‘As good as it gets’: Young Victorians’ experiences in flexible learning environments

By

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Social Science Strand

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree in any university or another educational institution and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I further declare that the ethical principles and procedures specified in Swinburne University of Technology’s document on human research and experimentation have been adhered to in the preparation of this report.

Linda Randall
Abstract

This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge about the role of education in shaping the life chances of young people through an exploration of young Victorians’ experiences in flexible learning environments. The findings presented here are based on qualitative interviews with nineteen young people completing year 10 and 11 qualifications through community organisations and TAFEs. They demonstrate that, despite having experienced difficulties in the mainstream education system, young people re-engage enthusiastically with learning once they find environments that cater appropriately to their needs. Although there were many factors that contributed to this, a central consideration was giving young people the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning and, by implication, their own lives. As a result this thesis challenges the current Governmental position on flexible learning environments as a ‘last chance’ at learning. Through an approach that acknowledged young people as the experts when it comes to their own lives, it found support for the idea that these programs should be repositioned as a real opportunity. It also found that young people not only want to have a say when it comes to policy decisions that affect their lives, they have valuable ideas to contribute.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AYAC</td>
<td>Australian Youth Affairs Coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGEA</td>
<td>Certificate of General Education for Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
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<td>DEECD</td>
<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s</td>
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<td>DPCD</td>
<td>Department of Planning and Community Development</td>
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<td>DSF</td>
<td>Dusseldorp Skills Forum</td>
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<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Training and Further Education</td>
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<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning</td>
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<td>VCAA</td>
<td>Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative education</td>
<td>Education programs that are delivered in place of, or in addition to, standard school curriculum and are generally directed at students who are experiencing some form of academic or emotional difficulty. These programs can be delivered within or outside of mainstream schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible learning environments</td>
<td>Programs that provide participants with qualifications that are equivalent to those received in a mainstream school but that are delivered entirely through TAFE or community settings. These environments generally contain fewer students than traditional school settings with class sizes of around ten to fifteen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream schools</td>
<td>Generally large learning institutions that cater to a diverse student population. It is acknowledged that the idea of a ‘mainstream’ is problematic however participants in this research clearly identified with this terminology and for this reason it has been adopted throughout this thesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student centred approach to education</td>
<td>An approach to education that puts students needs at the centre of both the learning process and the structural elements of the spaces within which education occurs.</td>
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Chapter 1:

The other education revolution

In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, announced that it was time for an ‘education revolution’ (Donnelly, 2008). This was based on an acknowledgement that ‘[e]ducation... empowers individuals to reach their full potential, and helps overcome disadvantage’ (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 1). The ideas engaged with throughout this thesis support the power of education to combat disadvantage. This thesis questions, however, the value of a ‘revolution’ carried out by politicians and bureaucrats. It argues that there is another, less publicised, education movement happening in this country that is perhaps more worthy of attention. This movement began long before the declaration from Canberra. Through this movement young people who have rejected, or been rejected from, traditional educational institutions are given an opportunity to learn in smaller, community based programs that better meet their needs. This thesis will demonstrate that, these programs, often referred to as ‘alternative education’, provide a meaningful platform through which to address disadvantage through education. It finds that young people who are considered ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk of disengagement’ in the mainstream system have the potential to do extremely well. Although there are many factors that contribute to this, a central consideration is giving young people the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning and, by implication, their own lives.
Writing in 1970, in a Latin American context, Paulo Freire argued that: ‘to carry out a revolution for the people... is equivalent to carrying out a revolution without the people, because the people are drawn into the process by the same methods and procedures used to oppress them’ (1970\1993, p. 108-9, emphasis in original). Like Rudd, Gillard, and myself, Freire also believed in the power of education as a means to social mobility. For Freire, however, the liberating power of education could not be realised through traditional pedagogical methods that rely on experts to “fill” the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge’ (1970\1993, p. 57). This method, he argued, served only to fit students for passive existence within the societies that created their disadvantage. Instead, Freire advocated for a system where students are ‘critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (1970\1993, p. 62). Where “[t]he teacher presents the material to the students for consideration, and reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own’ (Freire, 1970\1993, p. 62).

Although Freire’s ideas are from a different time and place, they are of great relevance to education policy in Australia. They present important questions about young people’s ability to influence structural change within the education system and highlight the importance of a student centred approach to education. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to reinvent, or even explore the entire Australian education system. Instead, this thesis will make a contribution to knowledge about the role of education in shaping the life chances of young people through an exploration of the alternative learning environments touched on in the opening
paragraph. An assessment of the way that these programs are currently operating in Victoria is undertaken. In keeping with the idea that meaningful social change can occur only *with* those whom it most affects this thesis is based on the experiences of students themselves.

**Thesis structure**

This thesis contains seven chapters, including this, chapter 1. *Chapter 2:* *Understanding ‘alternative’ education*; will provide an overview of alternative education programs and the educational landscape in which they emerged. It will then draw on the relevant literature in this field to provide a critique of the Victorian Government’s current policy direction with relation to alternative education programs. *Chapter 3: Methodological and ethical considerations*; will undertake a critical review of youth research methods and in doing so will outline why and how the research method for this project was employed. The following three chapters will present the findings of this research incorporating previous literature to provide a critical discussion of each area. *Chapter 4: Flexible learning environments as a last chance at learning for young Victorians*; discusses the problems with positioning flexible learning environments as a last chance for young people. *Chapter 5: Positive experiences through a student centred approach to education*; outlines the specific things that students reported worked well for them, exploring the ways in which the programs encompass a student centred approach to education. *Chapter 6: The importance of youth voices in education policy*; emphasises the importance of including young people in discussions about things...
that affect their lives. This chapter is followed by *Chapter 7 Where to from here?*; the concluding chapter.
Chapter 2:

Understanding ‘alternative’ education

In its investigation of ‘alternative education’ programs this thesis deals with two central issues: education practice and marginalised young people. These two areas are of considerable interest to policy makers and researchers and the literature on both topics is extensive. As a result, some of the issues raised in this chapter have received much attention in the youth studies field but due to space constraints will be addressed only briefly here. It is important to note that the current project is concerned specifically with understanding the importance of alternative education programs in the lives of young Victorians. Its primary aim is to establish how policy developments in this area can best serve the interests of the young people they most affect and how this relates to the broader political goal of creating a more equitable society through education. The literature presented here is that which has been deemed the most relevant to these tasks and is largely from Australian contexts.

There is a small body of literature dedicated to understanding young people’s experiences in alternative education programs and exploring program provision in Australia. A large portion of this scholarship has been generated and made available through the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF), ‘an independent, not for profit body’ that aims ‘[to] develop and advance the innovative practices of those who engage young Australians in acquiring skills for a sustainable future’ (DSF, 2010).
Kitty te Riele; Joanna Wyn and Roger Holdworth have also written extensively in this field and their work makes an important contribution to this thesis. Drawing from these sources, and others, this chapter will explore what is meant by alternative education and outline the current landscape with regard to these programs in Victoria, providing a critical overview of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s (DEECD) current policy direction. The implications of this policy are explored based on the contradiction alternative education programs present as both a ‘last chance’ and a real opportunity for young people. Following this, current knowledge surrounding the value of alternative education is presented. Finally this chapter will use empirical research in this field as a basis to argue that young people should have a voice in the current discussion about alternative education in Victoria. Prior to this it is necessary to outline the broader educational landscape in which the need to provide alternative education arose.

**Education in Australia**

Regular school attendance plays an important role in the achievement of educational outcomes, and in the development of young people’s social skills (DEECD, 2009a). Educating young people also serves economic interests in that it ensures a supply of skilled workers to the labour market (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). A combination of these factors has resulted in education becoming a Governmental priority and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) have identified a national target of 90 per cent completion of year 12 or an equivalent qualification for all young Australians (those under 25) by 2015 (COAG, 2009). This represents a
shift towards a ‘knowledge society’ in which education has become highly valued (te Reile, 2000). Whilst striving towards a more educated society is perhaps admirable, it presents obvious implications for those who do not obtain basic qualifications. It means that the one in four young Australians who currently do not complete their secondary education face significant challenges upon entering the labour market (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). As a result, researchers have questioned whether young people have any real power to resist educational structures (Spierings, 2003; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). They have argued that as a form of counter-hegemonic action leaving school is ineffective as the young person is often further disadvantaged by the decision while the system remains intact (te Riele, 2000).

In both policy and research, early school leaving is consistently associated with disadvantage (DEECD, 2009a; Ross & Gray, 2005). While there may be some legitimacy to this claim, scholars have also found that reasons behind non-completion are complex, and that attempting to describe the ‘typical’ early school leaver is problematic (Dwyer, Stokes, Tyler & Holdsworth, 1998; Cole, 2004). One finding that has achieved consensus across the literature is that it is push factors associated with negative experiences within the school system, not the pull of more lucrative options, which are the main cause of early school leaving (Ross & Gray, 2005; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Dwyer et al., 1998). Early school leavers then face significant challenges upon entry to the labour market, resulting in the need to reconsider their rejection of education (te Riele, 2000). One effective response to this has been to reengage young people with learning in Training and Further
Education (TAFE) and community education settings (Holdsworth, 2004). A detailed account of these environments is provided in the next section.

**Defining alternative education**

The term ‘alternative education’ has been used to identify a range of school, community and TAFE based options. Programs vary in length, structure and in the qualifications they offer, resulting in a diverse array of options (Cole, 2004; te Riele, 2007). Assessing the alternative education landscape in New South Wales, Kitty te Riele (2007), categorised programs based on their underlying assumptions about the need for change. She found that some programs aim to create change in the individual so that they can return to mainstream education or enter the workforce, while others are based on changing the practices of educational provision to better suit the needs of the young person (te Riele, 2007).

Programs that aim to change the young person and return them to mainstream education are based on a deficit approach (te Riele, 2006; te Riele, 2007). Deficit approaches imply that barriers to learning are a result of attributes that young people themselves are lacking (Bland, 2008; te Riele, 2006). Underpinning this is the idea that we have the provision of education correct and as a result the young people who resist it are at fault (Holdsworth, 2004; Searle, 2007; te Riele, 2007). Alternately, programs that aim to change the way in which education is provided are more accommodating of individual difference, both within and between groups of young people. These programs recognise that all young people have the ability
to learn, but that the conditions under which this will happen are different for different young people (Holdsworth, 2004; te Riele, 2007).

In 2009, the Victorian DEECD commissioned consulting group KPMG to conduct a review of alternative education programs. Based on this review, the DEECD have devised their own approach to categorising alternative education programs. They propose a model through which four tiers of educational provision may cater for young people ‘at risk’ of disengaging from education (DEECD, 2010). These ‘tiers’ are provided along a continuum that suggests increased level of intervention based on the risk of disengagement displayed by the young person (DEECD, 2010). The interventions suggested in the model are: 1) differentiated provision of education; 2) targeted initiatives; 3) flexible learning options within school settings; and 4) flexible learning options within community settings (DEECD, 2010, p. 14-17).

Tier one and four of the DEECD model (supposedly those at the most and least extreme ends of the model) appear to be aimed at changing educational provision, while tier two and three appear to be aimed at addressing deficits within the young person and returning them to mainstream classes. It appears that the DEECD are prepared to acknowledge the need for diverse educational provision within the mainstream environment, however if this method does not work interventions that target the individual are recommended. If the young person is still resistant to learning within a mainstream setting another attempt is made at changing educational provision, this time by referring the young person to a TAFE or community setting to complete their education. This option is tier four of the
model: ‘flexible learning options in community education settings’. These settings
are the focus of this research. Due to the lengthy nature of this term, the
abbreviated version ‘flexible learning environments’ will be adopted throughout the
remainder of this thesis to refer to alternative education programs that operate in
TAFE and community settings.

Specific information on the number of flexible learning environments providing
services to young Victorians is not currently available. Due to the diverse array of
providers and courses offered it is also difficult to generalise about the structure of
the programs and the subjects offered. The available evidence describes a focus on
‘practical work related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the
opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work’ (Victorian
Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], n.d, p. 2). Two main certificates
delivered by the providers are: The Certificate of General Education for Adults
(CGEA; equivalent to year 10) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
(VCAL; equivalent to year 11 and 12).

**Flexible learning environments in Victoria**

As noted above the DEECD have recently released a review of flexible learning
environments. The review provides the basis for a policy framework that will guide
the future provision of these programs in Victoria and is expected to be rolled out
across the State in 2011 (DEECD, 2010). Government acknowledgement of the
importance of flexible learning environments is encouraging, and elements of the
report provide a strong basis for positive change. The proposed policy addresses,
for example, the consistently identified need for a streamlined approach to flexible learning environments (Cole, 2004; Wyn, Stokes & Tyler, 2004). It emphasises the importance of a shared vision regarding the provision of these programs, as well as laying the foundations for improved connectedness and greater support for those working in the sector (DEECD, 2010). These considerations represent positive steps towards acknowledging of the place of flexible learning environments in Victoria’s strategy for educational provision. They have the potential to bring these programs in from the margins they have tended to occupy (Holdsworth, 2004; Spierings, 2003).

Despite the positive aspects of the proposed policy, two key elements of the DEECD’s approach to flexible learning environments have been identified as problematic. The first problem is the focus on flexible learning environments as an absolute last resort for disengaged young people. The primary goal of the approach is to keep young people engaged in mainstream schools, suggesting that young people should be placed in these programs only after they have failed all other attempts at learning. This is concerning, given the positive experiences reported by young people in research into these settings (see for examples: Holdsworth, 2004; Searle, 2007; Wyn et al., 2004). The second and perhaps the more significant problem in the DEECD’s approach is that despite the apparent thoroughness of their review, the opinions and ideas of young people themselves are absent. Most troubling is that there is no sign that this deficit will be addressed prior to a policy being produced. The remainder of this chapter will explore these themes drawing on academic literature to provide a basis for these critiques.
The contradiction of flexible learning environments

Literature in this field highlights the complex nature of flexible learning environments and the implications of such environments for young people’s identity formation (te Riele, 2007; Searle, 2007; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). On the one hand these programs provide opportunities, but on the other their very existence is defined by young people’s displacement from ‘normal’ educational pathways (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). As a result, previous literature has suggested ‘that the notion of “choosing” to attend an alternative program is problematic’ (Vadeboncoeur, 2009, p. 294), particularly during the compulsory years (Spierings, 2003). As noted earlier, in some cases the disadvantage young people face as a result of non-completion leaves them with little choice but to continue with some form of education. This raises the question as to whether young people in flexible learning environments are returning to education for its own sake or because they have no other options. Fundamentally it raises the question as to whether these programs are simply a ‘last chance’ or whether they present a real opportunity (Spierings, 2003).

It is possible to view these competing ideas as distinct discourses, in that they provide different ways of representing knowledge about what it means to be involved in flexible learning environments (Thompson, 1996). Discourses are thought to be instrumental in constructing social contexts and creating meaning for social actors (Scott, 2006). As a result, the way we talk about flexible learning environments may be instrumental in shaping the experiences of those who take part in them. If the programs themselves come to represent disadvantage, the
opportunities they provide for young people are, at least to some extent, undermined. The approach outlined by the DEECD review (2010; see also KPMG, 2010) explicitly suggests a ‘last chance’ approach to flexible learning environments.

According to the DEECD (2010, p. 14), when ‘all other educational options... have been exhausted’ flexible learning environments will provide a support for ‘higher risk’ young people. Depicting flexible learning environments as a ‘second chance’ or a ‘last chance’ for disengaged young people is common (see for examples: Munns & McFadden, 2000; Ross & Gray, 2005). The obvious assumption here is that before they enter these programs young people have been given an adequate ‘first chance’ in the mainstream system. Underpinning this view is the idea outlined earlier: we have the provision of education correct and the young people who resist it are at fault (Holdsworth, 2004; Searle, 2007). In her work, te Riele (2007), described this as the ‘youth at risk’ perspective.

The DEECD’s approach is interesting with respect to the ‘at risk’ perspective. It acknowledges that the focus in flexible learning environments is on changing educational provision yet the emphasis on these settings as an absolute last resort still suggests a deficit model. This is further highlighted by the idea that these environments are suitable only for the most ‘at risk’ students. The term ‘at risk’ refers to ‘behaviour or life conditions that research has shown to have a high correlation with negative outcomes’ (Wyn, 2009a, p. viii). Historically the emphasis has been on classifying the factors that distinguish young people ‘at risk’ from the rest of the youth population (Bessant, 2002; te Riele, 2006). Such categorisation
enhances the illusion of homogeneity among young people who remain in mainstream learning (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). It also ignores the fact that young people who resist traditional education structures are likely to be as different from one another as they are to young people who do conform. Another problem with the ‘at risk’ approach is that by focusing on the individual, the social, structural and contextual factors are often ignored (Wyn, 2009a).

Drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck, Furlong and Cartmel (2007) describe the way that risk has become individualised in late modernity. They contend that despite the persistence of structural factors in determining the life chances of young people, explanations for failure are increasingly being attributed to individual deficits. With regards to education, this approach assumes that because most young people conform to what society expects of them and successfully complete school, the current system is working (Holdsworth, 2004; te Riele, 2007). This has implications for policy in that interventions that target the individual may be implemented as solutions to problems that would benefit more from large scale structural change (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). It also has implications for the individual, as identifying social barriers through largely negative generalisations may serve to maintain, rather than address social exclusion (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001).

Under the DEECD’s proposed reform there will be a single entry point (in each region or network) through which a young person can be referred to flexible learning environments (KPMG, 2010). Referrals will be managed by
Interdisciplinary Assessment Panels, who will assess the need and risk of each young person before deciding whether these programs are appropriate (KPMG, 2010). This gatekeeper approach has the potential to present a serious barrier to young people attempting to reengage with education. It undermines young people’s ability to exercise agency suggesting that choice is something available only once the fundamentals of education are in place (Spierings, 2003). It also neglects the fact that in some cases the suddenness of students departure may make intervention difficult (Ross & Gray, 2006), and fails to acknowledge that many young people are happy with their decision to leave school (Searle, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; te Riele, 2000).

Waiting until a young person has exhausted all other options and has displayed an appropriate level of ‘risk’ has obvious implications for program delivery in flexible learning environments. Spierings (2003), noted the irony of ‘young people...[needing to] exhibit problematic behaviour in order to gain entry to an appropriate learning environment customised to needs that produced the behaviour in the first place’ (p. 3). This ‘last chance’ approach also contradicts the governmental shift towards policies that emphasise early intervention and prevention (Department of Human Services, 2008). Research suggests that ease of referral is an important factor in predicting successful re-entry to education (Ross & Gray, 2006; Wyn et al., 2004). Subsequently, there is a risk that making the referral process more complex will result in young people spending longer periods of time not attending any form of education prior to being referred to a suitable program. It also underestimates the potential of these programs to provide a real opportunity for young people.
Researchers have cautioned against the ‘last chance’ perspective and have advocated for the repositioning of alternative programs as a ‘real choice’ for young people (Holdsworth, 2004; Spierings, 2003). They argue that one model of educational provision is unlikely to meet the needs of all and highlight the need for a variety of educational options that cater to the needs of a diverse range of young people (Holdsworth, 2004; te Riele, 2007). In her work, te Riele (2007) deemed this the ‘learning choice’ perspective. This perspective invites questioning of traditional practices from both within and outside of educational institutions and recognises the potential of alternative programs to empower young people (te Riele, 2007).

There appears to be a general consensus in the literature that discourses that depict flexible learning environments as an active choice are a more constructive way to assess the situation (Holdsworth, 2004; Searle, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Spierings, 2003; te Riele, 2007). Given this, the DEECD’s approach to these settings as a last resort is problematic. It also contradicts consistent evidence that highlights the positive experiences of young people in flexible learning environments.

**Current knowledge about the value of alternative programs**

Knowledge of how flexible learning environments are fairing in terms of accommodating young people’s needs is sparse. Despite this, a small body of literature suggests that young people’s experiences in these programs are overwhelmingly positive when contrasted with their experiences in the mainstream system. The largest study into flexible learning environments in Victoria was
conducted by Wyn, Stokes and Tyler in 2004 and involved 158 young people enrolled in six different programs across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. The researchers found that, although the sample was diverse with relation to age, background and context of involvement, there was a high level of agreement with regard to what worked in these settings (Wyn et al., 2004). The three key elements that were found to facilitate young people’s involvement in education were: ‘the quality of relationships with staff; pathways and accessibility; and flexibility, choice and autonomy’ (Wyn et al., 2004, p. 24).

Other researchers have reported similar findings, noting the importance of the mutually respectful relationships young people are able to form with teaching staff (Searle, 2007; Spierings, 2003; te Riele, 2000); the value of small class sizes and one-to-one guidance (Cole 2004); and the significance of flexible rules and regulations that acknowledge students as young adults (te Riele, 2000). Flexible learning environments have also been found to operate in a manner which encourages and supports students to take an active role in their own learning and allows for student involvement in decision making (Cole, 2004; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). This relates back to the Freirian idea of student centred pedagogy (1970\1993). For Freire (1970\1993), student centred pedagogy was about rejecting the idea of students as passive subjects who are fitted for the world by a teacher whose role is to impart his or her knowledge. Instead, he advocated for a system where students take a more active role in the learning process and are ‘critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (1970\1993, p. 62).
The evidence cited above suggests that student centred pedagogy is being employed in flexible learning environments and some researchers have found this to play an important role in re-engaging young people with education (Milbourne, 2009; Searle, 2007). Interestingly student centred pedagogy has also been implemented in several mainstream school environments through the Values Education in Australian Schools project (Curriculum Corporation, 2008). Evaluation of this project has shown that:

- When students are at the centre of learning design, there are observable changes for the student, the teacher and the learning environment. These include calmer classrooms and happier students, students who are empowered, engaged, more responsible, confident and positive about their place in the school and wider community. (Curriculum Corporation, 2008, p. 26)

The reference to happier students, higher levels of engagement, and increased confidence shows striking similarities to findings from research into flexible learning environments (for examples see: Searle, 2007; te Riele, 2000; Wyn et al., 2004). This further supports the idea that student centred pedagogy may play an important role in the success of these programs.

An important consideration here is that research has also found that these programs work well because students’ needs are central to program structure more broadly (Milbourne, 2009; Wyn et al., 2004). This suggests that although student centred pedagogy is important, it is perhaps too limited a term to encompass the full scope of the ownership students are able to exercise over their education in flexible learning environments. As a result, this thesis will employ the phrase ‘student centred approach to education’, in order to reflect the role of students in
shaping both the learning process, and the structural elements of the spaces within which education occurs.

Although the literature discussed above presents a largely positive picture, it is important to acknowledge that these programs also present challenges. One critique of flexible learning environments is that grouping ‘problem’ students together may result in exacerbating difficult behaviour (Murphy & MacLean, 2006; Zyngier & Gale, 2003). This contradicts other research that has found that young people in flexible learning environments had rejected mainstream education settings for a variety of reasons that were not always related to behavioural problems (Cole, 2004; Searle, 2007). Searle (2007), found that some students were socially isolated and experienced bullying and harassment while others found the constraints of the classroom challenging due to being creative or more active social types. Similarly, Cole (2004) found that young people were in flexible learning environments for reasons including bullying, low self esteem, mild intellectual disabilities and encounters with the law. Despite these findings there is still a danger that, by positioning flexible learning environments as a ‘last chance’, young people who are involved in them may be characterised as ‘failures’ who did not succeed in ‘normal’ educational settings (Holdsworth, 2004). This, in turn, may result in programs that re-produce disadvantage, rather than address it.

Writing in a British context, Cooley and Hodkinson (2001) suggest that ‘Bridging the Gap’ – a report that aimed to increase the social inclusion of young people disengaged from education and the labour market – may have actually contributed
to social exclusion for this group. They argue that by constructing social inclusion in a narrow and restrictive manner (i.e. a manner that assumes conformity with education as the ideal), the British government inadvertently excluded young people with differing ideals or priorities (Cooley & Hodkinson, 2001). Australian researchers have voiced similar concerns, noting the need for policies focused on inclusion to transcend the push for uniformity in young people’s school-to-work transitions (Wyn, 2009b).

The work of these scholars highlights the importance of a distinction between conformity and inclusion. It suggests that a political focus on mainstream education as optimal may result in other options being, by default, stigmatised. Avoiding this is an important step towards reconceptualising flexible learning environments as an empowering choice for young people and requires careful consideration of their experiences in these settings. Achieving this level of understanding may be difficult, given that the DEECD appear to have no intention of involving young people’s ideas and opinions in the policy making process.

**Including young people in the discussion**

In March 2009, the DEECD invited stakeholders to participate in state wide forums to share their ‘views and experiences’ with relation to flexible learning environments in Victoria (DEECD, 2009b). These ‘views and experiences’ were combined with a literature review to inform the production of a report entitled: Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school (DEECD, 2009b, p. 1). This

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report formed the basis for a discussion paper entitled ‘Pathways to re-engagement through flexible learning options: A policy direction for consultation’, that invites further feedback from ‘stakeholders and staff involved in the provision of flexible learning options for students at risk of disengagement’ (DEECD, 2010, p. 6). Despite the seemingly thorough nature of this intervention, one major oversight is apparent: no young people were involved in the consultation process.

Failure to consult with young people who will be most affected by intervention strategies is not a new phenomenon (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Ross & Gray, 2006). Youth ‘problems’ are often addressed through adult driven inquiry that happens outside of the lives of those they most effect under the guise that it is ‘for their own good’ (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 147; Levin, 2000, p. 155). Despite this, the decision to exclude young people from the consultation process undermines the well established idea that young people have as much right to have a say on issues that affect their lives as adults do (Bessant, 2006). Research that relies singularly on adult accounts of the youth experience not only denies them this right, but has the potential to result in ineffective policies and programs (Bessant, 2006; Wyn, 2009a).

The decision to exclude young people from the consultation also contradicts the Victorian Government’s own stance on youth involvement in decision making processes. A report released recently by the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD, 2010, p. 10), claims that ‘the Victorian Government has continued to expand and strengthen opportunities for young people to have a say on matters of importance to them’. Unfortunately the
evidence cited to support this is somewhat limited as it relies on data that reflects the opinions of young people aged 18-24 and examples of participation in formal decision making structures (DPCD, 2010). While it is important to recognise the value of these initiatives, it is equally important to acknowledge that the capacity of these formalised processes to engage more marginalised young people may be limited (Holdsworth, 2001; Vromen & Collin, 2010). Consistent with this, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC, 2010, p. 12) noted that ‘historically both non-government and government organisations have been criticised for only consulting with well educated, already empowered young people, often missing the needs of disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people’. Despite this, recent research published by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations showed that ‘given the right approach ..., even the most disadvantaged [young people] will engage in the debate’ (Salvation Army, 2009, p.2).

Understanding the complexities of young people’s struggles with formalised education requires a commitment to allowing these young people to have their voices heard (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). Allowing young people a voice in education policy is also important in ensuring that developments within the education system reflect the changing needs of young people in modern society (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Although the DEECD may have done a relatively good job ironing out the processes necessary to coordinate their approach, consideration of the impact these processes are likely to have on young people is necessary. The literature outlined in this chapter is helpful in identifying potential problems with the DEECD
approach and, although these problems are complex, it presents some insights into how they may be overcome.

There remain, however, areas that require further consideration. In particular, there is a need for a greater understanding of how young people’s experiences in alternative learning environments relate to the competing discourses of ‘last chance’ and ‘learning choice’. This knowledge has the potential to be extremely powerful. It may be instrumental in determining whether the policy approach to flexible learning environments results in programs that contest disadvantage or re-enforce it. There is also a need for a deeper understanding of the role of young people in the organisation of educational institutions both in the classroom and at a policy level.

The current project

This research seeks an understanding of young people’s experiences in flexible learning environments, working from the premise that gaining insight from young people themselves is an important step towards producing youth policies that work (Bessant, 2006). It will focus on programs that provide students with qualifications equivalent to a year 10, 11 or 12 pass but that are delivered entirely outside of traditional secondary schools. These programs include: the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA); Community based VCAL; and VCAL foundations.

The current study will explore accounts of young people’s experiences of taking part in these courses, and will address three questions:
1. In what ways do young Victorians’ experiences of flexible learning environments reflect the idea that these programs are a ‘last chance’ at learning?

2. What role does a student centred approach to education play in the success of flexible learning environments?

3. Why is it important that youth voices contribute to the production of education policy?

This research concerned itself with young people’s overall experiences in flexible learning environments and as such did not attempt to compare specific programs. This was also an important consideration in protecting the identity of the research participants.
Chapter 3:

Methodological and ethical considerations

The following chapter will outline the methodological approach employed in this research, addressing each step of the process in the order in which it was undertaken. It will also provide some background to the young people who took part in the research. A specific ‘ethics’ section has not been included. Instead, the sections of this chapter concerned with the design and execution of the study deal in some depth with ethical considerations as they arise. It is important to note, however, that this project was approved by the Swinburne University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee. Methodological considerations relevant to this study included: the need to balance protection and empowerment; issues of informed consent; external approval processes; recruitment; the interview process; and the transcription, analysis and presentation of results. This chapter will address these in turn as well as providing some demographic information about the research participants.

Balancing protection and empowerment

Young people are generally viewed as vulnerable within research settings due to perceived power inequity with adult researchers (Bessant, 2006). Such considerations are enhanced when conducting research with young people who have been excluded from mainstream school settings, as they are often identified as being vulnerable more broadly (Allen, 2002). When working with young people
the conflicting goals of protecting the individual from harm and increasing the body of knowledge must be carefully considered (Allen, 2002; Valentine, Butler & Skelton, 2001). It is important however that this does not result in young people being excluded from research about their lives. This means that while the best interests of potential participants are of primary concern to the researcher, a core element of this responsibility includes providing space for young people’s voices to be heard (Claveirole, 2004). It is interesting to note here that while this dilemma receives considerable interest in the youth studies field, these considerations are equally relevant to adult research (Kirk, 2007).

Complying with ethics requirements when conducting research with young people can be time consuming and at times this results in a reliance on adult accounts of the youth experience (Bessant, 2006). Both Bessant (2006) and Claveirole (2004) view this as problematic and suggest that with careful methodological consideration research that incorporates the views of young people is achievable. One area that can be particularly challenging is negotiating informed consent.

**Informed consent**

There is a great deal of debate about young people’s perceived inability to give informed consent (Bessant, 2006). A common method of addressing this concern is through obtaining parental consent (Munford & Saunders, 2004). This can be problematic as obtaining this consent may be impractical at best and at worst may result in unwanted inquiry, or even harm to the young person involved. An
excellent example of this is provided by Hillier, Turner and Mitchell’s (2005) research with same sex attracted young people. They argued that:

The parental consent requirement meant either that there would be no one in the research or that young people would be forced to tell their parents [about their sexuality] before they were ready. (Hillier et al., 2005, p. 7)

The sheer logistics of obtaining parental consent can also present a substantial barrier to young people’s participation in research (Rew, Taylor-Sheehafer & Thomas, 2000). This in turn limits opportunities for young people to contribute to popular understanding about their own experiences and shape policies that affect their lives (Bessant, 2006).

Another concern is that young people may resent consent requirements, seeing them as undermining their competence and independence (Trussell, 2008). This research acknowledged the autonomy of the young people involved by inviting those aged 16 and over to participate without parental consent. The anticipated difficulties in obtaining parental consent proved to be warranted. Despite being invited on several occasions to participate and being presented with the relevant consent forms, no one under the age of 16 took part in the research. This was disappointing as young people under the age of 16 have received little attention in this area (Wyn et al., 2004).

**External approval processes**

The DEECD were contacted about this project in the early stages of development. Advice received from this Department was that their approval would be required only if research or recruitment of participants was to occur within government
schools (DEECD, 2009c). Required approval was thus obtained from participating organisations through negotiations with the program co-ordinator and in one case also involved consultation with the student welfare officer.

**Recruitment**

Young people were recruited to participate in the research through three TAFE or Community Education providers, all of which were located in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. Initial contact was made with organisations by phone and email. All of the organisations contacted expressed an interest in being involved and were sent further information about the project including an introductory letter (see Appendix A for the ‘Letter of Introduction for Organisations’), a copy of the information to be given to potential participants (see Appendix B for the ‘Project Information Statement for Participants and Parents’) and a copy of the consent forms to be used in the study (see Appendix C for the ‘Informed Consent Form for Participants’ and Appendix D for the ‘Informed Consent form for Parents’). One organisation also requested a copy of the interview schedule which was sent accordingly.

A follow up phone call was made to organisations one week later during which questions were raised and addressed. A time was then negotiated where I could attend the organisation to speak with potential participants about the research. In qualitative research the importance of reflexivity is often discussed (see: Claveirole, 2004; Trussell, 2008 for youth specific examples), and as such I felt it was appropriate to disclose my own less traditional educational pathway to potential
participants. I also explained my position as both a youth worker and a youth researcher and used this as a starting point to emphasise how important I felt their opinions were in informing policy developments in this realm. Of the thirty one young people who were addressed across the three sites, sixteen expressed an interest in being involved in the research. These young people were given a copy of the ‘Project Information Statement for Participants and Parents’ and copies of the ‘Informed Consent Form for Participants’. Given that none of the young people who expressed an interest in participating in the research initially were under the age of 16 the ‘Informed Consent form for Parents’ was not required. Times were then negotiated with the program coordinators for me to return and conduct the interviews.

Attendance rates at these programs tend to be lower than at mainstream secondary colleges (DSF, 2006) and this proved to be somewhat problematic. Upon returning to conduct the interviews, several of the young people who had initially expressed an interest in being involved in the research were absent. In some cases I was able to return at another time to interview these young people. In other cases, teaching staff allowed me to recruit other students to take their places. Although overall this method was successful, it resulted in more trips being made to the sites than originally planned and had the organisations not been so flexible it may have affected levels of participation in the study. Upon reflection, given the ‘hard to reach’ nature of the population being recruited it may have been beneficial to offer participants the option to be interviewed directly following the first meeting had they wished to.
Interview process

Data was collected using one-to-one semi structured interviews of approximately 15-20 minutes in length (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Several of the interview questions were adapted from work published by Searle in 2007 (see Appendix E for the ‘Interview Schedule’). After careful consideration, this method was deemed to be the least likely to cause distress to the participants desired for this study, as well as the most likely to result in meaningful participation (Bessant, 2006; Conolly, 2008; Sanders & Munford, 2005). Several things were taken into account in coming to this conclusion. There is evidence to suggest that employing questionnaires to collect information from young people with low educational attainment levels can be challenging (Allen, 2002). The population drawn from for this study may already feel self-conscious about their literacy skills and being asked to fill in a questionnaire may exacerbate these feelings. Further to this, youth researchers have noted that attention difficulties and problem behaviour have made management of focus groups difficult (Allen, 2002).

Finally, by designing an interview schedule that could be completed in approximately 15-20 minutes I had hoped to restrict the content of the interviews to accounts of young people’s everyday experiences in the programs. The aim of this was to avoid in depth accounts of the circumstances leading participants to be involved in the programs that may be distressing and were not relevant to the aims of this project. It is interesting to note here that, despite this working well over all, several participants still revealed information about themselves that could be
deemed sensitive in nature. This included: information about their sexuality, use of illegal substances, mental illness, family dysfunction and domestic violence.¹

The interviews were conducted in a confidential environment at the sites where participants attended their respective programs. At the beginning of each interview the main points of the information statement were re-addressed verbally. I explained that the interview would be tape recorded and that at a later date I would type our conversation into a word document. Participants were offered the opportunity to review the interview either by listening to the recording or reading their transcribed interview once compiled. I explained that if anything came up through the course of the interview that they did not want to talk about all they needed to do was tell me and I would move on to the next question. I also explained that if there were any things that we discussed that they were happy to talk about but would prefer me not to use in my report they just needed to let me know and I would remove it.

Participants were made aware of the fact that their name would be changed, and that any identifying information would be removed from anything I wrote. I also made it clear that despite my best efforts people who knew them well may still be able to identify them based on their stories (Tolich, 2004). The thorough nature of this conversation ensured that all participants were clearly aware of what participation in the research involved prior to signing the informed consent form.

¹ Further questioning revealed that this issue has been handled by the Department of Human Services and that the young person is currently receiving support in dealing with it from workers at the program.
None of the participants refused to answer questions, terminated the interview or asked to review their interview. At the conclusion of each interview young people were given a movie ticket and a letter of thanks as a token of appreciation for their participation (see Appendix F for the ‘Letter of thanks’).

As mentioned above, due to the ‘hard to reach’ nature of this population it was important to be flexible and responsive to participants needs. In two cases it was necessary to conduct interviews with more than one participant at a time or risk losing these participants from the sample. In one case, a young person felt nervous about the interview process and asked if her friend could come with her. Once I had explained the research, this young person decided that she would also like to participate and so all questions were addressed with both young people. In a second case three young men were the only ones present for the last day of term prior to semester break and just prior to the researcher arriving they had been told they could be dismissed early. Once I explained why I was there they were happy to stay and be interviewed, however I felt it would have been unfair and unrealistic to expect them to wait while I interviewed them each individually so offered them the option of a group interview. I used a similar technique here, addressing each question with each young person.

As this was a significant deviation from the proposed method, it is important to reflect on what occurred. By ensuring that I addressed each of the interview questions with each young person in turn I was able to ensure that the data collected in these interviews was as similar as possible to that collected in the other
interviews. The presence of others did not appear to inhibit these participants who spoke of their experiences as openly and frankly as the participants in the one-to-one interviews. In addition to this, in each of these interviews when one participant mentioned something of interest I was able to ask the others what they thought about it. In some cases this was met with simple agreement, however there were times when it revealed stark differences in participant’s experiences. The following is an example of this taken from the interview with the three young men:

Linda: What sorts of things were you getting suspended for, do you mind me asking?
Greg: Ummm, [pause], answering back, fights, just being a smart arse. But now I realise it was stupid, doing that. I wish I could go back and not do it. But [pause] I can’t go back.
Linda: Do you think if you were back in that environment now you wouldn’t do it?
Greg: I wouldn’t, I don’t reckon I would.
Linda: What do you guys think about that?
James: I’d be the exact same if I went back.
Kalub: Mmmm [in agreement]

The one area where the presence of others may have detracted from the quality of the data was when participants were asked to reflect on their opinions about things they perhaps had not thought about before. In these cases participants would at times respond with ‘I dunno, what he/she said’ or ‘What they said pretty much covers it’. This did not present a problem, as it did not appear to reflect withholding of information. Rather participants seemed to feel that their peers had substantially answered the question and had nothing further to contribute. Despite the success of these two interviews, I maintain that one-to-one interviews were the best initial approach. This gave participants the option of privacy without having to
explicitly ask for it and meant that if they did choose to have someone else present this was negotiated on their own terms. What this deviation from the intended method does highlight however, is the importance of flexibility in research with young people.

**Transcription; analysis and presentation of results**

The four and a half hours of data collected during the interviews was transcribed verbatim and the audio and word files were stored on a password protected laptop. The data was quality tested by listening to the audio files while reading the transcripts and during this process initial open coding occurred (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). These codes were then refined and themes in the data that corresponded with the research questions were identified using thematic analysis grids (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). These themes are discussed in the following chapters, with one chapter dedicated to presenting and discussing the findings relating to each research question. Throughout the findings chapters, participants’ ideas are presented using quotes or short extracts from the interviews. Where a more in depth understanding of a particular participant’s experience is required, two case studies have been utilised (Berg, 2009). Italics have been utilised to indicate emphasis that participants put on particular words. Pauses of longer than one second are indicated with [pause]; and pauses of longer than three seconds are indicated with [long pause]. These pauses have been retained in the data in order to provide insight as to when participants took more time to consider their responses. Pseudonyms have been adopted as they provide greater meaning than simply using male/female, while still maintaining participant anonymity. As noted
in chapter two, to further protect the participants’ identities the locations of the programs have not been disclosed.

**Participants**

Nineteen young men and women took part in this research. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants by age and gender.

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<th>Table 1. Participants by age and gender</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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The greater number of males than females in the sample is not surprising, given the over representation of young men in flexible learning environments (Ross & Gray, 2005). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the lack of representation of anyone under the age of 16 is a potential limitation of this study. Table 2 shows the year level that was being completed by the participants at the time the interviews took place.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 2. Year level being completed by participants at the time of interview</th>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
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<td>-------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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*Two of these young men also completed year 10 at the same organisation

As can be seen in Table 2, all of the young people involved in this research were completing either year 10 or 11. This was occurring through a variety of qualifications, including the CGEA, VCAL foundations and Community based VCAL.
Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the challenges posed by conducting research with minors need not present barriers to young people’s inclusion as research participants. In the current project, challenges were overcome through careful conceptualisation and rigorous research design. This resulted in very few problems at the recruitment and interview stages. Despite this, there were some deviations from the intended method. These were not problematic rather they provide insights for others interested in conducting youth research. The results of the current study are outlined and discussed, with reference to the relevant literature, in the following three chapters.
Chapter 4:

Flexible learning environments as a ‘last chance’ at learning for young Victorians

As examined in chapter two, there are divergent views about whether flexible learning environments represent a ‘last chance’ for young people or whether they should be re-positioned as a real opportunity. This chapter will examine how these perspectives were reflected in the experiences of participants in the current study. Starting with an exploration of the pathways that led these young people to be involved in flexible learning environments, it discusses the problems with agency in a compulsory system. It then describes how the ways in which participants came to enrol in these programs reflected the system’s preference for utilising them only when ‘all other educational options... have been exhausted’ (DEECD, 2010, p. 14; KPMG, 2010, p. 83). Finally, it challenges the ‘last chance’ perspective arguing for the re-positioning of flexible learning environments as a genuine option.

Getting there: Problems with agency in a compulsory system

The participants in this research left their previous high schools at varying stages in their academic careers. Table 3 shows the highest level of secondary school completed by participants prior to enrolling in their current programs.

| Table 3. Highest secondary school year completed prior to enrolment in this course |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                   | Year 8 | Year 9 | Year 10 | Total |
| Females                           | 1     | 4     | 2      | 7     |
| Males                             | 1     | 8     | 3      | 12    |
| Total                             | 2     | 12    | 5      | 19    |
The majority of the participants left their previous schools after completing year nine and only five completed all of the compulsory years. Consistent with previous research, most of the participants entered flexible learning environments as a result of being ‘displaced from other educational settings’ (Vadeboncoeur, 2009, p. 293). Although only six participants were officially expelled from their previous schools, most of those who decided to leave of their own accord did so because of negative experiences within the mainstream system. This suggests that push factors do in fact play an important role in early school leaving (Dwyer et al., 1998; Ross & Gray; Smyth & Hattam, 2001).

Interestingly, five of the six participants who were expelled were male. This is consistent with previous research that suggests higher rates of non-completion among boys (Ross & Gray, 2005). It has been suggested that this is due to the mainstream education system’s inability to cater to the needs of young men (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002). Others have pointed out that young women may have more motivation to remain at school until they graduate due to the greater barriers they face upon attempting to enter the workforce (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001). It should be noted that, although gender differences in educational experiences represent an important area of inquiry, constraints of time and space have precluded any further discussion of them in this thesis.

The reasons that participants gave for leaving their previous schools were extremely diverse meaning it was not possible to categorise them in any meaningful
way. They included: ‘couldn’t go back’; ‘getting in too many fights’; ‘being bullied’; ‘never went anyway’; ‘teachers doing my head in’; ‘difficulty juggling school and family problems’; ‘preferred the TAFE system’; ‘not doing well’; ‘not enjoying it’; ‘moved areas and wanted to try something different’; and ‘experienced a mental illness’. The diversity of these responses highlighted the potential problems with attempting to identify specific risk factors associated with early school leaving. This supports the idea that young people who resist traditional education structures are likely to be as different from one another as they are to young people who do well in the mainstream system (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). It is consistent with previous research that has suggested there is no ‘typical’ experience of rejecting mainstream education (Dwyer et al., 1998), and that there are a range of reasons why young people seek alternatives (Cole, 2004; Searle, 2007).

Although concepts like ‘resisting traditional educational structures’; ‘rejecting mainstream education’; and ‘seeking alternatives’ may appear to reflect agency on the part of the students this is not necessarily the case. Previous literature has suggested ‘that the notion of “choosing” to attend an alternative program is problematic’ (Vadeboncoeur, 2009, p. 294), particularly during the compulsory years (Spierings, 2003). This idea was supported by several participants who, when asked why they decided to enrol in their current courses, explained that they wanted ‘to do something’ and had ‘no other choice’. Matt explained: ‘If I wanted to go to school I had to go here’. John admitted that the main reason he attended the program was ‘coz I get cut off my Centrelink if I don’t’. David was also motivated by
extrinsic factors, explaining he attended because: ‘it keeps me kind of at home... if I get kicked out of school mum’s going to kick me out’.

The concept of ‘choosing’ to return to education was also challenged by the idea that without an education one’s life chances are limited. I asked James what the main things that made him want to keep coming to the course were:

Linda: Why is that important to you?
James: Cause they always had no faith in me. They said I was gunna go nowhere.

Similarly, Jane explained that she came to the course because: ‘I started to realise that I need year 10 and year 11 and 12... to get further in life’. These statements clearly reflected that, for these young people, success in life was synonymous with having an education. This implies that young people were not choosing to return to education for its own sake but rather realised the limited nature of their opportunities without a secondary school qualification. This supports the idea that the degree to which education as a social structure can be resisted is limited (Spierings, 2003; Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that as a result of resistance of traditional education structures young people now have options outside of the mainstream system through which to complete their education. This suggests that, contrary to the dominant academic position, young people’s rejection of mainstream education does have some power as a form of counter-hegemonic action (te Riele, 2000).
When ‘all other educational options... have been exhausted’

The ways in which young people in the current study came to enrol in their respective courses overwhelmingly reflected the DEECD’s strategy to utilise flexible learning environments only when ‘all other educational options... have been exhausted’ (DEECD, 2010, p. 14; KPMG, 2010, p. 83). That is, few were told about this option by their previous schools and, of those who were, most received this information only after it was clear they were no longer welcome there. As Peter explained: ‘It was the day I got expelled they told me about [the program]’. Most discovered these education providers though family members, friends or professionals outside of the school setting (counsellors, social workers, employment agencies). It appears little progress has been made in this area as this finding is consistent with two other studies, both conducted six years ago (Cole, 2004; Wyn et al., 2004).

This ad hoc referral process resulted in varying amounts of time elapsing between participants leaving their previous school and enrolling in their current courses. This is illustrated in Table 4.

| Table 4. Time between exiting mainstream school and enrolling in current program |
|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------|
|                        | Summer holidays | Less than one week | Less than three months | More than six months | More than one year | Total |
| Females                |                |                   |                     |                   |                   |             |
| Males                  |                |                   |                     |                   |                   |             |
| Total                  |                |                   |                     |                   |                   |             |

*Two of these young men attended other alternative programs during this time
The shortest time a participant spent between exiting mainstream school and enrolling in their current program was one day and the longest was three years. Interestingly this had a marked impact on the way young people experienced the programs, a finding that will be addressed later in this chapter.

The main reason that most young people had at least some time off in between mainstream school and enrolling in flexible learning environments was due to a lack of awareness of their options. Larissa explained that when she was at her previous school she ‘didn’t know anything about [the program]’. Michael spent two years sporadically attending a variety of schools, during which time he said he ‘wouldn’t have had a clue’ that there were programs like this. Ironically, it was only once Michael decided to leave school all together and try the workforce that he found a learning environment that suited his needs:

I went to Centrelink, to go back on job seeker youth allowance payment... and they told me that the only way they could do it was if I was actively going to a job seeker association and they referred me to [an organisation] and through them I was talking to them about what I wanted to do, what work I was looking for. They told me that I needed to further my education and this was the best place to do it.

Michael’s experience demonstrates the problem with trying to keep students in the mainstream system even when it is clearly not working for them. It emphasises the need to challenge the idea that flexible learning environments are a ‘last chance’ at learning and supports the contention that they should be repositioned as a meaningful opportunity.
**Challenging the ‘last chance’ perspective**

The six participants who had spent six months or more outside of education or training all commented that knowing about the programs earlier would have made a difference to their lives. Several felt they would be more advanced academically and others spoke of how they may have avoided ‘horrible’ experiences in mainstream school. Sara explained that she ‘would have loved to start here earlier, because now that I know how good it is... why wait’. Several other participants reflected similar sentiments.

Interestingly, the young people who had spent longer periods outside of education spoke the most positively of their experiences in the programs. This conflicts with previous research that suggests that ease of referral is an important factor in predicting successful re-entry to education (Ross & Gray, 2006; Wyn et al., 2004). It appears however, that participants’ transitions were successful in spite of the disrupted referral process and not because of it. This was evident in the relief participants expressed about finding a learning environment that suited their needs. Consider Paige’s story below:

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**Paige’s story**

Paige ‘decided to leave’ mainstream school at the beginning of year nine. She explains: ‘people were bullying me a lot and I just couldn’t handle it’. She then went ‘out into the workforce’ where she struggled to find work at times and found things ‘a bit up and down’. Paige found out about the course at the beginning of this year from her boss at the diner where she worked and her dad supported her to enrol. This was a ‘really big change’ for her as she
had also recently moved suburbs: ‘I just wanted to get out of there and start fresh with my life again and yeah I came up here, and yeah it was amazing and I feel a lot happier and better now’. Paige talked about the way her outlook on the future had changed since starting the course:

Definitely! ... [in] every way. Um [pause] I’m just maturing more here, cause it’s an adult environment sort of thing, and like even though they’re all 15, 16, I’m still seeing like the big picture sort of thing so. I dunno, yeah everything.

When I asked Paige what she liked the most about the program she replied: ‘Um, [long pause] I dunno, learning! [laughs] I just, I dunno, I used to feel really dumb and not knowing what to do and stuff but nah I think learning is the main one’. Although she attributed some of her new found academic success to the fact that she was ‘learning to be more mature’, Paige said: ‘I don’t think I could go back to high school again... just not my environment... I reckon I’d still be happier here.’ She also talked about the difference it would have made to her life finding out about the program three years ago when she first left school:

I reckon if I found out there was a year 10 thing [back then] I would definitely have taken it, it would have made a huge difference. [long pause] Yeah, I reckon I would be doing my year 12 now if I done

Once Paige made the decision to leave high school it was three years before she had an opportunity to re-engage with learning; and even then this only occurred by chance. This example shows that by waiting until the last possible moment to inform young people of their options young people may leave education of their own accord and miss these opportunities (Ross & Gray, 2006). It also highlights the fact that while the system may be reinforcing these programs as a ‘last chance’, young people’s experiences clearly reflect a need to consider them as a genuine option.
Paige’s story provides just one example of the ways in which participants described how much happier and more confident they were than when they were attending mainstream school. Larissa also explained: ‘I just don’t feel confident like in proper schools, [pause] but here I’m like out there’. Similarly, when asked what it was like going from a bigger school to his new program Craig replied: ‘here’s better. The treatment’s better, everything’s better’. This suggests that some young people may, in fact, prefer flexible learning environments. Participants in the current study were not unique in this regard. Searle (2007, p. 180), drew attention to ‘the power of alternative programs to engage these young people, to assist in rebuilding self confidence and in constructing new identities’. Similarly Wyn and her colleagues (2004) discovered that, although upfront students were not always sure what to expect from flexible learning environments, they quickly became more confident and were empowered to establish their own pathways in life.

In the current study the most significant indicator of the positive nature of students’ experiences was the way they responded to the question: ‘is there anything you dislike about the program, or would change if you could?’ Almost all students struggled to answer this question with anything more than small, superficial changes, and most did not suggest any changes at all. John summed this up by saying: ‘[t]his is probably about as good as it gets I’d say’. These sentiments were reinforced by many participants who, when asked for suggestions about setting up an alternative education program, responded with things like ‘I would say all things similar to here’. Interestingly, participants’ experiences in no way reflected a sense that they felt excluded, or stigmatised as a result of taking part in
the programs. Instead they seemed relieved to have found a place where their needs were catered to in a manner that allowed them to continue their educations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that flexible learning environments represent both a ‘last chance’ and a meaningful opportunity for young Victorians. After leaving their previous schools young people had little choice but to seek alternative means ‘to get further in life’ and this invariably meant returning to some form of education. Despite this, students were happy in these environments, suggesting that young people have at least some power to influence change through the resistance of traditional educational structures. This supported the idea that the most effective and meaningful changes in education will be driven by those most disadvantaged by the current structures (Freire, 1970\1993). Some structural barriers remained however, and referral processes reflected the DEECD’s preference for the ‘last chance’ approach to flexible learning environments. This was problematic for many participants, reflecting a need to challenge this approach and re-position flexible learning environments as a genuine option. The following chapter focuses on the specific elements that participants described as being important in the programs, exploring the role of a student centred approach to education in their success.
Chapter 5:

Positive experiences through a student centred approach to education

The previous chapter outlined the variety of ways through which young people became involved in flexible learning environments. Despite the diversity of these pathways, striking similarities in participants’ experiences and opinions emerged (Wyn et al., 2004). Overall, findings from the current study are consistent with previous research, and suggest that young people are having extremely positive experiences in these settings (Searle, 2007; te Riele, 2000; Wyn et al., 2004). This chapter will focus on the themes relating to the day-to-day operation of flexible learning environments that were raised consistently during the interviews. These included: structural considerations; teaching practices; the curriculum; and peer interactions. It will examine the ways in which participants’ discussion of these themes reflected a student centred approach to education. Finally, as a further means of determining the effectiveness of these programs, this chapter will explore the way participants’ described their outlook on the future as having changed since becoming involved in flexible learning environments.

**Structural considerations: ‘You have more freedom’**

Participants noted structural differences between these flexible learning environments and their previous high schools. Students were given ‘more freedom’ which was greatly valued. Descriptions included reference to more reasonable rules and regulations; reduced time commitments; the freedom to smoke and wear
what they liked; and fewer students in classes and at the programs. Participants appreciated the lack of ‘compulsory’ activities and suggested that with more realistic regulations in place, students were less inclined to push the boundaries. James commented that ‘there’s no reason to muck around in class, you get to leave when you’ve done your work. You get your year 10 pass and go’. Despite this Greg cautioned students not to ‘take advantage’ of the flexibility by not attending, suggesting that ‘if you come every day [the program] is better’. This is consistent with the philosophy underpinning student centred pedagogy in that it suggests students are responsible for their own learning (Levin, 2000).

Students in the programs were not required to attend for as many hours as in the mainstream system. As Sam commented: ‘the times are more [pause], for me’. Most students reported that this suited them better but gave different reasons as to why this was the case. Some students were coping with personal problems, or increased responsibilities at home that made it hard to comply with the attendance requirements at their previous school. For others the shorter time commitment gave them the opportunity to focus some of their energies on vocational pursuits through part time employment. A third group enjoyed the time this left to pursue their hobbies. In some cases this led to the discovery of career aspirations. James, for example, was an avid skateboarder who has become involved with teaching young people to skate and running skate competitions though the YMCA. This experience has led him to aspire to a career in Youth Work. Only one student attributed his preference for shorter hours to the fact that he would prefer to ‘do
nothing’, explaining that he was ‘a lazy bastard’ and would ‘rather be at home smoking’.

The way students utilised their time outside of the courses suggests that although students were enthusiastic about the reduced attendance requirements, this was not necessarily due to laziness or a lack of motivation. Rather the more realistic demands on their time provided young people with the space to construct their identities in multi-faceted ways that acknowledge being a student as just one part of who they are. This is consistent with previous research which has acknowledged the way that learning occurs in a variety of sites across young people’s lives (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). It is perhaps not surprising, given that in late modernity young people are thought to be juggling more responsibilities than ever before (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). This finding suggests that making students’ needs central to the way flexible learning environments operate also includes taking into account their interests and responsibilities outside the classroom.

In flexible learning environments students were permitted to make their own decisions with regard to smoking and dress. The views of participants in the current study support previous literature that has cited this consideration as important in acknowledging the autonomy, and decision making capacity of young people (te Riele, 2000; Wyn et al., 2004). Further to this, participants explained that such regulation presented an unnecessary barrier to their education in the mainstream system. As Peter explained:
Peter: You’re allowed to smoke, and you’re not allowed to smoke at school.
Linda: Why is that important to you?
Peter: Cause I smoke and I wasn’t allowed to smoke at school and it was making me really angry at school, and you’re allowed to smoke at this school so I’m not angry like I was at my old school.

Similarly, Sophie described her difficulty in complying with her previous schools uniform policy:

My parents are both like really poor. Well not poor but, well they’re better now. My school skirt was like eighty dollars and then I had to have school track pants that are exactly the same as the ones in the MCL [discount] shop that we have in Adelaide and they cost us sixty bucks. And then our jumpers, we have to have two different jumpers and they cost us eighty bucks each. And I had to have black shoes and everything and the shoes were like eighty bucks as well and we just can’t afford that. And so every time I go to school I wear the wrong shoes and I get detention. And I end up having – I think it was a hundred and eight detentions.

Concern was also expressed about the impact of uniform policies on body image for students who did not feel comfortable in the allocated uniform. Jenna expressed the view that students should be able to look ‘how you want to look and [wear] what makes you feel special or different or pretty’. Being disciplined for having piercings and tattoos was also seen as inhibiting students’ ability to express themselves. Jacob had extensive tattoos covering both his arms and explained that he found the policies around this at his old school frustrating and unnecessary:

At [my old school], you couldn’t have tattoos nothing. And, yeah one of mates... he had from his hands all the way up both arms and he went back to [my old school] and they made him wear long sleaved t-shirts, and he had tattoos on his legs and they made him wear pants in summer and shit, he wasn’t allowed to wear shorts.
With reference to piercings Jane explained: ‘if you want to have your nose pierced or your lip pierced you should be allowed cause it’s not hurting anyone else’. Both Jacob and Jane’s comments highlight the potential problems with rules and regulations that appear to serve the interests of the school (in this case with regards to image) rather than the students. By making allowances for things that did not directly impact students learning, like wearing casual clothes, having piercings or tattoos and smoking, staff in flexible learning environments were able to remove some of the barriers that had previously detracted from students’ learning.

The smaller class sizes were also reported as being important; a finding that has been well documented by previous research (Cole, 2004; Wyn et al., 2004). In this research it was difficult to determine if this was helpful in itself, as most participants benefited from it indirectly through the way it affected teaching practices.

*Teaching practices: ‘You feel as if they want you to be here’*

Almost all participants identified the level of guidance provided by the teaching staff as a key component underpinning the success of their respective programs. Craig explained that at his program teachers are ‘willing to help you whenever’. At his old school, ‘[t]hey would have just left me there with my hand up’, whereas here, ‘[y]ou have your hand up for about two minutes and they help you’. The approach to teaching reflected an acknowledgement that in order for these young
people to be successful, educational provision needed to change (Holdsworth, 2004; te Riele, 2007). As Michael explained:

Michael: It’s more individual, when you’re having trouble with something you ask the teacher and the teacher will say it a different way or set it up a different way, that you can understand [pause] and in a normal school they set it up for a class of thirty people and if you don’t get it you just sit in the back corner not saying anything, because the teachers just gunna [pause] shut you up if you do anyway.

Linda: Cool, so do you find that makes it easier? How were you finding the actual school work when you were at school?

Michael: It’s – when I was at school I was very very good at English, but I was really bad at maths. So there wasn’t anybody there who would sit there and help me with my maths, they’d just sit there and keep giving me the same work and making me move forward with the class and I was just like ‘I don’t get it’. So I just ended up not doing the work and then I ended up not going to maths class.

Linda: Are you doing better with your maths here?

Michael: You are. Because if you don’t understand something a teacher will sit with you and show you the formula and how to calculate it.

Other participants told me that the reason they received more guidance in flexible learning environments was due to teachers genuinely caring about students and wanting them to understand the material. For Craig, this helped him feel accepted: ‘you get welcomed here [pause] with open arms. You get the help that you need’.

Greg drew a connection between these teaching practices and his increased self confidence:

Greg: If a teacher’s being mean to you or like if you do something wrong and the teacher tells you off in a real bad way you probably lose self confidence in yourself, you think you can’t do anything. And then, where here the teachers will ask you to try again and then they’ll help you along the way, where high school
teachers if you don’t do it, if you fail once, they just walk away and they’ll help someone else.
Linda: How does that effect your work do you think?
Greg: Aw, badly.
Linda: And how does it affect it here?
Greg: Aw, much better. I’ve got better at maths, English, projects, I’m just much better at my work now.

Participants also noted the level of respect students received from teaching staff. For many this respect was reciprocal: ‘I’m a lot nicer to teachers when they treat me nice’ explained James. An important part of this reciprocal respect was teachers adhering to reasonable discipline measures and treating students like adults, ‘not like a little kid like the secondary school teachers do’. As with this comment from John, many students used negative examples of their experiences with high school teachers to illustrate or reinforce positive experiences in their new programs.

Many researchers have noted the importance of student-teacher relationships in assisting young people who have had negative experiences with education to reengage with learning (for examples see: Cole, 2004; te Riele, 2000; Wyn et al. 2004). Despite this, the reasons behind these differences have not been adequately explored. That teachers in these programs are simply of a higher standard than those in the mainstream system seems unlikely. In fact, an ‘online survey of unconventional learning options’ suggested the contrary, finding that a large portion of instructors in these settings were not qualified teachers (DSF, 2006). In his research with program providers, Cole (2004, p. 9) found that the most important factor in selecting appropriate staff for the programs was finding
‘people who are able to relate to young people at risk’. Similarly, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, te Riele (2000) noted the difficulties that arose when there was a mismatch in cultural capital between students and teachers. Both of these studies highlight the fact that an instructor’s ability to relate to young people is just as important as their teaching ability.

The priority given to student-teacher relationships is not necessarily a reflection of individual teachers, but rather a reflection of the organisation of mainstream schools (Smyth, 2006). Greg provided some insight into this when discussing why he thought he would behave differently if he returned to a mainstream school:

Greg: Um, I just understand more where the teachers are coming from and like what they would have to deal with. With like all the classes and the stress that they have to go through, just by teaching teenagers. You know, it’s not as easy as it looks, so it’s real hard on them as well.

Linda: So you think that the mainstream set up doesn’t help teachers either?

Greg: Nah, I don’t reckon, there’s a lot of stress on them and stuff. Like they’ve gotta teach up to thirty kids sometimes, class all day, correcting work, they don’t get much free time for themselves.

Consistent with Greg’s statement, Smyth, McInerney, and Hattam (2003, p. 182), claimed that the structure of mainstream high schools inhibits teachers with regard to ‘connect[ing] with students’ lives, establishing positive relationships with young people, fostering independence and a sense of identity in students, and creating the conditions that support dialogic learning’. He argued that constant transience from one ‘pedagogical space’ to another makes it difficult for teachers to form meaningful relationships with students, and that this in turn has a negative impact
on the learning community (Smyth et al., 2003). Based on this, the success of smaller, more consistent learning environments with a strong focus on student-teacher relations is perhaps unsurprising. Again this highlights the important role of a student centred approach to education in ensuring young people have positive learning experiences. Student-teacher relations in these programs also appeared to play a role in ensuring student’s engagement with the curriculum.

**The curriculum: ‘It’s easier to understand the work’**

Although the curriculums varied slightly across the sites, all three had a focus on ‘practical work related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work’ (VCAA, n.d, p. 2). Trainers worked with groups of up to 15 students who were encouraged to work through competencies at their own pace. This had an effect on the way students experienced their study loads and many described the work at their current programs as being easier and more enjoyable than it was in mainstream school. They appreciated the varied and hands on nature of the curriculum and also felt that tasks and expectations were explained more clearly. For Adam, taking part in the course was primarily about getting the qualification and he appreciated the opportunity to move quickly through the work:

> You only have to do three or four pieces of work on one thing and you’ve proven that you’re competent. You know rather than doing it bloody every week for six weeks to see that you can do it... You do similar sort of work just not as big, not as often. So you’re doing the same thing, proving the amount but doing it less. It’s good.
A student centred approach to education was again evident in the ways that students were given opportunities to shape the curriculum and obtain competencies in ways that were meaningful to them. For example, Adam was learning about research methods and report writing skills through conducting a research project about attitudes towards the decriminalisation of marijuana. As Sam explained, this practice ‘helps you a little bit more [and] because you’re interested in it you’ll do the work’. This is consistent with previous research that suggests negotiating the curriculum directly with students in a manner that acknowledges their current situation is the key to active and meaningful engagement with learning (Holdsworth, 2000; Levin, 2000). Sophie explained that this method worked well for students who were struggling as teachers would ‘adjust things to your level’. Both Michael and Adele said that it also worked well for students who had strengths in particular areas and wanted more challenging work.

One area in which these programs were perceived as falling somewhat short was in terms of resources and subject selection. Several participants spoke of how they missed doing sport. Others wished they had access to a more diverse range of subjects including health, science and electronics. This was not the case for all students however and in line with previous research (Searle, 2007) some students, including Sara, actually preferred the more limited curriculum:

Sara: Well there’s a lot more subjects that you can learn in high schools but in [this course] there’s not that many but it’s still good. Umm, like in [this course] you still learn the things that you would learn in high school but just not as many and yeah.
Linda: Cool. So what do you think about that, having less options?
Sara: It’s good that there’s not a lot of things on your mind and you can focus on one or two things and get it done. Instead of just focusing on so many things and lost track and um not getting much done.

This idea of quality rather than quantity was also reflected in the ways in which students spoke about the absence of homework and exams. I asked Adele what impact she felt this had on her learning:

I think it’s good because sometimes with homework you either just copy it from a friend or if you don’t really know what to do you just make it up, but cause we don’t do anything at home everything we do is in class so you always have someone to help you. So I think the work you do do you get it done better. And because maybe you don’t have as much you sort of put more effort into the stuff you do have.

Participants’ reflections on their learning supported the notion that the way the school is run is as important, if not more important, than curriculum itself (Holdsworth, 2000). They also supported the importance of a dialogical teaching process through which both teacher and students are active participants in the learning process (Freire, 1970/1993). The marked absence of animosity between students also contributed positively to the learning environment.

**Identity and peer relations: ‘We can be ourselves’**

Several participants had left their previous schools as a result of bullying or negative experiences with their peers. These students noted the efficient and fair manner in which conflicts were handled in these new settings. At his previous schools Michael had been in a lot of fights, but this was not an issue in his new program:
Michael: Well [pause] there’s no stereotyping here. Not as much as in other schools. And you don’t get big groups of people coming up to you and starting a fight with your group of people because you believe in different things. And [pause] everybody’s different in this school. There’s not groups of stereotypes there’s just individual people, [pause] and it’s just a lot easier to just fit in with that rather than trying to conform to a group of people because you don’t wanna be left out.

Linda: What sorts of things do you think contribute to making that happen? Making the environment like that here?

Michael: I [pause] really couldn’t tell you.

Linda: Just happens?

Michael: Yeah, it’s just [pause] it’s different you know. [long pause] instead of being a group of 15 emos, there’s two metros and three emos and they just leave each other be.

Other participants reflected similar ideas, reporting that they were free to be themselves without judgement or ridicule: ‘If I have something to say then I can let it out without being put down’, explained Larissa. Several participants such as Adele, noted the friendly environment as a key factor maintaining their interest in the course:

I like it [here]. It’s fun. Like you don’t wake up and think, ‘argh I gotta go to school’ coz you come see your friends and like the teachers like everyone talks, the teachers’ll be like ‘aw what did you do on the weekend’ and ‘aw I did this’ and like everyone sort of interacts and its all really sort of social. Yeah, and so it feels fun to come here, I just like it.

This response was typical of the way that students described their enjoyment of the programs and found them superior to their experiences in the mainstream system.

It is consistent with other research in this area that has found friendships with other
students to be an important factor connecting young people to school (Ross & Gray, 2005; Speirings, 2003).

**The future: ‘Less of a dream and more of a goal’**

I asked participants about their plans for the future and whether or not their outlook had changed since starting their respective courses. Three types of responses were elicited: some said their outlook had ‘not really’ changed; others said their outlook had ‘definitely’ changed; and a third group explained that although their goals were similar they were now ‘more reachable’. Those who described their outlooks as not having changed had quite fixed career goals prior to entering the programs. Sam explained that he’d ‘always wanted to be a computer programmer or something like that’ and he would still follow a similar course. The majority of participants said they thought that their outlook on the future had changed since starting the course. Sara, for example, explained:

> I used to be like [long pause] so confused about what I want to do and have less confidence about myself – [long pause] and [pause] um [long pause] like [this course has] given me a path that I can just turn to without thinking, or without regretting in the future what would happen. Um, it helped me be more positive about myself and made my future more clear.

Larissa indicated that she was thinking about going on to TAFE to do either childcare or bricklaying. I asked her if she thought her outlook had changed since starting the program:

> Yeah it has, like I didn’t know what I was going to do for work experience down at [my old school], I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. But now I’ve just started fresh and set my life up how I want it to be.
Other participants explained that although their goals were similar, they felt a lot better about being able to achieve them now. Kalub wanted to be an electrician and explained that this would be easier now his ‘maths has gotten a lot better’. Michael wanted to work in the fitness industry and eventually hoped to get into the police force. He explained: ‘[my outlook] hasn’t changed but it’s made what I want to do more reachable. Less of a dream and more of a goal if that makes sense’.

These results provide encouragement that these programs have the potential to do far more than get the problem students out of the way (Murphy & MacLean, 2006; Zyngier & Gale, 2003). It is perhaps unsurprising that a school structure that acknowledges the other facets of young people’s lives and encourages them to develop their interests through the curriculum would also be instrumental in helping their goals become clearer.

**Conclusion**

Despite the diverse ways in which participants became involved in flexible learning environments, there were striking consistencies in their experiences and opinions about the programs. The examples outlined above demonstrate the ways in which these environments: foster learning; encourage positive interactions with adults and with peers; provide an atmosphere where students feel comfortable to be themselves; and equip them for the future. They also highlight the importance of providing young people with the space to develop their own unique identities, acknowledging that being a student forms only one part of that identity. These findings support the idea that a student centred approach to education is utilised in
flexible learning environments and suggest that this is an important factor underpinning their success. The following chapter will focus on student involvement more broadly exploring the exclusion of young people from the DEECD’s policy consultation process.
Chapter 6:

The importance of youth voices in education policy

The views and experiences outlined in the previous two chapters provide evidence that young people have valuable things to say about how flexible learning environments can function effectively. Participants were also asked directly how they felt about being excluded from the formal consultation process that took place in Victoria about these programs. Most participants responded to this question without hesitation, saying that: ‘[the Government] should ask young people’ about it. The importance of acknowledging young people’s views also came up unprompted in more general discussions. Strong evidence was found for the idea that young people not only want to have a say but that they have valuable ideas to contribute. Despite this, participants expressed some doubts about the value placed on the voices of young people. This chapter will explore these ideas, organised around four themes: it’s our experience; ‘everyone deserves to have a say’; doubts about the value of youth voices; and young people are insightful.

It’s our experience

As with the DEECD’s approach to alternative education, initiatives aimed at reforming education have a ‘history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good’ (Levin, 2000, p. 155). Counter to this, there is a growing push for policy makers to acknowledge that when it comes to their own lives young people are the experts (Atweh et al., 2007; Levin, 2000). Participants in the current study
agreed wholeheartedly with this, supporting the idea that given the right approach young people will engage in discussion about the policies that affect their lives (Salvation Army, 2009). When asked to reflect on why consultation with young people was important many explained that the key reason was that ‘they’re the ones that are actually in [education]’. This is consistent with previous research that found marginalised young people wanted to be active decision makers on issues that affected their day to day lives (Vromen & Collin, 2010). Some participants felt that adults were ill equipped to approach policy making in the education arena as their own experiences in the school system were outdated. Kalub explained:

‘things have changed a lot, since like when they were going to high school... So they don’t know what it’s like at the moment... everything’s a lot different now’. This is consistent with a large body of literature that suggests the education system has been slow to catch up with the changes that have occurred across the rest of society (Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Wyn, 2009b).

Matt suggested that even if adults felt that they were still in touch with their own school experiences, these experiences were likely to be different to those of him and his peers:

if you’re going to talk to adults, they probably wouldn’t have even gone to these kind of schools. They’ve probably gone to some high up mainstream school that’s like so top notch and that. But like if you get more of the position of what the kids say you’ll get more of a view of what’s actually happening. Cause like you can talk to an adult and they might say ‘oh yeah I’ve heard about that blah blah blah’ but if you talk to a kid it’s more like ‘yeah I’ve been there and I’ve done that and it’s good’.
As a means of extracting a sense of what they might change if they had the chance, I asked Adam what advice he would give me if I were to set up a program similar to the one he was attending. His response was:

Let kids have their say. And go by like what they want because they’re the only ones that are gunna be doing it. Like the students are there to be doing their work and that it’s not going to help having teachers on their back going ‘you can’t do this, you can’t do that, don’t do this you can’t do that’. If they can voice their opinions and have stuff changed, grouse.

For Adam, simply having his voice heard was not enough. He wanted to see young people’s opinions being acted on in a way that would lead to meaningful change. This is an important distinction that has been somewhat neglected in the literature (AYAC, 2010). Further examination of the actual outcomes of consultation with young people is important as failure to link youth voice to agency or action can result in student participation that is tokenistic (AYAC, 2010; Holdsworth, 2000). For some participants, having their say was also about all citizens’ right to participate.

‘Everybody deserves to have a say’

The idea that ‘everybody deserves to have a say’ was reflected strongly in the responses. Participants rejected the idea of a singular ‘youth voice’ and instead encouraged the recognition of ‘multiple voices’, both young and old (Holdsworth, 2001). Paige explained that: ‘young people have a say in it as well, not just, you know, cause it’s us. I personally think everybody’s equal, so we should all get a say’. This suggests that the need to acknowledge young people’s views is important not simply because education is a youth issue but because as active citizens young
people are entitled to have a say in all issues. This is consistent with the literature that advocates for the need to broaden participatory structures so that they are appealing and accessible to all young people (AYAC, 2010; Holdsworth, 2001; Vromen & Collin, 2010).

As noted in chapter two, the Victorian Government claim that they have ‘continued to expand and strengthen opportunities for young people to have a say on matters of importance to them’ (DPCD, 2010, p. 10). Results of the current study do not support this idea. Some participants expressed anger at this:

Adam: It’s bloody stupid. They’re trying to have something set up for the kids or the teenagers or whatever and they’re not even talking to them. It’s stupid.
Linda: So do you think that young people have something valuable to say about these things?
Adam: Mhmm, and whoever thought they didn’t is stupid. Shouldn’t be working.

Others, like Michael, acknowledged that it was important to ‘do [the consultation] right and do it from every different perspective’. He said it was irresponsible to ‘just slap something together and hope it works’. For Sara, this meant that the perspectives of adults and young people were equally important:

Everyone’s opinion is important in this. Because if only young people’s opinions are important then, well, you know, you gotta have two sides to the story. But it is important that we have a say in it too.

Peter summed up the overall sentiment of participants nicely saying: ‘we might be young but we still have some good ideas’. Despite this comment reflecting
confidence, the need to preface it with ‘we might be young’ suggests an expectation that age may be seen as a barrier to meaningful participation.

*Doubts about the value of youth voices*

Although all of the participants in this research felt that they would like to see young people having more say in the policies that affect their lives, several expressed doubts about the capacity of adults to ‘take them seriously’. As Michael explained:

Michael: Honestly, to most adults we’re teenagers, our opinions don’t mean that much.

Linda: But what do you think?

Michael: I think you could learn a lot from teenagers. There are a lot of people that have experienced a lot more in a span of seventeen years than a lot of adults have in a span of forty years. It’s because we’re from different areas, we’ve experienced different things, we can give an insight they might not be able to comprehend themselves. But because of our age we’re just not thought of. They give us a system and we’re meant to follow it. We’ve got no choice, we’re just [pause] seventeen year olds.

Linda: And how do you feel about that? What do you think about the fact that people feel that way?

Michael: I think it sux because I can honestly say I’ve probably been through a lot more than most adults... We’re just – people don’t expect us to understand, people don’t expect us to have life experiences. When they’ve just got their eyes closed to everything that happens to us.

Linda: So do you think that you would have something valuable to contribute to a report about alternative education in Victoria?

Michael: Well you tell me, you’re recording me. [both laugh]

Matt expressed a similar view, warning of the potential problems with governments not listening to young people:
In my point of view government now they probably won’t give a flying hoot. Like I mean they’ll probably ask a kid and they might give the best answer in the world but they’ll probably just brush it off their shoulder. But I mean if they actually listen, yeah it would help. It could probably change a lot of their decisions that the governments making.

Other research has also reported young people feeling underestimated by government and the wider community (AYAC, 2010). Experiences that reinforce these ideas, such as being excluded from consultation processes or not having their ideas taken seriously, send a powerful message to young people about their role as citizens. By being positioned as passive recipients of adult policy decisions young people are taught that they ‘have no value except in terms of what they will become’ (Holdsworth, 2001, p.2). In fact, the current research found that young people already possess the ability to have relevant and insightful input into policy decisions.

**Young people are insightful**

The strongest support for the idea that young people should have a greater say in policies that affect their lives was not found in response to a specific question. Instead, it was evident throughout all of the interviews in the insightful ways in which young people related their own experiences to broader structural problems. As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, Paige, Kalub and James were all able to identify that different sorts of learning environments would suit different people. In chapter four Greg went beyond slandering his old teachers and spoke of the way that the structure of mainstream high schools seemed to make their lives difficult.
as well. Jenna’s description of the way socio-economic status impacts on young people’s school experiences also shows significant insight:

Bosses and stuff look at kids who could be going to [private schools] and they’re always going to give them the jobs first because they went to a higher school. And that’s not fair on the other kids who find it hard to get jobs and they’re parents don’t have enough money to send them to proper schools... everybody from every school should get treated the same. There shouldn’t really be private schools because they get treated differently. Like I went to an all girls public school... and like [the private schools] they did all these activities and seeing bands and stuff but we just got left out. Cause we’re public, publics don’t matter.

This quote from Jenna demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which class structures have influence in young people’s daily lives. It suggests that for some young people, rather than combating disadvantage, education actually reinforces inequity. This does not necessarily mean that inequity cannot be addressed through education. In fact, as the excerpt from Rudd and Gillard (2008) in the opening chapter of this thesis suggests, education has the potential to be extremely powerful in overcoming disadvantage. What it does mean is that the process through which this will happen is complex and requires a thorough understanding of the experiences of the young people taking part in educational structures. In many cases this may mean that, as Freire (1970\1993) suggested, those facing the greatest disadvantage are the best placed to understand what is required to overcome it. Consider Sophie’s story which is outlined on the next page:
Sophie’s story
Sophie completed year 10 at a secondary school in Adelaide before moving to Victoria last year. She had a year off school so she could look after her mum who was unwell, and then found out about the program though her Aunty who works in the building where it is delivered. Sophie did not want to return to mainstream school because she found it was ‘just crap really... just didn’t like the teachers, too many of them, too many students, too hectic.’ At her previous school Sophie was attending approximately one day out of five and found it difficult to concentrate and difficult to fit in because she ‘didn’t follow the trends’. Sophie described the way her family life made school life difficult:

The reason I did badly was because I have a shit family, well had a shit family. So I couldn’t just drop my family life at home and then go to school and then not think about it, like I was in a lot of trouble and I just don’t understand how they expected me to do everything. And I think a lot of young people still have these sort of problems at home. And I think it’s hard to go to school when there’s [pause] problems at home.

Sophie explained the way her outlook has changed since starting at this program:

Before I come to this school I couldn’t give a shit about anything and I just honestly wouldn’t have any motivation. But now I come to school, like I don’t like missing days of school, I freak out if I’m late. It’s weird. I never used to be like that, it’s changed me... it shows me that I can still motivate myself and they’ve given me more opportunities and ideas of what I can do.

Sophie talked about how she felt her life would be different if her parents had been given a similar opportunity:

If there was more of these places like when we were younger, like when my parents were younger, both my parents would have achieved more... We’d have more money and my mum would be more sensible... my mum dropped out in year 9 because she had the same situation as me, but she had a really bad family. [long pause] So she dropped out in year 9 and she could never get an education after that.

Sophie is planning to start a traineeship in nursing next year along with her studies.

Sophie’s experience provides insight into the potential of flexible learning environments to combat disadvantage. Through the opportunity to learn in an environment that takes into account her circumstances Sophie is afforded the same
right to an education as a young person whose personal life is less challenging. As a result she has access to opportunities that were not available to her parents and reports feeling optimistic about her future. This suggests that, through making education more accessible, flexible learning environments have significant power to shape the life chances of the young people who take part in them.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that, not only do young people want to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, they have valuable insights to contribute. When young people were asked how they felt about being excluded from the consultation process about flexible learning environments in Victoria they were angry but not necessarily surprised. Many replied in a manner that suggested they were resigned to the fact that as young people their opinions were not important to adults who had the power to make important decisions. Despite this the insights provided by participants in this research support the idea that young people are the experts when it comes to their own lives (Bessant, 2006). Participants provided insights into the day-to-day workings underpinning the student centred approach to education that made the programs so successful. They also linked their experiences to broader ideas about the way educational structures operate. This evidence suggests that if the Government are serious about addressing disadvantage through education they should look to disadvantaged young people themselves to determine how this might best occur.
Chapter 7:

Where to from here?

This thesis has made a contribution to knowledge about the role of education in shaping the life chances of young people through an exploration of young Victorians’ experiences in flexible learning environments. It found that, despite having experienced difficulties in the mainstream education system, these students re-engaged enthusiastically with learning once they found environments that catered appropriately to their needs. Although there were many factors that contributed to this, a central consideration was giving young people the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning and, by implication, their own lives. Three key questions were addressed through this research: 1) In what ways do young Victorians’ experiences of flexible learning environments reflect the idea that these programs are a ‘last chance’ at learning? 2) What role does a student-centred approach to education play in the success of flexible learning environments? and 3) Why is it important that youth voices contribute to the production of education policy? In this, the final chapter of the thesis, the conclusions relevant to each of these questions are summarised. Based on these findings recommendations for future undertakings in each area are made.

This research found that while flexible learning environments are currently positioned as a last chance at learning for young Victorians, this is not necessarily ideal. In the current study, it meant that young people who left mainstream school
environments of their own accord were often unaware of their options. This resulted in some participants spending months or even years not taking part in any form of education. Although these pathways clearly reflected a last chance approach, participants’ experiences taking part in flexible learning environments supported the idea that the programs provide a real opportunity. These findings come at an important time as they highlight a major problem inherent in the Victorian Government’s proposed policy direction regarding flexible learning environments. They present a need to challenge the last chance approach and reposition these programs as a meaningful choice for a broader range of young people. Based on these findings it is recommended that further research is undertaken to explore the benefits of engaging young people in flexible learning environments earlier in their academic careers.

This research also found that young people are having extremely positive experiences in flexible learning environments and that a student centred approach to education plays an important role in this. Despite the diverse ways in which participants became involved in the programs, there were striking consistencies in their experiences and opinions about why they worked so well. The programs provided young people with the space to develop their own unique identities, acknowledging that being a student forms only one part of that identity. They were also found to foster learning; encourage positive interactions with adults and with peers; and provide an atmosphere where students feel comfortable to be themselves. A combination of these factors was instrumental in many participants reporting that they now had more positive outlooks on the future than they had
previously held. A student centred approach to education was important with regard to both the overall structure of the programs and in the way that they functioned day-to-day. It is therefore recommended that more resources are committed to initiatives that incorporate student centred approaches to education in Victorian schools.

Perhaps the most important outcome of this research is the voice it has provided to a group of young people who seldom have the opportunity to be active participants in decision making processes. This research took an approach that acknowledged young people as the experts when it comes to their own lives. In doing so it found that, not only do young people wish to be included in policy discussions, they have extremely valuable insights to contribute. These insights shed light on why these programs are successful in a manner that adults may not consider. They also incorporated broader ideas about the way education functions on a macro level as a means of both addressing and reinforcing social inequity. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Government consultation processes are re-structured to allow for input from the young people who will be most affected by policy changes. The evidence presented here suggests that if Governments are serious about addressing disadvantage through education they should look to young people themselves to determine how this might best occur.
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Dear <name>,

Thank you for your interest in taking part in the research I am conducting about young people’s experiences in alternative education settings. The research will be conducted primarily by myself, Linda Randall as a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) student at the Swinburne University of Technology and will be supervised by Dr Paula Geldens. The project aims to give young people a voice in the current discussion about alternative education programs in Victoria. In order to do this I am interested in gaining insight from young people themselves about their experiences taking part in CGEA and Community VCAL courses.

Young people’s participation in this project will be in the form of one-on-one interviews of approximately 15-20 minutes in length. If possible, I would like to negotiate with you that the interviews take place at the site where the program is delivered. The interviews will include questions about why the young person became involved in the program, what they like and dislike about being involved and where they see themselves in the future. Young people will also be asked to reflect on the difference between this settings and the traditional school environment. The interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed by myself for analysis. All responses will be treated as confidential, which means that in all publications neither the young people nor the organisations will be identifiable (a pseudonym will be used in place of young people’s names and any identifying material will not be included). Publications from this research will include a fourth year honours thesis and an academic paper. All data collected for this study will be retained by myself and Dr Paula Geldens for the requisite period of 5 years before being destroyed.

Young people’s participation in this research is completely voluntary and they will be free to refuse to take part, or to withdraw their participation at any stage during the interview. Participants will not be expected to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Before proceeding with the interview, young people will be asked to sign a consent form to ensure that they have been advised of their rights as a voluntary participant. For young people under the age of 16 the consent of a parent or guardian will also be required.

This research provides a valuable opportunity for young people to share their experiences, and I do not feel that there are any risks associated with young people’s participation. I will contact you within the next week to confirm your participation and to set up a time to come and speak with your students about the project. Should you have any questions prior to that please contact me at 0432439636 or email research.randall@gmail.com.

Regards,

Linda Randall
Student Researcher

Dr Paula Geldens
Lecturer in Sociology

This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project, you can contact:

Research Ethics Officer, Swinburne Research (H68), Swinburne University of Technology, P O Box 218, HAWTHORN VIC 3122. Tel (03) 9214 5218 or +61 3 9214 5218 or resethics@swin.edu.au
Appendix B

Project Information Statement for Participants and Parents

Project Title: A qualitative exploration of young people’s experiences in alternative education settings

Principal Investigator(s): Linda Randall and Paula Geldens

My name is Linda Randall and I am a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) student at the Swinburne University of Technology. I would like to invite you to be part of a research project I am conducting. This research is supervised by Dr Paula Geldens.

The research is about young people’s experiences in CGEA and Community VCAL courses. I want to hear from you about why you became involved in the program, what you like and dislike about it and where you see yourself in the future. I am also interested in what you think the differences are between doing this course and being at a traditional school.

If you choose to take part in this project you will be invited to a one-on-one interview which will take about 15-20 minutes and will be held at the place where you attend the course. The interview will be tape recorded and I will type up our conversation. If you want, I can contact you after the interview so you can read or listen to it and make any changes before it is included in the research. I will not include your name, or anything that might show who you are in any published material or in any discussions about the research findings. Published material will include a report for my university and an academic paper. All data collected for this study will be kept by me and Dr Paula Geldens for 5 years before being destroyed.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary, this means you don’t have to take part if you don’t want to, and if you change your mind about taking part we can stop the interview at any time. If there are any questions that you don’t want to answer you can tell me and I will move on to the next question. Before we start the interview I will ask you to sign a form saying that you understand all of these things, and if you are under the age of 16 you will need permission from a parent or guardian to take part in the research.

This research is a valuable opportunity for you to share your experiences and I do not feel that there is any risk to you in taking part in this research.

If you or your parent/guardian has any questions about the research you can contact me by email at: research.randall@gmail.com.

Please retain this sheet for your information.

This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project, you can contact:

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Appendix C

Informed Consent Form for Participants

Project Title: A qualitative exploration of young people’s experiences in alternative education settings
Principal Investigator(s): Linda Randall and Paula Geldens

1. I consent to participate in the project named above. I have been provided a copy of the project information statement and this consent form and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. Please circle your response to the following:

- I agree to be interviewed by the researcher
  YES  NO
- I agree to allow the interview to be recorded by electronic device
  YES  NO
- I agree to provide my contact details to the researchers, for the purpose of reviewing the interview before it is included in the research.
  YES  NO

3. I acknowledge that:

(a) my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation;
(b) the project is for the purpose of research and not for profit;
(c) my anonymity is preserved and I will not be identified in publications or otherwise.

By signing this document I agree to participate in this project.

Name of Participant: .................................................................

Signature & Date: .................................................................
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form for Parents

Project Title: A qualitative exploration of young people’s experiences in alternative education settings
Principal Investigator(s): Linda Randall and Paula Geldens

1. I consent to my son/daughter participating in the project named above. I have been provided a copy of the project information statement and this consent form and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. **Please circle your response to the following:**
   - I agree to my son/daughter being interviewed by the researcher
     - YES  NO
   - I agree to allow the interview to be recorded by electronic device
     - YES  NO
   - I agree to my son/daughter providing their contact details to the researchers for the purpose of reviewing the interview before it is included in the research.
     - YES  NO

3. I acknowledge that:
   - (a) my son/daughter’s participation is voluntary and that he/she will be free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation;
   - (b) the project is for the purpose of research and not for profit;
   - (c) the anonymity of my son/daughter will be preserved and he/she will not be identified in publications or otherwise.

By signing this document I agree to my son/daughter participating in this project if he/she chooses to.

**Name of Parent/Guardian:** .................................................................

**Signature & Date:** ............................................................................

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Interview Schedule

Demographic information collected from participants at the beginning of the interview will include:

- Age;
- Highest level of secondary school completed prior to enrolment in this course; and
- Amount of time spent out of school before enrolling in this course.

Participants will then be asked the following questions:

- Why did you enrol in this course?
- How did you find out about the course?
- What is the difference between this setting and when you were at school?
- What are the main things that make you keep coming to this course?
- What do you like about it? What do you dislike?
- What do you think you will do when you finish this course?
- Has your outlook on the future changed since taking part in this course? In what way?
- What advice would you give to someone who was setting up a program like this?
Dear <name>,

Thank you for taking part in the research project, ‘A qualitative exploration of young people’s experiences in alternative education settings’. Through sharing your experiences you have contributed to ensuring young people have a voice in the current discussion about alternative education programs in Victoria. Please accept this movie ticket as a token of appreciation for your participation.

Should you wish to receive a copy of the final report, or any publications that come about as a result of this project please contact me at research.randall@gmail.com.

Regards,

Linda Randall
Student Researcher

And

Dr Paula Geldens
Lecturer in Sociology

This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project, you can contact:

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