

Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

Dusseldorp Skills Forum

Commentary by Roger Holdsworth

(Senior Research Associate, Youth Research Centre, The University of Melbourne)

Results and Analysis: 1 July 2011

Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

Introduction

Dusseldorp Skills Forum carried out an on-line survey of alternative education programs and approaches in early 2011. This summary presents and comments on survey results. It also includes suggestions for survey **Follow-Up** in which it identifies further questions that could be addressed, for example, through relevant case studies.

Background

Under the new COAG agreement, many new 'alternative education' programs have been established to meet the needs of the growing number of young people who are disengaging from school/education. However, for young people, parents, schools and youth workers there is currently a lack of information (on a national basis) on where and how these programs operate and the services they provide.

Dusseldorp Skills Forum sought the assistance of a range of educational networks to try and gauge the scale and range of these programs and to enable advocacy for stronger support, recognition and resourcing. The national survey was conducted to determine just how many young people are currently involved in some form with these programs across Australia.

The following pages are a summary of the results after the survey closed in mid June 2011.

The Survey Sample

As of 1 July 2011, there were 410 responses to the survey. These responses came largely from programs that one might term 'responsive', in that they provide alternative programs in response to identified needs of individuals and groups of young people. Some responses were also of a more general nature, and were concerned with 'preventative' approaches, addressing issues of education structures, curriculum and pedagogy in ways that seek to make schooling more inclusive of the needs of all students, particularly those currently marginalised.

In turn, these 'preventative' approaches can be seen to include programs inclusive of all students, and those specifically targeted towards 'holding at risk young people in school'. It has been more difficult to include descriptors and quantification of such 'general teaching and learning approaches' within the scope of this survey summary and some information from program responses that include a general population of students has been excluded from these results. However, an overview of alternative learning programs and approaches needs to acknowledge their existence and importance within current Australian provisions.

Learning Choices National Scan

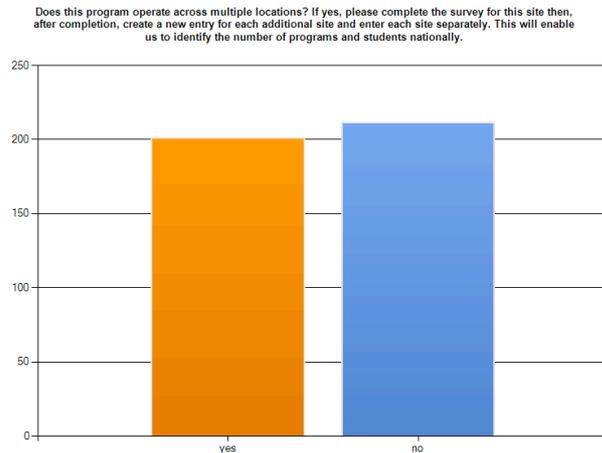
Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

1. Overall Program Descriptors

1.1 Sites

The programs described in the **410** responses to the survey occurred in **1979** locations. Approximately half of the programs were independent, single-location programs (51%), with the remainder occurring across several sites (overall, an average of 4.8 sites per program or, for those in multiple locations, an average of approximately 9 sites).

In looking further at the information, however, the number of locations is significantly affected by three responses: one in South Australia with 590 locations, and two in Victoria with 320 and 430 locations respectively. (Information about these programs has been presented in an aggregated way, whereas in other cases, where information is available on the details of each of the multiple sites, these are each counted separately.) Removing these three responses indicates a more realist figure of an average of just over 3 sites per multiple-site program.



Commentary:

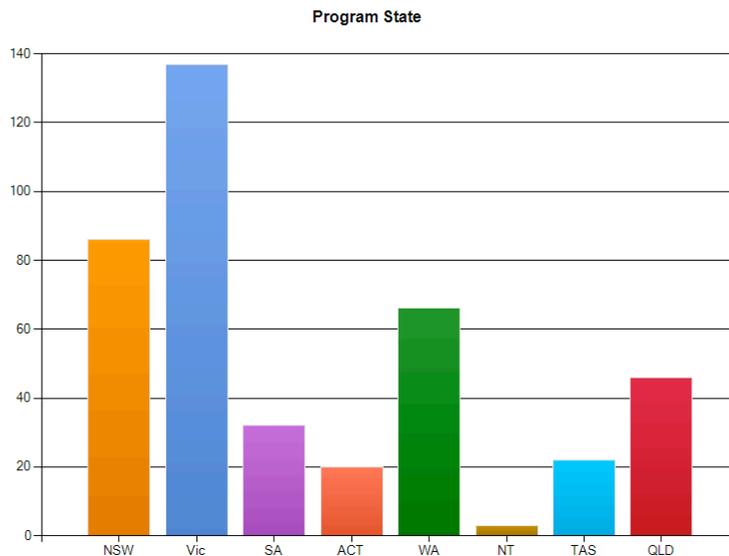
The issue of multiple locations is closely linked to issues associated with the networking of programs. In many cases, we know that programs are part of broader state initiatives (such as ACE, VCAL or ICAN). In other cases, programs have developed as single-location local responses and may not have strong links with other similar programs – though they might be strongly networked within that local community. In this light, it is interesting to note that just over half of the responses came from single-location programs – but that these are 210 of the 1979 locations identified – approximately 11%.

1.2 Location (Responses)

Responses were received from programs throughout Australia. Most responses were received from programs in Victoria with smaller numbers (particularly proportionate to population) from NSW, and larger number of responses than expected from WA.

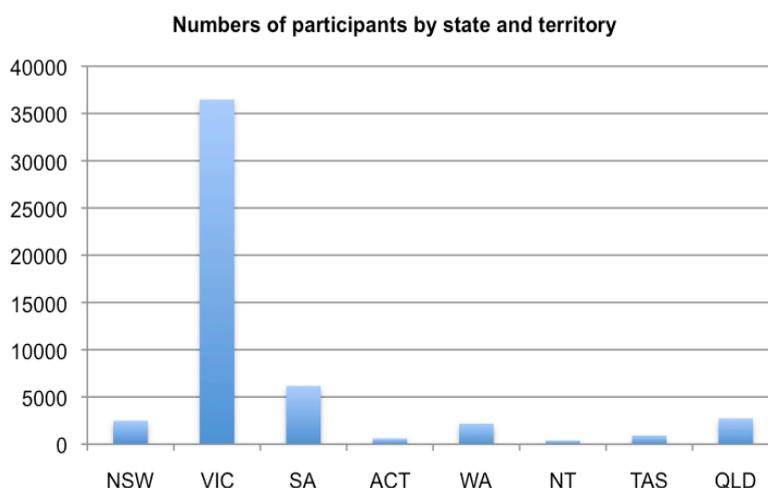
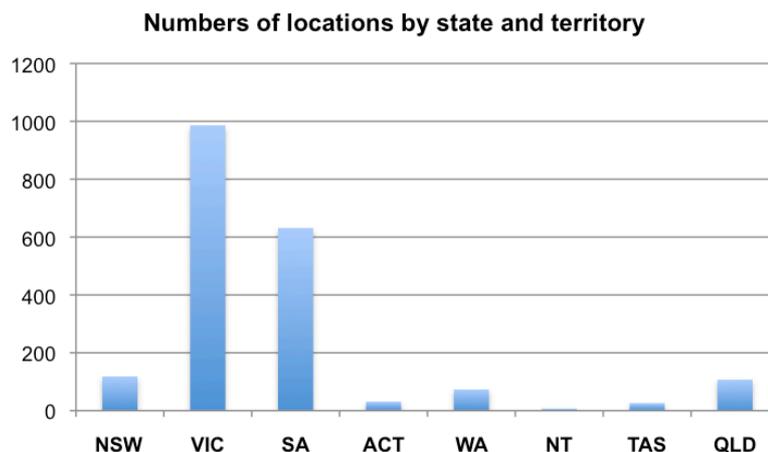
Note that these are program responses, not sites, hence the few large programs in South

Australia and Victoria don't distort these figures; comparisons based on locations/sites or numbers of students (see next graphs) would contrast jurisdictions even more dramatically.



Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education



Commentary:

Three large programs (ICANS, VCAL and ACE) substantially distort the analysis by location as they were not entered as separate responses and they operate in multiple locations as shown in the graphs above. Interestingly, the number of students in each State showed a substantial difference in the average number of students per program. Victoria for example, averaged 35 students per location while South Australia averaged 10.

The response rate from different areas may be affected by the degree of networking of information and contacts within various states and territories rather than accurately reflect the occurrence of programs per se. So it may be that critical program providers in areas such as NSW didn't respond, or that information about the survey didn't reach them. Of course, this result may also identify a real lack of such programs in those areas.

Follow-Up:

While substantial efforts were made to enable the sample to be as comprehensive as possible, particularly by contacting informants in areas that seem to be under-represented, it would also be useful to test these results further with education providers in these areas to see if these results match their perceptions.

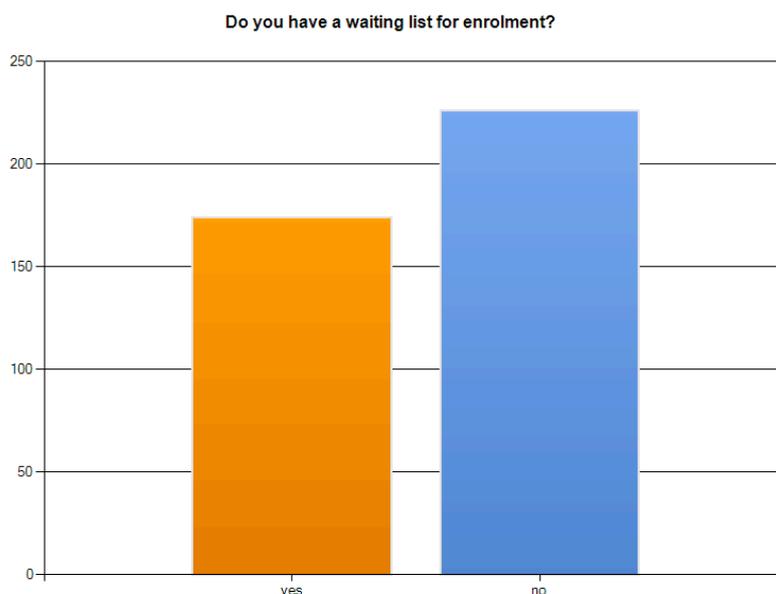
Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

1.3 Program Numbers

At the commencement of these programs, the total number of students enrolled was a substantial **51,943**. Even more students – a cumulative total of **60,967** – were reported as having been enrolled in these programs over the course of a year, as students left or graduated, and were replaced by others. It is estimated that this is approximately 4% of the total Australian population within this age group (see below).

A little under half of the programs (44%) reported a waiting list of students for enrolment; these indicated that a further **4104** further students were waiting for admission to programs.



Commentary:

These programs are catering for large numbers of students throughout Australia. Census figures indicate a 12-17 year old population of 1,379,423. While overall enrolment figures are not broken down precisely by age, an estimation based on the age-targeting of programs (see section 2 of this report) would indicate that approximately 4% of this age cohort is involved in these programs.

Within the existing programs, there is a further 7-8% immediate unmet demand for places. Given the uneven spread of such programs across Australia, and reports about un-met needs within these areas, we would expect an even greater demand in areas where no programs exist.

On top of these figures consideration needs to be given to the potential unmet needs of the young people not involved in any form of education, training or employment. Many of these young people have no contact with these education providers.

Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

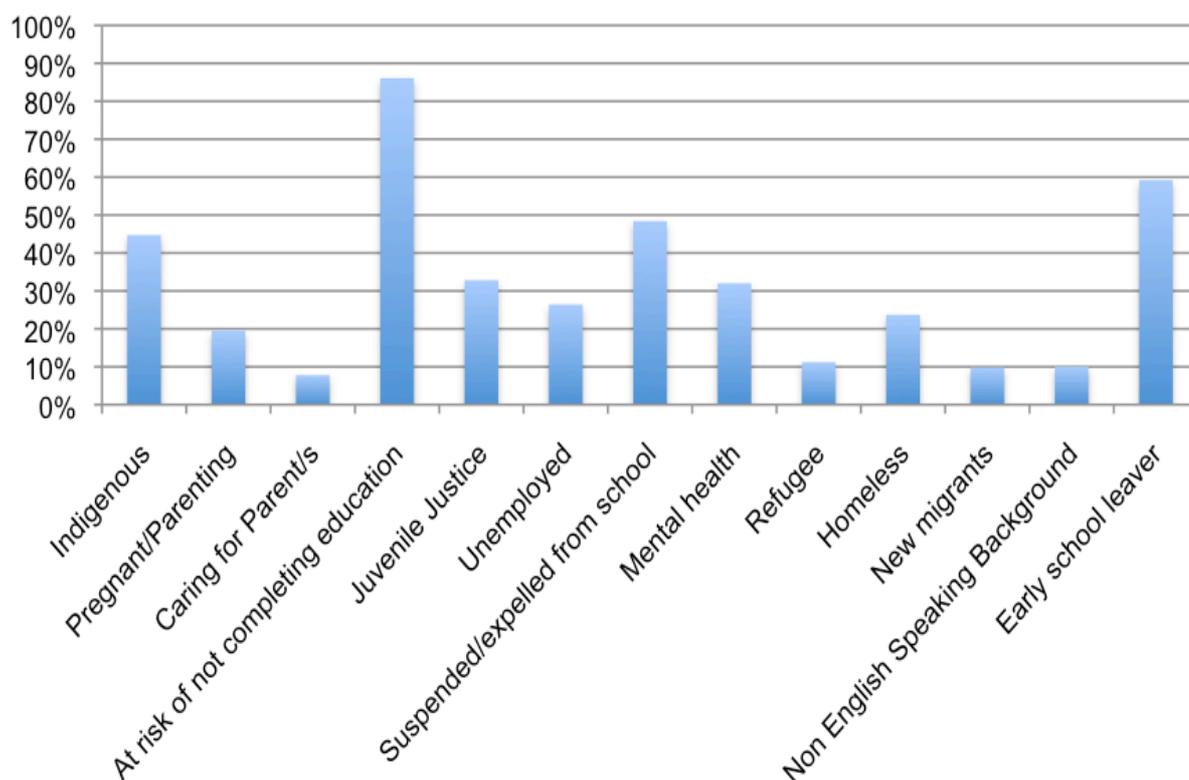
2. Target Group/s

Programs were asked to specify specific target groups from a list provided. They could also write in other groups. More than one response was allowed.

Program Target Group (you may choose more than one)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Indigenous	44.7%	183
Pregnant/Parenting	19.6%	80
Caring for Parent/s	7.8%	32
At risk of not completing education	86.1%	352
Juvenile Justice	32.8%	134
Unemployed	26.4%	108
Suspended/expelled from school	48.4%	198
Mental health	32.0%	131
Refugee	11.2%	46
Homeless	23.7%	97
New migrants	9.8%	40
Non English Speaking Background (NESB/LOTE/CALD)	10.0%	41
Early school leaver	59.2%	242
Other (please specify)		108
answered question		409

Omitting the 'other' responses provided, the graph below compares the target groups chosen:

Target Groups (more than one choice possible)



Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

The most common response was 'at risk of not completing education' (86% of programs) with significant numbers also identifying 'early school leavers' (59%), students 'suspended/expelled from school' (48%) and 'indigenous' students (45%). Several descriptors may apply to the same students.

Commentary:

While almost all the respondents specified that programs were targeted at students 'at risk of not completing education', the range of target groups was very large, with many responses specifying target groups other than the 10 categories suggested. These programs are clearly directed to the inclusion of students within 'at risk' categories, either focusing on potential risk: 'at risk of not completing education', or responding to the needs of students who have already experienced some exclusion: 'early school leavers'. It is unclear from the survey results whether such exclusion has occurred on behavioural, learning or other grounds.

Relatively few programs report that they explicitly target 'parents' (or those 'caring for parents?'), or 'refugee', 'new migrant' or those young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

It should be noted that the survey is generally not picking up students who are making a positive or assertive choice for an alternative eg that schooling approaches are not meeting their learning needs, except perhaps through the indicators of resistance to schooling. The exceptions are 18 programs that indicate target groups of: "students who prefer applied learning to academic learning", "school students not wishing to undertake VCE at year 11 and 12", "students interested in exploring faith", and those preferring hands-on or applied learning (3) or wanting skills up-grades for career changes or career entry (12). In addition, a few programs talk more generally of providing an alternative program eg for "all Year 9 students".

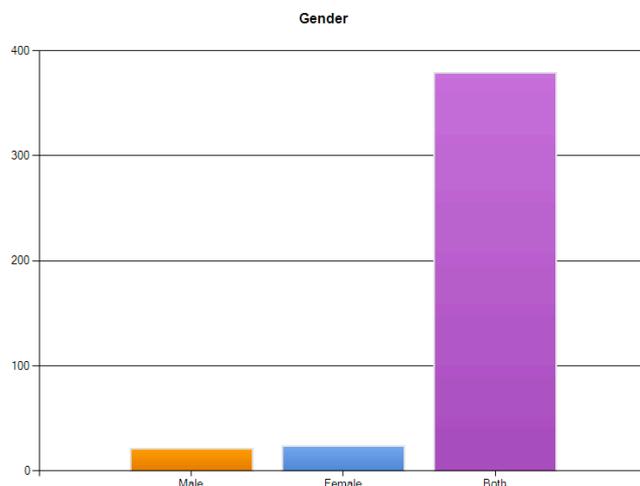
In looking in more detail at the approximately 100 responses classified as 'all other respondents', there are some clusters, but more questions as to meaning. While many repeat choices made from the responses provided, there are some examples that are not picked up elsewhere: there is a cluster of about 12 programs around health-related issues (including 6 programs with a disability target); 21 programs that specify "cultural groups" (which needs further exploration); about 19 programs that target specific 'situations' such as 'out of home or residential care' (10); 15 that continue patterns of 'disengaged students' (8), 'those young people who have disengaged from education and wish to reengage but are unable to integrate into a normal school setting' or young people who are 'disconnected from the traditional classroom setting'; and several that make a general reference to 'disadvantage', 'special needs' or 'fresh start'.

Program Target by Gender

Almost all programs catered for both male and female young people. Where programs were single-gender, there was a slight tendency towards these being female-targeted programs.

Commentary:

The public perception of 'alternative education' programs is that they are male oriented. While young males may make up the majority of participants (this information was not asked for), it is interesting to note that almost all programs were open to males and females.



Learning Choices National Scan

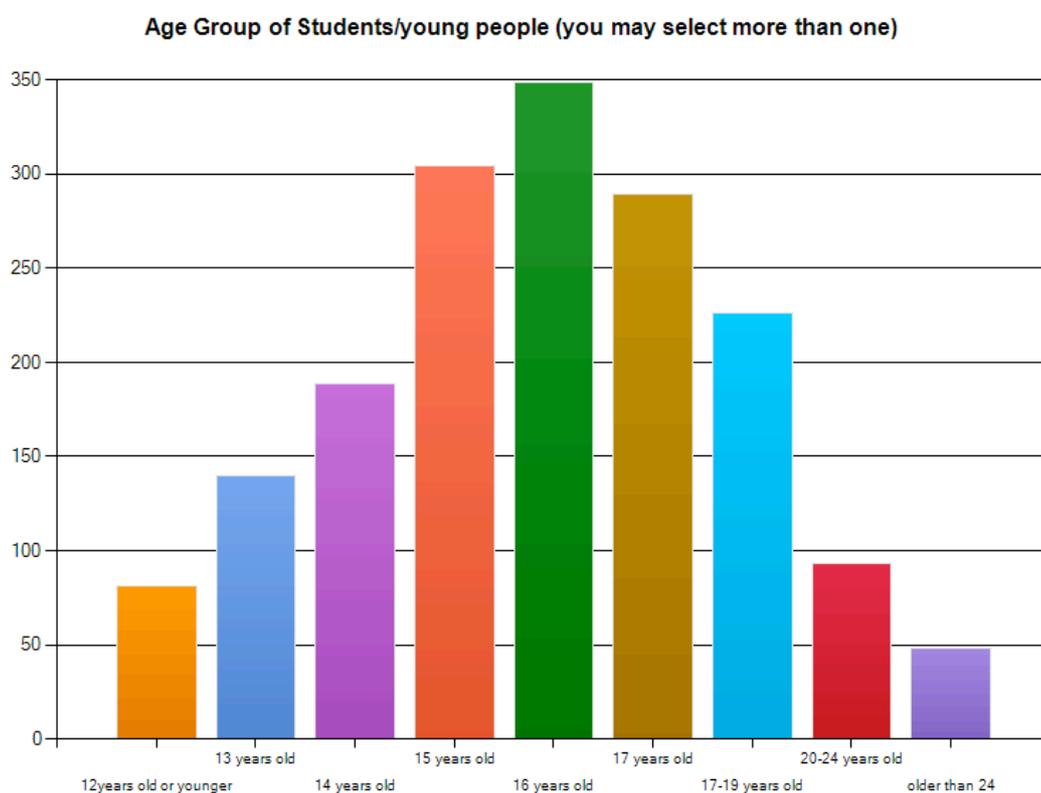
Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

This may also indicate that there is an un-met need for single-gender programs where gender is linked to the reasons for targeting young people eg around pregnant/parenting young people or those targeting young people excluded on the basis of sexual harassment.

Follow-Up:

It would be useful to know more about the gender of those actually enrolled in these programs, as distinct from program targeting.

Program Target by Age



The program enrolments range from '12 years or younger' to 'older than 24 years'. There is a clear uni-modal pattern to the age distribution, with peak targeting around 16 year olds (85% of programs include 16 year olds).

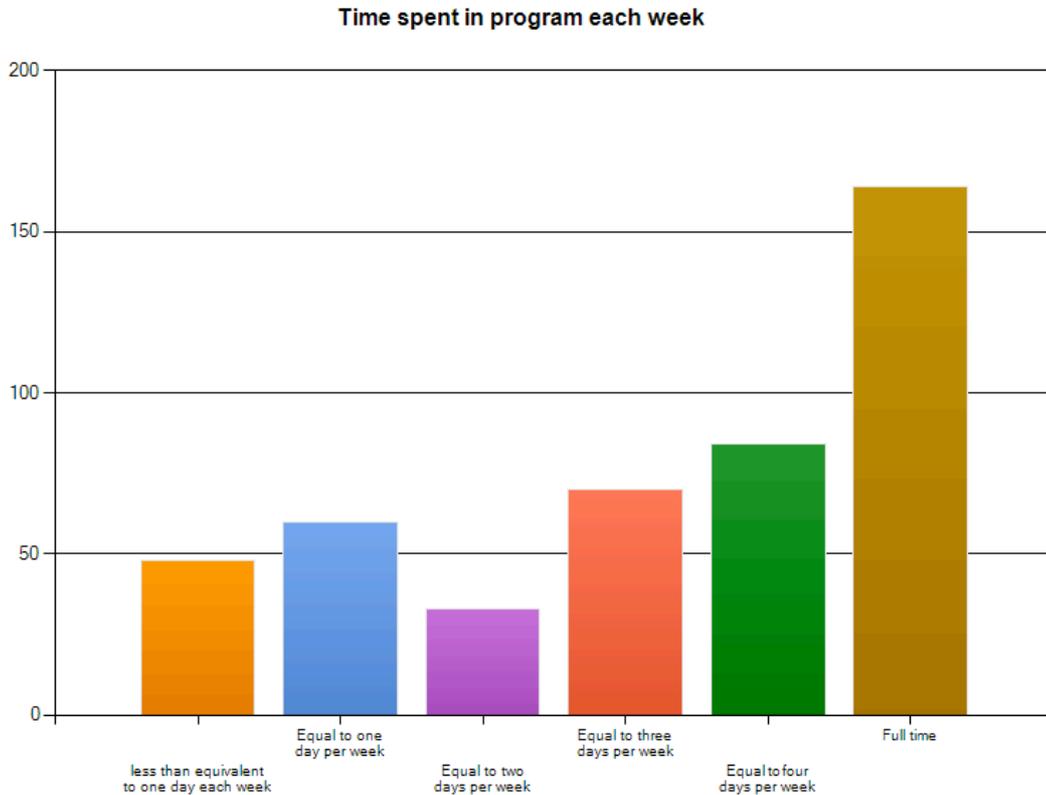
Commentary:

With all states now requiring attendance to 16 or 17 years of age, most programs are targeting students within the compulsory years of schooling. There is a fairly rapid drop-off of targeting of young people above 20 years of age (but 23% of programs include young people 20-24 years, and 12% include young people older than 24 years). Most programs provide 'alternative programs' for school-age students. At the other end of the scale, 35% of programs include young people who are 12 years old or younger.

3. Program descriptors

In this section of the survey, programs were asked to describe the extent and duration of attendance and the nature of their activities.

3.1 Duration: time per week



Less than half of the responses (36%) were from full-time programs, with the other half ranging from small commitments (less than a day a week) through to near full-time (4 days a week) commitments. (However, the largest number of programs require a full-time or close to full-time commitment.)

Commentary:

The amount of commitment implies that, while a large number of programs are 'stand alone' in another sense - they don't integrate with other education, work or training commitments, this is not the majority pattern. Almost two-thirds of the programs range between one day (or less) and four days a week, possibly maintaining young people in 'mainstream' education, with some 'alternate' program for a shorter time each week.

It should be noted that just over 10% of these programs enrol students for one day or less a week. The importance of these programs has been noted; they may provide 'hands-on' activities in parallel with 'mainstream' schools and these are directed towards holding students within schooling, and hence preventing the need for full-time 'responsive' programs at some future stage. To an extent, they also operate as 'preventative' approaches that model structural, curriculum and learning changes.

Follow-Up:

What are these young people doing for the other one to four days a week? Are they all attending 'mainstream' schools, involved in other programs, in part-time work? It would be useful to sample a subset of these programs and explore what is happening here.

Learning Choices National Scan

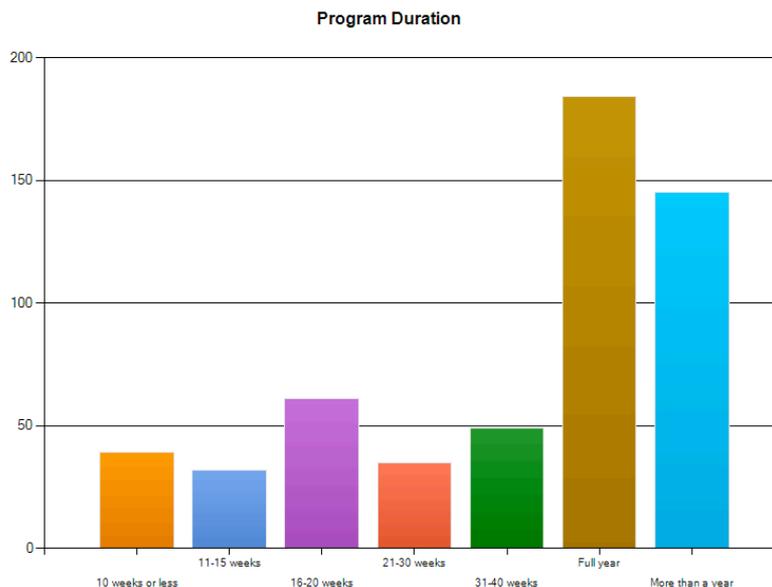
Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

3.2 Duration: program length

In specifying program length, responses could indicate more than one response (eg for different sub-programs). The most frequent program responses were of programs of at least a full year's duration (61%), with over a quarter of all programs supporting involvement of more than a year.

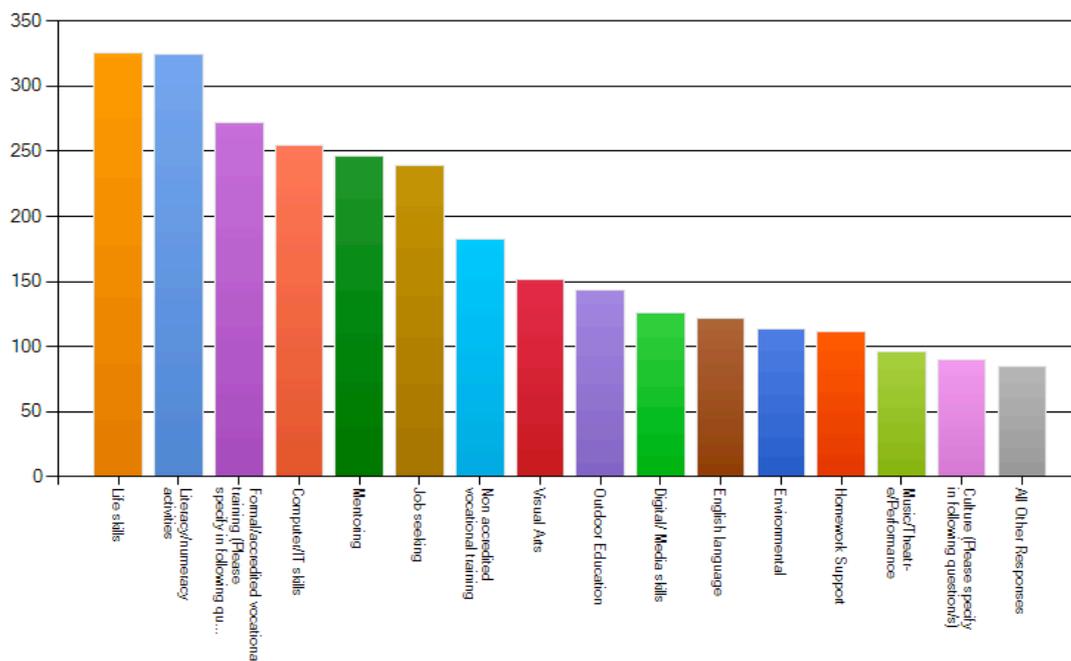
Commentary:

This further reinforces a picture of 'stand alone' programs: they don't move students 'in and out' of other education settings. Very few (8% are of less than 10 weeks' duration) suggesting strongly that most are not taking a 'remediation' approach in relation to young people's links with 'mainstream' schools ie 'fix them up and return them'.



3.3 Activities provided

Almost all programs provide 'literacy/numeracy' (80%) and 'life skills' (79%). About two-thirds provide 'formal/accredited vocational training' (67%); slightly fewer provide 'ITC skills' (62%), 'mentoring' (60%) and 'job seeking skills' (58%). Less than half the programs provide each of 'non-accredited vocational training' (44%), 'visual arts' (37%), 'outdoor education' (35%), and 'digital/media skills' (31%). Other options were provided by 30% or less of the programs.



Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

Commentary:

These program elements may be specifically focused skills training, or may be identified as the sorts of skills developed through other means. For example, 'literacy/numeracy activities' could involve specific instructional classes or, more likely, could be identified as being developed through a range of other activities. 'Life skills' in particular implies a broader individual and social approach to learning, based in practical and hand-on activities, and this may also be strongly linked to literacy and numeracy. Similarly, literacy and numeracy activities may include 'job seeking skills' as a specific program component.

It is interesting to note that two-thirds of the programs say at this stage that they include 'formal/accredited vocational training', while in the next question 80% of programs indicate that students have a chance to complete some form of credential.

Less than half the programs indicated that they offered 'non-accredited vocational training' and it is recognised that the two categories may overlap, with some programs offering both accredited and non-accredited training.

Follow-Up:

Again, a large number of programs (29%) indicate that other activities are offered. It would be useful to see if there are any recognisable groupings of activities here. A quick look at the information provided seems to show that many are more specific statements of activities coded elsewhere, but that there is a subset (of about 23 programs in various areas) that are described as 'whole school programs of change' and these need further investigation.

Specifying that activities such as 'literacy/numeracy' are included in many programs also raises the question of teaching approaches being used – it would be useful to examine a sub-set of programs in more detail on this.

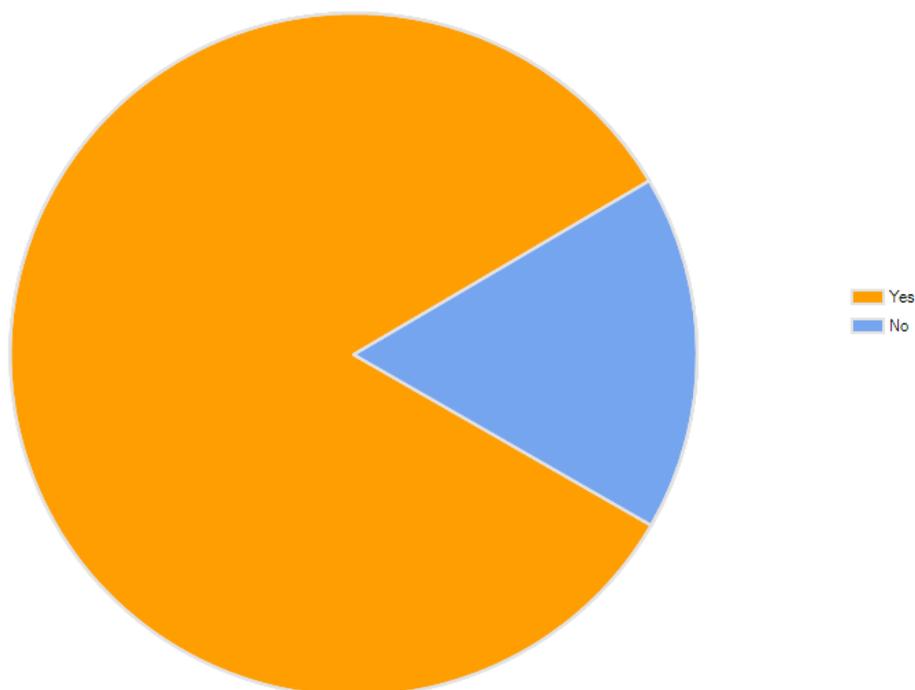
4. Articulation

A further criticism of alternative education programs is that they are 'dead-end' programs: they do not lead to recognised and credentialed outcomes, or allow movement to further education and training. These programs were asked explicitly about whether students have an opportunity to complete credentials – and hence to have program experienced recognised, perhaps for entry to further education, training or employment.

Most programs (84%) reported that their students had such opportunities.

Commentary:

Do students have the opportunity to complete any credential/accreditation through the program?



There appears to be strong awareness within programs of the need for their possible articulation to further education, training or employment. While students may also have such opportunities to complete accredited courses, we should also be aware that such accreditation might not open significant doors. There has been some criticism that students are enrolled in accredited courses at levels that do not provide substantial entry qualifications for further study or training.

Follow-Up:

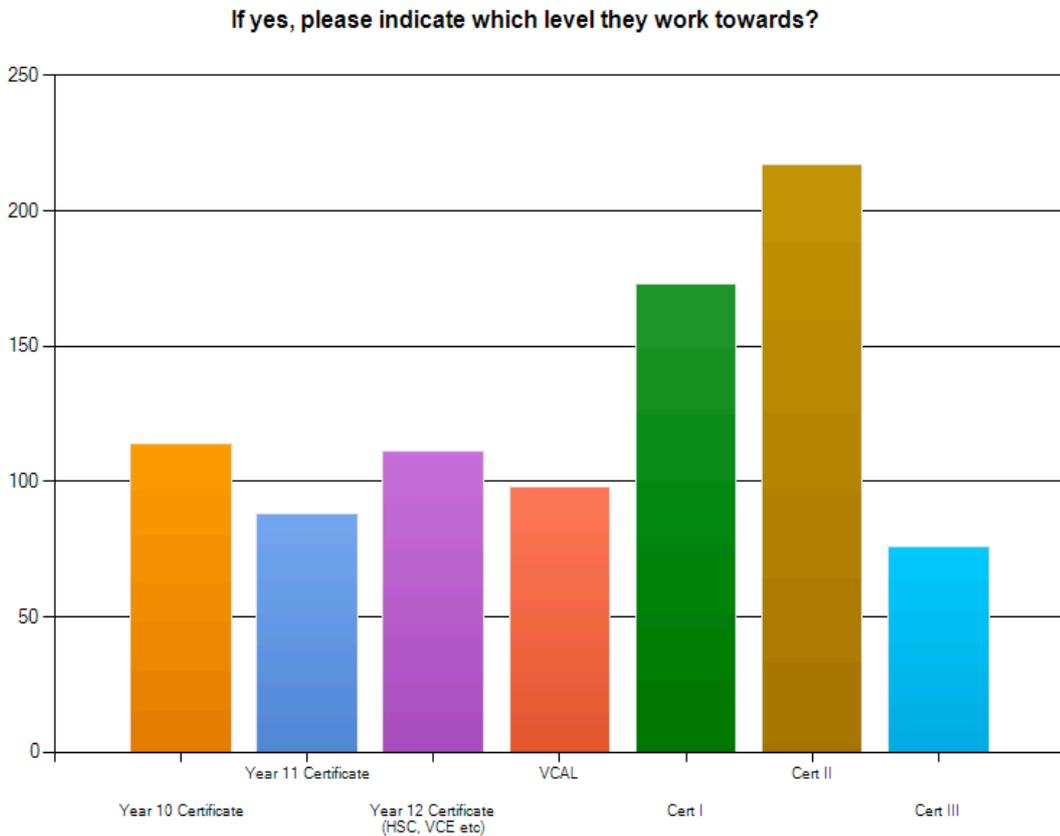
How many students do actually take this opportunity? What is the balance between the numbers of young people undertaking and not undertaking, and then those completing and not completing, credentialed courses within these programs?

Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

Level of Credentials Offered

It would then be useful to know the level of credentials available to program participants.



The survey results indicate a large number of possible credentials. Programs appear to offer multiple possible credentials. Certification within secondary education systems (HSC, VCE, VCAL etc) are offered in around 27-33% of credentialing programs, with a further 65% or more of programs providing Certificate level courses. Most common are Certificate II courses, with 65% of credentialing programs offering this. Lower level Certificate I courses are offered by about 53% of relevant programs. Very few programs (less than a quarter) offer Certificate III courses.

In Victoria, the state education system offers a formal 'alternative' course (VCAL) and around 22% of all program locations in the sample offer this, reflecting the sample dominance within Victoria (44% of the identified Victorian sites offered VCAL).

Commentary:

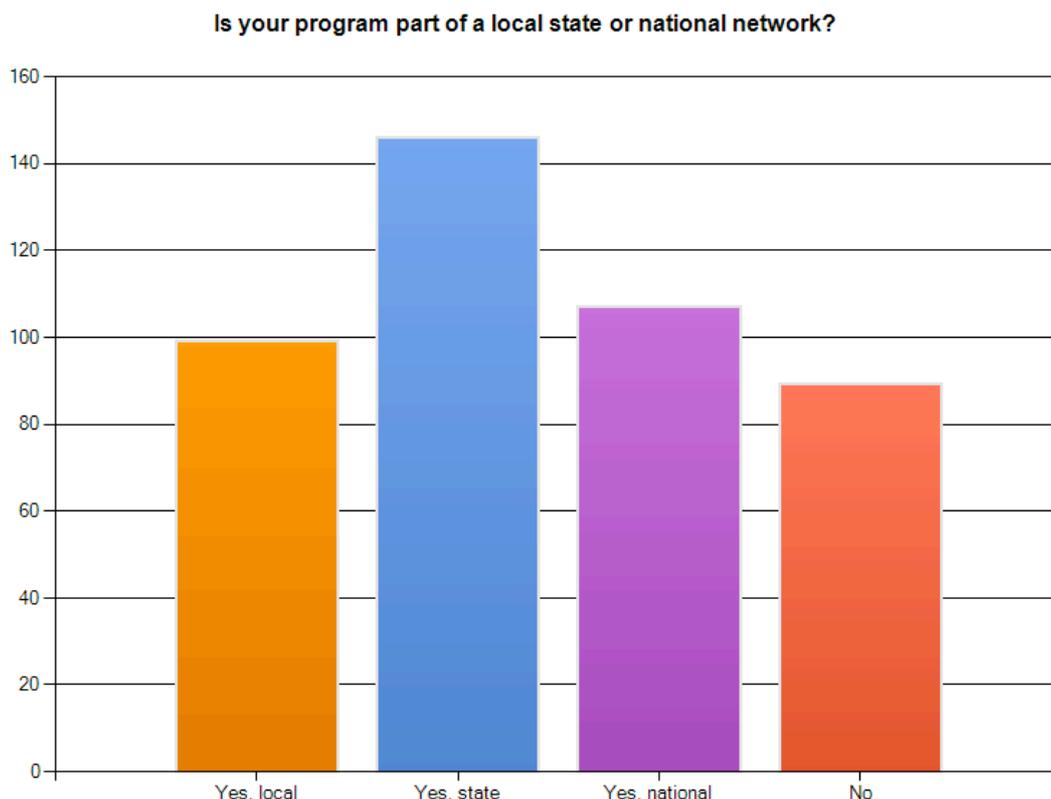
The multiplicity of credentialed outcomes seems to point to strong flexibility within courses.

Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

5. Networking

Finally, the survey asked about program membership of local, state or national networks. Results were varied, but the most common response was about membership of a state network (35%). There were, however, significant numbers of programs that were part of local (24%) or national (25%) networks. (A small number of programs seem to be members of multiple networks.)



Commentary:

The number of programs that were networked at a state level probably most strongly reflects the Victorian VCAL and Learn Local (Adult community education sector) and South Australian ICAN networks.

Of concern is the 22% of programs that responded that they are not networked at all.

These figures also reflect the nature of information flow that led to programs discovering and completing this survey. Many heard it through their state or national networks; some heard it through local youth sector networks. These methods will naturally underestimate the number of non-networked programs: many may not have heard of the survey's existence if they were not involved in appropriate networks.

This isolation should be flagged as a matter of concern.

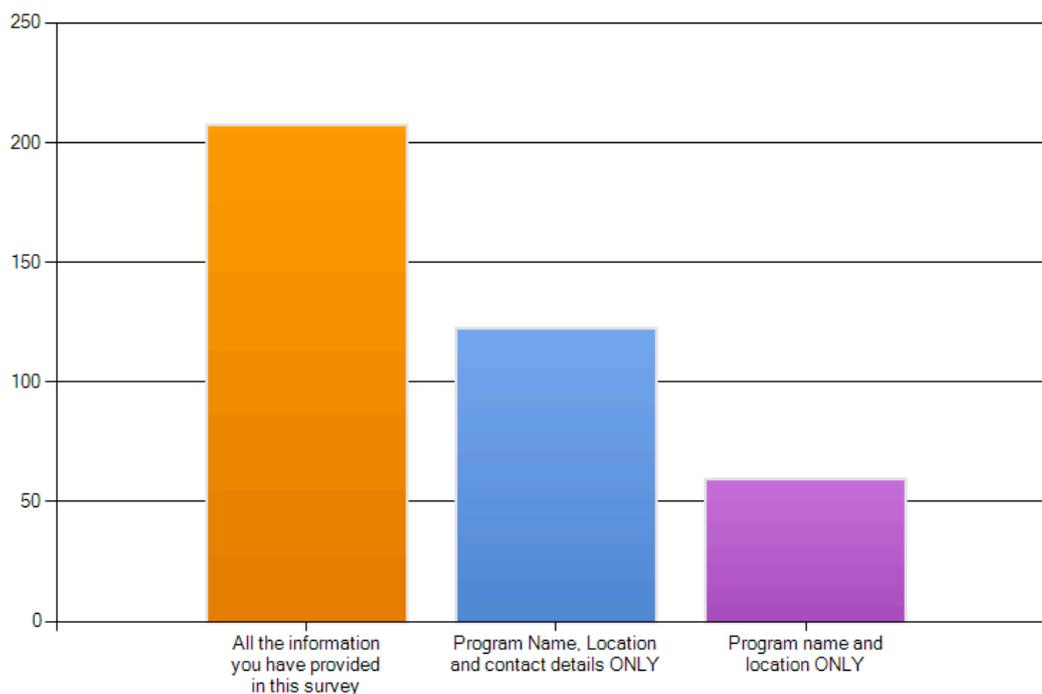
Learning Choices National Scan

Programs and schools catering for young people at risk of not completing their education

Sharing Information

Programs' interest in and commitment to networking may also be indicated by their response to the final question that asked if they would be happy to share program information. Most (54%) were happy to share all information, though around a third would prefer to place some limits on this, and 14% asked that contact details not be shared.

As part of this project, we hope to be able to publish much of this information on our website (<http://www.dsf.org.au/learningchoices>). Please select the level of information you agree to having published.



Commentary:

We can only guess at the nature of some programs' concerns: fear of being swamped with information requests, or fear of funding implications of program disclosure (including participant numbers). It is recognised that many programs are under-resourced and under intense pressure, including demands for proof of outcomes. The desire not to increase workloads is understandable.

However the responses provide a good basis for sharing and networking of information at least. Taken with the above comments, there is a strong push and opportunity for developing supportive networking between programs so long as this can be managed within the current resources – or supports cases for improved resourcing.