

# case study

## YOUTH OFF THE STREETS KEY COLLEGE



## Putting the jigsaw together:

Innovative learning engagement programs in Australia

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**Please note:** All individual names are pseudonyms.

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As the 7.30am train schedule is announced at the busy Redfern Station and commuters head off to their workplaces, Kris (staff) opens up the school, turns on the heating and puts down the bags of groceries in the kitchen. By 8.30am, other staff and students have arrived and breakfast is on the table. On a cold morning in June, Key College is warm and welcoming and the quiet is displaced by banter around the breakfast table. Staff congratulate the young people on the play they performed the previous evening to a packed house at Belvoir Theatre. The young people are clearly chuffed. The aroma of toast, the warmth and talk of feeling proud are part of the atmosphere that creates what young people call “the happy place”. It is a place where affection is openly displayed, where teachers crack sick jokes and bring chocolates to class, where ‘phoney police’ – staff dressed in safety vests and blue caps – confiscate mobile phones each morning as a ritual call to be ready to learn, where the first discussion of the day is always about stuff going on in young people’s lives.



For young people who do not have a stable place to call home, it is unsurprising that they describe this small, close-knit school community as “family”. So do staff and community members. There is a palpable sense of commitment on the part of each person to make this “family” work; and that often means a long term commitment. Many of the young people who have claimed the school as their home-base return even in their late twenties, to share the stories of their lives and catch up. Like the animated conversation about the play, these are also “key moments” (Bryce, student) when people at Key College are very aware that educational success is more than young people’s engagement with the curriculum or their achievement of outcomes in a particular year.

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# INTRODUCTION

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This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof Kitty te Riele, Dr Dorothy Bottrell and Dr Vicky Plows from The Victoria Institute at Victoria University, for the project Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia. The project was majority-funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and also supported by Dusseldorp Skills Forum and by The Victoria Institute through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Network.

The research project explored options for marginalised young people to complete secondary schooling (Year 9-12 or equivalent) through innovative, flexible and/or alternative learning programs.

**PHASE 1** - investigated the provision and diversity of such programs across Australia, with the results (listing over 850 sites) available through the Dusseldorp Forum website<sup>1</sup>.

**PHASE 2** - analysed publicly available documentation from about 20 programs to generate insight in how they work and the outcomes they achieve. Short vignettes of each program are also on the Dusseldorp Forum website<sup>2</sup>.

**PHASE 3** - involved more in-depth research with eight of those 'vignette' sites. For each program one member of the research team collected additional documentation and spent 3-4 days on-site to observe activities and interview staff, students, community stakeholders and, where possible, graduates<sup>3</sup>.

For this case study of Key College, fieldwork was conducted in June 2013. The researcher was on-site for three days that included observations at the school and visits to three organisations that are partners in students' learning programs. Interviews were conducted with two staff members, three students, two graduates and three community stakeholders.

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# ABOUT KEY COLLEGE: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

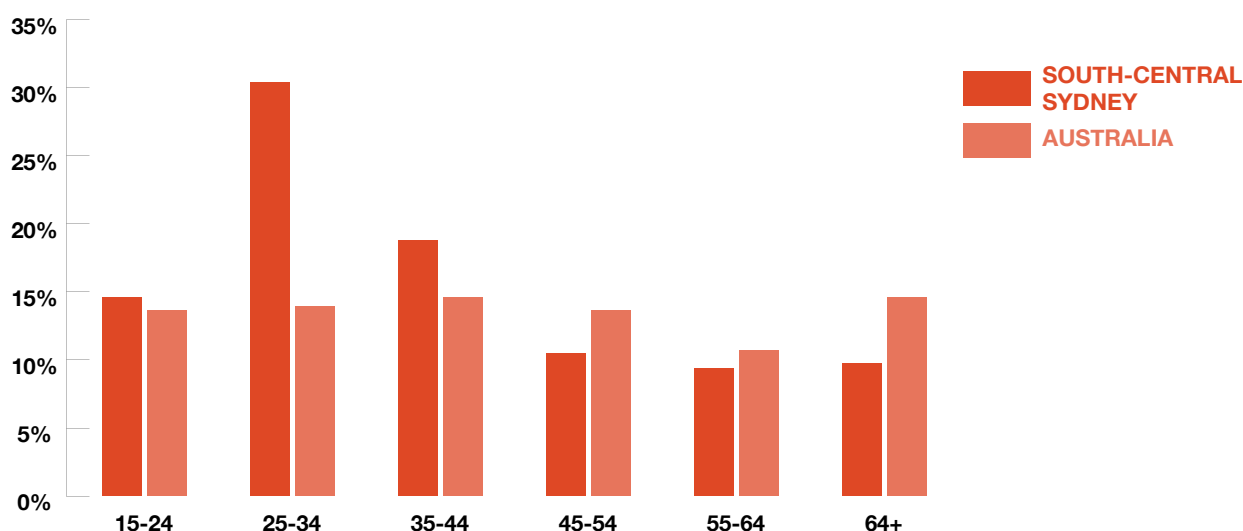
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## Context

Key College is situated in the inner-city suburb of Redfern, about three kilometres south of the Sydney CBD. The suburb of Darlington borders Key College to the west, while the suburb of Chippendale is less than a kilometre away to the north. About 52,000 people live in the South-Central Sydney area, which forms part of the larger Sydney Local Government Area (LGA)<sup>4</sup>.

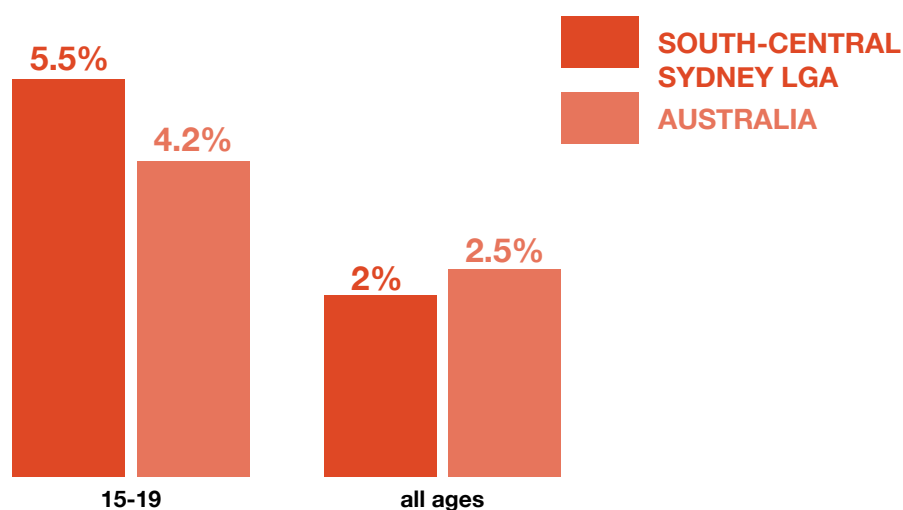
The South-Central Sydney area contains considerably different patterns of age-cohort demographics when compared to Australia as a whole, with higher percentages of people aged between 15 and 44 years of age and lower percentages of people aged above 45 years of age (see Figure 1). The proportion of persons aged 25-34 years old is more than double the national average (31.1 percent compared to 13.8 percent nationally)<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 1: Percentage of total residents by age cohort (2011)**



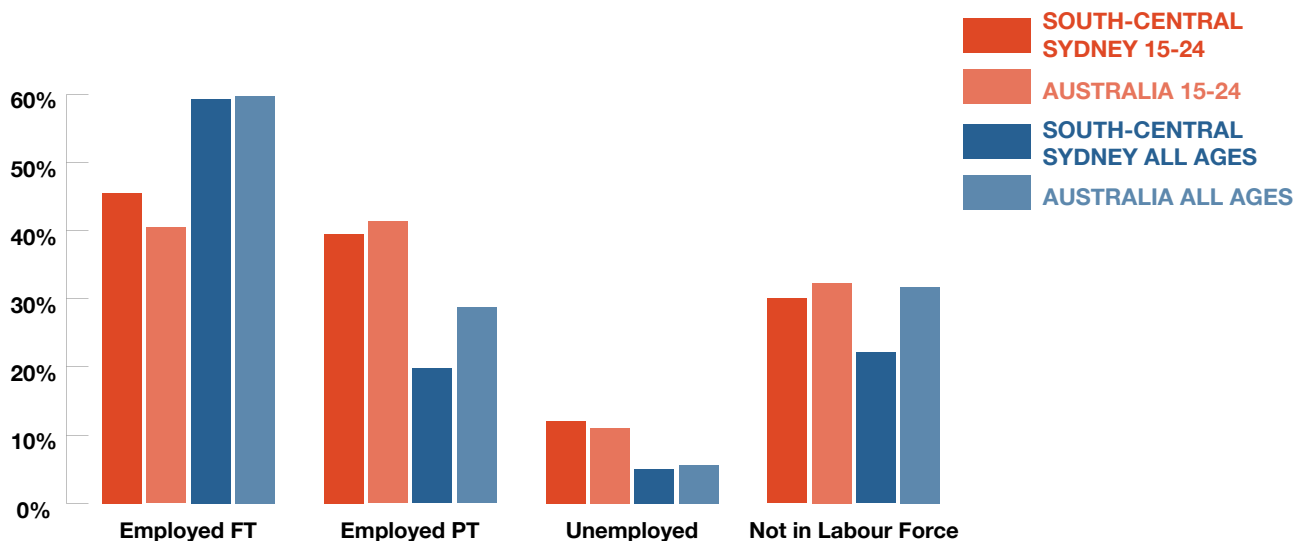
The South-Central Sydney area contains a marginally lower percentage of Indigenous people when compared to the national average (2.0 percent compared to 2.5 percent nationally, see Figure 2), yet the rate of young Indigenous people aged 15-19 is higher in the South-Central Sydney area compared to the national average (5.5 percent compared to 4.2 percent nationally)<sup>6</sup>.

**Figure 2: Indigenous status, percentage of age group (2011)**



The youth labour market situation in the South-Central Sydney area demonstrates some different patterns compared to the Australian average (see Figure 3). Among 15-24 year olds, more are in full-time employment (45.5 percent compared to 40.4 percent) and fewer in part-time employment (38 percent compared to 41.3 percent) in the South-Central Sydney area than nationally<sup>7</sup>. Youth unemployment in the South-Central Sydney area is marginally higher than the national average (12.6 percent compared to 12.1 percent nationally)<sup>8</sup>.

**Figure 3: Labour force status, percentage of age group (2011)**



There are 12 schools in the South-Central Sydney area, which includes four primary schools (two public and two private), four secondary schools (one public and three private), one community school (Kindergarten to Year 12) and three specialist schools<sup>9</sup>. The area is also well-served by tertiary education. Sydney Institute of TAFE has its main campus in Ultimo, a short distance north, and its Eora campus in Chippendale, which has a particular focus on education and training for Indigenous Australians. The University of Sydney's main campus is in Darlington. In addition, the main campus of the University of Technology Sydney as well as the College of Fine Arts (University of New South Wales) and a campus the University of Notre Dame are very close. The area contains much tertiary student housing, both formal as associated with various universities and informal through rental shared accommodation. This may explain why the Year 12 or



equivalent completion rate for 20-24 year olds in the South-Central Sydney area is higher than the rate of completion nationally: 77.5 percent versus 69.9 percent<sup>10</sup>.

Key College has a particular focus on supporting homeless young people. In New South Wales there are over 28,000 people experiencing homelessness, with young people aged 12-24 comprising almost one quarter of this population (24.6 percent)<sup>11</sup>. The inner-city area of Sydney has one of the highest rates of homelessness in NSW<sup>12</sup>. Research on youth homelessness suggests that young people most commonly access specialist homelessness services due to the breakdown of family relationships, conflict at home, mental health issues and school disengagement and that youth homelessness is often a precursor of homelessness in adulthood<sup>13</sup>.

## Program governance and aims

Established in 1996, Key College is located in Redfern, 3 kilometres from Sydney's CBD, and is one of five accredited independent high schools serving disadvantaged young people that is operated by Youth Off The Streets (YOTS), a non-denominational community organisation providing a wide range of educational, accommodation and other services for young people aged 12-21 in Sydney and rural NSW. The YOTS organisation works with young people who have been or are experiencing homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, exclusion from school, neglect and abuse. Key College aims to create a sense of belonging for students and to empower them through participation in relevant learning programs that are tailored to each student's interests and talents. With strong support, students are enabled and encouraged to take responsibility and be accountable for their own decisions, learning and behaviour. In these ways, Key College aims to help young people to address barriers in their lives, so that they may move on to positive futures and achieve their unique potential.

## Students

Key College provides educational opportunities for young people aged 14-18 who have become disengaged from education and who are homeless or have unstable accommodation. Most young people attending Key College are living in youth refuges and many have experienced difficult family and legal issues, abusive situations, and/or alcohol or other drug dependency. Key College enrolls around 20 students each year. In 2013, ten young people maintained enrolment throughout the year, including seven male and three female students. Some young people in transient circumstances may participate in a limited way and at times withdraw due to residential instability. In 2011-13, an average of 14 percent of students enrolled were identified as Indigenous. One-third of students have a language background other than English. Most students reside in the inner-city and inner-west area of Sydney with others travelling from the western and southern suburbs, mainly reflecting the geographical spread of available supported and refuge accommodation.

## Staff

Key College has two full-time teachers and a part-time youth worker. Between them, the teachers have twenty years' experience of working at Key College and one is the school Manager. In addition, a Principal is employed by Youth of the Streets who collaborates with the managers of all five YOTS schools to oversee the operation of the programs. Key College has one teacher to about 6-8 students. Although this is a favourable ratio, the human resources of Key College are stretched due to students' need for assistance with housing, legal, health and welfare issues. Key College's access to youth services provided by its parent organisation, Youth Off The Streets, is an important complement to resources, as is the dedicated small group of long term volunteers.

## Curriculum

Key College offers a broad curriculum catering for students' academic, psychological and vocational needs and interests. Key College is accredited to provide individual learning programs at Year 8 to 12 levels, though currently it has a focus on Year 10 programs based on the New South Wales secondary curriculum. Students may obtain the Record of School Achievement (RoSA)<sup>14</sup> on completion of Year 10 or may continue their studies for the Higher School Certificate (HSC, Year 12) at another Youth Off The Streets school or elsewhere. In addition there is a strong program in work experience and vocational education, including the option of undertaking Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate or taster courses and a range of short training programs as preparation for employment or further study, such as a barista course, White Card for employment in the construction industry, and first aid certificates.

Young people's welfare and wellbeing are supported through a range of YOTS services and programs and through inter-agency networks. These include programs in health and mental health, drug and alcohol education, careers counselling, service learning, leadership camps, mentoring and assistance with housing and legal issues. Breakfast, lunch and clothing (when necessary) are provided for students and YOTS outreach also provides personal support, recreation and cultural activities for students during school holidays.

## Timetable

Staff commence the work day by 7.45am and finish around 4.00pm, though a typical day for staff includes some after-hours phone or email contact with present or past students. Young people attend the school Monday to Friday, with classes and activities from 9.20am-3.00pm. Each morning begins with a talking 'circle' for around ten minutes, followed by one hour each of English and Mathematics, with a 15 minute break between them. The morning schedule reflects the importance placed on building students' literacy and numeracy skills as many have had gaps in their formal education, often (but not always) associated with homelessness. Afternoon schedules include a range of project and community-based learning activities that comprise integrated subject studies, vocational programs, service learning and life skills.



## Facilities

Key College occupies the ground floor of the Henry George House, conveniently located adjacent to Redfern Station, a main interchange of the Sydney metropolitan rail service. The school consists of one classroom, a small staff office with three desks, a kitchen, male and female bathrooms and a small multipurpose room used for one to one interviews, casework, music and storage. One section of the classroom has desks, computers, a whiteboard and Smart Board and looks much like a small 'regular' classroom. On the other side of a partition are two more computers, a comfortable nook with two sofas and a coffee table and the dining area where the table also doubles as another work area, for example, for art making or sewing. A vibrant atmosphere is created with lots of posters of students' art and project work around the walls. At the front entrance of the school, there is a display of Anzac reference books, posters, student essays and artefacts greeting visitors. Other recent work on display in the main school room included students' projects on Indigenous cultures and portraits painted by young people for their own 'Archibald' exhibition. Next to the school building there is a concreted parking area for the school minibus and a small outdoor space for staff and students to use.

## Key Dimensions

The remainder of this case study will report on four key dimensions of the work of alternative or flexible learning programs: Valued Outcomes, Actions, Principles and Conditions. These dimensions are interrelated, which means some specific aspects (eg. curriculum) may appear in several sections. Figure 4 schematically represents the dimensions.

These dimensions address aspects that are of relevance across alternative or flexible learning programs for marginalised young people, but the specific detail within each dimension varies for each program and case study. The dimensions are:

- Valued outcomes: this addresses outcomes from the program that count as 'success' in the perspectives of key stakeholders: students, staff, community members and graduates. Evidence is provided for achieving those outcomes, based on interviews, fieldwork observations, and program documentation.
- Actions: this dimension refers to the actions carried out through the program that support the achievement of the valued outcomes. This offers practical insights in how successes are realised.
- Principles: underpinning the program's practices are principles that produce a foundation for actions. These principles together form the (implicit or explicit) philosophy or vision of the program.
- Conditions: this dimension includes various conditions that enable or hinder people in a program to act on its principles and achieve valued outcomes.

The report concludes by summing up the most noteworthy characteristics of the Key College program that help to make it successful.

**Figure 4: Key dimensions – Youth off the Streets Key College**



**Note:** This model was developed by Kitty te Riele as Chief Investigator of the project team. Use permitted for non-commercial purposes and with attribution to Kitty te Riele and this report (see page 2 for citation guidance)

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# VALUED OUTCOMES

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Rather than pre-determining what counts as success, this section is based on the perspectives of key stakeholders. For Key College, valued outcomes include personal growth and wellbeing; enjoyment and achievement at school; genuine relationships; recognition, including recognised credentials; ‘normalcy’ or stability; and the school’s societal role in young people’s care.

At Key College, students, staff and community members understand success in terms of young people’s ‘life journeys’. As success is highly personalised, it is as varied as the situations, needs and interests of the young people: “it can mean a lot of things since there’s a lot of different kind of youth here” (Philip, community member). Many of the young people attending Key College have experienced disrupted education. Some “may [have] missed up to two or three years of schooling” and all have been homeless and without family support. The “many indicators” of success therefore include everyday “small steps” like getting to school (Shannon, staff). In the longer term, the young people attain skills, credentials, work experience, housing and healthy lifestyles that enable them to make good decisions and build a positive future for themselves.



## Personal growth and wellbeing

Students’ enhanced sense of self-worth, confidence, personal agency and more positive attitudes are interrelated aspects of Key College students’ personal growth and wellbeing. The staff see students’ improved sense of self-worth manifest in the way they relate to others. As young people value themselves – and often this is a significant change – they become more open and communicative. For some, there is a notable change in physical posture that embodied their newfound confidence. Improved self-worth is also seen to underpin the students’ sense of agency toward a more positive future. Danni (graduate) observed these changes in herself and other students. She reflects that (like many students) she had difficult circumstances to deal with, yet the school “just really helped me to believe in myself and then that’s how I kept pushing forward”. Over time, students gain confidence and become more involved at school and talk about their future.

Students’ sense of agency is expressed in their confidence that they can build a better future for themselves. For Bryce (student) this means working hard towards his goal of gaining further qualifications at TAFE or university. He sees this in terms of doing what is best for himself and to make his family proud.



Kane (student) similarly believes his goals are achievable step-by-step, that he is responsible for his own achievements and is committed to putting in the hard yards: At the end of the day... it's like up to you to come to school and... if you want to learn and achieve your goals, like you want in life and that.

Students and graduates feel proud of their personal and academic achievements and having gained the “confidence to do stuff” (Bryce, student), they acquire a more positive outlook. For some students, this is most evident in the classroom, expressed in their willingness to keep to the school rules and staff instructions, all in good humour. These may appear to be basic expectations but are significant achievements for young people who for many reasons have previously found little that was interesting in school or seen few good reasons to cooperate. The frustration and anger that have sometimes defined young people who then “go out and shout at society” shift to valuing “how to be a part of society” (Vera, community member), conviction that they “are able to feel a part of the community” (Shannon, staff) and the expectation that life has much to offer.

The change in some students over the course of the year at Key College is described by Shannon (staff) as “like chalk and cheese from where that person started to where they finished up”. This is particularly the case for students who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. Some students talk about having given up “doing crime” and attribute this solely to their experience of Key College that changed their expectations and attitudes toward life. For other students, the achievement of wellbeing is centred on a healthier lifestyle. Students describe how they have “given up” or “cut down” on their use of alcohol or other drugs. For example, Leroy (student) has quit using drugs and is confident he no longer needs them as he has found a rewarding alternative in going to the gym and boxing, and no longer goes to “chill out” with a particular group of mates. Many graduates let the staff know how they continue to focus on eating well, improving fitness and getting on top of long term physical or mental health issues. This orientation to being healthy is established through their education at Key College. For example, in 2011, students were assisted to access general and specialist medical (eight and three students respectively), dental (four students), mental health (four students) and counselling (six students) services. Ten students participated in the Youth Off The Streets Dunlea Alcohol and Other Drug Youth Service workshops<sup>15</sup>.

All of the young people who come to Key College have in the past experienced and/or presently experience very difficult circumstances and personal challenges. But by the time they graduate their personal growth and wellbeing provide a solid foundation for their future.

*[Key College] helped youth get off the streets and stopping crimes... and it helps a lot for the kids in the future... I can say probably every single one of the students that come here will change because of the environment and stuff. (Sophie, graduate)*



## Enjoyment and achievement at school

Key College is very successful in re-engaging young people. Shannon (staff) thinks that “getting them through the front door is the first major step in getting them to engage... because it is a five day a week program and most of our students would have been long term non-attenders at school... even a walk through the front door is huge”. Moreover, some students travel for up to two hours on public transport to get to Key College from refuges in outer suburbs. In 2013, Key College students’ attendance rate was 78 percent and the comments of students and graduates attest to the success of the program as engaging, enjoyable and providing opportunities for their many accomplishments.

For Bryce (student), who had been out of school for more than a year, “just being part of it” at Key College is what he values most – being part of the student group and school community, participating in many new activities and especially work experience. Sophie (graduate) had been out of school for two years and reflects that at Key College “I actually enjoyed coming to school every day”. Kane (student) says he really likes school and this is so different from his past experience. Having been bullied at his previous school, he got into fights and ended up being suspended several times. For Danni (graduate) who had been out of school for three years before coming to Key College, discovering her talents motivated her to achieve in her fields of interest, especially music and writing. The enjoyment of learning then inspired her to continue her education. Having successfully completed Year 10 at Key College, she is half-way through Year 11 at another Youth Off The Streets school.

At Key College many students enjoy learning for the first time in their school careers. Bryce (student) describes his previous interest in school as only about socialising with mates whereas Key College is “somewhere I come to learn. Now I enjoy learning and socialising”. Students find that they are “learning a lot more” and from their perspective have made significant gains in academic subjects and skills such as mathematics, reading and science. For staff, it is very rewarding to see the students complete their Year 10 studies but equally important are those everyday classroom moments when young people “get what you’re talking about and they finally understand” (Shannon, staff). As the students enjoy coming to school and actually engage in the program, they gain an awareness of their own capability as learners along with a sense of accomplishment. Their confidence to continue in education is evident in the long term. For example, a survey of Key College graduates found that two-thirds had completed some further education and training<sup>16</sup>.

## Genuine relationships

The quality of relationships formed between the students and with the staff and community members is a significant achievement, given the conflictual, sometimes exploitative and abusive relationships that many of the young people have experienced in the past. This was perhaps all the more an indicator of success of the school given the small space available where, as Philip (community member) suggests, we might expect to see “people just getting on each other’s nerves”. On the contrary, the students and graduates all have commented on how well people got along and that feeling accepted by peers and adults is a valued outcome of the Key College experience.

Unanimously, students and graduates describe the school as “like a big family” (Leroy, student). That many of the graduates stay connected with the school reflects the genuine reciprocity of trusting relationships they have with the staff and community members. As Philip points out, “they have predominantly come back to us, rather than us reaching out to them”.



## Recognition

Through their participation in vocational and community programs, students become aware of community support for them, that “people want them to succeed” (Shannon, staff). This works as a virtuous circle as young people’s achievements, big and small, are recognised. For example, the school regularly receives positive feedback on students’ participation in external programs and this is passed on to individual students. One important form of community recognition is the attendance of the annual “Presentation Day”. Around one hundred friends and community partners of Key College acknowledge the students’ achievements on this formal occasion. In these ways, the school helps young people to achieve “a status that they didn’t have previously” (Philip, community member).

Recognised credentials have always been an important goal for students of Key College. All of the students and graduates value credentials that will help them achieve their goals: to “change my life” (Leroy), to establish a career (Danni), to obtain their “own place” (Kane). In 2012, 9 of 27 students enrolled achieved their School Certificate. Six students obtained the TAFE Certificate of Attainment in Work Skills, two gained the White Card for employment in the construction industry and six were awarded the Senior First Aid Certificate<sup>17</sup>. These credentials have been important to young people’s post-school achievements, fulfilling entry requirements for TAFE Certificate and Diploma studies, apprenticeships, traineeships or full- or part-time employment. One graduate used her barista training to gain employment and with some experience under her belt, she then went on to work in a restaurant and from there moved into events management. Sophie (graduate) has similarly followed through on the plans she devised whilst at Key College. In the two years since leaving school she completed a six-month traineeship in hospitality, sales and marketing and several short business courses. Her further training and work experience have been achieved whilst also finding and getting established in semi-independent housing.

Other individuals’ accomplishments have gained significant community recognition such as a NSW Apprentice of the Year Award: Kendall’s (graduate) career path began with work experience and gaining the School Certificate that was required for the apprenticeship. Sam (graduate) was awarded a scholarship to continue studies at TAFE towards completion of a mechanics apprenticeship. This award, part of the YOTS National Scholarship Program, recognised that the young person was excelling in the chosen trade and was presented by the state Governor at an official ceremony. For several young people, this formal recognition has also provided opportunities for overseas travel to participate in conferences or exhibitions. Jade (graduate) has completed a university degree, received several study awards and participated in an overseas inter-cultural exchange program.



## ‘Normalcy’ or stability

Gaining stability in their lives means different things according to students’ individual circumstances. Obtaining supported (or “affordable”) or independent accommodation is a highly valued outcome and one that makes a significant difference in young people’s lives. In 2012, seven students who were in crisis refuges achieved more stable housing, two students moved to semi-independent and four into independent accommodation<sup>18</sup>. For other students, stability is found in good relationships and life partners. For example, Philip (community member) describes how one young woman is in a “good relationship” and “has had a child with her partner”. He believes that the sense of security she found at Key College has been an important foundation for her “getting on with her life”. Kris (staff) underlines the importance of stable housing to graduates’ successful relationships and parenting. When young people have secure accommodation they are able to provide the same sense of security “and stable schooling” for their children.

This is not to say that these outcomes are achieved easily. Housing is one of the most problematic issues that crops up again and again. In addition to the shortages of social housing and different kinds of accommodation suitable for young people, Kris (staff) points out that “there’s so much red tape out there” that they have to deal with. For example:

*One kid thought he had to leave his house, that he was being thrown out of his house. He had a piece of paper and he thought he was being evicted. In actual fact he wasn’t... but he was in hiding... because he thought this was the case... So this house had gone from affordable accommodation to market value [rental arrangement], because he was earning a normal wage and not on Centrelink. But no one had bothered to explain these changes to him. They expected him to just “know” and also understand the document that was written in legal jargon. (Kris)*

The assistance provided at Key College helps young people to “feel normal” as it offers another opportunity to achieve the milestones that they have missed out on. Re-engaging with her education “was the first, like normal straight thing” Sophie (graduate) did after a period of being involved in “the crime scene”. Re-focusing her involvement with Key College “showed me I guess maturity and I really needed to stop doing stupid things and start getting on track”. Gaining the Year 10 certificate is even more valuable to Sophie because “success for me was just doing what I didn’t get to do two years ago when all my other friends did”. The culture of the school gives students permission to “change track”. As Sophie explains, “I found relief in coming to school so it was like I wanted to come to school every day”.

This framework is effective for understanding ‘what works and why’ and resonates with practitioners in alternative learning programs. It helps to highlight commonalities across programs but also permits sensitivity to distinctive features. Some aspects of central significance to a program may be relevant across more than one dimension. A drawback of our framework is that, by discussing these aspects under several headings, this importance may have been concealed. This final section, therefore, sums up the most noteworthy characteristics of the program that help to make it successful.

Staff and community members see Key College as playing an important role in the societal system of care for marginalised young people. Key College is a small “system within society that looks after these young people” (Philip, community member). Over the course of one year, students make many significant gains that are a solid foundation “to break the cycle” (Shannon, staff) of family poverty and abuse and be “able to provide a living for themselves... if they move a little bit further up the ladder than where they started off... that would be awesome... some go far beyond that” (Kris, staff). Sophie (graduate) observes that there are “a lot of kids that are really successful that have come through this school and I’m sure it’s because of this school, 100 per cent is because of this school”.

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# ACTIONS

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To achieve these valued outcomes, Key College uses a range of actions that are familiar from across many alternative and flexible learning programs – although each of these is given its own shape within the program – such as staff care and concern, personalised relationships, relevant curriculum, and practical, personalised learning. In addition four sets of actions are somewhat more distinctive about Key College: engaging routines, health promoting curriculum, community-based learning and networks and personal support that is practical and long term.



## Staff care and concern

Students and graduates identify staff care and concern as number one in their accounts of the school support mechanisms that enable their achievements. For example, “Just by them caring” is Danni’s (graduate) summation of what helped her re-engage in education, enjoy school and achieve her certificates. Leroy (student) says that students know the staff care because they communicate it through the support they provide: “They just want you to succeed”.

Staff care is shown in many ways that the young people recognise. As Leroy puts it, “They don’t treat us like students. They treat us like people.” By way of example, he describes how staff ask about “stuff” that is going on in his life and let him know about events or activities he can attend on the weekends. This is not only about his access to movie tickets, concerts and sporting events through the school but Leroy sees this as staff being realistically concerned about where he might be and how circumstances might lead him back to drug use: “They keep asking me about it... they tell you, ‘Come out on the weekend’ don’t go out with them. It’s bad for you’... They’re fully supportive, like yes, we care.” Students and graduates point out that staff “help in pretty much everything” (Sophie, graduate). Bryce (student) describes the staff as “very thoughtful and helpful” in everything from wake-up calls to school work and “cooking food for us in the morning”. Staff care is reflected in their attitude: because they “really enjoy what they do and because of their attitude it really helps the kids” (Sophie). Philip (community member) describes the care shown by staff as “the warmth of their humanity” that the young people find “enlivening for themselves”.



Staff concern for students' learning and wellbeing is based on their knowledge of each young person's history, living circumstances and issues they are dealing with. Additionally, they are well attuned to cues about what students find engaging and are curious about. For example, student Kane's enthusiasm for horticulture began with Kris (staff) suggesting he might like to try landscaping. This idea originated in a "throwaway comment one day". Answering Kris's call to the refuge where Kane was living, a staff member mentioned that Kane was out in the garden. Kris thought, "he must have a keenness for that... I go, wow, I know just the spot for you mate, that's good." Kane has since completed a short course in landscaping and is looking forward to his upcoming work experience in horticulture.

## Personalised relationships

The care and concern shown by staff are the basis of trust that enables personalised relationships to flourish. Sophie (graduate) explains that "if they didn't really care about the kids we wouldn't build a connection with them and we wouldn't really care about coming in". For these young people, the most important aspects of student-staff relationships are that staff "relate to you" and are "always willing to talk" (Bryce, student). Building the connection takes time and the everyday conversations through which staff communicate care, interest and that it is safe to speak openly, enable students "to let their guard down a bit more" (Shannon, staff). For staff, this means being "not too pushy" and "in their own good time, they'll let you know what's really going on" (Shannon). Students then gain confidence in the staff, that they are able to hear their issues and "know how to deal with kids" (Sophie, graduate).

Witnessing that staff are their advocates is an important element of growing trust and confidence within student-staff relationships. For example, one morning a student was stopped by police when he jumped the barrier at the railway station. The student describes how he was tackled to the ground, handcuffed and taken to the police station. He was not charged but was upset and angry. Although he just wanted to tell the staff, he was clearly pleased when Kris decided to have a word with the police youth liaison officer. For Sophie (graduate), staff advocacy made school feel like family: staff are "more like a parent to me". She sees this as an important form of support for the students "because a lot of people don't have their parents there".

Students' positive relationships extend to other adults closely linked to the school. Regular volunteers and the staff of businesses and community organisations who have had a long association with Key College are also embraced as "family", especially when, for many different reasons, students' own family is unable to be part of their lives. For example, staff and students comment on how chuffed the students were to see various community members in attendance at their annual performance night. It was those adults with whom they had become closely connected that lit up their faces as they scanned the audience and with whom they were keen to share how proud they were that night.

Peer support is also very important to the students. They find new friends at Key College and form close bonds. The shared experience of difficult situations such as living in care or having been involved with juvenile justice is not a liability in the context of Key College. People of all ‘backgrounds’ are included: “we were just all accepting of each other” (Danni, graduate). Peer support is then also an important resource for the students in terms of their learning:

*It was also good having the students in my class. We all helped each other out as well. So it's not just the teacher; it's the students as well that helped me. (Danni, graduate)*

As well as fostering young people’s sense of belonging, personalised relationships are the basis for promoting young people’s responsibility and accountability. For example, Key College takes a restorative justice approach to negative behaviour. Rather than being issued a punishment, students are encouraged to discuss issues with peers and staff, to communicate their feelings and resolve the issues.

## Engaging routines

The routines of Key College help students to establish or get back into habits that support their attendance, learning and motivation. Although some of the routines appear quite informal, they are structures tailored to the background experience of the students. For example, the staff provide ‘wake-up’ calls or texts for students who have been unused to getting up early. Breakfast and lunch are provided as well as any requisites for schoolwork and assistance in obtaining clothes, furniture or other items needed.



Every day begins with a ‘talking circle’ in the cosy nook of lounges. Conversations are initiated by staff and students, itemise the day’s activities, then range over many topics relevant to the young people’s life in and out of school. The conversations are often celebratory, acknowledging individual or group achievements. For example, the morning after their performance night there was much laughter as each student described what they enjoyed; most spoke of feeling really proud. The staff pointed out what they saw as each student’s contribution and strength – such as character portrayal, creative ad-libbing, conveying humour, and reminded them all that their persistent effort during rehearsals had paid off. Emails of congratulation from many friends of Key College were also read out. Sometimes the circle addresses issues that require some resolution or agreed action, for example, if there is some “stupid behaviour” on excursions or going to and from school. Talking it through in the circle means it is over and done with before everyone shifts into learning and teaching mode.

The appearance of the ‘phoney police’ also signals it’s time to be ready to work. Each day, one of the staff dons a fake police cap and fluoro vest and ‘confiscates’ the students’ mobile phones. This routine is a bit of fun and an example of how the staff use humour to elicit student cooperation.

The timetable of English and Mathematics each morning with afternoons “a bit more relaxed” with “personal development, things like music, drama” (Shannon, staff) is a rewarding routine. Bryce (student) thinks activities like going to the park to play basketball are fun after the harder work of concentrating on mathematics.

Rewards are also given in the form of certificates that recognise contributions to the life of the school, for example, for acting respectfully towards others in the classroom or on outings. Achievements in school work and behaviour also earn tickets in the weekly raffle for prizes such as items of clothing, shopping vouchers or music DVDs. The students “really like that recognition that they’ve done something”, particularly as “in most cases you know they haven’t had much positive reinforcement” in the past (Shannon, staff). Similarly, they are proud to show off the ‘Wall of Fame’ that highlights “key moments” or “any big achievements” (Kris, staff) through photos, media articles and students’ work.

## Personalised learning

An Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is designed for each student each term, with a focus on literacy and numeracy, and tailored to students’ interests and talents. ILPs usually include vocational training and work experience as well as mandatory subjects for the Record of School Achievement or to continue on to the NSW Higher School Certificate. Students complete barista and first aid courses as something extra “so that by the time they leave here... they’ve got some things to offer other people, their resumes look pretty good” (Kris, staff).

The focus of ILPs changes as students try out new activities, discover their talents and gain a clearer idea of their goals. For example, Danni (graduate) said, “I found talents that I’d never thought I had, that they recognised... Like on guitar and the piano”. The staff arrange lessons and “bought me a piano book and the CDs and everything”. Leroy (student) also “never saw I had talents” but found out that: “I do music and I’m good at art. I did a performance in music... And I rapped I got paid for it... [now] I’m just recording music”. Bryce (student) finds that he enjoys science and especially physics and is keen to learn more. From the staff point of view, fostering students’ interests is key to engaging each student and they intend to “make them realise they have skills and abilities that they haven’t probably developed... it shows them that they can do things and not to be afraid of doing things” (Kris, staff). For students, having choices is valued and is part of what makes the Key College distinctive: “They don’t force you to do things... They just say, ‘Do you want to do this?’” (Leroy, student).

Classroom learning is always personalised as staff know the students so well and connect new ideas or skills to their interests and prior knowledge. For example, the Socceroos’ (Australian soccer team) World Cup qualifying match was a focus for English classes. To explain the meaning of ‘pun’, Kris (staff) showed the media report on the NSW Premier renaming Sydney’s Cahill Expressway the Tim Cahill (Socceroos star) Expressway for the duration of the qualifier. Figures of speech were detailed through Kris’ commentary on the match, aided by a bag of chocolate bars. For example, a player was described as a ‘Chomp’ and after a goal was scored team supporters were ‘sniggering’ (Kris holds up the Snickers bar). Learning about language devices was brought into a conversation about individual and team performance and related to the students’ drama night. Similarly, in a mathematics class, students used online real estate sites to compare housing prices and costs of rental accommodation across Sydney. While “still in a curriculum and important to the maths” (Shannon), this work drew on and provided a context for students’ experience of accommodation systems.



Personalised learning support has several forms. Each lesson is structured with staff instruction and whole class inquiry followed by applied tasks with the one to one assistance of staff and volunteers. Danni (graduate) likes this approach because it fostered her persistence with work when she felt “over it”: if not understanding, she could ask for help as many times as needed. Staff explained things in different ways and did “not try and brush you off... they really want to try and help you figure it out”. They “taught us not to give up” (Danni, graduate). Learning is reinforced through connections made between lessons. Kane (student) explains why this is helpful:

*The school teaches you like different stuff every day... and then sometimes you go over what you learned before and the teacher will ask you questions... like what you learned... I think we learn over... the work we did and then they taught us to bring it out.*

Recognition of exemplary work adds to the scaffolding of students’ learning and honours personal achievement. For example, reading a piece of student writing, Kris (staff) commented to the class: “It’s giving me goosebumps... And that’s what good writing should do”.

Personal progress is regularly plotted so that each student can see what they have achieved and can identify new goals and challenges. This involves the student drawing a little figure representing him/herself and sticking that on a picture of a mountain. Over the year, students periodically adjust their position on the mountain to visualise their “learning journey”, “so they know that’s where they’re at, at the moment” (Kris, staff). The journey may be “two steps forward, one step back... sometimes it seems very slow... it does need to be pointed out to the kids that they are moving forward” (Kris, staff). The mountain and the journey are prominent metaphors in Key College discourse and remind students to “always look upwards and see where you’re going to, know that you’ve journeyed a fair way” (Kris).



## Purposeful practical learning

Practical, purposeful learning occurs through life skills activities that “teach things that are important to everyday living”, including “the skills to run a household, to be able to pay your bills and to know how to manage your money and things like that” (Shannon, staff). As well as being incorporated into the mandated subjects, the life skills program includes personal development activities and ‘tasters’ in music, drama, art, construction, cooking and clothes-making that students may then choose to study further at Key College and/or TAFE. Pedagogy is focused on showing how, learning by doing and always incorporating literacy and social skills development.

Negotiating systems is an important life skill related to students’ personal goals and practical needs for independent living. Students learn about how systems work by using them, with the advice and guidance

of staff. Sophie (graduate) explains that staff “ask us... what we want to do and then... they work with us through the process and then ask if we’re happy with the outcome and stuff”. In the process students develop systems knowledge, an understanding of their rights and responsibilities, and communication or people skills. This learning is important because it empowers young people and without it there can be a spiral of difficulties and barriers:

*You don’t know how to interact with other people, you’re not going to be very employable, no one wants to house you, your self-esteem is very low. (Shannon, staff).*

Sophie (graduate) had come back to Key College at various times to gain help with finding a counsellor, accommodation and to work out a plan to pay off old fines. Most recently she returned to print her resume, look up information and make some calls about TAFE courses. She now feels confident about negotiating these systems though she also knows that she can call on the staff if she needs assistance.

## Relevant and health promoting curriculum and activities

Staff, students and community members perceive the curriculum as relevant, engaging and promoting students’ health and wellbeing. Vocational learning is especially relevant to students in the present and longer term. Bryce (student) is keen to undertake the TAFE ‘taster’ course in plumbing and electrical trades as this will help him to decide whether to pursue that career path or to focus on his favourite subject, physics, and aim for university. All of the students and graduates agree that work experience gained through Key College prepares them well for employment.

Music, visual art and drama are not only relevant for young people and their enjoyment of school; they also have a “therapeutic and educative effect” (Philip, community member). For many students who have experienced depression and often still deal with high levels of stress, the arts are “enlivening” (Philip). From the fun of being part of the ukulele group to writing, recording and performing, reflection and self-expression through music contributes to students’ mental health and wellbeing. Fiona (graduate) says that singing and rapping helped her to “get everything off my mind”. For students like George, the arts are essential to wellbeing and the means of re-engaging with education. Staff encourage George to “have a go” at everything and gradually raise expectations of his work in all subjects by recognising his one great passion, drawing, and encouraging his artwork through adapted assignments and trips to exhibitions. On one occasion when students were helping with food service at a community organisation, George showed no interest. His teacher then challenged him to capture the spirit of the place in a drawing. Quickly George produced a piece of “graffiti” centred on one word: “HOPE”. His reflection on the community seems to also convey his feeling about becoming “part of it all”, through his growing involvement at Key College.

Healthy lifestyle is promoted in Key College through students’ regular access to a range of services to address needs in physical, mental and sexual health. One day per week an Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) Counsellor from YOTS provides one to one counselling, seeing four or five individuals so that each student has access every two to three weeks. The counsellor also provides the AOD education program. It focuses on students’ understanding of the properties and effects of alcohol, various prescription and illicit drugs and managing social situations that promote AOD use, aiming to minimise AOD use and harm. It is highly interactive, relevant and fun. For example, learning about alcohol effects involves students wearing ‘grog goggles’ (simulating high level consumption) and trying to put on lipstick or walk a straight line.

Physical activities include inter-school sports events such as basketball and Oz-tag matches, indoor activities like ten-pin bowling and ice-skating and outdoor leisure activities: “adventure courses and things like that that they usually excel at” (Kris, staff). Bushwalking and trips to the beach to just walk around, explore and enjoy the company of the group promote wellbeing through “camaraderie” between students, staff and community members and appreciation of the “beautiful environment” (Philip, community member). Students also access free tickets through Key College, to football, gym, a concert, play or ballet. These experiences enhance “that feeling of being part of something that’s good” (Shannon, staff) and in practical terms are healthy options for students seeking to move on in their lives.



## Community-based learning

Key College is a very small school with a big classroom: the city. Excursions include museums, galleries, theatre, Botanic Gardens, Chinese Gardens, Sydney Opera House, The Fish Markets, sporting events, recreations and “treats” like free haircuts and personal styling workshops. Students participate in celebrations for International Women’s Day, NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week, leadership camps and the Young Leaders Day at the NSW Parliament House.

Since 2002, Belvoir Theatre has provided a year-long program for students, “Youth Express”, that teaches them about theatre and how to be an audience member, followed by a project based on their life experience in which they workshop ideas, develop a script, learn roles and perform for a public audience. It is a major event as the students and their mentors at Belvoir work hard over many months and their plays always attract a full house. In the music program, students are tutored by the Heaps Decent crew and use the professional studio provided by the City of Sydney at Redfern Community Centre to mix and record their own songs.

Key College’s activities take young people across Sydney and beyond. For example, in 2011 one of Key College’s talented music students was the first young person to “rap the house” at Parliament House in Canberra. Students and staff have cycled from Sydney to Wollongong and Surfers Paradise and a few have trekked the Kokoda Trail. These challenges link personal, global and local experience, the formal school curriculum and life, through which students develop an understanding of their place and opportunities in the broader community.

Service Learning at Key College and other YOTS schools is based on the idea that “giving back” builds young people’s empathy with others, their sense of self-worth and “what a community should be” (Philip, community member) and practical skills. Key College students help out at the Newtown Mission every Tuesday for three school terms and have participated in a broad range of other service activities, including Rotary sausage sizzles and other fundraising for various charities and YOTS, clean-up days



on the Hawkesbury River and packing Rotary's 'shelter boxes' that are provided in disaster relief. Many construction projects are undertaken for marginalised or isolated groups. For example, students built a ramp for disabled access and a barbecue as well as tables and benches for a local church serving the residents of boarding houses in the inner city area. They have repaired and recycled furniture to donate to charities and worked on landscaping for houses being built by Habitat for Humanity. Writing children's books and reading them with local children is an annual project.

Work experience is a significant part of the community-based curriculum. It builds on the students' interests to help them clarify career directions and prepare for employment. Kris (staff) gives an example of how such learning in the community can work:

*We went to the aquarium and suddenly Ray [student] started spouting forth about these fish and I'm going, 'well how do you know about that'? In the end he ended up a zoo mentor... He had such a knowledge and the zoo took him on board.*



## Community networks

In addition to the focus on community-based learning, Key College connects students into a broad network of youth services, community organisations and businesses. Staff have established relationships with youth services for assisting students with their personal goals, for housing and other needs that arise. Through personal contacts, they have also gained support from businesses and community organisations. This network is especially important for vocational learning as businesses host 'Lunch and Learn' sessions during which they provide information about career pathways, training and applying for jobs. Personal contacts are also important to finding work experience placements, such as Ray's work experience at the zoo, and paid work for students and graduates. For example, Kris (staff) described how staff contacts helped a recent graduate to get a start as a general assistant in a marketing office while he completed Year 11 at TAFE. Long term supporters of Key College are crucial because they understand the kinds of issues the young people have to deal with and are willing to be flexible to support their development as young workers. Students additionally benefit from "just be[ing] around good people" (Kris, staff). Through this

network, Key College students have accessed a broad range of work experience, with placements in retail, office work, hospitality and horticulture amongst the most popular.

## Personal support

Strong personal support is provided to students at Key College. It is practical in meeting current needs and is made available to graduates over the longer term. There is a strong focus at Key College on assisting students to find stable accommodation and an employment pathway. Meeting these needs provides a strong foundation for everything else to fall into place.

*I see these young people have actually achieved success if they have accommodation and if they have some sort of work, whether it is still within the education system, but it has to lead to an employment opportunity. (Ingrid, community member)*

The young people, staff and community members provide many examples of the “wrap-around” support arranged for students, including “getting into a detox program”, “help with counselling and psychiatrists”, “pregnancies or health” and “income, legal or court support”. Leroy’s story of a judge’s response to a court support letter shows how significant this can be. The school report detailed his regular attendance, involvement and excellent progress. Leroy (student) describes how the judge told him the letter had made him happy and advised Leroy to “just keep doing good”. Leroy believes that if it were not for the letter and all the support of Key College to be doing well, “I’d be in gaol now”. Instead, he is keen to stay out of trouble and continue “doing good”.

The support of young people continues after they have left Key College. Staff follow up each year’s cohort and graduates continue to access assistance over the long term. Graduates most often initiate contact to let staff know that “they’re going really well”, but there is not so much contact “when kids are just plain sailing” (Shannon, staff). According to Shannon, “finding a job is huge”. For example, a young man who left Key College five years ago “just started working at a butcher’s and he rang Kris and myself to let us know that he’s got a job and he also married and his wife’s pregnant”. While some students engage in counselling whilst at Key College and find that this helps them to “mature emotionally” (Kendall, graduate), it is often once graduates are more established with homes, relationships or work, that they are then ready to deal with “deeper” issues and contact Key College for assistance in finding a psychologist. Kris (staff) emphasises the value of long term support in responding to young people’s changing needs.

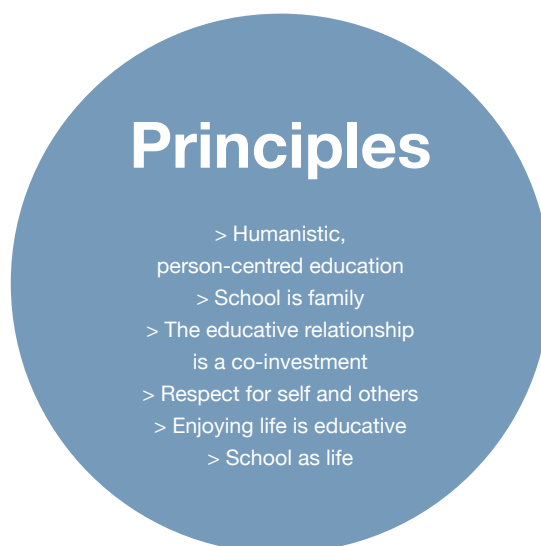
It is also common for graduates to call staff “if things have really gone pear shaped” (Shannon, staff). It is not surprising that the graduates turn to Key College staff in times of “crisis” because, as the staff point out, homelessness can be cyclic and linked to age-related services. Young people “age out” of supported accommodation or community housing services (often at age 18) and they may still be on a waiting list for public housing and not in a position to pay market rent. Moreover, losing accommodation disrupts the stability the young person had worked hard to gain. As community member, Ingrid observes, “Without accommodation and work, these kids continue to flounder, to fall back into difficult situations, unable to make good decisions because they don’t have those basics”. However, having Key College to turn to does make a difference. Despite the devastating consequences of losing his home, one young man managed to get to work every day and retained his job. Very importantly, he had a sensitive and understanding employer who noticed that all was not well and offered to help. With the practical support of both Key College staff and the employer, this young man was assisted to find a new residence and over time regained his positive outlook.

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# PRINCIPLES

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The outcomes that are valued and actions taken within Key College are underpinned by several principles. They are discernable in comments from the young people, staff and community. Some are explicitly formulated in the interviews and reflect the values shared by Youth Off The Streets schools and services; others were determined through our analysis of the data.



## Humanistic, person-centred education

At Key College, education is framed as a concern with each young person's humanity: "You want them to be coming out of school as a better person, not only as a smarter person" (Shannon, staff). Education then entails a commitment to young people's "whole welfare" (Kris, staff). It is recognised that students' achievement within the formal curriculum is only one aspect of empowering them to move on to better futures. The view is that "your maths and your English and your tests and all that" is often "secondary to all the other things that we do here" (Shannon, staff) because the students who come to Key College have "been hurt so much by adults" (Vera, community member) and marginalised by society. Addressing the gamut of welfare issues young people are dealing with is thus necessary to their achieving wellbeing and stability in their lives, recognising their own capabilities and taking steps towards a better future.

The person-centred approach is evident in staff and community members' belief in each student, the "goodness in them" (Philip, community member) and their capacity to learn, achieve and overcome obstacles given the necessary support. The personalised attention to students enables them to move forward: "Like, this school just makes you realise what you're good at, gives you a chance" (Leroy, student); "they open up a lot of doors for us" (Sophie, graduate).

## School is family

Students and graduates experience Key College as more like a family than school. Building genuine relationships within the school community is deemed necessary to “take down barriers” (Vera, community member), break down isolation and feelings of being “outcast” (Shannon, staff). It is also recognised that the personal warmth and homeliness of Key College is especially important to young people who are not connected with their own families. There is, then, an element of “parenting” in the way staff relate to students and think about curriculum in recognition that “most people get taught by their parents or by some sort of role model that these kids don’t really have” (Shannon, staff). The “family” principle is then concerned with demonstrating care and modelling and fostering positive and healthy relationships. Establishing strength-based relationships aims to provide a basis for the young people’s own partnering and parenting and, for some, also promotes family re-connection or improved relationships.

## The educative relationship is a co-investment

The principle of co-investment is closely interrelated with building genuine relationships. This principle encapsulates the collaboration and reciprocity of educative relationships and is evident in the shared and shifting responsibilities of staff and students. The staff give considerable thought and time to setting up opportunities for the students to elicit their interest and help them to recognise their own capabilities. This is a blanket principle, whatever the duration of young people’s involvement with Key College, and is apparent in Kris’ (staff) definition of what success means at Key College:

*Success is if a kid puts his foot through the door, stays for the day and leaves with a smile or a positive comment. He leaves knowing he is capable of being in a school situation, taking part in a program and actually learning. He may not be quite ready to start a program but he knows that he has the potential to do so in the future.*

As students engage in the program and work toward their personal goals, they take on greater responsibility for their own learning and decision-making and are expected to do so: “you have to try and strike a balance where there’s a bit of give and take” (Shannon, staff). This applies to “little” issues and “big decision-making” (Kris, staff). For example, over time the students establish routines and no longer expect ‘wake up’ calls. In turn, they take responsibility for phoning the staff if they are going to be late or are unable to attend school. This process establishes habits that will be important to their working life in meeting employers’ expectations. Similarly, the students come to appreciate that while staff and community members set up opportunities for them to develop vocational directions, it is then up to them to take the opportunities. This shifting dynamic of co-investment works because there is such strong support available and because it builds on having taken the time necessary for students to try lots of different things and discover their talents and vocational interests. In the longer term, the “continuity” with graduates (Shannon, staff) is a further example of co-investment.

This principle also underpins community-based learning. The students learn about community by participating in it and contributing to it, particularly through work experience, service learning and the arts, and the community embraces them. Community members involved in these aspects of the students’ education appreciate the significance of their investment in the young people beyond students’ personal gains, in terms of benefits coming back to society through the achievements of the young people.



## Respect for self and others

Respect is the basic principle underpinning genuine relationships and is conspicuous in the ways students and staff relate to each other and to community members. Vera (community member) observes that at Key College “it’s all about respect... The kids respect them and Shannon and Kris respect the kids”. This principle is apparent in the ways that “teachers are supportive, they’re not always having a go at you, like never have a go at you actually...” (Bryce, student); and students and graduates feel “always welcome” (Sophie, graduate).

It is understood in the school community that self-respect is crucial to being happy in life and necessary for students’ “maturing into what we call responsible young adults” (Ingrid, community member). Students’ self-respect is directly related to being respected by those around them. A key dimension is the non-judgmental attitude of staff and community members closely involved with Key College. Ingrid (community member) observed this over many years and identifies non-judgment as embedded in the school culture: “That’s one of the most important things that I’ve seen there”. Students adopt the non-judgmental attitude they experience and see valued in the school. Danni (graduate) found that students do not “judge or bully” each other; rather, students “just kind of all have each other’s backs, and that’s what I love about it”.

## Enjoying life is educative

There is an apparent reciprocal relation between enjoyment and education at Key College. Enjoying school and learning is important in sustaining students’ engagement. At the same time, just being “part of it” is enjoyable. The notion that enjoying life is educative is evident in the value placed by staff, students and community members on using the community as the classroom to expand students’ horizons through cultural activities they may not have had opportunities to experience and the simple pleasures of recreational outings. Enjoying the “beauty of the world we live in” is educative in a spiritual sense of “expanded awareness of what it is to be alive” (Philip, community member). Being out in the environment and community provides time for some fun, for the conversation to flow naturally and sharing thoughts and insights in this way is an important form of learning.



## School as life

School as life is a key principle that underpins the work with students to achieve stability in their living circumstances. Accommodation and work are “essentials of life” (Ingrid, community member) and stable housing is seen as a prerequisite to learning. Until the young person can feel secure in having their own place, it remains a barrier to their achieving their potential. Moreover, research with Key College graduates has shown that in the longer term, those with stability in housing, including young parents, have not found it easy to gain and maintain employment but compared to their peers who did not secure stable accommodation, they maintained income above the poverty line and a higher level of satisfaction with their lives .

The long term view of young people’s lives orients the staff approach of tailoring teaching and learning to individuals’ present needs and talents but with an eye intently cast toward the future. From the staff and community members’ perspectives, education must lead to employment and both must contribute to enhancing the self-belief and positive outlook that will sustain the young people and enable them to establish the better futures they envisage for themselves. In particular, the staff view of “breaking the cycle” of poverty and abusive relationships envisages the young people as “good parents”. Kris elaborates: “I think that parenting... is so important and I think that’s what I’d like in the long term, that they became good parents – which I am seeing in general.”

The principle of ‘school as life’ underpins the view that learning is lifelong and building a good life after school may involve “two steps forward, one step back” (Kris, staff), warranting strong support to students and continuity of support to graduates, so “they know they can always come back” (Vera, community member).

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# CONDITIONS

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Several conditions enable (and/or constrain) the ability of Key College to undertake the actions outlined above, in order to meet the outcomes that are valued within the program. Some of these conditions are similar to conditions for other alternative learning programs, but others are specific to Key College, such as being part of a larger organisation and having long term community partners.



## Small school

Being a small school with one small class of students enables personalised relationships and tailoring learning programs for each student. In Shannon's (staff) view, being able to provide "individualised attention" accounts for "the major part of the success" of Key College. Noticing and recognising difficulties and achievements is possible "because you haven't got a class of thirty kids". Students and graduates emphasise the benefits of one to one tutoring provided by staff and volunteers. The "individual connection" with staff and peers, feeling accepted and free from bullying are features of the different experience at Key College compared with "big schools" (Danni, graduate). While extending the program to incorporate Years 11 and 12 is greatly desired by the Key College community, it is also recognised that the quality of relationships and programs that are benefits of being small could be compromised.

Being a small school also requires flexible ways of working. The commitment to each student means that staff have to be excellent time managers and individual learning plans and schedules need to accommodate the various appointments (eg. housing, health and counselling) necessary to young people's changing circumstances. There are also challenges for the Key College community to manage in the small space where staff need to be (and are) creative and adept at using the city as a classroom.

## Staff commitment

The staff of Key College are passionate about their work and their commitment is a crucial condition of the young people's many achievements. It is crucial to ensuring that programming embeds the outcomes of

state mandated curriculum whilst making it relevant to students' lives. The staff are always on the lookout for relevant activities and placements, alert to cues from students about what will engage them in their learning and vocational preparation. The person-centred orientation then relies on staff often working longer hours than their positions require. Staff regard the "after-hours" work with students and graduates as a personal choice, based in their affection for the young people and their sense of "human commitment" that this is the right thing to do. Their consciousness of the precariousness of housing, the many challenges that students and graduates face to gain and maintain health, wellbeing and employment, means they are not prepared to "let kids walk out the door" (Kris, staff) without access to their "home base" (Vera, community member) of support because "You want them to be a success, you want them to move on". This attitude is characteristic of present and past staff of Key College who make themselves accessible to graduates over the long term.



## Being part of a larger organisation

Key College benefits from being part of the Youth Off The Streets organisation through its funding of the school, access to the broader range of services YOTS provides and its corporate partnerships. All of the necessary material resources are provided free to students who see this as important to their engagement at Key College. Danni (graduate) sums this up: "You don't have to worry about fees and stuff... about bringing lunch, it's free. I think that's a big benefit... for kids out there who aren't living with their parents... and can't afford to go on excursions". Having the backing of YOTS is crucial to Key College's long term support as young people 'age out' of supported accommodation and other youth programs, however "Fortunately, Youth Off The Streets sees that the role... doesn't finish when they're 18, it goes on" (Ingrid, community member).

The YOTS system of services is a central part of Key College's inter-agency network for young people's welfare support and being part of the YOTS education network is particularly supportive of young people who complete Year 10 at Key College and want to then complete Years 11 and 12. Being able to enrol in



another YOTS school that operates similarly to Key College can make for a smooth transition. In the 2013 annual YOTS online survey that included students of YOTS schools, 80.1 percent of young people thought that YOTS had helped them “to achieve things I didn’t think I could”.

## Community partnerships

There is an extensive network of support for Key College, including YOTS, youth inter-agencies, corporate programs and community volunteers. Many opportunities are made available to the young people through the generosity of community organisations and businesses, including free events, workshops and arts programs. However, Key College relies on a small band of community volunteers and businesses that have been involved long term. Volunteers assist in the life skills program, teaching cooking, sewing and home crafts, joining in the outings and providing one to one tutoring alongside the staff. Vera has been coming one day per week for two years; Philip, a retired teacher, has assisted with tutoring two days per week for the last eight years; and lecturers from two Sydney universities are volunteer teachers and collaborate with staff on curriculum development.

Not all work experience placements are suitable for the students as some businesses are not able to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate other demands on young people’s time or their inexperience. Key College then relies on employers who “get what our kids are about” (Kris, staff), who do not simply expect that the young people will follow instructions or demonstrate initiative but carefully mentor them. The commitment of employers, like the staff, is based on the observed success of Key College students and graduates over the years. A few businesses, like Eden Gardens, have become advocates for Key College and YOTS, not only providing work experiences but organising fundraisers and taking responsibility for community consciousness-raising to break down the stereotypes and prejudices that are barriers to young people’s personal achievements and participation in society.

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# SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

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The core of each case study report (including this one) focuses on four dimensions that emerged from analysis of all the vignettes and case studies. The starting point is the outcomes that are valued and achieved by alternative learning programs. In order to achieve these outcomes, specific work is done and actions are taken. Underpinning the aims (valued outcomes) and approach (actions) we can discern principles that inform each program. Finally, certain (external and internal) conditions help or hinder the actions and the achievement of outcomes.

This framework is effective for understanding ‘what works and why’ and resonates with practitioners in alternative learning programs. It helps to highlight commonalities across programs but also permits sensitivity to distinctive features. Some aspects of central significance to a program may be relevant across more than one dimension. A drawback of our framework is that, by discussing these aspects under several headings, this importance may have been concealed. This final section, therefore, sums up the most noteworthy characteristics of the program that help to make it successful.

For Key College, the following features are particularly remarkable:

**1) The long term view.** Staff, students and community members work with a sense of holding “the big picture” of students’ learning and life “journeys” and taking “small steps” each day toward them. Taking time is then an important component of “what works and why”: time for students to discover their talents and strengths, to develop the skills they need for continued personal growth, learning the curriculum and negotiating systems. Sophie (graduate) sums this up: “Yeah like we can look at the big picture and then work out little things, yeah, one at a time and, yeah, that’s how they do it. We always go one at a time by things.”

**2) Wrap-around support.** With a person-centred focus, the academic domain is important, but only one dimension of education for empowerment. At Key College, education is seen as “a vehicle” (Shannon, staff) for young people’s welfare, wellbeing and personal growth. For young people with “high and complex needs”, the wrap-around support available in the personalised small school environment and through the inter-agency and community networks is key to their many achievements.

**3) Long term support.** Providing long term support to graduates is a distinctive feature of the program. The year at Key College provides a strong foundation for the future but it is recognised that life throws up many challenges to young people living independently, without family, and that ongoing access to support through the school is critical to maintaining and building on their gains. The metaphor of mountain climbing is as applicable, perhaps more so, in young people’s post-school experience than it is while they have a community wrapped around them, “holding the ropes for them” (Kris, staff). With ongoing access to staff and the school support networks, graduates are able to continue to “look up... and see where they’re going” instead of “slipping back” (Kris, staff).

**4) Community commitment.** Members of the Key College community frequently describe the school as “family”, reflecting the close relationships of co-investment in the young people’s education. With the backing of YOTS and the broader community, Key College provides an “extended family” that helps young people to take a respected place in society. Summing up her view of community involvement with Key College, Ingrid (community member) quotes the proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”. As with many alternative programs, Key College relies on partnerships with community agencies and businesses but the outstanding commitment of a small number of volunteers and organisations is quite distinctive. Remarkably, the corporate culture of businesses that have been involved with Key College long term has been greatly influenced by the Key College model, incorporating principles of inclusiveness, non-judgmental attitude and the expectation that experienced staff provide support and nurture young people’s personal and professional growth.

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# ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/case-studies/>
- <sup>3</sup> This phase of the research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE13-038) and permission was given by each of the programs. All programs agreed to be named.
- <sup>4</sup> The diversity of the Sydney Local Government Area makes it unsuitable for use as the basis for statistical background information in relation to Key College. Instead, a statistical area has been purposely created, which we name the 'South-Central Sydney' area. This area combines data from the ABS 2011 census community profiles of seven suburbs: Redfern, Eveleigh, Chippendale, Surry Hills, Waterloo, Darlington and Alexandria.
- <sup>5</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>6</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>7</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>8</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/locator/>; <https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Pages/SchoolFinder.aspx>
- <sup>10</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>11</sup> Homelessness Australia (2012) Homelessness in New South Wales, [homelessnessaustralia.org.au](http://homelessnessaustralia.org.au)
- <sup>12</sup> NSW Government (2009) A way home: Reducing homelessness in NSW. NSW homelessness action plan.
- <sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013) Specialist homelessness services: 2012-2013. Canberra: AIHW.
- <sup>14</sup> The Record of School Achievement replaced the Year 10 School Certificate in 2012. It is a cumulative credential for young people leaving school before completion of Year 12.
- <sup>15</sup> Key College Redfern (2011) Annual School Report.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin, AVF (2013) Key College, a school for homeless youth: A follow-up of ex-students. Unpublished MEdPsych Thesis, Massey University, New Zealand.
- <sup>17</sup> Key College Redfern (2011) Annual School Report.
- <sup>18</sup> Key College Redfern (2012) Annual School Report.
- <sup>19</sup> Martin, AVF (2013) Key College, a school for homeless youth: A follow-up of ex-students. Unpublished MEdPsych Thesis, Massey University, New Zealand.
- <sup>20</sup> National youth Commission (2008). Australia's homeless youth: A report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness, p. 190. Citing Submission 68, Key College, Youth Off The Streets.







