



Youth Conversations Research Report

Prepared for Beyond the Bell Great South Coast
by Deakin University



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Front cover: Priscilla Du Preez, Unsplash

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands in the Great South Coast region of Victoria and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land, and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders. We respectfully acknowledge young people who participated in Youth Conversations who identify as Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nation people.



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Youth Affairs
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Executive Summary

Youth Conversations was a research initiative of Beyond the Bell, a community organisation that seeks to alleviate relative disadvantage that is disproportionately experienced by children and young people living in the Great South Coast region of Victoria. During 2019 and 2020, the Youth Conversations initiative involved over 700 young people between the ages of 12 and 19 living in six local government areas (LGAs) across the Great South Coast of Victoria: Colac Otway, Corangamite, Glenelg, Moyne, Southern Grampians and Warrnambool. It offered a forum whereby Great South Coast young people could articulate their thoughts and expectations about education, training and future employment. The young people were also invited to talk about how they connected with local community and how these communities could better meet the needs of young people.

The overarching question guiding Youth Conversations was: **what matters to young people living in the Great South Coast region with regards to education, training, employment and community?**

Summary of key findings

The summary of key findings that follows brings together young people's responses to the surveys and the focus groups. The body of the report contains the LGA-specific breakdowns of the data from which our learnings about what matters to Great South Coast young people come about. These learnings are presented as three strands addressing the six research questions guiding the research. Note that the research started with questions one to four. Questions five and six were added in response to the COVID-19 pandemic after the online surveys were complete.

Strand One is *Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes*. This strand specifically addresses the two research questions examining:

- What events/activities do you participate in that make you feel **connected to your community**?
- What do you want your **community** to look/feel like?

Strand Two is *Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future*. This strand specifically addresses the two key research questions examining:

- What do young people want their near future to look like in terms of **education** and **employment**?
- What would help young people stay in school and pursue training/employment **in the region**?

Strand Three is *Changes brought about by the pandemic and learnings from them*. This final strand addresses the two questions introduced to the research during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- What has changed for you since the **COVID-19 pandemic**? How have you adapted to the pandemic?
- What have you have **learned about yourself and others** during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Strand One: Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes

Young people across all LGAs expressed a very strong connection to their local communities through common sources of livelihood and their engagement in local activities such as team sports, arts and cultural events, festivals, volunteering, and active participation in community groups. However, while young people across the region frequently identified that regional events were working well in their communities, this was not evenly distributed, and many reported a desire to see access to more events locally, and better coordination and communication associated with these events. They noted that access to adequate transport, road infrastructure and prohibitive transport costs frequently prevented them from engaging in training opportunities, employment, community events and festivals.

Young people reported becoming more aware of the role played by school and education in keeping them connected to their community during the pandemic lockdowns and periods of remote learning which prevented them from connecting with peers and teachers. Yet young people who are seeking a vocational pathway often do not feel supported by their schools and communities, reporting that their choices are judged as inferior. This contributes to feeling disconnected from school and, in some cases, 'getting into trouble'. Many young people reported feeling connected to their local community yet compelled to leave in pursuit of travel, education and employment. They indicated a need for more suitable education, training and employment opportunities in the region to enable them to stay or, if this was not possible, return. This was highlighted in a focus group with young Aboriginal people who emphasised that a pathway to returning to the Great South Coast region was crucial for maintaining connection to Country, family and culture.

Young people consistently expressed a desire for their communities to be more inclusive, more diverse, and less judgemental of difference. They voiced the bittersweet dilemma arising from a tight-knit community's intolerance to less 'conservative views' and racism. Members of the LGBTQI+ community expressed they did not always feel safe in their community. Youth Conversations data indicated that youth experiences of negative social relations could be reduced by addressing discrimination, conservative attitudes towards life choices, lack of safety in the community, and perceived risks such as crime, poor roads and transport infrastructure, and street lighting. On the flipside, positive social relations could be strengthened through more youth-focused organisations, free or affordable activities, and better resources and infrastructure in their community. The dual action of reducing young people's experiences of negative social relations while enhancing positive social relations through school and community connectedness is a critical factor for wellbeing and mental health of young people, especially in the pandemic recovery period (Cahill et al., 2020; DET, 2018; Laurence, 2019).

Strand Two: Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future

Young people consistently reported the quality of programs offered by the schools in their local community was inconsistent. This meant that not all young people had an equal opportunity to access a quality education. Some young people also identified limited access to transport as a barrier to their participation in educational opportunities involving vocational and workplace learning.

Those interested in a vocational or applied learning pathway consistently reported feeling judged in their school and wider community for not studying for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and they often felt they were studying an inferior option. Young people voiced strong views about the need for their schools to provide a range of programs that were more relevant to their pathway interests and employment options beyond school, noting that they would be more motivated to stay at school if they felt it was more relevant to their future, and they would also be less likely to get into trouble. They consistently reported a desire for their teachers to use teaching approaches that would be more hands-on and give their learning increased meaning and enjoyment. They frequently expressed the view that they need much better career advice that would help them make more informed decisions about their possible transitions to further study and employment beyond school, suggesting the need for schools in their community to work more closely together to offer greater diversity of programs in their community. To this end they identified some excellent examples of learning programs that cultivated the motivation to learn by connecting school learning to young people's engagement, interests and workplaces in their communities (such as the Country Fire Authority).

Young people expressed a desire for their community to recognise a greater diversity of pathway interests to be celebrated as a successful education outcome, with a particular emphasis on celebrating the equal success of vocational pathways rather than overemphasising the VCE. However many young people still expressed a strong desire to complete a successful VCE and to pursue a higher education at university, often envisioning attending a university in Melbourne because it offered the opportunity to experience life in a large city, and a pathway to employment not available to them at home. Those who wished to achieve an excellent Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score consistently expressed a concern that the teachers in their school were spending too much time trying to help struggling students and had insufficient time to support their desire to achieve excellence in their VCE. Despite the perceived focus on struggling students, some young people reported that their school did not provide well for students with special needs and a differing range of abilities.

Strand Three: Changes brought about by the pandemic and learnings from them

The pandemic impacted young people significantly with many reporting a strong feeling of being mentally down and pessimistic about the future. The lack of opportunity to connect with peers and participate in the events that connect them to their communities made it particularly difficult for students living alone or in challenging domestic circumstances such as a parent with a mental health condition. Young people frequently reported that they did not respond well to remote learning arrangements that were put in place during the periods of lockdown, with some finding it unmotivating and limited because of lack of social interactions. Others noted that there was unequal access to the technology, resources and essential help they needed to participate effectively in remote learning.

The silver lining to this was that young people frequently reported a new appreciation for the role played by school in keeping them connected and expressed that they particularly missed the social connections provided by school and other socially engaging contexts in their community. A few students also reported they responded positively to online learning, becoming much more focused on their schooling, and achieving levels of success in their study they did not previously believe they could achieve. Some young people reported becoming closer to their families because they spent more time together during the pandemic.

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Nine key recommendations

Strand One



1: Strengthen and expand innovative programs linking community engagement and education provision.



2: Identify specific areas of impact created by young people's limited transport and technology access.



3: Strengthen and expand programs to make communities safer and more inclusive places for everyone.

Strand Two



4: Strengthen careers and pathways advice for young people.



5: Strengthen teachers' and school leaders' understanding of applied and vocational learning approaches and pathways.



6: Strengthen community understanding of applied and vocational learning.



7: Develop and advocate for the region's unique place-based model for senior secondary education provision.

Strand Three



8: Support young people, teachers and schools with trauma-sensitive learning approaches.

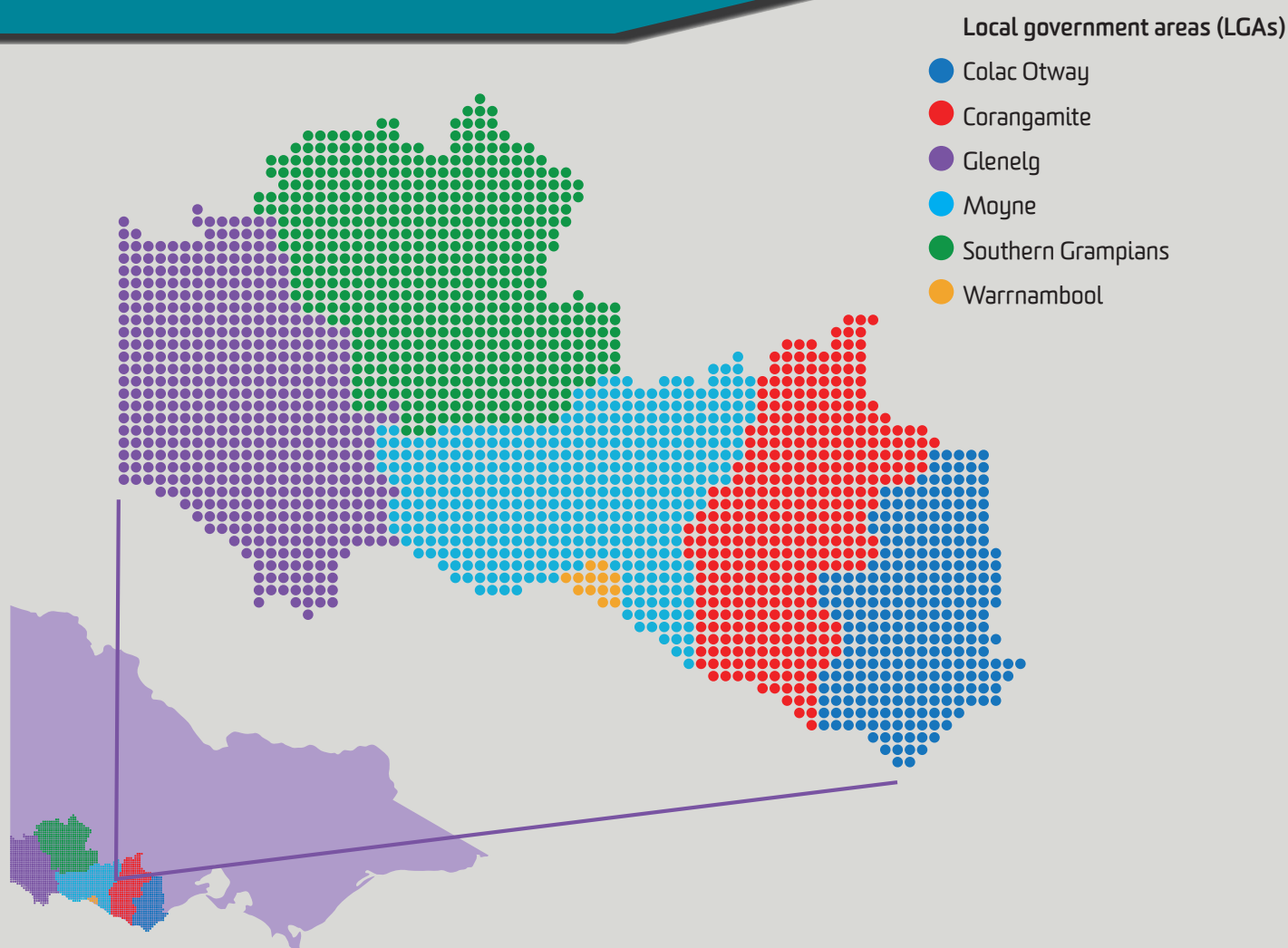


9: Advocate for sustained region-wide targeted support for young people whose educational progress has been impacted significantly by the pandemic.

Beyond the Bell and the Great South Coast Region

“One important role for BtB has been to better understand the stories of young people living and being educated in Southwest Victoria. To this end, more than 620¹ young people shared their needs and ideas for the region gathered by a regional team and 16 trained Youth Facilitators in the Youth Conversations Project.”

Message from the Chair
p. 6 of the 2020 Beyond the Bell Community Report Card



1. The actual figure was 711; 620 was the total at 30 June 2020, when the Community Report Card was published (see Table 1: Participants per local government area for details).

About Youth Conversations

Beyond the Bell is a community organisation committed to enabling Great South Coast young people to succeed. To help make this a reality, Beyond the Bell engaged local expertise to gather evidence that will inform future work priorities and the organisation's strategic plan. The purpose of the Youth Conversations initiative is to provide accounts of how young people aged 12–19 years across the six local government areas (LGAs) of the Great South Coast region connect to their communities and are enabled or constrained in their experiences of education, training and finding fulfilling employment.

Aims of Youth Conversation

The broad aim of Youth Conversations is to better understand what connects young people to their communities, the barriers they face in terms of education, training and pathways to employment, and to capture potential 'solutions' to identified issues. More specifically, Youth Conversations sought to conduct a comprehensive survey of young people living in regional Victorian towns and communities to find out their perceptions of what is important in relation to access, participation and/or attainment in:

- Education
- Training
- Employment
- Community

The anticipated outcomes of the research include:

- Creating opportunity for young people to express views on what matters
- Identifying what matters to the youth population of Great South Coast
- Involving and building capacity of youth facilitators to engage in research
- Connecting youth facilitators with community concerns
- Recommending strategies for addressing what matters to young people
- Developing a report that informs local youth organisations seeking to support youth access / participation / attainment in education, training, employment and community

Significance

As a flagship research initiative of Beyond the Bell and partner organisations,² Youth Conversations contributes to a research-informed, place-based understanding of what matters to young people growing up on Victoria's Great South Coast. This will inform an element of the strategic direction of Beyond the Bell's work in 2021–2023. It is intended that this research will also assist youth organisations and communities located in the Great South Coast to become more responsive to the needs of young people who are living in the region. It is anticipated that greater responsiveness to youth needs will create opportunities for young people growing up in regional Victoria to experience better life outcomes.

Geographical context

The geographical context of young people has long been acknowledged as a factor contributing to the inequity of educational 'outcomes' (Thompson, 2000). More recently, the degree to which geography influences school attainment has been demonstrated by research which maps NAPLAN data indicating relative performance of a school's students onto school location. In one such study, conducted in Victoria, Smith et al. (2019, p. 147) found, "Town size, remoteness, geographic location, proximity to the coast, and community particularities such as connection with, for example, the tourist industry are relevant to NAPLAN results, reinforcing the idea that the spatial dimension of schools' NAPLAN results is more than just socio-economic." The place where a student lives has a direct influence on school attainment and access to post-school education, training and employment opportunities. Young people in the Great South Coast continue to experience the combined effect of relatively low levels of Year 12 and equivalent attainment rates (56–65% across the region) and relatively high youth unemployment (14–15%). The relatively low attainment rates impact health outcomes, the local economy and future workforce development.

Exposure to relative social and economic disadvantage adds an additional layer of complexity to the lived realities of Great South Coast young people – with some being affected to a greater degree than others. The Australian Bureau of Statistics *Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas* (SEIFA) can be used to indicate relative social and economic disadvantage of LGAs in the region, placing Colac Otway (SEIFA 961) and Glenelg (SEIFA 947) in the second most disadvantaged quintile in Australia. While the other LGAs fare comparatively

2. Youth Conversations research design was informed by the Lighthouse Project (www.gslp.com.au), a similar project conducted in Greater Shepparton, Victoria.

better, with Corangamite (SEIFA 977) and Warrnambool (SEIFA 986) sitting in the middle and Southern Grampians (SEIFA 992) and Moyne (SEIFA 1016) moving into the second most advantaged quintile, pockets of disadvantage exist throughout all LGAs in the Great South Coast (ABS 2016 statistics compiled by .id consulting, 2021) with certain postcodes of Youth Conversation participants representing some of the most disadvantaged areas in Victoria. And, although we are cautious about reproducing deficit discourses of 'youth disadvantage' and 'struggling communities of the Great South Coast', the implication of space, place and time in achieving socially just education for the young people growing up in the region must be acknowledged (Comber, 2021). The varied and unique geographical contexts of each LGA in the Great South Coast, each educational setting within the LGA, and each young person that shares their lived reality in Youth Conversations needs to be considered to ensure that our account of what matters to young people in the region does not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities nor overly simplify the complexity of daily life. Thompson (2000, p. 158) argues that to achieve this (or attention to 'thisness'), we can look for patterns – common data stories – about the challenges faced by a particular community while simultaneously accounting for how the local, contingent and specific social relations and policy practices coalesce to produce a given situation.

Policy context

Youth Conversations comes at a moment in time when several important state government policies related to young people's lives are either under review or being developed. These can be divided into two strands – broadly reflecting the first two of the three strands of inquiry followed in this project. The first is to do with community connectedness and promoting wellbeing in a post-pandemic climate. The second is to do with vocational education, training and pathways to employment.

Young people's connectedness to school and community

Some interesting intersections between school, community, connectedness and wellbeing emerged from the conversations that were had with Great South Coast youth. What was discussed in the focus groups resonated with existing Victorian state government policy (DET, 2018) and associated literature (see e.g. Cahill et al., 2020 and Laurence, 2019) which has found connectedness to school and local community to be a significant protective factor for young people's wellbeing.

The fostering of positive relationships for young people is a key component of creating the conditions for connectedness as positive relationships are "significantly associated with increased 'school connectedness' and with cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement" (DET, 2018, p. 8). Positive social relations and increased connectedness are also associated with positive health, wellbeing and academic outcomes (DET, 2018). In the context of the Great South Coast region, this highlights the need to listen and respond to what young people are saying about how they want their local communities to be improved. It also highlights the vital role played by local organisations that advocate for young people and facilitate youth friendly events, services and transport options. This is pertinent during the pandemic recovery period especially given that "Arts, sports and leisure programmes can be used post disaster to provide young people with a voice and an opportunity to enhance connectedness and relationships" (Cahill et al., 2020, p. 25).

The need for frequent and varied opportunities to experience positive social relations comes at a time in Australia when young people are becoming increasingly aware of the discriminatory practices in their communities. The 2020 Mission Australia Youth Survey (Tiller et al., 2020a) reported that young people are encountering discrimination now more than ever before in Australia, noting that "For the first time, equity and discrimination is the top national issue for young people, increasing by more than 60 per cent since last year" then adding that "More than one quarter of young people reported being unfairly treated in the past year, most commonly due to their gender and race/cultural background" (Mission Australia, 2020). There is a strong need to address this barrier to connectedness, to create what Coffey (2020) calls the conditions of possibility for wellbeing. Strengthening positive social relations and increased connectedness must be accompanied by a reduction in young people's experiences of negative social relations because negative social relations weaken young people's subjective wellbeing to a greater degree than it is strengthened by positive social relations (Laurence, 2019).

Vocational education, training and pathways to employment

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a cornerstone of vocational education in the state, became:

“one of the key strategies that aimed to offer young people a broader educational experience. In particular, developing a personal development programme stream that was youth-centred and built upon young people’s education and employment connections was seen as an innovative component.”
(Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 212)

Yet VCAL has struggled to contend with poor levels of community understanding and broader levels of commitment. A decade ago KPMG concluded:

“There is a need for systemic change in the way that the Victorian education system responds to this group of children or young people, and recognises that no one school/provider can achieve this degree of a change alone.” (KPMG 2010, as cited by Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 215).

More recently the Firth Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling found that separate vocational and academic senior secondary programs served to unnecessarily define students in deficit terms, “exaggerate difference” and “reinforce outdated stereotypes and dichotomies of academic versus vocational learning, theoretical versus applied learning” (DET, 2020, p. 42).

The Firth Review is the first stage of the Victorian government’s significant vocational education and applied learning pathways reform agenda and, as such, has the potential to have an important impact on the lives of secondary school students living in the Great South Coast who wish to pursue a vocational pathway to employment. A key recommendation made in the review is to replace the existing, standalone VCAL by better integrating applied learning and vocational educational within the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The Victorian government’s response (State Government of Victoria, 2021) to the Firth Review includes the following two excerpts:

“The Victorian Government has accepted in principle all of the review’s recommendations. They provide a set of transformative reforms that will:

- *lift the quality and perception of vocational education*
- *help more students access high-quality programs, and*
- *provide students with a vocational pathway that gives them the skills they need to move successfully into further training and jobs”*

“The move to a single certificate will happen in stages. The first is the creation of a new vocational specialist pathway within the VCE, with the first cohort of students starting the new certificate in 2023. The next stage will create a fully integrated senior secondary certificate by 2025.”

Given that vocational education and employment pathways emerged as a very strong theme in the Youth Conversations data, the Firth Review, and the subsequent vocational reforms to VCE is significant to the lives of young people living in the Great South Coast region. This is coupled with the Macklin Report into the future skills for Victoria’s growing economy and pandemic recovery – another policy document released in 2020. Of the 30 recommendations listed in the Macklin (2020) report, the following areas for reform have particular relevance, and should be considered in the context of the young people’s voices and discussions related to the Great South Coast’s vocational education and employment pathways:

- *“Establish a strong institutional base for a more collaborative skills system that can deliver the training requirements Victoria needs*
- *Build and share an evidence and data base that can support improved planning and decision making*
- *Begin development of an annual Victorian Skills Plan that sets out Victoria’s skills needs for the year ahead and beyond*
- *Encourage specialised labs with a focus on emerging industries, commencing with the Clean Economy, Care Economy and Digital Economy*
- *Strengthen on-the-ground support available to local learners and businesses*
- *Develop and share excellent curriculum and improve professional learning for VET practitioners.”*
(State Government of Victoria, 2019)

Together these reports provide a Victorian level overview of the pressing need and recommendations for systemic reform in education and training – especially for young people who do not see themselves forging a university style post-secondary pathway. However, while the Firth Review and Macklin Report provide a comprehensive analysis of the state of vocational education, training and employment across Victoria, they do not speak to how these connect with local community, local schools and local youth. Youth Conversations provides a place-based mechanism to make these connections more visible and examine the material difference these make to the lived realities of the young people who participated in the research.

Aspiration and policy discourse

At this point we add a cautionary note regarding ‘aspirations’ and ‘raising aspirations’ discourse that has been prevalent in policy and is sometimes put forward as a solution to low participation of disadvantaged groups of people in higher education. Discussions of ‘raising aspirations’ imply that a single standard that can be applied to all young people exists, regardless of social, material, cultural and geographical circumstances. For example, the standard that Great South Coast young people are expected to meet is the standard created for metropolitan, middle class Australians who ‘aspire’ to go to university. Much is written about the problem of ‘overcoding’ young people with a neoliberal discourse rooted in middle class, metropolitan aspirations of sandstone universities. Not only does the practice of ‘aspiration raising’ risk becoming another form of ‘blaming the victim’, it also masks the understanding that “the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004) is not equally distributed and that the young person’s sociocultural context and the availability of information are key in understanding patterns of participation” (Harrison, 2018, p. 3). Moreover, empirical research indicates that communities that have low participation rates in higher education do not lack aspiration at all (see Harrison, 2018, for a more detailed overview of these studies). The Youth Conversations data also corresponds with this, showing that young people in the Great South Coast aspire to follow a range of career pathways from becoming a police officer to entering the medical profession.

Instead of emphasising aspirations, it is suggested that expectations – including expectations that a particular aspiration would likely come to pass – have a greater correlation with participation in higher education (Harrison, 2018). Shifting focus from aspiration to expectation is a move that opens up the conversation about participation in higher education, making it possible to think about it in terms of the complex interplay of structural inequality and individual circumstance, without ‘responsibilising’ the individuals involved. Quality co-designed research aiming to compose ethical (e.g. response-able) interventions that have the potential to shift expectations of participating in higher education is warranted.

Organisational context

Beyond the Bell is a not-for-profit organisation working across the Great South Coast to serve young people who live in South West Victoria. It is based on principles of collective impact and advocating for a community-wide approach to improve outcomes for young people with a focus on educational attainment. In contrast to other models of cooperation such as public–private partnerships, social sector networks or funder collaborations, collective impact initiatives can be understood as:

“long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.”
(Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39)

Beyond the Bell and its partner organisations are working towards improving post-school outcomes for children and young people by cultivating a culture of continuous improvement and eliminating the disparities that create barriers to educational attainment and employment in the region. The measure of success will be:

Young people in the Great South Coast will attain Year 12 or equivalent at the same rate, or higher, than their metropolitan peers by 2030.

An element of Beyond the Bell’s work lies in their support of Local Action Groups that advocate for change. These groups need evidence, such as that produced through Youth Conversations, to strengthen their advocacy work. As stated in the 2020 report card, the ultimate aim of Beyond the Bell is to lead a cultural shift in the way communities and service providers work to support Great South Coast young people. Beyond the Bell has listed a series of 76 medium- to long-term indicators under four strategic priorities that will guide and be used to measure the impact of their efforts to make a shift in culture (Beyond the Bell, 2020). The Youth Conversations project sits within the ‘Engagement with Learning’ and ‘Disadvantaged Children/Young People’ strategic priorities for 2021–2023. The foci and intended outcomes these strategic priorities relate to are (1) supporting children and young people to become more connected and engaged in education and learning from kindergarten to VCE or equivalent; (2) supporting young people to realise their aspirations by ensuring they have greater access to visible pathways to education, training and employment, particularly within the region; (3) increasing young people’s access to and attainment of VCE or equivalent; and (4) better preparing young people for the transition into a post-school pathway of work or further study/training, particularly in the region.

In this project, Beyond the Bell partners with advocacy groups and support networks respectively (Youth Affairs Council Victoria, Brophy Family and Youth Services and the Glenelg Southern Grampians Local Learning Employment Network). It also cooperated with educational institutions (Deakin University, South West TAFE) and government bodies (Australian Government, State Government of Victoria, Department of Education and Training Victoria, and Regional Partnerships Great South Coast).

The Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate for young people and the youth sector in Victoria. Its vision is “that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities” by elevating voices, promoting solutions, building capacity, nurturing connections and advancing thinking (Youth Affairs Council, n.d.). YACVic has provided funds and in-kind contributions such as recruitment of youth facilitators, facilitation training by qualified staff, and project steering representation in the Project Control Group.

Brophy Family and Youth Services provides “community based services that promote a just society and improve the life circumstances for people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged, especially those who are experiencing homelessness, family violence, marginalisation or disconnectedness” (Brophy Family and Youth Services, n.d.). Their contribution included funds and in-kind support by providing their expertise in youth engagement, the recruitment of youth facilitators, youth engagement training, and assistance in data collation, analysis and project steering representation in the Project Control Group.

The **Glenelg Southern Grampians Local Learning Employment Network**, founded in 2002, is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to advance education, training and employment outcomes for people aged between 10 and 19 years in the LGAs of Glenelg and Southern Grampians. Its in-kind contribution to the project included the support of the recruitment of prospective participants, the provision of venues to meet, and representation in the Project Control Group.

Deakin University, a higher education provider with a regional campus in Warrnambool, provided funds and assisted with in-kind support such as the recruitment of students facilitating the focus group discussions. Deakin provided the final report including the analysis of data obtained through the focus groups (face to face and online) and the online survey. It also provided venues to hold meetings, supported the project with promotional activities, and participated in the Project Control Group.

In addition, **government bodies** and **Regional Partnerships Great South Coast** provided funds; **South West TAFE** participated in the Project Control Group; the local **Department of Education and Training** provided a representative who participated in the Project Control Group; and a **youth representative** from community participated in the Project Control Group.



Photo credit: Anggun Tan, Unsplash

Methodological Approach

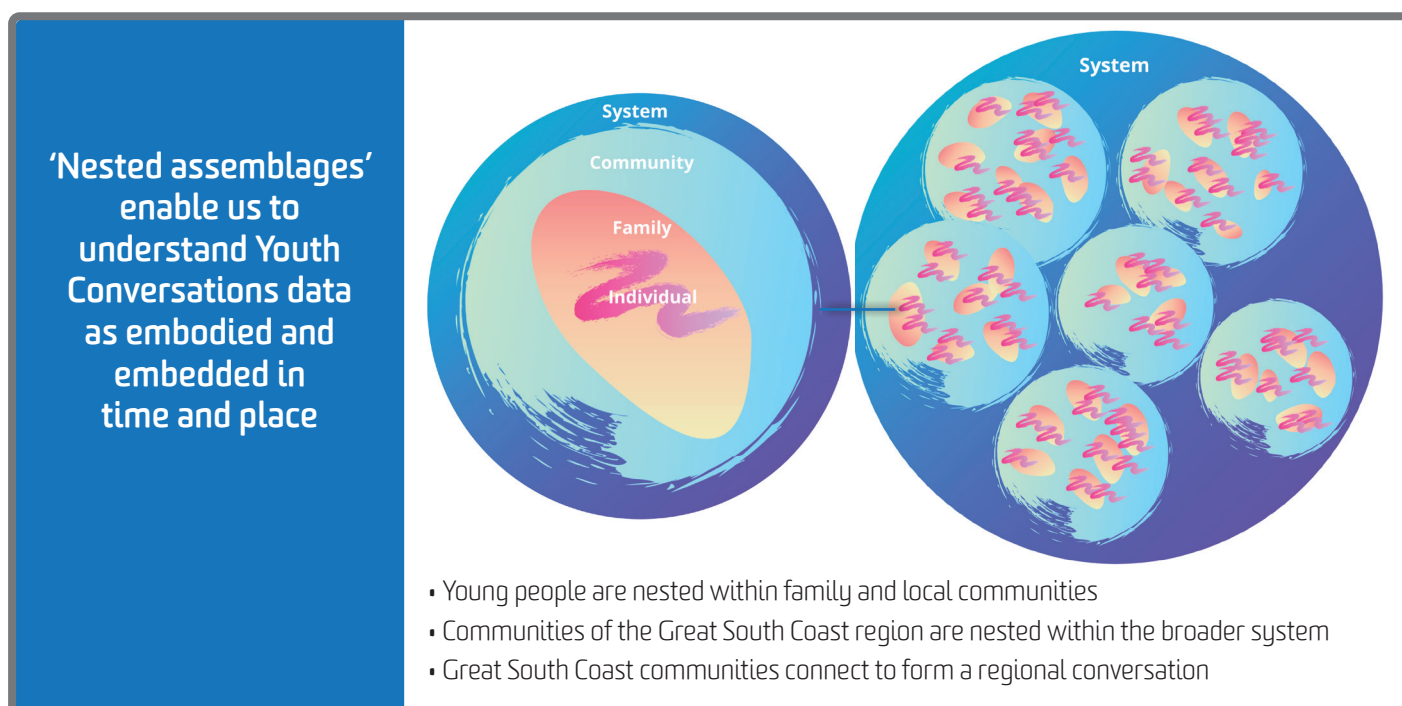
Youth Conversations takes up a multi-method approach. A quantitative approach was adopted for conducting an online survey to provide insight into the broader patterns of experience both within and across the six LGAs involved. A qualitative approach was adopted for the in-person and online focus group sessions, which were designed to create the opportunity for young people to articulate their experiences of education, training, employment and connection to their local community. While the quantitative data collection and analysis enables the common stories (or patterns) in the data to emerge, the qualitative data collection enables an understanding of the local, contingent and specific. The corresponding research design aligns with Beyond the Bell's recent Measuring Impact Framework (Nagorcka-Smith, 2020) which outlines the argument for conducting research that is simultaneously designed to understand the 'big picture trends' while attuning to the complexity of everyday experiences of social, geographical and educational inequity.

Conceptual lens

The methodological approach and analysis of Youth Conversations data is framed relationally (Fenwick et al., 2011; Hickey et al., 2021). The likes of educational attainment, pathways to employment and community connectedness are understood not as things possessed but as processes of engagement arising in everyday experiences involving a myriad of social and material interactions (Coffey, 2020).

Within this relational framing, the individual, family and local communities are taken to be *nested* within the broader society which, in the context of Youth Conversations, is heavily influenced by Victorian government policy discussed in the policy context section of this report. The idea of nesting can be approached through the concept of 'nested assemblages' (Roppola et al., 2019), which is useful when thinking about how young people live in a range of dynamic and multi-scalar networks (see Figure 1). This enables us to approach the Youth Conversations research and the experiences of the young people participating in it as both embodied and embedded in their local settings. It also prompts consideration of how the specific family, school, community and local government context of each young person living on the Great South Coast of Victoria currently shapes their daily realities.

Figure 1: Visualisation of nested assemblages



What matters to young people living in the Great South Coast region with regard to education, training, employment and community?

The implications of adopting the idea of nested assemblages as a lens through which to look at the relations between young people, families, schools, communities and systems are three-fold. First, it enables young people's lives to be understood as entangled with family, school, transport options, access to services, local community, geographical location, state policy, local and global events and more. Second, it positions social change as a complex process contingent on certain conditions of possibility. Third, it resists 'responsibilising' young people and does not seek to place the onus of change on them or their families.

Data collection and analysis

Beyond the Bell wanted to know:

What matters to young people living in the Great South Coast region with regard to education, training, employment and community?

To find out what mattered, 1000 Great South Coast youth from six LGAs were invited to engage in Youth Conversations in one of three ways: they could return an online survey, they could participate in an in-person focus group, or (after the COVID-19 outbreak in Victoria) they could participate in an online focus group conducted via Zoom (the popular video conferencing platform). The recruitment process was initiated and organised by Beyond the Bell and its partners. They made announcements and provided information about the research on their websites and relevant social media channels. In addition, local newspapers and radio stations announced project details. Local Action Groups across the region also made announcements. The in-person and online focus groups were co-facilitated by young people (19–25 years) from the area who received specific training and support from Beyond the Bell to do so. The intention behind employing young people to do this fieldwork was to build capacity of youth facilitators living in the Great South Coast to engage in research while providing a mechanism to connect them with community concerns. The youth co-facilitators were supported by a project officer who was present during the in-person and online focus groups.

The online survey collected information related to a participant's age, postcode, gender identity, country of birth, living arrangements, current year level at school or higher education, employment situation, and identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The person filling in the survey was then invited to provide a short comment on four key questions that guided the data collection. These were:

1. What events/activities do you participate in that make you feel **connected to your community**?
2. What do you want your near future to look like in terms of **education and employment**?
3. What would help young people stay in school and pursue training/employment **in the region**?
4. What do you want your **community** to look/feel like?

The focus groups were also structured by these four questions, with comments recorded by the focus group co-facilitators in situ onto an Excel spreadsheet along with facilitator reflections and the demographic information pertaining to the individuals participating in the focus group. These groups were held in-person in local LGAs. However, due to the COVID-19 restrictions on social gatherings in Victoria in 2020, the final 14 focus groups were conducted online,

Table 1: Participants per local government area (LGA)

	Colac Otway	Corangamite	Glenelg	Moyne	Southern Grampians	Warrnambool	TOTAL
Targeted total no. of participants per LGA	175	130	160	135	130	270	1000
Engagement via online survey	35	26	66	20	31	61	239*
Engagement via face-to-face focus groups	112 (7 focus groups)	71 (13 focus groups)	111 (11 focus groups)	35 (5 focus groups)	14 (3 focus groups)	57 (6 focus groups)	400
Engagement via online focus groups (Term 3/2020)**	5	2	27	11	7	18	72***
Total participants per LGA	152	99	204	66	52	136	711***
% of target delivered	87%	76%	127%	49%	40%	51%	71%

Notes:

* While 288 participants initially commenced the survey, after data cleaning and sorting, 239 respondents provided a postcode/nearest town allowing for derived LGA data.

** There were 14 online focus groups conducted during Term 3, 2020 (COVID lockdown period).

*** 72 participants were included in the online focus groups but LGA data is not available for 2 participants.

allowing participants from a range of LGAs to come together to partake in the conversation in one setting. This presented the researchers with an opportunity to find out how young people in the Great South Coast found the extended school-from-home period during the autumn and winter of 2020 and how they were faring. The following two questions were therefore added to the focus groups:

5. What has changed for you since the **COVID-19 pandemic**? How have you **adapted** to the pandemic?
6. What have you have **learned about yourself and others** during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Who engaged in Youth Conversations?

Of the 1000 young people invited to participate in the study, over 76% (762) of young people accepted the invitation and over 71% (711) of the responses were included in the dataset. A small number of responses were removed from the dataset for several reasons. These included too many incomplete/unreadable answers to online survey questions, insufficient demographic data provided to confirm the participant met the sampling criteria, and the primary place of the respondent's residence not being in the Great South Coast region. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants per LGA and how the participants from each LGA engaged with Youth Conversations.

How was the Youth Conversations data analysed?

The survey data was analysed using quantitative techniques and the focus group data was analysed using qualitative techniques. Together these produced the insights which enabled us to connect what young people in the Great South Coast region were saying with their community and state level context, joining the dots between young people's lived experiences and the policies that have potential for greatest impact on their futures. More specifically the survey and focus group data were engaged with as outlined below.

Survey

Proportional analysis of aggregated survey data was performed. Demographic data enabled a breakdown of short answer responses into LGAs for further descriptive analysis. SEIFA indexes were used to code relative socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage according to postcode then correlate with survey responses from each location. The LGA-specific survey data is represented in graphs that show proportional responses of what young people said per age group. Insights from the LGA-specific data are also provided.



Photo credit: Helena Lopes, Unsplash

Focus groups

As previously mentioned, in-person focus groups attended by participants from the same LGA ceased part way through the study due to social distancing requirements during the pandemic. These were replaced by online focus groups, which were attended by participants from mixed LGAs.

For both types of focus groups, participants tended to be grouped according to how they were recruited. For example, they might all attend the same youth group, school, TAFE, sports club or have a social connection in common. When reviewing the focus group data we found that each focus group provided a distinctive snapshot of how a particular group of young people, of a particular age, experiencing similar life circumstances, in a particular setting, were talking about education, work and connections to community, and living through the pandemic in 2020. This was useful when making inferences about the impact of age, living arrangements, gender identity, country of birth and identification as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth. For this reason, these findings are presented, as much as possible, in context of the focus group in which they emerged.

The findings from the focus groups are perhaps best understood as a collection of data storylines that weave together to form what are referred to in the literature as 'textual portraits' (Smyth et al., 2014), an analytic strategy engaged to preserve the integrity of the focus group conversations and to accommodate the complexity inherent in young people's lives. These sit with the quantitative data, providing a glimpse of the everyday occurrences that contribute to what matters to young people in specific locations. We adapted Smyth et al's (2014, p. 6) "principles of portraiture as a textual strategy" to create the LGA portraits.

This involved a commitment to:

- Approaching the focus group data in a holistic way, honouring the deeply contextual nature of the research conversations held
- Framing each portrait as a 'scene', informed by the reflective notes made by the youth co-facilitators who conducted the focus groups
- Preserving, as much as possible, the cohesion of the focus group material by not breaking it into fragments
- Maintaining the unique and multifarious perspectives offered by the young people
- Rendering the 'portrait' with carefully selected and curated quotes but not risking the exposure of the young people involved by attaching demographic details to these quotes
- Maintaining, as much as possible, the participant's intentions when doing this rendering

Findings: Voices of Young People from the Great South Coast Region

The findings from Youth Conversations are structured to reflect the multi-method approach to data collection and analysis. First, the demographic data from the survey responses (N = 239) is presented as a series of tables which show the distribution of participants across LGAs. This is accompanied by a short description of how the demographics of participants tended to influence their answers to the research questions. We found the trends described to be consistent across survey and focus group data sets although the quantitative analysis was only performed on the survey data.

Second, survey and focus group data are combined to create a snapshot of findings for each LGA. This snapshot brings together proportional analysis of the open-ended survey questions with a dialogic portrait formulated from thematic analysis of the focus group data.

Accounting for relative advantage and disadvantage in the research findings

Experiences of advantage and disadvantage (dis/advantage) are complex and multifaceted, requiring attention to the deeply contextual and inherent complexity of living in so-called disadvantaged communities such as certain towns on Victoria's Great South Coast. To live in a Great South Coast community does not mean living without skills, knowledges, histories and capacities to contribute in a range of ways. So, while we use the SEIFA indexes to sort and analyse data, we are mindful of the pitfalls that present when dis/advantage is approached in such a way. As Comber (2021, p. 2) surmises:

"words such as 'background' – as in, family background, socio-economic background, rural background, non-English-speaking background – literally consign key elements of people's living to a 'factor' that might be named or measured. They highlight the dangers of relegating spatial and place related matters to context as something that can be treated summarily (Comber 1998). As such, terms such as 'background' can be an unintended shorthand route to the reproduction of deficit discourses."

And it is exactly this that we seek to avoid, not least because it risks reinforcing public (and political) perceptions of location-based educational attainment that designate some localities as disadvantaged and therefore leading to poor educational and employment outcomes.

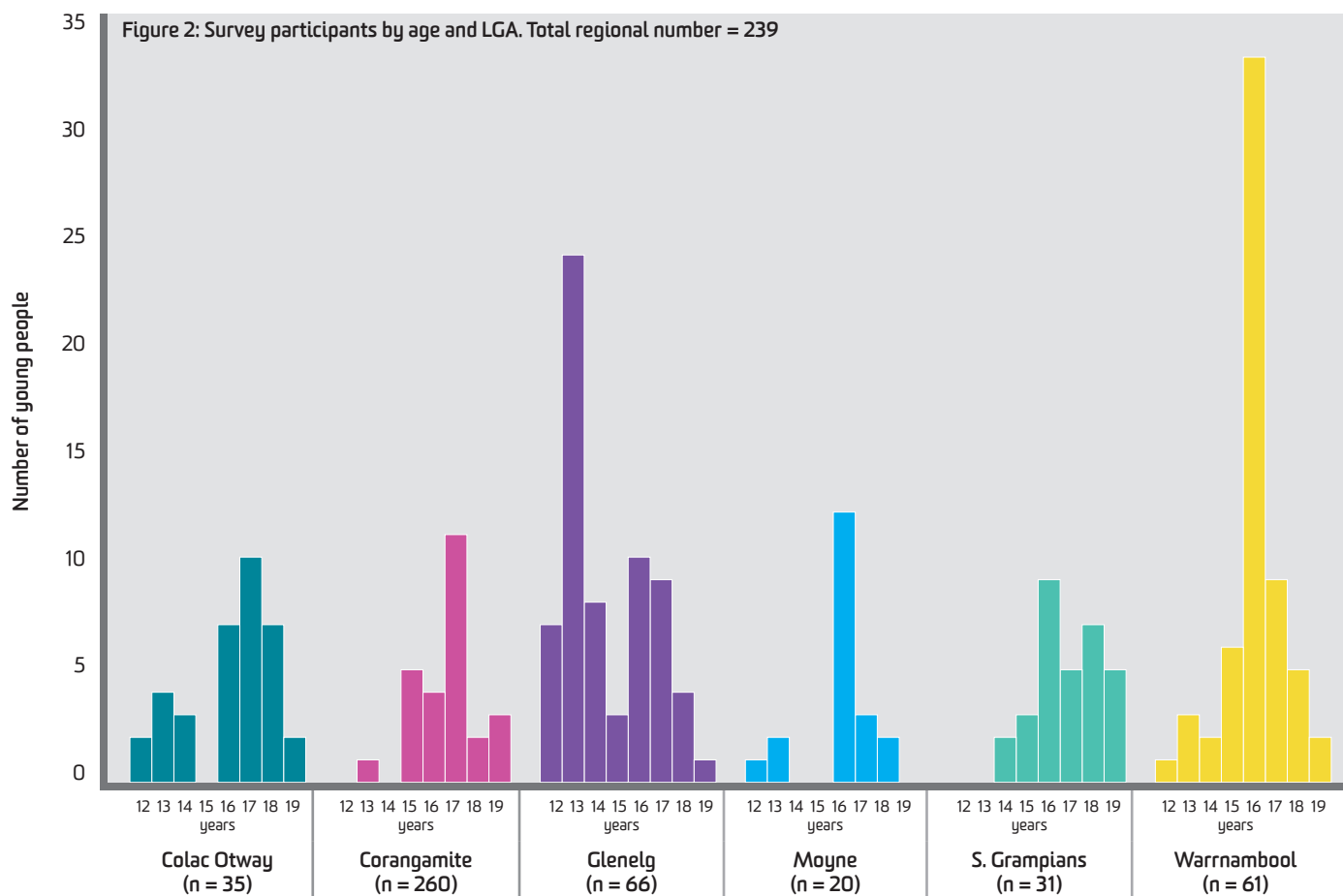
That said, the survey and focus group data was approached from the position that they provide a snapshot of the unique

community contexts in which Great South Coast young people found themselves in a particular point in time, the 2020 COVID outbreak. The data help to bring young people's lived realities and voices into the picture, revealing the gritty realities of what it is like to grow up in communities located on the Victorian Great South Coast. This is important because it emphasises the material consequences of the wider, long-term neglect of vocational education, training and workforce planning which has been enabled somewhat, as the Macklin Report points out, by a heavy reliance on acquiring skilled workers through immigration rather than a more effective, systematic and place-based approach to cultivating future skills in our young people.

Demographics of survey participants (survey data N = 239)

The following graphs and tables are visual representations of the demographic breakdown of the survey participants, separated into LGAs. Total regional numbers are presented as 'N' and LGA numbers are presented as 'n'.

Age and LGA



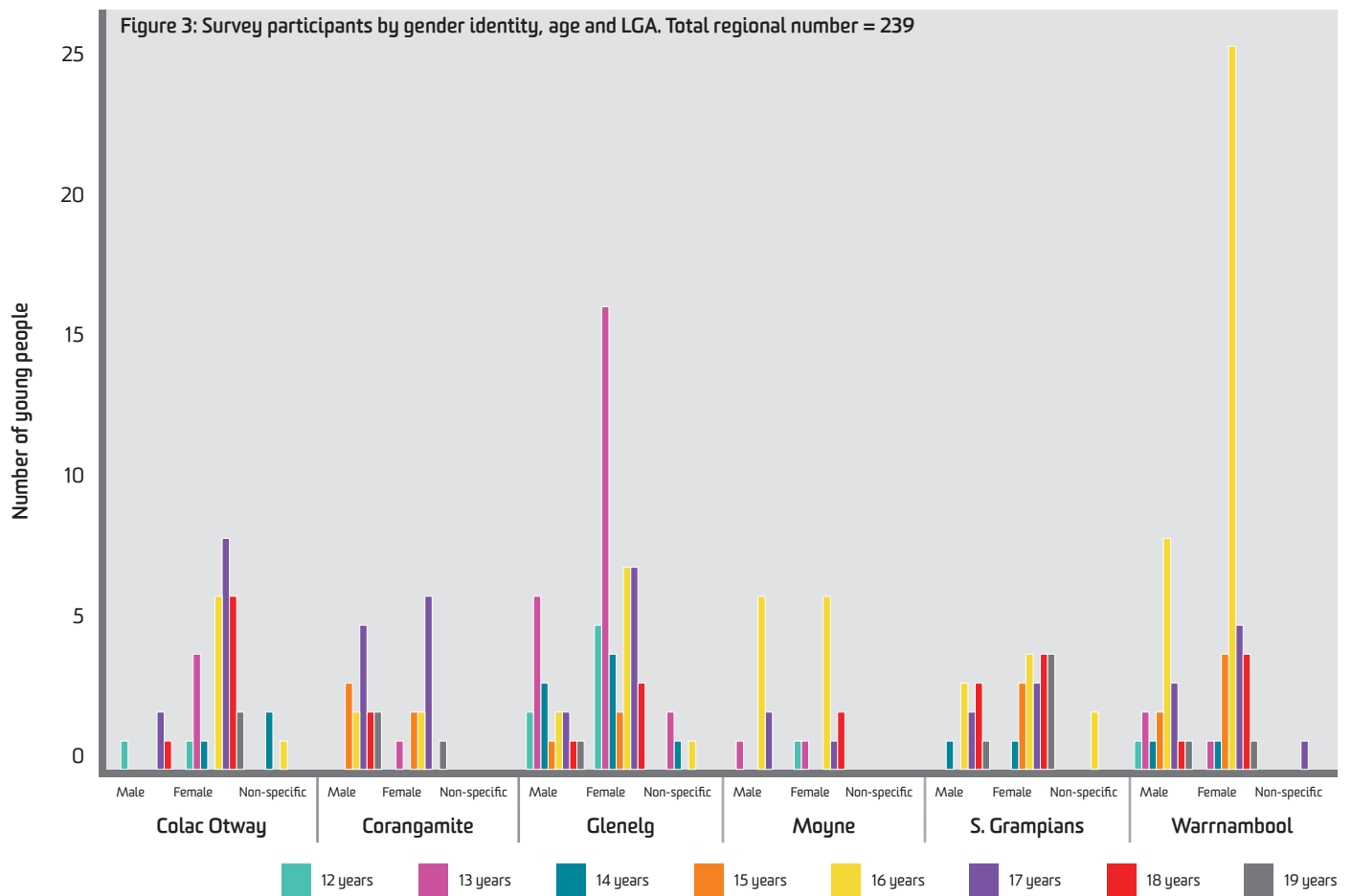
Living arrangements and LGA

Table 2: Survey participants by living arrangements and LGA

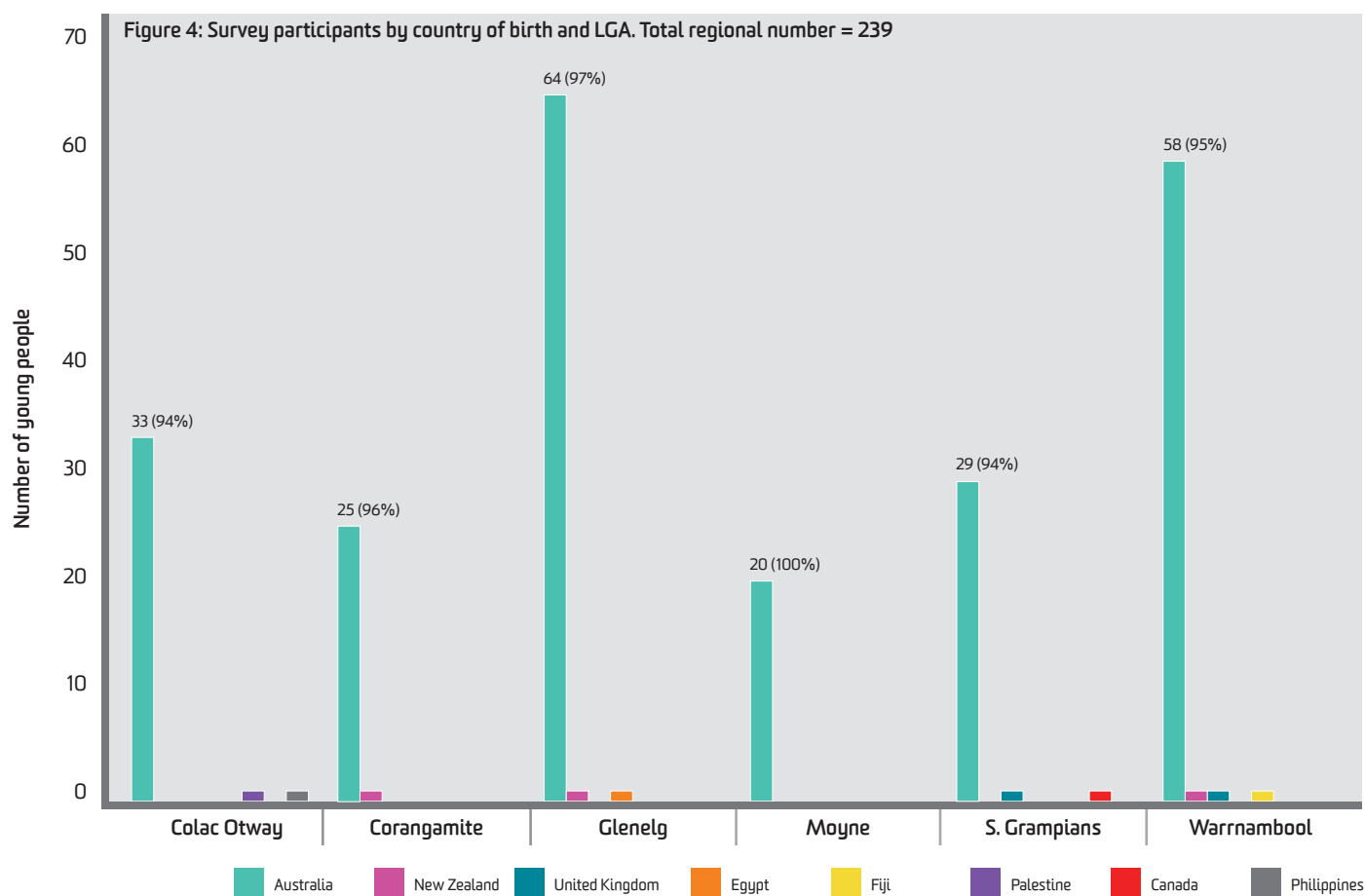
	Parents	Independently	Carer	Living with a disability	Living with a family member with a disability	Living with no disability	Prefer not to say	LGA TOTAL
Colac Otway	35			6		27	2	35
Corangamite	26			3	3	19	1	26
Glenelg	62	2	2	3	5	51	7	66
Moyne	17	1	2	3	3	10	4	20
Southern Grampians	31			3	3*	24	4	31
Warrnambool	57	3	1	5	2	52	2	61
REGIONAL TOTAL	228	6	5	23	16*	183	20	239

* Double counted

Gender identity, age and LGA



Country of birth



Identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

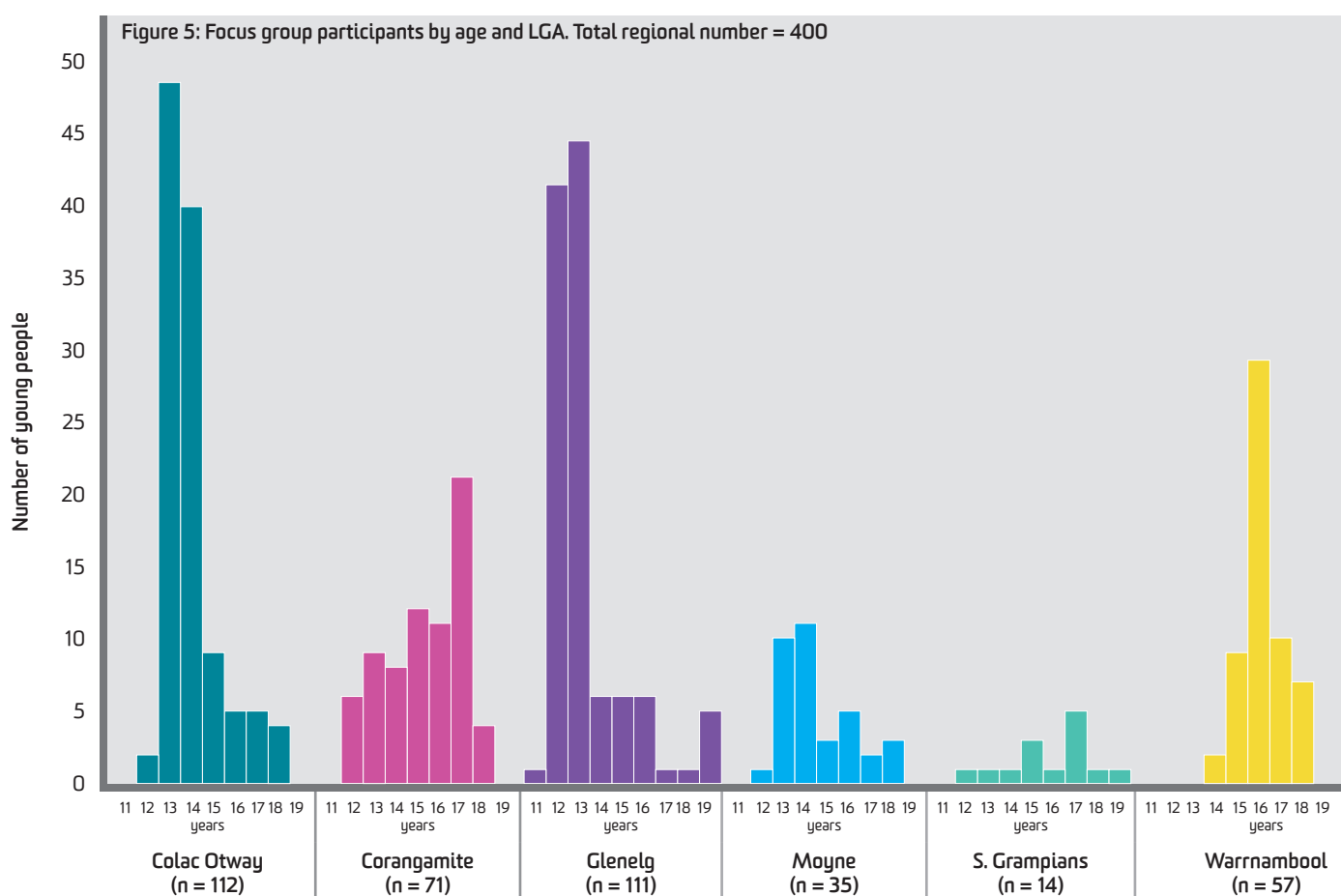
Table 3: Survey participants by identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and LGA

	No	Aboriginal	Torres Strait Islander	Prefer not to say	LGA TOTAL
Colac Otway	34	1			35
Corangamite	26				26
Glenelg	58	7	1		66
Moyne	19	1			20
Southern Grampians	30	1			31
Warrnambool	57	2		2	61
REGIONAL TOTAL	224	12	1	2	239

Demographics of focus group participants (focus group data N = 400)

The following tables are visual representations of the demographic breakdown of the in-person focus group participants, separated into LGAs. The demographic data for the 72 participants who engaged in the online groups have not been represented as the sample size was too small to provide meaningful insights. Total regional numbers are presented as 'N' and LGA numbers are presented as 'n'.

Age and LGA



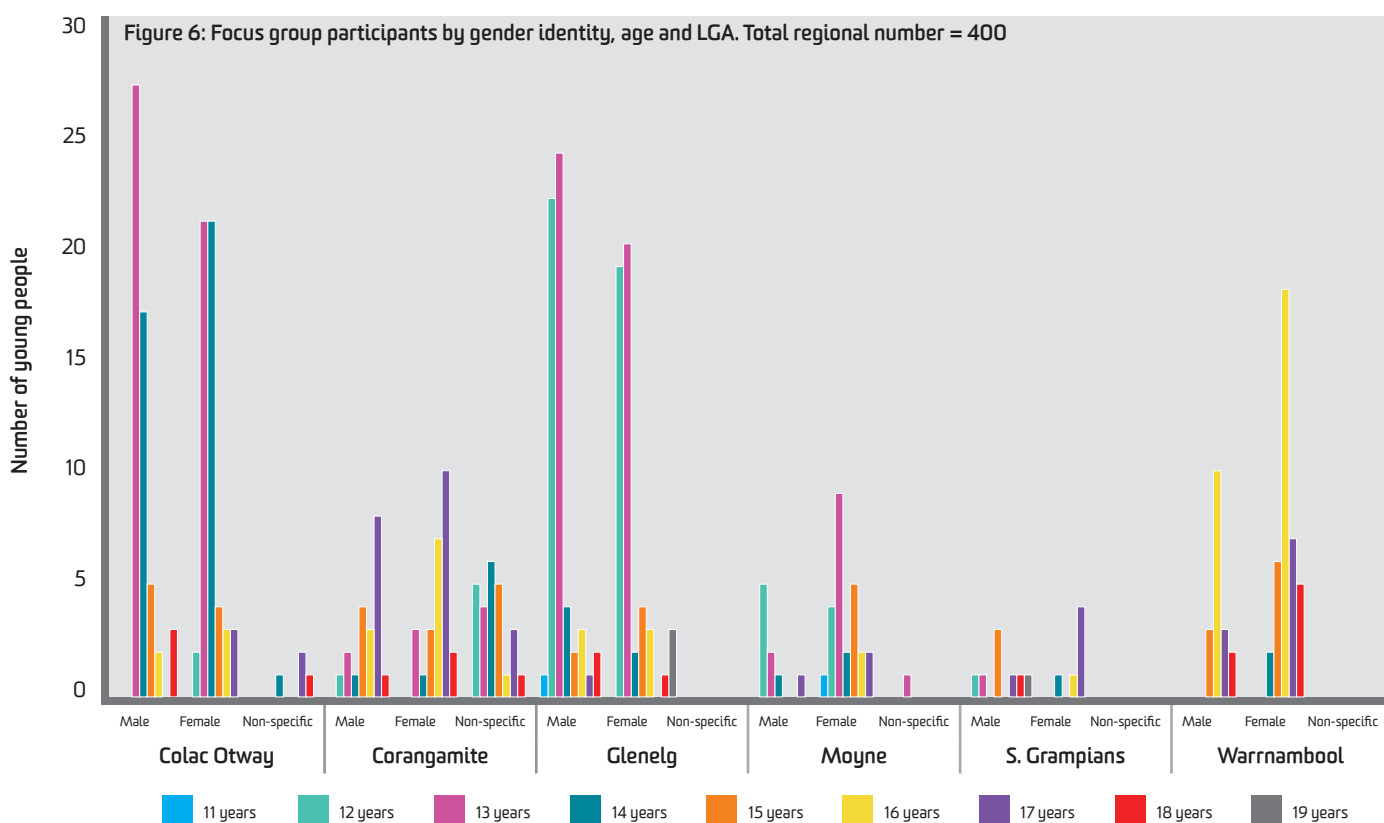
Living arrangements and LGA

Table 4: Focus group participants by living arrangements and LGA

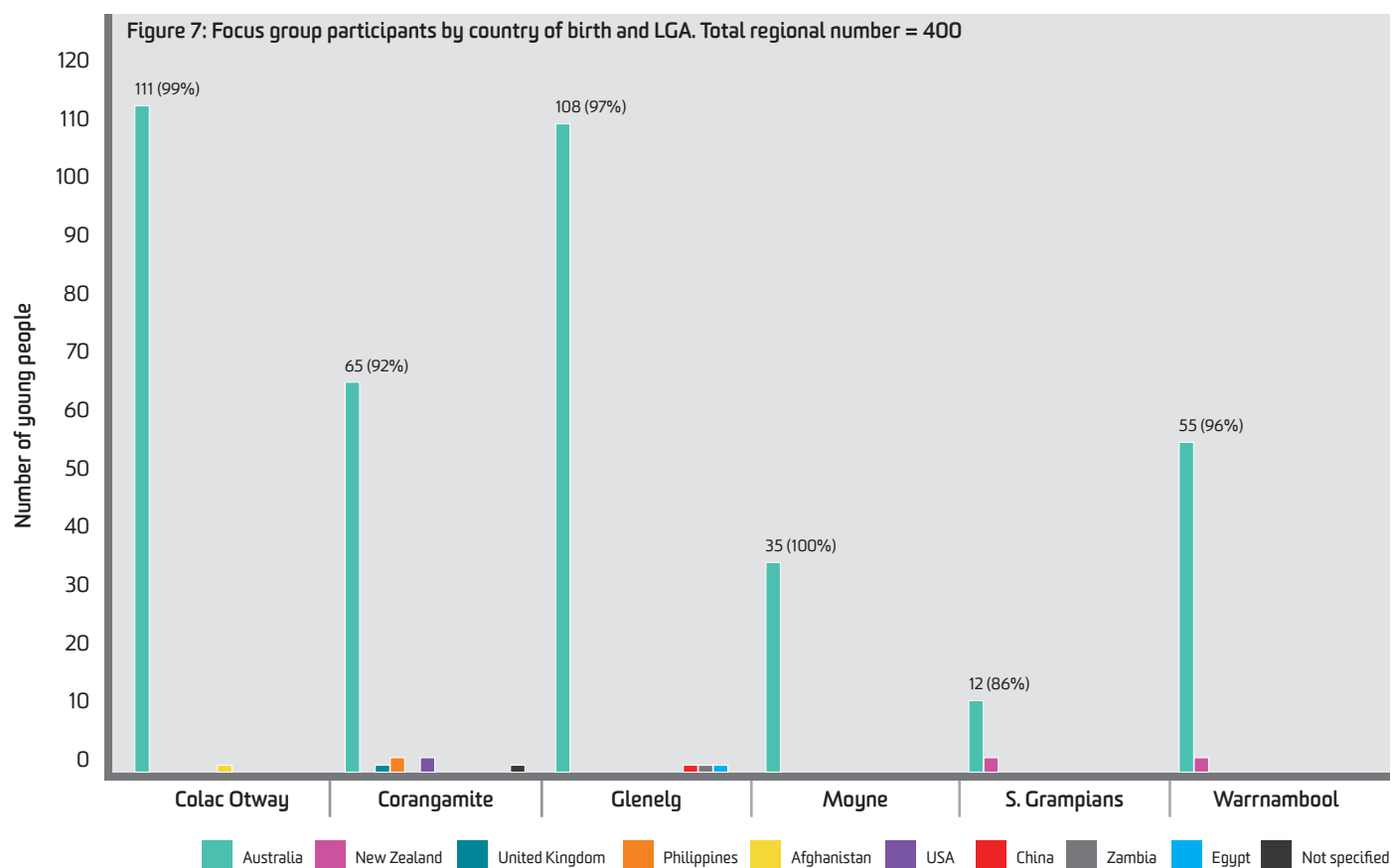
	Parents	Independently	Carer	Living with a disability	Living with a family member with a disability	Living with no disability	Both living with a disability and with a family member with a disability	Prefer not to say*	LGA TOTAL
Colac Otway	108	1	3	3	6	102	1		112
Corangamite*	67		4	14	4	49		4	71
Glenelg	109		2	12	10	83		6	111
Moyne	32		3	3	5	27			35
Southern Grampians	14			4	1	9			14
Warrnambool	48	4	5	8	5	40		4	57
TOTAL	378	5	17	44	31	310	1	14	400

* Where data was not specified in relation to living with a disability this has been coded as 'prefer not to say'.

Gender identity, age and LGA



Country of birth



Identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Table 5: Focus group participants by identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and LGA

	No	Aboriginal	Torres Strait Islander	Prefer not to say	LGA TOTAL
Colac Otway	111	1			112
Corangamite	69	2			71
Glenelg	98	7		6	111
Moyne	35				35
Southern Grampians	14				14
Warrnambool	55	1		1	57
REGIONAL TOTAL	382	11	0	7	400

Insights from survey and focus group demographic data

Age and living arrangements of research participants tended to have the most impact on how they responded to the survey and focus group questions. The relative age of the cohort of participants influences the LGA-specific data and should be considered when making interpretations of the findings. Colac Otway and Glenelg LGAs had the greatest representation of younger participants (12–14 years), Moynes and Southern Grampians had a more even spread, and Corangamite and Warrnambool were represented by an older group (16–19 years).

The notes made by a youth co-facilitator of the Colac Otway focus groups, reflecting on her facilitation of the session, sheds further light on how age influenced participation in the focus groups. She describes how the younger cohorts tended to be less engaged in the project than others, but those who did participate “said some really great things”. The younger cohorts had trouble answering questions related to employment as few were employed and were less likely to have formulated plans for when they finish school. They were particularly unsure of how to answer questions about how to improve education and employment opportunities in the area.

In the online focus groups, younger individuals (e.g. Year 6 and 7) living at home also tended to report less impact on their living situation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic with many younger individuals saying that they enjoyed the opportunity to stay home and play games. This is despite the responses of younger participants indicating those in the earlier years of their secondary schooling were more reliant on accessing social activities through school, community groups and organised sport than older participants. Older participants, especially those who were living independently, tended to report greater effects of the pandemic – especially social isolation, access to the internet and difficulty finding

support. Older participants (e.g. Year 11 onwards) and those living with a disability or a family member with a disability also tended to express a greater need for better transport and better communication between services. Some 50 out of the 239 survey respondents and 98 of the 400 in-person focus group participants live out of home, with a disability, or with a family member with a disability (or both), indicating the prevalence of the need for better transport and communication infrastructure.

Gender identification influenced survey and focus group responses related to discrimination, safety and the need for communities to feel welcoming with those identifying as non-binary and/or part of the LGBTQI+ community tending to perceive a greater need for these issues to be addressed in their communities. In the survey responses, Colac Otway, Glenelg and Warrnambool were represented by significantly more female than male identifying young people. In the focus groups the gender identity was evenly spread except in Corangamite which had a notable number of non-binary or gender diverse young people compared to the other LGAs.

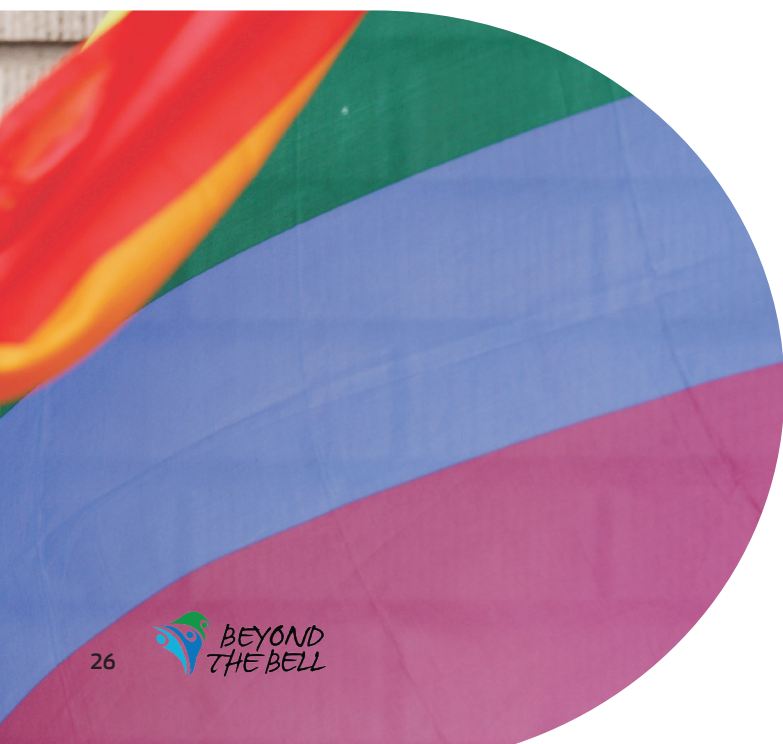
Country of birth data reveals that the participants in Youth Conversations were predominantly Australian born. While the nominated country of birth follows the general patterns in the census data for the region, the proportion of Australian-born participants is higher than in the general population. The focus group data is more skewed towards Australian-born participants than the survey data. A limitation of this research is that it did not engage the full diversity of young people living in the Great South Coast region.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander³ identifying youth showed no significant difference in the types of responses provided in the survey; however, a group of young Aboriginal identifying people attended a focus group together and raised issues to do with maintaining connection to Country and culture in the region and also expressed a discomfort with speaking on behalf of their communities in case their point of view was not in alignment.

Snapshots of local government areas in the region

The following LGA-specific snapshots of Youth Conversations data bring together textual portraits formulated from thematic analysis of the focus group data. This is followed by a series of tables which show the proportional analysis of the open-ended survey questions.

Photo credit: Sharon McCutcheon, Unsplash



3. We respectfully acknowledge young people who participated in Youth Conversations who identify as Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nation people.

Colac Otway – a portrait by a youth co-facilitator

Scene: A group of Year 8/9 students come together for a focus group in Colac. Despite their relatively young ages (14–15 years) these four young people have a firm grasp of the issues confronting their schooling and the region more generally. The youth co-facilitator reflects on the experience, providing the groundwork for this particular portrait. Another focus group, attended by a group of seven young people from Forrest (12–18 years) provides a contrasting narrative from outside the main centre of Colac Otway LGA.

The main themes to come out of the Colac group were related to more education, guidance and support in schools around career opportunities. Young people found their exposure of careers to be limited. They think schools should focus more on educating young people around their interests so that more school-aged people are engaged in education and are passionate about what they are learning. There was a resounding call for hands-on and community-based learning. They reported that more support is needed within schools for young people who don't have support at home around attaining educational goals. Students picked up on a strong stigma attached to seeking assistance from wellbeing teams at school. There was a strong arts focus among participants. This was accompanied by the presence of a strong sport culture in Colac, with most participants saying they felt connected in their online world as well as within their direct community. However, safety was indicated as an issue in Colac at night, especially the lack of lighting – with young people suggesting that lights on and between trees be installed – and road safety. The lack of ambulances was also a common theme, as was the lack of public transport, with young people frequently stating that transport was a barrier to education and employment.

For most participants Colac was not somewhere they would like to stay after high school as most felt there were limited opportunities available to them. Many expressed a strong desire to continue education either at university or at a tertiary education institution that would support their career pathway. There was discussion of having more incursions and excursions, as a way to gain more exposure to the jobs people have in the region. A significant number of younger participants (in Year 8 at Colac Secondary College) want the school's Clay Target and Fishing Club to be back up and running. This cohort expressed a need for Colac Lake to receive better care so that they can swim in it and take

up water sports. Many of these same participants also indicated that young people need to know the benefits of staying in school to encourage more young people to stick with education.

In another focus group, attended by teenagers aged 12–18 years from Forrest, there was an attuning to what needed improving – roads, maintenance and a community hub. The young people expressed a strong pride in Forrest as a place to live and a strong sense of belonging to their community – something they attribute to getting a little older (although they were certainly not old). As a Forrest young person noted, "As you get into later years you know where your group is" This provides encouragement and support to stay in school: "Having a friends group has encouraged me to stay in school." This group of young people are linked through a Youth Group and a Mountain Bike Club and "come together as a community and support others outside of the community to come and join in". By participating in trail maintenance events organised by the club, they work together to keep the trails in good condition. For these young people Soupfest and the Otway Odyssey (Forrest mountain bike race) are a feature on the calendar.

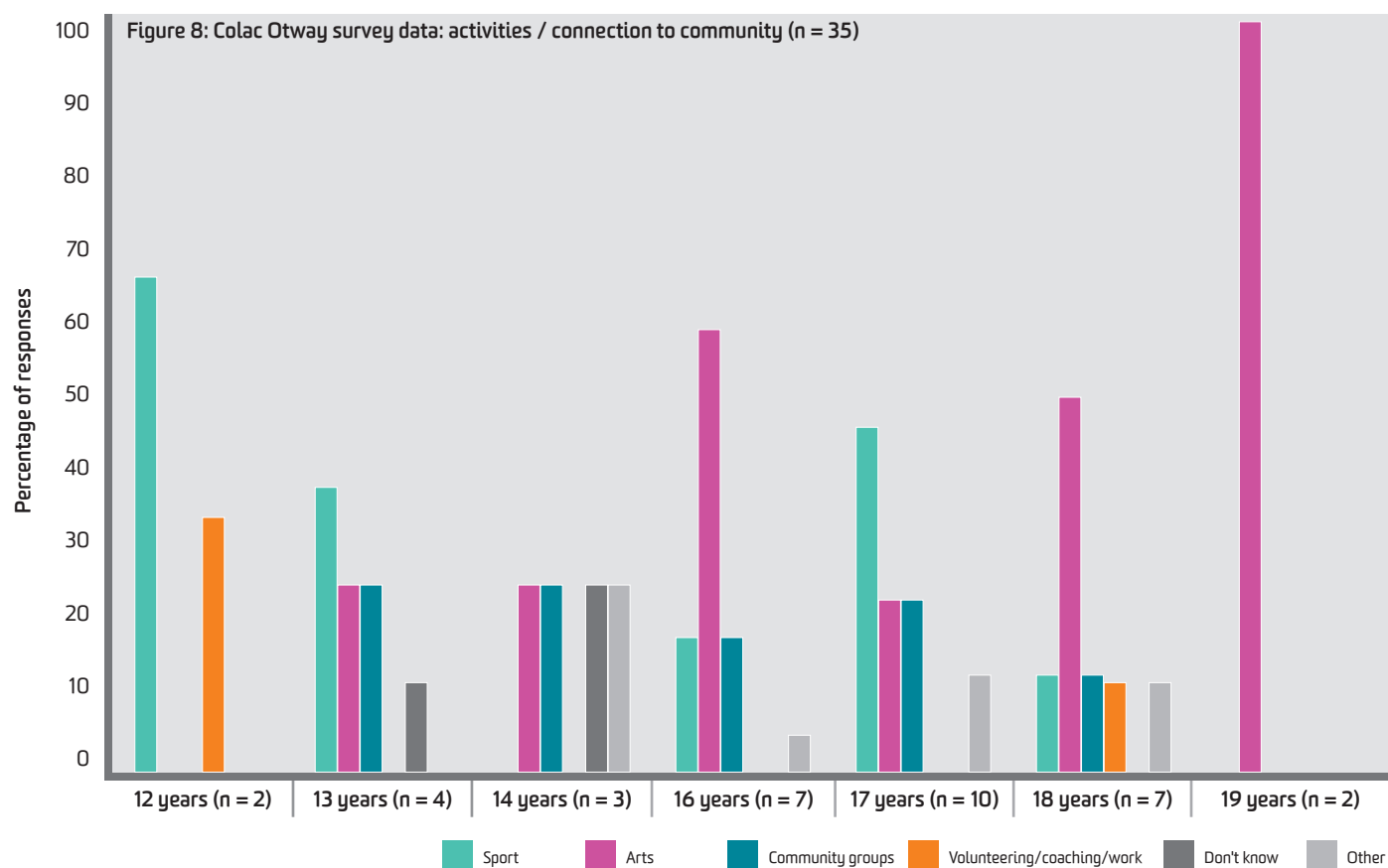
Table 6: Colac Otway survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
12	2 at high school	2 in Year 7
13	2 at high school 2 home schooling	2 in Year 8, 1 in Year 9, 2 at home
14	3 at high school	3 in Year 9
16	7 at high school (VCE, 1 VET)	6 in Year 11, 1 in Year 12
17	9 at high school (VCE) 1 at TAFE	5 in Year 11, 4 in Year 12
18	2 at high school (VCE) 2 at TAFE 2 not studying 1 at university	2 in Year 12
19	1 at TAFE 1 at university	

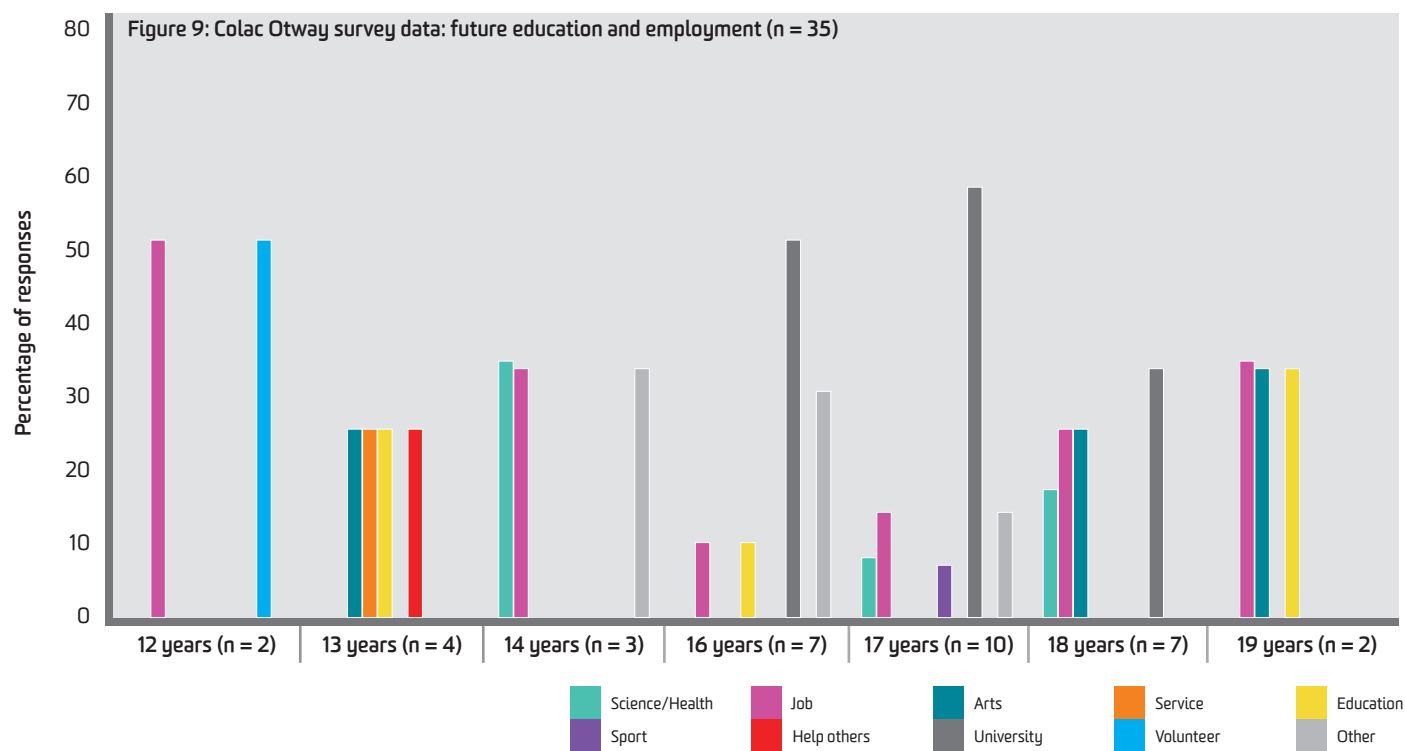
Table 7: Colac Otway survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
12 (n = 2)	3					2		
13 (n = 4)	3					1	2	1
14 (n = 3)	9					2	1	
16 (n = 7)	16	5		2		2	5	
17 (n = 10)	148	7	1	1		3	6	1
18 (n = 7)	2	2	3	1		2	5	
19 (n = 2)		2				1	1	
	186	16	4	4	0	13	20	2

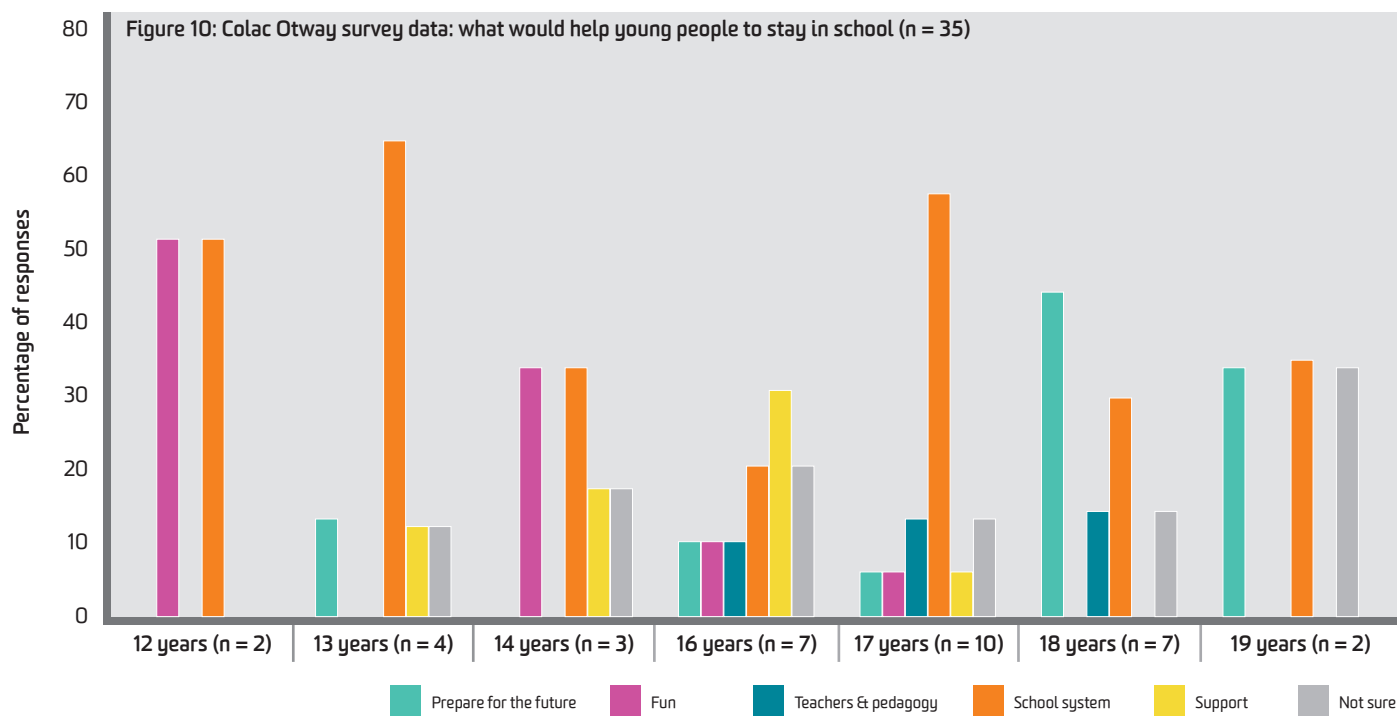
Activities / connection



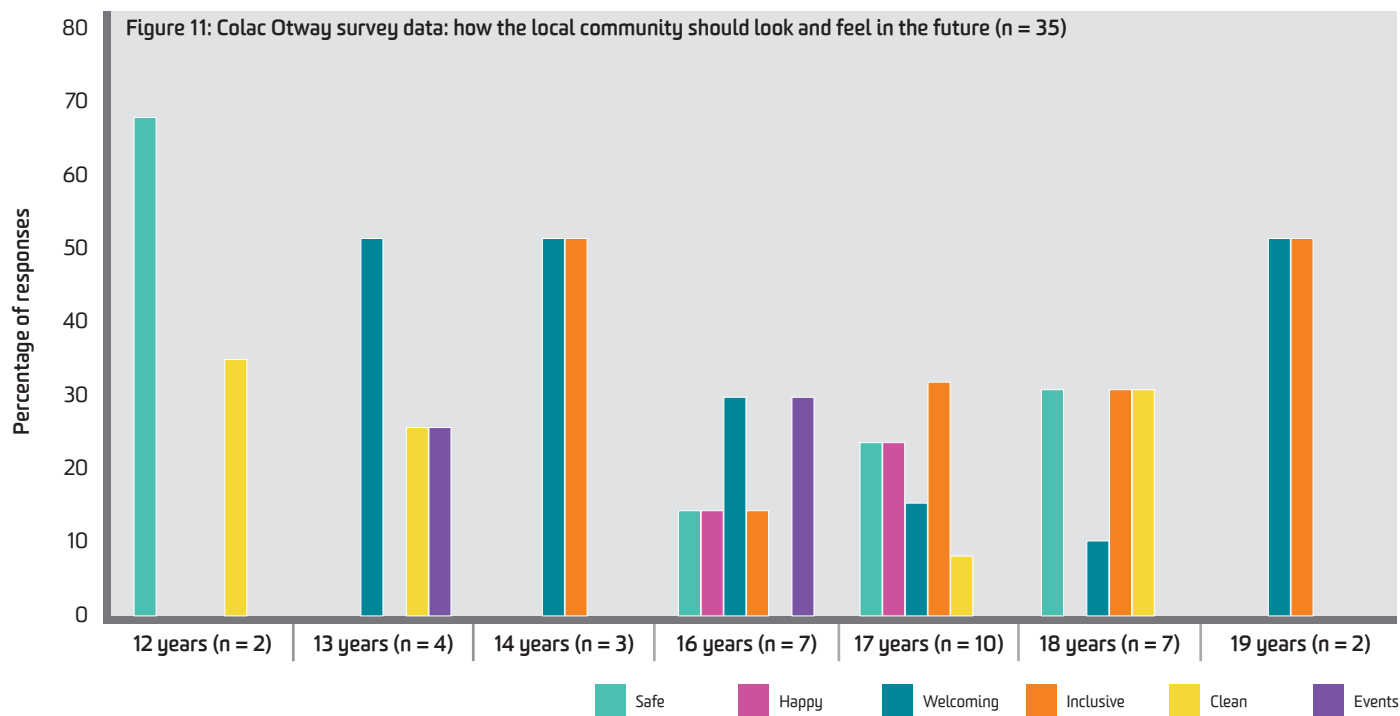
Future education and employment



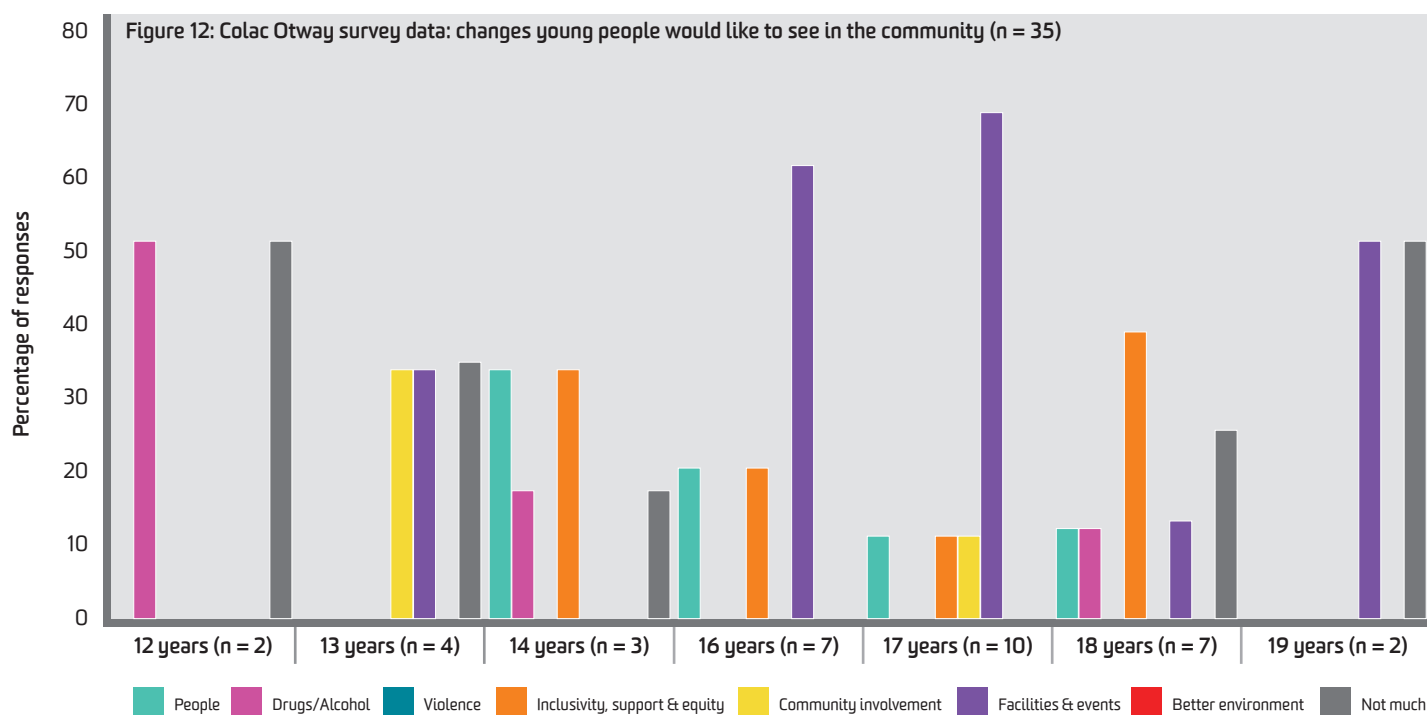
Helping young people to stay in school



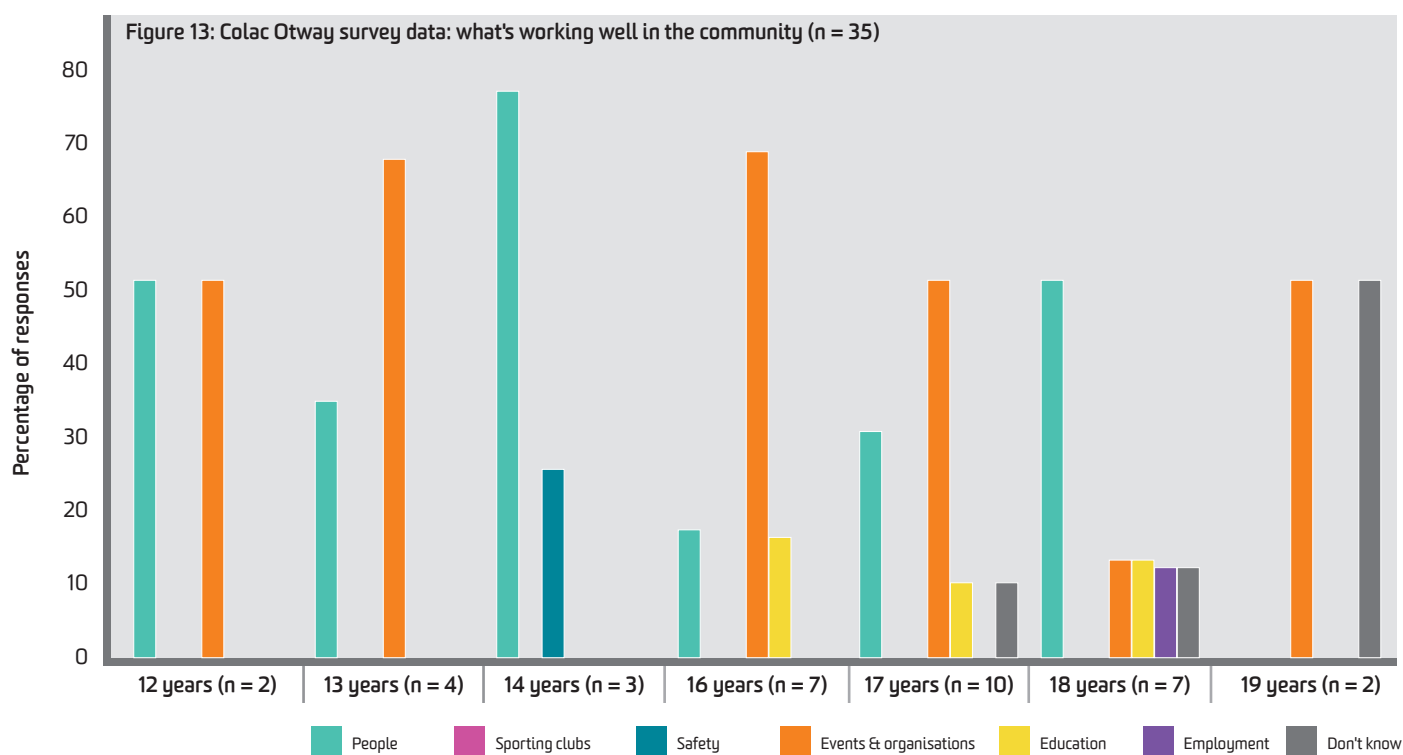
Future community



Community changes



What's working



Corangamite – a portrait of young people living a complex regional life

Scene: This portrait is formed from a combination of focus groups to give a complex rendering of the highs and lows of growing up in Corangamite.

The young people from this region expressed aspirations to further their education and pursue a meaningful career post school. Often young people discussed their future in the bigger cities of Victoria and sometimes abroad. A 13 year old states that she wants to become a “journalist, which will hopefully take me all over the world”. A

16 year old plans to become a helicopter pilot.

A 17 year old has detailed plans to do a tattooing apprenticeship while another young person is preparing to become a marine biologist and yet another is planning to undertake a “sports management diploma through Richmond football club”.

The young people who participated in Youth Conversations were involved in the local community in a variety of ways. Local schools effectively facilitated some of this involvement. As a 17 year old VCAL student attending a school in the Shire explains, “the local school Mow Down gives people purpose, preparing for months in advance”. She and her fellow students also named other community events such as the Rock the Clock festival, footy and the Camperdown Show as highlights on their social calendars. Other notable events included the Cobden Spring Festival and the Cobden Technical School colour run. “Music events in Terang are well received” and “sports is huge in this area”, a 17 year old adds. Another concurs that “sporting events and Youth Council/FReeZA [events] are well received” but there needs to be “more communication between services” and “events need to be more publicised”.

Like the other areas of the Great South Coast, young people in Corangamite feel that school could be changed to better suit their needs. They plainly state that they are offered a “not good VCAL program”. They want more engaging teachers, more relevant subjects, stigma attached to VCAL addressed, more

after-school activities and training opportunities, and more support at school for careers: “Subjects should be offered inter-school (more school collaboration) if not available at a student’s school” and “VCAL is so different at all schools, meaning some students from some schools miss out on certain opportunities”. Another young person adds that there needs to be “better communication between [vocational education] services”, stating the need to “offer more courses in the region”.

A Year 12 student comments that Camperdown appears to be a “tight-knit community, everyone is supportive and everyone knows everyone, unlike Melbourne”. He continues, “Everyone here shares relatively the same livelihood, which everyone can connect with”, however “views around here can sometimes be too conservative” noting “casual racism and racist slurs. Lack of recognition for minorities, especially Indigenous peoples”. This conservatism and adherence to the status quo gets in the way of some young people feeling connected to the community. This is captured in the observation that “sport is looked upon more honourably than the arts”. Another Year 12 student elaborates on this need to push for the arts and provide opportunities to participate in less mainstream sports by creating more diversity in sports. They believe that there is a need to connect the schools in the area because students are quite isolated and would appreciate being exposed to a broader range of ideas and opinions.

“More public transport” was a catchphrase among young people in the Corangamite focus groups across all demographics. The focus group of 11 young people, all living with a disability, were particularly vocal about this. Elaborating on the issues with transport in the area, one 15 year old says “Buses/trains are inconsistent/unreliable. Information isn’t readily available to young people.” This is reiterated by a 17 year old who says there needs to be better “transportation to events”.

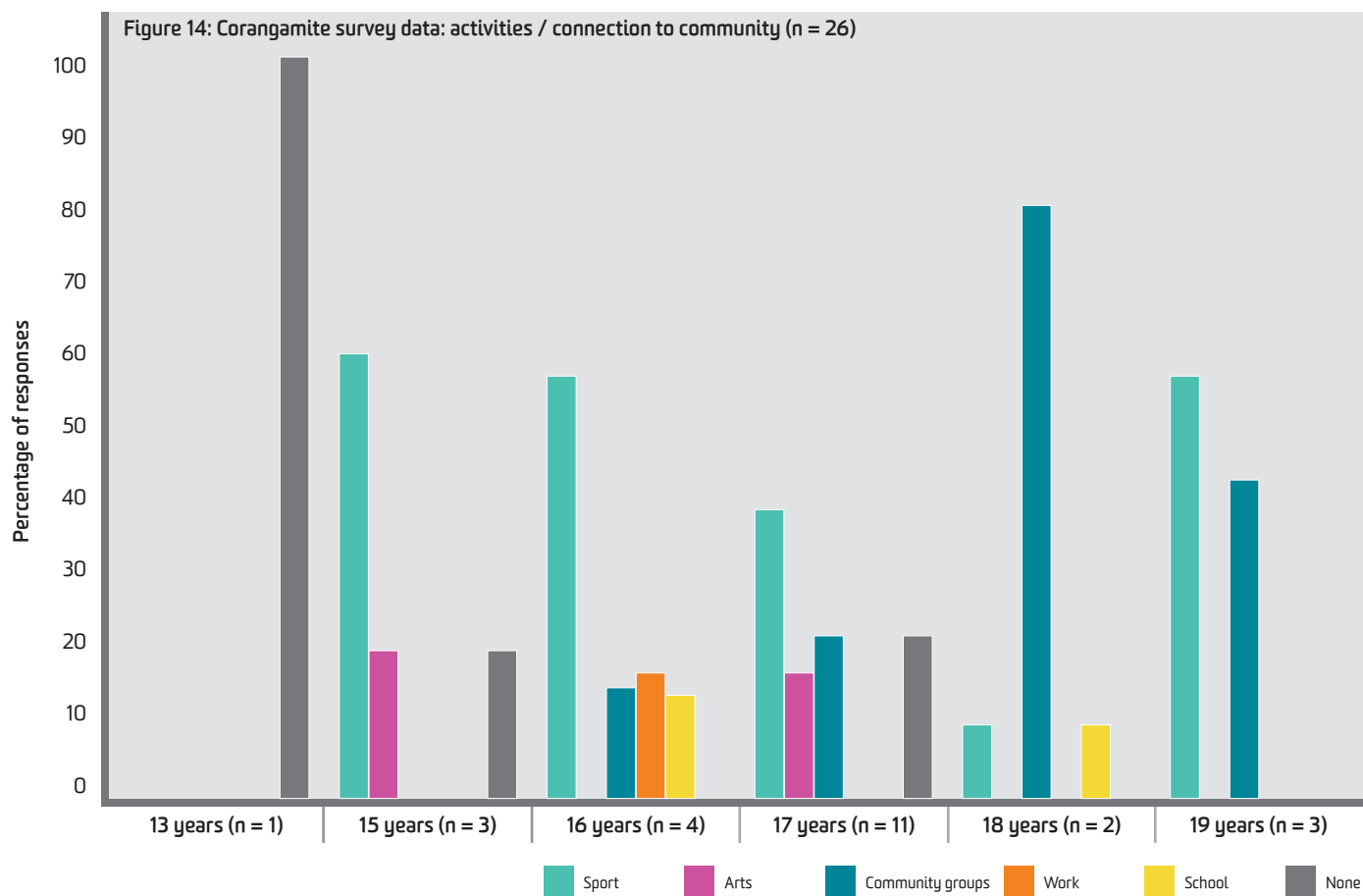
Table 8: Corangamite survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
13	1 at high school	1 in Year 8
15	5 at high school (1 VCE) 1 at TAFE	5 in Year 10
16	4 at high school (2 VCE, 1 VCAL) 1 at TAFE	2 in Year 10, 2 in Year 11
17	8 at high school (VCE) 2 at TAFE 1 home schooling	3 in Year 11, 7 in Year 12 1 at TAFE
18	2 at TAFE	Apprenticeship
19	2 at TAFE 1 at university	Apprenticeship

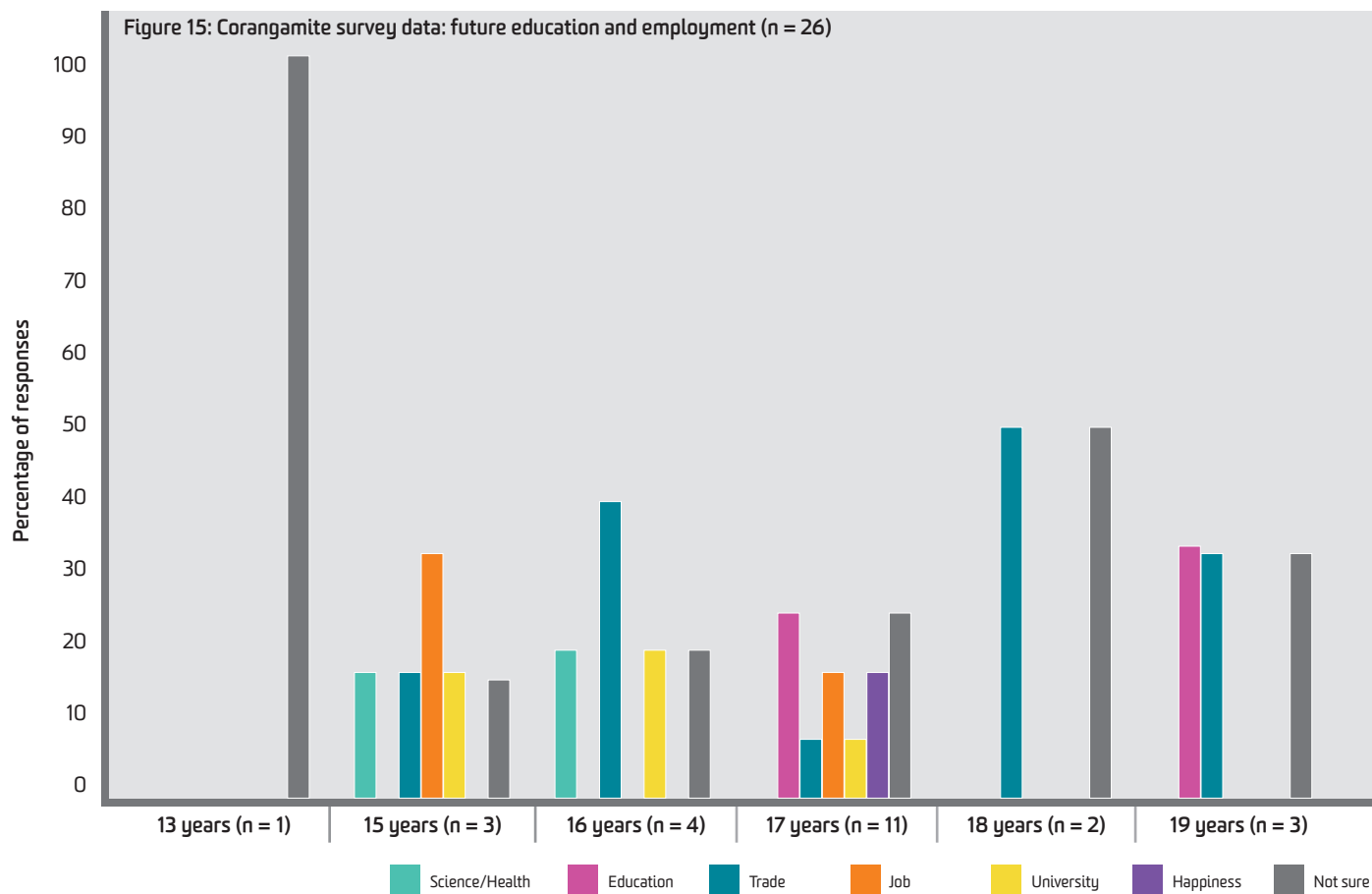
Table 9: Corangamite survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
13 (n = 1)	2					1		
15 (n = 3)	11	1				5		
16 (n = 4)	18	2				3	1	
17 (n = 11)	24	6		2	2	3	8	
18 (n = 2)		2		1	1	2		
19 (n = 3)		2	1	1	1	1	2	
	55	13	1	4	4	15	11	0

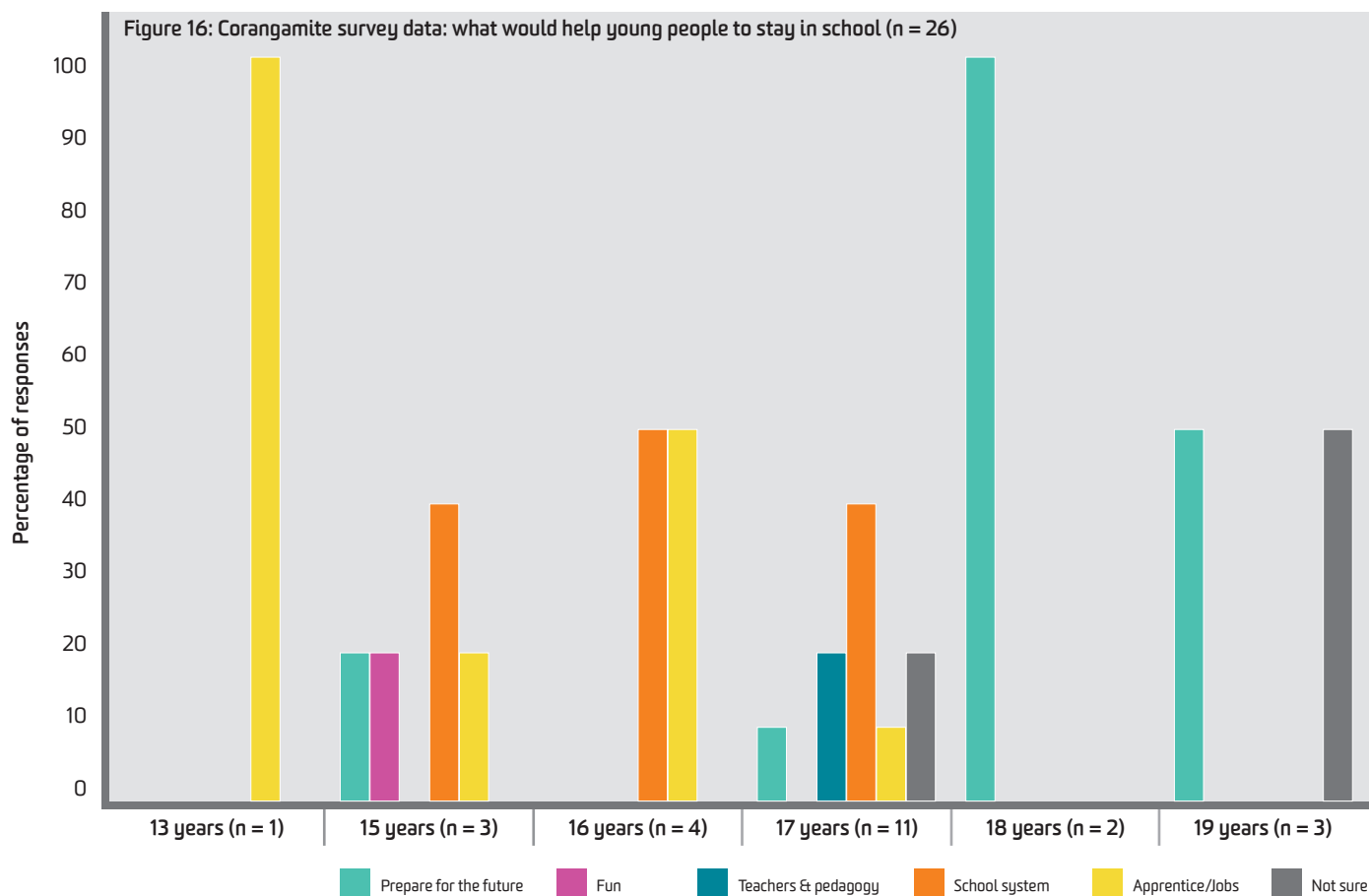
Activities / connection



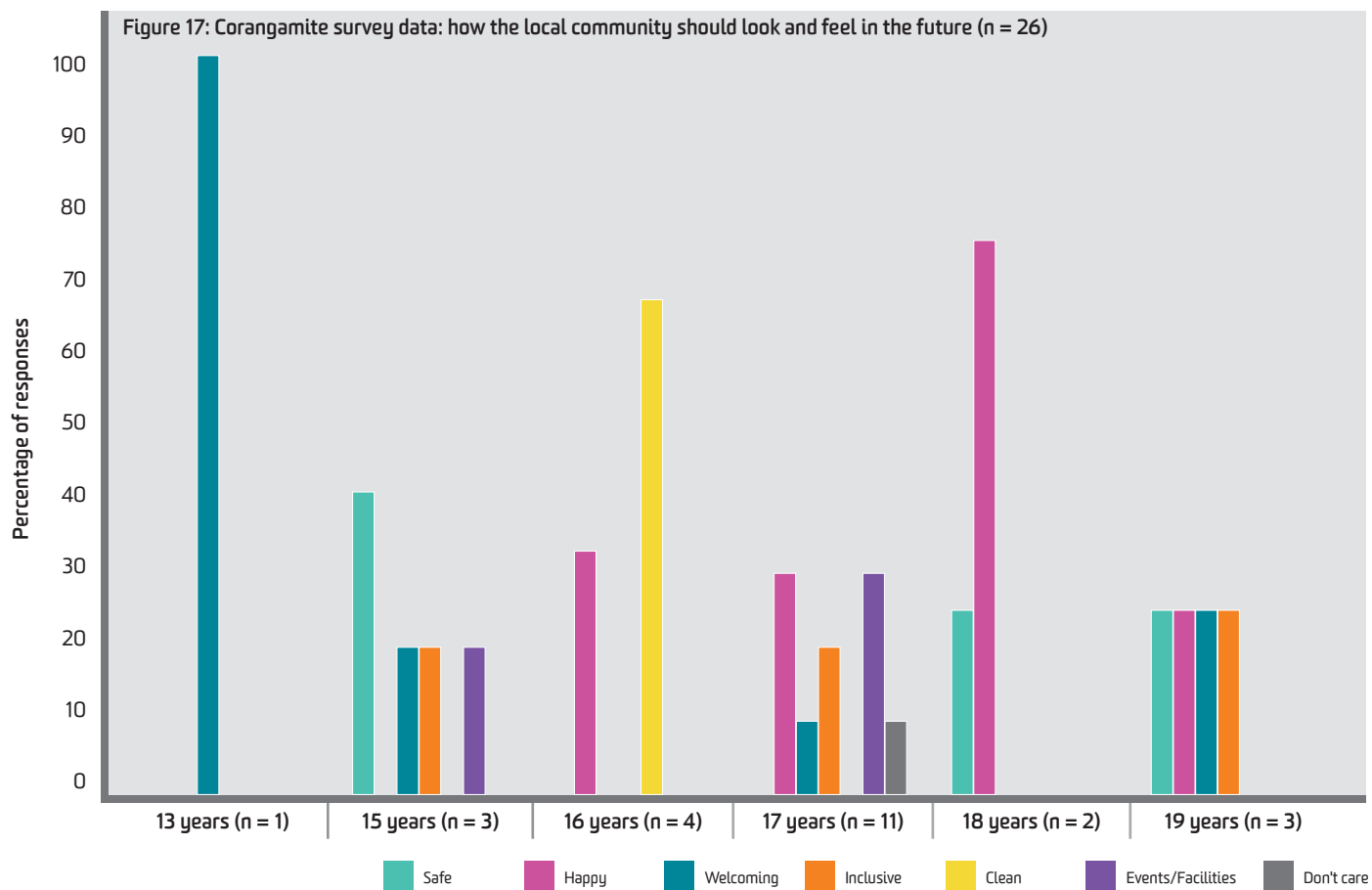
Future education and employment



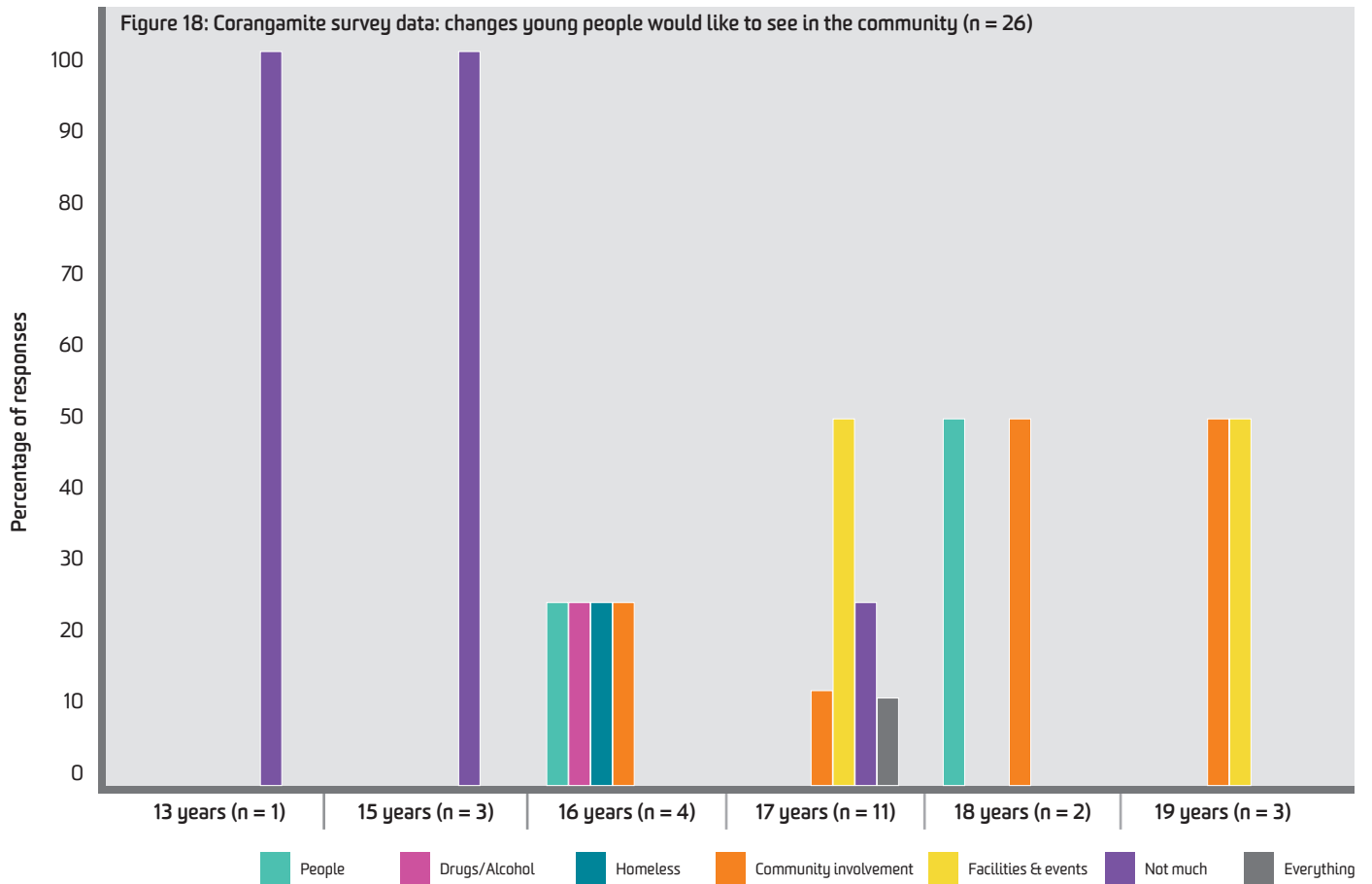
Helping young people to stay in school



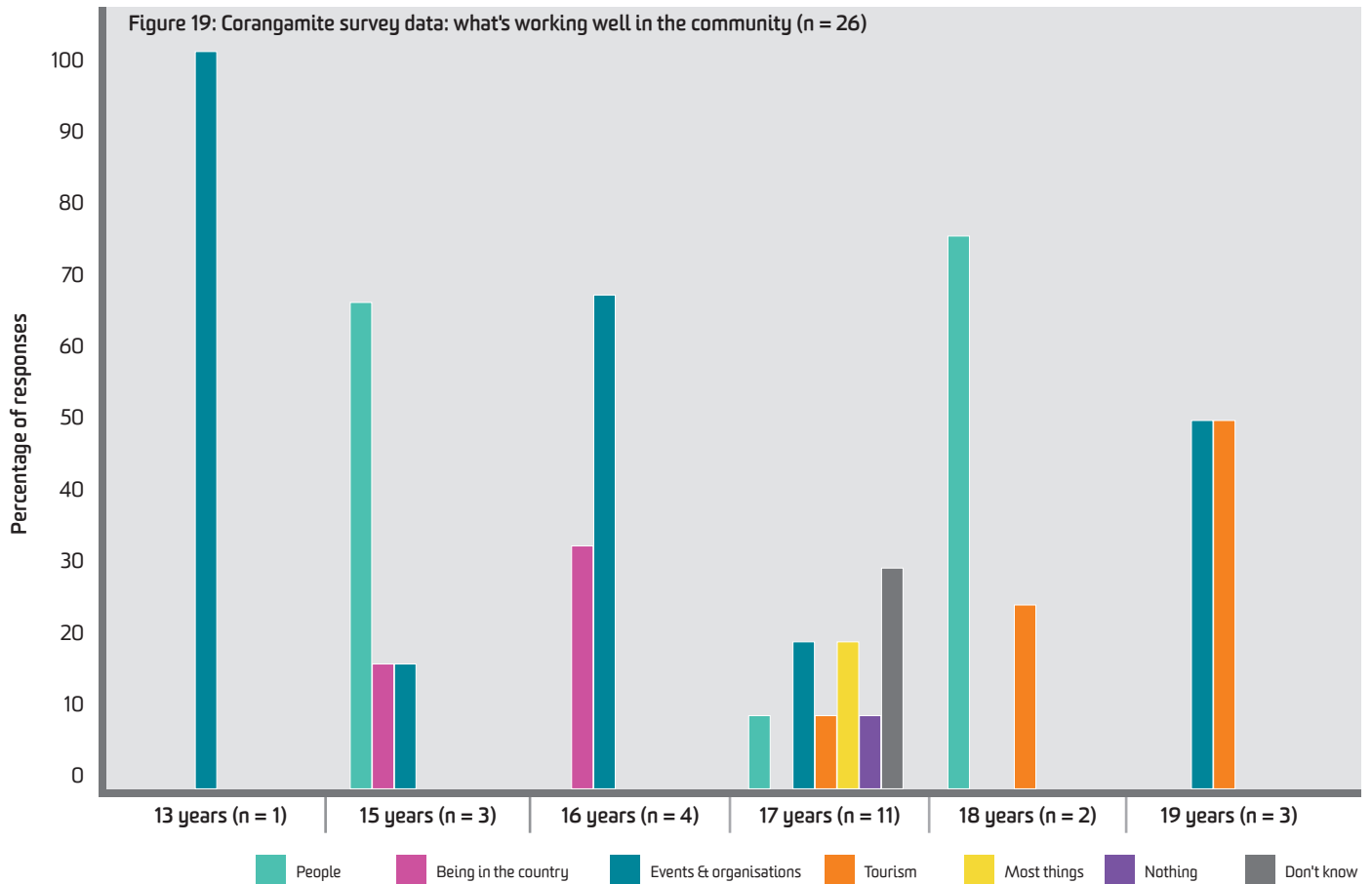
Future community



Community changes



What's working



Glenelg – a portrait of nippers and lifeguards

Scene 1: The group of young people gathered at the local surf lifesaving club for this focus group have spent the morning at the beach doing surf lifesaving activities through the club. There were five 'nippers' altogether, aged 12–15 years old. Their families wait while they do the focus group.

This group of young people was very sport-focused in their interests and activities. They enjoy interschool sports competition because it is an opportunity to “mix with other school students”. They also attend local events like the markets, the Upwelling festival, the rodeo, go-karts, motorbike club, Matilda (a student musical), Relay For Life, and one is on the student representative council (SRC) at school. While these activities give the young people a sense of connection to community, they don't see a future for themselves here. They said that the pool needs fixing because it's “too stuffy inside and makes people sick ... I stopped swimming because I kept getting sick”. This group was highly attuned to discrimination in the local community, especially in sporting environments, with sport coaches being responsible for “homophobic shit” as one nipper put it, further explaining that the:

“cricket coach says 'gaylords' which does not make me feel good. I don't want to call them out on it. Friends call soccer a 'gay' sport. They seem more accepting if I tell them that I get into fights during the soccer game.”

Another nipper recounted that he had encountered intolerance of his dancing hobby:

“I get judged for going to dancing school. They think I am weird. Kids need to stop judging your hobbies ... STIGMA.”

The nipper who had raised the issue of homophobia in sport lamented the disappearance of the Whitten Project in the region. Later, the research team looked this up and discovered that it hadn't been stopped, just rebranded as the Western Bulldogs Leadership Project. The fact that the young people did not know this links with the challenges with coordinated communication between services for young people and the young people they are trying to reach.

Photo credit: Benjamin, Unsplash



Scene 2: Four university students, aged 18 and 19 years, work part-time as lifeguards. They've been invited to come along to the focus group via social media and are highly engaged, keen to contribute and comfortable with the venue.'

This group of university students all connected with local community through work, sport and socialising down on the foreshore. They didn't have much to say about their personal pathway to employment at this stage, instead choosing to reflect on the assumption that "you'll have to move away to further education", saying that "schools/teachers tell you 'you will need to move to the city to ensure success'". They note that moving away from parents has its benefits with one student saying that it:

"led to meeting people with different backgrounds ... more exposure to world issues ... personal growth ... different conversations ... and forming of own opinions".

She noted that it "really changed me. I was narrow-minded before I moved away to uni". But this comes at the expense of family, familiarity and connection:

"It's easier to get involved in [local] community. Networks help with getting a job ... coming back to where you have relationships is great."

Having said this, the young people are keenly aware of the limited job opportunities in the area and the importance of "choosing a degree that will lead to a job that I can do anywhere". When asked about what would help young people stay in school they said that they:

"need earlier information to know how to get to where you want to go [Year 7]. I knew nothing about TAFE".

At secondary school there is:

"lots of focus on struggling students. Teachers did not mark our practice exams as they need to spend time helping struggling kids to re-sit their exams to get their school's 'stats' up and pass failing students".

They saw a:

"need to cater for all students. A need for after-school study support. [A need to] Ask students what they want."

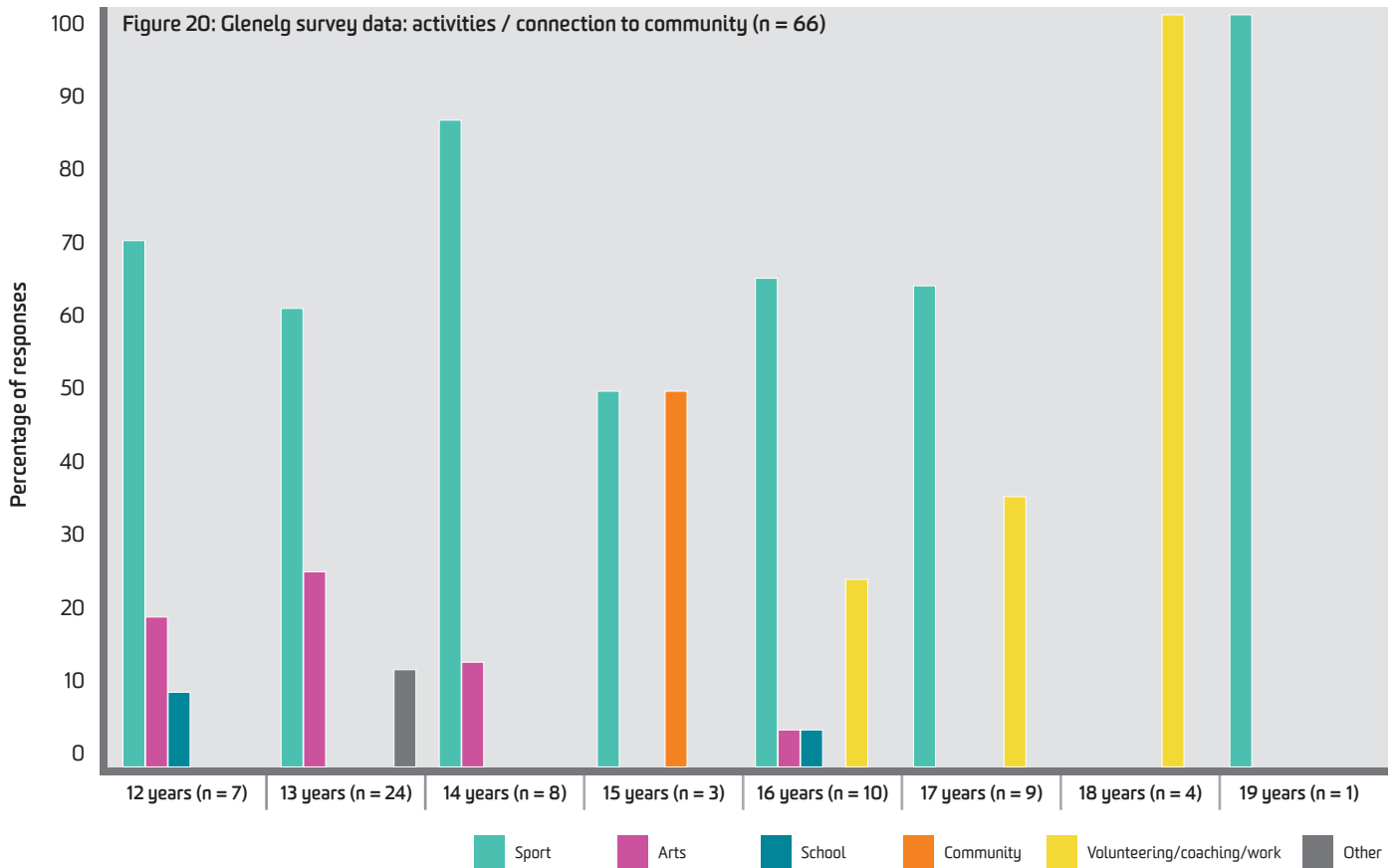
Table 10: Glenelg survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
12	7 at high school	3 in Year 7, 4 in Year 8
13	24 at high school	1 in Year 7, 23 in Year 8
14	8 at high school	7 in Year 8, 1 in Year 9
15	2 at high school 1 at TAFE	1 in Year 8, 1 in Year 10, 1 in Year 11
16	9 at high school (VCE, 1 VET) 1 at TAFE	9 in Year 11
17	8 at high school (VCE) 1 at TAFE	2 in Year 11, 6 in Year 12
18	1 at high school (VCE) 3 at TAFE	1 in Year 12
19	1 somewhere else	

Table 11: Glenelg survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
12 (n = 7)	15	1		1		2	5	
13 (n = 24)	72	1		3		9	15	
14 (n = 8)	87	2		2		1	7	
15 (n = 3)		1				1	2	
16 (n = 10)	9	7		4		2	8	
17 (n = 9)	22	5		4		1	8	
18 (n = 4)	40	2			2	1	3	
19 (n = 1)			1		1	1		
	245	19	1	14	3	18	48	0

Activities / connection



Sport:
Little Athletics,
basketball, netball,
football, cricket

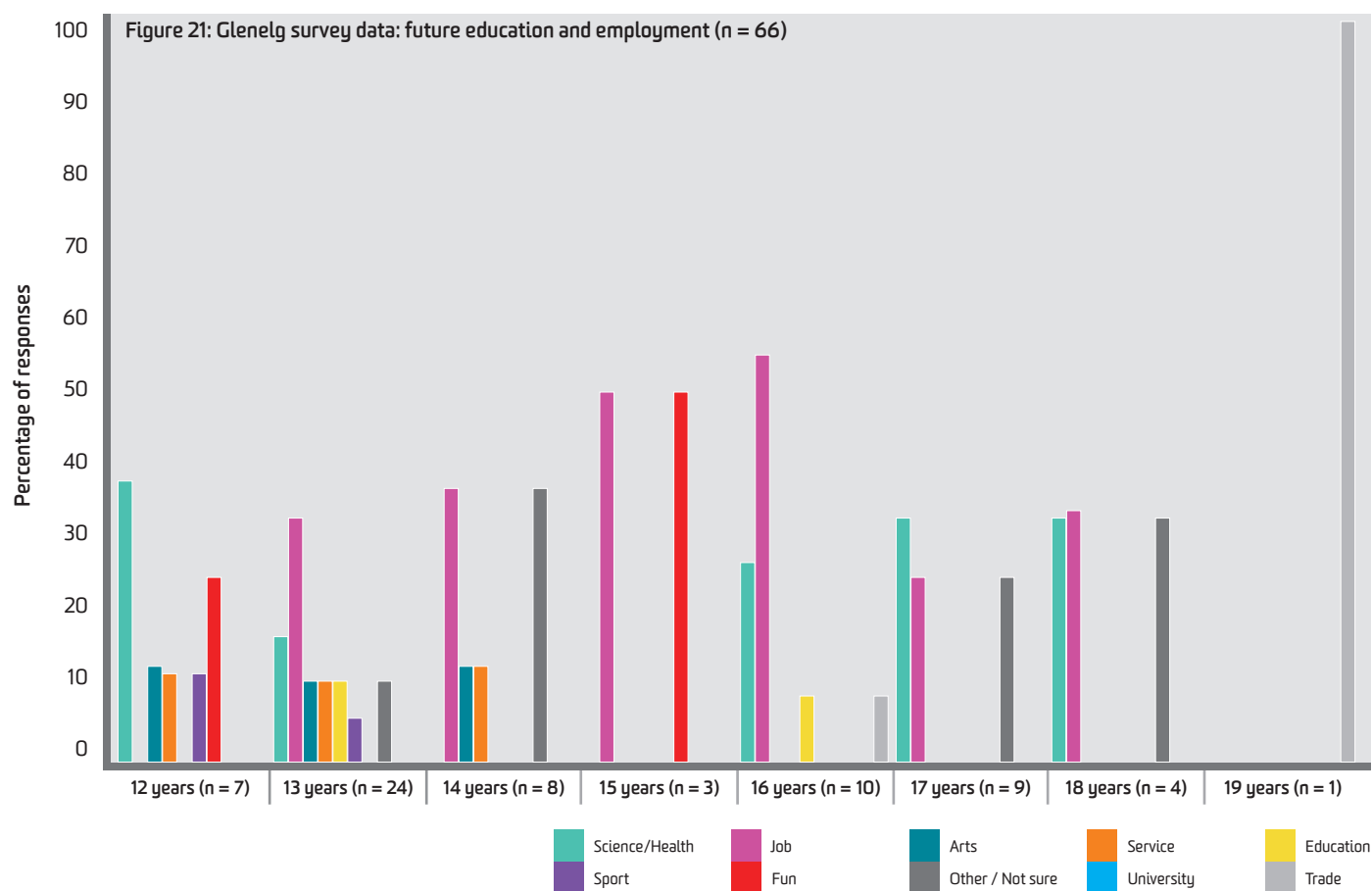
Arts:
Theatre, dance,
festivals, piano

School:
School events

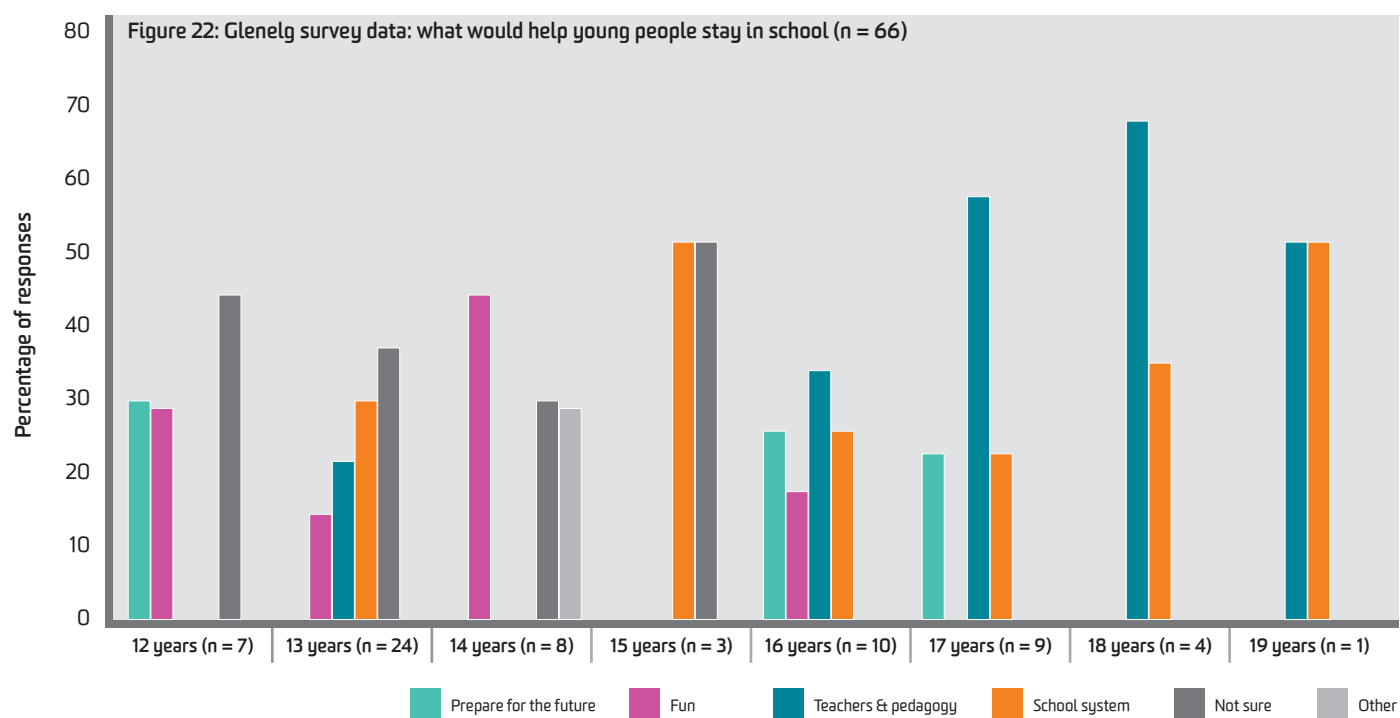
*Community
groups/events:*
Scouts

*Work: Working a part-time
job, I feel pretty connected
to small community that
my workplace caters to.
Just community service
around Portland.*

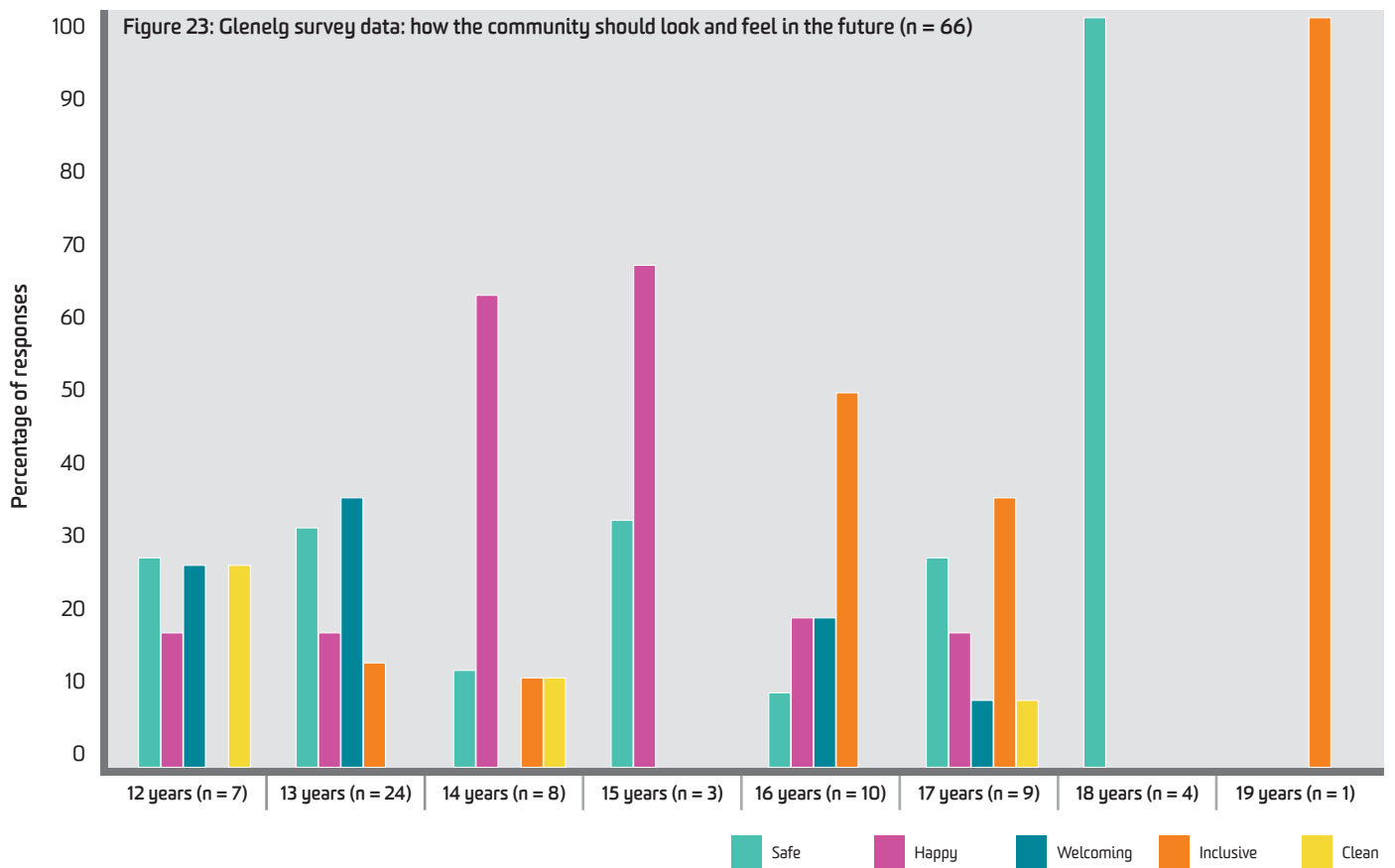
Future education and employment



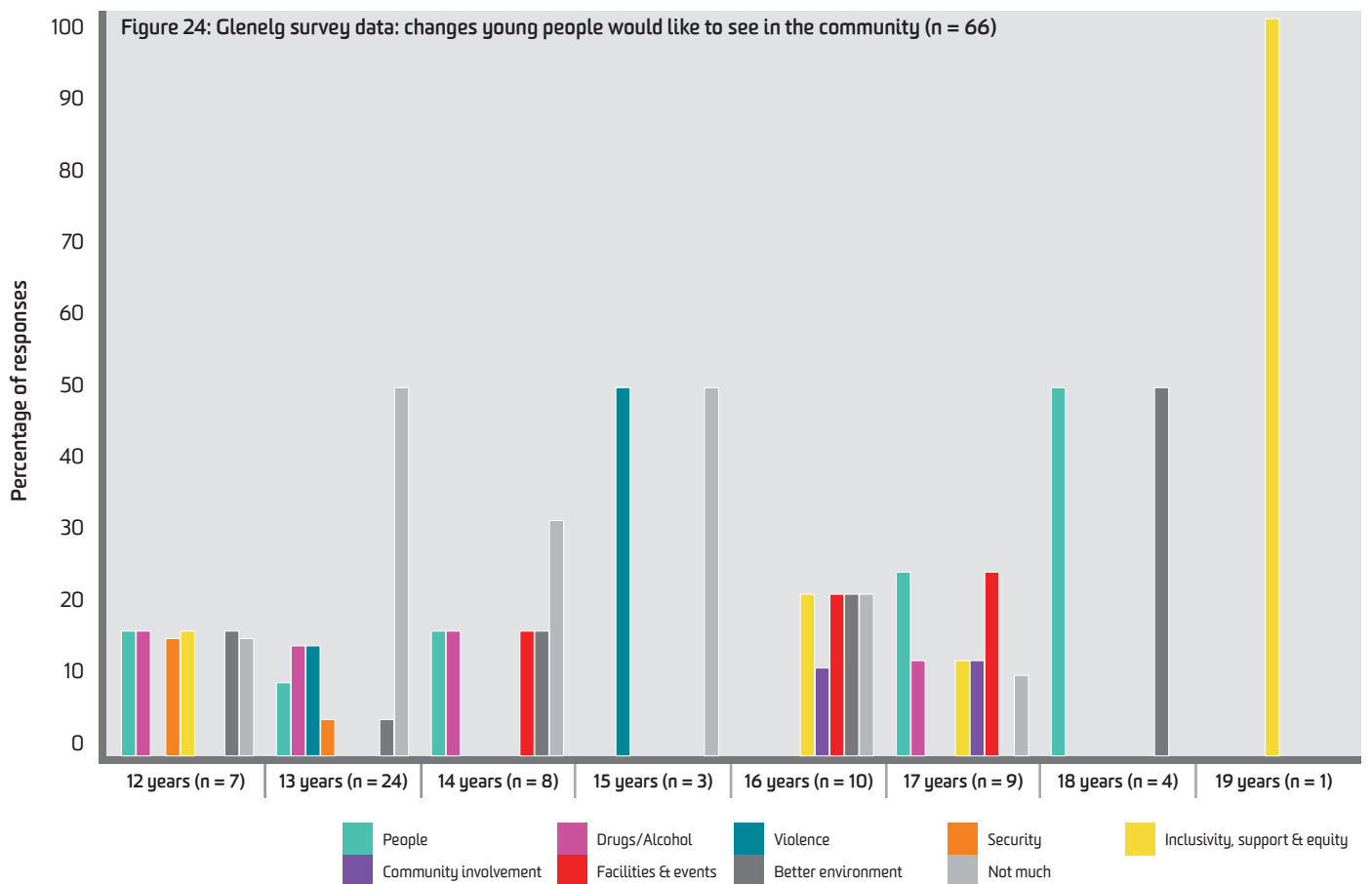
Helping young people to stay in school



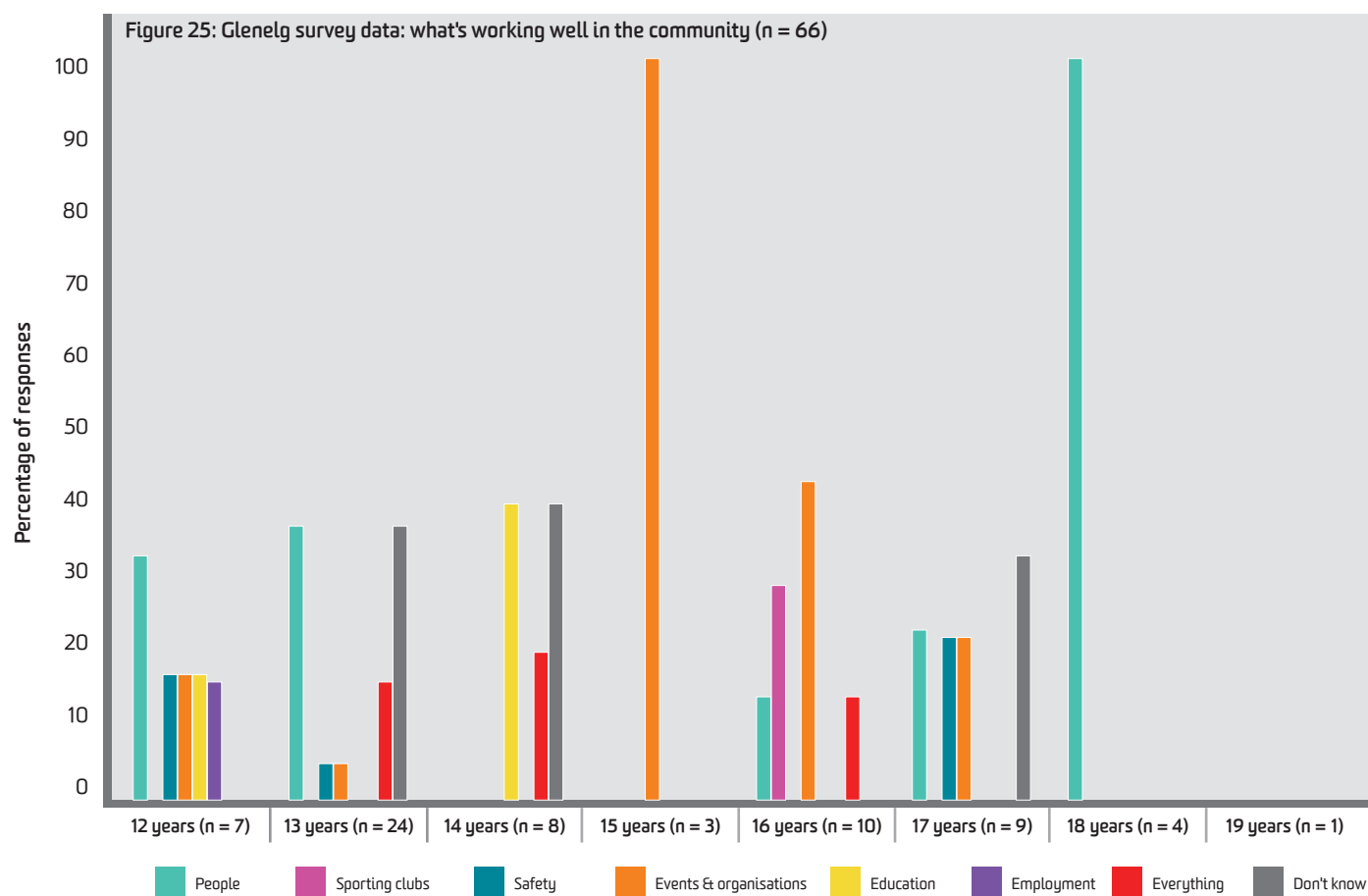
Future community



Community changes



What's working



Moyne – a portrait of the next generation of CFA volunteers

Scene: The school day began with a whole school briefing on COVID-19 and the school's response to a rapidly changing situation. The students are told that there will be no more excursions, among other things. The focus group goes ahead with seven young people in years 10–12 and the project officer. The youth co-facilitator is unwell so is not there.

These young people report strong participation in sports such as cricket, netball, football, fishing and shooting. They are particularly enthusiastic about the CFA (Country Fire Authority) which, they explain, you can do as an elective in Year 9/10 then return to your brigade as a volunteer. Every one of these young people talk about wanting to work hard and complete school with the best possible ATAR so they can go on to study at TAFE (and in one case, university) to become fisheries officers, farmers, automotive workers, café owners and teachers. They articulate their desire to leave so that they may “get new experiences and learn from different people, but always come back”. This group resoundingly state that more needs to be done to support struggling students, offer local training opportunities to mitigate the need to travel to Warrnambool, and provide a wider choice of subjects instead of focusing on farming-related opportunities “as not everyone is gonna be a farmer”. One participant said, “Let students study what they want to, not what others want them to. Encourage people to keep seeding the thing they love, so they don't fail.” It would also help young people to stay in school and seek employment in the region if there was “reassurance of employment”.

Transport in Moyne is a real issue for this group. They all comment on the need for better public transport in rural areas, which ideally should be free for young people. A young person who was extremely concerned with the need for public transport also expressed the need for “housing for kids who have to leave home – so that we can still go to school” and not just emergency housing, “somewhere that is routinely ‘a home’”. This individual also spoke about the need for “more support for mental health at school – teach about mental health issues in health classes from Year 9 up [Headspace].

We learn about alcohol and drugs, but not mental health.” They also suggest that facilitating talk sessions where students can talk through solutions once a month and setting up anonymous chatrooms for students in need of support would be a good idea.

A young person from Moyne who has recently left school with plans to become a primary school teacher spoke further about this topic in an online focus group. She said:

“... also major for school is wellbeing facilities. It is really important that we should have access to a team to help health and wellbeing. At my school a really well-trained therapist was requested by everyone and it was really good. Stress related to workload and exams and if people can't deal with stuff at home. Not all schools have that, but I think it's a really good idea to see different ideas on other ways to deal with stress, what is behind stress – mixture of anything – everything going on from different essays tests, teachers push people to do their best. That push to do well. More support would help people stay at school.”

Finally, the young people from Moyne who engaged in Youth Conversations all generally agreed that there needed to be “more opportunities for young people [from smaller communities] to meet” because there is “not much for us to do. It is either adult or smaller kid stuff”. They think it would be great to have a high school in Port Fairy and more youth-focused events. One young person sums this last point up nicely by saying:

“Get young people involved in planning events, without parents. After events get feedback from youth – rather than just adults.”

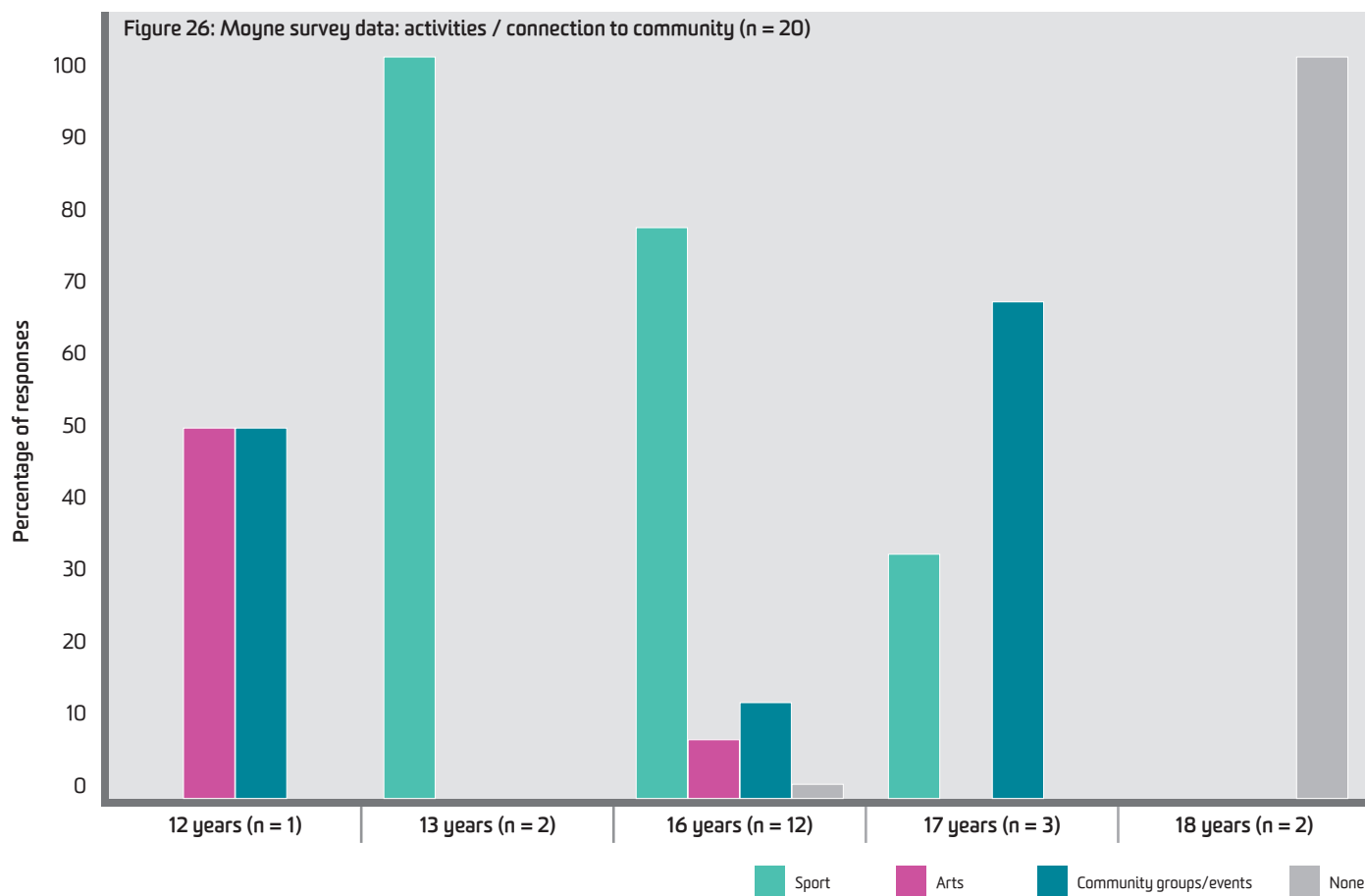
Table 12: Moyne survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
12	1 at high school	1 in Year 7
13	2 at high school Home schooling	1 in Year 7, 1 in Year 8
16	11 at high school (8 VCE, 1 VCAL, 1 VET) 2 at TAFE	11 in Year 11
17	2 at high school (VCAL) 2 at TAFE	2 in Year 11 1 at TAFE
18	2 at TAFE	1 in Year 11

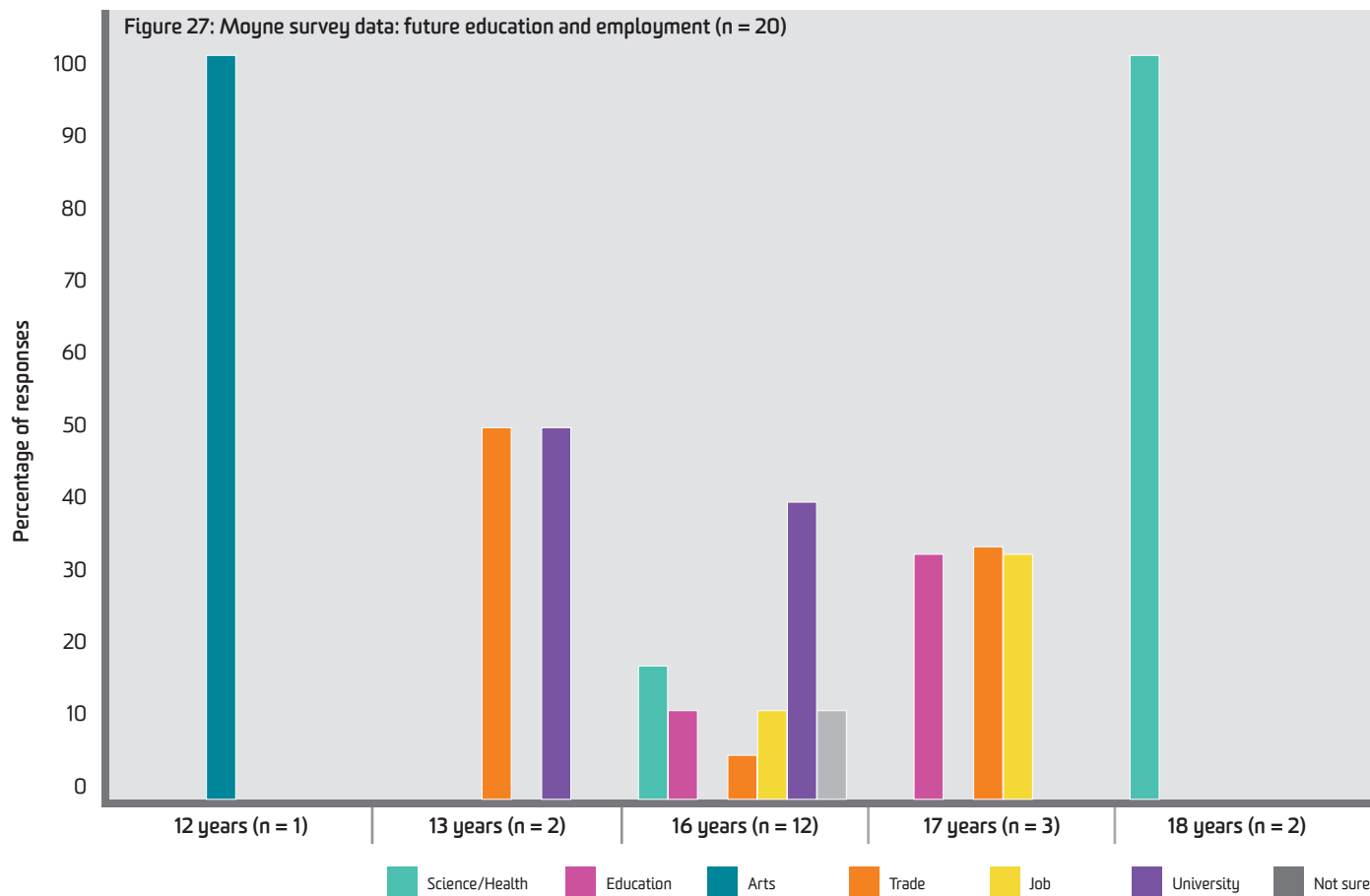
Table 13: Moyne survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
12 (n = 1)	1					1		
13 (n = 2)	2					2		
16 (n = 12)	13	9		2	1	7	4	
17 (n = 3)	1	1		1	1	1	2	
18 (n = 2)			1				2	
	17	10	1	3	2	11	8	0

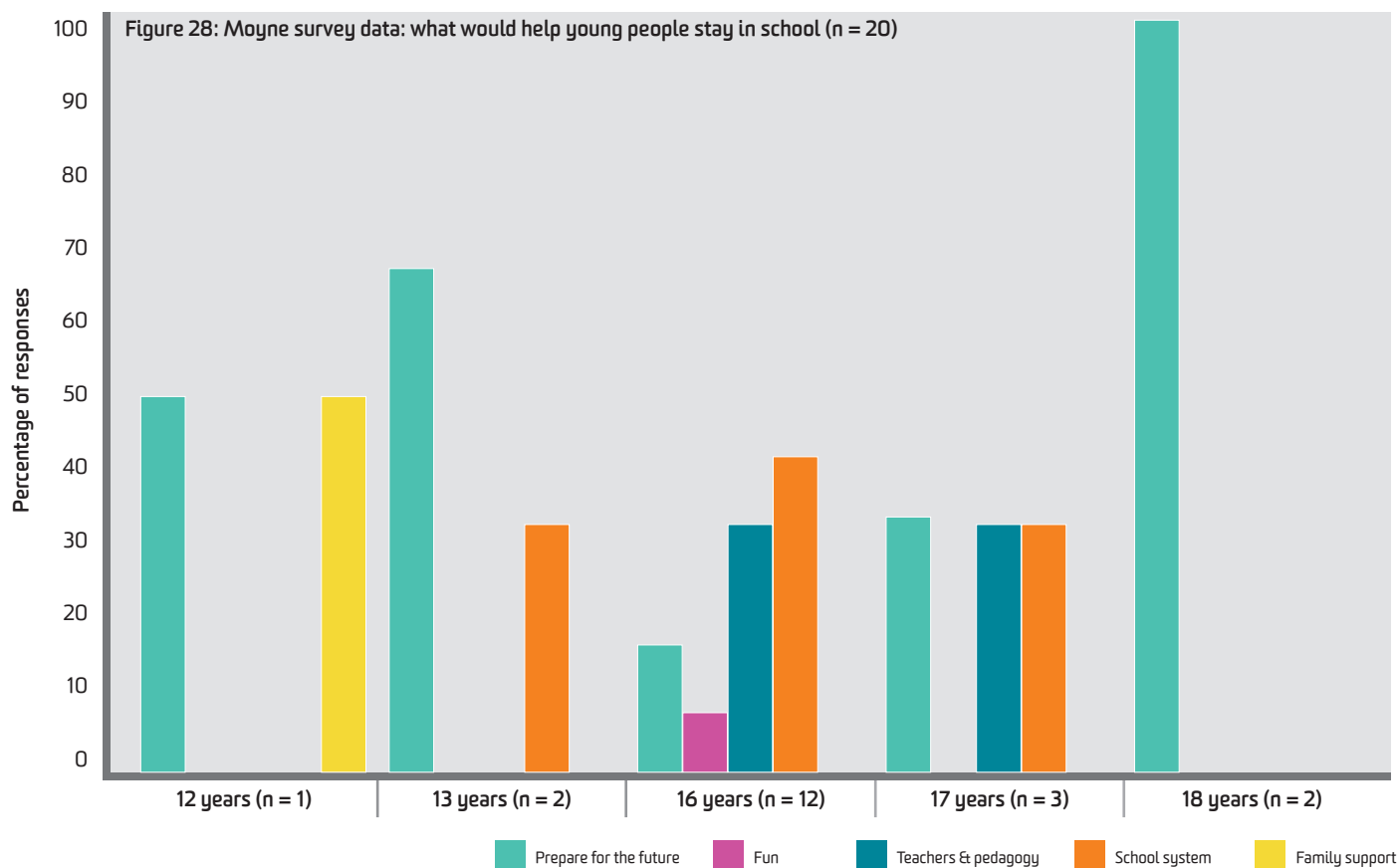
Activities / connection



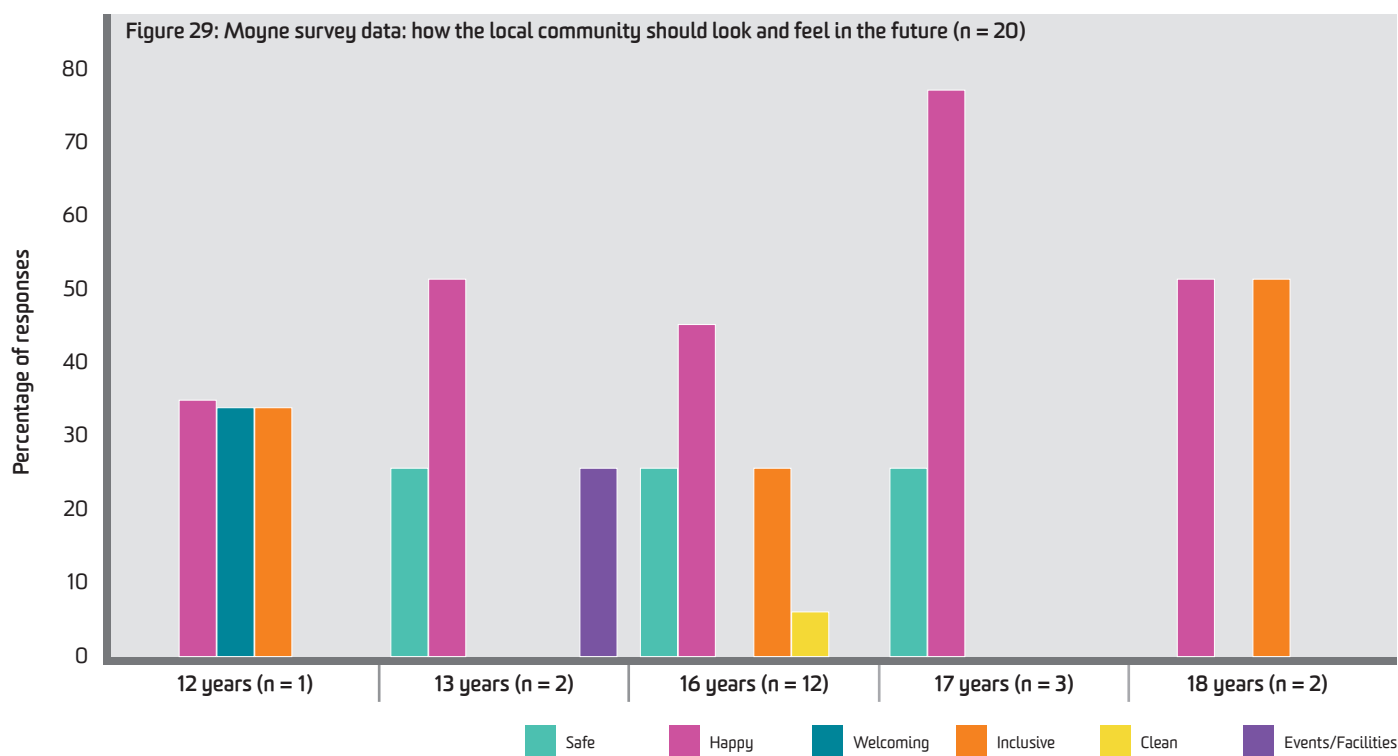
Future education and employment



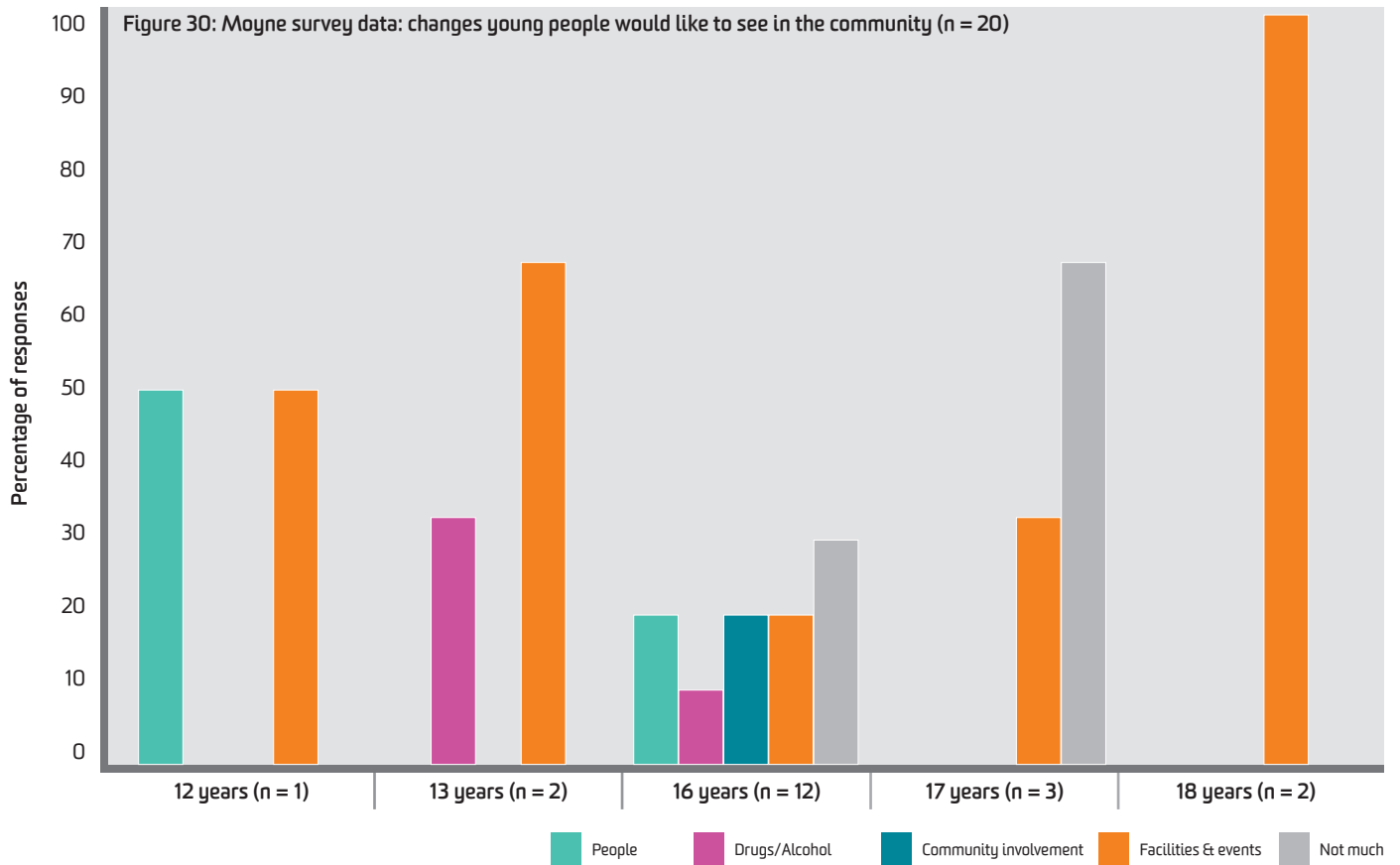
Helping young people to stay in school



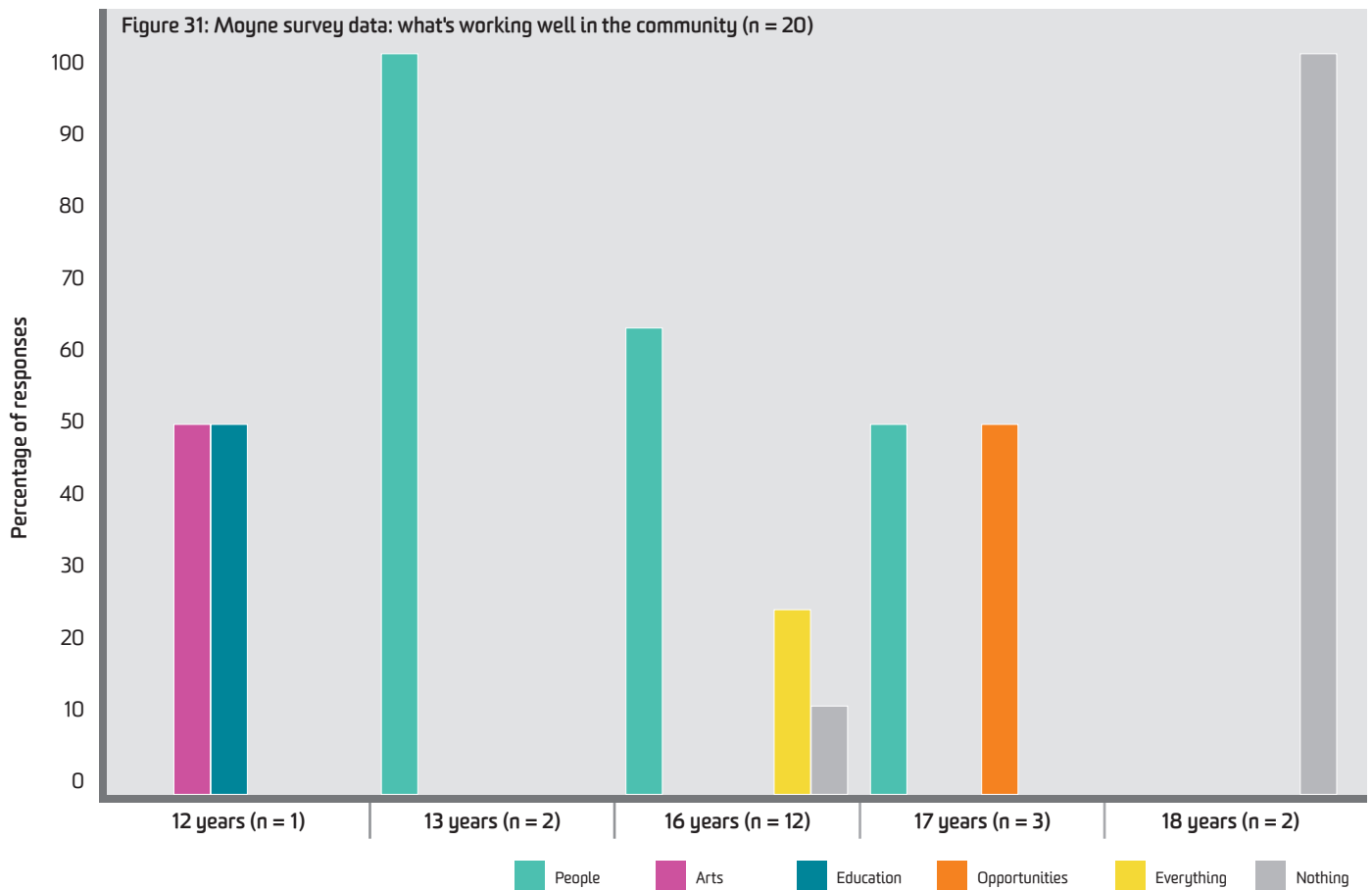
Future community



Community changes



What's working



Southern Grampians – a portrait of two towns

Scene 1: Six students in years 8–12 at school (13–17 years) gather on the Thursday before schools shut due to the pandemic. The students live in Hamilton, the main centre of Southern Grampians. They indicated an acute awareness of schools shutting in the area, and that most activities had ceased, but still discussed “normal things” during the focus group.

Some members of this group already have detailed plans for when they leave school – pandemic permitting. One young person is going to take a gap year, working at a bakery to save money before backpacking around Europe. She will then move to NSW or NT to work in farm management or perhaps take up a position with a family as a nanny. At 25 or 26 she will join the police force to become a detective or work in forensics. Another is less certain, saying:

“I am not sure whether to do VCAL or VCE but when I graduate, I want to move back to NZ as soon as possible and finish my driver licence there. I will join the police academy and after two years of parole [probation], I hope to branch out into forensic photography hopefully in different countries.”

A third young person comments that she wants to do well in school, finishing VCE with a good ATAR while staying fit and becoming either sports or house captain. She then hopes to enter the AFLW League while also pursuing a career in midwifery, nursing or teaching, or become a vet. Through this discussion the group expressed a sense of possibility with the capacity to explore pathways that aligned with their interests.

Despite their ambitions in life, these young people did not see their school in Hamilton as providing the education they both wanted *and* needed. They articulated a need for “more activeness offered to all year levels”, saying “Once you are in higher years, you miss activities. VCAL students do activity every day” but VCAL and VET are “looked upon as bad or lower” than VCE, creating an almost impossible choice between the education they want (e.g. applied learning) and the education they need to participate fully in higher education (e.g. VCE). They noted that they believed young people would be more likely to complete Year 12 if they had “better access to school-based training and easier access to

get back into school if you have left”. The conversation around re-engaging young people in school was accompanied by the observation that school could be made to be “less hard work for those who struggle – more hands on” and provide “free sleeping quarters at school for those who have nothing to go home to” and “some fun subjects for people who need to clear their minds in years 11 and 12”.

This awareness of other people’s struggles stretches beyond the school environment into what these young people want ‘Hamo’ to be.

“To me I think Hamilton should become a more accepting environment. I feel as if Hamo is very one-sided – if you aren’t on that side, you are not treated fairly by others. But something good about this community is that we are all very close as a whole.”

This sense of closeness expressed by these young people is accompanied by a feeling of goodwill towards others, captured by the comment:

“I want the community to be a welcoming place and the opportunity to go up to a friend you haven’t seen in a while and ask them how school is going and hear them say ‘It’s going good, I’m at uni now and I’m doing well.”

Scene 2: In the smaller Southern Grampians township of Balmoral, another focus group was held with seven senior secondary students. Their conversations show the contrast of growing up in a small regional town compared to a larger regional centre like Hamilton.

This group of young people describe Balmoral as a quiet, safe, calm, homely and welcoming place to live with the added benefit of small class sizes at the local school – due to the small population. They think the “school facilities are very good” and that the community’s “Bush Nursing Centre works well in connecting community and providing health services and support in emergency situations. [It provides an] activity group for elders to help them not be isolated and integrate with young people. Integration to P–12 schools.” However, lack of communication infrastructure, lack of transport and lack of opportunities to connect with local community outside of school-based events present specific challenges. Poor communication infrastructure impacts the whole community: “If you’re in the middle of two towers like Balmoral is, you get no reception.” The issues this creates are further compounded by transport difficulties: “Public transport is nearly non-existent and Hamilton, the main centre, is 45 minutes away.” The lack of transport prevents these young people from getting part-time work, with one young man commenting that:

“The thing of employment in our community – it’s really hard. If any of us want to get a part-time job, it’s an hour away in Horsham and Hamilton. Transport to there is also a problem, and getting parents to take you ... there is no point to it ... parents have to take time off work to take us to work.”

Even the main community event, The Balmoral Show, can be challenging for young people to participate in due to the lack of transport and communication infrastructure. One young man comments that transport difficulties mean “We don’t have much social life” but fortunately “Internet at home is great”, becoming his key link to community. This young man makes a case for doing an apprenticeship in a regional community because “you get a wider range of different tasks you can do, you can tick off all your different skills at one time ... You do something different in rural areas, and I would get OK in most skills than just one area”, adding “there is plenty of work (in building) here too”. He says that for him, the benefits of staying local come from staying near to the family farm and having a local support network. Some do not see themselves coming back to the community at all though. And still others are undecided.

“I don’t see my future just yet. I have an idea of taking a gap year or seeking a TAFE course in the creative industries in 3D animation ... I love 3D animation. I have been inspired by it when I was a little kid when I watched my first Disney movie.”

This young person is currently doing a VET course in Screen and Media, Gaming, Programming and 3D Animation and gets to meet students from other schools who also attend this class.

Photo credit: Luisa Denu, Unsplash



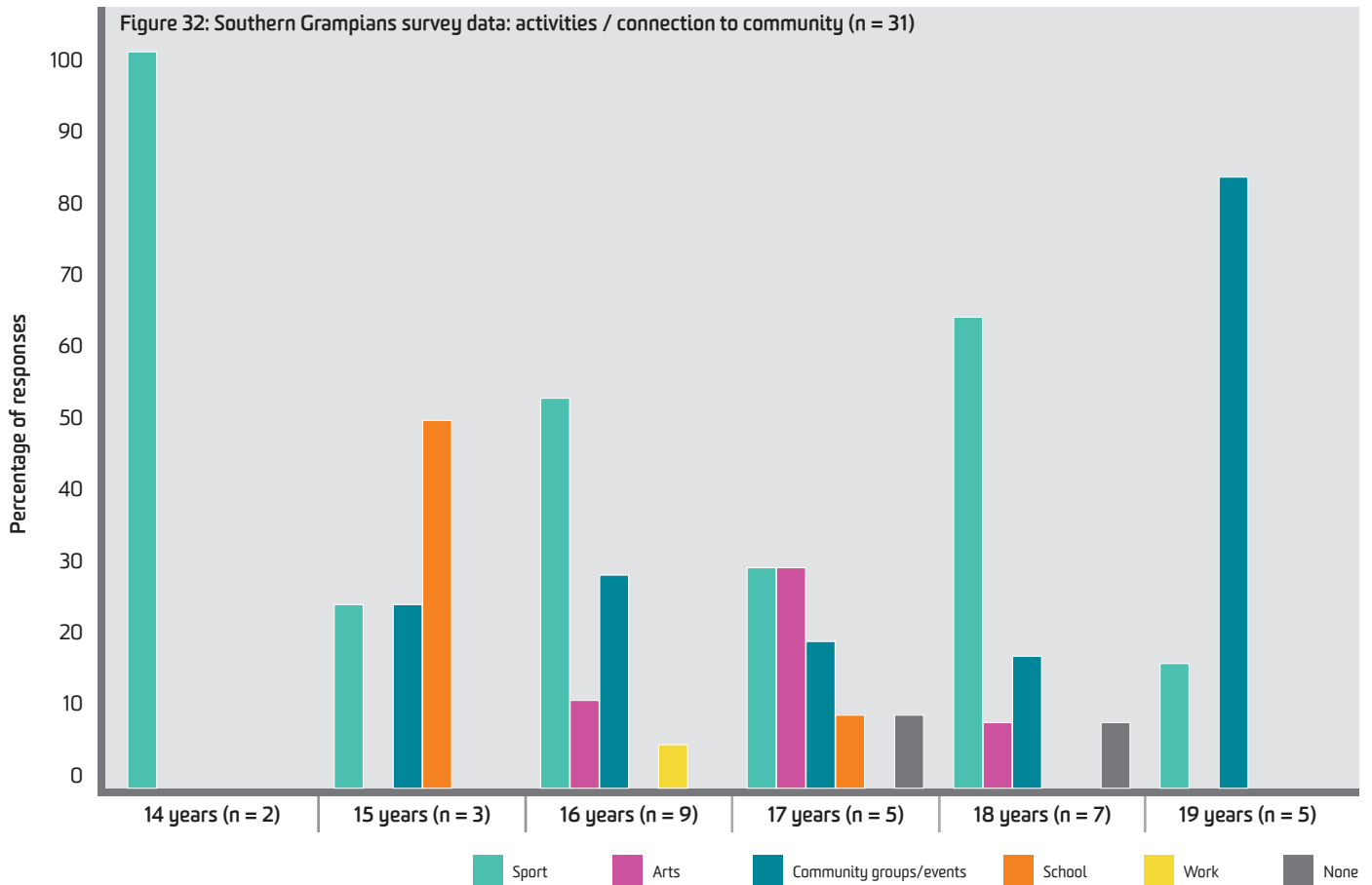
Table 14: Southern Grampians survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
14	2 at high school	1 in Year 8, 1 in Year 9
15	3 at high school (1 VCE)	1 in Year 9, 1 in Year 10, 1 in Year 11
16	9 at high school (5 VCE, 1 VCAL, 1 VET)	2 in Year 10, 7 in Year 11
17	3 at high school (VCE) 2 not studying	1 in Year 11, 2 in Year 12
18	3 at high school (VCE) 3 at TAFE 1 not studying	3 in Year 12
19	1 at TAFE 3 not studying	

Table 15: Southern Grampians survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
14 (n = 2)	7				1		2	
15 (n = 3)	37	1		1		1	2	
16 (n = 9)	22	4		2	2	2	7	
17 (n = 5)	6	3	1			1	4	
18 (n = 7)	90	1			4	2	5	
19 (n = 5)				1		2	2	1
	162	9	1	4	7	8	22	1

Activities / connection



*Sport:
Swimming, netball,
football, cricket,
basketball*

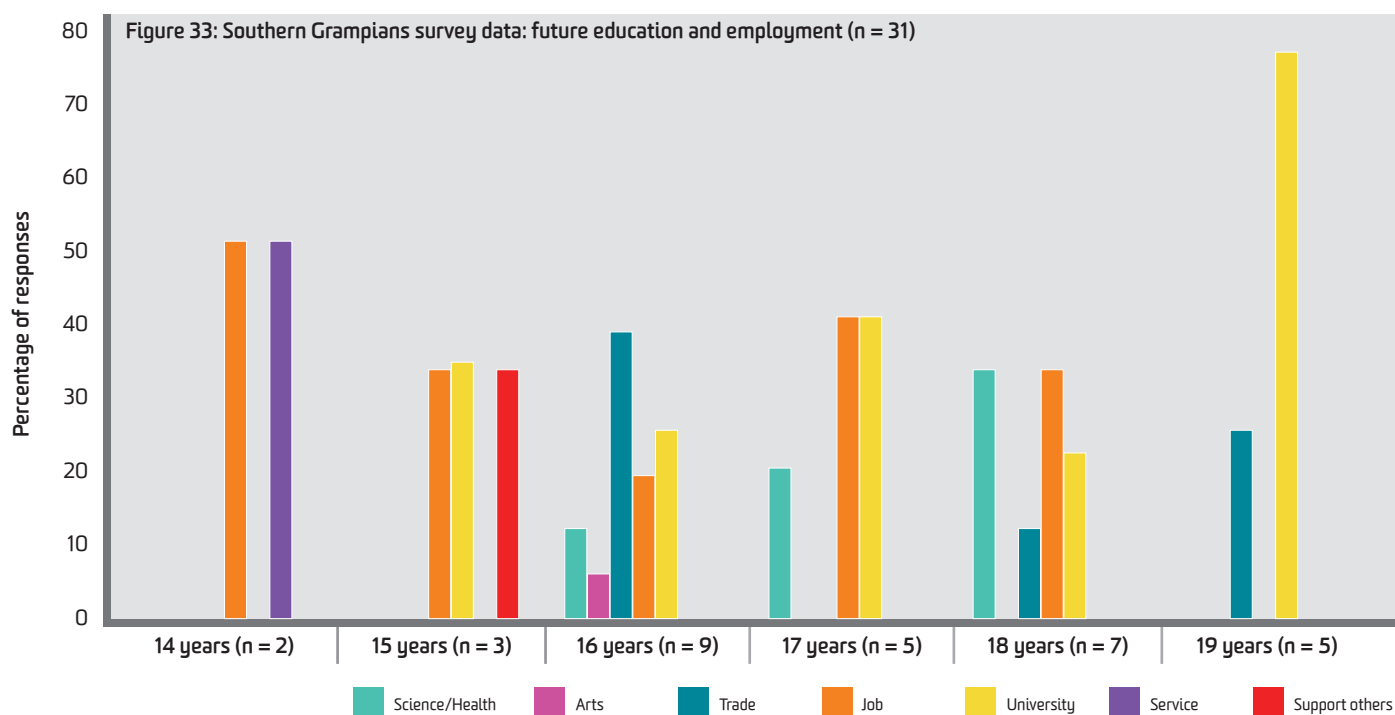
*Arts:
Playing with the
orchestra, singing
group, choir, music*

*Community groups/events:
Council run service for
young people, Scouts, skills
centre, youth alliance*

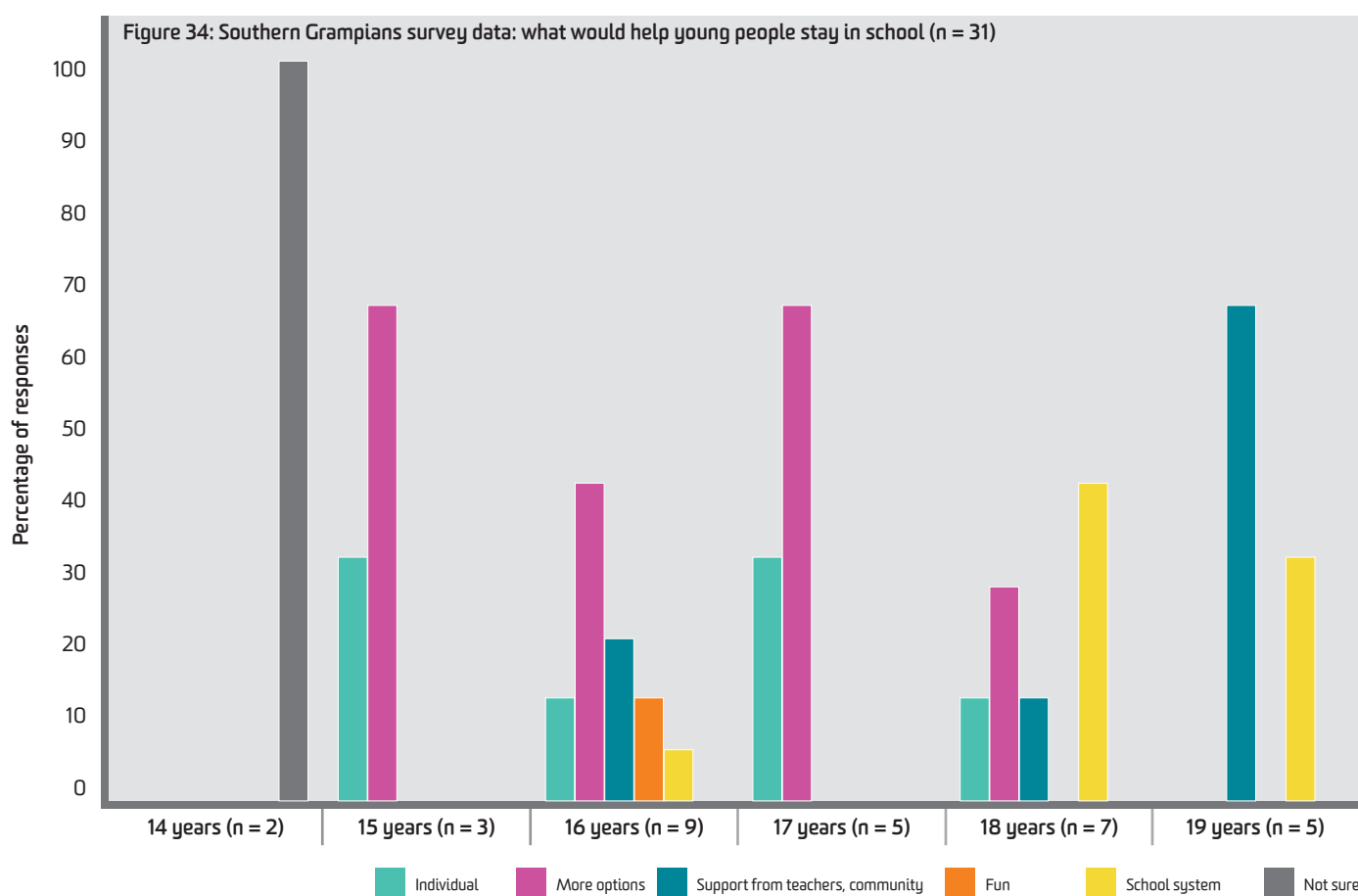
*School:
School events,
waitressing at school*

*Work:
Working and people
at work*

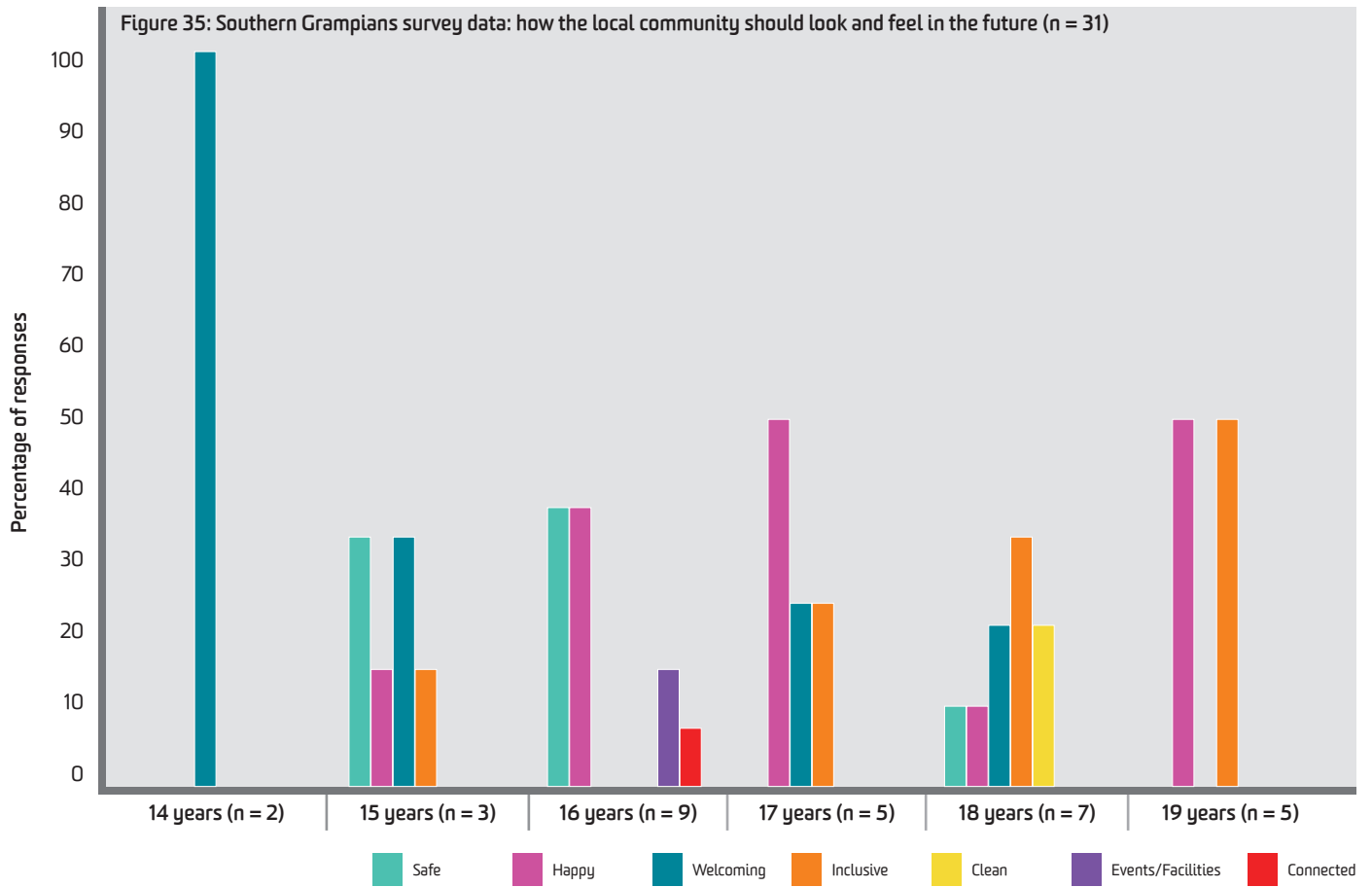
Future education and employment



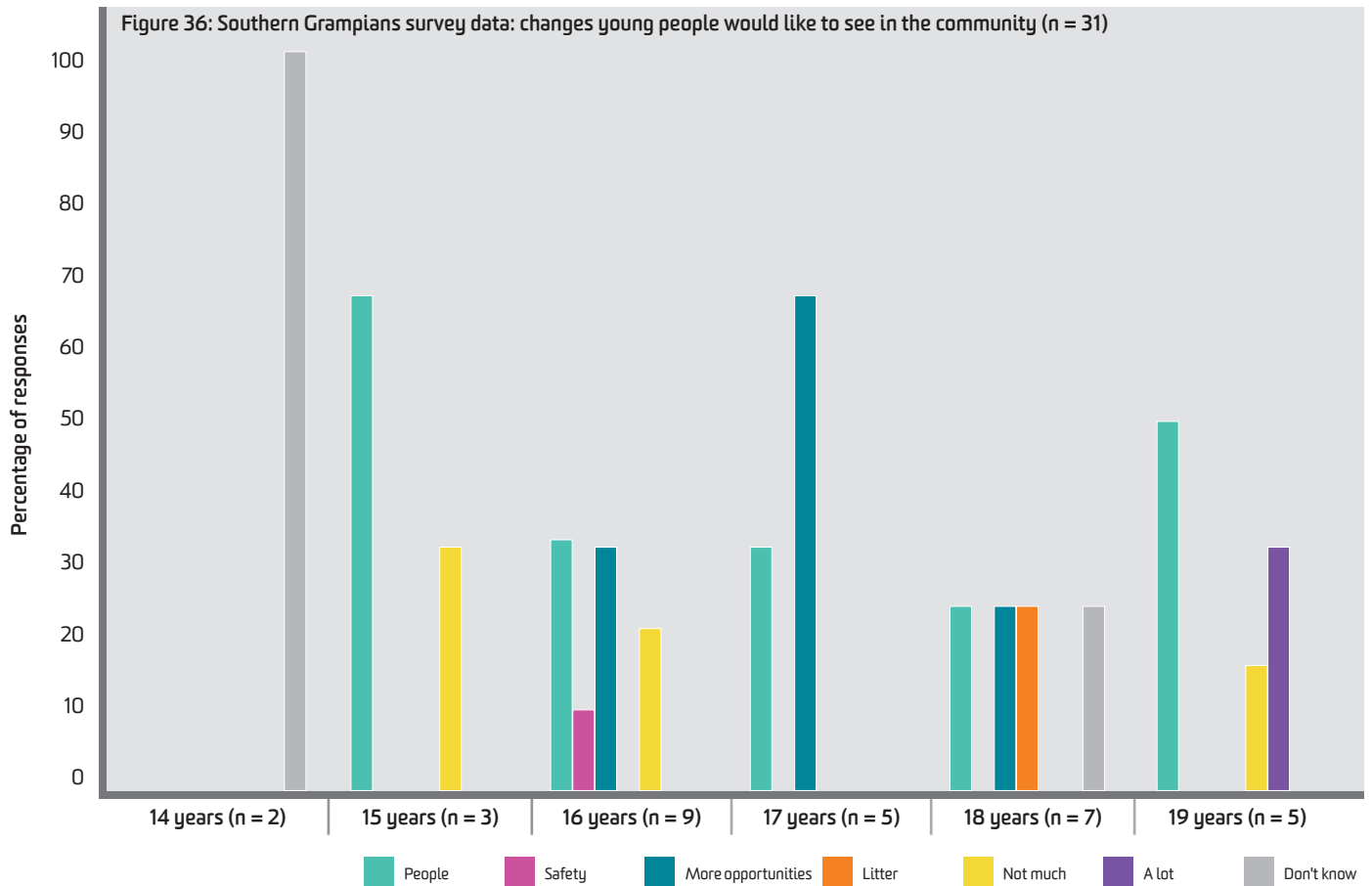
Helping young people to stay in school



Future community



Community changes



What's working



Warrnambool – a portrait of two educational settings

Scene 1: Three 18-year-old young women living out of the family home gathered online during the pandemic. They are no longer at school; two attend South West TAFE and the third plans to return to further education in the future.

These newly independent young people are moving through a critical transition period in tough times. Feelings of social isolation are compounded by the lack of public transport and expense of participating in the community. The pandemic then exacerbated existing isolation and made it virtually impossible to find work.

They talked about how they wanted to feel more connected to the community however, because “Warrnambool is a very isolated town, it is very hard to be involved in groups”. What does help this young person is that she receives a free gym membership, as her other friends do. This is helping with becoming active and being less stressed. They also noted the FReeZA events in the area were a good initiative and that more events like these combined with access to cheaper youth-friendly programs, youth centres run by young people for young people, better transport and affordable housing would make a big difference to their capacity to live well in Warrnambool.

Another young person from South West TAFE who participated in a different focus group (before the pandemic) raised the issue of sport being primarily based around football and netball, saying “If you aren’t a part of it, you aren’t a part of the community.” Like many of those involved in Youth Conversations, this young person volunteers, attends free events, participates in music groups and goes to see local bands but they would still like a more diverse range of ways to become part of the community, saying:

“The town of Warrnambool needs to be a place where anyone can be someone, a town where everyone can fit in and be a part of this community.”

A 16 year old who lives with a disability and is currently pursuing a VCAL pathway explains that they have engaged with their community by going to an all-abilities choir and working at McDonald’s. People have now started talking to her, she says, adding that “I’m not a good singer a few years ago but now they are saying ‘you’re a good singer.’”



Scene 2: Secondary school students in years 10–12 are recruited into Youth Conversations through their schools. They attend one of three different focus groups during the school day. These students live at home and almost all engage in part-time work.

Like their counterparts around the region, many of these young people had a clear sense of what they wanted their future to look like, with many mapping a pathway that would have them “Move to Melbourne to complete university. Then move out of the city to Warrnambool or Geelong.” These students connect with their communities in a myriad of ways – doing community theatre in Warrnambool, gymnastics, school leadership, school hockey academy, church, public speaking, musicals, playing on a mixed netball team, indoor tennis centre, Brierly Cricket Club, science academy, school events, free community events, music groups, local bands, surf lifesaving patrol, volunteering, clean up beach day, playing in bands, Warrnambool symphony orchestra, Robin Wright Ensemble, foodshare, Red Shield Appeal, gymnastics coach, and being a part of Warrnambool Youth Council. Even so, it was noted that:

“there needs to be more local [social] activities. There are lots of things in the tourist season but once it’s over there is nothing.”

These young people think that it would help them to stay in the region if there was some way “for students to know they will achieve their eventual outcome, that there’s a positive future in doing so”. Despite their overwhelming uptake of the VCE at school, they still thought that there needed to be “more VET courses in small communities” adding that “Mainstream school is not for some people. Some prefer more hands-on learning.” Their experience of school could be improved if it was:

“less stressful and [offered] more help and education on possibilities – not enforcing that study is everything and the only way to get places”.

These young people were attuned to the discrimination experienced by some people in the community, calling for what some referred to as “judgementalness” to stop: “I want there to be more diversity here and to make sure it includes everyone.” This group of young people also thought that transport needed improving. A 15 year old man commented that there needed to be “more effort and attention to drug abuse and addiction and more funding to WRAD⁴”, saying “People don’t feel safe.”

4. Western Region Alcohol and Drug Centre. <https://wrad.org.au>

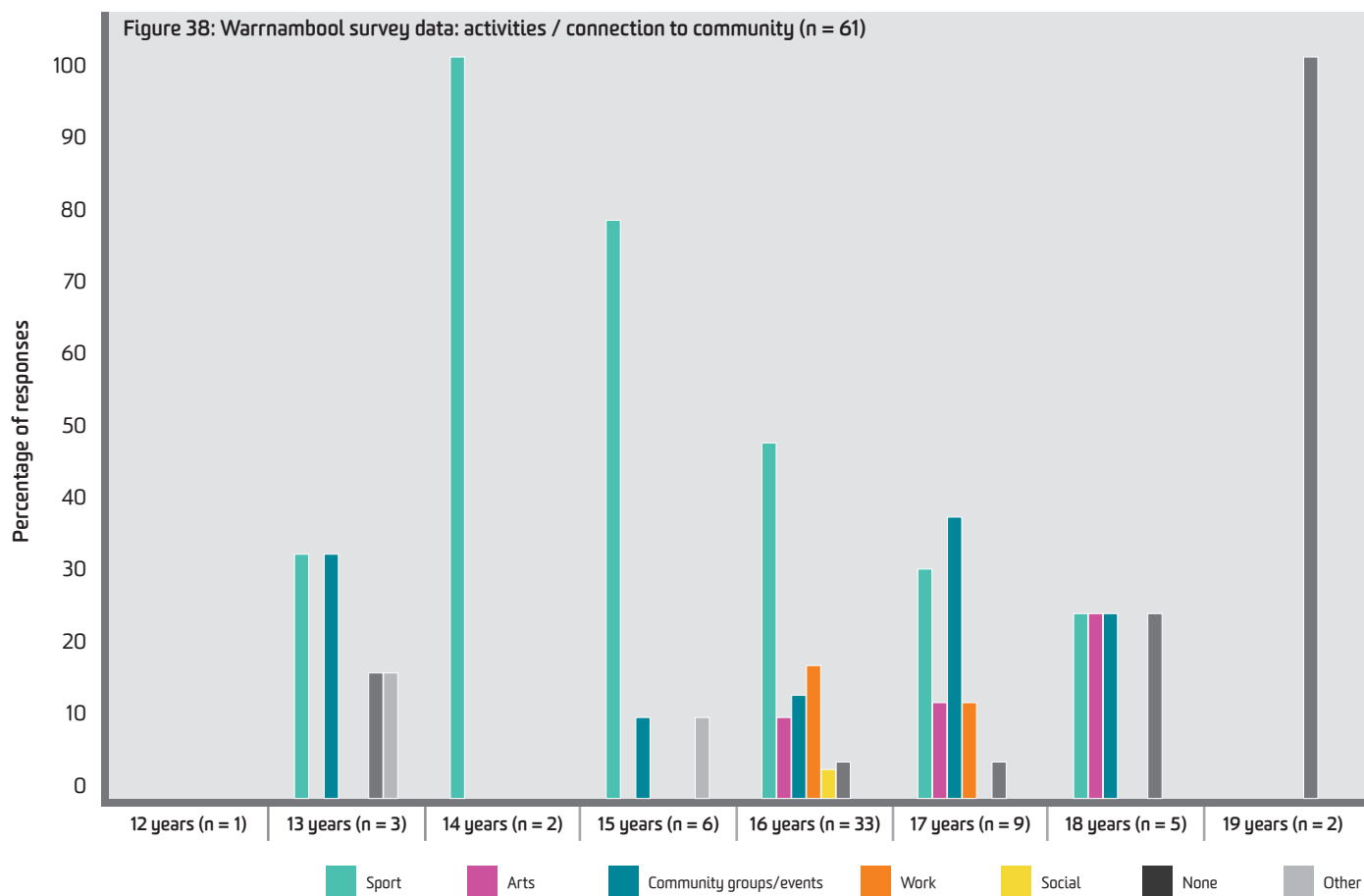
Table 16: Warrnambool survey data: education

Age	High school, VET, VCAL, TAFE	Year level
12	1 at high school	1 in Year 7
13	3 at high school	3 in Year 8
14	2 at high school (1 VCAL)	1 in Year 9, 1 in Year 10
15	6 at high school (2 VCE)	1 in Year 9, 4 in Year 10, 1 in Year 11
16	33 at high school (32 VCE, 1 VCAL, 1 TAFE, 5 VET)	33 in Year 11
17	9 at high school (7 VCE, 2 VET, 2 VCAL)	6 in Year 11, 3 in Year 12
18	1 at high school (VCAL, VET) 3 at TAFE 1 not studying	1 in Year 12
19	2 at TAFE	

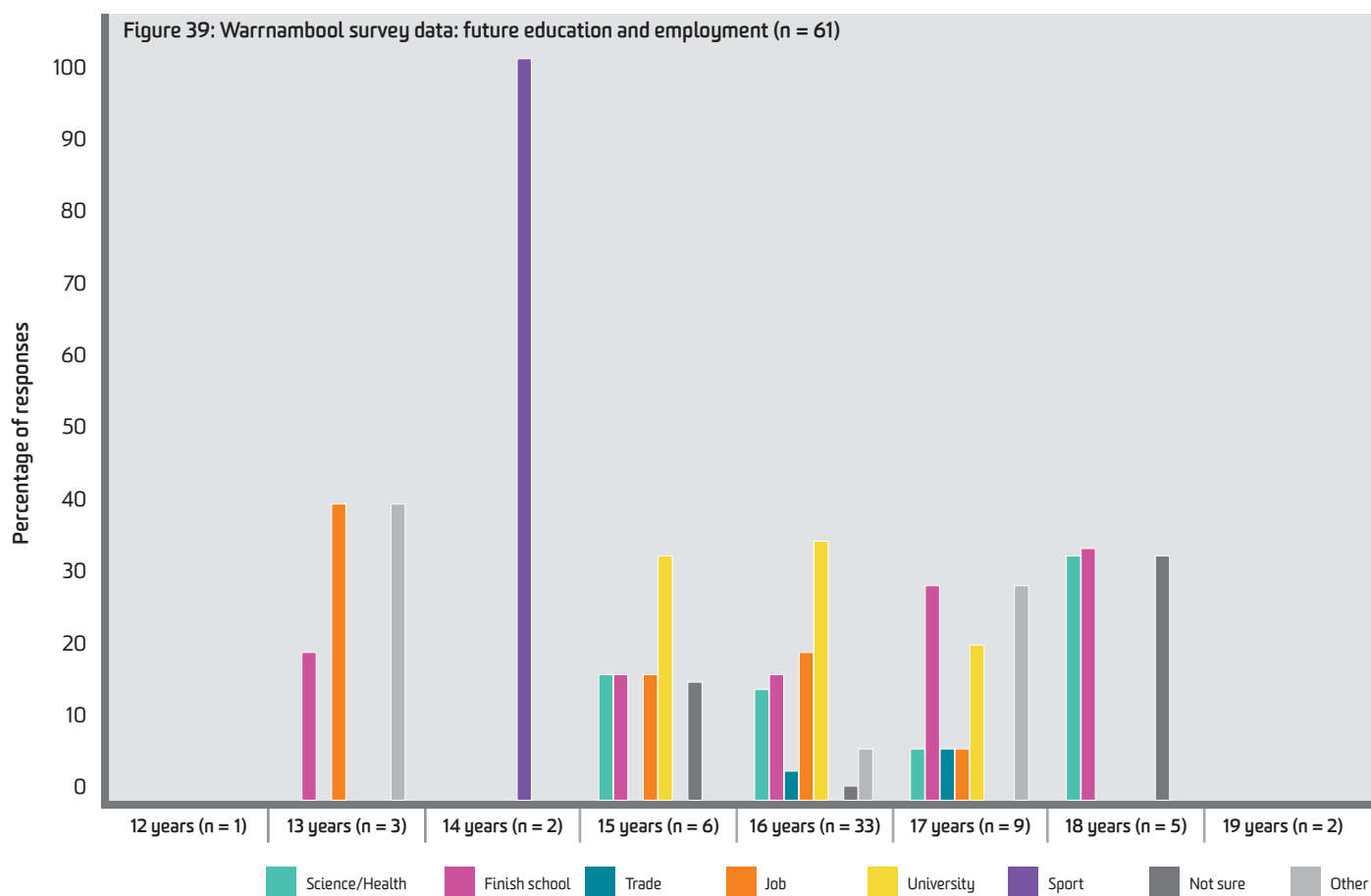
Table 17: Warrnambool survey data: school retention, work and future

Age	Days of school missed in last 3 months	Work part-time	Work full-time	Volunteering	Apprenticeship	Future here	Future elsewhere	Not sure
12 (n = 1)								
13 (n = 3)	70			1		1	2	
14 (n = 2)	3	1				2		
15 (n = 6)		3		2		2	2	2
16 (n = 33)	64	28		3		11	19	3
17 (n = 9)	42	7		2		6	3	
18 (n = 5)	2	2	1				3	2
19 (n = 2)	90					1		
	271	41	1	8	0	23	29	7

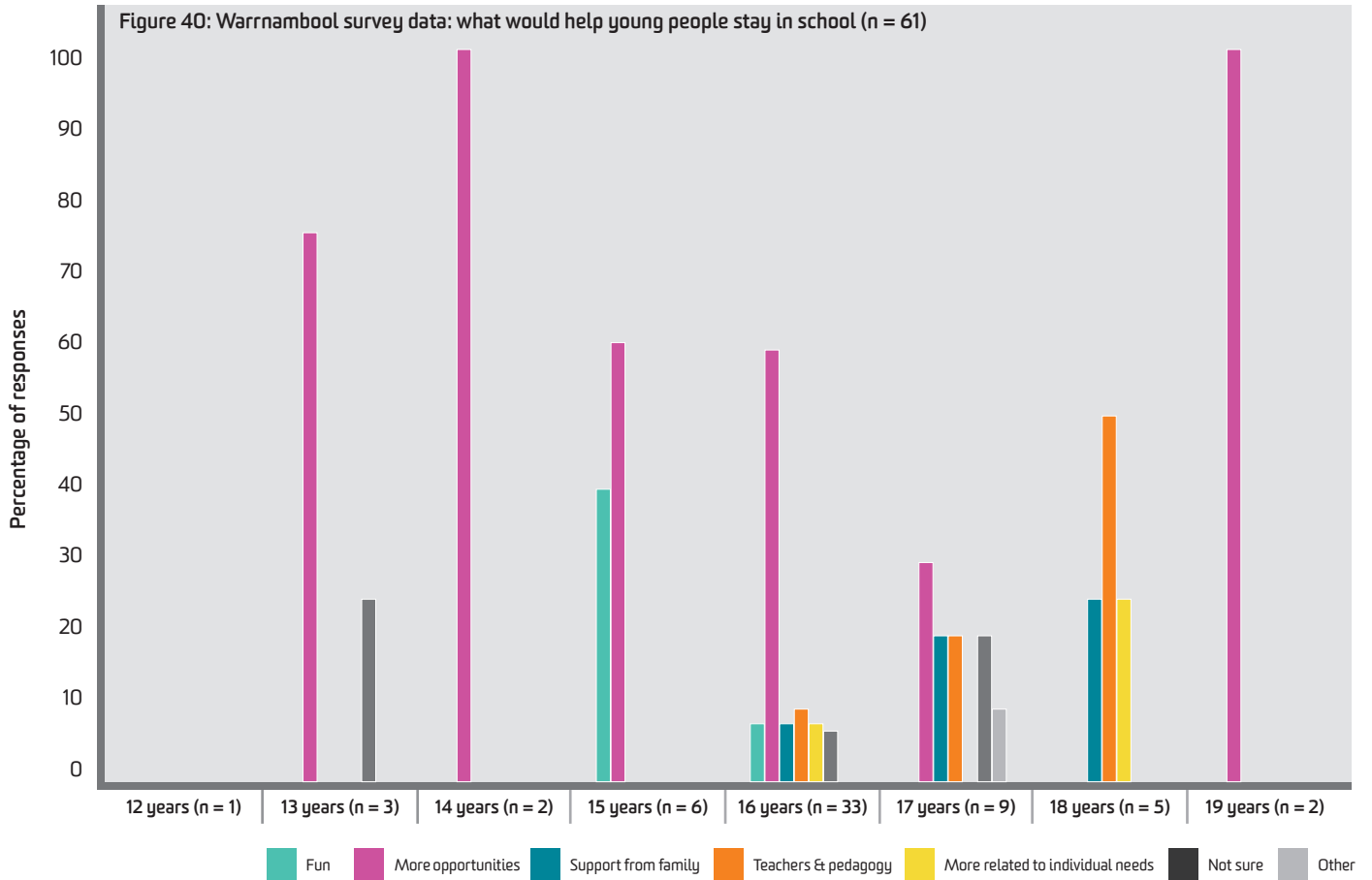
Activities / connection



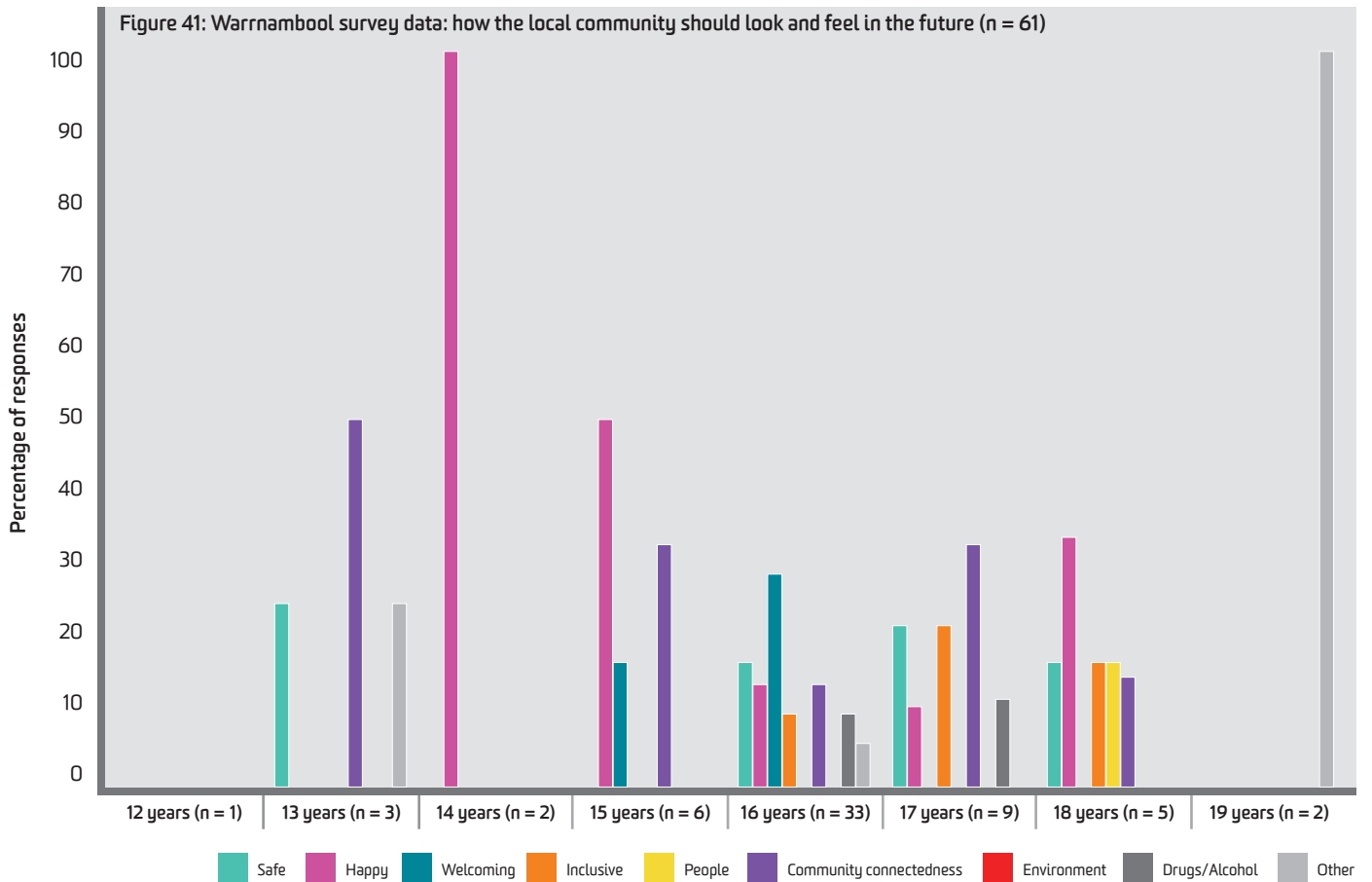
Future education and employment



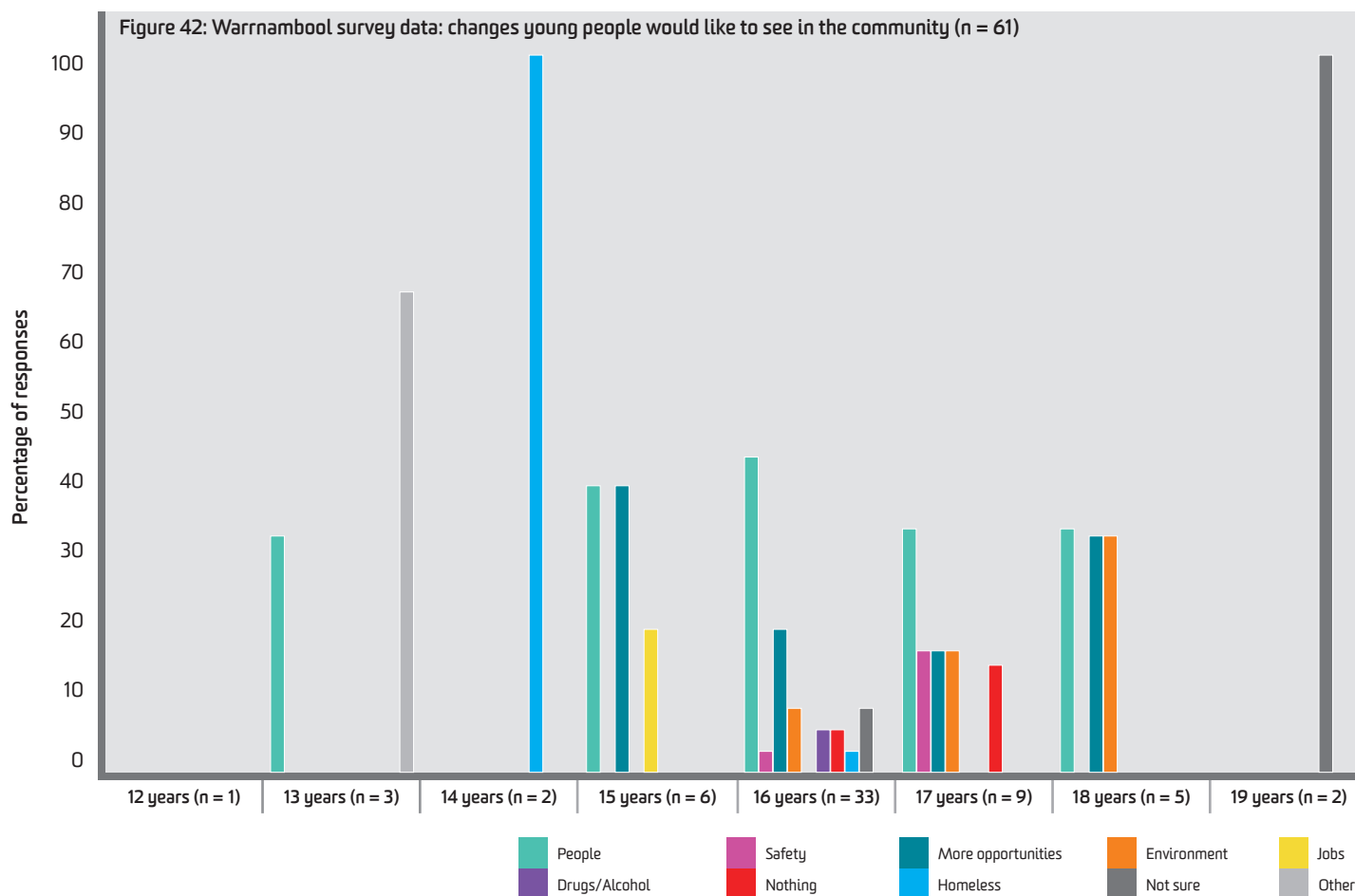
Helping young people to stay in school



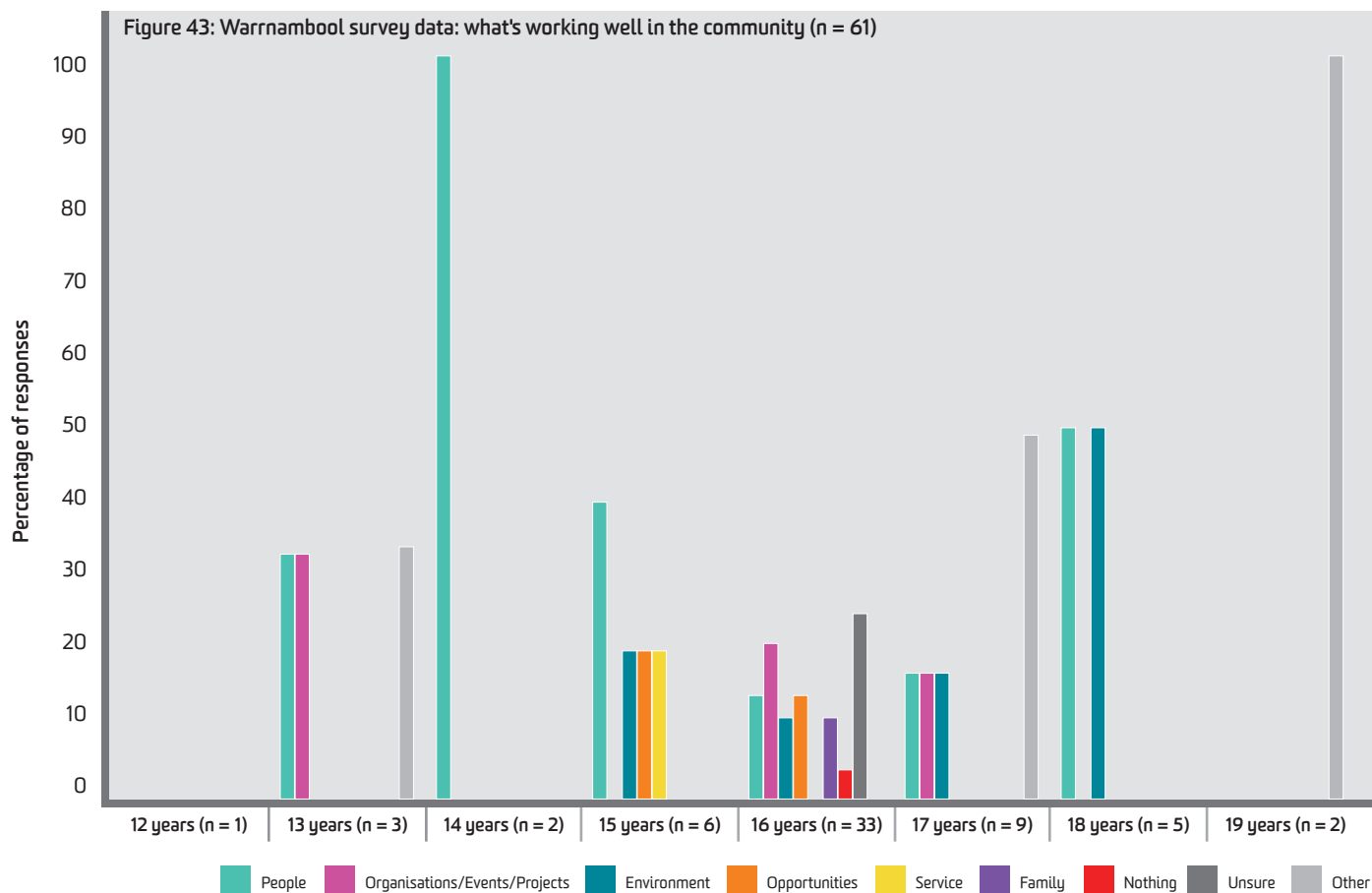
Future community



Community changes



What's working



Mixed LGAs – a portrait of living through COVID-19 on the Great South Coast

Scene: This portrait was rendered from the online focus group data featuring the conversations of young people from a range of LGAs within each group. It opens with an account of life in the region during COVID-19 that is (re)constructed from a conversation with five Aboriginal Australian young people aged between 13 and 16. The portrait then explores the COVID-19 related experiences that arose in the other online focus groups, juxtaposing the different accounts to reveal the tensions and inequalities that arose.

This group of young people articulated a range of career and life plans including going to Deakin University to study Marine Biology, becoming a Defence Force pilot, working in a friend's café and travelling. One young woman in Year 9 at school said, "I want to save money and travel and get experience for applying to the police force. I might have a gap year where I join the army. It's always been my dream to join the police. My pop is in the legal system and it will be my way of carrying on the legacy." This young woman says that she "will try to get a job back here to stay close to Country".

Yet, despite these well-considered plans, this group of young people all reported that they found school often did not provide the right supports for students with behavioural and learning challenges. The young person who plans to become a Defence Force pilot said that she has received "a large amount of support with dyslexia throughout school" but has noticed "students with behavioural issues aren't always supported in the right way". Another student elaborates, saying "I have a few friends that kept getting into trouble at school ... they did not want to come to school". These young people in the focus group correlate their friends' disconnect with school with 'getting into trouble', explaining the reasons for the disconnect being a result of not feeling supported by the school, a lack of tutoring outside of class, a lack of facilities, a lack of relevant subjects to choose from, and a need for more hands-on learning – reasons that have echoed across all the responses.

During the Victorian COVID-19 school-from-home period (autumn/winter of 2020) the young people noticed how a student's home life had an impact on their schooling, saying that "students' home environments need to be taken into consideration because they effect school" and that there was

"not enough help with remote learning for those that are struggling". These young people reported mixed experiences learning from home. They all missed seeing their friends in person and playing sport except the Year 6 boy, who commented that he did not want to go anywhere anyway because he liked to stay in his room and play games such as Minecraft and Roblox. The secondary school aged students had more to say, with one stating, "I hate online learning. I am a very social person. I have done most of the work but I don't have any motivation. I sleep in and can't be bothered, the internet drops out and sometimes you miss out on important directions and can't do the work." Working closely with a friend to go through schoolwork was a strategy that helped this student through. Another young person said that:

"online learning was hard at first because I don't know much about technology but now, I enjoy online learning because I don't like being in the classroom. Still struggling a bit with the technology but online learning suits me better because there are no distractions, and also, I don't sleep in ever and I am used to getting up early."

The personal learning experienced by this group of students resonated with the experiences of all the participants in the online focus group sessions held during COVID. They learnt how to do new things, from building on Minecraft to finding new ways to get active; they gained insights about themselves; they embraced the messy and lazy side of their personality; they discovered what they appreciated – which, for some, was school.

Despite their youth, this group of young people spoke articulately about the government response to the pandemic, reporting that they thought it had been handled well and that they agreed with the restrictions imposed. When asked what

could be done better one young person commented, “I don’t like making decisions for the community because everyone thinks differently and everyone has different opinions.” Other comments made by the group were that “youth are burnt out and unmotivated” and:

“there is no long-term strategy/plan in dealing with young people and providing opportunity for young people. We need commitment and not just 12 months or two years of funding. We need more resources to allow young people to speak and programs that are there for them.”

Other online focus groups followed a similar pattern to this one, with young people’s age and living situations having a discernible impact on their social and educational experiences during the pandemic. A group of young people attending South West TAFE discussed how “not going out of the house to do activities [was] affecting social and physical wellbeing”, saying “not meeting new people, not speaking to people or having social interaction, no school is making it hard to socialise”. Those who were living independently reported “feeling very isolated and alone” and “not having motivation to get study and other tasks complete”. They know “lots of people feeling mentally down” and found “not seeing family” particularly hard. One 18 year old said, “Sadly, I’ve found that the world is a worse place than I thought”. Individuals who were not currently engaged in school, training or employment found life in the pandemic particularly difficult, with one such young person living in Warrnambool saying that it had been:

“really hard to find a job, hard to find housing... not much else I want to add... Stuck here, not seeing anyone... Can’t see my brother which sucks.”

They also note:

“I’ve learned to become more independent, less reliant on other people. I am not usually a loner but I am now having to deal with my own problems ... I don’t have anyone to rely on.”

Another young person talked about his coping strategy for living with a parent who has “really bad mental health” during the pandemic. When “footy stopped” he found he could:

“still go out and exercise but it’s a different environment than when you do it with other people ... and I’m trying to get out of the house more ... my mum has really bad mental health and being around that all the time is pretty draining. The first week of COVID was hard, then I built my own fitness circuit and I just go out and do that and then come home.”

Young people who were still at school and in more secure living situations also faced challenges, despite generally reporting the positive effects of spending more time with family. A Year 12 student comments:

“Year 12 ... is a really different year, we haven’t been able to have a ‘normal’ Year 12. Schoolies, graduation, valedictory musicals are cancelled. The Year 12 experience was not what I had hoped for.”

While some adapted well to school from home, saying “I feel home learning suits me. I’m more productive than before ... no distractions”, others discovered they were “very reliant on a school environment to stay motivated with school” and found it “very hard to adjust”. Social connection was also challenging at times with friendships fading during the pandemic. Despite this young people also reported that they had “developed persistence. You’ve made it!! (proud) more exposed to family – reconnected” and “I have more time to react to things and think better to know what to say. I am better socially – thinking about what to say” and “going outside and being by the ocean, I started walking and listening to music lots more”.

Similarly, a student from Glenelg noted:

“I found that I can work under pressure, I found I did better than others and I suppose I could learn more about myself, feel comfortable with myself, it was good for me ... I got a lot of confidence out of it.”

Another young person living with her parents and in her first year of university said that she “learned how to be a businesswoman, entrepreneurship [started own business]”. She said she learned that she can trust herself and her ability to get things done. She described herself in the pandemic as “Motivated, my resilience is good, i just push through. and i am good at finding a balance between all aspects of life.”

Photo credit: Gryffyn M, Unsplash



Learning from Young People's Voices in the Region

The discussion that follows brings together young people's responses to the surveys and the focus groups to present what they have been saying about education, training, employment and their community. The learnings are presented as three strands addressing the six questions guiding the research.

Strand One is *Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes*. This strand specifically addresses the two research questions examining:

- What events/activities do you participate in that make you feel **connected to your community**?
- What do you want your **community** to look/feel like?

Strand Two is *Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future*. This strand specifically addresses the two key research questions examining:

- What do young people want their near future to look like in terms of **education** and **employment**?
- What would help young people stay in school and pursue training/employment **in the region**?

Strand Three is *Changes brought about by the pandemic and learning from them*. This final strand addresses the two questions:

- What has changed for you since the **COVID-19 pandemic**? How have you **adapted** to the pandemic?
- What have you have **learned about yourself and others** during the COVID-19 pandemic?



Photo credit: Cam Adams, Unsplash

Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes

Finding 1

Young people across all LGAs expressed a very strong connection to their local communities through their engagement in local activities such as team sports, arts and cultural events, festivals, volunteering and participation in community groups.

Finding 2

Young people reported becoming more aware of the role played by school and education in keeping them connected to their community during the pandemic lockdowns and periods of remote learning which prevented them from connecting with peers and teachers.

Finding 3

Young people across the region frequently identified that regional events were working well in their communities, but this was not evenly distributed, and many reported a desire to see access to more events locally, and better coordination and communication associated with these events.

Finding 4

Young people reported that some of their teachers advised moving to bigger cities if they wanted to be successful.

Finding 5

Young people expressed feeling connected to their 'tight-knit' communities through their region's common sources of livelihood.

Finding 6

Young people voiced the bittersweet dilemma arising from feeling connected to their 'tight-knit community' yet experiencing community racism and intolerance to less 'conservative views' and non-heteronormative identities.

Finding 7

Some young people were concerned that their family and home life did not always provide a supportive environment or provide access to knowledge and role models that were helpful for making decisions about their future and transition to life beyond school.

Finding 8

Young members of the LGBTQI+ community expressed they did not always feel safe in their community.

Finding 9

Young people noted that access to adequate transport, road infrastructure and prohibitive transport costs frequently prevented them from engaging in community events and festivals that connected them to their community.

Finding 10

Young people consistently expressed a desire for their communities to be more inclusive, more diverse, and less judgemental of difference.

Finding 11

Young people wanted their communities to be safer, and to address perceived risks such as drugs, crime, poor transport and roads infrastructure, and street lighting.

Finding 12

Young people expressed a desire to have more youth-focused organisations, free or affordable activities, and better resources and infrastructure in their community.

Finding 13

Many young people noted a desire to move to bigger cities like Melbourne to experience greater diversity, meet people with different backgrounds, to travel and to grow personally.

Finding 14

Young Aboriginal people noted a strong desire to leave the region to pursue further study that was otherwise not available to them locally, but also expressed a strong connection to Country and a desire to return to their communities.

Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future

Finding 15

Young people reported that inconsistency in the quality of programs offered by schools in their communities meant that not all young people had an equal opportunity to access a quality education.

Finding 16

Young people interested in a vocational or applied learning pathway consistently reported feeling judged in their school and wider community for not studying VCE, and they often felt they were studying an inferior option.

Finding 17

Young people voiced strong views about the need for their schools to provide a range of programs that were more relevant to their pathway interests and employment options beyond school.

Finding 18

Young people suggested the need for local schools to work more closely together to offer greater diversity of programs in their community.

Finding 19

Young people frequently expressed the view that there was a need for much better career advice that would help them make more informed decisions about their possible transitions to further study and employment beyond school.

Finding 20

Young people frequently noted that they would be more motivated to stay at school if they felt it was more relevant to their future, and they would also be less likely to get into trouble.

Finding 21

Young people consistently reported a desire for their teachers to use teaching approaches that would be more hands-on and make their learning more meaningful.

Finding 22

Young people identified some excellent examples of good learning programs that motivated them to learn them by connecting their school learning to their engagement, interests and workplaces in their communities (such as the CFA).

Finding 23

Young people expressed a desire for their community to recognise a greater diversity of pathway interests to be celebrated as a successful education outcome, with a particular emphasis on celebrating the equal success of vocational pathways rather than overemphasising the VCE.

Finding 24

Young people who wished to achieve an excellent ATAR score consistently expressed a concern that the teachers in their school were spending too much time trying to help struggling students, and had insufficient time to support their desire to achieve excellence in their VCE.

Finding 25

Many young people expressed a strong desire to complete a successful VCE and to pursue a higher education at university.

Finding 26

Some young people identified limited access to transport as a barrier to their participation in educational opportunities involving vocational and workplace learning.

Finding 27

Many young people envisioned studying at a university in Melbourne because it offered the opportunity to experience life in a large city, and a pathway to employment not available to them at home.

Finding 28

Some young people reported that their school did not provide well for students with special needs and a differing range of abilities.

Changes brought about by the pandemic and learnings from them

Finding 29

Young people frequently reported that they did not respond well to remote learning arrangements that were put in place during the periods of lockdown.

Finding 30

Young people noted that not everyone had access to the technology, resources and essential help they needed to participate effectively in remote learning.

Finding 31

Young people also frequently reported a new appreciation for the role played by school in keeping them connected and expressed that they particularly missed the social connections provided by school and other socially engaging contexts in their community.

Finding 32

Young people who were living in isolated or personally challenging circumstances typically reported that the pandemic made them feel more isolated.

Finding 33

Young people frequently reported a deep concern for their mental health and consistently 'feeling down' during the pandemic, arising from their isolated circumstances.

Finding 34

Some young people expressed they had developed a pessimistic view of the world and their future because of the pandemic.

Finding 35

Young people reported their access to communications technology and social networks was important in keeping them connected during the pandemic, but this access was not equally shared by everyone.

Finding 36

Some young people reported the lockdown meant they became much more focused on their schooling and were able to achieve levels of success in their study they did not previously believe they could achieve.

Finding 37

Some young people reported becoming closer to their families because they spent more time together during the pandemic.

Finding 38

Some young people reported significant challenges faced living at home with a family member who has a mental health condition.

Recommendations



Recommendation 1

Strengthen and expand innovative programs linking community engagement and education provision:

- Work with young people, schools and community organisations to identify and build on local examples of innovation where young people's key connections to their community are being integrated into their schooling program and leading to improved educational attainment and outcomes.
- Engage with young people, schools and community organisations to identify opportunities for the development of new initiatives and programs leveraging the region's unique range of sports, arts, culture and events that have been identified by young people as important to their community connection.
- Document and strengthen the community's wider understanding of the positive impacts on personal, community and educational value of these innovative programs.



Recommendation 2

Identify specific areas of impact created by young people's limited transport and technology access:

- Undertake more detailed analysis of transport and technology accessibility for young people in LGAs to better understand the impact limited access is having on community engagement and educational participation.
- Examine and advocate for priority areas where young people's access to transport and technology could be improved to support greater participation in community activities and education provision.



Recommendation 3

Strengthen and expand programs to make communities safer and more inclusive places for everyone:

- Involve the region's young people in developing a public awareness program addressing the need for their communities to celebrate diversity and be more inclusive.
- Support young people's engagement in design and implementation of community safety / crime reduction programs.



Recommendation 4

Strengthen careers and pathways advice for young people:

- Identify professional development needs for the region's careers teachers and provide a mandate to strengthen access to high-quality careers and pathways advice for young people in all the region's schools.
- Work with young people, schools, tertiary education providers and employers to develop careers and pathways resources for teachers and young people that reflect more of the place-based opportunities for young people making the transition to higher education, training or employment.



Recommendation 5

Strengthen teachers' and school leaders' understanding of applied and vocational learning approaches and pathways:

- Provide professional development and examples of best practice for teachers and school leaders to develop their knowledge and understanding of the importance of high-quality applied and vocational learning approaches and pathways for the region's young people.
- Identify connections between young people's priorities and current Department of Education and Training policy and opportunities that are aligned with the integration of applied and vocational learning into a single VCE certificate by 2023.
- Involve young people in the facilitation of a region-wide forum considering how the region's schools can work with and be supported at the community, regional and system level to improve the quality and provision of applied and vocational learning and pathways in all schools.



Recommendation 6

Strengthen community understanding of applied and vocational learning:

- Work with young people to implement a program or communication strategy that broadens community knowledge about the range of educational pathways available and addresses misunderstandings and negative attitudes about applied and vocational learning pathways for young people.
- Engage young people, schools and community organisations to identify approaches facilitating targeted support for young people whose families have limited pathway knowledge or capacity to support them in their decision-making related to further study and/or employment beyond school.



Recommendation 7

Develop and advocate for the region's unique place-based model for senior secondary education provision:

- Advocate for a collective approach across the region that will be essential for schools, young people, employers, VET providers, university, community organisations and government to achieve a genuine, place-based approach to senior schooling and improved educational attainment.
- Identify areas where educational providers can better collaborate and join up to provide improved access to a broader range of high-quality programs and pathways.



Recommendation 8

Support young people, teachers and schools with trauma-sensitive learning approaches:

- Provide the region's teachers with ongoing professional development that will support trauma-sensitive teaching approaches that are responsive to higher levels of youth anxiety and the unfolding implications for young people's mental health arising from the pandemic.
- Continue to advocate for the adequate provision of accessible mental health services.



Recommendation 9

Advocate for sustained region-wide, targeted support for young people whose educational progress has been impacted significantly by the pandemic:

- Facilitate the development and implementation of a collaborative, region-wide strategy that will ensure targeted educational support is provided for young people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concluding Remarks

Young people living across the six local government areas of Victoria's Great South Coast region have voiced their thoughts and expectations about their communities, education, training, and future employment through the Youth Conversations initiative. The findings of this report highlight what young people have said about being connected to their communities, their experiences of staying at school, aspirations for education and training pathways leading to future work, and changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nine key recommendations arising from this report address opportunities to act on young people's voices to strengthen the foundations of what connects them to their communities and significantly improve the need for more equitable participation in education and training pathways leading to their aspirations for future employment.

It is timely to be listening very closely to what our young people are saying, particularly in the context of COVID-19's continuing impact on our communities, and new opportunities arising from state and federal government initiatives seeking to strengthen schooling completion and address current and future skill shortages and gaps in industries and communities recovering from the pandemic. Most importantly, it is essential to be advocating for a bold, place-based approach that takes seriously the need for young people to be deeply involved and invested in future actions and initiatives arising from the recommendations of this report. The foundations for a strong, youth facilitation approach have been well-established in the Youth Conversations initiative and provide a solid base to inform future youth engagement strategy across the Great South Coast region.

Photo credit: Cadence T, Unsplash



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