CONTEXT
The Links to Learning LOTE (Language Other Than English) program works with Year 9 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who attend government schools in the Wollongong/Shoalhaven area. A considerable percentage of the participants are newly-arrived refugees.

TARGET GROUP: STUDENTS AT RISK
Year 9 students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) at risk of not completing their schooling.

The organisation responsible for the delivery of the LOTE program is the Multicultural Communities Council of Illawarra, a peak ethnic organisation that represents, lobbies and advocates for the many multicultural communities of the Illawarra region.
PROJECT AIM

• to build the social and educational capacity of every student so that they complete Year 10 before deciding whether to remain at school, move into training or secure employment.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Links LOTE program is a structured intervention that has been researched, assembled and refined over the seventeen years of its existence. The program focuses on improving communication, language and living skills; increasing self-esteem and self-belief; planning career and educational pathways and goals; and instilling in students an ‘I can do’ attitude. This is achieved in a culturally inclusive environment in close consultation with schools, families and community partners.

The thirty-eight week program operates two days a week and caters for sixty students from six secondary schools. The main program elements include Certificate II in Retail (4 modules), TAFE taster courses, hospitality experience, the Duke of Edinburgh Award, self defence and volunteering.

A significant contributor to the effectiveness of the LOTE program is the number, breadth and strength of the community partnerships that have been built, nurtured and maintained.

REFERRAL PROCESS

The referral and acceptance process for the LOTE program generally commences in Term 4 of the preceding year when the students are in Year 8.

Students must be disengaging from school and come from a multicultural background to be eligible for the program. Barriers to learning, such as family dysfunction, low self-esteem, poor language skills, lack of positive role models, isolation from peers, abuse and unacceptable behaviours, are then considered.

Although each of the six referring schools uses different measures to identify students, all involve the school counsellors, year advisors and school welfare teams in the decisions regarding potential participants.

Schools work very closely with the LOTE program coordinator. Ten student places are allocated per school resulting in a total cohort of sixty students. Each school holds an information session for applicants during which the LOTE coordinator outlines program requirements and provides information packages for parents. A parent information night is then organised for the families of all sixty students.

To enhance the referral process, the next year’s Year 8 advisors are encouraged to attend the December graduation dinner thus giving them an understanding of program directions and a better foundation from which to begin thinking about future referrals.

PROGRAM FEATURES

The words ‘empowerment’ and ‘transformation’ sum up the objectives of the LOTE program – equipping students who are struggling to remain at school with the knowledge, skills and understandings to manage their situation, stay in education and change their lives.

The program acknowledges that many students face a number of specific challenges caused by disrupted education, the impact of trauma and dislocation and lack of family support as well as language and cultural barriers. The unique needs of students and the diversity of their educational backgrounds and life experiences are recognised and addressed as:

- every student is supported to develop an individual pathways plan that builds on interests and abilities and sets educational and careers goals
- learning is removed from the mainstream and placed in a more personalised, non-threatening alternative environment most appropriate for the needs of the group
- innovative and creative activities cater for complex learning needs and preferred ways of learning. Teaching approaches are based on the premise that these students ‘learn best by doing rather than sitting’.

Activities are designed to engage students in learning and to enhance their ‘employability skills’. They are taught, and given opportunities to practise, how to plan and organise, be part of a team, communicate effectively, problem solve, be enterprising, self-manage, use technology, and learn how to learn.

The program is structured to develop progressively students’ academic, coping, concentration and perseverance skills, so they can better manage the more challenging second half of the year.

The core program strands are:

- Retail. Described as the ‘spine’ of the LOTE program, retail is delivered throughout the year in partnership with the registered training organisation, Access Community Group. Students receive a Certificate of Attainment on completion of the four modules they do from Certificate II in Retail.
- Career readiness. Activities in this strand support students to acquire key workplace skills and competencies and include visits to industry and career expos, job pathway training, Novatel Student Hospitality program, TAFE taster courses and Senior First Aid and WH&S ‘white card’ training.
• Volunteering. Over the course of the program students spend twenty hours connecting with the community as they undertake volunteer work in the aged care sector, in primary schools or with National Parks and Wildlife.

• Self Defence. Offered free of charge, a four week series of workshops, tailored to the group’s needs and emphasising self development, are conducted by Southern Crane Kung Fu.

• Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award. This organisation’s slogan is ‘Empower! Endeavour! Experience! Achieve!’ and taking part in this challenging course is a very powerful positive experience for students. Participants are assisted to plan their involvement, to set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely) goals and to stay on target. They learn about teamwork, cooperation, determination, problem solving and very importantly, about commitment, community and connectedness.

By the completion of the LOTE program, students possess a very impressive portfolio of awards and achievements. These are compiled and presented to students in a specially designed ‘Graduation folder’ at the celebratory dinner held in December. This event, attended by over 250 students, teachers, parents, program partners and invited guests, is organised and emceed by the students.

The intention of the LOTE program is for students to return to school the following year and finish Year 10. To assist in the transition to full-time mainstream schooling, the LOTE coordinator works closely with schools to provide intensive follow-up support for the first three months of Year 10.

BENEFITS, SUCCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Careful program planning, refined and reviewed over many years, has resulted in a tightly-structured format that delivers relevant, meaningful and engaging content in a culturally sensitive and appropriate context.

The LOTE program personnel are a multi-skilled, passionate and professional team who have a wealth of experience in addressing the complex personal and educational needs of disengaged multicultural youth. They are responsive to the needs of students, work collaboratively with the schools and mentor participants in order to achieve the best outcomes possible for each student.

Creative in partnerships, activities and environments, the program delivers the learning, skills development, workplace opportunities and support structures necessary for the students to achieve their goals.
The effectiveness of the program is largely due to the successful community partnerships that have been created, developed and maintained over time.

The program leverages much needed personnel, infrastructure and financial support, the students connect with education, training and the community, and the partners gain enormous satisfaction from investing in these young people’s futures. Successful program outcomes are also achieved through strategies including:

- delivering the program in a Police Citizens Youth Club rather than in a school. This provides a dedicated classroom in a youth-friendly venue. The relaxed atmosphere is more conducive to learning it gives students a greater sense of security and belonging.
- using humour, storytelling, entertainment and performance to make learning ‘fun’ and to motivate and re-engage students.
- providing education, vocational and personal opportunities, advice and guidance that draws on social networks and community links.
- working with students to develop individual learning and pathways plans and regularly monitoring and supporting their progress in implementing these plans.
- providing students opportunities to become acquainted with the culture of work by helping them get work experience, work placement and part-time employment.
- engaging parents in their child’s learning through regular telephone contact and progress reports.

Student outcomes include:

- students exiting the program with greater confidence, with a network of support in and outside of the school and with a portfolio that considerably increases their employability.
- 57 of the 60 students completing all 200 hours of the program.
- 83% of students receiving a Statement of Attainment.
- schools reporting that students return to school exhibiting greater maturity and a stronger belief in themselves.
- improved attendance, academic achievement, behaviour and connectedness to school.

As one teacher commented, “The students finish the program with hope and direction taking with them a portfolio of success and achievement that will support them through their lives both personally and professionally.”

STUDENT SNAPSHOT A

Rhywinca was born in Liberia, but, at 8 years of age, his family was forced to flee Liberia to survive the ravages of the civil war. Rhywinca, separated from his family and alone, escaped to Nigeria where he spent five years working on a farm.

At 13, having heard about a Ghanian refugee camp where many Liberians were awaiting resettlement, Rhywinca set off on a 500 kilometre trek in search of his family. When he reached the camp he found his older brother and learnt his mother had been resettled in Australia. Rhywinca and his brother were granted permission to move to Australia where they were reunited with their mother and younger brother and sister.

Rhywinca was 14 when he attended the Intensive English Centre and transitioned to Year 9. This was the first time he had attended school. Rhywinca was shy and withdrawn and his lack of confidence, social isolation and extremely poor communication skills concerned his teachers and prompted his referral to the Links to Learning program. On joining the program in Year 10, Rhywinca identified his main goal as ‘getting a job to support his family’.

During his time in the program, Rhywinca was focussed and earnest, completing everything, including the prestigious Duke of Edinburgh Award, with enthusiasm and commitment. By the end of Year 10, Rhywinca, determined his mother would never have to pay for anything again, was employed in three part-time jobs as well as attending school.

Rhywinca is now a confident, talkative young man who works nights at the Novatel Northbeach Wollongong while attending TAFE during the day to complete a Pre Apprenticeship Mechanics course. In 2013, Rhywinca discovered his father was still alive in Africa. He is now working with Immigration authorities to have his father join the family in Australia.
### PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

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