THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

Passport to a Positive Future
Evaluation of the Melbourne Academy

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with Luke Swain

melbourne
city mission

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

THE **VICTORIA INSTITUTE**
Building Better Learning

PASSPORT TO A POSITIVE FUTURE

EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE ACADEMY

MAY 2015

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Acknowledgements

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Cover image: Display of photos by students from several Melbourne Academy classrooms at the 2014 mid-year exhibition, curated by Alison Baker. Photograph Hendrik Jacobs.

Please note: All individual names used in this report are pseudonyms

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About

The Victoria Institute

The targeted research program of the Victoria Institute aims to build better learning and greater participation and success for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those who have been disengaged or excluded.

Connected with the College of Education at Victoria University, our researchers work collaboratively with a range of government departments, policy makers, philanthropic organisations and community groups. The Victoria Institute has social justice as a key focus and operates with the explicit intention of contributing to improved educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Kitty te Riele is Principal Research Fellow in the Victoria Institute and Associate Professor of Alternative Education. Kitty had overall responsibility for the research project and carried out the engagement matrix component. She authored the report except where indicated below.

Merryn Davies is Principal Research Fellow is the Centre for International Research on Education Systems, associated with the Victoria Institute. Merryn had responsibility for the student questionnaire and authored sections 1.2 and 2.2 of the report.

Alison Baker is a Research Fellow in the Victoria Institute. She had responsibility for the creative project, including many student interviews, and authored sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

Luke Swain was the project Research Assistant. Luke carried out most interviews and their analysis as well as practical project management. He supported writing the case studies and report editing.

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Abbreviations

ACE:	Adult Community Education
ATSI:	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
AVETMISS:	Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard
CALD:	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
COAG:	Council of Australian Governments
DET:	Department of Education and Training (formerly DEECD)
DHHS:	Department of Health and Human Services (formerly DHS)
FYA:	Foundation for Young Australians
ICAN:	Innovative Community Action Networks
JSA:	Job Services Australia
LSAY:	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
MA:	Melbourne Academy
MCM:	Melbourne City Mission
NEET:	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO:	Non-Government Organisation
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RTO:	Registered Training Organisation
SRC:	Student Representative Council
TAFE:	Technical and Further Education
VCAL:	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE:	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET:	Vocational Education and Training
YMAP:	Youth Mentoring Assisted Pathways
YSAS:	Youth Support and Advocacy Service

Executive Summary

Melbourne City Mission commissioned researchers from the Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning at Victoria University to evaluate the Melbourne Academy during 2014, focusing on:

• whether and how students are 'better off' as a consequence of attending the Melbourne Academy,
• distinctive aspects of the Melbourne Academy model.

The project drew on a range of data sources: interviews with 20 students, 13 staff and 2 parents; photographs and notes associated with a creative student project in 3 classrooms; observation notes; a semi-quantitative questionnaire with 29 students; staff ratings of student engagement at two time points in 2014, for 41 students; and documentation made available by Melbourne City Mission.

Overview

The Melbourne Academy is a program of Melbourne City Mission, a community services organisation supporting people and communities who are experiencing disadvantage to overcome barriers to participation. Melbourne City Mission is a Registered Training Organisation and Non-School Senior Secondary Provider. The Melbourne Academy is a flexible learning program for young people who experience severe disengagement from schooling, and aims to reconnect these young people with education. It operates from six sites across Melbourne, with one classroom in each site:

• North Fitzroy
• Melbourne CBD
• South Melbourne
• Sunshine
• Braybrook
• Maribyrnong

Almost half of the students live outside the Local Government Areas in which these sites are located, therefore making a considerable commitment to travel to the Melbourne Academy in order to gain an education. The curriculum at the Melbourne Academy includes:

• Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) – Foundation, Intermediate, Senior
• VET Certificates – including Music, Community Services, and Printing and Graphic Arts

Rolling enrolments occur across the year at all sites. During 2014, 98 students were formally enrolled in the Melbourne Academy.

Students at the Melbourne Academy face various disadvantages for achieving educational, social and personal goals, due to one or (usually) several of the following factors:

• disability or illness
• Indigeneity background
• refugee and/or CALD background
• economic hardship
• family breakdown
• homelessness

The achievements of the Melbourne Academy must be read against this background of considerable marginalisation.

Elements of being better off

Formal outcomes

A core purpose of the Melbourne Academy, in common with any other Australian school, is to facilitate young people to achieve valuable education credentials and learn new knowledge and skills. During 2014:

- 65% of the cohort of 98 students completed all or part of their VCAL certificate
- many students worked towards VET Certificates within the Melbourne Academy or through an external provider.

Staff, students and parents agree that most students would not have achieved these qualifications without the opportunity to attend the Melbourne Academy. The main reason why some Melbourne Academy students did not complete a (part) VCAL or VET certificate was low attendance – due (usually) to the disadvantages listed above. For most students, their participation had improved markedly at the Melbourne Academy:

- 83% of surveyed students (N=29) agreed they were more likely to come to school
- the proportion of students who were engaged (based on the Engagement Matrix, for 41 students at two time points in 2014) increased:
  - from 44% to 76% in terms of their class participation,
  - from 59% to 78% in terms of their satisfaction in their own work.

Essays, projects, art work, class debates, songs and even completed worksheets carry with them a sense of pride in achievement, for students but also for staff. Ensuring curriculum is interesting, practical and relevant plays a major role in enabling students' academic success at the Melbourne Academy. However, there is scope within the Melbourne Academy to incorporate more opportunities for active student input.

Pathways

Aspiration is often regarded as pivotal for enhancing young people's access to post-school pathways by policy makers and practitioners. The Melbourne Academy also aims to foster an aspirational mindset. In the student survey (N=29):

- 86% list working in a job that interests them as their future aspiration,
- 54% regard living in a good community as very important, and 50% want to play a contributing role in that community.

For most learners, the most highly desired pathway is into some form of employment and viable financial independence, usually alongside further study.
In order to achieve their goals, surveyed students indicate they chose to attend the Melbourne Academy to:

- gain their VCAL (83%)
- learn practical skills (73%)
- learn study skills (73%)
- learn in a more relaxed environment (73%)

Gaining the VCAL certificate is the focus for students, and the less formal, applied learning setting is how they hope to achieve that goal.

- 100% agreed that compared with their previous school(s) at Melbourne Academy they get more support in planning for their future
- 86% agreed they were able to do things they are good at
- 79% agreed the program will help them get what they want in life

These levels of commitment and connection are positive foundations to leverage effective work for student pathways.

Connection and wellbeing

A key component of connection to the Melbourne Academy is having family, friends and other significant people supporting and encouraging the young person. In the student survey:

- 93% indicate they get on better with teachers at the Melbourne Academy
- 75% indicate they are with friends at the Melbourne Academy
- 90% indicate their family encourages them to do well at school

Students identify staff as being, 'understanding,' 'encouraging,' and 'really helpful' in relation to learning as well as emotional support. Staff note young people developed improved communication and conflict resolution skills. However, some students felt lonely or experienced conflict with peers.

In terms of social connection and social wellbeing:

- students gain experience in the 'real world' and engage in the community,
- opportunities for volunteering are important for young people who are often at the receiving end of services and care,
- the Melbourne Academy offers holistic support for challenges faced by young people outside of school, for example in relation to dealing with Centrelink, housing agencies, Family and Criminal Courts, and childcare,
- for many students the opportunity to engage with education is at the heart of the Melbourne Academy being a safe place.

Students' personal wellbeing is enhanced through increased feelings of pride, self-belief, and ownership – and reduced anxiety and depression. The proportion of students who were engaged (based on the Engagement Matrix) increased during 2014:

- from 54% to 85% in terms of their confidence
- from 41% to 68% in terms of their resilience

Improved confidence is built on a solid foundation of achievements, such as participation in class projects, successfully completing assessment tasks and gaining a part-time job. For some students, however, it will take more time to overcome anxiety and fear of failure.

Overall, the findings highlight significant improvement in the connections and social and personal wellbeing for many, if not all, Melbourne Academy students during 2014. These so-called 'soft outcomes' are vitally important for enabling formal outcomes and pathways.

The Melbourne Academy Model

Small classes

The use of relatively small class sizes and the employment of both teacher and youth worker to work in classes is fairly typical for flexible learning programs. The student:staff ratio was:

- 14:1 in the largest class
- 7:1 on average across the six classrooms

Keeping classes small is a key strategy for the success of the Melbourne Academy. It enables staff to get to know their students well and lays the foundation for strong staff-student relationships. On the other hand, the small class size also has some drawbacks, making it difficult for students to avoid or get away from negative peer interactions.

The teacher-youth worker pairs are the greatest asset for the Melbourne Academy:

- their complementary expertise enables the provision of holistic support to young people,
- the contribution the Academy makes to young people being 'better off' relies heavily on the commitment and sheer hard work of the teachers and youth workers.

Multiple sites

The Melbourne Academy grew rapidly between 2012 and 2014. This enables the Melbourne Academy to serve far more young people across a greater geographic area. Teething problems include some staff feeling that not all necessary processes were in place and there was a lack of resources. Over the course of 2014 support for staff (such as the opportunity to come together most Fridays for reflection and professional learning) enabled many of these concerns to be addressed. The MA is, in effect, a multi-campus school, with each 'campus' holding a single class with its own teacher and youth worker. This model means:

- each classroom has its own group dynamic, as well as different levels of VCAL and different VET courses that are offered,
- students are able to transfer between campuses, to access a different curriculum or for a 'fresh start'.

Co-location of Melbourne Academy sites with other youth and community services:

- extends the range of professional support available for students at short notice and in close proximity,
- facilitates enhanced professional interagency communication.

Sticking by young people

The Melbourne Academy offers a program to young people over years rather than months, especially if they progress from Foundation to Senior VCAL. Provision for disadvantaged and disengaged young people, outside of regular schools, comprises many programs that run for only a term or two. The duration of the Melbourne Academy offers students the stability and time needed to achieve valuable credentials.

Young people are actively warmly welcomed at the Melbourne Academy:

- staff refuse to treat young people as 'problem children' and create an accepting and caring culture,
- new students can join a classroom immediately rather than waiting until all paperwork has been processed and funding is received for their enrolment.

The Melbourne Academy demonstrates its commitment to young people by supporting them through crises:

- the difficult life circumstances many young people face do not magically disappear when they join the Melbourne Academy. Poverty, family breakdown, housing issues, ill-health and justice matters continue to impact on their lives,
- staff do not give up on young people in these situations, but rather rally around and stick by them,
- for these students the Melbourne Academy provides a lifeline, not only for the wellbeing support provided, but also because it maintains the connection with education, learning and community.

Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation found a small number of issues for Melbourne City Mission to attend to, in its quest for continuous improvement of the Melbourne Academy. The answer to the question whether students are 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy is a resounding 'yes' for the vast majority of students, in particular in relation to academic achievement, attendance and participation, aspiration and motivation, connections with peers and community, and social and personal wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION **1**

1.1 THE MELBOURNE ACADEMY

1.1.1 Overview

The Melbourne Academy (MA) is a flexible learning program that enables young people who have experienced severe disengagement from schooling to reconnect with education. The program was established as a pilot program in 2010 with a single classroom for 20 students. This developed into the MA, growing to six classrooms on six separate sites with a total of about 100 students by 2014.

Melbourne City Mission considers itself a core piece of mainstream responses to social issues facing Australian society and the Melbourne Academy as part of the broader landscape of educational provision.

The Melbourne Academy is part of Melbourne City Mission (MCM), a not-for-profit community service organisation which aims to "help people and communities to develop their own pathways away from disadvantage"[1]. Melbourne City Mission is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and registered Non-School Senior Secondary Provider[2]. In parallel with the Melbourne Academy, MCM provides a range of pre-vocational and pre-employment education programs. A distinctive feature of the Melbourne Academy sites is their co-location with various youth services (including some that are also provided by MCM) rather than in a traditional school setting[3]. Importantly, however, MCM considers itself a core piece of mainstream responses to social issues facing Australian society. The Melbourne Academy is one those responses and is seen as part of – rather than separate from – the broader landscape of educational provision.

Melbourne Academy students are enrolled in one of three levels of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)[4] – Foundation, Intermediate or Senior – loosely corresponding with Years 10, 11 and 12. In addition, the MA enables students to gain VET certification. In 2014, the six sites each had their own focus in terms of VCAL and VET[5]:

- North Fitzroy – Intermediate and Senior VCAL; music and multimedia VET.
- Melbourne CBD – Foundation and Intermediate VCAL; Creative Industries VET.
- Braybrook – Foundation and Intermediate VCAL; Printing and Graphic Arts VET.
- Sunshine – Intermediate and Senior VCAL levels; Community Services VET.
- South Melbourne – Senior VCAL; Desktop Publishing VET.
- Maribyrnong – all three levels of VCAL; focus on young mothers and early childhood support.

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1. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/about/who-we-are-what-we-do/vision-values-and-goals
2. 2012-2013 Annual Report, pp 28-29
3. 2012-2013 Annual Report, pp 29
4. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), introduced in 2002, offers a senior secondary qualification focused on engagement in practical and applied learning that connects strongly to training and employment pathways. It is well-established, offered in over 440 secondary schools as well as many non-school providers to over 22,000 students. It sits alongside the more traditional senior secondary qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).
5. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/melbourne-academy

The MA employs a teacher and youth worker for each site, with one youth worker and one teacher taking on an additional leadership role across the whole program. Each pair of teacher and youth worker works closely together to improve the learning and wellbeing of students in their classroom. Staff from across the classrooms come together most Fridays at the MCM head office in South Melbourne, for collaboration, administrative tasks and professional learning.

Young people often become aware of the MA informally through word-of-mouth, from friends or siblings. The Student Wellbeing Report for one classroom noted:

> *Students telling other young people about the Melbourne Academy was again the biggest source of referrals this year. […] Many of these students stated that they had heard good things about the program and liked that it was an alternative to mainstream education. This clearly demonstrated that the students themselves were the best advocates of the program.*

In addition, the Student Wellbeing Reports[6] point to more formal referrals through Melbourne City Mission programs (such as Detour, Wheels, Frontyard, Job Services Australia, and Youth Connections), and other community service organisations such as Youth Justice, Youth Support and Advocacy Service, MacKillop Family Services, Westgate Community Initiatives Group, and Youth Junction at the Visy Cares Hub in Sunshine[7]. Referrals can, in exceptional circumstances, also come from local schools. MA staff have strong relationships with colleagues in both government and non-government schools. Young people, and their parents, can make sweeping statements criticising their previous school(s) – and some of these are included in this report as representations of their perspectives. MA staff tend to take a more nuanced view. They perceive other schools as offering largely positive experiences and recognise that high workload and a lack of specialised services and training often militate against staff in these schools being able to cater for young people with complex needs as well as they would like.

Students telling other young people about the Melbourne Academy was the biggest source of referrals this year. Students themselves were the best advocates of the program. [Student Wellbeing Report]

1.1.2 The student population

Rolling enrolments occur across the year at all sites, as a purposeful strategy to the re-engagement of young people with education when they are ready for this – rather than making them wait until the start of a term or even of a new school year. As a result, the actual number of students on the books can vary considerably from week to week. Moreover, the MA welcomes young people in class even when their enrolment has not yet been fully processed, especially towards the end of Term 4, and despite not receiving any funding for these students. The demographic data below is based on the officially enrolled cohort of 98 students in 2014[8].

The student population includes an equal proportion of male and female students (49 students each). The MA enrols young people between 15 and 20 years of age except for the South Melbourne classroom, which enrols young adults between 18 and 35 years of age. In Victoria, it is compulsory for young people to complete Year 10, and then to be in full time education, training and/or employment until they turn 17[9] (DET, 2013). Figure

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6. De-identified summary Student Wellbeing Reports for 3 classroom sites, semester 1 and semester 2 2014
7. The Visy Cares Hub is an integrated youth services centre for young people aged 12–25yrs in Melbourne's west. See: http://www.youthjunctioninc.net.au
8. Data are extracted from the Melbourne City Mission 2014 database for the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS)

1.1.1 highlights that three-quarters of MA students are above this compulsory participation age. The number of students enrolled at Foundation, Intermediate and Senior level largely follows the expectation based on age.

Figure 1.1.1   Age distribution of students, by VCAL level (numbers, N=98)
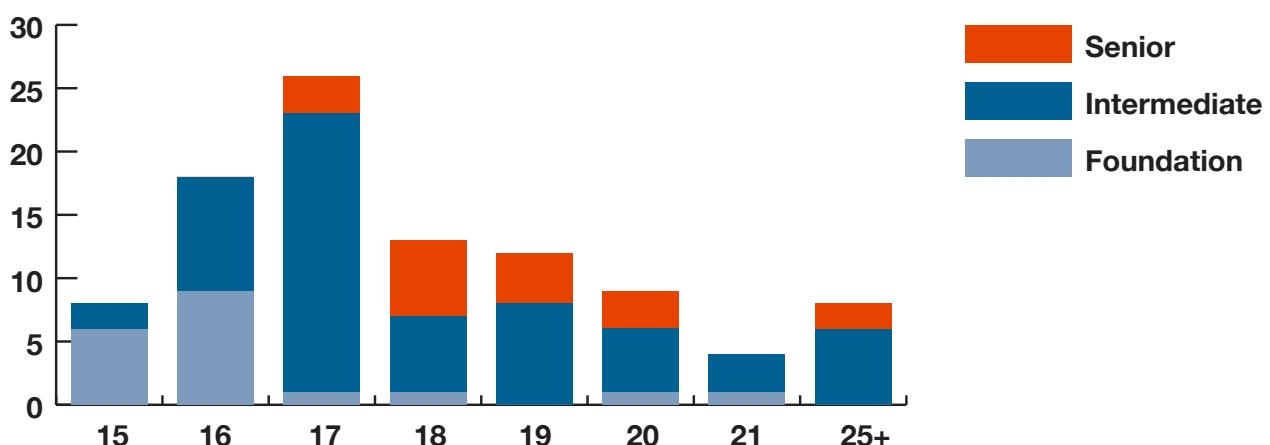
 With the exception of the South Melbourne site, the MA enrols students who have not yet completed Year 12[10]. Prior to enrolling at the MA, out of 98 students, 40 had completed Year 9 or below, 31 had completed Year 10, 17 had completed Year 11, and 2 had completed Year 12.

The six Melbourne Academy sites are located in the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of:

- Maribyrnong (Braybrook and Maribyrnong classrooms)
- Brimbank (Sunshine classroom)
- Melbourne (Melbourne CBD classroom)
- Port Phillip (South Melbourne classroom)
- Yarra (North Fitzroy classroom)

The map in Figure 1.1.2 shows that while many MA students lived in these LGAs, almost half travelled from further afield. These latter students make a considerable commitment to get to the MA in order to gain an education. The expansion of the MA into other sites was partly in recognition of the need that existed for a flexible learning program, especially in the western suburbs. A staff member comments about a student in the first MA classroom:

> *He took the train for two hours every day to come to class. That's an indicator of somebody that actually wants to be in the space. He never missed a day for three years. (Robert, staff)*

9. http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/legislation/pages/act2006age.aspx
10. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/melbourne-academy

Figure 1.1.2   Location of students (Local Government Area, numbers, N=98)
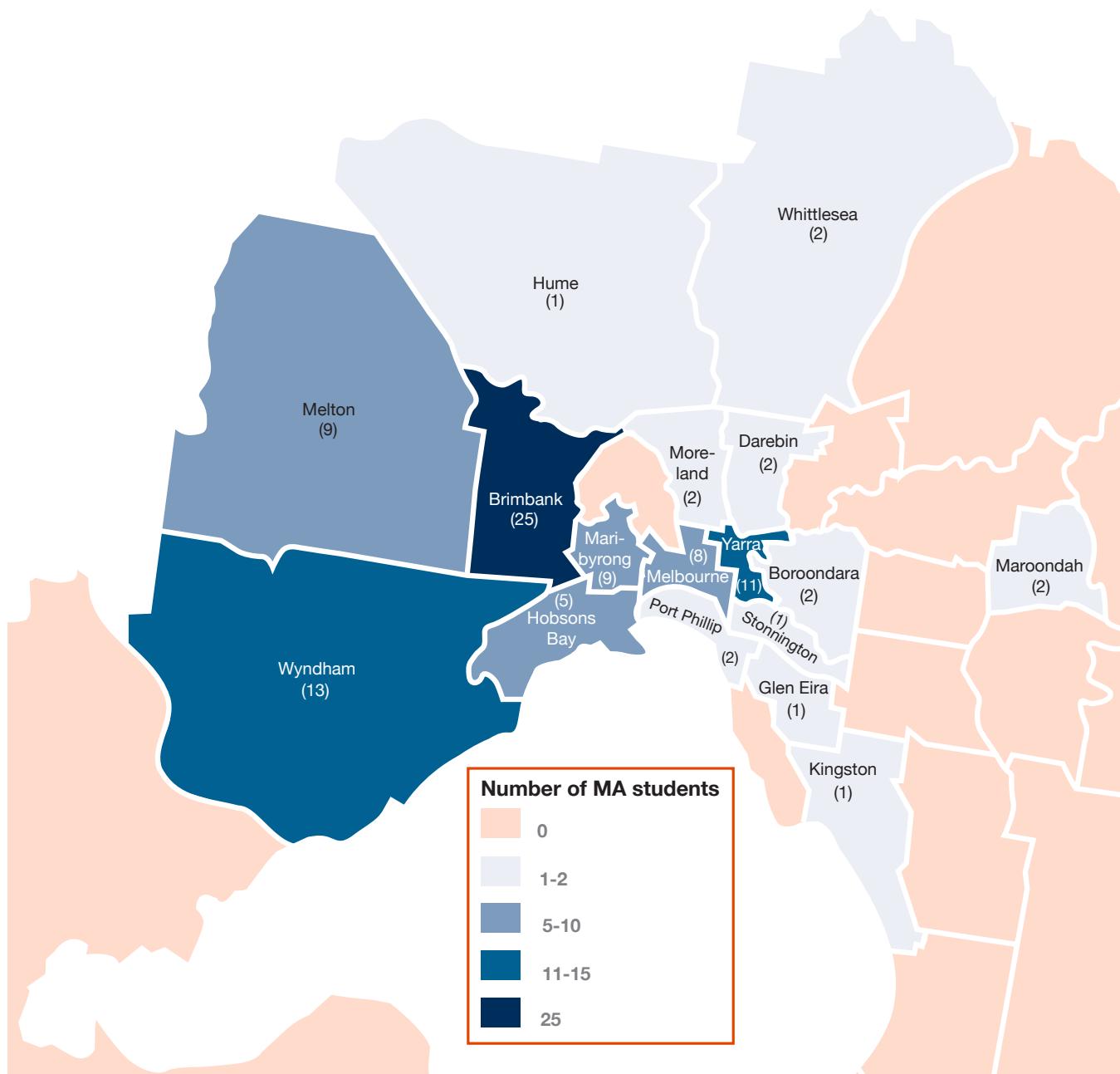
Almost four-fifths of students were born in Australia and of those 9 per cent explicitly identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background. Among students born overseas, 63 per cent are from Africa, 21 per cent from the Asia-Pacific, and 16 per cent from the Middle East. Although not formally recorded, many of the young people born in Africa are likely to have come to Australia as refugees.

Slightly over one-quarter of the students (N=27) are identified as having a disability or illness. Interviews with staff suggested that several students are likely to experience an undiagnosed disability or illness, and therefore this proportion may be an underestimation. Figure 1.1.3 shows that among those formally diagnosed, most common are mental illness or a general 'medical condition', and these are fairly evenly distributed among male and female students. Male students are over-represented in the other three categories: intellectual, learning and physical disabilities. Student Wellbeing Reports also point to the prevalence of social anxiety and disrupted sleep patterns.

Figure 1.1.3   Student disability and illness, by gender (percentage, based on N=27)
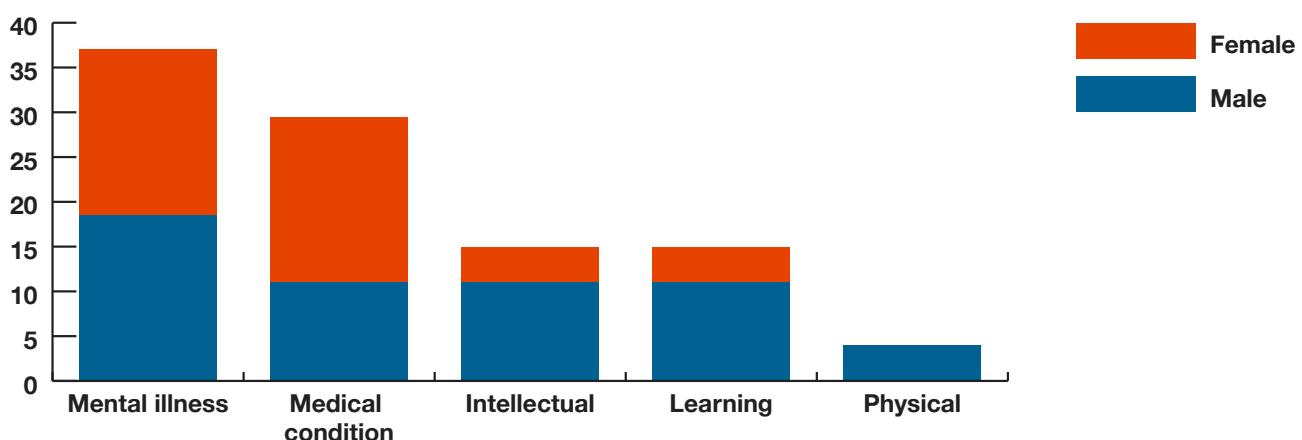
Many students face economic hardship. This is evident by 60 per cent of students being eligible for a course fee exemption[11]. MA 2014 Student Wellbeing Reports record several students who are couch surfing, sleeping rough, in crisis accommodation or moving between different family households. Some students who travelled a long way found it too expensive to attend school. They were provided with half-yearly Myki cards[12], subsidised by Travellers Aid Australia's Pathways to Education program[13]. The Wellbeing reports also point to difficult life circumstances in relation to family breakdown, having matters before the court, and drug and alcohol dependency.

Students at the Melbourne Academy face various and multiple disadvantages for achieving educational, social and personal goals. The achievements of the Melbourne Academy must be read against this background of considerable marginalisation.

Overall, the demographic data indicate that students at the Melbourne Academy face various forms of disadvantage which present a barrier to attaining a Year 12 qualification, for example disrupted previous education, ATSI or migrant background, disability or illness, or poverty. Usually, individual students are impacted by more than one of these forms of disadvantage.

1.2   THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT

1.2.1   Policy

School completion or its equivalent constitutes an important foundation for subsequent education, training and employment, and individuals without this level of qualification risk social and economic marginalisation. While there is variation from country to country, OECD indicators show that the higher the level of formal qualifications, the higher the average earnings are likely to be and the better the chance of avoiding unemployment (OECD, 1998, 2000). There is also evidence suggesting that the importance of qualifications has increased over time, for example, in respect of the likelihood of escaping from a period of unemployment and in relation to earnings (Davies, Lamb and Doecke 2011, Bynner & Parsons, 2001).

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11. Data are extracted from the Melbourne City Mission 2014 client enrolment database
12. Myki is the electronic smartcard used for public transport travel in Melbourne
13. https://www.travellersaid.org.au/news/newsletters-publications/pathways-education-fact-sheet

In 2001, the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (the Kirby Review) highlighted the need to minimise educational disengagement, optimise school completion and promote effective post school pathways in Victoria. At that time, the policy responses to the Review's recommendations included the introduction of a target of 90 per cent of young people completing their Year 12 or equivalent by 2010, the expansion of the VET in Schools program, the introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and the establishment of the Local Learning and Employment Networks. All addressed the need to support school completion and qualification attainment for an increasingly diverse school student population.

The approach was not confined to young people in mainstream school settings. It included the provision of support to early school leavers not engaged in education, training or employment and the expansion of the range of education and training opportunities available to young people in post compulsory years in non-school settings such as vocational and community learning environments, particularly for young people who had disengaged or were at risk of disengaging from education.

For some young people mainstream school settings do not represent feasible options. How to best serve disengaged young people who have yet to complete Year 12 continues to be an important policy question at state and federal levels.

The retention of young people in education and training until school completion (or its equivalent) has also seen policy support in state and federal education, training and employment programs and in areas distinct from education. The Department of Human Services (DHS) Vulnerable Youth Framework, for example, aimed to guide organisations in better responding to the needs of vulnerable young people, especially in removing barriers to participation so that vulnerable young people might receive an education and actively participate in training and employment activities. Other elements included mental health initiatives and engagement of young people in Out of Home Care.

While a primary focus of most school-based engagement programs has centred on retaining students within the mainstream school system, it is widely recognised that for some young people mainstream school settings do not represent feasible options. How to best serve disengaged young people who have yet to complete their Year 12 has been – and continues to be – the subject of significant and successive federal and state policy initiatives.

Issues such as homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, mental health issues, low self-esteem, previous low attainment, or behavioural issues can compromise a student's ability to learn within school settings.

In this context, Community VCAL programs in Victoria (as well as VCAL in non-school Senior Secondary providers) offer important options for students who are at risk of disengaging or who have already disengaged from education. In these settings young people are enrolled as students at a government school campus but their VCAL programs are delivered away from the school site and involve partnerships with either ACE providers or other communities or NGOs. Students enrolled in a Community VCAL program have often become disengaged from education for a range of reasons including poor connections between the student's learning style and the learning environment in the school, homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, mental health issues, low self-esteem, previous low attainment, or behavioural issues. These issues can compromise

a student's ability to learn within school settings. The wellbeing supports available to and within conventional schools are usually not capable of responding to the particularly challenging life circumstances of these young people. Alternative environments enable programs and pathways to be tailored to more specifically meet their complex needs.

1.2.2 Young people in Victoria: Engagement in education and training

The economic and social benefits of school completion, both to society and the individual, have long been acknowledged by governments, and most recently articulated at the national level as part of the Council of Australian Governments' National Education Agreement and subsequent reforms (COAG 2008). Rates of school completion, however, vary considerably across the jurisdictions. Figure 1.2.1 shows the apparent retention rates for all states and territories for 2013. Apparent retention rates represent the proportion of a secondary cohort still at school in Year 12, having progressed at the expected rate from the first year of secondary school. The rate for Victoria, at 86.2 per cent, sits just above the national rate of 84.2 per cent. While this is to be commended, it still means that one in seven young Victorians leave school before the end of Year 12. It means that of the 66,068 school students in Year 7 in 2008, 9,117 are no longer at school in Year 12 in 2013. While a small proportion of these students will have continued their schooling interstate or overseas, the majority have disengaged with the school system.

Figure 1.2.1 Apparent retention rates, Australian States and Territories, 2013 (%)
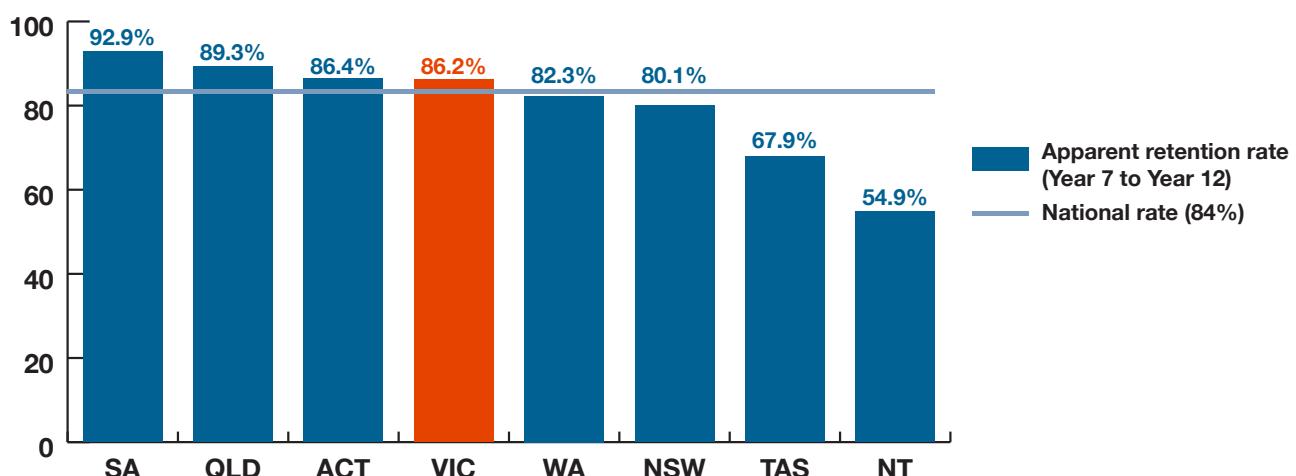
Source: Schools, Australia, ABS 2013, Cat. No.4221.0

Apparent retention rates are lower, too, for different groups of students in Victoria. Boys are less likely to stay on (retention of 82.5 per cent compared to 89.9 per cent for girls), and government school students are more vulnerable to dropout than Catholic or independent school students (retention 80.4 per cent for government school students compared to 86.5 per cent for Catholic school students and 98.4 per cent for independent school students).

A broader perspective on the dimensions of early leavers can be obtained from the ABS Census. In 2011, 14.7 per cent of all Victorian 15 to 19 year-olds identified themselves as having left school and not completed Year 12. This equates to over 45,000 young people in Victoria. Boys are 1.7 times as likely to be included in this group. For the cohort of 20-24 year old Victorians, in 2013 84.5 per cent reported having a Year 12 certificate or its equivalent, compared with 77.2 per cent of their peers Australia-wide.

In a cohort where school completion is high, the disadvantage associated with early school leaving and not achieving Year 12 is actually compounded. Increasingly, with the bar raised to Year 12 completion, young people need this qualification as a base platform for access to any subsequent study and employment pathways. A significant minority of young people still fall short of this base precondition. When these young people disengage prematurely from education, they are more likely to be penalised for their incomplete education participation. For example, they are more likely to be unemployed than low skill learners in older age-groups. Those who are 15-24 years of age account for just over one-quarter (26 per cent) of all those unemployed and disengaged. By comparison, those low skill learners in the oldest age group—55-64 years of age—make up only 11 per cent of the unemployed (Davies et al 2011).

In a cohort where school completion is high, the disadvantages associated with early school leaving and not achieving Year 12 are compounded.

Many early school leavers do continue in education and training, as can be seen in Figure 1.2.2, which details the destinations of a sample of 4,094 Victorian early school leavers surveyed in 2010, in the year following their exit from school. Just over half (52.7 per cent) of those surveyed were undertaking campus-based VET, or on-the-job training with an apprenticeship or traineeship. A considerable proportion of this group of early leavers, however, find themselves in a more vulnerable position, with over one in five or 21.1 per cent not in employment, education or training (NEET).

Figure 1.2.2   Destinations of Victorian early school leavers, On Track Survey, 2010

	Frequency	Per cent
Certificate IV and above	243	5.9
Certificate I-III	579	14.1
Apprenticeship	1091	26.6
Traineeship	248	6.1
Employed full-time	513	12.5
Employed part-time	550	13.4
Looking for work	647	15.8
NILFET*	223	5.4
Total	4094	100

Source: *On Track 2010* (DECD 2011) *Not in the labour force, education or training

Post-school destinations vary according to the socio-economic status and location, as illustrated in Figure 1.2.3. Early leavers from the most disadvantaged areas of Melbourne are the most vulnerable, with one-third or 33.5 per cent not in education or employment after leaving school, compared to 16 per cent of early leavers from the wealthiest areas of Melbourne. Conversely, apprenticeship take-up is most likely in the high SES areas. These patterns are mirrored in country Victoria, where the likelihood of transitions to apprenticeship are stronger.

Figure 1.2.3   Distribution of early school leaver destinations by SES quartiles and location, 2010 (%)
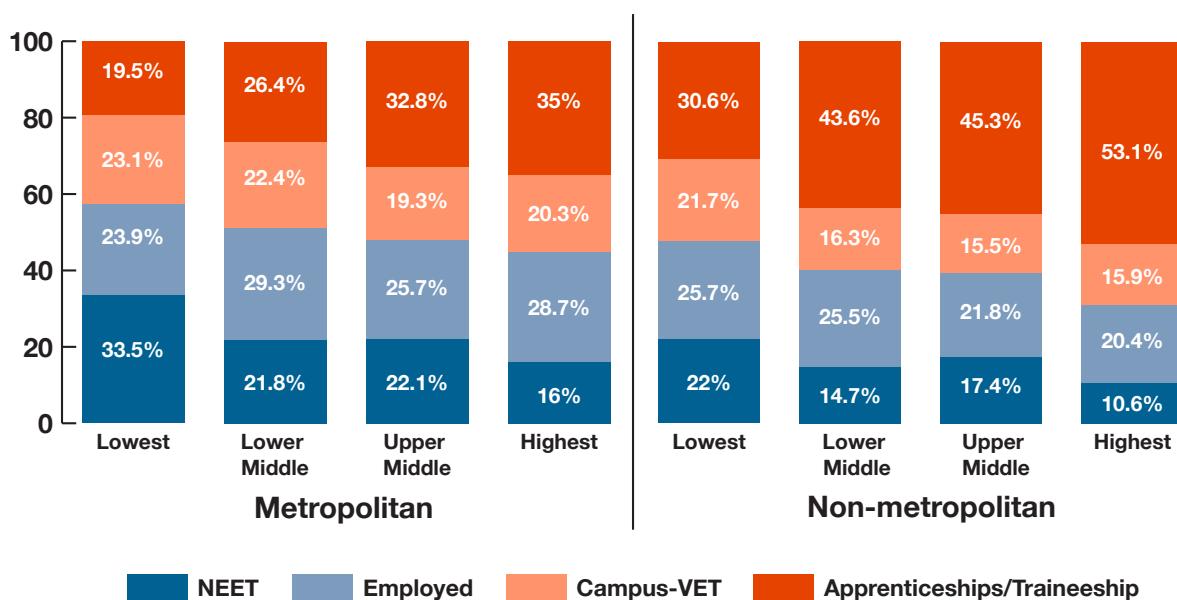
1.2.3   Reasons for early leaving

On Track[14] surveys of early leavers shine a light on the reasons why young people make the decision (or have others decide for them) to leave school early. For nearly two-thirds of country students, and over 55 per cent of metropolitan students, the desire to work and the dislike of school are key reasons for early leaving.

These young people depend on access to flexible learning settings that can accommodate their very specific needs to achieve positive transitions.

As Figure 1.2.4 demonstrates, metropolitan students were more likely to report other reasons for separating from school – such as illness or other personal reasons including financial reasons, an unhappiness with their school environment (school was "too hard", or they wanted to learn in an alternative setting) or schools had actively excluded them (expulsion or asked to leave).

Figure 1.2.4 Early school leavers, main reason for leaving by location, 2010 (%)
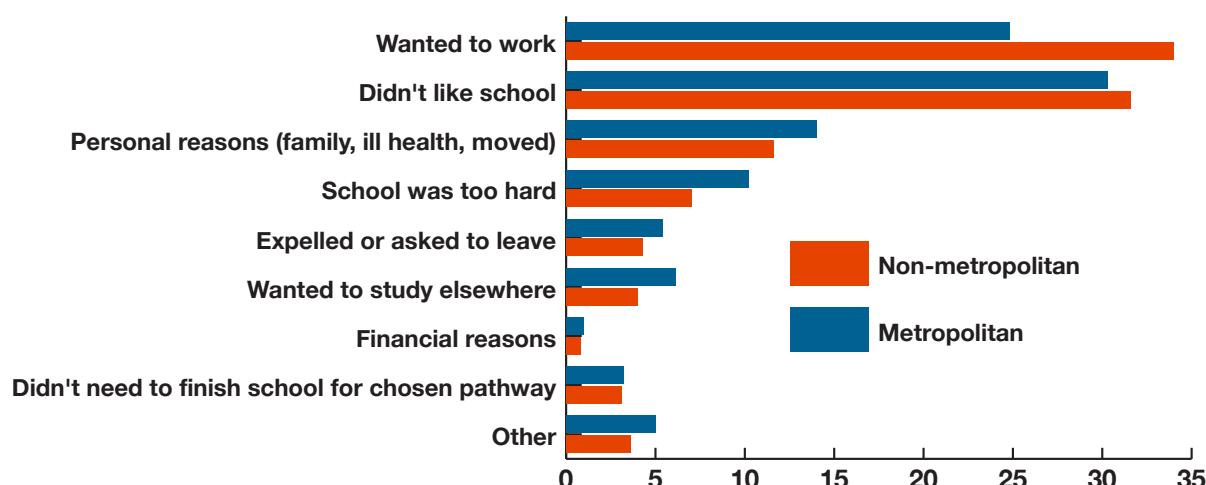
14. On Track is a Victorian Government initiative which surveys school leavers who have left school in the last six months. See: http://www.education.vic. gov.au/about/research/Pages/ontrack.aspx

The needs of these young people in metropolitan regions can be further explored in terms of their reported post-school pathways (see Figure 1.2.5). For young people who left school for personal reasons, or because school was "too hard" or because they were asked to leave, the chances of being not in employment, education or training (NEET) are high compared to other pathways options.

More than others, these young people depend on access to flexible learning settings that can accommodate their very specific needs to achieve positive transitions.

Figure 1.2.5 Melbourne early school leavers, main reason for leaving by post-school destination, 2010
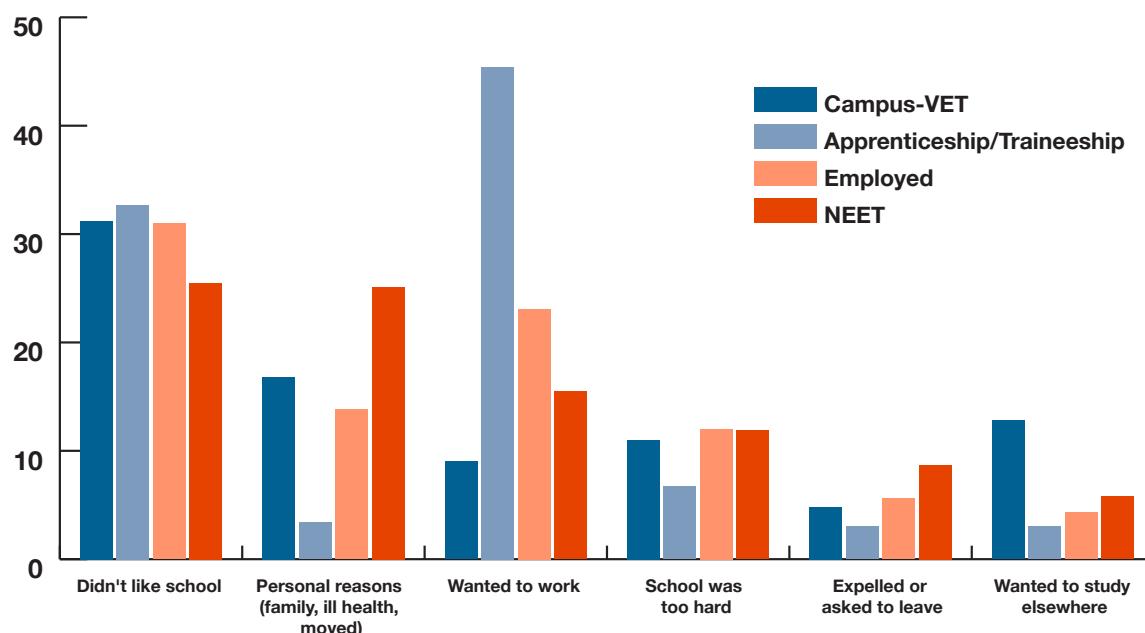
1.3   WHAT IS (FLEXIBLE) EDUCATION FOR?

1.3.1   The rise of flexible learning programs

A wide variety of flexible learning programs exists in Australia, sometimes referred to as alternative schools or re-engagement programs. These programs have in common a commitment to supporting disadvantaged and marginalised young people to achieve school credentials and engage in education in ways that work well for them (Te Riele, 2012, 2014). Such programs and schools take as their starting point that 'mainstream' approaches to school have not worked well for these young people and therefore a different approach is needed. Not-for-profit organisations are a key player in providing such programs as part of their broader remit for social justice. The Melbourne Academy program offered by Melbourne City Mission is an example of this.

Flexible learning programs have in common a commitment to supporting disadvantaged young people to achieve school credentials and engage in education in ways that work well for them.

Flexible learning programs such as the Melbourne Academy are not a new phenomenon in Australia. Some programs can trace their origin back to the progressive education movement of the 1970s and the federally funded Disadvantaged Schools Program of the 1970s and 1980s. The past decade or so, however, has

witnessed a significant growth in these programs. In part, this is due to high youth unemployment, especially since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). Disadvantaged young people who turned to education for refuge from harsh labour market conditions found that too often conventional schools were unable to offer them an education. Flexible learning programs stepped into the breach (Davies et al, 2011; Te Riele, 2012).

Government policy also encourages young people to complete upper secondary education. The *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions* (COAG, 2009) between federal, state and territory governments set a target of 90 per cent of young people (aged 20-24) achieving Year 12 or an equivalent qualification. As part of this policy, new requirements were legislated in Victoria, and around Australia, mandating that young people complete Year 10 and participate in full time school, training or employment (or a full time combination of these) until they turn 17. The funding for several key support mechanisms – such as Youth Connections and School Business Community Partnership Brokers – to enable raising senior secondary attainment as part of the *National Partnership Agreement* was discontinued at the end of 2014 (see Te Riele, 2014). So far they have not been replaced by similar constructive initiatives at the national level, although in Victoria the School Business Community Partnership Brokers are continuing under the state banner of Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs)[15].

The National Partnership Agreement built on previous policies aimed at raising school attainment, starting with the *Participation and equity in Australian schools: The goal of full secondary education* (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1983). The dual aim of the latter was to improve the quality of schooling and encourage the majority of young people to complete a full secondary education. The Commission was keen to point out that these objectives were not simply a reaction to youth labour market problems but, as is evident from the title of the policy, were underpinned by a desire to improve social equity. This stands in stark contrast to the *National Partnership Agreement* which ties the benefits of completing school mainly to increased economic productivity (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2014; Te Riele, 2011).

1.3.2 Perspectives on the role and purpose of education

Overall, the benefits of educational success for personal, social and economic wellbeing both for young people themselves and for society as a whole are well-established (Deloitte Access Economics, 2008; FYA, 2011; McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, 2013; OECD, 2012). However, the specific outcomes that are valued from school education are closely associated with differing perspectives on the role and purpose of education. As indicated above, the Australian federal government changed its perspective between the 1980s and 2000s.

Broadly speaking, four major perspectives (or philosophies) can be distinguished, each leading to a very different answer to the fundamental question 'what is education for?' (Goodlad, 1979; Marples, 1999; Symes & Preston, 1997; Wadham, Pudsey & Boyd, 2007):

1. The instrumental perspective is recognisable in the neoliberal orientation of much contemporary education policy, including the *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions*. School education in this view should be future-oriented, in particular, preparing children and young people to take up roles as productive citizens of society. The qualifications young people gain from schooling therefore are paramount – it is about generating 'human capital'. Outcomes that are valued are largely economic,

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15. http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/pathways/Pages/llens.aspx

in relation to employment and generating wealth for both the individual and the nation. Citizenship is also valued, in the sense of preparing young people to uphold the law and become responsible adults.

2. In contrast, the classic liberal perspective is largely past-oriented. The role of education is to pass on to the next generation the accumulated wisdom of previous generations and to develop students as autonomous, rational and moral agents. There is a large emphasis on Culture (with a capital C – such as classical music and grand literature) and on developing critical thinking skills. Valued outcomes include moral virtues (such as integrity), intellectual virtues (such as open-mindedness) and being a cultured and thoughtful person.

3. The humanist perspective considers each learner, and their interest and talents, as essential features of the learning process itself. It is characterised by a commitment to educating the whole person. School education should nurture each individual student, with the ultimate aim of enabling everyone to realise their full potential. As a result, personal happiness, the ability to make one's own choices, and self-expression rate highly as valuable outcomes from education.

4. Finally, the emancipatory perspective adds a focus on community and social justice. This means a focus on school-wide and system-wide change so that society becomes more equitable. At the level of individual students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds should be provided the same possibilities for success as those from more privileged backgrounds. At the level of community, people should be encouraged to contribute to making the world a better (more democratic and just) place, both now as students and later as adults. Critical thinking, social responsibility and hopefulness are important. Empowerment to improve one's own life and the lives of others is therefore valued as an educational outcome.

Most of the literature on the outcomes of alternative education focuses on strongly futures-oriented goals. However young people stress everyday differences that are in the present.

1.3.3 Purposes and outcomes of flexible learning programs

Flexible learning programs vary in terms of the extent to which they lean towards one (or a combination) of the perspectives outlined above. Most commonly, however, they combine a commitment to young people's future (in terms of being able to live an independent and satisfying life) and to their present (in terms of their current wellbeing and enjoyment of learning). This means instrumental outcomes such as gaining qualifications and pathways to employment are valued, but so are the relevance and interest of skills and knowledge for young people themselves, and their social and emotional wellbeing now and into the future. Thomson (2014, p. 36) suggests:

> Most of the literature on the outcomes of alternative education offers strongly futures-oriented goals of the kind that policy-makers, education systems and schools prefer – educational achievement, wellbeing, access to further education and training. However, reports from young people about their experiences in alternative education stress everyday differences – relationships, a sense of agency and identity, activities that are both enjoyable – things that are in the present.

Recognising that there can be a mismatch between the outcomes valued by funders of flexible learning programs (government departments, but also philanthropic organisations and businesses) and the outcomes valued by staff, students and community partners who are at the heart of those flexible learning programs, a recent Australian research project has proposed a new conceptual framework (Wyn et al, 2014, also see O'Donovan, Berman & Wierenga, 2014). The framework conceives of successful learning programs as 'enabling spaces': "where students can form respectful relationships and derive a sense of meaning, connection, and control over their lives" (Wyn et al, 2014, p.7):

- Meaning: the sense of purpose a learning activity holds for young people,
- Connections: genuine links between people and organisations,
- Control: young people have a sense of being 'in control' of what they do and who they are.

Previous research that has examined the work of flexible learning programs provides evidence about the practices and outcomes of successful programs (Brooking and Gardiner, 2009; Davies et al, 2011; Evans et al, 2009; Gutherson et al, 2011; Mills and McGregor, 2010; Te Riele, 2012, 2014). This body of research highlights the following sets of outcomes that are achieved by flexible learning programs:

1) Academic achievement
  - Basic skills, especially literacy and numeracy
  - Vocational skills
  - Successful completion of assessment tasks
  - Certification for short courses (e.g. First Aid, Barista)
  - Upper secondary credentials
  - Vocational Education and Training Certificates

2) Engagement
  - Attendance
  - Enjoyment of learning
  - Sense of accomplishment
  - Reduction in disruptive behaviour
  - Development of new interests

3) Pathways
  - Aspirations and hopes for the future
  - Employability skills
  - Further study
  - Meaningful employment

4) Personal and social wellbeing
  - Positive sense of self
  - Confidence and resilience
  - Improvement in physical and mental health
  - Communication skills
  - Teamwork skills
  - Positive relationships with peers and adults
  - Connection with community services agencies

5) Community wellbeing
  - Reduction in social exclusion
  - Voluntary work
  - Reduction in criminal activity

As research also points out, these outcomes do not apply across the board for all young people and all programs, and most are not easily measured. The concept of 'distance travelled' is valuable. Thomson (2014, p. 36) suggests staff in flexible learning programs can "talk about the differences between the young person when they arrive, and observable changes that have happened during their time in the programme". In the context of the Schools First awards[16] in Australia, Simons (2011, p.5) notes that:

Successful outcomes for a school starting from a low base, in terms of student performance or levels of student engagement, may be quite different from the successful outcomes of schools that are already high performing.

It is impossible to determine the progress made by young people and the success of a program without understanding the challenges faced by the students in their life and through their previous educational experiences. Myconos (2011) points to the difficult circumstances in which flexible learning programs operate, often having relatively low resources to work with young people whose prior experience with schooling has been unsuccessful. He argues that "any judgements on program effectiveness should therefore be tempered by a reminder of the scale and difficulty of the undertaking" (2011, p.42).

Finally, time is an important factor. As Thomson (2014) points out, some outcomes may be immediately apparent, others may take considerable time to develop, and yet others may appear in the short term but not remain. It is worth attending to her caution:

It is important for anticipated outcomes to be tailored to the achievable goals of the specific programme. […] Any homogeneous set of outcomes across this population is likely to miss the mark for many. The issue is how to allow for difference and common entitlement at the same time. (Thomson, 2014, p.37)

Different outcomes may be valuable and achievable for different young people and programs, and most outcomes are not easily measured. The concept of 'distance travelled' is valuable.

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16. Schools First was a program (operating up to 2014) that gave awards to school-community partnerships that delivered improved educational outcomes for students. See: http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/about

1.4 THE PROJECT

As outlined in section 1.2, the Melbourne Academy (MA) expanded rapidly between 2012 and 2014, involving opening several new sites, modifying existing ones, and setting up the overall structure. In this context, senior staff from Melbourne City Mission (MCM) approached the research team with the request to conduct an independent evaluation of the Melbourne Academy in its first year of operation in this new shape. The resulting knowledge contributes to MCM's own commitment to continuous improvement and can also provide inspiration for other flexible learning programs. For these reasons, MCM committed both time and funding to enable a better understanding of the work of the Melbourne Academy. The team was asked to address the following research questions:

1. **Are students 'better off' as a consequence of attending school through the Melbourne Academy? If so, how are they 'better off'?**
2. **How, and how well, does the Melbourne Academy model work?**

In commissioning the evaluation, Melbourne City Mission staff purposely took a broad view of what might be elements of being 'better off', including formal outcomes in relation to enrolment, attendance and achievements, development of and achievements against pathways plans, connection to school and the wider community, and well-being and health. In relation to the MA model, Melbourne City Mission staff pointed to factors such as class size and the dispersed classrooms.

These suggestions informed the data collection strategies, but in turn the actual data generated ultimately informed the findings presented here. These cover most of the elements and factors listed in advance, as well as unforeseen ones. The research design involved a wide range of data collection strategies, enhancing the opportunity for gaining diverse insights through method triangulation. This included qualitative, creative and semi-quantitative tools, as outlined below. To facilitate the ethical conduct of the research, much effort was made to ensure participants understood the project and genuinely consented to taking part. In particular, it was important that participants understood the limitations on confidentiality: although pseudonyms are used for all individuals, this does not offer full protection from recognition by colleagues and peers within the Melbourne Academy.

Interviews

Students, parents and staff were invited to take part in individual, semi-structured interviews with a member of the research team (Luke, Alison or Kitty). For students, this focused on their experiences in and opinions about the Melbourne Academy. 20 students were interviewed from five of the six sites, representing about one-fifth of the total 2014 cohort. In addition, two parents were interviewed, both mothers of male students, exploring their views of the impact of the MA on their sons. Staff interviews focused on their views regarding the impact of the MA on students, as well as their insights into how the MA worked. Almost all teachers, youth workers and relevant managers were interviewed: 13 in total.

The interviews form a particularly rich source of data for the evaluation. The large number of interviews enabled the overall analysis to be comprehensive and balanced, generating a strong sense of the trustworthiness of the findings. This report draws a great deal on verbatim interview quotes to represent the voice of these most direct stakeholders in the Melbourne Academy. Quotes were selected carefully, with an eye to the overall

findings, and are identified through a pseudonym (first name) and an indication of the role of the interviewee (student, parent or staff). Using pseudonyms (and by not referring to a staff member's specific job title) enhances confidentiality for an external readership. We explained to all people interviewed, however, that it is impossible to provide full confidentiality for people within the Melbourne Academy, who might recognise each other from the sentiment expressed in the quote or a typical turn of phrase.

Creative project

The Melbourne Academy curriculum for Term 2 included an arts-based learning activity. As part of this activity, students in three of the sites (Sunshine, Braybrook and North Fitzroy) were given the option of participating in the creative project, using photography as the medium for documenting their experience at the Melbourne Academy. In terms of the curriculum, this culminated in the creation of a photographic display at the MA's mid-year exhibition, curated by Alison as the researcher for this component (see Figure 1.4.1). For the research, the photo elicitation method involved the students in conversations with Alison about the meaning of the images they had taken. There was flexibility when and how young people engaged both in taking photos and in conversations, enabled by Alison spending a considerable amount of time in each site, and also by the availability of a range of equipment: mini Polaroid cameras provided by the researcher, 'point and shoot' digital cameras owned by the MA, and students' own smartphones.

Figure 1.4.1: Display from the creative project at the mid-year exhibition
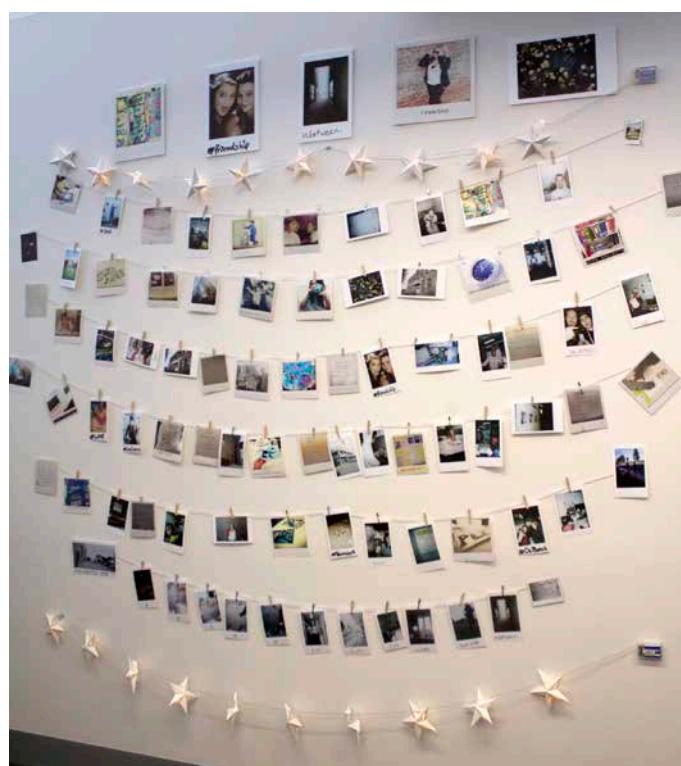
Overall, many students in the three classrooms took part in taking photographs but fewer participated in the conversation about their images. Analysis focused on images that had been given captions by the student-photographer and/or had notes from a conversation with the researcher. The photos proved to be a particularly evocative manner of representing students' views, and have been reproduced throughout this report with the students' permission. Several of the images make it possible to identify people. To reduce the possibility of harm flowing from this, only images that represent those people positively are used here, and the people are not identified by either their real name or pseudonym.

Observation

Several members of the research team spent time in classrooms (especially for the creative project, see above) and at special events such as the mid-year exhibition and graduation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork strategies, field notes were taken to capture key impressions from the observations on these occasions. These were not a major source of data in their own right, but served to inform subsequent interviews, as well as act as both a check and expansion of information from other data sources.

Student Questionnaire

All students were invited to respond to a questionnaire about their educational goals and experiences. Most of the questions in the questionnaire are in Likert-scale format, with some open-ended short answer questions. A forerunner of this survey instrument had been implemented by Merryn in comparable settings, providing confidence that it was feasible for MA students to complete. The questionnaire was administered as a class activity by staff in Term 2 and in Term 4, and was able to be used as a completed competency towards the personal development skills strand in VCAL.

The intention of providing the same questionnaire twice was to provide the opportunity for comparison of results over time. Unfortunately this was not feasible due to the low response rate, with very few of the same students responding at both time points. This is not unusual in flexible learning settings, due to rolling enrolments and variations in attendance (also see Section 2.1.1) and was one of the reasons for using a multi-method approach. Analysis is at the level of aggregate data, across the whole group of 29 students who completed the survey.

ICAN engagement matrix and interviews

The ICAN engagement matrix has been independently validated as an instrument for gauging the engagement of young people in flexible learning settings. It was "designed to provide a snapshot of the levels of engagement of a young person in areas which affect their ability to be successful in learning [… and] allows information to be recorded about any changes in levels of engagement over time"[17]. The matrix has five levels of engagement, measured for three dimensions: Wellbeing (7 aspects), Relationships (3 aspects), and Involvement in Learning (7 aspects).

For the Melbourne Academy evaluation, one staff member for each site used their professional judgement to rate students' engagement level for each aspect across the three dimensions at two time points. The first time, the staff member sat down with Kitty (who helped them understand the instrument) to complete the matrix in relation to all students who were on their roll in early term 2. In term 4, the same staff member (except for one site) independently repeated the survey for all students from time point 1 who were still enrolled in their class now. They did this on a new blank survey form, so they could not refer to (and be influenced by) the time point 1 ratings. This resulted in 41 students (19 female and 22 male) for whom the ICAN engagement matrix was completed twice, enabling comparison of results between the start and end of 2014. Results from the quantitative analysis of the matrix are provided in this report through diagrams that highlight changes between the two time points.

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17. http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/files/pages/ICAN%202011/Student_Engagement_matrix.pdf

About a week after staff completed the matrix for the second time, Kitty met with staff members from four of the sites, individually, to examine the ratings for all of their students across the two time points. A conversation was recorded in which the staff member commented on any differences between those times that stood out, for each individual student. These conversations served to explain changes from the staff member's perspective. They generated remarkable additional insights into the impact that the Melbourne Academy had on these 41 students during 2014. As with the interviews (see above), this data is represented in the report through verbatim quotes, using the same identifier of a pseudonym and the role of 'staff'. In other words, a quote followed by (pseudonym, staff) may have its origins in a semi-structured interview or in an ICAN engagement matrix related interview.

MCM data and documentation

The final source of data was provided by Melbourne City Mission itself. This included documentation that is in the public domain, such as annual reports, as well as data generated by MCM itself, such as from their student enrolment system, attendance and attainment records, site aggregate wellbeing reports, and student end-of-year reports. The analysis from these sources provided reliable findings about the background of students (used in Section 1.1) as well as about formal outcomes (section 2.1). It also supplied additional staff commentary on student achievement (2.1) and connections within the classroom (2.3).

The next part of the report, Section 2, addresses the first research question: Are students 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy and, if so, how? The section answers this question in relation to three major elements: 2.1 formal outcomes, 2.2. pathways, and 2.3 connections and wellbeing. In addition, case studies are provided of four individual students, to offer a window into the holistic experience for these young people. Section 3 addresses the second research question: How and how well does the MA model work? It provides answers in relation to three aspects: 3.1 small classes (and associated practices), 3.2 having multiple sites, and 3.3 a commitment to 'sticking by' young people. Finally, Section 4 summarises the main findings, providing a concise answer to each of the research questions.

CASE STUDY 1

Madison (Melbourne CBD)

Madison has always had a passion for music, and is blessed with a beautiful singing voice. She struggled to keep up with the work at her previous school no matter how much effort she put into it. She explains that she did not get along with most of the teachers and the principal, and felt disappointed that they did not provide her with the support she needed when she was being bullied and in relation to her stress-induced asthma. In the end, she turned to drinking alcohol before school to deal with her anxiety. Madison dropped out of school in Year 10 and spent the rest of the 2013 out of schooling.

At age 16, Madison joined the Melbourne Academy, initially at North Fitzroy but soon moving to the Melbourne CBD site at the suggestion of a staff member. Since then, as both Madison and her teacher agreed, her confidence improved dramatically. Madison was relieved that she no longer suffered breathing problems and has also stopped drinking. One of the things that helped this 180 degree turn for Madison was the support from staff: "*They'll focus individually and they'll take their time to be able to cater for our needs*".

Most importantly, the Melbourne Academy enabled Madison to pursue her passion for music. Initially, she was only interested in achieving the Music qualification, but she was pleased to find out that she could study VCAL at the same time. In the survey, Madison agreed strongly that 'I really want to do well in this program' and 'Being in this program will really help me get what I want in life'.

During 2014, Madison completed Intermediate VCAL in the Melbourne CBD classroom as well as many modules of the Certificate II in Music on Wednesdays at North Fitzroy. Her music teacher commended Madison in her End of Year report, writing she "*has been an enthusiastic and versatile music student this year. She has demonstrated an impressive range in voice across several styles*".

Staff noted many improvements across the year in her wellbeing, connections with her peers and her overall involvement in learning. They put these improvements down to her increased attendance and punctuality as the year progressed. Her end-of-year report noted:

> **Madison has made excellent academic progress since the start of the year. She has completed all requirements for Intermediate VCAL and will progress to Senior VCAL next year. Madison has also worked very hard in her music VET. (End of Year report)**

Madison performed publicly at the 2014 graduation ceremony, singing live – testimony to having overcome her previous anxiety. Madison's experience provides an example of how the support and encouragement provided at the Melbourne Academy, as well as a curriculum that is of interest, can generate remarkable success for young people whose previous school experiences had led to their disengagement.

ELEMENTS OF BEING BETTER OFF

2

2.1 FORMAL OUTCOMES

A core purpose of the Melbourne Academy, in common with any other Australian school, is to facilitate young people to achieve valuable educational credentials and to learn new knowledge and skills (discussed in 2.1.1). Two additional formal outcomes enable these academic achievements: increased attendance at school and enhanced participation in learning (discussed in 2.1.2).

2.1.1 Academic achievements

Completing VCAL

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning was introduced in 2002 to meet an identified need in post compulsory education and training for young people in school and non-school settings – a qualification that marked the conclusion of secondary schooling and allowed young people to engage in practical and applied learning that connected strongly to training and employment pathways. Today there are over 440 secondary schools, together with non-school providers such as TAFE institutes and Adult Community Education (ACE) organisations, delivering VCAL to over 22,000 students.

In 2014, 65 per cent of Melbourne Academy students across all three VCAL levels completed part or all of their Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

Academic achievement is recognised most obviously when students pass all or part of their VCAL level. These credentials are valuable because they open doors to future opportunities such as further study and employment (see McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, 2013). An additional value is that the achievement of credentials builds the self-confidence of students who (usually) have had little previous academic success (see section 2.3.3). The Melbourne Academy enables young people to complete Foundation, Intermediate and Senior VCAL, as well as a wide range of specific vocational qualifications provided internally or through links with another RTO. Figure 2.1 illustrates that the number of students attaining all or part of a VCAL certificate went up as the level of VCAL increased.

Excluding the ten students who had only been enrolled for a short time (see Figure 2.1.1), in 2014 26 per cent of students completed a full certificate and 39 per cent completed part of a certificate. The MA includes highly capable students who achieve very well, sometimes despite low attendance due to personal circumstances. Phil (staff) describes a student who achieved Senior VCAL in 2014: "Julia's attendance is pretty poor […]. But when she does attend she achieves a lot".

Figure 2.1.1   Completion of VCAL by VCAL level (Number, N=98)
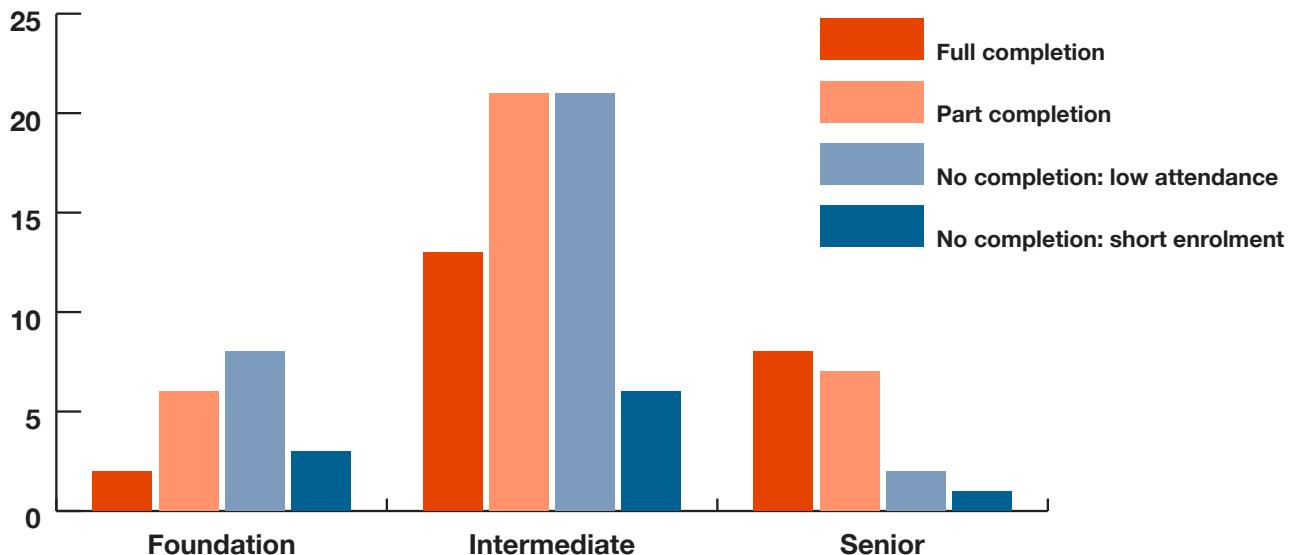
A parent compares the different approach at the MA, where low attendance does not have to prohibit a student from achieving, to her son's previous school:

> [At previous school] he was becoming more and more unhappy and having absences. He was still struggling with his physical health as well. Of course all this led to was more punitive measures, and harsh words really, from the school, because they were all caught in the kind of high pressure tumbling machine, threshing machine, to turn students into high achieving university fodder. (Mary, parent)

Her son achieved his Senior VCAL at the MA in 2014. Although staff do not tend to share these kinds of critical views of other schools, they – as well as parents and students – have a strong sense of pride when students pass their VCAL level:

> Just to be able to see that they've achieved something at the end of the year. Because for a lot of the students they have attempted VCAL at other places and this might be their third go. So for them to be able to finish and walk away with a certificate is really good for them. (Nikki, staff)

A student who completed Intermediate VCAL was "really happy about that" and explained she did not think she would have achieved this without the Melbourne Academy:

> Probably [I would have done] home schooling and I wouldn't enjoy it, and it would be too hard to do the tasks and everything. I wouldn't be able to follow through with them and it would all get probably way too hard. (Madison, student)

This sentiment is affirmed by other students, parents, and staff. Asking what would have happened without the opportunity to attend the Melbourne Academy, the consensus is that achieving any kind of VCAL or VET credential would have been far less likely.

Completion of only part of a VCAL certificate is usually due to the student not yet having completed all the required VET hours. For some students, life circumstances made it difficult to attend and achieve the full certificate. This is recognised by staff, and where possible they work to support these students in terms of both achievement and wellbeing:

Adam has very significant mental and physical health issues which dominate his life. He […] loves to do the work, loves to get feedback on his work, feels a sense of achievement when he does it. But they are few and far between because he can't get there very often because of his other issues and they have come to impact on him much more so than the first half of the year. We've hardly seen him in Term 3 and I think I've seen him once this term. I was on the phone to him just a few days ago and he'd like some work sent home so he still feels connected to the place. (Patrick, staff)

For others, staff encourage students to return next year and finish off the final work required, for example by commenting that the student was "so close to completing his VCAL this semester" (End of Year student report). The levels within VCAL allow students to gain recognition for what they have achieved, and to build on that: "it's not so much 'you've failed intermediate', it's just that 'you got 80 per cent through', which is great" (Phil, staff).

Staff, students and parents have a strong sense of pride when students pass their VCAL level. The consensus is that achieving a credential would have been far less likely without the opportunity to attend the Melbourne Academy.

Staff commented that the pressure to complete units towards the end of the year, with the VCAL assessment deadline looming, encouraged some students to pick up speed for a sprint to the finish line. Patrick explains how that worked in his classroom:

We got her through with a major push at the end. Linda and I basically sat all our students down and gave them a bit of a reality check as to how far along the passing line they had gone for the year. Some of them got a rude awakening a few weeks out from the end to say "Oh I didn't realise I was that far behind" […]. She was one of them and she had it set in her head that by hook or by crook she wanted to get it done this year. (Patrick, staff)

For several students, such pressure was encouraging – even if they referred to it as 'ball-busting' (see Figure 2.1.2). For others, however, the pressure can be counterproductive: "a lot of our students don't cope with pressure well, so they self-destruct" (Phil, staff). One student, who did end up completing Senior VCAL, was 'sabotaging' his achievement towards the end of the year:

I believe wholeheartedly that this was a fear of success rather than a fear of failure. […] He even mentioned his concern at leaving the safety of our classroom, that is an indicator of just how important these classrooms are. (Phil, staff)

In the student survey, 45 per cent of students agreed with the statement 'I am not sure how I will cope when I leave school'. Nikki (staff) is concerned that "we are really good at doing hand holding but we hand hold for too long". This highlights that support for making the transition out of the Melbourne Academy may be as important for many young people as support for their achievement and wellbeing within the MA (also see section 2.2).

Figure 2.1.2   Student photo and explanation: 'Ball-busting'

BALL BUSTING!!
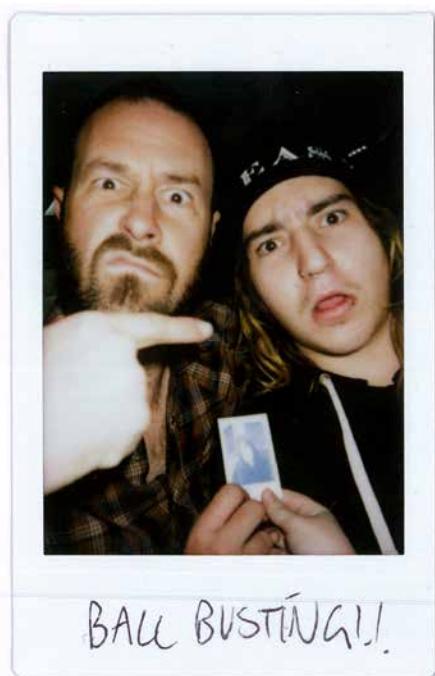
I'm a musical person, and so I get [staff] always pushing me. Because I rap, so he's always pushing me to go— he's always pushing me to the limit and then go further than I think I can. Because he's telling me I'm way ahead of kids my age, which is good to hear.

You don't really expect it, but when it's coming from people in the music industry. Like even the other big rappers […] in my first instinct because I know all those dudes, they're telling me how far I've gotten and how I kind of should be more out there. So that's pretty good.

There are two main reasons for students not achieving any VCAL completion in 2014. First, low attendance throughout a large part of the year. This applies to 32 per cent of the 2014 cohort (see Figure 2.1.1). Staff recognise that many students are capable of achieving if they are able to attend more frequently:

> *Her attendance is sporadic and this has had an adverse effect on the completion of class activities. The work that she has attempted has been of a sufficient standard and I have no doubt that with higher attendance she would be an extremely successful Senior VCAL student. (End of Year report)*

Second, students who were enrolled for only a few weeks in 2014 simply had not had enough time to complete any units. This is the case for 10 per cent of the 2014 cohort (see Figure 2.1.1). Staff make a point in the end-of-year reports for these students to recognise the work they have achieved, and encourage them to return:

> *[Student] has completed some initial work including making some good contributions toward end of year artwork for graduation and taking part in the Thursday afternoon gym sessions. She has also completed initial Compass[18] activities. As [student] has just started with Melbourne Academy she is yet to complete much work. We look forward to learning more about your academic abilities in 2015.*

Vocational Education and Training

A distinctive feature of the VCAL approach in Victoria is to include VET (vocational education and training) units. MA students therefore can attain not only the VCAL credential but also a VET certificate. The MA offers some VET certificates in-house, such as Music, Community Services, and Desktop Publishing. These draw on the vocational expertise of MA staff, and are offered in one location – such as Community Services at Sunshine.

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18. Compass is a computer based assessment of core literacy and numeracy skills specifically designed for disengaged and educationally marginalised young people and adults, see: http://www.acer.edu.au/compass

In 2014 Wednesday was a designated VET day, allowing students to move to a different classroom for their VET course if necessary. For example, Madison (mentioned above) attended Melbourne CBD for her regular class, but on Wednesdays travelled to North Fitzroy for Music VET. A factor that helps students complete these internal VET courses is that staff can make sure they collect the required evidence, sometimes almost 'by stealth':

> *I could create things that got him outcomes that he didn't realise. […] I was just secretly collecting all of this stuff because I teach the VET, I knew what he needs to do. And you would just go "that sounds great, that sounds oriental, why don't you do a jingle for an advertisement?", and he would kind of work on this thing and then we recorded it. He was like "oh I don't like it" and he'd walk off. It doesn't matter if he likes it or not, he still managed to come up with a jingle and created a musical piece that […] ticks off competencies. (Phil, staff)*

This applies to VCAL as well, for example making sure to map the outcomes from project-based learning to a range of VCAL units and competencies, so they "are getting marked off within that one project" (Nikki, staff). Showing students "how many more ticks you've done now" (Elena, staff) provides motivation for completion. On the other hand, at Senior VCAL level "the expectation is that they [students] would keep their own records" (Linda, staff) but that does not always happen.

Besides offering VET courses internally, the MA also supports students to attain a VET credential through an outside provider. MA staff have strong connections with some providers – but at times the student independently pursues an interest, which the staff then help facilitate. Support may involve helping to research available options, completion of forms, financial (helping to pay a fee), communication with the RTO staff, and simply showing an interest and offering encouragement.

The Melbourne Academy offers several VET certificates in-house and also supports students to attain a VET credential through an outside provider.

At times, an external VET course can replace attendance in the MA classroom. Students return after completing the course, which then counts as the VET requirement for their VCAL. For example, several students won a scholarship to complete a VET course in Automotive at Hand Brake Turn[19].

For Paul (student) this experience proved to be highly rewarding:

> *At Hand Brake Turn […] he's been going every day, he's been helping his other classmates actually attend everyday. He is also identified as one of the leaders. He is 16, so he's going with like 19-20 year old young men and you see him shine, amazing. (Eugene, staff)*

> *Paul has won a scholarship this semester from Hand Brake Turn to do a short course in mechanics. His supervisor spoke well of his work attitude and dependability. He has been invited to continue with diesel mechanic and given an extended scholarship to pursue his dream. (End of Year report)*

Similarly Sonia, an older student with a mild intellectual disability, was able to progress from work experience at the Grand Hyatt, to completing a Certificate 3 in Hospitality, and gaining casual work in the hospitality industry. This all developed from a visit earlier in the year that was facilitated by the corporate partnerships team at Melbourne City Mission.

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19. See: http://www.handbraketurn.org.au

I just got to take seven of our young people that are genuinely passionate about a career pathway into hospitality to the Grand Hyatt for a whole day. [...] We got fitted out in chef's whites. We met with the head chef and he spent the whole day with us and talked about his journey and how he left school at 16, found it really challenging, went into hospitality and now he's the Head Chef of the Grand Hyatt and oversees seven kitchens. [...] They're offering two work experience placements to our young people for the rest of the year. We wouldn't get to do those things if we didn't have a team of people that go out and find those opportunities for us. (Elena, staff)

Paul and Sonia are shining examples of the high impact the MA can have through the VET curriculum. Most MA students have more modest successes, for example through getting to know different vocational fields and enjoying the practical work. Mary (parent) valued the opportunities offered to gain hands-on experiences so that her son "could put that on his resume". At the other extreme, a few students were not offered the kind of vocational or work experience they had hoped for, since those opportunities turned out to be difficult to secure.

The Melbourne Academy enabled young people to achieve genuine and high quality learning outcomes in terms of improved knowledge and skills.

Learning achievements

In association with earning valuable credentials, the MA enabled young people to achieve genuine learning outcomes in terms of improved knowledge and skills. This compares to experiences at previous schools of falling behind: "when I went there I just found that it was too hard to get everything done" (Madison, student). As noted above, the workload in many conventional schools prohibits staff from giving all students the attention they need. The small class size at the Melbourne Academy (also see section 3.1) supports students to learn. In the end-of-year reports at the Melbourne Academy, staff praise many students for the high quality of their work, for example:

Lewis is always prepared to push himself beyond his comfort level. If a task outlined for him is unclear he will investigate until he has complete understanding. This analytical mind will be very valuable for his future endeavours.

Tara has done fantastically well this year with her academic progress. She has completed a number of tasks to a very high standard and has filled not one but two folders with all of her work!

Kimberley should be praised for her wonderful photography skills in our social enterprise of making charity Christmas cards this year.

In both the end-of-year reports and in interviews, staff recognise the importance of and improvement in literacy and numeracy. For many students, their oral literacy skills are better than their written literacy, and Phil (staff) argues the former can be put to good use to push their intellectual development and "higher order thinking". Project-based learning is also useful, applying key learning strands in literacy or numeracy to relevant and authentic situations:

Last term we did a big 'moving out of home' project. That was a Term 1 numeracy project about budgeting and about furnishing your house and what your weekly grocery bill would be. (Warren, staff)

Staff recognise that many students need to have the freedom to learn and achieve in their own way. For some students this is about staff understanding the impact of a specific learning or health condition. More generally, it is about students being able to engage with topics in a range of ways (such as through writing a personal reflection or creating a movie) and by being able to choose a specific topic for a particular unit. Both the MA environment and the VCAL curriculum are very flexible, which staff appreciate as it helps them tailor their teaching:

I went and took the girls on an excursion to Parliament House and to the State Library the other day because of our democracy unit, and they decided that they really would like to learn about bushrangers and Ned Kelly. […] it's not really in our syllabus to learn history but we can definitely turn that into a literacy kind of task. That's the beauty of it because I can take anything, a passion of mine or a passion of theirs, and turn it into anything and whatever it might be to meet the outcomes. (Fiona, staff)

Figure 2.1.3   Student photo and parent comment: Musical achievement

Straight Outta North Fitz, that was entered by the Fitzroy students into the short film festival. I don't think it won anything, but it's an exceeding good piece of work, a lovely piece of music, and very entertaining and well made, and they should all feel proud of that. You know, they've got that in their resume now, in their portfolio[20]. (Mary, parent)

Another staff member agrees that the flexible program enables her to "develop the curriculum around their interest" (Ella, staff). Several curriculum projects use creative arts, such as the 'Straight Outta North Fitz' rap and movie project (see Figure 2.1.3). This was driven through students' expressed interests but in terms of VCAL learning: "it has literacy. It has numeracy. It has social awareness" (Phil, staff). As explained on the Melbourne City Mission website[21]:

The class explored the history of hip hop and the concept of identity and self-expression. In addition, students researched American history with regard to racism, social segregation, and social injustice. After this research and lively class discussions, the students wrote and recorded a rap about their classroom that celebrated difference, education, the Melbourne Academy, and above all, the idea that 'knowledge is power'.

Despite good intentions and practices aimed at catering for students' interests and offering choice in terms of both what and how to study, several staff argue there is scope within the Melbourne Academy to build in more opportunities for active student input. Donna (staff) suggests occasionally decisions have been made to offer a particular course, but it "hasn't really turned out to be what any of these people want or need". As she vividly puts it: "Don't open a shop selling green jellybeans if everyone wants apples and bananas".

20. The students and their video clip were also featured on ABC news: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-12/fitzroy-rap/5807576
21. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/news-media/latest-news/news/2014/10/16/straight-outta-north-fitz!

As part of the creative photo project, some students talked about wanting more or different subjects. In addition in the survey, 38 per cent of students indicated a subject they would have liked to do was not available at the MA. Some suggestions are available at MA (such as music, photography and mathematics) or through an external VET provider (hairdressing, animal care). Other suggestions from several students, however, could well be adopted by the MA: science (especially experiments) and sport and recreation. At the level of more every day practices, Nikki would like to see more student consultation because as a result "the young people have a buy-in on everything we say and do on behalf of them".

Figure 2.1.4   Student photos: More and different subjects

 Warren recognises that establishing processes to gain student input is a challenge not only for the MA but for flexible learning programs generally:

> *I think one thing that the whole sector needs to get a bit better at, is really having that student voice present, and so I think that's one thing that I see as an area of growth at the Melbourne Academy as well, is to really get a student voice to the fore of how we do our programming and so forth. (Warren, staff)*

More than four-fifth of surveyed students agreed they were more likely to come to school at the Melbourne Academy compared to their previous school experiences.

2.1.2 Attendance and participation

Attendance

In common with other flexible learning programs (Te Riele, 2012), students at the Melbourne Academy often have a chequered attendance history. Even 'less than perfect' attendance at the MA is therefore usually an improvement compared to the students' past. Ben recalls:

I failed at [previous school] for attendance. […] Although I started a bit slow this year, I've kept it up. I've been on a perfect attendance for a while now, which is pretty good for me. It's a much more comfortable learning environment, as you can see. […] I live out near Springvale. Yes, the trip is long, but it's not that bad. (Ben, student)

This is confirmed across more students by findings from the survey. When they were asked whether they were more likely to come to school at the Melbourne Academy compared to their previous school experiences, more than four-fifth of students agreed (45 per cent strongly, and 38 per cent moderately, based on 29 students). Staff also comment on the commitment by students to attend:

His mum said that, "he loves VCAL, he actually wakes up by himself to come to VCAL", she doesn't have to be like, "come on". (Eugene, staff)

He has a perception of where he sits and he wants to maintain that so he likes the idea of coming to school to study and to better himself in an external "rock up, sit down, pay attention to the work, do it" way. (Phil, staff)

Attendance is seen as an important outcome within the Melbourne Academy (and also in education policy). Eugene (staff) comments that as a staff member he feels "you're succeeding by them coming every day and by you motivating them to come every day". As noted in section 2.1.1 above, low attendance is the main reason for students not having any completion towards their VCAL level. Attendance also is the foundation for social connectedness (also see section 2.3.1) as Donna (staff) points out: "[he] came here as quite isolated, but now feels like he's part of the group, comes every day even if he's unwell, really wants to be here".

"I have been on a perfect attendance for a while now". (student)
"Now he turns up because he wants to and that is a massive difference". (parent)

Measuring attendance, however, is complex. Average attendance rates can be meaningless due to large variation among students within a class or school in any given week – and also due to large variation in the attendance of individual students over the course of the year. Phil (staff) explains about one student: "She started off strong, she dropped off, she came back another strong attempt and now she has dropped again". This is illustrated in Figure 2.1.5. The six students whose attendance patterns are displayed here were chosen to represent male and female students, with full or part completion across the three levels of VCAL. The diagram dramatically illustrates (using hard data) the impact of the complex life experiences on MA students' attendance, so that it does not follow a linear or predictable path.

When a substantial number of students attend, this has a positive effect on the quality of the learning activities: "it's so much easier, we can have class discussions, we can go off and do things, we can create projects" (Fiona, staff). Moreover, for students there is a qualitative difference between turning up under duress or as an active choice:

[At previous school] he hated it. So he'd turn up because he knew he was supposed to, but now he turns up because he wants to and that's a massive difference. (Caroline, parent)

Female
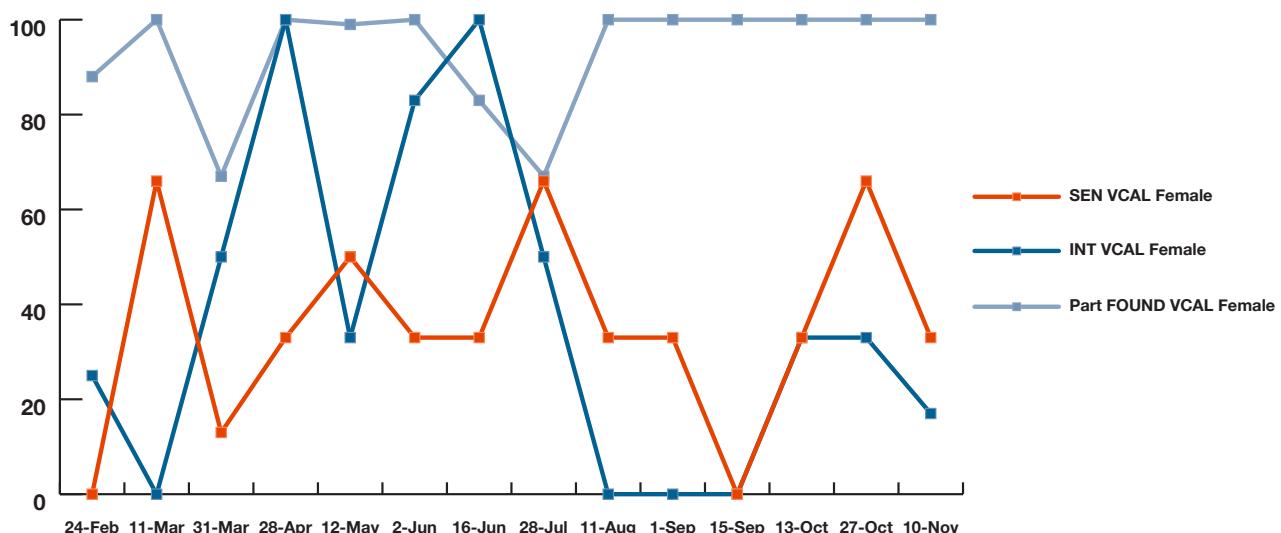
Male
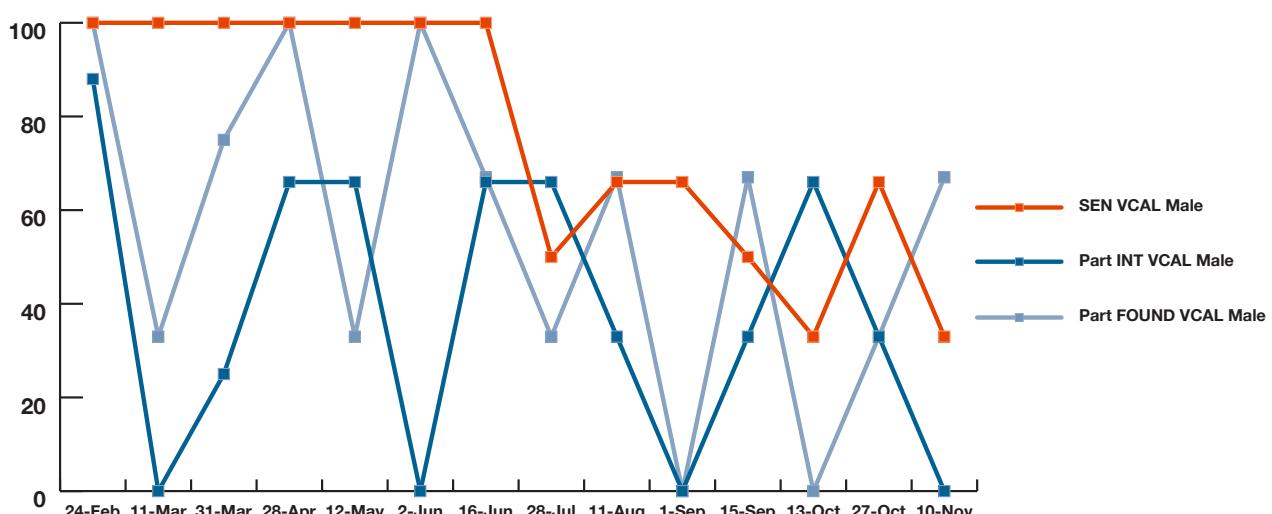
Participation

Academic achievement (both earning credentials and learning new knowledge and skills) is facilitated not simply by students attending but particularly by students actively participating in their classroom activities. From the perspective of staff the level of participation of several students was frustratingly low in the early part of the year, but on the whole improved as students developed strong relationships with staff and peers (see section 2.3.1) and became committed to the MA.

This change over the course of the year is reflected in the results from the ICAN engagement matrix (see Figure 2.1.6). Based on staff ratings (for 41 students) at two time points over the course of 2014, the proportion of students who were engaged (a rating of 3, 4 or 5) in terms of their class participation rose from 44 per cent to 76 per cent, and in terms of their satisfaction in their own work from 59 per cent to 78 per cent.

Figure 2.1.6 Change in Engagement: Class Participation and Satisfaction in Work (%, N=41)
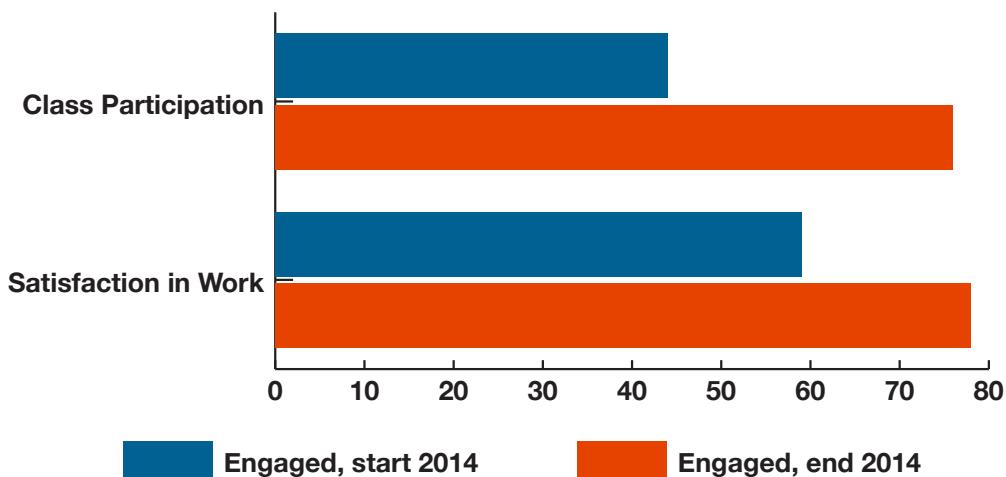
The change displayed in Figure 2.1.6 is exemplified by a student who, in the estimation of Patrick, improved from a rating of 2 (partly disengaged) to a rating of 5 (extremely engaged) in terms of class participation.

> *He's the class clown, very popular, very funny, very witty but in the first and second term really difficult to get on track. Respectful enough and not nasty or confrontational or anything like that but it was like flogging a dead horse trying to get him to do some work. […] Term 3 was a real watershed for us and he started to, with a lot of support, expand his parameters in what he could produce and gain a little bit of confidence in himself. It's probably only been this term and a little bit of late Term 3 where we can almost set him free to do independent work and he seeks your feedback on it now. (Patrick, staff)*

Compared to the more traditionally academic Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the VCAL qualifications rely on class work and assignments rather than standardised examinations. Active participation, therefore, is essential for success in VCAL. Phil (staff) argues that:

> *An exemplary VCAL student for me is someone who may not be academically gifted but every task that they are given they will attempt to understand it and give it a go and are really open to that pushing themselves beyond the pain zones. (Phil, staff)*

Students' active participation in their classroom activities improved dramatically over the course of 2014. Essays, projects, art work, class debates, songs and even completed worksheets carry with them a sense of pride in achievement, for students but also for staff.

For some students, active participation is enabled by the interest they have in the topic, whether it is through a personal connection or project-based learning. As Clinton (student) says: "learning here is fun at the same time while I'm learning. But in high school we would be bored every day". Staff also make judicious use of incentives that are genuinely desirable for a particular student:

> *He was offered a scholarship to do with recording his rap. Unfortunately, no amount of charm or networking produces lyrics which is the fundamental thing that you need to be a rapper […]. We wanted to empower him with the ability to back it up and so a lot of these wins have been in helping empower him on that journey to become a rapper. […] He's just achieved it, just last week [… because …] for the last six weeks he has demonstrated continued academic effort and perfect classroom conduct, give or take a few tantrums. (Phil, staff)*

Alongside enhanced class participation, students' satisfaction in their own work also showed considerable improvement between the start and end of 2014 (see Figure 2.1.6). Essays, projects, art work, class debates, songs and even completed worksheets carry with them a sense of pride in achievement, for students but also for staff (see Figure 2.1.7 and also Section 2.3.3):

It's done wonders for her self-esteem […] and her participation in things and her sense of pride to do with her work. She has achieved huge things which is a major part. […] it was achieving dramatic wins and those wins were really what were helping her get up and come to that school every day. (Phil, staff)

Figure 2.1.7   Student photos: pride in creative products

CASE STUDY 2

Raquel (Sunshine)

Raquel is an effervescent young woman who is highly capable and knows what she wants. Prior to starting at the Melbourne Academy, she had been out of school since Year 9 and had become a heavy drug user for the next two years. In 2013, she started in the Melbourne CBD classroom, and caught up with her learning, passing Intermediate VCAL Certificate in half a year. In 2014, she moved to the Sunshine classroom for Senior VCAL.

As a natural born leader, aged 19 and therefore a little older than most of her peers, and with previous experience of the Melbourne Academy giving her a sense of expertise, Raquel quickly established herself as something of a 'chief' in the classroom. Initially she used this to test staff but, once she decided they were genuine and trustworthy, she turned to pulling her peers into line. She again proved herself capable academically, knocking the work over when she put her mind to it. Unfortunately, external circumstances interfered, and during Term 2 *"she went well off the boil in terms of her happiness and in terms of her willingness to be there and in terms of just her general demeanour in the class"*.

Melbourne Academy staff felt that she had outgrown the program, and said to her: *"Correct me if I'm wrong here, but you're over this class aren't you?"* She agreed that *"Sometimes it really feels that way, I'm not really into it anymore"*. Nevertheless, she had invested in the MA classroom and it also provided the single stable connection in her life. Therefore, she was taken aback when staff suggested she try a traineeship with a youth organisation located in the same building. She quickly changed her mind, however:

> **Day two of being in that program she walked downstairs at lunchtime, came into the classroom and said, "Patrick, thanks for kicking me out, I really needed it. I'm loving doing what I'm doing now and I was probably the only one who couldn't see it". So she had this incredibly mature take on her own position, she was able to think about where she'd been, what she was doing and where her path was going, and she's flourishing there.**

During 2014, Raquel managed to complete a Certificate III in Medical (Office) Administration and a Certificate III in Business Administration through TAFE. She was also keen to complete Senior VCAL, so staff gave her work to take home, she came into class on her non-work days, and with an end-of-the-year push was able to graduate. Both Melbourne Academy staff and her traineeship supervisors were impressed with Raquel's commitment, professional attitude and hard work, and are confident she is well-placed to find paid employment. Raquel would like to use her qualification in Medical Office Administration to gain a job in a doctor's office and pursue more meaningful and full-time employment in 2015. Her end-of-year report from the Melbourne Academy is full of praise:

> **Raquel has proved she is reliable, punctual, hard-working and diligent; skills and attributes that mean she should be successful in the workforce. Her ability to get along with staff is testament to her growth and maturity.**

Raquel's successful transition from the Sunshine classroom to both TAFE and her workplace environments is a tribute to her own determined efforts and to the pathway planning processes provided by staff at the Melbourne Academy.

2.2 PATHWAYS

For the young people in Melbourne Academy classrooms, the pathways component of the course has great significance. This section explores the students' general motivations and aspirations, their more immediate goals, and the extent to which they have confidence in achievement of those goals. It attempts to provide a perspective on a complex picture of aspiration, achievement and outcomes, drawing on student survey data, staff and student interviews, parent interviews where appropriate and field notes developed over the past year in multiple interactions with Melbourne Academy learning settings.

In 2014, students at Melbourne Academy undertook a short survey (see section 1.4) that sought to identify students' aspirations and motivations in undertaking their VCAL course, together with their perceptions about their teaching and learning experiences. All results from this survey are presented here as percentages. Some of the questions asked explicitly for a comparison with previous experiences.

100% of the survey respondents agreed that compared with their previous school(s) "at Melbourne Academy I get more support in planning for my future".

2.2.1 Motivation and aspiration of students

For policy makers and practitioners aiming to enhance young people's access to post-school pathways, particularly study destinations, aspiration is often regarded as pivotal. Recent reports by Homel and Ryan (2014), Gemici et al. (2014) and Nguyen and Blomberg (2014) highlight the statistically significant impact of aspirations upon young people's future education and economic destinations. Sellar and Gale have identified the "capacity to imagine futures" (Sellar & Gale 2011, p.122) as an important precondition to successful engagement with pathways planning and attaining goals. The Melbourne Academy builds on a strength-based philosophy to nurture an aspirational mindset for students.

The key factors in determining young people's aspirations have recently been identified as their experiences of schooling and level of school attainment, their immediate peer groups and educational achievement and goals of those peers; their knowledge and awareness of post-school education and career opportunities; parental, family and community views on education and career; the availability of advice, support and assistance in relation to post-school transitions; and the complex constellation of conditions and circumstances that make up socioeconomic status. To this should be added factors associated with young people's immediate and unique life experiences, including direct experiences of family or social breakdown, illness, dislocation and social exclusion (Webb et al 2015).

These factors provide an important context for young people enrolled in the Melbourne Academy (see Section 1.1). Identification and acting on aspirations are not always straightforward for members of the Melbourne Academy community and this important work involves an extended and iterative process that can commence before enrolment and may well continue after the student has left the program.

In the survey, students were asked to identify what would be most important to them in a set of possible futures (see Figure 2.2.1). Because many of the propositions were seen as generally desirable, with high levels of overall endorsement, we have separated out students' strongest responses – the 'very important' category. In this set of questions students were not asked about practicalities, such as how they would achieve that future or about the likelihood of its eventuation. This is a formulation of 'aspiration' in terms of how students prioritise their imagined futures.

First, satisfying work is a dominant aspiration for almost all students, with over 85 per cent of respondents nominating "having a job that is interesting" as highest priority. Second, the desire for social connection, support and relevance is strong. Over half the students regard living in a "good community" as very important and also want to play a contributing role in that community. These are important motivators and the latter desire, in particular, is often overlooked in framing support structures for young people.

Students' preferred futures primarily involve roles as engaged and productive members of society who enjoy positive social connections and recognition both through their contribution and through links to others.

The place of family and family expectations is quite complex for this diverse group of young people, with highly variable life experiences. Family ties are nominated as highly important for some, but this is one area where a number of students specifically nominate these elements as "not important". Money and status, the hallmarks of individualist motivations, feature least strongly. Essentially their idealised futures primarily involve roles as engaged and productive members of society who enjoy positive social connections and recognition both through their "contribution" and through links to others.

Figure 2.2.1   Personal goals and priorities (%, N=29)

	Very important
Working in a job that interests me	85.7
Living in a good community	53.6
Making a contribution to society	50
Having my family around me	46.4
Meeting the expectations of my family	39.3
Making a lot of money	32.1
Having a high status career	25

Can these aspirations connect to students' present circumstances? The survey's final question asked students to nominate the relative importance of a number of reasons for "doing a VCAL program". Responses identified in Figure 2.2.2 develop a snapshot of students' own perspectives on their post-VCAL pathways.

Students need the time and space to explore what their future career would look like as well as engagement in learning that is interesting now. Trust building, development of future-focus and the generation of confidence all help to build the aspirations on which pathways can be based.

For almost all the young people undertaking the survey all reasons provided are "important". Again, however, the hierarchy of responses and the extent to which students nominate particular goals as "very important" is telling. There is clear alignment between students' desire for "working in a job that interests me" (in Figure 2.2.1) and their focus on developing a picture of what that sort of career would look like – setting up the stepping stones for that future to happen. They need the time and space to undertake that exploration. Allied to this is engagement in learning that is interesting now. Given their focus on community and contribution, it is also important to note that well over half of these students regard learning "to communicate and get on with a range of people" as very important in their VCAL program.

Figure 2.2.2 Reasons for doing a VCAL program (very important only, N=29)
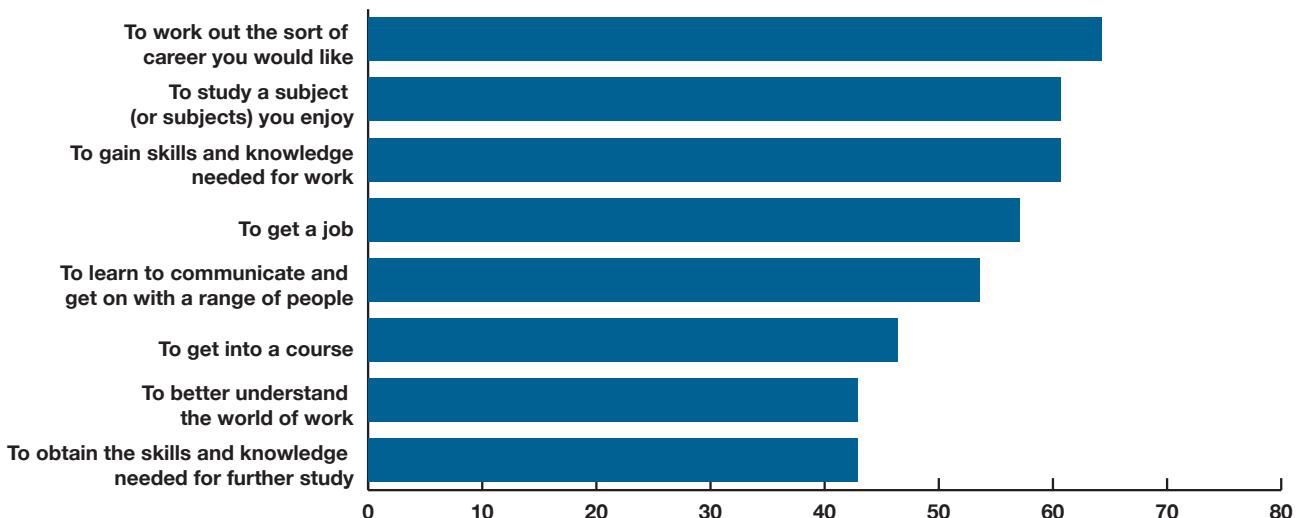
If employment is a clear goal then the skills and knowledge needed for work are also high priorities and link with the more instrumental aim "to get a job". For most learners, a most highly desired pathway at this point is into some form of employment and viable financial independence. Linking up the high-end future of the satisfying job with the reality of a present where the choice of career has yet to be 'worked out' is played out in the day-to-day experiences of students and staff at Melbourne Academy. Staff note the need to understand the complexities of aspirations and the layering of this concept – and identified a key role for the program in scaffolding 'future thinking' behaviours for young people:

> In terms of kids having more confidence in their immediate future I don't think there's a single kid in this class who could tell you what they want to be doing in three years' time, or where they envisage themselves. (Patrick, staff)

Such long-term planning is likely to be challenging for a majority of teenagers, and even for many adults, in modern Australia. For students at the MA, developing 'future thinking' relies on a space that is safe and that allows such projection to take place:

> When I came I thought "maybe it's not going to work", but it works […] they try their best to tell you "You can do this. You start with us, but you can go to uni or to other, there's a lot of different courses in Melbourne". So they give you a lot of options: "You can do this. What do you want to do? If you can't do this today, might be tomorrow, but you can do this one to try to keep yourself applied and focused, instead of staying home and getting stressed". (Kurt, student)

Parents involved in interviews were also able to attest to the importance of these time consuming and sometimes confronting processes in assisting students' maturation and growth. Sometimes the process can be protracted and involve the full team of supports associated with the young person – teachers, youth workers, parents, and others. One parent described a cathartic moment where her previously withdrawn son had moved from 'anger' to engagement:

> Part way through the discussion, when he became aware that we were all just encouraging him to make his own choices, and find out where he wanted to go, and then help him to get there, and ask him to speak up about his own choices, he actually got […] outspoken, and angry, clearly. And then in that atmosphere there, he could just be allowed to say those things, and nobody would say, "right, out the door with you", or "that's it, you're out", or anything like that […]. Then things settled down and then the meeting could continue, and I think it was important for him to have a thorough understanding of what was going on in his education. (Mary, parent)

Trust building, development of future-focus and the generation of confidence in articulating need are all important elements in building the aspirations on which pathways can be based. All (100%) of the survey respondents agreed that compared with their previous school(s) "at Melbourne Academy I get more support in planning for my future", including two-thirds agreeing strongly.

2.2.2 Specific Goals

When confronted with more immediate concerns, such as their reasons to attend Melbourne Academy, students are able to articulate responses about specific and short-term goals with some confidence. Question 1 of the survey provided a series of reasons why a student may wish to attend the Melbourne Academy, ranging from the instrumental through to the social (see Figure 2.2.3). Some of these propositions implied a comparison with other education settings (such as school) in positing a more congenial learning environment or a more amenable set of peers.

Figure 2.2.3 Reasons for choosing to attend Melbourne Academy this year (multiple responses)
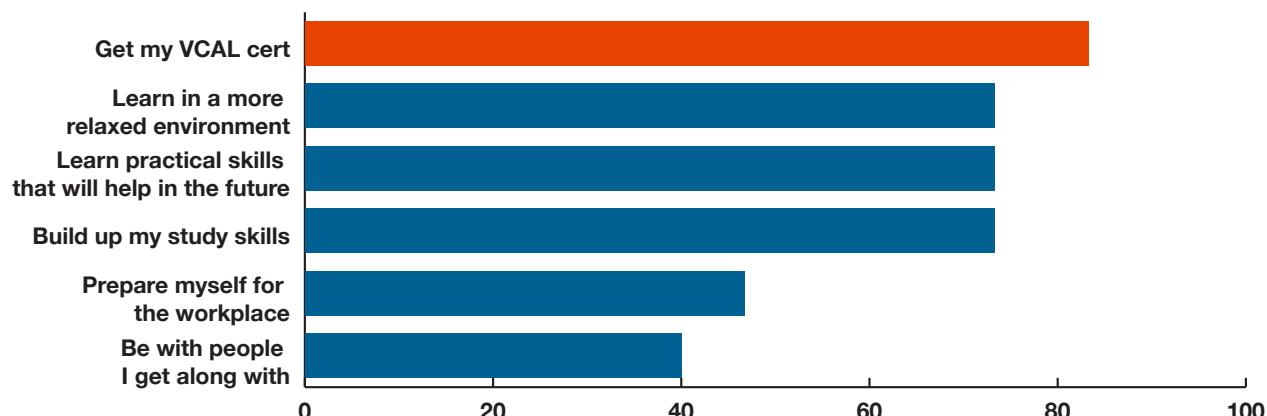
Obtaining the qualification is the primary focus for students and is indeed important as a base platform for further pathways. Then there are the skills that make further study or training possible and successful – the development of successful study strategies and the cultivation of practical skills that may be associated with successful VCAL and VET completion.

Also clear, however, is that students do not want their learning environment at the MA to be like traditional schooling. Around three-quarters agree that they want to learn in a "more relaxed setting". This desire should be seen in the context of the primary goal: get the VCAL certificate is the focus and the less formal, applied learning setting is how they hope to achieve that goal. Nearly 6 in 10 of survey respondents planned to leave the Melbourne Academy program only "when I get my VCAL Certificate". This motivation is articulated by one MA staff member:

> They've chosen to come here and they very much have a goal of finding work or moving into further training. They've come here specifically to move themselves along. (Donna, staff)

These are the aims which the majority of the young people in MA bring to the program. They are hopeful that the program can deliver outcomes for them in ways that acknowledge and respect their own specific learning needs and pathways development needs – which may not have been as well recognised in previous educational settings.

Students want to gain the VCAL certificate and the less formal, applied learning setting is how they hope to achieve that goal.

How students conceive of their post-VCAL pathways tells us a lot about how they see their future generally and how they approach their time at the Melbourne Academy. Nearly three quarters envisage their preferred immediate future beyond VCAL in terms of further training, however, in all cases these options involve a combination of study and work (see Figure 2.2.4). Nearly half of all respondents nominate part-time study at TAFE while working as their first choice.

The need of these young people for qualifications is strong and their awareness of this need is encouraged at Melbourne Academy:

> [We] are all about trying to instil a little bit of looking forward in to them, which we don't think they've ever really had. In terms of, it could be as little as three months, six months, where are we going to be in three months? That could be about developing pathways towards training, towards potential employment because virtually none of our kids have worked, except for one or two on a very part-time basis. (Patrick, staff)

Figure 2.2.4   First and Second Preferences for Pathways following VCAL program (N=29)
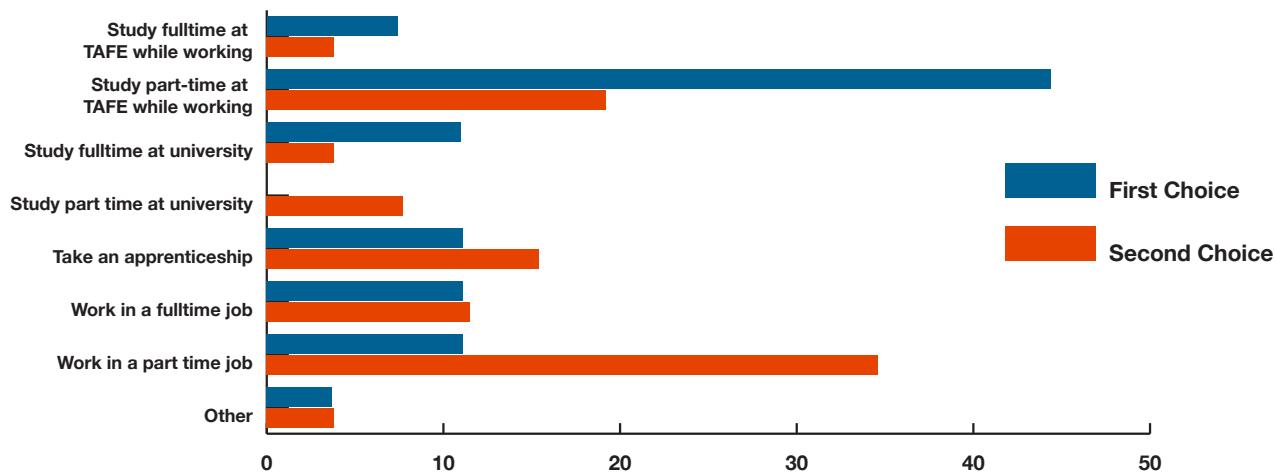
In this context parents, too, spoke of the role played by the learning settings in the modelling of strategies and explicit support for students' decision-making and choices. These included development of strategising behaviours, including the breaking of tasks into manageable elements" "he's not good at setting boundaries for himself, so if someone else can set them and he learns to live with that, then he can do it for himself" (Caroline, parent).

Students demonstrated some anomalies between their desire to achieve and perform well in their study and their actual behaviours and levels of self-belief (see Figure 2.2.5). Nearly all students agree (including three-quarters who strongly agree) that they "really want to do well in this program". Yet it is evident that for some

students their own behaviours or approaches to study will let them down: over 50 per cent, for example, volunteer that they find it difficult to get themselves "motivated to study".

Nevertheless the overall picture of motivation is strong. Students are committed to the MA and express high levels of intrinsic interest (a response that connects to findings that they do "more interesting" work at the MA). Over three-quarters express a belief that the program will help them "get what I want in life". These levels of commitment and connection are positive foundations to leverage effective work for students' pathways.

Figure 2.2.5   Motivation (%, N=29)
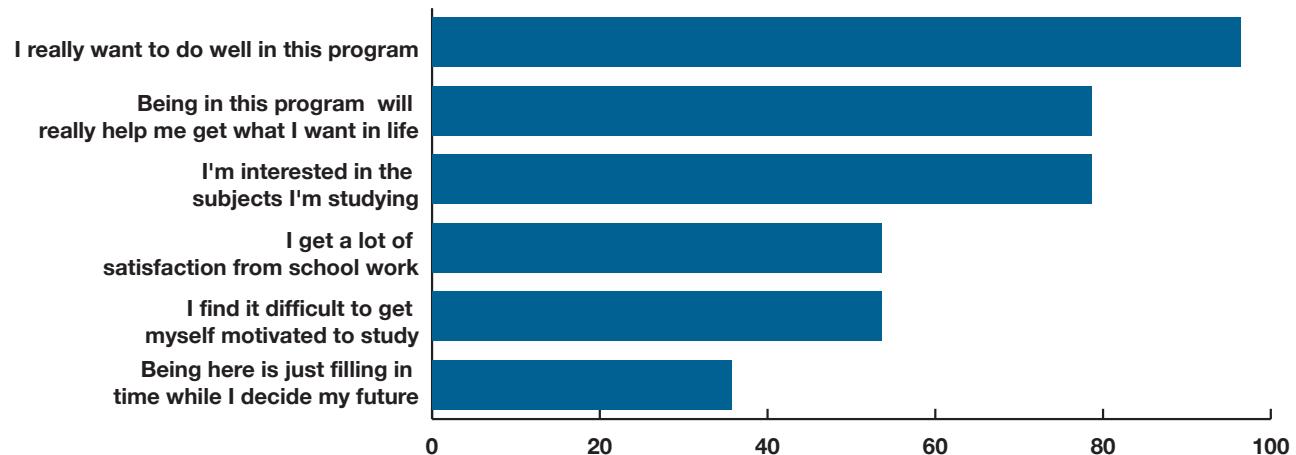
Several pedagogical and social learning approaches employed by the program are aimed at supporting and building learner confidence and resilience that reinforce motivation and pathways planning.

Flexibility at the Melbourne Academy means that students' learning programs can accommodate emerging circumstances and setbacks without compromising their study.

First is the principle of flexibility, with students' learning programs built around the learner's goals with timelines that accommodate specific circumstances. This is important in a context where young people's lives can be sometimes chaotic and challenging. Students need to know that setbacks, when they do occur, do not necessarily need to compromise their study or the program's commitment to them. Students' experiences of the approach were articulated in interviews:

> They do care [...] say if I was to take some time off, do you get what I mean, they would probably call me and say "we can work out a strategy plan for you to maybe come in a little bit less but to maybe prolong that time of the pass and everything and you'll get it done within a certain amount of time and then you'll pass" [...] they'll set out certain plans to be able to help the students, so they're not struggling in any way. (Madison, student)

> The teachers are really good and the youth workers are really good. If there's something going on you can always go and talk to them and they'll help you or find something for you. (Wade, student)

An illustration of how this is enacted in practice is seen in the case of one young man whose strong performance in his vocational area was nevertheless compromised by inadequate attendance. At the end of the year he was unable to graduate. However flexibility does mean that the pathway is still in place and he will be able to complete requirements to secure his qualification:

He's looking forward to coming back next year. He realises that he's 90 per cent completed and he regrets not stepping up in the last couple of weeks to do that but he recognises the value in it. He is looking forward to coming back and just ticking off those outcomes and being more focused with that. So something has shifted, he's on the way. (Phil, staff)

Second is the importance placed – by both students and staff – on the acknowledgment of young people as individuals and of their personal and academic strengths. When students are encouraged to develop a sense of what they are good at and how they are able to contribute personally to a group or class, they are developing a growing sense of themselves as learners and of pathways possibilities.

It should be noted that students report a strong sense that their capacities are recognised within their VCAL program: 86 per cent believed that at the MA they were able to do things they are good at. This sense of efficacy is important in strengthening motivation and future-focus. Ongoing support can also involve assisting a student in identifying a passion or interest and negotiating a pathways plan that works for the learner:

(He had been) really stressed that he had to move into VCE, and that was a huge stress for him. He felt that it was necessary to move into VCE for his pathway, but...the teacher who's here has had a really good conversation with him about the difference between VCAL and VCE and how they can pathway into things, they can both pathway into options he's interested in. So for him he's suddenly turned a corner in that he's really excited that he can stay doing VCAL and it can lead onto something to do with the law, which is what he's interested in, a legal profession. He doesn't necessarily need to do VCE and study law at uni for ten years, he's got other pathways. (Warren, staff)

Students are acknowledged as individuals and encouraged to develop a sense of what they are good at and how they are able to contribute personally to a group or class.

Some factors might hinder students in building goals and motivation. Students' connection to the program is a paramount factor in success; one of the strongest risks is learner disengagement and attendance dipping to levels where students' continuity of learning and connections to staff and peers are lost (also see section 2.1.2). Some students express disquiet about the management of the balance between flexibility and over-accommodation, feeling that they are not challenged as fully as they could be in the demands of the learning or in the behaviours expected. At one site, a student spoke of the need for stronger protocols around attendance, punctuality, behaviour and management of learning:

To just let us swear and let us smoke whenever we want it's kind of not the point of coming here. […] I mean trying to get us on time and actually do our work, because we are going to use that in the workforce and if we had got to university. You're going to need that skill of listening to someone and being there on time. (Skye, student)

The calibration between flexibility and permissiveness is often contested and it may be that learners do not always understand the extent to which their own skills in independent learning are emerging in this environment. Staff, for example, emphasise the importance of strategies in developing a "socialised" student body capable of engaging effectively in more mainstream study contexts:

Part of our job is – and it's a strength – is to prepare them for the next step. So, for me, it's things like being able to survive in, say, another tertiary classroom. For some of them it's about teaching them normal classroom behaviour, listening to the teacher, being respectful, negotiating with the group, that chalk and talk stuff just a little bit, class discussion […] as well as keeping to timelines and classroom behaviour. And also those things of punctuality and attendance and work. So it's about preparing for the next step and I think that's what it does very well. (Linda, staff)

2.2.3 Confidence for Attaining Goals

When the student survey invited students to nominate their intended post-VCAL pathways (see Figure 2.2.4), it also asked about their confidence that they would achieve their first choice. As Figure 2.2.6 shows, only around 4 in 10 expressed confidence that they would be successful in achieving their first choice. These proportions remained comparable for the most widely-subscribed choice: students who would like to combine TAFE study with working – that is, around 6 in 10 students did not have strong confidence that they would be able to access their chosen pathway.

Figure 2.2.6   Confidence of achieving first choice (%, N=29)
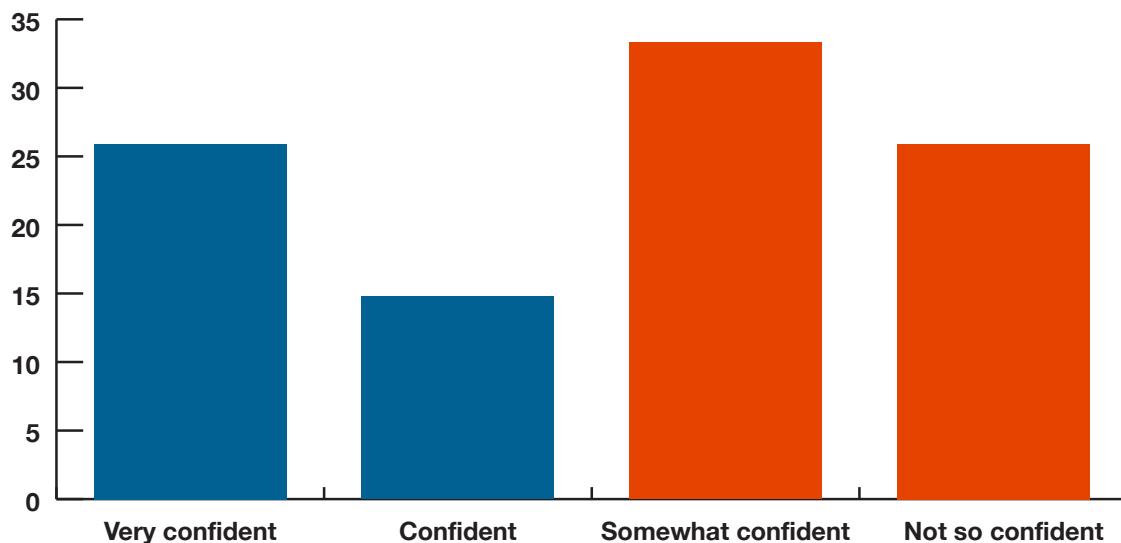
A number of factors underpin the limited confidence evident in the cohort at this point. First is the effect of past experiences, where plans or aspirations may have been dismissed, such as one student who felt that her previous school had dismissed her hopes and faith in herself, reporting that hairdressing had been described as 'too hard' for her. Others have drawn on the negative experiences of peers, setting their own aspirations against those outcomes.

Limited attendance (see Section 2.1.2) and finding it difficult to get motivated (see Figure 2.2.5) form realistic barriers to achieving pathways goals. It is not surprising that some students, in light of personal experiences and those of their peers, make a judgment that their likelihood of achieving goals in the short term may not be high. Students' responses on the "confidence" measure involve a comparatively realistic assessment of past experiences and externalities, including immediate life circumstances.

When programs are student-focussed, progress happens on diverse time frames guided by students' readiness for next stages. Staff report their alertness to optimal moments to leverage for engagement:

> *We've had a few young people like this – a couple in particular who have no idea of pathways at all and what they want to do, just have no clue, no direction and they're just treading water – and I reckon the indicators are that they're ready to move on is when they start engaging with that, "Well, what's next?" sort of thing, looking at, "Oh, I might want to do A, B and C," or, "Yeah, I think I am interested in that," or, "I really don't know, but I think this might be a good next step". […] I consider that an indicator that it's working when they're starting to engage with that sort of process as well. (Linda, staff)*

This means that progress can occur in spurts, sometimes dramatically, as in the case of a young woman who wanted to re-enter mainstream schooling to undertake VCE and then access a university pathway:

> *What she achieved in the final four weeks was a massive amount and it was really rewarding, not only for us as the educators in that space, but for her. […] Her opinions were really valued, we really used that as motivation for a lot of the class work to really push her and find her own direction. […] She was doing homework to make sure it was on time, became far more organised and I really feel that we prepared her for that massive jump she is about to make. I don't think she quite realises what she is in for but I feel that we took her from 20 per cent output to 30 per cent to 50 per cent to 70 per cent so I feel confident that she will be able to now rise to the challenge in that VCE setting. (Phil, staff)*

The emphasis on capacity and skill building – together with demonstrated outcomes – provide signals to current and future students about the program's ability to deliver for them. This is something that will strengthen with time, if outcomes continue to be generated.

Progress happens on diverse time frames guided by students' readiness and can occur in dramatic spurts, supported by staff who are alert to optimal moments to leverage for engagement.

2.2.4 Supporting pathways

So far the findings regarding pathways have focussed more on what students hope for and expect rather than what is actually achieved. There are two specific areas that are worth exploring further within the Melbourne Academy. First, some staff are concerned that there needs to be more systematic follow-up on the pathways of learners after they complete:

> *We don't really follow students after they finish with VCAL. I know last year it was encouraged to still stay in touch with them, but that's kind of it. So we don't do any research into what happened to them after they left. (Cassie, staff)*

This follow-up is important to ensure that young people are actually accessing sustainable and appropriate pathways. Importantly, the power of stories of successful transitions for informing current students' confidence and motivation also would be significant.

Second it may be that the specific and distinct nature of the MA model would benefit from an extended transition process – with enhanced connections even into the post-VCAL phase – as suggested by one parent:

Maybe there need to be special categories or extra help for them where they've got a student, they've got to a certain point, they need more help to get through, to bridge through to the next step. So it would be good to see their ability to work with students beyond senior VCAL, I think. (Mary, parent)

The volatility of context for many of the young people enrolled in MA is evident in much of the data collected over the course of 2014 – in attendance patterns, student and staff interviews – showing the day-to-day manifestation of often very challenging circumstances that undermine immediate outcomes:

This is another example that will not reflect her abilities within that class or her wins, purely through life dramas, suicide attempts, mental health, continued 'out of home' scenarios. I mean, everything that she has gone through this week, it's surprising that she is here at all. (Phil, staff)

Within that context then an important contribution has been the carving out of a place and time for some stability to occur to build social and educational learning as preconditions for next steps – whether that is into a higher level of VCAL at Melbourne Academy or a transition to further education or work.

CASE STUDY 3

Julian (North Fitzroy)

Julian is a highly intelligent young man with a wicked sense of humour. He completed Year 11 in 2012, but left his previous school soon after starting Year 12 in 2013. At his previous school, Julian struggled with learning difficulties and physical and mental health problems. He felt like his teachers did not care and did not listen. His mother suggested he had one teacher who was "*very compassionate*" but another who was "*quite dismissive and rude*". Julian also struggled to get along with peers. He became increasingly unhappy and depressed and as a result was often absent from school. Julian's mother stated that the school responded with "*punitive measures, and harsh words*". Although he was keen to complete Year 12, Julian explains he "*failed Year 12 due to lack of attendance*" and had little choice but to leave school.

In 2014, at age 19, he was enrolled in Senior VCAL at North Fitzroy. Melbourne Academy staff noted his impressive intellect and were therefore not surprised that Julian successfully attained Senior VCAL. On the other hand, his mother was convinced he would not have achieved this if he had not come to the Melbourne Academy. Even more remarkable, however, was Julian's personal transformation. His mother enthused:

> **"He's gone through the year and grown up quite nicely with more confidence. He's made a good friend at the school. I'm very pleased, because he was a very unhappy, withdrawn young man when he entered, and he's come out a lot more confident and well liked. "**

Staff helped develop Julian's communication skills by encouraging him to take part in class debates and listening to other people's viewpoints. Over time, Julian became more reflective and less 'black and white' in his opinions, to the extent of being able to acknowledge: "*no worries, I see where you're coming from*". He contributed constructively as a team member to class projects such as the creation of the *Straight Outta North Fitz* video. While Julian would have liked some more intellectually challenging curriculum, he appreciated that staff "*clearly show that they care and that there's a lot of support to get you through*". Comments on his end-of-year report sum up the difference a year at the Melbourne Academy made:

> **"Julian's renewed enthusiasm and commitment to academic success has led to him finishing an excellent body of work throughout second semester. Julian has gained a great deal of respect from his VCAL peers over the course of this year. The broad scope of his ideas and his willingness to get to the heart of any matter has led to some very educational class discussions. He has become far more tolerant of others' opinions and his input is always considered and beneficial. He has forged stronger friendships within the class and his mood had lightened. "**

Julian's experience illustrates how the Melbourne Academy can help young people to construct positive relationships with peers and enhance their social and personal wellbeing, alongside (and perhaps even as the basis for) achieving academic success.

2.3 CONNECTIONS AND WELLBEING

In this section we begin by exploring MA students' past experiences of school in order to understand how and to what extent they are 'better off'. It is important to acknowledge that staff at the Melbourne Academy sympathised with students' feelings of disconnection in their previous schools, but did not share students assignment of blame to teachers. MA staff understood, as Smyth and Hattam (2001, p.403) put it, that students' social and educational marginalisation can be "as much a struggle for the schools and teachers as it is for the young people".

Generally, students discussed poor or negative teacher-student relationships and interactions as a major difficulty with their previous school experience. This was especially true for students working through difficult life circumstances such as mental health issues and those who did not have a stable place to live. Julian articulates his experiences:

> I just had depression throughout [mainstream school] more or less […]. They're more focused on teaching you what they've been assigned to teach you, just doing work they've been assigned to do. So there's not really any sort of personal – it's basically just "That's not my job so I won't do it". […] There's a counsellor, but that doesn't work because that's too out of the way. (Julian, student)

The lack of availability of professional counsellors in conventional schools has also been noted by students in other flexible learning programs (Myconos, 2011). Another student remarked that at his previous school "the teachers weren't very compassionate to my situation" (Joseph, student). In addition to negative teacher-student relationships, a number of MA students said that they felt isolated in their previous school, either as a result of bullying or because of the ways in which schools dealt with difficult behaviours. For example, one student explained:

> I stopped going […] And when I did return back to school, they wouldn't let me in classrooms so I'd be doing one-on-one tutoring […] It was kind of boring though, because I lost all my contact with my friends, so at lunchtime I'd be on my own. (Violet, student)

Finally, some students also felt that there were many times they were ignored in their mainstream schools, made to be quiet and listen rather than being able to interact and actively contribute to learning activities. Regardless of the efforts by individual staff in conventional schools – and acknowledging the challenges faced by many schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in meeting all students' needs – these experiences were very real to young people, and impacted particularly negatively on their sense of connection and wellbeing.

"The teachers here are better. It's more about you and what you want to do, where you want to go". (student)

These experiences serve as points of comparison for current MA students, providing the backdrop that highlights the ways in which students' sense of connection and wellbeing improved at the Melbourne Academy. In the next sections, the perspectives of students, parents and staff are examined to explore students' connections within and beyond the Melbourne Academy school community (2.3.1) as well as their social and personal wellbeing (2.3.2). These so-called 'soft outcomes' are highly valued in the Melbourne Academy and in flexible learning programs generally (Myconos, 2014; Te Riele, 2014), and are vitally important for enabling the more formal outcomes and pathways discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

2.3.1 Connections

Connections within the Melbourne Academy

Students' connections within the Melbourne Academy are evidenced in a number of areas including the sense of community they have established through the relationships, support and social skills they have developed. As can be seen in Figure 2.3.1 below, most of the surveyed students (N=29) were positive about the relational element of attending the Melbourne Academy. In particular, almost all students agree that they get on better with teachers, that their family encourages them to do well, and that overall they enjoy being at the Melbourne Academy – and a substantial majority that they are with friends. Somewhat counter-intuitively, a different question in the survey revealed that only 74 per cent agree that getting on with teachers is important in schooling and only 50 per cent agree that being with friends is important. Having teachers who know their work is considered highly important by 89 per cent, and an equal proportion of the survey respondents agree the MA lives up to this.

Figure 2.3.1   Connections at the Melbourne Academy (%, N=29)
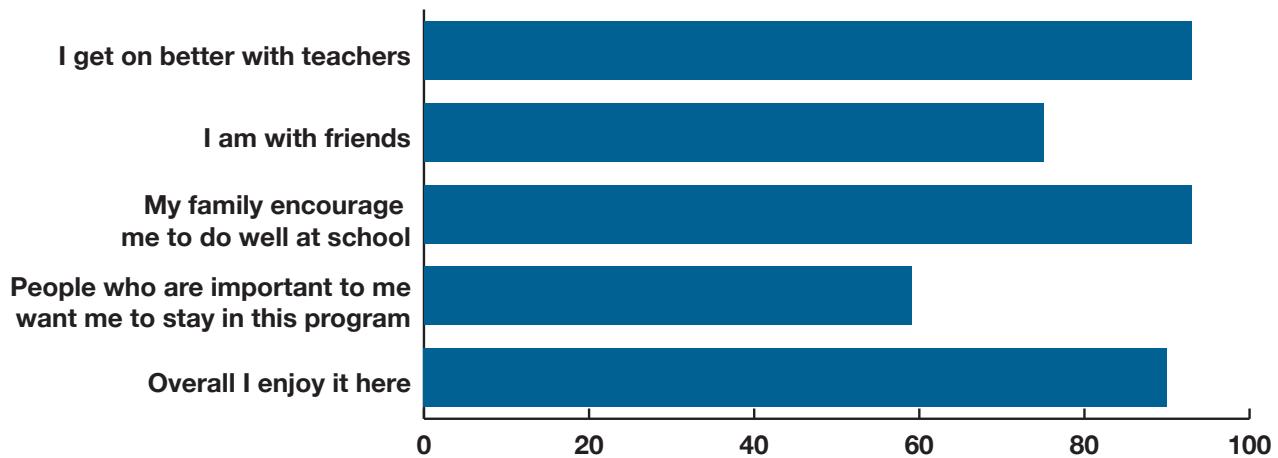
Based on this information, a key component of connection to the MA is having family, friends and other significant people supporting and encouraging the young person. At Melbourne Academy one of the major strengths – identified by staff, students and parents – is the sense of community that has formed as a result of the connections formed through relationships, support and (mostly) a lack of negative interactions.

Relationships with staff

A number of students indicated the importance of the support they received from teachers, youth workers and other staff involved at the Melbourne Academy. For example, students identified staff as being, 'understanding,' 'encouraging,' and 'really helpful' in relation to learning, but also in terms of emotional support. For example, one student said (in comparison to mainstream school): "The teachers here are better. It's more about you and what you want to do, where you want to go" (Lewis, student).

"Rather than take a kind of punitive or negative stance, [staff] just keep encouraging, and that makes a tremendous difference." (parent)

Figure 2.3.2   Student photo and image caption: staff support

Image caption:

The youth worker
understands
what you are going
through.
He is
ALWAYS POSITIVE.
(Krista, student)

In the creative project, a number of students identified that what 'works well' at MA is the 'relaxed, kicked back' environment with everyone getting along, noting that the flexibility and being able to 'take time out' was a major advantage. One student captioned one of her images as "This is the only place I come and have my opinion heard", highlighting that the settings provide a safe space for students to voice concerns and ideas.

Parents were also positive about the support that their child receives at MA, reiterating what students had said about staff being supportive but also pushing the young person to achieve:

> They relate to the students. They're leaders, and they demonstrate good behaviours, but they relate to them as – not quite equals, but you know, they don't talk down to them at all. And they're not punitive. If a student doesn't quite have full attendance or hasn't done all the expected tasks of finishing absolutely everything that they're directed to do, rather than take a kind of punitive or negative stance they just keep encouraging, and that makes a tremendous difference. (Mary, parent)

MA as a 'family'

Several students commented that the MA felt like a 'family' and provided a special kind of support. For example, one student said that a moment that really stood out for her at MA was when her mother died and her classmates and teacher all came to the funeral. Other students commented on the ways in which difficult life experiences worked to create a mutually supportive environment:

> People are easy going. It's less snobby people and more down to earth: "I've been through some horrible things, you've been through horrible things, let's try to build each other up", and we try. (Skye, student)

Staff members agreed, also using the metaphor of family to describe the MA environment. Patrick (staff) said for one student that "Melbourne Academy is like her little family" and Eugene (staff) explained that for another student, the MA "made her feel that she has a home that she can come to as a second home".

Figure 2.3.3   Video still and excerpt from students' rap lyrics: Straight Outta North Fitz[22]

Straight outta Fitzy,
A school from Melbourne City Missy!
When I'm called on, I get me day on
And now it's with a class that I can count on
You'll find a place where you're respected
If you make mistakes you just correct it
Admitted, trusted, even celebrated
If you say I'm wrong I'll just debate it
Cause with this set up – it's all about you
It's true just do what you want to do –
people gonna help you.

Peer Relationships

As Figure 2.3.1 (above) shows, 75 per cent of surveyed students agreed that at the MA they were 'with their friends'. Despite not identifying it as very important (50%) in school in general in the same survey, other data indicates that peer relations and friendships were significant to young people. Generally the students' accounts about their peers and friends were very positive, indicating that they were 'better off' because they felt accepted. For example, Cody (student) found that "kids at Melbourne Academy are really open and really kind".

Some students also felt they 'got along' with their peers better at MA, were able to make friends more easily and were no longer getting bullied. Students participating in the photo projects took a substantial number of photographs that depicted 'friendships' and their peers, highlighting the importance of peer connections as a major part of their connection to the MA.

Figure 2.3.4   Student photos: friendship

22. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/news-media/latest-news/news/2014/10/16/straight-outta-north-fitz!

In addition, results from the ICAN engagement matrix (in which staff rated student engagement at two time points) highlight that both male and female students were more engaged and connected to their peers by the end of the school year at the Melbourne Academy (see Figure 2.3.5).

Figure 2.3.5   Peer connections (Average ratings): Start and end of 2014* (N=41)
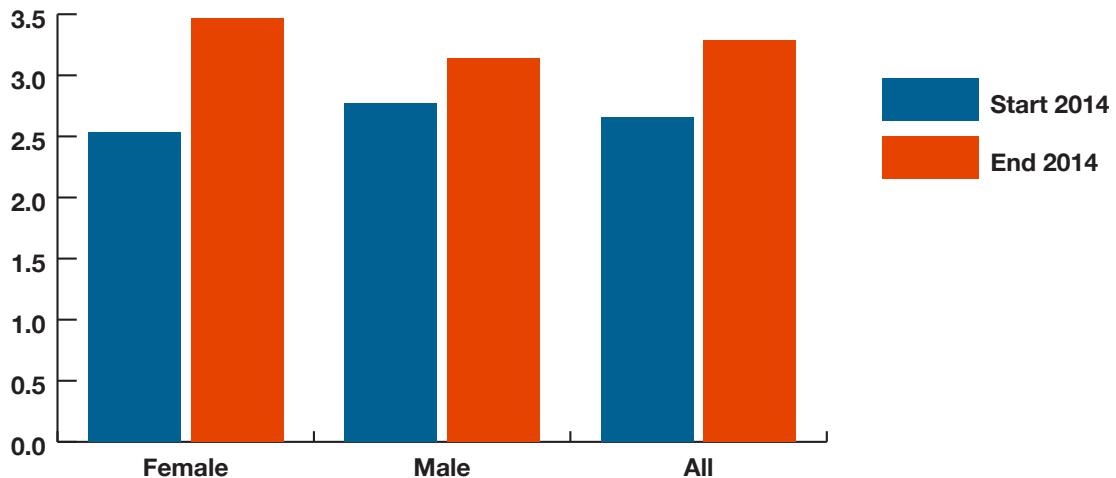
*1 = significantly disengaged, 2 = partly disengaged,

3 = moderately engaged, 4 = very engaged, 5 = extremely engaged

Finally, while the vast majority of students appear to have positive peer relationships and friendships in their MA classrooms, it is worth noting that there were students who felt 'lonely' and that they did not have friends. Staff and students were also aware of some peer tension and the potential negative influence students could have on one another. Conflict between peers occasionally required staff intervention or even working with one of the students to transfer to a different site (also see section 3.1.1).

Through their connection to the Melbourne Academy students are able to relate to and interact with each other better than when they first came to the school.

Gains in social skills

Another way in which students are 'better off' is in terms of developing improved social skills and as well as improved skills for navigating conflict when it arises. Through their connection to the MA and the supportive environment, it is clear that students are able to relate to and interact with each other better than when they first came to the school.

Another way in which students are 'better off' is in terms of developing improved social skills and being better able to navigate conflict when it arises.

Many of these changes were identified by staff reports on student behaviour, for example: "Learning how to ask and to receive support and help" (Elena, staff) and "They're able to socialise and communicate with the class group" (Nikki, staff). Other staff members also identified that a number of students improved in the area of managing conflict. Linda suggested:

There is evidence that there's a lot of improvement in the way that the young people relate to one another. We've seen improvements in the way that they manage conflict, for starters, because they used to react in a more aggressive way and now they know to talk things through and work things through. (Linda, staff)

These gains were not just reflected in the interviews with staff, but were also evident in the students' perspectives. A number of students took pictures illustrating positive skills linked to communication and interaction and spoke about their improvements in these areas. One student in particular highlighted how she had changed after coming to MA through a photo series that depicted three images on the left to represent her mainstream school experience and three images on the right to represent her MA experience. As seen in Figure 2.3.6, she felt that mainstream school was stressful and filled with negative peer relationships. In contrast, at the MA she had friends and felt more relaxed and free. She explained that she had made improvements in her responses to staff and her peers, being less reactive and not allowing potential conflicts to escalate.

Figure 2.3.6   Student photo: Comparing peer experiences at previous school and MA

Connections with the broader community

Students' connections to the broader community are fostered through a range of engagement activities, such as professional networking and experience, volunteering and the VET course in Community Service.

Students are able to pursue their interests and passions through extra-curricular opportunities organised by staff. For example, one student who was interested in music and rapping was introduced to musicians outside of MA in order to provide him with the chance to make contacts and networks in the industry. The opportunity to work with an older, more established rapper gave him valuable new experiences in a professional environment:

He and Cassie put on this hip-hop workshop at the start of this year, and they were so good. I got to work at Adobe Studio and I met so many other cool people, and engineers that helped me out, and then Eugene was helping me out as well. That was a good moment. I have a lot of good moments here. (Wade, student)

Students who expressed interest in various other arts (such as street art, filmmaking and hip hop dance) have been linked by staff to relevant community-based programs for young people. Such programs offer points of connection within the school and to the outside community, giving MA students a chance to be part of activities with other young people.

MA students occasionally have the opportunity to act as a spokesperson for the MA for external visitors and events, extending their oracy skills, confidence and connections. One student so impressed the Secretary of the Victorian Department of Education during a visit to the MA, that "two days later he just wanted to talk about [student name] some more" (Robert, staff). Students also get to interact with staff from major employers who offer their time to run mock job interviews and provide advice about the expectations businesses have, thus building students' social and cultural capital.

Across the MA classrooms, students identified activities related to the VET certificate in Community Services as being satisfying due to the social connections that were involved. Two students said that organising an International Youth Day barbeque at the Visy Cares Hub in Sunshine was one of the highlights of the year. They enjoyed passing out flyers and speaking with people in the street to advertise the event. A student from Fitzroy explained activities she was involved in:

> So I'm currently doing Community Services […] I was doing this last year and I was doing work placement with disabilities […] So teaching them to get out and use public transport and how to get to destinations, going to movies, getting there on time, get your tickets to stuff. It was pretty amazing. (Violet, student)

Students have opportunities to take part in community-based programs, leadership, or volunteering as ways of engaging as citizens in the broader community.

As noted by the staff, it is important that students gain experience in the 'real world' and engage in community so that students are able to transition into life outside of the MA: "They're actually citizens in the community" (Fiona, staff). Ensuring that MA students are involved in the community provides them with a type of 'civic education', working towards the nationally agreed goal that all young Australians should be assisted by schools to become active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008). This is also fostered by opportunities to volunteer in the community. For example, in the Maribyrnong classroom:

> .. we've engaged in going down to the local council's Biggest Morning Tea and help serve the Biggest Morning Tea for the elderly and those sorts of things. So I like getting them to do bits and pieces in the community as well. (Fiona, staff)

A parent appreciated the opportunity offered to students to gain experience "serving drinks and food and hospitality to a launch, an art launch", meeting different people and adding this to their resume "as a sort of recent customer service experience" (Mary, parent).

It is clear that such experiences and opportunities are important for young people who are often at the receiving end of the services and care. Such connections can also provide students with experience that can translate into a career pathway.

2.3.2 Wellbeing

Students' wellbeing is closely connected with their social connections within and beyond the Melbourne Academy. In this section, social and personal aspects of wellbeing are distinguished. Social wellbeing refers to the holistic support the Melbourne Academy offers for challenges faced by young people outside of school. Personal wellbeing refers to characteristics such as confidence, responsibility, happiness and flexibility.

Figure 2.3.7   Student photo with caption
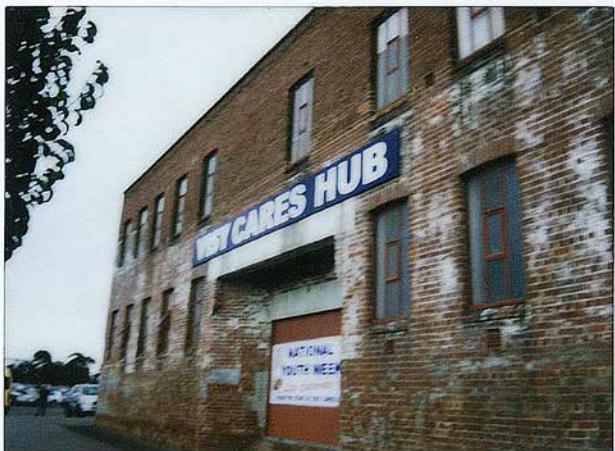
Caption:

Sharing. Support. Care.

Social Wellbeing

The Melbourne Academy caters for many young people who have substantial challenges in their lives outside of school. For example, in relation to the Maribyrnong (young mums) class Fiona (staff) explains: "Some of the girls have extensive issues and a lot of its mental health and a lot of it is ex-partner related, custody related". At Melbourne Academy, the holistic approach to students means that all aspects of their life are considered relevant to providing them with education (see also section 3 later in this report). Ben gives an example of the help he received:

> *Just earlier this year, I got cut off [from Centrelink payments] for a while and one of the workers here helped me get on to it again [...] If they didn't help me, I probably would've been stuck in that cycle because I had no money to travel, so I couldn't get to school which meant Centrelink was still cut off. It would just keep going in a loop. (Ben, student)*

In common with other flexible learning programs, central to the Melbourne Academy approach is the employment of a teacher and youth worker for each classroom. These two staff members work together for the overall benefit of students (see 3.1.2), however the role and expertise of the youth worker is of particular importance for fostering social wellbeing:

> *The youth worker is fantastic. He solves their problems for them, whether it's housing, homelessness, whatever or they get into trouble and they go to prison. [...] So they get supported and that's important. (Jane, staff)*

Support with the justice system is frequently highlighted by staff. For some young people this may occur when they are charged while they are at the MA. This involves visiting them in prison "so when they are released, it's an easy transition back to us" (Elena, staff) and supporting them through the court process while

they are on bail. Eugene (staff) mentions a young person who had an altercation with a security guard at a nightclub, explaining MA staff supported her with her "anger problem" and also "connected her with all the right lawyers and we make sure that we follow all that stuff up".

In addition, young people who have been charged with a criminal offence (especially if they have served a custodial sentence) usually face barriers in gaining enrolment in a school. This is particularly concerning if their parole requires them to be actively engaged in education. The MA is among a small number of providers that welcomes and supports these young people. Eugene (staff) refers to a young man who, with the support of the MA, ended up as "one of the only young people in the Western suburbs in the last two years to actually finish his parole clean with no relapse".

This support for students in relation to criminal justice not only enhances the social wellbeing of these individual young people, but also generates a substantial benefit to the community through financial savings and improved social cohesion. As Nikki (staff) puts it "being here also diverts some of them from some of that risk taking behaviour". In particular, for some young people this includes "staying off drugs" (Warren, staff).

For the Maribyrnong classroom, support with childcare (within the classroom or externally) and with learning parenting skills for the students (all young mothers) enhances the social wellbeing of both the students and their children. Referrals to support student wellbeing in various classrooms include to mental health services such as Headspace, housing services, Youth Connections, Youth Mentoring Assisted Pathways (YMAP), and the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS)[23].

The holistic approach to students means that all aspects of their life are considered relevant for both education and wellbeing. For many students, the opportunity to engage with education is at the heart of the Melbourne Academy being a safe place.

Overall, the Melbourne Academy provides a stable and safe place for young people regardless of the difficulties they may experience. Providing a safe haven is crucial. For one student who has been in foster care and, more recently, couch-surfing "the one constant has been the Melbourne Academy […] it's a nurturing place to be" (Elena, staff). Having a place to belong and to access services helps to meet young people's fundamental need for security and stops them from getting bored: "not have the whole day on their hands and not doing anything" (Eugene, staff). While for some students this helps to simply keep them from mischief, for others the opportunity to engage with education is at the heart of the Melbourne Academy being a safe place:

> *You see a young person go from having all these problems with being homeless and health issues and all of that, to they're so engaged in the classroom. Regardless of what's going on outside they know that this is the one place that they can come to where they don't have to worry about those problems. (Nikki, staff)*

Personal Wellbeing

A major benefit from attending the Melbourne Academy is that it supports young people to develop a healthy belief in themselves. The contrast with previous experiences can be stark, as is evident from the photo and quote in Figure 2.3.8.

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23. Data from de-identified summary Student Wellbeing Reports 2014. Youth Connections was de-funded by the federal government at the end of 2014.

Parents notice the difference: "he was a very unhappy, withdrawn young man when he entered the system, and he's come out a lot more confident and well liked" (Mary, parent). Improved confidence is built on a solid foundation of achievements, such as participation in class projects, successfully completing assessment tasks and gaining a part-time job. Phil (staff) argues: "we underestimate just how powerful those wins are for these students". A boost in self-belief can be the spark needed for gaining employment:

> He ended up going off to do his forklift driving licence and then getting some work, having a baby – and his whole confidence and demeanour had totally changed from when he first came in. (Donna, staff)

Figure 2.3.8   Student photo and staff quote: Pride
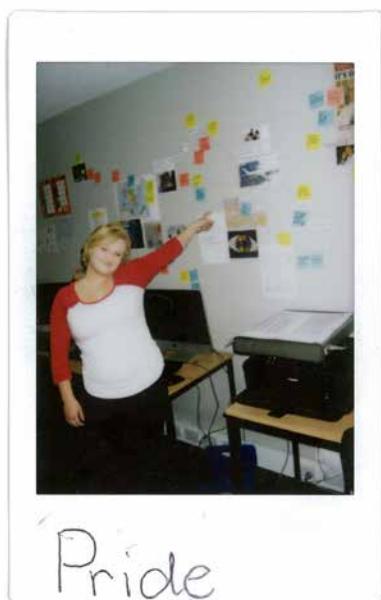
When you see them with the chest up and they're all confident it's just amazing. (Eugene, staff)

For some students, anxiety about their capacity to achieve and fear of failure are hard to dispel, despite staff belief in the student. Patrick (staff) suggests a student "is his own worst enemy in the confidence stakes" because "he doesn't seem to think that he's achieving as well as we believe he is". Students may also feel that doing VCAL is not as good as VCE:

> They get bullied by other outsiders going 'oh, you're just a VCAL student, you don't do any work', and I'm like 'you know what, you guys do a lot of work, it's just done differently'. (Fiona, staff)

On the whole, however, a dramatic increase in students' confidence is reflected in the results from the ICAN engagement matrix (see Figure 2.3.9). The proportion of young people (within the same cohort of 41 students) who are considered to be engaged in terms of their confidence rose strongly during the course of 2014: from 54 per cent to 85 per cent.

Improved confidence is built on a solid foundation of achievements, such as participation in class projects, successfully completing assessment tasks and gaining a part-time job.


Staff and parents talk of students becoming more mature and responsible. Building on their boosted confidence, students: "are taking ownership of X amount of outcomes. They're going to tick them off. They're going to succeed" (Phil, staff). Both maturity and confidence are also reflected in an enhanced ability by students to deal with feedback on their academic work. Linda refers to a student who now is "able to cope with that and not be so anxious about moving forward and learning" (Linda, staff). Phil gives another example:

> I think he's come a long way and I think that he has a real sense of self and he's also very reasonable. He thought he was graduating and I said "no, you're Intermediate, you did Foundation last year, you are Intermediate but you're going to be a 'shoe in' with Senior". He'd be like "I thought I was graduating, okay no worries. See you next year". You know, it's amazing. That's why I think he's much more able to deal with feedback. (Phil, staff)

As Figure 2.3.9 shows, these improvements are also reflected in results from the ICAN engagement matrix, with the proportion of students who were engaged in terms of their resilience rising from 41 per cent to 68 per cent during 2014.

On the other hand, some students continue to struggle with feedback, with change, and with learning how to adapt. Fiona refers to a student who has a "tendency to flip" when faced with changes, which has not improved over the year. Phil explains that for some student suggestions in relation to their work are an attack on their fragile sense of self: "They just want to know that they're right […] rather than just that small amount of adjustment".

Figure 2.3.9   Change in Engagement: Confidence, Resilience, Emotional condition (%, N=41)
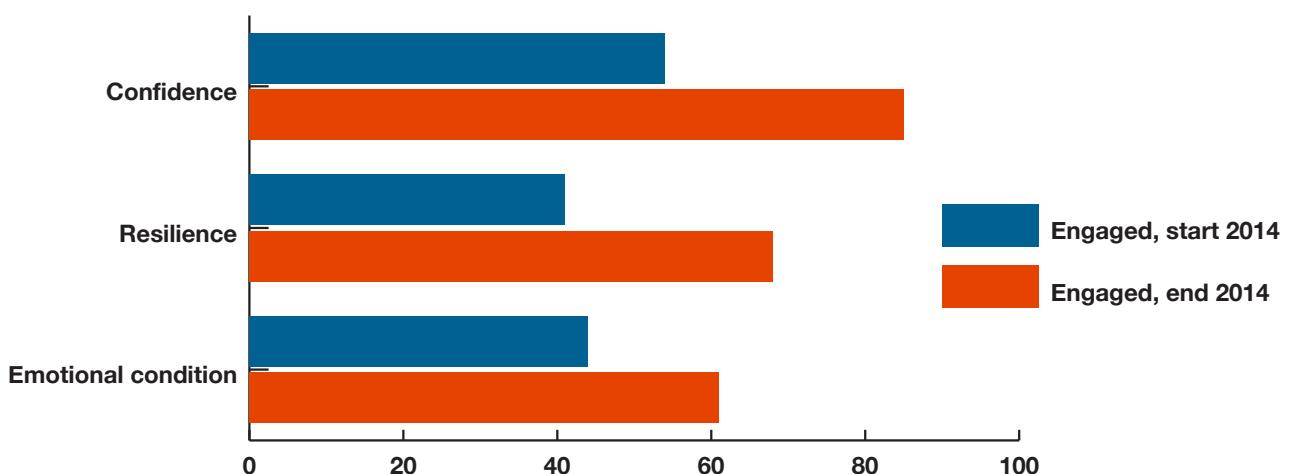
Finally, a parent points out that better personal wellbeing for her son means happiness: "He's happier. I don't know how you quantify that. But he smiles more" (Caroline, parent). Staff ratings of students on the ICAN engagement matrix demonstrate improvement in terms of students' emotional condition: the proportion of students rated as engaged increased from 44 per cent to 61 per cent during 2014.

Overall, the findings highlight significant improvement in social and personal wellbeing for many, if not all, Melbourne Academy students during 2014. Moreover, it is clear that rather than merely the icing on the cake these benefits are essential ingredients of the cake itself: supporting students being 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy in terms of their formal outcomes as well – and thereby extending benefits of the Melbourne Academy to the wider community.

CASE STUDY 4

Cody (South Melbourne)

Cody enjoys helping other people and volunteering for extracurricular service. He was an example of the kind of student who 'flies under the radar' in traditional large schools because he was quiet, and therefore he did not always get the support he needed. For Cody, these needs were mainly in relation to mental health, goal-setting and wellbeing. His mother explained that "*he couldn't deal with people at that point – or people his own age*". Cody himself said he was not able to be "*passionate about learning*" at his previous school due to what he perceived as judgmental peers, unhelpful staff and an uninspiring environment. He left his high school in 2012 and spent three months without attending school.

Cody began at the Melbourne Academy in the Melbourne CBD classroom in 2012. During 2014 he indicated that he would prefer "*a more adult learning environment*" and, although only 17 years old, the Melbourne Academy supported him to move to the classroom for young adults in South Melbourne. Cody successfully completed Intermediate VCAL, made substantial progress in the Certificate II in Community Services, and has started Senior VCAL in 2015. Cody was pleased to discover, with the help of staff, that he could continue with VCAL as a pathway to working in the legal profession, because for "*everything that I want to do I don't even need a VCE diploma, so it's just skipping all that stress altogether*".

The smaller, quieter and more mature environment at the South Melbourne site helped to reduce Cody's mental health problems and enabled him to make positive connections with peers. In his End of Year report, staff noted that "*Cody is a likable and friendly young person who gets on well with all the students in the class*". In return, Cody said that students at the Melbourne Academy were friendly and kind.

His mother believed he was able to take more personal responsibility for his learning, supported by high expectations from staff who "*demanded things of him that he knew he was capable of, but they gave him the support that was necessary to achieve it*". Cody himself also enjoyed the real life approach to mathematics, preparing him "*to live in the wide world*". In particular, the Melbourne Academy provided him with the structures he needed, as his mother argued:

> **He needs someone to sort of lead him down the path. […] I was really glad that I was told of this place because it gave him direction, it gave him a focus. He is not good at setting boundaries for himself, so if someone else can set them and he learns to live with that, then he can do it for himself.**

In addition, both Cody and his mother credit the "*small class sizes*" with the improvement in wellbeing as well as academic outcomes that Cody achieved during 2014. He also took on an advocacy role, as noted in his End of Year report: "*He has recently begun investigating how to help start an SRC [Student Representative Council] for next year and has signed the Melbourne Academy up to the Safer Schools Coalition*".

Cody commented cheerily that the name 'Melbourne Academy' sounded really fancy, and argued that in fact the school lives up to that. He said he actively spread the word about the Melbourne Academy: "*I have already mentioned it to a few people, because I love it so much*".

THE MELBOURNE ACADEMY MODEL **3**

As part of the brief from Melbourne City Mission, the research team was asked not only to gauge whether and how young people were 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy (with those findings discussed in Section 2) but also to gather information about how and how well the specific model of the Melbourne Academy was working.

The Melbourne Academy 'sticks by' students, offering long-term commitment, a warm welcome and support through crises.

Three elements of the model are prominent in our findings and discussed below. First, the use of relatively small class sizes with a teacher and youth worker in each class. This is fairly typical for flexible learning programs (see Te Riele, 2014) but unusual compared to most mainstream high schools. Second, the growth from one to six classrooms, and the dispersal of those classrooms across separate sites that are co-located with a range of other youth and community services. Third, the ways in which the Melbourne Academy 'sticks by' students, offering long-term commitment, a warm welcome and support through crises.

3.1 SMALL CLASSES

3.1.1 Class size

During 2014, the MA had a core of 98 student enrolments (see section 1.1). In addition, another dozen or so young people didn't make it onto that list, but attended briefly before withdrawing or had joined in Term 4. On the other hand, some of the students on the core list left or joined the MA throughout the year. Given these variations, estimates of class size over the year are as follows:

Sunshine	23-28		North Fitzroy	14-20
Braybrook	12-22		Melbourne CBD	14-20
Maribyrnong	3-10		South Melbourne	3-5

Each classroom of the Melbourne Academy has two staff: a teacher and a youth worker, who work together closely to support young people's learning and wellbeing (see 3.1.2 below). The student:staff ratio therefore ranges from less than 2:1 through to 14:1. This highlights that keeping classes small is a major investment for the MA. It is also a key strategy for the success of the MA.

The most important benefit of the small class size is that staff can get to know their students well. This lays the foundation for the strong staff-student relationships outlined in section 2.3.1. In turn, these relationships are recognised in research as essential for enabling successful engagement and outcomes in flexible learning

programs (Mills and McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014). Also useful is that the Melbourne academy is a multi-campus school (see 3.3.3 below) with each campus having only one class – because as a result not only are class sizes small, but the extra-mural experience is also small, reinforcing the 'family' atmosphere (see 2.3.1).

Staff explain how getting to know students better enables them to tailor their support and interactions more appropriately, using phrases such as "we had to learn" (Eugene, staff), "what we've discovered recently" (Phil, staff) and "we just stumbled across the fact" (Patrick, staff). All of this helps staff learn to "read" students (Cassie, staff) and "actually really getting an understanding of who they are" (Phil, staff). The small class size at the MA means staff can ensure that nobody 'slips through the cracks' as Patrick argues:

> It's not feeling like a small fish in a giant pond, where they get lost. That seems to be a recurring theme for a lot of young people who come through here: that they didn't feel that they were listened to at high school, that they felt like they just slipped through the cracks […]. As we all know, teachers have 35 kids in class sometimes, and the ones who don't want to do the work or the ones who find it difficult to engage aren't being engaged by the teachers because there are just too many others to deal with, so they slip away. Here, they get a bit more personalised one-on-one time. (Patrick, staff)

For students with anxiety, being in a classroom "where there's not too many people in one space" (Robert, staff) is particularly helpful. Donna (staff) talks about one student who felt bullied in a large RTO and "is terrified now of going into that kind of learning space". For him, the "small, quiet, individual kind of environment" enabled him to engage with learning and start planning for his future.

Low student-staff ratios enable staff to give each student far more individual support. As a parent, Caroline appreciates the small class size "which worked really well because they could focus and do more one-on-one". Violet (student) remembers in her previous school: "You end up having your hand up for an hour". In contrast, students in flexible learning programs frequently note, with a tone of amazement, that staff 'actually' give them the help they need (Te Riele, 2014). Jane (staff) argues:

> Class size is very important. Too many and you can't give them attention. The reason why they come to us is to improve on their literacy and numeracy and also other skills and if it's too big we can't do the job. (Jane, staff)

The most important benefit of the small class size is that staff can get to know their students well and build the strong relationships that are essential for enabling successful engagement and outcomes in flexible learning programs.

On the other hand, the small class size also has some drawbacks. Some students and staff commented that the space was too small. This was a particular issue in Sunshine, which has the largest number of students on the books. Moreover, the small groups can make it difficult for students to avoid or get away from negative peer interactions. This may be because students reinforce each other in negative ways: "when one has a drama they both have a drama and they are falling into that pattern so there is a sequence" (Phil, staff). One staff member reflected:

> They have quite intense relationships in here, which are good, but sometimes you'll hear stories that they've been doing drugs and alcohol and stuff on the weekend. And I wonder whether sometimes that increases for some kids because of their interaction, so I think that's a problem. (Linda, staff)

In one site, some older students ended up moving because they considered the other students too immature. In two of the sites, during 2014 romantic relationships and break-ups among students created friction. Although it appears that bullying does not happen often, its impact can be greater in a small group. Patrick explains how an older student with a mild intellectual disability was affected:

> *She arrived in Term 2 and from the very first morning of her very first day she was a target for a couple of boys in our class. […] she copped the brunt of a fair bit of bullying and it really affected her through that Term 2 and into Term 3. I won't go into the reasons why but I'm happy to say that early on in Term 3 those problems so to speak have been ironed out and it's given her a lot more freedom to open up, to engage, to be confident about being there in the first place. Because you could see on other mornings before it all got smoothed out that she was panicky from the moment she walked in the door […]. So she's remarked to me several times how much more comfortable she feels there, how she loves to come along. (Patrick, staff)*

As the example above shows, the small class size also makes it easier for staff to intervene quickly. This is essential for ensuring the Melbourne Academy remains a safe and positive space for all students.

3.1.2 Two staff per class: teacher and youth worker

Besides relatively low numbers of students in each class, the presence of two staff members per class further reduced the student-staff ratio at the MA. Crucially, this is not just any two staff but the combination of a teacher and youth worker. The expertise each of these professions brings enables the MA to achieve learning, pathway and wellbeing successes.

The teacher-youth worker pairs are the greatest asset for the Melbourne Academy. The contribution the Academy makes to young people being 'better off' relies heavily on the complementary expertise, commitment and sheer hard work of these staff.

All staff are enthusiastic about the benefits generated by having this professional collaboration. Elena (staff) comments that "those two roles integrate and work together" to provide genuinely holistic support to young people. Linda (staff) notes that in the past she has done team teaching, but that the complementary skills from the youth worker are more useful. As Eugene (staff) puts it, the youth worker can be a "bridge" between young people and teacher. Phil appreciates the way the youth worker sometimes reigns him in:

> *Having a youth worker in the classroom and tag teaming with that I think is invaluable. As an educator, you can have high expectations for these kids and you can focus on that because that's what you're driven by. […] But a youth worker is on top of everything that's going on, well most things that are going on in that child's life, and they can go, "look, settle down, this is what's going on in their life". You know, it's kind of a need-to-know basis and then you go, "oh thanks so much. I'll ease up on them". (Phil, staff)*

Warren (staff) points out that when students have high welfare needs, these "can be quite immediately and quickly addressed in the classroom". This was certainly Julia's experience:

> *Especially having the youth worker in the classroom. If you've got a problem you can go straight to Cassie and she's there, and she'll get you on the phone to Headspace or Centrelink, whatever you need as soon as you need it. (Julia, student)*

As a result education and learning can also remain a focus for staff and students. Warren (staff) concludes that it is powerful "to have that dual focus from two people from different professional backgrounds, but with a common goal of good outcomes for the young person".

The teacher-youth worker pairs are the greatest asset for the Melbourne Academy. The contribution the Academy makes to young people being 'better off' relies heavily on the commitment and sheer hard work of these staff. It is important to recognise that work in these settings is 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) both because dealing with young people's emotions is a daily task and because of the impact of this work on staff members' own emotional wellbeing. Patrick highlights the latter:

> *You're going to have days where you fall flat on your face and you're going to have days where you wish you didn't do things that way […]. But the best thing is just to not hang on to it. In my earlier days here, I was taking a lot of it home and it was affecting my own wellbeing, so that's a big point of it too, try to switch off. (Patrick, staff)*

Some staff argue that senior managers in Melbourne City Mission need to acknowledge more fully that the work is quite different from the usual workplaces that teachers and youth workers are prepared for during their pre-service education. They also indicate that they learnt a lot over the course of 2014, especially for those who were new to working in a flexible learning program. Therefore, it is worthwhile "for Melbourne City Mission to actually invest in their staff and make sure that they stay" (Eugene, staff). This is reinforced by Warren:

> *I think it's about making sure that you stay keenly aware of the impact that working in the sector can have on your staff. Your staff can get very rundown and turnover quite easily, and then you lose your knowledge of what the program is. So getting those support models right for the staff is really critical. (Warren, staff)*

3.1.3 Diversity and balance

Even though each group is small, there is still diversity among students in terms of their previous academic achievements, capabilities, interests, life circumstances and wellbeing. Staff appreciate sites are structured so that each classroom caters for only two levels of VCAL. It means they "can quite easily cater for that person who's a little bit more literate and a little bit more numerate" whereas if they had to work "across all three levels […] that would probably be a little bit more challenging" (Fiona, staff). One staff member suggests that maturity is also a major factor and that therefore, in addition, it would be useful to separate classes based on age: "putting a 19 year old with a 23 year old would be fine but putting a 19 year old with a 15 year old is not" (Eugene, staff).

The individually tailored approach "keeps us on our toes" (Phil, staff), but is essential for enabling both learning achievement and wellbeing. Linda (staff) explains how this works for the group of students who attend her class on any given day:

> *We have 10 to 12 on a day, but we might have five or six regulars. Now, those five or six regulars work at different paces. At any one time, out of those ten that we have that come, some of them are a third of the way through, some of them have just started, some of them are almost finished. So, we can go, "Okay, student A only needs to do a bit of literacy and numeracy, maybe they should do this project". So we can tailor things according to what they need. (Linda, staff)*

Such tailoring relies heavily on the skill of staff. Donna comments the adaptability means there needs to be a lot of improvisation, likening this to the performance by a stand-up comedian:

> It's a bit like being – I imagine – being a comedian and being heckled every time you go on stage until you're quite good and you can read the audience a bit better and have more material up your sleeve or something. (Donna, staff)

The individually tailored approach hinges on the skill and adaptability of staff – and is essential for enabling both learning achievement and improved wellbeing.

In managing diversity, finding the right balance between learning and wellbeing is not always easy. Cassie (staff) recognises that it is still early days for the Melbourne Academy (also see 3.2.1) and suggests it would be useful to "talk about things a bit more on levels of education versus welfare […] it would be good to have a bit of structure in defining those fine lines of what we are". This emphasises the importance of each teacher-youth worker pair not only physically working in the same space but also using this arrangement as an opportunity to frequently discuss their work together and seek to harmonise the youth work and education contributions.

Sometimes staff are concerned that some students may not be meeting the required standards for their VCAL level, despite working hard. Staff would like to be able to reward effort and improvement as measured against the student her/himself. The role of the youth workers means students can be validated for the work they have done, even if they have not passed VCAL. This applies especially to students who face barriers to learning in relation to disability or coming from a language background other than English. On the other hand, occasionally a student finds the work too easy and staff agree that for some students "the school was not challenging enough" (Eugene, staff). An overly comfortable approach can unintentionally sabotage the possibility for young people to achieve as well as they are capable of. Warren argues:

> One of the biggest challenges for good outcomes for young people is getting the mix right with the way the curriculum works and the way the wellbeing focus works, and finding a way to keep the pace appropriate to young people that is both supportive of the fact that they've got a whole lot of challenges, but also able to keep them moving towards their learning outcomes really well, and that's not too slow. (Warren, staff)

In the context of traditional high schools, Lamb and Rice (2008) provide evidence that students are more likely to disengage and even drop out when expectations are too low and programs not stimulating. Combining high expectations with flexible, individualised support is hard work for staff but pays off when it facilitates success for students.

3.2 MULTIPLE SITES

3.2.1 Rapid growth

The structure of small classrooms across several sites reinforces the benefit of the small class size (see 3.1.1) because staff can concentrate on getting to know and working with the specific young people in their own classroom. Elena sees this as fundamental to the Melbourne Academy:

> The fact that we've capped our classrooms and have multiple sites rather than one big school is another reason that we've been able to be so successful. […] It means that our educator and our youth worker are able to develop really strong relationships with each kid in that classroom because they don't have 100 kids that they have to get to know. (Elena, staff)

This model of six small classrooms in six different sites developed quickly between 2012 and 2014. It enables the MA to serve far more young people across a greater geographic area. Alongside this growth, all classroom staff at the start of 2014 were new to their site, although several of them had experience in other flexible learning classes and programs. There is no disagreement among staff about the need for more flexible learning programs and the particular need in the western suburbs, where three of the new programs are located. Some of the staff, however, express concern that the fast growth of the MA meant that not all necessary processes were in place, that staff frequently had to play 'catch up' and that not everyone in the team was "on the same page" (staff). Being left "in the grey area" is frustrating for some staff, although others welcome the freedom to make decisions.

Several staff also comment on a lack of resources, which was linked by some to the fast growth. One staff member explains: "there's not really like that bank of resources that you can go to a room and go, alright, I want this for my class today". Staff comment on a lack of basic resources – such as desks and chairs, stationery, sets of books, and art supplies – as well as lack of funding for excursions and to support students by providing meals.

The multi-site model exacerbated the feelings of a lack of preparedness for some staff, because those at the 'chalkface' have limited opportunities to meet with each other and with senior staff. Other staff, however, comment on the "supportive nature of the staff and the understanding from management about the job that we do". Staff get together most Fridays for planning and professional development, and senior staff visit classrooms regularly. In Term 1, this simply was not enough for some staff.

Figure 3.2.1   Time for reflection

Creative.
Capturing important moments

Over the course of year, these supports provided opportunities for all staff to air their concerns, for processes to be established, and for staff stress to reduce. Some, but not all, resource issues were also resolved, but one staff member comments that "no matter how well-resourced we are, there's always going to be a want for more things" (staff).

3.2.2   A multi-campus school

The MA is, in effect, a multi-campus school – although each campus is very small, holding a single class with their own teacher and youth worker. This model means each classroom has its own group dynamic, as well as different levels of VCAL and different VET courses that are offered (see Section 1.1). The choice of the best site for a student takes all of this into account:

> It's all really done in an interview with the youth worker and a senior worker: "Do you have a relationship with anyone else in the Melbourne Academy, who is it and what's it like?". If two kids have been in fights constantly we're not going to put them in the same class, number one. "What level is your education at?" because all our classrooms are either Foundation / Intermediate or Intermediate / Senior. So if they're at a Senior level they need to go into the classes that can deliver Senior level education. The third factor is "What's your area of interest, what are you interested in?". If you're really interested in music then you need to head up to the North Fitzroy classroom but that might be prohibitive because of where you live geographically so you might just go up there on a Wednesday which is a VET day and do the rest of your study in a Sunshine classroom. (Robert, staff)

A benefit of the dispersed model – commented on by staff, students and parents – is the possibility this creates for students transferring between sites after they have started their enrolment. Examples are given of students who prefer to move, for example because they consider another site to be more mature, because they have an interest in the VET option offered at that site, or because they have moved house. For example, Cody (student) commented: "I transferred from the Melbourne CBD classroom, because I wanted to do a more adult learning environment". In other cases, staff may encourage a student to move, to separate peers who are in conflict with each other or because they consider that a student would receive better support in another site. Although transfer between classes is possible in other flexible learning programs that have multiple classes on the same site, the benefit of the dispersed model is that the move can give a student a genuine 'fresh start'.

> I think we're really lucky that we have the classrooms to be able to provide [moving around] as well. Sometimes it's just around a bad dynamic, that it's not working. We've had some just geographical shifts. You know, someone was living in the western suburbs. All of a sudden they're living in the northern suburbs. (Elena, staff)

A benefit of the dispersed model is the possibility this creates for students transferring between sites to access a different environment or curriculum, or to get a fresh start.

3.2.3   Co-location with other services

Another characteristic of the MA is that none of the classrooms are based in traditional school buildings[24] but rather are co-located with other youth services in community settings. This extends the range of professional expertise available to support young people, at short notice and in close proximity. Examples include the Cradle to Kinder program[25], working closely with the staff in the Maribyrnong Young Mums classroom, the youth crisis accommodation co-located with the North Fitzroy classroom, and the Frontyard services[26] at the Melbourne CBD site.

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24. The SKYS classroom, which merged with the Melbourne Academy in 2015, is the exception, as it is housed in an old primary school.
25. https://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/program-detail/cradle-to-kinder
26. http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/homelessness/young-people-25-years/frontyard-youth-services

A young person from North Fitzroy explained:

> I moved out of home and I went to these people at the refuge downstairs and I told them I wanted to apply for a school. They said there's a class upstairs. (Clinton, student)

In relation to the Frontyard services at the Melbourne CBD, Nikki explains:

> Within this building are all the services that any young person could need that would help them to alleviate a lot of the issues they're going through. […] at any point in time if a young person has an issue rather than me going out and looking for an external number to call somebody and make an appointment, try and make sure the young person gets to the appointment, or go with them – I just need to go downstairs and let the Frontyard staff know that a young person has an issue in relation to health or law or whatever it is, the appointment is made for them and then the worker comes and gets them during class times. (Nikki, staff)

The immediate and easy access to welfare services also supports students' education and learning:

> I think that helps them to feel really supported in their life and be able to focus on education and not just get caught in that cycle all the time of have to leave to go on various appointments all over town. […] It also just helps with time. Because they go to a JSA[27] appointment and it's just down there, and they see the housing worker and it's just at the end of the hallway. So they have no excuse to leave their classes early. (Cassie, staff)

The Sunshine classroom is co-located with a wide range of services at the Visy Cares Hub[28]. One of these services is Youth Now, a career and transition service used by several of the Sunshine students to gain assistance with finding opportunities for further study or work. For one Sunshine student, Youth Now became even more important, when she wanted a change from the regular classroom:

> We hooked her up with a co-tenant at the Visy Cares Hub called Youth Now. […] It's not paid work but she spends all day there, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, learning admin skills, client and customer skills, on the phones, greeting people coming in, facilitating their intake, all sorts of things. They love her, they absolutely cannot speak highly enough of her. (Patrick, staff)

Melbourne Academy classrooms are co-located with other youth services in community settings. This extends the range of professional expertise available to support young people, at short notice and in close proximity.

For staff, the advantages brought by the collaboration with co-located services become especially apparent when compared to the lack of information flow that characterises some of the other interagency contact. Warren explains that:

> Often what happens, if they get referred into a program like ours, is that they'll have a case manager that's external to the program, and once they're enrolled they're just a box ticked and that's where it stops. So there's a sort of handover I suppose from wherever they've come from, to us, but there's not that transition. (Warren, staff)

Another staff member agrees, and suggests that therefore "it's good to have the staff onsite that are also working with them" (Cassie, staff) since that tends to improve the flow of communication.

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27. Job Services Australia
28. http://www.youthjunctioninc.net.au

3.3 STICKING BY PEOPLE

3.3.1 Long term

The Melbourne Academy offers a program to young people over years rather than months, especially if they progress all the way from Foundation to Senior VCAL. Provision for disadvantaged and disengaged young people, outside of regular schools, includes many programs that run for only a term or two. Some students at the MA had experience of moving from one short-term program to another. In this context, the lengthy duration of the MA offers students stability and the time needed to achieve valuable credentials. Contemplating the alternative scenario to being at the MA, Robert suggests:

> I think a lot of them wouldn't be in education. A lot of them would be in a very short term program that won't take them anywhere, that won't give them the time to heal, to progress, to pathway, to develop, to learn, to be educated. (Robert, staff)

Having time means that staff can "plant that seed and let it grow a little bit" (Patrick, staff). When students can get used to an idea before deciding to run with it, the chance that they will be successful is much improved. In an era of 'performance-based rewards' and 'key performance indicators', workers in community service organisations may feel pressure to quickly "get their outcomes for their client" (Cassie, staff). In this context, being able to be patient with young people is a distinctive advantage of the MA approach. Eugene (staff) argues: "Because maybe in three months times you'll actually engage". Referring to a specific student for whom this happened, Eugene adds: "It makes the whole struggle of it worthwhile. I feel like I've passed with him". Two more examples are worth quoting at some length:

> He would actually be the pin up boy, I would say, because he was thoroughly disengaged. He is twenty something, completely disengaged and then this year was a complete turnaround, one hundred per cent involvement, a real understanding of community, a real change of attitude, a real ability to have a pride in his self-development as a student academically. (Phil, staff)

> It's like an old football term, like when you'd give out trophies at the end of the year: he'd get the most improved by a mile. […] We were forever into Adrian about how much we believe in him, about how much potential he's got, just his sheer wit and intelligence and his vibrancy, "You could go anywhere Adrian". After telling him 100 times it's finally sinking in, he understands that we believe in him and he's willing to stretch himself a bit. (Patrick, staff)

Having time means that staff can "plant that seed and let it grow a little bit" (staff). Being able to be patient with young people is a distinctive advantage of the Melbourne Academy approach.

3.3.2 Warm welcome

As outlined in section 1.1, most young people arrive at the Melbourne Academy carrying a substantial weight of social, economic and educational disadvantages. MA staff do not dismiss these circumstances (understanding the need for support, see 2.3 and throughout this section) but neither do they allow these circumstances to be perceived as insurmountable. This makes for a refreshing change in attitude to some students, as highlighted by Cody:

> I dropped out of the school and I needed to and I wanted to look for a new school. Lots of other schools probably won't take on someone who hasn't been going for three months. So Melbourne Academy was really nice and just like "we accept you". (Cody, student)

Staff refuse to treat young people as 'problem children' and create an accepting and caring culture. This is illustrated by Phil:

> *Violet came to us with a dossier that was like an encyclopaedia justifying why she is unteachable, you know: high anxiety, self-harmer, bi-polar, it was a massive list, massive, massive list. Homeless, cut off from the entire city, a very vulnerable young woman. But an absolute delight to teach. She has been a really valued member of the class. […] We don't look at her as the problem child that we don't want to take. Like that's how she's been treated everywhere she's ever been. (Phil, staff)*

Young people are actively warmly welcomed at the Melbourne Academy, regardless of their circumstances and regardless of their formal enrolment status. Fiona recalls a Melbourne City Mission manager stating: "I'll give any kid an education if they want one". For example, the MA commenced enrolment of several students in Term 4, 2014. They were made to feel welcome in the classroom immediately, rather than waiting until all paperwork had been processed and funding was received for their enrolment. Many received a positive End of Year report, encouraging them to remain connected with the school, with comments such as "in her short time with us she has settled in well" and "we look forward to working with you in 2015". At the other end, when students are unsure whether to return to the MA, for example after completing Foundation or Intermediate VCAL or gaining a work experience opportunity, staff make it clear to them that they are "welcome in that room any time" and that "You're on the roll now, there's no reason why we can't keep you on the roll" (Patrick, staff).

Young people are actively warmly welcomed at the Melbourne Academy. Staff refuse to treat young people as 'problem children' and create an accepting and caring culture.

3.3.3 Support through crisis

The difficult life circumstances many young people face do not magically disappear when they join the Melbourne Academy. Poverty, family breakdown, housing issues, ill-health and justice matters continue to impact on their lives. For example, Phil (staff) refers to a student experiencing "life dramas, suicide attempts, mental health, continued 'out of home' scenarios" and another one who "had a personal trauma, I think it was a break up […] started smoking marijuana again. With that came a broken sleeping pattern". As outlined in 3.1.2 above, the model of having a youth worker as well as a teachers in each MA classroom is a key strategy to help young people cope with such issues.

In addition, it is noteworthy (and exceptional) that staff do not give up on young people in these situations, but rather rally around and stick by them. This is illustrated by Phil's narrative about one particular young man:

> *Vincent is a shining example of why an alternate setting is so important. If he was in a mainstream, what is going on in this student's life would one hundred per cent prevent him from success. He is an extremely intelligent and high order thinker. He is also very strong with literacy and I believe with his numeracy however he is extremely hard on himself. [..]He's a student who is very capable, highly intelligent, has obviously revered his father, but […] his father is terminally ill. This has put Vincent in an extreme tailspin. Whereas at the beginning of the year he was engaged despite himself and he got a few great wins, like through the rap. They got to see how clever a wordsmith he was and what a performer he was with his creative ideas and he really was shining. Like I got him on interviews during that time and he is just glowing, it's amazing. But then […] he became less and less, you know, his self-loathing increased. Having said that, he still had that one place out of anywhere where he could come and express himself and have Cassie to talk to and myself to talk to. […] He knows that we are supportive of whatever his headspace is and that we listen to him. I think, above all, that being listened to is an extremely valued quality of the Academy on behalf of all of these students. The fact that they are listened to, they are understood, and that we*

actively shift how we teach daily, based on all of their complex issues, is something that is very powerful in their worlds. It obviously keeps us on our toes but it's worth it in the long run. (Phil, staff)

For students such as Vincent, the Melbourne Academy provides a lifeline, not only for the wellbeing support provided through times of crisis, but also because it maintains the connection with education and learning.

When difficult life circumstances continue to impact on students' lives, staff do not give up on young people but rally around and stick by them. For these students, the Melbourne Academy provides a lifeline for both wellbeing and education.

ARE YOUNG PEOPLE BETTER OFF?

4

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the evaluation found a small number of matters for Melbourne City Mission to attend to, in response to its request for input into its commitment to continuous improvement of the Melbourne Academy. Some of these are of the nature of 'teething troubles', associated with the rapid growth of the Melbourne Academy between 2012-2014. Others reflect the complexities and issues faced more generally within the flexible learning sector. These matters include:

1. **Low attendance by some students.** This is usually due to the economic social and cultural disadvantages these young people experience. Strategies for enabling these students to attend more often are not straightforward, but could reap benefits in terms of their academic achievement as well as their connections and wellbeing.

2. **Student input.** Listening to students' suggestions for curriculum, pedagogy and wellbeing approaches at the Melbourne Academy could be incorporated more systematically. Hearing from more students, rather than the most vocal ones, could provide MA staff with valuable insights and suggestions. Moreover, offering students more opportunities to practice democratic participation matches the strength-based vision of Melbourne City Mission and helps prepare young people to fulfil their desire to contribute actively to their community.

3. **Post-MA support.** Helping students make the transition out of the MA may be as important for many young people as support while they are in the MA. There are informal strategies for staying in contact with young people and following up after they have left. Further building those processes, and including connections between graduates and students, could facilitate more successful pathways into further study, employment, and independent adult lives.

4. **Peer connections.** Most MA students feel they have more friends and get on better with peers at the Melbourne Academy. Some students, however, feel lonely and some experience conflict with peers. In the relatively small classes the impact of these experiences may be felt more keenly by young people. More explicit peer support processes (for example as leadership opportunities for more mature and 'veteran' students) may be useful. In any adolescent environment, however, it may be impossible to abolish negative peer interactions entirely.

5. **The balance between learning and wellbeing.** Establishing this is likely to be an ongoing quest, rather than something that can be ever be 'ticked off' as having been accomplished. This requires remaining vigilant about the risks of low expectations and of students becoming overly dependent on support by Melbourne Academy staff. It also emphasises the importance of teachers and youth workers frequently discussing their work together and seeking to harmonise the youth work and education contributions.

6. **Agreement on processes and vision.** As the Melbourne Academy gets further established, perhaps attracting new staff or establishing more sites, it is worth ensuring that staff are all aware of and agree on the range of processes that make any large organisation run more smoothly, and that staff are on the same page – as far as possible in a fluid environment – in terms of the vision that underpins the work of the Melbourne Academy.

7. **Valuing staff.** The contribution the Melbourne Academy makes to young people being 'better off' relies heavily on the commitment and sheer hard work of the teachers and youth workers. Investing in support for these staff – in terms of practicalities, feeling valued, and professional learning – is essential for the ongoing sustainability and success of the Melbourne Academy.

4.2 CONCLUSIONS

The answer to the question whether students are 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy is a resounding 'yes' for the vast majority of students. This applies in particular to:

- academic achievement
- attendance and participation
- aspiration and motivation
- connections with peers and community, and
- social and personal wellbeing.

Several key characteristics of the Melbourne Academy model contribute to achieving positive outcomes for students.

- Keeping classes small is a key strategy for the success of the Melbourne Academy.
- The teacher-youth worker pairs in each site are the greatest asset for the Melbourne Academy.
- Combining high expectations with flexible, individualised support is hard work for staff but pays off as it facilitates success for students.
- Co-location of MA sites with a range of other youth and community services extends the range of professional expertise available to support young people at short notice and close proximity.
- The duration of the Melbourne Academy (1-3 years: longer than many other flexible learning programs) offers students the stability and time needed to achieve valuable credentials.
- Young people are warmly welcomed at the Melbourne Academy, without exception: regardless of their circumstances and regardless of their formal enrolment status.

The final words for this report go to a parent and to a student, who sums up a sentiment expressed by many of her peers:

> *Classrooms like Melbourne Academy can offer a flexible, very supportive and very compassionate kind of environment that doesn't give up on them. (Mary, parent)*

> *I think that there should be more Melbourne Academy classes throughout Melbourne and Australia. I think that people would really benefit from it because of what it can do for people. (Madison, student)*

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