BRIDGE PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT

A report to Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth + on the evaluation of the Bridge Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bridge Program is a flexible education pilot program run by Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth + and funded by the Queensland Government (Department of Education and Training – Office of Non-State Schools). The program provides support for young people aged between 12 and 15 years who are at serious risk of disengaging from education and who are, or have been, involved with the youth justice and/or child protection systems. The overall aim of the Program is to assist a young person to re-engage with an educational institution.

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Bridge Program, undertaken by Griffith University's School of Human Services and Social Work. The evaluation covers the 18 month period from January 2010 to June 2011. The evaluation examined whether the program has been implemented as intended; the success of the program; and whether modifications are required to maximise the program's potential.

A mixed method design was utilised, providing information about both *process* and *outcomes*. Evaluation data were drawn from the following sources:

- a literature review to identify the components of effective alternative education programs for young people with high and complex needs;
- a document review of Bridge Program policies, procedures, program and funding documents
- a review of Bridge Program administrative data and records
- case studies of how the Program has assisted young people
- interviews with staff involved with the Program at each site
- interviews of key stakeholders at each site
- feedback from a sample of young people who have been or are currently on the Program.

The Bridge Program operates from three sites in Queensland: Deception Bay, Townsville and Mt Isa. There are two phases to the program:

- an intensive small group program for up to two terms (20 weeks). A Personal Learning Plan is developed for each student. They are connected to health and welfare programs where required; and

- transition support whereby a young person is individually supported to engage with an educational institution and may receive support when there are difficulties doing this.

The Bridge Program has a strong outreach component and many young people self-refer to the Program. Referrals also come from Queensland Police, Youth Justice Services, Child Safety Services and school Guidance Officers.

Since the Program commenced in January 2010, there have been a total of 125 young people referred and, of these, a total of 104 have been enrolled. The Bridge Program is dealing with a

group of young people with high and complex needs. Over half of all young people (53%) had problematic drug misuse at the time of enrolment. A significant proportion (20%) had a diagnosed disability or a conduct disorder. Of the 104 young people enrolled, 80% were involved with the youth justice system or in care of the Department of Communities (Child Safety), with 34% of these young people having dual status, that is, subject to both child protection and youth justice orders. The other 20% had significant risk factors that increase the likelihood that they would have contact with these government agencies in the future.

Mainstream education was not a realistic option for many of the young people as they had been disengaged from formal education systems for some considerable time.

While the program is still in the early stages of development, at 30 June 2011 the following outcomes had been achieved for young people:

- 52% of young people enrolled in the Bridge Program since its inception were engaged in an educational/training institution,
- a further 29% had regular contact with the Bridge Program but were not engaged with an educational institution/training
- 79% of the young people engaged in an educational response were attending alternative education options (Bridge 28%, FLC 28% and other 23%)
- 16% were attending mainstream schools
- 6% were involved in employment and/or traineeships.

The Bridge Program at all three sites received positive feedback from stakeholders. The referral process was working well. Three main possible improvements were identified:

- having a combination of teaching and social work or psychology staff;
- developing stronger linkages between the Bridge program and local community services and supports should be strengthened; and
- investing in further developing the research base for the program activities.

The literature points out that a range of factors can contribute to successful education programs for young people with high and complex needs. These principles and components are regarded as central to the development of tailored and effective educational responses for marginalised young people. Overall, the Bridge Program is performing well when assessed according to these criteria.

Program component	Bridge Program assessment
1. Clear goals and a well structured, coordinated program	Overall, the Bridge Program is well structured, well thought-out and tailored to the needs and backgrounds of the young people participating.
2. Clearly stated philosophy and values system	Bridge has a clearly stated philosophy and value system based on the four principles of Respect, Honesty, Safe and Legal and Participation. These are used on a daily basis as a core part of the Program.
3. Recognising the centrality of relationships and relationship-building	Bridge staff have consistently emphasised the importance of the relationships they have developed with young people as a core part of the Program.
4. Quality, caring, committed staff who can engage well with young people with high and complex needs	Consideration should be given to ensuring that at each site an experienced social worker/psychologist is employed as part of the staffing mix.
5. Research-informed program activities	It is not clear to what extent program components are informed by a research base. They are informed by a substantial 'practice wisdom' and are strongly goal-focused.
6. Support, training and professional development for staff	Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth + has invested significant time and resources into staff professional development and training.
7. Small group numbers, staff – young people ratios	This is a strength of the Program.
8. Young people-centred and individualised intervention plans involving youth workers and other support staff	The small group numbers enables young people to receive significant individualised attention and support.
9. Clear standards and expectations of young people for communication and social interaction	The four principles at the core of the Program establish a set of clear standards in this regard.
10. Learning choices (curricula) that are engaging, interesting, applied to the real-world and uses multiple teaching strategies	Activities have been designed carefully to provide educational content that is applied in real-world settings.
11. Encouragement of young people to be actively involved in decision-making, goal setting and monitoring of progress	Within the framework of the four program principles, young people are encouraged to participate in negotiating and decision-making over program activities and settings.
12. Clear linkage to other professionals, community services and supports for young people	Generally, in the early stages of Bridge Program, staff were not well connected to other agencies. However, this has developed over time and should continue to be strengthened.
13. Clean, well-cared for, healthy physical settings	The Bridge Program operates in a number of community settings and facilities including, at times, Flexible Learning Centres.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Adolescence can be a turbulent and difficult time for some young people. It is a time of development and adjustment from childhood to adulthood, with new responsibilities and opportunities (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Most young people progress through adolescence with minimal problems and accomplish developmental goals. However, for some young people this transition is more complicated. They may experience difficulties in a range of areas in their life – one of which can be the unsuccessful completion of secondary education (Aron & Zweig, 2003).

Young people who are unable to achieve school competency are at risk of a number of adverse outcomes. School completion is a basic requirement for most employers in the Australian labour market and in many other countries. Yet not all Australian young people are successfully completing this requirement (Lamb, Dwyer, Wyn, 2000; OECD, 2000 cited in Riele, 2007). According to Australian Bureau of Statistics report 'Education and Work' (2010, p. 5):

> *[...] in May 2010, there were 351,200 people aged 15–24 years who were enrolled in secondary school in 2009 but were not in May 2010. Of these school leavers, about half(57%) were enrolled at a non-school institution in 2010 and 25% were employed and notstudying. In 2010, 10% of school leavers aged 15–24 years were unemployed and not enrolled at a non-school institution with a further 8% not in the labour force and not enrolled at a non-school institution.*

Young people who are unable to successfully achieve secondary education or equivalence may be at risk of a range of unfavourable short and long-term outcomes: unemployment, poverty, poor self esteem, health problems, mental health issues, relationship difficulties and involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems (Aron & Zweig, 2003, Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; Mayer, 2005).

In response to this concern, governments in Australia have increasingly introduced alternative education programs to cater for those young people who are 'at risk' of disengaging from the education system. Riele (2007) notes this growth has led to a wide variety of alternative education programs in Australia. One such program is the Bridge Program.

The Bridge Program is a pilot program run by Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth + and funded by the Queensland Government (Education Queensland Office of Non-State Schools) with recurrent funding of $918,000 for three years 2010-2012 with additional capital start-up funds. The Bridge Program operates from three sites in Queensland: Deception Bay, Townsville and Mt Isa.

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Bridge Program, undertaken by Griffith University's School of Human Services and Social Work. The evaluation covers the 18 month period from January 2010 to June 2011.

Evaluation approach and methodology

Broadly, the evaluation aimed to identify:

1. whether the program has been implemented as intended;
2. how successful the program has been to date in achieving the stated objectives;
3. good practice case-studies of how the program has assisted young people to achieve outcomes; and
4. whether modifications are required to maximise the program's potential.

A mixed method design has been utilised, providing information about both *process* and *outcomes*. This has involved the collection and analysis of quantitative data about referrals, program activities and program outcomes, and the collection and analysis of qualitative data about the operation of the program from the perspective of key stakeholders and those involved in the delivery and administration of the program.

The evaluation has attempted to use all reasonable endeavours to examine the structure, process, outputs and outcomes of the program to identify features associated with successful implementation within the context of operational constraints, and to contribute to the evidence base and the development of future practice and programs in relation to educational support for marginalised young people.

Evaluation questions

1. What are the key elements of the program model?
2. Is the program operating in accordance with the principles for service delivery?
3. Referral process:
   - How many referrals have been made, how does the referral process operate, and is there room for improvement?
   - What are the characteristics and needs of young people referred? (age, gender, Indigenous and CALD status, placement history, child protection or youth justice orders, educational status pre-Bridge, homelessness issues, other health or welfare needs and service use)
4. Have there been improved outcomes for young people who are referred to the Bridge Program?
   - How many young people have been participated to date?
   - What are the main forms of direct assistance provided?
   - Overall, to what extent has the program assisted young people?
5. What are the benefits to stakeholders (management, staff and external agencies) of the program?
6. What are the learning outcomes from the operation of the program to date and how could the program increase its capacity to achieve its objectives?

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation has used a range of methods including the following:

- a detailed literature review to identify the key components of effective alternative education programs for young people with high and complex needs;
- a document review of Bridge Program policies, procedures, program and funding documents;
- a review of Bridge Program administrative data and records;
- interviews of key staff involved with the program at each site;
- interviews of key stakeholders at each site;
- feedback from a sample of young people who have been or are currently on the program across each of the sites.

In July-August 2011, the evaluation team visited each site to conduct interviews with Program staff and stakeholders. The primary stakeholders targeted for interview were officers from Youth Justice, Child Safety and school guidance officers who refer young people to the program, as well as FLC staff. Some stakeholders not available at the time of site visits were interviewed by telephone. A total of 37 participants were involved in the evaluation including 26 interviews with staff and other stakeholders and feedback obtained from 11 young people across all sites, as summarised in Table 1 below. A copy of the interview schedule is available at Appendix 1.

Table 1: Evaluation informants by site

	Deception Bay	Townsville	Mt Isa	Central	Total
Staff	3	3	2	2	**10**
Stakeholders	4	6	5	1	**16**
Young people	4	4	3	n/a	**11**

Coding conventions

Direct quotes from evaluation participants are used in section 5 which discusses the key evaluation findings. A code has been assigned to each quote to indicate the site [A, B or C], whether they are Bridge Program staff [P], stakeholder [S} or young person [Y] followed by a number to indicate different individuals within the previous categories. It should be noted that each site has been de-identified due to the small number of participants across all three sites.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for this evaluation was obtained from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee – Protocol Number HSV/15/11/HREC.

Limitations of the evaluation

There are a number of limitations of this evaluation that should be noted. Purposive samples were selected which are not generalisable, and the stakeholder sample for each site is relatively small. The views of the young people who provided feedback may not be representative as they were self-selected, and young people who disengaged from Bridge were not able to be included. Because the program is at the early stages of implementation, the assessment of outcomes for young people is limited.

Overview of this report

The following section provides a detailed overview of the Bridge Program in terms of its aims, objectives, staffing arrangements and program activities. This is followed by an outline of the characteristics of young people participating in the program. Section 4 of this report provides a review of the research literature relating to alternative education programs and identifies a framework of key components for effective alternative education programs. In section 5, this framework provides the basis for assessing the Bridge Program, drawing on data from a number of sources collected during the evaluation.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE BRIDGE PROGRAM

The Bridge Program is a three-year trial program funded by the Queensland Government through the Department of Education and Training. It has a recurrent annual budget of $918,000 and an establishment budget of $246,000. Whilst the three-year funding period is from July 2009 – June 2012, it has been agreed that the program would begin in January 2010 and that a six-month extension would be given for it to conclude in December 2012. This has enabled a greater alignment with a school year.

Target group

The Program provides support for young people aged between 12 and 15 years who are at serious risk of disengaging from education and other social connections, who have been involved with the juvenile justice system and/or are in the care of the State, and who have complex needs. The overall aim of the Program is to assist a young person to re-engage with an educational institution. During the program, a young person is encouraged to gain a better understanding of themselves and how they can overcome their specific barriers to re-engage with education. These barriers could be numerous and related to educational, physical, social or emotional aspects of a young person's life.

The aim is for 20 young people to be enrolled in the Bridge Program in each site each year (total 60 enrolments per annum) with the aim of achieving up to 180 enrolments over the 3-year period of funding. Over the 18-month evaluation period of January 2010 to June 2011, a total of 104 young people have been enrolled in the program.

A detailed overview of the characteristics of young people attending the Bridge Program is provided below in section 3 of this report.

Project objectives

The overall aim of the Bridge Program is to assist a young person to re-engage with an educational institution. Program objectives are to assist young people to:

- make a transition to a structured educational setting
- reduce recidivism and anti-social behaviour
- improve positive social connections
- improve non-cognitive outcomes such as communication, self confidence, peer relations, self-care skills.

Service delivery framework and program logic

The program is delivered at three sites in Queensland: Deception Bay, Townsville and Mt Isa. Each site has up to three full time positions, with a full time Coordinator managing across the three sites. Staff offices are co-located on existing Flexible Learning Centres (FLCs) sites.

There were originally three phases to the program:

- an intensive 8-10 week small group program,
- a transition program where a young person is supported at an educational institution with an option to attend some after-school group activities and lastly,
- assistance when requested by a young person who has been re-engaged and now experiencing some difficulties.

At the beginning of 2011, based on a reviewof the previous year's operation, these phases got modified to:

- an intensive small group program with greater flexibility in the duration of this component, extending it up to two terms (20 weeks) with a rolling enrollment process
- transition support where a young person is individually supported to engage with an educational institution/s and provide support when a young person experiences difficulties doing this.

The Bridge Program has a strong outreach component and many young people self-refer to the program. Referrals also come from Queensland Police, Youth Justice Services, Child Safety and school Guidance Officers.

Re-engagement Reports and a Transition Plan are developed for each student. They are connected to health and welfare programs where required.

The program logic for the Bridge Program is presented below in Figure 1.

Program principles

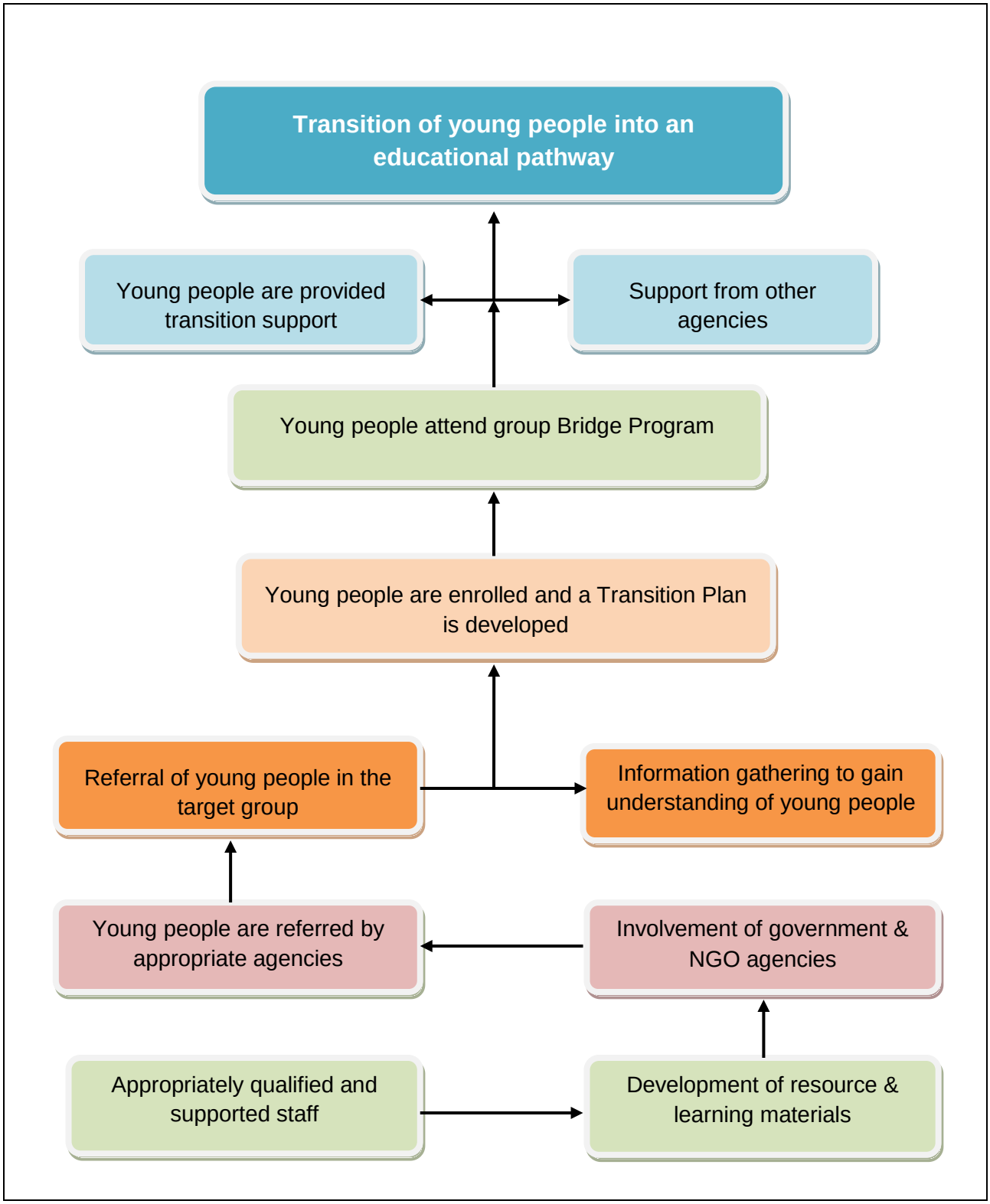
An important part of the Bridge Program is a set of principles that forms the 'philosophy' of the Program's approach to group management and operation. The principles are:

- Respect
- Honesty
- Safe and legal
- Participation.

Staffing profile

Each site employs a combination of teachers and youth workers or teaching staff with significant youth work experience.

Figure 1: Program Logic for Bridge Program:



3. CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON BRIDGE PROGRAM

In order to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the Bridge Program, it is vital to gain an understanding of the characteristics of the young people who have participated on the program and the complex nature of their lives.

Since the program commenced in January 2010, there have been a total of 125 young people referred and, of these, a total of 104 have been enrolled. There were a number of reasons as to why some young people who were referred did not enroll. These included:

- being outside the target age range (mostly being too young)
- being placed in detention after referral
- change in residential address
- no vacancies in the small group program.

As at 30 June 2011, 15 young people were currently enrolled in the small group program with a further 80 young people in transition support.

Table 2: Overview of Bridge Program enrolments – January 2010 to June 2011

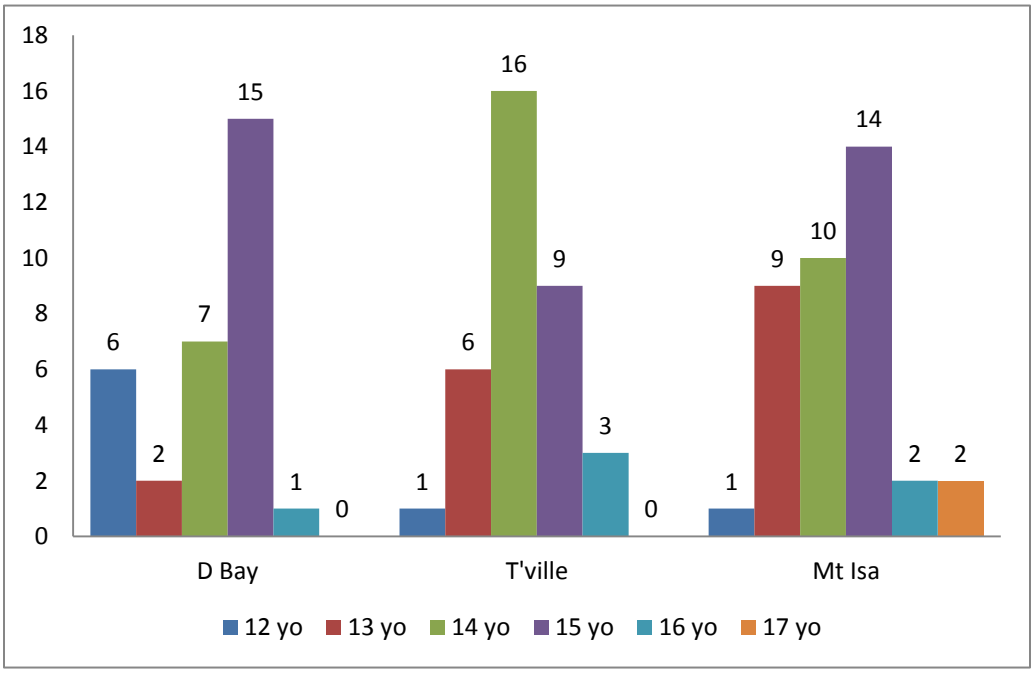
	Deception Bay	Townsville	Mount Isa	Total
No. referred	40	46	39	**125**
No. enrolled	31	35	38	**104**
No. currently on program	4	7	4	**15**
No. in transition support	25	25	30	**80**
No. exited program	2	3	4	**9**

Of the young people enrolled, the majority have been male – 68% overall, although Mt Isa has a slightly more even split. A significant proportion have been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander with Mt Isa having 100% of participants identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Townsville 71% and Deception bay with 23% as shown in Table 3 below. Overall 96 young people aged 12 – 15 years old have been enrolled in the Bridge Program. An additional 8 young people aged 16 years of age have been included in the program. The average age across all sites is just over 14 years. All sites have enrolled at least one sixteen year old during the period. Figure 2 below shows the age distribution.

Table 3: Demographics of young people

	Deception Bay	Townsville	Mount Isa	Total
Male	21 (68%)	29 (83%)	21 (55%)	71 (68%)
Female	10 (32%)	6 (17%)	17 (45%)	33 (32%)
Indigenous	7 (23%)	25 (71%)	38 (100%)	70 (67%)
Average age (years)	14.1	14.2	14.3	14.2

Figure 2: Age distribution



The complexity of the lives of young people attending the Bridge Program can be seen by examining a number of risk factors associated with the young people. Table 4 below provides an overview. From this it can be seen that over half of all young people (53%) had problematic drug misuse at the time of enrolment and this was quite pronounced in Deception Bay (65%). In addition, a significant proportion (20%) had a diagnosed disability and/or a conduct disorder. Of the 104 young people enrolled, 80% were involved with the youth justice system or in care of the Department of Child Safety, with 34% of these young people having dual status, that is, in care and subject to youth justice orders. The other 20% had significant risk factors that increase the likelihood that they would have contact with these government agencies in the future.

Table 4: Overview of risk factors for Bridge Program young people

	Deception Bay	Townsville	Mount Isa	Total
Youth Justice orders	29	9	16	54
Child Safety orders	12	4	2	18
Dual YJ/CS	12	12	11	35
At risk	2	10	9	21
Problematic drug misuse	20 (65%)	21 (37%)	22 (58%)	55 (53%)
Diagnosed disability	9 (29%)	9 (26%)	3 (8%)	21 (20%)
Out-of-home care	4	12	10	26

From this profile, it is clear that the Bridge Program is dealing with a group of young people who have high and complex needs. The combination of problematic substance misuse, disabilities and/or conduct disorders presents significant challenges. It is also clear that the Bridge Program young people have been disengaged from the education system for some time. This was particularly the case in Mt Isa. To give a more detailed indication of this, two case studies of Bridge young people are presented below.

Case Study 1: 'Karen' – Mt Isa

Karen was enrolled with the Bridge Program in term 2 during 2010. Karen was 13 years old and had not attended school (mainstream) since year 5. Karen had extensive contact with Youth Justice and was on court orders during her time with Bridge. Karen had to sign in at the Dept. of Communities' office twice a week and later she had community service hours added to her sentence/orders.

Karen also has extensive contact with Child Safety, and was in state care but due to lack of foster places and Karen's' volatile behaviour, she was self placing at the home of her Mother (now deceased).

Karen was a chronic sniffer (inhalants such as deodorant, paint and glue), and also used recreational drugs such as alcohol and marijuana.

Karen was referred to the program by several people and agencies, and was known to one of the Bridge workers in 2010. Karen came on program many times although due to her 'social' life, her attendance was sporadic. When Karen was on program she would often 'act-out' displaying inappropriate behaviours such as excessive amounts of swearing, spitting, intimidating other students as well as workers. This was done to get what she wanted, such as changing activities to suit herself or cutting program days short etc.

Many different strategies were employed by Bridge workers, such as one-on-one time, team building activities, many conversations about behaviours etc, time-outs and meetings with Youth Justice, Child Safety and family contacts, but nothing seemed to break down Karen's volatile exterior.

Karen was sent back to Detention shortly after she attempted transition into the FLC.

Karen continues to move back and forth between Mount Isa and the Townsville detention centre, and continues to engage in crime (shoplifting, break and enter, assault etc) and has a small group of young people who follow her in these pursuits.

Case Study 2: 'Billy' – Deception Bay

Billy, aged 15 years, was referred to the Bridge Program by the Deception Bay FLC. At the time of referral Billy lived in Deception Bay with his mother. His father passed away when he was eleven and not long afterwards, Billy's grandmother, who lived with the family, was terminally ill and passed away. Billy's mother said these deaths affected Billy deeply.

At the time of referral, Billy had some contact with Youth Justice for minor issues such as trespassing and abusive language directed at police. Billy regularly drinks alcohol and smokes cigarettes, and smokes marijuana on an irregular basis.

Billy attended numerous primary schools as his family travelled around. He was enrolled in Deception Bay State High School for year eight in 2007 but was expelled at the end of the year due to numerous behaviour issues. Billy was then enrolled at the FLC, but his attendance was inconsistent during 2008 / 2009 and he was often on 'time out'.

Initial work with Billy indicated that he was positive about joining the Bridge Program, he wanted to improve his numeracy and literacy skills but he sometimes found it difficult to interact with large groups. He can lose his temper when people annoy him or challenge him on inappropriate behaviour. When he loses his temper he will react by fighting, using abusive language, or storming off.

Whilst enrolled in the Bridge Program for Term 1, Billy attended 15 days out of a possible 28 with all absences explained. Billy participated well in most activities and his behaviour was manageable and appropriate most of the time. He demonstrated that he understood the four Principles and how to follow them, and occasionally was a role model for other young people not so familiar with the Principles. Whilst on the program, Billy was enrolled in a 10 week (2 hours/week) numeracy and literacy tuition program. Billy enjoyed attending. He improved his maths and reading competencies and received a very positive report from his teachers on his attitude to learning.

Towards the end of Billy's time on the Bridge Program, he indicated that he wished to return to the FLC. Transition plans were initiated but Billy's enrolment in the FLC proved to be unsuccessful with the major barriers being Billy's inability to go for an entire school day without a cigarette and challenges of participating in a large group environment.

In late 2010 Billy indicated that he wanted to enrol in Youth Connections at Redcliffe as they can offer him intensive literacy assistance, he can smoke during the day when on breaks and the contact time is less than the FLC but is still Centrelink approved. Bridge staff supported his enrolment into Youth Connections, but he did not stay long with this program, as he said the group was too big and the teachers gave him tasks that were not age or ability appropriate. Early in 2011, a meeting was held with Redcliffe Youth Space, Youth Connections, Bridge, Billy and his mother, during which Youth Connections agreed to a supply literacy and numeracy tutor for Billy two days a week. Billy experienced success with this one-on-one tutoring, , 'graduating' at the beginning of Term 3 to a small group literacy and numeracy program for four days a week..

When Billy turned 16 years old, the family income from Centrelink was halved and Billy's mother could no longer afford to pay the rent for the house where they were living. Billy was not receiving Centrelink payments because he was not regularly attending the FLC. Bridge staff supported Billy's mother with access to emergency relief, phone calls and appointments with the bank, real estate agency, the rental collection agency, Neighbourhood Centre and Centrelink. On a later occasion, Billy's Centrelink payments were suspended due to a reporting error by Centrelink. Billy received support from Bridge and RYS to have his payments re-instated.

As the fourth anniversary of Billy's father's death was approaching, Billy and his mother wanted to have a small ritual to commemorate his death. Staff spent time with Billy and his mother on the day, transporting and participating with them in their remembrance ritual.

4. COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION – A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

The current and future wellbeing of young people can be significantly compromised if education is not completed. This section of the report presents findings from a review of the research literature to identify the key components of effective alternative education programs for young people.

Understanding what works for disengaged youth requires an understanding of the reasons for disengagement.

Reasons for disengagement

There are numerous reasons why young people disengage from education (external and education-related) some of which include (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005):

- Have been in trouble at school and fallen behind (Roderick cited in Aron, 2006, 5-6);
- Became parents early, or have home situations which make attendance at school challenging (Aron, 2006);
- Have struggled academically with key learning areas (e.g. reading, numeracy) and are older than their peers (Aron, 2006; Cole, 2004);
- Have significant behavioural difficulties (e.g. anti-social behaviour)(Foley & Pang, 2006; Van Acker, 2007);
- Have been bullied, or developed a dislike for the school environment (Cole, 2004);
- Have a disability (Foley & Pang, 2006);
- Have previously been suspended or expelled from school or find it difficult to gain school acceptance due to previous history/actions (e.g. criminal history) (Foley & Pang, 2006);
- Have low self esteem due to experiencing failure or poor achievement (Cole, 2004);
- Have been significantly harmed and/or disadvantaged (i.e. child abuse and neglect, involved in substance abuse, involvement in the juvenile justice and/or out-of-home care systems) (Cole, 2004); and
- Being part of what is perceived as a negative school environment, and/or an ineffective behaviour management approach, and/or inadequate, diverse teaching methods (Shannon & Bylsma, 2005).

Young people who disengage from education are a *diverse group* with *diverse needs.* Their disengagement may also be compounded by barriers such as: family and community difficulties, cultural issues, socioeconomic disadvantage, minimal adult or mentor support and disability (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001, cited in Aron & Zweig, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005; Baldridge, Lamont Hill & Davis, 2011).

Alternative education

Many young people who are unable to participate in mainstream education may undertake alternative education. Although there is no universal definition of what constitutes alternative education (Riele, 2007; Aron & Zweig, 2003), it is generally those activities that fall outside or are different to the traditional schooling system. Alternative education can encompass a variety of different programs and teaching methods and structures. Further, it can take several forms as exemplified by Raywid's (1994, p. 26-31) typology:

- Type 1: schools that offer full-time programs. Characteristics of these school programs may include: "caring and professional staff; small size and small classes, and a personalised approach to the student ... Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without wall, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, drop-out recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums" (cited in Aron &Zwieg, 2003, p. 26).

- Type 2: programs that target disruptive young people. They are short-term programs and have been conceptualised at times as 'last chance' programs. They have a discipline focus.

- Type 3: short-term programs that include a therapeutic objective by "offering counselling, access to social services, and academic remediation" (cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003, p. 26).

Importantly, not all alternative education programs will reflect Raywid's (1994) typology as programs may target a range of objectives and use a range of strategies, thus mixing components of the typology (Aron & Zwieg, 2003). Alternative education can be conceptualised more broadly according to *who* they are focusing on, *type of content* covered, *where* the program operates and its *administration and funding* (Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Riele, 2007).

Effective alternative education

A range of alternative education programs exist both nationally and internationally. However, there appears to be minimal evaluations of these programs, particularly in terms of outcomes (Powell, 2003; Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005). For instance, Klima, Miller & Nunlist (2009, p. 5) comment in relation to truancy and dropout programs that "most programs are not evaluated, and those that are evaluated generally use research designs and methodologies that do not permit us to draw conclusions about causality". One of the reasons suggested for the dearth in evaluation research is the difficulty of this area for program evaluation. Alternative education serves "...children and youth in extremely diverse settings" with varied program objectives (Gable, Bullock & Evans, 2006, p. 8). Lack of comparability between studies severely curtails capacity to be able to draw effectiveness conclusions.

A range of different programs exist to assist at-risk youth: drop-out prevention and recovery, truancy and absenteeism, mentoring and peer programs, after-school programs, experiential/outreach programs and many others. Of those evaluations that have been conducted, mixed results are often reported. The evidence base on alternative education is fragmented and disparate. For instance Aron (2006, p.5) reports that Type 1 programs appear to be most successful[1]. Type 2 is less likely to lead to positive participant gains. For Type 3, the results are mixed "with students often making progress while enrolled but regressing when they return to a more traditional school".

However, researchers and commentators on alternative education for at-risk youth offer suggestions on *possible* quality practice and program components. These inferences take the form of principles, suggested outcomes, characteristics and descriptions of program designs. These are conceptualised as 'promising' or 'best practices' of alternative education (Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Van Acker, 2007). Although, these suggestions require empirical testing, there is considerable uniformity in the literature on this topic (Aron & Zwieg, 2003, Aron, 2006). These components are briefly summarised next.

Principles for alternative education

Broadly, quality alternative education programs should aim to support the positive development and capacity of youth and thus adhere to principles that can optimise a young person's potential. These principles include:

> "(1)physical and psychological safety;
>
> (2) appropriate structure;
>
> (3) supportive relationships;
>
> (4) opportunities to belong;
>
> (5) positive social norms;
>
> (6) support for efficacy and mattering;
>
> (7) opportunities for skill-building; and
>
> (8) integration of family, school, and especially community" (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001; cited in Aron&Zwieg, 2003, p. 20).

Powell (2003) adds that programs should be guided by effective practices for developing resilience in youth by incorporating protective factors such as: quality, caring relationships, commitment by staff in a young person's capacity to change; facilitating participation and engagement, and opportunities for participants to experience success. Other principles considered important when aiming for quality alternative education include: opportunities for learning in and outside of school environments, tailored programs to respond to the unique physical, social, psychological and academic needs of youth, flexibility of programs related to

[1]These conclusions about Type 1,2,3 programs is based on provisional research and anecdotal evidence (Aron, 2006).

participants' needs and links made to community services and educational or vocational pathways (Cole, 2004).

Walker and Fecser (2002) point out the importance of program foundation and philosophy for effective alternative education programs. This includes a clearly stated values system to serve as the basis for decision making and program planning. This helps to establish a 'healthy program climate' where participants are able to develop a sense of belonging, identity and cohesion. It is also important to use meaningful rules, rituals and routines.

The role of physical activity programs

There is some literature that explores the role of physical activity programs for re-engaging 'disaffected youth' (Sandford, et.al., 2006; Sandford, et. al., 2008). The evidence suggests that 'sport and physical activities are able, to *some* degree, to facilitate personal and social development in *some* disaffected young people under *some* circumstances' (Sandford, et. al., 2006: 261 – original emphasis). The key elements that are required for engaging 'disaffected young people' are:

- match young people's needs with the specific project objectives;
- recognise the significance of the social relationships – it is not the activity *per se* but the social relationships experienced during program activities;
- enthusiastic, effective, credible, fair and respectful leaders are needed;
- involving young people in key decisions relating to the program is important;
- keep program numbers small; and
- employ a multi-agency approach – collaborations between different agencies are required to address the wider social contexts of young people's lives.

Working with young people in a child protection context

There are a diverse range of strategies and practices that are considered to be effective in working with adolescents. The literature indicates that establishing a relationship with a young person to facilitate their engagement in services is the core element of practice. To build and maintain a relationship with a young person, a worker should display characteristics or attributes such as empathy, honesty, humility, care, flexibility and practicality, together with the skills of a professional helper such as being a good listener, being non-judgmental and being able to be straightforward and accountable towards a young person (Davis, Day & Bidmead, 2002; Elliot & Williams, 2003; Maidment, 2006; Schmied & Walsh, 2010).

Overall, it is clear that the relationship between worker and the young person is the central component of effective practice with adolescents in a child protection context (Schmied & Walsh, 2010).

Outcomes for alternative education

Sloat, Audas & Willms (2007) suggest three outcome domains when assessing programs for at-risk youth: personal development, social behaviour and school outcomes. Personal development denotes aspects associated with a young person's confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing. Outcome assessment can be examined via attention to a young person's: "self esteem", "perception of locus of control and personal responsibility", "sense of security", "capacity to develop positive family relationships" and "perception of degree of social support" (Sloat et al, 2007, p. 462). Social behaviour "encompasses outcomes describing participants' behaviour in their social context and the nature of their peer relationships". Dimensions considered in this domain include: "relationships with other children", "orientation towards prosocial and antisocial behaviour", "how spare time is utilised", "use of alcohol and other substances", and "capacity to work effectively with others" (Sloat et al, 2007, p. 462). The final domain, school outcomes, incorporates measures relevant for school participation, which include: "academic achievement", school conduct, engagement in education and in the school environment, and a sense of belonging to a school community (Sloat et al, 2007, p. 462).

Aron (2006, p.18) argues that although alternative education programs should address a diversity of participants' needs, they are "first and foremost educational programs" and therefore should target educational outcomes. Education outcome measures could include: "educational attainment, grade repetition, achievement motivation, academic self concept, school engagement, good study skills, basic skills: reading, writing and mathematics, higher order thinking, oral and interpersonal communication skills and knowledge, computer technology skills [and] research related skills"(Hair et al, 2003; cited in Aron, 2006, p. 19).

However, outcome measures must also relate to the specific *objectives of the program* and use valid indicators that are broader than pure academic performance and which measure the continuance of an issue/difficulty or change (e.g. young person who was regularly truanting from school participates in a program and his/her truancy declines) (Apte, Bonser & Slattery, 2001).

Effective alternative education program components

Several suggestions have been made on the design and characteristics of quality education programs for at-risk youth that may increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. The following thirteen components can be identified from the literature for effective alternative education programs:

1. Clear goals and a well structured, coordinated program (Greggs, 1999; Raywid, 1993; cited in Land & Sletton, 2002 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Schorr, 1997 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

2. The importance of program foundation and philosophy including a clearly stated values system to serve as the basis for decision making and program planning (Walker & Fecser, 2002).

3. Recognising the centrality of relationship and relationship-building when working with young people (Davis, Day & Bidmead, 2002; Elliot & Williams, 2003; Maidment, 2006; Nation, et al, 2003; Schmied & Walsh, 2010).

4. The importance of quality, caring, committed staff who can engage well with young people with high and complex needs. Staff are flexible, can communicate effectively, can develop strong rapport with students, model prosocial behaviour, treat young people as adults and with respect (Cole, 2004; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; Apte, Bonser & Slattery, 2001; Baldridge et al, 2011; Sandford, et.al., 2006).

5. Support, training and professional development for staff so they are well equipped to provide the most engaging, creative and innovative approaches with young people (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999 cited in Land & Sletton 2002 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Schorr, 1997 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

6. Research-informed program activities (Geurin & Denti, 1999 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

7. Small group numbers, staff – student ratios. This allows individualised attention to participating students (Cole, 2004; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; National Association of State Boards of Education 1996 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Coalition of Juvenile Justice, 2001 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

8. Young people-centred and individualised intervention plans (case management) to support the educational, social, emotional, cognitive and health needs of a young person (Frymier, 1987; cited in Land & Sletton, 2002; National Association of State Boards of Education 1996 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005). Youth workers and other support staff are critical to the success of individualised intervention plans (Cole, 2004). Interventions employed should be evidence-based and as these are more likely to be effective (Van Acker, 2007).

9. Clear standards and expectations of young people for communication and social interaction. Positive behaviour management strategies are employed. The environment is nurturing, warm, inviting and non-competitive. Curricula include attention to interpersonal skills (e.g. conflict resolution, anger management, empathy) and prosocial behaviour along with topics such as family interaction and peer pressure (National Association of State Boards of Education 1996 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Coalition of Juvenile Justice, 2001 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

10. Learning choices (curricula) that are engaging, interesting, applied to the real-world and uses multiple teaching strategies. A range of activities may be used to facilitate learning and self expression. Frequent attention is also given to quality instruction on core learning areas such as literacy and numeracy (Coalition of Juvenile Justice, 2001 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Tobin & Sprague, 2000 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Apte, Bonser &

Slattery, 2001; Cole, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005; Van Acker, 2007). Career and job training opportunities for participants can be beneficial (Van Acker, 2007).

11. Encouragement of young people to be actively involved in decision-making and negotiation over goal setting (both short-term and longer-term aspirations) and monitoring of progress (Cole, 2004).

12. Clear linkage to other professionals, community services and supports for young people (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999 cited in Land & Sletton, 2002 in Aron&Zwieg, 2003). Parent/carer and community involvement is also vital (National Association of State Boards of Education 1996 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Cole, 2004; Aron, 2006).

13. Clean, well-cared for, healthy physical settings (Tobin & Sprague, 2000 cited in Aron & Zwieg, 2003; Aron, 2006).

Table 5 below presents a summary of these components and this framework of components will provide the basis for an assessment of the Bridge Program.

Table 5: Effective alternative education components

1. Clear goals and a well structured, coordinated program
2. Clearly stated philosophy and values system
3. Recognising the centrality of relationships and relationship-building
4. Quality, caring, committed staff who can engage well with young people with high and complex needs
5. Support, training and professional development for staff
6. Research-informed program activities
7. Small group numbers and low staff – young people ratios
8. Young people-centred and individualised intervention plans involving youth workers and other support staff
9. Clear standards and expectations of young people for communication and social interaction
10. Learning choices (curricula) that are engaging, interesting, applied to the real-world and uses multiple teaching strategies
11. Encouragement of young people to be actively involved in decision-making, goal setting and monitoring of progress
12. Clear linkage to other professionals, community services and supports for young people
13. Clean, well-cared for, healthy physical settings

Overall the literature points out that a range of factors can contribute to successful programs for young people with high and complex needs. These principles and components are regarded as central to the development of tailored and effective educational responses for marginalised young people. However, rigorous program evaluations are required, so as to ascertain with confidence what is effective for young people not able or willing to use mainstream education.

Issues and gaps relating to the literature

There are a number of issues and gaps arising from a review of the research literature relating to alternative education programs. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity about definitions for alternative education program and what constitutes these programs. Secondly, it is difficult to pin down what programs are best suited for which young people – the characteristics of young people. Finally, it is not clear from the literature what an ideal program 'dosage' should be – that is, the length of program intervention.

5. EVALUATION FINDINGS

Introduction

This section of the report brings together the findings of the evaluation drawing on a number of data sources including interviews with program staff and other stakeholders, Bridge Program administrative data and program records and reports. Three areas will be reviewed:

1. aspects of program implementation including the target group and referral processes
2. outcomes for young people participating on the program
3. an assessment of the Bridge Program against the framework of components for effective alternative education.

Aspects of program implementation

Target group

There was a clear consensus across all those interviewed for this evaluation that the Bridge Program is 'hitting the mark' with the young people who have participated. It is clear that the Bridge Program is dealing with a group of young people with high and complex needs. These young people were variously described as:

- 'the hard end kids – Bridge Program is the last line' [AP2];
- 'the young people have been burnt – they haven't seen anything functional' [AS2];
- 'the most disengaged' [BP1];
- 'complex and extreme in their behaviour' [BS1]
- 'the young people battle with addiction and behaviour problems – they have been excluded from everywhere' [BP2]
- 'the young people have very challenging behaviours' [CP2].

It was noted that many young people had problematic substance misuse issues, were suffering the impacts of trauma from previous physical and sexual abuse, they were trapped in cycles of offending and dysfunction and that, often, their families were 'in a mess'.

In the staff interviews, it was often pointed out that mainstream education is not a realistic option for many of the young people as they had been disengaged from formal education systems for some considerable time. This was a major concern raised in Mt Isa where some young people being referred as 12 year olds had been disengaged from when they were 10 years old and in primary school.

In this regard, a number of stakeholders in Mt Isa suggested that the age group for the Bridge Program should be lowered, for example: 'We have 10 year olds disengaged from school for the last year – intervention needs to happen earlier' [S4].

Many young people had problems with empathy and emotional regulation which made it difficult for them to handle a mainstream educational setting or even to function in a group setting.

In terms of achieving positive outcomes for young people, a major challenge has been the levels of substance misuse by the young people. This appears to be particularly pronounced in Mt Isa where many of the young people are involved in 'sniffing' of inhalants such as deodorants, glue and petrol. As noted in section 2, over half of all Bridge young people had problematic substance misuse issues.

Referral processes

There was a general consensus amongst program staff and stakeholders that the referral process is working well. In Mt Isa some concerns about the referral process were raised by Child Safety and Youth Justice officers. However, recent meetings between these officers and the Bridge Program coordinator have addressed these concerns. Continued efforts by Bridge staff to link with local community services networks will also strengthen the referral process.

As shown in Table 6 below, across the program, the FLC network has the greatest number of referrals and the corresponding greatest number of enrollments per referral. Given the co-location of Bridge and FLCs this is to be expected and this is an encouraging sign of the possibilities of co-locating the Bridge Program with FLCs.

Referrals and enrollments from Youth Justice and Child Safety are highest in Townsville and lowest in Deception Bay. Deception Bay has a very low level of referral from the Youth Justice and Child Safety areas of the Department of Communities but appears to have a good referral profile from local schools and associated Guidance Officers. Mt Isa has a relatively high rate of referral from families and relatives. Referrals from non-government service providers are relatively low across all sites.

Table 6: Source of referral for enrolled young people in Bridge Jan 2010 – June 2011 (referred) and enrolled

Source	Deception Bay	Townsville	Mt Isa	Total enrolled
FLC	(6) 6	(6) 6	(15)15	27
Youth Justice	(1) 0	(16) 13	(3) 3	16
Child Safety	(1) 1	(10) 6	(2) 2	9
School/Guidance officer	(13) 9	(8) 6	-	15
Police	(4) 3	-	-	4
NGO service provider	(6) 4	(3) 3	(4) 4	11
Parent/relative	(5) 4	(3) 1	(13) 12	17
Self referral	(4) 4	-	(2) 2	6
TOTAL (REFERRED) & ENROLLED	**(40) 31**	**(46) 35**	**(39) 38**	**104**

Outcomes for young people

In terms of outcomes, it is important to bear in mind that the program is still in the early stages of development. In the course of the evaluation it became clear that the first 12 months of operation were very focused on establishing the program. The following six months of operation have built on a number of lessons learnt from program implementation in 2010 and various improvements have been incorporated.

At the end of 30 June 2011 (end of Term 2, 2011), the following outcomes included:

- 52% of young people enrolled in the Bridge Program since its inception were engaged in an educational or training institution,
- a further 29% had regular contact with the Bridge Program but were not engaged with an educational institution or training
- Bridge Program had lost contact with 19% of young people
- 79% of the young people engaged in an educational response were attending alternative education options (Bridge 28%, FLC 28% and other 23%)
- 16% were attending mainstream schools
- 6% were involved in employment or traineeships.

In terms of responses from young people, when asked *What have you got out of being involved in the Bridge Program?* responses have included the following:

- 'I'm going to Flexi and I will get a job'[BY1].
- 'I am going to the Flexible Learning Centre and Bridge will help. I made a CD. I am happy' [BY2].
- 'I get to be with my mates and I get out of bed in the morning. Sometimes I have something to eat' [BY3].
- 'I got back to Flexi. I am more confident and I feel I can achieve more. I don't sniff and I come to school regularly' [CY1].
- 'I attend the FLC now as much as I can and I like it but before I was doing nothing so Bridge helped me to go and do that' [CY2].
- 'I got back into Flexi so now I go to school as much as I can. I feel more motivated to have a go at new things and try to be good at school' [CY3].
- 'Being able to see my dad again. Bridge helped convince me to see [acounsellor]which led to me being able to talk to Dad' [AY1].
- 'Success. I have changed as a person and I've got into Trade College' [AY2].
- 'A stable place to learn and study and complete Access 10. I wouldn't have been able to stay in Youth Connections if I hadn't done Bridge Program first. Because of my black and white thinking these programs don't normally work out for me' [AY3].

The counterfactual

In any evaluation a key issue to consider is the counterfactual question: *what would happen for these young people without the Bridge Program?* In response to this question, stakeholders offered the following comments:

- 'These kids would just bump along from school to school, exclusion to exclusion, get lost between the cracks, and probably end up on welfare' [BS3].
- 'Young people would not be attending a program and they would have no direction to educational opportunities' [BS1].
- 'There would be no one to fill the gaps, mentor these young people. It's really helpful for the kids to give them a push in the right direction' [BS2].
- 'These young people would go into a spiral of decline; they would spiral into youth justice. The Education Queensland exclusion process does not cope with these young people' [AS2].

It is clear that the Bridge Program is making an important contribution to supporting a group of young people with high and complex needs who would not be catered for otherwise.

Assessment of Bridge Program against the framework of effective components of alternative education

This section of the report presents evaluation findings against the framework of effective components of alternative education identified through a review of the research literature (section 4 of this report). Thirteen components were identified and each of these will be used to assess the Bridge Program.

1. Clear goals and a well structured, coordinated program

A small group program (at least 4 days a week) has been offered each term at each site. Based on the first twelve months experience, a small group program in 2011 contains (where possible) an established daily pattern as set out in Table 7 below:

All sites use a range of outdoor learning experiences, usually involving the use of public parks, swimming pools or local swimming holes, ocean swimming, Police Citizen Youth Clubs (PCYC) for gym and basketball, etc. Most Bridge staff have undertaken or are in the process of undertaking training to gain the necessary skills to be able to offer a widening variety of outdoor education activities.

In the Mt Isa site, it was reported that a key reason for using parks and facilities out of town was to help young people to resist the temptation of 'running-off' and sniffing, drinking or taking drugs. This reflects the somewhat more complex nature of the young people in the Mt Isa Bridge Program.

Across each of the sites, staff indicated that a priority for the program is getting young people into a regular routine – being ready to be picked-up on time, making a commitment to the program and 'hanging in there' until the daily program finishes.

In 2011, the duration of the small group program was changed from a set 10 week (one term) program to a rolling enrolment and a small group program of up to 20 weeks. A number of stakeholders indicated this was an improvement as it provided for greater flexibility in terms of engagement and participation in the small group program – for example, 'the ten weeks was too short'. [AS1]

Table 7: Overview of small group program activities and the rationale for activities

Program activity	Rationale/intent
Pick-up of young people begins at 9.00 and takes between 60 – 90 minutes.	Young people are required to be ready at the designated time and/or pick-up location. Workers engage in conversations with young people to establish their physical and emotional well being.
Morning meeting to focus for the day and can include quite time (15 minutes – depending on the location for the day's activities.	Plan for the day. Any follow-up from yesterday. Relaxation exercises. Teaching young people about body clues and body control, as well as helping to settle them for the day.
Shopping for food, meal preparation and cooking for breakfast, morning teas and lunches (often in a park).	Role modelling healthy eating, building manners and confidence for young people, working as a group, opportunities for conversations about any issues for young people on the day. Communication during the cooking and consumption of food facilitates relationships.
Structured physical activity for 30 minutes involving repetition and skill development.	Designed to facilitate communication, sharing, participation, teamwork, physical fitness and skill development for young people. Also encourages young people to become more grounded and focused.
At least 3 focused conversations in functional numeracy and literacy.	These conversations may occur in the bus or specifically designed activities aimed at building young people's confidence in their literacy and numeracy skills through everyday activities such as reading newspapers/magazines (such as tide books for fishing), writing shopping menus, journaling their personal story and completing worksheets. This gives them some sense of keeping in touch with "school" and also provides an opportunity to identify areas of strength / weakness in terms of determining potential transition locations.
Build to one 90 minute major activity	Anything from fishing, bushwalking, swimming, mini-golf, bowling, indoor rock-climbing, library or museum visits, etc. Idea is for all to participate, expose young people to new experiences, show that you can have fun without drugs or alcohol, build relationships with staff, or sometimes just to provide stress free opportunities for conversation (e.g. whilst walking). Other activities have specific goals – e.g. trust / confidence / self esteem building for indoor rock-climbing.
Pack up, clean up, drop off	Provides an opportunity to discuss the day's activities.

Source: Bridge Program Annual Report (2011); Bridge Program staff interviews and records.

However, some stakeholder raised concerns about aspects of the program's operation. These concerns related to the pick-up and drop-off arrangements and the program activities:

> *... the young person is picked up and dropped home at their door step – how does this enable a young person to develop self discipline to prepare them for attending mainstream schooling?* [BS1]

> *It can be seen as a baby-sitting service rather than an educational service. The activities are quite light-hearted and, although this is appropriate given the aims of the Bridge Program, I feel that the service could provide more practical activities, for example, writing resumes* [BS2].

However, from the feedback from the young people themselves across the three sites, the pick-up/drop-off arrangement was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of the program as being the most helpful, for example, 'I liked the pick-ups and drop-offs because I had time to get ready ...' [CY1] and 'Getting picked up and learning to get along with another young person' (was the best thing about the program) [BY1].

From the perspective of Bridge Program staff and coordinator, transport issues are a major barrier for these young people re-engaging in education: 'Don't let transport be a barrier' [AP1], along with other costs such as school uniforms and text books.

In the staff interviews it was also noted that there is a need for some flexibility with the program on a day-to-day basis – the small group programed-activities need to be responsive to the emotional and social context of young people on any given day, so the program could change on a daily basis depending on that context.

Although the small group program is generally up to 20 weeks, for one Guidance Officer this was a key advantage of the program: 'Bridge is longer term – other programs only run for the period of suspension' (generally up to 20 days) [BS3].

Overall, the Bridge Program is well structured, well thought-out and tailored to the needs and backgrounds of the young people participating. A strong emphasis is placed on the 'intentionality' behind program activities – that is, what is the intention or goal-to-be-achieved behind a particular activity.

2. Clearly stated philosophy and values system

The Bridge Program operates within a clearly stated philosophy and a clear set of four principles:

- Respect
- Honesty
- Safe and Legal
- Participation.

This is one of the strengths of the program. The program philosophy and principles have emerged through the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centres network experience in the provision of alternative education programs over many years. Edmund Rice Education (2005) note 'these principles represent broad directions for group practice and establish a common ethical framework which promotes appropriate learning and personal relationships' (p.6). The framework of principles is an alternative to a rules-based system of group management which has been alienating to the program's young people from their previous experience of suspension and exclusion from mainstream education.

An emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for the articulation of issues and their resolution:

> *The consequence of operating within a common ground set of principles is that all group participants, whether they be staff or students, are accountable for their behaviour. Within this framework emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for the articulation of issues and their resolution. Considerable time, sensitivity and skill are often required to allow for briefing, challenge and registration of on-going expectations* (ERE, 2005: 6).

In the interviews, staff continually stressed how the principles were used on a daily basis as a way of resolving issues and managing the small group program. All young people are introduced to the four principles at their initial interview and they are required to agree to work with the principles during the program.

However, at a program level, it was also acknowledged that 'this way of resolving issues is very challenging for both young people and staff' and that 'the Bridge Program is working with young people with complex needs and thus there needs to be some flexibility in the implementation of these principles' (Bridge Program Annual Report, 2011: 18). For example, one of the Bridge staff commenting on the use of the four principles stated: 'It's not what they always want to hear' [AP1]. Nevertheless, this framework of principles provides an important foundation for the consistent implementation of the program and beyond – as one staff member put it, 'these are guiding principles for life, not just school' [BP3].

3. Recognising the centrality of relationships and relationship-building

Through the interviews, all staff stressed the importance of building relationships with young people as a core component of the program, in particular, young people learning how to have a positive relationship with adults. Bridge stakeholders also emphasised that 'the relationship is the most important thing' in working with the Bridge young people and that one of the key strengths of the program is 'the staff capacity to build relationships with young people – this is critical' [AS3]. Other stakeholders from Youth Justice and Child Safety also highlighted the importance of the relationships between Bridge staff and the young people:

> *The relationships that have occurred between coordinators* [program staff] *and the children*[young people] *are really good. These relationships are very positive and great. The coordinators/leaders provide advice and mentoring to these young people* [BS2].

However, there was also a corresponding concern if staff move on and the disruption this causes to relationship-building.

Staff also recognised the challenges of establishing a relationship with some young people 'who are displaying challenging behaviours such as animal cruelty or embarrassing behaviours in a public setting' [AP2].

During 2011, the program has moved towards a 'lead worker' approach to build on the relationships between Bridge staff and individual young people. In the first 12 months, the program service delivery model entailed two staff delivering the small group program with the third staff member being responsible for transition support. This has now changed to an approach whereby all staff are involved in following up individual young people with whom they have formed a relationship during the small group program stage. Staff interviews indicated that this change in approach has been a positive development.

4. Quality, caring, committed staff who can engage well with young people with high and complex needs

Bridge Program staff are generally teachers with considerable previous experience of teaching in mainstream education settings. Youth workers are also on staff in both Townsville and Mt Isa as shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Staffing profile as at 30 June 2011

Deception Bay	3 x full-time teachers (2 female, 1 male)
Townsville	1 full-time teacher (female) 0.8 FTE teacher (female) 0.8 Aboriginal youth worker (male) 0.2 casual youth worker (male)
Mt Isa	1 full-time teacher (male) 1 full-time Aboriginal youth worker (female)

Both staff and stakeholders emphasised the value of some Bridge staff being teachers. For example, one Guidance Officer noted 'Bridge staff are teachers so they understand the issues for the school and the students' [BS3]. Generally, from the perspective of program staff, having a teaching background, while useful, is not necessarily essential – 'the emphasis is not on pedagogy but on relationship building' [BP2]. It was also acknowledged that it was important to have staff with a social work background.

One of the consequences of having predominately teachers in the program staffing mix is that no program activities are offered during the holiday periods between terms, particularly over the long break at the end of the year. This was identified as a problem in some sites as young people have nothing to do and often revert to old behaviour patterns. In Townsville, non-teaching staff are able to run other programs during holidays but at a much lower intensity.

Another issue is the availability of appropriate staff. As one staff member indicated: 'we need access to young, fit Indigenous males' who can work with the young people and be positive role models.

All staff indicated the importance of a team approach amongst the staff.

5. Research-informed program activities

This is an evolving part of the program's development. Staff indicated that the program is 'goal-informed' rather than necessarily 'research-informed' in that the program activities drive towards an overall goal for the young people involved. However, there is an increasing emphasis being placed on using a number of evidence-informed activities such as the Stop-Think-Do program, the Rock and Water program developed by Newcastle University and the MarteMeo program to support young people's social and emotional development.

Given the complex nature of the young people involved in the Program, staff are trialing ways of decreasing young peoples' anxiety on a daily basis – an attribute of young people who have experienced trauma and/or have disabilities and conduct disorders. Activities include visually displaying what is happening for the day and a timeframe, encouraging relaxation sessions, giving young people personal space to undertake worksheet activities, and repetitive eye/hand/sound coordination activities. In this regard, the Program is investigating recent neuroscience research to gain a better understanding of brain development in the 12 to 15 year age group.

It is clear that there is a considerable amount of practice wisdom underpinning the design of Bridge Program activities. This practice wisdom has been derived from many years of experience in Edmund Rice Education Youth + of developing and delivering flexible education programs.

6. Support, training and professional development for staff

Staff professional development and training has been a significant focus for the program since its inception. Over the period January 2010 to June 2011, Bridge Program staff have spent a total of 134.5 days in professional development and training activities. These activities have involved staff induction, child protection training, understanding issues for young people with high and complex needs, outdoor education training and first aid training, amongst others. Training has also been provided on evidence-based educational resources suitable for this target group, such as Stop-Think-Do.

There has also been a significant investment in all-staff reflection and planning meetings whereby staff from across all sites come together with the program coordinator and the Youth + Director to review and reflect on the program's progress, identify key lessons and adjust program settings accordingly. This provides an important opportunity to maintain consistency across the program while making adjustments for local conditions where appropriate.

In addition, external professional supervision has been made available to Bridge staff to enable them to improve practice and debrief particular challenging situations.

7. Small group numbers, low staff – young people ratios

As at 30 June 2011, there were four young people currently enrolled on the Bridge Program in Deception Bay and Mt Isa and seven in Townsville. Given the complexity of young people's needs and the barriers they face, the small numbers on the program at any one time is an important feature. As one staff member put it: 'it's important to have small numbers – the main thing we have to offer is individual attention and a relationship – small numbers enable young people to come to see us' [AP1].

Having small numbers is also important in terms of avoiding 'contagion effects' whereby there is a danger of bringing together young people with similar problem behaviours in such a way that the group reinforces the problem behaviours (Dishion & Dodge, 2005).

8. Young people-centred and individualised intervention plans involving youth workers and other support staff

One of the goals of the Bridge Program is to produce a Transition Plan (and/or re-engagement reports) for each young person to suit their individual needs and facilitate successful transition to education (Bridge Program Annual Report, 2011). The intention has been to develop these plans with stakeholders from other key agencies.

There have been some challenges in producing these reports consistently across all sites. In some cases, they can be quite sophisticated whilst in others there is a much stronger informality about the process. Some staff indicated that considerable time and resources are required to generate these reports and this can be onerous.

Nevertheless, it is clear that across each Bridge site, young people are monitored on an individual basis and in the process of transitioning to an educational institution (particularly a FLC) detailed information on each individual is shared with staff of the transitioning institution either through the written reports or verbally.

9. Clear standards and expectations of young people for communication and social interaction

The four principles underpinning the program provide a clear framework for setting out standards and expectations for the young people involved. As indicated above, the principles provide the basis for the management of individual and group behavior. They are used by staff on a daily basis to reflect with young people on particular incidents. As one staff member indicated: 'the principles are simple, so they need to be un-packed through daily conversations. The aim is for young people to internalize the principles' [BP1].

From the perspective of young people, several commented on perceived improvements in their social interaction as follows:

- 'I am learning to control myself and get along with other people, I tell myself "control". I sorted out stuff with another young person. [Bridge staff] helped me find my happy place to calm down' [BY4].

- '[I have got] a second chance at school and in life I suppose. Social skills, and my anger management skills have improved. I've got so many different ways to deal with things. It's been good because it has basically just been like a big family' [AY4].

10. Learning choices (curricula) that are engaging, interesting, applied to the real-world and uses multiple teaching strategies

As discussed above, an emphasis has been placed on developing a range of learning choices that 'expose young people to new experiences and give them an experience of success at something' [AP2].

Activities have been designed carefully to provide educational content. There are structured literacy and numeracy activities and, in addition, planning the day's food shopping involves a budget and a menu plan to incorporate everyday numeracy skills. Arranging outings in public facilities fosters community participation and a sense of citizenship. Providing healthy recreational pursuits is important as these young people often do not have access, for various reasons, to such activities. Both small-group and individual teaching strategies are used.

For young people with work-related goals, Bridge has been able to link them with TAFE and other employment support services. One Guidance Officer noted: 'skills for the workforce are important - even getting a Certificate 1 is good' [BS4].

11. Encouragement of young people to be actively involved in decision-making, goal setting and monitoring of progress

Within the framework of the four program principles, young people are encouraged to participate in negotiating and decision-making over program activities and settings. Young people are also actively involved in individual goal setting through the development of transition plans. Both staff and stakeholders indicated that an important part of the program model is that young people themselves chooses to be involved in the program.

12. Clear linkage to other professionals, community services and supports for young people

This is also an evolving aspect of the Bridge Program. Generally, in the early stages of Bridge Program, staff were not well connected to other agencies, with the focus being more on establishing the program in each site. There is now an increasing emphasis on developing better linkages to other services and supports for young people. One Guidance Officer noted: 'they [Bridge staff] got a young person to a psychologist far quicker than I could have' [BS3].

Given the high and complex needs of the young people participating in the Bridge Program, it is critical to have a range of other agencies involved. Clearly, the Bridge Program cannot be expected to deal with the full range of services and supports these young people need. This is particularly the case with issues such as alcohol and other drugs, mental health issues, trauma from previous physical and sexual abuse, conduct and behavioural disorders, housing, family violence.

In the interviews, all staff indicated that the improvements in working with other agencies had been important. As one staff member put it: 'we are now part of the youth providers in the area' and 'other agencies benefit – Bridge is sharing the load' [AP1]. In this regard, a number of staff indicated that it was important to have other staff with a social work background who knows the community services area.

A key strategy to improve linkages to other services is attending strategic interagency forums, in particular those with a case management focus. For example, in Townsville, Bridge staff have formed a closer working relationship with non-government service providers which has resulted in them being invited to case management meetings.

However, as one staff member noted: 'the demands of the program mean that some opportunities for networking cannot be taken up' [BP1].

Not surprisingly, the program has good links to the FLCs with whom they are co-located. This was consistently highlighted in all the FLC stakeholder interviews as well those with program staff. The FLCs are usually the most likely transition option for Bridge young people. In this regard, the program supports young people to build relationships with staff and students of the FLC (or other transition option) whilst still on the Bridge Program. As a result, some activities involve joint gatherings such as FLC Big Breakfast, shared art, music activities with FLC students on site, so that Bridge young people become familiar with the environment, the young people and some staff before enrolling at the school. However, it was noted that these joint activities were only undertaken when Bridge young people have the capacity to be in these environments in constructive ways.

Working with parents is also seen as an important aspect of the Bridge Program. Whenever possible, parents are involved in planning for the participation of their child in the program, and workers have ongoing contact with them. Often parents are very disadvantaged themselves and receive support from Bridge staff.

Overall, the improvement in linkages between the program and other services is an important development and one that should be strengthened in the near future. Ensuring a program staffing mix that allows for at least one social work position would help in this regard. The Bridge Program Annual Report (2011) indicates for the coming year: 'When there is staff turnover, take the opportunity to recruit an experienced social worker/psychologist to strengthen the staff team's linkage ability' (p. 25). This evaluation strongly endorses that proposal.

13. Clean, well-cared for, healthy physical settings

Generally, Bridge Program activities are undertaken in public places or using community facilities such as public parks, community halls, libraries, museums, amongst others. The rationale for this is that many of the young people cannot handle structured, classroom-like settings – 'the young people are generally not ready for a designated space' (such as a classroom) [BP1].

However, one staff member indicated that one of the challenges of the program was 'not having a space we call our own – we need a room of our own'. The use of public spaces such as libraries could be stressful with the public due to the behavior of some of the young people.

6. CONCLUSION

Table 9 below provides a summary of the assessment of the Bridge Program against the framework of components for effective alternative education. From this, three main possible improvements have been identified:

1. Consideration should be given to ensuring that at each site an experienced social worker or psychologist is employed as part of the staffing mix.
2. Efforts to develop stronger linkages between the Bridge Program and local community services and supports should be strengthened.
3. Consideration could be given to investing in further developing the research base for the program activities.

Overall, the Bridge Program is operating effectively. It has met enrolment targets, provides a quality program and positive outcomes for a very disadvantaged target group and in doing so, the Program provides good value for money.

Table 9: Summary assessment of Bridge Program against components of effective alternative education

Program component	Bridge Program assessment
1. Clear goals and a well structured, coordinated program	Overall, the Bridge Program is well structured, well thought-out and tailored to the needs and backgrounds of the young people participating.
2. Clearly stated philosophy and values system	Bridge has a clearly stated philosophy and value system based on the four principles of Respect, Honesty, Safe and Legal and Participation. These are used on a daily basis as a core part of the Program.
3. Recognising the centrality of relationships and relationship-building	Bridge staff have consistently emphasised the importance of the relationships they have developed with young people as a core part of the Program.
4. Quality, caring, committed staff who can engage well with young people with high and complex needs	Consideration should be given to ensuring that at each site an experienced social worker/psychologist is employed as part of the staffing mix.
5. Research-informed program activities	It is not clear to what extent program components are informed by a research base. They are informed by a substantial 'practice wisdom' and are strongly goal-focused.
6. Support, training and professional development for staff	Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth + has invested significant time and resources into staff professional development and training.
7. Small group numbers, staff – young people ratios	This is a strength of the Program.

8. Young people-centred and individualised intervention plans involving youth workers and other support staff	The small group numbers enables young people to receive significant individualised attention and support.
9. Clear standards and expectations of young people for communication and social interaction	The four principles at the core of the Program establish a set of clear standards in this regard.
10. Learning choices (curricula) that are engaging, interesting, applied to the real-world and uses multiple teaching strategies	Activities have been designed carefully to provide educational content that is applied in real-world settings.
11. Encouragement of young people to be actively involved in decision-making, goal setting and monitoring of progress	Within the framework of the four program principles, young people are encouraged to participate in negotiating and decision-making over program activities and settings.
12. Clear linkage to other professionals, community services and supports for young people	Generally, in the early stages of Bridge Program, staff were not well connected to other agencies. However, this has developed over time and should continue to be strengthened.
13. Clean, well-cared for, healthy physical settings	The Bridge Program operates in a number of community settings and facilities including, at times, Flexible Learning Centres.

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Appendix 1: Interview and Focus Group questions

- What are the key elements of the program model?
- Is the program operating in accordance with the service delivery framework?
- In your opinion, what are some of the key issues and challenges with the Bridge Program?
- What is the best aspect of the Bridge Program's current operation, and what are some of the problem aspects that should be addressed?
- Who do you consider the Bridge Program is suitable for?
- Are there any specific changes to the Bridge Program that you would like to see introduced?
- Have you experienced any barriers or difficulties for referral or assistance with young people with the Bridge Program?

- What has been the impact, if any, of the the Bridge Program for young people who have participated?
- What are the main forms of direct assistance provided to young people?
- What do you consider to be the main outcomes for young people participating in the Bridge Program?
- In your opinion, in what way, has the Bridge Program assisted young people who have participated? If the program has assisted young people, in what specific way? If it has not assisted young people, can you explain why you think this may have occurred?
- What are the benefits to stakeholders (management, staff and external agencies) of the program?
- What are the learning outcomes from the operation of the program to date and how could the program increase its capacity to achieve its objectives?