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Parliamentary Inquiry – Retaining Young People in Rural and Regional Towns & Communities

Submission from - Lead On Australia

Date - March 2006

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About Lead On Australia –

This submission is based on information, learning and research collected from our work in developing and implementing the Lead On program.

Lead On (established in late 1999) is a program that builds the capacity of a community through the development of young people and has been purpose-built to incorporate all sections of the community and to provide exposure for young people to real-life projects and community activities. The projects undertaken are diverse in nature and emanate from the local community and engage a broad cross section of people from business and community organisations representing and embracing business, education, local government, health & welfare, new innovations, new enterprises etc and all projects seek to enhance whole-of-community outcomes.

Younger people are the key clientele and Lead On's strength is that we welcome (and attract) young people from the entire youth sector and find ways to engage them with older people from the community. All Lead On projects and activities aim to integrate young people into the community, not segregate them or have them work in youth based silos. Lead On brings young people from diverse backgrounds together to work in real life projects and activities that will introduce them to older people from the community (particularly the business community). A key aim is to expose young people to what is possible in their community, provide them with real connections to their community and provide linkages that help attach them to their community.

Lead On Australia

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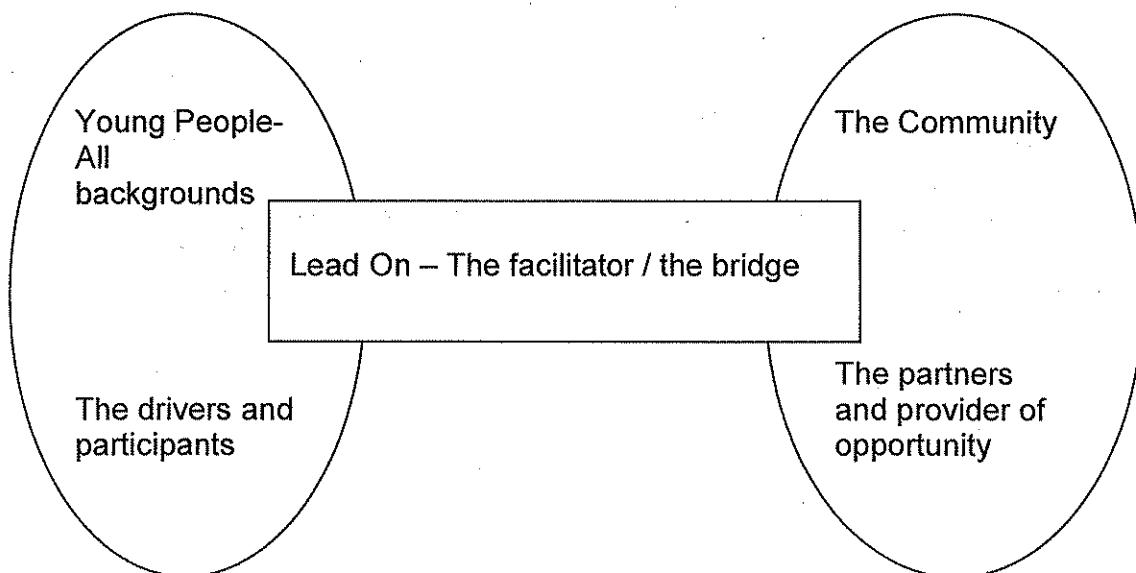
Bendigo Bank

The Model

Lead On Australia is a community building model - or community enterprise structure - designed to enable young people to engage and become involved in real life business and community activities with a dual objective to develop and broaden the range of skills and experiences for the young person and to involve older people and expose them to the value and role of young people in a community.

Mentoring & Role Models - Lead On develops mentors and role models for the young participants through the real-life projects and activity. These relationships develop organically and are based around mutual interest and an outcome based approach. We aim to avoid 'contrived' or structured mentor programs.

In brief, the Lead On Australia model is about gathering a diverse group of young people, developing a diverse range of real-life projects from the broader community (with an emphasis on the business community) and facilitating the outcomes. It is the activity and relationships from the activity that builds the connections and skills and confidence for the young people.



Lead On Australia was established in Bendigo, Victoria in late 1999 (as a result of community leaders seeking new ways of connecting and engaging young people and building more sustainable futures for regional areas) and by early 2006, more than 3200 young people have participated in over 640 real-life projects of varying types and through the 14 Lead On sites now established across Australia. 6 of these Lead On offices are in Victoria. Lead On sites are funded and driven by their communities and do not set out to be sustained by accessing prescribed Government funding grants. Local ownership is therefore genuine and ensures the projects and activities at each Lead On site are relevant to both the young people and the community.

In hours of community involvement, volunteering, up skilling and personal development, this equates to approximately 100,000 hours where these young people have been doing something to help both themselves and their community.

More than 250 of these young people have gained employment as a direct result of their Lead On participation and hundreds more found new mentors and role models from their communities and have been exposed to what is possible in their community.

Further details of the diversity of Lead On projects, participants, outcomes, values, activities and locations of Lead On centres can be accessed at www.leadon.com.au

1. Factors that influence young people to decide to remain in their home community.

Lead On has conducted various qualitative, quantitative and casual research with many of the young participants of the program. Combined with the empirical data, our aim has been to determine –

- (a) What attracts them to Lead On activity?
- (b) What impacts their participation/involvement has?
- (c) The potential broader community benefit from their Lead On involvement?

In brief, we have discovered the following –

The young people initially participate in the projects/activity and opportunities Lead On provides because they see a relevance in them – that is they will enjoy them (first criteria) and they see a future

benefit such as new skills, new friends, new networks and future jobs. The projects need to meet their needs, not be imposed on them. For example, if they have an interest in music or media and the project involves music/media – they will participate.

As they progress through the projects/activity they realise the other values such as sense of achievement, sense of community, sense of being valued as well as the skills and more obvious outcomes.

They often comment that “we didn’t know this was possible in this town”, “we didn’t realise there were so many switched on people in this town”, “we didn’t think that many people would be prepared to help us.”

They feel more validated, valued and start to see their community through fresh eyes.

Our feedback tells us that their view of their community subsequently changes. They have a more positive view – one great comment from some young Swan Hill people stated that “We won’t call it Swan Hole anymore – this is a better place than we thought”.

The result is a new desire to stay and participate and contribute to their community. Again, we have evidence of this attitude and desire. As one young person said recently “Why would I want to leave Bendigo? Look at the contacts and opportunities I have here now!”

In our opinion, young people who are connected to, valued by and feel part of their community have a strong desire to remain and be part of that community. Our recent Community Door program in Bendigo initially aimed to place 20 young people on local boards and committees – we placed 36 and the list continues to grow. The name Community Door came from young people saying “it is like opening the door to the community for us”. Young people want to be involved provided the opportunities are relevant and worthwhile and not imposed on them. Information regarding Community Door is available from the Lead On web site.

Communities can be the domain of only the “selected” older and wiser heads. When younger people are “allowed” to participate – it not only changes the dynamics of the community but the attitude and opinions of both the older and the younger. The Community Door program has provided many examples of this.

Therefore, our assessment is –

- If young people can be engaged and participate in activity that is relevant and worthwhile for them AND exposes them and engages them in their community they will feel better connected to it and more likely to want to stay and participate and contribute in the future.
- Their community is made up of people – when we say 'community' we want older people from the community to participate in the activity as well – this provides the emotional connection through relationships that are developed. This emotional connection can be very strong and a key driver in helping young people want to remain in their community.
- Activity needs to be real and involve people the young people would usually not have access to. It is a big deal to a young person to actually be part of an activity where they meet business or community people.

2. Factors that influence young people to return to their home community.

Many young people need to leave their community for a variety of reasons – employment and study are two major factors. However, thanks to some of the outcomes previously mentioned, more young people can be exposed to employment opportunities available for them that were previously unaware of, and this can lead to further retention of young people in regional communities. And improving access to tertiary education in the regions has improved opportunities for more young people.

Lead On Australia has never set out to keep young people in their community –or put a fence around it to keep them in – our aim has been to expose them to what is possible locally and also grow their desire to do things and contribute and aspire to contribute.

However, our feedback has proven that even young people who need to leave their community for education or specialist employment – aim and aspire to return when they can because they feel they have networks and connections and want to be part of their community.

Our response to this is similar to the previous comments – if young people are engaged in worthwhile activity that connects them to their community and people in it – then they are more likely to want to return to it as they get older.

3. Developing strategies and recommendations to further assist youth retention in regional and rural areas.

There are a number of strategies or initiatives we believe are possible and valuable to address youth retention in regional and rural areas.

Obviously we consider Lead On is one successful approach to achieving these outcomes. However, Lead On cannot be in every community but the model and approach can be adopted or modified to suit a variety of regional and rural communities.

Organisations that have the charter or desire to work with and around young people should be encouraged to find ways to engage young people in the following type of activity –

- Projects or activity that provides opportunities for young people to work along side or be exposed to older people in their community – with an emphasis on the business community.
- Projects or activities need to be real- not tokenistic. They should be driven by the community and the young people – not forced “down a line”.

In addition, we believe the following are points for consideration.

- People working in the youth sector should be encouraged or trained to find ways to integrate young people from all backgrounds – not predictable groups of young people “with issues” who end up being placed in prescribed programs that have groups of similar types of young people working on something that does not interest them and in isolation from the broader community. This approach builds silos and does not expose young people to other groups of young people nor the broader and older community.
- Older people from the communities need to be given ideas and ways to involve and engage younger people – we know older people are willing – they need support and encouragement to be able. Not everyone is suitable as a mentor – but to find simple ways of engaging older people and letting them evolve into being genuine mentors is a successful approach. Contrived mentoring programs often don't work – for a variety of reasons – there needs to be environments created where older people and younger people can find some ground and let natural relationships develop. Giving the older and younger people a real life activity to work on can be a good approach.

- Local Government is not always the best place to drive youth focussed programs out of. It is often not high on the priority list.

Lead On aims to be an aspirational model. That is, to present opportunities to young people that can inspire them and give them something to aspire to – one great aspiration we have witnessed is the desire to stay or return to their home community and be part of its success.

There are many other ideas and we would be happy to discuss some of these as required.

We also appreciate the opportunity to submit these thoughts and that this inquiry is being held. There is no doubt that young people – the next generation – are indeed the future for these communities and we all have a role to inspire them to aspire for something good for themselves and their communities – only by being pro-active and innovative will we find solutions and opportunities for our younger people and the regional and rural communities that are such a vital component of Victoria.



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