

# DISENGAGED YOUTH *AND ACE*



Adult  
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## INTRODUCTION

Australia, like other western developed countries, is grappling with the implications of widespread economic and social changes. These include globalisation of industries, new technologies and consequent pervasive changes in the shape of the workforce.

Decline in the manufacturing industry and technological advances in agricultural industries, have resulted in fewer work opportunities for low-skilled manual labourers and more pressure on young people to attain the skills required in the 'new economy'.

On the other hand, approximately 15% of 20 – 24 year olds have not completed year 12 or a vocational equivalent (ABS, 2013). The number of young people who do not complete school is disproportionately high in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, and these people are further disadvantaged in career terms. In fact, they are at risk of long-term unemployment, especially at a time when there is pressure on older people to continue in the workforce to a later age.

Adult community education (ACE) provides an avenue through which young people can re-engage in education.

This paper outlines reasons for disengagement, motivations for re-engagement, and factors that contribute to re-engagement, with illustrations of how this is happening in ACE. It also touches upon factors that impinge on organisations providing such programs.

## 'DISENGAGEMENT' AS A POLICY THEME

Youth disengagement is a problem not only for the individuals concerned, but for society as a whole. When young people are unable to complete school or to move successfully either into further education or directly into employment, they face a difficult future.

In discussing ways to re-engage marginalised young people, Debra Hayes points out that 'a socially just system of schooling prepares all young people to adapt to new technologies, and participate in a global economy that is highly differentiated at the local level' (Hayes, 2012, p. 641). In Australia, as elsewhere, governments are setting targets to reduce the number of people who have no qualification (Davies, Lamb, & Doecke, 2011).

According to Youth Connections, an Australian Government initiative established to support young people who are disengaged or at risk of becoming so, their situation is likely to involve financial hardship, physical and mental health problems, long-term welfare issues, and an increased likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system (Youth Connections National Network, 2013), a finding also made in a Canadian study (MacGregor & Ryan, 2011). This comes at a cost both economically and socially: economically because of an increased financial burden on financial support systems, the medical system and the criminal justice system, and socially because a fragmented society is *ipso facto* not a just or healthy society.

However, research undertaken in Britain (Duffy & Elwood, 2013) indicates that disengagement as a concept can extend more widely, to include some people who are still officially involved in the education system. Such people include those who turn up to classes periodically but do not achieve outcomes sufficient to take them into employment or on towards further qualifications. In this situation it is difficult for a government focus on raising the age of participation, and promoting the attainment of vocational qualifications as an aim, to succeed.

## CAUSES OF DISENGAGEMENT

The Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFE), in its 2009–2010 Annual Report, identified nine groups of learners that ACE providers should seek to support.

Two of these groups relate specifically to young people, but there is considerable overlap between the groups. For example, disability and culturally and linguistically diverse

backgrounds may contribute to disengagement; Indigenous students have higher than average rates of disengagement; and low socio-economic status is one of the strongest predictors of educational disadvantage.

NSW has set a similar goal for ACE to engage with 'young people (15–24 years of age) who are at risk of not making a successful transition from school to further training or work or are unemployed or underemployed' (DEC, 2013), as has South Australia under its Skills for All strategy (DFEEST, 2013).

In research reports on ACE initiatives in two areas of Victoria, Ellum & Longmuir (2013) and Foley (2011) recount the many reasons that can contribute to young people's disengagement from mainstream education. Among these is family background, which may include poverty, which prevents regular attendance, and generational unemployment leading to low expectations of engagement. Those on low incomes and living in rental accommodation may have to move house frequently, disrupting their schooling, and may live in areas where means of transport are poor, so that it is difficult to get to school. These factors are in themselves indicators of low educational outcomes (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010). Their own physical or mental health problems may prevent attendance. Where family members suffer health problems, the young person may need to act as a carer. Learning differences and disabilities may slow progress or act as a disincentive. Bullying at school may make young people reluctant to attend. Unplanned school-age pregnancies cause long-term problems such as financial difficulties and social isolation associated with looking after a baby.

Debra Hayes notes that these young people come to a negative view about school and schooling, and so are reluctant to re-engage in formal education. She cites research in which students regard themselves as "'thick", "stupid", not wanted in the school' (Hayes, 2012, p. 644).

In discussing measures that may prevent disengagement, Nelson & O'Donnell (2012) talk about the importance of parents and families, who can positively influence the thinking of young people not only about education but also about other social structures. Unfortunately, this influence may be felt negatively as well as positively: where families have negative experiences of education, their attitudes may be passed on to their children.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDYING IN ACE

The ACE sector encompasses a wide range of programs, including both accredited vocational certificates and pre-accredited programs targeting those who have left school early. The programs are generally structured to encourage those who may be diffident about returning to study (Thompson, 2013).

Reasons for enrolling in ACE may be either work-related or social and cultural, or both. A recent Australian study reaffirms the economic vulnerability of many of these people. Of adult learners, the report suggests that 'they are often in relatively insecure situations within the labour market (under-employed, unemployed, or workforce-inactive, even while studying for work reasons)' (Teese, Klepetko, & Lai, 2013, p. 3).

The same report points out that pre-accredited courses 'offer a pathway to reverse the disadvantages of limited education and precariousness in the labour market' (Teese et al., 2013, p. 3). Work-related motives predominate in those who take pre-accredited courses, but for many, including some of those who are seeking job skills, the cultural and social benefits are also important.

The young people who enrol in ACE programs generally have no or few qualifications, and in many cases have not completed school. They may be unemployed, under-employed, or in low-paid or insecure jobs. In addition to these job-related motivations, they may also see more general life benefits. These include overcoming loneliness, managing relationships better, and other reasons related to well-being (Teese et al., 2013). In most cases, however, these aims are intermingled with work-related motives.

## EFFECTIVE RE-ENGAGEMENT

What, then, is helpful in drawing these young people back into education?

A British study (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 2) categorises disengaged young people in three groups: as 'open to learning' (i.e. those most likely to re-engage because of higher past achievements and a fairly positive attitude to schooling); 'sustained' (i.e. those with the most negative experiences and attitudes, who are therefore the least likely to re-engage); and 'undecided' (i.e. those who are reasonably open to re-engaging but not satisfied with

the opportunities that are open to them and because they cannot gain access to what they want to do). This grouping, though it should be used with caution, is useful because it can help in deciding how much and what type of support an individual may need.

The European Community, which is concerned about the problems of disengaged youth, moves away from a deficit model and suggests that 'young people need to be empowered through a relationship which sees them as resourceful individuals with a lot of untapped potential, rather than as trouble-makers or underachievers' (Cedefop, 2010, p. 147). And 'ultimately, while support workers can influence a young person's re-engagement, reintegration only happens when a young person takes responsibility for their own learning and career development' (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 28).

There is consensus that the first priority is an environment that the young person sees as safe and supported. The environment encompasses the physical location in which learning occurs, the relationships between people, the way in which teaching takes place and the support that is needed outside the learning setting.

ACE as a sector is well placed to provide the kind of support needed by these young people. This is shown as we consider a number of the factors that help young people to feel safe and supported, and move towards re-engagement.

## INFORMAL LEARNING

Informal learning, that is, programs that are not structured towards a particular target point, are useful as an introductory measure. They enable learners to participate in setting their own action plans, and the teacher often acts as a mentor. They can be flexible in starting dates and attendance times, and are particularly suited to those who have other duties that call on their time. They may, however, be most suitable for young people who do not fall into the 'sustained' group (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). Lower-level courses can help students to develop confidence which will enable them to persist to further, more demanding programs (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010) (Gelade, Stehlik, & Willis 2006).

## LOCATION

Some disengaged young people are reluctant to go through the door of a learning institution. An Australian review of partnerships between ACE and other providers (Gelade et al., 2006) suggests that this may be because of their previous negative experiences of school. Some organisations take steps to place their learning centres where they are better integrated into the local community, so that it seems less like a big decision to enter. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, for instance, has placed a 'One Stop Shop' in a housing commission location (Davies et al., 2011). Notice that the word 'learning' is not used in the name of centre.

The choice of location can also be important in reducing difficulties of transport, and can help to link with other support services in the area (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010).

## PHYSICAL SURROUNDINGS

A level of anxiety may continue to be felt even once the learner has made the decision to take on some study. The physical setting can help to ease this anxiety if it is easy to access, warm and welcoming, relaxed and non-threatening – in other words, unlike the schools that many students remember. Gelade et al. (2006) note the good reputation of ACE in providing this sort of environment. Many ACE learning centres are provided with soft furnishing, plants and pictures, and have open spaces rather than division into formal classrooms, and they are usually small – often converted houses. Learn Local centres in southern Melbourne report that their students become comfortable because the centres are small enough for all students to feel nurtured (Ellum & Longmuir, 2013).

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND STAFF

Once the learner has entered the centre, personal relationships are probably the most important factor in their success. This is important right from the first contact, as Nechvoglod & Beddie (2010) find, so that it applies equally to teaching and all other staff.

Relationships based on mutual respect are fundamental. Further than this, teachers need to gain the trust of learners and build their confidence. This happens when they are friendly and supportive but establish suitable boundaries, so that the students know what behaviour is acceptable and what is expected of them in learning and in the learning environment. Peter Cole, in considering

what makes for a sustainable learning centre, notes that these learners are adolescents, who need to be able to test boundaries and gradually take on a more adult outlook (Cole, 2004). In this situation, teachers will be role models for their students (Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). Teachers therefore need to be informal, patient and empathetic, but keep a degree of discipline. In doing this, staff at the Learn Local centres report that they 'try to work in with the students with their illness or situation and use flexibility and understanding; [students] can take a break if they are having a bad day; we are good at dealing with mental health; flexibility is built in', but 'there are also boundaries' (Ellum & Longmuir, 2013, p. 31). This approach echoes that suggested by Nechvoglod & Beddie (2010), who advise teachers to recognise that there will be complications in learners' lives, and that they may have valid reasons for non-attendance.

Learners can support each other, too, if a buddy system is instituted, and if former learners visit to talk about their experiences. Both teachers and more experienced learners can act as mentors, and this one-to-one relationship can be particularly valuable, according to Davies et al. (2011).

'Supportive relationships have been the cornerstone of the program', writes George Myconos about the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Community VCAL program (Myconos, 2013, p. 2). On the same page, he reports that students who were initially 'constantly angry' acknowledged that their outlooks changed during the program, which they found 'secure, welcoming and ultimately transformative'.

In order to sustain these improvements, in Myconos' experience, the students' need for pastoral support, identified when they enter the program, does not cease as they finish; they need support for transition out of the program, and even later; but he acknowledges that this stretches the finite resources of the program. Myconos' view is supported by Cedefop (2010), though they both recognise that this is not always the norm.

The pastoral support may extend outside the program. In the Young Mums program in Ballarat, a welfare worker was appointed for every five teachers. The welfare workers worked with students who needed help with such things as health and housing. A vital aspect of keeping these young women involved was being able to keep their babies with them as they learned (Foley, 2011). A program for young men, also based in Ballarat, had counsellors on site, and the learners could temporarily leave the classroom to consult a counsellor if they became stressed (Foley, 2011).

## PROGRAMS AND TEACHING

Debra Hayes gives an account of a re-engagement program in Glebe, Sydney, in which she talks about the identities and self view of the students (Hayes, 2012). In this regard, Wyn, Stokes, & Tyler put forward the view that ‘when young people successfully complete courses or modules, they are then given the confidence to construct or reclaim successful selves, or identities, which will sustain them in the next stage’ (2013, p.13). We have seen the importance of personal relationships to this development, but the structure and teaching of the program are also vital. The learner needs to see how the program is relevant to their own life and goals. It needs to be flexible so that it can be adapted to the needs of the individual (both learning needs and real-life demands on the young person) (Wyn et al, 2004). As Nelson & O'Donnell (2012) observe, involving the learners in the design of activities that relate to their interests can be empowering, and especially useful where the young people are not well served by a conventional classroom style of learning. Then, as at Learn Local centres, ‘the kids can work at their own pace; the learning can be more casual even though there is a tough curriculum; all projects are focused on the students’ interests and what they want to do for their career’ (Ellum & Longmuir, 2013, p. 31). But this necessitates careful listening on the part of staff.

The young people’s programs based in Ballarat searched for what the teachers called a ‘hook’ which would keep the learners engaged; in these cases specific projects such as a debutante ball, or a canoeing or camping trip (Foley, 2011).

Such a hook can be seen in a South Australian program, the ‘Deadly Treadly’ program offered (in both accredited and non-accredited form) by Re-Engage. In this program, young Aboriginal people repair and revitalise donated bicycles, and at the conclusion choose one of the bicycles to keep, and donate the remainder to refugees in their area. Along with the mechanical skills, the young people learn about safety, good work habits, healthy choices, and leadership skills. Volunteers are involved in the program. It combines physical activity with skill development and the development of inter-generational relationships (Re-Engage Youth Services, 2012).

An organisation specifically designed for young people in Years 9–12 who want to return to school, but not to a mainstream school or TAFE, is the WEA Hunter Alesco Learning Centre. The Centre runs a normal secondary curriculum in an adult learning environment, where they are supported with welfare and student-centred approaches. Here, as elsewhere, the Centre emphasises the importance of strong relationships.

Hands-on, ‘real life’ learning occurs as part of the opportunities at the Caversham Training and Education Centre in Western Australia, where construction students are restoring the Old Caversham Primary School site. Originally established to cater for students involved with the justice system, it now has a wider remit looking after students who do not fit into mainstream schooling. It reports its services as:

incorporating literacy and numeracy, life skills and employability skills in a non-threatening and unobtrusive manner. This helps students develop emotional intelligence and increases the employability and vocational skills needed for employment. The role of Caversham Training & Education Centre is to develop and maintains local partnerships between state and local government, local industry and businesses, and local Aboriginal communities.  
(Caversham Training & Education Centre, 2014).

One way of designing learning that meets learners’ expectations is using technology. The students under discussion in this paper expect to use the internet for study and leisure, and sometimes both at the same time. For those who are extremely lacking in confidence, virtual interaction gives them a shield that they value (Davies et al., 2011). Social media can therefore be used to advantage as part of the program structure. It can also be used for teacher–student interaction and for peer-to-peer support.

Dilemmas continue to exist, however. The Glebe, Sydney, program described by Hayes (2012) is attempting to re-engage young people aged 13–24 who had left or been required to leave school, and who had legitimate concerns

about re-entering formal education. A danger was foreseen that these young people, already marginalised, could be further marginalised if they were pressured back into education: interviews revealed that they had constructed workable identities for themselves, and that mainstream schooling might force them into an 'identity makeover' that would de-link them from their existing support networks.

The importance of relationships, discussed earlier in this paper, is emphasised by the Xavier Flexi Schools Network in Queensland, a network of four non-state school flexible learning centres widely scattered across the state. The Centre Education Programme, serving students in Jimboomba, Beaudesert, Crestmead and Marsden, targets marginalised, disadvantaged young people. The school achieves its aim by building honest and authentic relationships with students and their families, supporting and celebrating the uniqueness and dignity of each individual. The school provides holistic learning experiences that address the social needs of students, and promotes their emotional, cognitive, spiritual and academic development. By developing supportive relationships with young people and their families, the program aims 'to empower young people to take personal responsibility for their actions and learning, achieve greater autonomy and self-reliance and to engage in the transition to further education and/or employment' (*Youth Plus: Enfranchising young people through inclusive learning communities*, 2014).



## THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACE

The examples cited in this paper illustrate only a few of the ways in which ACE contributes to skill formation as well as social health. A study on this subject acknowledges the value of both formal and informal programs. According to this study, both types of program contribute to the national vocational and training effort (Harris & Simons, n.d.). The paper summarises ways in which ACE plays a significant role:

ACE can play a role in providing alternative education settings for those young people who cannot be accommodated in schools (ACFEB 1997) but that issues relating to a lack of knowledge about ACE, complex and multiple problems relating to drugs and other behavioural issues and the lack of skilled staff to deal with these issues can create significant barriers to participation

- [I]t contributes to increasing the overall quality of VET provision by offering alternative ways in which vocational learning might be accessed and experienced and by specific outreach to those groups who are under-represented or under-served by mainstream providers
- [B]ecause of its close links to communities, it is sensitive to small-scale demand that arises from local needs; accountability to the community is enhanced through community ownership and management of providers
- [I]ts commitment to 'learner centred' practice through its staff, curriculum development and management practices offers an environment and orientation which is attractive to learners and provides an alternative to more bureaucratised settings. (Harris & Simons, n.d., p. 5).

But in addition to these benefits, ACE Aotearoa (2013) notes that the benefits to the nation are far wider, including, ultimately, better health, reduction in re-offending, increased productivity and increased social and community participation. The Brotherhood of St Laurence's VCAL program was found to have made a significant contribution to learners' lives, not least in their relationships with their parents.



## PARTNERSHIPS

Earlier in this paper mention was made of partnerships with welfare officers and with other local organisations. Nechvoglod & Beddie (2010) see a number of benefits to partnership arrangements. Links with childcare centres, other social services and employers may help to overcome barriers to access and to case manage students with particular problems. Links with employers and with other vocational education and training (VET) organisations can help in making transitional arrangements.

The Sandybeach Centre, which operates in bayside areas of Melbourne, works with various services including childcare and library services to provide support. It also works with community groups in community gardens and kitchens and other social initiatives. Davies, Lamb, & Doecke (2011, p. 26) report that this centre considers it important to know 'where to find the supports and resources in the community that can be brought in around the learner, rather than believing that the program can deal with everything itself'.

The Swinburne Indigenous Youth Re-Engagement Program provides a culturally inclusive foundation pathway in order to re-engage Indigenous young people into vocational education and training. It is run in partnership by Swinburne University and the Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Service in an informal community setting, and includes support from community Elders, youth workers and other services (Swinburne University, 2010).

More formal partnerships exist between ACE and TAFE organisations, with varying contributions and responsibilities on each part. These partnerships can help with transition from informal to formal learning and can strengthen links between education and the community. There can be stumbling blocks to these partnerships, however, since the structures, processes and ethos of these sectors differ; so it is important to establish good working relationships and clear expectations.

## CHALLENGES

Not everything in the garden is rosy, however.

Among the challenges faced by ACE is the perpetual problem of funding. ACE centres have always provided their programs on a low funding base, and the additional services and activities described in this paper add to the strain on their resources. The requirement for adequate technology places an additional financial burden.

Possibly associated with this problem, and with the high personal demands associated with working with disengaged young people, is staff turnover. Some centres have a low turnover; for others the situation is different. Myconos (2013) notes that, though staff morale was high, unsettled staff arrangements both caused and symptomatised problems in keeping students engaged.

Even without problems of staffing and funding, disengaged, unconfident and sometimes angry young people are always going to be challenging, and require staff who are highly qualified, patient and dedicated, who are capable of forging lasting working relationships with other organisations whose practices and protocols may be different from those of ACE, and who will be dealing with pressures of their own. It is difficult to teach a group whose members' interest is low and attendance spasmodic. A high ratio of staff to students is desirable, often multi-disciplinary to enable a holistic approach (Ellum & Longmuir, 2013; Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012). Wyn et al (2004) express the view that, since ACE and TAFE have traditionally formed a home for older learners, they may not always be a good fit for disengaged youth.

A challenge in partnerships with much larger bodies, such as TAFE, is that the larger partner may dominate, resulting in a dilution of identity for the ACE body and its staff (Gelade, Stehlik, & Willis 2006). Indeed, the 'brand recognition' of ACE is not as strong as it should be, states a study of the place of ACE in the community (Golding & Foley, 2011). It is necessary, then, for ACE bodies to work hard in their communities to maintain their profile.



## CONCLUSION

'ACE is known from international research "to be particularly effective in enhancing *the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens*" (Field, 2009, in Golding & Foley, 2011, p. 57). By reason of their social, economic and vocational disadvantages, disengaged youth are among our most vulnerable citizens. At the same time, they are among the most important to the well-being of our society and economy, since it is they who will form our future workforce, and it is they who will need to function well in society and to help their own children, in due course, to have productive lives. It is therefore crucial to re-engage them in education so that they may play their part in a productive workforce and society.

Not only is it important to re-engage young people, failing to do so comes at a cost, for example the opportunity cost to the nation of not achieving a highly skilled workforce; the cost of dealing with those who fall into the justice system; and the cost of welfare services for those who are unable to find a stable place in the workforce. Indeed, analysing this cost forms a recommendation of the important report of the Dusseldorp Forum which provides a picture of what it calls 'Learning Choices' programs, i.e. those targeting the groups discussed in this paper (te Riele, 2012).

ACE is particularly well placed to support these young people. The structure of ACE, the small size and informality of ACE centres, and the community linkages of its staff and local governance bodies, enable it to reach out to young people in ways that are more difficult for larger bodies. At the same time, as a part of the larger education sector, it is able to work with TAFE, universities and social welfare bodies to put in place arrangements for transition to tertiary education or work.

The teaching style of ACE reflects the ACE physical environment. Small groups, one-to-one interactions, flexible and informal teaching arrangements and nurturing staff are able to instil confidence and trust in students, which can be built on to accomplish educational achievements which the young people may not previously have believed possible.

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