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Second chance education: barriers, supports and engagement strategies

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Second chance education programs are now a well-established presence in institutions seeking to provide access and equity pathways for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. This paper focusses on the strategies used to support positive engagement in second chance equity programs, drawing upon evaluation research data from four TAFE sponsored programs. Interviews were held with service providers involved in the programs' development and delivery, and focus groups were held to gather information from program participants. The findings highlight the complex and often multiple barriers facing participants and the importance of delivering programs with sustained and tailored approaches. While tangible educational and/or employment outcomes were delivered, it was the associated social and personal development that made these programs especially successful. Hence, there is a need for equity programs to be holistic, scaffolded, and tailored to practical and vocational pathways.

Keywords: *Vocational pathways, second chance education, access and equity*

Introduction

Australia's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes have long provided Vocational Education and Training (VET) opportunities that fulfil access and equity policies for disadvantaged individuals, including disengaged learners and workers, by enabling them to attend programs that promote inclusiveness, access and equity (Barnett and Spoehr, 2008; Murray and Mitchell, 2013; Volkoff, Clarke and Walstab, 2008).

There are numerous terms used and contested in the literature to describe programs that enable individuals to access and re-engage in learning outside of mainstream education. The terms include second chance education programs, alternative education programs, re-engagement programs, and flexible learning programs (Te Riele, 2014). While these programs are often commonly characterised for their flexibility (Te Riele, 2014), they are also often a 'second chance' learning opportunity for socially diverse groups. Rothman, Shah, Underwood, McMillan, Brown and McKenzie (2013:141) state that the National Vocational Education and Training Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) has identified the following groups for whom VET may provide second chance learning: individuals with less than Year 12 or an equivalent level of educational attainment; those returning to learning after a long period of absence from study and or work; individuals re-skilling following redundancy; those involved in the criminal justice system; and individuals of working age who are neither working nor studying.

Second chance education is not a new concept. Over two decades ago, Inbar and Sever (1989) suggested three basic criteria for genuine second chance frameworks; that they should be: accessible for all; effective in improving educational attainment; and provide the same/ similar opportunities for success that conventional education opportunities provide. More recently, Keogh (2009) posits that second chance educational opportunities facilitate social inclusion and equality and can play various roles, including: compensating for learning not previously achieved; preparing individuals for the next level of education; raising skill levels; increasing access to learning and qualifications; and positively influencing subsequent generations' learning outcomes. However, there is a paucity of rigorous evaluation research that links program characteristics with specific participant outcomes (Gutherson, Davies, and Daszkiewicz, 2011).

While some research has focused on the tangible education and work outcomes that second chance education provides, Ross and Gray (2005) assert that the real value of these programs lies in the intangible personal benefits for individuals that include, taking greater control over their lives, developing social skills and confidence, and most importantly in building relationships with program peers and staff. This view is supported by Hargreaves (2011) who argues that these programs offer two-fold benefits in providing individuals with the skills needed to find employment, and also by assisting to alleviate potential barriers that some individuals may have in participating in education and training. The present study aims to explore the benefits of second chance education programs, specifically the intangible benefits, by examining the barriers, supports and engagement strategies in specified programs. The study will also focus on the challenges and successes experienced by the program participants and service providers to determine the critical factors for successful learning programs.

Background

A key benefit of second chance education is to build social capital which increases self-esteem, confidence and personal satisfaction through the development of social skills, a feeling of increased agency and autonomy, the development of new friendships, improved and sustained relationships, and enhancing contact with people and the community (Ross and Gray, 2005). However, Ross and Gray also caution that these programs are not a "panacea" for participants, and highlight the risk of participants getting stuck in such programs and not progressing to higher level courses. Nevertheless, the literature, as discussed below, demonstrates that these programs are an important first step for many disadvantaged participants in order for sustained participation in further training and/or employment to occur.

In delivering training needs to these diverse cohorts, TAFEs are faced with addressing the complex challenges impacting many learners who have experienced multiple and cumulative disadvantage. These challenges can impede both access to and successful participation in training (Considine, Watson, and Hall, 2005). For example, in a survey of 58 TAFE institutes across Australia, Volkoff et al. (2008) found that the most significant barriers reported by TAFEs in relation to accessing

training opportunities were low literacy and numeracy skills, with courses available attempting to bridge this gap by providing literacy and numeracy training to assist individuals to then enrol and participate in higher level vocational courses (Phan and Ball, 2001). Research also supports the view that an individual's social network, especially family and significant others, plays an influential role in accessing and successfully participating in training (Barnett and Spoehr, 2008; Volkoff et al., 2008). Additional barriers include coming from a low socio-economic background, a lack of family support (including a perceived devaluing of education), intergenerational unemployment, and non-participation in compulsory education.

The complex challenges faced by some disadvantaged learners often falls outside the scope of VET as external and multisector support is needed to deal with issues such as housing, finances, substance abuse, mental and physical health, and justice and legal issues (Barnett and Spoehr, 2008; Volkoff et al, 2008). This notion is supported by Figgis, Butorac, Clayton, Meyers, Dickie, Malley and McDonald (2007:15) who state that "when an individual is trying to learn, the disadvantages they suffer-whether limited literacy, homelessness, poor health, lack of confidence etc. tend to be magnified and compounded. Learning is a big ask if one is poorly prepared or diverted by other concerns."

In a study of short-term funded 'pilot' initiatives 'seeded' in TAFE institutes by Figgis and colleagues (2007) they found that funds for those initiatives were primarily used to provide direct support for learners (for example, ensuring more personal contact by increasing the teacher-to-student ratios; providing a diverse range of adults to work with the students; the inclusion of individual mentoring; and extending the duration of the course). These additional practices provided further support to disadvantaged learners (many of whom faced multiple and complex barriers to their successful participation). However, the researchers concluded that once the funding ceased, so did the additional support which was the key ingredient for participants to successfully engage in the programs. Similarly, Volkoff et al. (2008,) reported that the limitations of funding posed numerous barriers for TAFEs to remain inclusive due to the lack of resources that were necessary to provide the critical elements of targeted support and delivery practices that were customised and tailored to the needs of the learners.

The literature relating to second chance education commonly points to several key characteristics of training that successfully support disadvantaged and second chance learners (Davies, Lamb, and Doecke, 2011; Gutherson et al., 2011; Murray and Mitchell 2013; Te Riele, 2014). Research by Davies et al. examined low skilled and disengaged adult learners, and found that this target group often reported former experiences with learning and training as disjointed and problematic. The key factors that contributed to their sense of disengagement were access, achievement, application, and aspiration. Davies and colleagues developed a conceptual model of effective interventions based on the existing body of national and international literature that comprised the four components of outreach, learner well-being, pedagogy, and pathways.

In a review of the international literature on alternative education, Gutherson et al. (2011) found that effectiveness is based on: trusting and caring relationships; an effective assessment of the needs of learners; a person-centred and needs-led program with an outcomes focussed approach; the provision of personalised and relevant curricula emphasising the basic skills of literacy, numeracy, communication and technology; and having flexible and accessible initiatives that are delivered by highly skilled and trained staff. In addition, programs should be effectively monitored and assessed to ensure that participants' needs are met, that practices continue to inform program delivery, that there is strong program support by the wider family and community that links exist to multiple agencies, and the provision of pastoral support that includes counselling and mentoring.

Aspects of Gutherson et al.'s (2011) research are reinforced in Murray and Mitchell's (2013) study of second chance education programs within TAFEs which found that the flexibility of the learning environment and the trusting, caring and respectful relationships between teachers and students were fundamental to students' re-engagement with formal education. Recent research in Australia by Te Riele (2014) also focused on the importance of flexible learning and the key dimensions of achieving *valued outcomes* by improved futures, recognition and successful growth and well-being; *actions* to create meaningful learning opportunities, support, genuine relationships, and community engagement; *principles* in a commitment to students' needs and

enabling an empowering education; and *conditions* such as flexibility, systemic support, and a shared vision.

In pulling together this array of literature, three broad common themes are evident. Second chance programs need to be **customised** to the learner, **collaboratively** linking with multidisciplinary services, and **contextualised** to be relevant to the individual, local community and/or the needs of industry. Indeed, McGrath (2007) and Barnett and Spoehr (2008) describe this approach as holistic, as relevant training is contextualised and specifically tailored to the needs and goals of the learner or community. These three themes are discussed in the following section.

Customised and contextualised programs

In research examining disengaged adult learners in Victoria, Davies et al. found that a consistent theme for the "engagement of low-skill and disengaged mature learners is the significance of place and of locally accessible and relevant training opportunities" (2011:9). Therefore programs need to be tailored to meet the specific needs and interests of learners by allowing learners choice in the modules to be undertaken so that learning is relevant, and that career counselling is provided to explore individual skills and aspirations, and matched to training and vocational opportunities (Barnett and Spoehr, 2008). McGrath (2007) refers to the national training and employment literature to define 'contextualisation' as a training activity delivered to apply meaning to learners. For example, this may include 'hands-on' training through real life and work situations thus making direct links between theory and practice which may appeal to disengaged learners (Davies et al., 2011).

To facilitate this tailored approach, service providers need a deep understanding of their participants in order to develop strategies which address the complex issues faced by participants (Considine et al., 2005). In order to achieve this level of engagement, there needs to be time and opportunities for sustained conversation and trust-building. Figgis et al. (2007) assert that the most successful of such initiatives are established within the community rather than by government or government agencies; and that these community providers tend to have a long term commitment to the learners. Davies et al. (2011) also argue for the importance of funding models which support the continuity and

sustainability of the provider-participant connection, thereby building familiarity and trust on the part of the learner, which is particularly important for disengaged learners with limited support/social networks.

Collaborative approaches

As highlighted earlier, some disadvantaged and second chance learners require additional and resource intensive support which is beyond the scope of what most TAFE institutions can provide. Thus, coordination amongst agencies, organisations, and educational sectors to provide 'wrap around' support through a case management approach is integral for the success of second chance education programs. Again, this requires service providers to have an awareness of holistic learner needs, beyond their training-specific needs and be able to consider the learner's family and social context and to recognise and undertake timely action when support is required.

It is these positive and supportive interactions between individuals and their environment that can result in resilient responses to barriers. According to Windle, resilience is defined as a dynamic "process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and "bouncing back" in the face of adversity" (2011:152). Thus, resilience explains how an individual's characteristics (i.e., positive emotions) can interact with situational factors (i.e., available social support) and that this process is moderated by being exposed to similar stressors in the past (Pangallo, Zibarras, Lewis, and Flaxman, 2015).

In an evaluation of an education program for young people disengaged from secondary school education, Myconos (2014) found that an integrated program combining teaching, well-being and supportive pathways led to positive outcomes, including increased school completion rates and school attendances; and improvements in engagement and well-being with many students reporting improvements in their attitudes to schooling and their relationships. Students attributed this to a welcoming environment that was tailored to their needs; a holistic learning approach which emphasised social and emotional learning; pathways such as enhanced career guidance; onsite vocational training; and enabling former students to remain engaged

with the program and connected to staff who provided them with ongoing assistance.

Considine et al. (2005) argue that in measuring program success (particularly those in a community setting), a balance is needed between economic goals such as improved labour market outcomes, and the social goals of encouraging closer connections between the program participants and the broader community. Barnett and Spoehr (2008) propose that a model of 'good practice' in providing VET pathways includes: a case management approach to address multiple and complex needs; an individualised approach to teaching; linkages and collaborative working relationships within the VET sector and across other relevant sectors; and a systems-based or a structural framework for the continuation of support for individuals. They also assert that the program delivery should be flexible and provide real life and work situations, and that support for the program includes financial assistance and childcare for participants and professional development for VET staff in order to provide them with training to meet the complex needs of participants. This model provides benchmarks of good practice that can be employed in the evaluation of access and equity programs undertaken by TAFE Institutions.

This paper will present findings from an evaluation of four TAFE sponsored programs (see details below) delivered in the northern region of Adelaide, South Australia that sought to offer second chance educational opportunities to disengaged individuals. The key aim of this study was to investigate the experiences and the perceptions of program participants and service providers on the effectiveness of the programs in terms of their reported strengths and weaknesses, and their failure and/or success in long term educational and employment pathways. As discussed below, these findings resonate well with the key themes canvassed above and provide research evidence to support the case for continuing and augmenting second chance programs.

The research

Context

In 2012, the South Australian State Government began implementing a range of reforms to its VET sector under the '*Skills for All*' initiative

to build the State's skill levels, particularly in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, which is characterised by very high unemployment rates (particularly youth unemployment), high proportions of the population on income support, and low levels of educational attainment. Some suburbs exhibit pockets of extreme deprivation, being among the most disadvantaged in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The *'Skills for All'* initiative aimed to specifically target groups that faced barriers to participation in learning and work: including early school leavers; those without preliminary qualifications; the long-term unemployed; carers seeking to return to work; and individuals with language, literacy and numeracy issues.

To address social exclusion in the targeted suburbs, several partnership projects were delivered by the TAFE SA Adelaide North Institute to promote social inclusion for disadvantaged groups by encouraging their participation in education and training. Consistent with previous initiatives, the projects received short-term funding to deliver educational and vocational outcomes to redress past disadvantage, and to improve the position of particular community groups including women, youths, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the unemployed, and people with physical or intellectual disabilities. TAFE SA approached the University of South Australia (UniSA) to conduct a research evaluation project in 2012.

Research methodology

The research was jointly funded by TAFE SA and UniSA. Ethics approval was sought and granted in October 2012 (Ethics protocol "TAFE SA Evaluation of Community Engagement Programs in conjunction with Northern Business Partnerships Program" (ID: 0000030702). The key data collection methods used for the evaluation were focus groups and interviews with program participants and service providers in addition to participant observation. Program participants were provided with information sheets detailing the purpose of the research and to consider whether or not they wanted to be involved in a focus group prior to participation. Refreshments were provided at all focus groups.

Eight service providers involved in the programs' development and delivery, were interviewed to provide background and contextual details, commentary on participant findings, and to provide their own

perspective on the effectiveness of the programs. Six focus groups were held to gather information from program participants. A total of 37 individuals (22 males, 15 females) across all four programs participated in the research. The researchers also engaged in participant observation and used follow-up interviews/discussions to clarify key themes and issues.

A research report, where findings were collated and discussed in relation to the prevailing literature, was made available to research participants and other stakeholders for comment before the report was approved for distribution by TAFE SA and UniSA. This paper draws upon those findings.

The programs

Four programs were evaluated, all of which received short-term funding for their development and delivery. Each program had multiple partnering organisations, including state, local and federal governments, industry and community organisations. The programs ran from 12-20 weeks, with one requiring full-time attendance. The same service provider was involved, in some capacity, across three of the programs. As highlighted below, a key feature of the programs was their real work setting.

The first program, *Blokes on the Block* was designed as the first step for male participants to engage in further education, training, volunteering and/or ongoing sustainable employment. Involvement in the program gave participant's experience in a live training site as they upgraded the outside yard of a government owned residential property. A later iteration of the program was offered to both males and females and was titled *Blokes and Beauties on the Block*. The program's delivery was described by its service providers as *"intensive, supportive and individualised"*, with all stages of the program underpinned with literacy and numeracy skills and mapped to competencies from the Certificate I in Introductory Vocational Education (IVEC). Some participants from later iterations of the program also undertook Certificate I and II in Horticulture units.

Secondly, *Word@Work* was an industry-based program aimed at providing participants with the skills to move into formal educational

or employment pathways. It combined literacy and numeracy through hands-on project-based delivery and was aimed at individuals aged 17 years and over. Each iteration of the program was structured in different industry sectors, for example construction, horticulture, hospitality and community services.

Thirdly, the *Building Better Communities Program* trialled a training model integrating language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills with industry training. It aimed to increase LLN and employment outcomes for specifically targeted young people and indigenous groups through partnering with industry and the community. The program was undertaken at a local hospital and involved participants constructing a community garden.

The second iteration of the *Building Better Communities Program* was delivered during the period of data collection with participants undertaking a Certificate II in Civil Construction and 4-6 units of Education and Skills Development. This iteration also involved participants working on another garden within the same hospital. This iteration also included a mentoring component, with each participant provided with one-on-one time with a mentor once a week.

The final program, *Powerful Pathways for Women* was a pre-employment program for females aged 18 years and over aimed at increasing the number of women employed in the energy utilities sector.. It was an inaugural program both nationally and within the industry and had two iterations over two years. The program comprised full-time training over 20 weeks with the completion of three accredited certificates – Certificate II in Women's Education, Certificate I in Electro Communications Skills and Certificate I in Information Technology, including training at a power station. On completion of the program, there was an opportunity for the women to continue studying the Certificate II in Electro-technology.

Research findings

The findings below are presented in an integrated thematic format. Although there were four distinct programs, the objectives and the people targeted by the programs had commonalities. The following

sections examine the approach taken by the service providers in delivering the programs and the experiences of participants. Preliminary discussions with service providers highlighted a common understanding of program participants and approaches to developing and delivering programs, client relationships and outcomes.

Participant characteristics

Each program targeted disadvantaged individuals disengaged from the workforce, in the northern areas of Adelaide. Service providers indicated that many participants came to the programs with complex social and personal issues (including substance abuse, mental health problems, homelessness, anger management, financial difficulties, relationship problems), low levels of literacy and numeracy skills, and from dysfunctional family backgrounds. While participants were not asked specifically about their personal details and situation, the focus groups confirmed that most participants had experienced issues including substance abuse, low levels of literacy and numeracy, welfare family backgrounds, relationship problems, and long term unemployment.

Service providers had a comprehensive understanding of the participants they were working with, and acknowledged the importance of tailoring the programs they delivered in a way that engaged them, and addressed their needs. For example, providers commented that many were second, third or fourth generation unemployed and that missing from many of the participants' lives were networks and structures that could provide meaningful and sustained support. They also suggested that the complex issues many participants faced meant that they required long term support to move forward in their lives:

> *"...over 80 per cent of our clients...com*[e] *to us with drug problems, mental health issues, financial issues...relationship issues...increasingly housing issues...anger management issues, problem solving issues. I'd say over 95 per cent of them do not know how to get over basic...things."*

The *Powerful Pathways for Women Program* specifically targeted women, while the first program of what would subsequently become, *Blokes and Beauties on the Block*, initially only targeted men. All other programs had a mixture of male and female participants. The age range

of participants varied from 15-48 years and among the participants were Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) individuals, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities.

Participants' motivations and reasons for attending the programs varied: including an interest in the training topic (for example, construction, horticulture); wanting to improve their skills (including reading and writing); and for personal development. As an example, one participant explained that they had lost their job of 20 years and were looking for a means of getting back into the workforce. Another participant, who had never been in the workforce talked about their love for cooking, and as this was a component of one of the programs, they were interested in getting involved.

Participants' experiences

All participants who took part in a focus group provided positive feedback about their experiences within each respective program. These experiences included practical employability skills, but overwhelmingly, personal development, social support and the training environment were the key themes throughout.

> *"They got the job for me, they went to where I worked, set up… the work experience and everything. Other people wouldn't have done that, my job provider didn't even do that, couldn't even do that for me."*

Participants talked positively about gaining assistance with literacy and numeracy, writing resumes, applying for jobs, and the practical skills gained within the respective fields (for example, horticulture, hospitality, construction, electro-technology).

The friendships made between participants, and the (peer) social support that this provided throughout the programs (and beyond), were often the most memorable aspects for participants. For example, within the *Powerful Pathways for Women Program*, some participants were dealing with family and personal issues and they would support each other through this; some wanted to leave the program, and other participants encouraged them to stay. They also supported each other with home study sessions. It was also evident by the interaction between

participants at the various focus groups that the participants were fully engaged and a strong rapport and camaraderie had developed, even between participants who were only five weeks into a program.

Participants also talked about the importance of the assistance, support and one-on-one interaction with service providers, and in some programs, that the number of participants was a lot smaller than other courses they attended. One participant likened other programs to being at the motor registration office where participants were *"just a number"*. Some participants described the atmosphere of the training environment as *"fun"*, and felt they were able to joke around with both participants and service providers.

> *"I pictured a classroom mentality, lecturers, that sort of environment. I was deciding whether to can it* [drop out] *or continue going with it in the first week as well, but because* [the service provider] *were so genuine…they made it fun…it gave me back that motivation that I had last year."*

The role of service providers

There was overwhelming positive feedback from participants about service providers across all programs evaluated. Descriptions of service providers included their genuine, approachable and down to earth nature and their ability to draw out participants' strengths and weaknesses.

Many participants of *Blokes and Beauties on the Block* and *Word@ Work* indicated that they are still in contact with service providers, even two years after completing the program. This ongoing connection and support was underpinned by strong nurturing relationships and proved very important for further educational participation.

> *"They* [the service providers] *were just always there, always backing us up in everything that we did."*

It was evident from interviews with the service providers that having the right people to deliver these programs is integral to their effectiveness. As noted by Gutherson et al. (2011), building trust between service providers and participants, as well as amongst participants, was an important factor, as was flexibility and tailoring the program

to individual learning styles. Service providers commented that relationships skills were key to engaging with diverse participants:

> *"We've got to recognise as trainers their personality types, their different learning styles and make sure we put the right people together in pairs because we want it to be constructive not destructive."*

Importance of ongoing mentoring support

A common theme of all focus groups and interviews was the importance of providing mentoring support for participants. Mentoring support *during* programs was seen as important, but some service providers stated that for particular client groups, such as those facing complex issues, sustained social, personal and educational/employment outcomes are far more likely when mentoring support is also provided *beyond* the conclusion of the programs.

Participants also expressed that an ongoing connection and support was very important - *"after the course is completed you're not just left by the wayside, you are still contacted and you can still contact them for advice, reference or anything that you kind of need, they're still there for you."* However, it was noted, that this ongoing support (beyond the conclusion of a program) is unfunded and most service providers could not sustain this additional support long term. Hence service providers felt frustrated - *"I actually felt like I was deserting them, because I wanted to continue guiding them."*

Participant outcomes

Participant outcomes were wide ranging across the four programs, and included both planned and intended outcomes specified in program goals and unintended and serendipitous outcomes. As per previous research (Hargreaves, 2011; Ross and Gray 2005) participants in all programs talked about the various personal development skills they gained including: goal setting; time management skills; increased confidence; enhanced self-esteem, motivation and assertiveness; learning to focus on their strengths; learning to relate to others using positive language and teamwork; and leadership skills.

These findings were consistent with service providers' comments, who talked about participants' personal and social outcomes beyond the formal scope of the program, including assistance with housing, drug rehabilitation and relationship coaching. Enhanced employment and further education outcomes were reported across all programs, including certificate completion, course enrolment, employment, volunteering, and work experience. However, as the programs only received short-term funding there is no official reporting of whether the above outcomes produced longer-term engagement with education, training and/or employment.

Discussion

Participant diversity and complexity

As recent literature suggests, acknowledging "cumulative disadvantage" (Considine et al., 2005:8) in programs aiming to address access and equity in VET is important in ensuring that the appropriate support and resources are identified and the needs of those client groups are met (Considine et al., 2005; Figgis et al., 2007). Throughout the evaluation it became clear that addressing these issues for many participants was a long-term, incremental undertaking and not a 'quick fix'. Service providers all acknowledged, addressing these issues needs to be a pre-cursor to any vocational skill development and for some participants it could be a protracted journey until sustained personal, social and vocational outcomes were evident. Indeed, the reasons for the overwhelming 'success' participants reported was a sustained holistic approach underpinned by customised, collaborative and contextualised learning – all of which resonated well with the three common themes identified in the literature. Acknowledging the importance of these themes, discussed below, has major implications for program planning, funding, and the types and levels of support required by participants to cogently engage in vocational education.

A tailored and flexible approach and the right people

The findings strongly suggest that much of the success of these programs, and what sets them apart from others, can be attributed to their original and tailored project delivery models and having the appropriate staff delivering them. Each of the programs evaluated used

training approaches tailored to the needs of participants and the service providers recognised how crucial this was for engaging participants, discerning and catering to their needs, and providing training activities based on each individual's learning style - *"we've got to recognise as trainers their personality types, their different learning styles and make sure we put the right people in pairs because we want it to be constructive not destructive."* This supports McGrath's (2007) call for holistic and relevant training purposely tailored to the learner's or community's needs.

The effectiveness of these tailored approaches was evident in participants' feedback, many feeling that they were being genuinely engaged, often for the first time, and could seek the necessary assistance with their learning and personal development if and when they needed it. This was in stark contrast to other programs they had undertaken, where they felt like *"a number"*. It was also evident that having the right people facilitating these programs is paramount to their success. Not only must service providers be able to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the participants' specific characteristics and the barriers that they face in moving forward; they must also have the empathy, ability and willingness to respond to those needs and provide holistic support to participants. Both participants and service providers highlighted the importance of the above (service provider) attributes in establishing *credibility* with participants, many of whom were sceptical of education and/or training programs. Hence, the service providers' ability to relate to participants and build rapport was integral to the success of these programs. Of particular importance to both participants and service providers was the fostering of trust, and the service providers' willingness to share their own life stories – *"it was important that they gave, so we gave as well"* – thereby fostering the strong supportive relationships recommended by Ross and Gray (2005) and Hargreaves (2011).

Social support and networks

As highlighted earlier, many participants reported lacking social supports within their existing networks that are necessary to engage educational and employment pathways. Indeed for many, participating in one of these programs was the first time they had been provided with sustained personal support.

> *"After the course is completed you're not just left by the wayside, you are still contacted and you can still contact them for advice, reference or anything that you kind of need, they're still there for you."*

The new social networks that participants formed through these programs often had a profound "life changing" effect, as one service provider described – *"...there is a lot of facilitation there around creating their new social networks, so that they can make it sustainable, because they are breaking away from everything they know."*

It was also evident that the programs that provided mentoring support for participants were more effective, especially if mentoring was undertaken using a holistic approach. Here service providers acted more as life coaches, engaging the complexities of the participants' lives and acknowledging the need to look at individuals as *"a whole person"*, incorporating their health, education, mindset, and financial, social and personal environments. The support provided amongst peers was equally important, and its success in building social and relationship capital amongst learners is consistent with findings in other research (Balatti, Black, and Falk, 2006; Figgis et al., 2007). Indeed, the strong rapport and trust established by the service providers often provide the environment and synergy for strong peer relationships to form. An example of the strength of these relationships could be seen in *Powerful Pathways for Women*, with participants explaining that when some women were dealing with certain family issues they would provide mutual support for each other and became a*"... backbone to each other"*.

The findings also highlight that for most participants, sustained social, personal and educational/employment outcomes were more likely when mentoring support is provided beyond the conclusion of the programs. Participants still in contact with service providers reinforced the importance of this ongoing connection and support. Service providers too keenly felt the need to provide follow-up support. However, the provision of this ongoing connection and support was unfunded and relied on the ongoing investment and goodwill of service providers. It is this "investment mindset" that the literature asserts is particularly crucial for these types of programs to continue and flourish and for meaningful changes to occur (Figgis et al., 2007). This is an important

consideration for funding bodies and suggests that equity programs serving participants with multiple and complex needs require longer timeframes and support scaffolding, to achieve the personal growth and development (the so called "soft skills"), as a prerequisite to undertaking more structured training and education.

Skills development and changing attitudes towards education, training and employment

What also set these programs apart from other programs for many of the participants was the innovative ways that the training was approached. For example, participants in *Blokes and Beauties on the Block* talked about how the excursions they undertook (for example orienteering and paintballing) assisted them in developing peer relationships, and building their teamwork and leadership skills. Similarly, participants in *Powerful Pathways for Women*, expressed how the practical electro-technology training they undertook gave them the opportunity to do things that women normally wouldn't *"get out and do"*, and helped them to realise the opportunities for women in non-traditional fields.

Participants in the *Calvary Project* highlighted the fact that the project was on an actual work site, and they were working on a development that would be retained and used and of benefit to others, unlike other courses, where they would *"build a wall and then pull it down so the next group can use it."* This supports research undertaken by Hillman and McMillan (2005) and Davies et al. (2011) identifying a link between life satisfaction and undertaking *purposeful* activities in education and training.

At the completion of most of the programs, participants also received a qualification, a tangible recognition that they could then use to either gain employment or move into further training/education. The practical 'hands on' experiences enabled these participants to visualise their futures in tangible ways as they could now see the opportunities available to them, and had developed skills that could enable them to move forward.

Conclusion

As outlined in the literature (Considine et al., 2005) and highlighted in this paper, achieving a balance between pursuing social and educational outcomes is critical for the success of second chance equity programs. Striving towards this balance means: acknowledging the complex and multiple barriers participants face in engaging in these programs; developing programs that are sustained and tailored to participants; and measuring programs from both an economic perspective (for example, improved labour market outcomes) and social/personal perspective (connections between participants, increased social supports and personal development).

To this end, the paper identified several vital features of successful equity programs. Firstly, the importance of mentoring with a focus on participants' personal development, especially for participants who face multiple and complex needs and challenges. Here the importance of tailoring services proved paramount. Secondly, service providers delivering the programs need to take a holistic perspective, requiring specialist skills and experience – especially relationship building skills – to support and fully engage with participants. Thirdly, program outcomes need to take a long-term approach, scaffolding personal development with incremental learning in order to deliver sustainable engagement and training/educational pathways.

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