



Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. We work with the most disadvantaged members of the community, providing services and advocacy in the areas of justice and crime prevention; mental health and well-being; settlement and community building; education, training and employment; gender and ecological justice.

John Firth
VCAL Review
VCALReview@edumail.vic.gov.au

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Dear Mr Firth

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Victorian Government's review of Vocational and Applied Learning (VCAL) in Senior Secondary Schooling.

In our experience working with young people who have disengaged from education in Victoria, many students benefit from undertaking VCAL as an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The young people we work with often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have diverse needs. Jesuit Social Services believes it is the shared responsibility of schools, education providers, families and support services to take steps to address the discrimination and stigma experienced by many young people on VCAL which, for some, leads to permanent or long-lasting disengagement from learning and vocational pathways. Ensuring equal access for all students to quality programs delivered under VCAL, in a safe and stimulating learning environment, must be championed and enhanced.

1. VCAL delivered in Parkville College

Young people in detention have often experienced multiple, complex issues – including high rates of abuse, trauma or neglect, mental ill-health and cognitive difficulties – which impact their educational needs and abilities. Many of these young people have had a disrupted education. According to the Youth Parole Board's most recent annual survey, 68 per cent of young people in Parkville and Malmsbury youth justice centres had previously been suspended or expelled from school.¹ For the large number of young people on remand, they are coping with the additional uncertainty of not knowing how long they will be in custody, which impacts their engagement with education.

Parkville College offers VCAL to young people across Parkville and Malmsbury youth justice centres (in addition to other sites). This program is a valuable learning option for some young people while incarcerated. However, a range of challenges need to be addressed to ensure access to quality education for all young people in custody. Firstly, it must be recognised that the highly securitised environments of Victoria's youth justice centres are not conducive to learning. Regular lockdowns (often daily) mean young people often miss classes as they are forced to stay in their unit. There is no dedicated library in either Parkville or Malmsbury, and the majority of young people are not able to access the internet – a clear barrier to enhancing computer literacy.

A 2019 report by researchers from three Australian universities detailed some of the ways in which security considerations impede the delivery of education to young people in Parkville College.² This included that students are taught in groups identified primarily on the basis of security concerns,

¹ Youth Parole Board, *Annual Report 2018-19*, https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/embridge_cache/emshare/original/public/2019/10/4e/4b32a40c4/YPB_Annual_Report_2019_WEB.pdf.

² Victoria University, University of Tasmania, Deakin University (June 2019) *Improving educational connection for young people in custody*, <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Improving-educational-connection-for-young-people-in-custody.pdf>.

rather than their educational needs, resulting in those with strong levels of educational attainment being taught alongside others with significant challenges. The report also outlined concerns in relation to classrooms that were hot, echoey and with harsh lighting that were detrimental to learning and especially difficult for young people with experiences of trauma and associated learning difficulties.

Staff training

The challenges of learning for young people with experiences of trauma must be properly understood by all staff, inside and outside the classroom. Significant trauma affects brain development and impacts behaviour and emotional and cognitive functions. It is integral for youth justice staff to better nurture relationships with young people, centred on using a restorative approach. In recognition of the unique challenges and importance of their role, a minimum workforce qualification for all youth justice staff should be introduced, encompassing youth-specific training on understanding trauma, child brain development, impulsive adolescent behaviours, cultural competency, alcohol and other drug issues, and the impact of family violence. This would improve awareness across the entire youth justice staff group about supporting relationships with young people and more effectively addressing issues when they arise.

In addition, we are concerned that there is no 'culture' of learning fostered by the custodial staffing group more broadly. Education shouldn't be confined to the classroom and all staff should be responsible for developing a learning culture and encouraging meaningful activities in youth detention, including when young people are forced to stay on their units.

Individual support

In our experience, young people would benefit from more individual support, such as one-on-one tutoring. In a group environment with young people at all levels of needs and abilities, individuals are unlikely to put their learning challenges on display. Some young people with learning difficulties tend to disengage from Parkville College and refuse to attend class. They often say they would prefer to be locked in their rooms rather than attend. We are also aware of at least one young person who had been attending class without an adequate assessment of his numeracy and literacy ability. This young person couldn't spell his own name. Every young person should have a thorough, individualised learning plan that reflects their needs, strengths and aspirations and is linked to real and manageable learning pathways and opportunities in the community. The vocational aspect of VCAL does not appear to be widely available throughout Parkville College. In our view, there should be a focus on

Youth justice in New Zealand

- On a recent study tour of New Zealand, Jesuit Social Services observed that the country's youth justice facilities appeared markedly more therapeutic and child-focused than in Australia.
- At Korowai Manaaki youth justice centre in South Auckland there was a maximum of eight to 12 children and young people per unit.
- Here, we witnessed a strong focus on education, with one classroom and two teachers per unit.
- Separate skills centres provide training in cooking, carving, music and art. Young people at the centre tended to animals and grew fruit and vegetables.
- Step-down facilities on site allow young people to learn independent living skills, and day leave is permitted for work.

See: Jesuit Social Services (Sept. 2019) *#JusticeSolutions New Zealand Tour*, available here: <https://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/JusticeSolutions-New-Zealand-Tour.pdf>

providing more practical learning opportunities for young people, including through training programs in areas such as hospitality, landscaping, woodwork, metalwork, mechanics and electrical. Some pre-accredited programs, such as *Hand Brake Turn* run by Concern Australia, are working well by offering hands-on training and a flexible program that allows young people to join at any time.

Supporting transitions

Critically, the link with learning on release from custody is poor. In many cases, there is uncertainty about what learning level young people are at when they leave custody and limited opportunities for ongoing learning that pick up where programs in custody left off. Educational opportunities in the community also fail to understand some of the broader challenges facing a young person on release, such as compliance with an order. In our experience, while young people may have completed a certain level of VCAL in custody, they may often struggle to undertake further education or training opportunities open to them in the community. This speaks to the particularly complex needs of many young people in detention and their need for ongoing individual support. Equally, it reflects a 'one size fits all' approach to many learning opportunities in the community. All young people should be exiting custody with documentation of what learning they have undertaken – even when a unit or qualification has not been completed. In practice, however, this often doesn't occur. Further, there should always be a detailed and realistic individual learning plan in place with associated supports.

The Missouri Model

- In 2017, senior Jesuit Social Services' staff undertook an international study tour to explore youth justice practices in parts of Norway, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. This included Missouri in the US where youth detention facilities are small, home-like and based in local communities, and where the recidivism rate is low.
- The Missouri Model approach is therapeutic and developmental rather than correctional.
- Education is mandatory each day and young people are given age appropriate tasks, with their educational achievements regularly marked.
- Many of the youth centres in Missouri have developed robust links between young people and the local community (e.g. young people involved in community tasks and with community members visiting the centres).
- Programs include vocational and practical living skills in small classes (e.g. 12 students) with a suitably qualified teacher and assistant.
- An impressive 77 per cent of young people in the system earn high school credits.

See: Jesuit Social Services (August 2017) *#JusticeSolutions Tour: Expanding the conversation*, available here: <http://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/SUB-170623-Solutions-Tour-Long-Report-v.15.pdf>

2. VCAL delivered in secondary school

School environments must be inclusive places for students of all backgrounds, needs and abilities. A key measure of a well-functioning school is the extent to which it effectively provides for the learning needs of its most disadvantaged students. Schools must place utmost priority on individual student wellbeing and inclusion, rather than academic rankings, as a primary marker of success. In our view,

the following issues should be addressed to ensure VCAL is able to meet the needs of all students:

- VCAL must be appropriately resourced so as to be a genuine option for all students, regardless of the school they attend or the area they live, at the same level of quality as VCE. This includes the need to attract high-quality teachers and ensure a diversity of vocational training opportunities, whether delivered in-school or offsite. Teaching staff must be equipped to understand and respond to the needs of young people who may have experienced persistent social exclusion, including racism or discrimination, which causes them to disengage from education.
- All students undertaking VCAL should be able to access additional support, such as youth workers, mental health specialists, careers counsellors and other relevant expertise according to their needs. This kind of support is particularly important for the many young people and families we work with who face a range of barriers to social inclusion, including those experiencing mental ill-health, trauma or behavioural issues, who are struggling to cope with the social environment of school. Schools would benefit from specific funding to employ additional staff to support students to access and participate in VCAL. This resource should be linked with well-being teams and the family/carers of the young person to put practical strategies in place to keep them engaged in their learning.
- All students at risk of disengaging from education should have an individual learning plan. This plan should describe not only the student's needs and a path forward, but also who is a part of the 'team around the learner', what each is accountable for and to whom. The voice of the student and their families is key.
- Additional resources should be committed to promote greater awareness among students and families of VCAL opportunities and pathways, at an earlier stage of their education. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring newly arrived families or those experiencing disadvantage are aware of the benefits and opportunities of VCAL and future career and training options.
- More scrutiny is needed regarding how schools allocate funding for student well-being and inclusion, and adequately attend to the needs of disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, we see too many young people expelled from school – formally or informally. Funding for students needs to follow them so it can be used to ensure they access individually tailored learning opportunities that have clear links with employment and vocational programs.

3. Reengaging young people with education

3.1 The Navigator program

We know many of the young people involved in the criminal justice system have disengaged from school.³ For those disengaged, it means reduced opportunities to participate more fully in community and connect with peers through learning and vocational opportunities. The Navigator Program supports disengaged young learners aged between 12 and 17 to reconnect with education or training. Jesuit Social Services is the largest provider in Victoria, delivering the program across three metropolitan regions. We work closely with the young person and their families, acting as a bridge between them and their school and other services. The program's work includes the development of

³ Youth Parole Board, *Annual Report 2018-19*, https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/embridge_cache/emshare/original/public/2019/10/4e/4b32a40c4/YPB_Annual_Report_2019_WEB.pdf.

individualised learning and cultural plans, and therapeutic and practical support. A key emphasis is placed on building a relationship with the young person and taking the time to understand their needs and goals. We use an evidence-based approach and restorative practice and processes to do this effectively.

For many Navigator participants, VCAL is a critical opportunity for them to remain engaged with learning. However, there are also cases where a lack of resourcing, an ad-hoc approach, and the stigma associated with the program mean young people disengage from this learning opportunity. Anecdotally, some schools who want to be seen as ‘academic’ in focus inadvertently ostracize young people in VCAL. We have heard from some young people undertaking VCAL that other school kids tease them and call them stupid. This needs to be meaningfully addressed by the school leadership.

Jesuit Social Services welcomed the state-wide expansion of the Navigator program in the 2018/19 Victorian Budget. In Jesuit Social Services’ experience delivering Navigator, we have found that young people would also benefit from better coordination between the varying services they interact with. Beginning with the school, coordination should be extending to family violence, child protection and youth justice services. We also believe that lowering the age of eligibility for the program from 12 down to 10 would enable earlier intervention with at-risk young people and help strengthen the likelihood of positive outcomes.

“Young people that get into trouble have been to hell and back so they need support to learn skills for the future.”

“We need better education options, not just mainstream school. That won’t suit everyone. Find out from the young people what will suit them.”

“Young people need to feel like they belong in the community. Not in prison.”

— Young people speaking at a [Kitchen Table Conversation](#) convened by the CREATE Foundation and Jesuit Social Services, in 2019.

3.2 Transition from custody back to community

There is a real need to support young people exiting from custody in many areas, in particular, with regard to their education. It is critical that they are reconnected with a school and with their ongoing education.

We appreciate you taking these views into account.

Regards



Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services