

Local investment. National returns.

THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

A Report on the National Youth Commitment Partnerships and Project
by **Peter Kellock, The Asquith Group.**



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This report is one of two companion reports, the other being six case studies of the Youth Commitment regions which is available on-line at:
<http://www.dsf.org.au>

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FOREWORD

At a time when skill shortages and gaps are a hot economic and political issue, this country has about 15 percent or some 200,000 teenagers not in full-time education or full-time work.¹

The proportion of young people not fully engaged in learning or work has remained roughly the same for more than a decade. In 2003 more than 78,000 school leavers were either unemployed, or working part-time but not studying, or not in the labour force six months after leaving school.² As in most OECD countries, on average it is taking longer for a young person in Australia to make a successful transition to sustainable employment. A serious disconnection exists between national labour market and skill development policy and the under-participation of a substantial number of young people, with severe implications: not just in terms of the lost opportunities for individuals, but also in terms of Australia's future economic prosperity.

Across the world nations are placing increasing emphasis on raising the education and skill levels of their workforces, and improving the links between human capital formation and economic policy, as key ways of improving their comparative economic advantage.

The importance of youth transitions

The recent OECD analysis of the Australian economy noted that to secure continuing high levels of economic growth, further reforms were needed in a number of sectors, including education and training. Praising many recent Australian Government policy initiatives in education the OECD also observed that:

... international comparisons of school-to-work transition outcomes for young people suggest that the employment disadvantage [in Australia] of poorly qualified school leavers, compared with their better educated counterparts, is somewhat above the OECD average. Increasing demand for skills in Australia (and other OECD countries) have made qualifications at the upper secondary level of education (or an apprenticeship qualification) far more desirable for young people. The improvement in education achievement rates could also yield significant long-term economic benefits. Results from the Monash macroeconomic programme imply that raising the proportion of young people in Australia who obtain a Year 12 or equivalent education by ten percentage points, would have a positive impact on GDP, real private consumption and economic welfare in the longer-term, outweighing its costs.³

There needs to be a twin track policy response to enable all young people to make a successful transition from school to work over time.

One track needs to focus on continued learning, making this as attractive as possible, whether through continued participation in secondary education or a trade apprenticeship, or another equivalent pathway. A simple rationale is that continued participation of young people in learning is crucial if Australia is to overcome the trade, technical and professional skill bottlenecks we appear to be facing in coming years.

Continued participation is also regarded as one of the most effective strategies nation-states can make to insure against the perils of unemployment. "On average among OECD countries, male labour force participants aged 25 to 64 with a qualification below upper secondary education are around 1.5 times as likely to be unemployed as their counterparts who have completed upper secondary education."⁴ Since 1991, the OECD reports, the evidence is that the employment prospects of secondary school completers have increased relative to early school leavers in a number of countries including Australia.⁵ Nervousness about the potential skill obsolescence of a sizeable section of the workforce over time is a key driver of the focus on qualifications, competencies and investment in education and training.

¹ DSF, *How Young People are Faring 2004*, Sydney, 2004

² Ibid

³ OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys. Australia.*, Paris, 2004, p173

⁴ OECD, *Education at a Glance*, Paris, 2004, p150

⁵ Ibid, p51

A second track needs to focus on work, and developing much better follow up and linking of school leavers, especially early leavers, to decent full-time work, apprenticeship and other options. Longitudinal tracking of young people in Australia consistently shows that early leavers in full-time work for the first year after leaving school are less likely to be unemployed or to have dropped out of the labour force during their mid 20s. The drift of extended periods mixing unemployment with casual and part-time work in the late teens and early 20s is much more typical of school leavers that experience a troubled transition than those that get a better start after leaving school.

For everyone involved - young people, parents, teachers, principals, many employers and most communities - the decisions each student makes during Years 9 to 12 about what to do at school, whether to stay on or to go, and then what to, are powerful.

A modern youth transitions approach

As the prospects of easily accessible entry-level career employment and training in industry or the public service for school leavers eroded during the 1980s and the early 1990s, these decisions took on an even more formidable character for those without adequate family, peer or other informal support networks. It meant that while the vast majority of young people could successfully navigate their way through, a significant minority would experience a troubled transition.

By the 1990s many of our schools, workplaces, public and family institutions and systems of support understandably found it difficult to keep pace with a fraying of the traditional pathways from school that young people had followed during the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and a good part of the 80s. A systemic lack of reliable local knowledge about the fate of school leavers and their patterns of participation over time was just one indicator of this difficulty.

The patchwork of legislative and funding arrangements in our federal system to assist young people in their transitions has not helped, and in fact has hindered the development of a truly modern youth transitions system.

The States are largely responsible for secondary education, while the Commonwealth is chiefly responsible for employment services and outcomes, and training has been mutually shared between the two. For many parents and schools, and especially 'at risk' young people transiting across these jurisdictional arrangements, it can be a confusing maze of pilots and duplication, gaps and dead ends, with a profound lack of joined up effort and funding, and unclear accountabilities about who is responsible for successful outcomes.

Over the past decade many communities, schools, local governments, youth workers and others in different parts of Australia have made attempts to fill these gaps, to knit together tighter arrangements so that young people at risk of a troubled transition do not 'fall through the gaps'.

Peter Kellock's report is the story of six particular communities, in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, that since 1999 have been working on the dual policy tracks: "to encourage [potential early school leavers] to stay on at school, and to support them in the world outside school if they choose to leave."⁶

Their work in Macarthur, Tumut, the Central Coast, on the Northern Sunshine and Gold Coasts, and in Whittlesea has taken place in collaboration with DSF, and has been funded by the Commonwealth Government, state education and training departments, local government and other stakeholders. In addition the Baw Baw-LaTrobe LLEN and the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula LLEN have collaborated with these six in sharing knowledge, good practice and research.

The logic underpinning the project was simple: young people leaving school before completing Year 12 and not going onto equivalent study or full-time work should be entitled to the same level of resources, support and assistance as school completers. They should be able to do this through a combination of options including apprenticeships, subsidised work linked to training, TAFE or re-

⁶ DSF, *Why Australia needs a national Youth Commitment. A Discussion Paper*, Sydney, 1999, p5

entry to school. This effectively recognised Year 12 completion as both a new threshold of educational attainment and also a benchmark of equivalent support for young people leaving school early. For this benchmark to be realised customised support and assistance would be a crucial component. It was a policy response first outlined in the Australian country report for the OECD's international review of youth transitions and derived from best practice within the OECD circle of nations.⁷

The cost according to one estimate would be \$760M in a full year shared between the Commonwealth and States, or less than three per cent of Australia's annual overall education and training budget (excluding universities).⁸ An alternative cost issued during the 2004 federal election was \$308M, not taking account of some program savings and the expected contribution of the states.⁹ By contrast the cost of lost productivity, wages, poorer health outcomes and social security payments - the cost of not acting - has been estimated at \$2.6bn annually.¹⁰

Youth Commitment pathfinders

Each partnership embodied an attempt to bring together the ingredients and stakeholders to make such an entitlement possible at a local level. No wonder Kellock describes it as a formidable objective. The partnerships were organic organisations established in the first instance without any formal government sanction or authority. His report provides an honest perspective of what could be realistically expected within this design framework and the time to date, with the resources garnered and the skills available.

For the school leavers from the 30 Youth Commitment schools that have had access to dedicated 'transition brokers', and others that have enjoyed being mentored, there have been important outcomes.

Assessed against the destinations nationally of early school leavers, these measures have improved initial outcomes by at least 10 per cent and probably more. Impacts on school retention are harder to quantify but there is evidence of improvement in a number of schools.

Suspension and exclusion policies are being rethought and senior teachers and principals are looking at alternative curricula and modes of learning. There are significantly stronger safety nets for school leavers in transition in each of the regions. Young people are being equipped to make more effective and informed choices about school, further learning and work.

The report and the case studies cite examples where Youth Commitment schools and agencies are developing effective and enduring partnerships to better integrate services, to provide seamless assistance and advice - to 'blur boundaries' as it is sometimes called - and to make sense of the funding spaghetti bowl they work in.¹¹

These are not insignificant results from partnerships that have only been fully operational for the last eighteen months or so. In the long standing Whittlesea partnership there are demonstrable improvements in reducing 'unknown destinations' of school leavers; enrolments in TAFE and apprenticeship commencements have improved; and school retention is now at a level comparable with other Victorian schools.

But there have been and remain some significant gaps and barriers too.

Firstly, partnership development can sometimes seem more of a bureaucratic activity than 'breaking the mould' inspiration. The Youth Commitment partnerships are muscling up against considerable State and Commonwealth bureaucracies and structures whose tentacles reach right down to the local stakeholders at the table. People around the table can have one eye cocked to their funding masters and another to their local stakeholder partners.

It can mean the bright idea, the challenging, original insight is sometimes, perhaps too often, suppressed or discarded. Sometimes a lot of energy and resources are consumed in simply keeping

⁷ OECD, *Thematic Review of the Transition from Initial Education to Working Life. Australia*, Paris, 1997

⁸ Applied Economics, *Realising Australia's Commitment to Young People*, DSF, Sydney, 2002

⁹ *Labor's Youth Guarantee: Learn or Earn*, ALP, Canberra, May 2004

¹⁰ Natsem, *The Cost to Australia of Early School Leaving*, DSF, Sydney, 1999

¹¹ J. Figgis, *The Landscape of Support for Youth in Transition*, DEST, Canberra, 2004

people at the table, rather than developing the next innovative project. Attempting to reform a system and creating coherence when often there is none may sometimes have been at the expense of simply capturing and harnessing local ingenuity, skills and insights: creating truly local solutions. The report notes the limited research capacity of the partnerships to achieve broader social change goals.

Secondly, too often governments have not matched their policy engagement with the Youth Commitment concept with the contribution of their key service delivery agencies on the ground. For example, while Centrelink offices have often embraced the idea, Job Network agencies have been difficult to engage. And while State departments have promised co-operation, in some jurisdictions the release of crucial local data held by their local agencies has been problematic. Despite crucial funding and in-principle support, at different times and in different ways the partnerships have faced significant hurdles from governments or their agencies. Purchaser-provider funding arrangements that do not adequately take account of community partnerships have been a particular barrier.

Thirdly, like most Australian partnerships of this type the Youth Commitment regions have not successfully engaged industry. The Youth Commitments do have employers on Committees of Management, employers do contribute financially to transition support in some regions, and employers have been extensively surveyed and researched in some partnerships as well. But while more young people in most Youth Commitment regions are going into apprenticeships and traineeships than previously, this is mainly due to improved transition support rather than particular employer investments or actions. It is fair to say the partnerships have not generated radical ideas or fresh insights to date into improved school-training-industry links.

Fourthly, the focus in the project design was more squarely on early school leavers and the idea of prevention of long term risk rather than exploring innovative ways to re-engage the considerable number of older teenagers and young adults already disconnected from learning and work needing a 'second chance'.

However Kellock's report does validate the general approach and outcomes:

- Intensive support, whether delivered via mentoring or via the case management of dedicated 'transition brokers', works. It makes a positive difference for potential early school leavers, while at school and subsequently. Jane Figgis, in recently reviewing the landscape of youth transition support, concluded:

The 'transition broker' model which is being used by some schools and within some communities to offer a supportive base for all school leavers during the 12 months following their leaving school may prove a foundation for a system which is available to youth for another five or six years. It needs to be a helpful, non-bureaucratic environment for young people to return to when a bit of a hand is required. Evidence suggests that there should be a strong mental health component to this provision as the presence of depression, in particular, is insufficiently acknowledged in the supports designed to help young people. The logic and philosophy of community development – strengthening communities – should encourage this kind of systematic provision.¹²

- Pathway planning and career guidance does make a substantive difference for young people - informed choice is a central value in senior education and in the transition experience.¹³
- Environmental scans about how young people are faring locally in learning or work, however difficult to compile due to a paucity of reliable datasets and variable in quality, are worth the effort. They focus the attention of local schools, governments and community service agencies, help set evidence-based priorities, and encourage stakeholders to look more systematically at what happens to young people beyond the school gate.
- The value of tracking school leaver pathways, a major task for the Youth Commitments, has prompted significant change: comprehensive surveying of destinations has become a priority for most states.

¹² Ibid, p32

¹³ See A Beavis et al, *Post School Plans: Aspirations, Expectations and Implementation*, ACER/The Smith Family, Sydney, 2004

- The organic partnership approach is a difficult but powerful route to improving the way governments deliver services and engage communities. Constrained by not having a mandated authority and operating within the limitations of purchaser-provider arrangements, they are authentic rather than mercenary ways of reaching out to community goodwill and collaboration.
- Key stakeholders such as local government and Centrelink have found new and effective ways of engaging with young people and their priorities through the partnerships.
- Schools especially are enriched through the partnership approach, through shared learning, and through cluster arrangements that result in better pastoral care for students, broader curriculum offerings and diversity, and shared responsibility for students at risk of a troubled transition.

The quiet revolution taking place

Since 1998 there has been a quiet revolution gradually taking place in the way governments are addressing these issues:

- some State governments, notably Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory are now committed to a learning or training guarantee for young people up to the age of 17 years
- all governments have in some way reviewed the senior certificate or Year 12 qualification
- mentoring and customised support for young people in transition is being introduced
- VET in schools has become a priority
- attention is being paid to alternative and more inclusive learning settings in the middle years
- new monies are being provided to do many of these things.

Pressure from local communities and constituencies, the weight of research, recognition of the need to ensure Australia's continued economic competitiveness have all given momentum to these initiatives.

The attached table attempts to capture some of the dimensions of the impressive scale and breadth of the changes taking place. Not listed is the fact that the ACT Government is introducing a *Government Commitment to Young People 2004-8* encapsulating many elements in the original Youth Commitment proposals.

Most of the States and now the Commonwealth too, are busy shaping the implementation phase of the policy promises they have made.

The table highlights some obvious policy gaps and indicates the differential effort among jurisdictions. It is clear that making school participation more attractive and implementing post-school tracking are generally priorities for most states, while the major Commonwealth contribution in coming years will be in making apprenticeship and technical training pathways more attractive. Both the states and the Commonwealth however can claim multi-layered responses.

Beyond the supply side the other track of good transitions policy - an adequate pool of decent full-time work opportunities, especially for early school leavers - has not been an explicit part of the policy agenda of governments. Policy settings continue to assume that Australia's strong economy and the much discussed demographic squeeze will benefit the youth labour market. These assumptions need to be tempered by market failures that have resulted in skill shortages; the character of much part-time employment; and the state of some regional youth labour markets.

Other observations can be made from the table. Mixed with a philosophy of youth development and lots of carrots are plenty of sticks, and down the track there may be inevitable clashes between these approaches. And then there is the staying power of governments: will those offering education and training guarantees honour these if the economic good times wane, or training and job opportunities erode, or costs rise?

Summary of significant youth transition policy changes 1998-Feb 2005

Key Issue	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA ¹⁴	SA	TAS	COMMONWEALTH
Review youth transition performance	Part of the Laughlin review 2005	Kirby 2000	ETRF reviews 2001-	Tannock 2003	Future Connect & Making the Connections 2004	State of Learning 2004	Eldridge 2001
Review senior certificate	McGaw	VCAL initiative	Pittman & QSA	Tannock	SSABSA review	TQA: proposed	Proposal for Australian Certificate of Education
Timeframe for action		2000-	Current pilots; 2006-	2006-	2004-	2005-	Eldridge pilots 2001-; election initiatives 2006-
New benchmarks & legislation		2010 Year 12 or equivalent targets	Compulsory Participation in a broad "Senior Learning Phase"	Proposal similar to Queensland	School leaving age raised to 16	Legislation similar to Queensland	Youth Allowance dependent on participation status
Education/Training Guarantee		Some elements	Yes	Yes	Some elements	Yes	
Increased funding		\$132M ¹⁵	\$135M ¹⁶	\$182M over 5 years	\$28M over 3 years	\$21M over 4 years	\$55M + \$1064M 2005-8 election commitments ¹⁷
VET initiatives¹⁸	HSC possible thru TAFE	VCE possible thru TAFE	School- TAFE parities				SBNA: Australian Technical Colleges; extend Youth Allowance; pre-voc places
Alternative learning¹⁹ settings	Links to Learning: new alternative schools strategy	VCAL; Cole review	Flexischools ; <i>Learning Place</i> ; & other initiatives	Not a specific focus	Support for local initiatives	Senior colleges, many local alternatives	POEMS
Customised support²⁰	School based mentoring; Ready to Work; careers teachers	MIPs & On Track Connect	Youth co-ordinators	100 training mentors promised	Transition brokers	Youth co-ordinators	JPP, CATS pilots; Mentor Marketplace; ANICA
Student tracking & monitoring	Local initiatives	On Track reporting	Mandated: unique identifier in development	DET surveys; proposed school monitoring	New 'data warehouse'	Statewide tracking	Requirement of some programs
Community partnerships²¹	LCP partnership with Commonwealth	LLEN	ETRF clusters	LLEPs	ICAN	Promised	ECEF closed; LCPs: Youth Commitment & ICYS pilots
Youth employment initiatives	'Skill eco-system' pilots	Local Government program	ETRF: Breaking the Cycle		Employment program review; state traineeships		Recent improvements to Job Network assistance; Work for the Dole

¹⁴ Gallop government policy commitment, *It Pays To Learn*, during 2005 election

¹⁵ VLESC figure, funding for LLEN, MIPs, VCAL, On Track over three years

¹⁶ Estimate of 2004-5 funding for Education and Training Reforms for the Future; additional funding to be announced in 2005 state budget.

¹⁷ \$55M estimate includes post-Eldridge funding for CATS, POEMS, ICYS over three years; Mentor Marketplace; additional funding for ECEF, including Youth Commitment pilots; DOTARS Sustainable Regions funding for Youth Commitments, and recent career education initiatives. Excludes on-going funding for JPP, LCP and other programs. Election commitment funding includes all the skill and trade training related initiatives, some will also involve considerable state contributions, eg. Australian Technical Colleges

¹⁸ SBNA: School Based New Apprenticeships

¹⁹ POEMS: Pathway Outreach Education Model (in effect, alternative education sites and settings); VCAL: Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

²⁰ ANICA: Australian Network of Industry Career Advisers; MIPs: Managed Individual Pathways; JPP: Job Pathways Programme; CATS: Career and Transition Support

²¹ □

Innovative Community Action Networks

There is richness in the diversity of initiatives but there is also an emerging risk of policy fragmentation and fractured effort. Few initiatives are being enacted in concert between governments, and sometimes within government agencies. National benchmarks of performance will be hard to achieve and to measure.

Local investment for national returns

However while there are deficiencies, we can say that a significant transformation in the social contract about the opportunities for young people to learn and the level and depth of support offered them during transition is taking place in Australia. But there is still considerable work to be done if this potential is to be turned into an enduring reality. The lack of a truly national approach and leadership is a serious issue.

Underpinned by appropriate state and Commonwealth co-operation and pooled funding arrangements, the Youth Commitment partnerships and others like them, organic and mandated, could be key instruments to test these transforming possibilities on a transferable scale. They could be a powerful demonstration of local investment delivering important national returns.

The Youth Commitment partnerships over the past few years have essentially played a pathfinding role exploring how to best pursue the dual tracks of good youth transition policy. They have scored some failures but they have also achieved some notable successes for young people, and in the process helped influence national and state policy agendas.

So much more could be achieved if governments and stakeholders were prepared to more seriously test their potential: to agree on common objectives, to pool funding, to provide the data sets and research resources needed, and to actively link their own programs, the dual learning and work tracks required and the associated service providers. The Youth Commitment partnerships could be the basis of a significant national demonstration project bringing together on the ground all the elements of good transition identified in so many reports and initiatives in recent years, if State and Federal governments are willing.

They are key instruments to making good John Howard's 2004 election promise: *We aim at nothing less than assisting all young Australians from age 13 to 19 to make a successful transition from school to an enduring career.*²²

²² J Howard, Coalition Campaign Launch Policy Speech, Brisbane, 26 September 2004, p6

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OECD studies consistently indicate that failure to make an early transition to permanent work or to full-time study is associated with long term risks of marginalisation, helping to trap people in a cycle of unemployment, part-time work and government schemes. The National Youth Commitment is based on the idea of preventing such marginalisation through providing an entitlement for each young person to access a minimum level of education and training in the post-compulsory years.

Under a Youth Commitment, each early school leaver would be supported and assisted to either:

- complete Year 12 either at school or another recognized provider; or
- obtain an education or training qualification that is at an equivalent level such as a TAFE certificate or apprenticeship; or
- obtain a full-time job that is linked to education or training.

Six partnerships were established between 1999 and 2001 to explore the capacity of local communities, in partnership with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF), to deliver a Youth Commitment. Principally funded by the Commonwealth, these community partnerships bring together the range of agencies involved in providing services for 'at risk' young people.²³ Local governments, schools, TAFE providers, Job Network brokers, Centrelink, employers, private training organisations, and community agencies are all actively involved in these partnerships.

The six partnerships were established in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, and were located on the Northern Sunshine Coast, the Gold Coast, the Central Coast, Macarthur, Tumut, and Whittlesea. While the partnerships were approached and formalised through a common process, each has operated in different contexts. The three state governments variously manage their own education and training systems, the legislation defining and administering post-compulsory participation differs, and the cohesiveness and infrastructure within each community varies according to their size and location.

The scope and scale of these six partnership projects are significant. Geographically they cover nine Local Government Areas, encompassing over five percent of the total Australian population. There are over 100 secondary schools located in these regions. While the area covered in these demonstration projects is large, the agenda has been even more ambitious. Despite a series of reforms to school systems, transition services and the employment network over the past decade, almost a quarter of young people nationally still leave school before completing Year 12, and many of these subsequently become unemployed, work in part-time low skilled jobs; or drop out of the labour market entirely.

While reforms of government systems has led to some recent improvements in rates of school retention, the aim of the Youth Commitment partnerships has been to demonstrate that, by providing intensive support to young people identified as potential early school leavers, and building a collaborative platform of support among all relevant local agencies, the outcomes for young people at risk of early school leaving can be significantly improved.

The partnerships also set out to provide access to independent information and advice so that young people could make informed choices about their options in staying at or leaving school.

This ambitious agenda was based on an approach consistent with best practice transition principles outlined in the 2001 Report of the Prime Minister's Taskforce on Youth Pathways, *Footprints to the Future*.²⁴ The partnerships have focused on collecting information on the needs and aspirations of young people, and have been able to use this information to influence local planning and provision decisions. Within a generally common framework, the partnerships have shown the flexibility to adjust programs and approaches to suit local circumstances and existing initiatives. Common benchmarks to measure progress were agreed by local agencies in various sectors, and attempts

²³ In NSW and Queensland; in Victoria, the Whittlesea Youth Commitment has received considerable support from local schools and the Victorian Department of Education and Training, local government (City Of Whittlesea), and other agencies as well as the Commonwealth.

²⁴ The Taskforce was chaired by Captain David Eldridge of the Salvation Army, and involved extensive consultations with young people, parents, employers, schools, state governments and Commonwealth agencies.

made to introduce common accountability and responsibility for outcomes across services.

The partnerships have largely been concerned with developing local agreements between schools, agencies and services for the integrated delivery of services, common strategies and joint planning. They have generally not themselves directly provided services to young people.

While patience is required in developing community partnerships, after three years these projects are in a position to demonstrate that the Youth Commitment strategy is making a difference.

The key finding of this review is that identifying potential early school leavers and providing them with intensive support is an effective strategy. Across the six partnerships outcomes for early school leavers improved by more than 10 percent, compared to the national average. Over the review period only a proportion of early school leavers in the partnerships, about one-third, received intensive support, indicating that greater levels of improvement are possible. The percentage of early school leavers not in education or full-time employment after leaving school reduced from a national level of well over 40 percent to just below 30 percent, as a result of the interventions provided through the Youth Commitment partnerships.

The timing of the support provided to students at risk is critical, and depends on effective processes for identifying students who are likely to leave school early. Those providing support to the young people have generally been in a position to offer advice that is, and is seen to be, independent of any particular agency. The independence of this advice has lent it credibility and validity. Offering independent support to early school leavers has necessarily developed a different and flexible role in providing transition support focussed on the needs of the individual.

In addition, the six partnerships have documented the situation of young people in their local communities, and have established processes across sectors and agencies to facilitate monitoring and follow-up of the pathways taken by early school leavers. In Queensland, this work is supported by new legislation that requires young people to continue at school beyond Year 10 unless they secure full-time employment or enrol in further training. Similar legislation has been introduced in Tasmania.

While the partnerships have tended to particularly focus on working with young people in the schools sector, there is strength in adopting a staged approach that initially concentrates on working with schools and potential early leavers. While the training sector, employers and other support agencies have been involved in the partnerships, there is scope to now develop a stronger focus on engaging these partners in supporting young early school leavers.

In Queensland and New South Wales the Commonwealth has provided the majority of funding to support the Youth Commitment projects. However, most of the partnerships have also attracted important funding contributions from State and local governments, and in some cases, the business sector and non-government organisations as well. The capacity to pool funding from a number of sources and negotiate locally agreed strategies and objectives suggests that devolved funding and accountability frameworks have considerable potential.

In return for the funding provided, the public sector receives a major benefit from partnerships through the value added to existing government programs. Some State governments have used the Youth Commitment demonstration projects as a template to develop their own state-based local networks. However, the partnerships are still struggling with the segmented nature of Commonwealth and State government funding and coordination, which hampers the integrated collection of data and the development of collective responsibility.

There are also other barriers to further progress for the Youth Commitment partnerships. Each local partnership generally has limited resources for research, and requires the support of external expertise to maintain an action research capacity.

With governments establishing their own mandated and new partnership arrangements, the status and mandate of Youth Commitment partnerships can be compromised. In addition competitive tendering regimes, short-term funding for pilot programs, and current government accountability frameworks all inhibit the development of collaborative approaches and shared local accountability.

Despite these barriers, the partnerships have demonstrated that some form of participation entitlement for young people is viable, and recent legislative changes in Queensland and Tasmania endorse this approach.²⁵

In addition, there is an appetite among stakeholders in the community to engage with such approaches. There are also innovative examples emerging in some of these partnerships that highlight the potential roles that agencies such as Centrelink can play, creating much tighter safety nets for young people at risk. Some local governments are also demonstrating a capacity and willingness to play an important role linking skills and youth aspirations to economic development. Local government can have an important role bringing agencies together as a local neutral broker.

What more is needed?

Due to limited resources, the intensive support required to assist potential early school leavers has been available to only some schools within the partnerships, and even in these schools some students who could benefit through this support are not referred. With the resources and the capacity to provide such support to all early school leavers, the impact of the Youth Commitment approach would be even more significant.

A stronger commitment by schools and TAFEs to providing more flexibility to meet the needs of young people would ensure that more young people would find education and training relevant to their needs.

Governments need to be clear about what they are trying to achieve within their own jurisdictions and they must develop a much better understanding of the roles and funding relationships between the States and the Commonwealth.

It is difficult to develop an integrated approach to transition support under a purchaser / provider model that both levels of government tend to favour. A more productive arrangement for governments would be to pool funds, identify where common effort can take place and where gaps exist, actively assist local partnerships to gather and share data, document good ideas, arrange training, and promote the approach to other communities.

The Youth Commitment partnerships are strategic, have credibility within their communities, and have the potential to link to other Commonwealth and State government initiated transition-related networks to produce more capacity.

The continuing challenge within Australia is to develop partnership approaches that embrace all levels of government, take advantage of the potential to pool funding, and which adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach to assisting young people at risk of social exclusion.

²⁵ See education.qld.gov.au/etrf/ and <http://www.education.tas.gov.au/stateoflearning/strategy/default.htm>

1.INTRODUCTION

This report reviews the achievements of six local partnerships committed to improving support for young people in their communities. These partnerships have been developing a collaborative approach with a specific purpose: trialing integrated approaches in assisting young people make the transition to independence.²⁶ They were originally established by local stakeholders in collaboration with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) and the former Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEF), which is now part of the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (DEST),

The first of these partnerships began approximately five years ago. Most have been developing over the past two or three years. Sufficient time has elapsed to take stock of what has been achieved, and to assess whether or not these six local Youth Commitment partnerships are ‘making a difference’.

The main objectives of this report are to:

- document the achievements of six national Youth Commitment partnership sites
- evaluate whether the approach is consistent with current local and international knowledge of transition principles and the extent to which the implementation of these has led to improved outcomes for young people
- capture examples of innovation and implementation, and impact on other systems; and
- identify any barriers to further progress

The intention is to assist other communities that might be interested in creating a similar local commitment to improving the learning and working situation of young people by providing detailed information on the achievements and the process by which they have been obtained. In addition the lessons learned and the issues raised can be useful to governments and those interested in policy development on this important national issue.

The report is based on previous progress reports, summaries and reviews compiled by DSF and ECEF, interviews with individuals and groups at the six regional locations, analysis of data, and review of documentation produced within the projects.

There are two parts to this report. The first provides an overview of the main findings from the research as well as a general background and context to the partnerships. The second part, published online at www.dsf.org.au, provides greater detail on each of the six Youth Commitment partnerships in case study form.

Background

In 1998 and 1999 the Dusseldorp Skills Forum published two major pieces of research providing a national perspective on developments that had affected young Australians during the 1990s. *Australia's youth: reality and risk* and *Australia's young adults: the deepening divide* set out the learning and work circumstances of Australian youth.²⁷

These reports showed that nationally:

- 15 percent of all teenagers were either unemployed, working part-time but not improving their educational or skill qualifications through recognised study, or not in the labour market at all
- school retention was static or declining nationally
- close to 10 percent of teenagers were engaged in sequences of casual work and prolonged periods of unemployment
- there were rising levels of casualised and low skilled work for young people (DSF, 1998).

Studies across the OECD show that failure to make an early transition to permanent work or to full-time study is associated with long term risks of marginalisation, helping to trap people in a cycle

²⁶ One of the six partnerships, the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, was established prior to the involvement of ECEF and did not receive funding support from that Foundation.

²⁷ The annual *How Young People are Faring* series continues the main indicators on learning and work developed in these reports

of unemployment, part-time work and government schemes. There are clearly significant economic and social costs involved for the community and these are felt at both national and local levels.²⁸

Almost one quarter of young people still leave school before completing Year 12 in Australia. They leave school to get a job, undertake an apprenticeship or traineeship, earn their own money, or experience freedom. Most do well over the long term, but a substantial proportion of young people leave initial education without an adequate understanding of the labour market and without sufficient knowledge about employment and related vocational education and training opportunities.

Young people leave school early for a number of reasons, but the Victorian On Track report has found that lack of interest in schoolwork is one of the largest single motives for dropping out, particularly for young males when this is combined with low achievement levels (Teese, Polesel & Mason, 2003, p70). More than one-half of school leavers say they are unhappy with school (McMillan & Marks, 2003). Despite the many changes that have occurred, young people often find that secondary schools are not necessarily the most appropriate places for them.

A recent national study on improving school retention identified the quality of programs, experiences and learning in schools as key factors leading to early school leaving. The broad objective of quality retention or its alternatives requires a greater emphasis on early intervention strategies, monitoring of student progress, promoting quality school-community relations, creating positive learning cultures in schools, building strong alternative pathways, monitoring transition outcomes and improved careers education and guidance (Lamb et al, 2004).

National Principles of Youth Transitions

Commencing in 1996 the OECD conducted a study reviewing the transition from initial education to working life in fourteen countries, and identified a number of pre-requisite features for effective transition programs across these countries. These pre-requisites included:

- a healthy economy
- well organised pathways developed that connected initial education to work or further study
- widespread opportunities for combining study with workplace experience
- tightly knit safety nets for those at risk
- good information and guidance systems, and effective institutions and processes in place (OECD, 1999).

The Australian Government's response - the Prime Minister's 2001 Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce and its report, *Footprints to the Future* - subsequently identified key principles of effective youth transition services. These principles were considered to underpin effective transition arrangements for young people including those at risk of early school leaving or otherwise not making a smooth transition. These were:

- flexible local delivery allowing communities and regions to plan and implement programs and services
- active participation by young people with the capacity to negotiate and navigate their own pathways
- a comprehensive approach that supports the multiple youth transitions of school to further education; education to working life; and living in the family home to living independently. (Transitions will be more effectively supported if service elements have the flexibility to address the full range of problems confronted by young people as they negotiate their transitions.)
- effective policy and program coherence and coordination across all levels of government and different government departments, as well as with local communities
- comprehensive transition programs and services that encompass early childhood programs, vocational training, apprenticeship schemes, workplace mentoring, community services and income support – all designed to address problems of exclusion from full education, training and employment participation

²⁸ Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Taskforce, 2001 and Natsem, *The Cost to Australia of Early School Leaving*, DSF, Sydney, 1999 and available at www.dsf.org.au

- coherent national policy leadership creating a framework that locates commitments and responsibilities of the three levels of government, as well as the community services sector and industry partners; and
- a strong research base, effective monitoring and quality control.

Crucially, the Taskforce recommended that **A National Commitment to All Young People** be developed by the Australian Government in co-operation with the State and Territory governments to underpin and sustain young people by providing the opportunity to complete 12 years of schooling or its vocational equivalent.

It noted the high level of government co-operation needed to achieve this, and the benefits that could result from local communities and regions assuming increased responsibility for the flexible local application of programs and services. Existing local community partnerships could provide a platform to trial the potential of innovative approaches for improving outcomes for young people.

Key service elements for transition services were also identified.

Providing individual and independent support to young people through mentoring, providing careers advice, and supporting access to services outside school have all been shown to be valuable in supporting transition. Mentoring provides a structured relationship that can assist young people to develop generic competencies, explore career options and develop social skills. Brokering involves advocacy on behalf of individual young people and negotiation with providers to access appropriate services. Case management provides more intensive one-to-one and group-work support to those young people needing more intensive counselling, support, guidance and advocacy. Tracking ensures that intervention and support is available to young people and is intended to ensure continuity of contact between all young people and mainstream institutions.

These strategies had all been experimented with and trialed by agencies and sectors in recent years. Schools and Job Network providers have provided forms of case management. Mentoring programs have been developed and implemented by community agencies, schools and other providers. Tracking has been attempted locally, in regions and by State government systems.

However, approaches had been located within particular sectors and systems, and usually implemented as isolated programs. A comprehensive, coherent and coordinated approach would require that these elements be linked across a community to provide an integrated response (Kellock, 2003).

The National Youth Commitment

The argument for the National Youth Commitment was also developed in a discussion paper published by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in October 1999, *Why Australia needs a National Youth Commitment*.

The Forum's idea of a Youth Commitment was based on the notion of an entitlement enabling each young person to access a minimum level of education and training in the post-compulsory years. Early school leavers would be provided with a 'second chance' by being assisted to either:

- complete Year 12 either at school or another recognised provider; or
- obtain an education or training qualification that is at an equivalent level such as a TAFE certificate or apprenticeship; or
- obtain a full-time job that is linked to education or training.

Young people would be able to make informed choices about their future, through schools and local communities focusing on the needs and aspirations of young people. It was hoped that the Youth Commitment would become a key impetus for institutional change in secondary schools, encouraging schools to work harder to retain students, and to offer greater flexibility and choice (Spierings 1999).

Community partnerships would bring together the range of key actors involved in providing services for 'at risk' young people: local governments, schools and their School Councils, TAFE, Job Network brokers, Centrelink offices, employers, training organisations, unions, community agencies and so on.

"The Community Partnerships would provide participating organisations with a common framework, focus and collaborative means of developing the life skills, education employment, training and active citizenship of each young person in their community" (Spierings 1999). It was proposed that the partnerships would be able to adapt a national approach into the local community, taking advantage of local expertise, knowledge and capital, and make the Commitment a flexible and locally adaptable program. The Youth Commitment established at Whittlesea in the northern suburbs of Melbourne in 1999 trialed many of the strategies subsequently adopted in other partnerships.²⁹

By taking a community partnership approach, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the former Enterprise and Career Education Foundation attempted to create a process that would embody the principles of effective transition support. There would be flexibility in local delivery through interagency coordination and responsibility. The breadth of the partnerships would enable the communities to systematically address the full range of issues confronted by young people in the transition process including health, independent living and the move from learning to working.

The partnerships had the potential to use government policies and programs more effectively by coordinating and integrating related programs and services across the three levels of government and the local community. By involving government as partners with the local communities, separate services could be transformed into an integrated system of support.

Young people would be better equipped to manage their own transitions by being provided with individual assistance and support, and relevant information on options as they required it. As a result of the Youth Commitment, it was anticipated that young people would be better equipped to cope with the demands of the labour market as well as possessing the foundation skills for learning through adult life, through taking advantage of the goodwill towards young people in local communities. Their needs could be collectively articulated back to the various sectors and systems about changes required to current arrangements.

It was also expected that those responsible for providing education and employment services would become more accountable and responsive in assisting young people at risk. The partnerships would develop benchmarks to be met by the participating organisations, written into Memoranda of Understanding or Spirit of Co-operation Agreements, as well as the annual plans of each organisation. The benchmarks would particularly focus on:

- lifting school retention or its equivalent
- developing a range of clear, definable and rewarding options providing Year 12 equivalence
- support, advice, mentoring and case management to enable young people to exercise those options
- dismantling barriers to education and learning becoming lifelong experiences
- enhancing employer commitment to workplace learning, training, and to youth employment opportunities
- developing flexible and responsive school learning environments that seek to integrate rather than exclude.

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum was well placed to support these partnerships in providing a base that could provide tools and assistance for monitoring progress and quality control. The Forum was also able to provide initial coherent policy leadership building on the best of existing policies and practices to create relevant and coherent youth support arrangements. In the longer term, the challenge would be to discover whether such coherent policy leadership could be formulated across Commonwealth and state governments as well as with external partners.

²⁹ For details of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, refer to the case study at www.dsf.org.au.

The Community Partnership Approach

The concept of partnerships was identified some twenty years ago as a promising way of helping local communities to cope with problems specific to their area (OECD, 2001).

Partnerships that understand and address local needs are an increasingly significant feature of international public policy in Europe and the developing world. Most OECD countries have established local community partnerships to address issues of social exclusion, economic development and community regeneration (OECD, 2001; Considine, 2004).

Social partnerships are seen to be particularly helpful in addressing the needs of young people. They can provide learning opportunities outside existing education and training institutions, and can target individuals who may not have access to traditional learning (Seddon & Billet, 2004).

Partnerships develop out of community concerns and commitments and form to address local issues or problems. They can also be initiated by agencies outside local communities to support particular policy objectives. Examples of the latter are the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) in Victoria, the Education and Training Reform Framework (ETRF) in Queensland, the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs) in South Australia, and the Local Learning and Employment Partnerships (LLEPs) in Western Australia (Seddon & Billet, 2004). Partnerships are most often at risk when they are 'enacted' across too wide a geographical area and attempt to cover too diverse a set of interests.

Where partnerships are established by external agencies, they are frequently assigned four key agenda:

1. to pursue a particular policy goal
2. to seek to attain this goal mainly through increasing the degree of coordination between policies and programs adapting them to local conditions
3. where better coordination is not enough, to set up new projects and services
4. to work at local level to involve local actors in defining priorities, development of projects, and draw on local resources and skills (OECD, 2001).

The experience of OECD countries is that it usually takes between five to eight years for local partnerships to begin to deliver significant benefits for their communities and government (OECD, 2001). Evaluation of the UK Learning Partnerships noted that a major difficulty was the "lack of recognition that partnership development involves culture change and changing hearts and minds, and that this was a long term process" (UK Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p61).

They have been demonstrated to be successful in other contexts. In 1995, Ireland launched a network of 38 partnerships aimed at improving social exclusion (an initiative since replicated in several other countries) (OECD 2001, p13). One of the seven broad objectives of the Irish partnerships has been to tackle the problems of early school leaving. A subsequent evaluation of the Irish partnerships showed that they played an important role in reorienting national policies as local lessons and concerns were fed back to national authorities.

Using a community partnership approach as the basis of a national approach to providing careers information and transition support is being successfully used in England. The *Connexions* Service, which the Department for Education and Skills launched in England in 2001, has changed the way that young people are provided with support and guidance during their transition to adulthood.

Connexions is based on partnerships, separate from, but accessed by, schools to support students. Across England, 47 *Connexions* partnerships have been established. The management boards for each partnership include a wide range of agencies providing help to all young people, aiming to provide a single integrated youth support service. Partnerships commonly include organisations such as social services, youth offending teams, career advice and training companies, youth services,

local authorities and drugs action teams.

A review by the UK National Audit Office has found that *Connexions* is on course to meet its objective of reducing the proportion of young people aged 16-18 who are not in education, employment or training by ten per cent between November 2002 and November 2004. The proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training fell by eight percent in the established partnership areas between November 2002 and 2003.

Austria provides an example of a successful long term social partnership approach within a Federal government structure. The Austrian Territorial Pacts (TEPS) focus on helping unemployed or at-risk workers. Regional agreements between each regional government, the public employment service, and the social partners (labour and business) involved the sharing or pooling of resources to focus attention on specific local needs. This helped to break with the top-down approach of universal responses across the whole country (Considine, 2004).

With no additional budget available, the Austrian partnerships had to focus on pooling existing resources in a region, and sharing data on common problems. The federal ministry used its limited funds to support the operating structure of the partnerships, rather than to fund individual projects. A Partnerships and Pacts Coordination Unit was also created as an independent national bureau, designed to help partnerships gather and share data, benchmark good ideas, foster staff training and promote the partnerships to the public. The result of these arrangements and the various regional agreements has been real improvements in employment and economic activity in Austria (Considine 2004).

In Australia, the past decade has seen the introduction of social partnership approaches in areas as diverse as health care, neighbourhood renewal, and the promotion of lifelong learning. Commonwealth and State Governments have separately introduced their own partnership approaches. The Commonwealth's Local Community Partnerships focused on building links between schools and industry while the majority of State Governments have implemented local planning networks to improve the coordination of learning and training pathways for school leavers.

The challenge within a federal system remains to develop partnership approaches that embrace all levels of government, take advantage of the potential to pool funding, and which adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach to assisting young people at risk of social exclusion.

2. ESTABLISHING THE YOUTH COMMITMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Building on the experience of the Whittlesea partnership, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and ECEF set out to identify five further potential communities interested in developing Youth Commitment partnerships. These communities were selected on the basis of strong local interest, previous experience in collaborative arrangements, demonstrated need and potential benefit (Willett, 2003). Three were based in New South Wales, and two in Queensland.

While all demonstrated a strong interest and a track record in collaborative approaches, there was a wide variation in the size and scale of the partnerships, as the table below indicates. The communities ranged from 10,000 people and 3 schools in Tumut to almost half a million people and 34 schools on the Gold Coast.

Table 1: Youth Commitment Partnerships

	Coverage by LGA	Secondary Schools	2001/2002 Population	Initiated
Northern Sunshine Coast Queensland	Noosa ³⁰	5	44,000	2001
Gold Coast Queensland	Gold Coast	34	438,000	2001
Central Coast New South Wales	Wyong & Gosford	22	292,000	2001
Macarthur New South Wales	Campbelltown, Camden & Wollondilly	35	228,000	2001
Tumut New South Wales	Tumut	3	10,000	2001
Whittlesea, Victoria	Whittlesea	10	114,000	1999

Collectively, the six community partnerships cover 109 secondary schools in nine Local Government Areas (LGA) with a population base in excess of 1.1 million people. These partnerships cover extensive areas and populations, and provide a strong basis for evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach.

These communities also provide balanced representation of social conditions in the wider community. A 1999 study of local social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales used thirteen social indicators to determine the distribution of social disadvantage included unemployment, early school leaving and the skill profile of the workforce in the analysis (Vinson, 1999). Tumut and the Central Coast communities are around the average or slightly better in terms of social disadvantage for areas outside the metropolitan area in NSW. Macarthur and Whittlesea are both partnerships that encompass the full range. Some parts of these communities have low levels of disadvantage while there are small pockets in both cases at the high end of cumulative disadvantage and also with large parts of their communities in between.

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum, in partnership with ECEF, created a process to establish the Youth Commitment partnerships and provided access to research supporting the use of key strategies for consideration by the local sites. The establishment process as proposed by DSF is included at Appendix 1.

The Youth Commitment sites each progressed along a similar path of establishment, mobilising support, gathering information and developing an operational structure. This generally involves:

- commissioning an environmental scan which consolidates data on young peoples' pathways and relevant services in the region
- holding a community forum to consider the implications of the environmental scan and to decide

³⁰ The Northern Sunshine Coast Youth Commitment also includes part of the adjacent Maroochy Shire. The 2001/02 population figure reported relates only to the Noosa Shire.

- a course of action
- appointing a full-time or part-time dedicated coordinator
- formalising a commitment between stakeholders based on a Memorandum of Understanding that has subsequently led to incorporation
- establishing a management committee and a number of working groups
- developing a Strategic Plan through the work of the management committee
- continuing to collect baseline data as a means of both informing and mobilising the local community

In 2003 ECEF entered into funding contracts with five of these sites, providing infrastructure funding until 2005. The sixth site in Victoria had become the local planning group for Whittlesea within the recently established Hume Whittlesea LLEN and was eventually supported by the State Government through that process.

Establishing and administering each Youth Commitment partnerships costs between \$100,000 and \$150,000 each year, apart from very small communities such as Tumut which is currently operating on an annual budget of \$20,000. Establishment costs are relatively small with incorporation, administration set up, and initial research costing less than \$30,000, particularly if office accommodation is provided by Youth Commitment partners (as in Macarthur, Whittlesea and the Gold Coast) or through home based coordination (Northern Sunshine Coast and Central Coast).³¹ Depending on the size of the community, and the level of provision of in-kind support, the cost of each Youth Commitment is in the vicinity of \$100,000 p.a. for management, administration and ongoing research.

The following table summarises grants received by Youth Commitment partnerships from Commonwealth, State, local governments, and foundations over a three year period. It does not include in-kind contributions from partners, or from government initiatives such as the Commonwealth's Career and Transition pilot projects (CATs) or Innovative and Collaborative Youth Servicing Pilot Projects (ICYS) successfully tendered for through the partnerships.

³¹ With the exception of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, the partnerships are all incorporated.

Table 2: Direct Funding of Youth Commitment Partnerships, all sources, 2001/02 – 2003/04

	Funding Source	Purpose	2001-02 \$	2002-03 \$	2003-04 \$
Central Coast	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data, admin, transition broker, pilots • Event sponsorship • Transition brokers, event sponsor 		40,000	130,000 10,000 20,000
Gold Coast	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admin, research, data, brokers • Transition broker trial • Forums • Resource development 		100,000 50,000 4,000	140,000 30,000 6,000
Macarthur	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data, brokers, research, admin • Coordination, research • Coordination, admin, planning • Coordination, admin 	53,800 19,000 8,000 6,000	171,500 2,500	455,000
Northern Sunshine Coast	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admin, research, planning • Mentoring, research, networking • Forums, promotion, research • (Centrelink) transition broker 	5,000	100,000 42,500 20,000	75,000 62,000* 25,000
Tumut	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition broker • Transition broker 		10,000 10,000	10,000 10,000
Whittlesea	Commonwealth State Local Gov Non Gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-employment project • Transition brokers • Resources • Youth Participation 	66,000# 40,000	121,000 110,000 40,000 27,000	149,000 40,000

*an additional \$125,475 provided by State Government to providers for mentoring implementation

\$66,000 comprising \$45,000 from DET and \$21,000 from the schools

The cost of providing transition workers or brokers to assist young people with individual support and information averages around \$50,000 p.a. for each full-time worker.

Six Whittlesea schools obtained the resources for three transition brokers by annually pooling \$150,000 of State Government funding allocated to their schools. Other partnerships have accessed three year funding from governments allocated to trial transition brokers. Macarthur has been able to trial four transition brokers using a component of the three year grant from the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS), and the Gold Coast, Central Coast and Tumut have established transition broker trials based on combinations of funding from Commonwealth, State and local governments, as well as local businesses, foundations and other sources.

The Whittlesea approach of pooling resources across half a dozen schools has sustained the role of transition brokers through almost five years and despite changing administrative arrangements in reporting and administration of the partnership.

The partnerships have generally pooled resources to fund their infrastructure and key initiatives. The partnerships have brought together available State and Commonwealth funding, local government contributions, cross-departmental programs and non-government funding sources. Regional economic development funding from Area Consultative Committees and DOTARS has been directed at supporting school and youth transition funding. In doing so, the partnerships are encouraging State and Commonwealth agencies in particular to re-consider how they operate alongside each other and how they can each gain maximum value for their funding dollars.

By the nature of their independent status, community partnerships of this type are an appropriate vehicle through which pooled funding from multiple sources can facilitate more effective policy and program coherence. It's an approach that challenges the favoured way that governments like to use purchaser-provider models, in which government defines the service that it wishes to purchase and

chooses an agency to deliver that service under contract for a particular price. Instead, the experience of the partnerships suggests that the development of integrated transition approaches would be better supported by governments encouraging and participating in local priority setting and development of benchmarks with local communities, and allowing the combined impact of funding from various sources to produce a locally coherent and sustainable transition strategy.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS TO DATE

Individually and collectively, the Youth Commitment partnerships have undertaken an ambitious exercise. Despite the long term national tracking studies of youth transitions undertaken by the Australian Council for Education Research, and the more recent tracking activities of some State Governments, much remains unknown about the issues and outcomes of transition (Macmillan and Marks, 2003 and Teese, Polesol and Mason, 2003).

The lack of coherence between State and Commonwealth policies and programs, short term piloting of strategies, and the encouragement of competition between service agencies and systems has created an environment in which it is extremely difficult to obtain an overall picture of the situation of young people, and to identify who needs assistance at any point in time. TAFE systems around the country for a long time were generally unable to provide information on completion and pathways of early school leavers, and all partnerships have encountered great difficulty in locating or accessing robust regional data on young people. Some State governments have been extremely reluctant to release data on transition outcomes that could provide a baseline against which to measure achievement. Given the magnitude of the task, the approach taken by the Youth Commitment partnerships has required much work to change attitudes and build confidence.

International experience in developing similar local partnerships suggests that even two or three years is a short time frame in which to expect such arrangements to deliver significant outcomes. While each of the Youth Commitment partnerships is now seen as credible in their local communities, much effort has been expended on building relationships as a platform for future action.

However, the Youth Commitment model has been able to develop local partnerships with strong potential. The Youth Commitment is seen locally as being 'more strategic' than previous approaches to assisting young people and the role of the partnerships as a neutral broker bringing other agencies together is highly valued in local communities.

National transition principles identify "flexible local delivery" as an important ingredient in an effective transition strategy. The local partnerships have been able to interpret and emphasise particular aspects of the Youth Commitment approach to suit local circumstances. In Whittlesea and Macarthur, transition support has been primarily focused on students in the post-compulsory years. However, on the Gold Coast, analysis of the amount of transition support through various other programs has led to a decision to concentrate additional transition support resources on students in Years 8 and 9 to address issues of student engagement. On the Northern Sunshine Coast, the partnership has concentrated on collecting information on young people's career intentions while evaluating various options for providing transition support.

Although mentoring programs have also been used across the partnerships, these have also been adapted in some places to meet the needs of particular groups such as very marginalised or disengaged young people who have left school.

The capacity of the Youth Commitment partnerships to interpret the approach to suit local circumstances was anticipated from the outset, and suggests that partnerships might be expected to further develop organic local responses to transition issues of 'at risk' young people that may differ from community to community.

The six communities were provided with key strategies that might be used as action research tools to improve outcomes for young people through their collaboration with DSF. The main intervention strategies promoted to the communities were transition brokerage (incorporating case management), mentoring programs, the use of focused surveys and data collection, and local tracking of outcomes for young people.

The Outcomes Achieved

Six different Youth Commitment partnership sites in three states provide an opportunity to test the impact of the principles and strategies of the Youth Commitment approach.

(1) Active Participation by Young People

Young people need information, advice and appropriate services to be equipped to navigate and negotiate their own pathways. Most will find these supports through parents, friends and other close networks, but a substantial minority will struggle and find it difficult to an informed decision about the right sort of participation in learning and work.

Transition brokers and mentors have provided potential early school leavers with timely and relevant information on their options, opportunities and forms of support available. This has been supplemented by published information in Education and Training Passports, School Leaver Guides, and other locally developed transition resources.

Mentoring appears to provide a potentially important role assisting young people to better understand the education, training and work options open to them, maintain contact with the education and training system, and find pathways to employment and economic and social participation (Hartley, 2004).

Mentoring has particular appeal for community partnerships, because it brings employers, retirees and other community members together with young people in a framework of structured support for young people still at school, or in transition to employment and other post-school options. The partnerships have generally used mentoring as a complementary strategy in addition to the work of other services, particularly dedicated transition brokerage.

Mentoring has assisted young people to clarify their career paths and intentions about continuing at school to complete Year 12. Various mentoring strategies are being developed to assist different groups of young people, including those still at school but at risk of early leaving, those who have already left school, and some who are long term disengaged and disadvantaged.

Plan-It-Youth mentoring (PIY) has been the most frequently used program model for students who are considering leaving school early. Students are matched with a volunteer community mentor trained by TAFE. Students and mentors work through a structured program that usually lasts for three months and concludes with a formal presentation. However, mentors continue to support students for the next six to 12 months.

The partnerships have been able to adapt the mentoring model to reflect local needs and cater for diverse groups of young people. In several locations mentoring has been provided to support disadvantaged young people who are not at school, assisting them into part-time work that might subsequently lead to full-time employment.

PIY was first developed simultaneously with the Youth Commitment on the Central Coast and since has been adopted on the Gold Coast, at Macarthur and the Northern Sunshine Coast. 457 young people in 15 schools have been provided with mentoring support at these four Youth Commitment sites in the past three years.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has adopted and supported the Plan-It-Youth mentoring program at six sites, including Macarthur and the Central Coast.³² The Department reports that across these six NSW sites mentoring has achieved:

- increased retention and number of students choosing to complete the Higher School Certificate
- improved attendance at school
- increased number of students who obtained traineeships and apprenticeships
- increased number of students who referred themselves to the program

³² For data on the outcomes achieved by the six Department of Education and Training Plan-IT-Youth Program sites in 2003, refer to Appendix 2.

- improved planning for school and post school options and pathways
- increased confidence and social skills
- successful work experience placement.

The Queensland Youth Commitment sites achieved positive outcomes through mentoring. On the Gold Coast in 2003 a pilot with thirteen Year 10 students at risk of early school leaving from one secondary college were mentored. Eighteen months after the program commenced all students involved reported that the program had been a positive experience, that they had clearer goals regarding education, training or employment, and that they would recommend the program to other young people.

The Northern Sunshine Coast adapted PIY to meet the needs of young people who had already left school, as well as those at risk of early leaving. Outcomes of this pilot were similarly positive, particularly for the five young people in the program who had already left school. Overall, only 13% of this group of identified 'at risk' students were not in positive outcomes the following year.

Table 3: Queensland Youth Commitment Mentoring Program Outcomes

Outcomes	Gold Coast	Northern Sunshine Coast	Total	%
Engaged in education	6	8	14	46.7
Working full-time	4	2	6	20.0
At TAFE or completing a traineeship	2	2	4	13.3
Alternative literacy & numeracy program		2	2	6.7
P/T employment		1	1	3.3
Job seeking	1		1	3.3
Uncontactable		2	2	6.7
Total	13	17	30	100

At Whittlesea in 2002-2003, a mentoring program was established for disengaged young people to develop skills for employment. The project was very successful in re-engaging a cohort of 43 marginalised young people in education, training or employment activities. 28 mentors were trained and matched with young people.

Table 4: Whittlesea Mentoring Program Outcomes

Full-time employment with training (apprenticeships & traineeships)	27%
Full-time employment without training	36%
Part-time employment	9%
Voluntary work	5%
TAFE pre-vocational programs	18%
Preparation for employment and training programs	5%
Total	100%

The program's benefits included the re-engagement of young people in employment and training programs to build their skill base, through the support of a mentor. The accredited training for mentors has provided a pool of people who can be matched with disengaged young people in the future.

The mentoring strategies in the Youth Commitment partnerships have played an important role encouraging young people to maintain contact with education, training and employment.

It supports research findings that point to the key role played by aspirations and the need to create a climate of achievement through effective leadership and expectations on student learning. Mentoring programs are an important vehicle for including students in this culture (Lamb et al, 2004).

(2) A comprehensive approach to transitions

The transition broker role is designed to address the multiple transition needs of vulnerable young people and has the flexibility to assist with the range of learning and working issues confronted by them as they negotiate their individual path from school to independence.

Transition brokers focus on the needs of students who are potential early school leavers by providing them with individual support, information and assistance. It's a service provided both while the young person is still at school, and if necessary, after they have subsequently left school. The service acts as a bridge between school and the variety of options and supports available to early school leavers beyond the school gate.

The brokers have a dual role: providing encouragement for students to remain at school where appropriate, and helping them to make a successful transition should they decide to leave. Exploration of options for the young person to remain at school is the usual starting point. If young people still propose to leave school prior to completing Year 12, the broker is able to provide information on relevant courses and programs suited to their interests, and to follow up for an extended period to ensure post-school options are considered and to offer further advice and support.

The transition worker, operating without the constraints imposed by program targets and guidelines, is able to offer an individualised response tailored to the unique circumstances and issues facing each potential early leaver, rather than a template menu or generic 'pathway plan'. This includes accessing services and advice about health, family, housing, welfare and related issues.

Based in schools, the brokers operate under the auspices of the community partnership, relating strongly with school management but also independent of it. Transition brokers complement the roles of career teachers, student welfare and pathways planning functions, but are distinct from these school-based roles by working both within and outside the school. The following table summarises key features of the transition worker role in comparison to other forms of support available to young people leaving school without completing Year 12.

Table 5: A comparison of typical school based student support arrangements

	Focus	Location	Mode	Contact Intensity
Career Teachers	All students	Inside school	Group/individual	Low
Welfare Coordinators	All students	Inside school	Individual	Low-high
Pathways Planning	Year 10 +	Inside school	Group/class	Low
JPP Program	Early leavers	Outside school	Case managed	Low
Job Network	Job seekers	Outside school	Some case managed	Low-medium
Transition Broker	Early leavers	Inside/outside school	Case managed	High

Source: Familiarity Produces Trust, DSF, 2002

Transition workers buttress the roles of careers teachers in schools who are required to support the entire school student cohort. In a number of states and non-government schools career teaching is not a full time role, being frequently combined with other teaching duties, and in any case it generally works through class based structures and formats. Careers teachers, limited to providing support and information within the school setting, are able to refer current students and early leavers to transition workers as an independent source of advice and assistance, including accessing Centrelink, Job Network, training and other learning and work services and information.

The transition broker pilot has made a difference to the particular Catholic School with access to it. The careers adviser there is reporting very positively and indicates that it has opened her eyes to new ways of working with at risk and disengaged students.

Catholic Education Office Macarthur

The Commonwealth funded Jobs Pathways Programme (JPP) provides a level of individually tailored assistance, but it is primarily situated outside the school, and its capacity to adequately cover schools and students 'at risk' is uneven in many parts of the country. JPP is frequently used by many transition workers as a first point of referral for school leavers, and staff from JPP are closely involved in the development of support resources in Youth Commitment partnerships such as Whittlesea, the Sunshine Coast, and the Gold Coast.

Table 6: Transition Brokers by partnerships – June 2004

	Brokers	Schools	Period	Coordination
Central Coast	2.6 brokers	4 schools	Since May 2003	Coordination outsourced to local Youth Services provider
Gold Coast	3 brokers	8 schools	Since April 2003	Directly managed by schools
Macarthur	3.6 brokers	11 schools	Since late 2003	Coordination outsourced to Centrelink
Sunshine Coast	0 brokers			Not implementing transition brokers
Tumut	1 broker	1 school	Since April 2003	School managed
Whittlesea	2.8 brokers	6 schools	Since 1999	School managed with professional support

Transition brokers work intensively with between 25 and 40 young people at any one period of time, but will also be intermittently contacting and following up anything up to a further 100 early school leavers for periods of up to one or two years.

Interviews with school administrators, careers teachers, local government officers, Centrelink staff and youth workers confirm the emerging impact of transition workers. There is strong qualitative information from all sites implementing transition broker support that this is having an extremely positive impact on outcomes for young people.

The transition broker at Tumut High School is proving to be very effective, and the principal of the school is very positive about the outcomes.

Local Government CEO Tumut

We are finding that the placing of transition brokers in schools is making it much easier for us to get kids who are our clients and are disengaged from school able to be reconnected back into the school environment. So they have helped us and our clients a lot.

Macarthur based community agency

The two really positive things that have come out from the Youth Commitment are the work of the transition brokers, and the two alternative learning environments.

Central Coast Local Government representative

The transition brokers are quite an amazing program. As careers advisers, we can't walk the streets with these kids and can't follow them up after they leave school. The whole process is working really well for our school.

Macarthur school careers teacher

Data collected by Youth Commitment sites indicates that this comprehensive approach to transitions is improving outcomes for young people. Whittlesea is the Youth Commitment partnership that has

used transition brokerage for the longest time. Other Youth Commitment partnerships have introduced transition brokers within the past eighteen months. However, in the south-eastern/Frankston corridor of Melbourne, similar transition work has been sponsored by a cluster of schools, funded by the state Managed Individual Pathways program and co-ordinated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Although not formally part of the Youth Commitment process, there has been considerable sharing of data and program development between Frankston and Whittlesea that enable their data collections to be used for joint analysis and policy development.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data the likelihood that early school leavers will be unemployed, or in only part-time work, or not in the labour force six months after school more than doubles compared to those who complete Year 12. Annual reporting of these data by DSF shows that in 2002 and 2003, students who completed Year 12 the previous year not attending an education institution or in full-time work the following May were 18 percent in 2002 and 19 percent in 2003. But among students who completed Year 10 or Year 11, the rates averaged above 40 percent.

Table 7: Education and labour market destinations of 15 to 24 year olds who have left school by school leavers' highest Year of school completed, Australia, May 2002 and May 2003, percent

	2002	2002	2003	2003
	Completed Yr 10 in 2001	Completed Yr 11 in 2001	Completed Yr 10 in 2002	Completed Yr 11 in 2002
In education or full-time work	51.1	63.8	53.3	64.0
Part-time work	15.9	16.1	13.8	16.8
Unemployed	23.8	12.6	16.3	10.1
Not in labour force	9.2	7.5	16.6	9.1
Sub Total	48.9	36.2	46.7	36.0

Source: Dusseldorp Skills Forum, *How Young People Are Faring, Key Indicators*, 2003 & 2004.

However, if a potential early school leaver is provided access to a transition broker who can provide case management support and identify opportunities, there is a significant increase in the likelihood that early school leavers will be attending an education institution or in full-time employment six months later.

The support transition brokers provide to students appears to help early school leavers to continue to attend school until they find a viable alternative option such as employment, a TAFE place, or an apprenticeship, rather than leaving school without a position in learning or work in hand. Securing an employment offer, especially a full-time one, or a place in full-time education and training, before leaving school reduces the likelihood of long-term unemployment and social exclusion.

Transition brokers at five Youth Commitment partnerships and the Frankston region have assisted more than 3000 early school leavers in 28 schools around Australia in the period from 2000-2004. Overall outcomes reported by these transition brokers demonstrate that providing individual transition support produces very positive outcomes. The percentage of those early school leavers not in education or full-time employment after leaving school is reduced from the national figure of well over 40 percent to just below 30 percent, reducing the percentage of early school leavers in problematic destinations by more than 10 percent. However over the review period only a proportion of early school leavers in the partnerships, about one-third, received intensive support indicating that greater levels of improvement are possible.

Table 8: Outcomes for early school leavers contacted and assisted by transition brokers, all sites, 2000-2004

		Number	Percentage
Total Early School Leavers contacted	3092		
In education or full-time work		2169	70.1
Part-time work		160	5.2
Unemployed		345	11.2
Not in labour force		418	13.5
Sub Total		923	29.9

Source: Unpublished reports of the Youth Commitment Management Committees

Note: The numbers contacted include students not referred to or assisted by transition workers before leaving school, but contacted after transition workers are notified that they have exited. Some of these early leavers reject offers of assistance.

The following table indicates the extent to which destination outcomes for early school leavers are improved by access to a transition broker at each location. The transition broker data is not broken down by year level, and includes all school leavers not completing Year 12.

Table 9: Labour market destinations of early school leavers assisted by transition brokers, per cent

	Whittlesea 2000-03	Frankston 2002-03	Gold Coast 2003	Macarthur 2004	Tumut 2003-04
	2137 early leavers	744 early leavers	67 early leavers	165 early leavers	15 early leavers
In education/full-time work	71.3	69.7	62.0	52.7	100.0
Part-time work	4.4	7.4	N/A	9.3	0.0
Unemployed	10.0	11.4	1.5	34.8	0.0
Not in labour force	14.3	11.5	37.0	2.3	0.0
Sub Total	28.7	30.3	38.0	46.4	0.0

Source: Unpublished reports of the Youth Commitment Management Committees

Note: Gold Coast and Macarthur problematic destinations are higher than longer established Whittlesea and Frankston, due to schools making selective referrals to transition brokers of small numbers of very high needs students.

Monitoring and follow up of early leavers are part of the transition broker job description, resulting in a more accurate, but not perfect, picture of their destinations than is available in most regions in Australia.

Also working intensively with students while they are in school, the brokers are positively influencing the decision-making of young people considering whether or not to remain at school until the end of Year 12. In schools provided with a full-time transition worker, increased numbers of students are deciding to continue at school.

Student aspirations and the need to create a climate of achievement through effective leadership play a key role in the decisions they make about staying on or leaving. Case management and robust, customised student planning is the foundation of many successful programs for potential early leavers (Lamb et al, 2004).

As examples, the Gold Coast partnership trialed a transition broker based in two local high schools from April 2003 to April 2004. These are high growth schools reporting *apparent* high retention rates. The work of the transition broker focused on supporting Year 10 students in each school who were surveyed as to their intention of completing Year 12.

Table 10: Gold Coast 2003 student at risk of Non-Completions

	High School A	High School B	Total
Year 10 enrollment	188	400	588
Numbered surveyed	175	398	573
Identified by survey	22	99	121
Separately referred by staff	27	16	43
Self-referred	5	7	12
Total students at risk	54	122	176
Percentage of total students	29%	31%	30%

The transition broker assisted 176 students identified as 'at risk' of not completing Year 12. Services provided included interviews, development of career and learning plans, preparation of resumes, job searching and skills development, job application assistance, service provider visits, referrals and communication with parents. A second survey of the same group of students taken 12 months later showed that at the first High School 63 percent had reconsidered their intention not to complete Year 12. At the second High School 62 percent of students identified as 'at risk' had reconsidered their intention to not complete Year 12.

At Tumut the transition broker located at the local High School also reports a higher percentage of students progressing from Year 10 to undertake Years 11 and 12, and attributes this change in intention to a combination of factors, including the role of the worker in the school, the wider range of VET options now available, and a new combined workplace and classroom based work studies program.

Transition brokers have also had a positive impact on retention rates where there are systematic and appropriate referral procedures in place and the service is widely accessed by early school leavers. This is most clearly evident in Frankston and Whittlesea where the transition brokers have been operating for sufficient time for them to develop positive relationships with students, principals, teachers and the broader school community and for a positive trend in retention to become clear.

Since 1999 (when transition workers were first employed), apparent Year 7 to Year 12 retention has improved by eight percent across the seven Whittlesea schools, and in 2002, for the first time in many years, was equal to the statewide average. In 1999 16 percent of the total number of Year 9 to Year 12 students in the Whittlesea public schools left early and did not go on to further education at another school. By 2002 this had reduced from 16 percent to eight percent.

Within the Whittlesea cluster, student retention from Years 10-11, 11-12 and 7-12 is now generally at or above the 'like-school' mean across the State, a significant achievement given the retention profile of schools in the northern region of Melbourne. Two of the seven schools have retention rates that are above the like school mean for each of the retention data sets collected from schools. These are all schools in which transition workers support students in Years 10, 11 and 12.

Table 11: Comparison of Whittlesea school retention with Victorian ‘like-school’ state average

	Year 10-11 Retention	Year 11-12 Retention
Secondary College 1	Above the mean	Slightly below the mean
Secondary College 2	Above	Slightly above
Secondary College 3	Below	Below
Secondary College 4	Above	Above
Secondary College 5	Above	At the mean
Secondary College 6	Above	Above
Secondary College 7	At the mean	Above

Source: P. Cole, *Whittlesea Secondary College: Later Years Project, Report 1*, 2004.

Transition brokers are making a difference in other ways as well. Their work with disengaged students and early school leavers is providing schools with access to information on the perspective of a group of students that previously had no voice.

As a result, some schools with transition brokers are bringing together teachers and others in the school community to consider the reasons gathered by the brokers about why students want to leave school, and these schools are beginning to explore possible changes to provision. This includes developing appropriate alternative learning settings, and changes to discipline and exclusion approaches.

The national evaluation of the Commonwealth funded Career and Transition (CAT) pilots highlighted the pressing need for comprehensive career and transition services throughout Australia, the value of advice being independent from school management, and of facilitating the involvement of community agencies and industry in the provision of these services. The effects of partnering with others to provide career and transition services to young people were reported to be overwhelmingly positive (Miles Morgan, 2004).

Community-based transition brokers are an ideal fit with the Miles Morgan conclusion. They provide the basis of an independent transition support and information service providing advice and guidance to all potential early school leavers. Able to draw on a wide range of resources to deal with broader issues than just career planning they can address the related transition issues facing a substantial minority of young people, such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and youth offending.

(3) Coherent and coordinated policy and programs

Effective youth transition policies, programs and services need to be co-coordinated and integrated with related programmes and services across all levels of government and the local community. Coordination across programs and interventions ensures that the multiple needs young people excluded from full participation in education, training and employment can be addressed.

The Youth Commitment partnerships have established a foundation with the potential to increase and improve the coordination and integration of programmes and services.

Developing profiles of the situation of young people in the region led to the development of a strategic plan by each partnership. These environmental profiles or scans provided detailed (but by necessity not always complete) community information of young people’s learning and employment situations, which formed a basis for agreement on the problems and the issues that needed to be addressed. The quality of the scans commissioned have varied, but all have proved useful tools in helping to mobilize local support for the concept of a youth commitment, and some were very useful in laying the groundwork for subsequent planning.

Better knowledge and awareness of the issues surrounding youth transitions as a result of these data and research is widely reported by local stakeholders.

There is quite compelling evidence of a heightened community awareness of, and commitment to addressing, youth issues in this region. In particular, there is an enhanced understanding of the labour market and educational/training disadvantage that our young people experience relative to the state as a whole.

Research Officer, Macarthur Youth Commitment

Further steps to improve coordination have resulted from the introduction of Community Teams in locations such as Whittlesea and the Gold Coast. These Teams have provided a means of improving locally based referral processes with practitioners from across local, state and Commonwealth funded programs, and they have generally increased local knowledge of the range, role and possibilities of youth support services in the community.

A practical outcome is that this increased local capacity to map available services and to identify where gaps exist is providing a coordinated response to how different government programs and services are delivered, funded and planned at the local level.

We think that the Community Reference Group (Community Team) has been the most useful aspect of the Gold Coast Youth Commitment because of the information exchanged and the capacity to identify the real needs across the board.

Gold Coast community agency member

Transition brokers also link up services connecting schools and early school leavers to other service systems. JPP in particular operates as a primary source of assistance for schools, but through transition brokers young people are directly linked to Group Training companies, New Apprenticeship opportunities, mentoring programs, vocational placements and various housing and community services. School staff in particular benefit from this increased knowledge and awareness of relevant services outside the school.

Where partnerships have possessed the capacity and the strategy to maintain a focus on capturing and using local research, it has proved an effective way of aligning community support. A good example is **Snapshot 2004** produced by the Northern Sunshine Coast Youth Commitment.

All Year 10 students in five local schools were surveyed in a standard format as to their career intentions. Data from that study is being used by the local council's Economic Development Officer, the regional university and local schools' proposed curriculum development plans. The **Snapshot** has provided powerful information for local planning, matching careers intentions with potential local education and workplace opportunities and identifying the need for more 'creative industries' in the area. The university involved in the partnership is building a new faculty which will be based around creative enterprises.

Despite the work of transition brokers, and the integrating mechanisms of data collection, strategic planning by the community and the formation of Community Teams, the capacity of local communities to achieve coherence and coordination across levels of government and different government programs is limited. Greater flexibility in how State and Commonwealth programs related to transition can be implemented and applied at the local level would increase the capacity of the partnerships to make better use of the raft of current programs and policies.

(4) The need for coherent national policy leadership

The Whittlesea Youth Commitment, established over five years ago, was the leading case study in the *Footprints to the Future* report. It was also one of a number of influences in shaping the community partnership model recommended by the 2001 Victorian Ministerial Review of Post-Compulsory Education and Training, which subsequently evolved into the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN).

In Queensland, the major Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF) plan has drawn at different stages on the work of the Northern Sunshine Coast and the Gold Coast Youth Commitments. The former Employment and Training Minister Matt Foley noted in January 2003 that “... the Chair of the Gold Coast Youth Commitment... was particularly persuasive in convincing us to broaden the approach ... from a government service focus to a community focus” (unpublished letter to DSF).

These governments, other State and territory governments such as the ACT, South Australia and Tasmania, and the Commonwealth, have recently drawn on a number of community partnership approaches that include examples such as the Youth Commitments. They have also adopted some of the particular processes such as environmental scans, student pathway planning, transition workers, post school training and learning options, and cross-sectoral planning.

Yet despite this it is not clear whether governments are partners or are contract managers in the community partnership arrangements. Government participation in most partnerships has been at arms length, programs and pilots continue to be rolled out as separate initiatives, and a purchaser-provider culture continues as the predominant program supply and delivery model.

The Youth Commitment partnerships are trying to take an integrated approach, making sense on the ground of various state funded school based pathways planning programs, training opportunities and other initiatives, and Commonwealth initiatives such as the JPP, JPET, and pilots such as CATS and POEMs (Pathway Outreach Education Models - alternative school and learning settings).

The task is made more difficult in the absence of coordination between the levels of government, and even across programs delivered by the same government departments. The need for a coherent and integrated approach between the States and the Commonwealth is apparent, especially on the ground at the community level where the impact on young people and their parents is actually felt.

While the Commonwealth and most State Governments are generally supportive of partnerships approaches, and each has developed their own version of local partnership networks, it is too early to see whether these will eventually lead to approaches based on pooled funding, flexible programs and locally developed benchmarks and accountabilities. Failure to resolve tensions between a partnership and a purchaser-provider approach risk an unnecessarily competitive and fragmented outcome. The momentum of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, for example, was dissipated for an extended period when the State Government incorporated the partnership into a larger regional network. Partnerships funded by government can be set up in competition with each other in the same region.

Community partnerships such as the Youth Commitments require more regular communication and contact with relevant government departments, and stimulate the need for much better linked government agencies and departments that have shared responsibilities and commitments.

(5) A Strong Research Base

Locally based, effective, on-going action research is an essential element of programs and services. It assists participating agencies and partners to improve practice through systematically collecting and sharing information and knowledge, and can lead to reporting processes that also provides the basis of local quality control.

However, expectations that each local partnership would be able to achieve this without significant external assistance set them an extremely challenging task. The difficulty and magnitude of the task results from difficulties in accessing comparable data across government programs, the quality of ABS data at a local or regional level, the fragmented and narrow focus of existing data collections, and the time lags involved in accessing information. In addition, most partnerships have limited skills and resources in this area.

The partnerships have played an important role in highlighting the difficulty of filling in the gaps on what is happening to young people locally. However, the extent to which any substantial progress in developing a local strong research base will occur without an external catalyst is questionable. An agency that fulfills a role similar to the Austrian independent national bureau that help partnerships gather and share data, benchmark good ideas, and foster staff training appears to be required.

Tracking the pathways taken by school leavers is poor in most regions in Australia - but was seen as crucial for the partnerships to establish baseline information and to assess the effectiveness of interventions and programs. But this has so far proved to be a major challenge for the Youth Commitment partnerships. Transition brokers have been able to provide improved information in some locations where they have been established across a large number of schools, but in most cases the Youth Commitment partnerships have lacked the resources and the capacity to systematically track the post school pathways of all the early school leavers within their ambit.

A software program specifically commissioned and developed to assist transition brokers to case manage young people and to provide a consistent format for reporting on tracking outcomes has been used in four of the six partnerships. This software, *Timepoint*, was first made available early in 2003.

More time is needed to produce reports capable of providing directly comparable results. Transition brokers need more professional development support and training in the production of reports, the software has continued to be modified to create a more useable system, and a local emphasis on the importance of reporting of data will help to establish a stronger information base in the future. *Timepoint* software has so far been used mainly as a case management tool by the transition brokers.

Partnerships where brokers have been provided with ongoing external support external have been in a better position to report on the pathways taken by young people referred to them. Whittlesea (due to the length of time that transition workers have been operating) and Macarthur are two sites able to provide some systematic information on outcomes for early school leavers. They have highlighted the particular importance of the TAFE system as the predominant pathway taken by early school leavers, and the need for local TAFE providers and for the wider VET system to respond to the needs of a younger client group.

Tracking is occurring in an informal sense through the Community Teams. With resources limited however, a primary focus has been on action rather than on research, and broad tracking of the pathways of young people has not always been the highest local priority. This appears to be particularly the case where schools have directly managed the transition brokers rather than the wider partnership, as the schools have relied on qualitative rather than quantitative reporting. The idea that the partnerships might progressively take collective ownership and responsibility for the outcomes of young people is largely unrealised.

Information and data is being exchanged more freely across members of the local partnerships, but the idea of joint accountability and the development of an integrated set of data on what is happening to young people seems a long way down the track. The Youth Commitment partnerships report on outcomes to the various government agencies that provided funding for particular projects, and periodically to the DSF for the purposes of research; reports to government for accountability purposes have taken priority over broader reporting to the community.

Most Youth Commitment sites do not have a research capacity built in to the partnership that is likely to provide future capacity to monitor and coordinate local tracking. External assistance is required, not only to provide the technical capacity for research, but also to create a culture in which participants in the partnership seek and use information for the purposes of their own reflection and improved service delivery, rather than justifying expenditure of funds received from government and other sources. State based initiatives such as the Victorian On Track telephone follow up of all school leavers, the Tasmanian Year 10 survey, the Queensland unique student identifier have the potential to provide more comprehensive data sets, and may provide a more effective means of providing the partnership sites with tracking data.

4. PERSPECTIVES ON THE YOUTH COMMITMENT PARTNERS

One of the distinguishing features of the Youth Commitment is the attempt to take a broad and integrated approach to the transition process: the school sector has for some time been focused on improving retention; the training and adult education sectors have been developing equivalent pathways for young people; Centrelink and Job Network employment services have been assessing their capacity to respond to the needs of young people.

Bringing together these various approaches is leading to new relationships being created across agencies and organisations in the highly fragmented field of youth transitions. For example schools are making new links to Centrelink, the Job Network, training providers and local government. The proactive engagement of Centrelink staff within Youth Commitment partnerships in all three States is highly significant given the documented difficulty that early school leavers have usually experienced accessing Centrelink services. A new acknowledgement is emerging among senior teachers, career advisers and principals about the role of schools in the life of students beyond the school gate, especially those not going on to tertiary study. This is a substantial and significant development.

One emerging strategy that is supporting an integrated approach is the collection of information on young people's intentions and aspirations. This is providing a basis for dialogue between schools, employers, local government planners and the training system. The partnerships are creating a platform for advocacy of youth interests through surveys, forums and expos. The Youth Commitments have attempted to systematically and authentically capture local youth voices and concerns about learning, work, pathways and relationships. The views of young people are being seriously considered in the priorities and issues of the Youth Commitments, especially their views about employment options and role of young people in local community life.

A Whittlesea *Youth Voice* project is ensuring that the aspirations of young people actively shape the development of the Youth Commitment.

A recent project *Youth Voice*, funded by the Hume Whittlesea LLEN, conducted a survey of disengaged and 'at risk' young people from local schools in Years 9 and 10, identified through enrolment in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), and local service providers dealing with 'high needs' young people. This youth participation approach was designed to ensure that the Youth Commitment is youth driven, focused and responsive. Youth Voice is resulting in greater involvement of young people in the Whittlesea Youth Commitment and the intention is that teams of young people will develop a series of outlets for a youth voice including youth websites, forum, newspaper and radio. Youth representatives are also being incorporated into the Community Team and the Committee of Management.

Local Government

I think now local government here is better connected to education and training in general, and is more aware of the role we can play.

Central Coast local government officer

Local Government has a potentially pivotal role in the partnerships. Local governments are well-placed to regularly and independently identify how their young people are faring, to better harness the skills and well-being of young people in their communities, and they have the capacity to bring services and sectors together as a neutral broker. Municipal authorities overseas play important roles implementing transition strategies in Scandinavia and other western countries, although this is often mixed with a strong role as a local education provider and funder.

Several Scandinavian countries have demonstrated the value of co-coordinating measures designed to support early school leavers at the level of the local municipality. In Denmark, the 15 percent of students who have left school before completing a qualification are actively encouraged to return to education through a combination of rewards and penalties. Each local municipality is legally required to follow up all young people under the age of twenty who drop out without receiving a qualification. Norway also has a follow-up service coordinated at the county level that is designed to reintegrate early school leavers into education, which is also reported to have reduced the rate of early school leaving (Kellock, 2002).

Research and reporting by the partnerships on the situation of young people is reported to have had an influence on most local governments.

I am the Youth Services Coordinator with Campbelltown Council. Definitely our council now has more knowledge and awareness since the Youth Commitment began. We were aware of the general issues in the youth area, but some of the studies by Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the university have influenced our thinking. We had relatively little information initially, but we have learnt a lot.

Campbelltown Council officer

Local government has been supportive of the Youth Commitment approach. Each local government is represented on the respective Committee of Management, and where the partnership covers more than one local government area, all the relevant councils participate.

However, local government has the potential to make a more significant contribution to the partnerships, which include providing:

- additional funding
- facilitation across sectors and systems
- the development of ideas for new initiatives
- coordination of partnerships.

Resourcing that supplements State and Commonwealth funding is an important function, providing increased flexibility and the capacity to expand particular projects identified as a priority for the local community. Most local governments have provided some funding to supplement State and Commonwealth resources, and in some cases this has been a significant support to establishing interim funding for transition brokers. On the Central Coast, transition broker services have expanded due to local government funding support, as well as short term funding from local businesses. The City of Whittlesea has provided significant support including an annual allocation to support development and publication of transition resources such as student passports, school leaver guides and transition worker resources. In kind assistance such as providing financial support services are also provided by some councils.

Bringing together local business communities, employment service agencies, youth services and young people improves the links between young people and potential employment pathways. Local government can act as an independent facilitator and broker. The Shire of Noosa on the Northern Sunshine Coast has been an important contributor to establishing the local *Lead On* project in partnership with the Bendigo Bank. The program links young people to appropriate businesses to create and maintain projects and the council has assisted negotiations with local businesses regarding potential sponsorship and expertise. The Gold Coast and Whittlesea Councils have also helped to facilitate local forums with employers and young people canvassing employment and youth issues.

The contribution of key ideas requires local government to become more actively involved in the development of these partnerships. Staff at the City of Whittlesea were instrumental from the outset in helping to positively develop initiatives and projects for their community partnerships, and have most recently been part of developing proposals for an intermediary labour market scheme to assist underemployed young people. In Tumut, the council took initial responsibility for the set-up and facilitation coordination of the Youth Commitment until internal administrative issues resulted in this role passing to another local organisation.

Ultimately perhaps, local government could be the location for coordination of the community partnerships. The potential for local government to host and coordinate transition brokers would provide opportunities to forge strong links between schools and local government, and facilitate better links with the business community through council's business development role.

Environmental scan data has been used in social planning processes as awareness of the importance of youth transition issues has increased. Surveys conducted by the Northern Sunshine Coast Youth Commitment identified the need for more 'creative industries' in the area and has been used by the Council's Economic Development Officer for forward planning. In Tumut, the Shire CEO reports that the environmental scan raised the profile of youth issues in the local community and led to council setting up a 'Youth Matters' committee. Active coordination of transition brokers would potentially strengthen the links between youth services and economic development.

The goals and objectives of the Youth Commitment have been adopted by some councils as a key strategy for meeting youth needs on the local government agenda. The Campbelltown Council's November 2002 Youth Strategy identifies the Macarthur Youth Commitment as a key strategy for achieving the priority area of education, skills and employment.

The close links and ties that have emerged through the partnership is providing huge confidence, despite the slowness of the process. The result is sharing of information, reduced competitiveness and a sense of contributing to better outcomes. The partnership is the beauty of it.

Northern Sunshine Coast councillor

However, in other cases, it appears that the involvement of local government is more dependent on the support of an individual councillor or officer, and is not imbedded in the council's strategy or planning processes. Local government has sometimes adopted more of a watching brief rather than taking a leading role.

The Youth Commitment does create a platform for local government advocacy on behalf of young people to other sectors and levels of government. The capacity of local government to bridge both youth services and the business community to address both local transition and skills requirements has only been superficially explored to this point. There is the capacity for links to be forged between youth services and economic development within local government to provide a bridge between employers and young people; a capacity beginning to emerge in well-established partnerships such as Whittlesea. Local government is also well-placed to taking leading responsibility for convening local inter-agency groups, and to act as the focus of reporting by the partnerships.

Centrelink

School staff are starting to know our staff and recognise them. We used to be a closed shop, but now we have a strong relationship with the agencies that support kids who leave school.

Centrelink Manager

Like local government, Centrelink is an active participant in the Youth Commitment partnerships and is represented on all current committees of management. It has an important role to play in developing an integrated transition system, holding important data on young people in need of support, and with the capacity to proactively link young people leaving school with referrals to appropriate services and support.

Typically Centrelink becomes involved after a young person seeking employment or income support has left school. Encouragingly, some Centrelink managers have been able to use the Youth Commitment approach to explore strategies for an earlier intervention with school leavers including preventative action before leaving school, part of constructing a tighter safety net, and providing more coherent programs and services.

The level of Centrelink involvement in the partnerships vary, but at Macarthur, the Northern Sunshine Coast and Whittlesea the potential of their involvement to drive change, form new relationships with transition services, and bridge gaps for early school leavers demonstrates what can be achieved within a community partnership framework.

Centrelink has been involved in various forms of transition trials in most partnerships. Offices have also been prepared to share relevant data that has proved useful in identifying young people needing particular forms of assistance.

The benefits for Centrelink from involvement in the Youth Commitment have included improvements in their knowledge of relevant local services, resulting in improved referral processes for young people. The systematic distribution of local information on services and new initiatives has been an improvement on previous ad hoc arrangements.

In Macarthur Centrelink staff are now actively involved in hosting and managing Youth Commitment transition brokers and Plan-It-Youth mentoring initiatives. Their outreach workers visit youth centers and schools to meet and help young people (rather than waiting for them to attend a Centrelink office). The manager of the local Centrelink Office works from a car rather than a desk and the philosophy adopted is that the Centrelink staff will bridge the gap with young people, rather than requiring young people to do this.

After Centrelink funded the initial two month trial of a transition broker for local schools in 2003, additional funding from the Commonwealth then permitted an extensive trial of transition brokers in almost one third of the secondary schools in the region. Centrelink was selected as an appropriate partner to manage the transition broker program, due to their capacity to support the workers, their prior involvement in the partnership, and their understanding of the requirements of the broker role. The current transition brokers are former Centrelink workers from the Youth and Students section who were provided with one month of up-front training on potential issues associated with working with the client group.

The four transition workers are coordinated and supported by Centrelink under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Macarthur Youth Commitment. The outcomes for students are being regularly reported through Centrelink to the Youth Commitment.

On the Northern Sunshine Coast, Centrelink has adopted a similar approach to early intervention and providing greater support for young people. While the strategies used to provide early intervention and bridge the gaps differ from Macarthur, the intention is the same.

In 2002 the Centrelink office at Noosa Heads funded and evaluated a short term trial of a transition broker to advise and intervene with potential early school leavers. While successful in retaining more students at school, the approach was put on hold until long-term funding could be found to support the transition broker strategy.

Instead, the Centrelink office developed a collaborative Community Team that has been operating for over two years attended by representatives from local schools, JPP, Queensland Health, and the Youth Commitment Partnership staff. These meetings are regularly used to exchange information, ideas, and support the development of resources to inform school staff, students and their families on options, assistance and career pathways. These meetings are also used to plan data collection, careers information, and share ideas to improve services.

The Noosa Heads Centrelink office helped collect common data on young peoples' career intentions across five local schools and supports its collection, analysis and publication. The data includes career aspirations of students in Year 8 to 12 and shows that a significant number of students are potentially very interested in creative industries, which has in turn engaged the interest and planning of schools, government and providers in the area.

The manager of the Centrelink Office indicates that staff attitudes to 'at risk' students has changed, with greater awareness of the other services and pathways that are available, and a preparedness to use those agencies as referral points. Centrelink is also involved in the Partnership's other working groups.

In the Whittlesea Youth Commitment the Centrelink office at Epping was an active partner from the outset. Centrelink responded to initial studies in the region that identified the extent of difficulty young people, and particularly early school leavers, had in understanding and accessing services through Centrelink. The Centrelink Epping Office changed their mode of operation in dealing with schools and early school leavers, adopting a case manager approach and allocating a specific officer to work with each school.

At Whittlesea, Centrelink was a partner in establishing the 2002-2003 mentoring project LYPET (Linking Young People to Employment and Training) which sought to reengage marginalised young people in education, training or employment. The program helped them to build their skills base and provided them with the support of a mentor.

The mentoring partnership project emerged from work undertaken between Centrelink Epping and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment in 2002 that identified there were 60 young people between the ages of 16 and 17 who had exited school the previous year and had received job seeker Youth Allowance for 10 months without intensive support and management.

The LYPET mentoring project aimed to achieve 50 opportunities for paid part-time work placements for young people who were disengaged from education and employment. The intention was to convert the part-time employment into 25 full-time ongoing positions. As the project developed it became clear that early school leavers who had not been engaged in social, educational or economic activity were presenting with multiple barriers that needed to be addressed before they could be linked to employment.

The mentoring project also aimed to identify employers with skills needs who were prepared to offer part-time work to young people, introducing them to an industry and allowing them to demonstrate work readiness.

The project was very successful in re-engaging 43 marginalised young people in education, training or employment activities, as well as referrals to agencies offering professional assistance.

Centrelink is interested in the potential of community partnerships nationally. Involvement in the Youth Commitment sites has demonstrated the potential of Centrelink's involvement in these partnerships. It would be beneficial to further consolidate the learning that has occurred.

Schools

*Schools are changing in the way they think about transition. One very positive aspect of the Youth Commitment has been the development of interagency work, with groups such as Centrelink assisting kids in schools and supporting them in the transition to work. **Manager, NSW DET District Office***

The main focus of the Youth Commitment partnerships has been on working within and on school systems. Transition brokers, mentoring programs, data collection and pathways advice and guidance have been, appropriately, concentrated on working with and influencing the programs and policies of how schools provide for all their students.

Engagement with schools in a community partnership framework takes time to develop. Schools compete for enrolments and funding, and to work differently and overcome this underlying competition requires school principals and their staff to see clear benefits for their school and their students.

Patterns of engagement by schools are also influenced by variations in State Government approaches to community partnerships. Victoria has mandated school support for local partnerships focused on early school leavers, while Queensland's ETRF is trialing a similar approach. In New South Wales there is currently no system level engagement with local partnerships, other than that determined at a local and regional level.

Of the 109 schools in regions with a Youth Commitment partnership, 30 of these are currently involved in the transition broker trials. Both Catholic and government secondary schools are involved in these partnerships, but the independent sector has not been a significant participant to date.

Schools with transition workers have made important changes to their policies and systems affecting early school leaving, including:

- the adoption of common exit procedures
- use of career intention surveys
- paying increased attention to the reasons that young people leave school early
- exploration of alternative approaches to discipline and expulsion policies
- and increased use of external support services.

It is not necessarily only those schools that have transition brokers that have made these changes as a result of involvement in these local partnerships. On the Sunshine Coast, transition brokers have not been appointed, but the collaborative framework established has seen schools commencing discussions on sharing staff, resources and students to improve the range of available programs, and consciously trialing a range of initiatives in particular schools on behalf of other principals. The use of alternative programs are increasing in these schools.

But schools in other partnerships that do not have access to transition brokers have not yet made significant changes to their approach to dealing with young people at risk of early school leaving.

It also appears changes in attitude and approach can be detected more quickly among schools located in smaller geographic partnerships such Whittlesea, Tumut, and the Northern Sunshine Coast.

Building on long standing collaboration between all government schools in Whittlesea, which for some years have been pooling resources to fund the transition worker positions, the principals commissioned further joint investigation of their curriculum and program choices in an attempt to better meet the needs of all their students. Principals are working together to consider deep seated issues underpinning student achievement in the seven schools - curriculum offerings, the profile and morale of the teacher workforce, the satisfaction and involvement of parents, discipline policies for students, and the infrastructure of the school precincts themselves.

Particular school principals have played key roles advocating the Youth Commitment partnership

approach to other principals in the region and the wider education sector.

On the Gold Coast Fran Jones, the principal of Keebra Park State High School and Chair of the Youth Commitment Committee of Management, has been an influential supporter of the partnership providing information to colleagues on the Gold Coast through monthly government schools principal meetings. Well-regarded by other principals and with a reputation for supporting students at risk of early leaving through an alternative learning setting in her own school, she has been able to influence the development of the Queensland Government's ETRF strategy through advocating a community partnership approach to Ministers. For the school sector on the Gold Coast, the positive participation of Jones in the management of the Youth Commitment has ensured that principals of other local schools are supportive of the Youth Commitment.

In Macarthur another principal, Kevin Garrick, has played a similar role. Originally involved in the regional Full Service Schools partnership, he is now on the Management Committee of the Macarthur Youth Commitment and is considered by the NSW Education Department District Office to have a 'deep understanding' of the community partnership approach. A strong advocate of transition brokers and the positive impact they are having in local schools, he notes the "enormous change in the attitude of schools to linking with the community, planning to support students whilst in school and linking to other services to support them when they exit from school."

The schools involved appear to be generally more open to partnerships and to accessing external services. The data and qualitative information collected by transition brokers on post school destinations and the experiences of early school leavers has proved to be an influential factor in motivating school administrators to reform discipline and expulsion policies, and introduce more flexible learning arrangements.

New Alternative Learning Centres

Central Coast school principals indicate that the introduction of brokers is having a wider influence on their schools. The availability of more detailed information on student needs and pathways is influencing related activity within the schools. Schools are catering both for students at risk of disengaging, and those who have already left. Alternative Learning Centres have been established at Tumby Umbi and at Peninsula. Schools are allowing other agencies such as Health and Community Services access to these alternative settings.

State and Commonwealth funding are being used together to help set up new alternative learning centres at Tuggerah and at Brisbane Waters Secondary Colleges.

The establishment of alternative learning centres at Tumby Umbi and Woy Woy High schools are good examples of services emerging as the result of integrated approaches between educators, transition brokers, councils and health workers focusing on kids at risk. The alternative settings are located within existing High Schools. The outcomes for these kids from centres such as Tumby Umbi are very positive from the figures that I have seen.

Local Government officer

In 2004 one school has introduced a new one hour period of careers each week for all students in Year 10 as a result of the information supplied by the transition broker, and the school is also investigating the introduction of an alternative Year 10. There are now also consistent exit procedures across the four schools with transition brokers.

School exclusions have reduced once schools become aware that there are alternative strategies available, through providing improved information and support for students.

Our school hasn't done an exclusion in a long time now.
Northern Sunshine Coast High School Principal

Principals and regional administrators in Macarthur suggest that the Youth Commitment is also beginning to have an impact on local schools culture, as awareness develops of the importance of supporting the transition process and improving the tracking of those who leave school. These schools are becoming more receptive to the introduction of a range of external services to assist students prepare for their transition to post school destinations. Youth agencies are also being drawn closer to the school system. Five youth centres in Macarthur are running programs in local schools as a result of developing close working relationships with transition brokers.

Schools are changing the way they provide careers advice, introducing careers content into the teaching curriculum and class time, and adjusting staffing arrangements. The schools have all introduced common exit surveys for school leavers.

Schools that were previously competitive are now sharing in areas such as curriculum. There is learning amongst the professionals of how to work more professionally with at risk and disengaged young people and in the transition process. There is an increased professionalism across the board in dealing with these young people.

Local Government Councillor

There is also a developing momentum for introducing more flexible learning arrangements. Examples are the introduction off-campus literacy and learning programs, new enterprise education programs, and supported work experience. A new initiative is the proposed Tranzed program organised as a joint venture between Noosa High School and Noosa Youth Service. Young people who have been officially disengaged from education for at least six months will be provided with learning environments at Noosa Youth Service to enable them to commence studies toward their Year 10 education. Education Queensland has employed a teacher to work off campus with 24 of these students.

I've seen significant changes in a short period of time. Schools are tracking where their kids have gone and are keeping an eye on them. The mentoring program is producing significant outcomes. The local public debate has been focused around young people, and has given a real profile to youth initiated projects. Broad networks have been formed and the schools' use of language is changing.

Northern Sunshine Coast TAFE Manager

In Queensland the State Government's education and training reforms under the ETRF are consistent with the focus of the Youth Commitment partnerships on students at risk of early school leaving. The ETRF requirement for Queensland regions to produce annual District Youth Achievement Plans is developing a clear focus on students at risk of early school leaving.

TAFE

TAFE is a very important sector in developing an overall strategy for early school leavers. Analysis of the destinations of early school leavers at both State and local levels shows that TAFE is the main pathway, particularly if apprenticeships and traineeships are included. The earlier that a young person leaves school, the more likely it is that they will try to access a basic vocational program.

While local TAFE Institutes are involved in all the Youth Commitment partnerships and participate on all management committees, relatively little attention has been paid to ensuring that there are places, support and follow up support for early school leavers seeking access to TAFE in these partnerships. The initial focus has been more on influencing the culture and approaches of schools.

This is not to suggest that some TAFE Institutes have not been responsive in some partnerships. The Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE responded to the local Youth Commitment with a series of initiatives linked to a new Youth Unit. Another TAFE Institute provides free accommodation for the administration of the Macarthur Youth Commitment; on the Central Coast most meetings are

held in the local TAFE and university centre. Training for mentors in the Plan-It-Youth and other mentoring programs has generally been delivered by local TAFE Institutes. Further examples of such responsiveness are provided below.

Nevertheless, the focus of TAFE on meeting the training needs of the adult population, the skills profile of TAFE staff, and the funding and reporting arrangements for TAFE nationally have restricted progress in achieving a TAFE system able to respond to the needs of early school leavers. In particular, the previous lack of capacity to report on TAFE retention and completion at national, state or local levels presents a real difficulty in developing an integrated and coherent transition system.

The lack of resources put into TAFE tracking or monitoring contrasts with the efforts being put into monitoring school outcomes at local State and national levels.

Even in a region such as the Central Coast, which has a high rate of TAFE participation among school leavers, there are still insufficient TAFE places for many students despite there being two campuses in the region. There are few pre-vocational courses available on the Central Coast despite their importance for those not completing school. TAFE is generally seen as an adult learning environment, and despite some outreach programs for youth at risk, many young people (and early school leavers in particular) get turned away.

But there are some examples of positive responses to the Youth Commitment.

On the Northern Sunshine Coast management committee members are encouraged by a general change in attitude of TAFE towards early school leavers. In one example the Building Studies area of TAFE established “the Wicked Program” at Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE for high risk kids in the school system, providing trade programs for 15 and 16 year olds, trying to capture these students into a trade pathway.

Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE

Outcomes for early school leavers reported by transition brokers in Whittlesea demonstrates the importance of the VET sector, and particularly TAFE Institutes, in providing a pathway for these young people..

The main local TAFE provider, Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, responded to the issues identified by the Whittlesea Youth Commitment and established a new Youth Unit to draw together a range of programs and services to meet the needs of young people. An early initiative of this Unit was to introduce the General Certificate 1 in VET for local school students and young unemployed people.

As the transition broker program was established across the Whittlesea schools, the TAFE Institute also provided the brokers with access to professional development activities and other forms of support.

The Jobs Pathways Programme, JPP in the North, is also managed by the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE. The Institute coordinates a “Lets Look at Work” program for Year 10 students through JPP funding, an important option for local schools to allow students at this level to explore vocational options one day a week for a term.

Macarthur Youth Commitment also has strong relationships with South West Sydney Institute of TAFE. The Macarthur region has one of the highest VET participation rates in NSW in government schools with over 2000 students enrolled. Local school principals are very positive about the development of a TAFE Outreach program to support students in schools. Transition brokers in schools have been linked in to TAFE Institute equity brokers who are involved in these alternative learning outreach programs.

Despite the responsiveness of the South West Sydney Institute of TAFE in providing \$2.8m worth of programs for unemployed youth and TAFE Institute staff meeting with the transition brokers to obtain information on the needs of young people, and programming extra 'youth at risk' courses, pressures for sufficient places remain. Younger people who have left school early often challenge TAFE staff and teaching approaches which are oriented to self-paced and adult learning approaches. Access to sufficient funding and places in TAFE to accommodate the numbers of young people requiring assistance is a continuing challenge.

Industry

Employers have an important role to play in the community partnerships if early school leavers are to be provided with a 'second chance' obtaining a full-time job linked to education or training.

Employers have generally been a group that has proved hard to engage in the partnerships, particularly as the focus of the Youth Commitment is in assisting disengaged and marginalised young people. Employers seek the most skilled and motivated entrants to the labour market, and many young people assisted by the partnerships need a lot of support, personal and skills development before they are 'job ready'.

Employer involvement is strong in the Central Coast partnership, with several major employers and the ACC represented on the Management Committee. Six companies provided one-off interim funding to establish transition brokers, and these businesses were actively involved in subsequent forums at which young people provided feedback on the impact of the brokers on their decision-making and their sense of self.

However, this level of employer involvement is more the exception than the rule. Generally, the Management Committees are composed of government agencies and service providers. Despite various businesses being signatories to the original Whittlesea Youth Commitment's Memorandum of Understanding, this has not subsequently translated to strong involvement so far. Most responsibility for programs and funding has remained with governments.

Employers tend to require specific and practical initiatives that they can contribute to and engage with. There has been some support for the employment oriented mentoring programs, providing increased work placements and School-based New Apprenticeship opportunities, and showcasing opportunities in particular industries. Employer views and requirements regarding youth employment have been canvassed through a forum on the Gold Coast, and surveys in Macarthur, but as yet the responses have not led to further activity.

Industry is potentially an important partner in local arrangements, particularly as skills shortages and recruitment issues become more pressing. Employers need to be involved contributing to ideas for new initiatives that will assist in developing employment skills. Their role should include contributing to the pool of funding for relevant initiatives (as they have on the Central Coast), and helping to guide the partnerships into engaging with and linking to economic development planning. The participation of employers is more likely to be mobilised through partnerships developing a more active focus on economic development to complement the current focus on social exclusion.

With a broader focus on economic development, industry is more likely to become involved in development of "products" that can be used as a vehicle for employers to engage with youth employment issues.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Most of these partnerships have only been established for approximately two years. This is a comparatively short period of time, and international experience suggests that significant benefits and innovation from such partnerships develop over a much longer time frame. Increasing levels of trust lead to new opportunities and approaches.

However, progress has been made in achieving a number of the original objectives of the Youth Commitment.

What has been achieved

The key objective of the Youth Commitment was that early school leavers would be provided with a 'second chance' by being assisted to either:

- complete Year 12 either at school or another recognised provider; or
- obtain an education or training qualification that is at an equivalent level such as a TAFE certificate or apprenticeship; or
- obtain a full-time job that is linked to education or training.

Ensuring that potential early school leavers return to school or an equivalent to complete Year 12, or leave school for a positive destination, has been the main focus of the partnerships. Data that is available indicates that higher levels of potential early schools leavers are changing their intention to leave school and that school retention levels are rising. Young people are making decisions based on independent information and support provided through a combination of case management, mentoring and relevant resources. More are deciding to stay at school longer and they are remaining until they have an appropriate alternative option. Opportunities for continuing education in alternative settings are increasing in availability. Progress has been achieved through working with and within the school systems.

Assisting those young people who decide to leave school early to obtain an education and training qualification at an equivalent level, such as a TAFE certificate or an apprenticeship has seen more limited achievement. Transition brokers have directed many early school leavers into places in TAFE and campaigns have been arranged with group training companies and local employers promoting apprenticeship pathways. TAFE is a critical pathway for early leavers, and while TAFEs are involved in all partnerships, there are currently no strong incentives for Institutes to create additional places or redirect funding from meeting other needs to servicing early school leavers.

The third alternative pathway for early school leavers was to obtain a full-time job linked to education and training. There is less evidence of progress or achievement here, although mentors and brokers have helped linking young people to potential employment and there have been promotional campaigns targeting employers. Experimentation continues in an attempt to develop products and processes that can engage employers and lead to new employment opportunities for young people, and this may develop if the partnerships can become more engaged in economic development activity and planning.

Further progress against the original objectives can be reported, bearing in mind that in effect the partnerships have had capacity constraints that have limited their impact to about one-third of the schools and population they embrace:

- (a) The potential for young people to 'fall through the cracks' has been significantly reduced with transition brokers in some locations following up all early school leavers from some schools. Numbers of early school leavers going to 'unknown destinations' has reduced, and a higher percentage of early school leavers have achieved a full-time education, training or employment outcome. But while transition brokers can be highly effective, too many young people are not referred to brokers before they leave school, and tracking systems are not sufficiently well developed to identify all those who need assistance at the time.

- (b) Young people are being equipped to make informed choices. The partnerships have made significant advances in equipping young people to make informed choices. Brokers are providing independent information to young people as they need it, mentoring is playing similar role, and transition resources such as school leaver guides and passports are all contributing to more informed choice. Feedback from young people assisted provides powerful testimony to the effectiveness of the independent personal support and information provided by mentors and transition brokers. However limited access to these forms of support remains a concern because greater capacity to provide access would lead to more significant outcomes.
- (c) Support and assistance for young people needs to be targeted at crucial stages when young people are deciding whether or not to stay at or to leave school. The partnerships have targeted their efforts at this point of the transition process. Transition brokers in particular are highly effective in providing support and assistance at the critical time, and this approach compares well with more generic and less focused approaches taken in pathways planning in some school systems.
- (d) Schools and local communities are focusing on the aspirations of young people. The Youth Commitment partnerships have been particularly effective at placing young people's aspirations on the agenda of local communities, and the use of surveys, forums and 'Youth Voice' projects is beginning to affect planning at a local level. Planning for education provision is taking more note of the aspirations of young people, and some local governments are also beginning to respond to the information coming forward.
- (e) The objective of encouraging all schools to work harder to retain students, through offering greater flexibility and choice has not yet been achieved. Only a minority of the 109 schools covered by the Youth Commitment partnerships are reported to be providing greater flexibility and choice. Those with access to transition brokers are more likely to be involved in such reforms, but schools on Northern Sunshine Coast in Queensland demonstrate that this can be achieved by other means as well. Changing the attitudes, culture and structures of schools does take time. One area in which many of these schools are working harder to retain students is in the area of discipline and expulsions policy. As the principal of a Whittlesea High School noted, after the start of the Youth Commitment he was more likely to 'keep the gun in the holster' when dealing with a potential expulsion. More time, extending access to brokers, and stronger incentives for school reform are required to achieve greater flexibility and choice.
- (f) It was also anticipated that young people would be provided with the tools to construct their own flexible personal action plans. Since the Youth Commitment was first conceived some of these tools and processes have been developed by State Government school systems in their various pathways planning programs. Transition brokers and resources developed by Youth Commitment partnerships have informed this approach.

The Barriers

Despite the progress made, the partnerships face barriers that must be overcome to achieve further progress.

- (a) The partnerships lack detailed capacity to clearly identify whether overall progress is being made, other than at a 'gut level'. Their data and systems management and research tools are not adequate, and the definition of 'success' is not consistent across each partnership. Significant factors have been restrictions on access to and release of government-held retention, completion, exit and destination data from the education systems, although States such as Victoria have made some key outcome data much more publicly accessible in recent years. Release and publication of locally comparable information on the learning and work outcomes of young people is a key requirement for developing effective local strategies based on evidence of improvement.

The Australian training system provides even less consistent, timely and clear public data on the pathways taken by young people, and little information is available on the outcomes for the many early school leavers who use the TAFE pathway.

Youth Commitment partnerships rely on local skills and capacity to extract and meaningfully analyse information generated by their programs. However less priority has been placed on collecting and reporting local data as evidence of effectiveness than on implementing new initiatives. Understandably local partners have often been more interested in making a difference through projects than in the intricacies of analytical research. Most partnerships have neither the resources nor the focus to take responsibility for the development of a research base, effective monitoring and quality control. They have depended on external agencies to provide this capacity, and it is likely that this will require either an independent agency such as DSF or a partnership with government.

- (b) The sources of funding accessed by the partnerships are usually short term, for pre-defined purposes, and applied independently of other programs and initiatives. Government funding for programs requires that agencies compete to secure resources, and the reporting and accountability requirements tend to drive outcome reporting on a program by program basis, rather than in an integrated way that allows the local agencies to use the information to improve services to young people.

While partnerships have been able to adapt funding from a number of government and program sources, the application of funds and the associated reporting responsibilities impose a fractured rather than an integrated approach. A new approach to resourcing is required.

- (c) Partnerships can be initiated to meet a number of policy agendas, but there are risks that in taking up support for local partnerships, government can create local confusion and uncertainty regarding legitimacy and mandate. This includes confusion resulting from governments funding multiple 'partnerships' in a region with overlapping areas of focus, and the roll-out of government mandated networks over the top of community initiated partnerships.

Without strong connections to government and feedback mechanisms to policy makers and program developers, the valuable lessons learned at a local level can be lost, and the continuing viability of partnerships compromised as they become disconnected from national policy and practice.

Protocols for collaboration between government departments would assist in creating a supporting environment for the partnerships that would enable a more effective conversation between local partnerships and government.

- (d) The limited availability of transition brokers and the sometimes haphazard nature of referral processes within schools means that the partnerships have not been able to offer transition support that is truly systematic or comprehensive. Sufficient resources to ensure that all young people at risk of early school leaving can be assisted in a community underpins the idea of a Youth Commitment. The lack of capacity to appoint a transition broker for approximately every 40 potential early school leavers currently denies access to independent and timely support and advice for some who need this assistance.

To ensure the independence of transition broker support and advice, independent community-based management of the brokers is also important. School-based management of some transition brokers potentially compromises this independence over time. Independent management, whether by Centrelink, local government or some other independent local agency is needed.

- (e) Transition brokers have provided a focus for local partnerships' engagement with schools. The lack of an equivalent 'product' to engage with industry and employers in order to provide increased opportunities for young people continues to challenge the partnerships.

While it has made strategic sense to focus at the outset on young people in the school system and to encourage systems change within schools, the lack of a focus for engagement with employers needs to be overcome if the intention of the Youth Commitment is to be further realized.

The skills of social entrepreneurs may be required to broaden the focus beyond social exclusion to incorporate a stronger focus on economic development.

- (f) The partnerships have little capacity to influence the nature and extent of TAFE provision for early school leavers. Transition broker reporting on the destinations of early school leavers makes it clear that TAFE is the preferred pathways for a majority of early school leavers. While some of the TAFE Institutes involved in local partnerships have introduced new initiatives and created programs more relevant to the needs of this group, TAFE at national and state levels needs to be more responsive to the needs of early school leavers. Insufficient training places, staff without the skills to deal with younger students, and the lack of capacity to report on achievement and student completion, all require attention if the needs of all young people are to be met.

Achieving a more coherent funding approach

Partnerships are operating on funding provided by the Commonwealth government supplemented in most cases by state government resourcing and with assistance coming from local government, industry and community agencies. A major challenge in the youth transitions area in Australia is to shape a sustainable and coherent approach to roles, responsibilities and funding across the three levels of government and across government departments and authorities responsible for education, training, employment and economic development.

Transition arrangements cross federal and state responsibilities, and local government also has a strong stake in the outcomes that are or are not achieved. It is not always the case that additional funds are necessarily required, but there needs to be much better design, more explicit complementarity of purpose and funding, and shared agreements to ensure that existing resources better meet agreed local priorities and objectives so enabling local partnerships to be more effective.

Creating a series of regional agreements between the three levels of government, the community partnerships and local businesses based on the pooling of resources for a defined period to meet local needs would provide a more coherent approach for the future. Contributions to the funding base should come from pooled resources from all of these stakeholders. National and state bureaucracies should actively contribute to the mandate for local partnerships and participate on the management committees. Budget for local projects and some form of partnership secretariat will be required.

Potential for the Future

With the Youth Commitments the core elements of an important national demonstration project are in place. Without any major change to existing bureaucratic arrangements and accountabilities, the partnerships could be an honest broker in securing "joined-up" government among local and central agencies and avoid accountability confusion between local and central government.

The Youth Commitment partnerships do require long term support, monitoring and facilitation. The Commonwealth needs to provide leadership in establishing an integrated approach in youth transition policy and provide the programmes and funding arrangements that flow from such an approach. This means having a more holistic view of the issues facing young people in transition, a more informed view of the potential of community partnerships to achieve change and deliver

effective services, and to be serious about engaging the states. State governments have the capacity to assist local partnerships by bringing their agencies and initiatives into much closer alignment, engaging with the Commonwealth, and providing local access to data that can assist communities to obtain a more accurate local picture of how their young people are faring.

With such support from government, community and industry, these Youth Commitment partnerships have the potential to provide a comprehensive local safety net for young people making the transition from school to study and working life.

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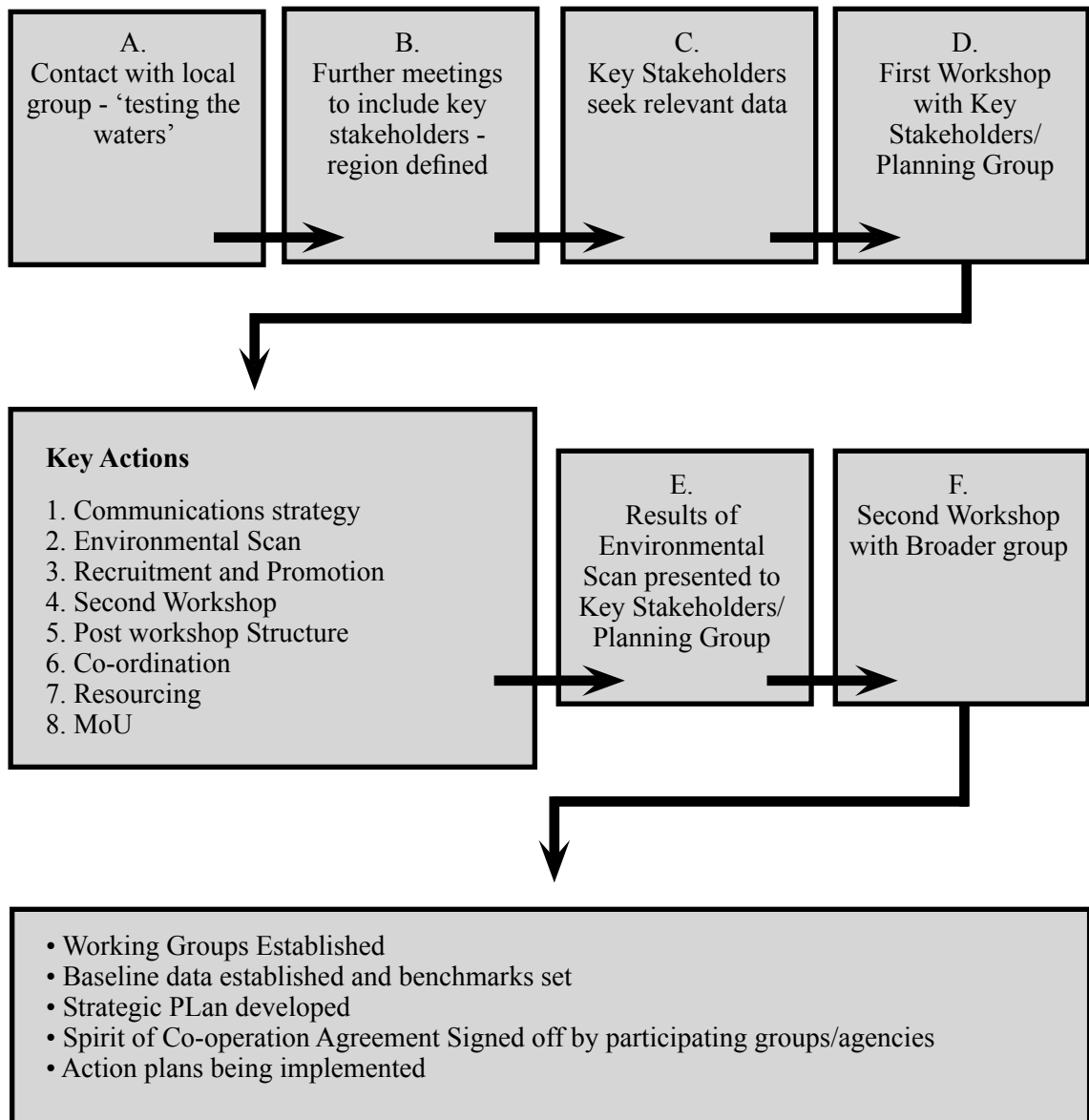
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APPENDIX 1: YOUTH COMMITMENT CHART



APPENDIX 2

New South Wales Department of Education and Training reported outcomes for Plan-It-Youth.

Across the six NSW sites, 315 young people at risk of early school leaving who participated in the mentoring program in 2003 were tracked six months later. They were followed up in April 2004. The outcomes reported were:

Table: NSW Plan-It-Youth Nov 2003 completers; Post Program Data – April 2004

Summary of all schools	Students at April 2004	Percentage
Still in school (mainly Years 10 & 11)	219	69.5
Full-time TAFE	10	3.2
Further Study - Private Provider	2	0.6
Apprenticeship / Traineeship	21	6.7
Full-time employment	14	4.4
Part-time TAFE and part-time work	4	1.3
Part-time TAFE	6	1.9
Part-time or casual employment	11	3.5
Unemployed	15	4.8
Moved out of region/state	8	2.5
Unknown	5	1.6
Total	315	100

88% of the participants had positive destinations six months later, and less than 2% were unknown. Similar results were reported from Macarthur in 2003, where one month after completing the formal mentoring program, more than 92% of participants were still at school and a further 6% were in employment.



DUSSELDORP SKILLS FORUM

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) is an independent, not for profit body with a mission to achieve changes needed to enable all Australians to reach their potential through the acquisition of productive skills. In particular, the Forum seeks to improve the learning and work transitions of young Australians by cooperating with communities, industry, government and non-government organisations to generate ideas, research, tools and information, and to build networks of common interest. It finances its own work.

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