

Heading Upstream*

Preamble

We, the 370 participants at this Learning Choices Expo, offer this brief expression of our impressions and experiences from this short time together.

Welcomed by the Traditional Owners to their country, we came from all over this land: from Balga to Launceston; Noosa to the metropolitan heartlands of our cities. And from New Zealand (Aotearoa) from where we have much to learn.

We are teachers, youth workers, educators, trainers, public servants and researchers.

We hope that this statement of the key messages from this Learning Choices Expo sets some important directions for a community of practice among students, teachers, parents and policy makers connected to learning alternatives.

'Learn for Life' and 'Let Me Be Me'

Sixty young people over these two days showed what they **can do**. The Expo experience was built on this.

They left us with a message summed up in two phrases 'Learn for Life' and 'Let me be me'. But many other messages came through too. Relationships matter. The opportunity to be and to be treated as an individual makes the difference. Learning can excite and provide a real sense of achievement. It can be fun.

How often did we hear young people in their presentations describe the difference in these learning experiences in terms of the people: 'friends', 'like a family', 'safe'. At the same time, the programs they spoke of were often characterised by the high expectations that they have of the students, and a clear structure which enabled learning to take place in a personal and protected environment. Many stressed a preference for voluntary participation.

Not Just Upstream but Mainstream

The diversity and richness of successful programs has been evident throughout the Expo. However, there has also been a recurrent emphasis on the environment in which these programs operate. 'Alternative programs' can too often be left at the margins of education. We should not only be recognising what these programs are achieving with young people but actively working to build on their success in improving schooling for all.

Jack Dusseldorp spoke of a fundamental indicator of a society's well being the degree to which its young people are encouraged and able to develop into productive and independent adults.

But here in our own country the rates of non-attendance, truancy or suspensions of schoolchildren are still causes for concern, with the long-term trend slightly worsening. In the absence of sufficient, relevant data, this is the best we can conclude.

Our sense is that a struggle is taking place inside education systems driven at one level by narrow measures of success – most especially university entrance – and yet a desire in some

areas to encourage some recognition at least that students deserve teaching, support, programs, and qualifications based on learning alternatives.

Underpinning successful 'alternative education' are three critical elements: equipping young people to exercise control over their lives; ensuring that it is meaningful and important to the young people themselves; and enabling them to develop stronger bonds with those around them. Taken together these three elements provide the necessary conditions for learning.

We should seize the opportunity to build on the evident strengths of decades of practice in 'alternative education' to develop a framework which brings education to life for **all** young people regardless of where they learn.

In this there is some cause for optimism. As one participant wrote: "when does alternative education become mainstream? Programs such as work experience and work placements were once considered radical."

Not all our questions have an answer. Yet.

We have found new enthusiasm and energy in the company of our colleagues here. And we have taken heart at the realisation that we share many good practices though our programs have generally been developed in isolation from one another.

We welcome informed discussion and have enjoyed the vigorous debate. We have struggled with difficult questions:

- To what extent should the priority be on the development of diversity in mainstream educational settings? What would the implications be for those smaller educational annexes and other separate alternative settings?
- What are the appropriate expectations of our programs and the young people participating in them (including literacy and numeracy skills)?
- What is the right policy balance between punitive measures - such as associated surveillance and reporting systems - and positive inducement - such as changed educational practices where schools are a place where young people want to be not just have to be?
- How do we best use whatever resources are available to provide learners with real choices in the nature not just the content of their education? And how do we prevent multiple funding sources dictating what our programs deliver rather than the needs of our students?
- How do we establish and sustain the connections with others in our communities (including TAFE institutes, employers and employment services) to ensure that the promise young people display through their achievements in successful programs is realised when taking their next steps?

Challenges

At the same time, we recognise that there are a certain key challenges to be confronted now:

- Ensuring more students have access to programs that inspire.
- Significantly expanding access to: curriculum content that is relevant, challenging and meaningful; pedagogy that is interactive, engaging and purposeful; an environment that is characterised by respect, commitment and care at all times.
- Ensuring every child has someone to trust, talk to and depend on in the school environment
- Meeting the needs of Indigenous students and communities
- Sustaining –through professional development- those teachers, youth workers and others working with young people in alternative education settings.
- Recognising the role that healthy communities play in young people's development and the implications for the school environment;
- Improving our knowledge base including acquiring, analysing and publicly disseminating basic data

- Measuring what we 'know' and demonstrating what we achieve through our programs while retaining the characteristics that make them successful.

A significant issue remains whether States and Territories should legislate for a young person's right to an education that is relevant, of good quality and reflects individual needs.

The Task Ahead

We need to construct bridges between grounded practice, system responses and the further educational opportunities that create or support learning choices for young people. This is likely to involve:

- Placing the need for learning alternatives on the educational map – in terms of research, good practice, funding, evaluation and recognition; engaging with the policy makers – students, parents and the media.
- Building a positive profile around alternatives – not as residual programs but as pathfinders for the mainstream: finding champions for the ideas around learning choices among educationalists, economists, social commentators, professional associations and concerned citizens.
- Engaging with issues facing indigenous communities: a better understanding of the issues in indigenous communities, sharing experiences, knowledge and resources
- Creating a national network of people working in learning alternatives – a community of practice - both to continue our conversations that translate into improved practice, but also to promote a 'dialogue with the mainstream' that leads to better policy. These conversations would clearly benefit from learning from international experience; and providing bi-annual opportunities to come together to reflect on achievements and directions, and more **local** learning choices expos over the next two years.

*'Our challenge is to create systems that
give our young people the capacity to change the world'*
Expo participant

In Conclusion

We came to this Learning Choices Expo aware of our differences. We leave treasuring the rich diversity of our experiences and activities, conscious of how much we have in common and how much we have to offer.

* Having told the parable of confronting the choice: do we jump in to save one drowning person after another; or do we search upstream, looking to stop whoever it is who is throwing people in to drown? Expo keynote speaker, Roger Holdsworth, proclaimed: 'Me? I'm heading upstream.'