Engaging young early school leavers in vocational training

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *In their words: student choice in training markets — Victorian examples* and *Choosing VET: aspirations, intention and choice*. They can be accessed from NCVER's Portal <https://www.ncver.edu.au>.

To find other material of interest, search VOCEDplus (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <http://www.voced.edu.au>) using the following keywords: access to information; completion; dropout; enrolment; learning support; participation; providers of education and training; student retention; student services; vocational education and training; youth.

About the research

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With almost one-third of young people unemployed or underemployed, it is important for early school leavers to gain skills that improve their employment opportunities. The role that vocational education and training (VET) plays is critical, particularly for young early school leavers. They have a greater risk of experiencing disadvantage in multiple areas of their lives — economic, social, health — than those who complete Year 12.

But getting young people into VET can be difficult. The proportion of those in VET aged between 15 and 19 years declined by about 2% between 2015 and 2016, and the number of students in this age group has been in a steady decline since 2012.

Through interviews and focus groups with young people and those from organisations and agencies serving the interests of young people, as well as with training provider staff, this study sought to determine what actions and initiatives would maximise the successful entry into and engagement with VET for young early school leavers. The focus of the study was on selected economically disadvantaged areas in Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania.

A theoretical framework drawn from existing literature guided the direction of the data collection and analysis. The framework took into account the various factors that may impact upon a young person's likelihood to engage with the VET sector at three critical times: just before commencement, at the enrolment phase and then during the subsequent training.

Key messages

- At the pre-enrolment stage, information is vital. Training providers and support services need to work together to *demystify* the VET sector for young early school leavers to enable them to gain a greater awareness of what VET is and what it can offer them. Connecting with families, schools and other community groups will help to raise awareness among young people about VET options.

- At enrolment, the complexity of the process, as well as of VET funding and subsidy structures, can be overwhelming for young early school leavers. *Engaging* young people in the process through the provision of well-communicated information on course choices and financial support, and making the enrolment process as simple as possible are crucial changes needed at this stage.

- During training, the provision of multiple *supports* — logistic, academic or social — from both training providers and support services working together is needed. For example, support may take the form of scheduling timetables around public transport availability or helping the young person to plan how they will travel to and from their course; or offering assistance or referrals to other organisations to help them to develop their language, literacy, numeracy or learning skills.

Dr Craig Fowler
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Executive summary

This research focused on one of the most vulnerable groups in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system: young early school leavers.[1] While a quarter of those undertaking government-funded vocational training are aged between 15 and 19 years (NCVER 2017a), many early school leavers are unfortunately disengaging from their vocational training before completion. There are also many early school leavers who do not access or enrol in vocational training as an alternative to school completion. The issues of disengagement, non-completion and disinclination to undertake vocational training were central themes in our research into the factors enabling engagement with vocational training.

This research, undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre, with the assistance of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Vocational and Educational Policy, addressed the central research question: what approaches would maximise successful entry into and engagement with vocational training for disadvantaged young people?

The most recent data on completion rates for *young VET students (25 years and under) without prior post-school program completion* shows a completion rate in 2015 of 58.3% (NCVER 2017b). Despite the NCVER data projecting this is an increasing rate of completion from 2014 (54.9%), promoting access to and completion of VET programs for early school leavers has assumed an added urgency. This is due to both the increasingly hostile labour market confronting young people and the relative advantage those with post-secondary school qualifications have over those whose education has ended prematurely.

Predominantly qualitative, our research was conducted in a total of 16 selected sites spread across three states (Queensland, Tasmania, and Victoria) that were able to provide access to disadvantaged urban, regional, and rural communities. Direct consultations were undertaken with adults working to deliver accredited training; adults in community youth organisations that support disadvantaged young people; and young people themselves.

The research affirms the need to conceptualise engagement as an unfolding series of encounters — or potential encounters — between a young person and the vocational training system over time, one that can be shaped far in advance of the young person's (potential) formal commencement. It proceeds on the assumption that a young person's knowledge and experiences prior to their encounter with vocational training plays a very significant role in determining their (potential) training outcomes. We thus look within and beyond the confines of the training setting to identify the factors and strategies that can enhance participation and engagement.

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1 In this report, 'early school leaver' refers to a person who disengages from secondary schooling prior to completing Year 12, even if they subsequently complete a Year 12 equivalent qualification. The level of qualification that is considered equivalent to Year 12 varies from state to state.

Guiding the data collection and analysis is a framework that blends socio-ecological and temporal analyses. In particular, it considers the factors at play prior to commencement, at the 'moment' of enrolment and, subsequently, during the actual training experience.

Findings

Prior to enrolment

- The vocational training sector is mysterious to many early school leavers: the costs associated with training, the range of course and qualification options and subsidy and entitlement regimes often appear complicated and confusing to young people. During this phase they often lack the information, skills and resources required to make informed decisions and may need targeted support and guidance.

- Many people and institutions across a spectrum of social networks and relationships help to establish the foundations for early school leavers' positive engagement prior to their first encounter with the training system. Of particular importance are those within their immediate circle — parents, carers, older siblings, and acquaintances — who play vital roles in enabling the young person to consider formal engagement.

- Effective pathways guidance (for example, from schools, training providers, employment services and community services) and accessible youth support services can assist early school leavers to recognise and consider the merits of training programs.

- Although the vocational training sector sometimes presents a daunting institutional interface to young people, there are indications that vocational training is held in high regard by many disadvantaged young people.

At enrolment

- Enrolment processes, and in some cases large training institutions, can be intimidating and unsettling. Many young people in the early school leaver group lack the social skills, confidence and motivation needed to initiate, complete and commence formal enrolment procedures. Streamlined, personalised and supportive processes can assist young people to remain engaged in these critical first encounters.

- For training organisations, the information gleaned from prospective students, particularly in relation to their wellbeing and learning needs, preferences and aspirations, is vitally important for assisting the young person to orient themselves to the new setting and to cope with the course content.

- Early school leavers can have numerous temporary or ongoing support needs that may go unrecognised and unmet. These needs include housing and financial stress; degraded social networks; low language, literacy and numeracy skills; physical and mental health concerns; and limited access to transport. During busy enrolment processes, training providers can struggle to identify and address these important needs.

During training

- Programs that incorporate structured workplace experience and learning, and a 'hands on' approach to training can support the engagement of early school leavers.

- Access to safe, reliable and timely transport services to training settings impacts significantly on young people's engagement, particularly in regional, rural and outer urban locations.

- Early school leavers are most likely to sustain engagement in contexts where language, literacy and numeracy, learning needs and wellbeing supports are provided. Currently, however, the availability and standard of such supports in the vocational training system is uneven. Both direct provision of support and effective processes for referral to external and specialised support services are often lacking.

Conclusion and recommendations

Engagement is a process that involves a number of stages, with numerous socio-ecological factors having a slightly different impact at different engagement 'moments'. The engagement of early school leavers in vocational training can be well supported when:

- training providers offer programs and services that flexibly meet the learning needs of early school leavers, including enrolment processes attuned to the identified needs of this group, more convenient timetabling, a greater emphasis on lower-level and foundation-level qualifications, improved wellbeing and learning supports, financial aid where needed, and ongoing access to careers guidance

- training providers offer flexible pathways towards a wide range of qualifications of interest and relevance to young people, particularly in regional, remote and disadvantaged regions

- training providers adopt creative local options for improving transport access by young early school leavers, such as car-pooling, buses or via timetabling arrangements

- training providers, their peak bodies and governments make available to schools and the broader community high-quality information about the VET system, its programs and support services, including vocational guidance, and links with local employers

- policy-makers and community and education leaders embrace 'wrap around' and coordinated service delivery models to promote vocational training as a key part of local and national social infrastructure; infrastructure that works with and for young people, employers, health services and the local community. Presented in this wrap around context, VET may less often be viewed as a destination for 'low performers'.

ⓘ Introduction

This research focuses on one of the most vulnerable cohorts in Australia's vocational education and training system: young early school leavers. With 25% of those in government-funded training aged between 15 and 19 years (NCVER 2017a), vocational training has assumed a significant role in efforts to equip young people with the skills needed to negotiate difficult economic and social forces. The role of vocational training is of particular importance to disadvantaged cohorts, who are less likely to complete senior secondary schooling and to transition to higher education or employment.

Unfortunately, many early school leavers are disengaging from their vocational training before completion. Without a post-compulsory qualification, these young people are at risk of long-term disadvantage in the labour market and are consequently at risk of various forms of social disadvantage (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon 2013; Mission Australia 2014). There are also early school leavers for whom vocational training would appear to be a suitable option, but who do not access or enrol in vocational training, preferring to remain at school or at home. These problems of disengagement, non-completion and disinclination to undertake vocational training are central to our research into the experiences of disadvantaged young people.

This research was undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre, with the assistance of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Vocational and Educational Policy. The undertaking builds on past research by the Brotherhood into issues that impact on the social, educational and employment outcomes of disadvantaged young people and on the implications for policy-makers.[2] The principal research question addressed is:

- What approaches would maximise successful entry into and engagement with vocational training for disadvantaged young people?

In responding to this main question, our research intentions were twofold: to hear and give voice to the views of early school leavers in disadvantaged communities; and to consider the practices that support the entry and retention of disadvantaged youth in vocational training for the benefit of early school leavers and VET and youth agency stakeholders.

Significance

This research sought the views of young people, vocational providers and intermediary support services and agencies on the factors that restrict access and lead to the exclusion from, or negative experiences with, VET for the most disadvantaged and 'hard to reach' cohort. The aim of the research was to identify the specific and explicit factors shaping interactions with, and experiences in, vocational training for disadvantaged young people.

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2 See Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre activities and publications, <https://www.bsl.org.au/knowledge/>.

Although there is a substantial body of research that considers equity and access in vocational training (Bowman 2004; Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab 2008; Brown & North 2010; Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Wilson, Stemp & McGinty 2011; Bowman & Callan 2012; Rothman et al. 2013), relatively few studies have incorporated in any significant way the perspectives of disadvantaged young learners (Black, Balatti & Falk 2010; Umemoto 2015), and there is also a lack of analytic research that describes how young people arrive at their decisions in relation to vocational training.

Who are the disadvantaged young people?

The group of interest in this research was early school leaving young people, that is, those who had exited school before completing Year 12. Then of these, we included those who were either undertaking vocational training or those who had attempted but abandoned vocational training, and those who had contemplated the option but chose a different path. The overwhelming majority of participants were aged between 15 and 19 years.

Our sample sites, where we focused our research, were selected disadvantaged regions in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria. Details about the research participants, the methodological approaches used and limitations of the research are provided in the Methodology section.

It is well established that early school leaving can have a profound and negative effect on an individual's employment and life prospects (COAG 2009; van Alphen 2012). Early school leavers are at markedly higher risk of experiencing deep and persistent disadvantage than their peers who have completed Year 12 (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon 2013). Often, this manifests in disadvantage across multiple life domains, including economic participation, social connectedness and health (OECD 2008).

A secondary analysis of existing participation data on early school leavers indicates that those from lower socioeconomic areas and/or those who leave school prematurely are less likely to engage in and complete higher-level certificates. These learners are also much more likely to be completing or enrolling in low-level certificates.

In Australia, the 2011 census data show that almost 18% of 15 to 19-year-olds (over 250 000) had left school prematurely (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013). Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to non-completion. Recent LSAY research indicated that approximately 78% of young people from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) background complete Year 12 compared with 93% of young people from the highest SES background (Stanwick et al. 2014).

Table 1 provides data on the number and proportions of early school leaving nationally and in our focus states. Both the target 15 to 19-year-old cohort and the 20 to 24-years early school leaving population are included for comparison in table 1. We see that Tasmania (21.7% and 32.5%) has much higher proportions of early school leaving when compared with the national average for both age groups (12.5% and 18.9%). In contrast, Victoria and Queensland have somewhat lower proportions than the national average.

It is well established that early school leaving can have a profound and negative effect on an individual's employment and life prospects.

Table 1   Numbers and percentages of early school leavers, 2011

	No. of 15–19 years ESL	% of total 15–19 years	No. of 20–24 years ESL	% of total 20–24 years
Australia	177 373	12.5	295 517	18.9
Queensland	32 697	11.0	56 386	17.8
Tasmania	6 737	21.7	9 700	32.5
Victoria	39 728	11.1	67 631	16.3

Note: ESL = early school leaver.
Source: ABS 2016 Census, Community Profiles, tables G01a and G16.

Nationally an estimated 62.1% of early school leavers aged between 15 and 19 years were enrolled in a VET program in 2015 (table 2). Nationally, program enrolments in vocational training by the 20—24 years early school leavers were lower — at an estimated 43.3%. Looking at our sample states, program enrolments in VET for both age cohorts in Victoria were greater than the national average. Despite Tasmania's high early school leaving rates (table 1), the proportion of both 15-19 year-old, and 20-24 year old early school leavers enrolled in VET is relatively low in this state (table 2). The proportion of program enrolments in VET for 20 to 24-year-old early school leavers in Queensland reflects the national average, but among the 15 to 19 year olds it was considerably lower.

Table 2   Numbers and percentages of program enrolments in VET among early school leavers, 2015[3]

	No. of 15–19 ESL in VET	% of total 15–19 ESL	No. of 20–24 ESL in VET	% of total 20–24 ESL
Australia	110 218	62.1	127 843	43.3
Queensland	18 155	55.5	24 655	43.7
Tasmania	2 331	34.6	3 360	34.6
Victoria	33 178	83.5	36 750	54.3

Note: ESL = early school leaver.
Source: NCVER 2015; ABS 2016 Census, Community Profiles, table G16.

It is also useful to consider the completion rates of the programs undertaken by young people, for many of whom a VET qualification is their first qualification. The projected 2015 VET program completion rate for young people (25 years and under) without prior post-school program completion is estimated to be 58.3% (NCVER 2017b). Despite the NCVER data projecting a rise in the rate of completion from the 2014 rate (54.9%) for this group, it remains problematically low. Completion rates also vary by state, with Victoria (56.9%) having the lowest projected completion rate for this cohort of the three case study states in our study. The NCVER data forecast there will be higher 2015 completion rates in Queensland (67.2%) and Tasmania (71.4%).

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3 As the number of VET program enrolments closely mirrors the number of students doing them, we estimate the percentage of ESL program enrolments from the ESL population counted in the ABS 2011 Census.

What do we mean by 'vocational training'?

This research began with a focus on accredited VET leading to a certificate — at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) certificate I or above. As the research progressed, it became clear that many of the young people and stakeholders we spoke to were engaged with programs outside this strict definition. This included a range of program types, including:

- foundation and pathway programs designed to bridge the gap between school and future enrolment in an AQF level course

- short-run taster programs designed to inform choice of an AQF level course

- Year 12 equivalent courses, such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

While the models of delivery varied, vocational, technical and/or workplace-based learning were common features of all the providers and programs included this study.

Developing a theoretical foundation for the research

This research set out to deepen our understanding of the factors enabling the engagement of early school leavers in vocational training. As has been described by others, engagement is a challenging and fluid concept (Jonasson 2012; Baker 2015). In line with Fredricks, our view is that engagement 'incorporates aspects of behaviour, emotion, and cognition into one multidimensional construct that can provide a richer picture of learning' (2011, p.328). Hence, engagement in learning includes behavioural and psychological ways of relating or connecting to learning. This distinction is functionally important, as high-quality or 'deep' learning is more likely to occur if a learner has high levels of both behavioural and psychological engagement (Fredricks 2011; Crick & Goldspink 2014).

Existing frameworks for theorising and understanding engagement in VET specifically have adopted temporal structures aligned with policy expectations. For example, the framework offered by Morgan, Chiem and Ambaye (2004) identifies three stages in the VET experience: participation, progression and outcomes. Higher or lower levels of participation or attainment by various groups with similar characteristics in each stage are used to identify those that can reasonably be considered as 'priority groups' or target equity groups. Similarly, the Equity Outcomes Framework, developed through the former National VET Equity Advisory Council (Rothman et al. 2013) used participation, achievement and transition to gauge the progress made by specific equity groups. Progress was constructed with reference to statistical data derived almost solely from enrolment and outcomes records contained in the national VET administrative collections and student outcomes survey data held by NCVER.[4]

Early in the development of this research, it became apparent that 'engagement', conceptualised solely through participation and enrolment, was insufficient on its own as a key analytical principle for considering the factors shaping the early school leavers' interactions with vocational training providers. The aim of this research was to understand

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4 National VET Provider Collection (*Students and Courses*); National Apprentice and Trainee Collection; National VET in Schools; Student Outcomes Survey.

not only participation in vocational training, but also the complex temporal and socio-cultural factors and actors shaping young people's interactions with vocational training providers. That is, to understand not only how different factors vary in significance and intensity over time, but how these various factors occupy different socio-ecological spaces and affect different actors.

Underpinning the empirical investigations presented in this report were several progressive iterations of conceptual and theoretical framework development. This aimed to provide a strong conceptual foundation for theorising the complexity of early school leavers' decision-making relating to vocational training. In the sections below, we firstly provide an overview of the breadth and depth of the theoretical background that has been fundamental in shaping our understanding. This is followed by a description of how we interpreted and translated those theoretical perspectives to enable the development of three analytical lenses, two of which were used in the current research. Finally, we present the first iteration of these three analytical lenses in a multidimensional framework for understanding engagement in vocational training.

Theoretical perspectives informing our work

The primary theoretical framework we drew upon in the initial project design was the 'integrated theory of parent involvement in family support programs', developed by McCurdy and Daro (2001). Their framework draws on both socio-ecological and stages of change approaches (Prochaska & DiClemente 1983; Bronfenbrenner 1994; Green & Kreuter 2005). It offers a stage-based approach to understanding the factors influencing engagement with and use of particular social services. The McCurdy and Daro approach also provides a temporal dimension, by incorporating a range of factors into a schema showing person-to-service contact in three stages: intent to enrol, enrolment and retention. Each of these stages is in turn understood through a focus on dynamics at four socio-ecological levels: individual, service provider, program and neighbourhood.

Our need to understand the decision-making of young people as temporal, fluid and dynamic was further informed by Prochaska and DiClemente's 'Transtheoretical Stages of Change' model, which provides an underlying logic of how engagement unfolds and is made manifest (Prochaska & DiClemente 1983). Their work originates from the study of health behaviour change and posits that, in order for a person to implement and maintain a particular change to their behaviour (for example, commencing and completing a training course), they must progress through a series of stages: 'pre-contemplation', 'contemplation', 'preparation', 'action', and 'maintenance'. The model is called 'transtheoretical', as it can be used with a variety of behaviour change theories and models, depending on the behaviours of interest.

For the factors shaping the engagement behaviours of young people in vocational training, we also considered what McCurdy and Daro (2001) highlight as the crucial role of self-efficacy expectations and outcome (cost-benefit) expectations in producing motivations and intentions, as well as the complex relationships between contextual conditions, cognitions, behaviour and outcomes (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Bandura 1986, 1997; Ajzen 1991; Green & Kreuter 2005; Lawson & Lawson 2013). This literature has supported our understanding of the ways in which school-leaving experiences and community socio-cultural factors can shape the confidence and self-efficacy of young people and influence their decision-making

processes. It also reflects the modes through which socio-ecological factors may act to predispose, precipitate and sustain behaviour decisions.

Three analytical lenses

These theoretical perspectives (socio-ecological, stages of change, behavioural decision-making) emerged iteratively from our review of the theoretical literature identified above. In drawing this conceptual material together, we propose three analytical lenses to support understanding of the factors enabling engagement with vocational training.

The temporal lens offers a way of viewing the impact of factors over time and is highly congruent with how enrolment phases are described in the VET sector today (e.g., pre-enrolment, enrolment and retention/completion).

The second lens supports our understanding of young people's decision-making processes. This lens draws together three of the key behavioural decision-making concepts previously identified:

- Transtheoretical stages of change (Prochaska & DiClemente 1983)

- Behavioural decision-making theories (e.g., social cognitive theory, Bandura 1986)

- Predisposing, precipitating and sustaining factors (from socio-cultural analyses, for example, New Public Health[5]).

The final lens from the McCurdy and Daro (2001) model allows a deeper understanding of how factors operating at various socio-ecological levels create structural and agentic choice-preference and behavioural impacts. We describe these levels as microsystems, local community and place, policy and service systems, and macrosystems.

A combined multidimensional framework

The strength and utility of this three-lens conceptual framework is that they align with and are causally related to each other, representing engagement with VET as a continuous journey through time, with particular socio-ecological factors impacting on each stage of that journey. It therefore enables consideration of both the structural and psychological factors that exert a direct or indirect influence on young people's decisions to engage with VET. The framework potentially offers a more systematic understanding of the causal links between various dimensions of disadvantage and educational engagement as these relate to young people and vocational training.

The multidimensional framework (see figure 1) illustrates the three lenses. The first lens (at the top of the diagram, in light blue) identifies the three phases of VET engagement describing formal enrolment decisions. The language used to describe these engagement phases is widely used within the Australian VET sector.

The next lens has the three elements of:

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5 Green and Kretuer, 2005. A useful additional reference is Dupéré, V, Leventhal, T, Dion, E, Crosnoe, R, Archambault, I & Janosz, M 2015, 'Stressors and turning points in high school and dropout: a stress process, life course framework', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 85, no. 4, pp.591-629.

- stages of change (shown in figure 1 in purple)

- behaviour change and decision-making factors (shown in the grey bar), including cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes required to enable young people to progress from each stage of engagement to the next

- modes of socio-ecological factors influencing VET engagement (in dark blue). These correspond with stages of change and are drawn from socio-ecological frameworks widely used in sectors such as New Public Health and health promotion discourses.

The modes offer insights into the intersections between temporal stages of change and socio-ecological dimensions. They give a way of understanding how the factors shaping engagement in VET ebb and flow in their significance and intensity as they occupy different stages of decision-making and enactment, engaging different actors and stakeholders. For example, at any given moment, an enabling or inhibiting factor can be characterised in terms of:

- whether it predisposes a person towards or against engagement with VET

- whether it precipitates a specific trigger or 'turning point' in the person's journey with VET towards greater engagement or disengagement

- whether it sustains or enhances engagement.

The last lens identifies where various factors are located in socio-ecological position and how they impact on adjacent levels.

Although it is from these theoretical explorations that the methods adopted in both our empirical work and our analytical approach emerged, the empirical component of the study focused mainly on two of these 'lenses' in generating empirical data, namely, the time (or temporal) lens and the socio-ecological lens. At the time of data collection, the third (behavioural decision making) element of the framework had not been fully developed, and whilst pertinent data was collected, it was not fully responsive to the final theoretical formulation of the behavioural decision making lens. A description of how these lenses were used to gather and analyse the empirical data is provided in the methodology section, along with some preliminary considerations of the use of the behavioural decision-making lens.

Figure 1   The three lens multidimensional framework of theoretical underpinnings for understanding engagement in VET
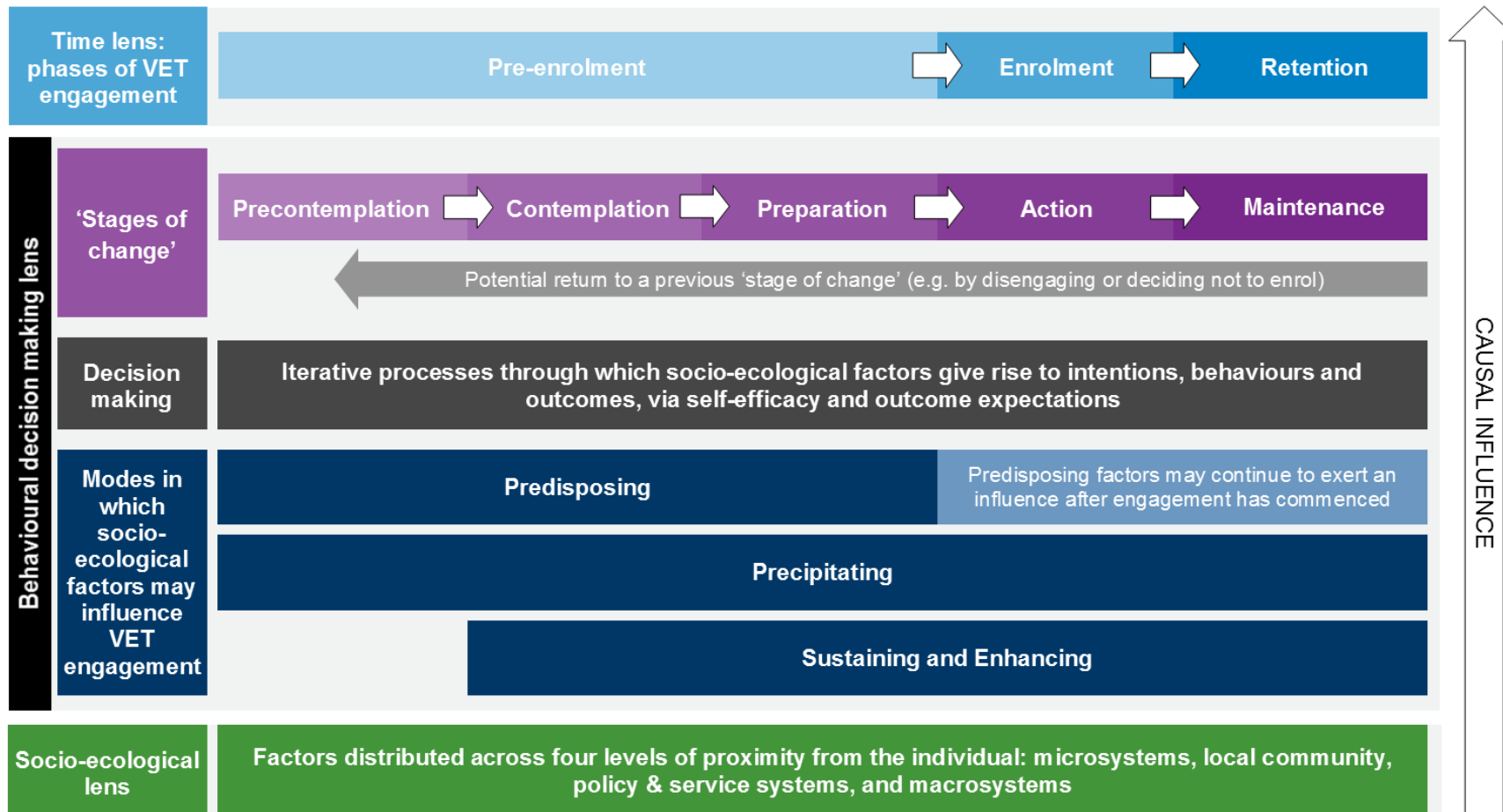
Methodology

This research was undertaken in selected disadvantaged regions in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria (see table A2). Time and resources prevented further data collection in additional states and territories; however, research sites were predominantly identified by our Industry Advisory Group as locations that matched our inclusion criteria of high levels of disadvantage, declining levels of training participation, and relatively convenient access to networks of community youth support agencies and accredited training providers. We used a multi-phase, mixed-methods design. It involved direct interaction with training providers, local social service agencies and disadvantaged young people who had considered participating in, or who had undertaken vocational training.

The fieldwork was locally based and set out to discern patterns which enabled generalisations about the factors shaping the engagement of disadvantaged young people with vocational training in Australia.

All 16 sites were characterised by relatively high levels of disadvantage. The sample of participants within these sites was chosen to provide triangulated perspectives on the range of factors shaping the engagement dynamics of young learners in these contexts. In sum, 216 participants took part in the interviews, focus groups and teleconferences (see table A3), and young people accounted for approximately half of the fieldwork sample.

The participants fell into three categories (table A3): young people (n = 112), staff from training providers (n = 55) and staff from intermediaries (n = 49). Intermediaries included staff from institutions that provide services, advocacy and support to young people, but who were not engaged in the provision of vocational training. Many such participants routinely advise young people about the merits of vocational training and/or refer the young person to training providers.

Limitations

The initial hopes of utilising intermediary contacts to venture beyond Greater Brisbane were not realised, with fieldwork in Queensland consequently limited to metropolitan areas of high disadvantage. This was in contrast to fieldwork conducted in Tasmania and Victoria, which engaged more extensively with disadvantaged regional communities.

Our hope to access large numbers of young people who had no connection whatsoever with vocational training were also not fulfilled. Nonetheless, a significant number of participants who had recently commenced training were able to provide accounts of their pre-training experience. In Queensland and Victoria we were also able to access fewer numbers of young people for face-to-face interviews than anticipated, with a resultant increase in the number of small group interviews and focus groups.

Finally, even though people of Indigenous background participated in the research across each state, the limited numbers in our sample means there is no basis upon which our findings can be applied to entire communities.

Data collection and analysis

Multiple data-collection strategies were employed, including teleconference consultations with training provider staff and intermediaries, as well as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with intermediaries, provider staff and young early school leavers. Drawing on the theoretical foundations outlined above, all questions posed to participants focused on identifying the factors that shaped engagement in VET and how these factors operated across time and across socio-ecological levels. The aim was to gather data that illuminated the factors shaping engagement through two of the three analytical lenses: time lens and socio-ecological lens. As shown in figure 2, it is at the intersection of these two lenses that we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the effect and intensity of these factors in shaping engagement in VET. A simple outline of how we understood and applied these two lenses to the generation and anfdalysis of the empirical evidence is provided in figure 2.

Figure 2   Diagrammatic representation of the two analytical lenses used in this study
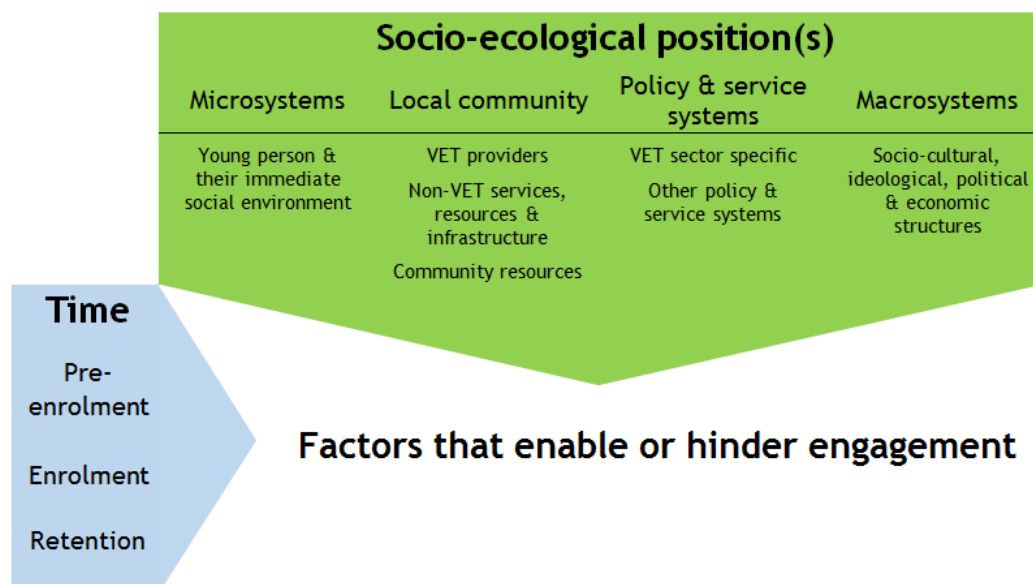
Time lens

Key to our analysis was identifying the factors that have the strongest influence in relation to the following temporal 'phases':

- pre-enrolment: the period before formal involvement with the vocational training

- enrolment: from formal enrolment to course commencement

- retention: from commencement to course completion.

Pre-enrolment phase

In this phase, the young person may not be considering VET as an option. Indeed, they may be unaware of VET, or the relationships between various occupations and industries, and the importance of the related qualifications or skills that the training system might provide. Alternatively, they may have some awareness of the VET system but hold negative beliefs and attitudes about it, and therefore be disinclined to engage with vocational training.

Contemplation of VET starts when a young person begins to consider it as a potential option. Engagement begins with the idea of undertaking VET. During the contemplation stage, the young person's motivation to engage in VET may increase to the point where they decide to enrol in the near future, even though they may not have settled on a specific course or training provider. While contemplating the VET option, the young person weighs up competing considerations. They may seek information and advice about options, which may involve direct interaction with the training system.

Enrolment phase

This phase begins when a young person applies for a place in a VET program, and continues to the point of course commencement. It features direct engagement with the VET environment and particularly with the processes and systems associated with application and enrolment, including direct interaction with training and support staff. This phase requires the learner to maintain a sufficient level of commitment to enable them to proceed to commencement.

Retention phase

This phase begins at course commencement and ends with course completion. We recognise that in the months following commencement, the risk of disengagement remains high due to a potential combination of initial barriers and often weak sustaining factors. During this phase the institutional learning setting becomes a dominant influence on engagement behaviour. However, the influence of factors outside the setting should not be underestimated. We also note that progress in all the phases is not linear or one-directional.

Socio-ecological lens

This lens recognises that the factors influencing engagement in VET may be located anywhere across the socio-ecological system (Bronfenbrenner 1994). In line with socio-ecological theory, we understand that causality can be complex, with many factors interacting to produce a particular outcome (Mattaini 2008). We also recognise that collective and cumulative impacts must be considered when identifying factors that enable or inhibit engagement with vocational training. We considered factors distributed across four domains or levels:

- the young person and their immediate social environment (microsystems)
- the local community and place, which can be further detailed as:
  - VET providers
  - non-VET services and infrastructure (including health, community, youth and employment services, schools, transport and public amenities)
  - other community resources and stakeholders (including the business community, community groups, community leaders and community role models)
- policy and service systems, including:
  - the VET sector (for example, VET governance and funding regimes, training provider types, program qualifications, modes of delivery etc.)

- – other service sectors (for example, broader educational and youth policies, the mental health system, and labour market policies)

- the macrosystems level (concerning socio-cultural, gender, ideological, organisational, political and economic structures).

Reference to these levels does not imply that influences are confined to one level or another. Rather, the approach offers a way of visualising the complex ways by which social, political and economic forces can combine and manifest in factors that run across multiple socio-ecological levels.

The socio-ecological lens was also used to guide and structure the review of existing literature (see appendix B).

Analysis

All qualitative data were coded using NVivo software, which enabled us to ascertain both *frequency* and *intensity* of factors. Individual factors were then grouped into categories based on the causal or other types of relationships among those factors (for example, location of training providers and transport options).

Following the initial thematic coding processes, we analysed the grouped factors using the two lenses (temporal and socio-ecological) to identify and determine the times or stages at which the factors had the strongest influence on engagement, and the 'socio-ecological position' of these factors; that is, where they were situated, from the micro level to the macro level (the young person and their immediate social environment, training provider, program, local community, policy and service system, and macro system levels). We then compared the empirical factor groupings for alignment with the factor groupings that had emerged from the literature review. Finally, we also undertook some exploratory analysis of the grouped factors from the combined temporal and socio-ecological lenses by using the behavioural decision-making lens, with a view to assessing the capacity of the data to reveal decision-making patterns. Although this preliminary assessment was promising, it yielded too little new data to be able to report with confidence at this time.

Ethics

The ethical considerations and precautions needed for this research were addressed in the project's application for approval from the Brotherhood of St Laurence Human Research Ethics Committee (accredited by the National Health and Medical Research Council). Plain-language project descriptions and informed consent forms were used and signed off with all interview and focus group participants. Each of these forms stated the possible risks to participants as a result of their participation in the research, as well as their right to withdraw and to review the findings.

Views of young people, training provider staff and intermediaries

In our findings we convey the views of young early school leavers, intermediaries — those from referral organisations, community-based services and other agencies serving the interests of young people — as well as those working for training providers in disadvantaged locations across our sample sites. (Note that pseudonyms are used throughout.) The insights and perspectives of our participants were focused upon:

- the circumstances of young people prior to undertaking VET

- the factors that attracted them to, or discouraged them from, choosing VET

- the regard for VET as a means for advancing their education and employability

- the barriers and challenges faced in transitioning from secondary school

- their experiences of enquiring into and, where applicable, undertaking enrolment processes

- the barriers or enablers when choosing and then enrolling into courses

- the factors that hindered or enabled learning and their continuing engagement

- the factors that assisted in overcoming barriers to continuation.

It is important to note that the order and structure of the findings presented should not be interpreted as indicating increasing or decreasing levels of importance. Rather, the findings are grouped into the factors and themes that correspond to phases of engagement (see figure 3). The temporal terminology adopted here corresponded closely with that which was used by the participants themselves and is commonly used in VET policy documentation: pre-enrolment, enrolment and retention.

Figure 3   Mapping grouped factors by phase of VET engagement

PRE-ENROLMENT	ENROLMENT	RETENTION
Family attitudes to/knowledge of VET		
Information from schools and providers		
Range and availability of courses		
Location of providers and transport options		
Access to subsidies and funding		
Difficulty of enrolment processes		
Communication and commitment by staff members		
Peer dynamics and learning environments		
Skill levels and learning supports		
Work-focused and hands-on learning		
Wellbeing issues and supports		

Family attitudes to and knowledge of vocational education and training

Informed family members pass on information

Young people identified family members as the main source of information about VET. Some interviewees noted that they learnt about vocational education through siblings who had undertaken formal vocational training. For John (young person, metro Queensland), 'until my brother came here, I had not one clue that TAFE existed'.

Some young people stated that their parents had taken the initiative to explain VET options and their own experiences with it, which were important in prompting the young person's interest. For Alice (young person, regional Victoria), her parents discussed TAFE (technical and further education) with her in Year 9 'so when I got to Year 10 I could actually have more serious thought into it'.

Parents' attitudes to vocational education and training influence the attitudes of young people

Intermediaries spoke about the intergenerational transfer of attitudes and perceptions regarding VET and education in general. The most common cultural attitude they identified involved the perceived low value of completing education at all:

> Their socioeconomic background, that really affects them getting into school and trying to make something of their lives, because their family are not doing that. They might be perennially on unemployment, like grandmother, father; everybody's on unemployment, so that's normal for them.   (Cheryl, intermediary, metro Tasmania)

Interviewees held the view that adults' negative experiences of education filter through to their children, and that a significant number of adults could not see the benefits of education and were content to subsist on welfare payments.

Family members' opinions about VET sometimes played a pivotal role in the young person's decision about whether or not to engage. Training provider staff and young people offered examples of parents who were unsupportive. A provider staff member noted that one young person was afraid that their parents would learn of their intentions: 'We had to actually keep [their] books at the office for them because they felt like they couldn't take them home' (Irene, provider staff, metro Tas.). Young people similarly noted that the negative attitudes of parents prevented some young people from enrolling in vocational training:

> There are so many people I can think of at university or struggling at college [high school] right now and I'm like, 'Why don't you go to TAFE?' 'Mum and Dad won't let me!'   (Rachel, young person, metro Tas.)

A young mother noted that she had family and friends who were unsupportive of her undertaking vocational training 'because apparently, being a mother is all I'm allowed to be' (Katherine, young person, regional Vic.). Even grandparents might offer strong opinions: 'My grandfather said go to TAFE if you want to … My grandmother said TAFE is for unimportant people' (Rachel, young person, metro Tas.).

However, one young person noted that parental attitudes could change for younger children if older siblings led the way and undertook training themselves:

> My brother came here and said it was good, and my mum didn't want him to go and she
> didn't want me to go. By the time I got here she started finally seeing what it was like
> and that it was a good program. (John, young person, metro Qld)

Some training provider staff suggested that parents who are supportive of their children undertaking VET are usually those who have done so themselves, or who work in a trade. These parents feel that practical hands-on learning expands the range of opportunities and is 'something that gives their sons and daughters immediate exposure to career experience and career pathways' (Patrick, provider staff, metro Vic.).

The need to challenge negative community attitudes

Community perceptions and expectations were regarded by some training provider staff as a barrier, with university for the 'smart people', and TAFE reserved for trade workers. According to some intermediaries, these perceptions have hardened over time as young people are increasingly pushed towards university rather than to VET. Despite these social norms, both the provider staff and young people we spoke to often held VET in high regard, pointing to some false assumptions about intelligence and skills. As Margaret (provider staff, regional Tas.) noted, 'you don't want a dumb tradie working on your car'.

Information from schools and training providers

Adequate and relevant careers guidance in schools about vocational education and training options is essential

Many respondents commented on the uneven nature and quality of the advice about VET given to young people in schools. They highlighted the inconsistency or absence of advice and information about training options. For James (young person, regional Tas.), 'going through high school, I never even heard the word TAFE being used'. Another young respondent argued that many of their peers would have taken the TAFE option instead of enrolling in senior secondary schooling if they had had more knowledge about it:

> When we finished Year 10 they didn't tell us that we could go to TAFE. If they had told
> us we could go to TAFE and get a cert III and we didn't have to do Year 11 and 12 and
> we could get a job, most of us would have [gone]. We didn't know, so everyone signed
> up for Year 11 and 12, and half of us dropped out. (Ryan, young person, metro Tas.)

Some young people were unable to access information about VET at school (for example, via careers guidance discussions, pamphlets or careers information boards), while others felt that the onus was on them to initiate conversations with guidance counsellors: 'it was always us having to do the work' (John, young person, metro Qld). Interviewees from all participant categories argued that careers guidance for students either was inadequate, or was offered belatedly and needed to begin earlier than the 'senior years'. This delay has serious consequences relating to disengagement:

> When you look at where school disengagement really starts and peaks … it's kind of in
> those middle years of schooling around Year 8 and 9 … the question of not knowing how
> relevant your schooling is, not seeing a pathway out of it, not knowing why you're
> bothering to do it or not, certainly does seem to be one factor for young people.
>
> (Ruth, intermediary, metro Vic.)

Intermediaries and training provider staff in all three states argued that adequate resources — funding and/or expertise — were not made available for careers learning and guidance in secondary schools. The effect of this was raised by intermediaries and young people alike:

> Your careers teacher in the school has a teaching load or that person may be the welfare facilitator. Gone are the days where you had dedicated teachers to work with these kids. (Judy, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Vocational education and training pathways need to be 'valued' in schools

Many interviewees spoke at length about the perceived low status that secondary schools gave to VET pathways, and which often resonated with family biases. Lisa (provider staff, regional Vic.) argued that many schools are 'encouraging their students to aim to go to uni, and TAFE tends to be the second choice'. Young respondents demonstrated an awareness of such judgments:

> A lot of people from the schools think that TAFE is for dropouts and I was getting a lot of that … I got a lot of attitude from them. (John, young person, metro Qld)

> It's more like they threaten you in a way, as in, 'Hey, if you don't finish school, you're going to TAFE! (Timothy, young person, regional Vic.)

Many intermediaries and training provider staff also offered the view that schools frequently 'streamed' their students towards university or VET using academic achievement as the principal indicator with little regard for students' own interests.

Training providers need to market and engage directly with schools

Young interviewees referred to the absence of information and marketing by training providers themselves. Rachel (young person, metro Tas.) noted that: 'You see a lot of university [adverts] on the back of a bus, you never see a [TAFE] one'. Numerous respondents also argued that training providers should spend more time and effort engaging with schools to convey information directly to students and staff:

> I would probably be a fully qualified chef by now if someone had come in from TAFE and said, 'This is the hospitality course we're offering, this is how much it is, come in and do it'. I would have probably gone straight to TAFE into kitchen work while I was still in the hospitality headspace. (David, young person, regional Tas.)

Interviewees' suggestions for closer engagement by training providers included student information sessions, presentations at school assemblies and school staff professional development.

Range and availability of courses

A wider range of courses in regional and rural areas could increase the uptake of vocational education and training

The majority of our respondents emphasised the importance of offering young people a wide range of course choices. Student interviewees often preferred the larger TAFE institutions, which offered access to a greater variety of trade courses than schools or smaller VET providers. However many interviewees reported the lack of course options available to young people living in regional and remote areas with relatively small

populations. Interviewees in Gippsland, for example, explained how restricted options were directly linked to the lack of training providers:

> In the city, a student of VET would walk out their door and walk to their VET training and probably pass five other training providers ... whereas here, [TAFE is] largely it. We don't have an alternative. (Fred, provider staff, regional Vic.)

> Private providers have largely stayed out of this region because of the return on their investments. It costs a lot to deliver down here if they're travelling from Melbourne or if they have to set up new infrastructure. There isn't the sizeable market for them to come so they don't ... and even the TAFE has had to merge and has cut back the courses it's offering. (Amanda, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Some intermediaries and training provider staff lamented the lack of online VET courses, which they felt had the potential to overcome the barrier of distance. For eastern Gippsland and parts of Tasmania, this gap was in part attributed to poor internet connectivity. In Tasmania, some restricted course options applied to the entire state:

> There were a couple of things I wanted to do, a few of which weren't actually offered in Tasmania, which was really difficult for me. Obviously being my age, you can't just up and leave and go to Sydney. (Rachel, young person, metro Tas.)

Courses offered need to be in fields and at levels suitable for early school leavers

Beyond the limited *range* of course offerings, interviewees also noted that there was often a lack of *suitable* courses, those that would interest school leavers:

> Hobart isn't saturated in lots of courses. There's a lot of aged care and community courses, but not everyone — not early school leavers — are going to be suitable for that. (Sandra, intermediary, metro Tas.)

Intermediaries and training provider staff in regional areas suggested that the problem of limited options stemmed from a lack of funding. They also lamented the shortage of prevocational or certificate I or II options for young people contemplating VET. They regarded these options as the most appropriate for many early school leavers. However they noted that referral agencies and careers advisors tended to regard them as being of low value compared with certificate III options. This devaluing is exacerbated by funding models that privilege certificate III level qualifications:

> There is a bit of a disconnect ... with the role of certificate IIs. No one is saying that someone should complete a certificate II and they'll be a tradesman, but it does provide them with really good transferable basic skills ... there's a whole range of people out there that just don't have the capacity to complete a certificate III.
>
> (Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

Multiple intake periods could increase motivation to enrol

Training organisations prefer to accept enrolments only at beginning and mid-year intakes and appear reluctant to adopt rolling enrolments. Some intermediaries noted that the effect of these arrangements is 'delayed enrolment', which can undermine motivation:

> The problem that we do encounter, if it's face-to-face delivery through TAFE or a provider, is the space in between when the next ones start. So if someone was showing

signs of being motivated, it might be five or six months before there's another course
starting.   (Richard, intermediary, regional Tas.)

Course duration and contact hours should acknowledge the needs of learners

The need to adjust the pace of delivery and the duration of courses for early school leavers and disadvantaged learners was highlighted. Charles (provider staff, regional Vic.) noted: 'It doesn't mean our kids couldn't get the certificate, it just sometimes goes a bit too quickly'.

The optimal duration of a course was not agreed, however. Some interviewees noted that fast-paced courses led to disengagement by young people, who struggled to keep up; others suggested that courses that were 'too long' also led to disengagement. Face-to-face contact time across a week was another point of contention. Some young people, intermediaries and training provider staff saw the need for an interval of one or more days per week to allow young people to work to gain an income:

> I'm doing two and a half days a week and it leaves enough time to work part time. I've got enough time where I can finish my studies, work a decent amount of hours a week, and I've still got time to do what I want to do.   (John, young person, metro Qld)

Some provider staff saw dangers in early school leavers having fewer contact days per week:

> There's always downtime in TAFE and in our community [and] that's probably the biggest issue. Those two days you're not at TAFE, what are you doing? Sitting at home, possibly engaging in antisocial behaviour of sorts, feeling like I don't want to get up the next day to go to TAFE because I can't be stuffed.   (Charles, provider staff, regional Vic.)

Location of training providers and transport options

Young people are more likely to take up courses close to home

Interviewees in all three participant categories spoke about the importance of proximity to training providers and courses. Young interviewees favoured local courses, where long commutes were not required, and intermediaries and provider staff argued that young people's anxiety was exacerbated if they had to travel long distances from their homes:

> Some of them might have some severe anxiety issues about getting on buses, but they will go if it's around their area. I know people say, 'Get them out of their comfort zone', but step-by-step you get them somewhere first, and then you might suggest something else a bit later once they're comfortable.   (Cheryl, intermediary, metro Tas.)

Fear of bullying and risks to personal safety loomed large in the minds of many young people:

> If you're disengaged you're probably disengaged for issues like being marginalised by other kids in your school so you're not going to sit on a bus with the kids who stir you and make you feel worse than what you did … we met with these kids yesterday … and in the end [they] said, 'If we stay after class we can't get home' … There's not another bus until seven o'clock at night. So the last thing we want to do is be part and parcel of something that has kids wandering the streets waiting for a bus.
>
> (Amy, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Having a driver's licence and access to a vehicle were very pertinent issues, particularly for young people who do not receive family support.

As a result, some young people opted to forgo their preferred course in favour of one provided near to them, or even to forgo vocational training altogether. Proximity of training providers and transport was especially important to early school leavers in regional and rural areas:

> I wanted to be a midwife — they don't offer that program down here, so I'd have to travel to [the city], and for me to do that five days a week?
>
> (Katherine, young person, regional Vic.)

> In rural regional areas a lot of them stay hidden. They stay at home on the farm with Mum and Dad … they can't get into town.　　(Frank, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Improving transport options

Having a driver's licence and access to a vehicle were key issues, particularly for young people who do not receive family support:

> I don't live with my parents … so I can't get my driver's licence as easily as I would like. I'm trying to get my motorbike licence, but it's paying it that's the problem. That's the reason I'm trying to get a job, which is really hard when the jobs require you to have a licence!　　(Rachel, young person, metro Tas.)

Some intermediary organisations provided transport assistance in order to encourage independence and also to mitigate access problems for young people who might otherwise be discouraged from undertaking vocational training. Supports included direct financial assistance, guidance in navigating local transport systems, or even personal transport by staff:

> [We] sometimes drive them down … they have to realise that if they don't have any transport of their own, they have to work out how to get to work if they eventually get a job, by public transport … they need to learn a little bit of independence. But we help them out in the beginning if they need it.　　(Elizabeth, intermediary, metro Qld)

However, the cost of transport support for students is prohibitive for some training providers, particularly in rural areas. Instead, some providers adopted hours of training which aligned better with public transport timetables.

Access to subsidies and funding

Affordable courses encourage uptake of vocational training

Many interviewees identified the cost of courses as a major factor influencing early school leavers' decisions about whether to undertake vocational training, with capacity to pay being directly impacted by young people's very limited incomes:

> I'd like to go do the course but it's just their fee … if the fee was about 100 bucks or something that's fine, I'd be able to do that. But 355 bucks? That's pathetic for a 12 week course … that's breaking my budget a bit.　　(Billy, young person, metro Tas.)

> Even if they've got a Concession Card and with fee waivers and things, once you start talking anything over $300 to a kid of that age, it's too much. It's surprising that more people don't walk away when we start talking cost.
>
> (Kathleen, provider staff, regional Vic.)

Perceived and actual costs of training options, particularly when compared with mainstream Year 12 studies, were noted as significant by intermediary support staff:

> We're hearing … that young people looking for a VET pathway in schools are hit with costs they just wouldn't have if they were doing VCE [Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education], which is additionally concerning when you think the VET pathways tend to be a bit more popular amongst young people from lower income families.
>
> (Ruth, intermediary, metro Vic.)

Transparent information about course subsidies and fees could reduce confusion

Information about the training costs offered by training providers also appeared to be confusing for early school leavers. A lack of clarity and variable fee structures became a significant deterrent. Lillian (provider staff, metro Vic.) noted that there were already three categories of fees at their TAFE — 'your government supported place, your non-government support place and a concession amount' — and argued that these options need to be explained better to young people.

Intermediaries argued that young people are more likely to commence vocational training when higher or full subsidies are offered. However, many noted the negative effect of inconsistent and changing subsidy regimes. Subsidies could change mid-qualification and varied between states:

> I was originally going to do a distance education thing for NSW TAFE. [If I was] a resident of NSW it would cost me $2500 upfront [with] subsidisation — instead it was $4500. (Rachel, young person, metro Tas.)

Without a thorough knowledge of the intricacies of funding (for example, caps on access, waiver or concession eligibility across qualification types), many early school leavers become confused and potentially open to manipulative marketing techniques, to inappropriate referrals, and to entry into programs that they are unlikely to complete. Two support workers conveyed some of the complexity young people confront:

> It used to be you could do as many Cert II courses as you wanted. You didn't have to really explain why. In a way that was wasting a bit of government funding, but at the same time, now they only get one crack at a Cert III, and if that's not what you want to do for a career — then that's you done for. (Clarence, intermediary, metro Qld)

> You go to low socioeconomic areas like Moe or Morwell and you'll have people going around knocking at your door saying, 'Sign for a Diploma in Project Management and we'll give you this laptop and give you an iPad'. One of the young people [here] is signed up to a Diploma of Community Services Work. No idea why she is in it. Doesn't know how much she's completed. She knows she's got a 'free' laptop. She thinks it's free but it's not … she would realistically be at a Cert II level. She can't attain that without paying full fees now. (Judy, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Financial assistance may be needed for costs other than course fees

Many early school leavers experience severe financial hardship. Expenses such as transport and internet usage, together with fluctuating income from intermittent employment, can reduce their capacity to engage with vocational training.

Intermediaries and training provider staff argued that assistance in the form of travel allowances and payment plans is often necessary to maintain a young person's capacity to undertake vocational training. Even for those young people who are aware of the various types of assistance, there can be challenges and frustrations in applying:

> There's an application you can put through so that Centrelink can help you pay your childcare fees while you're attending [TAFE]. I've applied for that three times and [missed out] every time, because apparently my criteria isn't enough, being there four days a week. (Alice, young person, regional Vic.)

Difficulty of enrolment process

Support in completing the enrolment process is vital

Many respondents spoke about the length and complexity of enrolment:

> The whole enrolment process, it's just very bureaucratic and it really needs to be streamlined, and it's so different from anything they've ever experienced in the secondary system. It's hard for an adult to navigate it, let alone a 15-year-old that may not have family support as well. (Anna, provider staff, metro Vic.)

> Before they even get in the door they have to have gone through this whole pile of information that we have to provide them on what they're doing, how long they're going to do it. We have to make sure they know how many hours work they're going to have to do. We have to make sure they understand that they're going to have to do a literacy and numeracy test. The interview to get in is two hours. For someone who is already disengaged and they're bringing into it a mindset that the world's against me — it's going to be against you by the time you've finished that.
>
> (Kathleen, provider staff, regional Vic.)

The speed of the enrolment process seems to be an issue for young early school leavers. Elizabeth (intermediary, metro Qld) argued that they often 'feel bombarded', so instead her program 'might hold off on the referral [for] another couple of days until they start getting comfortable with us'. Another concern, as one intermediary warned, is that online recruitment and/or course delivery may attract the attention of young people who may enrol on an impulse into inappropriate programs, or with providers whose credentials are uncertain.

Intermediaries and provider staff indicated that the levels of support that providers and services offer young people during enrolment have a significant effect on the likelihood of their completing enrolment. Filling out paperwork and enrolment forms are daunting for early school leavers; without support, they can 'shy away' and fail to complete the process:

> The amount of paperwork required … I absolutely get the government's concern for rigour around publicly funded support. But it is a real turnoff for young people, particularly if they're struggling. (Amanda, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Another major challenge that young people can experience when enrolling is providing identification. Again, they often need assistance:

They have to have valid ID … Some don't have driver's licences. Some of them don't have a copy of their birth certificates … I think that is something we need to be aware of and I don't think everyone's like us, with a drawer full of documents.

(Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

Intermediaries noted that, without support, many young people do not bother completing enrolment processes. If they miss enrolment cut-off dates, they can also find themselves unable to commence or continue the course. For some young people, having support the first time they enrol into training helps them to build confidence for future enrolments:

I'm not really good with paperwork stuff so it was really a great help [from] them … the first time I don't reckon I would have been able to do it, but now that I've been through the process and all that, I reckon I would be able to do it.

(Andrew, young person, regional Tas.)

The need to put young people at ease during the enrolment process was a significant factor identified by respondents. In an institutional setting, many young people are apprehensive and can be guarded in their interactions. Some young people experience the formalities of enrolment as an 'interrogation' or as a test of their intelligence — one they are fearful of failing. Interviewees often described instances of discomfort during enrolments:

Can you imagine what it is like for a person that has left the school system feeling like a total failure to spend a day, or even one hour, sitting around a table doing paperwork that you can't read … paperwork that puts you right back to how you were feeling?

(Susan, provider staff, metro Tas.)

They said 'What are you disappointed with in your life?' and I didn't know what to answer. I said 'Sorry, I don't have anything on the top of my head'… and she said 'I need to write it … you need to answer it'. I was sitting there like 'argghh!' I was looking out the window.   (Jennifer, young person, metro Qld)

Intermediaries and those working for training providers highlighted the importance of more accommodating enrolment processes, effective orientation and the provision of support during the initial weeks of training, for example, being assigned a mentor, 'buddy' or contact during enrolment and the early stages of actual training.

Communication and commitment by staff

Staff commitment to young people is appreciated

There was strong agreement among interviewees that success is closely related to the extent to which care and commitment are demonstrated by staff:

They call me 'Mumsy' … Because there was a breakdown in their own family unit, or at school, or whatever, someone forgot to teach these young people basic human necessities on how to survive … I'm taking it as a personal challenge that I'm going to teach them because someone has to.   (Laura, intermediary, metro Qld)

They will go out of their way to show you something more if you do have a problem understanding something. You just know that they are there to help, not just doing their job and home at the end of the day like they don't care.

(Phillip, young person, metro Qld)

This support often needs to be sustained in order to keep young people engaged with their program. Indeed, several provider staff indicated that the provision of almost unconditional support is essential:

> No matter what the outcome is, you put your energy into the job — end of story. You could put your energy in, and a participant says 'I've changed my mind'. That's okay, I [can] deal with that … you're allowed to change your mind. It's not conditional … I should always be giving my upmost support. (Susan, provider staff, metro Tas.)

Approachable staff improve engagement by young people

Training staff who create conditions that facilitate comfortable communication is one key to providing support to students in need. Interviewees affirmed the importance of having staff who can relate to young people — 'speak their language' — and build rapport with them.

> I think one of the biggest things is being able to make a connection with them, and often if you're a straight-laced school teacher you're probably not going to make those connections. You need to be able to connect with them as much on a personal level as on that academic level … I think it takes a particular sort of person to be able to do that. But it really is about just listening, and not appearing threatening.
>
> (Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

> I feel like the teachers here you can be more friendly with, more comfortable with. So straight away you can tell them, 'Hey, this isn't my best area of expertise. I'm not good here; but I am good here'. So you don't have to just put your head down and try and get through it. You can be straight up with them at first.
>
> (John, young person, metro Qld)

Constructive communication fosters engagement; negative communication fosters disengagement

A strengths-based and positive approach to communication with young people was regarded as an effective means of promoting ongoing engagement:

> When they come here they are told, 'Look, you need to get your stuff together. You need to sort it out. You can do this, and then we will help you … but you can't just keep sitting at home, living on your parents' couch sort of thing'. Telling it to them real really seems to help … often hearing it out loud is a bit of a wake-up call for them all. (Sharon, intermediary, metro Qld)

Many young interviewees shared experiences when there was failed or no communication with training staff. Such instances could occur at various stages in the young person's vocational training:

> My friend wanted to sign up for a Cert in childcare. She was contacted by someone and spent at least two and half hours on the phone trying to do all this stuff and the next day got an email to say that she'd signed up for a business course. So she was like, 'I'm in a business course. I want to get out of the business course. I want to go in childcare'. They were just very cross-wired and they didn't care on a personal level. They just cared on a business level. I'm just lucky that I didn't have that.
>
> (Kimberley, young person, metro Qld)

I've started at TAFE twice now and left both times. Actually, the second time I got a Facebook message from my TAFE teacher saying, 'We haven't seen you in class for three days. I'm going to have to remove you because we don't know what's going on with your study'. Then I got a letter in the mail a couple of weeks later saying, 'we've tried to contact you through phone, email, text, and we haven't heard back. So we're removing you'. I haven't got one phone call, one email, one text … I'm like, 'I'm not going back now. The teacher doesn't want me'.   (Jessica, young person, metro Tas.)

Peer dynamics and learning environments

Balanced peer groups can provide a supportive environment for learning

Training provider staff commented on the importance of having an appropriate mix of personalities, dispositions and needs in their student groups. They indicated that getting the student balance right enables a mutually supportive peer dynamic to evolve, one that helps students to collaborate and communicate effectively with others:

We basically go through and look at how we think the cohort will work because obviously we don't want to have a huge cohort of really high risk kids that are going to feed off each other and it's going to be unmanageable … sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong.   (Anne, provider staff, metro Qld)

Young interviewees confirmed the importance of supportive peer relationships and several identified that an absence of peer bullying in training programs made young people more receptive to learning and engaging in their courses. They also spoke of how building strong peer relationships provided young people with an additional support network:

[At school] if you're a little bit different to the majority of kids, then you get treated differently as well. That's why lots of people come to TAFE … there's no childish bullying like there is at high school … there's not distinctive cliques.

(Nicole, young person, metro Qld)

Now I'm settled in here I feel safe. I'm more relaxed. I've got my mates around [that] I know I can depend on if it comes to it, so I feel less anxious about doing things.

(William, young person, metro Tas.)

One provider staff member also noted the surprisingly positive effect of having a large age range in course cohorts:

We've often had groups where we've had mature age students and school students in the one group and they really support each other. The young ones are showing the older ones about technology and you've got the older ones providing that mothering support for the young ones.   (Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

However, a cautionary note was sounded by a young person and a provider staff member highlighting that some student interactions can be fraught because the negative attitudes and actions of some can influence the motivation and engagement levels of others.

The school was good — well, the Trade Centre — but just a few people in there that just kept starting on me, so that's why I quit … I couldn't concentrate because he just kept on mouthing when I was in class … I did talk to [the trainers] about it and they said 'Tell him to cut it out' and I did, but it didn't work.

(Joseph, young person, metro Tas.)

Students need to feel connected to their learning environment

Although some early school leavers, especially those who had attended smaller schools, may feel intimidated by the size of larger VET institutions such as TAFEs, others reported that they experienced TAFE as a compact community, which offered more supports than their (previous) school.

Opinions were also mixed on the subject of online learning, particularly when compared with on-campus and face-to-face delivery of course content. Some interviewees disliked online learning. While no interviewee regarded online delivery as superior to face-to-face learning, a number of interviewees saw benefits in a combination of both:

> I think you need both. I think you need to be able to study in your own area and in your own time, as well as have an interaction with other people who can explain things in person, and who you can talk to about things … You can Google things, but when someone is sitting in front of you, actually doing it is a lot easier.
>
> (Rachel, young person, metro Tas.)

Young students enjoy feeling respected in an adult learning environment

Many young people spoke with enthusiasm about how much they enjoyed being in the adult learning environment of vocational training. They particularly liked being treated 'like adults', and this contrasted with earlier experiences in secondary schools of being 'treated like children':

> They treat you maturely [here], like how you should be treated in the real world … In high school, people look at you and go 'you're just a student and you should adhere to the rules and you have to stay in between these lines'… being held down and looked at as a little kid. (Sarah, young person, metro Vic.)

For some young people, the adult learning environment enabled them to engage and learn and enhanced their overall motivation. Yet some interviewees observed that vocational training settings are generally not designed primarily with young teenage learners' needs in mind. As a consequence, some can be overwhelmed by, and react negatively to, their training experience. The mixed responses are conveyed here by one training provider:

> TAFE is very much an adult environment … I think some students really rise to that and feel empowered … whereas others I think feel a bit lost in the system where there isn't sort of a bit more routine … It's difficult to say, it's half-and-half probably.
>
> (Anna, provider staff, metro Vic.)

Skill levels and learning supports

Support for learning difficulties improves engagement

All participants indicated that among the major hurdles for engaging young early school leavers were learning difficulties and disabilities. While diagnosed learning issues presented challenges, undiagnosed issues could present even greater challenges. A number of trainers and students illustrated the types of problems posed by learning difficulties:

> A lot of them [have] learning disabilities: so dyslexia, central auditory processing
> disorder, other language disabilities, intellectual disability. Quite a lot of them are on
> the autism spectrum. (Patrick, provider staff, metro Vic.)

The ability to identify a previously undiagnosed learning disability can be a valuable skill for staff in training providers working with early school leavers.

> I can recognise ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], cerebral palsy, intellectual disability
> really, really quickly, and hearing loss, all those sorts of things, because I've worked
> with people in that field. I get to know the person first and then we work that out from
> induction. I'm training my staff to know that as well, what extra support we have to
> give these young people … and that's the key. (Roy, provider staff, metro Qld)

Many young interviewees spoke of the decisive role that learning support can play in whether the student engages and progresses as intended. They also contrasted conventional training with an approach that is more attuned to their needs:

> They'll explain it in multiple different ways until you do get it, and that's what really
> makes you connect with the teacher more than anything … but when they're up there
> on a board just writing stuff down, 'Yes, learn this', and then sitting there, it's just
> like, what do you want me to do? It pretty much looks like Chinese language up there
> and I can't tell a word of it. (Phillip, young person, metro Qld)

Trainers also noted that individualised learning approaches, preferably within smaller classes, often proved effective for young people who otherwise struggle to engage and learn. In addition, they noted the need to avoid publicly highlighting a young person's shortcomings in ways that would cause unease or embarrassment:

> Because we're a small group and because we do have those networks and an
> opportunity to just phone someone and say, 'I've got a student who needs support or
> needs some help with this'. Often that's how things happen — without it being too in
> their face. Once you highlight an issue, sometimes that's enough for them to shy away
> and become embarrassed and then they don't come back.
>
> (Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

A number of training providers also reported that they felt their efforts were hampered by a lack of information about their young students. They noted that the reasons for the information gaps are complex, ranging from a young person's reticence, to a lack of resources in schools, other referral agencies, or the training system itself:

> Sometimes students are reluctant to share information … if they think that you might
> say, 'No, you can't come here'. Sometimes we don't get the whole story about what a
> student might actually need. (Janice, provider staff, metro Qld)

> There is funding in schools for teacher aides but there's no funding for teacher aides
> here [TAFE]. Even though we're doing a high school component we can't get access to
> any teacher aide funding. (Carol, provider staff, metro Qld)

Providing appropriate language, literacy and numeracy support is vital

The provision of language, literacy and numeracy support was considered by many trainers and support workers as the single most important factor in sustaining the engagement and completion of vocational training by early school leavers. Low language, literacy and

The provision of language, literacy and numeracy support is a critical factor in sustaining the engagement and completion of vocational training by early school leavers

numeracy skills were identified as an important barrier to continued engagement, particularly for young men and those in regional and rural areas. Some training staff also spoke of the lack of capacity or 'willingness' of smaller private training organisations to provide language, literacy and numeracy support. One TAFE trainer made a connection between registered training organisation (RTO) size and the capacity to respond:

> That's the beauty of being big, if you do your training needs analysis with us and you're not suitable, we'll recommend you the course to do with us to get you back … Where if you're a small RTO, you've done your LLN [language, literacy and numeracy] assessment, sorry you don't meet our need, go apply somewhere else. We can teach our students in-house if they've got literacy and numeracy needs which smaller RTOs can't do.
> (Carol, provider staff, metro Qld)

Developing soft skills is necessary for prolonged VET engagement

Intermediaries and training provider staff frequently noted the lack of 'soft skills' (for example, punctuality, communication) among many young people, and particularly early school leavers. Some provider staff focused on developing these skills:

> There's personal development and vocational education as well, and I think they overlap — I overlap them a lot … so within those personal development ones … if there's a participant who is struggling financially, I might pull out the money management program. If there's someone who suffers from anxiety I might do stress management and some mindfulness and meditation.
> (Julia, provider staff, metro Tas.)

Young people valued this approach:

> At the start of the year I could not possibly go in front of a class to speak. I wouldn't even be able to speak here. But my teacher built me up. When I had to do a speech, she let me do it just in front of her and then we slowly just built it up and then I felt more comfortable in front of my class … You learn life skills as well as doing what you have to do.
> (Nicole, young person, metro Qld)

Similarly, many intermediaries and training staff felt that young people lacked employability skills, including basic literacy and IT skills. The development of 'work readiness' consequently often became a major focus of training programs:

> [Our organisation was] born out of that need to not just train, but to work with them enough that they understand that they are gaining some form of education, and in that process becoming job ready, so [they] understand the concept of getting up every day, having a shower and being somewhere, presentable, on time.
>
> (Laura, intermediary, metro Qld)

Work-focused and hands-on learning

Project-based and non-classroom learning improves engagement

Training provider staff often talked about the need to find different modes of learning for some of the young people who experience difficulties with conventional pedagogies and learning environments. In particular, they noted that early school leavers were not well equipped to deal with abstraction and theorising:

Engaging young early school leavers in vocational training

I think one of the biggest issues is the theory component. Regardless of how much you manage it, at some point they will be required to sit down and answer questions out of a book or online, and often that's the most challenging. Some students just simply cannot manage that process. They don't have that self-discipline to be able to remain seated for a period of time. (Margaret, provider staff, regional Tas.)

Young people confirmed such observations. They spoke of their varied learning styles' preferences and of their aversion to conventional classroom environments:

There's more than one way to learn. For me, I'm a very visual person, so if I was shown something, I would understand it a lot better than if it was described.

(Kimberley, young person, metro Qld)

Some provider staff noted that a 'project-based' approach to learning improved student engagement levels and helped to develop language, literacy and numeracy skills in a subtle and discreet manner:

Some of our groups have been learning numeracy. We don't call it that — we actually called it 'building a pizza oven'. So they have to figure out how they're going to build it, check out designs, do costings, source the materials, get quotes on materials, write to me to get approval to spend the money, then physically build it.

(Janet, provider staff, regional Vic.)

Hands-on, practical learning suits early school leavers, including women

There was strong agreement that one of the keys to engagement was the use of practical, hands-on activities. This was especially the case when teaching young people who had experienced difficulties in mainstream schooling:

There are kids that are academically minded and there are kids that are hands-on. If you're trying to put a kid that's hands-on through an academic way of learning, they don't take that in ... kids that don't have that ability to sit and learn, they are far better off getting them out there with their hands working and slowly putting the academic stuff in. (Martha, intermediary, regional Vic.)

Some of the young people commented on the differences in engagement:

Everything we do here is heaps more practical. You do what you need to in the books and on paper, bur the rest you do hands-on. I'm doing a marine course now and almost every lesson we are out on the bay, in the boats, learning about boats, about bait. Where the school that I went to before, the marine course there, they went out on the water one day out of the whole year and that was just to get their licence.

(John, young person, metro Qld)

Interviewees noted that, while hands-on learning was favoured by virtually all young people, it could not be assumed that obstacles would not arise. One young person recalled that hands-on learning could be unnecessarily gendered:

Because I was the only girl I had completely different things to do ... the things they were getting the boys to do I'd never done before so I was like 'Look, give me something that I can do' and I'd explain to them what I wanted ... but if it was my construction teacher he'd be like, 'The boys are building so you can paint'.

(Bonnie, young person, metro Tas.)

Incorporating work experience and tasters as part of the vocational training program is important so as to develop employability skills and work-related knowledge.

Work experience complements learning

Training staff highlighted the importance of incorporating work experience and tasters in order to develop employability skills and work-related knowledge. Young people also confirmed that work experience and tasters were interesting and valuable for developing skills:

> We found that kids going out to work experience in Year 9 and 10 just did not have a clue what was expected in the workplace, so we developed a program with the school that … took kids not only past Bunnings but into Bunnings, and not only into Bunnings but into the staff of Bunnings and what people did, what their backgrounds were.
>
> (Michael, provider staff, regional Vic.)

> TAFE is more realistic. It gives you firsthand experience of what the actual industry's like, whereas at uni you're in a classroom most of the time, depending on the course.
>
> (Chris, young person, regional Tas.)

Wellbeing issues and supports

Adequate wellbeing support is critical

Addressing wellbeing issues was considered by intermediaries and young people alike as fundamentally important and a decisive factor in a young person's VET engagement. Barriers to student wellbeing included lack of food, homelessness or transient housing, legal and justice issues, disability and poor health (including anxiety and depression), and substance abuse. These barriers to learning and participation demanded a corresponding range of supports, whether provided in-house or through referrals to external services:

> The role that I do is integral to retaining them and supporting them through their learning … we have ourselves; we have counsellors, welfare … we're one team. So it's having everything in place that supports those students, that, I guess they don't receive in the mainstream.　　　　　　(Rebecca, provider staff, metro Vic.)

> I honestly reckon [my mate] could be put on disability for back problems … in the workshop he gets real agitated and shitty because he can't stand up straight otherwise he starts twisting his back and it hurts him. He won't understand something and he'll get really agitated while he's trying to do it and all of a sudden he'll go, 'Oh, f*** it!' and walk out. They have tried their very best to keep him in the course.
>
> (Brandon, young person, regional Tas.)

Intermediaries noted that geography and distance make a difference, with young people likely to falter when local networks and access to support are lacking or seem inaccessible. They pointed out that young people living outside large towns or regional centres were more likely to miss out on the necessary services:

> We have a youth service directory … it has an online and a phone app so it's really great. But a kid that's in strife, homeless or worried about what to do next who looks at that app … If you're in Orbost and your closest branch is Bairnsdale, where do you go for help?　　　　　　(Amanda, intermediary, regional Vic.)

The importance of funding and resources for wellbeing support was highlighted, particularly by those delivering training in regional areas. One such training provider described the

difficulties experienced when attempting to reconcile the learning and wellbeing needs of young people:

> Being able to offer that wrap-around support they need, somehow we need to be able to tap in to some funding to provide that, because the training dollars aren't really enough to cover that in their own right … we're providing a community service but we're only funded to provide education, yet we can't provide education unless we provide those wrap-around services. (Janet, provider staff, regional Vic.)

Anxiety and mental health issues require professional support

Intermediaries and provider staff spoke at length about young people's mental health issues, including anxiety, depression and very low self-esteem, stress that accompanies physical ailments, and the impact such challenges have on young students' ability to remain engaged in vocational training:

> They often go 'No, I'm not going to tell you that, but I'm too dumb. I can't do it. I'm not smart enough. I don't understand this. I don't get it. I'm stressed … Nah, not going to do it'. A lot of our guys do suffer from anxiety, so [if] you put them into something that they're not going to be able to cope with, because they don't understand it or they can't read it, boom! Anxiety levels just rise and then that's it.
>
> (Marie, provider staff, metro Tas.)

Some young interviewees were clearly impressed by and grateful for support, and spoke of how this dynamic support function plays out at an interpersonal level. Nicole (young person, metro Qld) reported that it 'makes you feel more welcome and safe … knowing that there's someone who cares about you'. However, the skills needed to cater for such personal needs were not always provided either by specialised providers or through staff training programs:

> I'm not a trained counsellor. You need someone who's actually trained. Too often I think staff are expected to deal with mental health issues, and they can cause a lot more damage when they try and deal with issues they're not trained to do … we can give them the wrong guidance and the wrong support if we try and delve into their personal lives and we don't know enough. (Shaun, provider staff, regional Vic.)

Family issues and precarious housing also require attention

Many interviewees identified housing and 'home life' issues such as dealing with family breakdown as key determinants of whether a young person engages successfully with vocational training. These issues were frequently linked to transience of housing and, indeed, to severe financial hardship:

> Family comes first, so if there's some sort of drama they will do the family thing and not go to TAFE. Then they get to a point where they've missed a bit and they're behind and then that fear of failure comes in, so they don't sort of bother going back.
>
> (Richard, intermediary, regional Tas.)

> Some of our younger people are couch-surfing. They don't have permanent homes. So the fact that we have warm places they can be … we have food supplied all the time. It's pretty basic — cereal and toast. So if you are doing it rough [here] you can get a feed and be warm. (Janet, provider staff, regional Vic.)

💬 Discussion

Identifying factors shaping engagement in vocational education and training

In this section we discuss our analysis and interpretation of the empirical findings through the two analytical lenses of 'time' and 'socio-ecological position', the relationships between the empirical findings and the existing literature on engagement in VET and the potential implications of our empirical analysis to the theoretical framework.

Time lens

Our analysis identified a number of influential factors that are at play prior to the commencement of formal training or exposure to the learning environment. While the levels and degrees of awareness among young early school leavers about VET are clearly critical factors shaping their potential intentions to engage, numerous young people indicated, when reflecting on their pre-VET days, that they had no (prior) conception of what it entailed or of its potential value. Indeed, some interviewees referred to VET as a 'best kept secret'. Many young people we spoke to had been either unaware of the VET system altogether and were consequently at risk of forgoing training opportunities, or had experienced general bewilderment with the nature and means of accessing the VET system.

In part, this is because most of the information young people receive about VET comes from trusted peers, siblings or parents, people who themselves may often have only a tenuous grip on the nature, opportunities and intricacies of the VET system. Under these circumstances, young early school leavers frequently receive conflicting and inconsistent advice, or advice that may not be appropriate for their circumstances.

It is clear that there is a need to inform and re-educate young students about what quality VET looks like and about what the potential merits or expectations of quality training could be. Both the quality of the information distributed by training providers, schools, referral agencies and government departments and the types of communication platforms used are consequently very important if young people are to make informed and well-considered choices prior to a formal encounter with the VET system. Another important consideration in attempting to increase the engagement of early school leavers is to work closely and continuously in both designing and distributing such information together with disengaged young people, their parents, relevant school staff and other key stakeholders.

In the pre-enrolment phase, it is important to consider how the hardship that many disadvantaged young people experience impacts on their view of VET. Many in this cohort face very practical and tangible barriers to further education of any kind, including limited finances, geographical and transport barriers, limited access to or use of vocational guidance services and, with limited resilience or psychosocial resources needed to (re)engage. The use of supported referral practices, including some degree of 'hand holding', is therefore essential for many, right up to the point of enrolment and beyond. It is also important for disadvantaged young people to be aware that such support services exist and are in fact available to them. This type of support is also essential if, for

administrative or other reasons, there are delays between the provision of course advice and actual enrolment times, as initial enthusiasm can easily wane at such times.

Enrolment is clearly a key moment in time when engagement can be enabled. For many the enrolment process is the young person's first formal encounter with VET. Yet early school leavers typically experience the enrolment processes as highly complex, confusing and off-putting, particularly when a level of experience, literacy (or financial literacy in terms of subsidy entitlement arrangements) is called for. Many young participants in our research reported that the enrolment processes are so demanding and intimidating that the prospective student recoils. The contributing issues included:

- the high level of technical literacy required to complete the documentary paperwork and the large volume of paperwork

- the fast pace at which the enrolment process is sometimes conducted

- the formality, intrusiveness, sense of scrutiny and the insensitive manner in which some training provider staff administer the process.

For all these reasons we identify the importance of much more user-friendly and sophisticated processes of orientation, enrolment and induction into the world of VET.

Successful engagement relies on what transpires through the 'retention' period. This is while the young person is undertaking their vocational training and interacting with trainers, peers and, in many instances, employers. We focus below on the importance of learning environments conducive to young people. Additionally, the programs require delivery by highly skilled staff who are provided with the resources and processes needed to attend to the learning and wellbeing needs of young people.

In sum, improvements in engagement are supported by:

- more comprehensive, extensive and varied communication about the merits of 'the VET option' during the pre-enrolment phase (when students are still at school or have recently left school and are seeking advice from community service agencies, family or peers)

- improved awareness of the needs and sensitivities of early school leavers during their initial engagement and enrolment processes by all those charged with assisting young people

- positive, supportive, hands-on interactions between learner and trainer during tuition

- a wide range of learning, social, financial, health and wellbeing supports during the engagement process to support and enhance retention and completion.

Many of these factors require VET providers to reach well beyond their physical infrastructure and deep into their local communities and other providers.

Many participants reported finding the enrolment processes demanding and intimidating.

Socio-ecological lens

When viewed through the socio-ecological lens (see figure 4) we can identify how grouped factors (left hand column) align with sites and settings of significant impact (green areas), as well as the locations of greatest temporal impact (blue areas) in the process of change. This lens also enables us to identify or consider some ways in which young early school leavers' understanding and experience of vocational training might be improved, and by whom.

Figure 4   Mapping grouped factors by socio-ecological position and phase of engagement

MAPPED BY SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL POSITION   **MAPPED BY TEMPORAL PHASE**

FACTOR GROUPINGS (From empirical data)	MICROSYSTEMS	LOCAL COMMUNITY			POLICY & SERVICE SYSTEMS		MACROSYSTEMS	PRE-ENROLMENT PHASE	ENROLMENT PHASE	RETENTION PHASE
	Young person & immediate social environment	VET providers	Non-VET services & infrastructure	Community resources & stakeholders	VET sector	Other	Socio-cultural, political & economic structures			
Family attitudes/knowledge	G	G	G	G	G		G	B	B	
Information from schools & providers		G	G		G	G		B		
Range & availability of courses		G			G		G	B		
Location of providers & transport options		G	G		G	G	G	B		B
Access to subsidies & funding		G	G	G	G	G	G	B		B
Difficulty of enrolment processes		G	G		G				B	
Staff communication & commitment		G			G				B	B
Peer dynamics & learning environments	G	G		G					B	B
Skill levels & learning supports	G	G	G	G	G	G	G			B
Work-focused & hands-on learning		G	G	G	G	G				B
Wellbeing issues & supports	G	G	G	G	G	G	G			B

G = Socio-ecological position(s) where the factor grouping is considered to manifest, operate or be significantly determined.

B = Evidence of the factor grouping exerting a strong influence on engagement during the phase(s) indicated.

The young person and their immediate social environment

Our focus is not solely on the supports needed to promote engagement with vocational training. It is also on the need to provide information, encouragement and access to experiences that may simply introduce the possibility of vocational training to the young person. One of the most important findings is that parents and role models, siblings, and influential adults, and the manner in which they convey unmediated and unfiltered information about the benefits of vocational training, all play vital roles in facilitating engagement (NSW Centre for Education Statistics & Evaluation 2013; Webb et al. 2015). Indeed, those within the immediate circle of an early school leaver are critical in readying the young person to undertake informal and formal engagement. An absence of alternatives to secondary schooling being raised and discussed with young people means that engagement with vocational training is less likely. This, in turn, means that the way in which the training sector communicates, as well as the nature of the information conveyed, should engage with a community-wide audience and reach out well beyond the prospective consumer/learner to their family and peers (CEDEFOP 2014).

Local community and place

To a great extent, a young early school leaver's actual or potential involvement with vocational training hinges on community and institutional assistance. Yet this cohort's general experience with education more often occurs in a regional context of depressed economic conditions, limited labour market opportunities and weak social networks. Therefore effective careers guidance is critically important (within and beyond schools), and youth support services in general, for introducing early school leavers to vocational training options.

Importantly, assistance is needed from those with relevant insight, information, and knowledge, but who may not necessarily be intrinsic to the vocational training system. This group includes schools, community agencies such as youth service providers, sport and recreation groups, councils and even relevant employers. Of equal importance are the availability and range of educational options — TAFE campuses and community-based or commercial training providers offering qualifications of interest and relevance to young people. These, we find, are more limited in regional and rural locations.

Intermediaries and young people alike identified wellbeing issues as fundamentally important to sustainable engagement with vocational training. Amongst numerous wellbeing issues identified, both anxiety and depression were identified as significant and common issues. Of particular importance in the findings is the sense of apprehension that many young people experience as they move into an adult world without having first successfully concluded their secondary schooling. This is a period in which they are still developing their identities, direction(s) in life, and self-confidence but without many of the resources and resilience for building experiences, which most adults possess.

Many disadvantaged young people are trying to 'feel' their way through training courses, and most are uncertain about their vocational aspirations and options. For quite a few, training offers a way of finding out more about potential vocational choices, the skill sets needed and where and how they might fit into the world of work. Their stories about the challenges of dealing with a large and complex training system, their lack (for many) of

'foundation skills', their frequently low self-confidence and their anxieties and concerns about using public transport all serve to highlight and remind us of the vulnerability of their situation.

The challenges of being a young person and feeling poorly resourced, undereducated and inexperienced are in turn amplified and exaggerated by the structural disadvantages of poor local transport, thin local course offerings and having often unmet health and wellbeing needs. Yet, despite these challenges, many still displayed a sense of optimism about vocational training as a way forward and an opportunity to develop positive connections with adults and peers. The point we emphasise here is that the measures that might address such needs — and hence enable improved outcomes in vocational education — must be resourced by state and local authorities and implemented through broader partnerships and the community-wide networks that extend far beyond the training sector.

The vocational education and training sector

Many lessons can be drawn from this research by policy-makers, administrators and those delivering vocational training to young early school leavers. In terms of course delivery, there is a need to understand the diversity of young learners' needs and preferences and to attempt to meet these needs. Although learners vary in their preferences relating to many aspects of vocational training (with regard to the size of the institution, the use of online learning and the extent to which the learning environment incorporates adult learning principles), meeting those diverse learning needs and preferences makes a significant difference to the young learners' feeling of confidence, competence and engagement. For example, literacy and numeracy support was confirmed by most of our research participants as the most important factor for sustaining the engagement of young early school leavers. Despite this, intermediaries reported that access to such support was uneven across the vocational training system and often lacking in small-scale training providers.

Early school leavers appear to be subject to limited, confusing and conflicting information, much of which serves only as marketing among competing training providers. The result is that young people's decision-making capability is adversely impacted and this problem is currently not being adequately addressed by careers advice services across various sectors — governments, VET providers or school-based or other referral agencies.

This sense of confusion is exacerbated by complex (and frequently changing) funding and entitlement regimes, as well as by a fragmented provider and qualifications landscape. Our findings suggest that vocational training is in many respects inaccessible for early school leavers, who frequently lack the skills and supports needed to fully engage. Inaccessibility can also manifest in a lack of training services relative to a location (with those living in regional and rural communities most affected) as well as in the form of financial and institutional barriers.

There is a need for the VET sector to present a less opaque and more welcoming interface to young people, whose experience with institutional settings has been problematic. The research also prompts us to reflect that the sector is increasingly expected to deliver training to a significant number of young people who may have had very negative experiences with education. It needs to become even more flexible in terms of its pedagogy, delivery, support arrangements and curriculum. Such flexibility would manifest in enrolment processes that:

- are more attuned to the dispositions and needs of the cohort

- offer more convenient timetabling

- have a greater emphasis on lower-level and foundation-level qualifications

- offer improved wellbeing and learning supports

- provide improved careers guidance.

Establishing positive interpersonal relations with young clients is imperative. Staff within training organisations plays a vital role. To a great extent the successful engagement of a young early school leaver is reliant on the ability of the trainers to empathise, display patience and have good humour, and contribute what they can to building a stable, supportive and collaborative learning environment. It is also reliant on a degree of further cultural change within the sector to remove processes that are not fully attuned to the needs of disadvantaged and increasingly younger cohorts.

Macrosystemic level

The nature of much vocational training is determined at a higher socio-ecological level. The training providers, large and small, play a mediating role in determining how government funds are employed in the delivery of vocational training at a local level. We are unable in this study to examine many of the macrosystemic factors that pervade socio-ecological levels.[6] Nevertheless, some of the important concerns and factors raised in this research can be linked to these less tangible macrosystemic imperatives. One such factor is the role of vocational training in the context of the rapidly diminishing employment opportunities for industries once central to VET, with the lagging adjustment of the VET sector to new growth industries. Indeed, a disconnect between formal training offerings, labour market opportunities and the needs of young learners seems more pronounced than ever (Wheelahan, Buchanan & Yu 2015). This research suggested that this disconnect may be a contributing factor in many young people's understanding of the training system.

The fragmented nature of Australia's vocational education system also impacts on the capacity of early school leavers to engage effectively. On the basis of our findings together with the existing literature, it seems that the sector is mysterious for early school leavers. It is therefore significant that many of the young people consulted in our research held VET in relatively high regard. It is important then to build on this receptive disposition. Simultaneously there is also a need to further challenge assumptions that vocational training is of less worth than conventional academic pathways, and that professional 'white collar' labour is inherently of higher value and status than other forms of labour activity. Our findings affirm the need to counter any suggestion that vocational learning acts as a convenient destination for 'low performing' young people.

A concerted effort is needed from governments, VET management, schools and community groups to recast vocational education as a rewarding step for pursuing fulfilling learning and employment aspirations.

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6 For example, we refer to wealth redistribution, policy-formation, technological change, cultural norms and values, the commodification of knowledge and, hence, how education is regarded and provided across society.

Engaging young early school leavers in vocational training

Correspondence between empirical findings and previous literature

Our literature review[7] identified over 100 factors that impacted strongly on engagement, while our empirical data yielded over 70 such factors. The overlap between them, however, was very significant, with the two groups yielding 65 factors in common. Even when reduced to more manageable 11 factor groupings identified in figure 4, there was a strong alignment between our empirical findings and the factors identified in the review of the literature, with differences only in emphasis around some factors. More evident in the empirical findings, for example, was the perceived complexity of VET enrolment processes and of funding and subsidy structures. The complex and often intimidating nature of enrolment processes — and their role as a trigger of disengagement — was less evident in our literature review, perhaps in part because literature from other countries had quite different interfaces and funding regimes.

In regards to course delivery, the empirical findings affirmed the challenges identified in the literature of matching each learner to an appropriate program and training provider. They also revealed the challenges of tailoring course content and pedagogy in ways that respond to diverse needs and preferences. The findings also extended our knowledge of the issues that many young people face in relation to travel and personal safety, in many cases exacerbated by geographic disadvantage, financial hardship and low levels of family support and resources.

Finally, in considering *when* specific factors have the strongest influence on engagement, there is a relative absence of literature that directly addresses this question. Some studies focus on factors that enable or inhibit the uptake of training or comparable activities, while others focus on factors affecting retention. Of those studies that address multiple stages of the engagement journey, the time or times at which specific factors are likely to influence engagement is in most cases assumed or left implicit. We posit that this aspect of our study is of some importance and justifies its inclusion in our multi-dimensional theoretical framework.

This research presents an array of factors that the participants in our research deemed most important in the process of the engagement of early school leavers in vocational training. We see factors relating to geographical and financial 'access', catering to wellbeing and learning needs, the complexities associated with formal enrolment and commencement, the opaque nature of Australia's vocational training system and the sector's reputation among important sections of young people's formal and informal support networks.

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7 See Appendix B.

Implications for the theoretical understanding of engagement in vocational education and training

In this section, we employ our framework, and in revisiting some of the most important factors, we point to important reforms and measures needed if engagement is to be enhanced.

The decision to structure the empirical aspects of this study around both socio-ecological and temporal aspects allowed a capacity to elicit the implications for vocational training providers and intermediaries, as well as for their roles, in responding to the breadth of factors shaping the ways in which young people view and interact with vocational training during different phases of the engagement process. This study focused on the use of the time and socio-ecological lenses and also undertook some exploratory analyses of the utility of the behavioural decision-making lens. This suggested that family attitudes and information from schools and providers align well with both the pre-enrolment phase and with potential changes in attitude and intention, both of which are predictive of behaviour change.

Similarly, the four grouped factors (range and availability of courses, provider locations and transport, access to subsidies, and ease of enrolment) all fit very well into cost-benefit considerations and outcome expectations that are key to 'weighing up' behavioural options (see discussion in the section 'Developing a theoretical foundation for the research'). The next two grouped factors also fit here (commitment by staff members and peer dynamics and learning environments). The last three grouped factors (learning supports, type of learning, wellbeing supports) also speak to both outcome expectations and self-efficacy expectations. While these analyses are tentative at best, they do indicate the potential of the behavioural decision-making lens to contribute to an even deeper examination of how the factors work causally and temporally, and we recommend further work in this area.

⚖️ Conclusion

Disadvantaged young people frequently 'slip through the cracks'. On the basis of the current rates of early school leaving, and early school leavers' low rates of completion within the vocational training system, educators across the schools and VET sectors are facing significant challenges.

This research underscores the importance not only of recognising and catering for the needs of those formally engaged in the vocational training system, but anticipating and being prepared to cater for the needs of those who are as yet on the periphery.

Our approach has highlighted the value of thinking about the nature of engagement, the temporal phases and the ways in which various causal factors impact on the stages of engagement. The quality of experience with vocational training, or even whether a disadvantaged young person considers training as a viable option, is found to be contingent on a complex set of individual, sector-specific, social, environmental and systemic factors.

The challenges identified highlight the need to ensure that the mostly adult-oriented training system is provided with the co-ordinated funding, specialised resources, networking and integrated systems required to attract and then cater for young, early school leavers. Such measures would help to enable entry into appropriate and sustainable education and training pathways and, ultimately, into the world of work.

Where to next?

Currently, the priorities that shape Australia's vocational training system are determined largely by the Commonwealth and the states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments, within the parameters set out in 2008 by the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform and the National Skills and Workforce Development regimes. A key objective of the National Partnership Agreement was to increase overall training activity by building a competitive demand-driven model, underpinned by government subsidies (ACIL Allen Consulting 2015).

This research, within this policy context, has generated further questions that could usefully guide ongoing activity and additional research into the role and functions of vocational training for disadvantaged young Australians. Our findings suggest that future work in this area should consider the ways in which community understandings of the VET system reinforce a deficit perspective, and how this impacts access and success in vocational training provision for the young people already outside the school system.

An additional set of questions relate to co-ordination of VET resourcing, culture, leadership and professional development. This arises in terms of accountability for meeting the educational and associated health and wellbeing needs of excluded young Australians and particularly in the context of an ever-tightening employment market. Integration, collaboration and joined-up service provision remain key elements that are needed.

The questions of how early school leavers and others in regional and remote areas lacking infrastructure can gain improved access to VET remain a perennial problem. However we hope this research makes some contribution towards a deeper understanding of the factors enabling the engagement of early school leavers and other disadvantaged groups for accessing and completing VET.

The quality of an experience with vocational training is contingent upon a complex set of individual, sector-specific, social, environmental and systemic factors.

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Appendix A: Data collection

Table A1 Teleconference participants

Participant type	No.	Date (June 2016)
Training providers		
Tasmania	4	7th
Victoria	6	8th
Queensland	5	13th
Intermediaries		
Tasmania	7	16th
Victoria	4	22nd
Queensland	3	23rd
TOTAL	29	

Table A2 Fieldwork sites and regions

State	Metro/regional	Local government area	Suburb/town
Queensland	Metro Qld	Moreton Bay	Brendale, Lawnton
		Redland City	Alexandra Hills
Tasmania	Metro Tas.	Glenorchy	Derwent Park, Glenorchy
		Hobart	North Hobart
	Regional Tas.	Brighton	Bridgewater
		Circular Head	Smithton
		Devonport	Devonport
		Kingborough	Kingston
		Launceston	Invermay, Newnham
Victoria	Metro Vic.	Hume	Broadmeadows
		Melbourne	Melbourne
	Regional Vic.	Bass Coast	Wonthaggi
		Baw Baw	Trafalgar, Warragul
		La Trobe	Morwell
		South Gippsland	Leongatha
		East Gippsland	Bairnsdale

Table A3 **Interviews and focus groups**

		Qld	Tas.	Vic.	Overall
Young people	Interviews	8	12	1	21
	Focus groups	4 groups (28 YP)	4 groups (16 YP)	4 groups (47 YP)	12 groups (91 YP)
	Total	36	28	48	112
Training provider staff	Interviews	2	6	14	22
	Focus groups	3 groups (13 RTO)	5 groups (14 RTO)	1 group (6 RTO)	9 groups (33 RTO)
	Total	15	20	20	55
Intermediaries	Interviews	6	10	7	23
	Focus groups	2 groups (7 INT)	1 group (7 INT)	2 groups (12 INT)	5 groups (26 INT)
	Total	13	17	19	49
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS		64	65	87	216

Note: YP = young people; RTO = training provider staff; INT = intermediary.

Appendix B: Literature review

The literature review adopted a multidisciplinary approach prioritising research on the role of different socio-ecological levels shaping young early school leavers' interactions with vocational training providers and their decision-making. The review was limited to those factors supported by clear data-supported evidence of a strong influence on engagement; factors that appeared to be significant but lacked such evidence were excluded.

The literature review findings are grouped under the four levels of the socio-ecological lens in the framework:

- Microsystems (young person and their immediate social environment)

- Local community (vocational training providers, non-VET services and infrastructure, and other community resources and stakeholders)

- Policy and service systems (VET sector, other policy services and systems)

- Macrosystems (socio-cultural, ideological, political and economic structures).

Microsystems

The family, particularly parental attitudes and expectations, is one of the strongest influences on the occupational aspirations, post-compulsory educational decisions and educational outcomes of young people (Gemici et al. 2014; Webb et al. 2015). Young people's peers also influence their attitudes and knowledge about vocational options (Smith et al. 2005; McCrone et al. 2013; Gemici et al. 2014; Nguyen & Blomberg 2014). Social norms and the level of community knowledge about various educational and career pathways are known to influence student attitudes and aspirations (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Webb et al. 2015). Nonetheless, young people are increasingly accessing a wider variety of information sources, including online information and peer perspectives via social media, to assist them in understanding vocational and educational options and pathways (Anderson 2004; TNS Opinion & Social 2011).

The concept of 'needs' includes a focus on the goals and priorities of young people and an awareness that young people often pursue multiple goals in learning situations, including academic, employment-related and social goals (Mansfield 2010). The learning-related needs of disadvantaged young people include learning supports, including support with foundation skills; personal development needs; and the need for educational services to be attuned to the effects of negative past experiences with learning including bullying; poor relationships with teachers; low language, literacy and numeracy skills; and low levels of academic success and self-efficacy (Haywood et al. 2009; Black, Balatti & Falk 2010; Hillman 2010; Myconos 2014; Hancock & Zubrick 2015). All of these experiences can result in lasting feelings of alienation from formal learning (Finn 1989; Stehlik 2013). Learning difficulties are relatively common among disengaged young learners and can include an inability to sustain focus (McCrone et al. 2013; Myconos 2014). Many also experience low self-esteem and psychosocial challenges, such as underdeveloped communication and interpersonal skills and a lack of life skills, including self-organisation, financial literacy, and the ability to navigate service systems (Anderson 2004; McCrone et al. 2013; Umemoto 2015).

Local community

Within the socio-ecological level of 'local community', we looked at literature that considered the role of VET providers, other local services and infrastructure, and the various community resources and stakeholders who can shape the role of VET for young people (for example, location, demographics and community role models). Given their often interactive nature, we discuss these factors below under the following headings:

- The training environment and institution

- Other local services, and the interface between VET and non-VET service sectors

- Other community resources and stakeholders.

The training environment and institution

Training providers can assert a high degree of influence on the decision-making and experiences of young people. Young people's attitudes and knowledge about vocational options are shaped by the quality of information and advice they receive from schools and training providers — if they receive any at all (Smith et al. 2005; McCrone et al. 2013; Gemici et al. 2014; Nguyen & Blomberg 2014).

The vocational and post-secondary training literature relating to disengaged and disadvantaged learners clearly identifies the importance of leadership, organisational culture, service integration, partnerships and institutional capacity-building (for example, the empowerment of staff through professional development and secure employment arrangements) in meeting these equity needs (Nechvoglod & Beddie 2010; Hargreaves 2011; McCrone et al. 2013).

While acknowledging the impact of market forces on campus size, course range and staff quality, enrolment and retention in vocational training among disengaged young learners is strongly influenced by students' ability to access their preferred course, to choose from a variety of subjects within a course, and whether course duration, pace, timetabling and number of contact hours per week suits their needs. Course duration is a noteworthy factor: while it is often thought that disadvantaged young learners prefer shorter courses, long formats can be just as engaging if learners are appropriately supported (Nelson & O'Donnell 2012). Longer course formats can also potentially facilitate stronger engagement, by allowing for the development of deeper supportive relationships and for a higher-quality work experience component (Nelson & O'Donnell 2012; McCrone et al. 2013).

The initial experiences of disadvantaged young learners with the training system is an important determinant of whether the learner proceeds to enrolment and commencement, with disadvantaged learners at considerable risk of dropping out prior to commencement (McCrone et al. 2013).

The quality of relationships between learners and staff is a key issue for young people in all learning contexts, but particularly for disadvantaged and disengaged learners (Smith et al. 2005; Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab 2008; Hancock & Zubrick 2015). High-quality relationships with disengaged learners are described as trusting, respectful, supportive, collaborative and strengths-based; and, while it is important for staff to hold high expectations of learners, the learner's current circumstances, abilities and state of readiness for learning must also be respected (Black, Balatti & Falk 2010; Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Bowman & Callan

2012; Hancock & Zubrick 2015). Small class sizes are well recognised as facilitating high-quality relationship-building in educational settings (Lamb & Rice 2008; Hargreaves 2011).

For disadvantaged learners, the opportunity to engage in an adult-oriented learning environment also provides a vital opportunity for the development of social skills and social capital (Bowman & Callan 2012), contributing to both educational and social outcomes. At the organisational level, inclusive practices such as actively valuing diversity and making pedagogy and content culturally appropriate can be particularly effective when engaging disadvantaged learners (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Bowman & Callan 2012).

In order to help learners to face these challenges, the evidence from the literature suggests that training staff need specific expertise in working with disadvantaged learners, as well as the resources and ability to 'work across boundaries' (Carrington & Elkins 2002) and engage in multidisciplinary collaboration within or beyond their organisations (Nechvoglod & Beddie 2010; Bowman & Callan 2012).

Dutch research into young people's engagement in post-secondary training highlights the need for pedagogy that promotes autonomy while simultaneously providing adequate structure, guidance and support, including clear expectations (Elffers & Oort 2013). Many disadvantaged young learners come into learning situations with low levels of autonomy and self-motivation and therefore do not fit neatly into 'adult' learning environments and the related principles of adult learning or 'andragogy' (Knowles 1980; 1984). However, when appropriately facilitated, adult learning approaches can be highly empowering for disadvantaged learners (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Hargreaves 2011). Incremental assessment has also been found to foster confidence and motivation by providing clear and regular recognition of goal achievement (Bielby et al. 2012; Bowman & Callan 2012; Beddie, Hargreaves & Atkinson 2017). This does not preclude the use of informal, embedded assessment methods, which are generally more appealing to disadvantaged learners (Bielby et al. 2012; Bowman & Callan 2012). Self-paced learning and pedagogical 'scaffolding' (whereby learners are assisted to extend their skills and knowledge in gradual increments) are also important for building the confidence and mastery of disadvantaged learners (Bowman & Callan 2012).

Other pedagogical factors that support the engagement of disadvantaged learners are hands-on or applied learning activities that are relevant to real-work environments and not unduly formal or intimidating; quality work experience placements and meaningful interaction with potential employers; varied and interactive delivery modes, such as group work and project-based learning, as these foster motivation, autonomy and responsibility for learning (Bielby et al. 2012; Lamb & Rice 2008); and the integration of language, literacy and numeracy teaching with the teaching of vocational competencies (Black, Polidano & Tseng 2011; Hargreaves 2011; Bowman & Callan 2012).

Within an inclusive teaching and learning approach, part of the trainer's role is to assist disadvantaged learners to develop their self-confidence, self-awareness and other aspects of social and emotional literacy, sometimes referred to as 'soft skills'. Such measures have been shown to be highly effective in enhancing and sustaining engagement, particularly among disadvantaged young learners (Myconos 2011; Bowman & Callan 2012; Lamb et al. 2015).

Other local services, and the interface between VET and non-VET service sectors

As noted earlier, in order to adequately address the educational and non-educational needs of disadvantaged learners, training providers must engage effectively in service integration and partnership-building activities with external services — especially if they are unable to provide a high level of in-house non-educational support. To achieve this, the training organisation needs strong leadership, a culture of innovation and cross-sector collaboration, and dedicated resources (Hargreaves 2011; McCrone et al. 2013; Nechvoglod & Beddie 2010). The same is true of partnership-building between training providers and local employers (McCrone et al. 2015).

However, even where training providers are willing to work with other services in a joined-up approach, many communities — particularly those in rural, regional and outer urban areas — lack access to an adequate range of health and support services. As a consequence, some young people miss out on the non-educational support they need in order to engage effectively with education and training (Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; Victorian Department of Education & Early Childhood Development 2014).

Regardless of the extent to which the VET providers partner with other services to meet learner needs, individualised service planning, monitoring and follow-up are always required with disadvantaged learners (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011). These processes need to be undertaken in a collaborative learner-centred manner and are most effective when delivered within a coordinated wrap-around model (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011). Mentoring has also been found to be highly effective in sustaining and enhancing engagement among disadvantaged learners (Nechvoglod & Beddie 2010).

Beyond the immediate learning environment, participation in non-educational activities, such as cultural or recreational activities, has also been associated with higher levels of social capital in young people and higher rates participation in further education (Chesters & Smith 2015; Lawson & Lawson 2013; Semo & Karmel 2011). Students who participate in extracurricular activities associated with their educational institution tend to show stronger engagement with learning, partly because it enhances their feelings of belonging and connectedness with the institutional environment (Hillman 2010; Lawson & Lawson 2013).

For learners with a disability, access to dedicated disability support in the vocational training system relies on the learner disclosing their disability. However, for a variety of reasons, including concerns about stigma, many learners with a mental illness, for example, may choose not to disclose their disability, thereby also making it more difficult for training providers to address these needs (Griffin & Nechvoglod 2008).

Australian and United Kingdom research suggests that for many young people in mainstream schooling — and particularly those experiencing disadvantage — high-quality, timely careers education and advice are not available; or, the barriers to accessing it are such that few take up the opportunity (Blenkinsop et al. 2006; Clayton et al. 2010; Fuller & Macfadyen 2012). Even though information and advice about further education options is a critical factor in enrolment and retention (McInnis et al. 2000; Nelson & O'Donnell 2012), the career-development services provided by training providers and other non-school services are underutilised (Rainey et al. 2008). These services often lack the capacity to address the full spectrum of young people's needs for advice, information and support with educational

or career decision-making (Rainey et al. 2008; Urbis 2011). An important strategy for promoting re-engagement among disadvantaged learners is for training providers to target the provision of training and employment information to disengaged learners, including through outreach activities, trade tasters and the like (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011). Unfortunately, many disadvantaged or disengaged learners reported receiving no formal careers information or advice whatsoever (Rainey et al. 2008; TNS Opinion & Social 2011; McCrone et al. 2013).

Community resources and stakeholders

As discussed earlier, the educational engagement of disadvantaged young people can be hindered by complex and/or cumulative difficulties, which may relate to physical or emotional wellbeing, disability, family difficulties, childcare, transport, housing or financial issues. Young people in low socioeconomic status (SES) areas are more likely to experience concerns about physical and emotional wellbeing. This includes mental health difficulties, trauma, substance use, relationship or family difficulties, family violence, homelessness and unstable housing (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Myconos 2012; Mission Australia 2014). These factors in turn can constrain access to vocational education and deter young people from considering or continuing in vocational programs.

Low socioeconomic status is associated with low educational achievement (Lamb et al. 2015) and low aspirations, as well as lower levels of health, wellbeing and perceived personal safety (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon 2013; Mission Australia 2014), with regional and rural communities at particular risk. Family attitudes to education and careers, as identified above, are shaped by personal experience, social norms, wider community role models and structural factors such as poverty and location (Cranston et al. 2016).

Socioeconomic factors also impact on the attitudes and knowledge of individuals and groups, by shaping or limiting disadvantaged young people's exposure to diverse career paths and role models (Webb et al. 2015), as well as by limiting their training and local employment opportunities — including the scale, quality and resources of their educational institutions (Sullivan, Perry & McConney 2013).

Among young people, location and practical convenience, including travel distance and travel costs, are among the top reasons for choosing particular training providers (TNS Opinion & Social 2011; McCrone et al. 2013). Personal safety is also a particular concern for young people from low-SES areas (Mission Australia 2014), with bullying and anxiety commonly listed causes of early school leaving (Haywood et al. 2009; Myconos 2014).

Members of the business community, cultural and sporting leaders, and other people who have succeeded in their field can also have a positive effect on educational engagement — including through guest speeches, mentoring, and becoming involved in student projects (Watson et al. 2015). Meaningful interaction with positive and varied role models can have a particularly powerful effect on young people who have felt excluded or stigmatised by society (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002) and can help to counteract a lack of exposure to such role models in the young person's usual environment (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab 2008; Alloway & Dalley-Trim 2009; NSW Centre for Education Statistics & Evaluation 2013).

Policy and service systems

While this research was undertaken in three Australian states, it is important to contextualise our understanding of the factors shaping early school leavers' interaction with VET in the national landscape. Australia's vocational training system is constituted by a complex web of Commonwealth and state and territory-based policies, initiatives and relationships, with responsibilities shared by governments across these jurisdictions. States and territories are largely responsible for training provision and have a high degree of autonomy. As noted in the White Paper on Australia's Federation, in spite of efforts to bring all jurisdictions' priorities into closer alignment, the system remains 'messy' (Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014, p.1).

The literature on the role of factors at this level of the socio-ecological framework focused on systemic policy and socio-cultural systems, as well as their impact(s) on young people in vocational training. The complexity of VET fees and subsidies is also known to make it difficult for prospective learners to make informed choices (Bowman, McKenna & Griffin 2016). In recent years, the participation rates in various courses and qualification levels have been shaped by student entitlement models and the VET FEE-HELP scheme (Atkinson & Stanwick 2016). These measures were partly intended to improve access and equity in the VET system, but have also had a range of unintended consequences (Bowman, McKenna & Griffin 2016).

Structurally, Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) argue that a needs-based funding model is required to meet the needs of disengaged learners, one with indices for calculating the relevant loadings to support activities such as needs profiling, foundation skills development and building outcomes focused on 'work readiness'. While numerous small-scale trials and pilots are being conducted in some high youth unemployment areas, the processes and outcomes remain inconsistent and, without a more systematic and structured approach, largely unsustainable (Myconos, Clarke & te Riele 2016).

VET funding structures have generally favoured higher-level qualifications (certificate III or higher), with less financial incentive provided for learners to undertake certificates I and II (Atkinson & Stanwick 2016). This compounds the low regard in which many people hold lower-level VET qualifications (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Atkins & Flint 2015), and is unfortunate in light of the substantial number of disadvantaged learners who have difficulty completing a certificate III qualification or transitioning thereafter into employment, without first undertaking a preparatory or foundation course (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011).

Financial barriers can also impact significantly on enrolment and retention. The most common financial barriers are high course fees (real or perceived), the need to relocate to pursue preferred courses, and a lack of financial or material support from family members (McInnis et al. 2000; Freeman, Klatt & Polesel 2014; Umemoto 2015; Cranston et al. 2016).

Macrosystems

In the model of Bronfenbrenner (1994), macrosystems are comprised of the most far-removed and extraneous collection of factors and which continue to exert an influence on the life circumstances, thoughts, beliefs, ethics and behaviours of a young person. Importantly, this level includes the social, political, economic and cultural forces and factors that affect all other levels and consequently impact on the family of the young

person, and, in part through the family, on the young person themselves. Given the nature of these factors, it is difficult to find direct evidence of their impact on the engagement of early school leavers in VET. Some of the clearest examples are the very strong correlations already identified (see Introduction) between low socioeconomic status and educational achievement (e.g., Lamb et al. 2015), including, for example, the numbers of early school leavers who disengage or fail to complete VET courses (NCVER 2015).

The macrosystemic level recognises the persistence at this socio-ecological level of expectations that market forces can drive improvements in the scope, quality and access of VET; and the persistence of confusing relationships and funding and accountability streams across federal and state-based VET 'strategy' and structures.

VET-related political and economic discourses are often characterised by phrases such as 'earn or learn', 'employability skills', 'knowledge-based' economies, and 'marketisation', which often fail to connect with the real-world problems of disadvantage, including disability, gender, ethnicity, rurality and remoteness and place-based disadvantage. It is for this reason that authors such as Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) argue for considerations of needs-based funding models, those that might better support the needs of disengaged and disadvantaged learners.

Summary

More than 100 factors were found which exert a strong influence on disengaged or disadvantaged young people in VET or similar programs; however, many were inter-related and are better understood as grouped factors. The strongest groups of factors tend to derive from the microsystemic level and include family attitudes and expectations, peer knowledge and attitudes, learning self-efficacy, and personal experience of receiving support for learning and wellbeing needs.

At the local community level, the important factors include the perceived relevance of course offerings; the capacity, culture and services offered by VET providers to recognise and meet early school leaver needs; various 'access' issues, including provider location and proximity, transport, safety and course costs; the perceived importance or value of an adult learning environment, which nonetheless meets students' learning and wellbeing support needs; hands-on or applied learning opportunities; joined-up service arrangements; careers guidance; and social capital-building activities such as participation in (training-related) social, cultural or recreational activities. Higher-level factors include the lack of clarity around the VET system and, in particular, fee structures, eligibility and the various course types and levels.