

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



REPORT SUMMARY

Passport to a Positive Future

Evaluation of the Melbourne Academy

"When I came, I thought "maybe it's not going to work" but it works."

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“ We are all about trying to instill a little bit of looking forward in them, which we don't think they've ever really had. In terms of, it could be as little as three months, six months, 'where are we going to be in three months?'. That could be about developing pathways towards training, towards potential employment because virtually none of our kids have worked, except for one or two on a very part-time basis. ”

Introduction

School completion, or its equivalent, constitutes an important foundation for subsequent education, training and employment, and individuals without this level of qualification risk social and economic marginalisation.

Since 2001, a range of policy measures have been implemented to minimise educational disengagement, optimise school completion and promote effective post-school pathways for young Victorians. Whilst a primary focus has been on retaining students within the mainstream school system, education policy has recognised that issues such as homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, mental health issues, low self-esteem, previous low attainment, or behavioural issues can compromise a student's ability to learn within school settings.

Community VCAL programs delivered by non-school Senior Secondary Providers, such as Melbourne City Mission's Melbourne Academy, provide options – and open new pathways – for students who are at risk of disengaging from education, or who have already disengaged.

'Passport to a Positive Future: Evaluation of the Melbourne Academy' examines the impact of Melbourne City Mission's education model at a time when youth unemployment is high and demand for flexible learning programs is on the rise, particularly amongst early school leavers who want to re-engage.



“ You see a young person go from having all these problems with being homeless and health issues and all of that, to they’re so engaged in the classroom. Regardless of what’s going on outside, they know that this is the one place that they can come to where they don’t have to worry about those problems. ”

Background to the study

Over the past five years, the Melbourne Academy has grown from a pilot program with a single classroom for 20 students, to nine classrooms across seven sites and around 250 enrolments in 2015. Melbourne City Mission is now one of the largest community providers of VCAL in the State.

In 2014, in the context of this growth trajectory – and in light of the complex educational, social and health issues that students present with – Melbourne City Mission wanted to independently test whether (and how) students are ‘better off’ as a consequence of attending the Melbourne Academy.

The Victoria Institute researchers were commissioned to evaluate the Melbourne Academy during the 2014 school year, when the program comprised six classrooms across six sites (one each in North Fitzroy, Melbourne CBD, South Melbourne, Sunshine, Braybrook and Maribyrnong) and had 98 formal student enrolments.

Key findings

The Melbourne Academy student body comprises some of the State's 'highest needs' learners, including young people who are experiencing homelessness, young women who are pregnant or parenting, and young people who have grown up in families characterised by inter-generational early school leaving and long-term unemployment. Most of the students have a two to three year gap in their education attendance history, and approximately 90 per cent have complex trauma.

Are these students 'better off' for attending the Melbourne Academy? The Victoria Institute research finds that the answer is a 'resounding yes' for the vast majority of students, across a range of academic, social and community indicators:



Academic achievement

Despite significant educational barriers, 65 per cent of the cohort completed all or part of their VCAL certificate in 2014, and many worked towards VET certificates. Staff, students and parents agree that most students would not have achieved these qualifications without the opportunity to attend the Melbourne Academy.



Attendance and participation

83 per cent of Melbourne Academy students agreed they were more likely to come to school. Over the course of the year, the proportion of students who were 'engaged' increased from 44 per cent to 76 per cent in terms of class participation and from 59 per cent to 78 per cent in terms of satisfaction in their own work.



Aspiration and motivation

Aspiration is pivotal for enhancing young people's access to post-school pathways. In the student survey, 86 per cent listed working in a job that interests them as their future aspiration and 83 per cent indicated that they were attending the Melbourne Academy to gain their VCAL in order to achieve their goals.



Connections with peers and community

A key component of connection to the Melbourne Academy is having family, friends and other significant people supporting and encouraging the young person to do well. In the student survey, 93 per cent indicated they got on better with teachers at the Melbourne Academy; 75 per cent indicated they are with friends at the Melbourne Academy; and 90 per cent indicated their family encouraged them to do well.



Social and personal wellbeing

The Engagement Matrix used in the research found significant increases in student confidence (an increase from 54 per cent to 85 per cent) and resilience (from 41 per cent to 68 per cent). Students' wellbeing is enhanced through increased feelings of pride, self-belief and ownership, and reduced anxiety and depression.

“ I failed at [previous school] for attendance. [...] Although I started a bit slow this year, I've kept it up. I've been on a perfect attendance for a while now, which is pretty good for me. It's a much more comfortable learning environment, as you can see. [...] I live out near Springvale. Yes, the trip is long, but it's not that bad. (Ben, student) ”

Several key characteristics of the Melbourne Academy model were identified as contributing to achieving positive outcomes for students:

- Keeping classes small is a key strategy for the success of the Melbourne Academy (the student:staff ratio was 14:1 in the largest class in 2014). It lays the foundations for strong staff-student relationships.
- The teacher-youth worker pairs at each site are the greatest asset of the Melbourne Academy. Their complementary expertise enables the provision of holistic support to young people.
- Combining high expectations with flexible, individualised support is hard work for staff, but pays off as it facilitates success for students.
- Co-location of Melbourne Academy sites with a range of other youth and community services extends the range of professional expertise available to support young people at short notice and close proximity.
- The duration of the Melbourne Academy (one to three years, longer than many other flexible learning programs) offers students the stability and time to achieve valuable credentials.
- Young people are warmly welcomed at the Melbourne Academy without exception: regardless of their circumstances and regardless of their formal enrolment status. Staff refuse to treat young people as 'problem children' and create an accepting and caring culture. New students can join a classroom immediately, rather than waiting until all paperwork has been processed and funding is received for their enrolment.



This document is a summary of a detailed evaluation of the Melbourne Academy undertaken by The Victoria Institute, Victoria University, and commissioned by Melbourne City Mission.

The full report – *‘Passport to a Positive Future: evaluation of the Melbourne Academy’* – by Associate Professor Kitty te Riele, Associate Professor Merryn Davies and Dr Alison Baker with Luke Swain is published at www.mcm.org.au. Hard copies are also available upon request.

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