate features of the activity that make employment of participants attractive for employers.
- Report systemic barriers, which may prevent activity from achieving greater scale and success in the future.
- Determine the extent to which each of the following components contributed to the activity achieving its objectives;
 - School participation / engagement
 - Parent / career expectations of employment
 - Participants expectations of employment
 - Employment opportunities
 - Project design that integrates the employer
 - Stakeholder support
 - Individualised service delivery
- Meet regularly with participants to obtain information to assess the benefits of support that participants receive from industry buddies.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION

The evaluation of the Program utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach providing information about process, outcomes and impact and capacity building (*Evaluation Methodology: page 69*). Qualitative and quantitative data was collected at key points during the Program and included focus groups, participant Workbook data, Facilitator's Field Notes, volunteer's reflections and surveys as shown in Figure 3.

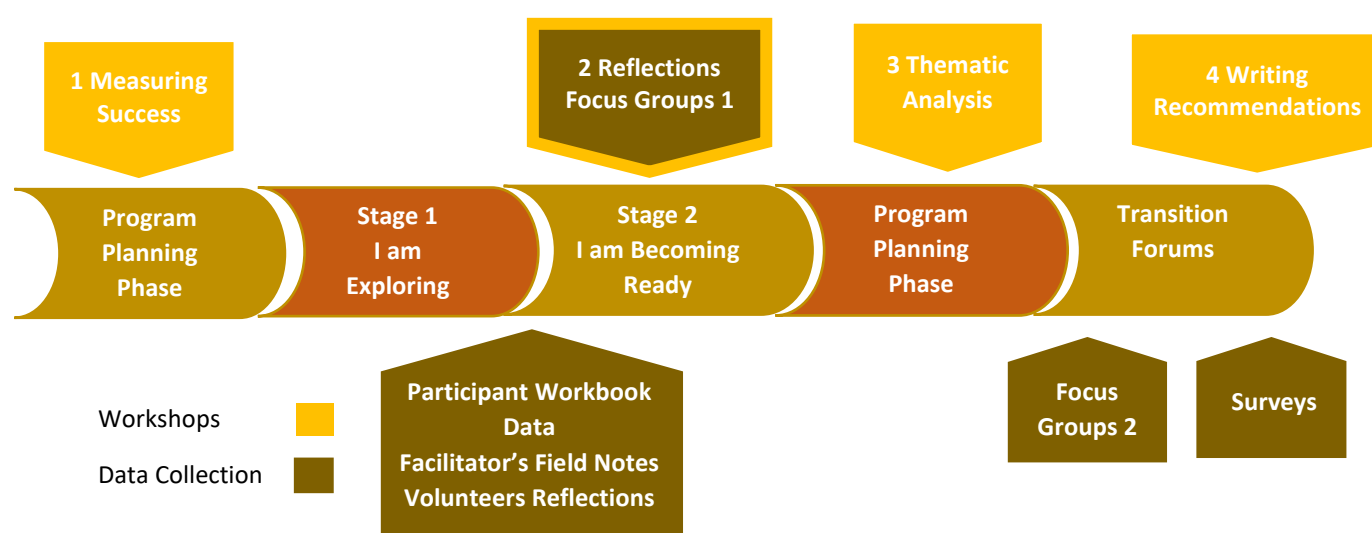


Figure 3. Data Collection Points and Capacity Building Workshops



5. PROGRAM EVALUATION FINDINGS

This section sets out the findings from each set of data as follows:

- 5.1 Workshop 2: 'Reflections'
- 5.2 Focus Group Thematic Analysis: The Partnership, Facilitators and Volunteers
- 5.3 Volunteer Reflections
- 5.4 Facilitator Field Notes
- 5.5 Participant Workbook Data
- 5.6 Focus Group Thematic Analysis: Parents, Participants and Teachers
- 5.7 Employer, Organisation and School Survey: and Capacity Building Workshops Feedback.

5.1 WORKSHOP 2: REFLECTIONS

A full day workshop after the completion of Stage 1, 'I Am Exploring', brought together those who had contributed to the Program to that date. A total of 20 people attended, representing the Facilitators, volunteers, associated agencies, the Partnership, the Project Team and a representative of the Program funding body. The workshop was interactive and provided significant insight into the lessons learnt and provided suggestions for the future delivery of the Program.

THINKING ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Workshop participants were asked a series of questions and asked to identify the word, printed on cards and placed around the room, which best represented their answer and the reason for their choice. The words included, *Hard Work, Confusing, Boring, Needs Improvement, Alright, Don't Know, Useful, Fun, Great and Fantastic*. The responses were analysed as follows⁵.

Question 1. Thinking about the program, how do you feel?

Of the workshop participants, 56% (n = 10) selected 'fantastic' as their word of choice, 28% (n = 5) selecting 'useful' with remaining participants selecting 'needs improvement' or 'great'. They stated that the Program was an '*opportunity for young people*' and that it '*allowed* [the Program participants] *to open up*' and that they '*Didn't want to leave*' as they had '*bonded*' during their time together.

Question 2. Thinking about the Program, how do you think the Program participants feel?

In answer to this question the workshop participants equally selected the words 'alright' and 'great' with 28% (n = 5) for each one. This was followed by the word 'useful' for 17% (n = 3) of the workshop participants. Other lower scoring words included 'fantastic', 'don't know' and 'needs improvement'. Workshop participants stated that the Program participants had said '*it was alright*' and that it was '*a lot of sitting*'. They also noted that '*confidence [was] up*', the '*students engaged*' and that they were '*surprised the difference it made*'.

⁵ The results are presented in valid percentages and number of participants (n=X).

Question 3. Thinking about the Program, how do you think the parents feel?

Workshop participants responded to this question by predominantly selecting 'don't know' (39%, n = 7) with equal numbers selecting 'fantastic' or 'great' (22%, n = 4, respectively). The least selected word was 'useful'. The Facilitators and volunteers stated that they often had *'no contact with parent[s]'* and wondered if the Program participants were *'at home, using employability skills'*. However, a workshop participant also commented that it was great to see the *'kid [you] normally have to drag out of bed – charged up and ready to go'*.

Question 4. Thinking about the Program, how do you think employers feel?

In answer to this question, 28% (n = 5) of workshop participants selected the word 'great', followed by 22% (n = 4) 'don't know'. Low rated words included both 'useful', 'alright' and 'fantastic'. The workshop participants stated that *'local business networks afterwards engaged and asked to participate again'* and that *'Industry was wanting any program to spark interest in work'*.

Question 5. How do you think the Program participants feel about the Workbook?

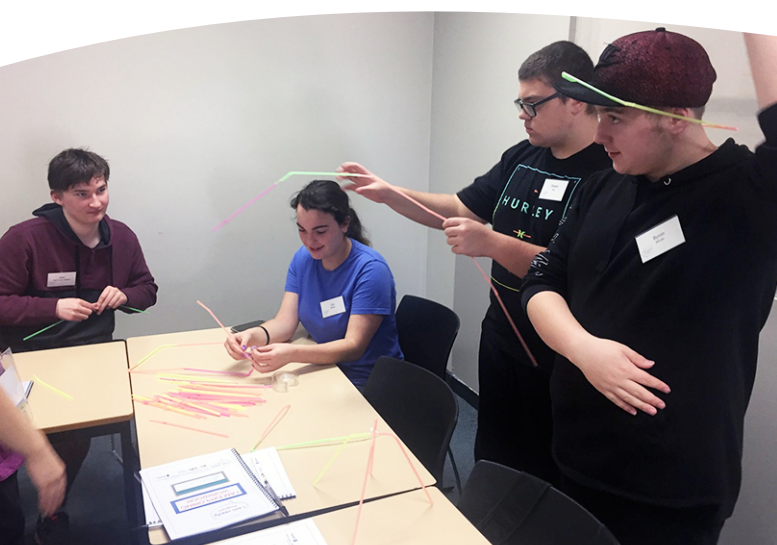
Workshop participants responded to this question with 'don't know' (28%, n = 5), followed by 'confusing' (22%, n = 4). Low rating words were 'needs improvement', 'alright' and 'boring'. The workshop participants stated that *'students with low literacy had no input into [the] workbook but verbally they stated their feelings'*. In addition, they stated that there were *'too many questions to work through'* and that perhaps *'students [were] embarrassed about writing [due to] literacy skills'*.

Question 6. How do you feel about the Workbook?

In answering this question, the workshop participants were equally split between the words 'needs improvement', 'alright' and 'don't know' (33%, n = 6 respectively).

Question 7. How do you think the Program participants feel about the activities?

Workshop participants responded with an equal split between the words 'useful' and 'great' (39%, n = 7 respectively) with lower rating words 'fantastic' and 'don't know'. They noted that during the hands-on activities the Program participants were *'more engaged'* and that they enjoyed *'engaging and connecting from doing'*.



UNPACKING LESSONS LEARNT

Workshop participants collaboratively brainstormed three questions about lessons learnt during the Program planning stage and the delivery of Stage 1. Their responses were analysed as follows.

Question 1: What are the lessons learnt from the program planning and delivery?

Several key points were raised from the discussion about the Program planning and delivery including:

- Providing alternative ways to respond to activities in the Workbook
- Program participants thrived in an environment outside of school
- Information about learning styles or barriers would have been useful for the Facilitators
- Maintain flexibility in delivery style to suit different groups of Program participants

The majority of words workshop participants used in this activity related to the Program activities and learning styles, as seen in the word cloud in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Word Cloud – Program planning and delivery lessons learnt⁶.

Workshop participants suggested that it would be useful to have had more details about each Program participant's learning needs prior to them commencing. The issue of literacy, it was felt, required further discussion to ensure each Program participant received adequate support. Individualised lessons would cater for a variety of learning needs while ensuring flexibility during delivery.

It was noted that Program needed to maintain its hands-on approach to activities with consistent messaging and delivery.

Question 2: What changes, if any, did you see in the participants?

⁶ The word clouds are a representation of word frequency used by the participants in the workshop. Words that appear more often are given prominence.

Workshops participants observed a number of positive changes in the Program participants including:

- They seemed to find their tribe
- They reset their compass of their perceptions of themselves becoming ‘future orientated’
- They increased in self confidence
- They improved self-management
- They improved communication and social skills
- Their engagement improved.

The majority of words workshop participants used in this activity related to changes in Program participant’s attitude, behaviour and skills as seen in Figure 5⁶.



Figure 5. Word Cloud – Perceived changes seen in the Program participants

There were several positive changes observed in the Program participants overall behaviour, in particular, their improved self-confidence and communication skills. Program participants exhibited a renewed willingness to engage and an emerging awareness of their own potential and ability. Program participants were seen to develop a level of tolerance and acceptance towards others in the class as they developed their social skills in a positive learning environment.

Question 3: Do you see a future for the Program and what does it look like?

There were several key points workshop participants raised in describing the Program of the future including:

- Broaden the selection criteria to 'engage' with a greater number of students
- Improve external partnerships
- Integrate the Program with education providers permanently

The words workshop participants used in this activity related to connections with schools and some gaps in the delivery of some skills as seen in Figure 6⁶.



Figure 6. Word cloud – What the Program should look like in the future.

There was a strong emphasis on the need for resume writing to be included in the Program with many workshop participants feeling that it did not deliver all the necessary skills required for the program Participants to be job ready. There was mention of the need to address literacy levels and writing skills to enhance the ability of the participants to secure future employment.

The need to make stronger connections with schools and industry partners was highlighted. The workshop participants noted that the Program addressed an existing learning gap by providing a facilitated, integrated, non-judgemental and participant focused learning environment.

5.2 FOCUS GROUP THEMATIC ANALYSIS: THE PARTNERSHP, PROJECT TEAM, FACILITATORS AND VOLUNTEERS

Focus groups for the Partners, Project Team, Facilitators and volunteers were conducted during Workshop 2: 'Reflections' (*Focus Group Questions Appendix 2*). The transcripts from the focus groups were analysed collaboratively with the Partnership and Project Team in Workshop 3 with the results as follows.⁷

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The focus groups involved nineteen (19) participants, separated into three groups, Partnership and Project Team members (n=5), Facilitators (n=5) and volunteers (n=9). Representatives from all five locations that hosted the Program attended. The majority of the focus group participants were female with one male.

ANALYSIS

The findings of the analysis will be presented under four major themes that were identified through thematic mapping (Table 2).⁸

Major Themes			
Learning went both ways	Targeting teaching strategy to learning activity	Tribe: the importance of belonging.	Building participants confidence

Table 2. Major Themes of the Focus Group Thematic Analysis

LEARNING WENT BOTH WAYS: PARTICIPANTS, FACILITATORS AND VOLUNTEERS

The 'I Am Ready' Program was targeted at improving the work readiness of participants, however, many focus group participants identified that it enabled the participants and Facilitators to learn from one other. In some cases, the Partnership and Project Team, Facilitators and volunteers learnt as much from the participants as the participants learnt from them.

Facilitators observed the benefits that participants gained from the uniqueness of the Program and its difference to the school learning environment. They reported that participants who had previously been disengaged at school were attentive and responsive during the Program. There was an occasion of note, when a participant's aunt discussed her first job working in a public house cleaning the toilets and '*they [participants] were absolutely glued*' (F), indicating that the Program was well received by students'.

Facilitators acknowledged that traditional training methods did not fully engage participants and adjusted training methods to be a better fit. Facilitators and volunteers worked together engaging participants. A Facilitator stated that:

⁷ The number of participants is represented as (n=X).

⁸ Focus group participants are identified as: Facilitators (F), volunteers (V), Partnership and Project Team (P)

'I had three really marvellous support workers. Sometimes I'd get them to read a couple of paragraphs and we'd stop and have a bit of a discussion and then move on. We just tried some things like that to stop the interest from flagging, otherwise, they [participants] just zone out' (F).

Many acknowledged that the Program enabled them to connect with the participants, recognising that *'it was so much more than I expected... how emotionally attached you can get to kids in such a ridiculously short period of time and that you can actually make a difference' (F).*

Facilitators and volunteers were also able to learn valuable skills from the participants. Some volunteers were undertaking Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate III in Disability Training. The Program provided an opportunity for volunteers to work alongside young people with a disability, enhancing their work experience. One volunteer stated that *'it's [volunteering] going towards my support education Certificate III, and hopefully, give me some employment, but also, being able to be part of it [the Program] has been fantastic' (V).*

Although the experience itself was valuable to volunteers, the Program enabled them to learn valuable lessons from the participants. For example, one volunteer said:

'I realised a bit late quite a few [participants] had literacy problems. They would literally rather be seen as lazy than incapable' (V).

This insight highlighted the need for traditional teaching methods to be adapted to suit various levels of literacy. Through the adaption of training methods, volunteers enhanced their own learning. One example of adaption enabling participant success was described: *'you would see them [participants] sit up and listen every time someone talked about their first job' (V).*

LEARNING WENT BOTH WAYS: PROJECT TEAM AND SCHOOLS

During the Program planning phase, the Project Team engaged with schools. The Project Team identified that *'a lot of building those personal connections with the school and the teaching staff' (P)* were required to facilitate participant inclusion in the Program. Schools initial engagement in the Program proved problematic and the Project team acknowledged that *'schools are notoriously hard to engage with. You almost needed 12 months to do the work prior to being able to build the brand of the program' (P).* This provided the Project Team with an insight into improving future engagement with schools by starting the engagement process earlier, thus ensuring all students, that met the inclusion criteria, were identified earlier and given the opportunity to enrol.

TARGETING TEACHING STRATEGY TO LEARNING ACTIVITY

Facilitators were provided with a range of resources, however, focus group participants identified the necessity for adaptation of teaching strategies to meet individual learning needs. Facilitators acknowledged the Program orientation training and resources were *'exceptionally organised' (F).* They stated that *'everything was there a week prior. I was really impressed with the resources, all their workbooks. I had a lot of information' (F).* Facilitators commended the Project Team's organisational ability stating: *'I couldn't believe the fact that when I left, after the orientation day that I had that box of tricks and it had everything in it' (F).*

Facilitators recognised that teaching styles had to be adapted to meet participant's learning ability. For example, a Facilitator noted that *'there was one girl in particular who can't translate from the board to the book, even though we talk it all out and wrote it all down, she could not process that*

information from there to there' (F). One Facilitator noted, 'you had to accommodate their [participants] needs. I eventually found out, probably second week in, that some of them couldn't read and write, everything became visual' (F).

To engage with participants Facilitators *'had to make things more interactive, hands on than writing, but there were some things that you couldn't. You try and explain it in lots of different ways, which took a lot of time, which left me short for other activities' (F)*. Activity adjustments that further engaged participants, required Facilitators to *'read it out and get them [participants] to highlight key words and that also helped to keep them focused on the page and follow along' (F)*. Another successful adaption involved Facilitators taking part in *'role-play with our support staff who we did the inappropriate interview [with] and they [participants] loved that. They thought it was hilarious' (F)*. Facilitators stated that *'I also know from high impact teaching strategies that multiple exposures is one of the leading ways that kids learn' (F)*.

Volunteers working alongside participants acknowledged that *'a lot of them [participants] needed more hands-on help. Some of them may be working ahead, but not talking. Some of them needed people to sit down and help them through everything' (V)*.

Delivery of the Program activities were, at times, problematic. Facilitators acknowledged that *'although I was very focused on trying to follow the Program and keep to the right times. I just didn't have enough time' (F)*. Facilitators also noted that time was short *'for each of the sessions, just to have that practical activity and then be able to reflect on it. I'm not sure that there was the ability on the sheets to have effective feedback from those activities' (F)*.

Participants regularly engaged via social networking sites, but their awareness and comprehension of social media privacy was limited to poor. Facilitators recognised that participants lacked this awareness:

Do you realise what you [participants] put on your social media, the first thing your perspective employer is going to do is he's going to look you up on Instagram and Facebook. They were like, that's breaching my privacy' (F).

Although participants recognised their rights to privacy, Facilitators acknowledged that *'there were so many things in technology that I think is just vitally important for that generation that we could have spent a lot longer' (F)*.

TRIBE: THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

The term 'tribe' is a social culture term that describes a small but powerful group of people that is not created but found when groups of people form around very specific interests and passions. The importance of the feeling of belonging and belonging to a tribe was identified when bringing together the experiences and observations of the focus group participants.

Facilitators and volunteers recognised this phenomenon, articulating it as *'knowing your tribe. Just seeing them interact as a group was really heart-warming and seeing the bond that they'd built. They'd [participants] found their friends, they found their tribe' (P)*. Although participants were acknowledged as initially *'reserved'*:

They were sitting quite far apart from each other. There was a lot of heads down. As the weeks progressed, they formed friendships' (V).

Facilitators and volunteers recognised a shift in social structure when *'they made friends and they felt this is where they belonged'* (F). A Facilitator described development of the feeling of belonging to a tribe:

'I don't ever see that level of love, it's beautiful. It's allowing these kids to be together and grow together' (F).

One member of the Project team acknowledged that, *'I couldn't believe it when they [participants] actually said, all three of them, I don't have friends and that connection is so important in their lives'* (P). Yet as participant connection developed, another phenomenon occurred, staff *'had a problem that they were getting too social at times'* (V).

The Project Team acknowledged the overarching value of the Program when *'a student was not engaged in school, not attending school and he was coming to every session of the program'* (P). They went on to say that *'there's been kids who haven't engaged in school, who don't go to school but have come to this Program. By having the Program in the school, they're not going to participate'* (P).

'Students had at last found their Tribe'.

A Facilitator reflected on the enormous impact of the Program through the life experience of one participant, when *'the previous day this boy's cousin had committed suicide and he came to the I am Ready class – he didn't tell me this, his mum came at lunch to check up that he was all right. He just so wanted to come here today'* (F). The impact of belonging to a tribe and its overall importance cannot be quantified, especially when participants had experienced isolation and feelings of inadequacy, prior to their involvement in the Program.

BUILDING PARTICIPANTS CONFIDENCE

This theme articulates the spontaneous development and increase in participant confidence. During the mock interview process *'...you could just clearly see he [participant] was acing it because the industry experts who were interviewing him were beaming ear to ear'* (P). Another participant *'come out right on cue and he's just gone 'smashed it'. It was just like there it is, that just tells you what this Program does'* (P). The Project Team acknowledged that:

'I think that's a really great thing that's come out of the Program that they [participants] now see themselves as able now to take that step' (P).

Facilitators recognised that *'they [participants] had a goal and they stuck to it and achieved it, they've sat that interview, which is massive'* (F). Participants had expressed lack of confidence prior to the interviews yet volunteers *'noticed that they were becoming a lot more confident. The quiet ones actually started being a little bit more interactive getting involved in activities'* (V). Although *'they all had an expectation of where they wanted to be. You just had to drag it out of them. So they really do have something they want to do'* (V). Participants that had lacked confidence prior to joining the Program now had a realistic and achievable goal to pursue and the confidence to achieve it.

The Project team recognised participant learning limitations and strengths, when *'the ones [participants] that couldn't write, they were embarrassed to have to fill out a workbook and to record their answers and you could tell that they were. But they could verbally, express themselves in their answers and do a great job'* (P). Even though *'a lot of these kids [participants] have got areas where they're so good, they're problem solving, they're geniuses in some areas. But it's identifying those positive things too'* (P). Through the Program, the Project Team recognised that:

'If we can empower others to see that these guys are being embraced for all their differences, and that they've got, the skill and the ability and that you're also inadvertently supporting the parents to let go and let them fly, then that's the overall benefits of this Program' (P).

The highlight for one Facilitator was a participant who *'the previous week he said, I got a job interview. He didn't get the job, but he got an interview...'*

THEMATIC ANALYSIS CONCLUSION

From the four themes a pattern emerged that highlighted the issue of poor to no literacy skills of some participants. As a result, teaching methods had to be adjusted to meet individual participant's abilities and many techniques and strategies were utilised to ensure comprehension and understanding were achieved.

All focus group participants recognised that learning went both ways, as shared skills and knowledge were developed. Further, it was identified that participants with a learning barrier experience social exclusion in the general community and within the school environment. This was particularly highlighted through the recognition that participants found their tribe during the Program. Through finding their tribe, Participants became empowered, formed ongoing friendships and connections and found a place of belonging and purpose. This manifested itself in the development of participant confidence that was demonstrated through the attainment of knowledge that culminated in the mock interview process successes. Participants who had lacked confidence, who had been disengaged within society had become confident, happy, and purposeful. Through this socially positive inclusive activity, participants demonstrated the achievement of the Program goal, to facilitate participants entering the world of employment and self-actualisation.



*Industry Tour to
Aussie Broadband,
Morwell*

5.3 VOLUNTEER REFLECTIONS

Volunteers assisted the Facilitators and participants during the eight weeks of Stage 1: 'I Am Exploring'. They were provided with a journal to record their observations, reflect upon the Program and how the participants responded to various activities.

ANALYSIS

Volunteer journals were thematically analysed with the results presented below.

The positive environment that the Program engendered was noted by one volunteer who observed that, *'the students weren't pushed or forced to participate but instead encouraged to join in'*. This inclusive environment encouraged participants to open up, with one volunteer reporting that a participant *'told me that he had suffered from depression and had considered taking his life'*. Furthermore, volunteers noted the close personal connections that were being established, and that it was *'good to see friendships had formed by week 5 and students sitting in the bus chatting away to each other, laughing and enjoying the bus trip'*.

A highlight of the Program was the opportunity to put into practice skills learnt by preparing, dressing and attending a mock interview. Volunteers reflected that the participants were anxious about the mock interview, however *'once they put on their outfits and had a chance to revisit/run through the mock interview questions they seemed more confident'*. Volunteers noted that the outfits they had purchased made a difference in the participants' body language and that *'they stood up straighter and with more confidence when they came out of the change room in their new clothes'*, and that it was a *'big step for their self-esteem'*. In addition, volunteers observed participants practicing with each other for their mock interviews stating, *'it is great to see them taking it so seriously'* and that the participants *'encouraged another student to practice as well'*.

The mock interviews were an opportunity for the volunteers to observe the difference in the participants over the eight week period and that *'once students had done their interview, they were all feeling very proud of themselves which is fantastic....I was very proud and quite overwhelmed, they had come such a long way in such a short period of time'*.

The volunteers also reflected upon the value of industry site visits, that *'students seemed to enjoy visiting the sites and it was great to see them asking questions and showing an interest'*. In addition, the volunteers observed the *'fantastic participation levels and enthusiasm was high'*. The final reflections of the volunteers noted the overall satisfaction they observed within the participants. Volunteers commented that

'...overall, the course was fantastic, the students came a very long way in such a short period of time', and that there was 'lots of genuine appreciation from the students, some clearly disappointed that Stage 1 was complete'.

5.4 FACILITATOR FIELD NOTES

The Program Facilitators were provided with a journal to reflect on their experiences at the conclusion of each of the eight weekly sessions in Stage 1: 'I Am Exploring'. These reflections formed a valuable insight into the Program Workbook and the running of the sessions.

ANALYSIS

The Facilitator journals were thematically analysed with the results presented below.

Participants began by exploring team building, and career pathways in the first week of the Program. They looked at the landscape of the workplace and the various reasons for working. The Facilitators commented that the *'team building activities were great to commence the project to build group cohesiveness and to also build knowledge of employability skills'*. In general, the Facilitators commented that this week was *'too easy, [and] obviously depends on [the] cohort of students and their abilities'*. Further to this a Facilitator mentioned the difficulties some participants faced where, *'some participants seem to lack the confidence to verbalise answers to the whole group and quite a number lacked confidence in filling in the workbooks without assistance'*. The same Facilitator also stated that it *'became apparent that workshopping the answers and writing them down on the whiteboard was the best way to help those students to get started'*.

Preparation for work, employability skills and communication were explored in the second week of the Program. Facilitators commented that in this week *'some students struggled comprehending'* and that *'some students struggled with the role play activity'*. Nevertheless, the Facilitators commented that *'most were engaged through the activities'* and that *'they would have benefited from having more time to discuss topics and complete set tasks'*.

Problem solving skills, initiative and enterprise and organisational skills were topics for the third week of the Program. The Facilitators reported that *'students did stay engaged in the activities even though we did struggle for time'*. Other Facilitators reported similar, *'even though there were many topics to get through in one day, the students seemed to manage, the structure of the day was somewhat repetitive yet the students managed to stay engaged in the classroom discussions and activities'*. Of particular interest were the contributions made by the volunteers, with a Facilitator stating that the volunteer *'always made themselves available for students who struggle with group activities, their guidance encouraged students to participate and be involved'*. In addition volunteers brought opportunities for discussion into the classroom, with one Facilitator reporting that *'news of the day was that support worker had been for an interview, won the job and today was last day.....the session developed into a chance for the participants to ask questions about job interviews, part of the discussion included what did she wear, questions asked, interview preparation, how nervous was she and how many interviewers were there'*. On a final reflection for this week, a Facilitator noted that the participants *'seem to be more comfortable with each other'*, an indication that the Program created a positive environment for learning.

Self-management, technology and transferable skills were explored in week four. Facilitators wrote that *'some activities would have benefitted with more discussion time to explore topics'*. Furthermore, by the end of the day *'students seemed to become somewhat disengaged and needed prompting from staff to stay focussed'*. The same Facilitator also noted that this impeded the participants with low literacy skills as they *'struggled to respond to answers and participate in group activities'*.

Dressing for success was the topic for the fifth week and included purchasing a suitable outfit, practicing handshaking, networking and first impressions. Facilitators noted that the *'students enjoyed going shopping and purchasing clothes to wear during their job interview'* and that they also *'enjoyed practicing the perfect handshake and learning about the importance of first impressions'*. In particular it was highlighted that *'everyone participated in the role play activity even the introverted students'*

who did exceptionally well and that even the *'least confident students did exceptionally well with the handshake / introduction activity'*. However, the Facilitators reflected that they thought more activities were required on these topics, for example one Facilitator states the Program should *'allow more time to discuss body language, tone of voice; show YouTube videos of what not to do at an interview'*. Another Facilitator commented that *'it would have been useful to spend time discussing how to research an employer...what to look for, places to seek information including alternatives to the internet, templates for jobseekers etc.'* Furthermore Facilitators made comment that many participants do not have a current resume or know how to write a cover letter, for example a Facilitator reported that *'4 students do not have a resume, 7 students have never written a cover letter'*, and as such *'students would benefit from having a session to complete these tasks'*. The Facilitators state that these missing areas *'may have necessitated some restructuring of the Program but it would give the participants a whole new area of knowledge and perhaps confidence when hopefully going to interview'*.

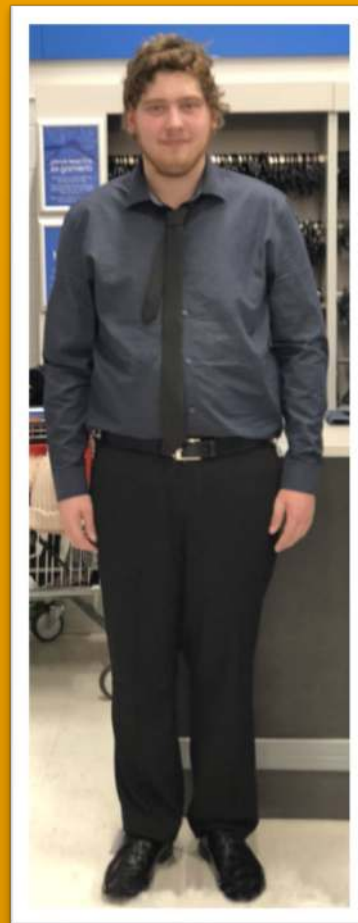
Industry site tours were organised for week five. The Facilitators reported that the participants were *'prepared with questions and asked some appropriate questions'* and that they *'responded well to this activity, they were engaged and showed interest'*. One Facilitator stated that *'many [participants] asked questions and were very interested in what the workplaces had to offer'*. Facilitators especially commented on the hosts inclusivity and engagement, and that *'they spoke clearly and made time for students to ask questions'*. Facilitators also noted that *'students would have benefitted from a longer day or having the visits over 2 days so there would be enough time to discuss each workplace and complete the activities in the log book'*. Despite this, and a highlight, was a tour by a manager of a local company with dyslexia who discussed his employment pathway. He left school at a young age, struggled with reading and writing tasks, yet still managed to complete an apprenticeship and open his own workshop. Here the Facilitators reflected that *'all students were fascinated with his story and you could see the hope in their eyes when he told them that he struggled at school'*.

By week seven of the Program the participants were exploring interview skills. Facilitators reflected that the participants *'did well at presenting themselves in their 60 second commercial and learning about the way to prepare for the interview, the students were engaged and enjoyed the session'*. In addition, *'the 'bad' job interview was one which the participants particularly enjoyed and had a lot of fun picking to pieces'*. Facilitators also noted that there was *'not enough time to complete all activities'* and that perhaps *'part of being ready for an interview is to have a resume ready and be familiar with how to write a cover letter'*. The same Facilitator stated further that *'students needed to have this opportunity during the Program and before their job interviews to develop their resume and practice writing job applications'* and that *'when I asked about their resumes some of them hadn't updated these for a couple of years'*, further highlighting this need. Despite this, the Facilitator reported that *'all students present today seemed to be more confident within themselves'*.

Mock interviews were the highlight of the final week, with the participants also writing thank you letters to their interviewers. In reflecting on these activities Facilitators stated that it *'was great, and the students enjoyed the experience and, in most instances, prepared well for the interview'*. The same Facilitator goes on to report that the *'feedback from the people interviewing the students was very positive'* as well. Another Facilitator reflected on the participants waiting their turns for the mock interviews stating *'for some the wait to be invited in was very difficult and raised stress levels, for others the desire to talk to their friends who had been in for interview meant that concentrating on the other tasks for the day was a very low priority'*. Despite this, the Facilitators noted that *'there was a noticeable positive difference in the students' body language, self-esteem, communication style and*

the way they interacted with each other' and that by the end of Stage 1 'it was great to see all the students engaging in conversation'.

Overall reflections of the Program were positive, and Facilitators stated that *'bringing these young people together was a positive action which helped them to develop confidence as well as feeling part of a team of people who were all very accepting of each other'.* In addition, the Program afforded *'a great opportunity for the students which they valued'* and *'in general, the Program was well thought out and designed'.* Facilitators observed that over the course of the eight weeks there was *'noticeable change in student's confidence during the Program and they did develop their employability skills understanding'* and that *'each week the students became more comfortable within the class and were very supportive and inclusive of one another'.*



*Dress for Success
Participants Brodie (L) and Jamie (R)
Before and After*

5.5 PARTICIPANT WORKBOOKS

Data collected and key activities from participant Workbooks that was analysed is shown in Table 3.

Section	Data / Activity	
5.5.1	Participant Numbers and Demographics	
5.5.2	Participant Aspiration – their dream job	
5.5.3	How are you feeling? Activity	
5.5.4	Self-Assessment of Employability Skills	Communication
		Teamwork
		Problem Solving
		Initiative and Enterprise
		Planning and Organising
		Self-Management
		Learning
5.5.6	Transferable Skills Checklist Activity	Technology

Table 3. Key Workbook Data and Activities Analysed

The results of the workbook data are presented in valid percentages (removing missing data) and number of participants / frequency (n=X).

5.5.1. PARTICIPANT NUMBERS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Participants were recruited from across the Gippsland region from 33 schools.

A total of 89 participants were accepted into the Program of which 14 subsequently withdrew. Of the 14 that withdrew, three (n=3) did not attend any sessions with the remaining nine (n=9) attending 1 to 4 sessions. Bairnsdale and Leongatha experienced the larger numbers with five (n=5) participants withdrawing from each location, the remaining were three (n=3) in Sale and one (n=1) in Traralgon.

Local Government Area	Location	Participants Recruited	Participants Withdrawn	Participants Completed
South Gippsland and Bass Coast	Leongatha	18	5	13
Latrobe	Traralgon	20	1	19
Baw Baw	Warragul	18	0	18
East Gippsland	Bairnsdale	21	5	16
Wellington	Sale	12	3	9
Totals		89	14	75

Table 4. Participant Numbers by Region and Delivery Site

A total of 87 Workbooks were submitted, of which six (n=6) were later removed due to insufficient data resulting in 81 being included in the evaluation. The Workbooks were completed predominately in weeks 1 to 4 hence the reason why there are more completed workbooks than participants who finished the Program (n=75).

The participants ranged in age between 15 – 19 years of age with a mean age of 16.5 and median of 17 (16 years 31%, n=24, 17 years 41%, n=32). A total of 70% (n=57) of the participants were male, with the remaining 30% (n=24) females.

5.5.2. PARTICIPANT ASPIRATION – THEIR DREAM JOB

Participants were asked to write down their ideal or dream job. The top 10 responses are shown in Table 5. Responses were varied with many creative jobs listed such as dancer, Lego designer, and acting. Armed forces jobs included police, Army and State Emergency Services (SES), while other included occupations such as rock climber and pyrotechnics. Building and construction included electrician, earth moving, carpentry and mechanics with a number mentioning fixing bikes. Electronic gaming and Information Technology included designer, programmer and professional gamer.

Ranking	Dream job	Frequency
1	Video Gaming / IT	13
2	Building & Construction	12
3	Creative Arts	9
4	Hospitality	8
5	Other	8
6	Animal Welfare	6
7	Armed forces	5
8	Childcare	4
9	Beautician	3
10	Educator	2

Table 5. Top 10 Dream Jobs

5.5.3. HOW ARE YOU FEELING? ACTIVITY

Participants were asked to rate how they were feeling about their expectations and experiences of the Program using a visual image of tree with figures expressing a variety of emotions, at week 1 of Stage 1 of the Program and week 8, the end of Stage 1 (Figure 7). The participants were asked to colour in the figure in the picture that best represented how they were feeling using a series of five prompts.

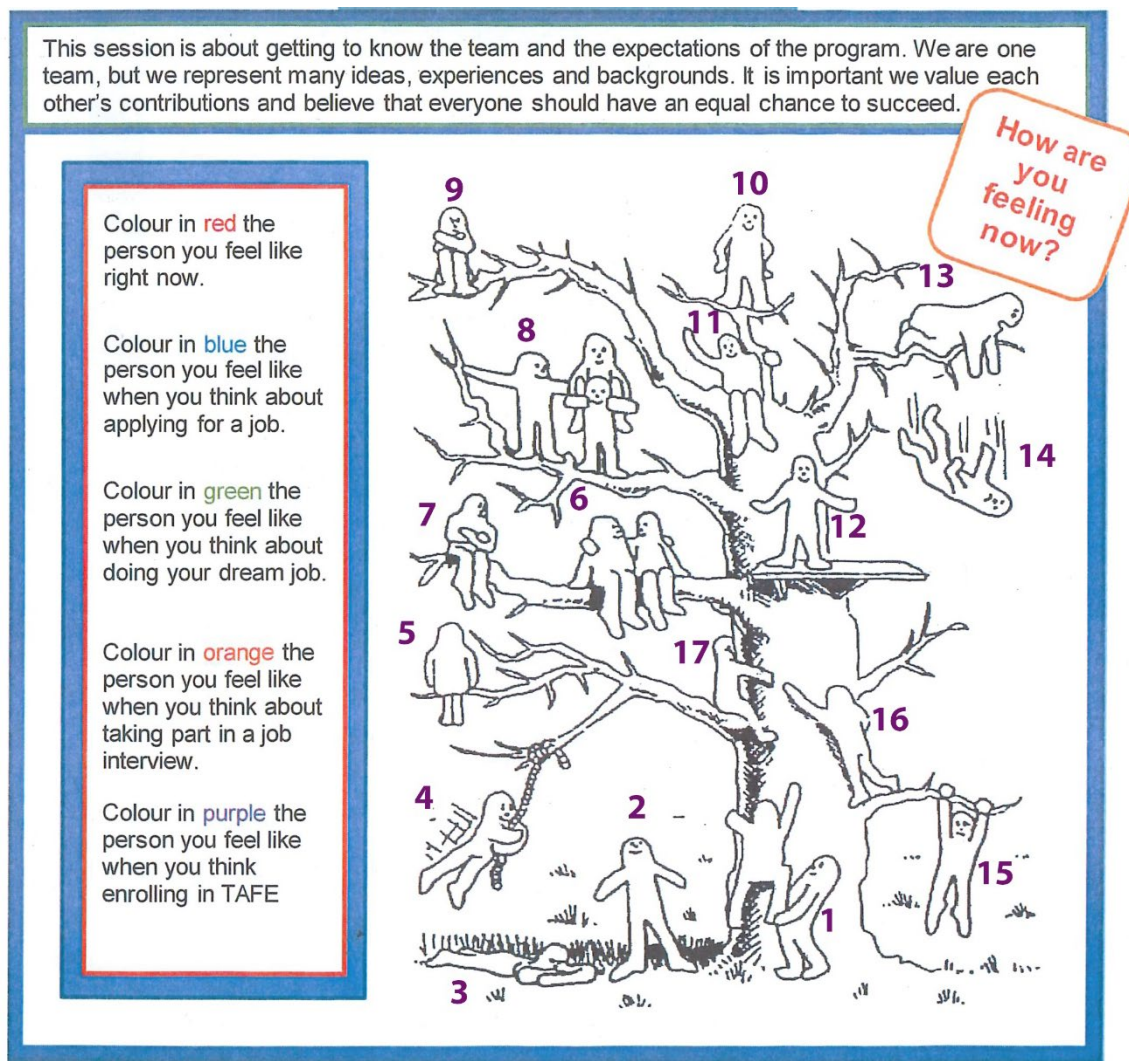


Figure 7 Tree Activity

Evaluation of the tree data included a discussion with the Project team and the CEU in which each figure in the picture was allocated a category that depicted positive feelings, feeling supported, working on and feeling overwhelmed (Table 6). The Program Facilitators were not informed of the sub-categories prior to instructing the participants to complete this activity and thus remains a limitation of the activity data analysis.

Category	Figure no.
1=Positive	2, 4, 10, 11, 12
2=Supported	1, 6, 8
3=Working on	13, 15, 16, 17
4= Overwhelmed	3, 5, 7, 9, 14

Table 6. Sub-Category Tree Activity.

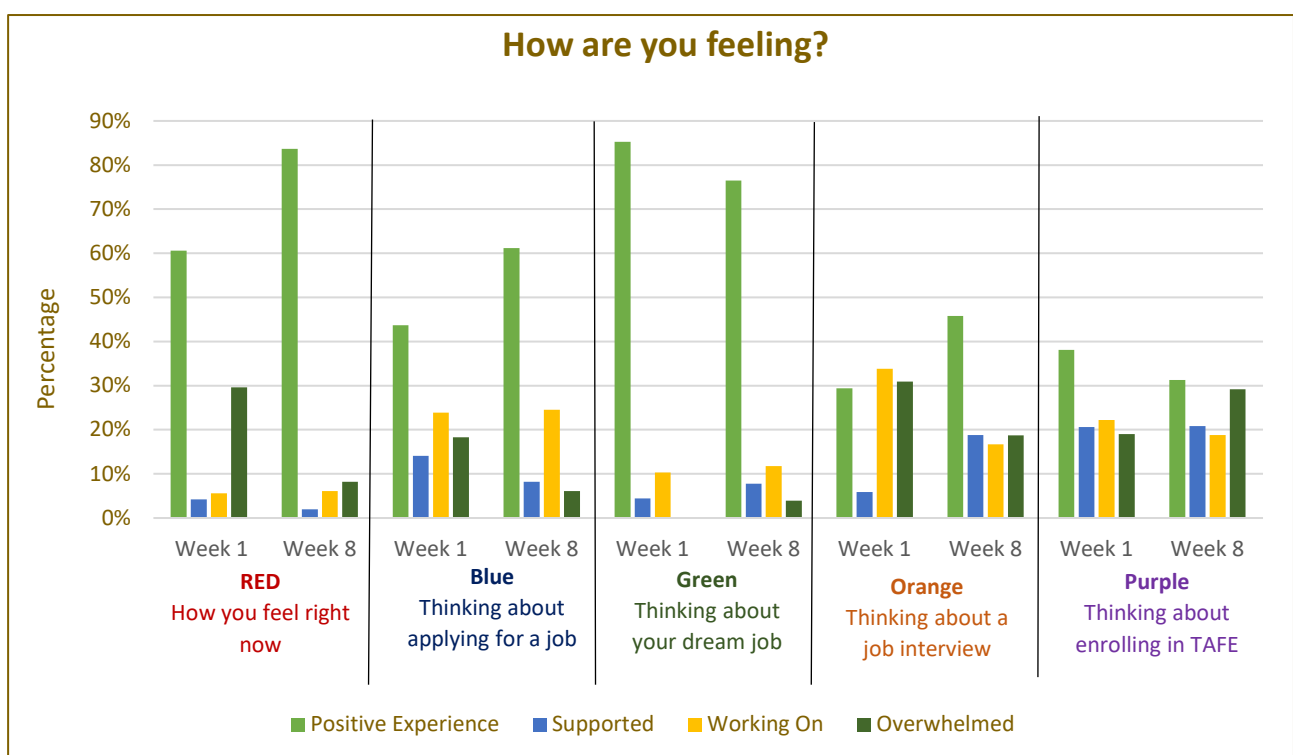
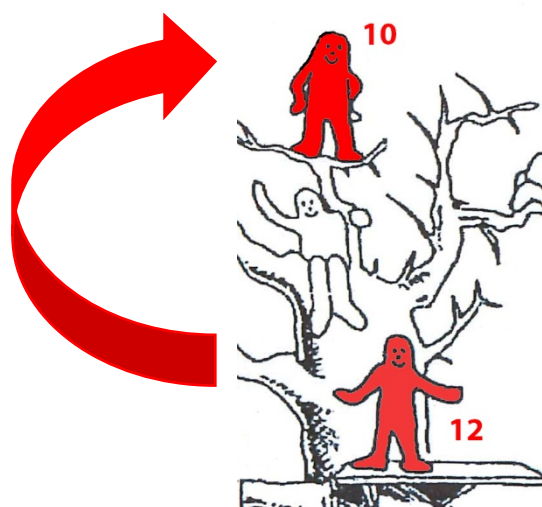


Figure 8: How are you feeling? Activity: Summary of responses at week one and week eight

RED How are you feeling right now?



When participants were asked to colour in red the figure that best represented how they felt at that moment the majority used a positive figure (figure no 12, 21.1%, n=15) which increased in week 8 (figure no 10, 34.7%, n=17) (Figure 9.)

There was a statistically significant increase in overall positive feelings and confidence at the end of the first stage of the Program (60.8% in week 1 compared to 83.7% in week 8).

It is interesting to note the dramatic reduction in the feeling overwhelmed at the end of the Program (29.6% in week 1 compared to only 8.2% in week 8). (Figure 9.)

Figure 9. Red - Week 1 to 8 Results

BLUE – applying for a job.

There was a significant increase in the percentage of participants that became more positive towards applying for job with 43.7% feeling positive in week 1 compared to 61.2% feeling positive in week 8 (Figure 10). There was a steady number of participants who continued to feel like they were working on feeling more positive towards applying for a job.

Encouragingly there was a reduction in the percentage of participants who felt overwhelmed at the prospect of applying for a job from 18.3% in week one compared to 6.1% in week 8 (Figure10). However, there was a decline in confidence visible in the activity which was predominately figure 10 (14.1%, n=10) in week 1 compared to figure 12 (28.6%, n=14) in week 8 (Figure 10).

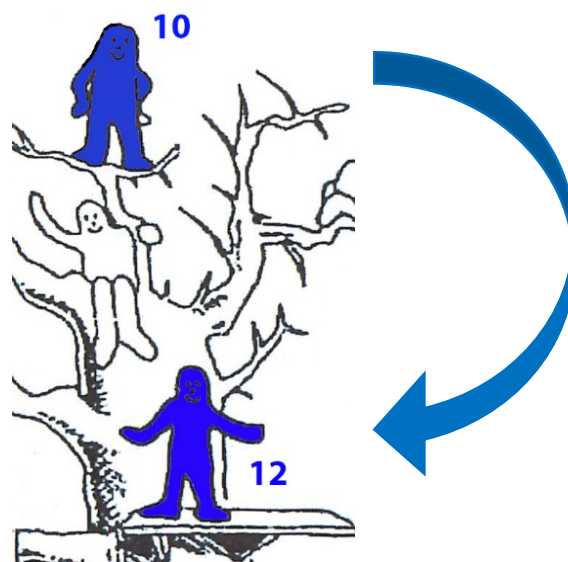


Figure 10. Blue Week 1 to 8

GREEN – doing your dream job.

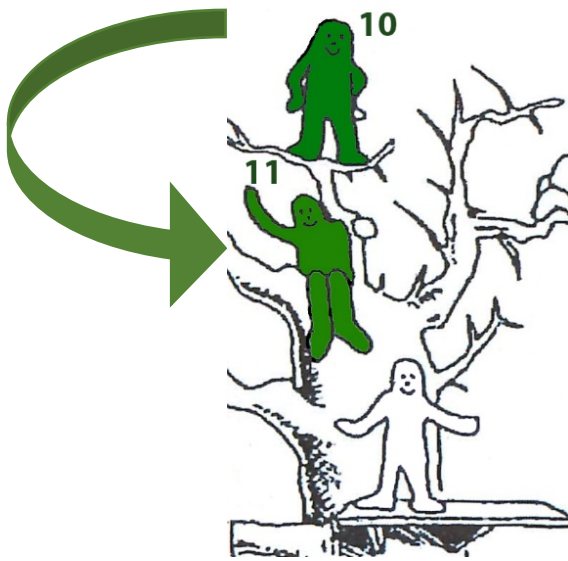


Figure 11. Green - Week 1 to 8 Results

Interestingly there were only a few participants after the 8 weeks who felt overwhelmed at the prospect of getting their dream job (2%). There was a reduction in the number of participants who felt positively towards the idea of getting their dream job with 85.3% in week 1 compared to 76.5% in week 8.

With no other information it is hard to evaluate if the reduction was related to a change in thinking, with participants changing their minds about their ultimate dream job or whether the realities of applying and securing their dream job reduced their positive feelings. The reduction was also visible in the activity participants coloured in figure 10 (35.3%, n=24) in week 1, by week 8 figure 11 (29.4%, n=15) was the most commonly coloured in figure which is lower in the picture (Figure 11).

ORANGE – taking part in a job interview

Overall there was a positive shift in the participants responses towards feeling more positive (29.4% in week 1, compared to 45.8% in week 8), less overwhelmed (30.9% in week 1 compared to 18.7% in week 8), working on (33.4% compared to 16.7%). There were more participants in week 8 (5.9% compared to 18.8% in week 1) who felt that support was required to successfully take part in a job interview.

The figure most coloured in was number 15 (23.5%, n=16) which is hanging on at the bottom of the tree. In week 8 the figure most coloured in was number 12 (16.7%, n=8) which is steady on the platform in the middle of the tree. Interestingly only one participant coloured in number 15 in week 8 (Figure 12).

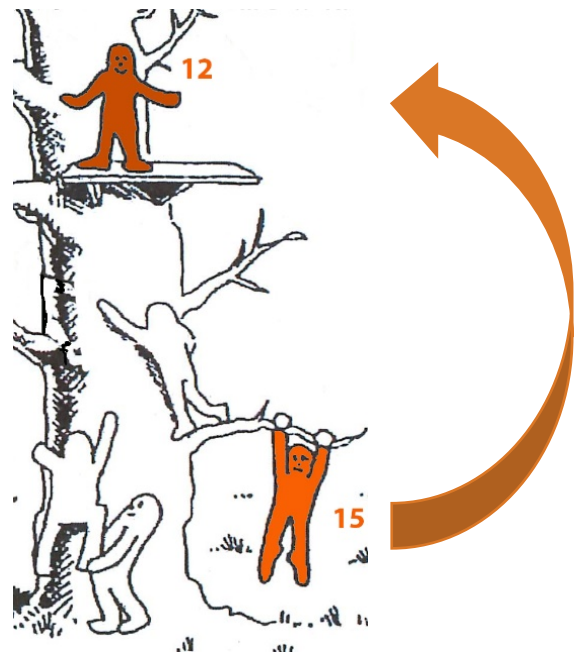


Figure 12. Orange – Week 1 to 8 results

PURPLE – enrolling in TAFE

There was little change during this stage of the Program regarding the participant's feelings towards enrolling in a TAFE course. Results remained constant, from feeling positive (38.1% in week 1 compared to 31.3% in week 8), supported (20.6% in week 1 compared to 20.8% in week 8), working on (22.2% in week 1 compared to 18.8% in week 8), with an increase in feeling overwhelmed (19.0% in week 1 compared to 29.2% in week 8).

There were no further questions in the workbook which enabled participants to elaborate on their thoughts about enrolling in TAFE, therefore it is not possible to understand why they did not feel more positive. Interestingly the participants were divided when asked to colour in the figure that best represented how they felt about enrolling in TAFE in week 1 between figure 15 (14.3%, n=9) and figure 1 (12.7%, n=8) compared to figure 12 (12.5%, n=6) and figure 2 (12.5%, n=6) in week 8 (Figure 13). Figure 2 was also in the positive range compared to 1 which was allocated to the supported category.

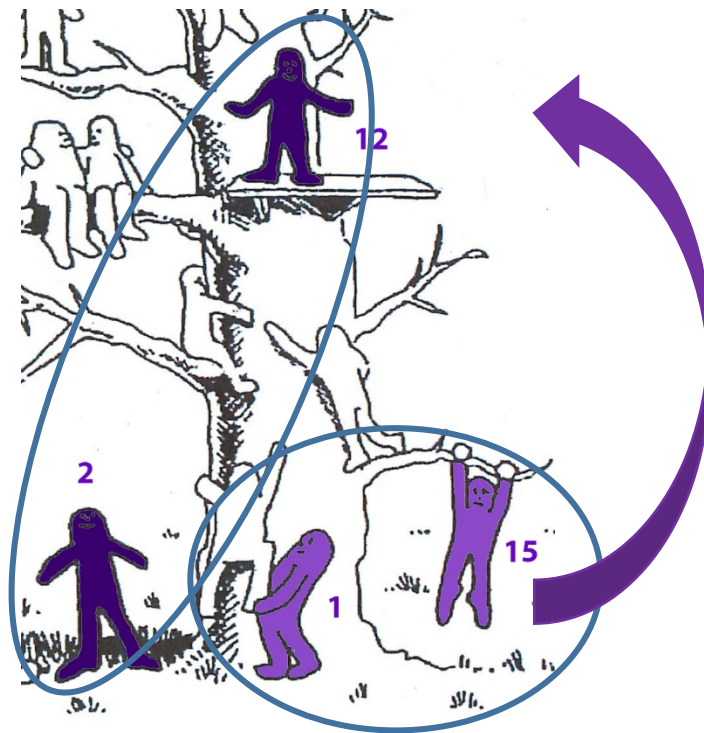


Figure 13. Purple – Week 1 to 8 Results

5.5.4. SELF-ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

COMMUNICATION SELF-ASSESSMENT

Participants were very reflective about their communication skills. Of interest 42.3% (n=30) of participants indicated that giving presentations in class was an activity that they did not do compared to 46.5% (n=33) that did sometimes. Writing lists was done often by 50.75% of participants (n=36) as was following instructions (60.9%, n=43). There was a strong response by participants with 67.6 % (n=48) indicating that they can speak clearly and get their point across without conflict, are good listeners (60.6%, n=43), understand what people need (62.0 %, n=44) and that they were able to listen and discuss issues with family, friends and workmates (54.9%, n=39) (Table 7).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I am a good listener and understand what people need	1.4 (1)	62.0 (44)	36.6 (26)
I can follow instructions	0.0 (0)	39.4 (28)	60.6 (43)
People come to me for information and support.	14.1 (10)	66.2 (47)	19.7 (14)
I listen and discuss issues with family, friends and workmates.	9.9 (7)	54.9 (39)	35.2 (25)
I can speak clearly and get my point across without conflict	9.9 (7)	67.6 (48)	22.5 (16)
I use the phone regularly at work or home to get and pass on information	21.1 (15)	46.5 (33)	32.4 (23)
I give instructions to people	33.8 (24)	57.7 (41)	8.8 (6)
I give presentations in class	42.3 (30)	46.5 (33)	11.3 (8)
I can write letters	22.9 (16)	54.3 (38)	22.9 (16)
I can write lists	11.3 (8)	38.0 (27)	50.7 (36)
I can write emails	23.9 (17)	43.7 (31)	32.4 (23)

*valid percentages and frequency represented in table

Table 7. Communication Self-Assessment

'My goal is to improve...'

Participants were asked to list their goals regarding improving their communication skills after completing their self-assessment. Five main themes emerged, *Written Communication* (n=9, Emails and letters, Writing and spelling), *Verbal Communication* (n=16, Speak clearly and get my point across, Speak to strangers and Better talking to people), *Presentations* (n=6, Public speaking, School presentations), *Understand people* (n=6, Understand what people need, To become independent and be more aware of my surroundings) and *Increase Confidence* (n=6, Grab people's attention, Make eye contact).

TEAMWORK SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Participants were divided when it came to assessing teamwork in a job and part of sporting team with an even number of responses for each statement. Participants did indicate that they sometimes (50.8%, n=33) work as part of team with a community group. The majority of participants indicated that they sometimes (46.2%, n=30) and often (44.6%, n=29) worked as part of a team at school or as part of a learning project (Table 8).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I have worked as part of a team with a community group	21.5 (14)	50.8 (33)	27.7 (18)
I have worked as part of a team in a job	30.3 (20)	36.4 (24)	33.3 (22)
I have worked as part of a team with a sporting team	31.8 (21)	36.4 (24)	31.8 (21)
I have worked as part of a school or learning project	9.2 (6)	46.2 (30)	44.6 (29)

*valid percentages and frequency represented in table

Table 8. Teamwork Self-Assessment

'My goal is to improve...'

Participants were asked to list what they would like to improve with regards to their teamwork. Three main themes emerged, *Improve teamwork skills* (n=18, Improve team building skills, Better working in team, Work well with team with support), *Communicate clearly* (n=6, Talking to people that I don't talk to very often, Communication skills) and *Increase Confidence* (n=5, More confidence, Getting better at trusting people).

PROBLEM SOLVING SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

When it came to problem solving 51.5% (n=34) of the participants stated that they often knew who to ask if they had a problem. They stated that they sometimes can identify when there is a problem (62.7%, n=42) and can work effectively with others to solve problems (59.1%, n=39) (Table 9).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I can identify when there is a problem and use different ways to get good results	6.0 (4)	62.7 (42)	31.3 (21)
I have worked effectively with others in a team to solve problems	6.1 (4)	59.1(39)	34.8 (23)
I would know who to ask if I had a problem	4.5 (3)	43.9 (29)	51.5 (34)

*valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 9. Problem Solving Self-Assessment

'My goal is to improve....'

Three main themes emerged when participants were asked about their goals with regards to their problem solving ability: *Communication* (n=12, Improve communicating ideals to others, Speak up more), *Teamwork* (n=8, Working in a team to solve a problem, Getting along with people I normally don't talk to) and *Critical thinking* (n=7, Think of more solutions to problems, Have more information on the problem at hand).

INITIATIVE AND ENTERPRISE ACTIVITY

In completing the initiative and enterprise activity participants were most likely to sit in the middle with the most common response being sometimes for the majority of the self-assessment statements. It was encouraging to note that 43.9% (n=29) of participants indicated that they often work hard to solve a problem and find an answer. When handling new situations 56.1% (n=37) indicated that they do it sometimes with ease and comfort. When approaching a difficult situation participants indicated that they rarely (30.8%, n=20) or sometimes (35.4%, n=23) feel hopeless and negative. Similarly, participants rarely (28.8%, n=19) or sometimes (36.4%, n=24) avoided doing something that looks difficult (Table 10).

Statement	Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
I do what I think is expected of me, rather than what I believe to be 'right'	3.0 (2)	7.6 (5)	45.5 (30)	31.8 (21)	12.1 (8)
I handle new situations with relative comfort and ease	7.6 (5)	13.6 (9)	56.1 (37)	18.1 (12)	4.5 (3)
I feel positive and energised about life	13.6 (9)	6.1 (4)	34.8 (23)	30.3 (20)	15.2 (10)
If something looks difficult avoid doing it	15.2(10)	28.8 (19)	36.4 (24)	12.1 (8)	7.6 (5)
I keep trying even after others have given up	7.6 (5)	4.5 (3)	43.9 (29)	36.4 (24)	7.6 (5)
If I work hard to solve a problem, I'll find the answer	1.5 (1)	12.1 (8)	24.2 (16)	43.9 (29)	18.2 (12)
I achieve the goals I set for myself	7.6 (5)	22.7 (15)	39.4 (26)	19.7 (13)	10.6 (7)
When I face difficulty, I feel hopeless and negative	15.4(10)	30.8 (20)	35.4 (23)	12.3 (8)	6.2 (4)
I relate to people who work very hard, and still don't accomplish their goals	7.7 (5)	16.9 (11)	44.6 (29)	23.1 (15)	7.7 (5)
People give me positive feedback on my work and achievements	0.0 (0)	9.2 (6)	38.5 (25)	35.4 (23)	16.9 (11)

*valid percent and frequency presented in table

Table 10. Initiative and Enterprise Activity

INITIATIVE AND ENTERPRISE SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

It was encouraging to see that when asked, participants were more likely to show initiative and create work for themselves in a café scenario (below) with 53.0% (n=35) indicating that they would sometimes, compared to 42.4% (n=28) who indicated often (Table 11).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
If I was working at a café and there were no customers, I would be able to show initiative and create work for myself.	4.5 (3)	53.0 (35)	42.4 (28)
I have used enterprising skills in the past and made something to sell to make pocket money.	42.4 (28)	43.9 (29)	13.6 (9)

*Valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 11. Initiative and Enterprise Self-Assessment

‘My goal is to improve...’

When participants were asked to list their aims in improving initiative and enterprise skills three main themes emerged; *Taking the initiative* (n=15, Do things without being asked, Find stuff to do when there is no customers), *Creative thinking* (n=8, Thinking ahead, Think creative) and *Make money* (n=4, Make things for people for money, Make more money and keep my hands busy).

PLANNING AND ORGANISING SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Participants indicated strongly that they were punctual getting to school on time with 67.1% (n=47) stating that this occurred often. In comparison, participants indicated that 49.3% (n=34) could not organise their time and didn't keep a diary or a 'to do' list. Participants sometimes recognised the need to plan (66.7%, n=46) and to prioritise tasks (62.3%, n=43) (Table 12).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I am punctual and get to school on time	1.4 (1)	31.4 (22)	67.1 (47)
I organise my time so I can fit in all the things I need to do, I plan ahead	4.3 (3)	66.7 (46)	29.0 (20)
I organise my time so I can fit in all the things I need to do, I keep a diary or a to do list	49.3 (34)	36.2 (25)	14.5 (10)
I organise my time so I can fit in all the things I need to do, I prioritise tasks in order of importance	11.6 (8)	62.3 (43)	26.1 (18)

*Valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 12. Planning and Organising Self-Assessment

‘My goal is to improve...’

Participants were asked to list what they would like to improve with regards to their planning and organisation. Three main themes emerged, *Making lists* (n=19, Write things down so I can remember, Making lists / diary), *Time management* (n=10, Make time to do things, Do the task and time manage) and *Better self* (n=7, Try my best, Have more hope).

SELF-MANAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Participants sometimes made a goal, planned and followed through (52.9%, n=36), knew what their strengths and weaknesses were (52.2%, n=36) and were able to manage their emotions (65.2%, n=45) (Table 13).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
In the past I have had a goal, made a plan and followed it through to achievement something like, example got your L's or P's to drive a car or completed a course.	17.6 (12)	52.9 (36)	29.4 (20)
I know my own strengths and weaknesses and what I need to improve	7.2 (5)	52.2 (36)	40.6 (28)
I am able to manage my emotions, example when I get angry or upset.	11.6 (8)	65.2 (45)	23.2 (16)

*Valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 13. Self-Management Self-Assessment

'My goal is to improve...'

Participants were asked to list what they would like to improve upon with regards to their self-management. Three main themes emerged, *Work on emotions* (n=12, Manage emotions and my strengths, Help understand my emotions, Emotions, not taking things out on the people around me), *Reach goals* (n=10, Set goals and complete them, Achieve goals) and *Get organised* (n=10, Initiative, Getting stuff early).

LEARNING SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Participants sometimes took responsibility to ask for help (55.4%, n=36), complete their homework (55.4%, n=36) and to research a skill online (56.7%, n= 37) (Table 14).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I take responsibility for my own learning, I ask for help if I do not understand something	6.2 (4)	55.4 (36)	38.5 (25)
I take responsibility for my own learning, by completing all my homework	20.0 (13)	55.4 (36)	24.6 (16)
If I want to learn something new I might research the skill online	6.2 (4)	56.9 (37)	36.9 (24)

*Valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 14. Learning Self-Assessment

'My goal is to improve....'

Participants were asked to list what goals they would like to improve upon with regards to their learning. Three main themes emerged, *Learn new skills* (n=12, Better learning new things, learn new skills), *Improve confidence* (n=8, More confident, My overall self) and *Ask for help* (n=8, Ask for help when I don't understand, Improve on homework skills).

TECHNOLOGY SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

Participants were very confident with the use of the various technologies. They stated that they were often able to receive emails (74.2%, n=46), find information on the internet (74.2%, n=46), send a text (80.6%, n=50), and make a phone call (77.45%, n=48). However, they were less confident about using technology to create a photocopy with 45.2% (n=28) stating sometimes and 37.1% (n=23) choosing often (Table 15).

Statement	Not at All	Sometimes	Often
I use technology to send and receive emails, write documents or play games	0.0 (0)	25.8 (16)	74.2 (46)
I use technology to find information on the internet	1.6 (1)	24.2 (15)	74.2 (46)
I use technology to send a text message	3.2 (2)	16.1 (10)	80.6 (50)
I use technology to make a phone call	1.6 (1)	21.0 (13)	77.4 (48)
I use technology to create a photocopy	17.7 (11)	45.2 (28)	37.1 (23)

*Valid percentage and frequency presented in table

Table 15. Technology Self-Assessment

‘My goal is to improve....’

Participants were asked to list what they would skills like to improve with regards to technology. Two main themes emerged, *Improved Knowledge* (n=13, Learn more technology, My knowledge on the computer) and *Electronic communication* (n=6, Writing and sending emails and Set reminders on phone).

Participant Aiden completed work experience at KND Services, Morwell



TRANSFERABLE SKILLS CHECKLIST ACTIVITY

Participants were asked to compare a series of responsibilities that were transferable between home, school and the work environment. The school and work environment were deemed to be similar with many of the participants ticking both school and work for each responsibility listed. Wearing appropriate clothing (16.9%, n=14), bringing money to buy food (19.3%, n=16) and coming back from breaks (9.8%, n=8) were all rated low for home environment however they were important in the school and work environments. Interestingly participants ranked getting along with people and making your own travel arrangements in all three areas with an equal level of importance.

Responsibility	Home	School	Work
Make your own travel arrangements	67.5(56)	61.4(51)	62.7(52)
Arrive on time each day	34.9(29)	74.7(62)	69.9(58)
Bring your phone fully charged	45.8(38)	50.6(42)	65.1(54)
Wear appropriate clothing or uniform	16.9(14)	73.5(61)	73.5(61)
Bring your own food, or money to buy food	19.3(16)	72.3(60)	67.5(56)
Call if you are running late or not able to make it	37.3(31)	60.2(50)	71.1(59)
Pay attention to safety instructions at all times	42.2(35)	71.1(59)	71.1(59)
Let your supervisor know if you have finished your tasks	20.5(17)	55.4(46)	67.5(56)
Come back from your breaks on time each day	9.6(8)	71.1(59)	71.1(59)
Try to finish your tasks each day	42.2(35)	73.5(61)	71.1(59)
Clean up your area at the end of the day	55.4(46)	74.7(62)	71.1(59)
Get along with people around you	60.2(50)	71.1(59)	72.3(60)
Ask for help if you do not understand the rules or responsibilities	34.9(29)	74.7(62)	72.3(60)
Report anything you think might be a risk to yourself or others	44.6(37)	68.7(57)	72.3(60)
Be aware of the emergency evacuation procedures	49.4(41)	72.3(60)	72.3(60)

*Percentages and frequency presented in table

Table 16. Transferable Skills Responsibility Checklist

Responses from the participants indicated that they were confident utilising technology, yet lacked confidence when learning new skills, communicating, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, and learning. The findings reveal that participants had a positive attitudinal shift as a result of stage 1, 'I Am Exploring' and they were prepared to apply for a job and participate in the formal interview process.

5.6 FOCUS GROUPS THEMATIC ANALYSIS: PARENTS, PARTICIPANTS AND TEACHERS

These focus groups followed a series of workplace information sessions that were scheduled at the five sites. The sessions were designed to provide attendees with an opportunity to gather information from a number of education and training providers, discuss options and plan for life after secondary school. However due to COVID-19 restrictions only three sessions were held, with the Warragul and Bairnsdale sessions unfortunately being cancelled.

Focus group discussions were conducted at the Leongatha, Sale and Traralgon sessions in February 2020 with a total of ten Program participants, three teachers and seven parents taking part (*focus group questions Appendix 3*).

The findings of the analysis will be presented under four major themes that were identified (Table 17).⁹

Major Themes			
Filling the Gap	Finding a Tribe	Stepping up to work	You can do it, Yes you can

Table 17. Major Themes of the Focus Group Thematic Analysis

FILLING THE GAP

It was identified that the Program was unique and filled a gap that currently exists in mainstream schools in ensuring that all students are provided with the opportunities to learn the necessary skills and attributes required to successfully join the workforce or enrol in further education. A teacher commented that *‘... some students who fall between the cracks ... That don’t actually get identified with funding but still need that additional support’* (T). In addition, it was identified that the schools were not able to provide the level of supported learning that was required for all students. One teacher spoke about being involved in the Program:

‘It’s definitely highlighted to me the shortfalls in secondary school education for students with disabilities or learning barriers for the resources to support that’ (T).

The recruitment of participants into the Program was at times difficult with many parents opting not to have their child involved, adamant that the Program was not designed for their needs. Teachers noted that when approached parents many were reluctant to discuss the possibility of their child becoming involved. *‘We did have a bit of a challenge. There were two students that I wanted to bring over and one other family just totally refused’* (T). There were concerns about participants being identified with a learning barrier, stating, *‘...some parents don’t want their kids labelled. When I asked for names, we came up with a list of five kids. Two just flatly refused. So whether it’s because of the labelling of students with disabilities and learning barriers’* (T). In addition, many parents were reluctant to become involved, worried about the level of supervision and support that was being provided during the Program. A teacher noted that *‘...many of our parents get nervous about, how well supported is my child going to be?’* (T).

Of those that did become involved they commented about the extra support that was provided during the Program as an important element to its success. Parents thought that the combination of a Facilitator plus additional volunteers was a recipe for success, with one parent stating *‘I liked the ratio,*

⁹ Focus group participants are identified as: Teachers (T), Parents (P) and Participants (S)

like you had your person who was teaching, and you had your support person' (P). They went on to say that the staff experience also contributed to their ability to respond to the participants in a positive manner, 'I think there was a big benefit to the number of people who were in there, and that they all had an understanding that not everyone is going to understand language the same way or respond the same way' (P). The parents did comment on the need for more regular communication between the Program staff and the parents so that they could be involved in reinforcing learnings at home help and with understanding the of work, 'I think the feedback needs to be a regular thing throughout the Program. Like at the end of the week, just a breakdown of what each kid or your child, what they've achieved what they've struggled with, all that sort of stuff' (P). Many said that they were happy with the level of communication provided, 'I found it positive, and I know they wrote back if I had a question about something through the Facebook page' (P).

The participants commented on the differences between being at school attending the Program, from the way staff spoke to them to how it made them feel. Participants commented on the feelings of being supported and really listened too. *'They just cared about what you thought and said. They would actually listen to what you've got to say and where you struggle' (S). They felt that being involved in the Program was an honour and that there were consequences if you stepped out of line in the Program, '... to be in the Program, it was privilege, you step too far out of line and you weren't going to come back in' (S). Participants went on to comment on learning in the school system, '... some teachers in high school, they sometimes watch you for a certain question or something, like sometimes you're not finished and you just fall behind' (S). The Program provided participants with the opportunity to speak up in class, feel valued and to ensure they all were able to keep up with the content being delivered. One participant stated, '... you can like take your time, not like other teachers' (S), and that the Program made sure that they 'Don't leave anyone in the dust' (S). Overall, the teachers noted the positive changes in the participants and the professional way in which the Program was conducted.*

'I think there's nothing but positives. ... from the way the Program was set up, we were kept informed, it was very well organised, the processes were great. Nothing slipped through the cracks. It was fantastic' (T).

FINDING A TRIBE

As with the focus groups of the Partners, Project Team, Facilitators and volunteers, a major theme identified was that of finding a tribe. The participants, although apprehensive at first, quickly made friends and felt secure within the learning environment, *'...the first day I turned up I was very scared and didn't talk to anyone, and at the end I think I came out with a couple of people I could call them a friend' (S) and 'I think two or three classes in, that's when you started to click, so you could learn and have fun' (S). Participants experienced a real sense of belonging while feeling that their attempts at the work would not be judged by the Facilitator or other participants. 'Feeling like they belong. They could really make mistakes without anyone else really...No one judging them' (T). Parents were pleased to watch the friendships develop during the Program as participants moved out of their normal comfort zones to speak with others, 'He talked to kids that he wouldn't usually talk to. He kind of figured he's not the only one with a disability' (P) and 'I think that was a really nice thing to be able to see other kids and get friendships with other students' (P).*

The parents were reflective of caring for a child with learning barriers, *'I can look up and someone is either smiling at you because they've seen something he's done or there's all sorts of reactions, he is*

noticed and that's a good thing in some ways and in other ways, there is a tag that goes with it' (P.)
Another parent explained,

'Then you've got the other end of the stick as well [my child] is autistic and doesn't look any different to any other kid and she's put into a different category and then when they actually start talking to her and interacting with her, they are like there's something queer here like there's something a bit odd' (P).

There were a number of parents who spoke of the daily barriers to ensuring that their children were provided with every opportunity to have new experiences leading into their future. The Program provided participants with an alternative learning environment in which to meet new friends and learn new skills free from judgement.

The participants also developed tolerance and understanding of others during the Program with many noting the disabilities of others in comparison to their own learning barriers, *'...it kind of opened his eyes to the fact that he's not the only one, but there are kids that are worse off than him' (P)*. Being part of something special together with others made the Program unique in its delivery, especially compared to the school environment, *'...she just likes being a part of something because as growing up through school, she was ostracised because she was different and I think it's being incorporated and everyone was the same, yeah' (P)*. The parents and teachers alike noted the impact the Program had on participant's level of confidence, and ability to self-reflect, *'I think they had also seen themselves have so much personal growth' (T)*. The sense of belonging, being comfortable with the learning environment and the other participants greatly contributed to that feeling of finding a tribe.



'Wrapping up with a 'How am I feeling now' ... all students reported back to have really enjoyed the whole process; from going shopping for professional clothing to practicing being in an interview type situation. They all expressed how much more comfortable they felt about being interviewed, which is wonderful to hear!'

STEPPING UP TO WORK

The Program had several key objectives in preparing participants for their work experience placement. There was a need for the staff to teach the participants the realities of working, that everyone starts at the bottom and works their way up to the top, that hard work and dedication are important attributes.

'Trying to tell kids, you get there, you're got to start off with sweeping the floors and cleaning. He says, I'm not going to do that. They run from that sort of thing, then they realise you've got to eat your main meal first before you get dessert, the easiest way to put it, isn't it, really? They want their dessert first' (P).

Many participants had a false sense of what working for a living would be like until they experienced it first-hand, *'I think [my child] had a false idea of what work really is. I don't think she realised what it entailed until she experienced it' (P)*, and another parent stated, *'...that they learned that I can't just be there and just say, I don't feel like working today, that's not a choice' (P).*

The success of the work experience relied on having the right participant matched to the right work environment to the right employer, *'Well, you've got to have obviously the right placement and the right boss' (P)*. The work experience had the effect of demystifying the work environment, taking away the fear and exposing the participants to possibilities that exist post school. Motivating participants to engage in further education and training, *'...the work experience component in particular showed him, actually that bit I can do really well. I think he learned that what comes next isn't scary, which has been a big help' (P).*

Preparing for the work experience placement included a visit to a shopping centre to choose the right outfit and the development of job interviewing skills and techniques. The first step was getting the participants to engage in the activities, which to some was the first hurdle, *'...his challenge was having that willingness to participate' (P)*. However once engaged the participants learnt communication skills, interviewing techniques, and importance of speaking up and asking questions. One participant commented, *'...they teach me how to like, to not be nervous and don't like fiddle around during a job interview' (S)*, and another said:

'It gets you ready for the workforce. They teach you a lot of skills that you need when you go for an interview and what you - what skills you need when you're at work' (S).

A participant went on to say *'It helped with my communication and organisation, all those types of things. Just not mumbling and all that, like, not talk quiet and stuff' (S).*

The Program focus on transferable skills, particularly communication, was noted as being essential to the participant's success during the work experience phase. One participant said that the Program taught him, *'Communication and knowing how to speak to actual workers and clients and stuff' (S)* and another said, *'It was really good, fun, you get to meet new people, build on every skills – talking, communicating and jobs' (S)*. It was important that participants learnt the importance of being organised, getting to work on time and for others learning how to independently catch public transport to and from work was a big part of their learning. *'Organised. Got to have everything to be ready to go to work' (S)*. Several participants were later offered part time employment as a result of being involved in the Program.

There was a period of adjustment for both the participants and employers during the work experience phase. One parent suggested that more support was warranted to ensure that the participants felt secure and that the employers were provided with enough information and strategies to

communicate effectively with them, *'I think the actual work experience, the very first day needs to be more supported than you just drop the child off and good luck'* (P). Knowing the participant and their personalities helped with communication, *'I think people actually having an understanding of her was probably one of the challenges, but as they got to know her, and that it became much easier'* (P). There were several comments about exposure of the participants to the workforce and exposure of employers to the participants which would lead to greater understanding of their capabilities. *'The more exposure these kids have to the workforce, the more success they'll have, and the more exposure they - the employers have, then the more success we'll have with getting kids into those places'* (T) and another stated *'...these kids are so capable of doing so much, it's just getting out there'* (T).

The teachers also noted that the skills learnt for interviewing and work experience could be seen at school noting the way participants engaged with staff, made eye contact and spoke clearly, *'...he follows instructions really well. He speaks really well to the customers. I guess those skills that were taught in the programme have come through'* (T). One participant summed up the experience by explaining the difference between work and school, *'...when I was actually at work, I would look forward to what I'd be doing, so learnt faster. When I was at school, I was sort of unwilling, so it's less enjoyable'* (S).

YOU CAN DO IT, YES YOU CAN!

The Program empowered the participants to strive for brighter futures. It reinforced each participant's strengths and attributes while building up their overall confidence levels. The increase in confidence was noted by the parents, teachers and the participants themselves. One teacher stated *'...they just become more and more engaged, and, I guess, my hope would be that the kids would actually develop a social connection'* (T). Another teacher spoke of the change to a participant,

'I had one of my students who was very withdrawn. No confidence at all. We brought her over to the I Am Ready last year and just the change in her was just dramatic within the first couple of weeks.' (T).

There were a number of participants that have since gone on to enrol in further training, and education, *'It's seen two of the kids go from really not socialising or even being able to hold a conversation to having confidence and now one's enrolled fulltime in TAFE, another one's participating in a work placement in VCAL, Year 12. It's fantastic'* (T).

Participants gained greater understanding of the realities of working and the skills and attributes required to be successful. One teacher noted, *'It's all about the confidence that they gained here and the skills, and the knowledge that they didn't have beforehand about different job opportunities that they can do'* (T), stating that the changes in the participants were noticeable *'Once she started the course, came out of her shell and just the confidence that came out of her was just - it's just a whole - like an overnight turnaround'* (T). One student stated, *'It brought confidence out a lot and opened your eyes of what you want to do and be'* (S). This growing sense of confidence and personal growth was repeated by a number of participants, *'More confident, and I'm finding like I'm more talking my opinion rather than standing back and waiting for someone else to do something'* (S) and again *'...help you build your skillset in talking and confidence'* (S). The participants found their voices, were able to speak up and to be heard, while feeling valued, *'I can open up and speak more and not hide what I've got to say'* (S). One participant pointed out that the level of support from the participating in the Program continued long after the weekly sessions had finished, *'It's lots of fun and it's very helpful. Even after the Program's finished they're still there to support you'* (S).

Parents noted that the changes to the participants extended into their private lives with the transferable skills helping with everyday interactions, *'...now when we're arriving at an appointment,*

she'll say, [her name] and I'm here to see the Dr It's given her that boost' (P) and 'He's more willing to give things a go. Even going to TAFE last year was a huge step' (P). The skills learnt in the Program helped build the participant's confidence and encouraged them to look beyond high school and into the future. Participants also gained confidence in their own abilities with many gaining a sense of achievement upon the completion of a task, '....after he wrote the list down, he actually realised that I'm not as stupid as I thought.' (P). Many struggled with the change in daily routine in the beginning, having to make new friends and get to know strangers, 'I think it gave him a level of confidence that being in a mixed group without his family around' (P). Participants gained a new level of self-reliance, independent of their families through the experience of the weekly sessions in conjunction with the workplace experience. The participants exhibited a sense of pride at their achievements in the Program, 'I don't think you can beat a kid that's proud of what they've achieved. That's pretty awesome' (T).

SUMMARY

The combined data from parents, teachers the participants who took part in the Program confirmed the importance of finding a tribe, feeling comfortable with the learning environment, building confidence and recognising that the Program fills a learning gap that currently exists. The Program works on developing transferable skills and it was evident that the skills and lessons learnt through the Program translated into personal lives with visible changes noted at home and in the school environment.

*Participants Jamie and Clare
working with Baw Baw Shire
Parks and Gardens Crew*



5.7 EMPLOYER, ORGANISATION AND SCHOOLS SURVEY

At the conclusion of Stage 3, 'I am Ready', surveys were distributed electronically to employers, organisations and schools that participated in the Program. Eight employers and organisations and 18 teachers responded to the survey.¹⁰

SURVEY RESPONSES: EMPLOYERS AND ORGANISATIONS

Responses from employers and organisations included two females and six males with the majority aged between 36-55 years of age (75%, n=6). They were located in the Baw Baw (38%, n=3) and Latrobe (62%, n=5) regions and came from a variety of industry types including; retail, construction, government, a neighbourhood house, telecommunications and a social enterprise.

Most of the employers (88%, n=7) either Agreed or Strongly agreed that they felt well prepared and supported during the Program experience, going on to say that they would participate again (88%, n=7). They thought the participants were well prepared (Strongly Agree/ Agree 75%, n=6) however 50% of employers were unsure whether there was a place in their organisation in the future. Over 63% (n=5) of the employers attended the organisation training session with 80% of those agreeing that the training helped to prepare them for hosting a participant. All the employers had hosted a student on placement before and all agreed that they would do so in the future.

Combining the strongly agree and agree responses 100% (n=8) of the employers found the participants to be well behaved, punctual, presented neatly and communicated effectively while on their work experience placement. The employers also found that participants were well organised to complete tasks in a timely manner, open to learning new skills and work as part of a team (88%, n=7) with a further 12% (n=1) unsure. There were mixed responses to the question relating to participants ability to solve problems with 50% (n=4) strongly agree / agree compared to 50% (n=4) unsure. There were similar results for participants being able to take initiative with 63% (n=5), strongly agree / agree compared to 37% (n=3) unsure.

Not all the employers were happy with the amount of time allowed and preparation prior to the commencement of the Program and made suggestions to improve the communication. *'Improvement needs to be made in terms of lead time provided to the organisation - two weeks is not sufficient. Also, the school's communication in relation to the student was poor and often adversarial.'* (Employer survey)

The employers who engaged in the Program were quite positive. One employer stated *'...we are so pleased to encourage those with learning difficulties into active service and participation in the community.....to help them see they are valued and have a valuable role to play in day to day interactions with others'*. Another employer commented on the positive experience and the place for the Program moving forward into the future, *'the participants we have been involved with through the I Am Ready Program have been a pleasure to have on site.....we hope to continue to partner with the I Am Ready Program to offer further opportunities'* (Employer survey).

SURVEY RESPONSES: SCHOOLS

There was a total of 18 teachers who completed the survey. Of those that responded 83% (n=15) were male, 17% (n=3) were female with the majority 43% (n=6) aged in their 50's, with 29% (n=4) in their 40's, 21% (n=3) in their 30's and one participant in their 60's. The majority indicated that they were

¹⁰ The results are presented in valid percentages and number of participants / frequency (n=X).

from the Bairnsdale region 46% (n=6) with teachers from Sale (15%, n=2), Leongatha (15%, n=2) and Morwell (23%, n=3) also completing the survey.

The teachers indicated that they clearly understood the Program (100%, n=18). Although the majority 89% (n=16) agreed that they felt prepared to support the participants in the Program there was one teacher who was unsure and one who stated that they were unprepared and would not recommend the Program to other participants.

'Lack of communication to the school, parents and student caused considerable anguish to the family and the student. Teaching staff found it lacked organisation and structure.'

It should be noted that 72% (n=13) Strongly Agreed and a further 22% (n=4) Agreed that they would recommend the Program to participants in the future.

The teachers felt that in general the participants performed better in class as a result of taking part in the Program with 77% (n=14) strongly agreeing / agreeing that participants were better at working as part of a team, more organised to complete tasks (67%, n=12), problem solve (72%, n=13), show more initiative (72%, n=13) and communicate effectively (72%, n=13). However, 50% (n=9) of teachers were unsure if the changes accounted for an improvement in classroom behaviour. It should be noted that a number of teachers were unsure or disagreed that the Program helped participants to be better able to solve problems (28%, n=5).

The teachers commented that the *'initial promotion of the Program was unclear, however with clarification that the Program was beneficial for students with learning barriers made it easier to identify possible candidates'*. Despite this, teachers praised the Program and commented that *'students always looked forward to the IAR [I Am Ready] Day'* and those participants who did take part fully in the Program had *'grown and developed personal and employment skills'*, and that *'their confidence has grown so much'*.

Teachers made comment that the Program was useful for participants that required more support with employability skills training, but perhaps could be improved to engage behaviourally challenged cohorts. For example, one teacher stated, *'...the I Am Ready Program is fantastic for those students who need gentle support and direction'* and that the *'more street-wise students did not relate to the Program as well and therefore did not get as much out of it'*. Despite this teachers commented on the strength of the Program to prepare participants for work placements, *'... students really enjoyed personal grooming and preparation for work placement'*. Further, *'...as schools we probably need to work more closely with the I Am Ready team to ensure that students are very aware of the expectations of their participation/ involvement of the Program'*.

5.8 CAPACITY BUILDING WORKSHOPS AND WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

The aim of the series of workshops that were held for the Partnership, the Project Team, Facilitators and volunteers was twofold. Firstly, as part of the participatory evaluation process, the workshops enabled collaboration and participation in the evaluation processes and outcomes with the Partnership and Project Team. Secondly, the workshops built capacity within the Partnership and Project Team. Topics covered included, planning, measuring and evaluation tools, thematic analysis and writing recommendations. Workshop 2: Reflection also provided a rich source of data as participants reflected on the planning and implementation of Stage 1 of the Program.

WORKSHOP 1: MEASURING SUCCESS

CAPACITY BUILDING

This Workshop, facilitated by the CEU, was attended by the Partnership and the Project Team and held during the Project planning phase. The Measuring Success Tool, developed by the CEU was used to enable participants to consider what success looked like and how it could be measured from three perspectives, the funder, the Program participants and the Partnership. As a result of this workshop the Evaluation Plan was shaped to meet the requirements of the Partnership and stakeholders.

See Appendix 4 for the completed Evaluation Plan

FEEDBACK

Feedback from the four participants attending the workshop was positive. All workshop participants (100%, n=4) agreed that it was structured to assist learning, relevant to their learning needs and that the Facilitator promoted discussion and group interaction. The only suggestion was that the session needed to be longer, however all workshop participants indicated that it was extremely likely that they would recommend future workshops run by the CEU.

The best elements of the workshop were:

- *Learning how to differentiate measures to evaluate*
- *The co-design element, listening to our needs*
- *Talking through all aspects of evaluation*

Suggested areas for workshop improvement include:

- *Would have loved longer to get into specifics of certain evaluations*

General comments include:

- *Looking forward to working with you all.*

WORKSHOP 2: REFLECTION

A full day workshop after the completion of Stage 1, 'I am Exploring', was organised to bring together all those who had contributed to the Program to date. A total of 20 people attended, representing the Facilitators and volunteers (classroom support personnel), associated agencies, the Partnership and Project Team and a representative of the Program funding body.

CAPACITY BUILDING

This workshop, based on the CEU LAP (Learn, Assess, Participate) tool, allowed time for the stakeholders to reflect on the planning phase and Stage 1 of the Program.

FEEDBACK

There were 18 participants who completed the workshop feedback form, of those 78% (n=14) either Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the workshop was relevant with 22% (n=4) Unsure. A total of 67% (n=12) either Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the workshop was structured to assist learning, with 100% (n=18) Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing that the facilitator promoted discussion and group interaction. Of those that completed the feedback survey 78% (n=14) gave scores of 8, 9 or 10 indicating that they were extremely likely to recommend future workshops by the CEU. The remaining 4 participants rated the likelihood of recommending in the future as a 7 (17%, n=3) and a 6 (6%, n=1).¹¹

The best elements of the workshop according to the workshop participants were:

- *Being a part of an amazing team, who are working together to help and assist students out in the community*
- *Others opinions of how their program went. Offering ideas of improving the (I am Ready) Program*
- *Watching the kids grow over the 8 weeks and build confidence*
- *Reading others view and adding too was an 'eye' opener*
- *The engagement of all present - willingness to share feedback and experiences*

Suggestions for improving the workshop included:

- *Pose questions to explore both positive and negative feedback. 'Evaluation' tends to promote how can we improve / fix? Which generates more negative comments than positive.*
- *More time to talk to other groups*

General comments included:

- *I look forward to watching this Program grow and evolve as time goes on. Thank you for this amazing opportunity to be a part of it.*

WORKSHOP 3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

CAPACITY BUILDING

This workshop introduced the Partnership and Project Team to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach to thematic analysis including, familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. The analysis focused on the transcripts collected in Workshop 2.

FEEDBACK

There were five participants who completed the workshop feedback form following the thematic analysis workshop, of those 100% (n=5) either Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the workshop was relevant, structured to assist learning and that the facilitator promoted discussion and group

¹¹ The results are presented in valid percentages and number of participants / frequency (n=X).

interaction. A total of 80% (n=4) rated the workshop a 10 extremely likely to recommend with the remaining participants giving the workshop an 8 (20%, n=1).

Best elements of the workshop according to the participants were:

- *Learning how to break down data. Learning what was important and what was useful*
- *Seeing where we came from at the start of the day and how we were able to reach an end point through the culling of quotes!*
- *Learning the method of evaluation. Working with the Evaluation Unit*

Suggestions for improving the workshop included:

- *Probably needed more time*

General comments include:

- *The workshop was very specific to the small group involved - a very positive experience*
- *It was good to do tasks individually then together as a team.*
- *Thank you for including our Team in the process.*

WORKSHOP 4: WRITING RECOMMENDATIONS

Writing recommendations were explored in this workshop. Key findings were presented to the Partnership and Project Team who were then able to craft recommendations to be included in this report.

FEEDBACK

Six participants completed feedback forms all of which (n=6) Strongly Agreed that the workshop was relevant, structured to assist learning and that the facilitator promoted discussion and group interaction. A total of 83% (n=5) rated the workshop as 10, extremely likely to recommend, with the remaining participant noting that workshop was relevant only to the Program.

The best elements of the workshop according to the participants were:

- *Getting together as a partnership and celebrating our work*
- *Learning about evaluation processes*
- *The positive vibe*
- *...workshopping recommendations and discussing common themes*
- *The information provided*

Suggestions for improving the workshop included:

- *Nothing!*
- *All Good*



6. DISCUSSION

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM ON PARTICIPANT CONFIDENCE

There was overwhelming evidence that the 'I Am Ready' Program contributed to increased participant confidence towards not only being able to apply for a job but also to engage in meaningful conversations with peers, teachers and potential employers. Participant's increased confidence levels enabled more classroom engagement as they became invested in the activities and work readiness content. Participants were also encouraged to be self-reflective about their own achievements with many explaining how the Program helped them to become more tolerant of others, patient with peers, proactive with employers and seeking clarification when unsure. Throughout the eight weeks of Stage 1 of the Program the teachers noted a dramatic transformation of the participants in the classroom with many going from zero engagement to asking questions in class. The transformation was also noted from parents who cited examples of their children modifying their behaviour, for example, being awake and dressed ready for the 'I Am Ready' Program day, arranging their own transport to and from the Program and being more engaged in conversation.

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PARTICIPANTS

The participants developed employability skills that were able to be transferred into their school and home lives, making eye contact, verbalising questions, seeking clarification and reduction in fidgeting behaviours. The Programs' focus on activity-based learning introduced trust base lessons which are important when working as a team member in the work environment. Interviewing skills including dressing for interviews assisted participants to become familiar with the requirements of successfully gaining employment. Many of the participants have gained part time employment as a result of the 'I Am Ready' Program.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

There was a noticeable change in attitudes throughout the duration of the Program. Of note was the willingness of the employers to participate in future 'I Am Ready' Programs supporting school aged students to gain valuable work experience. The schools, who were at first unsure of the Program, the suitability of their students to engage in the content and the disruption to the normal classroom activities, were impressed with the dramatic changes in the participants attitudes and behaviour because of their participation in the Program. The Facilitators, who each came with their own individual teaching experience, commented on the repetition of the activities and at times questioned the purpose of the task, however, all responded positively to the Program and would volunteer to be a Facilitator in the future. Facilitators reflected that their understanding of the tasks and sequencing of the Workbook grew as the weeks progressed, leading to the mock interview and work experience. The parents who engaged with the Program were also pleasantly surprised with the outcomes and were encouraged by their children's interest in future employment and or further education and training.

TESTIMONIAL

A participant's school teacher checked in with the coordinator to see what his behaviour had been like during the I Am Ready sessions as he had been in trouble at school for unacceptable classroom behaviours. The Facilitator advised that the participant is a model student who participates well and appears to be getting along with other participants without incident. In addition, the participant's mother messaged the coordinator to advise that the Friday of the Program was the only day she did not have trouble getting him to go to school. He is very excited about his placement opportunity this term.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The 'I Am Ready' Program involved a combination of Workbook tasks, activities, field experiences (purchasing of interview clothing) and work experience placement. Initially there was concern that the Program was too short and did not include all the essential skills related to gaining employment, for example, resume writing. However, as the time progressed it became evident that the intent of the delivery was a deliberate strategy to enhance learning. The success of the Program delivery was further emphasised by the employers who noted the level of preparedness of the participants who transitioned to the work environment smoothly. Several stakeholders suggested that although the communication between the 'I Am Ready' Program and other stakeholders was responsive it could be improved, with emphasis on reporting of participant progress and learning needs. Further exploration is recommended to investigate an online option for the 'I Am Ready' Program in order increase its transferability and its sustainability into the future. A hybrid approach is recommended which incorporates both a face-to-face and an online element to the Program.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Throughout the duration of the evaluation, a number of capacity building activities, have been arranged to ensure that the 'I Am Ready' Project Team continue to develop evaluation skills and techniques. Using a participatory evaluation framework model, the CEU encouraged the Partnership and Project Team members to be part of the evaluation decision making throughout the Program. Workshops included, measuring success, thematic analysis of Facilitator focus group discussions, developing project recommendations, review of related literature, data collection tools development and analysis and dissemination of project findings in peer reviewed publications.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The 'I Am Ready' Program was able to achieve all the project evaluation deliverables. The evaluation included over 11 separate data collection points including workshop activities, field notes, quantitative

data collection and analysis, interviews and focus group discussions including thematic analysis, employer and teacher surveys and interviews with the I Am Ready project team and project funders. The evaluation was committed to showcasing the opinions of all the relevant stakeholders to present a triangulation of findings in order to fully inform future development of the Program.

The Program was able to facilitate 89 participants in the 'I Am Ready' Program in 2019, across six local government areas in Gippsland engaging with 33 individual secondary schools and specialist schools. There was strong evidence that participants gained confidence as a result of being involved in the Program which has led to a number of participants enrolling in further education and training and gaining part time employment. Stakeholders including teachers, parents, participants, Facilitators and volunteer staff all expressed their support for the 'I Am Ready' Program to continue in the future.





6.1 CASE STUDIES AND REFLECTONS

Case Study 1 – Phil*

Phil was a Year 10 student when it was suggested by his school careers teacher that he might benefit from participating in the 'I Am Ready' Program. Building his confidence and goal setting for the future would hopefully provide him with the skills needed to pursue his career interests.

He was struggling to engage with work related skills activities such as resume writing and his inability to communicate and collaborate with others was noted as a potential barrier to future employment or work experience activities.

At the beginning of the 8 week 'I Am Exploring' stage of the Program, Phil wasn't keen to engage in activities or class discussions. He spent a lot of time drawing in his workbook. As the weeks progressed, the Facilitator realised that he was taking in the content. Opportunities to engage one-to-one produced some great conversations indicating that he was developing an understanding of employability skills and the world of work.

Phil had a very successful work experience placement where his employer was able to identify that he was very skilled and interested in information technology and office administration. He received a glowing report from his host employer in the form of a letter and was invited back in to complete some more work experience with potential for part-time employment.

Phil decided to exit the school system in June 2020. He contacted his host employer for work experience about any potential work opportunities. In response, Phil was offered a part time role with the company as a Junior IT Administrator.

FEEDBACK FROM PARENT

'I wanted to say thank you for how much we have seen Phil grow through the Program. Through the work experience placement he has grown in his comfort with receiving positive feedback (regularly discounted/undermined it previously), confidence in his appearance (no more hiding in hoodies, rather wearing his work clothes with pride), initiative to step in and problem solve. After receiving his feedback from his employer at the conclusion of work experience for the first time in a long time he was genuinely happy and proud. He couldn't stop smiling'

FEEDBACK FROM EMPLOYER

"Just wanted to touch base and let you know that Phil has joined the team on a part time basis as our Junior IT Administrator and has begun working for us today, hitting the ground running!"

Case Study 2 – Kelly*

Kelly was disengaged from school and had poor attendance for some time. She was nominated for the 'I Am Ready' Program in the hope that it would build her confidence and spark some interest in developing some future goals. The school was very surprised and pleased to know that she attended 90% of 'I Am Exploring' workshops even being resourceful enough to arrange her own transport. The school was also pleased that Kelly was excited about the prospect of a work experience placement with a local employer. The Program and the work experience opportunity provided the confidence for Kelly to consider some options post school.

She was still keen to participate in the work experience opportunity arranged through the 'I Am Ready' Program as a volunteer at a Toy Library and was also referred to a Skills First Connect program at TAFE. She commenced Certificate I in Vocational education and continues to work toward her goal of further training and future employment.

Case Study 3 – Sally*

Sally was an enthusiastic participant in the 'I Am Ready' Program. She was recommended to the Program by her teachers at school as she lacked confidence in her ability to gain employment. Sally's confidence and aspiration about being able to gain future employment had previously been affected when she experienced some significant discrimination during a job interview upon disclosing her disability.

Sally was a committed participant to the Program. For example, one week when she knew she would not make the following session she brought a portable memory stick so she could record the videos, watch and complete the activities in the Workbook. During the 'I Am Exploring' sessions Sally was able to recognise her own strengths based around the employability skills which were articulated during her shining mock interview.

Sally completed her work experience component at a local supermarket. She was so excited to begin the opportunity she started during the school holidays. She was thrilled to be able to gain experience in a workplace as she wanted the opportunity to build on her time management and customer service skills. Sally realised through this experience she needed a supervisor to show her the task required as opposed to just instructing.

At Sally's mock interview she was able to demonstrate her employability skills so well that she was referred for an employment opportunity locally by her interviewer. Sally approached the workplace regarding the position and was able to communicate where she needed support, completed a trial and gained employment in a busy kitchen.

Reflection – Dave*

'I just like to give you an update on Dave. He went for a job interview at McDonald's and interviewed fantastic and they gave him a job on the spot part time after school. I cannot thank you lady's enough for helping him with the 'I Am Ready' Program Thank you' (Dave's Mum).

Case Study 4 – Ash*

Ash completed a placement during term 3 with a Civil Construction employer and fitted in so well that he was asked to continue his placement on Fridays until the end of the year. It is looking highly likely that he will be able to commence a School Based Apprenticeship with this employer.

*Participants names have been changed



7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Project recommendations will be presented under the following headings and will include practical application suggestions; Program Delivery Recommendations and Systems Recommendations.

PROGRAM DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement a coordinated approach for DES and local service agencies to engage with schools and families.

Recommendations include:

- Development of promotional material that can be used by schools to advertise the 'I Am Ready' Program to students and parents.
- Investigate the feasibility of the 'I Am Ready' Program being integrated into existing school curriculums, creating stronger linkages between the secondary education system and further education providers.
- Create an open access approach to the Program to alleviate the stigma of learning barriers while maintaining the unique elements of the Program delivery in small classes together with additional support services as required.

2. The Program is valuable and worthy of refinement for future delivery and continuation.

Recommendations include:

- Additional Facilitator training: ensure consistency of teaching with clear messaging delivered across all the sites of the Program, for example:
 - Establish regular communication network between all Facilitators.
 - Create training videos to assist with delivery of activities and incorporate activities into Facilitator training.
 - Develop and deliver *Unconscious Bias Awareness* training
 - Incorporate leadership opportunities to support staff within the Program.
- Literacy level adjustments: assess participant literacy levels prior to Program commencement, communicate with Facilitators, and ensure contingency plans for lower order literacy skills are available.
 - Include Language Literacy Numeracy (LLN) testing as a component of recruitment process
- Communication between all parties: regular and consistent communication maintained between all parties involved in the Program. A communications hierarchy may assist this process (Figure 14).
- Employer supports: develop strong linkages with a variety of employers to enhance the work experience element of the Program while continuing to explore strategies to alleviate potential barriers to employment.
- Maintenance of volunteer support staff: enable a stronger relationship between Program and community and provide additional support to participants and Facilitators alike.

- Recruitment of TAFE and University students studying disability or community service seeking a placement or practical experience in a voluntary capacity

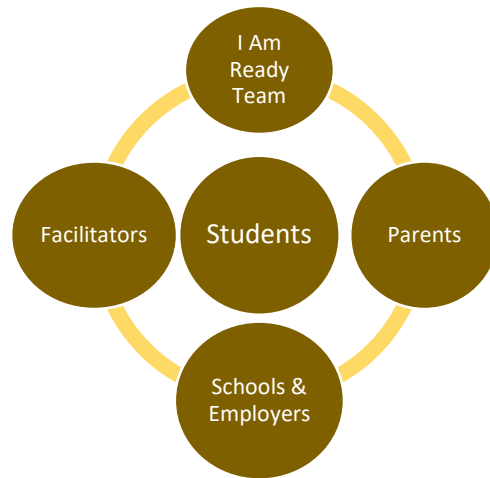


Figure 14: Communication Matrix

3. Post 'I Am Ready' Program offerings such as comprehensive resume writing skills and linkages between participants and employment services

- Maintain or establish relationships with Skills and Jobs Centres and Disability Employment Service Providers

4. A comprehensive tracking of the longer-term impact of the 'I Am Ready' Program to follow the participants post Program and track outcomes.

SYSTEMS RECOMMENDATIONS: PARTNERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

Outcomes from this report need to be used to drive change in enabling opportunities to increase aspiration, confidence and self-advocacy skills for the participant cohort.

Recommendations include:

5. An inclusive program should be delivered for all students. As with reasonable adjustment requirements in all areas of the education curriculum, students with learning barriers require specific reasonable adjustments in their employability skill development and work exploration beyond what is currently offered in schools

6. Education providers explore opportunities to enable young people to find their tribe in order to cultivate peer support and self-belief

7. It is important to mitigate against unconscious bias. Educators need to be provided with professional development opportunities that include awareness of disability and the impact inherent stigma and discrimination have on the lives of people with disability

8. Develop national strategies to challenge the societal culture of low expectations that persist for young people with learning barriers
9. Ongoing effort is needed to challenge historical attitudes about the meaning of a 'career' for individuals with disability. Parents, carers, and educators require specific resources and training opportunities to understand how to support positive career conversations and expectations that encourage student aspirations, and guidance
10. Investment in the development of strategies that increase employer disability awareness and confidence



Healthy Minds Drumming Workshop



8. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

8.1 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The evaluation of the Program utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach providing information about process, outcomes, impact and capacity building. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analysed as described below.

8.1.1 QUANTITATIVE DATA

Stage 1 'I Am Exploring' Workbooks

A key learning tool during stage one was the 'I am Exploring' Workbook completed by participants. The Workbook contained weekly exercises, activities and self-assessment exercises which provided data for analysis. Data from the Workbook that was analysed included:

- How participant's felt at the beginning of week one and at the conclusion of week eight.
- Participant's aspiration: their 'dream job'.
- Participant's self-assessment of employability skills, including responses to:
 - Communication skills self-assessment
 - Teamwork self-assessment
 - Problem solving self-assessment
 - Initiative and enterprise self-assessment
 - Planning and organising self-assessment
 - Self-management self-assessment
 - Learning self-assessment
 - Technology self-assessment
- A checklist of 'Transferable Skills'
- An 'Initiative and Enterprise Activity'

Surveys

Employers, organisations and teachers involved in the Program were surveyed at the conclusion of the Program. They were invited to complete the survey online.

Workshops

Four workshops were conducted with the Partnership, Facilitators and stakeholders:

1. Measuring Success
2. Reflection
3. Thematic Analysis
4. Writing Recommendations

Workshop 1: Measuring Success

This Workshop facilitated by the CEU was attended by the Partnership and the Project Team and held during the Project planning phase. The Measuring Success Tool, developed by the CEU, was used to enable workshop participants to consider what success looked like and how it could be measured from three perspectives, the funder, the Program participants and the Partnership. Evaluation tools were

then identified to measure the success of the Program. As a result of this activity the Evaluation Plan was shaped to meet the requirements of the Partnership and stakeholders.

(See Appendix 4 for the completed Evaluation Plan)

Workshop 2: Reflections

A full day workshop after the completion of Stage 1, 'I am Exploring', brought together all those who had contributed to the Program to that point. A total of 20 people attended, representing the Facilitators and volunteers (classroom support personnel), associated agencies, the Partnership and Project Team and a representative of the Program funding body. The workshop was interactive and divided into three distinct sections:

1. Overview presentation from 'I Am Ready' Program team

2. Group activities:

- a. Word association activity: Thinking about the Program

Workshop participants were asked a series of questions and asked to identify the word, printed on cards and placed around the room, which best represented their answer, and the reason for their choice.

- b. Group activity: Unpacking lessons learnt:

Workshop participants were asked to brainstorm one of three questions, recording their responses collaboratively.

The questions addressed were:

1. What are the lessons learnt from the Program planning, and delivery?
 2. What changes if any did you see in the participants?
 3. Do you see a future for the Program and what does it look like?

Participants spent 30 minutes recording their thoughts with a further 10 minutes allowed for them to contribute to the other group's responses.

3. Focus group discussions:

- a. Partnership and Project team
 - b. Facilitators
 - c. Volunteers

Workshop 3: Thematic Analysis

This workshop introduced the Partnership and Project Team to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach to thematic analysis including, familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Workshop participants focused on a thematic analysis of transcriptions from the focus group discussions held at Workshop 2 'Reflections'. The aim was to build capacity within the Partnership and Project Team and strengthen co-design and collaboration.

Workshop 4: Writing Recommendations

Writing recommendations were explored in this workshop. Key findings were presented to the Partnership and Project Team who were then able to craft recommendations to be included in this evaluation report.

8.1.2 QUALITATIVE DATA

Focus Group Discussions

Qualitative data was collected through a series of focus group discussions. These captured experiences, impressions and learnings from:

- The Partnership, Facilitators and volunteers
- Participants, parents and teachers

Volunteer and Facilitator Field Notes

Volunteers and Facilitators were provided with a journal to record their observations and reflections after each weekly session during Stage 1.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

A content / thematic analysis technique was utilised for the qualitative data with findings presented under theme headings together with participant quotes. The thematic analysis utilised Braun and Clarke's six step process which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.¹²

Triangulation

Validation of data for the Program was achieved by triangulation. Triangulation, in this evaluation:

- Used multiple sources for cross verification of results
- Tested the consistency of findings by the use of different tools.

Triangulation also broadened and deepened the understanding of Program.

¹² 2 Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp. 77-101. ISSN 1478-0887.



9. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND PRACTICE

Federation University aims to promote and support responsible research practices by providing resources and guidance to our researchers. We aim to maintain a strong research culture which incorporates:

- Honesty and integrity;
- Respect for human research participants, animals and the environment;
- Respect for the resources used to conduct research;
- Appropriate acknowledgement of contributors to research; and
- Responsible communication of research findings.

A Human Research and Ethics application, *'I am ready' Project Evaluation*, was approved by Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (A19-086). (*Appendix 5*)



10. LIMITATIONS OF THIS REPORT


There are a number of limitations related to this evaluation that must be considered. These include:

1. Restrictions enforced by the Australian and State Governments due to the COVID – 19 outbreak
 - a. Led to the cancellation of participant, parent and teachers focus groups at two sites (Warragul and Bairnsdale). However, data saturation prior to this collection point had been achieved with the initial focus groups.
 - b. The second thematic analysis workshop scheduled with the Partnership was cancelled.
2. There were limitations in the interpretation of the participant's Workbook (I Am Exploring) questions and activities that need to be considered.
 - a. Literacy levels of the participants varied considerably. Some had very low levels of literacy which impacted on their ability to complete the Workbooks.
 - b. There was a high rate of incomplete sections throughout the Workbook at the conclusion of Stage 1.
3. Facilitators worked across five sites with little interaction between them which led to a lack of consistency in interpretation of the Workbook and its subsequent delivery.
4. The timing of the focus groups with the participants was some months after the completion of the Program. This potentially impacted on the participants' ability to recall their experiences as effectively had they been held closer to the completion of the Program.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation is considered to present a credible assessment of the Program.



11. APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1

LITERATURE REVIEW: EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH BARRIERS TO ASPIRE TOWARD AND ACHIEVE WORK READINESS

ABSTRACT

The transition from school to post-school life is a significant period in a young person's life where they leave the traditional education system and pursue further education, training, or career-related activities (Koen et al., 2012), however, this can be challenging for young people who experience barriers, disability or disadvantage. Transition programs that ease the transition between school and post-school life can improve employment outcomes for people with barriers, however they can vary significantly in terms of delivery and intention.

This review explored the delivery and intention of transition programs that aimed to empower people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness. This review found that transition programs are an advantageous resource for people with barriers, with the ability to improve their academic, practical, and work-related skills (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), and to increase their confidence, self-respect, independence and social connectedness (Ashburner et al., 2018; Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). Areas for improvement are identified, and it is acknowledged that the continued improvement of these programs is essential to empower people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness, and to improve the employment outcomes for people with barriers in Australia.

Keywords: Employment, employability, barriers, disability, transition, empower, aspiration, skills

ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BOOST-A	Better Outcomes & Successful Transitions for Autism
CEU	Collaborative Evaluation Unit
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RAW	Reading and Writing Group
Studio G	Studio G Post-School Transition Programme
TAFE	Technical and Further Education

EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH BARRIERS TO ASPIRE TOWARD AND ACHIEVE WORK READINESS

Young people who experience barriers require additional support to negotiate the transition from school to post-school life in order to achieve work readiness. Transition programs that aim to empower people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness can improve employment outcomes for people with barriers, which is associated with improved mental health, self-esteem, and quality of life (Cocks et al., 2015). However, such programs can vary significantly in terms of delivery and intention. This review seeks to explore the delivery and intention of transition programs that aim to empower, inspire and educate people with barriers to achieve work readiness. In this review, the term ‘people with barriers’ refers to people who experience sensory impairment, learning, physical, or behavioural disability, mental illness, or any other condition that puts them at a disadvantage to their peers and acts as a barrier to work readiness.

TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL TO POST-SCHOOL LIFE

The transition from school to post-school life is a significant period in a young person’s life where they leave the traditional education system and pursue further education, training, or career-related activities (Koen et al., 2012). This transition allows for greater autonomy, goal-related achievements, and career development, however, it can be challenging, particularly for young people who experience barriers, disability or disadvantage. The barriers experienced by people with disability or disadvantage are not always addressed by traditional secondary school curriculum, putting them at a distinct disadvantage to their peers when they leave school. For example, they face the possibility of discrimination, misconceptions, and lack of disability-friendly work conditions (Cocks et al., 2015). Although some industries promote and encourage diversity, streamlined recruitment practices prevent applicants from providing details of disability and act as a barrier to employment (Moore et al., 2018).

These barriers can be overcome by education, training, and pre-employment experience that increase the opportunity for young people with barriers to become engaged in meaningful employment or further education. As education is identified as a basic human right, it is essential that the resources provided prior to and during this transition stage be adaptable to the needs of all young people in an equal and inalienable manner (United Nations, 1948).

BENEFITS OF EMPLOYMENT

Research suggests that people who experience disability or disadvantage have the ambition to become employed (Hendricks, 2010), but lack confidence. Employment and aspiring to employment are incredibly beneficial to the individual, with strong associations to improved mental health, self-esteem, a sense of purpose and belonging, and better quality of life (Cocks et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant for people with disability or disadvantage, as it also increases social inclusion (Cocks et al., 2015) and personal dignity (Jacob et al., 2015), which are experienced less by people with barriers.

Young people with barriers also have many capabilities and positive attributes to offer employers, including increased trustworthiness, reliability and low absenteeism, as well as the ability to pay particular attention to detail, above average work output and willingness to engage in necessary but repetitive tasks that are often avoided by other employees (Hendricks, 2010). There are also multiple benefits to society when people with barriers are successfully employed, as it increases community inclusivity, financial self-reliance, and reduces lost productivity costs and the economic consequence of community and government supports (Jacob et al., 2015).

REQUIRED SKILLS

People with barriers often experience sensory, intellectual or behavioural differences compared to their peers that put them at a disadvantage when applying for employment. This may include anxiety (Neil et al., 2016), social communication challenges (Chen et al., 2014; Hillier et al., 2007; Lee & Carter, 2012), and resistance to change (Ashburner et al., 2018; Hillier et al., 2007). Research consistently shows that the difficulty in adapting to post-school life is less to do with workplace task performance and more commonly related to difficulties managing increased social demands (Chen et al., 2014; Hillier et al., 2007). Intellectual ability is also not the catalyst for unemployment, as many young people with average or above average intellectual capacity remain unemployed (Taylor & Mailick, 2014).

In order to gain meaningful employment, people with barriers need to demonstrate self-care, community and communication skills (Foley et al., 2013). Improving communication skills can assist in improving interview skills, the ability to follow instructions, and the ability to articulate role requirements (Ashburner et al., 2018). It is also important for people with barriers to establish self-determination, problem solving skills, self-regulation and to demonstrate assertive communication (Hatfield et al., 2017). Improving frequency of community engagement can also increase the opportunity to network with industry members and improve social and communication skills (Davies & Beamish, 2009).

PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER PEOPLE WITH BARRIERS TO ASPIRE TOWARD AND ACHIEVE WORK READINESS

Programs designed to bridge the gap between school and post-school life are often referred to as work readiness interventions or transition programs and can be invaluable to empower people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness. In 2012-2013 this was identified as a priority of the Australian Government, with \$200 million provided to state, independent and catholic schools to improve the school-to-career transition for students with disabilities (Maher & Raciti, 2014). However, delivery of transition programs varies widely in terms of student age, mode of delivery, location, and aim. Delivery is most often a supervised face-to-face program, but may also include self-administered online training, and location may include community, home or school-based settings. Transition programs that are based within a school can assist students to plan and prepare for post-school life, including career exploration activities, goal setting, and work experience (Roberts, 2010). Conversely, industry based programs such as traineeships and apprenticeships provide post-school training that enables people with barriers to gain employment experience (Cocks et al., 2015).

When developing a transition program, Hatfield et al. (2017) suggests that to be effective, programs should be easily accessible, affordable, and user friendly. In regard to program content, Strnadova and Cumming (2014) encourage programs to actively engage students in the transition planning process, collaborate with local industries, and to inspire self-determination and self-advocacy skills. One of the biggest challenges for transition programs is the variability of needs of people with disability or disadvantage, as individual characteristics are likely to influence the success of each program (Hatfield et al., 2018). Many existing transition programs addressing the employment and work readiness barriers of people with disability or disadvantage were developed in the United States. It is important that Australia develop and validate its own transition programs due to this country's unique legislation, funding models, and service provision requirements (Hatfield et al., 2017).

PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

The objective of this study is to review Australian programs that sought to empower people who experience barriers to employment, to aspire toward and achieve work readiness.

In line with the objectives of this study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What were the aims of the transition program and how did the program seek to achieve these aims?
2. Did the program assist participants to aspire to and achieve work readiness?

SEARCH METHODS

SEARCH STRATEGY

The literature review was achieved using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Liberati et al., 2009). Reflecting the multifaceted subject of this review, both an education-focused database and a health-focused database were used to search for research articles to be reviewed. The Informit databases 'A+ Education' and 'Humanities and Social Sciences Collection' (51 results) were combined with the EBSCO databases 'Academic search complete', 'APA PsychArticles' and 'APA Psychinfo' (115 results). The same search terms and similar search criteria were applied to each database, directed by a Boolean search strategy whereby search terms and their variations were entered into the database separated by 'and' / 'or' (see Appendix 1).

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The search terms used were 'employment', 'Australia', 'disability', 'barriers', 'education', 'skills', 'opportunity' and 'transition', and their variations. Advanced search measures included only articles from journals, full text available, English language and published in the last ten years (2010 to April 2020).

STUDY SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

Study selection was performed in an unblended standardised manner and assessed using the PRISMA flow chart, (Figure 1). Combination of the two databases yielded 166 results. Titles and abstracts were sequentially assessed for relevance and 150 papers were excluded. The remaining 16 papers were then screened using the full text to ensure they addressed one or more of the research questions. One duplicate article was removed. A further 12 papers were excluded because they did not discuss an intervention or were a protocol or conference proceeding. Where a study was of particular interest, further research was done using the studies reference list and 'cited by' articles. One additional article was identified from the source of an included study and assessed using the PRISMA flow chart before being reviewed. A summary table was developed and customised to assist in the extraction, critique and summarisation of the 5 remaining studies. Data extracted from each article included the author and year, study type, aim, transition program, participants, and key findings (Table 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart of search strategy

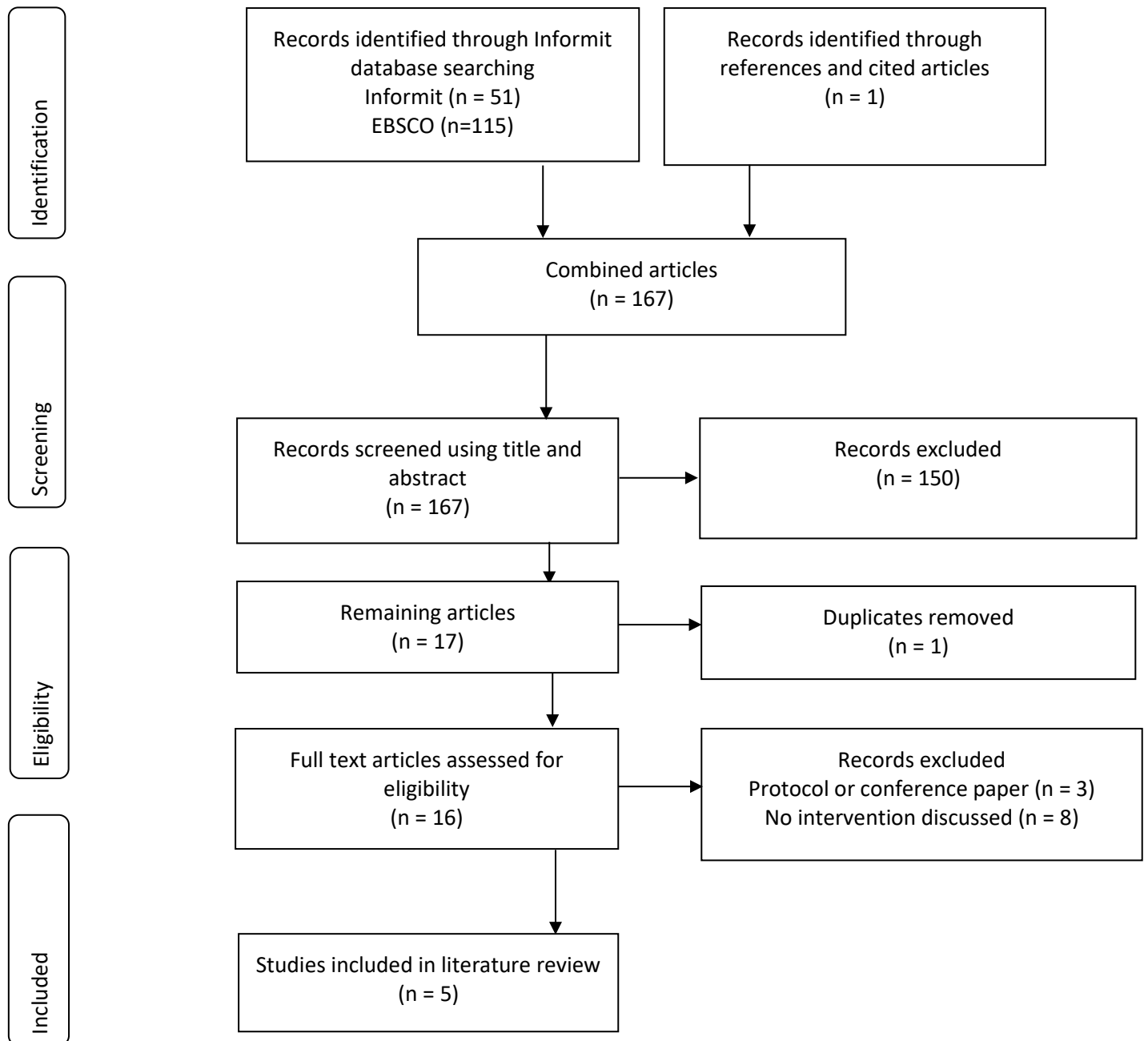


Table 1

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

	Authors(s), year	Study type	Aim	Transition program	Participants	Key findings
1	Ashburner, Bobir, van Dooren (2018)	Qualitative analysis	To assess the impact of a transition program on post-school preparedness	Individual case management post-school transition program	Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), IQ within average or near-average range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The study aimed to utilise the strengths and interests of young people with ASD. Participants must have the ability to manage basic self-care, regulate emotions and behaviors in a group setting, and understand instructions. - The study found positive impacts on mentee motivation, enjoyment, social participation, emotional wellbeing and skill development. - Mentees reported an appreciation for the program's flexibility and high quality mentors. - Only some mentee's developed awareness of post-school options.
2	Cocks, Thoresen & Lee (2015)	Mixed- method analysis	To assess the impact of post- high school pathways on quality of life	Apprenticeship or traineeship	People without disability and people with a disability including sensory impairment, intellectual, learning or physical disability, mental illness and other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participating in an apprenticeship or traineeship led to paid employment, enhanced quality of life, and social satisfaction for people with disabilities. - People who participated in an apprenticeship or traineeship had higher quality of life than the general population with developmental disabilities.
3	Hatfield, Falkmer, Falkmer, & Ciccarelli (2017)	Quantitative analysis	To assess the effectiveness of the BOOST-A online program to prepare adolescents for leaving school	Online interactive training	Autism spectrum Disorder (ASD), required to have basic computer skills and the ability to write at a year 5 reading level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This study made comparison to a control group. - Parents reported significantly greater transition-specific and at-home self-determination. - Participants reported greater career exploration. - There is evidence that the program enhances career-readiness outcomes. - The study recommends using face-to-face training to ensure compliance and better influence self-determination at school.

	Authors(s), year	Study type	Aim	Transition program	Participants	Key findings
4	Strnadová & Cumming (2014)	Qualitative analysis	To assess the transition process between high school and post- school life for students with developmental disabilities	Transition practices of government mainstream secondary schools	School principals with dedicated special education units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A subset of this study explored the practices of mainstream secondary schools to support the transition from secondary school to post-school life. - Practices identified included academic preparation, planning, exploration of post-school settings, and collaboration. - Most schools enable students to attend a course at a TAFE facility, while some incorporated skill training into the general curriculum. - Participants identified the following areas for improvement: systemic changes, placement needs, family challenges, communication, staffing, and satisfaction.
5	Marston & Johnson- Abdelmalik (2015)	Qualitative analysis	To assess how literacy education can assist social connection to the community	Community based literacy education	Adults with disability or disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The literacy program is voluntary and run by the same teachers and tutors each week, where possible. - Participant disabilities included cerebral palsy, mental illness, and intellectual disability. - Students in the RAW class are not classified according to disability. Their learning is guided by the literacy and numeracy skills that they want to improve. - Students reported that they come to the group to 'meet good people', to be independent, to learn computer skills, achieve social connectedness and gain self-respect.

Note. Articles were selected using EBSCO and Informit search engines and references of selected papers. Articles must meet inclusion criteria to be included in literature review summary table

RESULTS

This study aimed to review programs that sought to empower people who experience barriers to employment, to aspire toward and achieve work readiness. All studies included in the review feature an Australian based program. A total of five articles were assessed and their study type, aim, transition program, participants and key findings were reviewed.

RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Of the five articles reviewed, three used a qualitative methodology, one used quantitative methodology, and one used a mixed-method combination. Aims of each study varied from assessing the impact of the target program on post-school preparedness, to impact on quality of life, or impact on social connection to the community. Four of the five studies assessed a face-to-face transition program while one assessed an online program.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

Participants included students or adults with a disability including sensory impairment, intellectual, learning or physical disability, mental illness and other, people specifically with ASD, and school teachers who have students with barriers. In addition to these criteria, two studies required participants to demonstrate additional abilities for entry into the program. The study by Ashburner et al. (2018) required participants with ASD to have an IQ within average or near-average range, the ability to manage basic self-care, regulate emotions and behaviours in a group setting, and understand instructions, while the study by Cocks et al. (2015) required participants to demonstrate basic computer skills and the ability to write at a year 5 reading level at minimum.

DISCUSSION

The five studies selected for review encompassed a wide range of transition program designs and delivery modalities. This review explores the delivery of transition programs delivered within a school-based setting or to school aged students, delivery for post-school age participants, and programs that can be delivered online. The implications, limitations, and significance of this research is discussed throughout.

HIGH SCHOOL AGE INTERVENTION

Internal school programs

The traditional school curriculum can be inflexible and discount the needs of students with barriers. Additional practices that address the needs of these students can significantly impact their ability to transition from secondary school to post-school life. The Transition-Focused Education model (TFE) (Kohler & Field, 2003), which encourages staff to develop better vocational education and work centred activities, insists that the provision of TFE should be embedded in the curriculum, rather than treated as an extracurricular activity. A study conducted by Strnadová and Cumming (2014) explored how mainstream secondary schools supported students with developmental disabilities to transition from secondary school to post-school life. They found that many school curriculums focused on preparing students for this transition by increasing their academic, social, practical, and work-related skills. Experience specific examples included handling money and cooking. Another significant practice

included attending work experience and career expositions to explore post-school options. However, nine school principals who participated in this research suggested that there was not enough work experience available for students with special needs, and two respondents highlighted the inability of work experience programs to meet student's specific needs. One principle suggested that:

“Our students would benefit from a one to two day per week program/work experience rather than a ‘week block’. Not many places/companies support this, however, our students learn more as they have times to process new skills, environment, changes in routine and can transfer skills learnt at school into the work environment if they visit weekly over a long period of time. This also helps them to build relationships in the work place for future opportunities, and networking” (p. 327).

Only two respondents reported that their school engages the support of an external agency to assist the transition process (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), despite external programs showing significant advantages for preparing students with special needs for post-school life (Ashburner et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the primary focus of most schools was skill building, with only seven schools specifically supporting students' self-determination and independence. Strnadová and Cumming identify that in many cases the student is largely excluded from actively participating in the planning process, with decisions made for them instead of with them.

External school programs

As seen above, transition programs to ease the transition from high school to employment often focus on remediating the deficits of people with barriers to align their skillset with that of their peers. Conversely, the Studio G Post-School Transition Programme (Studio G) is an external support program that focuses on the strengths of participants, rather than their limitations, to recognise their abilities and aspirations (Ashburner et al., 2018). Studio G is located in a community-based setting to reduce the segregation associated with disability-specific facilities, and targets participants with ASD (Ashburner et al., 2018). Participants engage in mentor facilitated activities and excursions to education and employment facilities. They are paired with a mentor with a digital creative arts background, in accordance with past research showing that creative and technology focused programs can effectively engage the interest of young people with ASD and facilitate social engagement (Diener et al., 2015).

Qualitative analysis of the program found that participants were highly motivated to attend Studio G, even if they were not inclined to attend school or other programs (Ashburner et al., 2018). Participants referred to the program as a place of 'safety' (p. 278), and family members commented that their child was noticeably happier following participation. Many mentees successfully demonstrated increased initiative, maturity, confidence and social participation, even though Studio G did not aim specifically to teach social skills. Having access to a range of technical resources also allowed mentees to develop valuable skills, and some even used these skills to develop business initiatives such as a smart phone game application and a business website. Two mentees successfully transitioned to further education following participation in the program, and Ashburner et al. (2018) contemplate the possibility that more might have followed suit if the program had run for longer than two terms. A key success factor of the program was believed to be the use of mentors who acted as role models to facilitate the activities (Ashburner et al., 2018). Participants developed strong mentor-mentee relationships that assisted them to develop awareness of post-school education or employment options and vocational goals, and which sometimes translated to friendships outside of Studio G.

While results were mostly positive, some students of Studio G struggled to establish articulate goals and career aspirations. Mentor's commented that the development of psychosocial skills was essential

before transition goals could be established, and that the mentee's willingness to attend was of itself a sign of the program's success, even if the mentee did not make desired milestones. Studio G is specifically designed for students with ASD, however the use of a similar program, and particularly the mentor relationship, could be expanded to participants with other disabilities or disadvantage, particularly considering its strengths-based approach which highlights the capability of participants, rather than their limitations.

Post high school training

The opportunities presented to people with barriers in the 12 months following graduation from high school can influence their post-school pathways. In a study by Cocks et al. (2015), engagement in vocational activities, support from school personnel, and assistance from external agencies were identified as key components for career development. This included acceptance into an apprenticeship or traineeship, which was found to increase opportunities for paid employment, quality of life and social satisfaction among people with disability (Cocks et al., 2015).

However, engagement with traditional post-high-school education providers such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or university can require students to follow a strict curriculum that may be difficult for people with special needs or impaired capacity to handle stress (Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). Specialised transition programs provide the flexibility and personalisation required to overcome these barriers. The Reading and Writing (RAW) Group is a community organisation that aims to enable people with disability or disadvantage to connect with the community through increased literacy and numeracy skills (Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). Literacy and numeracy provide a foundation for transition into the community and chosen workforce, increasing social inclusion and economic autonomy. The goal of the RAW program was to increase student's literacy skills to help them overcome obstacles for inclusion in society, but also to give them access to the resources and knowledge to promote independence and autonomy (Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). The group is facilitated by a principle teacher and attended by both tutors and students. A qualitative study by Marsto and Johnson-Abdelmalik (2015) found that many students consistently attend the voluntary group and reported that their reason for attending was to 'meet good people'. Participants expressed the desire to be independent, to learn computer skills, achieve social connectedness and gain self-respect, many of which they achieved through the group. The classes also provided students with access to residential support services where required (Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015).

Online training

Online training can be used to increase career-readiness via a flexible, participant-friendly mode of delivery (Hatfield et al., 2017). The Better Outcomes & Successful Transitions for Autism (BOOST-A) program is an online transition program that utilises a structured, sensory learning style to prepare participants with ASD for leaving school (Hatfield et al., 2016). It has been found to increase self-determination in the home but was not effective at increasing self-determination at school. Hatfield et al. (2017) suggests this may be due to the program being delivered in the home and could be supplemented by a school based extension of the program to increase self-determination at school. The online mode of delivery of the Boost-A program is also flexible enough to be delivered either at school or in the home, which may be used to improve outcomes (Hatfield et al., 2017). A follow up study of participants found that the program assisted them to overcome inertia, ease anxiety and develop clear post-school career plans (Hatfield et al., 2018). However, caution is required when designing an online training program as research suggests that the easy, accessible and affordable nature of online delivery cannot effectively replace face-to-face delivery (Ashburner et al., 2016). In a

follow up study of the BOOST-A program, only 49% of participants reported that the program helped them to prepare for leaving school. Hatfield et al. (2018) suggest that using a 'champion' to guide participants through the program could assist participants to be better engaged with the program content and improve work ready outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This review supports that transition programs are an advantageous resource to empower people with barriers to aspire to and achieve work readiness. Support provided within a school or community setting, for school age students or post school age participants, enable people with barriers to improve their academic, practical, and work-related skills (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), and to increase their confidence, self-respect, independence and social connectedness (Ashburner et al., 2018; Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015). The use of mentors to guide a mentee's transition from secondary school to post-school life can be extremely beneficial, with positive feedback from both mentors and mentees (Ashburner et al., 2018). The use of online platforms can enable people with access barriers or special needs to participate in transition programs, however, Ashburner et al. (2018) suggest that online delivery cannot compete with the benefits of face-to-face programs. Suggestions were also made to improve the availability of work-experience for people with barriers, and that transition programs should put greater emphasis on supporting students' self-determination and independence, in addition to skill building (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). While some studies targeted only participants with ASD, it is acknowledged that the lessons and recommendations from these studies could be used to expand the reviewed transition program to include other people with barriers.

This study, and subsequent research regarding transition programs, is essential for the improvement of employment outcomes among people with barriers. Continuing improvement to these programs will contribute to empowering people with barriers to aspire toward and achieve work readiness, and to improve the employment outcomes for people with barriers in Australia.

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APPENDIX 1: Literature Review Search Terms

Informit Search strategy:

1. Informit searching: A+ Education, Humanities and Social Sciences Collection
2. Search conditions:
 - Search for:
 - o Employ*
 - o AND Australia
 - o AND Disab* OR Barrier*
 - o AND Educat* OR Skill*
 - o AND Opportuni* OR Transition OR Empower
3. Advanced search:
 - Full Text
 - Journal Article
 - Publication Date 2010 to 2020

EBSCO Search strategy:

1. EBSCOhost searching: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo
2. Search conditions:
 - Search for:
 - o Employ*
 - o AND Australia
 - o AND Disab* OR Barrier*
 - o AND Educat* OR Skill*
 - o AND Opportuni* OR Transition OR Empower
3. Advanced search:
 - Full Text
 - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals
 - Publication Date 2010 to 2020
 - Language: English

APPENDIX 2

Workshop 2: Reflection: June 2019.

Focus Group Questions

Questions for Facilitators

1. What preparation did you have prior to running the Program?
2. Could you make any recommendations to improve the Facilitator preparation?
3. What warm-up activities did you undertake to break the ice and how did the students respond?
4. What challenges occurred during the Program? And how did you manage the situation?
5. What teaching style did you adopt, and did you need to modify your style at any time?
6. Could you think about a time or incident when you had little successes during the Program?
7. What did you learn from the students, and about yourself, what would you do differently?
8. Would you like to be involved in the Program again, if so why or why not?
9. What did you think of the booklet and Program? What are your recommendations for improvement?
10. Now that the Program has finished, do you feel that students are job ready?
11. How you think the students are feeling about the work experience phase?

Questions for Volunteers

1. Tell me about some of the experiences and observations you made during the Program.
2. What did you learn as a part of the 'I Am Ready' Program?
3. What did you enjoy most about the Program? (discuss strengths and weaknesses)
4. Were there any changes in the student's attitudes throughout the program
5. Where there any challenges faced by teachers during the Program?
6. In your view did this Program give its students a deeper understanding and appreciation of work readiness?
7. Thinking about your experiences, what benefit, if any did this give to you?
8. What would you like improved/what was a weakness of the Program? Discuss
9. What do you see as a future outcome of having participated in the Program?

10. Is there any other comments or thoughts anyone would like to share about their experience of the Program?

Questions for the Partnership and Project team

1. Can you please tell me what is your role in the Program was?
2. Tell me about some of the experiences and observations you made during the Program.
3. Tell me about the experience of developing the 'I Am Ready' Program
4. What are you enjoying most about the Program? (discuss strengths and weaknesses)
5. How effective was the recruitment strategy?
6. How did you engage with the stakeholders (schools, employers)?
7. Were there any changes in the student's attitudes throughout the Program?
8. Where there any challenges faced by teachers during the Program?
9. In your view did this Program give its students a deeper understanding and appreciation of work readiness?
10. Thinking about your experiences, what benefit, if any did this give to you?
11. What would you like improved/what was a weakness of the Program? Discuss
12. Is there any other comments or thoughts anyone would like to share about their experience of the Program?

APPENDIX 3

Focus group questions: Participants, Parents and Teachers: March 2020

- Can you please tell me what was your role in the Program was?
- Tell me about some of the experiences and observations you made during the Program.
- What did you learn as a part of the 'I Am Ready' Program'?
- What did you enjoy most about the Program? (Discuss strengths and weaknesses)
- Were there any changes in the participant's attitudes throughout the Program?
- Where there any challenges faced by teachers / participants / employers during the Program?
- In your view did this Program give its participants a deeper understanding and appreciation of work readiness?
- Thinking about your experiences, what benefit, if any did this give to you?
- What would you like improved/what was a weakness of the Program? Discuss
- Is there any other comments or thoughts anyone would like to share about their experience of the Program?

APPENDIX 4: I AM READY PROGRAM EVALUATION PLAN

Objective	Description	Evaluation Tool	Timelines
Building evaluation capacity			
Build evaluation capacity within the Partnership and Project Team	<p>Provide learning opportunities for team members to build understanding of evaluation process and develop evaluation skills</p> <p>CEU – to provide workshops as required throughout the duration of the project to LLEN members, for example;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measuring success • Dissemination of findings • Data collection and analysis 	<p>Workshop feedback forms (CEU) (18)</p> <p>Attendance numbers (2)</p>	Ongoing
Process Evaluation			
Development of a reference group to oversee the planning, implementation and reporting of the project using a co-design methodology	The reference group will agree upon the terms of reference and governance.	<p>LAP cycle</p> <p>Focus group of the members of the reference group (14)</p>	Ongoing
Facilitator training and successful implementation of the 'I Am Ready' Program: 8-week program	<p>Facilitators will be recruited and trained on how to deliver the 'I Am Ready' Program</p> <p>Facilitators will be instructed to complete weekly progress reports</p>	<p>Facilitator diary reflections (3)</p> <p>Post focus group (13)</p>	Ongoing

The 'I Am Ready' Program team will successfully plan, implement and evaluate the program	The team members will be actively involved in all aspects of the project planning and delivery.	Focus group of the 'I am ready group' (15)	November 2019
The 'I Am Ready' Program will build capacity and capabilities of volunteers and team members	Students from Federation University will be invited to be involved in the project	Volunteer focus group (20)	September 2019
The 'I Am Ready' Program team will successfully manage the project budget and department reporting requirements	Regular reporting to the Department of Social Services	DEX (5) DSS client survey (6) DSS score (7) Final evaluation report submitted	Monthly reports June 2020 Final report
Outcomes Evaluation			
Liaising with Education providers informing, norming and reinforcing the importance of the 'I am ready Project'	Building on existing relationships, and developing new networks to establish and maintain the 'I am ready project' into the future	Post survey referring educators (1)	September 2019
Successfully recruit program participants from the six Gippsland local government regions	Participants will be recruited from the following local government regions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bass Coast • South Gippsland • Baw Baw • Latrobe • Wellington • East Gippsland 	Enrolment forms (21) Participant numbers (2)	March – July 2019
Participation in the 8 week 'I Am Ready' Program to build work ready confidence	Participants will attend the 8 week program completing the activities and workbook requirements.	Attendance numbers (2) Pictures (11) Workbook completion (22) Ready to start a job activity (19) Video testimonials (12)	July – Sept 2019

Participants will successfully complete a work experience placement	Liaising with industry partner's participants will be allocated a work experience placement.	Employer recruitment questions (10) Placement Workbook (16) Buddy post survey (9) School Experience report (17) Participant Focus groups (8)	September 2019
To evaluate the impact and success of the 'I Am Ready' Program from the parent's perspective.	Parents will be encouraged to participate in information sessions regarding the project and to provide ongoing support to their children throughout the program	Attendance numbers (2) Parent survey (4)	September 2019

Evaluation Tools

1	Post Survey referring educator
2	Attendance List – participants / workshops
3	Facilitators diary / reflections (weekly reports)
4	Parent survey aspirations
5	DEX
6	DSS Client Survey
7	DSS SCORE
8	Post focus groups participants
9	Buddy's post survey
10	Employer recruitment questions (industry)
11	'How are you feeling now?' pre – post participant
12	Graduation Video testimonials
13	Facilitator post interviews
4	Reference group – focus group
15	'I Am Ready' Program Group – focus group
16	Placement workbook

17	Work Experience Report? Schools
18	Workshop Evaluation sheet
19	Participants – 1-10 'How ready are you to start a job'
20	Volunteers focus group
21	Enrolment forms
22	Workbook completion (check in questions and activity completion)

Approval

Human Research Ethics Committee



Principal Researcher:	Associate Professor Joanne Porter	
Co- Researcher/s:	Dr Michael Barbagallo Mrs Jennifer Bur	Ms Val Prokopiv Mrs Jenni Graham
School/Section:	School of Nursing and Healthcare Professions	
Project Number:	A19-086	
Project Title:	"I am ready" Project Evaluation.	
For the period:	01/11/2019 to 30/06/2020	

Quote the Project No: A19-086 in all correspondence regarding this application.

Comment: The Committee recommend the adjustment of the Plain Language Information Statement to be suitable for the age and abilities of the participants.

Approval has been granted to undertake this project in accordance with the proposal submitted for the period listed above.

Please note: It is the responsibility of the Principal Researcher to ensure the Ethics Office is contacted immediately regarding any proposed change or any serious or unexpected adverse effect on participants during the life of this project.

In Addition: Maintaining Ethics Approval is contingent upon adherence to all Standard Conditions of Approval as listed on the final page of this notification

COMPLIANCE REPORTING DATES TO HREC:

Final project report:
30 July 2020

The combined annual/final report template is available at:

<https://federation.edu.au/research/support-for-students-and-staff/ethics/human-ethics/human-ethics3>

Fiona Koop
Coordinator, Research Ethics
1 November 2019

Please note the standard conditions of approval on Page 2:



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CRICOS Provider No. 00103D | RTO Code 4909

Federation University Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters where its campuses are located, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and First Nations Peoples.