



# **Support for Young People Disengaged from Education & Work: The Perspectives of Youth Services in Queensland**

***A Summary of Research Conducted by YANQ***

**September 2007**

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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
About the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland	1
<b>AIMS &amp; METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>RESULTS</b>	<b>3</b>
Backgrounds of Young People	3
Defining 'Earn or Learn'	3
Reasons for Disengagement	3
What Exists to Help Young People Re-engage?	5
What Makes it Difficult for Young People to get the Help?	5
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE</b>	<b>8</b>

## Introduction

During 2006, the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland noticed an increase in the number of organisations and youth workers contacting it to raise concerns about the level of support available for young people who were not involved in education or work.

These concerns were raised formally via the [Youth Consultative Network](#)<sup>1</sup> and informally (e.g. during phone calls or meetings with YANQ staff).

In response, YANQ undertook this small research project to investigate these concerns and to assess the level and nature of support that is available for young people who are disengaged from education and work. The research focused specifically on young people aged between 12 to 18.

This report summarises the findings of that research<sup>2</sup>. Briefly, YANQ has drawn four main conclusions from this research project:

1. This research project has (like many before it) confirmed that the factors that underpin disengagement are many and complex.
2. Generally, the overall support for disengaged young people does not match the complexity of their needs.
3. The overall response to young people's needs is lacking because:
  - a. where programs do exist specifically to support disengaged young people there are concerns about their effectiveness and the level of resources they have available; or
  - b. existing services are not able to respond to the needs of young people (e.g. homelessness) adequately because because of a lack of complementary services (e.g. a youth shelter) or programs; or
  - c. not all areas have access to specific services to help young people reengage;
4. And finally, insufficient attention is being paid to the systemic (rather than individual or personal) factors underlying disengagement.

As a result of this research, YANQ will be initiating a more indepth, long term project focussing on the needs of disengaged young people. The project will begin at the end of 2007 and more detail will be available via our [website](#) and [fortnightly E-mail Bulletins](#).

## About the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland, representing individuals and organisations from Queensland's youth sector.

We promote the interests and well being of young people across the state by:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development

1 <http://www.yanq.org.au/ycn>

2 A full report with detailed findings was provided to the Management Committee of YANQ. Details are available by phoning YANQ.

- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

We advocate on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. We promote and support cultural diversity. We encourage the development of policies and programs that respond to the rights and needs of young people.

YANQ employs a small team in its Brisbane based secretariat. The organisation is managed by a committee.

Any person interested in YANQ's work can find out more by visiting our website – <http://www.yanq.org.au>. Readers may also want to sign up to receive YANQ's free fortnightly e-mail newsletter. Details are available at <http://www.yanq.org.au/ebulletin>.

## Aims & Methodology

The aims of the research project were to explore:

- what support is available for these young people to take up their right to an education and/or employment;
- what, if any, barriers exist that make it difficult for young people to take up the opportunities provided by the existing services.

The research was conducted using:

- telephone interviews with 8 youth workers (see appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire);
- a facilitated focus group session with 12 youth workers;

The participants in the study were all employed in positions in which they were responsible for providing a service to young people who were the focus of this research. The program types in which the participants worked included:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| • Child and Youth Mental Health service.          | • Specialist Foster Carer.   |
| • ETRF Project officer.                           | • Youth Accommodation service.   |
| • Flexible Learning service.                      | • Youth crime prevention - Youth and Community Combined Action (YACCA).                              |
| • Get Set for Work.                               | • Youth housing service.   |
| • Indigenous student & family support.            | • Youth Justice service.   |
| • Jobs Placement, Employment and Training (JPET). | • Youth Pathways program.  |
| • Local Community Partnerships.                   | • Youth Support Coordinator (this participant was not a YSC, but rather a manager of a YSC program). |
| • Multicultural Mental health.                    |  |
| • Reconnect.                                      |  |

Telephone interview participants were based in the following locations:

- Brisbane x 3 (1 x inner southern suburbs, 1 x outer northern suburbs and 1 x outer south western suburbs)
- Caboolture
- Deception Bay
- Logan City
- Mt Isa
- Townsville

Participants in the focus group were all from South East Queensland.

## Results

In the results outlined below, the numbers of participants giving a particular response is indicated in brackets following the answer. For example: “(5/8)” indicates that five out of eight participants gave this, or a very similar response. The code “(FG)” indicates that this response was received from participants in the focus group.

### **Backgrounds of Young People**

All respondents were asked to discuss the characteristics of the young people they worked with who were not attending school or other education and training programs.

The attributes that respondents identified included:

- In care of the Department of Child Safety or past history of abuse/neglect (5/8).
- Chaotic/unsupportive family life (5/8).
- Poor housing or homelessness (4/8).
- Exhibiting drug-taking (mostly cannabis) behaviour (4/8).
- Drug use in the family or parents (2/8).
- Unemployment within the family (2/8).
- Single-parent households (2/8).
- Non-attendance at school started at a young age (2/8).
- Challenging behaviours (2/8).
- Fearful or mistrustful of adults (2/8).
- Poor literacy/numeracy (2/8).
- Indigenous (2/8).
- Low incomes (1/8).
- Geographically isolated from services (1/8).
- Self-harming (1/8).
- Poor life-skills (1/8). Examples discussed by the respondent included: Setting up a bank account, organising their time, housekeeping and laundry.
- Short attention spans (1/8).

### **Defining 'Earn or Learn'**

One question that was asked of the survey respondents was the sorts of activities they thought should be included in the 'education or training' that all young people are required to undertake.

Most of the respondents felt that there needed to be a wide range of legitimate education or training opportunities available. For most (7/8) this included non-accredited training, such as life-skills (5/8).

### **Reasons for Disengagement**

Participants in the survey were asked:

- what young people they worked with said about why they were not engaged in education, training or work; and
- what they themselves felt were the main reasons for young people becoming disengaged.

### **According to Young People (as stated by Youth Workers)**

The respondents described young people's reasons for becoming disengaged as follows:

- Negative view of school (4/8).
- Lack of support from schools (4/8)
- Breaking school rules (4/8)
- Don't want to (go to school) (3/8)
- Don't have the skills/intelligence or can't keep up (3/8)
- Worker not sure (3/8)
- Negative life events – e.g. abuse (1/8)
- No transport (1/8)
- Drug use (1/8)
- Lack of support from family (1/8)
- Discouragement from peers (1/8)
- Bullying (1/8)

## According to Youth Workers

The youth workers surveyed outlined the following factors underlying disengagement:

- Peers outside of school discouraging engagement (5/8)
- Lack of support from family (4/8)
- Shame or intense negative feelings of being 'different' (4/8)
- Lack of support from schools, including lack of understanding of non-anglo cultures (4/8)
- Bullying (2/8)
- Depression or anger (2/8)
- Difficulty 'keeping up', including low literacy/numeracy (2/8)
- Child abuse or neglect (1/8)
- Poverty (1/8)
- Homelessness (1/8)
- Family dysfunction such as drug abuse or domestic violence (1/8)
- Exclusion/suspensions that reinforce these feelings (1/8)
- Lack of discipline (1/8)
- Lack of transport (1/8)
- General lack of services to assist young people (1/8)
- High levels of staff turnover that reduce services effectiveness (1/8)
- Pressure to achieve (1/8)
- Poor health and nutrition (1/8)
- Lack of social skills (1/8)
- Inability of some young people to cope with rules (1/8)
- Social security providing an easy fallback position (1/8)

## What Exists to Help Young People Re-engage?

When asked about existing supports for young people, the following services were mentioned by participants.

Service	Survey	Focus Group
<b>Preventative Programs</b>		
Youth support coordinators*	1/8	✓
Youth Pathways Program*	2/8	
Guidance Officers	1/8	✓
School Based Youth Health Nurses	-	✓
Playgroups based in Schools	-	✓
<b>Intervention Programs<sup>1</sup></b>		
Child & Youth Mental Health Service	-	✓
Local Community Partnerships*	-	✓
Youth at Risk Outreach Service*	1/8	✓
Get Set for Work*	4/8	
Centrelink (social worker outreach)	1/8	
Flexi/Alternative School*	2/8	✓
Jobs, Placement, Employment Training (JPET)*	3/8	✓
Youth and Community Combined Action*	1/8	✓
Reconnect*	2/8	
TAFE	2/8	✓
Local Youth Service/s	3/8	
Job Network*	2/8	
PCYC	1/8	
CDEP	1/8	
Individual and Family Support Program	1/8	
Community Jobs Program*	1/8	
Personal Support Program*	1/8	
Local Council Youth Program	1/8	
Lifeline	1/8	
Arts Centre	1/8	

## What Makes it Difficult for Young People to get the Help?

The next question that was asked in the research was about any specific barriers or challenges that made it difficult for young people to access the existing support services which were mentioned by the respondent. Most of the responses received fell into two broad categories: problems arising from life circumstances; and deficits in the services. The other barriers were more general or pragmatic in nature.

<sup>1</sup> Some of these may also double up as prevention/early intervention type services.

\* Services marked with an asterisk are described in more detail in the accompanying report – '[Youth Service Programs in Queensland for Disengaged Young People](#)'.

## Problems arising from life circumstances

Many of the barriers that participants identified were related to life circumstances largely beyond the control of an individual youth service. These included such things as:

- Lack of parental support or care (1/8 + FG).
- Homelessness or unsuitable accommodation (1/8 + FG).
- Poverty/Low Income (1/8 + FG)

## Deficits in Services

- A lack of skills or expertise in the services - either schools or other human service agencies (4/8 + FG).
- Less 'difficult' or more 'mainstream' clients are the focus of most services (3/8).
- Services are unable to establish trust with young people (2/8).
- Time pressures being placed on services due to high caseloads, funding restrictions or reporting requirements (1/8 + FG).
- Poor coordination between services (1/8 + FG).
- The referral criteria for some services is too restrictive (1/8 + FG).
- Other barriers listed by respondents included under the category of Service Deficits were
  - High levels of staff turnover (1/8)
  - General lack of services (1/8).
  - General avoidance in society of the issue of abuse and its impact (1/8).
  - Low wages paid to youth support coordinators (FG).
  - Lack of outreach offered by services and services being in poor (inaccessible) locations (FG).
  - Schools not providing enough support to flexi-schools, particularly by providing curriculum resources (FG).
  - General lack of resources and funding for services (FG).
  - Schools placing too much emphasis on OP scores rather than social welfare (FG).
  - Services not taking up opportunities to work with other (more flexible) training providers (FG).

## Other barriers

The other barriers that were identified were:

- Inadequate transport and outreach (4/8).
- Poor diet of some young people (1/8).
- Young people rejecting the assistance of services (1/8).

## Conclusions and Next Steps

YANQ initiated this small piece of research to explore the concerns that were raised with us via the [Youth Consultative Network](#). The results have confirmed that the concerns of youth interagencies are valid and that as a community we need to improve the services offered to young people who are disengaged from education, training and employment. Specifically, the level of dissatisfaction with the quality and level of services are concerning to YANQ.

YANQ has drawn four conclusions from this project:

1. This research project has (like many before it) confirmed that the factors underpinning disengagement are many and complex. Indeed all of the factors described by participants in this research are discussed in YANQ's issues paper from 2004 *Let's Invite Everyone*<sup>1</sup>.
2. The overall support for disengaged young people does not match the complexity of their needs.
3. The overall response to young people's needs is lacking because:
  - a. where programs do exist specifically to support disengaged young people there are concerns about their effectiveness and the level of resources they have available;
  - b. existing services are not able to respond to the needs of young people (e.g. homelessness) adequately because because of a lack of complementary services (e.g. a youth shelter) or programs; or
  - c. not all areas have access to specific services to help young people reengage<sup>2</sup>.
4. Insufficient attention is being paid to the systemic (rather than individual or personal) factors underlying disengagement.

In response to this research YANQ will initiate an indepth long term project focusing on the needs of disengaged young people. The project, beginning around the end of 2007 will aim to:

- Map reengagement services available to young Queenslanders.
- Develop and articulate models of successful reengagement services.
- Encourage a deeper understanding within the youth and education sectors – workers, coordinators, managers, policy makers - about disengagement and the types of reengagement services that different communities may require.

More detail will be available via our [website](#) and [fortnightly E-mail Bulletins](#).

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1 Available online: <http://www.yanq.org.au/content/view/446/9/>.

2 Of the services that were mentioned by at least one survey respondent and a focus group participant, none were mentioned by more than 3 (out of 8) of the survey respondents. The only program that managed to be mentioned by half of the survey respondents (the 'Get Set for Work' program) was not mentioned at all by any of the participants in the focus group when the question was put to them about available services.

## Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

1. Do you, or have you in the last 6 months, work/ed with young people aged up to 18 that are not participating in education, training or work.

Yes                      or                      No

If no discontinue survey. **If Yes...**

- a. Can you describe the type of work you did/do (for e.g. what was the aim of your position)?
  - b. How long have/had you been in a role that involves working with young people that are not participating in education, training or work?
  - c. Where do you work (town, city or region of city – e.g. South Brisbane)
2. Government policy today, at the State and Federal level is essentially based on the view that “all young people should be participating in education, training or work”, can you tell me what sort of activities you think are covered by “education, training or work” (e.g. accredited, non-accredited, full-time, part-time etc).
  3. This next section is specifically about the young people that you have worked with in the last 6 months that are not participating in education, training or work. With these young people in mind...
    - a. Are there any general characteristics of this group of young people that you can describe?
    - b. Can you please describe generally (if possible), what those young people see as the reasons for their non-participation?
    - c. Can you please tell me, generally, what you believe are some of the main reasons for their non-participation?
    - d. Can you please discuss the opportunities (services or programs) which you know of that are available to these young people to help them get involved again in education or training?
    - e. Regarding these opportunities, are there any specific barriers or obstacles that you think make it difficult for the young people to access or make the most of these opportunities (these may be the same or different to what you mentioned in Qb above)?
  4. Is there anything else at all you would like to raise with me in regard to assisting young people that are disengaged from education or work that you think YANQ should consider (e.g. regarding Government Policy, service delivery or any related issues at all)?