



Project Ready 2019

Helping young people
prepare for their future

Preliminary Program Report

2019 Project Ready Program Evaluation Report

January 2020

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Report commissioned by the Central Ranges Local Learning and Employment Network

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Executive Summary

The Central Ranges LLEN initiative, *Project Ready*, supported some of the most disengaged Year 10 students deemed most at risk of leaving school in Year 10 and consequently not completing their secondary education. The data available for this evaluation indicate many of the program's stated goals are being met. Students are discovering their passions and strengths, building self-worth and resilience, understanding and identifying possible training and employment pathways and developing work readiness skills.

Eight schools ran *Project Ready* in 2019. Participating students' affirmed the benefits of the program in the Year 10 curriculum. Students said the program produces increased levels of self-efficacy, greater knowledge of pathways, and improved understandings and the capacity to articulate their future employment aspiration. In addition, participation in *Project Ready* may be helping to encourage students to remain at school. Student attendance, a proxy for disengagement, shows that *Project Ready* students' attendance declines over the year. However, the decline in attendance is only slightly greater than the student population at each school (Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2019) and less than might be expected for students most at-risk of becoming further disengaged and dropping out of school. Whether students remain at school in Years 11 and 12, undertake further training and education, or move into the workforce was beyond the scope of this research and would be valuable inclusions in subsequent evaluations.

In the 2019 *Project Ready* program evaluation, students' evaluation and program feedback indicated overwhelmingly that they enjoyed the program. The pedagogy used by facilitators created a sense of safety and respect for students in which relationships were built, and communication and confidence flourished. Students explained that increased confidence and communication skills helped them in school and social settings, and in their capacity to perform well in interviews. These were among the most commonly stated student outcomes of the program. By participating in *Project Ready*, students were more able to identify their passions and strengths. At completion of the program students were able to report their future employment goals and were able to articulate education and training pathways that pave the way towards them.

While *Project Ready* provided a structured program with modules specifically designed to prepare students for the workforce, it is only one of the factors contributing to students' positive outcomes. However, students attribute their personal, educational and employment gains to their involvement in the *Project Ready* program. One student commented that the program had taught them to "*take all opportunities you get because it could be the start to something amazing. You can be anything you want*" (S1). For a disengaged student, identified by the school as at risk of further educational disengagement, or termination of engagement with education entirely, such statements demonstrate a changed approach and mindset. Specifically, the student expressed excitement at future possibilities. Importantly, the student indicated their re-engagement with education and training and had achieved a greater conception of pathways to employment. While not yet a universal response, understanding the causes for this this students' changed perceptions would allow greater focus on success factors, combined with an improved understanding of how to generalise this program to alternate or new contexts.

Affirmation, confirmation, and recommendations for ongoing programmatic improvement

Affirmations, confirmations, and recommendations provide useful characterisations to précis the evaluation of *Project Ready*.

Affirmations

Many students who participated in *Project Ready* report enhanced self-worth, evidence of growth mindsets, renewed positive attitudes towards education, and clearer perspectives of their future career directions and employment opportunities.

Confirmations

Student-centred pedagogies appear to have contributed to an environment where restorative re-engagement occurred among these formerly educationally disengaged youth.

Recommendations

Program

- #1. The positive outcomes of *Project Ready* highlight the value of continuing the program at the eight Central Ranges region secondary schools. The students participating in the 2019 program developed confidence and found pathways to further training and employment pathways, both stated aims of the program.
- #2. *Project Ready* shows promise to benefit similarly disengaged students at other secondary schools. Extending the program to include disengaged students in other school contexts will likely increase the potential for those students to also become re-engaged with school and derive other positive outcomes similar to the students in this study.
- #3. The *Project Ready* program should be evaluated annually. The research should evaluate whether the program's aims are being met and include students' learning, attendance, school retention, and post-school trajectory. Additionally, the research should contextualise the pedagogical, theoretical, and practical approaches to the program.

Evaluation

While the 2019 program indicated noteworthy shifts in individual participant perspectives, more is required as part of a strategic and systemic evaluation of *Project Ready*. This would include the use of validated research instruments to provide internally consistent, valid, and reliable questionnaires that could be used to determine causes of student gains and attitudinal changes. There is also a need to track students' trajectories longitudinally to determine the long term influence on students' attainment of their career of choice. Longitudinal evaluation of causal factors contributing to students' improved approaches and wellbeing would also be useful. Further, such information would serve to inform and direct future program-level reforms, and quality improvement strategies at the current sites.

Information obtained from validated, theoretically-based instruments would allow the contribution of the project to participant's lives to be communicated and contextualised more broadly. At present, there is evidence the program produces improved attitudinal approaches among students, although the why and how remain beyond the reach of the current data collections. Having the capacity to evaluate an individual's growth in response to the program requires the ability to match student responses, reflections, and perhaps work in pre-, during, and post-program evaluations. Introducing the capacity to match individual students will lead to the ability to evaluate individual growth. Likewise, tracking students will reduce variability inherent within groups, and improve the resolution of causal factors contributing to students' growth. Current approaches limit the capacity to maximise outcomes among existing and future participants in these schools and beyond.

Introduction

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) were established to build sustainable partnerships with education providers, industry and local communities. While they build links for students to future employment and support structured workplace opportunities, they have a particular focus on young educationally disenfranchised youth at risk of disengaging from school. While LLENs have focused initiatives at the primary school level and have introduced programs such as Passions and Pathways (Harvey, 2018), the Central Ranges LLEN has concentrated efforts at the secondary school level, when students are making the decision to remain at school, or not. The Central Ranges LLEN hypothesised that targeted intervention during at-risk students' secondary schooling could create a pivot point from which students' educational trajectory might be positively influenced. The initiative was for students to participate in a program at Year 10 as a way to encourage students' to complete year 12 or its equivalent and provide students with the knowledge of possible pathways and qualifications required for future employment.

Project Ready was the Central Ranges LLEN's key strategy. The program targeted support for the most at-risk, educationally vulnerable, and challenging secondary school students. The program was piloted in 2017 and has been modified in each subsequent year. By 2019, eight of the 15 secondary schools in the Central Ranges region participated in the *Project Ready* program. Like many other Victorian schools, the Central Ranges schools – Alexandra Secondary College, Broadford Secondary College, Gisborne Secondary College, Kyneton High School, Seymour College, Seymour Flexible Learning Centre, Wallan Secondary College, and Yea High – enrol educationally at-risk students (Goss & Sonnerman, 2017). The Central Ranges schools, seeking to support their most vulnerable students, participated in *Project Ready* as a way to facilitate higher levels of school engagement and learning and to help students to find vocational pathways.

Project Ready background

Aim

Project Ready was designed to positively impact the most disengaged Year 10 students by building their self-worth and resilience and cultivating their passions to identify, aspire, and plan career pathways. These outcomes encourage students to remain at school to

complete Year 10 and re-enrol for the following year/s. Integral to the program design is the recognition of the need for students to understand and identify potential traineeships, apprenticeships and other job pathways, and to develop the skills required to be work-ready.

The Central Ranges LLEN identified Year 10 as the target year level for their *Project Ready* program, the year prior to the two years of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) that “provides the diverse pathways for further study or training at university or TAFE and to employment” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), 2020a, para. 1). Government data demonstrate the student retention rate declines from Year 10 to Year 12 (ACARA, 2019c). While senior secondary school attrition includes students who move into traineeships, apprenticeships or early employment, there remain Year 10 students who leave school without further-education pathways and with little or no opportunities for secure, well-remunerated employment.

Benefits accrue for students who complete Year 10 and re-enrol the following year because Year 11 offers the first opportunity for students to experience Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects, such as building and construction, community services, and hairdressing. VET subjects present opportunities “to improve ... skills, knowledge, employment opportunities, financial outcomes and education pathways” (VCAA, 2020b, para. 1), which lead to a range of diverse qualifications and employment. It is therefore important for students to remain at school, because it provides them with greater economic and social wellbeing, and as low-skilled jobs disappear, the need to attain educational qualifications increases (ACT Government, 2020).

Program Description

The *Project Ready* program employs a holistic approach to teach students and is deliberately different in content and delivery to regular classrooms. Central Ranges LLEN staff considered that disengaged students would derive potentially greater educational benefit when classes were conducted in ways that addressed students’ needs in a different way. The *Project Ready* program therefore takes an alternative educational approach from those typically found in most regular secondary school classrooms. The *Project Ready* philosophy was to offer classes that were “delivered in an uplifting, inspiring, open and non-judgemental way” (Central Ranges Local Learning & Engagement Network (CRLLEN), 2020, p. 5), and accordingly, a defined set of guiding principles were devised to ensure the *Project Ready* program would be delivered to students in all schools with pedagogical consistency.

The Central Ranges LLEN sought funding to employ facilitators to conduct the *Project Ready* program. Facilitators were not teachers and did not have teaching backgrounds. Lacking previous teaching experience, facilitators were less likely to revert to traditional instruction styles than seasoned teachers (McArthur, 2015). The facilitators were selected, among other reasons, for their capacity to initiate and sustain relationships with students who were disengaged and likely to be experiencing challenging life circumstances, low self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing issues, low literacy and numeracy levels, or with undefined career pathways or goals (CRLLEN, 2020). Facilitators were initially trained to conduct *Project Ready* classes. Classes were relatively informal, with the students and facilitator sitting in a circle – an egalitarian technique to make all members feel equal. This informal instructional style was intended to support and encourage students to join in group discussions. To comply with schools’ legal obligations, *Project Ready* classes all

required the presence of a supervising teacher who did not directly participate in group activities.

The 2019 *Project Ready* program was designed as a stand-alone subject in the Year 10 school curriculum. It was for students who were identified by school staff to be among the most educationally at-risk, based on criteria outlined by the Victorian Government (2019). Once identified, students were interviewed and counselled by school staff for their suitability for *Project Ready*. The program consisted of 20 classes timetabled for one double period a week, concurrent with other elective subjects, over Terms 2 and 3 of the 2019 school year. The program consisted of six modules:

1. Career Development
2. Self-Discovery
3. Work Readiness
4. Enterprise Skills
5. Work Placement
6. Community/Entrepreneurial Project

The six modules included relationship and team building activities to build trust between members, many hands-on activities, and a work-experience placement. As a group, students were guided by the facilitator, as they worked through the six modules in sequence, recording their learning in an accompanying workbook.

The program was specifically designed by the Central Ranges LLEN to focus on students' careers, skills for the workplace, and experience in local industry. In 2019, *Project Ready* was also adapted to meet the curriculum requirements for the Year 9 and 10 Work Studies Learning Area, as defined by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (CRLLEN, 2019).

Methodology

The 2019 evaluation of *Project Ready* began with the Central Ranges LLEN staff seeking to identify whether the 2019 program aims were being achieved or not. The overarching goal of *Project Ready* was to increase the school retention of students at risk of leaving school during, or at the end of Year 10, and for them to be better prepared for future employment (CRLLEN, 2019). The *Project Ready* program aimed to achieve this by helping students to:

- Discover passions and strengths
- Build self-worth and resilience
- Understand possible training and employment pathways
- Develop work readiness skills
- Learn enterprise and entrepreneurial skills

As an initial evaluation tool, the Central Ranges LLEN staff created a survey that was completed by students prior to beginning *Project Ready* at all schools. The surveys were de-identified and not given a unique identifier, so individual student survey responses could not be discretely compared with any other data collected. Towards the end of the 2019 school year, the Central Ranges LLEN commissioned this evaluation of the *Project Ready* program.

Quantitative data collection

Students were surveyed twice using an 11 item questionnaire. Questionnaire response options used Likert scales ranging from 3 to 5 steps per question (e.g. a 3 step response item could be scaled: *poor/fair/good*). Students completed the paper-based survey questionnaire prior to beginning *Project Ready*. They were surveyed again using the same questionnaire on completion of the *Project Ready* program, or in some cases, when the program ceased at their school without students completing all program modules.

To determine whether students' attendance was influenced through their involvement in *Project Ready*, at the end of the school year, each school provided daily attendance rates for each school term for each *Project Ready* participant. The data also provided evidence of students' retention in Year 10. All data were analysed in SPSS and included descriptives, frequencies, and a principal components analysis (Pallant, 2011).

Qualitative data collection

Student voice served to triangulate closely with survey data interpretation. Students, facilitators, and supervising teachers provided responses to open-ended questions on paper-based forms. Student feedback, devised by the Central Ranges LLEN, was intended as a way of identifying student learning and evaluating the program to inform further modification of *Project Ready*. Two schools provided these data (Broadford Secondary College; Gisborne Secondary College). Facilitator and supervising teacher feedback from three schools (Alexandra Secondary College; Wallan Secondary College; Yea High School) had a similar intention, as student feedback, although from a different perspective. Feedback of the program informed Central Ranges LLEN's review and amendments to module design, pedagogy, and consideration of behavioural issues.

An additional paper-based evaluation form was constructed and was completed by students at four schools (Alexandra Secondary College; Broadford Secondary College; Seymour Flexible Learning Centre; Yea High School) at the end of the program. The open-ended short answer questions asked students about themselves; what they had learned from the program and how being involved in *Project Ready* had impacted them personally.

Qualitative data were explored through thematic analysis using inductive coding and as analysis progressed, key themes were identified and refined (Cresswell, 2009). To preserve the anonymity of participants' comments, specific students are denoted via the term S1, where 1 refers to first student first mentioned in the report. Likewise, a similar naming scheme is used for facilitator (F1) and teacher (T1).

Evaluation and Discussion

Student surveys

All schools involved in *Project Ready* completed pre- and post-program student surveys. 107 students completed pre-program surveys and 87 students completed post-program surveys. While indicating an attrition rate of 18.7% from *Project Ready*, it may also include students who ceased attending school. Without being able to identify students, there

remain gaps in how to interpret the disparity in student numbers. Attendance data were obtained for 87 students, which may represent only the students who were involved at the end of the program. Whether the students left the program, enrolled at other schools, or secured full-time employment, in almost all cases that information remains unknown. One student was reported to have left school as s/he had secured full-time employment. Another moved to an internship. Two others who remained in school but left the program were reported to have identified career paths and returned to their previous class to pursue them.

To test the survey instrument as valid and reliable, a factor analysis was conducted. Initial evaluation demonstrated the survey had three statistically discernible question groupings consisting one main group or code (SELF_EFFICACY), and two less substantial codes (PATHWAY_TO_EMPLOYMENT and MINDSET). These three codes flag the existence of informative case relationships. Unfortunately, the survey data did not meet statistical test conditions for quantitative case-wise analysis because it failed to provide essential bases of comparison. Further analysis of refined data will be required to tease out causal relationships.

Statistical tests of the student survey

Quality & Validity

A principal components analysis (PCA) was found to be a suitable method for analysing the *Project Ready* questionnaire. PCA evaluated the relative contribution of each question and grouped related questions together.

Prior to analysis, all eleven survey questions needed to be standardized to a 5-point scale. It was noted that the 3-point and 4-point questions (respectively Question 11 and Questions 4, 5, 6) had lower resolution than the other questions. Inspection of the correlation matrix showed that all but one of the questions (Question 10) had at least one correlation coefficient greater than 0.3, which is a threshold measure of question quality. Question 10 had low correlation (.235) with the other questions and needs refinement. Notwithstanding, all questions were retained for analysis.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy indicates whether linear relationships exist between items; a requirement for PCA. The overall KMO measure was 0.78, which supported PCA. Individual KMO measures for Questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 11 were all greater than 0.7, which classified as good to excellent (Kaiser, 1974). KMO of the remaining questions were between 0.5 and 0.7, which Kaiser (1974) classifies as poor (Q4) to mediocre (Q5 & Q10). It was noted that Questions 4 & 5 correlated well together, and there was an intriguing negative correlation between Question 10 and Question 11. On balance, Questions 4, 5 and 10 were deemed to be substantially informative and were retained. Another measure applied to all eleven questions, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, was statistically significant ($p < .0005$), meaning that the data was likely factorizable. These preliminary analyses supported PCA, but highlighted the need to develop and refine the survey questionnaire to improve validity and resolution of information.

PCA revealed three components (question groupings) that had eigenvalues greater than one; the universally accepted threshold. The three components explained 36.0%, 12.2%, 10.0% of the total variance respectively. Visual inspection of the scree plot did not support three components (Cattell, 1966), yet a three-component solution met the interpretability criterion (arguably the most important). On balance three components were retained.

Table 1 Rotated component matrix

	Component		
	1	2	3
Survey Q 9	.837	-.035	-.071
Survey Q 7	.760	.106	-.007
Survey Q 8	.738	.087	-.101
Survey Q 1	.666	.141	.276
Survey Q 2	.634	.224	.293
Survey Q 3	.593	.125	.016
Survey Q6	.591	.241	-.298
Survey Q4	.070	.864	-.010
Survey Q5	.181	.843	.034
Survey Q11	.319	.193	.715
Survey Q 10	.307	.161	-.577

Note: Extraction Method was Principal Component Analysis, Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization. Shading and emboldened values highlight three groups of questions (components). Question 10 had a *negative* correlation with Question 11 (red font).

The three-component solution explained 58.2% of the total variance, which is close to the desired 60-70% lower limit. Varimax orthogonal rotation exhibited 'simple structure' that supported coding (Thurstone, 1947). The structure was intuitively informative, loading of SELF_EFFICACY items on Component 1, PATHWAY_TO_EMPLOYMENT items on Component 2, and MINDSET on Component 3. Component loadings and groupings of the rotated solution are presented in Table 1.

Question groups (components/codes) supported by PCA were:

- GROUP 1: Questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9
- GROUP 2: Questions 4, 5
- GROUP 3: Questions 10, 11 (negatively correlated).

Reliability:

Chronbach's Alpha was calculated to test the internal consistency (reliability) of Group 1. The Group 1 SELF_EFFICACY scale had seven items with a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83. It was not possible to test the internal consistency of the other two groups as they only had two items each. The survey would be greatly improved by reconstructing groups 2 & 3 with more questions, which would increase resolution and allow internal reliability to be measured.

Although problems with validity and reliability of the survey instrument meant statistical analyses of the pre- and post-surveys were not possible, analysis of school-level pre- and post-surveys was conducted using descriptive and frequencies (Fink, 2009).

The groupings identified in the Principal Component Analysis (self-efficacy; pathways to employment; mindset) fit neatly with the main aims of *Project Ready* and were the particular aspects of the program the Central Ranges LLEN sought to identify and evaluate. Other data collected for this evaluation also reveal predominant broad themes of self-

efficacy and pathways to employment. Students report increased levels of confidence and knowledge of career pathways and skills required to attain employment. As a result, student survey responses, student and facilitator feedback and student evaluation are reported using the following themes.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, as identified in the PCA, relates to a person’s belief they can enact some control over their motivation, behaviour and social environment to produce an outcome (Bandura, 1997). One of the *Project Ready* program aims was to build students’ self-worth and resilience through personal development and community involvement. *Project Ready* classes that focused on personal development and students knowing themselves were perceived by one facilitator to be “*very powerful [although it] took time for students to feel comfortable with self-reflection, it became a strength for many students*” (F1). Students’ self-reflection likely contributed to their self-worth, resilience, and confidence, all aspects of self-efficacy. Seven items in the survey measured self-efficacy (Table 2).

There was a positive shift in all survey items relating to self-efficacy, indicating that over the period of the program students’ confidence and resilience had increased, which students attributed to having participated in *Project Ready*. While survey responses mostly improved between 9.09% and 15.02%, the question about communication (Question 9) improved by only 4.9%.

Table 2 2019 Project Ready student’s pre- and post-program survey responses to questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 that relate to self-efficacy

Students’ pre- and post-program survey responses to self-efficacy questions					
	Scale	Pre-program n=107	Post-program n=87	Change	Change (%)
Question 1	(1-5)	3.43	3.76	+0.33	+9.62
Question 2	(1-5)	3.33	3.83	+0.50	+15.02
Question 3	(1-5)	3.36	3.65	+0.31	+9.23
Question 6	(1-4)	2.42	2.64	+0.22	+9.09
Question 7	(1-5)	3.20	3.62	+0.42	+13.12
Question 8	(1-5)	2.82	3.09	+0.27	+9.57
Question 9	(1-5)	3.50	3.65	+0.15	+4.29

The greatest improvement was for Question two, (15.02%). That question asked students how well they understood what they were good at. While it was a difficult question to answer, because the question lacked clarity, students’ post-program responses suggested students believed they had gained more insight and understanding about their own strengths and skills since beginning *Project Ready*.

“I am more social and confident in my abilities”

Students' confidence was directly surveyed in three survey items (Questions 1, 7 & 8). Students that provided qualitative data for this study consistently mentioned confidence as an outcome of participating in *Project Ready*. Students frequently stated for example, "*I am more social and confident in my abilities*" (S2) and that what had changed since they began the program was "*confidence in talking to others*" (S3). One student said they would recommend the program to other students "*because it helps with being confident [and building] confidence in working in groups*" (S4).

Question one related directly to students' self-confidence and survey responses indicated that it had increased between the beginning and the end of students participating in *Project Ready*. Data from student feedback and evaluation corroborates students' growing self-confidence. For example students commented that through participating in the program they had gained some self-confidence or had "*built a lot of self-confidence*" (S3). Students' confidence to speak in front of a group of people, canvassed in question eight, improved during *Project Ready*. Some students commented that one of the most useful things they had learned in the program was "*communication [and] talking in front of people*" (S5).

Survey responses for students' confidence to undertake a job interview (Question 7) showed that students were more confident to be interviewed than when they began the program. Many students made reference to the value they placed on learning the skills for job interviews and that those skills learn in *Project Ready* had contributed to their job readiness. Recommending *Project Ready* to other students, a student succinctly stated that the program was a "*confidence booster*" (S6).

Project Ready is a "confidence booster"

Student resilience was addressed in Question 3. The survey item asked students to rate how well they bounce back from adversity, challenges or setbacks in life or at school. Student responses were higher by almost 10% after they had completed *Project Ready*. There were no questions in the student evaluation directly addressing resilience. However, one student mentioned that through *Project Ready*, they had learnt to "*never give up*" (S7).

Rating their ability to communicate with other people (Question 9) in the pre-program survey responses, students produced the highest score of all self-efficacy indicators (Table 2). Students' responses in the post-program survey revealed an increase, albeit the smallest increase of all the self-efficacy indicators. It seems students feel that their mastery of communication skills had changed less over the course of the program than confidence. Interpretation of this question also may have varied among students from general day-to-day communication to more formal communication (particularly as it follows a question about speaking in front of a group of people).

"I have learnt how to become friends and have made many valued friends"

Although student evaluation and feedback questions do not directly address communication, some students reported an increase in the confidence and ability to communicate with others, listing communication as their key learning from *Project Ready*. Key learning for one student was the recognition that "*I can get along with anyone*" (S5), while another student stated s/he had learnt "*to always be myself*" (S8). Students frequently mentioned building friendships, which relies on effective peer communication, as a positive outcome from participating in *Project Ready*. They report that the program helped students to "*connect with others*" (S1) and "*to become friends with anyone*" (S9). One

student reported: *“I learnt how to become friends and I have made many valued friends”* (S10) through the program.

The final self-efficacy item in the survey (Question 6) asked about students’ knowledge of local job opportunities and student responses indicated that students were more informed than before they were involved in *Project Ready* (Table 2). A student stated that s/he had a *“better understanding of jobs/opportunities [and a] greater knowledge of what is around”* (S11). The only question about local employment opportunities was in the student survey, therefore, the students did not specifically mention local jobs in their evaluation or feedback. Some students, however, rated the community project as their favourite activity and mentioned *“work skills/community skills”* as valuable learning developed through the program (S12).

There are many factors over the course of two school terms that may positively influence students’ self-efficacy other than a particular program at school, however, all the data students provided attribute improved levels of confidence to the *Project Ready* program. Overwhelmingly, students provide evidence of increased self-confidence, ability to speak in front of a group, present to a group, increased skill and confidence in job interviews, and in communicating with other people. For many students, the increased confidence they gained through the *Project Ready* program was the major reason students would recommend the program to others. A facilitator also explained: *“students grew in maturity over the program [and] made significant gains in confidence and positive outlook”* (F1).

Pathways to employment

A key strategy of *Project Ready* was for students to discover skills, strengths, and passions that could inform and direct them to potential training and employment pathways. Whether a career pathway required further qualifications, such as a traineeship or tertiary education program or not, staying at school to attain the required entry-level education or complete secondary education was an intended outcome of the program. Survey questions 4 and 5 related to career goals and students’ pathways to employment (Table 3).

Table 3 2019 Project Ready student’s pre- and post-program survey responses to questions 4 and 5 that relate to pathways to employment

Students’ pre- and post-program responses to pathways to employment questions					
	Scale	Pre-program n=107	Post-program n=87	Change	Change (%)
Question 5	(1-4)	2.65	2.94	+0.29	+10.94
Question 6	(1-4)	2.42	2.64	+0.22	+ 9.09

Question 4, related to whether students had career aspirations or had identified a particular career. Student survey responses indicate that while initially some students already had career aspirations, others remained undecided or had little knowledge about career options. However, after graduating *Project Ready*, student survey responses indicate

10% more students had identified their chosen career. Students explained they were more aware of different jobs and had developed “a better understanding of job opportunities” (S10).

Many students reported that *Project Ready* enabled them to identify an employment goal and the pathway to reach that goal. Some students commented that participating in the program had enabled them to recognise “a clearer pathway for [the] future” (S5), while others noted, “it had opened up a lot of pathways” (S2). All students who completed the program evaluation were able to document their future education and employment pathway. One student recommended *Project Ready* to other students “because it is a good class to understand and figure out what you can do for a job” (S11).

“It is a good class to understand and figure out what you want to do for a job”

The following item, Question 5 asked about the skills training and qualifications required for future employment. This item should have confounded some students, given that it was prefaced with: ‘If you know what your career path is ...’. For those students whose pathway was unclear, this question should have been redundant. Interestingly though, all students answered the question. In addition, it was unclear whether the question was asking about education, skills, and training required to qualify to begin employment, that would be undertaken during the course of their employment to be fully qualified, or both. Student responses indicate students’ knowledge of the skills and training required for their career pathway increased by 9.09% (Table 3).

Student feedback and evaluation highlight that the program enabled some students to clarify their pathways. For example one student clearly outlined their pathway: undertaking Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning studies at school, applying for a part-time job to gain experience in welding, and following up with an apprenticeship in metal fabrication.

One of the benefits of the program in realising a career goal was that it “helped in finding a way on how to get there” (S6). A student had “changed class choice for the next year to suit” (S13) more closely align with their career aspirations. Through exposure to other possibilities in *Project Ready* classes, one student had unchanged career goals yet was considering additional studies and options. Another student “always wanted to do sport – but now want[s] to do psychology as well [to be a] mental coach for basketball” (S14). One student commented, “I don’t think [Project Ready] has changed my education, just showed me other ways to get there” (S15).

“I now know what I want to do and I’m not so confused about school”

For most students, *Project Ready* provided exposure and guidance to employment pathways that provided clarity for their future and as one student reflected, “I now know what I want to do and I’m not so confused about school” (S3). Importantly, many of these previously disengaged students were energised to continue their education, to be “more dedicated to it [and] have more determination” (S16) to fulfil career aspirations. Student responses indicated that students had much clearer ideas for when they left school than earlier in the school year.

A supervising teacher explained the overall positive outcomes of one group were that the majority of the class “really gained a valuable insight into themselves and workplace

expectations” (S17). These insights contributed to students recognising their self-efficacy, which is evident in one student’s recognition that “*the biggest thing I got from Project Ready was that you can control your life*” (S18). *Project Ready* may not have been the only influence for the increase although students attribute their experience in the program as a contributing factor.

Mindset

The final survey question related to a growth mindset, a term coined by Dweck (2000) that relates to peoples’ underlying beliefs that they are capable of success, and that their efforts are fruitful. By contrast a fixed mindset describes underlying belief that personal intelligence and achievement potential is fixed and beyond one’s control. Dweck considers that when students have a growth mindset they can increase their achievements by accepting challenges put to them and by learning from them (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Yeager 2019). Learning about fixed mindsets and growth mindsets was part of the *Project Ready* program, helping students to perceive that with a growth mindset future potentialities grow and expand.

Table 4 2019 Project Ready student’s pre- and post-program survey responses to questions 4 and 5 that relate to students’ mindset

Students’ pre- and post-program responses to mindset questions					
	Scale	Pre-program n=107	Post-program n=87	Change	Change (%)
Question 10	(1-5)	4.06	4.17	+0.11	+2.70
Question 11	(1-3)	1.52	2.28	+0.76	+50.00

The survey question that asked students if they knew what a growth mindset was, (Question 11) did not identify whether the students themselves had a growth mindset. It could be argued that knowing about a growth mindset indicates students attended classes where growth mindset was discussed, although that may bear little or no relationship with students’ actual perceptions of their own underlying beliefs. In any case, this question revealed that knowledge about growth mindset increased through attending the program (Table 4). Additional survey items relating to mindset and questions to specifically ask about students’ own mindsets would improve the survey.

Question 10 asked students to rate how important they thought it was to complete Year 12 or its equivalent. It appears a great many students placed high value on completing their formal education prior to Project Ready, which reflects the focus of schools to complete formal education. The post-program survey showed only a small increase in students valuing Year 12 or its equivalent important. While students may value completing their education, a more salient question may have been to ask whether students were actually considering completing Year 12 or its equivalent.

This question was negatively associated to the growth mindset, which suggests that as students build a growth mindset, positive perspective for completing education diminishes. One interpretation of this apparent conundrum may lie with the fact that while they consider completing education as important, some students have decided it is not required for their particular employment pathway. A more likely explanation is the two questions in the current form are less informative than intended, so modifications to these questions for future evaluations would provide greater insight.

Project Ready pedagogy

There were some initial challenges when *Project Ready* was introduced. At first, students didn't know what to expect of the program and "*some people didn't really like it at the start*" (S19) because the way classes were conducted was quite new. Some students felt "*confused at first, but then got comfortable with coming and enjoyed it*" (S20). In initial classes it was reported, "*some people in the groups were annoying*", however, students settled into the routines of *Project Ready* and they overwhelmingly report "*the program worked well, everyone got along [and] it was pretty chill*" (S21).

There are a number of unarticulated consequences of the program. One positive aspect of the program was that once students became familiar with the new context, the students perceived themselves differently. One student commented about the pedagogy: "*learning this way, I got to understand things faster*" (S9), while another commented, "*it's like a family, you feel respected and you can learn easier*" (S5).

"It's like a family, you can feel respected and you learn easier"

Students report the benefits of *Project Ready's* more informal class setting. Developing over the course of the program, students felt closer to each other and that they were in a more supportive environment than the regular classroom. Interestingly, a supervising teacher said that because students were enjoying the classes so much, other students were asking to be recruited into the program in Term 3 (T1). In affirming the way *Project Ready* progressed, another supervising teacher noted that the facilitator was "*quick to build relationships with students in a positive manner and took on board their suggestions*"(T2).

One well-researched and reliable contributor to educational retention, career success and community contribution comes via the capacity to engage socially. That the participants report greater social and peer friendship and interactions provided a central theme for continued research designed to identify and maximise these outcomes going forward. Students agreed that there were strong relationships built in classes, both with the facilitator and their peers. They said of the *Project Ready*, "*it's different because you feel cared about*" (S9) and they really enjoyed classes because "*there was more one-on-one time with each other so [it] was much easier to feel like myself*" (S22). Other students agree that in *Project Ready* classes, "*you have room to be yourself*" (S23). The group work was important for some students because it made them feel that "*I'm not alone, I'm with friends*" (S24). Safety and trust among the groups were built through "*being able to talk to people*" (S22) and the way that "*you sit in a circle and there was a lot of talk about emotion*" (S1). Friendships were established for students who report that through *Project Ready* one benefit was "*I got close to friends*" (S25).

School attendance

In 2019, eight schools in the Central Ranges region of Victoria participated in Project Ready. Seven schools provided daily attendance data for each school term for the students who were participating in the program. Yea High School provided no data and Seymour Flexible Learning Centre provided daily attendance for Terms 1 to 3. Attendance data were collected for 87 students in total (Figure 1).

Government data published on the *My School* website reveals that students attendance declines during the school year (ACARA, 2019b). Students' attendance rates are usually higher in Semester 1 when compared with Term 3 (Term 4 data are not published), and this pattern occurs in 2019 *My School* data for all study schools.

Students participating in *Project Ready* produce lower attendance rates than their school peers in each school term. That is hardly surprising as the students in the program are among the most likely to have low and declining attendance and at-risk of leaving school altogether. At program-level, students' daily attendance declines gradually over the 2019 school year, producing an overall decrease in attendance of 3.3 percentage points, which is only slightly greater than attendance declines in any of the school populations (ACARA, 2019b). However, when the data are disaggregated to school-level attendance (Figure 2), there are two exceptions that present a different pattern of attendance – Seymour Secondary College and Seymour Flexible Learning Centre.

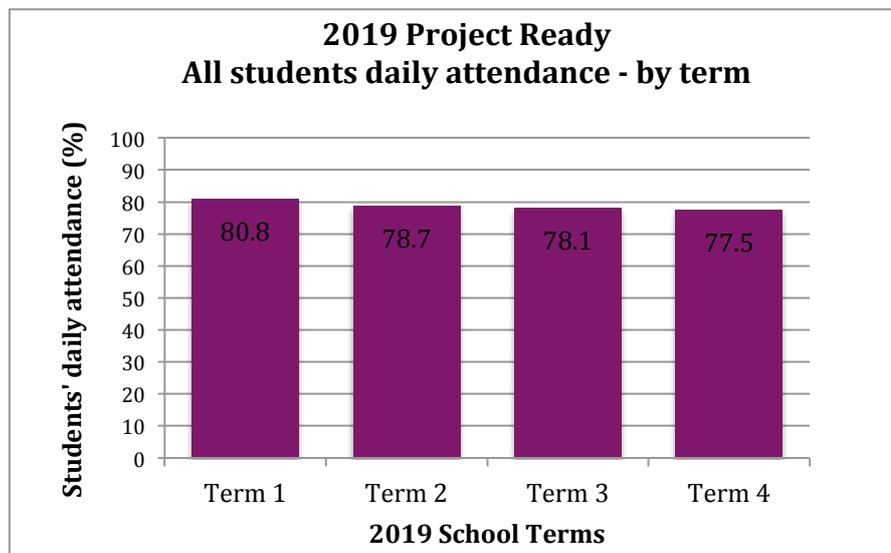


Figure 1 Aggregated students' mean daily attendance (%) for each school term for all students who participated in *Project Ready* in 2019

The Project Ready students' daily attendance at Seymour High School declines until Term 4 when it improves, although remains lower than Terms 2 and 3 attendance. Seymour Flexible Learning Centre produces a completely different pattern with students' attendance steadily improving over each school term to Term 3. Whether that pattern continues into Term 4 remains unknown because that attendance data was not provided.

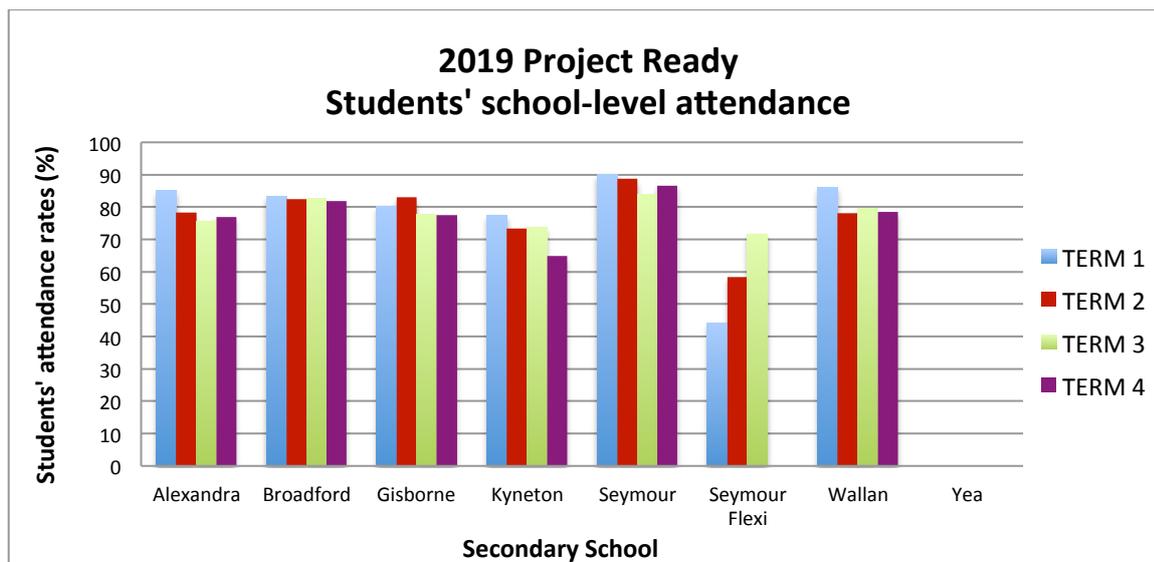


Figure 2 2019 school-level mean attendance (%) for *Project Ready* Students for each school term for secondary schools.

When attendance data are considered at school-level, a consistent pattern over the 2019 school terms is not evident. School level attendance rates vary across terms and between schools, and all remain below the 90% national attendance benchmark (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019a), which is commendable for students who are at high risk of leaving school and most likely to attend school far less often.

Limitations of the data

- Student pre-program surveys, completed prior to beginning *Project Ready* were de-identified without being given numerical or other identifier. As a result, survey and other data could not be analysed at individual student level as the data could not be identified and matched to each student. Survey data were analysed at program-level and attendance data were analysed at school-level and program-level.
- The surveys items were too few to enable patterns of responses to be determined for unmeasurable constructs such as self-efficacy and pathways to employment. Items needed to be more carefully worded so that they were not too general and/or open to misinterpretation. Student surveys, however, provided pre- and post-program student data for analysis.
- The data collected focus on the 2019 *Project Ready* program and the students in the current year, which precludes measurement of the program aims of students' school retention and post-school pathways to traineeships, apprenticeships and employment.
- While some schools and facilitators provided the data requested for qualitative data evaluation (student feedback, teacher feedback, and student evaluation), most schools provided some, although not all the data, so the data were less robust than preferred.
- Attendance was collected and student-matched, although may not have captured all the students in the program. Pre-program surveys numbered 107 and although the number of post-program surveys and attendance are the same (n=87), suggesting an attrition rate from the program of 18.7%. While Yea High school provided survey data but not attendance data, it does not explain the difference and without student-matched data, how many students and why they did not complete the program remains unknown. There may be many reasons, such as students' leaving the program, moving

to another school, or leaving school altogether. Available information is limited to one student being reported as exiting school because s/he had secured full-time employment.

- Attendance data was provided for each student in 2019. The addition of students' attendance for previous school years would have provided a useful baseline that allowed comparison of each student's attendance across years to identify whether their 2019 attendance (and attendance in subsequent years) continued previous attendance patterns, or changed in response to participation in the *Project Ready* program.

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Appendix

Project Ready student survey questions

1. How confident and positive do you feel about yourself?
2. How well do you understand what you are good at?
3. How well do you think you are able to bounce back from adversities, challenges or set-backs in your life or at school?
4. Do you know what you want to do when you leave school?
5. If you know what your career path you would like to follow, do you know what skills, training or qualifications you need?
6. How much do you know about local job opportunities (e.g. businesses or organisations around your area that hire local people)?
7. How confident or prepared would you feel if you had to undertake an interview for a job?
8. How confident do you feel to speak in front of a group of people?
9. How would you rate your ability to communicate with other people?
10. How important is completing year 12 or an equivalent to you? (Equivalent completions include VCAL or SBAT)
11. Do you know what a growth mindset is?



the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased from 10.5 million to 12.5 million (12.5% of the population).

There are a number of reasons why the public sector has expanded. One reason is that the population has aged. The number of people aged 65 and over has increased from 10.5 million in 1990 to 12.5 million in 2000. This has led to an increase in the number of people who are eligible for state benefits, such as state pension and state unemployment benefits.

Another reason for the expansion of the public sector is that the government has increased its spending on public services. This has led to an increase in the number of people employed in the public sector. For example, the government has increased its spending on health care, education and social services.

There are also a number of reasons why the public sector has become more important in the UK. One reason is that the private sector has become more important in the UK. This has led to a decline in the number of people employed in the public sector. For example, the private sector has become more important in the areas of health care, education and social services.

Another reason for the importance of the public sector is that the government has become more involved in the economy. This has led to an increase in the number of people employed in the public sector. For example, the government has become more involved in the areas of health care, education and social services.

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