IT’S TIME TO ACT

Making the case for a cross sectoral response to school disengagement and detachment in South Australia

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About the Authors

On the 21st Anniversary of the South Australian watershed report “Listen to me I’m Leaving” and as a follow up to the 2019 “Those Who Disappear” national report, this industry paper considers the issues of school disengagement and detachment from a South Australian perspective. In this report we draw together our experiences and research in school disengagement and detachment as former teachers and school leaders in the South Australian public education system. Our recent research has taken us into the Catholic and Independent sectors. In this report, our experience and research make clear a road map for more inclusive education provision for all students involving all sectors, all areas of government, NGOs, and young people – Acting Together.

Andrew Bills

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His previous professional roles have included positions as an educational leader and designer of three alternative schools, a diagnostic school reviewer, a special education teacher and an Education Department leadership consultant. He works within the research traditions of critical policy sociology, emancipatory action research and lived experience phenomenology. He has published 20 journal articles and three books in these areas.

Nigel Howard

Nigel Howard worked as a teacher, education activist and school leader for the last thirty years and has been primarily concerned with students in poverty on the edge of schooling.

His interest in school retention and achievement of secondary students stems from his involvement as a member of the Senior Secondary (2S) Team, where he was one of the major architects for a suite of subjects that became SACE Community Studies.

His work as an innovative teacher and leader has been documented in an ACE publication “Reforming Schools through Innovative Teaching” and “Making Justice Our Project” and in sundry other publications and project reports. He was on the expert’s group for the research project that led to “Listen to Me I’m Leaving”.
How we formulated the Section 1 & 2 overviews

Section 1:

RESEARCH INFORMED COLLABORATION

In Section 1 we propose that SA’s education sectors, SACE Board and research partners come together to develop a research informed collaboration to address the issue of school disengagement and school detachment. The opportunity that presents involves the three education sectors sharing information and developing a common approach to intervene in the journey out of school of compulsory schooling aged young people. This calls for cross systemic policy change foregrounding a coordinated cross sector ‘pass the baton’ (Watterston et al., 2019) state-wide approach for ‘students at risk’ which can be made possible through systemic and political willingness undergirded by altruistic education sector motives to ensure every young person can access their educational entitlement. Recognising the changes in the SA learning ecosystem comprising the development of a range of alternative learning sites and working with these sites to adapt and develop curriculum frameworks to enable the diversity of student learning to be recognised presents as a BIG unexplored opportunity and area of new work for South Australian education.

Conservative estimates are that at least 50 000 children and young people of school age have detached from any educational program or institution, across the country at any given time. We need to identify and support the children who are currently detached from education to re-enter the education system and to successfully complete their education. To do this effectively, we must guarantee the rigor and effectiveness of all current alternative and flexible schools, and to ensure that suitable options for students at risk are available to all students across the country.


Section 2:

HOW WE GOT HERE

In Section 2 we revisit some key policy and practice epochs in South Australian education, that help explain how inequity and early school leaving has gripped the State. We wind back twenty-one years to the South Australian “Listen to Me I’m Leaving” research report and recognise that much talk and research has ensued over the intervening years, but not much has changed in relation to the numbers of students from predominantly disadvantaged backgrounds choosing to forsake schooling. In fact, the following excerpt taken from the report is now as important and relevant as ever in addressing school disengagement and school detachment. Clearly, we have failed our young people and need to redress this failure.

If you want to find out why young people are leaving school you need to talk to them. Of course, this type of knowledge has low status presently. The experience of early school leavers is often misrepresented. We were interested in why the perspective of early school leavers tends to be discounted when considering what is happening in our schools. Surely the most disgruntled ‘clients’ offer powerful insights into what is not working well. If we honestly want more young people to stay at school for longer, then we need to listen to those who are finding school unconvincing.

Executive Summary

South Australia can lead the way in addressing school disengagement and school detachment. But leading the way requires school sector willingness to work closely together in the interests of those young people who are disengaging or are detached from our schools. To date, our state-wide response to COVID has shown when need presents, we can respond in short time frames and coordinate effective cross-government, cross-community, and cross-business responses. If we can do this for COVID, then we can do this for ‘at risk’ young people. It is time for our education stakeholders to become less sector bound. “It’s Time to Act”.

When we talk to young people who are engaged in school, they tell us how they fit in, how good they feel about fitting in and how they see themselves staying until the end of their schooling. They believe their school will support them through to the senior years, they are confident their school will guide them to achieve their career goals, and they are confident their school will help them if they experience difficulties.

When we talk to young people who are disengaging or detached from school, they tell us they did not feel as though they fitted into school, they tell us they could not see themselves staying on, they tell us they could not see how their learning was relevant to them and they tell us they didn’t believe their school would (or did) support them as they faced difficulties.

Many of the young people who have disengaged or detached from school are looking for a place where they can fit in, where they can feel supported and where they can see a hopeful educational future. Young people ‘at risk’ in our schools are more than any other student cohort, moving between schools, between sectors and between flexible learning options and programs looking for a place to hang on to.

Significant numbers of students move between the Catholic, Independent and Public-school sectors each year. Anecdotally, students leave government schooling for the non-government sector in pursuit of success, whereas students in Catholic and Independent schools leave because they were not experiencing success. We say ‘anecdotally’ because the publicly reported figures for student movement, disengagement and detachment are opaque.

Because of this opaqueness, we do not have a way of tracking young people between school sectors and consequently, we are unable to say with any confidence where students who detach from any one sector go. Within this invisible movement, we need to understand the deep complexities of young people’s lives and what drives them away from schooling.

We need a carefully crafted process aimed at addressing a very complex problem, namely, a research informed process solution that tackles in school and out of school barriers to school retention by increasing school responsiveness and flexibility to support young people through the curriculum, pedagogy, and care that all schools can offer.

This can only be done by removing the school sector silos and the operational barriers of other agencies that support young people. This response calls upon the NGO’s that continue to mop up the damage done by early school leaving, the SACE Board within its new ‘Thrive’ agenda to work more closely with these young people, and for the SA universities to collaborate in good faith on research, collectively finding better ways to listen and respond to the concerns and needs expressed by parents, caregivers, and young people.
Recommendations

1. A COMMITMENT TO DESIGNING A CROSS-SECTOR YOUTH COMPACT FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS
A commitment to designing a state-wide youth compact to ensure all young people access a quality and supportive education to prevent young people from falling between the sectors. The Youth Compact must involve all government agencies, NGO’s and young people co-designing a Community Impact model to tackle the complex problem of school disengagement and school detachment.

2. TALK AND LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE
The way to understand the lived experiences of young people in schools is to talk with them and involve them directly in policy decisions. We need to better understand the experiences of young people and their journeys into early school leaving.

3. TALK AND LISTEN TO SCHOOL LEADERS, TEACHERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS
To understand the support that schools, teachers, leaders and support providers need to enable more young people to stay and be successful at school, we need to engage in conversation with them. Within this, we must understand how the pressure to market the school and comply with top-down requirements can impact decisions made on behalf of young people disengaging or detaching from school.

4. DESIGN A ROADMAP TO WORK ACROSS THE SECTORS AND SHARE INFORMATION
The Department for Education tracking data has added to our understanding of the retention and achievement of young people in Public secondary schools. We need to better understand student movement between sectors and how this movement impacts students, schools, and systems. The data needs to be shared and allow us to work with “numbers and narrative” to understand how young people move between schools and sectors.

5. EARLY INTERVENTION
The pipeline out of school for many young people begins in the early years of their secondary education. The Department for Education’s well-being collection data points to increasing levels of disengagement as young people move from upper primary into the secondary schooling years.

6. WRAP AROUND SUPPORT AT A LOCAL LEVEL
School disengagement and detachment is strongly correlated with poverty and social location. It disproportionately affects young people with disabilities, those who are Indigenous and those who live in rural and remote areas of the State. We need to utilise the support available to keep young people connected to school and work outside the school gates to make better connections.

7. RECOGNISE FLEXIBLE AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AS INTEGRAL TO THE SCHOOLING ECOSYSTEM
Our research indicates these entities do outstanding work in relation to wellbeing interventions and are now collaborating to engender a negotiated Accountability and Improvement Framework for Specialised Assistance Schools in SA, supported by the Minister for Education, to better ensure robust pedagogies and quality educational outcomes lift young people’s life opportunities.

8. ACT ON THE NEED FOR A NEW KIND OF TEACHER
The Education Department’s FLO program catering for approximately 4000 students in the senior secondary schooling years in 2020 (DfE Annual Report) will be decommissioned in 2023. Currently, SA has only four Special Assistance Schools (SAS) working with a total enrolment base of 1000 students, but given growth trends in other states, these entities will grow in number. To highlight this point, the Director of CESA has indicated plans to expand its network of SAS across the State to support more young people dealing with mental health and behavioural challenges. These groups of young people and those turning to early school leaving in mainstream schools require a teacher workforce that has highly developed capabilities drawn from social work, psychology, and education to effectively lift well-being and life opportunities. The new SAS schools are finding these skills and dispositions hard to come by in teacher and leader recruitment.

9. MAINSTREAM SCHOOL REDESIGN IS LONG OVERDUE
Mainstream schools need to offer greater connectedness and care for all students, more personalised learning/inquiry-based approaches to learning and greater negotiation of curriculum with the young people they serve. Young people benefit from head, heart and hands on learning and a curriculum that attends to what the world is calling for. Literacy and numeracy are of course important, but the capabilities young people now need to make the world a better place stretches far beyond the basics. Young people are now taking action on climate change and government inaction. Schools can harness the lifeworld concerns of young people through new curriculum design with a keen focus on changing workforce demands. Mainstream schools must redesign structurally, culturally and pedagogically to better meet these challenges out of respect and care for the young people they teach and serve. They need to ensure all young people thrive during their schooling years.
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Research Informed Collaboration

There are several factors that have coalesced to make this an opportune time in SA to work together on developing an integrated approach to school disengagement and detachment. On the last day of Parliament in 2020, the Minister for Education released three reports that dealt with issues around school disengagement and detachment. These were The Inquiry into Suspension Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools, The Blame Game and the Learning and Earning Report. The Inquiry into Suspension Exclusion and Expulsion processes which we will call the Graham SEE Report from here on, made 78 recommendations. Of note for this paper, the Department for Education (DfE) has accepted the recommendation to decommission the Flexible Learning Options (FLO) Program and is developing a roadmap for a more inclusive education system for all students. The FLO program has contributed significantly to increased school retention and has increased our understanding of how NGO’s and schools can work together. However, FLO has not been able to demonstrate satisfactory attendance levels or achievement in SACE and VET. Schools are understandably concerned about what will replace FLO, and whether the lessons we have learnt from FLO will be considered when it is decommissioned. While the DfE is working towards the decommissioning of FLO, in the Independent and Catholic Sectors, there is growth in Specialised Assistance Schools (SAS). SAS are non-government schools recognised by the State Education Minister as special assistance in nature and purpose, primarily catering for students with social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties.

Special Assistance Schools, provide alternative educational settings for students with high-level needs and cater for students with disability, as well as students who are at risk, have behavioural difficulties, or whose needs are better met by flexible learning structures that may not be available in all mainstream schools. (Independent Schools Australia, 2021)

In South Australia, SAS are currently only a small part of schooling provision but have the potential to grow significantly if we take note of their growth in other States. SAS across Australia reflect by and large the same concerns as the FLO program; strong on wellbeing interventions but weak on educational outcomes. It is important to recognise that SAS federal funding is significantly higher than for FLO students in the state system. This funding, over twice the funding that public schools receive for a full-time enrolment, can overcome resourcing issues that have historically dogged flexible and alternative education ventures.

Recognising the Opportunity and the Challenge to THRIVE

While the Public, Catholic and Independent sectors are taking steps towards developing more inclusive educational provision, the SACE Board is pursuing a new strategic direction of their own: “re 枚raming the education narrative so that the ability to prosper and flourish now and in the future is the intentional outcome of a SACE education . . . so that students thrive.” (SACE Board, 2020, p.2)

These disparate elements present as an opportunity to develop a collaboration across the school sectors involving support services to assist young people in remaining connected to school. The intention that all students can participate in an education that is meaningful to them and to the community they live in so they can thrive in school and life offers new ways to work with young people disengaging or detached from schools. The opportunity can only be addressed by a well-articulated process that is fit for purpose to address a complex problem- a process solution that tackles in school and out of school barriers to school retention by increasing school responsiveness and flexibility. Now is the time to bring all the parties together to develop a common set of goals and ways of working that supports the ability of all students to thrive.
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Expansive Research Collaborations
We need to commit to an expansive research agenda informed by a collaboration of key stakeholders to address the protracted complex social issue of early school leaving seen through the lens of “Wicked Problems” (public policy problems that do not lend themselves to easy solutions). As such, the ensuing work will take time, commitment, and collaboration. We need to bring together all the people, services and organisations that surround the issue to work with altruistic endeavour, requiring a range of coordinated strategies. Examples of successful approaches to wicked social problems in Australia include Logan Together which uses a collective impact model to address early childhood development, Big Picture Learning Australia which foregrounds personalised, passion-based learning as the key to modernising education and preparing young people for successful futures and The Geelong Project which uses a community of schools and services model to address youth homelessness and school disengagement. These are place-based personalised learning projects that seek to inform wider and deeper approaches to the issues they address. Working together we can intervene in the process of disengagement and detachment by increasing school responsiveness and flexibility to support young people through curriculum, pedagogy, and care. Making sure there is adequate support and early intervention, we can keep young people connected to their school. This will ensure no young person falls between the cracks and can only be achieved by breaking down the education sector operational silos.

Coming Together to Address the Problem
The issues of disengagement and detachment can best be served by collaboration across school sectors involving the SACE Board, the education sectors, the universities, and the support services. A fit for purpose collaboration will assist young people to remain connected to school. Past solutions that have concentrated on individual organisation approaches to address student disengagement have not worked. They have been unable to integrate care and support within curriculum and pedagogy to enhance educational outcomes. The SACE Board is where the education sectors come together and presents as the most appropriate coordinating body to lead the process of change. An opportunity for this form of collaboration is a community impact model. Here, stakeholder organisations form a coordinated network, collaborate on a common vision, work to their strengths, and pursue mutually reinforcing activities, committing to common impact measurement tools. The collaboration is based on continuous communication, refinement of actions and establishing determiners of success. It is a research-informed process of inquiry rather than a short term “fix”.

Passing the Baton with Due Care
The priority is to ensure that all young people remain connected to forms of schooling that enable them to develop the knowledge, skills, and resilience to negotiate successful transitions in life. Initially this means making sure that young people can make a successful transition into secondary schooling where they feel supported to remain until the end of schooling. School teachers will need support to work with young people and other agencies to keep young people connected to school even when young people face adverse or distressing circumstances. Even after this, there will be students who feel they don’t fit in. In these circumstances, the school must empower student agency in finding a place where they can continue their education in a way that best supports them. In Jim Waterson’s terms, this finding a way includes “passing the baton” with due care. For the baton to be passed carefully, we must ensure there is a suitable process in place for the young person to continue their education.

Sourced from the SA Department for Education, 2020

Sourced from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Data Portal (2019)
Compass Catholic Community College In Adelaide’s Northern Suburbs

A VISION FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION WITHIN AN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

“There’s an incredible amount of goodwill for the vision, and everyone is super supportive. I can picture a thriving community of – a safe place where people come, where you leave and come back to, where we celebrate you, where you can come and serve later. So, all of that. And especially as the village grows and there’s more opportunity with different things.” (Head of Village, Kelly Bunyon)

Compass Catholic Community arose out of discussions within Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) for an educational provision in one of the more disadvantaged council areas in South Australia. Initial discussions were under the title “Vision for the North” developing the concept of an educational village encompassing different levels of education.

Compass Catholic Community College is the first part of the village catering for young people from 17 to 24 years who wish to reengage with education and community. CESA was clear that Compass would be an integral part of the educational provision in the North. The Flinders University research team are working with Compass and schools in the surrounding suburbs with a history of innovation and change. These schools are participating in a collaborative practitioner research to create a community of support for Compass that enhances the development of a curriculum and pedagogical framework grounded in appreciative inquiry.

Kelly was appointed at the beginning of 2021 with Compass scheduled to open in 2022. Work on the development of the curriculum and pedagogical framework, community connections and the broader operation of the school is occurring alongside the building works.

“There’s been a vision for a new school but now there is a face to that vision - it’ll be relational, and community based and inclusive ... this is a place-based solution, a place where we say, “This is yours, you make it yours.”
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How We Got Here

In Section 2 we look at the changes to the educational landscape and schooling eco-system that interact with school disengagement and detachment. Our exploration of this issue as researchers began in trying to understand the data that framed the policy interventions around disengagement and detachment. Simply put, the data is hard to pin down which means young people disengage and disappear.

The Widening Education Inequity Gap

Young people in South Australia’s most socio-economically disadvantaged regions must now compete for tertiary education places and jobs within an economic environment that is characterised by significant social disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011, 2016). According to Wilson and Spoehr (2015), an increasing percentage of South Australians are living below the poverty line, manifesting in a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

A 2014 Brotherhood of St Laurence employment analysis argued young people’s employment opportunities in Australia had reached ‘crisis point’. The report showed an average of 12.4 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in the year to January 2014 unemployed nationally, twice the overall unemployment rate. The Brotherhood’s analysis also indicated that the region of northern Adelaide had a youth unemployment rate close to 20 percent. Young people’s higher rates of unemployment in SA over the period 1992 to 2020 have been a consistent trend.

The jobless rate in South Australia for 15–24-year-olds rose to as high as 21 percent in 1992, and was at its lowest in 2007, at nine percent. Youth unemployment has been double the overall unemployment rate since 2001. Young unemployed people living alone, particularly those reliant on Youth Allowance or Newstart Allowance, live below the poverty line. (Baum and Womersley, 2020, p.27)
The nature and extent of disadvantage in SA is well illustrated in the 2015 “Dropping off the Edge” report by Vinson and Rawsthorne. In this report, significant South Australian rural and metropolitan regions were analysed in terms of cumulative disadvantage comprising: (1) internet access, (2) unskilled workers, (3) rent assistance and (4) year 9 reading levels. This report featured a socio-economic map of SA, highlighting the most disadvantaged regions (see the red and yellow shading in figure 1 above). These regions are predominantly found in the rural and metropolitan areas of SA which have been ravaged by decades of manufacturing downturn and population attrition in rural communities, and an ongoing lack of employment opportunities and health support in the very isolated Indigenous ‘lands’ regions.

The yellow shades on the map represent the significantly disadvantaged South Australian regions. The report indicated that seven of SA’s Statistical Local Areas (SLA) presented in Australia’s top 5 percent of most disadvantaged SLAs. In order of disadvantage these were: (1) Anangu Pitjantjatjara (Aboriginal ‘Lands’ Communities), (2) Ceduna, (3) Coober Pedy, (4) Maralinga Tjarutja (Aboriginal ‘Lands’ Communities), (5) Peterborough, (6) Playford-Elizabeth (Northern suburbs of Adelaide) and (7) Playford-West Central (the North-Western suburbs of Adelaide) which feature in the red shading in figure 1. A key commonality for young people living in these regions was non-engagement in work or study. According to Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015), the seven most disadvantaged SLAs in South Australia share vulnerability to specific indicators of social disadvantage that work to compound each other.

Unemployment as well as young adults not in full time work, education or training strongly shape the structure of disadvantage among the most disadvantaged SLAs. (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015, p. 88)

Alongside Dropping off the Edge, the 2017 “Educate Australia Fair” report (Cassells, Duncan, Gao, & Seymour, 2017) indicates that South Australian children living in the ten most disadvantaged areas of SA are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in their first year of schooling and three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains.

Non-attendance rates at school are also double the rate of the national average for children in the most disadvantaged areas in South Australia and triple the rate of the most advantaged areas in South Australia. Adding to this is the very low proportion of young people engaged in either the workforce or in an educational setting, averaging 64.1 percent across the bottom 10 areas. This compares to 86.7 percent in the most advantaged areas and 76.8 percent nationally. (Cassells, Duncan, Gao, & Seymour, 2017, p. 84)

Despite the sobering overview of concentrations of entrenched disadvantage in some SA communities, there was an outstanding turnaround in public secondary school retention rates from 2007 to 2017. According to the SA Education Department, retention rates to Year 12 moved from 71 percent in 2004 (Crafter, Crook & Reid, 2006) to 104.6 percent in 2016 (Education Department Annual Report 2016, p. 71). SA public education retention figures were making headlines in the local print media, The Advertiser, as the best in the country.

A SACE review presentation conducted by Emeritus Professor Alan Reid in 2007 (a member of the then SACE Review team), provided a 2001 educational atlas of metropolitan full-time participation rates in secondary schools (DfE, Adelaide, 1 March, 2007). This presentation highlighted the significance of postcode location in understanding schooling participation across the Adelaide metropolitan area at the time. It revealed a strong correlation between high school participation rates in the most affluent suburbs of Adelaide, in contrast with the lowest school participation rates in Adelaide’s most impoverished metropolitan regions, namely key pockets within the northern and southern suburbs. Moving forward 15 years, in 2016 the SA Department declared it had the highest apparent retention rate (ARR) in Australia. Clearly, on this basis, secondary schools in SA appeared to be doing very well, making up significant ground in schooling participation since 2001. The use of ‘apparent retention’ painted a politically positive image of school retention and achievement. However, . . .

CASE STUDY 1 – Improved retention without improved SACE completion

Improved retention without improved school attainment remains a public policy problem. The successful completion of secondary schooling in SA, recognised through the achievement of the SACE lifts work and life opportunities, a claim backed by a substantial body of national and international research. In other words, young people who successfully complete schooling have a far greater likelihood of continuing with further study, particularly in higher education, as well as entering the workforce.
(Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Foundation for Young Australians, 2011). For example, in relation to Australian research on educational attainment, a report produced by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) found:

Educational attainment improves the labour market prospects of young people; a corollary of low educational attainment is marginalisation to either part-time work only, or unemployment. Policies to raise educational attainment must be directed at those groups of young people among whom rates of school completion are currently low. (FYA, 2011, p. 8)

The coupling of school attainment with increased life opportunity is reinforced in a 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics report titled ‘Australian Social Trends’ which asserts that young people who have completed a Year 12 qualification in Australia have better chances of continuing with further studies, particularly in higher education, as well as entering the workforce (ABS, 2011). This finding is reiterated in a more recent Australian report prepared by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (Cires) by Lamb et al. (2015), which indicated that non-completion of Year 12 in Australia and not achieving well in school were predictors of later negative work and life outcomes. In more recent research:

To the taxpayer, each disengaged young person imposes a cost which is equivalent to $411,700 as a current lump sum across their adult years. The full lifetime fiscal burden amounts to $18.8 billion across the cohort of 45,700 disengaged young people in 2014. (Lamb & Huo, 2017, p. 4)

Such is the import of Year 12 attainment that an extensive body of Australian and international research has penetrated federal government policy in Australia through the COAG National Education Agreement (2009) which aims to lift the national proportion of 20–24-year-olds with Year 12 or a Certificate 3 equivalent to 90% by 2020. Australia fell well short of this target. For this attainment rate to have been met, all states and territories needed to consider, in the first instance, how to retain a greater proportion of young people in schooling and, in the second instance, how to do schooling differently in relation to presenting contexts to foster greater learning success.

CASE STUDY 2 – National Productivity Commission school completion data for SA

A 2018 Productivity Commission graph displaying Australian education school attainment (HSC completion) rates is provided in figure 2 below. This graph shows SA leading the country in school attainment across all socio-economic groups. However, the graph is puzzling. In the graph SA’s low socio-economic status students are represented as achieving a school attainment rate above 90 percent, higher than all other educational jurisdictions in Australia, including the attainment rates of other States’ high socio-economic status groups. An even more surprising aspect of the graph is that low socio-economic status groups in SA outperform medium socioeconomic status groups on school attainment in SA and across the nation. On this basis one would surmise that SA has successfully ‘cracked’ the school completion challenge. But . . .

![Figure 2: Sourced from the 2018 Productivity Commission Data](image-url)
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A creative form of accounting for SACE completion was used in the compilation of the Productivity Commission’s 2018 report above. SA students who completed just one year 12 SACE unit (rather than the full complement of three or four) were counted as school completers. This can be found in the small print caveat section of the Productivity Commission’s report (2018) which states:

In 2011 the SACE Board of South Australia introduced a new South Australian Certification of Education (SACE). 2011 data for South Australia include students completing the SACE requirements and students receiving a Record of Achievement for completion of at least one full year (20 credit) Stage 2 SACE subject. This constitutes a break in series for these data. (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016)

CASE STUDY 3 – Success measured from students who “had potential to complete”

A second misleading attainment completion measurement also presented. Prior to 2019, the South Australian Education Department determined the percentage of SACE completers over a five-year period based on those students who presented in September of their final year of schooling as potential SACE completers, and then in December the percentage of SACE completion rates was calculated. This measure for SA public education SACE completion outcomes portrayed a consistently positive SACE completion rate, published in the media and in DfE Annual Reports. For example, in the following extract taken from the Education Department’s 2015 Annual Report on public school SACE results, under the subheading ‘Better SACE results for public students’, with bold emphasis added, the department said:

For the third year in a row, South Australia’s government schools have increased the number of students achieving SACE, with 508 more students receiving their certificates in 2015 than in 2014. A record 14,594 South Australian students achieved their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) in December 2015. The proportion of year 12 students successfully achieving the SACE was also a record high, rising from 94.5% in 2014 to 96% in 2015. (DfE Annual Report, 2015, p. 7)

This accounting practice made the figures quite meaningless. But the reason for highlighting this data practice is that for many years it made invisible the true picture of school completion in SA concealing a serious public policy issue and potentially delaying a needed response. In a December 21, 2016, Advertiser newspaper article, Tim Williams reported that one third of public-school students did not get their SACE in 2015. In the article under the headline, “Red Alert on SACE dropouts” the report stated:

The 7500 public school students who achieved their SACE last year equates to 62 percent of the more than 12,000 who were in Year 10 two years earlier. The Education Department is exploring the extent of the issues, including students who do not attempt the SACE, students in alternative “flexible learning options” (FLO) programs who generally do not achieve the certificate . . . (Williams, p. 9, 2016)
CASE STUDY 4 – Year 10 students from the poorest schools are 40% less likely to complete the SACE

A 2016 school attainment report produced by the SA Education Department and the SACE Secretariat offers some insight into SACE completion equity across various SES categorised public schools, in contrast to the official publicly outwardly facing 95 percent-plus SACE completion figures.

Table 1 right shows the number of public-school Year 10 students undertaking the compulsory Personal Learning Plan (PLP) subject in 2013, showing a strong correlation between extent of school disadvantage, noting that Category 1 represents the most disadvantaged schools and Category 7 schools, the least disadvantaged (SA Department for Education and Child Protection, 2012) and SACE completion rates two years later. In this table, DfE schools present with a low equity tale.

In 2015 the DfE SACE completion rate was 62%, as reported in The Advertiser by education reporter, Tim Williams, and not called into question by the interviewed DfE School Improvement Executive Director; that completion rate applied to the 2013 year 10 PLP cohort configured by DfE and the SACE Board in the table above, meaning the table presented with relatively reliable predictive information about the 2015 SACE completion outcomes for the SA public secondary schooling cohort.

Within this data set, there was a 2.6% overall predictive difference from the 2015 overall SACE completion figure of 62 percent.

The presentation of statistics is partial because we cannot access the retention or completion rates of the Catholic and Independent schools. We do not know the movement between schools and because the statistics are hedged in by caveats and obfuscations, we do not know the full size of the issue. What we do know from working in this area as teachers, school leaders, policy bureaucrats and researchers is that it is a complex problem and will not be solved by doing more of the same.

The data only tells us so much – we can learn a lot more from talking to schools and young people.

CASE STUDY 5 – NAPLAN distribution outcomes across metropolitan Adelaide

A clear correlation between low SES school community and NAPLAN outcomes presents in the work of Smith, Parr and Muhidin (2019) which featured Year 5 NAPLAN reading results across Adelaide’s metropolitan area. Their findings showed NAPLAN Year 5 reading outcomes across the Adelaide metropolitan area were patterned with clusters of above average for schools situated in the more affluent areas, predominantly close to the CBD, and below average clusters in schools situated in the more disadvantaged suburbs. The Adelaide Year 5 Reading patterns have a particular nuance to them that is worthy of explanation.

Schools ranked above average are primarily located near the city centre and in the advantaged eastern suburbs. Schools ranked below average dominate disadvantaged suburbs, particularly the outer periphery of Elizabeth to the north and Morphett Vale/Christies Beach to the south. (Smith, et. al. 2019, p.10) In a historical analysis of spatial NAPLAN configurations nationally they said:

The overarching aggregate spatial patterns reported for 2016 were observable in 2008 but were not as polarised as reported here for 2016 ... For disadvantaged suburbs ... the proportion of schools ranked below average has increased from 60 percent in 2008 to 65 percent in 2016. (Smith, Parr & Muhidin, 2019, p.13)
What do the Five Aforementioned Case Studies tell us?

These case studies tell us that quantitative data can be used in multiple ways to represent an issue that must be addressed or misrepresent an issue, effectively hiding it away. The delay in public facing accurate data in the school disengagement and detachment domains has meant the educational entitlement of many students has been forfeited.

1. The case studies inform us that SA has a deep and entrenched problem with educational equity. By and large, poor students from poor locales get poor results even though they may be just as smart if not smarter than their more affluent peers in more privileged schools.

2. The case studies caution us that misleading data is never in the best interests of students. Misrepresentation of data may serve bureaucratic institutional needs for a time, but this ultimately means service to the institution takes precedence over service to young people who need it most.

3. The case studies indicate that young people at risk in schools are often treated unequally to those young people more fortunate in life. For example, those students who dropped out of year 12 prior to September of each year no longer featured in the publicly facing statistics. They counted for something in their absence, whereby they improved SA publicly facing SACE completion rates. Unfortunately, as Bauman (2011) suggests, students whose backgrounds do not fit comfortably with the middle-class norms of the school are displaced and labelled as unsuccessful players in the marketplace, and there is an acceptance that they are inevitable and unavoidable ‘collateral damage’.

Finally, the case studies teach us that holding to the status quo of policy and practice in schooling will mean we hold inequity and inequality in place. The dominant policies and practices impacting schools work for some, but certainly not for our most disadvantaged young people. If young people at risk are to achieve schooling success on par with their middle-class counterparts, then the current policy and practice status quo would have to be radically changed. Unfortunately, given the schooling trajectory of the last 20 years for disadvantaged young people, it is unlikely this will happen without political and bureaucratic willingness at the highest level.

What have we Learnt from Schools and Young People?

Over the last three years we have been working with SA schools to understand what keeps young people connected to schooling, even when they are facing adverse circumstances. The students in the schools in our current research with Catholic Education and the Independent sector, namely, NGUTU College and Youth Inc. feel as though they do fit in and see themselves staying until the end of their schooling. These students believe their school will support them through to the senior years and help them achieve their career goals. They are confident their school will be there for them when they experience difficulties. They talk about working collaboratively, that their achievements are recognised and that their schools care for them. You can read these school portraits overleaf.

This contrasts with our conversations with young people who are disengaging and detached from school. Young people detaching from school did not feel as though they fitted into mainstream school, they could not see themselves staying on, they did not see learning as relevant to them and they didn’t believe that the school would (or did) support them when they faced difficulties. For many of them these feelings began early in the transition into secondary school and their disengagement increased with every passing year.

For some young people the path out of school starts early. Lack of engagement and connectedness to school can start early, and the exit ramp from school can take many years or can come quickly. It can be a series of events that start with suspensions that grow into exclusions. The hurt that this can do was outlined clearly in the Blame Game report. For many other students, the exit ramp is more subtle, a feeling that school is not a place for them. Other young people experience the journey out of school in a series of moves where they are dislocated from their initial school of enrolment. The messages they receive from school can be forceful and direct in the form of suspension and exclusion. The messages can be less forceful but still clear when the young person is told by the school their needs would be better met in another setting.

For many young people disengaging from school, a lot of time is spent looking for somewhere they can fit in. They move across sectors, within sectors and between schools. They
jump from program to program. Across Australia there is recognition that for some young people alternatives to mainstream schooling are needed to ensure they can remain connected to school and develop the skills and dispositions needed to negotiate a successful transition into post schooling life.

Alternative placement for some young people gives them a chance to return to learning where they find a place that supports them in making more positive choices in their life. For others it is one more place where they didn’t fit in and so they continue their lonely journey of disengagement, dislocation, and detachment.

To address this problem, we need to know more about the journeys of young people and how we can follow them. We also need to know more about the experience of different cohorts of students accessing and engaging with alternative settings and how to ensure more young people find a place where they can engage in a meaningful education.

Early School Leaving in South Australia

The problem of youth marginalisation and social exclusion in South Australia has, in policy terms, mainly been presented as an issue of early school leaving. During the last decade of the 20th century the idea of students at risk (STAR) in South Australia was presented as part of a larger policy commitment to social justice in education. The failure of young people to complete school was understood as an issue of schoolings inability to accommodate and respond to the needs of the students who were most disadvantaged in our society. The expectation was that schools should adapt their structures, culture, curriculum and pedagogies to meet the needs of young people who were not engaging with education. STAR at this time was a school issue and policy sought to explain that solutions lay in the relationship of the school to the community that the student was a part of. The issues that each school faced were local and related to their community, so too were the solutions.

The STAR programs of the late 20th century were developed in response to local need and were never rooted in deep soil – the programs came and went in response to funding and changes in personnel and local priorities. They did however leave a deep curriculum ‘well’ from which teachers could draw – in the design of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The South Australian approach to curriculum policy development ensured that the concerns of those teachers working with STAR were part of the fabric of the SACE.

The election of the Rann Government at the beginning of the 21st century saw a shift in policy, informed by Listen to Me I’m Leaving, where low school retention and achievement was part of a wider problem of social exclusion of the individual from society. The Ministerial Review into Senior Secondary Education was instituted in the first term of the Rann Government in response to declining retention and achievement in the Senior Years of Schooling. It probably was the last formal policy expression of the commitment that arose from the STAR Programs. The “New SACE” as it became known in 2007, rested on the twin ideas of Capabilities and the Learning Space.

By 2009, school retention became a reference to the newly formed Social Inclusion Board and Unit. Over time there was a policy shift from schools working with communities to tackle the issue of educational disengagement through Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANS) to the development of Flexible Learning Options (FLO) that individualised risk to the young person and adopted an approach where school engagement problems lay with the student. The emphasis of the FLO programs to alleviate individual risk factors resulted in the problem being taken away from schools and outsourcing case management to youth workers who then worked with schools and community to “broker” support for young people’s learning.
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“The mini project the students did in co-lab (the second intervention phase of the Youth Inc. journey), was about helping a charity and doing some good in the world . . . they (referring to the students) were so energised and so uplifted by the chance to do that. I heard comments from the students like, “I’ve always wanted to do something to help, but I’ve never known what to do” and “here I am just being given an opportunity to do it.” There is an inherent wanting to make things better, but sometimes the students just don’t know where to start.” (Deputy Principal, Michelle Richards)

Youth Inc. was developed out of an employment training program that supported young people to gain the skills and attitudes to make a more successful transition to work. It opened as a Specialised Assistance School in 2017 knowing that many of the young people aged 17 to 24 years required more time and deeper learning to make their transitions successful and sustainable.

Over eighteen months, teams of young people move through a five-phase program, from “Unlearn” through to considering their future transitions in “Next”. Youth Inc. has worked on its own set of capabilities, Headware, Heartware and Hardware (HHH) are explicitly taught through the five project phases. Students have access to “experiential learning” and paid “work ventures”. Learning is project based and can earn accreditation through the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).

The learning team have engaged in a continuous process of reflection with the Flinders University research team to understand and refine their pedagogical framework. There is an ethic of care that is central to their practice and the knowledge that relational matters are central to young people engaging with them. In developing a more expansive understanding of care, the research discussions have moved towards developing a transformative learning framework.
SA FLO Connects to a Tradition of Alternative Education

At the end of the 20th century, as school leaving ages increased and the youth labour market collapsed, schools looked to find alternative curriculum and, in some cases, alternative placements for students who were not pursuing entrance to university. Further changes in the youth labour market and the pressure on schools to manage their image drove an expansion of alternate sites. All States had provision for young people under the age of compulsion to continue their education in non-mainstream sites in variously named Learning Choices or Flexible Learning Options. Some of these had a long history as community schools, not originally designed as ‘second chance’, but taking more humanist holistic education traditions into their work, and some were supported by faith-based organisations with a mission to the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised in society. Usually, ad hoc arrangements were codified most notably in South Australia under the umbrella of the ICAN-FLO.

The development of the FLO program expanded the SACE engineered Learning Space outside of school and into the community and has a history in alternative education provision. Alternative sites are usually small, community based, emphasising relationships and personalised “hands on learning”. They can offer a range of engagement activities including VET and wellbeing curriculum. Most often they define themselves by what they are not, taking pains to differentiate themselves from a mainstream school, highlighting the close relationships young people have with the staff. However, outcomes and destinations from alternative schools are often very hard to come by (te Riele, 2014).

SA FLO as an Enrolment Strategy to Increase Retention

The Flexible Learning Options (FLO) enrolment approach has historically catered for young people aged 13-21 years old who have disengaged from secondary school with complex social and emotional barriers to their engagement in learning. FLO enrolment allows schools to use student enrolment funding in a flexible manner to support the student’s wellbeing and engagement in an accredited personalised learning program. For senior students, this is most often delivered in a community-based learning setting established by the local community in partnership with the local cluster of secondary schools. For FLO-enrolled students in years 8 and 9, the learning and case management activity occurs largely on the site of the school of enrolment.

Three Reasons we need to Learn from SA FLO?

For all that, there is a lot to learn from the growth and persistence of the SA FLO Program.

1 The young people are enrolled in school and so we know who they are and we know they want to be engaged in learning;

2 It is possible to develop flexible, responsive learning environments often in association with non-government and community organisations where young people feel a sense of belonging; and,

3 There is an enormous amount of learning among teachers, school leaders, youth workers and schools closely associated with FLO to better understand how to address the needs of our most disadvantaged young people as we move forward.
SA FLO Decommissioning in 2023

The DfE has said that FLO will be decommissioned in 2023. Schools are concerned that there is no understanding of what this decommissioning means. It is important that we take the time to listen to the experience of the young people, their teachers, and their service providers in developing what comes next. We must open a discussion within schools and with the SACE Board to expand our understanding of how the Learning Space and Capabilities can include more young people in accredited learning built around their interests and lifeworlds. This may mean moving towards more integrated place-based programs that can be accredited within the SACE strategic plan for every student to thrive. Greater exploration of the Learning Space and the Capabilities is needed with ongoing negotiation with young people, promoting “having ideas and sustaining effort over time”, presenting the possibility of including more young people in meaningful engagement over the 12 years of schooling. The decommissioning of FLO must be informed by research and be predicated on all young people being fully engaged in an education in a place and style that meets their needs and aspirations.

From SA FLO to SA SAS

The FLO program was a systemic response to the issue of school disengagement. It was not monitored well enough to give confidence that it was meeting the needs of students detaching from mainstream schools. In the Independent and Catholic sector there have been a range of alternative programs catering to a diverse range of students. Federal funding changes in the early part of this Century made special provision for schools that catered for students with “special social and emotional needs” led to the expansion of alternative education entities in the Independent sector. Though only a small part of provision for disengaged students, SAS presents as a growth area with these schools eligible for significant federal and state funding. SAS funding provision is several times the funding provided to students at risk within the state system. SAS also have greater freedom to use the money in ways they see fit. Like the alternative sites attached to school systems, they tend to be small and focused on relationships and wellbeing.

ACER – Learning and Earning Research Project

One respondent was particularly descriptive and complimentary towards the FLO program structure, stating, “The part of the school that I attend, FLO, has individualised counselling for each student and it was open at any time. Teachers were available to educate students from home, and it was convenient from home. I have a learning disability and they were accommodating for my learning disability . . . they helped me get out of the loop that my disability put me in and how to react to everything around me. The teachers were open and comforting, and supportive.” (McMillan et. al., 2020, p.119).

FLO students were less likely than other students to be undertaking or have completed the four mandatory SACE subjects, to be planning to stay at school until the end of the year, or to be planning to complete SACE this year. Among leavers, former FLO students were more likely than other students to not be in employment, education or training, were less happy with what they had achieved since leaving school and were less likely to strongly agree that they had successfully made the transition from school. (McMillan et. al., 2020, p.120)
What is the Work that Needs to be done in SAS?

The Special Assistance School sector is relatively young and though growing, caters for only a small fraction of students who have disengaged. The potential, however, for significant growth exists. Table 2 right shows the growth of Special Schools since 1967 and the combined growth of Special Schools and SAS, with SAS federal funding available in the 2016 to 2020 period, the greatest growth period.

Table 3 right shows the breakdown of the Australian Government’s SAS data. SA has only 4 SAS schools while Qld leads SAS school growth and numbers nationally.

The school re-engagement work that needs to be done is not something that can be solely put on the shoulders of providers working to develop new SAS schools. We know young people detaching from school have a biography of moving between schools and sectors trying to find a place where they fit in and can complete their education. For the hope of SAS teaching and support to be realised, they must not be another choice that fails our young people. We need to look at the curriculum and pedagogical work that needs to be done in collaboration with these schools and their sponsors. The curriculum authorities, the accreditation authorities and the universities all have a stake in ensuring that we “guarantee the rigour and effectiveness of all alternative and flexible schools.” An integral part of this work includes the need for a joined-up SAS Accountability and Improvement framework to better assure educational quality for heightened life opportunity. The SA SAS network are currently leading out on this work.

Graham SEE Report: Inquiry into Suspension Exclusion and Expulsion processes in South Australian Government Schools

... of the 735 Year 10 students enrolled in FLO in 2017, only one in ten returned to government schools in Year 11, while three quarters remained in FLO and the other 13.2% were no longer actively enrolled. In Year 12, only 6.8% of the 734 students were in government schools, 47.3% were still in FLO, and 45.9% were no longer actively enrolled. Further, of the 734 students, only 25 (3.4%) undertook the SACE. (Graham, et. al., 2020, p.393)

Further, we identified patterns in the incidence of suspension and exclusion over time that strongly suggest students in FLO are not actually “in FLO”; as in, they do not attend frequently enough to be suspended or excluded, although these patterns were correlational and further investigation was not possible due to lack of attendance data. (Graham, et. al., 2020, p.324)
"The vision is still really the same (referring to his previous Principalship at a public primary school in Alberton) about equitable access and giving every child a chance to be exposed to opportunities that other kids are exposed to and being able to be put in touch with their potential passion.”
(Head of College Andrew Plastow)

Andrew Plastow, the founder of Ngutu, was an innovative Principal in the Public Education System. He left to pursue the freedom to develop a school that had Aboriginal Culture as its Soul, Children as its Heart and the Arts as its Spine. He began initial discussions about the possibility of establishing an independent school in mid-2019. Ngutu opened with one hundred students R – 7 at the beginning of 2021. The kindergarten based on Reggio Emilia principles and Aboriginal ways of learning will open in 2022 with the aim of the college extending to year 12 by 2026.

The college is being developed and building occurring around the learning community is being established. At the beginning of 2021, classes were held in transportable buildings erected on the site while the main building underwent renovation. Teachers and co-educators work with community members, volunteers, and the children to ensure the learning is culturally appropriate. Learning design is informed by the whole community including the children, to develop their knowledge and skills in ways that actively involves them in community.

A school culture of research and inquiry involves all levels of the college community in ensuring that those attributes that the college values form the basis of evaluation. The aim of the evaluation framework, led by the college in collaboration with Flinders researchers, is for the college to demonstrate impact on children’s learning to thrive beyond the ‘school gate’.

“Today we spent time ‘Finding Our Heart’. Our children were so grateful and joyous to play on our grass for the first time. It was an unexpected moment of connection we didn’t realise would be so powerful. When you have to wait for something, help create it, and watch on with anticipation, there is a strong sense of ownership and gratitude when the wait is finally over.”
(Ngutu College Facebook, 2021)
It’s Time to Act:
Making the case for a cross sectoral response to school disengagement and detachment in South Australia
Conclusion

From “Listen To Me I’m Leaving” To “It’s Time To Act” [21 Years Later!]

It is 21 years, just prior to the change of government, that an expansive student voiced research project titled, “Listen to me I’m Leaving”, hit schools and the Education Department. “Listen” was a joint project between Flinders University, the DfE and the then Senior Secondary Assessment Board of SA (SAABSA) that eventually became the SACE Board. The research and the 200 plus stories of young people on the edge of leaving school influenced the push towards a new SACE and the new School Retention Action Plan (SRAP). Contained within the report were stories of alienation, bullying, of adolescents being sick of being treated like kids, with these stories situated within undercurrents of mental health issues, drugs and undealt with domestic abuse, coalescing to interrupt learning in schools (Smyth, Hattam et. al., 2000; Lamb, Jackson et al. 2015).

But the voiced research of young people on the edge of school didn’t stop there. Other research followed up the young people who found new places to learn and to be. These stories become hopeful as excluded learners found places in one of many alternative sites and schools, where the complexity of their issues was recognised and began to be dealt with. The stories the young people told were of schools not able to meet the needs of students undergoing difficulties in school, in their families and community but there were hopeful educational places where flexibility for nuanced support was still available.

Unfortunately, many of the researchers came to realise that even though these alternative learning spaces provided safe, responsive, flexible environments, this often did not translate into sustained meaningful outcomes for young people. Despite the occasional success and the immediate respite for some young people, many of the researchers found that the main aim of alternative places was to enable mainstream schools to resist change as someone else dealt with the students that didn’t fit in.

The transitions for these young people remained difficult. Because their learning was interrupted it was unlikely that many of the young people in alternative education programs would leave with a credential and a pathway giving currency to “the skills and knowledge necessary for them to exercise genuine options in their adult lives” (Smyth 2010, Mills, Renshaw et. al., 2013; Robinson & Smyth, 2015). As we move further into the 21st century, we are being told that the issues for young people who are excluded from education will only get worse, making the challenge even greater. What tools do we have to ensure that all young people have the entitlement to thrive in their learning?

In South Australia we are persistently told of the flexibility of the SACE, but that flexibility may have atrophied because of lack of use in schools. Although FLO and other Learning Choices Programs have their failings we can still learn from the teachers and service providers that have contributed to the resilience of the alternative sites. Most importantly we can re-engage all young people in learning. The lead researcher of Listen to Me I’m Leaving and Australia’s preeminent researcher of student disengagement, Emeritus Professor John Smyth, has called for a new approach to research with young people based around a series of questions which include:

• What is producing disengagement from school?
• How is this (dis)engagement from school being experienced by young people?
• What needs be done differently about dis (re-)engagement to school?
• How [can] school places be made more affectively malleable to become more equitable?

(Smyth & McInerney et. al., 2013, p.303)

Now is the Time to Act on These Questions Together!
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Sourced from the SA Department for Education, 2020

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About Flinders University College for Education, Psychology and Social Work

Through our world-class teaching and research, we equip students with the skill, commitment and vision to protect vulnerable communities and advance human development.

Our educators deliver an environment of inclusion, cooperation and opportunity that offers our graduates a learning experience that will last a lifetime. We are a forward thinking, future focused place to research, study and work, supported by placement opportunities, innovative teaching and industry connected researchers. The College of Education, Psychology and Social Work is dedicated to cultivating bright minds and inspiring innovative, passionate and highly skilled citizens for future ready careers, and delivering connections for life.

Acknowledgement of Country

Flinders University was established on the lands of the Kaurna nation, with the first University campus, Bedford Park, located on the ancestral body of Ngannu near Warriparinga. Warriparinga is a significant site in the complex and multi-layered Dreaming of the Kaurna ancestor, Tjilbruke. For the Kaurna nation, Tjilbruke was a keeper of the fire and a peace maker/law maker. Tjilbruke is part of the living culture and traditions of the Kaurna people. His spirit lives in the Land and Waters, in the Kaurna people and in the glossy ibis (known as Tjilbruke for the Kaurna). Through Tjilbruke, the Kaurna people continue their creative relationship with their Country, its spirituality and its stories.

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians, both past and present, of the various locations the University operates on, and recognises their continued relationship and responsibility to these Lands and waters.

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