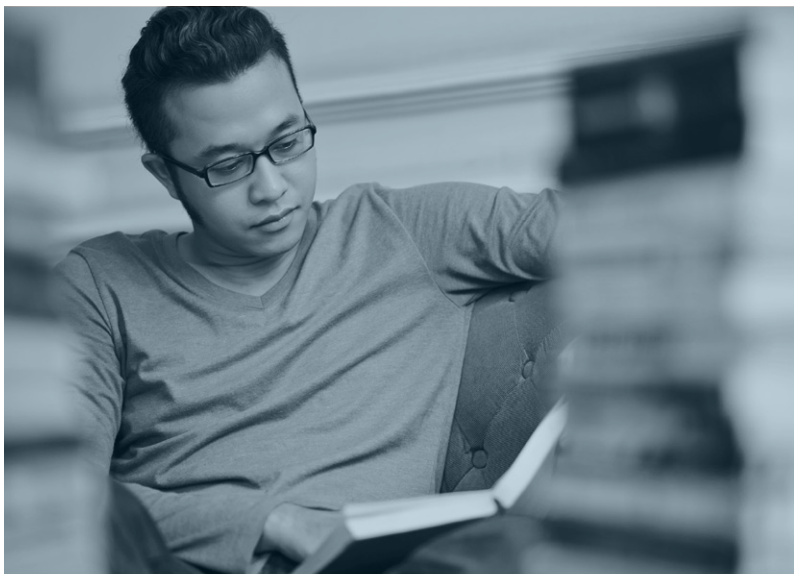


THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



Professional Learning in Flexible Learning Programs

Supporting staff to foster socially inclusive schooling

Dr Vicky Plows
Professor Kitty te Riele

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS

SUPPORTING STAFF TO FOSTER SOCIALLY
INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING

JUNE 2016

Dr Vicky Plows
Prof Kitty te Riele

Acknowledgements

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We gratefully acknowledge permission to incorporate questions about staff professional development from the Staff in Australia's Schools survey and the OECD Teacher and Learning International Survey in our own survey on FLP staff PL experiences and needs.

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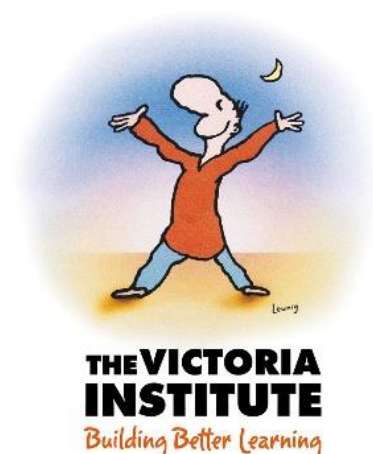
About

The Victoria Institute

The Victoria Institute is a research unit with a focus on inclusive education. We work collaboratively with a range of government departments, policy makers, philanthropic organisations and community groups to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Well placed within Victoria University, The Victoria Institute has social justice as a key focus. Our targeted research program aims to build better learning and greater participation and success for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those who are disengaged or excluded. This includes those young people enrolled in flexible learning programs and supported by the staff who are the focus of this report.

Vicky Plows is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Victoria Institute. Kitty te Riele is Professor of Alternative Education and Professorial Research Fellow in the Victoria Institute.



Contents

Figures.....	i
Abbreviations.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iv
1 INTRODUCTION.....	2
1.1 Flexible Learning Programs	2
1.2 Professional Learning	3
1.3 The Victorian Context.....	4
1.4 The Project	6
2 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS.....	12
2.1 The PL Cycle	12
2.2 Before PL.....	14
2.3 Accessing PL	19
> Online Directory of PL for FLPs (VIC)	30
2.4 Participating in PL	31
2.5 Delivering PL to others.....	48
> Models of PL in FLPs.....	52
2.6 Reflecting on PL.....	53
> The role of PL for the professional status of FLP Staff	69
3 SUPPORTING STAFF TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS	70
3.1 Summing up.....	70
3.2 Key findings and implications	72
References	76

Figures

Figure 1: Poster, Highlands LLEN Flexible Learning Forum (4 December 2014).....	2
Figure 2: Survey respondents by role.....	8
Figure 3: FLP locations of survey respondents, Victorian Local Government Authority Regions	9
Figure 4: Structure of the report, drawing on the PL Cycle	13
Figure 5: Support received to undertake PD activities in the last 12 months (%).....	20
Figure 6: Barriers to participation in PD (%)	23
Figure 7: FLP staff role and average number of days reported spent in PL over last 12 months ...	31
Figure 8: Teachers' average number of days reported spent in PL over last 12 months	32
Figure 9: FLP staff participation rates in different content areas over the last 12 months (%).....	33
Figure 10: Teachers participation rates in different content areas over the last 12 months (%)	36
Figure 11: Helpfulness of pre-service qualifications in preparing to work in FLP (%).....	38
Figure 12: Participation rates in an orientation program designed for new staff (%)	39
Figure 13: Helpfulness of induction activities when started at FLP (%).....	39
Figure 14: Types of PL activities participated in over the last 12 months (%)	40
Figure 15: Self-directed PL activities by role (%).....	41
Figure 16: Internal collaborative PL activities by role (%)	42
Figure 17: External collegial and formal PL activities by role (%)	43
Figure 18: Participation rates in selected types of PL activities over the last twelve months (%) ...	44
Figure 19: Categories of PL by level of formality	45
Figure 20: Types of PL provision accessed in the last 12 months (%).....	45
Figure 21: Content areas and number of PL providers identified.....	46
Figure 22: Providers of PL accessed of relevance to role in FLP (top ten) (%).....	47
Figure 23: Delivery of PL for colleagues in the flexible learning sector by role (%)	48
Figure 24: Delivery of PL to staff from conventional education settings by role (%).....	51
Figure 25: Improved capability due to PL activities in specific content areas (%)	53
Figure 26: Perceived helpfulness of different types of PL for role in FLP (%)	56
Figure 27: Areas that 50% or more of FLP staff reported a need for more PL in (%).....	62
Figure 28: FLP staff role and highest areas of perceived further need (%).....	63
Figure 29: Teachers' highest areas of perceived need (%)	63
Figure 30: Findings summary according to the PL cycle	71

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIP	Annual Implementation Plan
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (changed to DET in 2015)
DET	Department of Education and Training, Victoria
FLP	Flexible Learning Program
FLV	Flexible Learning Victoria
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Professional Development
PL	Professional Learning
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SiAS	Staff in Australia's Schools Survey
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TALIS	The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey
VALA	Victorian Applied Learning Association
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCAL	Victorian Certificate in Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VIT	Victorian Institute of Teaching

Executive Summary

Background

High quality staff are the greatest asset of Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) (Te Riele, 2014; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014), central to their students' educational experiences and outcomes. FLPs are characterised by a shared vision of offering inclusive educational pathways for young people who, for varied reasons, are disengaged from or have sought alternatives to traditional schooling models (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2007, 2014; Thomson, 2014). They require educators to work differently from common approaches adopted in many mainstream settings, and taught in many pre-service qualifications (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Te Riele, 2014) highlighting the need for relevant in-service learning opportunities.

Professional learning (PL) is a major lever for enhancing staff quality in schools and assisting staff to become more successful in their work with students (AITSL, 2012; Cole 2012; Desimone, 2009; Timperley, 2011a). At the end of 2014, participants in a forum for staff working in flexible learning settings were asked: "Do you feel there is enough PD [Professional Development] focused on flexible learning?". Without exception, the participants responded 'no'. This mirrors comments we have heard across many FLPs around Australia over many years. Yet, very little research exists into their PL experience. Listening to FLP staff, and taking their concerns seriously, was the impetus for the project this report addresses.

The project

The research, conducted during 2015, aimed to develop an understanding of the PL opportunities, experiences and needs of staff in FLPs in Victoria in order to better support the PL of staff in FLPs as well as to advance an understanding of PL for socially inclusive schooling more broadly.

Supported by the Victoria University Central Research Grant Scheme and industry partners: Melbourne City Mission, St Kilda Youth Services, SEDA, Oakwood School and Victorian Applied Learning Association, the VU researchers sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What professional learning opportunities exist in Victoria to support staff in FLPs to work in socially inclusive ways?
2. How well are these professional learning opportunities working?
3. How can this professional learning provision be enhanced?
4. How do the professional learning experiences of staff in FLPs compare to the experiences of teachers in conventional secondary schools?

The research included three data collection elements: internet search, online staff survey with 103 respondents, and 14 individual staff interviews, as well as ongoing consultation with our industry partners.

In addition to this report, the project led to the development of an **online directory of professional learning for staff in FLPs**. This can be accessed at: <http://www.vala.asn.au/professional-learning/index.htm>

Key findings

The major findings from this research are that FLP staff in our survey and interviews:

- were highly committed to undertaking PL,
- acted on this commitment by participating in a wide variety of PL activities,
- identified PL as having beneficial impacts on their practice and for their students.

PL is a multifaceted and ongoing process defined here as ranging across levels of formality, sharing situated and social elements, and aimed at supporting staff to better carry out their core roles (Desimone, 2009). Whilst the process of PL is likely to feel more like an ever evolving spiral than like a neat cycle, the concept of the PL cycle offers a helpful means to structure key findings about the PL experiences of staff in FLPs:

Before PL

- Often PL needs are identified by FLP staff themselves, usually in collaboration with colleagues and/or students.
- Some PL needs are externally mandated and staff may take part for compliance reasons.
- FLP staff usually choose to undertake PL, e.g. due to: wanting to develop specific skills sets, a passion for a particular topic, a desire to find practical resources for their work, or, meeting their own self-care and emotional needs.

Accessing PL

- FLP staff generally felt very supported within their FLP, both with everyday learning and for accessing PL opportunities.
- Specific useful supports for accessing PL include: 'filters' for finding out about relevant PL, scheduled time for PL, and a culture that fosters and encourages PL.
- Barriers to accessing PL include: feeling time-poor and stretched, the cost of PL and of replacement staff, difficulty in getting appropriate replacement staff, and emotional concern about having to leave their students in order to undertake PL.

Participating in PL

- Participation in PL is high in a diverse range of content areas and types of PL.
- FLP teachers report spending more days per year on PL than teachers in conventional secondary schools.
- The highest participation is in topics related to wellbeing and student diversity.
- Orientation or induction PL is common across FLPs and highly valued.
- Participation is high across external, internal and self-directed forms of PL provision.
- FLP staff also provide PL to others, internally as well as externally.

Reflecting on PL

- FLP staff are positive about the value of much of the PL they have undertaken in terms of its impact on their thinking, practice, wellbeing, and on their students.
- A portfolio of diverse PL experiences is required to match individual and sector wide needs.
- Three inter-connected aspects of the PL experience are highly valued: ongoing internal expertise and collegiality, collaboration and cross-fertilisation across FLPs, specific, relevant and practical external resources.
- FLP staff report high levels of ongoing PL needs in many topic areas.

Implications

There are three key messages from this research. Firstly, FLP staff have a strong commitment to and enthusiasm for PL but some barriers to access remain. Secondly, a wide variety of PL opportunities needs to be on offer, in order to enable staff in FLPs to support their students and to maintain their own wellbeing. Thirdly, PL has a potentially crucial role to play in raising the professional status of staff in FLPs and in addressing sustainability issues within the sector.

The research leads to the following implications:

1. Realising the commitment to PL of both individual staff and FLP organisations requires collaboration among the FLP sector, government and other funding agencies, to access and leverage existing supports and remove barriers to PL participation.
2. PL providers can enhance access by offering PL in online or blended modes on suitable topics, e.g. in relation to compliance and regulations, as well as access to curriculum resources that can be adapted for a specific setting.
3. Development of 'centres of expertise' led by well-established FLPs and experienced FLP staff to recognise the wealth of professional knowledge within the FLP sector and to more systematically extend inter-FLP collaborations and sharing of PL opportunities, especially with staff in newer, smaller or isolated FLPs, as well as with conventional schools and pre-service Teacher Education.
4. Development of more systematic approaches to sector-wide networking, for example through VALA¹, FLV² and sector conferences³, to support PL of staff across the FLP sector.
5. The Online Directory of PL developed through this project can fill a gap by offering easy access to information about relevant PL options, see: <http://www.vala.asn.au/professional-learning/index.htm> - if it proves useful, it should be resourced and updated to maintain its currency.
6. A comprehensive portfolio of PL experiences needs to be on offer to meet diverse individual and sector wide need, and staff new to the sector need support to navigate this diverse landscape.
7. More, as well as more helpful, PL opportunities are needed in relation to supporting the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
8. FLPs and PL providers should attend to staff needs for PL in relation to self-care and wellbeing.
9. It would be worth for FLP leadership to ensure access to relevant collegial, within-FLP PL opportunities is inclusive of all staff roles.
10. FLPs could identify certain within-FLP PL opportunities that could be shared with newer, smaller or more isolated FLPs in order to build capacity across the sector.
11. Future research is needed on the PL of staff in FLPs, particularly in the areas of:
 - ways of assessing and evaluating the impact of various PL activities,
 - internal models of PL to better understand whether and how they work, and consider their transferability,
 - experiences of 'leaders for learning' within the FLP sector,
 - the relationship between PL and FLP staff career development and paths.

¹ <http://www.vala.asn.au>

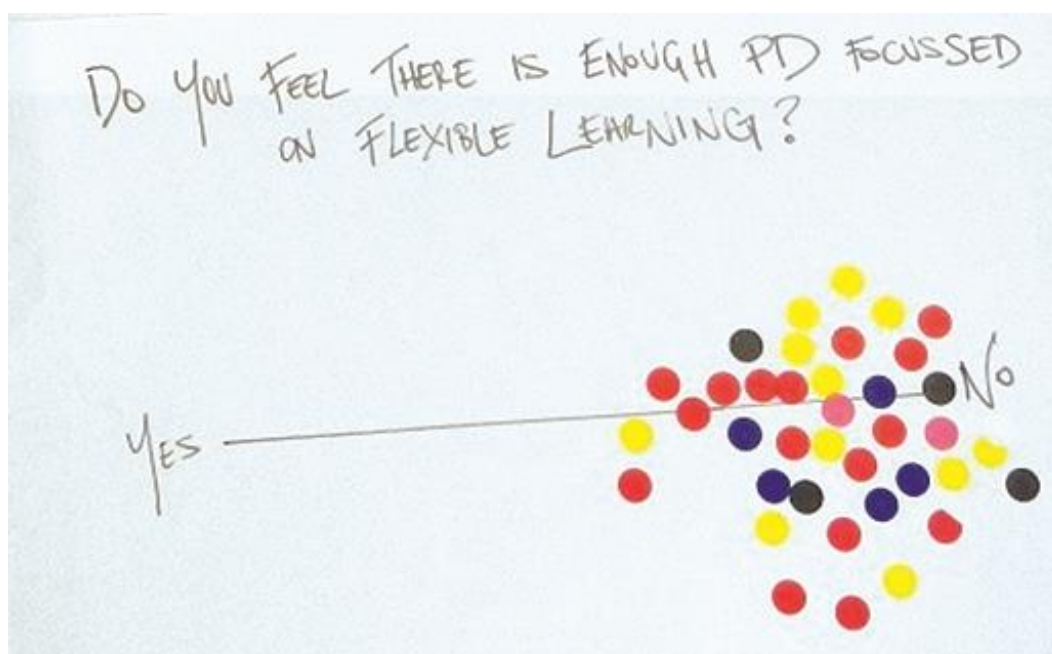
² <http://www.bgkllen.org.au/initiatives-2/flexible-learning-victoria-flv/>

³ E.g. <http://www.dsd16.org.au>

1 INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2014, participants in a forum for staff working in flexible learning settings were asked: “Do you feel there is enough PD [Professional Development] focused on flexible learning?”. Without exception, the answers (through placing a coloured dot) were clustered around “no”, see Figure 1:

Figure 1: Poster, Highlands LLEN Flexible Learning Forum (4 December 2014)



This mirrors comments we have heard across many Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) around Australia over many years. Staff often feel that they need in-service learning opportunities because their pre-service education did not prepare them enough for the specific context of working in an FLP. Unfortunately, however, at times formal professional development options do not suit these contexts either.

Listening to FLP staff, and taking their concerns seriously, was the impetus for the project this report addresses. Moreover, FLPs share a commitment to social inclusion by catering for disadvantaged students. The project team wanted to explore how professional learning may be leveraged to assist fulfilling this commitment.

1.1 Flexible Learning Programs

Almost one in five young Australians leaves school before the end of Year 12 (ABS, 2015). The recent report by Lamb et al. (2015, p.46) demonstrates that “annual cohorts of over 80,000 young Australians are entering transition to adulthood without having completed school”, with Indigenous, male and low-SES youth over-represented. In other words, early school leavers in Australia are disproportionately drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds. Socially inclusive schooling that supports the learning of these young people is of great social and economic benefit, not just to the individuals, but to all of society.

The Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) that are the focus of this project play a vital role in helping to achieve that target, as they offer pathways to successful educational opportunities specifically for young people experiencing barriers to school completion due to social and economic disadvantage. FLPs provide accredited education aimed at re-engaging disadvantaged young people with educational opportunities that enable them to gain secondary school credentials. Such programs often operate under the umbrella of non-government and charitable organisations.

More than 900 FLPs educate more than 70,000 young people in Australia (Te Riele, 2014). They are characterised by a shared vision of offering inclusive educational pathways for young people who, for varied reasons, are disengaged by mainstream schooling (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2007, 2014; Thomson, 2014). Without those programs, these young people would be unlikely to complete school, leading to substantial individual and societal cost, due to reduced earnings and productivity; increased unemployment, health, crime and welfare costs; and diminished social cohesion (Belfield, 2008; Deloitte Access Economics, 2008; McLachlan et al., 2013; OECD, 2012).

High quality educators are the greatest asset of these FLPs. Their commitment to socially inclusive educational practice is critical to the engagement and success of students. FLPs require educators to work differently to traditional approaches adopted in many mainstream settings, and taught in many pre-service qualifications (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Te Riele, 2014). Socially inclusive innovations challenge existing knowledge and routines of education professionals and their communities. As Slee (2011) notes, inclusive education requires a radical re-framing of the field, re-righting of language and re-visioning of the purposes of education. This is hard work, requiring a profound approach to staff professional learning.

1.2 Professional Learning

Professional learning (PL) is a major lever for enhancing staff quality in schools and in assisting staff to become more successful in their work with students (AITSL, 2012; Cole 2012; Desimone, 2009; Timperley, 2011a). Staff quality is widely accepted as central to students' educational experiences and outcomes (Hattie, 2009). This is particularly important for students facing personal or social adversity, with education a key to improving life circumstances (McLachlan et al., 2013; OECD, 2012). PL is defined as ranging across levels of formality, sharing situated and social elements, and aimed at supporting staff to better carry out their core roles (Desimone, 2009).

Research on effective PL suggests it should be: primarily school-based and school managed; collaborative and participatory; sustained over time; coherent with site / organisation vision; offer relevant content knowledge; and promote critical reflection on how learning is applied to practice and impacts on student outcomes (Cole, 2012; Desimone, 2009; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Howard, 2009; Mayer & Lloyd, 2011; Sangster et al., 2013; Timperley et al., 2007; Timperley, 2011a). This approach is reflected in the recent *Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and Schools Leaders* (AITSL, 2012, p.4):

Professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused, and when it supports teachers to reflect on, question and consciously improve their practice.

Access to PL opportunities for staff in FLPs is essential to maintain and develop a quality education workforce (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014). With indications the sector is growing (Te Riele, 2014) it is also vital that educators new to FLPs are inducted into its practice and philosophy (Morgan et al., 2014; Myconos, 2013).

A defining characteristic of FLPs is that they tend to have multidisciplinary staff teams. Educators in these settings who work directly to support young people's learning usually include teachers and youth workers, and may also include social workers, counsellors, teacher aides and Indigenous education workers. This inter-professional approach is a key strategy for supporting positive student outcomes (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014) but requires support for learning and collaboration across professional boundaries (Morgan et al., 2014).

FLPs are recognised as playing crucial roles as 'incubators of innovation' (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014) with more freedom to develop new and creative educational practices. However, the relatively fragmented and diverse nature of the FLP sector means staff may be isolated or lack relevant PL opportunities (Te Riele, 2014). While international research on the practices and outcomes of FLPs grows (Aron, 2006; Brooking & Gardiner, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Mills & McGregor, 2014), only limited research exists on PL for staff in these settings (see Hardy, 2012; Morgan et al., 2013, 2014).

Teacher learning for inclusive educational practice, equity and social justice is under-theorised (Kose & Lim, 2011; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013) with student difference and diversity often presented as a catalogue of deficits, causes and treatments (Allan, 2008). Instead, PL in this context needs to be infused with a broader social justice agenda, to address the multiple, fluid and intersecting dimensions of educational exclusion (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Studying the PL of staff in FLPs, who specifically cater to young people who have experienced educational marginalisation, offers opportunities to do this.

1.3 The Victorian Context

In 2009 all governments in Australia signed up to the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (CoAG, 2009) aimed at raising the proportion of young people completing Year 12 (or equivalent) from 83.5% in 2009 to 90% by 2015. As part of the agreement, the *Education and Training Reform Amendment (School Age) Bill 2009* in Victoria increased the minimum school leaving age to 17. Since 1 January 2010, all Victorian students must complete Year 10. After Year 10 and until the age of 17 students must be enrolled in school or training, or be employed, or a combination of those, for at least 25 hours per week.

In Victoria, 76.7% of 19 year olds have completed Year 12 or equivalent (Lamb et al., 2015). Although this is slightly higher than the national average (74%), it nevertheless indicates that a large number of Victorian teenagers are not completing school. The Victorian Government (2015, p. 21) reports that, "[e]ach year, approximately 10,000 young people in Years 9-11 leave their school and do not go on to any other Victorian education or training provider". This is of concern because a young person's future life opportunities are heavily influenced by participation in education. Those young people who do not complete school tend to be significantly more disadvantaged later in life (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012; Lamb et al., 2015; McLachlan et al., 2013).

Alternative pathways for school completion have been available in Victoria for many decades, for example in Community Schools, and through Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres. As economic and policy pressures to stay in school increased from the 1990s onwards, more flexible learning programs were established (Te Riele, 2007). In this context, the Victorian Government commissioned KPMG (2009, p.1) to develop a coherent framework for “education provision for children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school”. KPMG (2009, p.2) notes a “lack of a systems approach”, suggesting a widespread perception that the education of these young people is the “primary domain of alternative education providers, with a view that schools continue to lack the flexibility and capacity to respond to those children and young people at high risk of disengagement”. Of particular interest for this report, KPMG (2009, p.28) points to skilled staff as a key systemic success factor and, therefore, to the important role of professional learning:

A critical success factor of quality and effective education provision for children and young people at risk of disengaging or already disengaged, relates to skilled staff who not only have the expertise, but also the experience, patience and persistence to work with children and young people at risk of disengaging, or disengaged from school. Teachers and student support officers, primary welfare officers and others (including artisans) supporting this group of children and young people require a range of specialist skills, which at times may include counselling, mentoring, participation in case management teams, and liaising with community services and families. Underlying this is the need for ongoing professional development opportunities, which are embedded into school structures and processes. This includes both formal and accredited training, as well as the capacity to gain and share specialist knowledge from others working with this group of children and young people.

The KPMG report continues to be accessible through the website of the Victorian Department of Education, through the breadcrumb trail “Student Participation > Support for Disengaged and at Risk Students > Re-engagement programs” (DET Victoria, 2014). A string of policies and papers have been released since then, some specifically about (re-) engagement, others more generally in relation to educational inclusion and disadvantage. Most recently, the Victorian Government has engaged in consultation and policy development under the heading of the ‘Education State’, aimed at “building an education system that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage” (DET Victoria, 2015a). The Education State approach is sweeping, across all levels and aspects of education, with the consultation phase involving almost 500 participants in 51 sessions as well as local forums, and written and online submissions. Despite this breadth, the ‘Framework for Improving Student Outcomes’ (DET Victoria, 2015b, p.12) developed in response to the consultation is readily applicable to the specific context of Flexible Learning Programs. Much of it also is directly relevant to staff professional learning in FLPs, as demonstrated in four of the six ‘evidence-based initiatives’ in the Framework (emphasis added):

Building practice excellence: *Teachers, principals, and schools will work together to exchange knowledge and ideas, develop and strengthen teaching and assessment approaches, build a culture of collaboration, master the use of learning interventions and student data, and enhance feedback to students and staff.*

Building leadership teams: Schools will strengthen their succession planning, *develop the capabilities of their leadership teams in using evidence and proven coaching and feedback methods*, build a culture that is focused on improvement, and *strengthen the induction of new teachers* into the professional learning culture of their school.

Setting expectations and promoting inclusion: Schools will work across their communities to implement a shared approach to supporting the health, wellbeing, inclusion and engagement of all students, including setting behaviour expectations, *building teachers' understandings* of positive classroom behaviour and engagement practices and ensuring students have the tools and skills to develop positive and self-regulating behaviours.

Building communities: *Schools will strengthen their capacity* to build relationships within the broader community by partnering with the community sector and providers (for example, through the GPs in schools initiative), make strategic use of existing community resources and capabilities, and increase the services delivered 'inside the school gate'.

In addition, the report highlights the need for professional support for current principals and “to equip the next generation of principals with the knowledge and skills they need to take on leadership roles with confidence” (p.13), for time for teachers to “share great practice through on-the-job training” (p.14), and for support for teachers to “hone their skills and become more expert in their practice” (p.14). Finally, the ‘Navigator’ initiative to support disengaged young people back into education and ‘Lookout’ centres to support the education of school students in Out Of Home Care are evidence of the DET’s commitment to reducing educational disadvantage among the very groups of young people FLPs tend to work with.

The current policy context in Victoria thus offers fertile ground for professional learning for socially inclusive schooling in FLPs.

1.4 The Project

This report is based on a collaborative industry project, funded by the Victoria University Central Research Grants Scheme with additional funding and support from five industry partners: SEDA, Melbourne City Mission, SKYS, Oakwood School and the Victorian Applied Learning Association.

The first four partners are among the most prominent providers of Flexible Learning Programs in Victoria, sharing a strong commitment to socially inclusive schooling. SEDA⁴ (Sports Education and Development Australia) is a non-school senior secondary provider with 50 venues in Victoria, using Sport as the shared interest for enabling young people to complete Year 10-12. MCM⁵ (Melbourne City Mission) operates the Melbourne Academy, a non-senior secondary school, on several sites in Melbourne delivering accredited training and VCAL to young people facing disadvantage due to homelessness, poverty, as recently arrived migrants or as young parents. Based in South Melbourne, SKYS⁶ (St Kilda Youth Service) operates education programs specialising in engaging young people with complex needs. These include delivering VCAL via flexible and relevant learning options, and a program catering specifically for young parents.

⁴ <http://sedagroup.com.au>

⁵ <http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/education>

⁶ <http://www.skys.org.au>

In 2015 the SKYS education programs merged with the Melbourne Academy⁷. Oakwood School⁸ provides opportunities for students who have disengaged from education to re-connect with teachers and learning. Operating within Melbourne's Southern Metropolitan region, students can attend one of three campuses, or classes held in community venues as part of their flexible learning network. Although all sites had a commitment to supporting staff PL, the sites had differing overall approaches reflective of their various histories, governance, locations and staff teams.

The final partner, VALA⁹ (Victorian Applied Learning Association), is the peak organisation for applied learning practitioners in Victoria, and has a strong track record of providing development and advocacy for FLPs. FLPs are of particular interest to VALA as they have been successful and innovative in taking up VCAL and applied learning. PL is a major role of VALA, including its annual conference which always features a strong representation of presenters and attendees from FLPs.

The research investigated PL opportunities for staff working directly with young people in FLPs at secondary school level in Victoria, Australia. Four key considerations underpinned the development of this project:

- FLPs provide educational opportunities, qualifications and pathways for young people who, for varied and complex reasons, have disengaged from or sought alternatives to traditional schooling models.
- This is a growing sector, recognised as playing a crucial role as an 'incubator' for innovative and engaging schooling.
- Their staff may include teachers, youth workers, teachers' aides, counsellors, social workers and others.
- Access to PL opportunities for staff in FLPs is essential to maintain and develop a quality workforce, with particular significance for the transformation of thinking and practice necessary for more socially inclusive schooling.

The research, conducted over 2015, aimed to develop an understanding of the PL opportunities, experiences and needs of staff in FLPs in Victoria in order to better support the PL of staff in FLPs as well as to advance an understanding of PL for socially inclusive schooling more broadly. It sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What professional learning opportunities exist in Victoria to support staff in FLPs to work in socially inclusive ways?
2. How well are these professional learning opportunities working?
3. How can this professional learning provision be enhanced?
4. How do the professional learning experiences of staff in FLPs compare to the experiences of teachers in conventional secondary schools?

⁷ SKYS are referred to as a separate site throughout the report project as at the time of the interviews SKYS maintained a distinct identity as an educational provider and was located in its own site in Melbourne

⁸ <http://www.oakwoodschool.vic.edu.au/our-school>

⁹ <http://www.vala.asn.au>

The research included three data collection elements: internet search, online staff survey, and individual staff interviews, as well as ongoing consultation with our industry partners.

Internet search

To explore the availability of relevant professional learning opportunities for FLP staff in Victoria, an internet search was carried out targeting relevant organisations, service directories and through keyword searches. Insider information from our project partners as well as suggestions made in the online staff survey (see below) provided additional avenues for exploration. This data collection element captured the landscape of available PL opportunities for staff in Victorian FLPs in relation to curriculum, instructional practices, student diversity, wellbeing, behaviour and engagement, supporting staff, and collaboration. Information on more than 90 PL opportunities offered by over 70 organisations has been collated into a directory. With support from VALA staff, the directory was made available through the VALA website in February 2016¹⁰. Further information on the directory is provided at the end of section 2.3 'Accessing PL', page 30.

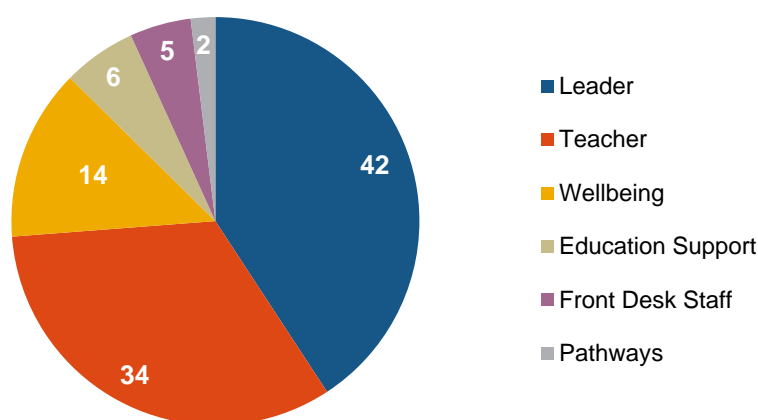
Online staff survey

Information available in the Learning Choices Program Database¹¹ was used to individually contact all known FLPs, including TAFEs with VCAL or VCE Programs, in Victoria (around 140 programs) to invite staff to take part in an online survey. Using a mixture of closed and open questions¹², the survey collected data on:

- PL staff had undertaken and its helpfulness
- PL staff needed and wanted to see available
- Support and barriers in accessing PL
- Delivering PL to others

In total 103 surveys were completed. Reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of staff teams, Figure 2 shows the proportion of responses from staff across teaching wellbeing, education support and leader roles. The dominance of responses from staff in leader roles may reflect those who were most interested to undertake the survey. It should also be remembered that FLP leaders in small organisations often juggle multiple roles, including teaching.

Figure 2: Survey respondents by role



¹⁰ <http://www.vala.asn.au/professional-learning/>

¹¹ <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/>

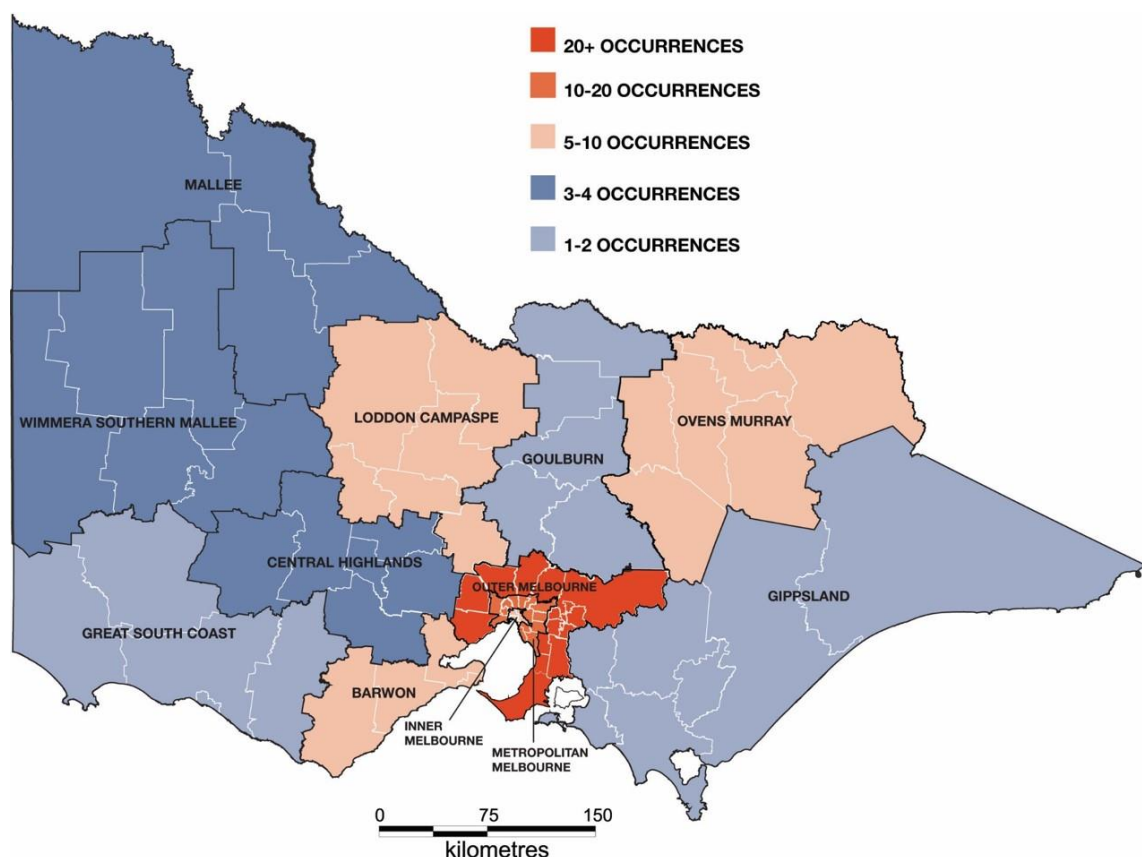
¹² Questions related to PL undertaken, PL needs, and support and barriers for PL were adapted from the Staff in Australia's Schools survey (SiAS) and the OECD Teaching and Leading International Survey (TALIS) to allow, where appropriate, for a level of comparison to available data on the PD reported by Australian secondary school teachers.

The survey data was analysed in Excel using descriptive statistics in order to provide an overview of the current state of the PL of FLP staff in Victoria and, where appropriate, for staff in different roles in FLPs. In terms of demographic background characteristics of the survey respondents: 77% of the survey respondents were female, 12% identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and 4% identified as having a disability. No respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Around 40% of respondents had been working in the flexible learning sector for 4 years or less, around half for 5 to 20 years, and 10% for 21 years or more. The FLP sector in Victoria is diverse in governance and size and the survey respondents reflect this:

- 62% were currently working in government sector schools or program.
- 48% worked in registered schools or programs, and 16% were in programs that were part of another school, and 36% were part of a TAFE / Community College.
- 73% of FLPs that respondents currently worked in were located on separate sites while 27% shared the same site with another school / program or TAFE.
- Around 10% of respondents worked in campuses of 300 or more students, 40% in campuses with 75-299 students, and around half in campuses with fewer than 75 students.

We sought views from around 130 FLPs located across Victoria. Among our 103 respondents, 65 provided the name of the FLP they worked at, naming 27 different FLPs. It is likely that the perspectives of staff from more than 27 FLPs are included in the survey as 45 different postcodes were provided. Figure 3 below shows the survey included responses from staff working in FLPs across the greater Melbourne metropolitan area as well as regional Victoria, located across 28 Local Government Areas (LGAs), and 12 LGA Regions. There is a concentration of responses from Melbourne, reflecting where the majority of FLPs are located.

Figure 3: FLP locations of survey respondents, Victorian Local Government Authority Regions



Individual staff interviews

Fourteen staff in total, 2-5 from each of our four FLP partner organisations (SEDA, MCM, SKYS, Oakwood School), were interviewed. The staff worked in a range of roles such as classroom teacher, youth worker, pathways, education support, and leader/coordinator, including some with responsibilities for the PL of staff at their sites. The length of an individual's experience at their organisation, within the flexible learning sector, and as a professional in their field varied: from 6 months to 6 years at their organisation, from 6 months to 13 years in the flexible learning sector, and from 4 years to 27 years in the education, youth, or community sector. Two interviewees were aged over 50, three were in their forties, seven in their thirties, and two in their twenties. No interviewees identified as having a disability or as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and six identified as having a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background.

The interviews focused on the staff member's PL experiences, the perceived impact of these experiences, their access to PL, and their opinion about PL needs in their setting and in the FLP sector more broadly. Interviews took between 15 minutes and one hour. All interviewees received a copy of their transcript with an invitation to make changes, deletions or corrections. Interviews (along with qualitative responses from the survey) were analysed thematically, supported by QSR NVivo software. Whilst the survey data offers a broad overview of a range of experiences of PL in FLPs, the interview data is likely to reflect more positive experiences as these FLPs have a demonstrated commitment to the PL of their staff and were all well-established programs recognised to provide valued outcomes for their students.

Research ethics

The first data collection element involved only information in the public domain and therefore did not require formal ethical approval. For the staff survey and interviews, the research team submitted an application to the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE15-051) which was approved on 14 April 2015. In addition, since Oakwood School is a government school, an application was submitted to the Victorian DET (2015_002705) for permission to conduct interviews with Oakwood school staff, which was approved on 22 May 2015.

For the survey, the major ethical issue was to ensure our introduction was easy to understand, since this was the key source of information about the project for potential participants¹³. In particular, it was important to explain clearly that taking part was voluntary, that the survey was anonymous, and that completing and submitting the survey signified consent to participation.

For the staff interviews, the main ethical concern was that some staff might feel pressure to participate, since their FLP was a partner organisation in the project. This risk was addressed by providing ample opportunity to staff to decline to take part, to decline to answer a particular question, and to withdraw all or some of their transcript from the research. In addition, any research drawing on small case study sites carries a minor risk to the participants' reputation. Pseudonyms have been assigned to individuals and generic job descriptions used providing confidentiality for outsiders. We chose not to list the FLP that individuals were from with their quotations. However, insider confidentiality is difficult to maintain and interviewees may be recognised by colleagues through these published quotes. Nevertheless, this was not a major concern since the topic of the interviews was not personal or sensitive. Moreover, this risk was further reduced by enabling staff to make changes or deletions to their transcript. Only one interviewee made minor corrections to their transcript.

¹³ We provided our contact detail in that introduction, inviting people to contact us if they had questions. However, as is typical for online questionnaires, this option was not used by anyone.

2 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS

2.1 The PL Cycle

The nature of PL is complex, related to the uniqueness of individuals, embedded in the specific contexts of their school and classroom, and influenced by the wider education system (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). PL refers to any activity or experience that aims to and/or has the impact of developing a professional's skills, knowledge or expertise in ways that improve their ability to perform their role. In education settings the focus is on improvements in student engagement and outcomes, but also on staff job satisfaction and self-care. PL activities vary across many dimensions not least formality, structure, frequency, timing, location, cost and who is involved, as well as the degree of choice in undertaking PL and the impact or outcomes of PL.

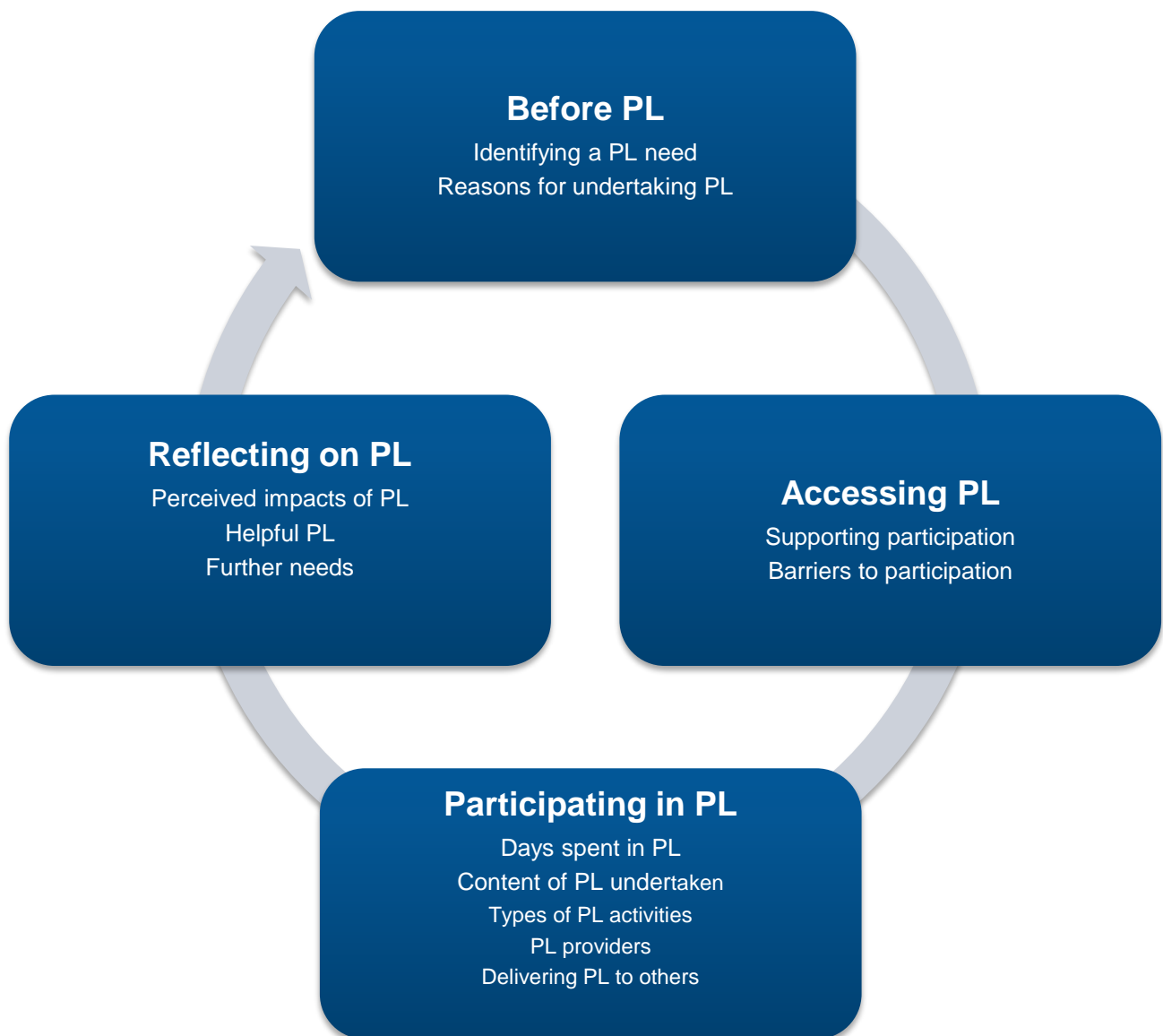
For staff in Victorian FLPs, as with staff in all schools, PL is a multifaceted and ongoing process. Staff may be expert in one area of their role and delivering PL to others, while also seeking learning in another area. Changes to the student cohort or to the curriculum can bring to the fore specific PL needs previously unexpected, and aspects like self-care and reflection are never finalised.

The concept of the PL cycle, similar to other learning cycles, captures this ongoing process and the various stages involved. In terms of evaluating specific PL activities, DET (VIC) promotes the use of an Evidence Based Professional Learning Cycle¹⁴ (based on the work of Professor Helen Timperley¹⁵) for teachers to measure the impact of their PL on their practice and on their students' learning. Because individuals may be at multiple points of the cycle simultaneously with various aspects of their learning, their overall PL experience is likely to feel more like an ever evolving spiral than like a neat cycle. However, the concept of the PL cycle provides a helpful structure through which to order our research findings, which are discussed in this report under the headings: 'before PL' (section 2.2), 'accessing PL' (section 2.3), 'participating in PL' (section 2.4), and 'reflecting on PL' (section 2.6). These sections focus on engagement in PL as a recipient or participant. In recognition of our findings that FLP staff also are active in providing PL to others, section 2.5 addresses the delivery of PL by FLP staff to others.

¹⁴ <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/profdev/Pages/cycle.aspx>

¹⁵ Timperley, H. (2011b). Using student assessment for professional learning: focusing on students' outcomes to identify teachers' needs: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/profdev/studassessforprofllearning.pdf>

Figure 4: Structure of the report, drawing on the PL Cycle



2.2 Before PL

This section explores how FLP staff identify their PL needs and the reason they give for undertaking PL. This is an important stage in the PL cycle, that influences the ways in which staff engage with learning. The analysis considers the extent of an individual's agency in determining their own PL needs and choosing to engage in PL. The degree of agency and self-determination can be an important factor in promoting learning. As Timperley (2011a, p.49) observed, if educators do not develop their own learning goals they may “come to many professional development sessions believing they have little to learn and have few expectations to change their practice as a result of their participation”. Learning is, however, widely recognised as a social activity (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1990) thus the analysis also considers the role of others at this stage.

2.2.1 Identifying a PL need

The identification of individual and team PL needs in FLPs occurs through a mixture of self-choice, collaboration, school needs and external requirements. Staff tended to talk about being free to identify their own PL needs as an important motivator for learning, but also drew attention to the ways in which their formal and informal interactions with others supported them to become aware of these needs. Some PL needs were also externally determined. This section draws primarily on interview data.

Self-identification

The majority of the staff interviewed (all aside from staff at one site) expressed a large degree of autonomy in determining when they needed PL in a particular area and also in identifying what kind of PL they would like to undertake. For Caitlin (Pathways - Interview) this was via a “mixture of what I'm interested in and what I feel like I need to more of” and for Daniel (Teacher - Interview) his PL needs came from “anything that I identify that I know I can't do”. The idea that PL needs are driven by the staff themselves is particularly evident in Sam's (Leader - Interview) assertion that “it tends to be me proactively deciding I've got a gap here so I need to go and find that and work it out and then take it to my manager”.

Self-identification of PL needs is important if staff are to feel respected and invested in their own learning. It also means that staff can seek to meet that PL in a self-directed and timely manner, for example through professional reading, accessing information online, or speaking with experienced colleagues and knowledgeable others. Then, if needed, they can decide to access a more formal PL opportunity:

There tends to be formalised processes, so at [the site] we do a once-yearly review and we set a professional development plan and those sorts of things. But, to be honest for me, I think it's more intuitive than that. I'm going through my working week or my working month and I think, I really need to know a bit more about such and such. My first port of call tends to be professional reading, so I just get online and read everything I can find about that thing. Then, if I start to think, no, I still need to know more about that, then I start to look around for a PD opportunity. (Sam, Leader – Interview)

One staff member, however, identified as an important concern that the freedom to self-identify PL needs, and then to also undertake self-directed PL, needs to be supported by processes that provide staff with the time and skills to do so. In the context of complex and challenging daily work there is reason to be attuned to this. Like their students, staff in FLPs require agency in their learning choices but also some structures to support their PL decisions and participation.

Input from leaders, colleagues and students

Supportive structures were apparent when staff talked about the collegial conversations and formal processes within which some of their PL needs are identified. Staff discussed how they identify, at times new or unexpected, PL needs for themselves through interaction with others: leaders, colleagues, and students. In terms of the role of leaders, this includes structures such as yearly and mid-year reviews that seek to support staff to set performance development plans, short term goals and career goals. Oliver's reflections provide insight into the importance of not seeing this as a one-off event but as an ongoing process:

I think going through with my manager, I sat down with him and spoke about goals at the beginning of the year. So I find it quite effective to do that and think about the goals and what I want to do and then talk to him about that throughout the year. I think you can't wait until you have these reviews to work on those type of things. So definitely an ongoing communication with him, I talk to him all the time and that's things that I want to work on or things that we need to do more of. (Oliver, Leader - Interview)

Coaching can be a useful and frequent vehicle for identifying PL needs:

Sometimes it comes out of coaching, so if I've had something that I'm working at, trying to get better at, I'm not quite understanding, struggling with and maybe it might come out of my coaching that I could find out more about a certain area, and then if there's a PD on that, I'll gravitate towards that. (Gabriell, Education Support – Interview)

The smaller nature of many FLPs, innovative practices (for example, the co-location of youth workers with teachers in the classroom), and the emphasis on support for staff and students, means that typically staff are given frequent opportunities to de-brief with managers and colleagues. Through these processes colleagues can become familiar with each other's practice in ways that may not occur in more conventional schools. Daily conversations with colleagues, regular staff meetings and regular supervision meetings with managers are key spaces in which feedback can be provided and an individual's PL needs identified:

I've got a youth worker in my room. On a daily basis we'll go through certain students and look at how they're travelling and what can we do or what services can we access to improve their situation and every three weeks or so I'll have a supervision with the Manager ... we have supervision, we have team meetings. I think they're about once a fortnight. We have site meetings every week. We have a lot of meetings which is great though because things happen on a daily basis. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

While common for staff to talk about colleagues identifying areas of PL need for them, less common, but of interest, is where staff are responsive to students directly identifying a staff member's PL need:

Students have said to me you should know how to do this or you should know how to do that. ... They expect you to say "bugger off, I'm the teacher", but they're a bit shocked when you say "oh great, I'll go and learn how to do that". Because that's the other thing too, within this environment is role modeling positive behaviour and showing them that life is about learning. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

Daniel viewed students as playing an active role, albeit in the informal conversations of the classroom, in identifying a teacher's PL need. He draws attention to the particular benefit of explicitly allowing students to identify the learning needs of staff (and staff acting on this) within the FLP approach of role modelling life-long learning.

While not directly addressed in the interviews or survey, the close relationships staff have with students and the specific context of FLPs (smaller classes, low student-staff ratio, complex and varied students' needs) may change the basis for identifying staff PL needs compared to conventional schools. Staff in FLPs can rely on their everyday experiences with students and reflective practice with colleagues to identify what their own PL needs are to improve the educational experiences of students and other staff.

Externally determined

Some PL needs are determined with less input from individual staff themselves. This occurs when staff are required to participate in internal ongoing everyday activities that are also professional learning such as staff meetings, supervision meetings, and receiving peer feedback. In these instances staff may have choice over the specific focus of the PL on but their participation in this type of PL is mandatory.

A lack of choice in PL also occurs in very visible ways in relation to the content of some formal PL opportunities, such as workshops or seminars delivered by internal or external experts on a specific topic area. Firstly, this applies when certain PL is necessary to meet the accreditation requirements of an external body, such as for teaching Vocational Education and Training (VET): "So there's two days a year that we do that industry currency they call it, which in the VET area you need to keep up to date with what's happening in the industry" (Oliver, Leader - Interview). Secondly, at times FLPs determine what PL staff in certain roles or the staff team as a whole require and provides 'mandatory' PL to them.

[The organisation] have brought in some guest speakers to deliver units on the environment and on retail ... So that was identified as looking at the list of units, this is an area where lots of staff don't have much experience so from [the organisation's] perspective they try and run things where there's gaps. (Oliver, Leader- Interview)

"Non-negotiables", as one staff member called this kind of PL, are illustrated through opportunities such as induction programs for all new staff and looking at how to "upskill" existing staff, and are influenced by school policies such as the school's Annual Implementation Plan (AIP):

"So you need that [AIP] to decide what's your focus for the year, what are your needs for the year. So for us it's about building capacity of teachers in literacy and numeracy, building students' post school readiness, so they're the two areas, and emotional development. So if that's what our school is about, that's where your focus needs to be, a little bit around your professional learning. (Lisa, Leader - Interview)

Interestingly, only one staff member interviewed across all sites felt that there was a lack of opportunity to determine any of their own formal professional development activities stating "here it's [PD] just delivered to us". This staff member expressed a desire to have more agency in looking for her own PL opportunities. Maintaining the balance between meeting the needs of the sector and the organisation as a whole, and the individual needs and desires of staff is important for FLPs to consider in enabling positive experiences of PL.

2.2.2 Reasons for undertaking PL

The reasons staff undertake PL matters. It is commonly accepted that the primary purpose for educators to engage in PL should be to meet students' needs or their own needs. Timperley (2011a, p.47) suggests that when there is an "absence of need to solve a specific problem of practice or to improve a particular outcome for students, there is little urgency or motivation to change and improve".

Compliance and skill-sets

As indicated above, needs may be externally determined and therefore reasons staff engage in PL include because they have to. A typical example is undertaking first aid training, as one teacher said: "I've done my Level 2 first-aid about ten times, because you've got to keep it updated". These kinds of 'service-delivery' driven reasons for engaging with PL can also be more nuanced. Staff engage because they have to but also because they want to: they feel it will enhance their abilities, in particular, to deliver and assess VET and VCAL curriculum. The skill set necessary to work in FLPs can be very different to more conventional schools. Lisa (Leader - Interview) reflected on why she undertook a Masters, as an already experienced educator, when she moved into the flexible learning sector stating "I felt like I didn't know how to teach, I just was like 'this is different and these kids need something different'".

Passion and practical resources

Interest or passion for a particular topic is a powerful motivator for staff engagement with PL. Interestingly, interviewees spoke about their personal interest in relation to their professional practices and interactions with the students. For example:

I guess it's a mixture between what I'm interested in and what I feel like I need to know more of. So, I'm going to one in December ... it's about finding the ability in disability. It's sort of along the lines of working towards the future of young people as well, which I think is important for me in my role, doing pathways. So if I think that it benefits my role, then I'm definitely interested in it, but also if I have just a general interest in it professionally and personally, learning more about a certain subject, then, yes, I always try and put in to go along to the PD. (Caitlin, Pathways - Interview)

Gaining practical resources (knowledge, skills, tools) was a key reason cited for engaging in PL to the extent that some would vet PL opportunities before attending to ensure they would be of value. As Natalie (Youth Worker - Interview) explained it has to be "something that is specific", "really in-depth" and "practical information". Related to this, staff would engage in PL that they saw as relevant or as providing new ideas, including visiting similar organisations as they "understand how our students function, how they work and are able to give us better ideas or different ideas" (Daniel, Teacher - Interview). Staff in FLPs get to know their students well, so they are able to identify their needs as a cohort and as individuals in ways that then shaped the PL they undertook:

"[I]f a student says I need to do this project in this, straight away I look at, so what PD do I need to do that's going to give me the skills to be able to help that student? The way I figure it is it might only be one student, but if there's one student that needs that, then somewhere down the track there'll be another one and more than likely you might be able to pull in five or six students into that project and develop those skills through them". (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

Self-care and emotional needs

Teachers' emotional needs arising from the challenges of working with students with high levels of social, emotional and behavioural needs and vulnerabilities also factor in the reasons staff engage in PL, specifically around self-care:

I had her [a psychologist] from the beginning, had a couple of incidents really early on here that were pretty confronting and then I kept her on, on a mental health plan. I've kept her for the four years, I've seen the same person for four years. Maybe once or twice a term, but really crucial too, it's professional learning, it's your mental health, it's about your well-being. (Lisa, Leader - Interview)

While for Lisa this PL for self-care meant engaging with a qualified mental health practitioner outside of the FLP, it can also be reason for engaging in internal and more informal PL such as de-briefing on a regular basis. This requires, as Daniel (Teacher - Interview) noted, "open channels of communication within the whole organisation" that mean staff are comfortable approaching leaders and colleagues with issues as they arise: "you don't want to be hiding stuff and you don't want to bottle stuff up in this environment. You get very stressed very quickly".

Summing up then, the interview data highlighted that FLP staff generally perceive a large degree of control in self-identifying their PL needs but that they tend to do this in collaboration with others at their FLP. Some PL needs are externally determined when FLPs or external organisations mandate learning that needs to be undertaken. Staff reasons for engaging in PL ranged from meeting compliance needs and developing specific skills sets, to a passion for a particular area or a desire to find practical resources for their work, and important also in meeting their own self-care and emotional needs.

2.3 Accessing PL

This section discusses support for and barriers to accessing PL, drawing on both interview and survey data. An important aspect in accessing PL is the level and nature of support received, including the ability to find out about relevant learning opportunities. To gain a better understanding of the nature of FLP staff engagement in PL it is also useful to consider what they perceive to be the barriers to their inclusion and participation.

2.3.1 Supporting participation

Interviews with staff in FLPs suggest they rely on their colleagues and organisations to find out about available PL opportunities and to support them to filter through to those most relevant. Staff spoke about receiving financial, practical and emotional support to access PL from their employer.

Networks and filters

Staff interviewed found out about available PL through their employer and colleagues, and through being connected to professional networks and peak body organisations, such as Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA), the Australian Skills Qualification Authority (ASQA), local councils and the Department of Education. Often this occurred via email but time created in staff meetings to share recent PL experiences also enabled staff to find out what is available and, crucially, what is relevant. The notion of colleagues or relevant organisations acting as a “filter” to direct relevant PL opportunities their way was common amongst the staff in different roles.

Such filtering is an important part of the process of finding available and relevant PL. With time pressures on staff and the immediacy of some PL needs, as well as the potential to be overloaded with PL flyers and emails, the more filtering that is done for the staff member the easier it is for them to find relevant PL. This is a positive role that networks, employers and other colleagues play in interaction with each other. The key for staff then is being able to prioritise which PL to undertake:

I think I've got all the opportunities that I would want, that I could want to have really. It's about figuring out which are the most relevant and important, and the most applicable for what we're doing now. (Roisin, Teacher - Interview)

It's a case of manage where you're at, do what you can, read a little bit, not to try and do too much and be overwhelmed by the wealth of knowledge that's out there. There's so much knowledge and courses, and things you could be doing, to actually go [exhales], that's my challenge, is to manage myself to not go too crazy. ... There's so many opportunities of things I could be doing, like regards to courses, or reading, or talking to people, or accessing stuff online. Don't get me started on podcasts, because you could be listening to podcasts day and night with the talks. (Lisa, Leader - Interview)

A further level of filtering is important in deciding whether or not to access the PL opportunity. For Daniel (Teacher - Interview) this involved “trying to look at getting information that’s from a reputable source”. Steven (Leader - Interview) explained how he also disregards types of PL he has not found useful in the past:

Every time I see an email about a PD I always look at who is running it. I always try to filter out the ones that are like we’re going to have a discussion around this or something like that. I just feel like they go in circles.

Staff with friends or personal networks in education or other relevant businesses or industries also proactively tap into these resources to access relevant PL by, as Daniel (Teacher – Interview) explains “just looking at how I can access what they have to help my understanding and teaching and stuff”.

Financial and practical supports

Financial support can be necessary for staff to feel able to undertake externally provided PD¹⁶. As Figure 5 shows, the survey data indicated that teachers in FLPs received similar levels of scheduled time off to undertake PD to their mainstream colleagues (as reported in TALIS¹⁷), but that they are less likely to have all of their PD paid for. 59% of FLP teachers we surveyed personally paid for none of the PD they had undertaken in the last 12 months, in comparison to 75% of lower secondary school teachers in Australia (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014, pp.87-88). Whilst not directly comparable, these results suggest that FLP teachers are more likely to pay for PD out of their own pocket than their mainstream colleagues. This may be due to the need for greater amounts of PD for staff in FLP settings, greater provision of internally provided (and paid for) PD, and / or fewer financial supports available for staff in these settings in comparison to mainstream settings.

Figure 5: Support received to undertake PD activities in the last 12 months (%)

Type of Support	% of FLP staff surveyed	% of FLP teachers surveyed	% of Australian lower secondary school teachers *
Personally paid for none of the PD (n=100)	57%	59%	75%
Received scheduled time off for activities that took place during my regular working hours (n=97)	80%	82%	80%

* OECD TALIS 2013 data, in Freeman et al., 2014, pp. 87-88

In FLPs, those in leader and education support roles were more likely, and those in wellbeing and front desk roles were less likely, than teachers to have paid for some or all of their PD. A number of staff interviewed referred specifically to “financial support” to undertake PL, including applying for leadership grants to encourage leadership development, funding allocated per staff member for PL, or a budget being available that staff could apply to. Some staff interviewed were, however, hazy on the details of how to access that budget, what funding was available or what employers would be willing to pay for.

¹⁶ In reporting on the survey findings on ‘support’ and ‘barriers’ we refer primarily to PD rather than PL as this was the terminology used in these particular survey questions.

¹⁷ The OECD Teaching And Learning International Survey

Providing scheduled time off and cover for work duties, is another way in which staff can be supported to access externally provided PD. Overall, 80% of FLP staff surveyed reported receiving scheduled time off for activities that took place during their regular working hours. Whilst noting that only six education support and two pathways staff responded to the survey, it is noticeable that only 50% of staff in these roles reported receiving scheduled time off for PD. This is in comparison to 85% of leaders, 82% of teachers, and 77% of wellbeing staff. The experiences of FLP teachers and leaders is similar to that of lower secondary education teachers in Australia, 80% of whom reported receiving scheduled time off (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014, pp.87-88, see Figure 5 above).

The leaders we interviewed spoke about encouraging teacher learning through providing 'cover' (with a colleague or casual relief teacher taking the class), as Sam (Leader - Interview) explained: "we really try to encourage our teaching team to value those ideas of getting that professional development and enabling them to do so by getting them covered". Time to undertake PL was often allocated to staff to enable them to fulfil professional requirements such as VET industry currency days and observing other teachers as part of the formal VIT registration processes.

Feeling supported

Among staff interviewed, there was a general perception that their organisation was very supportive and encouraging of their learning and development. Laura (Teacher - Interview) summed this up in her praise for her FLP, stating: "as an organisation they're very onto it and they're very supportive of their teachers. I feel like everything I've needed to know they have provided me with". Whilst such highly positive experiences of employer support may not be reflective of the broad FLP staff experiences in Victoria, it is worth noting only 30% of survey respondents felt a lack of employer support was a barrier to their participation in PD activities (see Figure 6 below).

Of interest, from the interviews, is that feeling supported was not just about funding or time off to do PL but also feeling encouraged to "go out there and upskill yourself versus just plodding along daily" (Natalie, Youth Worker - Interview) and feeling "encouraged to take on anything that we're interested in and develop" (Roisin, Teacher - Interview). These staff felt respected in their role and possibilities. For some, there is a strong sense of this encouragement and belief in staff from their organisations as displayed through support for PL:

I never feel like I'm overstepping the mark and I should be doing more photo copying or something like that, I'm always being encouraged to learn more here, which is amazing. (Gabriell, Education Support - Interview)

In addition to support for external PL activities, staff interviewed spoke of being well-supported in their learning through the daily culture and practices of their organisation and internally provided staff development opportunities. Such internal PL tends to take place during working hours when staff have scheduled time to take part in mentoring, staff meetings, supervision and group PL.

In this way, organisations support access to PL experiences by providing dedicated times and spaces for learning to occur - making them an unquestioned part of the daily, weekly or monthly running of the FLP. As Daniel (Teacher-interview) reflected: “because all that stuff is part of the everyday running of this place you forget that that’s almost like a PD”. Another strategy through which dedicated time for PL is created is to insist staff attend a particular PL opportunity:

...it’s really, really good that they force you to do it, not in a mean way but in a “Okay, we’re all going to [the other site] and we’re all going to learn about Calmer Classrooms and we’re all going to talk about this aspect of education and then we’re all going to play lawn bowls”. And it’s like great day, good mix, some learning, I’ll absorb that, they understand that you also need to rest and you need to get to know each other in a different way as well. So I feel incredibly supported here. (Laura, Teacher - Interview)

Laura talked about being “forced” to take part in PL but how this can be perceived as “incredibly” supportive, as it gives staff permission and the space to further their own learning and self-care. This is something Brooke (Teacher – Interview) also advocated for:

I just think that there needs to be more opportunity and there needs to be time allocated for it, there needs to be opportunity and it needs to be something that the management team need to enforce with their staff to go.

Staff in leadership roles and having “leaders for learning” are essential in fostering “the appropriate conditions, structures, and rhythms” for PL (Timperley, 2011a, p. 93). The leaders interviewed were aware of their role in creating this kind of culture, doing this through modelling collegial and supportive behaviours, being accessible, fostering relationships between staff, and through their enthusiasm for their own and others PL:

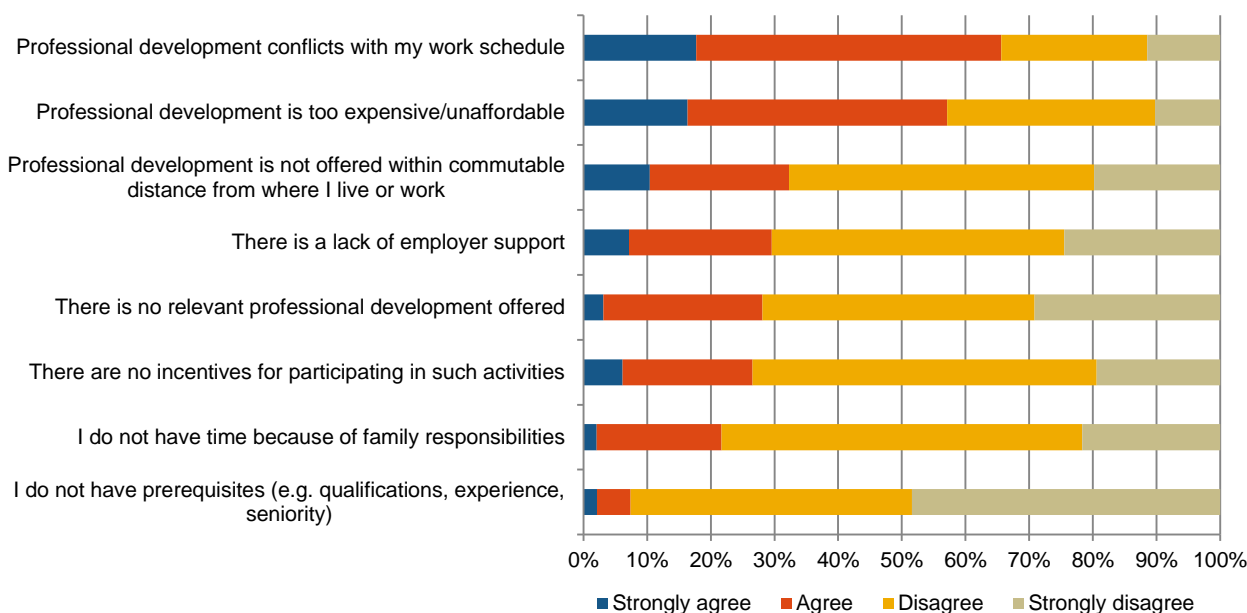
I mean professional learning is my thing. It’s what drives me and it’s everything, my biggest thing ... Yes, so really building capacity of teachers, that’s my life’s work is that. So all the learning I’m doing, is really around those things. All the mentoring I’m doing, is always around what work I’m doing with the staff, so when I talk to my mentor, it’s always really about the staffing, decisions around staff, decisions around professional learning for staff, so that informs me. (Lisa, Leader – Interview)

2.3.2 Barriers to participation

This section focuses on FLP staff perceptions of the barriers to their inclusion and participation in PL, offering further insight into what matters for their learning. The discussion of barriers focuses on PL experiences outside of mandated or internally provided opportunities. It covers more formal externally provided PD such as workshops, seminars, courses and conferences. These activities may occur within or outside of regular work hours, and on- or off-site. It also includes self-directed learning such as accessing online resources and professional reading.

The central barriers or challenges to accessing PL are often interrelated - connected to having the time, energy and resources to find, to access and to properly engage with relevant PL. Figure 6 shows the percentage of FLP staff surveyed that agreed each of the listed items was a barrier to their participation in PD. The main barriers are discussed in more detail below drawing on both interview and survey data.

Figure 6: Barriers to participation in PD (%)



* Between 95-98 staff answered each question

Time-poor and poor-timing

The interviewees suggested that having the time to undertake non-mandated PL is the key challenge for both leaders and teachers in FLPs: “time is the biggest factor, everything else is not a problem” (Laura, Teacher - Interview); “the restrictions are just time” (Oliver, Leader – Interview); “there's plenty [of PD] out there, it's having the time to go to them” (Leader - Survey). Feeling “time-poor” or “stretched” can lead to staff prioritising other aspects of their work over PL opportunities, even internal ones:

I mean, you just don't have a lot of time as a teacher. You're really time-poor and you try to stay on top of everything they've done today, as well as prep them for tomorrow and the next day and the big picture stuff. (Tom, Teacher – Interview)

And although I've had supervision with my manager fortnightly, sometimes we've skipped, and the biggest issue around that is we are stretched. We are so stretched and we're understaffed. (Brooke, Teacher - Interview)

Unless PL is seen as fundamental to student learning then it is likely to be positioned as secondary to other aspects of staff roles in FLPs. A shift in thinking to prioritise staff learning alongside student learning is, however, crucial because “if you support the staff, then the students will be supported” (Tom, Teacher - Interview). But for many staff it remains a tricky balance: “I'm starting to realise that it's a chicken and egg; you need to know this stuff but you don't want to do it at the sacrifice of your students' learning” (Laura, Teacher - Interview).

For some staff the idea of undertaking PL in their personal time was a given in the FLP context. Tom (Teacher – Interview) described how a lot of his PL has been done “on the fly”, in his personal time via online resources. For him, this was okay as he saw it as part of his own personal development, in this instance as a musician as well as for his professional development as a music teacher and then being able to pass on that learning to his students.

Some staff had made big PL commitments such as undertaking an online Master’s course in marketing and business or were completing a Bachelor’s Degree in Education, which meant they had very little time to undertake any additional ‘smaller’ PL opportunities outside of work hours. Accessing PL, or talking and thinking about work in personal time is, however, neither necessarily viable nor desirable for staff working in physically, emotionally and mentally demanding roles:

So that’s the challenge – the mental energy to go beyond what you’re already doing in a classroom on a day-to-day level. ... So that gets in the way for me. I know I get exhausted. I’m just 120% while I’m here and then I’m not here, I just power down and just whatever. I’m just trying to get that balance. (Tom, Teacher - Interview)

There is a particular need to have space away from work for FLP staff because of the kinds of experiences they encounter in their work with vulnerable students:

I try and separate my work life from my personal life, I try and switch off from work when I’m outside of the workplace, because you have to, otherwise you are at risk of vicarious trauma if you don’t do that. (Sam, Leader - Interview)

Like their own students, it is necessary for staff to be in a position where they are actually able to learn when they undertake PL otherwise it is likely to be a redundant, even potentially negative experience. The challenge of time is not just practical but emotional too – having the head space and energy to engage with PL. When PL happens out of hours and away from work and home this issue can be amplified:

There are some great PDs I’ve seen, but they’ll be at Wantirna [outer Eastern Melbourne] at eight o’clock at night and you think ... I can’t be bothered after work getting public transport to Wantirna and to see this PD and I’m just going to be disengaged myself. The hard thing about teaching this cohort is if you’re not in the right mindset you end up turning into one of your own students and disrupting everyone else. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

The majority of staff who responded to the survey, did not believe the location of PL offerings was a barrier (see Figure 6), but for the third who did, this can be a substantial challenge. There is a need for flexibly delivered PL alongside dedicated time and ‘head-space’ to encourage greater staff engagement in PL.

Daniel’s experience also highlights the issue of the timing of PL activities. Timing is tricky, with a sense that there is a never a ‘good time’ for PL. If it happens during working hours then getting classes covered is a barrier. If it happens when the students are not around then this is likely to be at the end of a long day, at the start of the year when staff are keen to get on with planning, or at the end of the year when they are exhausted. As Erin (Teacher - Interview) queried “we’ve talked about this recently. What is the best time then?”.

Staff did have suggestions including running PL in school holidays, just one day “where everyone’s paid to come in and they all go to a PD”, that happens at a few key points over the year “instead of just trying to jam it in over here or jam it in over there” (Daniel, Teacher - Interview). This proposal is mirrored in Erin’s (Teacher - Interview) conclusions about what might work best in terms of timing of PL ‘chunks’ at her FLP:

I think this year they’ve tried to break it up more which has been good. So we did two days maybe in term 2 and then they’ve flipped that, so you come back and do the other two days or the other two workshops next time. So I think that’s probably a better model.

Covering costs and the costs of cover

Cost is, unsurprisingly, a determining factor for the external PD staff can undertake. 57% of FLP staff (and 58% of FLP teachers) surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that a barrier to their PD participation is that it is too expensive or unaffordable. This is higher than the 39% of lower secondary education teachers who perceived cost to be a barrier to their participation in PD (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014, p. 93). This difference between FLP staff and their mainstream peers reflects the earlier finding (Figure 5 above) that FLP staff generally, and teachers as a group, are more likely than lower secondary school Australia teachers to pay for their own PD (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014 pp. 87-88). It remains, however, for both groups the second most commonly cited barrier to PD participation.

The “sky high” costs of some PL opportunities, cited by one interviewee as “\$1500 for a PD just for one person” means it can be prohibitive for the organisation to pay and unlikely that staff themselves can “afford to fork out that kind of money” (Daniel, Teacher - Interview). Not being able to access the necessary funds means staff may miss out on potentially important PL:

I think cost would be the biggest one [barrier], obviously. You’ve only got a certain amount of funding attached per person... So with the training and assessment Cert IV, we were meant to do it at the start of the year... we didn’t have enough funding to do it. So two of us missed out... So things like that obviously are going to happen because they’re quite expensive and [the organisation] has a whole lot of people and I understand that everyone wants to do PD... There’s a lot of free workshops out there or really low cost, but I think it’s the big ones – like, you know, there are courses that are going to get you qualifications that obviously cost quite a bit of money and time as well. So if you’re away from here for a week and a half, then they’re going to have to get a casual in and that incurs a lot more cost to the organisation. (Natalie, Youth Worker – Interview)

Natalie’s quote highlights that it is not just the costs of the PD activity itself, but the cost to the organisation in funding cover for the staff member’s work whilst they are away. Being released from classroom work in FLPs, however, is a barrier to staff engaging in extended (a day or more during work hours) external PL for more reasons than just the cost of getting other staff to cover. The specific nature of working in a FLP, means it can be “hard to get appropriate replacement staff” (Leader – Survey). In settings with unique approaches or student cohorts this can be problematic:

It is really difficult to get replacement teachers/ practitioners who are happy and able to work in our programs. Due to this many opportunities for professional learning go missing and team opportunities are almost impossible unless staff are bought in on their own time. Which can create a negative environment about professional learning overall. (Leader – Survey)

This has further implications for staff, who may perceive “pressure, whether it’s said or not, for us to be here all the time” and “you kind of feel like, ‘Oh, if I take it then [someone else] has to come in’” (Erin, Teacher – Interview). When staff perceive they cannot take time out for PL (or even for sick leave) because there is no appropriate cover, this has implications for staff wellbeing as well as development.

Organising time release and cover for leaders to access extended external PL opportunities during work hours can be equally as challenging, requiring much effort and flexibility on the part of the leadership team:

That’s, I guess, the big challenge. If I’m out I can’t be covered as such. I can just say, “Okay, I’m out for a couple of days, guys, if you need anything check with my manager”. But it’s not quite the same as getting a cover teacher to cover a class. So a couple of weeks ago I was in Geelong for a couple of days at a Deakin conference and that required a lot of shifting around of management responsibilities just for two days being out. That’s probably one of the trickier things. (Sam, Leader - Interview)

Where FLPs have small staff teams these barriers can be even more difficult to overcome:

I am one of only two teachers at my school, and five staff overall, and I am the school coordinator. I cannot take time off for PD as it leaves my staff exposed. (Leader – Survey)

I find because we are such a small organisation, getting the time off to participate in PD is not always supported (Teacher – Survey)

In addition, the intensity of work in this context, the relationships with the students, and the emotional investment of teachers in their students’ learning, can mean that teachers do not want to hand their class over to anyone else – or they can’t stop thinking about their students even when they do:

My bosses have always said ‘whatever you need to do we’ll support you and you can go and learn it’. But at the same time, you just feel so if I’m not here, the kids will go haywire and they won’t get their work done and, you know, you just get a bit parental about them. You know, you’re invested in them. (Tom, Teacher - Interview)

If I go to a PD and it’s during a class they will get a relief teacher to fill my class, but then I’m at the PD thinking “are my students being looked after, are they doing their work?”. And you’re not fully there. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

Two thirds of the FLP staff who responded to the survey perceived conflicts with their work as a barrier to undertaking PD (see Figure 6 above). This was the most commonly reported barrier. This is not unique to the FLP sector as conflicts with work schedule was also perceived to be a barrier for almost 60% of lower secondary education Australian teachers - the most commonly reported barrier for this group (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014, p.93). For those in teaching or education support roles in our survey the percentage was higher, with 73% of teachers and 80% of education support staff perceiving conflicts with work schedule to be a barrier to undertaking PD. The additional challenges in getting appropriate cover and staff feeling secure and confident to leave their students to undertake PD during school hours may be heightened for FLP teachers.

Finding out about available relevant PL opportunities

The citing of time as a barrier to PL participation implied that with more time, staff would engage in a greater number of PL activities. The availability and finding out about relevant PL is of interest here. Steven raised a noteworthy point about the coincidental nature of his own access to “really good PD” that succinctly links finding out about relevant PD to the previous barriers of time, timing, cost, and work cover:

I think a lot of the recipe to get really good PD, is actually there. For me it's always time. The organisations are out there. The experts are out there. The budget's there for PD. I mean that could obviously be bigger. It's just getting the right people in the right room at the right time. That's always the difficult part for me. Again I've been to some amazing PDs that really make a difference, but that was purely coincidence that I had the time to get out there, or someone could relieve me, or something like that. (Steven, Leader – Interview)

The survey data supports the notion that many FLP staff believe there to be relevant PL ‘out there’ to support their work as only 28% staff surveyed reported this as a barrier. The figure is slightly higher for FLP teachers and leaders, with 34% of teachers and 30% of leaders perceiving this to be a barrier. This is a little higher than the 25% of lower secondary school teachers who reported the lack of relevant PD as a barrier (OECD TALIS data in Freeman et al., 2014, p.93).

Interestingly, only 7% of FLP staff in wellbeing roles perceived this to be a barrier, suggesting there are plenty of relevant PL opportunities for their work within these settings, but that PL for teaching and for leadership is less widely available.

There is a perception amongst some teaching and leadership staff that PL activities offered externally are not always relevant to their context and students:

Some things I attended were tailored to mainstream schools and ignored many of the issues students face (including those in the mainstream schools) e.g. not being able to afford the fanciest calculators, having missed large chunks of schooling. (Teacher - Survey)

This means whilst staff might access some interesting PL if the content is not immediately transferable to practice in the specific context of the FLP then staff have to spend further energy and time adapting it to make it applicable, making undertaking external PL more time-consuming:

So you can go to great seminars or other organisations and learn about maths for example or learn about a particular numeracy skill for example but then you've got to rework it and think about how you're going to apply it here. So I'll probably put my energies more into looking at what we're doing and what people are doing well and how we can spread that across the whole organisation and teach each other skills. (Roisin, Teacher - Interview)

A greater challenge is that, despite perceiving there to be relevant PL out there, “finding stuff that is really relevant is not that easy” (Daniel, Teacher - Interview) because “it’s a little bit hidden, it’s certainly a lot less established [than PL for staff in mainstream schools]” (Sam, Leader - Interview). For those staff or programs without helpful experienced colleagues or that are not part of relevant professional networks, there is an increased potential to miss out simply because they “don’t hear about it” (Teacher - Survey).

The emergent nature of a 'Flexible Learning Sector' combined with the diverse and sometimes disconnected nature of provision can lead to isolation for some staff and exclusion from relevant PL opportunities:

I think it can be hard when Government schools or flexible learning programs get access to great PD and we hear about it and wonder why we weren't invited - we always invite others to our PD because we know not everyone can afford it or have the time to set it up. It would be nice to be more included. (Leader – Survey)

We don't always get the information about different professional learning that is taking place and available for mainstream schools that may also be relevant in our sector. We don't really have a supportive network and are working in isolation in some cases. (Leader – Survey)

For staff with extensive experience of working in FLPs the issue of finding PL that actually extended their learning was raised as a potential concern based on the perception that “too often PD is aimed at staff with little to no experience in an area. Staff with experience quickly outgrow most forms of PD” (Leader - Survey). Steven expands on this reflecting on his own experience:

I'm notorious for not going to too many PD's. A lot of them I go to I feel like are a waste of time. ... with a lot of them there's a lot of pamphlet level information. So it's that just entry level type stuff. Whereas if you've been in the industry, for even a couple of years, you're well past pamphlet level information. You've already experienced way past that in the classroom. ... I want to see, 'this is a strategy that I've used and this is the impact it has'. Take it or leave it kind of thing. Just a raw data kind of approach rather than let's all talk about it for 12 hours. Because that is really dependent on who is in the room and a lot of the time the people who are in the room are just the organisations who could afford to pay for the PD or the guys that were free that day. (Steven, Leader - Interview)

Whilst staff interviewed referred to using internet searches to search for online resources to support the learning, they noted there is nowhere obvious for FLP staff to go to search for PL opportunities: “I'm not really aware of anywhere that you can go and search specifically for PD within a certain area that I'd like to do” (Caitlin, Pathways – Interview). Sam (Leader – Interview) highlighted the potential value of a “well organised, clear, easy to read portal” – a “centralised bank or repository of information” that listed professional development for FLPs in relation to different categories e.g. how to deliver numeracy in VCAL (Sam, Leader – Interview). As Tom (Teacher - Interview) argued a central service like this would be valuable as, depending on how busy staff are or what their particular needs are at a certain time, information via email can be missed and staff don't have time to spare to “google it”.

To meet these needs this project team, in partnership with VALA, has created an online directory to support staff with this search. The Directory was created by drawing on information provided in the survey and interviews, as well from consultations at PL events for FLP staff, and internet searchers. Details on the directory are provided after this section.

To summarise this section, the interview data showed that FLP staff generally felt very supported in their everyday learning within their FLP and encouraged by their organisation to further their development. The support of leaders within the organisation was crucial. The survey and interview data showed a number of important supports for staff: financial, emotional and practical. These same factors could also act as barriers. FLP teachers received comparable scheduled time off to their colleagues teaching in more conventional schools, but appeared more likely to be paying for some or all of the PD they participated in. Finding time and covering costs were key in accessing PL, feeling able to leave the students and prioritise one's own learning was also salient for teachers. Being able to locate relevant PL easily online would further support staff in this sector.

Online Directory of PL for FLPs (VIC)

The online Directory of Professional Learning for Flexible Learning Programs (VIC) was developed as part of the project to support staff to more easily locate professional learning opportunities that are relevant to their work with young people in FLPs. Launched in February 2016, The directory can be found at: <http://vala.asn.au/professional-learning/>

Within the directory PL links are categorised under eight topic areas. A particular PL link may be found listed in one or in several of the eight categories, depending on the scope of the offering:



Clicking on a specific category provides a description of the kind of PL content that can be expected within that category followed by a list of potentially relevant PL providers with a brief overview of the provider and a descriptive link to an externally hosted webpage that provides further details of the PL that provider offers:



Listing in the directory is not an endorsement but it is hoped staff in FLPs will find the PL links useful for their work. Some of the options listed are specific to education settings, others are more general. Although focused on Victoria, many of the listings are accessible in other states and territories as well.

An analysis of the types of PL providers and content of PL they offer is provided in section 2.4.4.

2.4 Participating in PL

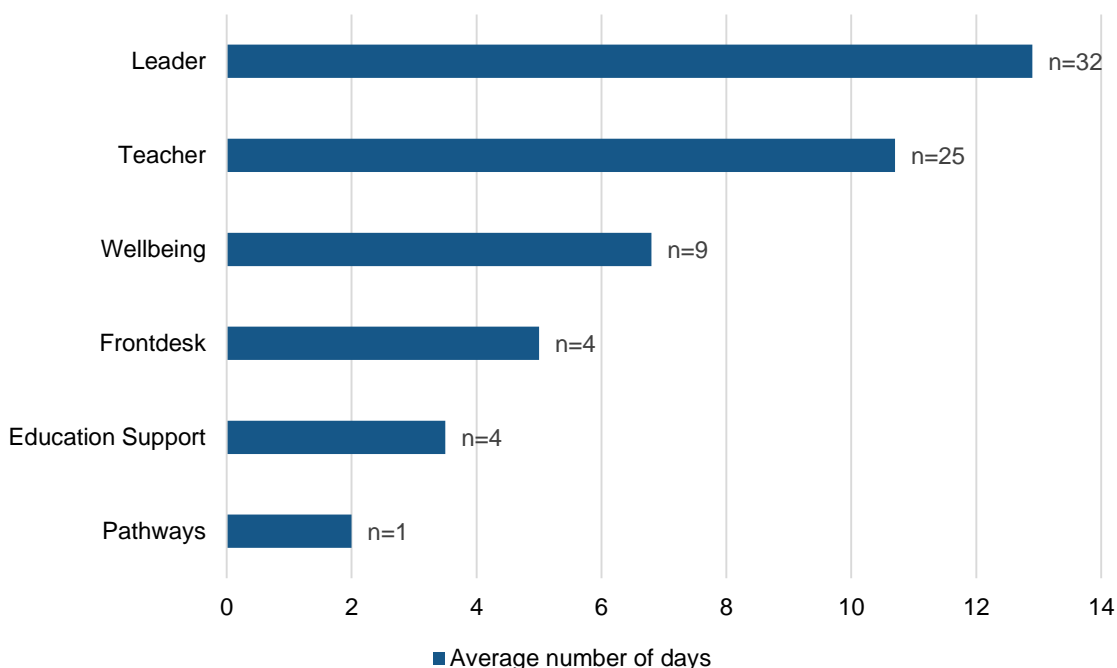
Once staff have found ways to access PL, the next step in the cycle is their actual participation in this PL. Drawing on both interview and survey data, this section analyses the reported number of days staff spent in PL, participation in various PL content areas and types of activities, and who provides PL of relevance to staff in FLPs. It considers variations across FLP staff roles and makes some comparisons to data on Australian secondary school teachers where appropriate.

2.4.1 Days spent in PL

The survey and interviews showed that staff across various roles undertake at least some PL. The specific content and types undertaken by staff in these different roles are reported in sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3. Staff were asked in the survey to estimate the number of days (defined as 6-8 hours) they spent on professional learning activities and to include all activities: accredited or not, organised or self-directed. This broad definition may explain some of the large reported numbers. Of the 80 FLP staff who reported the number of days they had spent in PL over the last 12 months, 42 people (52.5%) reported 1-8 days, the median number was 8 days, and the average number of days was 10.4 days¹⁸.

Whilst noting the small numbers of staff in some roles who provided a response to this question, across FLP staff roles the survey suggests variance. As Figure 7 highlights leaders and teachers reported a much higher number of days spent in PL over the last 12 months than staff in other roles.

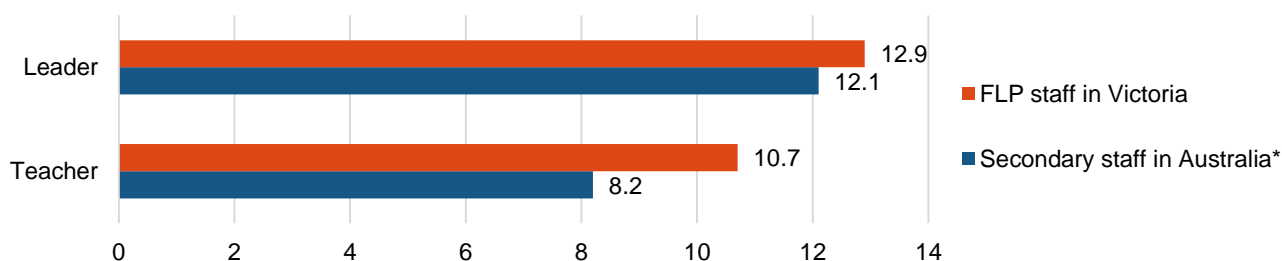
Figure 7: FLP staff role and average number of days reported spent in PL over last 12 months



¹⁸ 5 outliers were removed.

On average, Figure 8 shows FLP leaders reported spending 12.9 days over the last year in PL, a number very close to the 12.1 days reported by secondary school leaders in Australia. FLP teachers reported spending 10.7 days in PL, higher than the 8.2 days reported by secondary school leaders in Australia (SiAS 2013 data in McKenzie et al., 2014 pp.69-70). The higher participation rate of FLP teachers in PL is perhaps reflective of the complexity of teaching in this context, which their pre-service teacher education and pre-FLP teaching experience may not have prepared them well for.

Figure 8: Teachers' average number of days reported spent in PL over last 12 months



*SiAS 2013 data in McKenzie et al., 2014, pp.69-70

2.4.2 Content of PL undertaken

FLP staff surveyed reported they had undertaken PL in a wide range of content areas over the last 12 months across seven umbrella categories: collaboration, supporting staff, curriculum, instructional practices, behaviour and engagement, wellbeing, and student diversity¹⁹. As Figure 9 highlights, staff reported the highest participation rates in topic areas categorised under wellbeing and student diversity:

- Student welfare and wellbeing (69%)
- Child / youth mental health training (61%)
- Working with students experiencing social or economic disadvantage (58%)
- Teaching students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities (56%)

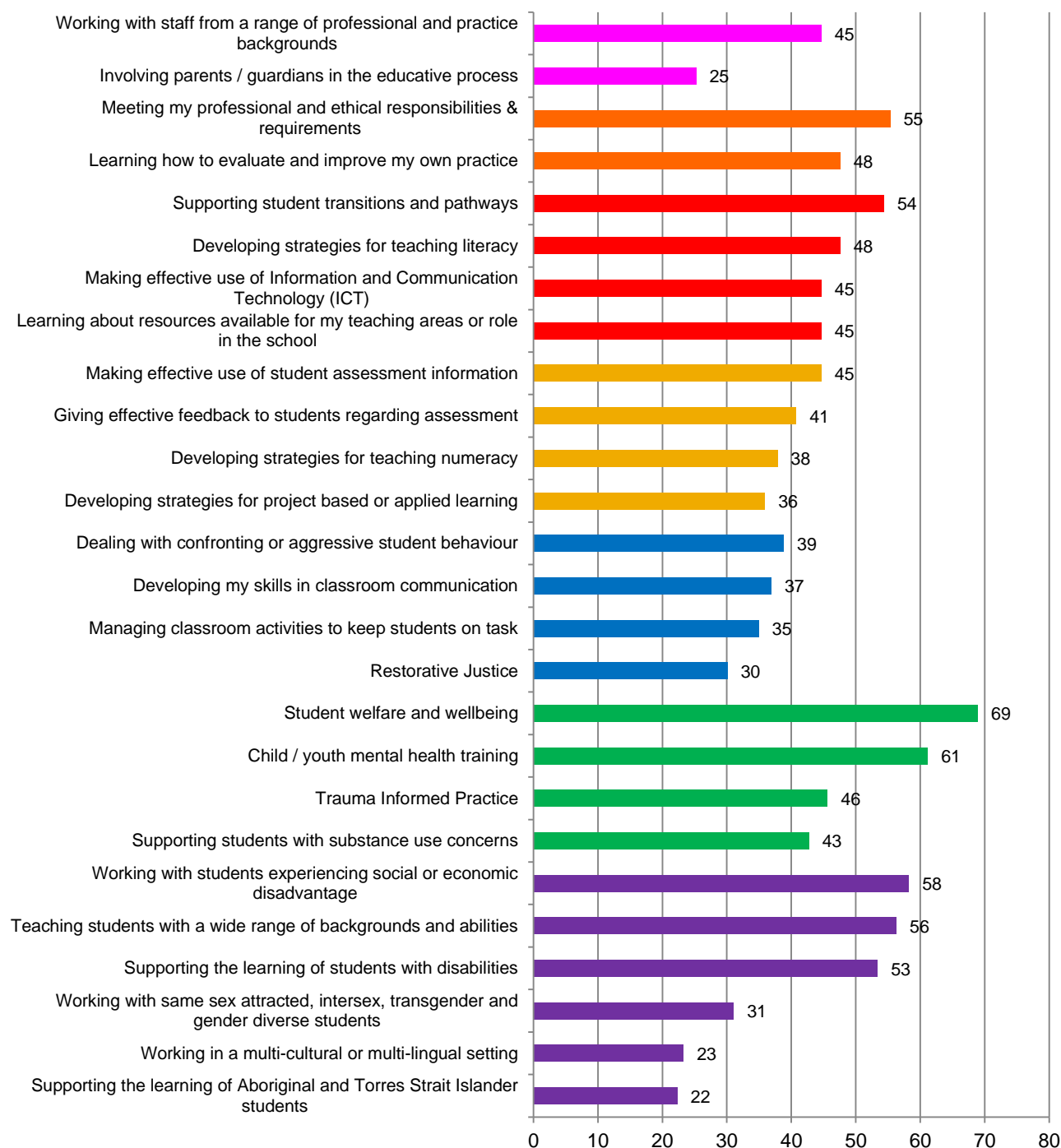
The relatively high participation rates in these topic areas are not unexpected in the context of the cohort of students attending FLPs. The higher level of participation in certain topic areas within this category may be due to a higher need or simply to the availability of PL. It may also reflect the complex relationship between wellbeing and learning, underpinned by an understanding of the need to “tackle [wellbeing] first – before we can work with a young person regarding their education” (Leader – Survey):

I think the most beneficial is more the stuff that is around wellbeing. So I really valued yesterday's chat about restorative justice because I thought I can really use those suggestions in my everyday teaching. (Laura, Teacher - Interview)

Whilst all FLP staff may consider undertaking PL in wellbeing and student diversity to support their practice, whatever their role, PL related to a specific aspect of teaching, for example, may only be of relevance to teaching staff.

¹⁹ We have allocated all topics to a single category as a useful overview and to connect with the Online Directory (see page 42). However, we acknowledge some topics may fit more than one category.

Figure 9: FLP staff participation rates in different content areas over the last 12 months (%)



These colours reflect the Online Directory (see page 30)

- Collaboration
- Behaviour & Engagement
- Supporting Staff
- Wellbeing
- Curriculum
- Student Diversity
- Instructional Practices

As highlighted in Figure 9, PL participation by FLP staff was lowest in the following content areas:

- Support the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (22%)
- Working in a multi-cultural or multi-lingual setting (23%)
- Involving parents / guardians in the educative process (25%)

It is noteworthy that three topics within the 'student diversity' category were amongst the most common, but two others (the first two above) were the least common. The low participation rates in PL related to these areas is surprising, as it might be expected that these would be of relevance in the context of the culturally diverse nature of the student population in Victoria. In particular Koorie students commonly have negative experiences in conventional schools (DEECD, 2010) and thus are more likely to seek alternative forms of educational provision to complete their schooling, such as FLPs.

Role differences

It is expected that staff in different roles would undertake PL in different content areas related to their requirements of their role (e.g. wellbeing related for wellbeing staff, and curriculum and instructional practices for teaching staff) but that all staff would be likely to undertake PL in some of the content areas (e.g. meeting my professional and ethical responsibilities). Responses to the survey showed that:

- At least 18% of teachers and 20% of leaders had taken part in all of the possible topic areas suggesting each have some relevance for their roles. Similarly, over 20% of wellbeing and over 17% of education support staff had taken part in 22 of the 26 content areas.
- Pathways and front desk staff had undertaken PL in the least number of areas: front desk 16 areas, pathways 10 areas. Both constitute, however, small numbers in the survey: 5 and 2 staff only.
- Surprisingly no education support staff had participated in PL on developing my skills in classroom communication or developing strategies for project or applied learning. Again, however, the number of respondent in this group is low: 6 staff only.

The survey data also showed that across many of the PL areas teachers had the highest proportion of staff participating in comparison to the other roles but that leaders were also well represented in many of the areas. Wellbeing staff, as might be expected, had higher participation in areas related to: wellbeing, student diversity and behaviour, and engagement. Around one-third of wellbeing staff had undertaken PL in curriculum and instructional content areas:

- making effective use of student assessment information
- managing classroom activities to keep students on task
- developing my skills in classroom communication
- giving effective feedback to students regarding assessment

This kind of education related PL participation from wellbeing staff is perhaps indicative of the role expectations of such staff (e.g. youth workers, social workers) when working in an FLP and their contribution to student learning. The areas with the highest participation rates for leaders, teachers and wellbeing staff are listed below. There are many similarities in terms of the kinds of PL they were most likely to have participated in over the last year. The only major difference between the groups is the high participation rate in PL for developing strategies for teaching literacy for teachers, which would be expected given their role:

Over 65% of **leaders** had participated in PL on:

- student welfare and wellbeing (81%)
- child / youth mental health training (67%)
- working with students experiencing social or economic disadvantage (67%)
- teaching students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities (67%)

Over 65% of **teachers** had participated in PL on:

- developing strategies for teaching literacy (74%)
- child / youth mental health training (68%)
- student welfare and wellbeing (65%).

Around 65% of **wellbeing staff** had participated in PL on:

- student welfare and wellbeing (64%)
- working with students experiencing social or economic disadvantage (64%)

Across sectors

The survey question distributed to FLP staff had a number of additional content areas not in the SiAS, in order to cover the range of staff roles and practices specific to FLPs. Nevertheless, there is still some value in looking at the participation rates in activities that were asked about in both our survey with FLP teachers in Victoria and in relation to Australian secondary teachers surveyed in SiAS 2013.

Figure 10 highlights that similar percentages of FLP teachers and secondary school teachers participated in PL related to:

- meeting professional and ethical responsibilities,
- making effective use of student assessment information, and
- managing classroom activities to keep students on task.

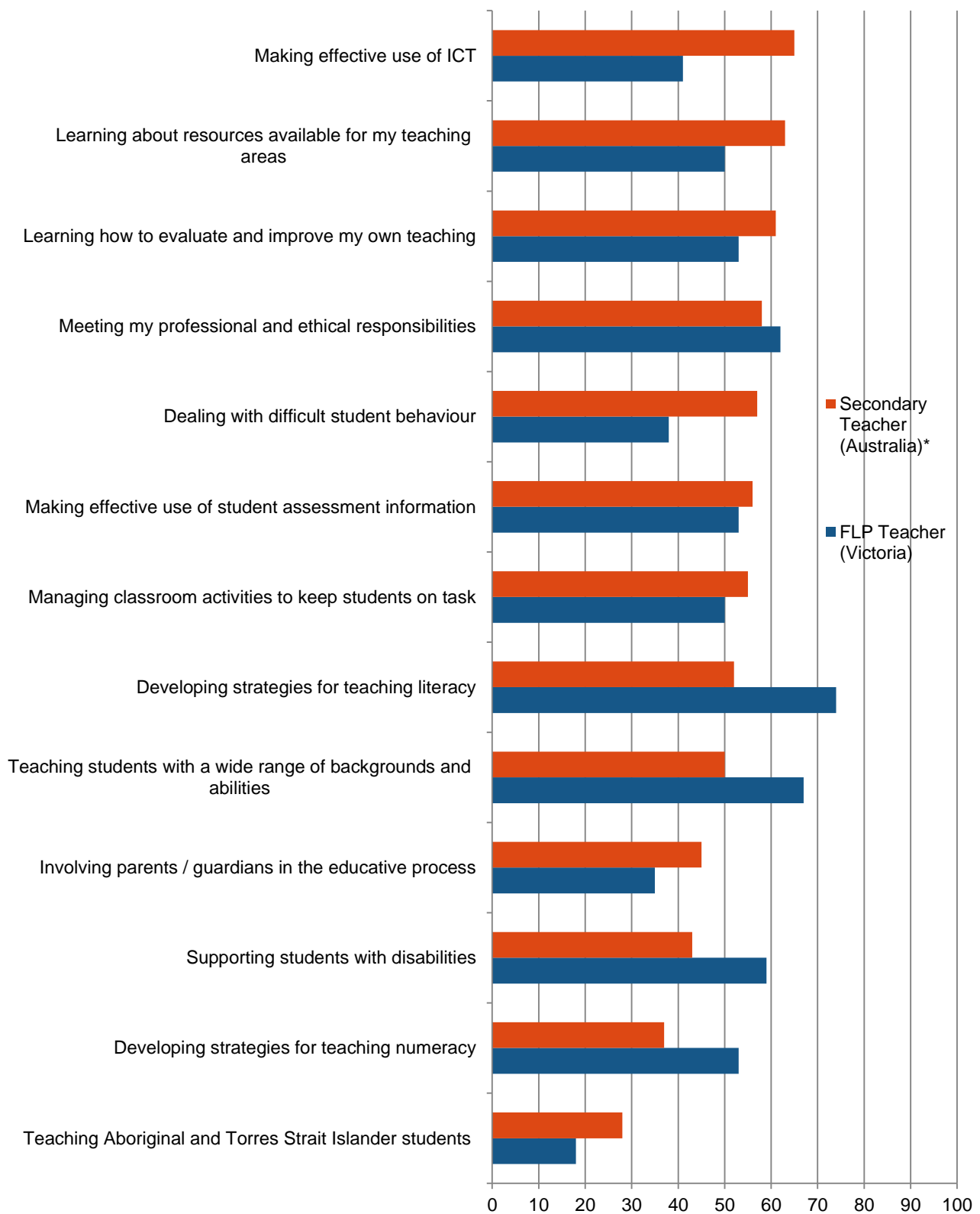
Figure 10 also shows content areas where FLP teachers reported notably lower participation in relation their mainstream colleagues, these were:

- making effective use of ICT, and
- dealing with difficult student behaviour.

Content areas where FLP teachers reported notably higher participation in relation to their mainstream colleagues were:

- developing strategies for teaching literacy,
- teaching students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities,
- supporting students with disabilities, and
- developing strategies for teaching numeracy.

Figure 10: Teachers participation rates in different content areas over the last 12 months (%)



*SiAS 2013 data in McKenzie et al., 2014, p.71

Supporting FLP staff further

Not all content areas were captured through the 26 options provided in the survey. The interview data highlighted three further content areas of PL staff had undertaken that are worth mentioning. These all relate to the umbrella category 'supporting staff'. Firstly, staff in various roles reported undertaking PL related to their own wellbeing and self-care:

We also had one [PD] at the end of last term for the staff, about staff wellbeing as well, which I think is really important because working in this field we put all of our energy and time and concentration into the kids and their wellbeing. It can be pretty tough going and stuff, I think, so that was really nice to be able to do that, concentrate on being mindful and all of those sorts of things (Caitlin, Pathways – Interview)

Secondly, staff undertook PL that supports innovative practice when working in an education setting with restricted funds, including how to raise funds to support a richer student learning experience:

I mean for me that's the kind of the nuts and bolts of the alternative ed teacher is, you're always going to be hamstrung by your budgets. So a lot of the training that I do, or not training but like informal PD that I do with staff, is around, this is how we can get around this financially. Don't have these ideas and then always kind of think 'oh we can't do it because we don't have money'. There are always other ways to go around it. Just setting up partnerships, getting any kind of support, doing grants, fundraising in different ways that gives kids ownership over, if the money's going to turn into this project then they'll go hammer and tongs for the money... So basically a lot of the training is around just how to negotiate the poorest paid education setting in Australia basically. We're always going to have less money than mainstreams and private schools. So that's been the focus for the last couple of weeks with staff, because we're getting to the end of the year and I want to see more excursions, more projects and stuff rolling out. (Steven, Leader - Interview)

These two content areas may be specific to the context of working in an FLP but perhaps are also relevant to mainstream schools experiencing similar challenges and disadvantages.

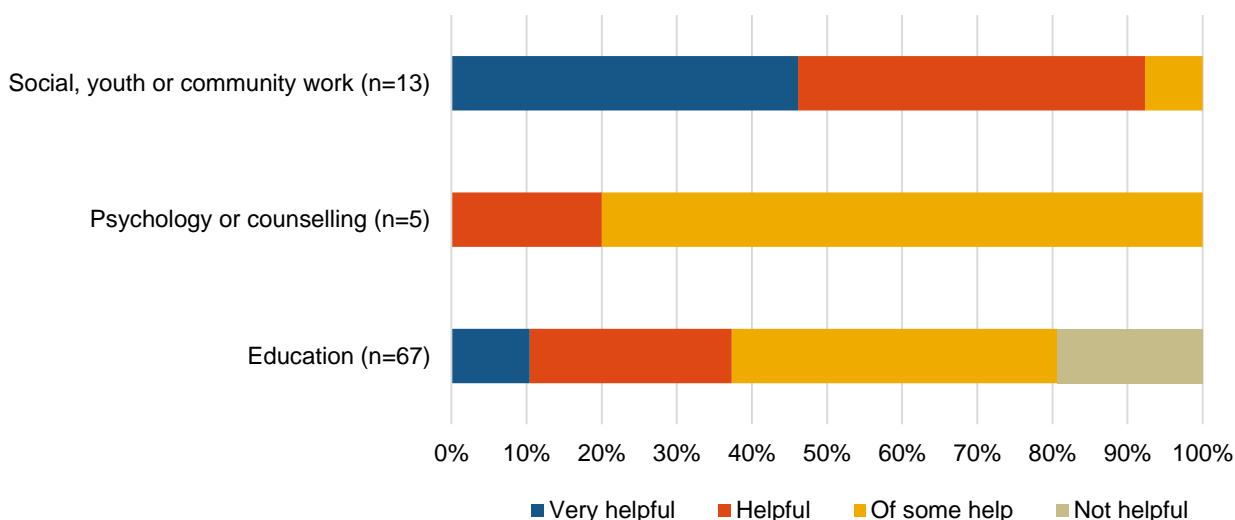
Thirdly, those in leader roles spoke of undertaking PL related to educational leadership such as on coordinating programs, working with data, leading professional learning, negotiating with people, and time management skills.

2.4.3 Types of PL activities

Pre-service, induction and in-service PL activities are part of a continuum of learning for staff in educational settings.

Figure 11 shows that less than 40% of the FLP staff surveyed who had undertaken an initial course in education found it helpful or very helpful in preparing them for working in a FLP. Nearly 20% did not find it helpful at all. Among those who had undertaken an initial qualification in social work, youth work or community work, a far greater proportion found this had helped prepare them for their role in FLPs: over 90% reported it was helpful or very helpful, with no-one reporting it was of no help at all. The small number (n=5) whose initial qualification had been in psychology or counselling had found it either 'of some help' or 'helpful'.

Figure 11: Helpfulness of pre-service qualifications in preparing to work in FLP (%)



Initial teacher education is usually geared primarily towards conventional schooling, and does not always prepare teachers well for working in the specific context of FLPs. This is understandable in the context of course accreditation requirements. Nevertheless, some targeted attention to skills and knowledge needed in FLPs (for example in relation to literacy, engagement, and mental health) would be useful for new teachers in many mainstream settings as well. Lack of preparation for working with marginalised young people can create the “praxis shock” experienced by newly qualified teachers that, in turn, can lead to an early exit from the profession (European Commission, 2010 cited in OECD 2014, p.88). Scaffolding teachers and education support staff in the transition from initial education courses, but also from more conventional schooling, into FLPs is essential. Because schooling is done differently in these settings, it requires teachers to, as Roisin (Teacher – Interview) reflects, learn “to teach all over again”:

[My leader] made a comment when I started work here about when she worked at [school] about learning to teach all over again and I kind of went ‘I thought I knew how to teach, that’s an interesting comment’. I really realise it now because teaching these kids really requires a lot of honing down to the micro-skills of the teaching and putting them all back together again.

This is something that induction programs can help with:

The teaching environment here is so different to a school, so that’s the thing that I think we learn off, whether it be your coordinator once you start or through the actual induction that you spend time before you start. So we have a staff induction at the beginning of the year when people start where they’ll do all their official paperwork at head office but then they’ll have time with a coordinator and they’ll also have time with a buddy or a mentor that they’ll work with as part of that (Oliver, Leader – Interview)

Of the staff who responded to the survey, a large majority, almost 70%, had participated in an orientation program designed for new staff when they first started at their FLP. As Figure 12 indicates staff in pathways and education support roles, however, were less likely than staff in other roles to have received this support.

Figure 12: Participation rates in an orientation program designed for new staff (%)

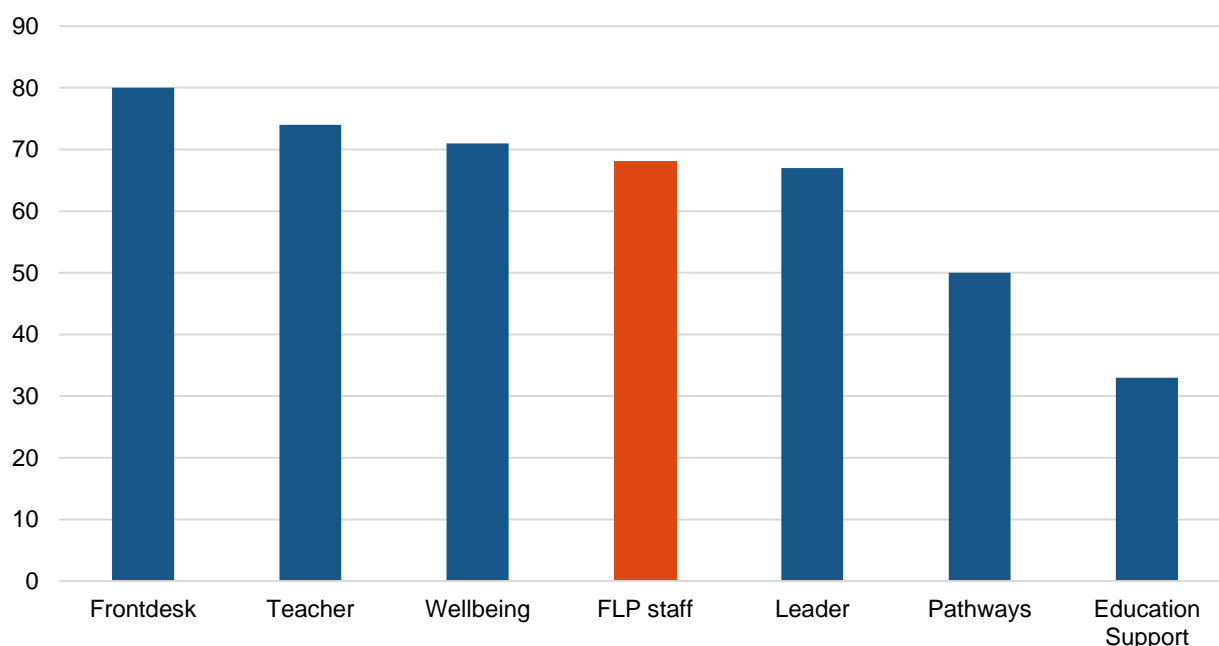
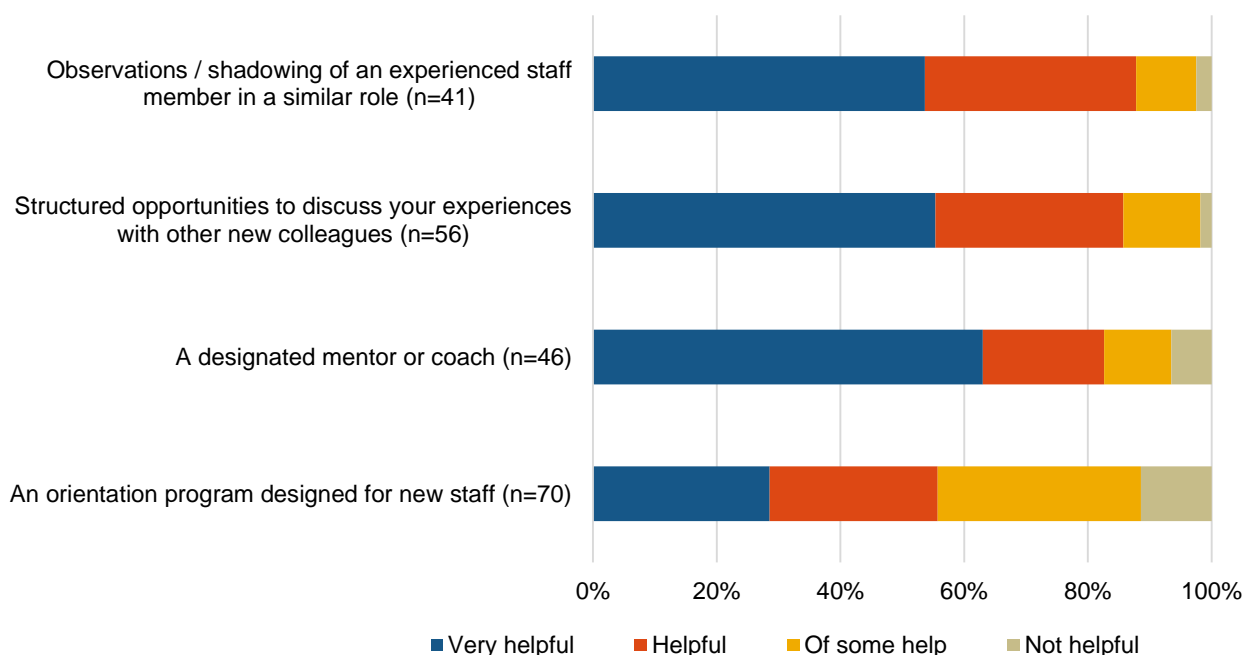


Figure 13 below shows the number of staff surveyed who undertook each type of induction activity and how helpful those who experienced that activity found it for their role. Undertaking an orientation program is the most common form of induction activity but a lower proportion of those who undertook the activity rated it ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful’ in comparison to the other types. The other types are similar to in-service, collaborative PL activities discussed in more detail later in this section and to internal provision of PL by FLPs (such as coaching), which is discussed in section 2.5.1.

Figure 13: Helpfulness of induction activities when started at FLP (%)

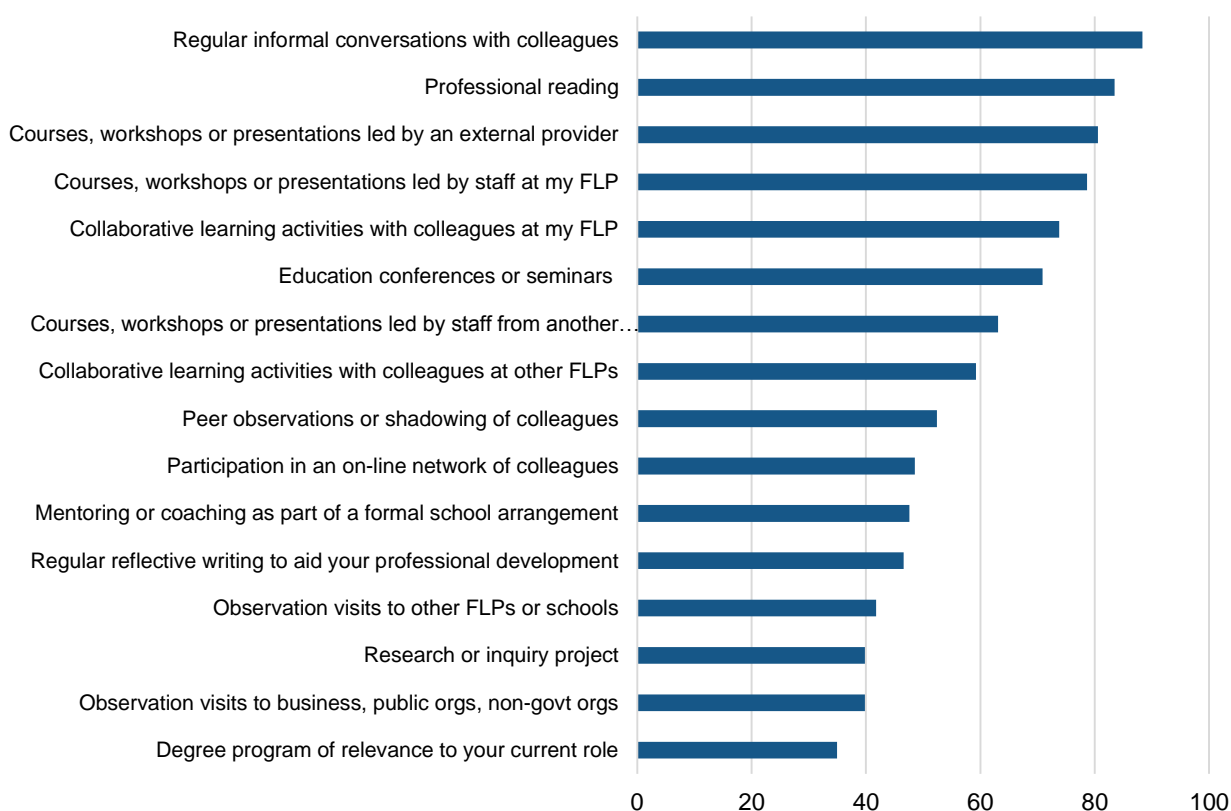


Looking now at in-service learning more broadly, FLP staff reported engaging in a wide range of different types of PL over the last 12 months:

- over 90% of staff surveyed reported that over the last year they had undertaken at least 4 of the 16 different types of PL activities listed,
- at least 70% had engaged in 8 types or more, and
- half in over 10 types of PL activity.

As Figure 14 indicates the types of PL FLP staff participated in varied in terms of the level of formality and structure, and the extent to which the PL was an individual or collaborative experience.

Figure 14: Types of PL activities participated in over the last 12 months (%)



The activities above can be categorised as being provided externally, internally or by staff themselves, as will be explored in section 2.4.4 (PL Providers). The most common activities occur across all three categories, and comprise both more informal and unstructured, as well as more formal and structured PL activities:

- regular informal conversations with colleagues to aid PD (88%)
- professional reading to aid PD (83%)
- courses, workshops or presentations led by an external provider (81%)
- courses, workshops or presentations led by staff at their FLP (79%)

This list shows that both collaborative learning activities, including conversations, and independent learning have high participation rates.

In terms of activities specifically labelled 'collaborative', nearly three quarters (74%) of staff surveyed reported engaging in collaborative learning activities with colleagues at their own FLP, and a high proportion (59%) in collaborative learning activities with staff at other FLPs. Regular informal conversations with colleagues can occur in different times and spaces within an FLP:

I'll hear people say that "Professional learning happens at the dishwasher, it happens at the photo copier, it happens if you're having a cup of tea, it's happening after class, it's when the teachers talk within the lesson". That's really where professional learning is going on and making sure that we're keeping on top of current thinking, not just being closed minded. (Lisa, Leader – Interview)

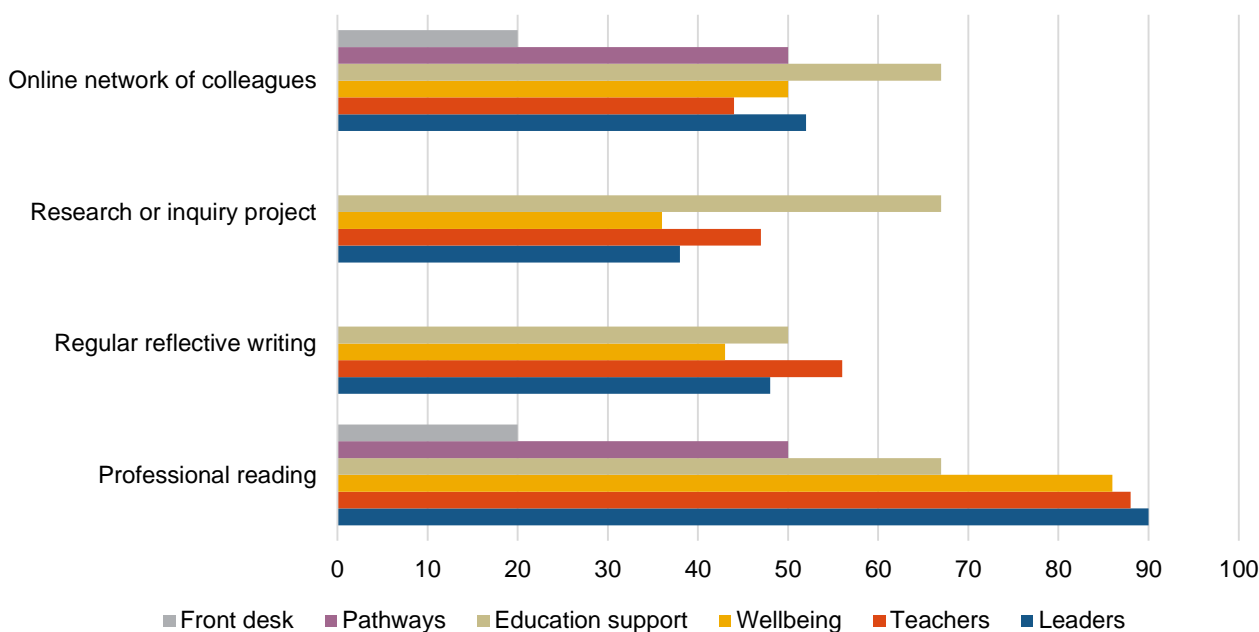
Not unexpectedly given the cost and time commitment, the PL activity with the lowest reported participation rate (35%) was a degree program of relevance to their current role.

Role differences

Looking across the different staff roles, whilst bearing in mind the small numbers of education support (N=6), pathways (N=2) and front-desk (N=5) staff surveyed, some interesting similarities and differences in participation rates in different types of PL over the last 12 months emerged.

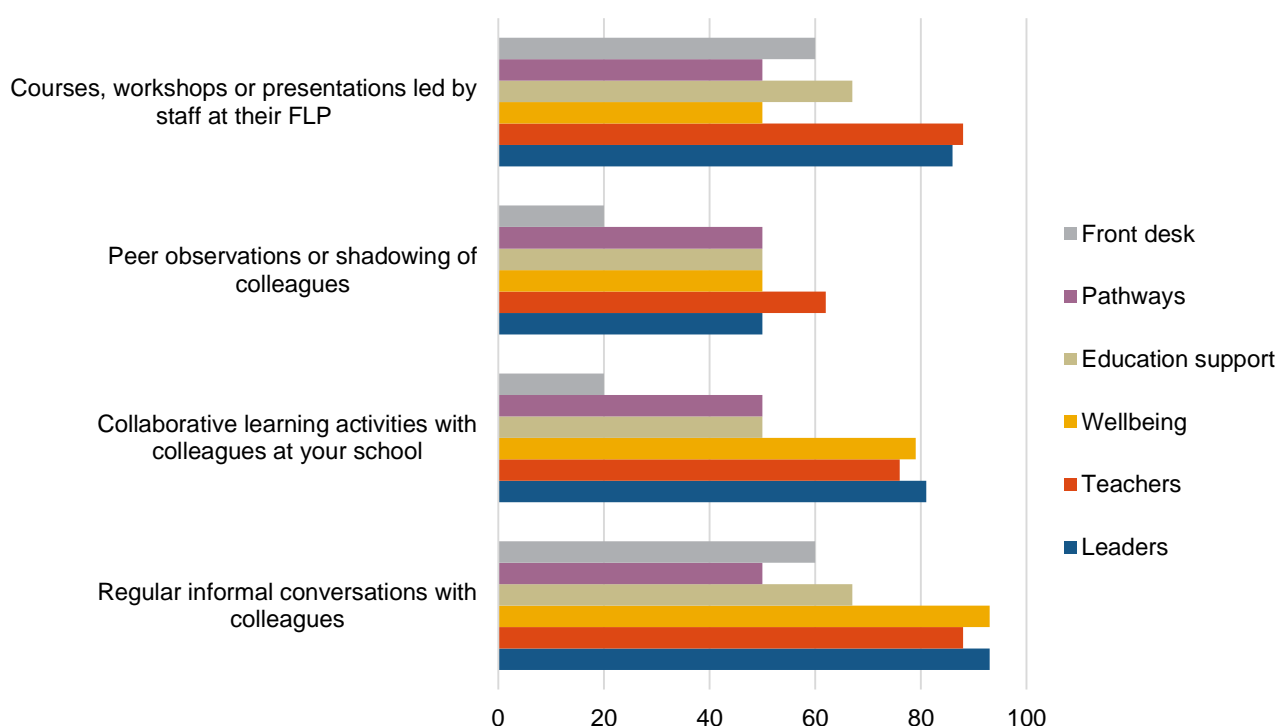
First, it is evident that all staff took responsibility for their own learning, see Figure 15. The vast majority of leaders (90%), teachers (88%) and wellbeing staff (86%) engaged in their own professional reading, but some education support (67%, or 4 people), pathways (50%, 1 person) and front desk (20%, 1 person) staff undertook that activity too. Participation in an online network of colleagues was most common among education support staff (67%, or 4 out of 6 staff), followed by leaders, wellbeing and pathways staff (all about half) and teachers (44%). These self-directed activities highlight a substantial commitment by staff in FLPs. Their individualised and flexible nature helps staff negotiate some of the access barriers noted in section 2.3.2. Interestingly this also reflects a common approach to student learning in FLPs (Te Riele, 2014).

Figure 15: Self-directed PL activities by role (%)



Collaborative learning within FLPs was also common across all roles, especially regular informal conversations with colleagues, see Figure 16. This is testimony to the culture of FLPs. However, when most staff take part in such activities, the few who do not may acutely feel being left out. For example, Figure 16 shows that among the three largest groups, it is much less common for wellbeing staff to have taken part in courses, workshops and presentations by colleagues, than for teachers and leaders. Although the numbers of front desk, pathways and education support staff in the survey is low, the data seem to suggest that overall these staff have less access to internal collaborative activities. Since these kinds of PL activities are more amenable to being steered by FLP leadership than some of the others, it would be worth ensuring such collegiality is inclusive of all roles.

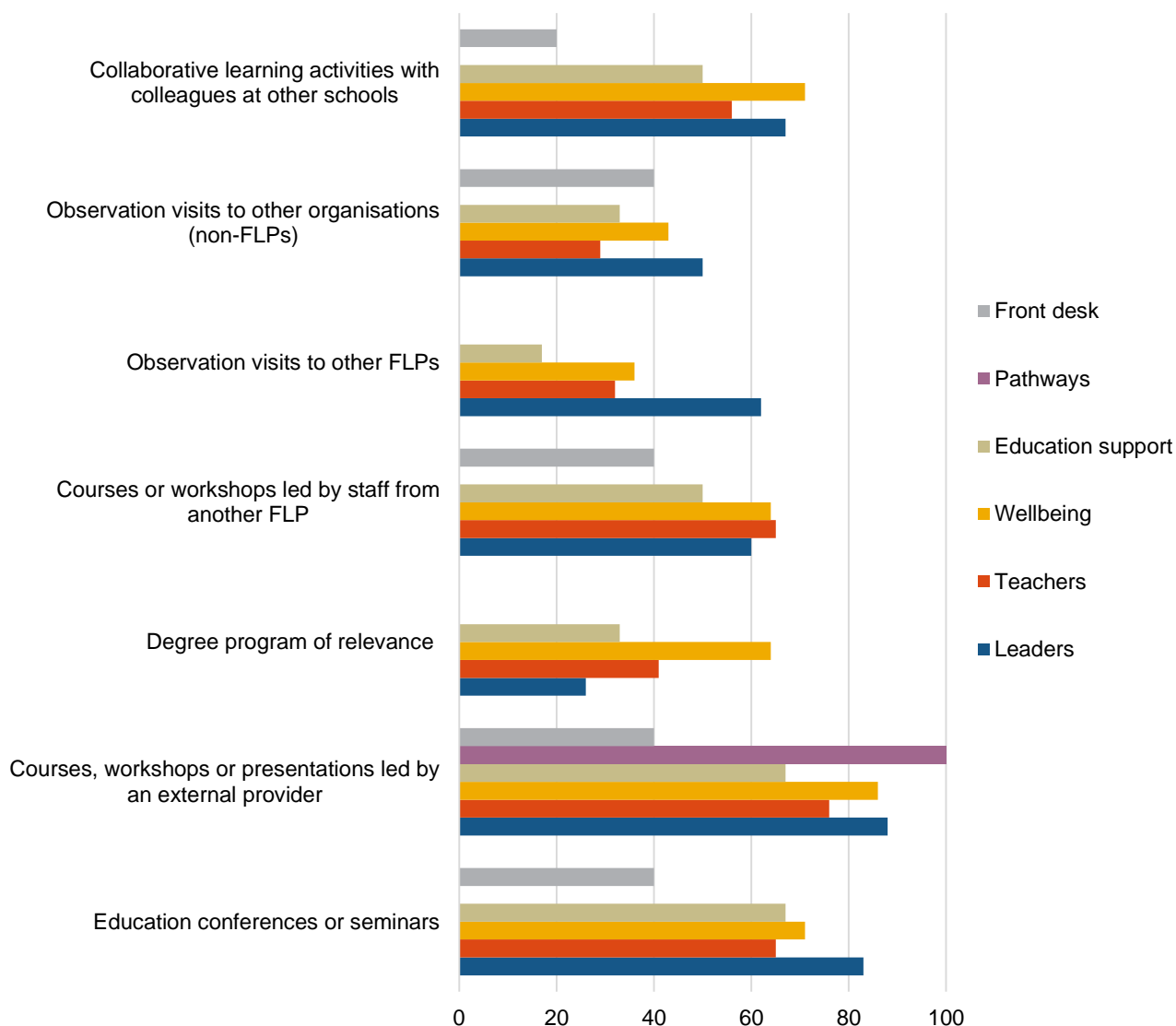
Figure 16: Internal collaborative PL activities by role (%)



Beyond one's own FLP, collegial activities were common across most groups, but played a particularly important role for leaders, see Figure 17. Collaborative learning activities with colleagues at other schools were more common for leaders (67%) and wellbeing staff (71%) than for teachers (56%).

Finally, formal learning opportunities were embraced by all roles (see Figure 17). Externally provided courses, workshops and presentations most common: from 100% of pathways staff to 40% of front desk staff. Degree programs were part of the PL for two-thirds of wellbeing staff (64%) and one-third of education support staff (33%). These staff are able to enter their profession with a Certificate IV or Diploma, and therefore may be more likely to enrol in a degree program while working. Nevertheless substantial proportion of teachers (41%) and leaders (26%) also were enrolled in a degree. While we did not ask which degree staff were engaged in as part of current or recent PL, we do know that several teachers and leaders had listed as part of the qualifications they had completed both higher level ones (Master's) and specialised ones (e.g. related to Alcohol and Other Drugs or Language, Literacy and Numeracy).

Figure 17: External collegial and formal PL activities by role (%)



Across sectors

The FLP staff, and FLP teachers, who participated in our survey appear to have good access to and participation in a variety of types of PL. The OECD TALIS 2013 data available on the PL experiences of lower secondary education teachers in Australia allows for some comparison to the experiences of FLP staff, and particularly FLP teachers, in this regard.

Figure 18 shows participation rates in selected types of PL activities that were listed in both surveys. It highlights that FLP teachers reported higher participation rates in all of these types of PL activity aside from courses and workshops. The survey responses indicated that FLP teachers were at least twice as likely to go on observation visits (whether to other FLPs / schools or to non-school organisations) than the Australian teachers surveyed for TALIS. They also indicated that FLP teachers were a lot more likely to have participated in a degree program than Australian teachers in the last twelve months (41% in comparison to 10%).

Figure 18: Participation rates in selected types of PL activities over the last twelve months (%)

TALIS Data*	Australian lower secondary education teachers	Our survey Data	FLP Teachers	All FLP staff
Courses / workshops	85.7%	Course / workshops internally provided	88.2%	78.6%
		Course / workshops external provider	76.5%	80.6%
		Courses / workshops other FLP	64.7%	63.1%
		All courses / workshops	76.5%	74.1%
Education conferences or seminars	56.3%	Education conferences or seminars	64.7%	70.9%
Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching	44.4%	Mentoring or coaching	55.9%	47.6%
		Peer observations or shadowing	61.8%	52.4%
		All mentoring, coaching, peer observation and coaching	58.9%	50.0%
Individual or collaborative research	37.4%	Research or inquiry project	47.1%	39.8%
Observation visits to other schools	14.7%	Observation visits to other FLPs or schools	32.4%	41.7%
Observation visits to business, public orgs, non-government orgs	13.6%	Observation visits to business, public orgs, non-government orgs	29.4%	39.8%
Qualification programme (e.g. a degree program)	10.0%	Degree program of relevance to your current role	41.2%	35.0%

* Source: OECD, TALIS 2013 Database, reported in Freeman et al., 2014, p.82

2.4.4 PL providers

The various activities listed in Figure 12 above can be categorised according to the nature of the PL provider or facilitator: internal, external or self-directed. Internally provided PL is defined as PL provided within a staff member's program involving the formal or informal sharing of expertise through activities such as internally developed courses or workshops, peer observations, mentoring, collaborative learning activities or regular informal conversations with colleague to aid PL.

Externally provided PL refers to PL activities led by external organisations or experts such as degree programs, conferences, courses or workshops provided by an external organisation, observations or visits to other settings, and collaborative learning with colleagues at other settings.

PL activities may also be more self-directed and not involve a formal internal or external provider, including learning that occurs through engagement with resources such as peer networks, reflective writing, or professional reading.

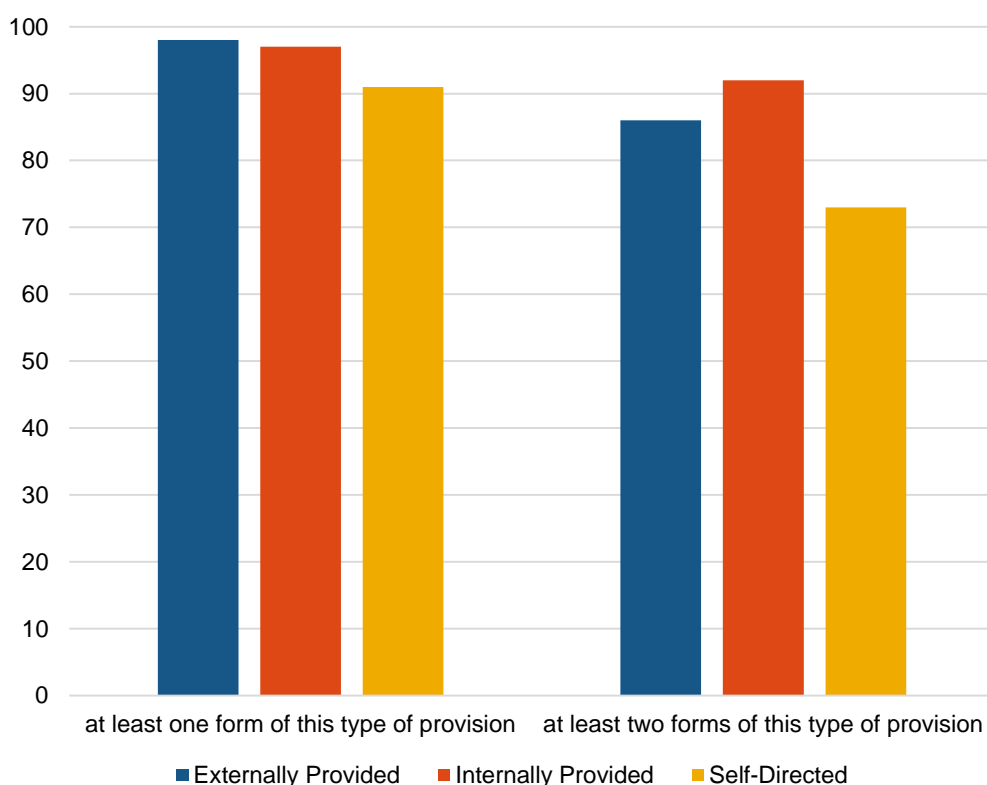
These three categories of PL provision can also be categorised in terms of their level of formality. The borders between the categories and the levels in Figure 19 are not always sharply drawn. Some provision could be seen to cross over between two categories and/or two levels. For example 'participation in an online network' is self-directed but also has an element of 'external provision, with the staff member learning from others in the network. It can also be more or less formal, depending on the way the particular network operates. Nevertheless, the distinctions in Figure 19 are useful for highlighting the diversity of the landscape of PL provision, well beyond traditional conceptualisations of 'external/formal' PD.

Figure 19: Categories of PL by level of formality

	More formal	Less Formal
External	<i>Degree program of relevance to your current role (35%)</i> <i>Courses, workshops or presentations led by an external provider (81%)</i> <i>Courses, workshops or presentations led by staff from another FLP (63%)</i> <i>Education conferences or seminars (71%)</i>	<i>Collaborative learning activities with colleagues at other schools (59%)</i> <i>Observation visits to business, public organisations, & non-govt organisations (40%)</i> <i>Observation visits to other FLPs or schools (42%)</i>
Internal	<i>Courses, workshops or presentations led by staff at my FLP (79%)</i> <i>Mentoring or coaching as part of a formal school arrangement (48%)</i>	<i>Regular informal conversations with colleagues (88%)</i> <i>Collaborative learning activities with colleagues at my FLP (74%)</i> <i>Peer observations or shadowing of colleagues (52%)</i>
Self-directed	<i>Research or inquiry project on a topic of interest to you professionally (40%)</i> <i>Participation in an on-line network of colleagues for professional development purposes (49%)</i>	<i>Professional reading to aid your professional development (83%)</i> <i>Regular reflective writing to aid your professional development (47%)</i>

Figure 20 shows that FLP staff surveyed had high participation rates across all three of these categories of provision: internally provided, externally provided and self-directed PL.

Figure 20: Types of PL provision accessed in the last 12 months (%)



Internally provided PL

Almost all FLP staff surveyed (97%) had participated in at least one form of internally provided PL at their place of work, and most (92%) had taken part in at least two forms of this type of provision.

Mirroring the high levels of reported participation rates in internally provided PL in the survey data, staff interviewed also reported that much of their PL occurred within their FLP, through both formal and informal interactions with colleagues and young people. Some staff credited all of their learning to this:

To be honest that's where I draw 100% of the support, and learning that I need in this role - all from colleagues. (Steven, Leader - Interview).

I honestly believe I get most of my learning from the young people. I could go to a million different courses and do a million different short courses in this and that, but I definitely think your learning is 100% on your job. (Natalie, Wellbeing – Interview)

The delivery of PL by FLP staff to their colleagues within their program and to others outside of their program is discussed further in section 2.5 'Delivering PL to others'.

External PL providers

Almost all FLP staff (98%) had also participated in at least one form of externally provided PL, and a large majority (86%) had taken part in at least two forms of this type of PL provision over the last 12 months.

Responses to the survey provided the names of 90 different external providers through which FLP staff had accessed PL of relevance to their work. These providers can be categorised into eight different types:

- other FLPs
- universities
- conferences
- professional and peak bodies
- networks
- not-for-profits
- private providers
- state and local organisations

The providers named by the survey respondents work across the seven key content areas identified as relevant to the practices of FLP staff (see section 2.4.2).

Figure 21: Content areas and number of PL providers identified

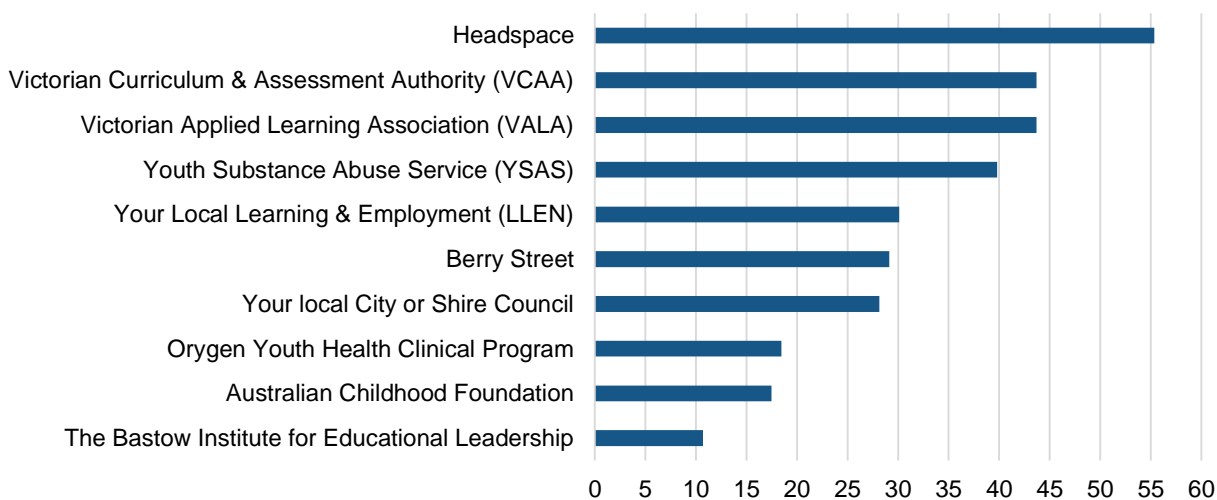
Content area	Providers identified
Wellbeing (e.g. mental health issues, substance misuse, self-harm or suicide, homelessness, trauma informed practice, sexual and physical abuse, child protection)	36
Curriculum (e.g. curriculum development, literacy, numeracy)	22
Supporting staff (e.g. leadership, reflective practice, supervision and / or mentoring staff)	20
Student diversity (e.g. indigenous students, refugee and / or migrant students, cultural competence / awareness, disability, autism, sexual and gender diversity)	17
Instructional practices (e.g. Inquiry, Applied, or Project based learning, personalised learning / Individualised learning plans, explicit teaching)	16
Collaboration (e.g. working with families / communities, interagency / staff collaboration, referrals)	14
Behaviour and engagement (e.g. challenging behaviours, school refusal, restorative justice)	11

Figure 21 above shows the content areas and the number of providers identified within each area. Providers may have PL offerings across more than one area. The online Directory of Professional Learning for Flexible Learning Programs (VIC)²⁰ produced as part of this project lists providers across these categories, including links to further online information about their PL offerings (also see the information on page 30).

The ten most commonly identified providers of relevant PL for FLP, as identified by the survey respondents, are shown in Figure 22 below. They include not-for-profit organisations, networks, professional and peak bodies, and state and local organisations working across different content areas:

- Over half of the FLP staff surveyed had accessed relevant PL from Headspace (National Youth Mental Health Foundation). This is not surprising given the high levels of mental health concerns within the student population at FLPs, which can be a barrier to student engagement in learning.
- Nearly 45% of staff surveyed had accessed relevant PL from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and from the Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA), suggesting these agencies play an important role in supporting the ongoing learning about curriculum and instructional practices of staff in FLPs.
- Around 30% of respondents reported they had accessed relevant PL through their Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) and 28% through their local City or Shire Council, highlighting the role of local networks and organisations.
- Just under 30% had also accessed relevant PL from Berry Street. Berry Street (Victoria's largest independent child and family welfare agency) runs its own educational programs as well as providing PL to others.

Figure 22: Providers of PL accessed of relevance to role in FLP (top ten) (%)²¹



To summarise then, FLP staff reported a comparable number of days spent in PL to their conventional schooling peers and reported high PL participation rates in a diverse range of content areas and types of PL. FLP staff engage in externally provided, internally provided and self-directed forms of PL provision at similar rates. Through the survey, staff identified 90 external providers offering PL that they had found relevant to their role working with young people in FLPs. These providers were diverse in terms of their governance, the types of PL they offered and the content areas they covered.

²⁰ <http://vala.asn.au/professional-learning/>

²¹ Percentages calculated from the total number of survey respondents (n=103)

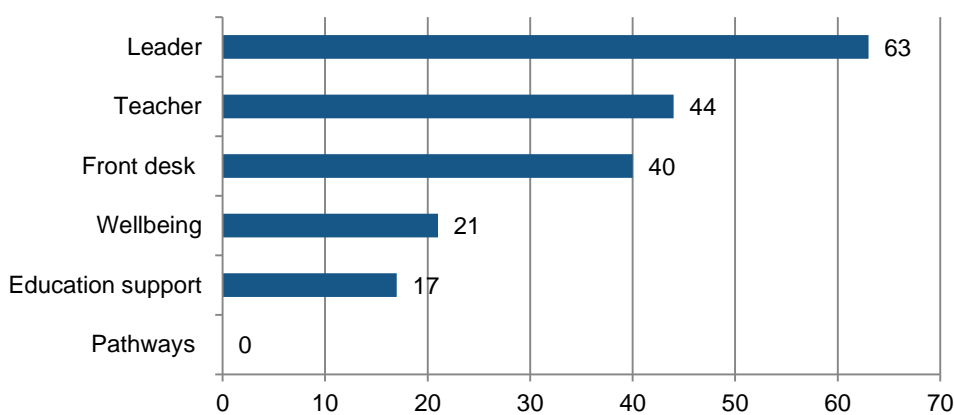
2.5 Delivering PL to others

As shown in section 2.4.3, much professional learning for flexible learning programs is accessed internally. That inevitably means that staff in FLPs are not only receiving PL, they are also delivering it to their colleagues. Moreover, drawing on interview and survey data, we found some FLP staff also deliver PL to colleagues in other FLPs as well as to staff in mainstream education settings.

2.5.1 Within the flexible learning sector

The survey data show that almost half (46%) of the respondents had delivered professional learning for colleagues in the flexible learning sector. As highlighted in Figure 23, people in leadership roles (such as principals and coordinators) were most likely to have done so. This is not surprising, given that much of this delivery is internal, to staff in one's own flexible learning program.

Figure 23: Delivery of PL for colleagues in the flexible learning sector by role (%)



Possibly more unexpected is that 40% of front desk staff indicated they had provided professional learning. However, this equates to only two people, since only five respondents had this role. One simply stated s/he provided “workplace training” while the other explained it had been “helping colleagues to learn the Compass computer system”. Such internal professional learning was also provided by the other groups, for example by sharing resources, supporting quality assurance processes, or running a workshop on a specific topic. Topics mentioned in the survey include “multicultural dealings”, “speech pathology”, “writing SMART goals” [a framework for setting goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound], “TAELL411” [a VET unit of competency addressing adult language, literacy and numeracy skills], and “validation of assessment”.

In our interviews, staff highlighted the delivery of PL internally to colleagues, both formally and more informally. At the more formal end of the scale, staff refer explicitly to “coaching”. This term is evocative of quite directed and explicit support, and this impression is borne out by staff explanations of coaching:

I coach most teachers one on one, so I've got about a half an hour coaching session with everybody one on one each week. Through their performance and development plans we set four goals a term so some people will carry goals over two terms or three terms so we work on whatever those goals are. (Roisin, Teacher - Interview)

Staff from several sites also referred to peer mentoring or a “buddy system” for new staff. In programs with dispersed classrooms, this worked in part by using phone and email communication.

In addition to such individual PL, staff pointed to regular (weekly or fortnightly) meetings of groups of staff which were used for debriefing and providing workshops. At times, such workshops were ‘top down’, providing information about “how you teach these units that are coming up next term” (Oliver, Leader - Interview). More often, these meetings were used for a PL ‘ripple effect’: staff sharing the PL they had engaged in with their colleagues:

When I go to training, or a PD, I come back and we sit around the table and have a chat about it and pass on what I've learnt at that PD, so in a sense we count that as professional learning here. We do that all the time, so that's probably the way in which I do that. I don't necessarily put on a slide-show and all of those sorts of things, but just in general information sharing. [...] At the moment I'm working on my PD plan, which is on some of that scaffolding numeracy stuff we're doing here and I'm going to be presenting all that next week at one of the staff meetings. So we all get a turn to share our knowledge here and help with others' professional learning. (Caitlin, Pathways - Interview)

Such sharing goes some way to addressing the constraints of time and other resources (see section 2.3.2) for accessing PL. This collaborative approach seems to characterise much of the approach to PL in FLPs. In addition, the strengths-based approach to the learning of young people is also applied to the sharing of knowledge among staff, for PL purposes. Steven (Leader - Interview) asserted: “Every one of them [staff] has massive strengths but in very different areas” and Laura (Teacher - Interview) gave an example: “I will be doing something around my strength I guess which is design. [...] we'll all be picking a subject and delivering some kind of PD for each other”.

The proactive outreach to staff learning through coaching, mentoring and regular meetings was supplemented by building a culture in which staff feel enabled to also contact their supervisors themselves if they have a question, as Oliver (Leader - Interview) explained:

A really key thing with the coordinator role is to make sure staff feel comfortable to email you or ring you and ask the silly question because they always feel like they don't want to ask a silly question but you need them to ask anything. Usually you can give them a pretty quick answer, or if they're just not sure about whether they've got the right idea or not, or you can support their ideas.

More generally across staff (not only with supervisors) Steven (Leader – Interview) reinforced that “we all need to be talking to each other constantly about what's working, what's not”. In another program, the co-location of youth workers and teachers in each classroom supported informal PL in terms of getting feedback on practice. Designed to meet the needs of the students it also, perhaps coincidentally, facilitated the PL of staff, highlighting the central role of informal, serendipitous PL within FLPs.

Finally, the nature of work in FLPs as ‘affective labour’ (Kostogriz, 2012) not only leads to a need for PL (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2) but, as the other side of the coin, also to a recognition by FLP leaders of the role of their delivery of PL to their own staff:

I have supervision with staff almost daily because it is a rough job. There is an emotional toll to it. Each class is so complicated. This is a young mum's room. We've got four or five girls up here who have really complicated backgrounds and then they've got children next to them to try and do work. The person running the class is ... amazing and really a high functioning teacher, but regardless, this stuff is challenging as a person, rather than just as a teacher. To be in this space people are really vulnerable who have really intense stories and she's not trained as a psychologist to hold that emotional weight. So a lot of it is around trying to teach emotional resilience and how to really make sure people have a bit of a self-care plan as well. (Steven, Leader - Interview)

Although teaching generally has been recognised as relational and care work (e.g. Noddings, 1984), this aspect of PL seems to be particularly relevant in the FLP context, with implications for the content and frequency of PL support offered by FLPs to their own staff.

For delivery of PL to other FLPs, workshop topics listed in the survey include “numeracy in the middle years”, “challenging behaviours”, and show-and-tell type presentations about the presenter’s own FLP. In addition, survey respondents pointed to hosting observation visits by other FLPs, and to presenting at FLP sector conferences, such as the North Western DET region re-engagement conference or the Community Schools, Alternative Settings and Teaching Units conference. When asked about providing PL to staff in other FLPs, none of the interviewed staff said they had done this. Some staff commented they’d like to offer PL to educators in other FLPs, including Daniel (Teacher – Interview):

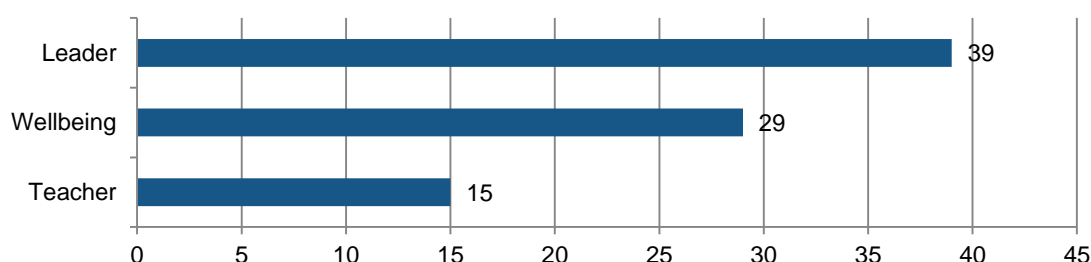
It's something I would probably have a chat to upper management at some stage about, given I have a fair bit of experience. I'd like to get into delivering that sort of stuff and also got the Adult Ed background. ... I've got a lot of experience that I could help some new staff with and I think it's really important for people to give back to the sector because otherwise young people come in and they start from scratch and have no idea.

2.5.2 To staff from conventional education settings

Delivery of professional learning by FLP staff to conventional education settings is less common, according to the survey data, than within the FLP sector: a quarter (24.5%) of staff had done so (see Figure 22). Nevertheless, this sharing of knowledge beyond FLP boundaries offers a glimpse of how FLPs can indeed be ‘incubators of innovation’ (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014) for the mainstream.

Again, staff in leadership more often provide PL to mainstream settings than staff in other roles. No front desk, education support and pathways staff indicated having done so. Interestingly, while twice as many teachers than youth workers indicated having provided PL within the FLP sector, the reverse is the case for delivery of PL to mainstream settings (see Figure 24 below).

Figure 24: Delivery of PL to staff from conventional education settings by role (%)



In describing the nature of this delivery, survey respondents commonly referred to presentations and workshops, for example on “awareness of other styles of teaching”, “the limitations and pitfalls of praising students”, “pathways information”, “how to work with challenging at-risk students”, and “teaching literacy to low achieving students”. The audience for such presentations ranged from a single specific school to groups such as LLENs, principal networks, and Independent Schools Victoria (ISVic).

Steven (Leader - Interview) in his interview said he had presented to the VALA conference (which has both FLP and mainstream staff as audience) on student engagement. Perusal of the program for recent VALA conferences also highlights the strong representation of FLP staff presenting workshops to share their practice.

FLP staff also support pre-service education for the next generation of staff, whether they end up working in conventional settings or in FLPs. In the survey, a youth worker mentioned presenting to pre-service teachers at a university, “focussing on alternative education settings and models”. In the interviews, Steven (Leader - Interview) said at his previous FLP he had been involved with a university to provide workshops both for pre-service teachers and for “Certificate 4 in youth work students”.

Sam (Leader – Interview) commented that with some logistical support, more mainstream schools would be able to benefit from the expertise FLP staff have to offer:

That’s an interesting thing that I’ve heard chuckled around a few times in the last 12 months, the idea that flexible learning centres are centres of excellence and centres of best practice around how to work with young people who are having a tough time at school, so we should be rolling this out to the mainstream schools more. And I wonder if it’s just about the mechanisms to get it happening, I wonder if that’s the key thing that needs to happen. Maybe notionally there’s a, you know, mainstream schools need to learn more from us and almost an underlying assumption that they don’t want to or are not interested, or are too busy, all of which could be true. But I also just think actually maybe it’s just the mechanisms to get it happening. Maybe it’s just a way of packaging the offer and saying to mainstream schools, here are some people who work in flexible learning programs, this is their expertise that they want to share with you, I think that that would be good.

Summing up then, both the survey and interview data highlight that FLP staff commonly deliver PL to their own colleagues, at various levels of formality, and this seems to be a typical feature for FLPs. In addition, some FLP staff also deliver PL to staff in other FLPs and in conventional education settings – but there is an appetite to do that more.

Models of PL in FLPs

This vignette combines elements of practice from across four FLPs. It offers insight into the kind of holistic approach to PL that supports staff within FLPs, based on edited interview excerpts.

“It’s such a full on environment when you first come to this FLP because the environment here is so different to a school. I joined the FLP at the beginning of the year and took part in an **induction program** with other new members of staff. As part of my induction I worked with a buddy, like a mentor, in a similar role to mine. We met early on, and then kept in regular contact. I asked her a lot of questions, and she would check in with me to see how I was getting along.

Once I was working at the FLP I got a lot of benefit from **interacting with other staff**. There is such a wealth of knowledge across the team. For example, I wanted to know about restorative justice, and seeing it in action, like being able to see someone else doing it, not just the restorative practice, but all of the preparation that happens before, was really invaluable. The opportunity to just debrief after a day in the classroom also really helps me.

More formally, we have **weekly staff meetings** that focus on teaching and learning and wellbeing. It’s often a really open forum at the start, where we discuss what’s happening in our work, what can we improve on, and what can we learn? Our leader acts as a facilitator but we all give advice to each other, grapple with whatever we’re doing and share resources. Time is also allocated for more formal information giving and learning. For example, two of our psychologists yesterday gave a presentation on borderline personality disorder, because they had been to a two day conference about that.

Sometimes **external experts** are invited to the FLP, usually by the leader, to work with staff on specific things such as developing VET curriculum. We also have a reflective practice session once a month where we have an external person come in from a mental health organisation. We present a case and then as a group you know, we unpack it with the guidance of the person that's there. That’s been really good. I’ve also accessed the **counseling service** through the Department, I can have a four sessions a year and they help you with a mental health plan, which I’ve found crucial for my professional learning – my own mental health and wellbeing.

At the moment I’m working on my **performance and development plan**. This plan is reviewed by the leader each term, we sit together and work through and discuss what my goals are and how I am going to achieve them. I set four goals a term and sometimes I carry goals over two terms or three terms. There is a lot of freedom and respect given to choose these goals myself.

Within the FLP we have a **coaching program** that was started once the staff had been working together for quite a while. We have a coaching session once a week and all staff have been trained now so we’ve done a full day workshop together and other people have done their own bits and pieces and we try and take the coaching approach as far as possible in all of the work that we do. I get feedback from the colleagues that I’m working with on my practice, and I can give feedback to them.”

2.6 Reflecting on PL

After PL covers FLP staff perceptions of the impact and helpfulness of different types of PL across different content areas and provides examples of PL activities staff have found to be highly useful or valuable in their work with students in FLPs. Coming full circle to the beginning of the PL cycle, the section ends with a discussion of what staff identify as their own further PL needs as well as the PL opportunities they would like to see available more widely for staff working in the FLP sector.

2.6.1 Perceived impacts of PL

Self-reported measures of effectiveness, such as the perceived impact of PL, are important because staff perceptions of the effectiveness of PL may impact on their future participation in such activities (OECD, 2014 p.106). Figure 25 provides an indication of the extent to which FLP staff surveyed perceived an improvement in their capability in specific areas following PL on that topic.

Figure 25: Improved capability due to PL activities in specific content areas (%)

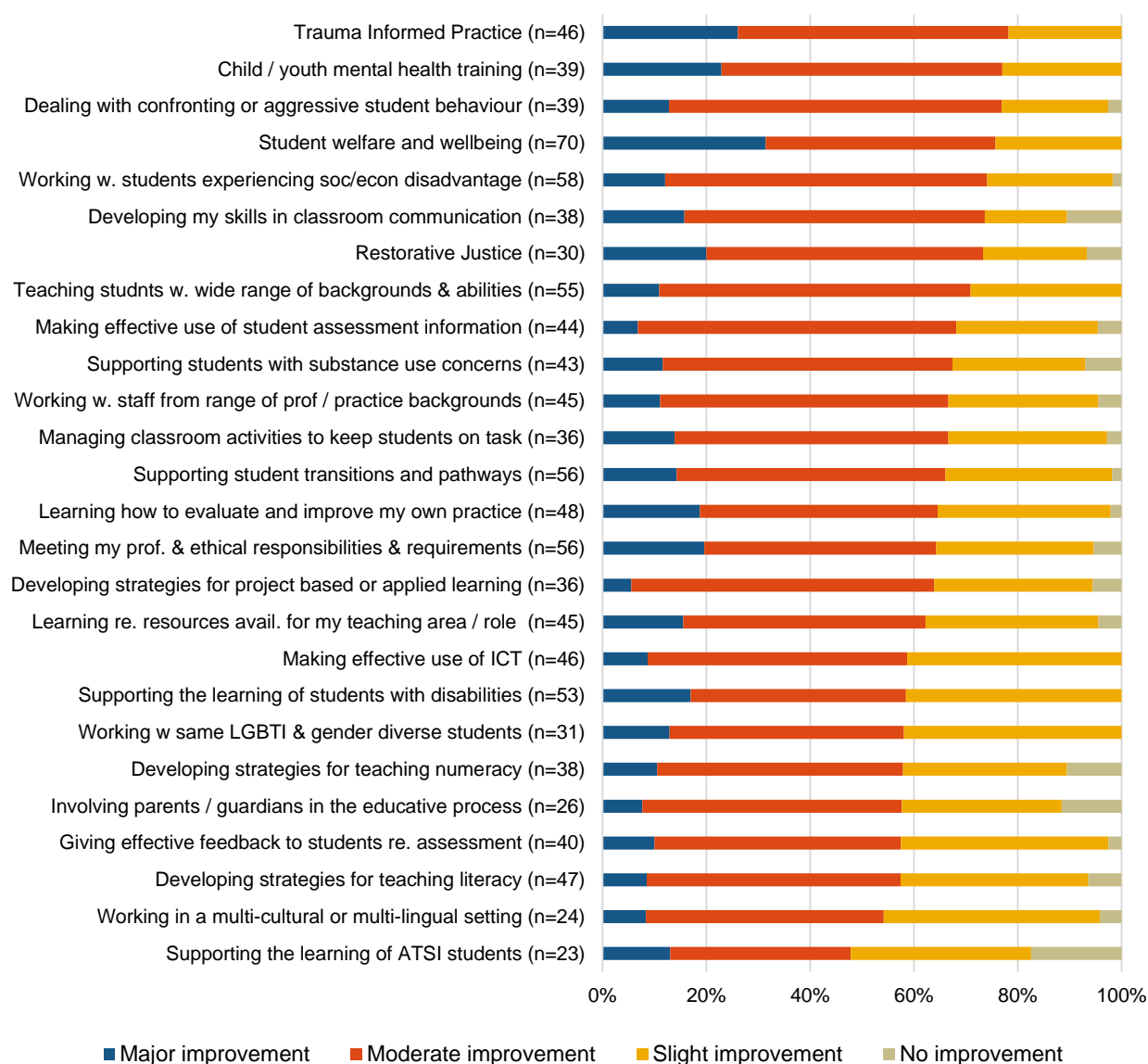


Figure 25 highlights that staff surveyed were reasonably positive in their own assessments of the impact of PL on their capabilities in relation to their current role at their FLP. Over half of staff surveyed reported that PL undertaken in the last 12 months had improved their capabilities to a 'moderate' or major' extent in all but one of the 26 topic areas asked about. Leaders, teachers and wellbeing staff reported similar levels of positivity in their assessments of the perceived benefits of PL. Over half of leaders reported that their PL activities over the past 12 months had improved their capabilities to a moderate or major extent in 23 of 26 areas, teachers in 24 of 26 areas, and wellbeing staff in 22 of 25 areas. As a point of comparison Australian secondary teachers reported the same level of improvement in capabilities in only 13 of the 23 areas they were asked about (SiAS data in McKenzie et al., 2014, p.72) suggesting FLP teachers surveyed were generally more positive in their assessments of the impact of PL than their mainstream colleagues.

The areas in which the highest proportion of FLP staff reported moderate or major improvements in capabilities were in the areas of wellbeing and behaviour:

- trauma informed practice (78%) – e.g. “Workshops on working with traumatised students has helped me understand the impact on their lives”. (Teacher - Survey)
- child / mental health training (77%) – e.g. “Youth Mental Health First Aid was a great learning activity which covered a range of mental health issues that we encounter”. (Teacher - Survey)
- dealing with confronting or aggressive behaviour (77%) e.g. “We’ve had a really complex couple of weeks, so I’ve had to be really conscious of bringing in that calmer class[rooms] stuff to give them [the students] those opportunities to re-own their good behaviour”. (Tom, Teacher - Interview)

The area of curriculum and instructional practices that the highest proportion of FLP staff reported moderate or major improvements in capabilities were:

- making effective use of student assessment information (68%)
- supporting student transitions and pathways (66%)

Reflecting on her Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, Brooke (Teacher) commented:

I just enjoyed the compliance side of it because I think once you understand compliance, you know what the expectations are and that benefits the young people because then you can deliver a program that's going to benefit them and provide them with good opportunities. And they know that "I'm not asking you to do this work for the sake of doing it, I'm asking you to do this work because then you'll get this, this, and this out of it". So the flexibility has been great in engaging the students and benefiting the students as well.

The area in which the lowest proportion of FLP staff reported moderate or major improvements in capabilities was: supporting the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (48%). This was also the area with the lowest proportion (35%) of Australian secondary school teachers reporting moderate or major improvements (SiAS data in McKenzie et al., 2014, p.72). Shay (2013) suggests that employing Indigenous staff, whether in designated 'Indigenous Education Worker' roles or in general leader, teacher and wellbeing roles, can support providing useful informal, internal PL to benefit the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in FLPs.

Types of impact

Whilst the impact of PL can be difficult to measure (and measuring impact was not a goal of this project), FLP staff interviewed and surveyed did offer explanations of how different PL had impacted on their practice, confidence, understanding and on their student's engagement and participation in learning. These impacts are, of course, interrelated. Firstly, PL impacts were talked about in terms of changing their practice:

When I was working at Corrections we did training on motivational interviewing and then the stages of change, and that really shaped the way that I work with all people now, including young people ... I found that it really changed the way I worked with all disadvantaged people. (Caitlin, Pathways - Interview)

Staff also talked about impact in terms of reinforcing existing practice, enhancing confidence and providing legitimacy to their current approaches in their work:

That was probably a real light bulb moment when the first time I went to one of her [external PD expert] seminars or she came in to do an in-service at my previous employer. Because everything she said was basically everything I believed and basically everything I'd been doing up until that time. ... That was probably the biggest one that gave me the green light to keep doing what I was doing. When you're out there doing stuff, you know it's working, but you need that re-enforcement at times. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

We had a presentation on young people who have suffered trauma in their lives and the speaker discussed certain behaviours and strategies that can assist with dealing with these students. Specifically I liked that he could give examples and scenarios that we could relate to and then put the outcomes into perspective based on our own school and students. It gave me confidence that we were on the right track with helping our students learn. (Teacher - Survey)

Gaining confidence was seen as a further important impact of PL more generally, an impact from speaking with experts in a particular field:

We had a fairly informal Q&A session with some experts from the police, youth justice, AOD, mental health etc and it was nice to be able to share stories and ask questions and everyone felt much more confident afterwards. (Leader - Survey)

This links to another key area of impact that staff talked about which was the impact on their understanding of the young people they worked with, their backgrounds and experiences:

Bridges over Poverty PD was one of the most insightful PDs on learning how low SES families operate. The PD enabled me to understand the patterns of behaviour that I was being challenged with on a daily basis. (Leader - Survey)

Furthermore, staff spoke about the impact they felt their own PL or the PL of their staff team had on their students in terms of benefitting student engagement and participation in learning, for example:

Collectively the staff have undertaken professional development in the area of Inquiry Based Learning. This has led to staff acting more as learning facilitators within their classrooms and enabling their students to take more control over their learning (Leader - Survey)

2.6.2 Helpful PL

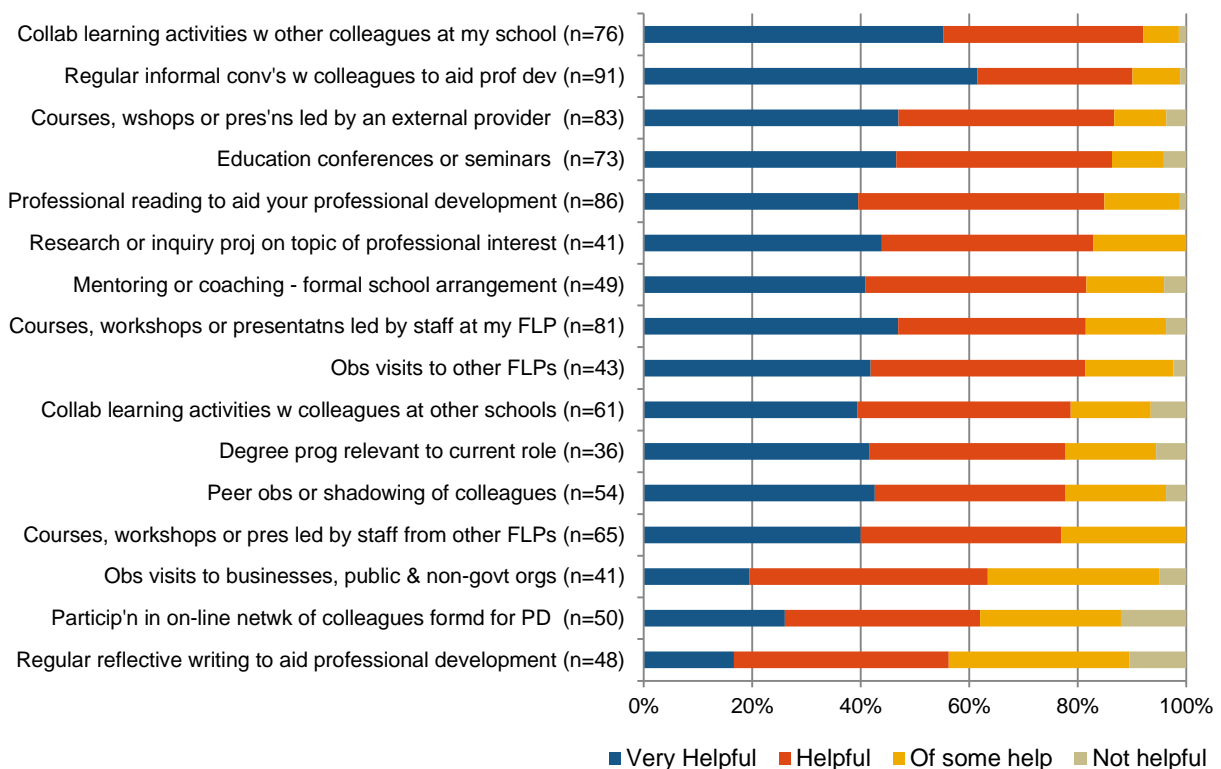
To discuss what kinds of PL FLP staff found to be most helpful and why, three broad themes are considered:

- internally provided learning and the role of insider expertise and collegiality,
- sharing practice across programs and the benefits of collaboration and cross-fertilisation, and
- accessing external expertise and the need for specific, relevant, practical resources.

These themes emerged across the interview and survey data in response to requests for examples of valuable or highly useful PL of relevance to their role in FLPs. First, we look at the overall picture.

FLP staff have been shown to engage in a diversity of PL types (see section 2.4.3), so which types did they find most helpful? Figure 26 shows how staff rated the helpfulness of PL types that they had reported they had undertaken in the previous 12 months. Over half of all staff, who undertook each type of PL, rated it as either 'helpful or very helpful', and only very low proportions deemed specific PL to be not helpful at all. FLP staff are generally positive about all types of PL undertaken, suggesting an openness to these types being employed further to support ongoing PL needs. 70 of the FLP staff surveyed (68%) and all of the interviewees were able to provide one or more example of a PL activity that they had found highly useful or beneficial to their work in FLPs.

Figure 26: Perceived helpfulness of different types of PL for role in FLP (%)



Internally provided learning: Insider expertise and collegiality

The survey data highlighted that over 90% of FLP staff found collaborative learning activities undertaken with colleagues at their own school and regular informal conversation with colleagues to aid PD to be 'very helpful' or 'helpful' for their PL. These types of PL also had high participation rates. Whilst less than half of the survey respondents had participated in mentoring or coaching as part of a formal school arrangement, of those that had, 82% rated it as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'.

This internally provided, 'everyday' learning was consistently perceived to provide highly powerful PL in terms of impact on staff learning and practice. This can occur through a range of valued formally structured learning opportunities such as "peer coaching, debriefing after each class, teaching and learning meetings" (Education support - Survey) or may be more impromptu:

Discussion with colleagues about specific difficulties I was having with individual students. Finding out what they did in similar situations - absolutely invaluable. (Teacher - Survey)

These kinds of activities may be commonly referred to as "learning 'on the job'", where staff learn with and from their own FLP colleagues, in particular those deemed to be more experienced or experts:

I often find learning on the job and using the expertise of my colleagues helps me. [...] I thoroughly enjoy professional development workshops, however I believe I learn best and develop best by working directly with expert staff members. (Teacher - Survey)

Staff who were new to the sector or to a specific setting commented that shadowing or peer observation was particularly useful:

Being new to the education sector, it was useful having the opportunity to observe classes and how these classes are managed by the staff. This was helpful as it gave an insight into the staff and students that I would be working with. (Pathways - Survey)

Shadowing colleagues in the initial stages of my employment meant that I could visually grasp the concept of the school and how it runs on a day to day basis. (Wellbeing - Survey)

Such observations are valuable because they are contextualised to that FLP. Similarly, regular professional learning meetings to meet "whole school learning needs [.. and..] therefore targeted and run by our colleagues" (Leader - Survey) were considered helpful.

Additionally, it is pertinent that staff can access feedback and guidance quickly and frequently. Glazer and Hannafin (2006, p.186) argue teachers in general need support that is "onsite, ongoing, and 'just in time'", and this may apply even more strongly to FLPs due to the nature of their work and students:

We have a lot of meetings which is great though because things happen on a daily basis. Within the space of a day you can have five different things happen that are really quite traumatic and people need to de-brief and need to know that they've done the right because at times things happen and it's quite emotional and you're wondering whether you did the right thing or wrong thing and getting that feedback's really, really good and really important. (Daniel, Teacher - Interview)

The value of this PL hinges on structures to support it, as well as the availability and accessibility of a variety of insider experts and collegial relationships amongst staff:

If you have a question you can go and ask them [other staff] and [Leader] is accessible, so it is just that everyday learning really that's important. ... the psychologists that are always sort of handing on that information regarding the trauma-informed approach, which I think has been really beneficial for me in understanding the kids that we've got here and working with them. That's probably been the most helpful for me, and because they're accessible as well (Caitlin, Pathways - Interview)

For more formal team meetings that bring everyone together, having a clear facilitation process and some kind of structure and agenda can help ensure that the time used is put to good use and that a certain depth of learning occurs. This is to avoid the potential of, as Tom notes, merely talking without a useful outcome:

I'm kind of just making sure that we're doing something because we've talked about something for 40 minutes, but if that doesn't go into something beyond that, then it's really just a team meeting rather than something we'll use our skills for. Like we've done a lot of meetings where they've been kind of pointless. (Tom, Teacher - Interview)

Sharing practice across programs: collaboration and cross-fertilisation

Staff highly valued PL that involved interactions with colleagues in other FLPs and visiting other flexible learning providers (see Figure 26). Around 60% of staff surveyed had the opportunity to be involved in collaborative learning activities with colleagues at another FLP and to attend courses, workshops or presentations led by staff from another FLP. A high proportion, almost 80% of those who had undertaken this kind of PL rated it as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. Further, whilst fewer staff had the opportunity to visit other FLPs (around 40%) as part of their PL, of those who did 81% rated it as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'.

There was a stated desire from staff in varied roles to have more opportunities to build relationships with colleagues in other FLPs through, for example, holding joint forums and workshops that would enable a shared critical reflection on the "strengths and challenges" of "different models or approaches" (Wellbeing – Survey):

Meeting and talking with other teachers who teach disengaged, socially and emotionally disadvantaged youth was fantastic. It was nice to know we aren't the only ones out there dealing with kids that mainstream schools reject. Being able to discuss what worked and what didn't. (Leader - Survey)

The powerful nature of these cross-program sharing and collaboration pivots on being able to talk about or see 'real' practice, with other staff who understand what it means to work in a FLP:

Visiting or talking with staff from other flexible and inclusive learning programs/schools. When you visit and spend time discussing practices with people who work with similar clientele it is possible to tailor the learning to your own specific requirements. It is possible to actually witness practice rather than just listen to theory. It is easy to see what will and won't work in your own workplace. (Leader - Survey)

The collegial nature apparent within FLPs appears to extend across different programs too. Staff spoke about the openness of colleagues in other programs in sharing their knowledge, practice and resources:

After attending a conference on Re-engagement Programs in schools I followed up with a visit to one of the schools who had given a presentation and they shared a specific digital resource with me. They had developed this themselves for use with disengaged students and I had identified it as useful in my own setting. (Leader - Survey)

The value in visiting other FLPs for staff was partly in confirming their existing ways of practice and the struggles they experience - “it opened my eyes because they had the same struggles we did” (Leader - Survey). Importantly, such visits also can provide new ideas in order to improve their own practice – “saw how our program could be done better” (Teacher - Survey) and “ideas that we could incorporate where applicable” (Teacher - Survey). Given the unique context of many FLPs, this may require some reworking of ideas but to a lesser extent than with PL designed for more conventional schools. Some staff desired greater structure and formality to facilitate the development of productive relationships such as through “proper organised networking” in specific geographical areas (Leader, Survey) or designing a program of “working visits” to other programs throughout the year (Lisa, Leader – Interview).

This kind of PL benefits the flexible learning sector more broadly as it enables the celebration of “work achieved by staff at different learning programs and schools” (Leader - Survey), supporting the development of a sense of pride and identity within the sector, and pooling of resources in challenging financial contexts:

I see this as a system in which we all need to feed into it so we can tap each others resources and also provide support to each other - given that the young people we work with are complex and have complex needs. (Wellbeing – Survey)

Further, it facilitates swift spreading of innovative and already validated practices:

I’ve realised if I go out and start prodding at new things that are actually being implemented in other places I can basically take those and implement them now instead of having to wait for the system to discover it. (Daniel, Teacher – Interview).

For staff in less successful FLPs, or in small programs that may not have the extent or variety of internal expertise, the ability to access the practice of colleagues in other programs is vital. The data suggests that a good way for this to occur is through attendance at relevant externally delivered or facilitated PL events. Events offered by VALA (Victorian Applied Learning Association) were mentioned multiple times in the data as particularly supportive for staff working in Victorian FLPs:

I have always found the VALA conferences extremely useful as I am able to connect with both schools and non-school providers and see what is working. (Leader - Survey)

VALA safari offered time to observe classes, compare other methods and classroom balances. Talk and share experiences in depth as opposed the surface conversations that are all you have time for at one day conferences. (Teacher - Survey)

Accessing external expertise: Specific, relevant, practical resources

Formal, externally provided courses, workshops or seminars as well as education conferences and seminars were also popular and well received by FLP staff, with over 85% of those who had undertaken each type of PL in the last 12 months, rating it as 'very helpful or helpful' (see Figure 26). For the smaller number of staff (35%) who had participated in a degree program relevant to their current role, 78% rated it as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. As we saw earlier, 70 FLP staff provided at least one example of an external PL provider or facilitator whose PL they had accessed and found relevant. The names of 90 different providers were collated, and the top ten most frequently mentioned are listed in section 2.4.4.

While much support can be garnered through staff within FLPs, sometimes there is a need to access PL on a specific topic where insider expertise does not exist. In this context, FLP staff reported that externally provided PL that focused on a specific area of relevance in depth was the most helpful. They also indicated that, as part of this, the external expert needed to establish their expertise as authentic:

So I think the fact that he was an actual psychologist that actually deals with it every day ... He was an expert in his actual field. So for me, if the person running it is actually at the top of their game, and it's a relevant field, I'll pretty much almost always try to get to it. (Steven, Leader - Interview)

With the conditions of relevance, realness and resources in place, shorter, one-off PL events can be helpful. For example, Steven (Leader – Interview) reflected on how a session with Orygen made him a “stronger professional” because it was run by an experienced professional who could provide real examples and strategies to take away. Others referred to, as another example, the “invaluable” Youth Mental Health First Aid Training because “the program provided me with knowledge I can use on a daily basis in my profession” (Wellbeing - Survey)

If these conditions are not in place, however, the value of participating in externally delivered PL drops significantly. Daniel (Teacher – Interview) referred to an example where a PL provider had “just collected a whole bunch of stuff from the internet” and “There’s nothing under the surface”.

Ascertaining this in advance is important, given that lack of time is a major barrier to accessing PL (see 2.3.2). Oliver (Leader - Interview) discussed how the good external providers of PL “tune in with what [our FLP] is understanding how it works and stuff” – and when they have not done this preparation to adapt their PL to be relevant to the site then “staff just switch off”. This suggests a briefing by the FLP for the PL provider, or even an opportunity to visit the FLP beforehand, would be beneficial to enhance the helpfulness of the PL for staff.

Staff were critical of being “bombarded with a whole bunch of info” without being given any actual “tools to be able to use in school with our young people” (Natalie, Youth Worker - Interview) and of PL providers who “aren’t keeping up” and offer the same learning activity unchanged from five years ago so that it seems “it is just a cash cow” (Daniel, Teacher - Interview).

A little bit of everything

In focusing on these themes as examples of particularly helpful PL for FLP staff it is salient to conceive of powerful PL not as a one-off experience but as “a combination of a little bit of everything”. This model of PL recognises that different learning experiences are “all valuable for different reasons” (Roisin, Teacher - Interview). The themes themselves are inter-related. Attending external PL events, such as conferences or workshops about a common educational issue across FLPs, provides important opportunities to connect with staff across the sector and thus increases the potential for collaboration and sharing of practice. Having strong internal cultures of support for PL and collegiality increases the chances staff will be confident and open to share their practice both internally and externally. Further, the role of the individual in this model should not be forgotten. Lisa (Leader - Interview) offered useful reflections on the important of “being humble” and open to learning something new (from students as much as from colleagues):

So if I'm teaching here, and I'm teaching a kid, I just had a kid yesterday for math activity, and that's really valuable learning for me, to see his response, “Did I get it right?”. And I might talk to the teacher afterwards, “I taught Ollie, but I don't know how...”. Being humble is really important in professional learning, because you have to think “You're not right all the time” especially with these kids, because if you stuff it up, they'll tell you, or “I don't get it”, you get instant feedback generally, if you're doing a shit job. (Lisa, Leader - Interview)

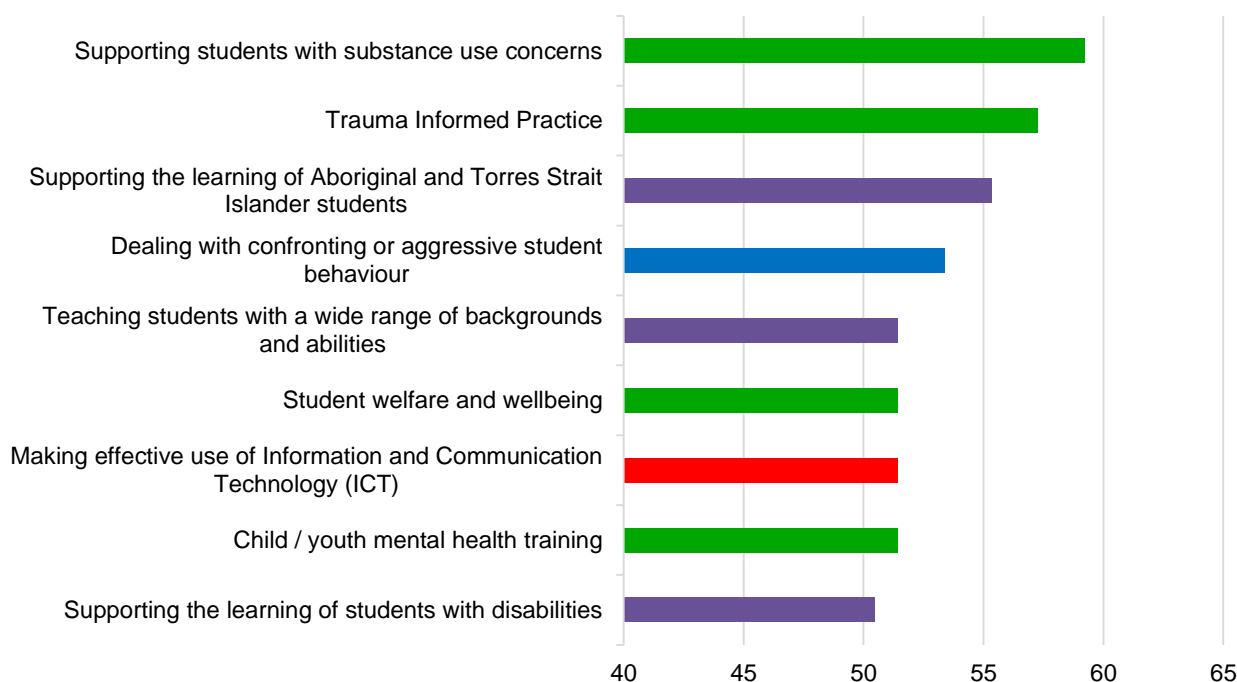
2.6.3 Further needs

As we suggested when we introduced the ‘PL cycle’ as the key organiser heuristic for this report in section 2.1, the process of PL is likely to feel more like an ever evolving spiral than like a neat cycle. In particular, it is unlikely that a staff member in an FL would ever feel that they have done all the professional learning they could ever need.

In considering how to enhance existing PL provision for staff in FLPs, it is therefore helpful to consider what the staff themselves identify as their further PL needs. In the survey and interviews staff identified topic areas in which they believed they personally needed more opportunities for PL, or that staff in FLPs more widely needed more PL for.

Figure 27 below shows the areas in which over half of the FLP staff surveyed felt they needed more PL (staff may or may not have undertaken PL in this area in the last 12 months). These 9 areas of highest perceived further need fall into the umbrella content categories of wellbeing (4), student diversity (3), behaviour and engagement (1), and curriculum (1).

Figure 27: Areas that 50% or more of FLP staff reported a need for more PL in (%)



These colours reflect the Online Directory (see page 30)

- Wellbeing
- Student Diversity
- Behaviour & Engagement
- Curriculum

Overall, at least some of the leaders, teachers, wellbeing and education support staff identified a further need across all of the possible content areas. It is worth noting that over half of the staff in teaching roles (teachers and education support) expressed a need for more PL in a much greater number of content areas than those in leader or wellbeing roles. Over half of the teachers felt a need for more PL in 17 out of 26 areas and education support in 18 areas compared to 6 areas for leaders and 8 for wellbeing.

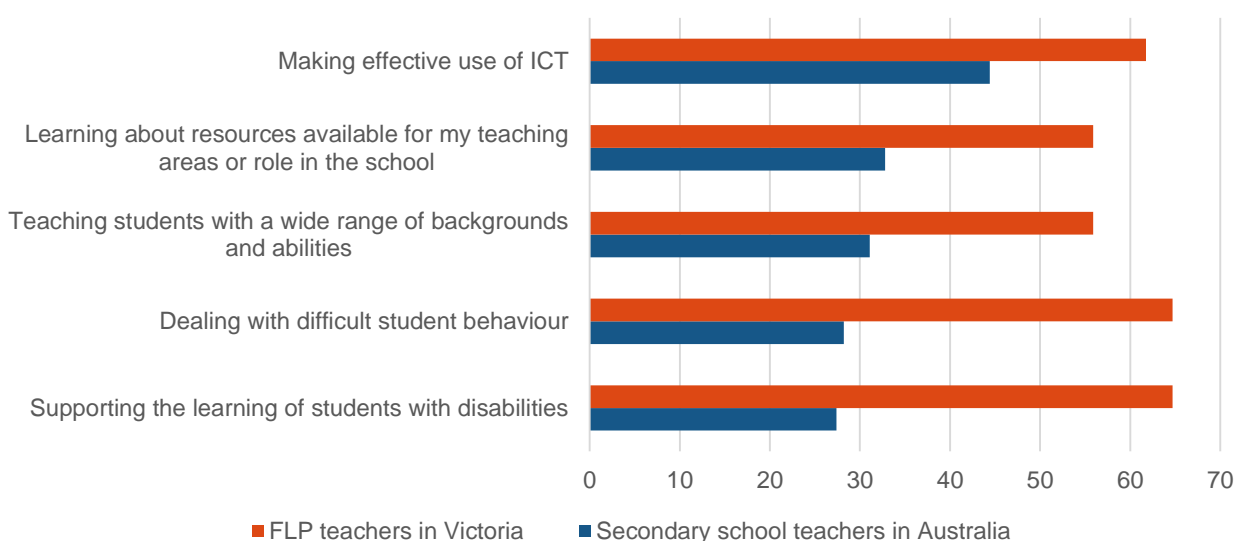
Figure 28 below shows the areas in which the greatest number of staff in each role felt a need for more PL. As expected the content areas were wellbeing, student diversity and behaviour and engagement focused, aside for education support who identified developing strategies for teaching literacy as a top further need. Also of interest, is that teachers see supporting student transitions and pathways as one of their greatest further PL needs, and that unlike teachers and leaders supporting students with substance use concerns is not a top perceived need for wellbeing staff.

Figure 28: FLP staff role and highest areas of perceived further need (%)

Leaders (n=42)	Supporting students with substance use concerns	52%
	Teaching students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities	52%
	Supporting the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	52%
	Trauma Informed Practice	52%
Teachers (n=34)	Supporting students with substance use concerns	74%
	Supporting the learning of students with disabilities	65%
	Supporting student transitions and pathways	65%
	Dealing with confronting or aggressive student behaviour	65%
Wellbeing (n=14)	Trauma Informed Practice	79%
	Child / youth mental health training	71%
	Dealing with confronting or aggressive student behaviour	64%
	Restorative Justice	64%
Education support (n=6)	Supporting the learning of students with disabilities	83%
	Developing strategies for teaching literacy	83%

Providing a comparison, Figure 29 below shows the areas in which the greatest number of Australian secondary school teachers expressed a need for further PL (SiAS 2013 data in McKenzie et al., 2014, p.74) and the percentage of FLP teachers who also felt a need for further PL in that area. The survey conducted with FLP teachers contained additional items to the SiAS survey developed to capture better the work of teachers in FLPs. For example, the SiAS does not ask teachers in secondary schools about their further PL needs in relation to supporting students with substance use concerns or supporting student transitions and pathways, so there is no data to compare these items. Supporting students with disabilities and dealing with difficult student behaviour were in the top 5 areas of expressed further PL needs by both FLP teachers and Australian secondary school teachers. Across the top areas of further need identified by Australian secondary school teachers, at least 55% of FLP teachers had also identified these areas as a further need indicating potential overlaps in ongoing PL needs across the sectors. It is also worth noting that a higher proportion of FLP teachers also expressed a need in each of the top five areas than the proportion of Australian secondary school teachers themselves.

Figure 29: Teachers' highest areas of perceived need (%)



The areas where there is a high level of perceived further need from FLP staff should be considered priority learning areas for the sector. The qualitative data offers further insight into these priority learning areas and why these are likely to be ongoing needs for staff in the FLP sector, as discussed below.

Student mental health issues

Lisa (Leader - Interview) reflected that even for experienced staff it can take a substantial amount of time to really understand what trauma informed practice means for learning and teaching, and to develop the necessary skills to respond to students who have experienced trauma:

I think what is interesting for us and challenging for us, is really trying to understand what our students come with, and the impact that that has on their learning. So we've talked about having a trauma informed practice, but really you need 10 years to get your head around what that actually means for a kid with trauma. If you've got kids in your class, actually you have this in mainstream, but you don't know it, you've got a kid in your class with a whole bunch of different learning needs and a whole lot of emotional mental health problems, and you're trying to do this great teaching. (Lisa, Leader - Interview)

Natalie offered a different explanation as to why training in relation to mental health and substance use is likely to be an ongoing area of PL need for FLP staff:

Mental health, drug and alcohol is really important because they try stuff all the time and I'm like "I have no idea what the f' that is" and they're like "Oh it's really good. It gets you really high" and I'm like "No". So then I'm going to go and google it. So I think a lot of training. I think you will never be up-to-date with any of that stuff because it changes all the time. (Natalie, Youth Worker - Interview)

Challenging behaviours and restorative justice

Learning how to respond effectively and inclusively to challenging behaviours within a multi-professional team in a flexible learning sector is complex. Staff interviewed spoke about trying to ensure all staff are on the same page. Getting the balance right between being empathetic and non-judgemental towards students but also setting and modelling appropriate boundaries around behaviour is delicate and requires collaboration between staff in different roles who may be approaching the issue from different professional standpoints:

We say we want to be flexible and understanding, but that doesn't mean we get permissive of behaviours that are not acceptable in the workplace or at any other training place. Yes, "we're here to care for you, we're flexible, we understand, but that doesn't mean it's OK for you to walk in and say 'f' you' to me every day and slam a door in my face every day", and then be told by a youth worker, "oh, but she's got stuff going on". (Brooke, Teacher - Interview)

I think we're always looking for triggers and things like that. I think some people need training on, you know, they are still humans, they have shitty days, they are challenging in a sense that because they've gone through a whole lot of stuff in their life that we can't always react the same way, we can't always just be punitive and really disciplinary and, you know, "That's it, you have to leave" sort of thing. It's much bigger than that. I think a bit more empathetic, if anything. Just, you know,

sometimes we forget to be empathetic and we can be a bit judge-y. Because we sort of think “I would never do that”. (Natalie, Youth Worker - Interview).

One area of potential support for this is PL on restorative justice. In the survey 47% of FLP staff indicated they felt a need for PL in this area. One of the leaders we interviewed also identified this as a key need for their staff: “restorative justice is one of those key frameworks and making sure our staff are well trained in that is a need” (Sam, Leader - Interview). Steven (Leader - Interview) explained that this is no quick fix – implementing an effective restorative justice model takes time to fully embed into the culture of an organisation and the practices of its staff, and requires specialist support:

Restorative justice is an area that is lacking in terms of training for staff, and that’s across the field. That’s not just not in ours, I think in every kind of alternative setting. I think a lot of it gets trivialised too much. You just have the little script where you just say “What did you do? How did you feel? What are you going to do to make it better?”. Whereas it is actually much more complicated and widespread than that. I remember when I first started doing training it was with a psychologist that we had kind of on retainer ... and it was you guys should not tell anyone that you’re a restorative school for two years. It will take you guys two years to really adopt the model of what it looks like and the practices, because it’s in every level. I think for me that’s really lacking. We book in half day workshops and things of the sort, and again, because we are still a really young school it’s hard to put all the training you want to do at once, because it’s just overload. But for me, I think that’s an area that’s severely lacking across the whole alternative ed sector. (Steven, Leader - Interview)

Teaching strategies and curriculum practices

PL to support the teaching of literacy and numeracy in FLPs was also identified in the interviews and open ended survey questions as a priority learning area due to the specific literacy and numeracy needs of students who often have significant gaps in their schooling before coming to an FLP. Staff are sometimes recruited to FLPs because of their understanding of the barriers to education the students may face and their empathetic and relational approach, but they may not have these specialised teaching skills:

Teaching of literacy and all the skill-based training of numeracy. I’m learning so much from staff about how challenging that is because not all of our staff come from a literacy and numeracy background so we employ for their ability to engage students, and train for skills which is a great idea ... it’s just a continual cycle of looking at teacher skills in literacy and numeracy and how we can improve them. (Roisin, Teacher - Interview)

Prioritising PL in the area of teaching literacy and numeracy is reflected in the survey data that showed:

- 46% of FLP staff, and 53% of FLP teachers specifically, expressed a need for further PL in developing strategies for teaching literacy, and
- 40% of FLP staff, and 50% of FLP teachers specifically, expressed a need for further PL in developing strategies for teaching numeracy.

These strategies need to be specific to the context of students attending FLPs, such as: “explicit teaching practices in literacy and numeracy that cater for low level learners who are teenagers!” (Leader - Survey). Referring to the concept of meaningful learning in FLPs, McGregor et al., (2014, p.11) cite a teacher who

objected to using early childhood books with FLP students: “[to] give you ‘See Spot run’, which is going to entertain a 17-year-old? No way! And the rigour has to be there”.

Teachers and leaders also identified concerns about working with the more flexible and inclusive curriculum models, particularly in the VET sector, that are integral to the work of FLPs but that can be challenging to deliver, assess and adequately meet compliance requirements:

I think that with our sector, a lot of flexible learning centres try to do quite flexible curriculum delivery, and still meet the compliance needs of that particular qualification. And I think that that's a real challenge ... Then, I think, even if you're delivering a senior secondary qualification, then there's still a range of compliance needs or qualification requirements that mean that you have to tick all the right boxes assessment-wise and so forth, and I think that's a gap in terms of how to do that well. (Sam, Leader - Interview)

Sam added the need for further clarity from external organisations about such compliance. Erin (Teacher – Interview) spoke of a positive PL experience she had in this area:

So now that we're writing it, we've done a lot of training around how to do that. So how to meet all the VET criteria and stuff. ... I think it just made us understand it more. So now, you know, if a kid tries to submit something and it's not yet competent I understand why it needs to be competent. Because we understand that it, like the auditing policy and how all that works. (Erin, Teacher - Interview)

Differentiation and meeting individual needs

Related to the PL areas of teaching students with disabilities and teaching students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, staff in the survey suggested various PL opportunities that would support staff in FLPs to become more effective inclusive educators:

I would like all staff to have training in learning interventions for inclusive learning. This is so that staff have the training and skills to meet their obligations towards students to make 'reasonable modifications', particularly for students with disabilities, that allow students to engage in learning, as per the Disability Standards for Education (2006), which very few teachers are informed about. (Teacher - Survey)

Professional development around how to deal with students who have differing degrees of need being social, emotional and circumstantial. Individually they need to be dealt with differently on a one to one basis. (Leader - Survey)

I would like to see teachers teaching in flexible learning environments know how to differentiate students' ability better, thus they need to learn how to use the data to drive their instruction and work preparation. (Leader - Survey)

Staff wellbeing and self-care

Whilst staff wellbeing and self-care was not an option that FLP staff could tick as an area of further PL needs, the qualitative data showed a desire for more PL in the area of “support and stress management”, “knowing how to switch off at the end of the day or to maintain that professional balance” to avoid staff “burning out” (Tom, Teacher – Interview). A survey response from a leader also highlights self-care:

Teaching in a flexible/ inclusive program is different to other types of teaching and we need to take care of our professionals so that burn out and stress does not occur. (Leader - Survey)

It is not enough to simply encourage FLP staff to look after themselves. PL, in the form of genuine support and strategies, is also required for this aspect of the work of FLP staff:

I think there's a lot of pressure on us as teachers and youth workers in this environment, and there are days that you feel really exhausted or something unpleasant has happened or been said and learning how and where to be able to deal with that. I think generally as teachers, I mean there's a lot of expectation on teachers, huge, and we get told “You need to make time for yourself, you need to do this”. Hey “we all know that, thanks, but what are some other techniques that you can teach us that actually we can utilise?”. Maybe even just smaller tips about if somebody says something to you, if somebody comes up to you like this and says, as happens all the time, “I hate you and I want to punch you in the face” or whatever, what can you do immediately after that? So I guess learning techniques of dealing with a unique cohort. And it's not always aggression, sometimes you hear really sad things or you see sad things and so how do you just wash that off at the end of the day? I haven't really heard of a lot of PDs that deal with that, about your own wellbeing. (Laura, Teacher - Interview)

Holistic package

The range of priority learning areas, support the notion of the need for a “professional suite of learning” or “holistic package” of PL for all staff in FLPs. This leader's vision encapsulates many of the content areas identified above:

A holistic package of Professional Learning for all members that start work in a flexible/ inclusive program. This would include opportunities such as: Youth mental health first aid; Understanding of Trauma in development and trauma informed practice; resilience building programs; Bridges out of poverty; Understanding Substance effects in teaching and learning context; Literacy and Numeracy diagnostic programs to evaluate individual learning needs (ie. STARS/ CARS; STAMS/ CAMS, Hawker Brownlow); and Careers development. (Leader - Survey)

Whilst this package may need to be flexible to the needs of staff in different FLPs, a baseline of necessary content knowledge to work successfully with students in FLPs would be a useful starting point.

To summarise, FLP staff are positive about the value of much of the PL they have undertaken in terms of its impact on their thinking, practice, wellbeing and students. No single PL type was deemed significantly more helpful than another overall, rather the interview and survey data suggested the importance of having a portfolio of PL experiences to match individual and sector wide needs. Rather, for PL to be helpful certain conditions had to be met: relevant, authentic, and practical.

Three inter-connected aspects of the PL experience were highlighted as crucial involving: internal expertise on an everyday basis, collaboration and sharing with colleagues within the sector on a regular basis, and accessing external expertise as needed. Multiple areas of further PL needs were identified, with topic areas from all the umbrella categories. FLP teachers shared many PL needs with their conventional school contemporaries, but had higher levels of perceived need across all areas.

The role of PL for the professional status of FLP Staff

Reflecting on the 'bigger picture', the quotations below indicate the potentially crucial, but seemingly under-realised, role that PL can play in raising the professional status of FLP staff and in addressing sustainability issues within the sector. All with the ultimate aim of enhancing provision for students:

“All professionals need to have a deep understanding of issues that can and do arise in this teaching and learning environment and have knowledge to support their decisions and actions. This is such a rewarding career but at the moment the staff are considered as second class teachers and this needs to change, by providing a professional suite of learning will hopefully also raise the profile of flexible and inclusive practitioners.”

(Leader - Survey)

“Probably the last thing I'd flag is just the fact that there's actually a need to make sure that our staff are professionally challenged. I think sometimes flexible learning programs can feel like a little bit of a cul-de-sac professionally, whereas there are really clear progression pathways in schools or TAFEs, they're often not so evident in a flexible learning centre. So ways to encourage pathways and professional movement up through PD, I think, could be a critical thing into the future for actually making the sector more sustainable and keeping staff long-term. You get real innovation and stability when you've got a staff member for five years plus, which is really common in a school and virtually unheard of in flexible learning centres. [...] I think the more steps we have towards increasing the professionalisation, I suppose, of the flexible learning sector is really exciting because then you become not just a cul-de-sac or a smaller pocket of the overall education landscape, but a sector that's well defined and well networked and well supported. I think that those are the ways that you get more longevity of staff and more interest in the sector and that means that that sector will be hopefully be taken a bit more seriously in a range of contexts. So, yes, I think that is only going to increase the opportunities for the kind of young people we work with, which is great. What I'd add to that is that a lot of people work in the sector out of passion, which is great, but passion only gets you so far. After that, you actually need a good, clear career pathway and good supports in that pathway. So if we can enable that, you're not just getting passionate people who get burnt out after a few years and move to a different sector, which I've seen happen time and time and time and time and time again. You're getting people who are passionate and move in and are well supported in a structured environment and then they've got a clear pathway. They can stay in the sector for 20 years, not for two years.”

(Sam, Leader - Interview)

3 SUPPORTING STAFF TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN FLEXIBLE LEARNING PROGRAMS

As the flexible learning sector in Victoria, grows and evolves, this is a pertinent time to consider the opportunities afforded through PL for FLP staff, organisations and, most importantly, students.

The research aimed to develop an understanding of how staff in FLPs learn to work in socially inclusive ways with a diversity of young people who have disengaged from or sought alternatives to traditional schooling models. This understanding, in turn, is intended to provide a foundation for better supporting the PL of staff in FLPs as well as for advancing insights in the role of PL for enhanced socially inclusive schooling more broadly. The research included three data collection elements: internet search, online staff survey, and individual staff interviews. In this final chapter, we first provide a summary of our findings before considering the implications for practice and research.

3.1 Summing up

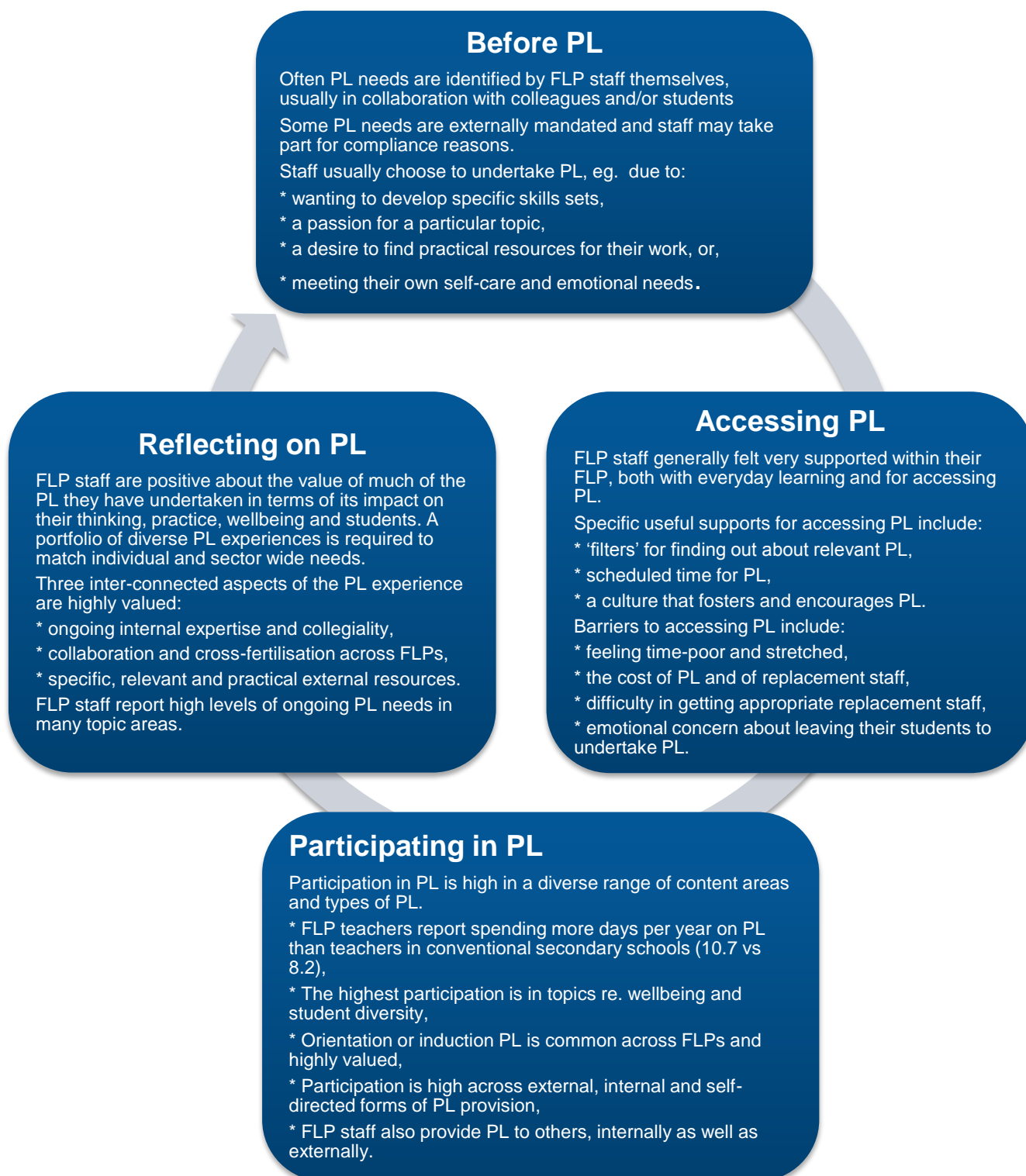
The major findings from this research are that FLP staff in our survey and interviews:

- were highly committed to undertaking PL,
- acted on this commitment by participating in a wide variety of PL activities,
- identified PL as having beneficial impacts on their practice and for their students.

These findings are slightly surprising, as well as heartening, in the light of the feedback represented in Figure 1 at the start of this report, which showed staff at a forum for FLPs indicating that there was not enough PL available with a specific focus on flexible learning. In our survey, only 27% of staff agreed that there is no relevant PL on offer for them (see 2.3.2).

In terms of the PL cycle, explained in section 2.1 and used to structure the presentation of our data in Chapter 2, the overall findings are summarised in Figure 30.

Figure 30: Findings summary according to the PL cycle



3.2 Key findings and implications

Overall, the research data provide valuable insights in the experiences of PL among FLP staff in Victoria, some of which apply across several parts of the cycle in Figure 30. These insights also point to opportunities for improvement. Below, we highlight the key overall findings (in blue font) and also outline implications for future action (in orange font).

FLP staff have a strong commitment to PL but some barriers to access remain

The need for PL is indicated in part through staff reflections on the usefulness of their pre-service qualifications, with only 37% of staff with an Education qualification appraising this as helpful or very helpful for their current role in an FLP. By their own estimates, FLP teachers spend more days per year on PL than teachers in conventional secondary schools. Staff felt that their organisation was very supportive and encouraging of their learning and development, making both time and funding available. Nevertheless, staff were aware of barriers to accessing PL due to the lack of funding for the FLP sector, the small size of many FLPs and already busy work schedules.

1. Realising the commitment to PL of both individual staff and FLP organisations requires collaboration among the FLP sector, government and other funding agencies, to access and leverage existing supports and remove barriers to PL participation.
2. PL providers can enhance access by offering PL in online or blended modes on suitable topics, e.g. in relation to compliance and regulations, as well as access to curriculum resources that can be adapted for a specific setting.

All FLPs, and indeed many conventional schools serving disadvantaged communities, have a shared purpose of enabling young people to learn and gain valuable qualifications, who otherwise would have few opportunities to do so. The findings show collegiality between FLPs, through visits to other FLPs, collaborative learning activities with staff from several sites, and courses or workshops led by colleagues from other FLPs. Moreover, sector events, such as the VALA conference, also offer inter-FLP PL opportunities. Such opportunities are not equally distributed however, with some staff indicating the location, size or nature of their FLP inhibits access. There are some inspiring examples of FLP staff providing PL to colleagues outside their own FLP.

3. Development of 'centres of expertise' led by well-established FLPs and experienced FLP staff to recognise the wealth of professional knowledge within the FLP sector and more systematically extend inter-FLP collaborations and sharing of PL opportunities, especially with staff in newer, smaller or isolated FLPs, as well as with conventional schools and pre-service Teacher Education.
4. Development of more systematic approaches to sector-wide networking, for example through VALA²², FLV²³ and sector conferences²⁴, to support PL of staff across the FLP sector.

²² <http://www.vala.asn.au>

²³ <http://www.bgkllen.org.au/initiatives-2/flexible-learning-flv/>

²⁴ E.g. <http://www.dsd16.org.au>

Staff indicated that, on the whole, much relevant PL exists, but locating the most relevant PL worth investing time, energy and funding into is not always straightforward. Colleagues as well as trusted networks (such as VALA) play a vital role in finding out about and selecting worthwhile PL.

5. The Online Directory of PL developed through this project can fill a gap by offering easy access to information about relevant PL options, see: <http://www.vala.asn.au/professional-learning/index.htm> - if it proves useful, it should be resourced and updated to maintain its currency.

A wide variety of PL opportunities needs to be on offer, in order to enable staff in FLPs to support their students and to maintain their own wellbeing

Staff identify a diverse range of PL topics in which they had participated, which they had found useful, and in which they desired more PL. These topics relate to both learning and wellbeing, and many are directly relevant to enabling staff to offer a socially inclusive education for all students regardless of their life circumstances. Diversity is also evident in terms of types of PL activities. Traditional, relatively formal, externally provided PL is certainly a key element, but internally provided PL is equally common, and so is self-directed professional reading. Overall, no single PL type was deemed significantly more helpful than another.

6. A comprehensive portfolio of PL experiences needs to be on offer to meet diverse individual and sector wide need, and staff new to the sector need support to navigate this diverse landscape.

An important specific topic area of need for PL is how to support the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Fewer than a quarter of staff had participated in PL to help them support Koorie students; more than half identify this topic as a further need for PL, and of staff who had done PL in this area less than half reported moderate or major improvements in their capabilities as a result (the lowest ranking). This is of particular concern given the long history and persistence of educational, social and economic disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. FLPs offer a last chance at a good education for many Indigenous young people, making it particularly crucial that PL staff feel confident and competent in supporting their learning.

7. More, as well as more helpful, PL opportunities are needed in relation to supporting the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

PL is not just a technical-rational process of acquiring a variety of new skills and knowledge. The emotional needs of staff arising from the challenges of working with students with high levels of social, emotional and behavioural needs and vulnerabilities impact on PL. In interviews staff pointed to the need for PL that supports staff wellbeing and self-care. At the same time, the emotional nature of the work can make staff reluctant to leave their students in someone else's care in order to engage in PL. Opportunities for within-FLP mentoring and debriefing are particularly highly valued.

8. FLPs and PL providers should attend to staff needs for PL in relation to self-care and wellbeing.

Internally provided, collegial PL is highly valued by staff as the most powerful and potentially most sustainable PL. This offers valuable opportunities to FLPs to influence the professional learning of staff in ways that help fulfil the program's mission to enhance the life opportunities of their students through education. However, the capacity to access and provide such internal learning is not equally distributed. Although based on small numbers in the survey, it seems front desk, pathways, and education support staff (and to a lesser extent wellbeing staff) have less access to internal collaborative activities. Moreover, for smaller FLPs, as well as FLPs with a dispersed model of small sites, providing a rich variety of internal PL options is more challenging,

9. It would be worth for FLP leadership to ensure access to relevant collegial, within-FLP PL opportunities is inclusive of all staff roles.
10. FLPs could identify certain within-FLP PL opportunities that could be shared with newer, smaller or more isolated FLPs in order to build capacity across the sector.

PL has a potentially crucial role to play in raising the professional status of staff in FLPs and in addressing sustainability issues within the sector

This report has focussed on Professional Learning in Flexible Learning Programs enhancing our understanding of the PL opportunities, experiences and needs of staff and why PL matters so much for individual staff, their students and the sector. But there remains much to learn. Specific topics for further research include:

- ways of assessing and evaluating the impact of various PL activities,
- internal models of PL to better understand whether and how they work, and consider their transferability,
- experiences of 'leaders for learning' within the FLP sector,
- the relationship between PL and FLP staff career development and paths.

A continued focus on the professional learning of staff who seek to provide socially inclusive schooling is necessary. In conclusion, it is worth repeating Tom's comment (Teacher - Interview):

If you support the staff, then the students will be supported.

While this applies to staff in all education settings, it is especially significant for Flexible Learning Programs because of the students they work with. The final word therefore goes to Brooke (Teacher – Interview):

I think there needs to be a lot more PD for alternative educators. There needs to be heaps more PD, heaps more support, and I think there needs to be more recognition of how hard alternative educators work and how much more responsible they are for the wellbeing of their students.

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