



youth affairs network qld

## Online Forum Report

### *What would it take to re-engage young people with education/learning?*

This Online Forum held on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2020, was the second in a series organised by YANQ in response to findings of a recent survey where the respondents prioritised re-engagement with education ([see the survey result report here](#)) as the key topic for discussion and exploration by the sector.

#### Guest Speakers:

**Dr Marnee Shay** - The University of Queensland

**Michelle Kinnane** – Deception Bay Flexible Learning Centre

**Lisa Love** – Director of Youth Engagement/Department of Education



Overall the Forum had 206 registrations online and 200 participants on the day. Feedback has been highly positive with many people unable to attend the Forum asking for the recording of the Forum to be made available to them. YANQ has uploaded the Forum recording on its YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AKDIhZFxX8>

## 1<sup>st</sup> Speaker Dr Marnee Shay - The University of Queensland

As a previous Youth Support Coordinator in Queensland schools as well as working as a youth worker in alternative education settings, Dr Shay has a unique perspective which is informed by both hands-on practice and academic research. In this Forum she shared findings from research which she has been carrying out in recent years focusing on Indigenous education within alternative schools. Her particular interest are longer term changes that meet the needs of young people.



In summary, her research highlights three ways that alternative schools manage to attract and retain marginalised young people:

1. Alternative schools have an emphasis on community/belonging;
2. Alternative schools have an emphasis on relationships;
3. Alternative schools focus on empowerment of young people (centring young people's voices – what are their educational goals and how are they met - what a school day looks like).

Dr Shay also referenced key findings from previous research carried out by YANQ in partnership with The University of Queensland and Griffith University [Engaging students in engaging schools, learnings from Queensland's alternative education sector](#). In that research we found that the alternative schools have a:

- Focus on meeting material support (food, shelter clothing, legal representation, child care);
- School environment that is young-person-centred, flexible and relational;
- Adjustment of pedagogical practices (how you teach);
- Strong community connection with local orgs, grassroots and local businesses;
- Evidence of growing demand;
- Recognition of the gap in research about outcomes for young people who attend. We know there are some tangible short-term outcomes but there is much more that we don't know.

Other research by Shay & Heck, 2015 explored demographic data which showed that the average Indigenous enrolment across nine flexi schools was 31% and that 30% of staff in flexi schools were also Indigenous. This shows the disproportionate high number of Indigenous people engaged in flexi schools as a school provider and employer. Although school leaders had reported a strong willingness to engage in self-learning in relation to Indigenous culture, there was limited evidence of how these understandings were implemented with relation to Indigenous education in their flexi schools. Indigenous staff undertake complex and important roles in flexi schools and through the employment of Indigenous staff, flexi schools acquire much needed local cultural knowledge and capital to support the high number of Indigenous students. There are issues of race and racism present at flexi schools, although this is at a much lower rate than in the mainstream settings. The biggest concern expressed by Indigenous flexi school staff is an over reliance on cultural activities or celebrations in embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across all areas of school including curriculum.

Research by [Shay and Lampert in 2019](#) highlighted that:

- There is evidence of a high number of enrolments of Indigenous young people in flexi schools;
- There appears to be a high number of Indigenous staff engaged in various educative roles in flexi schools;
- The youth centred approach and inquiry -led-curriculum appears to be engaging a high number of Indigenous young people but there are no studies that examine short or long term outcomes for Indigenous young people engaged in flexi school settings;
- Indigenous education policy has overlooked the role of flexi schools in addressing Close the Gap policy imperatives to date.

Key themes that Dr Shay wants to take forward in her research, first and foremost centres on the voices of young people and that of the practitioners in schools, seeking to answer the following two highly important questions:

- How to take the learnings from flexi schools to improve the provision of education in mainstream settings or do we want to keep expanding the flexi schools?
- What are the roles of flexi schools in the longer term?

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Speaker Michelle Kinnane – Deception Bay Flexible Learning Centre**

Michelle Kinnane started her presentation by reaffirming what the previous speaker had said about the focus of alternative settings on community, sense of belonging, empowerment of young people and a focus on relationships. She also agreed with the previous speaker that the two main questions we should be looking to answer are:

- How to take the learnings from flexi schools to improve the provision of education in mainstream settings or do we want to keep expanding the flexi schools?
- What are the roles of flexi schools in the longer term?



One of the key learnings from years of working in alternative settings with highly marginalised young people is that you can't wait for this cohort of young people to come to your school and that you have to go to them. Meeting young people's initial needs such as food and accommodation and building trust with them in the process is paramount to engaging them with other activities such as learning. This process cannot be rushed and needs to be taken slowly, sometime having contact only once or twice per week. The main task is to find out what are the young person's unmet needs and the issues that really block them from attending schools. There are always underlying issues such as lack of transport, anxiety and concern about what is happening at home. Once these issues are identified, then strategies for collaboration on resolving them are explored. This is called collaborative problem solving and it is at the heart of the operation of the flexi schools. Organisations need to develop systems and processes that enables youth workers to conduct outreach in young people's spaces.

Michelle raised specific concern that in 2020 we have seen the highest levels of disengagement from education ever, of course COVID-19 has exacerbated this situation. However, during COVID-19 some young people have thrived. For some young people being able to attend school online and from home has worked really well. They include young people who are carers for their family, have their own children or have significant mental health issues. The online learning format for these groups have been a positive outcome. We should ensure that this continues after COVID as it is a valid engagement method and highly beneficial for some young people.

How to engage young people and keep them attending school:

- Visually make your school or community safe;
- Know the young people and their story (they won't engage in education unless there is a relationship;)
- Have a robust induction including a discussion on how the brain works
- Demonstrate who you say you are, develop a personal plan with young people and have a well-being plan;
- Building in young people's voices into all levels of your work;
- Capitalise on young people's interests and make their interests fit your learning framework (student voice in co-designing learning).



### 3<sup>rd</sup> Speaker Lisa Love – Director of Youth Engagement/Department of Education

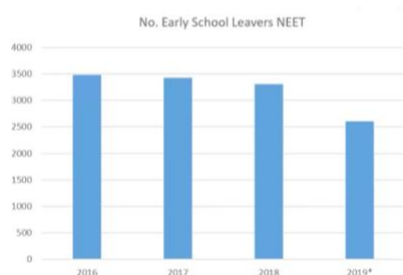
Queensland Department of Education has been reviewing various research since 2017 looking at mainstream as well as the flexible education and the gaps in service provision.



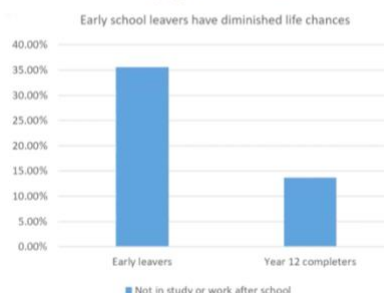
Why youth engagement in education is a priority? The graph below demonstrates, partly, why we should focus on maintaining young people's engagement with education and learning.

## Early school leavers slipping through

Too many early school leavers are disengaged – approximately 3,000 every year



Early leavers are 2.5 times more likely to be disengaged after school



What is the Youth Engagement Project?

- Supporting students to stay at school
- Catching them if they fall
- Strengthening the transition to further education and work

Key initiatives of the Youth Engagement Project:

The Queensland Department of Education has a [YouTube Chanel](#) with dedicated resources on engaging and retaining students. They also have been working on implementing the [FlexiSpace](#) project at 17 locations. FlexiSpace aims to retain young people in mainstream schools. The program will have another 15 schools engaged next year and a total of 52 by 2022. There is also the Digital Engagement Strategy [Spark Their Future](#) to support young people and their parents by providing online information about various options available in regards to education. The site also has some resources for youth workers who are supporting young people to remain at school.

Queensland Department of Education is also committed to alternative education. This year they release [Practice Frameworks](#) to support and help schools. A number of fact sheets have also been developed. These are not 'standards' nor are they 'mandated'. They are just what the sector has put forward to the Department as high standard quality practice in alternative education settings.

Every region has a Youth Engagement Hub. They work with multiple agencies and at least have 10 Government Departments to help identify young people who may need their support. They also work with all the schools within their region to identify young people who may have left school early without a transition plan. They connect with those young people and case manage them to find out what is the best education or training pathway that would suit them and help them to get there.

The latest initiative of the Department is [Link and Launch](#) which is operational in a number of schools. This is for year 12 completers and will help them with resume writing, job pathways and access to Centrelink.

## **Post Forum Survey:**

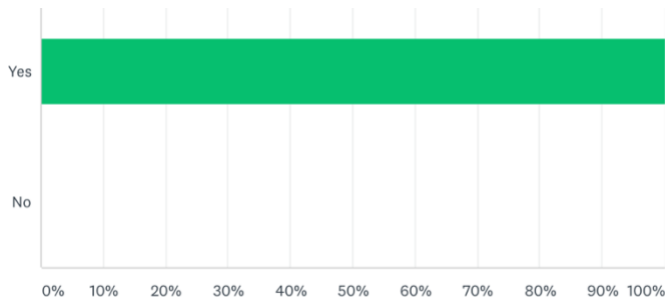
Following the Forum, YANQ administered an Online Survey and invited the Forum participants to contribute their feedback and thoughts about the Forum and how to move forward, as a sector, on issues discussed at the Forum. 16 people completed the survey. The following is a summary of these responses:

### **Q1. Did you find the Forum informative? Why?**

All of the survey participants indicated that they had found the Forum to be informative. Respondents, in particular, were satisfied with the mix of research presentation and practitioners sharing their hands-on knowledge and experience. The links to further resources, which was provided to the Forum attendees, was also mentioned as highly useful

as it provided further information to enable participants to gain a greater understanding of the issue.

Did you find the forum informative? Why?



### Survey responses

*“Dr Marnee Shay's research findings; Michelle Kinnane's practical information about Edmond Rice centres.”*

*“Provided information on how to work with disengaged students - what is their currency.”*

*“The second speaker; Michelle Kinnane was very informative. She spoke from a strength based, holistic approach, providing practical experience and ideas to actively engage vulnerable young people.”*

*“It was just great to hear all the work being done to encourage Indigenous young people to stay in school.”*

*“Hearing from practitioners in the field is always good for improving the work that I do.”*

*“It has given me some more resources to use in my work.”*

*“It explained Flexi School and took a student focused perspective.”*

*“Confirms what is happening with how education is or is not responding to young people.”*

### **Q2. What are the main issues facing the youth sector in respect of re-engaging young people with education? [Briefly outline or dot point what the key issues are]**

Responses to this question can be divided into two categories. The first are socio-economic issues which young people are facing in their lives and how the youth sector can respond to them. The second are to do with the structure of our schools and necessary changes required in our education system.

## Survey responses

*“Family violence, abuse and resultant disengagement from family, school and community resultant homelessness, drug addiction, school truancy/poor attendance.”*

*“Education not valued or supported in the home - lack of confidence in ability to successfully complete tasks - lower literacy skills.”*

*“Lack of connection - lack of future vision - cannot see the reasons behind why education important.”*

*“Young people who are experiencing substantial lifestyle disadvantages such as homelessness need support to find stable, safe housing options before engaging in education.”*

*“Parents not following up with return to school plans, stating that it is too hard.”*

*“Mental health issues, particularly anxiety. Family dysfunction. Complex trauma. Disabilities such as Dyslexia, etc. not funded, therefore limited support available.”*

*“Substance use, mental health issues - usually anxiety and unstable home life.”*

*“Mental health concerns, financial implications and lack of support.”*

*“Connectivity with young people - getting them to engage initially is often easy, keeping the communication going (from their end) can be difficult as addresses change, phone numbers regularly get changed etc.”*

*“Lack of social/educational support in high schools for such students - need for such students to have positive stable relationships with adults; particularly in the school environment - need for school curriculums to be responsive to student learning difficulties - need for alternative schools to improve students' literacy and numeracy levels - need for alternative schools to NOT use worksheets which only foster simplistic thinking and do not arm students to critically and creatively address problems in the real world - need for alternative schools to use a project curriculum that integrates cross curriculum subject areas and allows for student input and interests (such as Qld's New Basics Project in early 2000s).”*

*“A curriculum/content /teaching that does not engage students or make them curious to follow through - feeling unsupported - inflexible assessment.”*

*“Having enough places that are a high quality alternative to mainstream education, Places providing a curriculum that has efficacy and meets their actual learning needs (especially in literacy and numeracy). Having appropriate transition pathways for young people beyond initial re-engagement in education that are meaningful to young people and accessible in remote, rural and urban areas.”*

*“Education isn't flexible for some students.”*

*“Placing young people who have experienced trauma in the same education centre as young people with aggressive behavioural presentations can cause further trauma and dis-engagement with some young people. Educational centres that do not provide different delivery methods of education to actively engage those with different learning styles.”*

*“School not allowing external youth services into the school - School waiting until the young person has been disengaged for several months before referring to external services. Mainstream schooling is very difficult for Indigenous boys in my boarding facility to participate in without feeling anxious with English not being their first choice of learning.”*

*“Creating a sense of belonging to a school community - changing attitudes towards disengaged young people in mainstream schools.”*

*“Flexibility in mainstream schooling to cater for the diverse needs of adolescents.”*

*“Attitudes and inflexibility of education staff and environments. Youth expect more youth centric supports and respect for individual differences than what they are experiencing. Due to repeated negative experiences, some youth begin to view the world negatively, further compounding efforts to re-engage by well-meaning adults.”*

*“School response - Student teacher relationship / lack of - School reactive to implement suspensions.”*

**Q3. What can we create together that will enhance our capacity to make a difference in overcoming the issues? [How do we share information to improve our practice? How do we maintain sector best practice?]**

Responses to this question focused on what could be done by the youth sector itself. These suggestions will require co-ordination by YANQ as the peak body and will require YANQ to be resourced appropriately to undertake this work.

The second area of focus was on schools and the Education Department and how the youth sector can influence their policies and practice. Once again this requires YANQ to be funded to undertake this type of work.

For example, when YANQ was receiving funding it sat on the Ministerial Taskforce - Education and Training for the Future and Education Department's Equity Committee. At this level YANQ could represent the voices of the youth sector members on an ongoing basis, nurture collaboration, and ensure policies and program initiatives were informed by experiences of youth workers from across the state.



## Survey responses

*“When employing staff at alternative schools, ensure they have a mature, flexible and creative approach to teaching.”*

*“For alternative schools to work at building positive relationships with adjacent High and Primary school personnel; eg offer seminars for changing fixed mindsets; eg perhaps have High school teachers do a term/X weeks at the alternative school - Only employ guidance officers in schools with a Psychology/Social Work degree - with components that focused on youth issues.”*

*“Have two or three monthly Forums. Ask what people are looking for and have specific sessions that cover this, with examples of what is working. Provide a website with the different programs/initiatives, for example I had never heard of Link and Launch and I know I will be exploring that further. Find a way to support the creation of partnerships as they are a great way to enhance capacity to make a difference. Maybe put up onsite or email out what people are looking for. This might sound a bit confusing, and perhaps I need more time to explain. Our Clemente program is not government funded but ACU, Saint Vincent de Pau, Micah Services and Sisters of Mercy bring in-kind money, mentors, food and university lecturers and services, to see that disadvantage youth and others have an opportunity to succeed at tertiary level studies. There is lots of support and by the time they finish the certificate they are more confident to start university mainstream. None of this could be done if not in partnership with other organisations and volunteers.”*

*“Publish real advice and worked examples of how to enact a high quality program with regard to curriculum. Ensuring that well-being is catered to as part of a balanced program and not let the curriculum teaching and learning become secondary to that.”*

*“Forums - Best practice - Create small research projects and enact practice - analyse effect positive and negative.”*

*“Work together across sector organisations.”*

*“A holistic approach is needed, allowing services into flexi schools is critical in providing a wraparound social and emotional wellbeing response.”*

*“Greater collaborative practices between schools and service providers.”*

*“Keep pushing for flexible learning and more education for teachers, heads of dept, schools and politicians for more need for this flexible learning that they can't keep up with mainstream education.”*

*“On the ground work with teachers in schools. Professionals already working in this disengagement space have a deep understanding of the issues. Staff in schools do*

*not have the same depth of understanding and can make a young person disengaged feel even worse about attending school by making clumsy statements.”*

*“A yearly Forum that brings the coalface workers together with Qld Education, etc., to talk about the current issues that prevent young people from engaging effectively in education and then implementing reforms from this.”*

*“Working together and making a loud enough voice.”*

*“Share information such as these Forums at Brisbane City Council Inter Agency meetings.”*

*“More Forums like this and accessible research. So refreshing. Sharing success stories. Doing the long term evaluation of outcomes research.”*

*“Education Department and teachers on the ground, what are their thoughts on the speakers research and approach to supporting vulnerable young people?”*

*“Continual learning from each other, commitment of funding from governments.”*

*“Continual sharing of success stories/initiatives to ensure cross sector/inter-sector transparency for young people.”*

policy<sub>teacher</sub> support<sub>programs</sub> students<sub>making</sub>  
young people<sub>education</sub> school<sub>curriculum</sub>  
learning<sub>Increase</sub> need<sub>always</sub> YP<sub>also</sub> focus

Word cloud generated from responses to this survey question

#### **Q4. What would it mean to be the national leader in re-engaging young people with education? [How would young people benefit? What would be the flow on effects?]**

A systemic approach to planning our strategies for keeping young people connected to education and learning will ensure quality service provision to young people across formal and informal settings. Adequate planning will help ensure that Government and NGO resources are harnessed to respond effectively to meeting young people’s basic needs as well as ensuring young people’s right to education is upheld and acted upon by all stakeholders.

The flow on effect will be first and foremost the wellbeing of young people and expanding of the life opportunities which will be provided to them by the continuation of their education, the socio-economic dividends that in turn will be received by the community, and maximising Government’s investment to generate the best outcomes possible.

## Survey responses

*“To be a national leader we need to show measurable improvements in both academic and social emotional skills of the young people at-risk. We need a range of high quality options (not a one size fits all approach). We need to address the issue that young people are at very different points on a learning continuum and make sure we have appropriate learning opportunities that respond to the stage of learning they are currently at. We need to put money into researching what works with regard to academic improvement backed up by hard data.”*

*“Increase value placed on education by young people by assessing what they need (personalised structures/plans/strategies). Students to be engaged with design of curriculum which is best suited to them. Students will also be empowered by their considerations being utilised in the design of their learning.”*

*“Young people would benefit by gaining the advantage of completing school. Young people would be less likely to become adult offenders. Policy change - in teacher development framework. Professional development for teachers as part of national standards of registration to understand and implement inclusive practices for the vulnerable young people.”*

*“More flexible learning options, eg Pathways, YMCA, Flexi schools. Family Support Workers involved with schools. More support in school to support Mental health (There can be many barriers to getting young people to appointment outside of the school). More funding for support for Mental health disorders and learning disabilities.”*

*“State government (in particular, but flexi school also has some biases which disadvantage disability or Indigenous students) inflexibility in uniforms/school attendance hours through to rules for suspension/ behaviour support alternatives. A focus on how to keep people at school and all be safe, not just exiting the student and containing the problem. Flow on effects is we will avoid a younger generation who are not seen as employable and all the spin off psychosocial /socioeconomic impacts this has.”*

*“More opportunities for different education teaching rather than just ticking curriculum boxes. Making it more hand on and interesting to keep the young people engaged.”*

*“I think what Michelle Kinnane does is a good example of that. She has her finger on the pulse of many things that are happening in the community and she can bring that to the schools. So can't really answer that in a small section. But any program that excites or interests disengaged students will be worth following - and it should not always be about making yourself employable.”*

*"This question is very multifaceted and quite difficult to answer within a short response. key components - client centred, outcome focused and flexibility."*

*"Positioned to influence from the top down. Remove the blame of disengagement from the child and place on society."*

*"In supporting young people, 'Relationship' is the key issue and always at the top in any human engagement. With education, is it possible to focus on building relationships before attending to the curriculum?"*

*"Prospects of young people would increase, economy would benefit."*

#### **Q5. Where to from here? [Next steps for the sector? Ideas for further discussion with government?]**

Discussion at the Forum and the follow up survey responses have highlighted a range of initiatives that the youth sector and the Government can work together to implement. In terms of priority, Queensland should focus on having further discussions and answering the following two key questions:

- How to take the learnings from flexi schools to improve the provision of education in mainstream settings, or do we want to keep expanding the flexi schools?
- What are the roles of flexi schools' longer term?

Having clear answers to these two key questions is fundamental in planning future initiatives which would assist in keeping young people engaged with learning and education and to assist young people who have left the system to re-engage. Having such clarity has the potential to position Queensland as a national leader in this field.

YANQ is more than willing to partner with the Government to bring practitioners and researchers together to look at all the evidence on hand and to formulate a response to these questions.

#### **Survey responses**

*"Organisations such as YANQ that are giving "frank and fearless" input about young people should be supported by government funding and public - Establishment of a national leader as above who is given the power to "deliver" policies and programs that will in reality re-engage and prevent from dis-engaging young people - After "frank and fearless" input plus more importantly "delivery" is what PM Morrison said in 2019 on his re-election as being his priorities for the public service. Was this just a motherhood statement?"*

*"Addressing the elephant in the room that was asked but not addressed about how the department can actually support alternative education programs to build high quality curriculum programs for young people that are more than three years behind*

*their peers in literacy and numeracy skills (a typical scenario for young people disengaged from education). The current process of putting a child on an Individual Curriculum Plan that has not verified impairment is solely destroying for a young person who is disengaged and will not re-engage them (ie a 15 year old being told they are working on Year 3 Australian Curriculum in English and it be reported as such)."*

*"Increasing number of accessible places for students in flexischool/flexi - timetable considerations. Each school having a flexi component. Increase consultation with students. Increase opportunities for trade schools (TTCs)."*

*"More funding for the sector."*

*"Further education on a holistic strength based approach is needed and how to include this in the practical world."*

*"To look at alternative ways of providing education to young people within the community. Look at addressing common barriers to young people engaging into education."*

*"Keep pushing what you are already doing and hopefully enough voices will be heard to make a difference."*

*"More flexible learning options, eg Pathways, YMCA, Flexi schools. Family Support Workers involved with schools. More support in school to support Mental health (There can be many barriers to getting young people to appointment outside of the school). More funding for support for Mental health disorders and learning disabilities."*

*"Schools offering more alternatives to the 9-3pm, especially where families and students are showing a commitment to therapy/treatment/engagement in communities of support. Being a teenager is super difficult these days and while schools are more and more diverse in their support systems, these continue to fit the 9-3, in your box please, these are our standard and if you don't meet them you're out. This is where the learnings of COVID-19, distance education schools and Flexi schools become the story telling to change people's understanding of what works for individuals."*

*"Restructure the curriculum to match the current climate of young people."*

*"Access to more data around where young people transitioning to post engagement and if they are receiving support - if so, what are the outcomes of that support? is it meeting the target?"*

## Q.6 Any other feedback?

### Survey responses

*“I really enjoyed the Forum. Thank you for organising it. It makes me hopeful that so many people are trying to make things better for the young who will have much to contend with in the future.”*

*“Thanks for running this Forum and the work you do.” “Thanks for organising.”*

*“Thanks for the opportunity.” “Great session.”*

*“I always find it amusing that these discussions are held within the youth sector and its practitioners, rather than with the education sector and teachers on the front line and those becoming teachers.”*

*“Each school has their own rules on what services are allowed in their schools. Some schools won’t let youth workers anywhere near the schools.”*

### **Final comments**

YANQ would like to acknowledge the support of Office for Youth in planning and hosting this forum. We are also grateful for the interim funding which has been provided to YANQ as we continue to wait for the organisation’s core funding to be reinstated.

There clearly exists, in the youth sector, demand for improving our youth work practices. This requires processes which support youth workers to:

- Access contemporary research and practice frameworks;
- Access youth work training prior to the commencement of work and on the job training;
- Reflect on their work and discuss work practices with their peers.

The next important step for YANQ and the Office for Youth is to progress the ideas raised in this report and facilitate their progress towards becoming concrete strategies. It is this important step which will help build confidence in the youth sector in relation to engaging with policy processes.

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge and thank Dr Marnee Shay, Michelle Kinnane and Lisa Love for giving us their time freely and presenting at the Forum. We also like to thank all the people who participated in the Forum, especially the ones who took the time to complete the Survey and assist us in progressing the discussion.