

VICTORIAN CERTIFICATE OF APPLIED LEARNING (VCAL): CHANGING LANES

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)

How are education systems responding to the needs of young people ‘on the margins’ of schools?

In Victoria, a large scale system change has been initiated to introduce the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) alongside the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), in order to provide diversity in post-compulsory education options.

This has occurred in response to concern among many communities that there is an increasing number of young people who have found that post compulsory education is not useful for their lives and so are disengaging from mainstream schooling without completing secondary schooling.

This Case Study provides an overview of the operation of VCAL, and then outlines one example of a local initiative within VCAL that has been encouraged by that support for diversity, to offer a community-based ‘satellite’ VCAL for young people who were out of schools and/or whose needs were not currently being met by mainstream schooling.

Introduction

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was developed to meet the learning and educational needs of young people who have limited or poor outcomes from post compulsory education. These needs were identified in the *Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* (Kirby 2000). The review found the two factors most frequently cited by students for their decision to leave school were:

- A desire for work; and
- A lack of interest in schoolwork.

It was difficult though for these students to achieve a successful transition to work because of:

- lack of work related experience;
- no record of school achievement; and
- lack of relevant work related training.

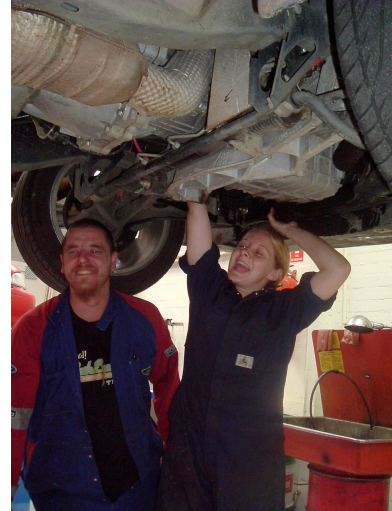
The Review also found that many school communities were aware and concerned about these issues and were developing programs at a local level to address the issues. VET in schools was being broadly used by schools, but schools were also developing their own local initiatives that included the local community, parents and local

businesses. The principles of applied learning (see section below) formed the basis for many of these programs. The Review therefore proposed that there be a coherent and State wide framework to support these local initiatives that were responding to local issues.

Educational Innovation?

The introduction of VCAL has provided a challenge to schools and teachers to rethink how schools are placed in their communities and how to deliver a curriculum that meets the needs of all students in the community. To deliver VCAL teachers have had to engage in activities that transcend the boundaries of the classroom and draw on the resources of the local community, agencies, Adult Community Education (ACE), TAFE, parents and local business.

The recent evaluation of the VCAL trial found that to effectively deliver a VCAL program that challenged the role of schools would require:



- The need for a new conceptualisation of quality curriculum that resists the domination of the generalised/abstracted knowledge-based curriculum and establish an applied learning of vocationally-oriented knowledge as a sustainable and valued pathway for students;
- The need for the development of teaching approaches for secondary school students that are informed by the principles of adult education and, as a result, are a clear departure from the teacher-centred, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that are still very much the norm in secondary schools today;
- The need for schools to enter into new partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other schools in their regions and with local community service agencies, employers, and TAFE and ACE providers in order to address more comprehensively the educational, training and employment needs of young people enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses;
- The need for an expanded conception of the role of the teacher, as part of diverse range of efforts necessary to address the above three points;
- The need to develop schools as more broadly based, inclusive and flexible learning and social environments for young people; and
- The need to overturn negative stakeholder perceptions about vocationally-oriented applied learning in comparison to vocationally-oriented academic learning, and to general and abstracted education (Henry, 2003:4).

Aims

The aim of VCAL is to provide students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make informed choices about pathways to work and further education.

Senior Secondary Certificates

VCAL sits alongside the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) as another choice that senior secondary students have to complete a senior secondary certificate. The two certificates are not mutually exclusive and students can select VCE or VCE /Vocational Education & Training (VET) units within their VCAL course. Students who start VCAL are able to transfer to VCE and any completed VCE units undertaken as part of their VCAL program are then counted towards their VCE.

Enrolments

In 2002, VCAL was accredited and introduced into a limited number of Secondary Schools, TAFE and ACE (Adult Community Education) across Victoria. There are now over 10,412 students in secondary schools, TAFE and ACE enrolled in VCAL throughout Victoria.

As of May 2005 – Government schools have 7,877 VCAL students, Catholic schools have VCAL 1079 students, Independent Schools have VCAL 75 students, TAFE has VCAL 1,151 students and ACE have VCAL 230 students.

In Government Schools, there are students enrolled in School Based VCAL and students enrolled in Community VCAL. If students are enrolled in a community VCAL they will be based off the school site as is the situation with Changing Lanes. But any school may have a combination of both School Based VCAL and Community VCAL.

It is not possible to determine what numbers are in Community VCAL out of the 7,877 students enrolled in Government schools because the VASS registration system does not distinguish between off the school site and on the school site, if the student is enrolled at the school.

Outcomes

Certificate Completions

In 2004 there were 3642 VCAL certificate completions (58.7%) out of 6126 enrolments. A student is eligible to complete a qualification if they have completed sufficient units or modules or are enrolled in sufficient units or modules that if completed satisfactorily met the requirements for satisfactory completion of the qualification.

Destinations

VCAL is a pathways program designed to lead on to further education, employment, apprenticeship or traineeship. Students may take up employment or a mix of employment and training such as an apprenticeship before certificate completion.

Destination data collected by the VQA from 90% of VCAL providers (88% of students) indicates 85.4% of students moving to further education and training and employment destinations; 51.5% into further education and training and 33.9% into employment. Of those going into employment, 15.1% went to apprenticeships, 2.2% went to traineeships, 3.5 % went to employment less than 15 hours per week and 12.9% went to employment of more than 15 hours per week.

What is Applied learning?

The VCAL is based on principles of applied learning. Applied learning is more than practical or ‘hands on’ learning. It includes both theory and application but the link between the two is provided by the context. Contextualising learning empowers and motivates students and assists them to develop skills and knowledge that they will need for education, employment, training and involvement in the community.

These following principles underpin applied learning:

- Start where the learners are at;
- Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum;
- Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment;
- Connect with communities and real life experiences;
- Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person;
- Integrate learning. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks;
- Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Different learning styles require different teaching methods; and
- Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best fits the learning content and context (VCAL Information sheet).

Research into the outcomes from applied learning approaches have shown that applied learning improves:

- student motivation and commitment,
- self esteem and confidence; and
- transitions from school to work and further education or training.

Applied learning approaches also:

- Provides a context for learning generic skills needed in the workplace;
- Caters for students with different preferred learning styles; and
- Provides a meaningful context for learning both theoretical concepts and practical skills (VCAL information sheet).

The Structure of VCAL

The VCAL is accredited at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate, and Senior. These three levels provide for different entry points for students with different skill, attitude and knowledge levels as well as providing for progression through courses as these skills, knowledge and attitudes are developed.

The VCAL has four curriculum areas called strands. A VCAL program must include elements from all strands.

These strands are:

- Literacy and Numeracy skills;

These can include VCE Maths or English or other accredited studies such as literacy and numeracy modules from the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA).

- Industry specific skills;

The VCAL program must include industry specific subjects from Vocational Education and Training or VCE VET. The students are not required to complete a single VET certificate but can undertake various modules and units from a range of VET certificates. Training packages are available from industries including automotive, engineering, building and construction, hospitality and retail, agriculture, horticulture, warehousing and hair and beauty. At Foundation level VCE units such as food and technology can be included.

- Work related skills;

Students can undertake either a structured work placement, part time apprenticeship or traineeship or part time work to develop employability skills. Units and modules for this strand could include occupational health and safety and job interview skills.

- Personal development skills

Students must participate in community-based projects, voluntary work or structured activities that help in the development of self-confidence and teamwork skills.



Each VCAL qualification is nominally of 1000 hours duration, although attendance and hours are not requirements of the VCAL qualification. The emphasis is on satisfactory completion of learning outcomes and the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

The flexibility of VCAL allows students to design a study program that suits their interests and learning needs. The 1000 hours may include activities such as structured workplace learning, School based new apprenticeships, part time work, classroom learning, community work, and TAFE.

To gain a certificate a student has to accumulate 10 credits. One credit is gained for a successful completion of one unit of study. Each unit must be justified against the purpose statement for one of the four VCAL curriculum strands.

A unit of study can be:

- 1 VCAL unit;
- 1VCE unit;
- 1 VET/VEC unit
- approximately 100 hours for VET modules/units of competence and /or Further education (FE) modules

A student's VCAL learning program must include:

- A minimum of two VCAL units
- At least one literacy unit;
- At least one numeracy unit;
- At least one unit from the Industry specific Skills strand. At Intermediate and Senior levels this must include a unit of study from a VET qualification;
- At least one unit from the work related skills strand;
- At least one unit from the personal development strand; and
- At least five credits at the level of VCAL they are enrolled in of which one must be literacy and one VCAL Personal Development Skills unit (VCAL Information sheet).

Integrating the program

VCAL provides an opportunity for students to learn in a context that is not distinguished by traditional curriculum divisions. While a student must undertake curriculum and learning outcomes from each of the four strands, the use of applied learning tasks and activities will involve learning across these four strands. This more accurately reflects how the skills learnt will be applied in the students' own lives, their work place and in the community. An example of an integrated applied learning task might include a construction project in the community that is developed through the Work Related Skills Strand and meets the some of the outcomes of Numeracy and Personal Development Skills Strands.

Having provided an overview of the operation of VCAL in this section, the next section provides an example of a community VCAL program operating in regional Victoria. This case study is one example of a Community based VCAL. There are many others throughout Victoria that have been designed and implemented using the VCAL framework to respond to local issues and needs.

Changing Lanes - Satellite VCAL in Bairnsdale, Victoria

Introduction

Bairnsdale is located 282 km east of Melbourne in a farming district and is the regional centre for the East Gippsland region, and the access point to the Gippsland Lakes and Lakes Entrance tourism region. The town has a population of 10,900. It has two secondary schools, one government and one catholic. The Satellite VCAL program is part of Bairnsdale Secondary College, but is located on a separate site.

The 'Satellite' Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was started in Bairnsdale in 2004 to provide a second chance for young people in the region who were out of school and not attached to any other education or training.

The program is based away from Bairnsdale Secondary College and is next to a building occupied by Bairnsdale Adult Community Education (BACE). The program comprises the VCAL program site and a workshop located in a shed made available by the local police close to the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program site.

Initiation and Development of the program

Many young people who had left school prior to completing Year 12 in the Bairnsdale area had previously been attached to a service such as Jobs Pathway Program or Jobs Placement Employment and Training, but they had used up their formal time allotment with those programs and could not gain access to further opportunities for work experience or work placement. This issue was identified as one of concern – a blocker to continued education and training for some young people - when discussed at the East Gippsland Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) at the end of 2003. It was felt that these young people were unemployed, engaged in crime, had mental health problems and no future. A strong sense of social justice existed among the participants of the Local Learning and Employment Network and they wanted to put something in place that would enable these young people, with support, to make themselves a future.

Personnel from a number of support agencies came together, including Workways Jobs Pathways Program, Bairnsdale Adult Community Education, TAFE, Bairnsdale Secondary College, and the police. They combined their collective local wisdom to identify young people they thought would benefit from the program. Some young people had left school but there had been no further follow up, while others were seen around town. Expressions of interest were sent to potential students and these were then followed up by visits (especially to Indigenous families) and telephone calls to encourage these young people to rejoin education. Once the word was out about the program, young people began to visit the site to ask to be part of it.

At the end of 2003 the Victorian Department of Education approached the Deputy Principal at the



regional catholic school to become the Coordinator of a Satellite Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program that would be attached to the local Bairnsdale Secondary College.

The Deputy Principal had previously been responsible for a regionally supported program called 'Changing Lanes' based at the Catholic College. It was funded by ATSIC through the Aboriginal Cooperative. Changing Lanes, in its first existence, provided work placement in automotive and basic mechanics for 8 young people from local schools at risk of leaving school for a 12 week block of time before they returned to mainstream schooling.

Who are the young people in the program?

"I wasn't really doing anything, I had left school in Year 11, worked in a café and left, so I started VCAL at Changing Lanes."

Forty-one young people were identified and enrolled in the program in 2004. Of those all but two were already out of school. While in the first year almost all the students were not transferred from the local schools but were already out of school, this profile has changed in the second year with the program taking students who want to transfer from the local schools. While the program does not want to be a 'dumping ground' for the kids that the schools find too difficult, it also acknowledges that some young people in the area need an alternative to mainstream schooling and that this program can provide this.

In the first year of operation, some of the young people had not been in school for three years. 17 of the students were girls; 12 were Indigenous students. Their ages ranged from 14 to 17 years. Most of the young people were on youth allowance. Of the young people enrolled, approximately 75% had dealings with Juvenile Justice and the police. In addition, 50% lived out of home, four were young parents and seven of the young people had part-time jobs. Most of those jobs were in the fast food industry and some of the young people worked up to 20 hours per week.

In the second year of operation, the profile of the students has changed. Many have transferred from a mainstream school setting. Overall there are younger students in the program but many are still living out of home and have had dealings with Juvenile Justice and the police.



Darren is sixteen. He started at Changing Lanes in 2005. He came to the Bairnsdale area from Melbourne about five years ago. He moved down here with his mum to stay with his grandparents so that he wouldn't get into so much trouble as if he stayed in Melbourne. He said all, of the young people his age that he knows that are still in Melbourne and into drugs and not going to school.

He has been kicked out of one secondary school in the Bairnsdale area and gone to another but didn't feel like he belonged, didn't like the people and got into fights. He then went to Adult Community Education for a year and did a few courses but didn't want to stay there either. His brother was coming to Changing Lanes so he thought he would give it a go. Before he came to Changing Lanes he said he was an angry person.

He has found Changing Lanes much better than school. It is more laid back and he doesn't have to do things straight away. He is given time to do the work and can chill out and listen to music if he gets angry and then is able to get support from the coordinator. The Coordinator is always there to help when there is a problem. The Coordinator doesn't just let him do what he wants but talks to him if he doesn't want to do something and explains how he needs to do certain things to get to where he wants to be.

He likes being with other students who also come from where he is coming from. They have a similar way of having lived life. It is different and harder than most people. But it is really important to him that the teachers understand the background that he comes from.

He would like to be a guitarist in a band and go to music school or TAFE but it is too expensive and he has trouble with traditional school learning and can't read music. He thinks he will stay at Changing Lanes until the end of the year but if he manages to get an apprenticeship as a chef at the local hotel he will leave.

Tracey started Year 11 at the local Secondary School. She left half way through and got a job at the local café. After three months she didn't like that much so she left and stayed at home. She was excited when she heard about the VCAL program. It was something new and it meant she could a Year 12 Certificate without going back to mainstream school.

She wants to get a year 12 Certificate so that she can apply to TAFE to do a jewellery or silver smithing certificate. She knows that she needs a folio and a pass at Year 12 to do this. At the moment she sells jewellery at the local markets so she would like to be able to develop her expertise in this area for her future work prospects.

The Philosophy of the Program

The program is based on the VCAL principles that underpin applied learning. In particular these include the need to: start where the learners are at; connect with communities and real life experiences; and consider the whole person to build resilience, confidence and self worth.

These principles are reflected by both the students and staff in the program when talking about what really mattered to them to keep them enrolled and participating in the program. Students, staff and community personnel felt that the students were starting to see themselves as having value, increasing self-esteem and feeling more integrated into the community.



At this point it has been difficult to work with TAFE. The Coordinator has found that the teaching methods there are not geared to these young peoples' needs. The TAFE teachers do not have the time to spend finding out about these young people and their lives and do not have the time to provide the emotional support that these young people need. Consequently the students drop out of the courses.

Some of the students' comments about the VCAL program included:

"Kids like us – not normal people - get a second chance."

"All of us here want to do something with our life. If we get the opportunity of a job we will take it."

The Coordinator of the program responded that it is the support that was provided to help with better life outcomes that made the difference for students. It involves having someone who worked with the students at a pastoral care level and kept the students in the program - the academic outcomes are achieved after that is in place.

The students respond very positively to the supportive environment that is provided. Comments by students included:

"The people here know where we are from. They don't argue with where we are at and just try and change us a bit."

"When I have a problem I just go and talk to the Coordinator."

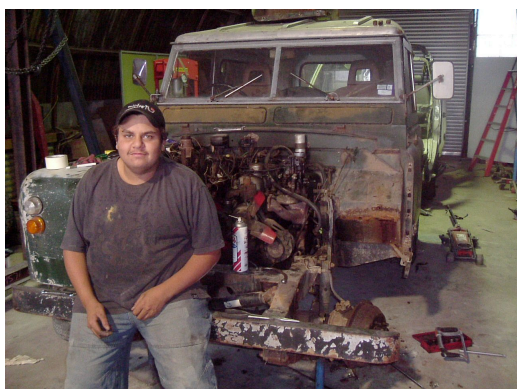
"Someone cares about us here and there is always someone to talk to."

The Structure of the Program

The program at the VCAL site is set up as a workplace. The program is based on the Victorian Certificate Applied Learning Curriculum, including: Literacy and Numeracy; Work Related Skills, Personal Development Skills and Industry Specific

Skills. The young people have workplace agreements and an Occupational Health and Safety Committee. They are required to ring if they will be absent from the program.

To meet the requirements for the Industry Specific Skills strand and the Work Related Skills Strand, a number of students are undertaking different certificates including Certificate II in Retail, Automotive, Childcare, Foundation Work Relations Skills, Food-handling and Occupational Health and Safety. They gain certificates when they complete modules from these competency-based courses.



Each day two students attend the workshop to do basic mechanical and engineering work. Over one week, ten students attend the program at the workshop. The work undertaken at the workshop contributes to the Industry Specific Skills Strand of the VCAL program. Students work on engineering projects such as fabrication of bull bars and other mechanical work such as repairing trailers, repairing engines and 'doing up cars'.

The placement at the workshop is negotiated with the program coordinator, the workshop coordinator and the student. The behaviour rules are stricter at the workshop. Because of safety requirements students must be able to behave appropriately in the workshop.

Other students are following interest areas including song writing, photography and sound technology. All curriculum areas are as practically based and integrated as possible, as many of the students have difficulties with literacy and numeracy. Examples are Maths based on football statistics and literacy skills involved in developing an Occupational Health and Safety evacuation plan.

A typical day at the program would include a morning with numeracy or literacy work, the work may be undertaken using numeracy or literacy modules designed for self paced work or it may be part of a larger community project that has been developed to incorporate a number of the strands. Further work includes: Personal Development, Work Related Skills or art. Students at different times are out on work placements, undertaking part time work or attending the workshop for Industry Specific skills.

Staffing

The program has:

- Two full time staff, the Coordinator of the program and the Coordinator of the workshop;
- A teacher from the Secondary School for the equivalent of one day a week teaching Maths;
- A teacher for the equivalent of two days a week teaching the Personal Development Strand and other teaching areas;

- A former teacher and Job Pathways worker who is the equivalent of one day a week teaching work related skills and literacy; and
- A teacher aide for five mornings a week.

Staff from Centrelink visit regularly and Workways - who are part of Jobs Pathways Program - visit one morning a week. In 2004, counselling support was provided by the School Focused Youth Service

The Workshop

The students can choose to undertake training at the workshop as part of their VCAL program. The coordinator of the workshop, an experienced mechanic, has worked with young people in a variety of settings prior to coming to the VCAL program. As with all of the VCAL program the workshop is not just about getting the task done but it is also about developing work ready attitudes and skills.

The workshop has been established to undertake basic fabrication and engineering projects as well as the repair and restoration of motor vehicles and farm equipment. Whilst the original idea was to concentrate on metal fabrication, the inclusion of basic mechanical work has broadened the appeal of participation to young people from what is a rural area and established a regular income stream. The participants have worked on a variety of mechanical repair jobs: cars, tractors, trucks, small engines and trailers. Agricultural machinery has been repaired, and small fabrication jobs have been undertaken.

Work placements and developing employability skills

VCAL aims to develop knowledge and employability skills that help prepare students for work and participation in a broader society. Participating in work placements is an important part of this process. As these are some of the most marginalised young people in the community the opportunity to do a work placement offers the chance to build employment networks they have never previously had.

Students complete a three-week work placement with a local industry. Local industries, including the timber mill, the truck centre, the animal shelter, the library, motor trimmers, photography shops and road constructors, have offered work placement for the young people to support the program.

One of the young Indigenous men has been offered an apprenticeship in welding as a result of the course and doing work placement. There are very few if any other Indigenous young people undertaking apprenticeships in the Bairnsdale area.

One young man had very low self esteem and confidence prior to his work placement. He had been expelled from the local Secondary College and spent the rest of the year either living with his parents or in foster care. He had been in trouble with the police and was banned from coming into the main shopping areas. He went to Centrelink to go on the dole but they suggested he come to Changing Lanes because he needed to be in education for 20 hours per week to receive his Youth Allowance. He had some friends going to Changing Lanes so he thought he would give it a go.

He recently completed a work placement at the local hardware store. The employers were so pleased with his work that they rated him as having 'outstanding application for the role' in his work placement report. They are now employing him one day a week and the VCAL coordinator is investigating turning the one day into two days' work and then into a School Based New Apprenticeship in retail.

He has now found something that he enjoys doing and is very interested in completing a Certificate II in Retail. He is now aware that he would like to be in the workforce. He feels that it is important to be occupied and to socialise and he finds work has given him the opportunity to do this.

In 2004 the Local Learning and Employment Network had a young woman completing Certificate 2 in Business Administration for one day a week at the organisation. The young woman has completed her Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at Changing Lanes and is still employed casually at the Local Learning and Employment Network. This young woman had been out of school for two years prior to returning to do her Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at Changing Lanes. She had previously failed Year 12 twice at the Secondary College.

For the young people it was important to learn the skills, attitude and presentation that are needed to apply for and get a job in the community:

“We learn lots of work related skills, occupational health and safety, how to present ourselves at work, and health and hygiene.”

Students in the program had developed a strong community and program identity. Many felt strongly about the behaviour of some students both in the program and when they were out in the community on work placement. One student responded that she was

“worried when someone was an idiot because it made the rest of them look bad and reflected badly on all of them.”

Management of the program

The principles of applied learning - in particular, those that are based on the need to acknowledge the skills that students bring to the program and the place of context in student learning - have been reflected in the management of the program.

A management group consisting of the Coordinator and five students has been established. The students are elected through a secret ballot and there is preferential voting. At the beginning of 2005, the group met on a weekly basis to discuss what was and was not working in the program, as well as issues of behaviour management. At a meeting last year the group made a decision to sack four students from the program but later reinstated two of these students. Decisions are made in accordance

with a negotiated workplace agreement that includes attendance, work expectations and respect for property. This group has been less active as the year progressed and decision-making has been on a more informal basis with discussions being held when needed with particular groups of students.

Community partnerships

Recently a partnership has been developed with Bairnsdale Adult Community Education to offer a themed Victorian Certificate Applied Learning in Civil Construction to provide young people with an opportunity to work on the roads. At this stage the Coordinator is still matching students to this course. It is important to match the students carefully to the available options. This particular certificate would not suit all of the participants.

Other local businesses offer food to the program. As in many alternative programs the provision of food is an essential part of keeping the young people at the program throughout the day. Food handling and cooking are also included in the program.



Centrelink runs a kerbside service at the program. This is more user-friendly than having to go into the office in town and ensures that young people retain their Youth Allowance. The program has a policy of only five unexplained absences, as this is the figure that triggers stopping of the Youth Allowance by Centrelink. It has also been agreed that Centrelink will send a letter to program participants within days if they do not attend in regard to reviewing their payments. This has been very effective in reducing absences.

As the program is working with the most marginalised young people in the community there will be times when life circumstances impact on their ability and motivation to attend the program. In some situations the contact with Centrelink can be the reminder that they need. It is though, the continued support that they receive when they attend the program and the employment and training opportunities that the program offers that was consistently emphasised by both the staff and the students that encourages the young people to stay in the program even when their life circumstances become difficult.

As one of the young people responded:

So many of the young people have got jobs while they have been here. That makes us want to stay.

Information about VCAL

Websites:

www.vqa.gov.au

www.vcaa.edu.au

Resources for VCAL include:

- Curriculum Planning Guide: Personal Development Skills Strand
- Curriculum Planning Guide: Industry Specific Skills Strand and Work Related Skills Strand
- Curriculum Planning Guide: Literacy and Numeracy Skills Strand
- VCE and VCAL Administrative handbook and
- VCAL Assessment Planning Guide.

These are all available at www.vqa.gov.au

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