

Visy Cares Hub and Victoria University: Making the door of a University open to the community

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In 1999, a group of men embarked on a remarkable project that resulted in building a two million dollar youth centre in one of Melbourne's most disadvantaged communities. From the outset, Victoria University (VU) was a keen partner in the project. This project had key synergies with the current experiences of the University—a dual sector higher education and vocational education institution in Melbourne's western suburbs. There were also alliances with emerging government policy, in particular policy focused on responding to the rapid social and economic transformations that were occurring where increasingly the social and employment divide was apparent in the western region of Melbourne.

Education, and in particular vocational education, it was hoped was to be part of the solution. And on that basis Government policy was focused on ensuring that young people stayed in the education and training system. Young people, as a result of policy changes in 2000, were encouraged or forced to re-enter education to continue

to secure any government income support. For Victoria University this meant that an increasing number of young people with complex issues came to their door. It is a situation that is again being faced by the education system in Australia with the most recent announcement by the Federal Government on the jobs and training compact (Council of Australian Governments 2009).

This paper outlines a dual track journey, one of a project destined to be built and another of a University that embarked on research, reflection and action to create a very different learning environment for some of the most disadvantaged young people in Australia. In the end, the University located one of its entrances at a multi-purpose youth centre in Sunshine, with the aim of re-orientating its welcome mat to young people and engaging them in returning to study and fulfilling their own aspirations to succeed.

Introduction

Each community requires a service infrastructure that can act as a gateway, providing pathways for young people into education and to connect to their community. For young people who do not have the common community facilitators such as parents, adult coaches, informed siblings and mentors, they require tailored entry points whereby they have the opportunity to develop their own information trail.

The Visy Cares Hub is one of the original Harvester company wool stores; a building of historical significance in the heart of Sunshine in Melbourne's west that has been renovated into a co-located youth centre that is currently 1,000 square metres in size. The Visy Cares Hub houses a broad range of youth services and programs, and represents the development of an integrated service delivery model assisting young people to engage and connect with their community.

The project has been premised on the notion that building the capacity of communities to be active collaborators in the challenges that are faced by community members can make fundamental and sustainable change in young people's lives. Cavaye (2000) would define community capacity as consisting of the networks, organisation, attitudes, leadership and skills that allow communities to manage change and sustain community-led development. In this case, this premise was coupled with the belief that in order to build the capacity of communities, community practice must be linked to appropriate physical infrastructure that can house the suite of services and activities required.

Victoria University has a long standing commitment to the western region of Melbourne. Encapsulated in the latest policy framework of the University is commitment number five which states: to resource three initiatives for a better life in Melbourne's western suburbs and to share this knowledge with other communities in Australia or overseas that may face similar challenges. The University was an active collaborator throughout the establishment of the Visy Cares Hub, using its own internal expertise to work alongside the project group. The result was intellectual capital combining with philanthropic interests and business acumen to build a \$2.5 million youth centre in one of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia.

For VU it identified the important role that a University can have in partnering community change. Partnership with this project provided an opportunity for the University to develop a community entry point for young adults, in effect making the door to the University much wider. The aim of this paper is to explore how the University, in particular the Vocational Education section of this dual sector University, has reflected on its own practice resulting in active participation in this project that would see the front door of

the University open for business to some of the most disadvantaged young adults in Melbourne's western suburbs.

The context of literature and policy: 2000–2005

This project was originally underpinned by a growing body of knowledge that identified the importance of community partnerships, collaboration and the delivery of a much more consistent and cohesive service system, essential to connecting young people to successful education transitions. More importantly, the ideas of this project were also finding synergy in current policy, similarly informed by a growing body of community research on young people, the communities in which they live and how they connected to and built social capital.

The Visy Cares Hub project was being developed at the same time as a (relatively) new State Government was driving policy and enacting change. This body of work gave rise to new concepts of social capital and community-building which had resulted from a growing concern by governments about the complexity of community issues. The nineties had fuelled discussions on how governments can support the development of communities, in particular, how they can act as an enabler for local communities to take action on local solutions to local issues; in this case, how communities could be more inclusive of young people.

Governments were concerned with how they could facilitate the building of social capital in communities. Social capital is a term that is regularly used to describe the kinds of social networks and social agencies that individuals rely on to give them meaning and purpose in life. Such connections gained through friendship groups, employment pathways, community organisations and cultural resources provide individuals with the ability to feel empowered and in control of decision-making processes that occur during their life span. Priest (2008: 4) asserts that, for young people, social capital is a

vehicle through which goals, civics participation, successful education transitions and career pathways can be created, sustained and achieved. Stokes *et al.* (2006) states that, in the presence of positive family relationships, and school, peer and community networks, young people are better positioned to navigate themselves into healthy states of thinking and being.

However, the concepts of social capital and private and public intervention remain a contested subject matter. Cavaye (2000) explored a number of these debates suggesting that technical assistance is development *in* or *for* the community, rather than development *of* the community. He goes on to discuss the work of Brown (1980) who argues that technical assistance does not address a community's capacity to manage the assistance it receives. Putnam (2000) points out that government programs, such as urban renewal and public housing projects, have 'needlessly ravaged existing social networks'. This was a project that wanted to collaborate with its community and build capacity and as such, suggests Cavaye, a project's service delivery is to form part of a new dual role that also includes the facilitation of community capacity.

This is the framework that underpinned the development of the Visy Cares Hub. Framed by the key research on social capital, the project set the benchmarks high, aiming to provide the opportunity for young people to be valued, connect with their community, develop new skills and experience the world around them. One of the key drivers of that focus was to explore how the Visy Cares Hub could assist in connecting young adults into a range of new learning opportunities. In the heart of the western suburbs, disadvantage had long become entrenched. Changing the opportunities for these young people to break that intergenerational hold on their future would take systematic change at every level, including each community.

The level of unemployment in these communities suggested that those who do not complete secondary school or its vocational equivalent

face relatively high risks of unemployment and low earnings (Access Economics 2005, Prime Ministers Youth Pathways Taskforce 2001, Teese 2000, Helme 2009, Lamb *et al.* 2008, Vaughan *et al.* 2005, Marks 2006). In this situation, young people often lack the necessary general education skills and knowledge to anticipate and respond to changes in the labour market and wider society. Early school-leavers tend to spend less time in employment—thus gaining far less access to on-the-job learning in the first five years after exiting education than do their better-educated peers (*ibid*).

The new Government of Victoria in this period generated a number of initiatives to ameliorate the difficulties young people were experiencing in the transition from school to further education and/or employment. The Kirby Report (2000) commissioned by the Victorian Government outlined a raft of reforms. It found that in 1999, 30% of school students left Victorian secondary schools without a qualification, and just under 20% left school before completing Year 12 and did not proceed to engage in any further education or training. The report found that in Victoria the provision of post-compulsory education and training for young people was fragmented and their pathways from school to further education, training or employment were not clear and difficult for young people to connect and access the necessary community support mechanisms. More importantly, however, the report found that young people were not achieving the type of outcomes that were necessary for them to enter vocational pathways, which was further highlighted by the rapidly changing employment market that required a range of skills and knowledge. Finally, the report noted, the absolute imperative related to improvement of a system of vocational education and training for young people given the strong links between educational failure and social and economic exclusion.

The Federal Government was also embarking on a number of key policy changes that were to highlight the importance of the

University-community partnership. The (then) Federal Liberal Government developed the Mutual Obligation policy that required young people to be connected to other education, employment and/or training activities to secure income support. It was as a result of this policy that by 2001 the University was seeing much higher numbers of young people enter its doors, often in a haphazard way that required each young person to be provided with information, educational assessments, identification of educational pathways that may be available to them and specialised support to act upon the information.

In this period the Federal Government also commissioned a report on welfare reform. The McClure report (2000) outlined that, amidst the economic and social transformation, it was necessary to re-think and reconfigure the approach to social support. The appointed Committee, led by McClure, identified that the current social support system may be failing many of those it was designed to help:

Australia, though in its eighth year of strong economic growth, joblessness, underemployment and reliance on income support remained unacceptably high. Disadvantage, the report outlines, is also concentrated increasingly in particular segments of the population and in particular localities. Over recent decades a variety of economic and demographic factors have combined to create the new and disturbing phenomena of 'jobless families' and 'job poor communities'. These unequal outcomes have generated the unacceptable prospect that significant concentrations of economic and social disadvantage might become entrenched (McClure 2000: 5).

McClure could have been referring to Sunshine, where high youth unemployment was exacerbated by intergenerational poverty and adult unemployment.

Minister Kosky in her Ministerial statement on 'Post-compulsory education and training pathways in Victoria' (January 2000) identified that:

... in Victoria and Australia, inadequate attention has been given to guidance and support for young people in their transition from education to further education, training and employment. Guidance has been treated as an information process rather than a program that will encourage young people to actively investigate and engage with opportunities for their own futures (in Schmit 2002, p. 6).

In 2001, the Victorian Government Department of Education, Employment and Training produced a discussion paper, 'Knowledge, innovation, skills and creativity: A discussion paper on achieving the goals and targets for Victoria's education and training system' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2001) which included a focus on increasing the percentage of young people who successfully complete Year 12 or its equivalent, specifically to raise the retention rate to 90% by 2010.

In 2001, *Footprints to the future* (known as the Eldridge report) was commissioned by the Federal Government to investigate the barriers to the development of engagement by young people in education, training and employment (Prime Ministers Youth Pathways Taskforce 2001). The report called for the development of local partnerships within a network governance framework based on a 'place management' or local community approach.

Similarly, Noonan (2002) in his review noted that Vocational Education must provide more workplace-oriented environments to accommodate young people, while at the same time helping them improve their skills, particularly literacy, numeracy and interpersonal skills, so that they can move on to some form of pre-employment training. Once this group leaves formal education and training, they will be difficult to get back and risk becoming a burden on the welfare and justice systems (Noonan 2002).

The UK, like Australia, was managing a similar set of complexities as a result of the changing economic and labour market demands.

The concept of education and adult learning as a partnership had emerged primarily as a result of the *Every child matters* Green Paper. This Green Paper took a systemic view of children's services, which focused on the idea that individuals and agencies across the system were not effectively integrated. Each area of service delivery came under review and, as a result of this, a focus on personalised learning was also an emerging area of interest (Department for Education and Skills 2005).

In 2003 the Victorian Government released its *Blueprint for government schools*. The Minister for Education, at the launch of the policy, identified that one of the key drivers was the changing and challenging demand of our increasingly sophisticated economy and a more complex and rapidly changing society. The ultimate measure of the success of the *Blueprint for government schools* would depend on effective partnerships. The Government alone could not deliver educational excellence for all students; nor could schools. Such excellence could come only from joint initiatives between the Government and the Department, schools and their teachers, principals and other workers, parents and other school community members (Department of Education and Training 2003).

The policy constructs of community, education, government/community partnerships, young people and their transitions became the focus of the two youth policies released during the (now) three terms of office. The first, called *Respect* (2003), referred to the encouraging of young people's contributions to building communities and increasing young people's skills and resilience through broader community participation (Department of Victorian Communities 2003).

It was these policy intersections and the growing government focus on these issues that provided the vehicle for Victoria University to apply for State government funds to further develop its partnership with Visy Cares Hub and take a tenancy in the new building. The concept

was one of partnerships: the focus on re-engagement of young people in education and employment. The partnership between the Visy Cares Hub and Victoria University strengthened as the synergies of their mutual directions became obvious, serving to build a common direction between government policy and what the University and the Board understood to be good practice.

Background to the Visy Cares Hub

In 1999, a group of men who were working in the justice system and in the judiciary were brought together by a key community liaison worker in the Victoria Police and two lawyers: two successful and respected lawyers, from the western suburbs, children of immigrant parents, three Chief Magistrates, Victoria's most senior Supreme Court Judge and soon (at that time) to be Chancellor of Victoria University, Justice Frank Vincent, and a number of their colleagues. Their motivation was underpinned by their own personal pursuit to be a part of the solution, instead of a constituent of the system, that would see a constant stream of young lives in front of the courts. Many, it would seem to them, were destined to enter into a life that would spiral into crime and punishment.

Over social occasions and 'court talk', they drew together a band of men that met regularly to consider what philanthropic venture they would like to be a part of. They were familiar with the Visy Cares Centre at Dandenong and were interested in such a concept in the Western Region. They asked an academic from Victoria University to attend and provide advice about current models of youth centres and to assist their ideas to take shape.

The model of a co-located youth service (or the one-stop-shop model) captured the interest of the group. The notion of a youth centre, particularly the concept of building something, became the focus of the discussion. It had appeal as it would leave physical infrastructure in the community. The concept of one-stop-shops and co-located

youth services had already been established in Victoria; previously the Whitlam Government had funded the NOW centre, and later through the establishment of the youth specific Visy Cares Centre in Dandenong. The concept had also taken shape internationally, and as such, there was growing evidence that such projects could be successful in providing community connections for young people.

Though there were other discussions with Local Government in the west, Brimbank City Council had a strong focus on the needs of young people and sought out the group which had now formalised their structure and incorporated the gaining of deductible gift recipient status, commonly referred to as registering as a charity. In 2003, the Council commissioned a Youth Needs Analysis, which raised the issue of youth facilities within the municipality. The Council was talking about co-located youth services, with the possibility of developing a new centre and new programs. Concurrent with these discussions, the Youth Junction (their registered name) Board had secured some funding from the State Government with the assistance of the Pratt Foundation.

What was needed was land or a building. The community at Brimbank had spent a long time campaigning and securing from demolition a building in the heart of Sunshine. The building was one of the original bulk stores of the H.V. McKay family Harvester Company. The company had strong historical links not only to Sunshine but also to Australian industrial relations history. The Harvester decision of 8 November 1907 is etched in the Australian history books as it mandated the wages of women and men.

This potted version of history does not do justice to the challenges that were met and overcome, however they are not the purpose of this paper. It is sufficient at this point to note that the Visy Cares Hub was officially opened on Monday, 14 May 2007.

The Visy Cares Hub 2010

The Visy Cares Hub in 2010 offers a range of co-located services (Table 1) aimed at improving access by young people and reducing travel between multiple locations. The Visy Cares Hub works collaboratively with agencies, organisations, groups and departments to assist young people, whilst recognising their differences, aspirations, constraints and backgrounds.

Table 1: Current agency list

| Agency | Service provided |
|--|--|
| Robert Stary & Associates | Legal Services |
| Brimbank Youth Services | Local coordination and youth programs both generalist and early intervention |
| Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues | Refugee Support Services |
| Sunshine Youth Housing | Housing referral, support and advocacy |
| Ardoch Youth Foundation | Education support for young people |
| Victoria University Youth Transitions | University youth portal, education guidance and support and youth transitions service for young people to reconnect with education and/or training |
| Western Melbourne Headspace | Young people and Mental Health, research, practitioners, counsellors and health professionals |
| Victoria University Student Legal Clinic | The clinic is a partnership between Sunshine Community Legal Service and Slater and Gordon. It provides a unique professional placement experience for VU law students |
| Melbourne City Mission | Jobs Services Australia; employment services for young people |

As a part of its charitable status, the Visy Cares Hub runs a number of programs for free. Young people from the local area attend these programs. The partnership with VU is essential to the delivery of

many of these programs, as it is students from the University that facilitate their implementation.

Victoria University Youth Transitions Unit

The changing policy environment of the early first half of this decade required broader educational solutions for young people in the western region. It was a period where a number of initiatives were colliding and finding synergies in their resultant focus on young adults in the region. There are still many similarities in the current policy environments that are driving the University in 2010 to work harder at integrated educational solutions.

The Commonwealth Government Youth Compact (2009) compels young people to enrol in an accredited training program to ensure receipt of their benefits. As a result of a decade of policy response in times of economic change, an increasing number of the University's students are aged 15 to 19 years of age. This is a situation that is common in community learning centres around Australia. More importantly, the young people that are re-entering the education system in this way are more likely to have failed in mainstream schooling and so bring with them a range of personal and academic issues.

Developing further educational pathways for young people who are economically and educationally disadvantaged is different from the more traditional role of providing further education and/or industry based training to adult learners. In the past, TAFE had been geared to workplace learning, particularly in relation to the re-skilling of workers often displaced through globalisation in a government and industry purchasing market. This focus on job training had determined the institutional structures and product range.

As in 2002 when the University undertook its own research into the changing demographic of its student cohort; the University still faces

challenges in managing this complex cohort of young people, many of whom have not developed the necessary skills to navigate through the secondary school system and are being left at the door of the adult learning system with little support. The Visy Cares Hub partnership was the first community project where the University entered a long-term alliance to develop a model of practice that could underpin future programs.

As a result of all of this work, several plans of action were implemented. The TAFE Division worked towards the establishment of a Youth Portal that would house all of its initiatives in one area. The concept aimed to facilitate staff to more effectively link themselves and the young people with whom they worked into important community connections. A youth portal, with a coordination focus, was created to be the central point for youth-specific programs (like VCAL), professional development, building community linkages and supporting a more systematic approach to sustaining the growing cohort of 'high risk' young people.

Concurrent with this work, the Youth Transitions Unit was established at the Visy Cares Hub. The three staff of the unit undertake a case management role for young people wishing to reconnect with education and support the development of educational programs. Given the limitations of staffing, the model has been supported by a partnership with the University based on the student clinic or field placement model.

The University requires that each student completes a 'Learning in the workplace project' as part of their study program. Students have undertaken a range of roles at the Visy Cares Hub. At the VU unit pre-service youth workers, teachers and recreation students have run a range of programs, supported individual young adults with their own educational challenges, met with local schools and assisted in representing VU at the range of events that are held by the centre. It has added a unique dimension to the Youth Transitions Unit, whereby

the University's own clients are involved in the broader community; of course for many of the students, it is also their community, strengthening their own education and community links.

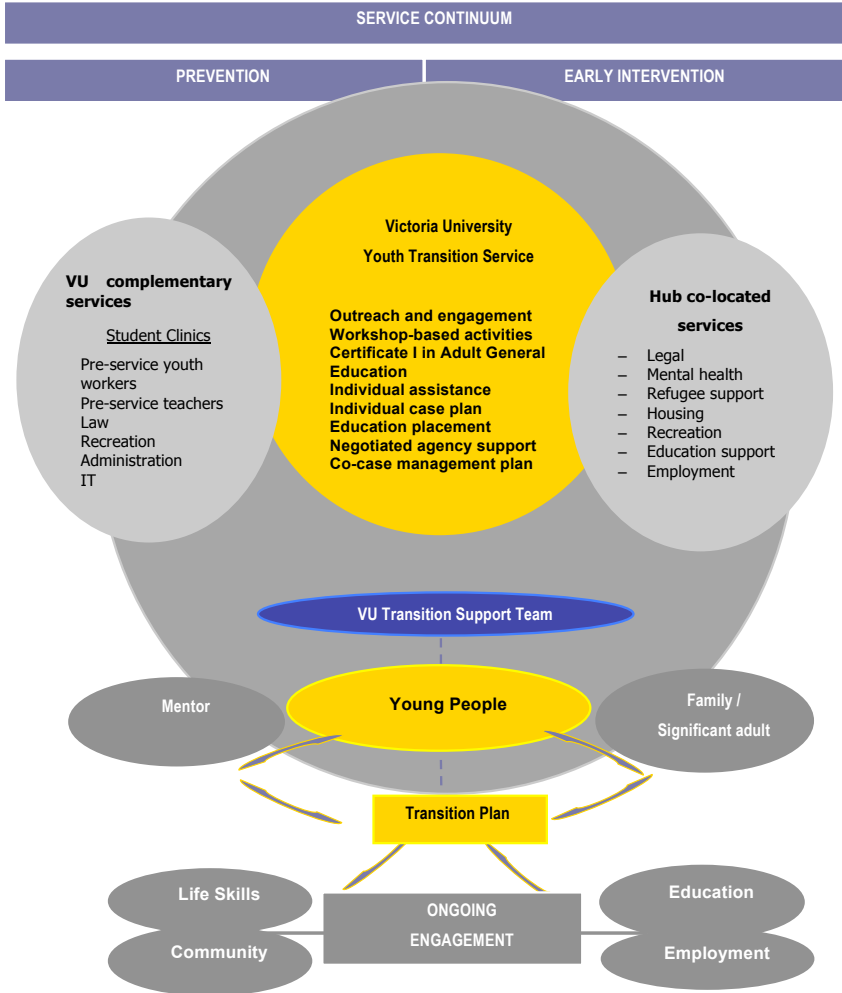
In 2009, 109 students from Victoria University undertook a professional placement at the Visy Cares Hub. As a result, 296 young people participated in programs delivered by students of VU and 950 young people attended events. These are young people with high aspirations, who are connected to education and in the case of this cohort were overwhelmingly from the western suburbs. This evidences how partnerships like this build the capacity of a community, with local role models working alongside local young people.

For students it has been a unique opportunity to develop a model where learners must not only learn to problem-solve the project at hand but also learn to transverse the challenges of an interdisciplinary team from their own group of peers that may share many of their values and professional ideals. At the Visy Cares Hub, there are professionals with different practice skills and values, a common challenge in the workplace.

The diagram below identifies the different components of the Youth Transition Service and the student clinics and how it is seen to be complementary to services that operate at the Visy Cares Hub.

Given the number of young people who are being referred with complex issues, the Transitions Unit is responding with a range of workshops and short courses to strengthen the ability of young people to connect with a pathway of their choice. These have included: careers workshops, financial literacy, learning for entrance tests and license tests as well as working with other professionals to induct them into the range of programs available in a dual sector university such as Victoria University.

Visy Cares



The Unit has also developed a number of partnership programs to support the young people who are looking for assistance. In 2008 the TAFE Division of the University explored using multi-media as a tool for high-risk young people located in the broader community. The project that uses Avatars and the University's own virtual world will be one of a new suite of programs that aim to connect African young men who come into the centre, primarily to use the computers, with a new learning environment that will aim to develop a broader group of life and employment skills with this largely disconnected group of young adult men.

In 2009 the unit formed a partnership with Headspace to implement a Baby Space program for young mothers with mental health issues. That program delivered a second program in 2010. Another partnership is with the employment service. A new life and employment skills program has begun for young people referred from the employment service to the VU Unit.

In 2010 they have also begun the delivery of the Certificate of Education in General Education—in effect, building on the relationships that have been developed to provide these young adults with the opportunity to expand their skills to progress into Further Education.

The unit has also become active in the range of policy discussions, particularly those that highlight the barriers young adults face in returning to education. For many young people, these barriers are multiple and a coordinated set of responses is required. The position of the Unit to challenge these barriers is strengthened when young people can also be referred to mental health specialists, a housing service, employment and legal aid. In effect, the policy and the practice are in synergy.

Below is a case study of a young man that has attended the Youth Transitions Unit at Visy Cares Hub and demonstrates the breadth of program response to which a community unit such as this is now responding.

20 year old male presented at VU @ the Hub wanting information on where he could study music. He had alcohol and other Drug (AOD) issues (regular alcohol and cannabis use and recreational amphetamine and heroin use), legal issues as well as severe anxiety. His anxiety preceded his drug use and in reflection he realised this contributed to him leaving school early and only obtaining a Year 8 pass. He did not realise at that time the symptoms he was experiencing were social phobia and generalised anxiety disorder.

The young person was linked in with a GP from Head Space at the time; however, he had no other supports. He did have a supportive family but they were at a loss to know what to do. VU @ the Hub provided the young person with case management to assist him to address his AOD/mental health and re-engage him back into education.

Over the course of one year, rapport and trust have been developed and the young person has dramatically reduced his alcohol and cannabis use and has ceased his amphetamine and heroin use. He is now linked in with a psychologist at Head Space for 12 sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to address his anxiety as well continuing to see the GP.

VU staff worked on a transition plan with the young person, outlining the steps and strategies that he would work towards before engaging in full-time study. This included maintaining his appointments with Head Space, completing a Music Mentoring Program at VU and joining a boxing program. There were also many discussions with his family and linking his mother in with an agency that supports parents with children who use drugs.

The young person is looking to the future with optimism and, working on his career planning, he has decided he wants a career working with animals and becoming a zoo-keeper. While he is working on the personal changes in his life, VU assisted him to

enrol in an on-line course in captive animals through VU. This is only two modules that will give him a slow but steady start into studying at TAFE. VU youth transitions has sponsored the young person to do this, as he could not afford the full-fee paying course.

Staff will continue to support him through this transition as well as assist him to then apply for Certificate II in Animal Studies at VU for 2010. He will be starting volunteering shortly at an animal hospital to improve his chances of getting accepted into the course. Until this time, he will also be taking part in the 'Tools and Skills 4 Life' Program run by VU @ the Hub. The young person has stated many times that he never thought anxiety could be treated and he would always be that way. He now believes that his life can only get better and is excited that he can study and have a career.

Conclusions

The Visy Cares Hub project took a building of historical significance that has been derelict for some years, and rejuvenated it into a youth centre in one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Australia. To make generational change in these communities takes vision, commitment, physical infrastructure and resources, as well as Government doing business differently. In this case, a small group of committed people partnered with the Pratt Foundation to be a part of that generational change.

The VU TAFE Division began discussions in 2002 with the Board of the Visy Cares Hub with the aim of establishing a University youth transition service at the Visy Cares Hub. This was to provide a new and innovative way to link the University with young people and to youth service organisations. It was anticipated that young people, particularly those at risk of disengagement from education, training and employment, would benefit from the ease of access to cross-sectoral services made available at the Visy Cares Hub. The University's involvement in the Visy Cares Hub offered an unprecedented opportunity to provide a service to young people

already enrolled and opportunities for other young people to re-engage with education.

Committing to the Visy Cares Hub as an anchor tenant on its opening in 2007 was a commitment to a holistic approach to vocational education that recognised the range of needs young people have that must be addressed to ensure success in education. The Visy Cares Hub provides the University with the opportunity to continue to forge stronger links with the range of community services that are essential to ensuring successful education outcomes for many young people.

Though not fully understood at the time, it also provided a very unique learning opportunity for students who could then undertake a component of their studies at a local youth centre. For many, the western suburbs of Melbourne is their community, and as such, it is their opportunity to role model the benefits of education and in many cases simply provide role models of young adults who are following their own aspirations to succeed. It has been a unique partnership in many ways.

The benefits are reciprocal, as community services have also benefited from the direct link to the University, in effect ensuring that the University door is not only wider but is open for a range of business. These relationships have the potential to provide a more seamless approach to ensuring young people have educational access and pathways not only in secondary education but in making the very important transition to further and higher education. In the Western region, not enough young people are successful or even in many cases have the aspirations to be successful, but this project is challenging the business of learning in a marginalised community with the aim of making a difference.

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About the author

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