

# case study

## WIRREANDA ADAPTIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (WAVE)



## Putting the jigsaw together:

Innovative learning engagement programs in Australia

**vu.edu.au**

CRICOS Provider No. 00124K  
CRICOS Provider No. 02475D



## Acknowledgements

This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof Kitty te Riele, Dr Dorothy Bottrell and Dr Vicky Plows from The Victoria Institute at Victoria University, for the project Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia. Luke Swain, Esther Chan and Hendrik Jacobs contributed to preparing the case study reports.

We are grateful for the major funding provided by the Ian Potter Foundation and for the additional support from Dusseldorp Skills Forum, and from The Victoria Institute through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Network.

The research would not have been possible without the considerable assistance of coordinating staff in each case study site – and all the staff, students, community stakeholders, and graduates who made us feel welcome and offered us insights into their experiences and viewpoints.

**Please note:** All individual names are pseudonyms.

### Creative Commons Licence

This publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence.



Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives

CC BY-NC-ND

Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence is a standard form license agreement that allows you to redistribute this publication, provided that you attribute the work. The reference for attribution is below. A summary of the licence terms is available from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>. The full licence terms are available from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/legalcode>.

**Please cite this report as:** Bottrell, D., Te Riele, K., and Plows, V. (2014). Wirreanda Adaptive Vocational Education (WAVE) program. Case study. Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning

For other products from this research project and related information, and to download this report please visit the website [dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/](http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/)

For more information about research by the Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning please visit the website <http://www.vu.edu.au/the-victoria-institute/our-research>

The Wirreanda Adaptive Vocational Education (WAVE) program is located in the grounds of Wirreanda Secondary School, just a five minute walk from the main school, but operating in its own dedicated space. This little hub of two buildings toward the back of the school grounds looks homely with an inviting courtyard connecting the two buildings. Students recently paved and landscaped the courtyard and surrounds and everything looks as neat as a pin. Rows of student folders and subject modules are the first glimpse of the same orderliness inside. On the classroom walls are progress charts, writing scaffolds and unit guides. In the kitchen, the toaster is out and the urn is on. Paperwork is set out on the table, ready for the daily staff meeting when staff share plans for the day and talk about upcoming events, student achievements and issues that need to be addressed. Everything is organised for students to be self-managing.

As students arrive they make coffee and toast and hover round the back steps to catch up. In ones and twos, they come inside and get down to work, well ahead of the program timetable. Some work at the computers, two on art projects and a couple are listening to music with headphones on.



There is nothing to signal when the first class begins except that staff emerge from the 'Yellow Room' next-door, greet and talk with students. Two teachers sit down with the group at the computers and conversations fill the room. One student heads off for an appointment with one of the youth workers; another submits an assignment and chooses the next module. People gather round to admire a student's surfboard artwork and hear his ideas for the next panel.

Many students are not on site today as each has their own timetable and learning plan to follow. WAVE operates way beyond these classrooms. Students are as likely to be bussing to Adelaide CBD for Certificate III studies, at work in a part-time job, conducting research in the local community, recording music in a studio or helping out with beach sports for local children. This flexibility enables young people to pursue their interests and stay connected with education. "It's a very relaxed environment. They expand on your strengths and work around you. Coming here gave me hope so I've got hope to continue on to the next steps until I'm where I want to be" (Ricky, student).

# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>ABOUT WIRREANDA ADAPTIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (WAVE) BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW</b>	<b>7</b>
Context	7
Program governance and aims	9
Students	9
Staff	9
Timetable and Curriculum	10
Facilities	10
Key Dimensions	11
<b>VALUED OUTCOMES</b>	<b>13</b>
Engagement and perseverance	13
Valuable credentials and work experience	13
Pathways to further study and employment	14
Personal growth and wellbeing	15
External impacts and contribution to the community	16
Recognition of the program	17
<b>ACTIONS</b>	<b>18</b>
Learning and pathway support	18
Relevant and integrated learning options	19
Individualised learning	21
Strong support for wellbeing	22
Quality relationships	24
Safe and comfortable environment	25
Acknowledging achievements	26
Community partnerships	26

<b>PRINCIPLES</b>	<b>28</b>
Finding strengths and believing in individual potential	28
Inclusive education	29
Enabling learning	29
Wellbeing for learning	30
Student-centred	31
Adult learning principles	31
<b>CONDITIONS</b>	<b>33</b>
Balancing flexibility and structure	33
Close student-teacher relationships	34
Strong leadership and a shared vision	34
Highly motivated staff	35
Low student-staff ratios	35
Subsidised courses and funding	36
<b>SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES</b>	<b>37</b>
1) Opportunities to gain multiple qualifications	37
2) Wellbeing for learning	37
3) Balance between structure and flexibility	37
4) Synergies with host school	38
5) Community networks	38
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	<b>39</b>

---

# INTRODUCTION

---

This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof Kitty te Riele, Dr Dorothy Bottrell and Dr Vicky Plows from The Victoria Institute at Victoria University, for the project Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia. The project was majority-funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and also supported by Dusseldorp Skills Forum and by The Victoria Institute through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Network.

The research project explored options for marginalised young people to complete secondary schooling (Year 9-12 or equivalent) through innovative, flexible and/or alternative learning programs.

**PHASE 1** - investigated the provision and diversity of such programs across Australia, with the results (listing over 850 sites) available through the Dusseldorp Forum website<sup>i</sup>.

**PHASE 2** - analysed publicly available documentation from about 20 programs to generate insight in how they work and the outcomes they achieve. Short vignettes of each program are also on the Dusseldorp Forum website<sup>ii</sup>.

**PHASE 3** - involved more in-depth research with eight of those 'vignette' sites. For each program one member of the research team collected additional documentation and spent 3-4 days on-site to observe activities and interview staff, students, community stakeholders and, where possible, graduates<sup>iii</sup>.

For this case study of the Wirreanda Adaptive Vocational Education (WAVE) program, fieldwork was conducted in August 2013. The researcher was on-site for three consecutive days from Tuesday until Thursday during a Term 3 school week. Interviews were conducted with eight staff (which include a main school representative and two sessional instructors), five students, two graduates and two community members who were parents of WAVE students.

---

# ABOUT WIRREANDA ADAPTIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION (WAVE): BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

---

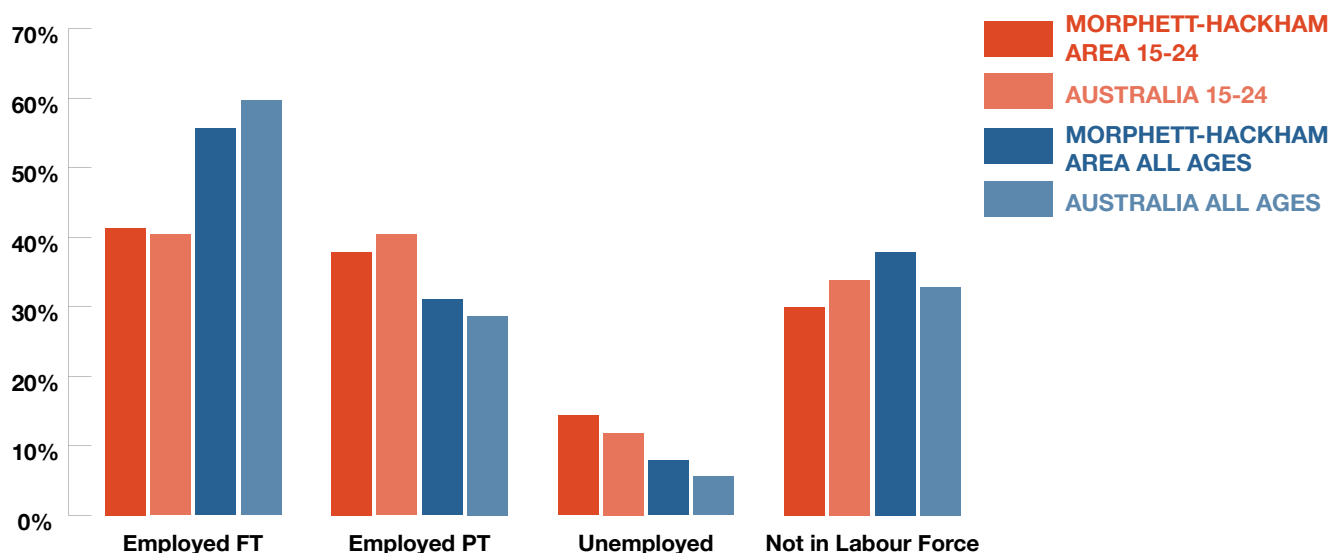
## Context

Wirreanda Adaptive Vocational Education (WAVE) program is located at Wirreanda Secondary School (WSS), the only public secondary school in Morphett Vale, about 25 kilometres south of the Adelaide CBD. The smaller suburbs of Hackham and Hackham West border Morphett Vale to the south, in close proximity to WSS and the WAVE program. About 30,000 people live in the Morphett-Hackham area, which forms part of the larger Onkaparinga local government area (LGA)<sup>iv</sup>.

Retail is the biggest employment sector in the Onkaparinga LGA closely followed by the Health and Community Services sector (20% and 18% respectively). The next two most common employment sectors are manufacturing and education (14% and 11% respectively)<sup>v</sup>.

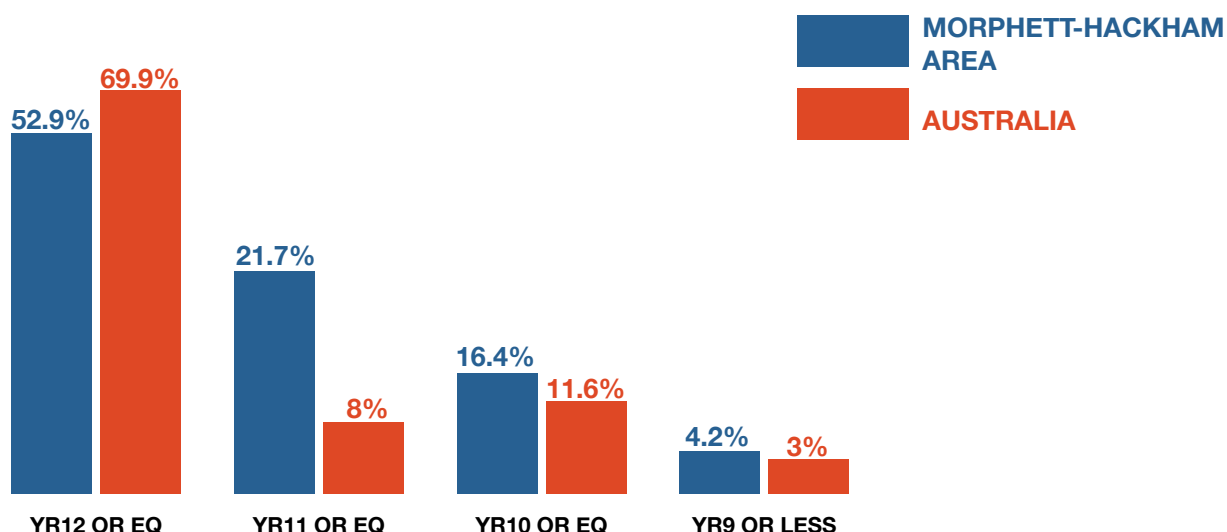
The Morphett-Hackham area has a marginally higher rate of young people employed full-time (41.5%) compared to the Australian average (40.4%, see figure 1 below), and a lower rate of young people engaged in part-time work (37.7% compared to 41.3% nationally). The Morphett-Hackham area has higher overall unemployment than the national average (7.0% compared to 5.6% nationally). Youth unemployment in the area is also higher than the national average (14.5% compared to 12.1% nationally)<sup>vi</sup>.

**Figure 1: Labour force status, percentage of age group (2011)**



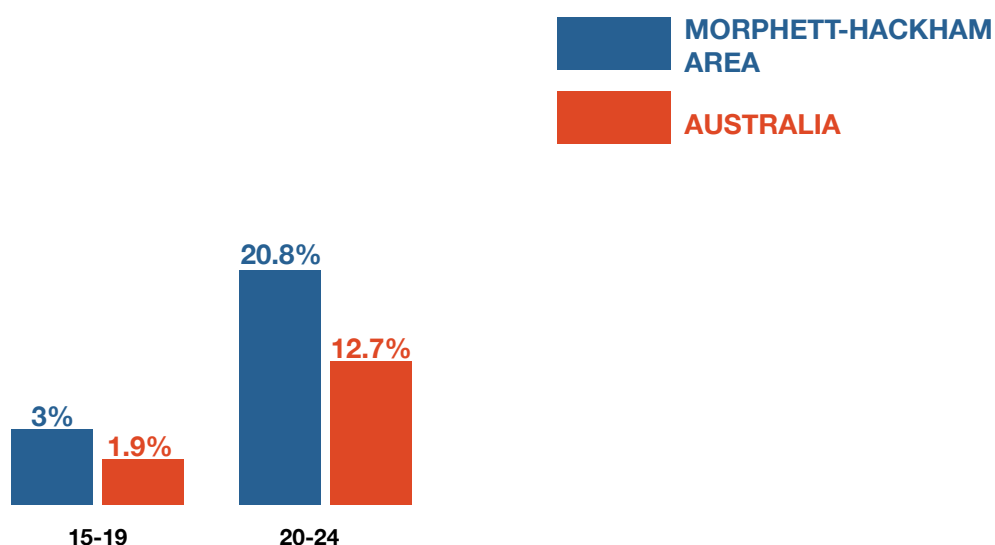
There are 10 primary schools in the Morphett-Hackham area (of which 7 are government schools) and 2 private primary and secondary combined schools<sup>vii</sup>. Wirreanda Secondary School is the only government secondary school in the area. The closest university to Morphett Vale is Flinders University, which is situated about 14km to the north in Bedford Park. There is a TAFE campus in the suburb of Noarlunga, which borders Morphett Vale to the south-west and Hackham West to the west. The Year 12 completion rate for 20-24 year olds in the Morphett-Hackham area is substantially lower than the national rate (see Figure 2). However, the Year 11 or equivalent completion rate is more than double the rate nationally<sup>viii</sup>.

**Figure 2: Highest year of school completed, percentage of 20-24 year olds (2011)**



Because WAVE hosts a program for young parents, it is important to note that young women in the Morphett-Hackham area are more likely to have children than young women nationally (see Figure 3)<sup>xii</sup>. Young women aged 20-24 years in the Morphett-Hackham area are almost twice as likely to have children as the same age cohort nationally (20.8% compared to 12.7%). Three percent of young women aged 15-19 in the Morphett-Hackham area had children, compared with 1.9% nationally<sup>ix</sup>.

**Figure 3: Females who have given birth to 1 or more children, percentage of age group (2011)**





## Program governance and aims

Established in 2003, WAVE is an alternative educational program of Wirreanda Secondary School (WSS), a comprehensive public secondary school with about 750 students. WAVE is one of three types of educational provision offered at WSS, alongside the mainstream program and The Unit program of comprehensive education for students living with disabilities. Whilst part of WSS, the WAVE program operates semi-autonomously. WAVE is supported by the South Australian Government's Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN) and Flexible Learning Options strategy (FLO) for secondary students who are identified as disengaged or disengaging from mainstream schooling<sup>x</sup>. As staff member Adrian explains: "If a student is homeless or dealing with substance abuse or family bereavement or conflict, or financial difficulties or many other barriers, engaging in 'mainstream' ways is not realistic".

The WAVE program aims to re-engage students in meaningful learning pathways in a highly supportive environment. There is a strong focus on student wellbeing for learning and preparation for employment or further study, through multiple pathways toward completion of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE, Year 11 and 12). The program provides opportunities for students to participate in projects, vocational training and short courses both on-site and off-site that will earn students multiple credentials. The Mums and Dads (MAD) program is specifically aimed at enabling young parents to study while looking after their children. WAVE aims to affirm students' personal strengths and capabilities, encourage their discovery of hopes, personal agency and career options, and development of appropriate goals and marketable skills. Through specialised case management and individually tailored learning, WAVE aims to empower young people to make a positive contribution to society.

## Students

In 2013, 130 students were enrolled in the WAVE program, predominantly aged 16-19 and completing Years 11 and 12. Around 10 students were completing Year 10. Most of the students who attend WAVE live in nearby communities around Wirreanda Secondary School. Many students come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and all had in some way struggled to stay engaged in study in the mainstream school system or had disengaged altogether. Some students are homeless, dealing with difficult family circumstances, or physical or mental health issues, especially anxiety, and/or substance abuse. In 2013, there were 27 students with diagnosed disabilities including learning difficulties. Six students participated in the Mums and Dads Program program, including five young mothers and one young father.

## Staff

In 2013, there were 12 staff members involved in teaching, student wellbeing, support and coordination of the WAVE program. Staff positions include:

- Program Manager;
- South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) Teacher;
- Two youth workers who are Case Managers for the majority of WAVE students;
- Seven hourly paid (casual) instructors include the Community Based Learning Coordinator and teachers of SACE and VET subjects, Personal Development Program, Work Experience and Job Seeking and mentoring;
- Student Support Officer (20 hours per week); and
- Two musicians who run the hip hop program 'Delta and Motion' one day per week.

Additionally, a Flexible Learning Coordinator who also worked with two other learning centres was based at WAVE and a sexual health nurse was on-site at WAVE once per week. A psychologist providing services to all Wirreanda Secondary School students was available to work specifically with WAVE students one day per week. Around 17 percent of WAVE students have an external Case Manager.

## Timetable and Curriculum

WAVE operates Monday to Friday during the South Australian school terms. The daily schedule includes three program blocks from 9.20am to 2.30pm, with 20 minutes recess and half hour lunch breaks, and the option of personal learning time from 9.00am. Students' attendance at WAVE varies according to their personalised timetable which usually includes both on- and off-site learning. The Mums and Dads program and VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses are held on Wednesdays when there are no SACE classes timetabled and students involved in work placements attend their host sites. SACE students who are not involved in work experience may still attend on Wednesdays, continuing with their work independently, with access to teachers' help and support as needed.

SACE subjects offered at WAVE include Maths, English, Personal Learning Plan, Community Studies, Research Project, Healthy Lifestyles, and a music production and performance course called Delta and Motion. Many short courses such as First Aid or Barista and Certificate I-IV courses are provided on-site and/or off-site through Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). All students participate in the Personal Development (PD) program and most in Community Based Learning (CBL). These programs promote self-understanding, independent decision-making, creative risk-taking, and enhance employment prospects through community visits, guest speakers, outdoor education, challenge camps, creative arts projects and driving lessons.



## Facilities

The WAVE program occupies two buildings and has an entrance from the street at the back of Wirreanda Secondary School. This provides the program with some independence from the larger school, though it is still close to the main school facilities and some classes held in the WAVE buildings include students from the main school. One building has a classroom, kitchen/multipurpose space and two staff offices. The other has one classroom, the MAD room, the nurse's office and a dance studio used solely by the main school.

A courtyard between the buildings, paved and landscaped by WAVE students, is used as an outdoor classroom and communal area for WAVE staff, students and visitors. Behind the buildings, a vegetable garden has been established and part of this area is being landscaped as a children's play area for the MAD program and a playgroup open to the local community.

There are two main classrooms: Green and Red Rooms. The 'Green Room' hosts SACE subjects, individual learning and Personal Development. The room is lined with computers, has work tables in the centre and two staff desks. The 'Red Room' is a larger space used for training and the music program. In addition, the 'Yellow Room' comprises a large kitchen where students can make coffee, breakfast or a lunch of sandwiches and fruit. There is also a washing machine and dryer available to students. The tables are used for communal lunches on Thursdays, daily staff meetings, and as a break-out area for small group work.

The MAD program has its own room with comfy sofas, a work table, several computers, children's play area with toys and cushions, two cots, a change table and a high chair. The setup of the space enables students to work on assignments while their children are present and being looked after by both parents and staff members.

## Key Dimensions

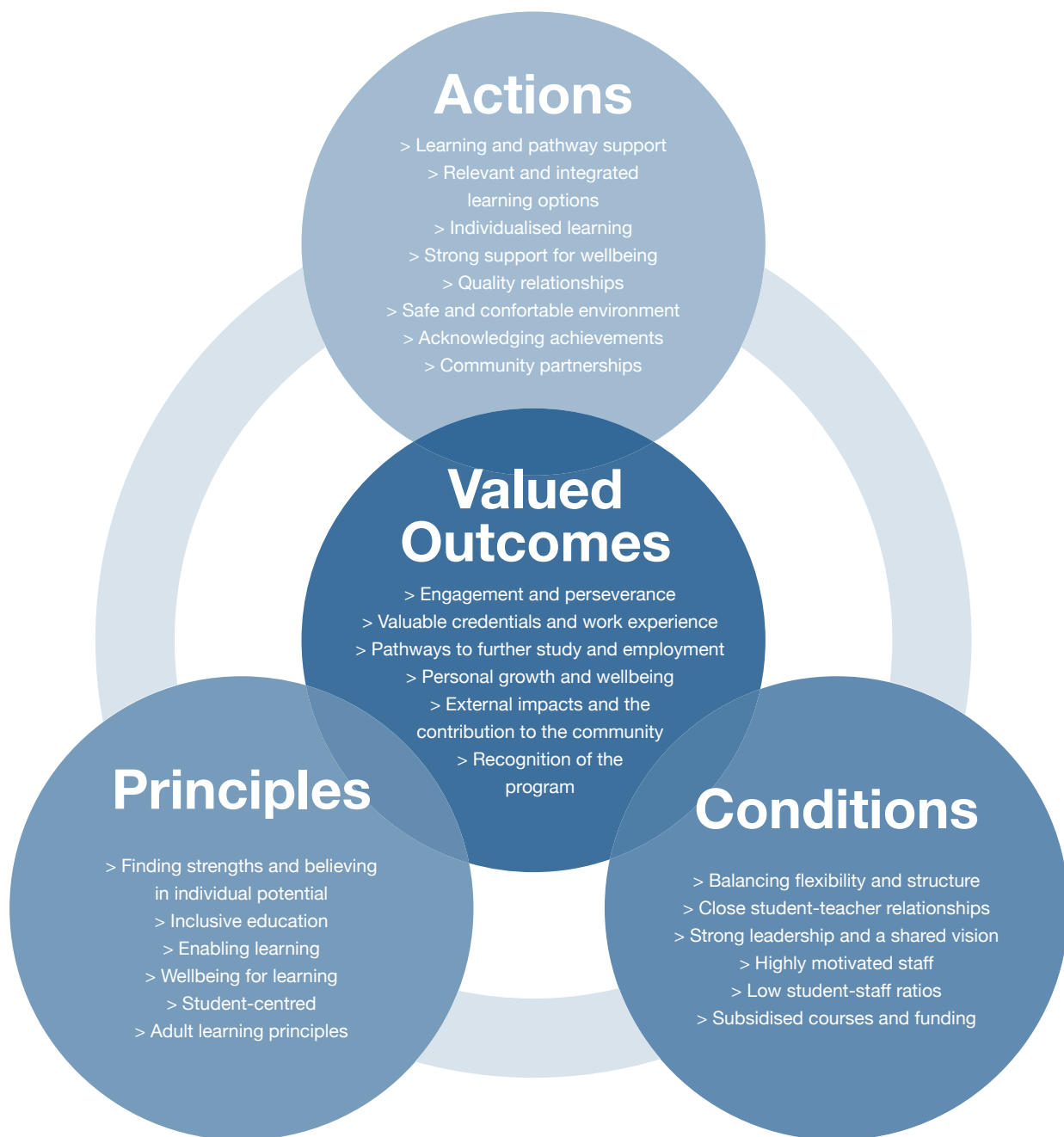
The remainder of this case study will report on four key dimensions of the work of alternative or flexible learning programs: Valued Outcomes, Actions, Principles and Conditions. These dimensions are interrelated, which means some specific aspects may appear in several sections. Figure 4 schematically represents the dimensions.

These dimensions address aspects that are of relevance across alternative or flexible learning programs for marginalised young people. The specific detail within each dimension varies for each program and case study. The dimensions are:

- Valued outcomes: this addresses outcomes from the program that count as 'success' in the perspectives of key stakeholders: students, staff, community members and graduates. Evidence is provided for achieving those outcomes, based on interviews, fieldwork observations, and program documentation.
- Actions: this dimension refers to the actions carried out through the program that support the achievement of the valued outcomes. This offers practical insights in how successes are realised.
- Principles: underpinning the program's practices are principles that produce a foundation for actions. These principles together form the (implicit or explicit) philosophy or vision of the program.
- Conditions: this dimension includes various conditions that enable or hinder people in a program to act on its principles and achieve valued outcomes.

The report concludes by summing up the most noteworthy characteristics of the WAVE program that help to make it successful.

**Figure 4: Key dimensions - Wirreanda Adaptive Vocational Education**



**Note:** This model was developed by Kitty te Riele as Chief Investigator of the project team. Use permitted for non-commercial purposes and with attribution to Kitty te Riele and this report (see page 2 for citation guidance)

---

# VALUED OUTCOMES

---

Rather than pre-determining what counts as success, this section is based on the perspectives of current and past students, staff and community members. For the WAVE program we identified six categories of valued outcomes, which are discussed in detail below.

## Valued Outcomes

- > Engagement and perseverance
- > Valuable credentials and work experience
- > Pathways to further study and employment
  - > Personal growth and wellbeing
  - > External impacts and the contribution to the community
  - > Recognition of the program

### Engagement and perseverance

Young people's re-engagement with education is a highly valued outcome of the WAVE program. A common pattern amongst WAVE students is that they "weren't attending at all previously, or had so many problems in their previous school experience" (Hilary, staff), or "had not a good word to say about school" and "didn't want anything to do with learning" (Helen, community member). In contrast, at WAVE they feel "accepted and happy to be involved with an educational institution" (Hilary, staff). Students are not only keen to attend every day but found renewed interest in learning and completing their secondary education. Ricky and Cindi (students) describe their experience of re-engagement with education through WAVE:

*I wanted to finish Year 12 because as soon as I left school previously I didn't want to do schooling anymore. I was very hesitant. I just wanted to work, but this opened me up and I now realise that Year 12 is important. (Ricky)*

*I wouldn't have completed my school at all if I wasn't in WAVE because I moved out of home at 16 and a half. I went to a mainstream school for about two weeks and I just wasn't going to any classes. (Cindi)*

Aden (student) also noticed changes in peers' motivation to learn: "I've seen a lot of students working really hard and which normally if they were somewhere else, they probably wouldn't, but here they just seem more motivated to do what they want".

### Valuable credentials and work experience

One of the most prominent outcomes prized by WAVE students and staff alike is the attainment of valuable credentials, and that young people often leave WAVE with multiple qualifications. Hilary (staff) comments that "the most obvious [measure of success] with this program is the amount of students that can complete

their 12 years of schooling which we call SACE". Achieving the SACE (the South Australian Certificate of Education, or Year 12 certificate) is Olivia's (student) main focus: "I think it's pretty important to finish all your SACE and stuff then you can go find a job and stuff. It's pretty important and that's what I'm here for". Ricky (student) says that he "obviously wanted to finish Year 12 and the teachers here and all the staff helped me to do so". The rate of students' completion of SACE at WAVE has been steadily increasing in recent years. Twenty young people graduated with their SACE in 2013, representing an 11 % increase on 2012 results<sup>xi</sup>.

Students' completion of multiple short courses and VET Certificates is also a strong outcome of the program. Trish (community member) suggests that WAVE students have more study opportunities than they would have in other programs, in school or elsewhere:

*[WAVE has] also given them extra studies that you normally wouldn't receive through mainstream schools. I think my daughter has got more diplomas, and graduate certificates, and so many other things than what she would have been able to achieve outside of school.*

In 2013, WAVE students undertook 172 Certificate I-III VET programs, including: 57 students in Hospitality, 21 in Hair and Beauty; 10 in Children's Services; 8 in Business Administration; 6 in Doorways 2 Construction; and 5 in Aged Care . Olivia (student) appreciates the range of cross-course study choices and the option to attain employment skills and credentials through short courses in addition to Certificates and SACE:

*WAVE actually does one day courses as well like, a barista course, a first aid course, your RSA [Responsible Service of Alcohol], white card, and traffic management. All of them are one day courses and I try and do all of them. So just on my resume I've got all these - I can do so many things.*

Bill (staff) sees the SACE and other credentials "something to use – real currency – for the next stage of wherever they go". WAVE students graduate with strong employment related skills gained in work experience including paid and voluntary work, VET related placements and School Based Apprenticeships. Students, staff and community members highly value the work experience opportunities that enhance students' skills and networks. As Aden (student) explains, "WAVE helps with getting people work, helps with building up a resume and just giving you experience before you go into work". For Helen (community member), the professional networks "made a big difference" for her son: "He's made that connection now with all those people that he did his work experience with."

## Pathways to further study and employment

In 2013, twenty-six WAVE graduates took up employment, including four apprenticeships; eight graduates enrolled in private or TAFE training courses, two went on to university and two continued their studies in other schools in South Australia . The multiple pathways to further study, employment and training that WAVE provides are accessible, enable young people to change track and facilitate longer-term successes. Bill (staff) describes the diverse pathways that WAVE facilitates:

*We've got some young people who, as a result of the WAVE program, have taken a university pathway. We've got others who are able to enter employment or pre-employment in a way that they never would have been able to prior to the WAVE program. We've got other kids who complete their SACE and then have some options available to them, which they didn't have available to them before.*





Jenna (graduate) emphasises how the WAVE program created a choice of pathways to further study:

*Through WAVE I did my Cert III in Community Studies and I did Cert III in Aged Care. So through that, and getting my SACE, I then got into a bridging course in university. I got into a TAFE, my Diploma of Nursing through TAFE. So yeah, I got to choose between them so that was pretty good.*

Jenna echoed the consensus amongst graduates, staff and community members that her success would not have been achieved without WAVE:

*I wouldn't have gone anywhere if it wasn't for this place. I'm not even kidding, I wouldn't have finished school. I wouldn't have continued on to do further study. I would not have half the stuff I have in my life... If they didn't have this, I don't know what I would be.*

Like many WAVE graduates, Ethan (graduate) believes he would not have stayed in school to gain access to the career opportunities he has through WAVE: "My career is up and running through WAVE. If it wasn't for WAVE I would have just left it, would have been in jobs I don't want". He also observes that many peers at WAVE who previously were "not interested in working - couldn't care less" had left WAVE with jobs or keen to find work: "now I see most of them and they've got full-time jobs."

## Personal growth and wellbeing

Valued outcomes related to students' personal growth and wellbeing include improved confidence and self-esteem, social and emotional wellbeing and a sense of personal achievement and success. For some young people in the WAVE program, this is about "being able to be in a good enough headspace that you can look after yourself and value yourself enough to not abuse yourself in whatever form that may be" (Jayne, staff). Jayne also observes that when young people gained "this value that, 'yes I can do things, I am capable of this'", they were able to make important decisions and act on them. Helen (community member) saw this process occurring with her sons: "with my boys it's about their self-confidence, learning that they can do it and finding ways to do it, whatever it is." Students' improved social and emotional wellbeing and confidence are "real indicators of success" (Bill, staff). The students "are in a much better place emotionally and socially and much more able to interact with other people and see some purpose of a future for themselves" (Bill, staff). Jayne (staff) agrees, "It just changes their whole self, and I think those achievements are really, really important, like actually seeing a change in them as a person, on that level".

Staff and students recognise personal growth in students' maturing attitudes and taking on personal responsibility. Ricky (student) feels that he has "grown as a person" during his time at WAVE. Andy (staff) describes students' growth from when they "come in at 16 or 17 and by the time they're 18 they've totally changed". He adds: "They're more tolerant; they're more understanding; they're more empathetic towards other people and themselves". Lex (staff) sees this growth into "young, respectful, professional adults"

as “probably the biggest benefit that we’ve been seeing happen. A lot of these boys and girls are getting trades, they’re getting jobs; they have hobbies which are healthy instead of destructive”. This is not simply a matter of natural development as students get older, but relies on “having the support from the staff to mature” (Andy, staff).



## External impacts and contribution to the community

WAVE’s positive influence extends to Wirreanda Secondary School as a whole, students’ families, and the local community more generally. Jenna (graduate) sums up the significance of her personal growth and wellbeing as not only for herself but having a positive impact on family and community:

*I don’t know what I would have been doing if it wasn’t for this program. I could have been a worse off person, far worse off, out in the community. They help you not to be like that. I mean, it’s helping out the community. My family has been helped by the fact that I’ve matured through being here as well. You get a sense of maturity because you’re responsible [...] So it sort of helps out in a greater good of everyone I guess.*

Bill (staff) explains how WAVE’s focus on student wellbeing influenced innovation within WSS: In 2014, the purpose built Wirreanda Learner Wellbeing Centre (WLWC) opened as a hub of services for students and their families. Key “aspects of it have come very much from the WAVE approach” (Bill, staff). WLWC expands the model and partnerships developed by WAVE, providing access to a range of community, welfare and allied health practitioners and programs to enhance wellbeing for learning and life.

WAVE engages parents as well as students, including parents who previously “had bad experiences with schooling” (Jayne, staff), both their own and/or related to their children’s education. Trish (community member) appreciates that “they help the parents as well”. She finds that “there’s always a friendly smile” and she values talking with staff and their practical advice. Focusing on learning “how to look after your child and have them develop into a healthy adult” (Jayne staff), the MAD program for young parents is seen as helping to “break a cycle” of family breakdown that some students experienced.

Finally, WAVE also impacts on the wider community through projects and students’ success. Students “become a lot more connected with their community” and have more “confidence... to go out and connect with people or organisations” (Jayne, staff). Helen (community member) comments on her son’s positive attitude:

*He’s going to become a positive community member as a result, whereas, the path that he was going down before was very, very negative. [...] He’s learnt now that he’s a valuable member of the community and that he can contribute to that. So he’s not going to be a burden on society.*



Preventing the detrimental and sometimes unlawful pathways that some young people may gravitate towards is “very helpful to the community as a whole” (Bill, staff). When graduates put the skills and knowledge they learnt in WAVE into action in the workplace, that is a benefit not only for themselves “but also for the employer who’s got them now” (Bill, staff). WAVE’s community-based projects directly enhance community capacity. For example, the Community Bus Project involves students in the renovation of a bus that will operate as a café run by young people and as a mobile training facility accessible to communities where there is currently little provision for youth training. The MAD playgroup is similarly being extended to parents and children of the local community.

## Recognition of the program

The WAVE program and its many valued outcomes for young people have gained positive recognition from the parents of students, the main school and the wider community. For example, reflecting on her son’s success at WAVE, Helen (community member) says, “I really feel that they’ve made such a huge difference to my kids’ lives that it’ll never be forgotten for us [...]. I just love what they do and it’s so vital for these kids”.

Amongst the staff of Wirreanda Secondary School there has been a growing appreciation of WAVE’s catering for the diverse needs, interests and circumstances of students. Seeing the achievements of WAVE students has changed the attitudes of some WSS staff who initially were sceptical of the program: “We have teachers saying ‘you’ve got to be kidding. I can’t believe it, I thought that kid would be on the streets or incarcerated’” (Bill, staff). WSS staff are generally “very proud of what we’re doing with our students here” Hilary (staff). One way staff at WSS show their respect for the program and appreciation for students’ achievements is by attending WAVE graduations and this gesture is valued by young people: “[we] had people’s families there and other teachers, the principal from mainstream, so it was really good” (Ethan, graduate). As Bill (staff member) notes, students are “willing for that [achievement] to be more publically demonstrated and... to be part of that public demonstration”.

In 2012, WAVE was awarded the Southern Adelaide Innovative Engagement with Business and the Community Award, a South Australian Teaching Award for excellence in public schools. This wider recognition provides opportunities for staff and students to challenge the stigma that has attached to being part of a re-engagement program and to ‘disengaged’ young people more broadly:

*We break down a lot of barriers of the idea behind students that come here when we get people in [...] You know, looking at them as real people and not this stereotype of what an at-risk youth is.*  
(Jayne, staff)

This extends to young people themselves. Jenna (graduate) says that when she first started at WAVE she thought “I’m going to be in with ferals” but now she argues “you get to understand other people are why they’re like that [...]. It’s nothing like people think it is”.



---

# ACTIONS

---

To achieve these valued outcomes, WAVE staff perform a range of actions. Some are familiar from across many alternative and flexible learning programs – although each of these is given its own shape and distinctiveness within the program. Grouped into eight categories, these actions are outlined below.



## Learning and pathway support

WAVE staff provide strong support for students' learning and future career and study pathways. From the young people's perspectives, staff are always helpful and committed to each student's success. For Aden (student), this is evident in the way "staff are very involved with the student's work [...] and really sit down and listen to you, so it's really helpful". Ricky (student) points just that "everyone helps everyone regardless of what class you're in" so that he feels able to attend even when he doesn't have a scheduled class: "a teacher would help me [...]. If they didn't know they'd go ask someone and they would help me". Ethan (graduate) contrasts the one to one support at WAVE with his previous school where he had felt that staff didn't care about how well he was learning.

*I had work, I'd submit it, and they'd say it was wrong but wouldn't tell you why. The WAVE teachers sit down with you until you actually understand. They're willing to help after hours and whenever [...]. The teachers here are awesome, they've been there from day one to help me.*

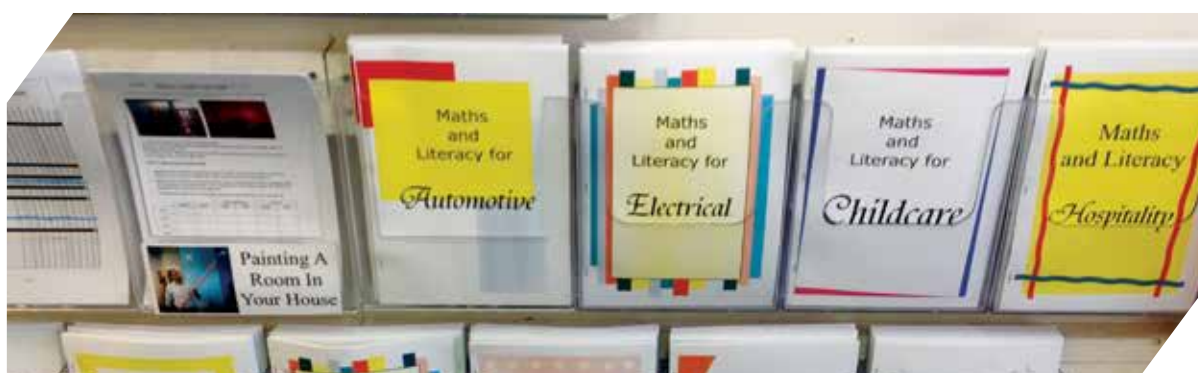
Students and graduates emphasise how personalised career planning and guidance helped students to work out their goals and attain a sense of direction. The Employment Assistance program provides one to one developmental and practical work on goal-setting, communication, interview preparation, personal presentation, job search, application and interview skills and approaching employers. Students are assisted in applying for work experience, apprenticeships, school-based or other traineeships and part-time and full-time employment. Students record and reflect on the development of their employability skills, for example, in team work, problem-solving, planning and organising, initiative and work with technologies.

These records and supervisor reports then provide evidence for constructing a detailed, valuable resume. As part of this program, 123 students completed their resumes in 2013<sup>xiv</sup>. Additionally, Cindi (student) appreciates the WAVE support that extends to graduates: "Even the people that finish their SACE, they'll help them get jobs".

## Relevant and integrated learning options

The WAVE program incorporates SACE and VET offerings, complemented by short courses, Personal Development and Community Based Learning. This range and variety of options is engaging and motivating for students. Hands-on and community-based projects feature across the program offerings and all the options contribute to students' vocational preparation. Staff create curriculum that is practical and relevant to students' lives and their future. SACE learning and assessments are planned to connect with students' everyday life, in school, the local community, workplaces and leisure activities. As Lex (staff) explains, "We try to integrate the knowledge [...] into their life in a way that is practical". For example, Jayne (staff) has developed SACE subjects around life skills:

*I try and make my SACE subjects relevant to real life, so things that they can actually use when they get out of here. So buying a car is one of the maths assignments. Figuring out how much paint you're going to need to paint a room in a house, looking at renting a house, and everything that goes into renting a house. All those kinds of things, I try and make things as relevant as I can in the subjects.*



Because VET courses can gain credits towards the SACE, the WAVE curriculum maximises students' opportunities to obtain their secondary schooling certificate while allowing them to try out different vocational subjects for a career pathway. Community-based projects are part of the curriculum. For example, the Community Bus Project:

*Was designed to expose young people to a broad network of industries and let them experience and talk to not only student apprentices but also professionals that had been in different industries. And really feel whether or not that's something they wanted to do and they wouldn't have to commit to anything, it was just a week by week experience. (Marnie, staff).*

Ricky (student) finds the project "gives you a broader idea of if you want to do trades" and that "it's sort of showing you what you've got to do for different job areas". Moreover, the hands-on learning is a productive way for students to build their skills and vocational knowledge: "You don't just sit there and let the tradies do it. The tradies will say, 'measure from here to here', or, 'I want that 400 high'. They involve you in the tasks" (Ricky, student). In these ways, learning is integrated and transferred between projects, VET and SACE and the different contexts and settings.

The integration of SACE with vocational development is similarly evident in the Delta and Motion music program. This is a SACE subject that centres on writing, producing and performing hip hop. A staff member explains that students develop their "knowledge of self [and] others, they learn how to process, evaluate, write their feelings, which of course increases their literacy, numeracy and comes from doing the musical

structure". Students engage with geography, history, politics and popular culture as they learn about the development of hip hop and performers' biographies and research and develop ideas for lyrics. Recording music in a professional studio, students become familiar with many aspects of the music industry. They develop nous about work environments and "the rules of engagement for different walks of life" (staff) as well as "functional and practical" skills such as using the phone, developing vocabulary, communicating with professionals and self-presentation: "We encourage them [to] look presentable because people take you more seriously. You know, you don't have to always be like that but if you want to get taken seriously, present yourself seriously" (staff).

The MAD program focuses on the 'Circle of Security' parenting skills, child development and play-based learning. Facilitated by a Youth Worker and Skills Development trainer, the program includes life skills and topics such as health, nutrition, sexual health, housing, financial literacy and local family services. The students contribute to the learning agenda and topics are taken up when they are most relevant. For example, when a couple was debating about whether or not to buy some new furniture, staff took them through the budgeting process to help them reach a decision on what they could afford and when. The program also links into SACE studies as parenting can be a focus for some students' Research Project and Community Studies. For example, one student's Research Project topic was pregnancy and she drew on her own experience as well as analysing the broader historical, health and cultural dimensions of pregnancy for her project.

Community-Based Learning (CBL) includes excursions and workshops for creative, leisure and life skills. Activities such as photography and learning cookery from professional chefs spark new leisure or further learning interests and enrich students' VET programs. CBL also meets practical needs related to enjoying life and gaining employment. For example, driving lessons are popular with students and gaining a licence broadens their access to services and employment outside the local area. This was especially important to Cindi (student): "They paid for my lessons which was really helpful because I found out I was pregnant before I got my P's". Having a licence enabled young people to actualise their commitment to work: "They're like, 'yeah I've got a car, it gets me where I need to go and I can be there for these early appointments'" (Matthew, staff).



## Individualised learning

As Flexible Learning Options (FLO) students, each WAVE student negotiates a Flexible Learning and Transition Plan which comprises a SACE subject. With the guidance of staff and their case manager, students complete a range of modules, learning about themselves, their learning, citizenship and career directions, with a focus on participating in the community. Each term students review their plan and set specific goals. This process flows onto all their learning in WAVE. SACE subjects are developed into modules that students choose and work on at their own pace. Developing individualised plans is often confidence building for students as they identify their past achievements and knowledge:

*We sit down individually with them, 'what do you want to do? What have you done?'. We actually point out their past successes. A lot of them have come from a mainstream situation where they might have failed their last year or they've dropped out. So what Adrian does is he gets their SACE pattern out and it shows that most of them got some credits. They might have done something in Year 10, they might have done a VET course, they might have finished a PLP. And he can say 'Well actually, you did this course and you did this. You're already halfway to your Year 11', and they'd be quite surprised. (Hilary, staff)*

For Ricky (student) the conversations around his learning plan are “open discussions” that enabled him to “explore a lot more”. He explains that staff “won’t tell you what to do”, instead showing him where he is at and what pathways are possible: “So they open so many doors and make you think about it”. In turn, this process is a lesson for life: “at the beginning I was very scared but coming here, it’s made me positive that there’s always ways around my situation”. Students chart their own progress toward completion of each subject. Progress in literacy and numeracy development is similarly benchmarked from results on the Compass literacy and numeracy assessment that are part of the information used to formulate individual learning plans. Staff one to one assistance is readily available and group classes provide a foundation for independent work in each subject, with additional group discussion or instruction on a more impromptu basis.

The individualised learning approach supports students to become independent learners. As Jayne (staff) explains, it is about building students’ self-efficacy: “the way that we do that is to look at them on an individual level, as opposed to on a class level [...]. We really, as much as we possibly can, focus on their individual interest area”. Helen (community member) favours this approach because it is “specifically tailored to [individual] needs, not the other kids in the class or the kid that’s getting the highest marks”. WAVE’s approach encourages students’ responsibility for learning. This occurs through supported choices: “it’s still your decision but they’ll give you all the support they can and then it’s up to you to decide” (Ricky, student). Gradually the balance of responsibility shifts to students.

*The teachers show a sense of support and it puts the decision back on them. 'What path do you want to go? We're here to support you whatever you want to'. But the other part then, 'we can only do so much. You've to put in the other 50 per cent. It can't just be us carrying you along'. [...] and that's when the students snap into gear and go, 'I want to finish. I'm getting the help. This is a good opportunity'. (Ricky, student)*





## Strong support for wellbeing

WAVE provides case management for each student to address any barriers to their participation both in WAVE and in their lives outside the program. Case management is led by Youth Workers from WAVE and community partners, the Bedford Group, Re-Engage Youth Services and Relationships Australia.

*We've got students with mental health issues and disability issues. Through the strong support we can put in here, they can get their basic needs met regarding addressing some of the huge barriers that are just making life difficult for them. (Hilary, staff)*

Support for students' wellbeing, like the learning support, is highly individualised. For example, Andy (staff) describes supporting a student who was homeless:

*Just after Christmas last year, I was taking one young lad who was homeless and trying to fit him up with some accommodation and work with his family and get him fitted in a place for Christmas. It's just whichever shape it takes, that's success to me. He's now not homeless, he's got somewhere to live and he's reengaging with coming into school.*

Without such practical support, this young man would not be in a position to engage with learning. This example also illustrates that support for students' wellbeing extends to working with families. As Trish (community member) explains: "they offer advice and they can be a mediator as well between, say, the student and parents".

Physical and mental health plans are created for individual students as part of their case planning. Jenna (graduate) describes how she had been "socially isolated" and was helped to overcome depression. It was just "coming in here" that "helped you a lot" and the staff "know what you need as well". WAVE's flexible attendance is especially supportive of students who are dealing with anxieties, as Hilary (staff) explains:

*They're given a lot of options so a lot of them can study from home [...]. I've got one student that just comes in on a Monday and does one class in the room which is quiet with about five kids and then takes the rest of the work home.*

Flexible attendance also takes the pressure off young people so they can better manage their lives. For Olivia (student), it means she can keep a part-time job: "If you have work one day or you're meant to go to school you just ring up and they'll be like, 'that's fine, just come in next week.' So they're heaps understanding".

Support for students' wellbeing is integrated across the curriculum with specific programs in Personal Development (PD) and Community-Based Learning (CBL). PD workshops focus on relationships, social skills, managing stress and emotions, mental health and sexual health. The program includes guest speakers from a range of youth services: Sammy D Foundation, Headstrong, Shine, Second Story, Drug Arm, Encounter Youth, Uniting Communities, Lifeline and Australian Defence Force. CBL includes recreational and outdoor activities such as ice-skating, bowling, surfing, fishing, high ropes, flying fox and kayaking. One of the challenging CBL activities is the eight-day trek in the Flinders Ranges, led by staff in collaboration with community partner Operation Flinders. Around ten students participate each year. The students find it gruelling but appreciate the break from city life, the fresh air, living more simply and forming closer bonds:

*At the start of the week it would be like a big group at the top and then a group in the middle and the group behind like, as we were walking. And so you'd be like, yelling at the group at the top to slow down, wait for the slower people and stuff. And by the end of the week we were all walking together, like as a team, so that was good. (Olivia, student).*

Reflecting on how hard she found the 100 kilometer trek, Olivia sums up her accomplishment as finding "strength and courage and can-do attitude, like, not to give up".

Practical support is also provided in everyday matters and for improving the quality of students' lives out of school. For example, when students forget to bring things they need for activities, they are not excluded. Andy (staff) refers to this as part of a "wrap-round service", and explains:

*.. rather than knocking them and saying, 'Oh well you're not going' or 'You can't do it now, because you've forgotten your stuff', [we say] 'let's just jump in the car and go and get them'. So, it builds up their confidence and their self-esteem and they don't feel rubbish about themselves, so then next time they might remember and if they don't, we just do it again.*

For young parents, the MAD program offers important practical support. Cindi, a young mother and student, explains how the MAD classroom and teachers made continuing her studies possible:

*They have toys, they have playpens, everything so you can sort of stick them in there while you're studying. The teachers are good. If you need to go to the toilet or something they'll watch him or if they know you're really busy they'll just sort of keep them entertained.*

Students are assisted by staff with "moving house, getting furniture, dealing with real estate agents, doing references, taking them shopping, taking them to the hospital, doctor's appointments" as well as supporting students with in dealing with Centrelink and accessing youth allowance, "helping them with the forms, taking them to the social workers" (Andy, staff). This practical support is crucial to many students:

*Many of our young people survive on absolutely nothing and you just wonder how they even do it, but they do survive on nothing. To help with that, we give bus tickets out and as you've seen, we've always got food, so they can come in and they can eat and once your tummy's full, you feel a little bit better about every else that's going on around you. (Andy, staff).*

Amber (student) agrees: "They make lunches for us on Thursdays and they've always got tea and coffee there, and it's just really great [...]. Some [students] look like they haven't eaten in days".



## Quality relationships

Building strong relationships between students, staff and parents and members of the community is essential to the many positive outcomes of the program. As Marnie (staff) summarises:

*We are focussing on building relationships with these young people and helping them foster relationships with each other. Exposing them to a network of people that they could potentially build a relationship with outside of school and potentially gain their trust or trust them enough to maybe do some work with them or create opportunities.*

Staff nurture a close-knit community. Adrian (staff) observes students who had previously been bullies or bullied getting along at WAVE and describes how developing supportive friendships began in the orientation week with “lots of get-to-know-you activities and fun stuff”. Individualised learning creates a non-competitive atmosphere conducive to peer support. Informal peer tutoring occurs alongside staff assistance. For example, in the ‘Green Room’ two teachers may work with individuals or small groups while other students buddy up to help each other. Over time this creates close relationships. As Amber (student) says, “Socially it’s been good because you get support from others as well as the teachers”.

Staff and students describe their relationships at WAVE as more like friendships and family connections that are based on respect, treating each other as equals and being non-judgmental and good-humoured. Ricky describes the staff as like “a best friend in a sense of they want to see you succeed”. He had been nervous about starting at WAVE but finds that “Adrian was pretty comforting and all the other staff members, you sort of just grow a friendship and a bond”.

For Andy (staff), connecting with young people is about open communication, encouraging the “banter” and the acceptance of family: “they know they can take the micky out of me and I’m not going to bite their head off... It feels like a family”. Mathew (staff) emphasises the importance of “finding common ground” with students, through “being open to learn and being open to understand and being able to listen”. For example, the connection might be in where people come from, the languages they speak, or the music they love. Finding connections with each individual and the group is essential to developing strong relationships that in turn can also encourage students to seek the common ground with others in their communities.

Jayne (staff) emphasises the reciprocity of respect: “I try and act in a way that’s equal. I treat them like they’re another human being. I expect to be treated in a certain way, and I’ll treat you that same way”. When there are occasional “blow-ups”, the staff approach is that “we’ll work on it together” (Nicole, staff):



*The kids come back the next day and every single staff member is like, 'hey, how are you today?'. They've got a fresh start and they've got a fresh slate and it's like they have to get to a point where they say, 'alright, well these adults are actually for real'.*

A mutually respectful relationship “allows you to actually get them to sit down and take a chance, and make a mistake, and not feel bad about themselves for making a mistake” (Jayne, staff). As a result, Jayne continues, students will take on “challenges that they otherwise wouldn’t”. The quality relationships forged at WAVE often continue after students graduate:

*I still have students from years ago contacting me, and wanting to know how I'm going, and talking to me about their lives still and that kind of thing. I think it's made me realise that it is really a huge connection that you make with students when you do pull down that barrier of teacher/student.*  
(Jayne, staff)

The formation of stronger relationships between students and their parents is encouraged by staff and includes mediation where appropriate. Parents are welcome members of the WAVE community and appreciate feeling “included”: “Every time I come here people call me by my name, say ‘hey, how are you going?’. [...] I feel appreciated, respected. I feel like they know me personally” (Helen, community member).

## Safe and comfortable environment

WAVE provides a safe, comfortable and non-threatening environment that supports students to remain engaged in the program. Although the flexible attendance means that students do not have to attend every day, many do and “it just speaks in volumes that the reason they want to be in is because of the relationships that we build and they feel safe and comfortable and supported within the program” (Andy, staff). From the students’ perspectives, the environment creates a homely atmosphere they enjoy. “This is like our second family, we’ve got a kitchen and everything and you feel like you’re at home doing schoolwork” (Olivia, student). Feeling comfortable flows from the genuine relationships established and enables students to focus and be successful learners. As Aden (student) explains:

*We're all equal so that makes you feel more comfortable just being able to come in and just relax and then do your work at your own pace without having all the pressure of all the stuff that happens in other schools.*

This process exemplifies what Nicole (staff) called a “circle of security”, which is about “providing a safe haven, a secure base for these kids” and thereby strengthening their “attachment”. The warm, friendly and less pressured environment allows students to feel relaxed, to talk, to be themselves and to be open to others. Students enjoy, as Andy (staff) puts it, that “there’s no shockability” and staff and students can “just have that banter and that bit of fun, but they feel really comfortable and safe in doing that”. Ricky (student) highlights that the sense of equality, and points out that teachers have fun too:

*Teachers sort of have to remind us now and then to calm down and do some work. But it's an environment that you feel like you can relax and joke around. And the teachers even joke around sometimes, and we're the ones telling them to, 'Calm down, we're trying to do some work', and they're the ones having a bit of a laugh. So, it's good, it's relaxing. [...] it's a lot more comforting than normal school.*



## Acknowledging achievements

Acknowledging students' achievements encourages students to recognise and own their achievements. Bill (staff) puts it down to the program staff who "are very confirming and very positive" and "work from a very positive mindset - growth mindset - so that there's reinforcement of the kid's own success". Music program staff refer to "gradual progression" and "achievable goals", and explain the importance of recognising accomplishments: "No matter how small the goal is, if you're going to do something and then you do it, it makes you feel like a million bucks and especially when people start recognising it".

Celebrations are held every term for students to receive certificates and show them off to their families who are invited to the events. In this way, staff "make it very clear to students that we are really proud that they've achieved" (Hilary, staff). Ethan (graduate) agrees that these presentations "made you feel good [and] if you get a certificate you know you did well". In addition, Cindi (student) points out that receiving these awards each term "sort of keeps you going". WAVE students who finish their courses or their SACE are able to join in the official graduation ceremony with other students from Wirreanda Secondary School. Hilary (staff) believes this is important as graduation ceremonies are "recognised rites of passage for young people".

Bill (staff) argues that "acknowledging their own success" and "having that acknowledged formally", is particularly important to students who previously had limited experience of educational success. This reciprocal process then builds students' confidence to take an active role in the community, and by their actions in community contexts, students contribute to challenging stereotypes of "disengaged" young people and changing the image of alternative educational programs.

## Community partnerships

WAVE works in partnership with many other programs, RTOs and government departments. The Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) in South Australia supports the program through both ICAN and its School Retention Action Plan (SRAP). Several youth services partner on projects, while larger organisations such as Families South Australia are involved for wellbeing support. Often a program initiative emerges from WAVE's collaboration with multiple partners and the local community. For example, Marnie (staff) describes how the Community Bus Project came about:

*[A worker from ICAN] was talking to us about this project but she was also talking to Re-engage Youth Services at Christies Beach about what they needed. They had been donated a big bus and we'd come up with this bus project without a bus and they had a bus and didn't really know what to do with it. She brought both of us together and then we sat down and had a conversation and we decided to go in partnership in the bus project.*

As part of this partnership, students from WAVE as well as from Re-engage Youth Services participate in the Community Bus Project. The project also relies on the collaboration of local tradespeople, including “plumbers, gas fitters, electricians. We're going to be working with people that specialise in branding a business and the graphics that go along with creating a logo; and the cabinetmaker” (Marnie, staff).

Outside the Community Bus Project, many local businesses and artists also work in partnership with the WAVE program to provide students with relevant learning or job training opportunities. In total, the WAVE program has established partnerships with 37 organisations across vocational education, employment, mentoring, outdoor, health, relationships and wellbeing programs. WAVE not only benefits from these partnerships, but also contributes to them through “community capacity building”, as Bill explains:

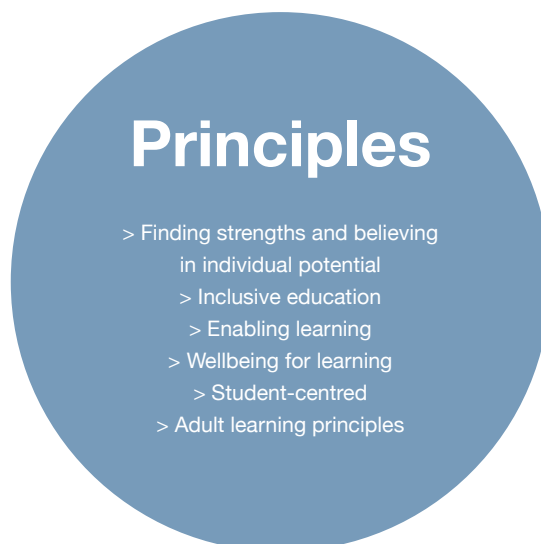
*That idea of probably linking or directly with the community and doing more things that link the mainstream school and WAVE and the community, I think there's a capacity for growth there. We're starting to talk more about how we can have shared resources and access programs.*

---

# PRINCIPLES

---

The outcomes that are valued and actions taken within the WAVE program are underpinned by several principles. These principles are discernible mostly in comments from staff and community. Some are explicitly formulated in interviews; others were determined through our analysis of the data. Below, we discuss six categories of principles that are relevant for WAVE.



## Finding strengths and believing in individual potential

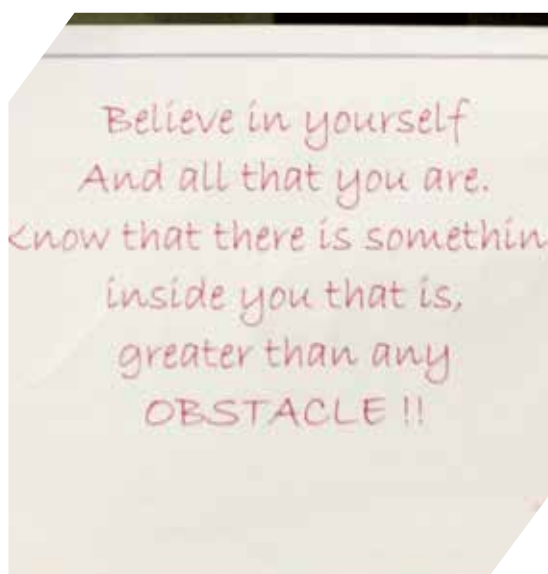
WAVE staff work with a strength-based approach to student learning. Linked to individualised learning and pathways, this approach involves teaching young people that they have worth and strengths to bring to the table, and that success comes from building on learning and life experience.

*A lot of the time you hear, 'oh but you're smart, you know, it's easy for you you're smart', and I'm like, 'well, no actually I'm just a lot older than you, and I've just been exposed to a lot more knowledge and information and education than you. It doesn't mean I'm smarter than you, it just means that I've lived longer and done more'. (Jayne, staff).*

Staff are conscious of helping students to recognise the importance of their prior knowledge and that strengths can be derived from challenging life experience. For example, staff believe the music program provides young people “an opportunity to realise that their story matters” (staff). From a student perspective, Ricky says that at WAVE the staff “sort of expand on your strengths”.

Believing in the potential of each individual and making that concrete in practices such as support to wellbeing, learning and pathways entails patience and understanding that it takes time to overcome barriers.

*It's forward and back and forward and back and forward and back. And it's having a good belief that if you pace [...]. It might take two years before they really switch on back onto learning. So it's having that patience and belief that, given enough time and space and support, that they will move forward. (Hilary, staff)*



## Inclusive education

WAVE staff strongly advocate that education should be inclusive of all young people. Bill (staff) explains WAVE's focus on the SACE in terms of this principle: "[SACE] is the core accreditation and not only should you do it, but it should be an entitlement". Belief in students' right to education and credentials then underpins the breadth of curriculum at WAVE and the ways it is organised to enable students' success.

This principle is evident in WAVE's flexible structures, including provision for flexible attendance and individualised and self-paced learning, to ensure that options are kept open for young people who have been educationally marginalised or not well supported. This includes young parents, young people dealing with mental health issues and disabilities, and distressed young people:

*These young people have a lot of hurt in their lives, particularly the wards of the state, or just substance abuse, or involved in criminal activity in order to make ends meet. It just seems to be that they are left no option and we don't want them to be left with no option. (Lex, staff)*

Even when young people do not graduate with the SACE through WAVE, they have the opportunity to do so later. The SACE structure enables part-time completion over time and the VET Certificates WAVE students complete give them credits toward the SACE. However, the trend at WAVE is that more young people want to achieve the SACE and when given the right environment, encouragement and opportunity to follow their interest, they are successful in achieving this goal.

Hilary (staff) emphasises the importance of the Flexible Learning Options (FLO) enrolment strategy as an inclusive system for young people who are disengaging from education and advocates that all schools need to consider how they can maintain such students past the age of 17 when education is no longer compulsory. Flexible strategies are deemed necessary to ensure the quality of educational outcomes for these students: "Just because they're 17 doesn't mean they've got a positive outcome" (Hilary, staff).

## Enabling learning

WAVE's principal aim is to provide opportunities for meaningful learning to those young people who have experienced difficulty in the mainstream system. The focus is to enable learning by providing a different way to learn and a different format for learning. This is highly valued by past and present students:



*At normal schools, you have to follow a particular way of learning, while here you will choose what you learn about and then they'll support you and find ways to make that help you in the long run.*  
(Aden, student)

*I guess it's just like a change in environment. You're not stuck in a classroom, told what to do. You obviously do [work] here, but it's in your own time. You've got teachers who will sit down and help you, keep you on track.* (Ethan, graduate)

Providing different learning options and formats meets students' needs for relevant, varied and challenging education. Ethan (graduate) suggests that WAVE provides "a good learning curve for students who don't want to be in mainstream school" and "want more variety in their work".

Staff are committed to facilitating enriching life experiences that better position students in terms of career pathways and focus on meaningful life skills. Trish (community member) reflects on the need for support for learning skills for life: "Some of us pick it up really easily as we're growing up but some of us don't, and it's those that don't that need the help from a different learning environment".



## Wellbeing for learning

WAVE provides strong support to students' wellbeing. However, this by itself is regarded as insufficient to take young people where they want to go in life. The principle of wellbeing for learning guides the work of WAVE staff to ensure that young people are achieving wellbeing in themselves and that this enhances their capacity and success in learning. Bill argues that this is one of WAVE's great strengths:

*Often a lot more investment goes into the wellbeing until a young person is ready for the connection with learning, but that connection is always implied or always an end point [...]. The WAVE program is about learning, has a big investment in the wellbeing of the kids, but it's still got to be around wellbeing for learning [...]. If we're not working in that space, then what are you going to end up with? You might be feeling better or you might be ready to engage, but what are you going to use to engage with? If you want to be able to access some course [and] you want to be able to be an accredited potential employee, then you need to have something in your hand to do that.* (Bill, staff)

Wellbeing for learning is thus regarded as critical to ensuring WAVE students leave the program with a better chance of success beyond the program. As Bill (staff) further explains: “I think success is that the kids not only have that sense of themselves, but they have some sort of accreditation or something to back it up”. Jenna (graduate) emphasised that the program helped her overcome depression and regain her wellbeing:

*[WAVE] was helping not just my schooling, but my life outside of school. They help you out with more than just your academics and that was succeeding for me – getting back to my healthy, emotional state as well as my education.*

Jenna’s experience illustrates the way support for wellbeing and for learning go hand in hand.

## Student-centred

*They just want your school to suit you. They want you to come so they’ll make you happy to do what you want so you come to school. (Olivia, student)*

The principle of student-centred education is captured in Olivia’s reflection and is especially evident in WAVE’s focus on addressing individual barriers and planning learning around individual student needs and interests. Staff attention for each young person and their future is a driver of the student-centred approach: “I think the way it works is you really show that you care, and you care about their future and what they want out of the program” (Jayne, staff).

The student-centred perspective also recognises where students have come from in their educational and life biographies. All staff decision-making – from those taken at daily staff meetings, to case planning and curriculum work – and each new initiative at WAVE, such as the Mums and Dads program, is based on staff knowledge of the students, their interests and what will enable their learning and next steps toward a positive future. For the students, this approach is “comforting” (Ricky, student), enabling and motivating.

*We do things that we like doing and that makes us want to do the work... and just being able to do other things that are really good for us and get qualifications for things. I reckon that’s helping us get success. (Amber, student)*

## Adult learning principles

Treating young people like adults, rather than children, is the final key principle underpinning the relationships and modes of teaching and learning at WAVE. This approach shifts the traditional power relations between ‘teacher’ and ‘student’, through mutual respect and facilitating students’ self-responsibility. It underpins significant changes in students’ sense of self and achievement:

*The actual act of treating them as adults who have got a say in their own education and have a say in how they conduct themselves does put the students into a different space. It helps them feel that they’re listened to. (Hilary, staff)*

Helen (community member) says that staff “treat the young people like adults” and as a result her son “immediately felt like he was respected”. She emphasises the contrast in the ways young people are spoken to by staff at WAVE versus in mainstream schools. Students describe the non-judgmental attitude of staff as respectful of their personal circumstances:

*The teachers are more like your friends. They're not just like, "I'm the authority, listen" sort of thing. They're really good. You can actually sit there and talk with them. They're not going to judge you.* (Cindi, student)

*You get treated like an adult. You don't get treated like a child as well. So you feel like you're not being patronised and you feel like you're being listened to as well. [...] They don't yell at you if you make a mistake, they don't send you to withdrawal. If you need time off, you go get time off. If you don't want to be here the next day because you've had a blowout with someone, you don't have to be.* (Jenna, graduate)

Adult learning principles embedded in WAVE's approach include a strong focus on students' self-regulation, planning and pacing their own learning based on their interests. As students may come into the program lacking in confidence, this shift to adult learning is facilitated with the right support, equipping students with the know-how so that they become aware of their own capability. For example,

*Brett, he never thought he could do an artwork on a surfboard. He didn't think that would be something he would be capable of doing, whereas if you give him the tools, [you] show him that it is something that he could achieve quite easily.* (Jayne, staff)

The students want to be treated like adults and have some control over their own learning but also appreciate the transitional approach to adult learning with the guidance of WAVE staff:

*Going from a teenager to an adult, it helps the transition from not knowing what you want to do, to having an idea, from being immature, to being responsible and they sort of guide you through that path.* (Ricky, student)



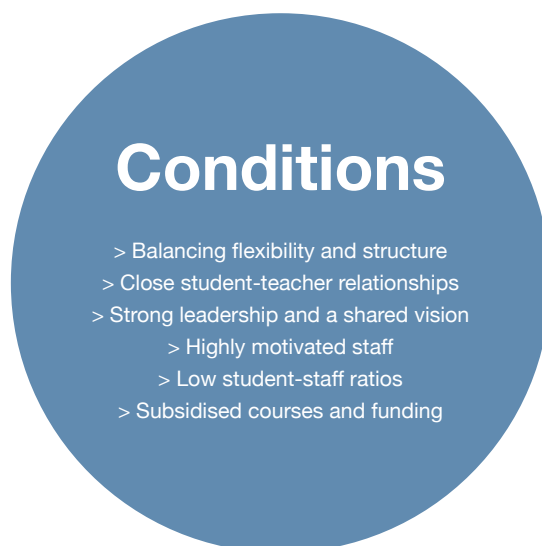


---

# CONDITIONS

---

Several conditions enable (and/or constrain) WAVE's ability to undertake the actions outlined above, in order to meet the outcomes that are valued within the program. Some of these conditions are familiar from other alternative learning programs, but others are specific to WAVE.



## Balancing flexibility and structure

While flexibility is necessary for re/engaging young people in meaningful learning, structure is crucial to the attainment of valued outcomes.

*One of the things I keep going back to structure because I do think that at times alternative programs tend to think that kids who are most at risk or disengaged need flexibility and they do, but they need flexibility within a clear structure. I think one of the strengths of WAVE is that it's got that tightness and looseness around structure and organisation that then enables the flexibility to happen. I think too often programs have flexibility without the structural organisation and they just sort of spin on themselves and so I think that's one critical thing. (Bill, staff)*

The individualised flexible approach rests on a complex, highly structured and practical organisation of attendance records, timetables, student progress charts, calendars for personal (medical, dental, counselling) appointments, vocational activities and community-based studies and projects. In short, it is a lot of work keeping track of where everyone is on any given day and synchronising the activities of students and staff. Students, too, need to be well-organised. Olivia (student) describes “helpful” practical ways students are assisted to organise themselves:

*They give you a folder at the start of the year and you just put all your work in there and all your assignments. So pretty much just my folder, if you keep everything in your folder you're organised. And they give you a USB and stuff so yeah, they sort of help you be organised. And on the whiteboard there's big notes and you just colour in your square when you've done that assignment and stuff. So there is things around the place that you can go up to and be like, 'Yeah, I've done that, that and that, I've got to do that now'. So they help you as well.*



Mathew (staff) argues that “one thing that makes WAVE extremely successful is the network of staff who are on the same page”. The “quality of the people in the program” is critical to “that continuity of vision and continuity of shared purpose” (Bill, staff).

## Highly motivated staff

The shared vision is realised in practice because “every staff member at WAVE walk the walk. One hundred percent” (Lex, staff). They are “all so passionate about the students and their success” (Amber, student). Jenna (graduate) describes WAVE staff as “complete professionals with what they do, and they put up with a lot, but they get [...] good achievements”. Patience, calm and understanding that students have “lots of issues going on... really big issues for them” (Andy, staff) need to go hand in hand with staff passion. Drawing on the complementary strengths of each staff member is essential: “we’ve all got different skills and we all do things in a different way” (Andy, staff).

Staff commitment often involve working extended hours outside of the program. For Adrian, there are typically two or three hours each evening in emails and preparing resources for staff meetings. Several of the staff members, including Adrian and Andy, can be contacted by students if they need assistance after-hours. Andy says “we’re on tap” and elaborates: “I get phone calls on a night and on a weekend and in the holidays, because like I said to Adrian, their lives don’t stop when we’re on holiday”.



## Low student-staff ratios

The low staff-student ratio of 1:10 (overall) is an important condition that enables WAVE’s achievements. Working with individualised timetables additionally means that a large number of students are readily accommodated in the available facilities. It also increases students’ access to staff, including one on one time, so that “they could actually help you a lot more” (Cindi, student). Many classes in practice have a teacher-student ratio of around 1:4, enabling the relational and curriculum work around students’ interests:

*Getting to a point with each student where you know a little about what they may be interested in, and then slowly pulling that apart until you find that thing that they are interested in – we have the luxury of being able to do that in this kind of environment, whereas I know as a teacher that used to teach 30 kids in a class, that just wasn’t possible. (Jayne, staff)*

The capacity to personalise the program is particularly important for students who do not have strong support from their immediate families:

*We've got lots of students that don't live with parents or they've got parents that don't support them, so for them they haven't really got anywhere else to go. In the main school [WSS] staff do support them, but it's very difficult to have the one to one quality that you've got in WAVE. Some of them are underprivileged, but they're very privileged at the same time [because] they've got [that] ratio of staff.* (Andy, staff)

## Subsidised courses and funding

The South Australian Government allocates \$8,000 for each FLO strategy student. A large proportion (87.5 percent) of the funds for WAVE students go to brokerage for individual programs and services, program materials, resources and staffing, while 12.5 percent goes to WSS to cover the costs of WAVE access to shared resources and administration. All programs, services and materials are thus free of charge to the students. This is especially significant in providing student access to VET Certificate courses through RTOs:

*Students with us can access training for free. A lot of families would never be able to afford that sort of input. So, they may have always wanted to do a VET course but their families couldn't afford it. And actually while they're still enrolled at school they wouldn't be eligible but there's a certain provision we've got through ICAN through the FLO "Skills for All" agreement where Certificate I and II courses in lots and lots of areas are free for 16 year olds and over, and also the Certificate III and IV are greatly reduced. So through the FLO enrolment strategy [...] we've got access to more support for the students, so that helps build their success.* (Hilary, staff)

What WAVE can provide is dependent on the level of available funding and as costs increase it is not always feasible to maintain or expand the level of student support desired. Hilary (staff) points to camps; a studio for music recording, drama and art; and more specialist programs as being outside the scope of WAVE due to funding limits, but adds that this kind of wish list "is being a bit unrealistic".



---

# SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

---

The core of each case study report (including this one) focuses on four dimensions that emerged from analysis of all the vignettes and case studies. The starting point is the outcomes that are valued and achieved by alternative learning programs. In order to achieve these outcomes, specific work is done and actions are taken. Underpinning the aims (valued outcomes) and approach (actions) we can discern principles that inform each program. Finally, certain (external and internal) conditions help or hinder the actions and the achievement of outcomes.

This framework is effective for understanding ‘what works and why’ and resonates with practitioners in alternative learning programs. It helps to highlight commonalities across programs but also permits sensitivity to distinctive features. Some aspects of central significance to a program may be relevant across more than one dimension. A drawback of our framework is that, by discussing these aspects under several headings, this importance may have been concealed. This final section, therefore, sums up the most noteworthy characteristics of the program that help to make it successful.

For the WAVE program, the following features are particularly remarkable:

**1) Opportunities to gain multiple qualifications.** This is one of the strongest features and valued outcomes of WAVE. Other programs also provide opportunities for students to achieve VET credentials, but for WAVE the staple aim and focus for all students is that they leave the program with multiple qualifications. The FLO brokerage model enables WAVE to provide the breadth of study options tailored to each student and support them to follow their passions and interests. Students are encouraged and supported to achieve their Year 12 SACE while also achieving VET Certificates and other credentials, such as the white card for the construction industry or first aid certificate, to further enhance their employability and consequently their quality of life and social opportunities.

**2) Wellbeing for learning.** A combination of support for wellbeing and for learning is common across flexible and alternative learning. Noteworthy for WAVE is that it makes the relationship between the two explicit, namely wellbeing for learning. There is a remarkable level of wellbeing support and patience in ensuring young people are ready to learn. Ultimately, however, WAVE is concerned with re-engaging young people with education. Wellbeing support addresses barriers in their lives to ensure they have access to learning that is meaningful, relevant and improves their future prospects. And the reverse is therefore also the case: learning contributes to improved wellbeing.

**3) Balance between structure and flexibility.** The right balance between structure and flexibility enables students’ wellbeing, learning and their many achievements. Structure is used as scaffolding, to support students, rather than as a rigid and coercive framework. This is also important to staff. The structures provide clear parameters for their work, enabling them to facilitate the flexible attendance arrangements, curriculum options and integrated, individualised learning programs. Both structure and flexibility thus underwrite and enable staff commitment, passion and support to students, as well as to each other and the broader WAVE community.



**4) Synergies with host school.** WAVE is unusual within the ICAN FLO system of programs that are commonly provided by youth or community organisations. In contrast, WAVE is a program for FLO students that is co-located with and part of a mainstream comprehensive high school. The respected status of WAVE within Wirreanda Secondary School (WSS) is largely due to strong and committed leadership in both WAVE and WSS. The vision shared by WAVE staff has been realised with the support of WSS; and WAVE's practice has influenced developments in WSS, especially initiatives in wellbeing for learning. WAVE's semi-autonomous status provides it with the benefits of shared student services, facilities, administration, resources and staff professional development opportunities. It also enhances WSS provision through student retention, shared courses, classes and community networks and contributions to program development. For many WAVE students who come from WSS, the co-location means they are able to maintain their friendships with former classmates.

**5) Community networks.** WAVE's extensive network of partnerships with youth and community organisations, RTOs and other service partners is critical to the case management approach to student wellbeing for learning, and enables significant achievements in addressing the barriers in students' lives. Partnerships enable the rich individualised learning experience of WAVE students, including their vocational studies and the many community events and projects in which they participate. Moreover, through community engagement, WAVE contributes to community capacity building and to public discourse to de-stigmatise and promote appreciation of young people perceived as 'disengaged' and of 'alternative' education. The Community Bus project illustrates how the students, staff and concrete achievements can contribute to public discussions of education and innovation:

*When [the bus] becomes the café, with the evidence of support from the local businesses that have helped us out I think it will stimulate conversations about flexible learning and flexible options. It would have been a project that was completely built by the hands of the young people and something that they will be proud to be a part of. (Bill, staff)*

---

# ENDNOTES

---

- <sup>i</sup> <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/>
- <sup>ii</sup> <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/case-studies/>
- <sup>iii</sup> This phase of the research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE13-038) and permission was given by each of the programs. All programs agreed to be named.
- <sup>iv</sup> The Onkaparinga Local Government Area is a large and diverse council area. The statistical data for the whole council area therefore do not accurately reflect the demographic dimensions of the specific area serviced by Wirreanda Secondary School and the WAVE program. Instead, this case study focuses on a statistical area created by combining the data from the ABS 2011 census community profiles of three state suburbs within the Onkaparinga LGA: Morphett Vale, Hackham and Hackham West. We have named this the Morphett-Hackham area.
- <sup>v</sup> [http://www.onkapringacity.com/onka/living\\_here/doing\\_business.jsp](http://www.onkapringacity.com/onka/living_here/doing_business.jsp)
- <sup>vi</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>vii</sup> <http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/locs/>; <http://www.ais.sa.edu.au/>
- <sup>viii</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles
- <sup>ix</sup> ABS 2011 census, community profiles; no equivalent statistics given for young fathers
- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/pages/aboutus/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Information provided by WAVE in 2014
- <sup>xii</sup> Information provided by WAVE in 2014
- <sup>xiii</sup> Information provided by WAVE in 2014
- <sup>xiv</sup> Information provided by WAVE in 2014
- <sup>xv</sup> Fieldwork observation notes
- <sup>xvi</sup> 2013 figures: <http://www.ican.sa.edu.au/pages/aboutus/>

