



DIRECTIONS TRANSITION PROGRAM

FINAL REPORT

OCTOBER 2004

CONTENTS

Executive summary _____ 3

Recommendations _____ 4

Evaluation Methodology _____ 5

Performance Indicators _____ 6

Evaluation Results – Feedback from students _____ 7

Evaluation Results – Feedback from school staff _____ 12

Discussion _____ 13

Conclusion _____ 14

Acknowledgements _____ 15

Executive Summary

The Directions Transition Program (Directions) is a prevention and early intervention program that worked with Year 10 students at risk of early school leaving for 20 weeks between February and July 2004. Directions combined group work and individual case management to support young people develop their life skills and goals to enable them achieve a successful transition to their senior years of schooling, training or employment.

Funded by The Gold Coast North District Youth Achievement Plan Committee as a strategy of the Education and Training Reforms, Lifehouse Project, a community organisation, undertook the development and implementation of the Directions Program.

Forty-three students from three state High Schools and Gold Coast TAFE were interviewed and invited to participate. These students embarked on a 20-week journey, developing their confidence and communication, decision-making skills and goals for the future.

Thirty-four students graduated in July 2004, 74% of the participants who began the program. Parents and friends attended the graduation held at a local football club. The students received certificates and an award. Some students choose to speak about the program and their experiences, several said that it was the first time that they had ever received a certificate.

The program evaluation was conducted within four weeks of the program being completed. The evaluation attempted to identify the successes and weaknesses of the program and any immediate outcomes identified by both participants and the school/TAFE they attend. The evaluation found that at the beginning of the program only 30% of the students said they wanted to complete Year 12 or University, but at the end of the program 81% of the students stated that they now aimed to complete Year 12 or University.

The evaluation also found that 81% of students said they believed that they make better choices and 78% said their attitude had improved since the program. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the students said that they felt more confident in making "big life" decisions, and the skills they had learnt would help them in the future. Fifty-nine percent (59%) thought the program was not long enough, and 100% said they would recommend it to their friends.

Feedback from school staff was positive and encouraging. The schools had witnessed the students improved life skills. One response indicated that the staff member believed the program had helped prevent some of the students from leaving school in Year 10.

Students responded well to the program's strength-based approach. They enjoyed attending the weekly workshops and being provided with individual case support which addressed many issues and barriers that might hinder them from reaching their goals. The strategy of using a community organisation working in partnership with the schools and TAFE, appears to have benefited the students, who are often difficult to engage and keep motivated. It is hoped that the partnerships between schools and the community will continue and further Directions Transition Programs will assist more students in the future.

Recommendations

1. The Directions Transition Program was an effective and appropriate initiative that engaged students at risk of early school leaving. This program should be provided in all state high schools and established as an ongoing strategy of working with youth at risk.
2. Positive and effective partnerships were made between the schools/TAFE and other support networks and organisations during the Directions Transition Program. Community organisations should be assisted to work collaboratively with schools and TAFE in order to achieve better outcomes for youth at risk.
3. The Career and Transition Survey was a useful tool, helping to identify the most appropriate students for the program. The recruitment strategy of using the survey and interviews was successful, as it made the students feel privileged to be part of the program, not punished. To achieve successful outcomes, future programs should also use this approach to identify and recruit participants.
4. The Directions Transition Program had no more than 10 students in each group. This was an appropriate group size, as it enabled each student to fully participate in discussions and receive the level of case management required by this target group.
5. Case management was an important element of the program. It allowed the Project Officer to identify and support the students in all areas of their life, particularly with issues affecting their ability to remain engaged in education. Case management should remain a significant element of future programs.
6. The Directions Transition Program was developed and implemented using strength-based principles. A strength based approach works with young people's strengths, rather than their deficits. This approach has found that young people are more likely to become involved in a personal development process and use their strengths and resources rather than continue their negative thinking and behaviour patterns. It is recommended that future programs working with youth at risk utilise and develop strength-based principles.
7. The PLAN book (Prospects for Life and Now) was a useful tool, and was successful in guiding the students to discuss and learn life and employability skills. This book should be used in future programs.
8. The program ran for 20 weeks over two terms. School staff indicated that they thought this was a good length of time, but 59% of the students felt the program was not long enough. It is recommended that future programs run for a minimum of 20 weeks. A trial of implementing the program over 3-4 terms would assess if additional outcomes could be achieved by running it for a longer period of time.
9. It is recommended that the students who graduated be followed up in 12 months' time to determine if they remain engaged in education, training or employment. This would reveal what long-term impacts and outcomes the Directions Transition Program has achieved.

Evaluation Methodology

Feedback from students

Twenty-seven surveys were completed by students who completed the program (82%). The evaluation was undertaken by the Directions Project Officer face-to-face, with the exception of five surveys, which were completed over the phone. All of the young people contacted were happy to take part in the survey, and a number commented that they appreciated someone asking for their feedback.

The students were introduced to the survey with an explanation that the survey's purpose was purely about the program and not about their individual performance. They were assured that their survey responses would remain anonymous. The survey questions were conducted in an open and unbiased way with some respondents preferring to fill out the surveys themselves and others preferring the Project Officer to fill it out for them.

The Project Officer collated the survey answers. Some answers do not add up to 100% because respondents were given the opportunity to mark off one or more applicable answers (or none, if appropriate). Responses to the open ended questions have been summarised and collated in the most logical and comprehensible way possible. There were a few occasions when respondents chose not to answer a question.

Feedback from school staff

A survey was provided to key staff within the schools who had most contact with the program and/or students participating. Six staff were invited to complete the survey and indicate their feedback about the program's successes, weaknesses and outcomes.

The survey answers have been collated and this report provides a summary of the responses.

Performance Indicators

Program outcomes

1. Protocols were signed between the schools/TAFE and Lifehouse Project
2. An office was established at Gold Coast Family Connections
3. 406 students completed the Career and Transition Survey
4. The schools worked collaboratively with Lifehouse to identify the most at risk students
5. 43 students were identified and took part in interviews
6. 43 students agreed to participate in the program
7. Five programs were delivered in four state high schools and TAFE
8. The Project Officer worked flexibly to cooperate with the students timetables
9. PLAN Books were provided to all students
10. There was an average weekly attendance of 81.7%
11. Using strength-based experiential learning, discussion and group exercises, the program supported students to explore and develop their life and employability skills
12. Extra sessions were run during lunch or recess times for students who could not attend the workshop on any particular week
13. Workshops included visits by the school nurse, the school VET coordinator and SCISCO Career Pathway staff to assist with career options and interview skills
14. Case management was provided to all students, with 34 students receiving regular case management beyond the initial needs assessment
15. All parents were informed that their son/daughter was participating in the program and contact was made with some parents who requested support or advice
16. Over 30 referrals were made to:
 - School Principals and Deputies
 - VET Coordinators
 - Guidance Officers
 - School Chaplains
 - School Based Youth Health Nurses
 - Youth Support Coordinators
 - SCISCO Career Pathways
 - TAFE
 - Centrelink Careers Information Centre
17. Twelve students attended a sailing excursion to Stradbroke Island
18. The project came within budget. Financial monitoring and reporting was maintained throughout the program

Partnerships

19. Relationships were established and effective communication strategies developed with stakeholders in the schools and TAFE
20. The Project Officer attended the Gold Coast Youth Commitment Community Network; Gold Coast Family Connections Network; the DYAP Launch and Action Group; the Youth Support Coordinators Principals consultation and meetings with YHES House
21. A conflict resolution and grievance procedure was developed but not required

Evaluation Results – Feedback from students

What did you expect to get out of the program when you started it, and did you achieve this?

85% of the respondents said that they achieved what they expected to get out of the program. 31 comments were made, including:

I learnt how to get a job
I got information about job/career choices
I have a resume now and know about interviews
I got help/support
I've got more confidence
I've got a better attitude
I've had a reality check
I got out of class

What did you personally get out of the Directions Program?

41 positive comments were made by students and 2 negative comments. Comments included:

interview skills
how to get a job
resume
choices after school
job/career choices & info
options for the future
how to treat/speak to people
made friends
think easier at school/focused
new outlook
more about myself & interests
nothing

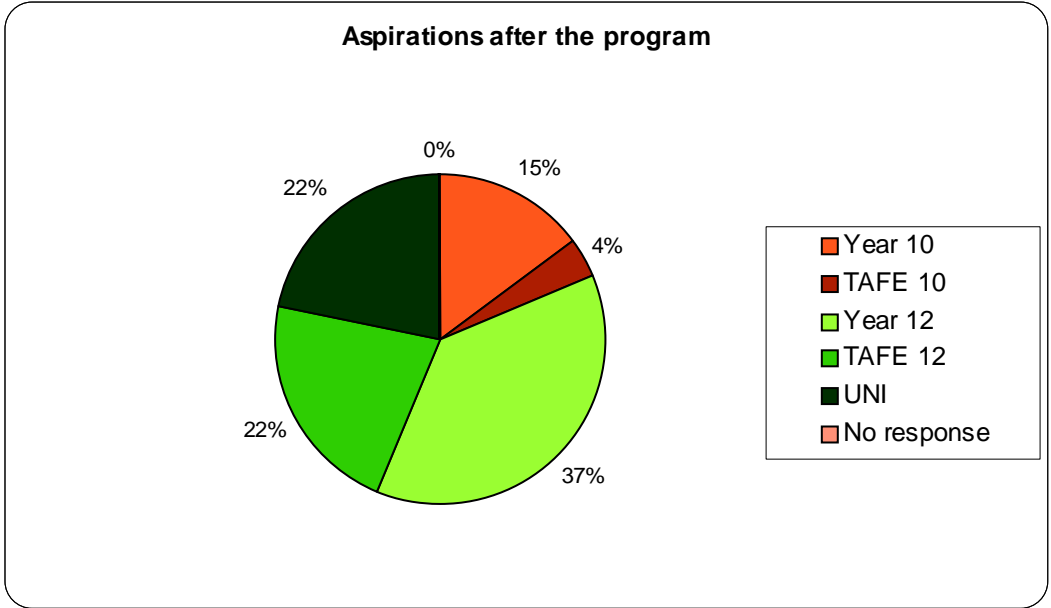
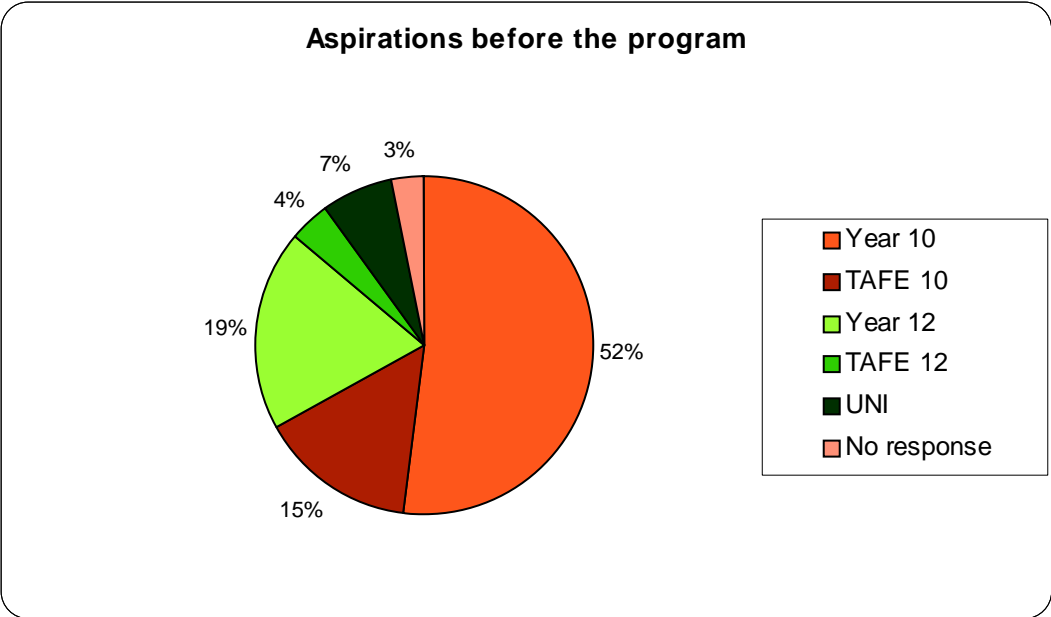
What things have changed for you since starting the program?

Respondents were asked to assess if they felt they had changed in anyway during the program.

78%	My attitude
81%	Choices that I make
56%	How I communicate
44%	How I get on at School
41%	How I get on with Friends
37%	How I get on at Work
37%	How I get on with Family/at home
14.8%	Other
	- confidence
	- how I look at life
	- how being mean affects people

Students were asked about school completion; the level they wanted to complete at the beginning of the program and what they hoped to complete after the program.

	Before the program	After the program
Grade 10	52%	15%
TAFE 10	15%	4%
Grade 12	19%	37%
TAFE 12	4%	22%
UNI	7%	22%
No response	3%	



How did you feel about the future at the beginning of the year?

Respondents gave 5 positive comments and 22 negative comments. These included:

didn't care/ think
wasn't prepared
uncertain
thought I would be a nobody
confused
not good/worried/scared/lousy
wanted to leave ASAP
bored

What does the future look like for you now?

Respondents gave 28 positive comments and 3 negative comments. These included:

a lot better
confident
will finish year 12
got the apprenticeship
finish school then TAFE
now I know
full of happiness
fun
dunno
I still don't know

Do you feel more confident in making "big life" decisions (about things like careers or jobs, whether to stay in school or not, where to live, etc.)?

93% of respondents indicated "Yes" and 4% indicated "No". Of those that answered "Yes", they stated that they felt more confident in areas such as:

how to make decisions
what direction to go
how to handle money
what to expect from work
taking things more seriously
opened my eyes
attitude
all about self trust

Will the things you learnt or experienced in the program help or support you in the future?

93% of respondents indicated “Yes” and 4% indicated “No”. Of those that answered “Yes”, they stated that the things they had learnt included:

- job/ work path
- resumes and interviews
- anger management
- communication
- making choices/decisions
- getting along with people
- contacts with people
- better attitude

Did you leave school/TAFE while on the program?

93% had not dropped out and 7% of students said they had left school or TAFE in the past six months. The students who had dropped out said that “home stuff” had affected their decision to leave before completing the year.

What motivated you to continue coming to Directions each week?

36 comments were made by the students. These included:

- it was fun
- wanted/liked to learn stuff
- to help my future
- interesting/worthwhile
- seeing Belinda/cool teacher
- how to get apprenticeship
- relaxing
- personal head space time
- the book
- it was relevant
- to get an edge over others
- I just kept coming

What part of the program did you gain the most benefit from?

- 52% Session work each week
- 41% Plan Book
- 56% 1 on 1 talking with program facilitator
- 48% Excursions & what you found out there
- 26% People you were referred to. (i.e. SCISCO, GO, VET Coordinator etc.)
- 11% Other
 - having fun
 - talking
 - meeting new people

Do you think the program was too short, too long or about the right length?

- 59% of students thought it was too short
- 37% thought it was a good length
- No one thought it was too long, but 4% weren't sure.

What did you think of the PLAN Book?

Students provided 34 comments, which included:

good
very good
good to look back on
good dreaming paper
helpful
interesting
learnt about myself
full of stuff I wanted to go through
set out well
helps us express how we feel/ think
easy to understand
bit confusing
liked talking as a group better

If you could change anything about the program, what would it be?

Students provided 28 comments that included;

nothing
more excursions
make it longer
have 2 sessions per week
more time with Belinda
have longer sessions

Would you recommend the Directions Program to other students?

All respondents said that they would. Students provided 30 comments, which included:

Yes
Yes definitely
Yes coz it's fun, exciting & you learn things
Yes because it would help them greatly
hell yeah

Evaluation Results – Feedback from school staff

Six surveys were completed by school staff.

Respondents stated that they had hoped the students chosen for the program would get some direction in life, career pathways and greater confidence and enthusiasm through participating. They felt that since the program, students now appeared more settled, and one Guidance Officer stated, “almost all students have made major steps forward”.

School staff indicated that the program complimented other programs in the school. One respondent said that the structure and delivery of the program was very good. One staff member commented that they had noticed that on the days of the program, the students attended school more consistently.

All respondents said the students were correctly identified and that the Directions Project Officer was easy to work with.

The staff felt that since being on the program, it was largely the student’s attitude that had improved. They now made better choices and their communication skills had improved.

All six school staff felt the program ran for a good length of time. They all gave different responses as to what part of the program was most beneficial. Many of them liked all elements of the program, the group work, case management and excursions.

A few suggestions were provided about improving the program. These comments were mainly about establishing and continuing the program within the school so that it becomes established and reputable within the school system, and amongst staff and students.

“When a program is well developed and has used community and public service manpower and resources, it should be given maximum opportunity to grow and evolve. This program needs to become part of the school infrastructure”

Guidance Officer

Discussion

The students identified for the program were young people who had negative attitudes towards school and their future. Some students were not interested in school, or they did not see the relevance of school. Some believed that they were going to be a 'drop out' and did not know what career pathways were achievable or attainable.

The method of recruiting the students and the approach to helping the students believe that they were special by being chosen for the program, rather than being punished, provided a framework that helped the students engage with the program from the beginning.

The evaluation has demonstrated that the program had a significant effect on nearly all of the students. The survey responses indicate that the students now hold higher expectations of themselves and their future. It would seem that this is linked with increased self-confidence and belief in their strengths and skills.

The vast majority of participants stated that they have experienced positive changes in relation to all areas of their life, including aspirations, relationships, school and home. A significant outcome was how the students gained a new concept of how school was going to help them in the future. 81% of the students stated that they now aimed to complete Year 12 or University, which is a clear indication that they are feeling more positive about school and what they are learning there.

"This (talking about consequences) is like today, if (another student) just kept their mouth shut and not sworn at the teacher, they wouldn't have got sent to the Planning Centre! I kept my mouth shut and I got to stay in the class"

The evaluation identified that the young people have developed many areas, including:

- Identifying personal goals
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Anger management
- Communication skills
- Problem solving
- Giving and receiving support

The survey responses suggest that the students were engaged in the program because they liked a program that was positive, fun and relevant. The discussion based group workshops, the individual case management and the excursions were all aspects of the program enjoyed by the students. It seems evident that 'at risk' students require a more unique style of support than many students who are happily engaged at school. These students responded to the discussions about their individual opinions, feelings and life skills. The program provided them with practical skills about how to manage their behaviour and attitudes.

All the students could see how the life skills they learnt throughout the program were helping them now, and were going to help them in the future.

"I'm getting more knowledge about careers and I'm getting more confident because I have better communication"

Research indicates that connectedness and 'help seeking' skills are important protective factors for youth at risk. Directions definitely had some outcomes in this area as the students now have more links and understanding about how to access both school and community resources available to them.

"I enjoyed going to the Careers Centre and I am understanding the paths I can take."

Many students who leave school early do not make the decision to leave based on positive opportunities offered elsewhere. These students' decision-making skills are usually poor and the result can have a long-term influence on their future career paths. An outcome for Directions was its ability to improve the students' decision-making skills. The evaluation indicates that since the program, the students are more confident about their decision making processes and thinking about how the decisions they make can affect them.

"The program is encouraging me to do better and I'm learning how to think on the spot better. It's helping me think about the future."

"I used to just go along with stuff but now I actually think about it."

The literature regarding early school leaving suggests that students at risk should be assisted and guided in learning how to choose goals, identify their interests and skills, taught self-determination and how to accomplish goals. Directions was able to meet these recommendations and the survey responses from both students and school staff clearly indicate that even if the students do leave before the end of Year 12, they now have more life skills and confidence to make their transition to employment or training successful.

Conclusion

The partnership between Gold Coast state high schools, TAFE and Lifehouse Project was extremely successful. The planning and delivery of the Directions Program was effective and appropriate largely due to the communication and positive approach that the partners took in working collaboratively.

The majority of the students were able to verbalise some of the benefits they believed they gained from the program. The students have demonstrated that they now have the ability to reflect and articulate their journey of personal development during the past six months.

The students were also able to verbalise that this program was appropriate to their needs. Directions was able to engage them and keep them engaged in school/learning, which is the most significant outcome for this program.

Acknowledgements

Lifehouse Project received assistance and encouragement from a number of organisations and individuals. Their support was invaluable and helped the program to achieve all that it did.

Appreciation is extended to the DYAP committee for funding the initiative, the Principals and TAFE for allowing Lifehouse Project to work with them and providing support to ensure the successful delivery of the program.

Finally, thanks must be given to the young people for all their hard work and determination to complete the program. Well done champions!

Thanks to

Belinda Rolle
Year 10 students and their parents
District Youth Achievement Plan Committee
Gold Coast Youth Commitment
Gold Coast Family Connections
SCISCO Career Pathways
Benowa State High School
Mount Tamborine State High School
Coombah State High School
Gold Coast TAFE
Centrelink Careers Information Centre
SAILS (Anglican Sailing Adventures In Life Skills)
Network Communications
Survey respondents (students and school staff)

Further Information

If you require further information about this program or report, please contact:

Lifehouse Project Inc

PO Box 1179, Mudgeeraba, QLD 4213

Phone: (07) 5522 8835

Email: admin@lifehouse.org.au



© Report written by Ruth Knight, Zark Consultancy. www.zarkconsultancy.com