

***Learning Beyond the Mainstream:  
‘Here, everything’s different’***

***A Multi-site Research Evaluation of  
Alesco-type Learning Centres***

THE  
WEAHUNTER  
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**Final Report**

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With Thanks to



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<b>Introduction</b>	

The aim of this multi-site research evaluation of five Alesco-type learning centre sites that this Final Report focuses on is to provide evidence to strategically inform

their rationale and operation. The sites included in this study report are in Newcastle (*Alesco Senior College*); Wollongong (*Alesco Illawarra*); Albury-Wodonga (*Albury Wodonga Community College, Independent School*); Bathurst (*Skillset Senior College*), and Dubbo (*Western College, Alesco Learning Centre*). ‘Summary and Conclusions’ are provided at the end of this report.

The intention of the research was to investigate young people’s current perceptions, experiences of and engagement with (or disengagement from) education in the five Alesco-type sites, informed also by perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders including staff.

This investigation (conducted between March and July, 2016) needs to be understood and read in the context of a similar investigation in 2009 of one site (the original *Alesco Learning Centre*) in Newcastle, titled *Education that works: A comprehensive, research-based evaluation of the Alesco Learning Centre to 2009* (Golding, 2009). The *Alesco Learning Centre* in Newcastle (in 2016 known as *Alesco Senior College*) began in 2002 as an initiative of WEA<sup>1</sup> Hunter in 2002, targeting ‘young people aged between 15 and 19 years of age who are not able to complete Stage 5 (Year 9 and 10) studies in mainstream schools for various reasons’ (Hamall, 2003).

The five sites included in the current study comprise most but not all of the Alesco-type learning centres across New South Wales<sup>2</sup>. Whilst three publicly call themselves ‘Colleges,’ all are independent schools, very broadly defined, focusing on ‘alternative’ or ‘second chance’, upper secondary education. While four of the sites are co-located and/or managed by pre-existing adult and community education (ACE) providers, the Bathurst school is managed via a recently restructured Group Training Organisation (GTO).

All five Alesco-type programs are characterised by very low fees, higher than average staffing ratios and greater welfare support. While all five schools have a strong educational and social justice commitment, their financial viability and sustainability has now become a very important consideration for the parent organisations, as vocational and ACE revenue streams have continued to diminish. What is common to all sites is that the funds generated by the Alesco-type independent schools now comprise approximately half of the not-for profit parent organisation’s annual revenue.

The Wollongong, Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst and Dubbo schools have been configured, informed and mentored to varying degrees by the original Newcastle-based *Alesco Learning Centre*. While the term ‘Alesco-type learning centre’ is used throughout this report to refer individually and collectively to the five ‘alternative’, ‘independent’ schools in this study, two of the schools (Albury-Wodonga and

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<sup>1</sup> WEA: Workers Educational Association.

<sup>2</sup> The Albury-Wodonga school operates in two states across the NSW-Victorian border.

Bathurst) do not regularly use the name 'Alesco' as part of their branding. All five schools operate parts of their program on more than one site or on extended campuses.

Two other Alesco-type providers that use the 'Alesco' name and approach are *not* included in this research evaluation. They are the *Alesco Learning Centre Far West* in Broken Hill (2015 enrolment of 40) and the *TLK Alesco School* in Berkeley Vale on the New South Wales Central Coast (2015 enrolment of 61). The Broken Hill Alesco Learning Centre, begun in 2014, operates through Robinson College on a former Charles Sturt University campus on the outskirts of Broken Hill South (WEA, 2014). Some of the available data relating to these other Alesco-type providers available from the My School (My School, 2016) website are provided towards the bottom of Table 3 to enable some general comparisons.

This investigation of young people being educated in five regional New South Wales communities was underpinned by a concern and conundrum neatly summarised in a 2015 Australian review, *Engaging young people in regional, rural and remote Australia* (Davie, 2015, p.62).

Efforts to stem the 'brain drain' or attract young people can sometimes miss the mark. Those who are disengaged and remain in regional communities will not have their needs met by initiatives to keep the best and brightest from leaving.

This report includes a review of some of the recent literature pertinent to alternative education (very broadly defined) in Australia. The Methodology section sets the parameters for the project, acknowledging the limitations imposed by scope, timing and practicalities.

## Research Questions

The field investigation for this report was underpinned by the following research questions as they apply individually or collectively to the five Alesco-type learning centre schools and programs:

- *What is it about the Alesco-type program that works well on the site?*
- *Why does it work?*
- *What aspects of each program might be improved?*

Aside from answering these site-specific questions, the intention of this research evaluation was to combine the student and stakeholder narrative data and critical insights to also answer:

- *What is similar or different across the five Alesco-type programs and sites?*
- *How does this set of providers sit in and inform the current discourses about school-based pedagogies and teacher education?*
- *What is it about these schools that may be distinctive and different, that may also be of wider interest or applicability?*

## Research design principles

This research was underpinned by a number of presuppositions incorporated into the research as design principles, summarised below.

‘Understanding issues from the point of view of young people is critical to targeting engagement efforts’ (Davie, 2015, p.99). And yet ‘there is no information available nationally on how local government involve young people in decision-making or service delivery’ (Davie, 2015, p.99).

In addition, research into education and training:

- ... is almost entirely based on the self-reports of existing participants in education. Whatever those participating say [including about financial barriers],
- ... non-participants often cite other reasons for not continuing with formal education. (Selwyn, Gorard & Furlong, 2006)

This study deliberately sought to hear narratives from young people in regional New South Wales, including non-participants in education. This study and the five schools included in this study acknowledge that ‘... those who ‘failed’ at school often come to see [mainstream] learning of all kinds as irrelevant to their needs and capacities’ (after Gorard, 2010, p.358).

The research therefore sought to ‘look behind’ the conventional participation and outcome data to hear ‘learner voice’ from young people in regional sites (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009) where opportunities for appropriate school education have, for a wide range of reasons, become very limited. It also seeks to hear and respond to the voice of young people in regional New South Wales in a way that is ‘... not top-down, patronising, tokenistic or unappreciative’ of their real interests and voices (Head, 2011, p.546).

The five research sites in the cities of Newcastle, Wollongong, Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst and Dubbo all have historical or current connections to the original Alesco Learning Centre in Newcastle. As this report anticipates, while there are some common attributes shared by the schools, because of different histories, purposes and community contexts, there are also likely to be discernable differences.

All five school sites examined in this April-May 2016 field study are located in relatively large cities in the relatively very accessibly ARIA+ (Accessibility /Remoteness Index of Australia: ARIA, 2016) ‘Inner Regional’ (0.2 to 2.4) range. They include one Category A Service Centre (Newcastle), one Category B Service Centre (Wollongong) and three Category C Service Centres: Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst and Dubbo (as defined by ARIA+: ARIA, 2016). All greater city areas have a SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indicator for Areas: ABS, 2016) below the Australian average (1000). Dubbo in particular has a higher level of recent, average socioeconomic disadvantage (as defined by Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015). In most areas (and schools) across regional NSW, lower socio-economic status (SES) tends also to be

associated with a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) people in the wider population.

It was intended to interview both current students and stakeholders, with up to five interviews of up to 30 minutes anticipated with both groups in all five sites. Permission to interview young people age less than 18 years (including parental or guardian consent) was organised by each school. Students 18 years or over and adult stakeholder were able to freely consent to interview.

The research observed the standard research ethics protocols contained in the *AVETRA Code of Practice* for research (AVETRA, 2016). All interviewees were invited to participate and informed by a *Plain Language Statement* and signed a *Statement of Informed Consent*. In addition, parental or guardian permission was supplied for young people interviewed who were less than 18 years of age.

## **Literature review**

### *The literature about alternative schools*

Given the widespread failure of ‘mainstream’ schools in many parts of the world to meet the diverse needs on all young people, it is unsurprising that a wide range of ‘alternative’ schools have sprung up, along with a diverse ‘alternative school’ research literature.

There is general agreement in the literature that there is no single, simple definition of alternative education, and that attempts to impose order on a diverse range of ‘types’ will always involve different presuppositions and tensions (Raywid, 1994). Thomson (2014) identifies three key questions that usefully attempt to transcend these differences.

1. Whether alternative education is only for those that do not fit into mainstream.
2. Whether the problem for those students is a result of something about them, or something about the schooling system.
3. Whether the goal of alternative education is to ‘fix’ the student in order that they can re-enter mainstream education and training, or offer a different pathway to outcomes which includes education and training, but also encompasses citizenship, spiritual and aesthetic development.

Whilst deliberately ‘different’ from and ‘alternative’ to most mainstream schools, the five schools in this study have not been independently or privately funded. All are in effect *publicly funded and managed* alternative schools (Bascia & Maton, 2016). Whilst all have sought to distinguish and reposition themselves from ‘mainstream’ schools, their access to state and national government funding is conditional on being accountable to school accreditation and assessment requirements and strict adherence to government regulation.

A review of the literature (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999, p.132) confirms that publicly funded and managed alternative schools have existed in some form for a century or

more, indeed as long as there have been mass education systems, and continue to proliferate.

Over 20 years ago Raywid (1994) created a typology of alternative schools with a spectrum of schools in three broad and overlapping types. At one end of the three-part spectrum, Raywid identified Type 1 schools that are often positively chosen by students, parents or teachers because of their child-centredness. Such schools tend to reflect organisational and administrative ‘... departures from the traditional as well as programmatic innovations ... likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both’ (p.27).

At another end of the spectrum are Type 2 school settings: in effect schools of final resort, designed ‘... as repositories for disruptive students and ineffective teachers’ (McLaughlin, Atkupawa & Williamson, 2008, p.9). As Raywid (1994, p.27) put it, at the extreme, these Type 2 school ‘... programs to which students are sentenced [are] one last chance before expulsion’.

Raywid identified Type 3 alternative schools as those ‘... for students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation – academic, social/emotional or both’ (Thompson, 2014). As Thompson puts it, Type 3 schools:

... often focus on remedial work and on stimulating social and emotional growth – often through emphasising the school itself as a community. ... The assumption is that after effective treatment students can return to mainstream programs.

Raywid’s third type of school sometimes allows ‘... students to gain academic credits without the distractions and obligations of comprehensive academic programs’ (Gagne & Robertson, 1995, cited in Bascia & Maton, 2016, p.133).

As in Bascia and Maton’s (2016) Toronto (Canadian) study, each of the schools in the current study would appear to include some elements of Raywid’s Types 2 and 3.

Thompson (2014) cites critiques of Raywid’s typology. Heinrich (2005), for example, ... suggested that Raywid’s approach worked from the assumption of a student or curricular deficit [and] that the success in alternative education could not be achieved by segregating students from their peers in mainstream schools who ... should also spend time in alternative provision while those from the alternative should maintain contact with the mainstream. He argued for an alternative education which combined a humanistic philosophy, a progressive pedagogy with insistence on behavioural compliance and an overall goal of emancipation. He was most insistent that the notion of ‘second chance’ education was coercive, and that of ‘another chance’ was preferable.

Kellermayer (1995, 1998, cited in Thompson, 2014) argued ‘... that most alternative provisions are pseudo-alternatives – ineffective and often punitive, they isolate and segregate students from peers in the mainstream’. Kellermayer suggests that ‘genuine’ alternatives are voluntary, distinctive from traditional education and offer a student-centred learning environment and a comprehensive set of objectives.

Bascia and Maton (2016, p.131), researching in Canada and the US note that 'It is remarkable that public alternative schools', that arguably include the Alesco-type schools in this study:

... are able to develop and maintain innovative programs ... given the bureaucratic, top-down nature of the school systems in which they operate. ... the same systems that promote the standardized programs at mainstream schools that alienate some students.

### *The discourse of care*

Early on in the current study several teachers and managers stressed that the Alesco-type model might be found not in the pedagogical space of adult education in which many of the schools were physically embedded, but in the intersection between education (or learning) and care. The notion of 'care', as Thompson and Pennacchia (2016, p.84) note, is 'ubiquitous to alternative education ... as well as to 'regular schools''. Thompson and Pennacchia (2016, p.95) suggested that what varied between dominant regular schools and most alternative education (AE) settings was:

... the nature of the care on offer, that is, in the choices that young people were able to make and the ways in which they could exercise power. Care in most AE is highly individualised and reductively focused on obedience and performing well in set tasks. There is a relatively simple binary choice of conform/resist.

The somewhat different AE contexts Thompson and Pennacchia examined might be closer to the ones espoused and arguably practised in the Alesco-type schools examined in the current study, in that they:

... offered different choices. There was no penalty for choosing not to participate. And the choice was not to simply conform but to care – for others (the group, nature, [other students]) and the self. ... The programmes steered, not coerced and punished. (p.96)

Thompson and Pennacchia (2016) note that in this way, the major target of student resistance:

The everyday, ordinary, disciplinary working of the school – was temporarily displaced. Students were able to choose to exercise their power differently and opt into alternative ways of being and becoming (p.96).

Thompson and Pennacchia identify the dilemma here for AE, arguably inclusive of the Alesco-type schools in the current study, stressing that:

It is too easy to suggest that school must abandon performative disciplinary regimes where the choice is to conform or not. [They] still have to keep order and the students will still need to learn and be taught. It is less easy to suggest what they might do instead. ... It is a question of what kind of disciplinary regime might be on offer. Rather than simply offering one way to choose to be part of the school, there might be more than one pattern of participation. ... [Instead of] thinking about whether a school is good/bad, liberatory/repressive ... it might be more generative

for schools to consider what horizons of possibility and what possible selves are on offer for young people, and what this might allow them to be and become (p.96).

### *Alternative education and social justice*

Mills *et al.*'s Australian study (2016, p.102) of alternative education and social justice stresses that 'Mainstream schools have a long history of not serving particular groups of young people well'. Multiple reasons have been advanced including:

... students' access to particular forms of cultural capital, lack of fit between the middle class expectations of schooling and (non)-working class culture, teacher prejudices, lack of resources ... Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that an injustice is being perpetrated against children of the poor. ... [reproducing] the existing patterns of wealth and poverty. (p.102)

Mills *et al.* (2016, p.102) note that 'many young people experience schooling as oppressive because they have no forum in which to express their opinions or challenge their injustices they have experienced'. In arguing for redistributive justice, they caution against the alternative education sector:

Being constructed as a dumping ground for students 'unwanted' by the education system where there is then little academic challenge. ... [Separating] younger and younger students ... from the mainstream and its benefits ... [and] 'poorly constructed and resourced' programs will reinforce student's poor outcomes from schooling. ... ['Care'] *by itself* is insufficient to address all their needs. (p.103)

Given the disproportionately high proportion of Aboriginal Australian young people enrolled in all Alesco-type schools in the current study, it is important to briefly reflect on why this might be and what its implications might be for these Alesco-type schools. It is also important to acknowledge (see Skattebol & Hayes, 2016) that a brief set of interviews by a non-Indigenous researcher with some Aboriginal young people will not be sufficient to identify why they became disengaged from the mainstream and to what extent the Alesco-type school actually engages them (or not). Like all other forms of colonisation and dehumanisation, research about schooling, unless undertaken carefully, coming alongside and amongst an Aboriginal community can also be construed as (and act) as a key mechanism for more of the same.

What is obvious from a superficial examination of the My School data in Table 3 is that as the ICSEA (Index of Socio-Educational Disadvantage) score for schools on all five sites goes down, the proportion of Indigenous young people enrolled dramatically increases, including in Alesco-type schools. Whether this phenomenon is about the push or pull - that is whether there is perceived value of an Alesco-type school compared to the mainstream alternatives, or whether Alesco is indeed a school of 'last resort' for young Indigenous people alienated by policies and institutional practices in mainstream schools - cannot be answered in the current study.

### *Critiques of the discourse of barriers*

There are many studies of 'barriers' to 'elite' forms of education, on the assumption that what lies on the other side of the 'barrier' is desirable. Gorard (2010), researching in the UK, critically examined the metaphor of barriers to participation in education. Gorard (p.355) concluded that the research evidence about barriers in the UK:

... is almost entirely based on the existing self-reports of existing participants in education. Whatever those participants say about finance (and it obviously has not prevented them from accessing education), non-participants usually cite other reasons for not continuing with formal education.

This research involving schools with minimal fees to participants provides an opportunity to explore this conclusion. Of particular relevance to the current research, Gorard (2010, p.356) noted that:

The relatively low level of participation of lower-income groups [in education and training]... gives rise to the explanation that cost is a barrier. ... There is little direct evidence that [approaches including grants, fees remission, and means-tested bursaries] are differentially effective for whom they are intended.

Gorard (2010, p.357) identified five determinants: time, place, sex and family and initial schooling, that determine participation (including non-participation) in learning, concluding that most of these characteristics:

... are set very early in life. ... Once background and schooling are taken into account, there is just not enough variation left for barriers to make any difference in participation.

Consistent with these findings, Australian longitudinal research (Gemici & Lu, 2014) found that characteristics of the secondary school students attended contributed very little to the degree of student engagement to age 15 years and beyond. Instead, 'students' emotional and cognitive engagement is overwhelmingly driven by individual background factors' (p.32).

While Gorard (2010, p.357, researching in in the UK) acknowledged that 'there may be important variables as yet unmeasured', he anticipated that:

... one possible explanation is that family poverty, lack of role models, and a sense of 'not for us' coupled with poor experiences of initial schooling can conspire to create a kind of lifelong attitude to learning, a negative learner identity.

Gemici and Lu (2014, p.32) also acknowledged that it is possible that '... any meaningful effect of school characteristics on student engagement in Australia occurs during the earlier years of schooling.' Several aspects of these UK findings were able to be further explored as part of the current research, both at an individual level through participant narratives, and by brief participant survey responses.

What was already known in Australia (RPAC, 2013, p.11) is that student participation in further education and training is largely limited by non-completion of secondary school, personal characteristics shaped by family, awareness of and exposure to

post-school opportunities, provision and access to such opportunities and transition support for those who take them up.

### *Learner voice*

Sellar and Gale (2011, p.129) identify the nub of the dilemma for those marginalised in and alienated by school, when they concluded, in a study about equity in Australian higher education, that:

... social position and access to resources mediate what ends are felt to be possible and desirable. For the elite, these conditions are such that desire tends to inform possibility: what is imagined is simply made possible. For the marginalised, possibility tends to inform desire: what is possible limits the desirable to what is 'realistic'.

As Gorard (2010) as well as Sellar and Gale (2011, p.129) advise, Alesco-type schools might be wise to adopt strength-based (non-deficit) approaches, given that:

... increasing student equity is not simply about removing barriers to participation for individual students, but about changing institutions to make access and participation more possible to a wider set of groups in society.

Green and White (2008, cited in Thompson, 2011) concluded that young people derive from class, family and friends specific varieties of social and cultural capital rooted in local conditions, which may be enabling or constraining. Zevenbergen and Zevenbergen (n.d.) concluded that successful school-to work transitions rely on strong social capital in communities, among schools, industry and the community.

## **Methodology**

### *Locations*

Onsite data were collected from five Alesco-type schools in order to provide sufficient insights to draw conclusions based around the research questions.

Table 1 summarises some key characteristics of the five school and data collection sites. The table also includes SEIFA (Socioeconomic Indexes For Areas) and ARIA+ (accessibility/remoteness) scores for the city areas where the Alesco-type provider are located. A SEIFA below 1000 is indicative of average relative disadvantage for the statistical local area compared to the overall Australian average. A high ARIA+ is indicative of increasing remoteness and reduced accessibility to a wide range of services.

*Table 1: Characteristics of the study sites and participating organisations*

<b>Cities;</b> <i>Alesco-type Provider;</i> Parent Organisation	City Population;  Alesco Enrolment (2015)	<b>SEIFA*;</b> <b>ARIA+ (Service</b> <b>Centre Category)</b>
<b>Newcastle;</b> <i>Alesco Senior College;</i> WEA Hunter	308,000  106	994  0.27 (A)
<b>Wollongong</b> <i>Alesco Illawarra;</i> WEA Illawarra	209,000  44	980  0.12 (B)
<b>Albury-Wodonga</b> <i>Independent School;</i> Albury Wodonga Community College	105,000  48#	977  1.75 (C)
<b>Bathurst</b> <i>Skillset Senior College;</i> Skillset	35,000  31	991  0.62 (C)
<b>Dubbo</b> Alesco Learning Centre; Western College	37,000  80	977  1.84 (C)

KEY: \* SEIFA: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas: 1000 is the Australian average; the AWCC total of 48 enrolments appears only to count Albury: the total school count in 2015 was 48 (NSW) + 45 (Victoria) = 93.

### *Recruitment of interviewees*

The research anticipated hearing from young people as well as stakeholders (mainly school staff) with a knowledge of the Alesco-type school, about their experiences of school education, specifically and most recently through the Alesco-type provider.

interview and survey data from a approximately 50 young people across five sites was considered to be sufficient to come to some common and general conclusions about their experiences of education and the Alesco-type school.

It was envisaged that at least 12 detailed ‘portraits’ of de-identified individuals might be drawn from across the five sites that would provide narratives to illuminate the common themes, relationships and general conclusions at the level of the individual, provider and the set of providers.

### *Focus of the questions to interviewees*

The interviews with both young people and community stakeholder took place in groups of between one and four interviewees. The questions were deliberately open and generally led with “Tell me about ...”.

Several of the themes in the questions were distilled from Wallace’s methodology in her study of Northern Territory rural communities (2008, pp.8-9).

- Context (individual, community, educational).
- Critical incidents and milestones in learning.
- Attitudes to and preferred ways of learning.
- Perceptions of options and choices for future learning.

The interview questions to both young people (mainly current students) and local stakeholders (mainly staff with experiences of the school) focussed on:

- *What is it about the Alesco-type program that works well on this site?*
- *Why do you think it works?*
- *What aspects of the program might be improved in the future?*

Towards the end of each interview, interviewees were asked, “Is there anything else we have not asked you about that you think is relevant to your previous, current or future learning, to help us understand your experience?”

### *Surveys to young people interviewed*

Each young person was invited to complete a brief survey. The survey was for two main purposes:

1. To provide a simple and standard way of collecting data about the student’s demographic characteristics (employment experience, education completed, gender and age).
2. To gauge opinions about the student’s education, work and future learning intentions, using ten brief statements on a five point Likert Scale.

### *Setting up the interviews and analysing the data*

The order of contact, engagement, data collection and feedback in each of the five Alesco-type providers was as below.

- Initial phone conversation with key contacts (typically the school Principal or College CEO) to invite their cooperation, seek their provisional approval and give an opportunity to ask questions.
- Follow up *Plain Language Statement* and email sent to each Alesco-type provider requesting a *Reconnaissance site visit*, and anticipating a second *Interview site visit*.
- *Reconnaissance site visit*, meeting with key stakeholders on each site, collecting baseline data and checking the interview protocols.
- Phone contact before the return visit to check the interview arrangements.
- *Interview site visit* including interviews on each site, with approximately five one half hour group interviews with students, as well as school staff and other stakeholders.
- Full (external) transcription of all interviews, then writing a *Draft Report*.
- Provision to the key contacts of a *Draft Report*.
- Provision of five draft *Site-Specific Reports* comprising illustrative quotes from interviewees in each site about what works and what might be improved, for checking of accuracy, interviewee confidentiality and appropriateness.

- This *Final Report* for wide distribution, as well as five final *Site-Specific Reports* to be used for internal and individual school planning and development.

### *Limitations*

This study provides a useful ‘snapshot’ of the voices of 55 young people and 66 other stakeholders in five Alesco-type providers who agreed to the invitation to participate in interviews. Given that young people interviewed were ethically recruited mainly via these providers, it is not possible to claim that interviewees are either a random sample or statistically representative of all young people enrolled as current students in these five providers. Whilst the number of achieved interviews (49) is regarded as sufficient to identify key themes within and across sites, the survey data from 55 young people, particularly when disaggregated for five sites, provides only a guide to their experiences and perceptions.

### *Acknowledgements*

The researcher and report author, Barry Golding, gratefully acknowledges the generosity and cooperation of the five Alesco-type schools, management and staff and particularly the young people and other stakeholders who generously volunteered to be interviewed and consulted.

Opening up to an external, independent and critical, research-based evaluation takes both vision and courage. There was a high degree of understanding, cooperation and support from everyone who participated in, contributed to and supported this study and also backed its purposes. Barry Golding sincerely thanks all staff, community organisations, parents and community members who assisted, participated and advised in every phase of the investigation.

This investigation, undertaken by Adjunct Professor Barry Golding through *Tertiary Tracks*, could not have been undertaken without the generous support of WEA Hunter and the vision and persistence of Ben Grushka, Executive Director, WEA Hunter in envisioning and commissioning this research. Barry Golding acknowledges the support and trust of the students, staff, School Principals, College CEOs and Boards of all providers that effectively ‘embed’ and manage these schools in ‘coming on board’.

Every effort was made to be as accurate as possible in this *Final Report* by checking site-specific information with key stakeholders in an early *Draft Report*. The author apologises for any inevitable errors, omissions and inaccuracies in this *Final Report*.

## Results

### *The achieved interview sample*

Between 9 and 11 group interviews were conducted on each site, totalling between 2 hours and 3.25 hours of fully transcribed interview data from each site. Once fully transcribed, they provide diverse and highly pertinent place-based information and narratives about student and stakeholder experiences and perceptions in that locality. In all, 55 current students and 43 program staff were interviewed in a total of 49 group interviews. In addition, three ex-students, four parents and five external stakeholders were interviewed (total 115 interviewees). All interviews (more than 13 hours) were fully transcribed. Table 2 summarises the achieved interviews and interviewees by type and site.

*Table 2 Achieved interview and survey sample by site*

SITES (tape time)	Interviews	Students (+Surveys)	Staff	Ex- Student	Parent	External Stakeholder	TOTAL Interviewed
Newcastle (193.05)	9	11 (11)	10	3			<b>24</b>
Wollongong (190.18)	10	9 (9)	14		2	1	<b>26</b>
Albury-Wod. (165.33)	9	11(11)	8		2	4	<b>25</b>
Bathurst (121.49)	10	12 (12)	5			1	<b>15</b>
Dubbo (119.58)	11	12 (12)	6		1		<b>19</b>
<b>TOTALS</b> (790.43: 13 H, 10 m., 43 s.)	<b>49</b>	<b>55 (55)</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>110</b>

An analysis was undertaken of the most recent, 2015 *My School* enrolment and outcome data for each Alesco-type learning centre (in **bold**), including 2015 Year 7 NAPLAN data for reading and numeracy (where available). Similar data from several other public, private and 'alternative' schools in each site is also included in Table 3 to enable comparison. The four columns with mainly missing (NA) post-Year 12 outcome data are deliberately included to emphasise that unlike in Victoria, valid comparisons of school outcome data are not publically possible for schools across New South Wales.

*Table 3: Secondary school enrolments, profile & outcomes^ by site, 2015^*

Alesco, Public and Private Colleges#	Enrolled % Male	ICSEA % Indig	% Low (High) ICSEA Quartile	NAPL. R/N	VET SBA	% to Uni	% to TAFE	% to Wor k	% NEET
<b>Alesco SC, Cooks Hill</b>	<b>106 50%</b>	<b>NA 6%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>B SB</b>		<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
Margaret Jurd College, Shortland	62 58%	NA 21%	NA	SB SB		NA	NA	NA	NA
Newcastle High School, Hamilton	1034 50%	1003 6%	29% (18%)	AV B	215 6	NA	NA	NA	NA
Newcastle Grammar	746 51%	1169 0%	1% (76%)	SA SA	3	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Alesco Illawarra</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>

	<b>59%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>SB</b>					
Smiths Hill HS Wollongong	752 54%	1195 1%	0% (72%)	SA SA	8	NA	NA	NA	NA
Five Islands SC Port Kembla	234 32%	NA NA	NA NA	NA NA		NA	NA	NA	NA
Illawarra Christian School, Cordeaux Heights	564 50%	1106 2%	6% (50%)	SA S	6	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wollongong Flexible LC, Towradgi	83 61%	NA 51%	NA NA	NA SB		NA	NA	NA	NA
Craig Davis College, Cordeaux Heights	21 62%	NA 52%	NA NA	NA NA		NA	NA	NA	NA
Illawarra Sports HS, Berkeley	684 56%	914 13%	61% (2%)	SB SB	150 12	NA	NA	NA	NA
Edmund Rice C. Wollongong West	1050 100%	1050 2%	13% (31%)	AV A	182 3	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Albury Wodonga CC</b>	<b>48 58%</b>	<b>NA 23%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA NA</b>		<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
Albury High School	1007 48%	1021 3%	22% (20%)	NA NA	162	NA	NA	NA	NA
James Fallon HS, N Albury	681 51%	939 10%	49% (4%)	B B	116 4	NA	NA	NA	NA
Murray High School, Lavington	687 52%	927 7%	56% (2%)	SB SB	123	NA	NA	NA	NA
The Scots School Albury	469 52%	1130 0%	3% (65%)	SA SA	38	NA	NA	NA	NA
Catholic College, Wodonga	1088 49%	964 1%	45% (3%)	AV B	185 1	28%	32%	13%	27%
Wodonga Senior SC	1084 48%	NA 7%	NA	NA NA	851 19	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Skillset SC, Mitchell</b>	<b>31 61%</b>	<b>NA 19%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
Denison College, Bathurst High Campus	940 55%	975 8%	39% (12%)	B B	302 4	NA	NA	NA	NA
Denison College, Kelso High Campus	776 52%	941 13%	47% (5%)	B B	296 4	NA	NA	NA	NA
All Saints College, Bathurst	746 47%	1123 2%	3% (57%)	A A	8	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>Western College Alesco LC</b>	<b>80 55%</b>	<b>NA 61%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
Dubbo College: Delroy Campus	409 48%	810 49%	70% (1%)	SB SB	1	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dubbo College, Senior Campus	468 51%	NA 30%	NA	NA NA	606 13	NA	NA	NA	NA
Macquarie Anglican Grammar	507 52%	1061 6%	8% (33%)	A AV	9	NA	NA	NA	NA
Dubbo College, South Campus	699 49%	910 30%	45% (6%)	SB B	3	NA	NA	NA	NA
Wellington High School	357 55%	825 48%	64% (2%)	SB SB	118	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>TLK Alesco, Berkeley Vale</b>	<b>61 43%</b>	<b>NA 16%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA NA</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
Tuggerah Lakes SC Berkeley Vale	699 51%	969 7%	37% (6%)	AV B	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

<i>Alesco LC Far West Broken Hill</i>	<b>40</b> <b>53%</b>	<b>NA</b> <b>35%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>SB</b> <b>NA</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>
<i>Broken Hill High School</i>	648 51%	916 16%	54% (5%)	B SB	235 7	NA	NA	NA	NA
<i>All 7 Alesco schools (Average)</i>	<b>410</b> <b>54%</b>	<b>NA</b> <b>24%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>

**KEY:** ICSAE: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, see explanation below; Bathurst, Albury-Wodonga, Newcastle, Dubbo and Wollongong have several other public and private schools; SBA = School-Based Apprenticeships; NA: Data not available; NEET: Not in Employment Education or Training, derived from other destination data; NAPL. R /N: NAPLAN Year 9 results for Reading & Numeracy C/F all Australian schools (SA: significantly above; A: above; AV: average; B: below; SB: significantly below).

Where available, the school data includes an *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)*, created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) specifically to enable meaningful comparisons of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test achievement by students in schools across Australia.

ICSEA overtly acknowledges that:

Key factors in students' family backgrounds (parents' occupation, school education and non-school education) have an influence on students' educational outcomes at school. In addition to these student-level factors, research has shown that school-level factors .... need to be considered when summarising educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level. ICSEA provides a scale that numerically represents the relative magnitude of this influence, and is constructed taking into account both student- and school-level factors. (*My School* website)

Unfortunately no ICSEA data are available for the Alesco-type schools. A close analysis of the ICSEA data, specifically the elevated proportion of young people in the lowest quartile in some 'feeder' public schools in all five sites, confirms the 'long tail' of disadvantage experienced by many young people in 'mainstream' public schools in regional Australia. It is important to stress that while this disadvantage becomes negatively associated with many public schools, the school does in effect not cause the ICSEA, but is rather a factor associated with the students and families living locally and attending the school.

#### *Young people's survey responses*

All young people interviewed completed a short survey, requesting information on age, gender, and attitudes towards school, learning, education and work as well as preferred future education and training. In addition, 10 statements (see Table 4) were included about learning and future intentions, each seeking a response between 'strong agreement' (5) and 'strong disagreement' (1) on a five point Likert scale, with 3 as a 'neutral' response.

*Table 4 Statements about learning and future intentions*

STATEMENTS (1= strongly disagree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree)	Average Responses: Closest response category
S1: I really enjoy learning at school.	4.4 Strong agreement
S2: I would prefer to learn locally.	4.7 Strong agreement
S3: I would like to go on to university.	3.2 Neutral
S4: I need to do more study to improve my employment prospects.	3.7 Agree
S5: I would like to go on to TAFE or other vocational course.	3.5 Agree
S6: I have a definite plan for future study beyond this school.	3.6 Agree
S7: I have no intention of doing future courses.	2.1 Disagree
S8: I would prefer to work than stay at this school.	2.7 Neutral
S9: I have the full support of a parent or guardian for being at this school.	4.4 Strong agreement
S10: I would prefer to be at a mainstream school than at this school.	1.7 Disagree

On average, young people were strongly in agreement about learning at their current (Alesco-type) school (4.4) and especially about learning locally (4.7). They were in general agreement that they needed 'to do more study to improve their employment prospects' (3.7) and most had 'a definite plan for future study' beyond the school (3.6). There was reasonably strong average disagreement that they 'would prefer to be at a mainstream school than at this [Alesco-type] school' (1.7) and disagreement that they had 'no intention of doing future courses' (2.1).

Table 5 disaggregates the same data by gender, site and age, whose sub-group averages are subject to the previously identified limitations of small sample size.

*Table 5 Average survey responses by gender, site and age*

Q #AV	Boys N=21	Girls N=34	Newc N=11	Dubb N=9	AW N=11	Woll N=12	Bath N=12	15Y N=12	16Y N=23	17Y N=33	18+Y N=7
Q1 4.4	4.3	4.5	4.6	4.6	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.3
Q2 4.7	4.8	4.7	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.8	4.7	4.8	4.7	4.6	5.0
Q3 3.2	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.6</b>	3.5	3.1	3.5	3.1	2.9	3.7	3.0	2.8	3.3
Q4 3.7	3.9	3.6	3.8	3.4	3.5	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.6	3.3
Q5 3.6	3.6	3.3	3.5	3.9	4.0	3.6	3.3	3.8	3.3	3.9	4.0
Q6 3.4	<b>3.5</b>	<b>2.1</b>	3.3	3.1	3.5	3.8	3.2	3.3	3.5	3.2	3.0
Q7 2.1	2.0	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.1	1.7	2.2	<b>1.6</b>	2.4	2.3	1.7
Q8 2.7	<b>3.3</b>	<b>2.4</b>	1.9	2.6	2.7	3.2	3.1	2.4	3.1	2.8	1.7
Q9 4.4	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.8	4.5	4.6	<b>3.8</b>	4.7	4.3	4.4	4.7
Q10 1.4	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.2</b>	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.3	<b>2.1</b>	1.4	1.6	1.4	1.0

**Key:** Statements asked for a response on a five-point scale between strong disagreement (1) and strong agreement (5); Main sub-group differences indicated in **bold** depart from the group average by 0.5+ and are discussed below the table.

- In general, the opinions of students did not vary much by site or age on these ten questions, but there were discernable differences on three questions by gender.
  - Boys (2.6) were much less likely to want to go on to university than girls (3.6).
  - Boys (3.3) were also much more likely to prefer to work than stay on at the school than girls (2.4).
  - Girls (1.2) were more likely to disagree that they would prefer to be at a mainstream school than boys (1.7)
- Bathurst (*Skillset Senior College*) students were somewhat less likely to have the full support of a parent or guardian for being at the school (3.8) compared to the overall average (4.4).
- Younger (15 year old) students were (understandably) more likely to disagree that they have no intention of doing more study (1.6) than older age cohorts.

### *Experiences of paid work and volunteering*

Young people interviewed were asked about their previous experiences of paid and voluntary work. Around one half of interviewees (51%) had *not* experienced some form of paid work. Table 6 list all reported experiences of paid work by employment sector. None of these jobs typically require a university education, though a small proportion, shown in *italics* might be enhanced by completion of a VET course. Instead, most work experiences for young people had been in employment sectors where no formal external qualification would be necessary or desirable to secure employment.

*Table 6 Young people's reported experiences of paid work*

Sport	Retail & Services	Trade, Farming & Manual	Food & Hospitality
<i>Soccer referee</i>	Retail Convenience store Show Dodgem Cars Big W Woolworths Bus lines Car wash Furniture removal Cleaning	<i>Traineeship</i> <i>Viticulture</i> <i>Horticulture</i> <i>Building</i>	McDonalds X4 KFC X2 Dominos X2 <i>Pastry cook</i> Hogs Breath <i>Bakery</i> DoNut King <i>Chef</i> Woolworths Boost Juice Pizza Hut Waitress

For some young people, particularly those without *paid* work experience; experiences of *voluntary* work (including supervised work experience) can be critical in shaping and developing workplace experiences, attitudes and skills. Around four out of ten (42%) of all young people reported some form of voluntary work.

Table 7 lists all reported experiences of voluntary work by sector. Most of the reported voluntary work was within the community services sector, with a smaller amount of voluntary work experienced in the retail and hospitality sector. Less than one third of this voluntary work (*italicised*) might lead via accredited training to future paid employment.

*Table 7 Young people's reported experiences of voluntary work by sector*

Community Services	Retail & Hospitality	Other
Fun Run X3 Youth advisory group <i>Primary school</i> <i>School work experience</i> Riding for the Disabled Salvation Army Community gardening <i>Fire Service</i> Blood donor <i>SES</i> <i>Enrolled nurse</i> After school care Culture centre Girl Guides	<i>Bakery</i> <i>Chemist</i> Café Cinema Coles Food work Sporting canteen	Show Cleaner Lamb Marking

### The changing national and state context for education and training

Before individually profiling the five Alesco-type school sites included in the current study, it is important to take a 'helicopter view' of the rapidly changing national and state context for education and training.

In relation to the ACE sector, in January 2015 the New South Wales government rolled out its 'Smart and Skilled' policy. The perceived problems of this policy for Community Colleges, such as for those four ACE providers included in the current study were summarised in *The Australian* (22 Oct, 2014).

Unlike the other jurisdictions, NSW is not allocating places through a voucher-style mechanism. Rather, places are contracted out centrally from the Education Department's Sydney headquarters. The government said it was taking this approach to avoid the budget blowouts suffered in other states, notably Victoria and South Australia. Commentators said the government was also avoiding the political pain of allowing its TAFE's to lose a huge slice of their market share, as occurred in Victoria and the Rudd government's Productivity Places Program. But this has generated turmoil for other state-subsidised colleges, particularly community colleges, which offer personalised services largely to disadvantaged students. Their peak body said more than 80 per cent of its members had either missed out completely or had their previous allocations slashed savagely.

As an example of the specific impact of the Smart and Skilled policy, the CEO of Western College in Dubbo reported in 2015 (*Annual Report, 2015*) that '... the scheme resulted in widespread confusion within the marketplace, and the result was a disappointing take-up of this training across the state.'

Separately, by 2016 there was evidence nationally of extensive waste and fraud of VET programs and providers, particularly by private providers, leading to massive

blowouts in VET Fee Help (ABC, 2016). The federal government belatedly responded by greatly increasing the level of compliance, with the effect that some community colleges and ACE providers have lost provider scope, programs and funding. In many cases, the costs, complexities and difficulties of reporting of assessment and attendance have been greatly elevated. In July 2016, the Editor of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* (p.138) observed that a:

... massive waste and fraud evident [was] in the privatised VET system [that] continues leaving both a terrible debt burden for students as well as a failure to deliver the skill needs of a modern economy.

### **Contextual background for the five Alesco-type schools**

This section provides a contextual background to each of the five Alesco-type schools and sites. For each site, the broad context for learning is followed by a brief history of the provider and school.

#### ***Newcastle***

##### *The broad context for learning in Newcastle*

Newcastle is a large city of around 150,000 people with around one quarter of a million people living in the broader Hunter region. The Port of Newcastle is one of the world's largest coal export ports, with coal representing over 90 per cent of its throughput tonnage. The city has relatively recently diversified from manufacturing and energy exports to embrace a range of industries, including agriculture, education, health and tourism. The city has most services found in Australian capital cities including a comprehensive and highly regarded local university.

##### *A brief history of the of the WEA Hunter 'Alesco' model and its dissemination*

WEA Hunter established the Alesco Learning Centre as 'an independent non-profit community based organisation whose sole aim is to promote and provide opportunities for adults' (WEA 2016, p.2). While WEA Hunter had primarily and historically been an adult and community education (ACE) provider since 1913:

... the Alesco Learning Centre was founded [in 2002] by WEA Hunter as a Board of Studies Registered and Accredited Senior High School for students who were unable to complete their studies in mainstream education. (WEA, 2016, p.27)

Hammal (2003, p.1) noted that:

*Alesco* is Latin for growth and maturity, and this title reflects the personal learning journey that young people are invited to take when they attend an Alesco Learning Centre.

Hammal suggested in 2003 (p.1) that:

The greatest difference between Alesco Learning Centre, other schools and many alternative education settings is that Alesco's foundations lay in Adult Education philosophies.

Golding (2009) undertook a comprehensive study of the Alesco Learning Centre in 2009. It included a comparison of the espoused literature to 2009 about alternative and early school leaving.

By the time of the current study in 2016 the original single-campus Alesco Learning Centre at Cooks Hill had become a multi campus school rebadged as the *Alesco Senior College*<sup>3</sup>. As of mid-2016 the school was still operating from the original Cooks Hill (Newcastle) Campus, but by 2015 had added a Raymond Terrace Campus (26 km north) and was initiating other campuses at Tuncurry (163 km, 2 hours drive north) and Cessnock (49 km, one hour drive west).

In the past decade WEA Hunter has encouraged and mentored several other, similar Alesco-type learning centres, schools and campuses primarily through organisations in regional New South Wales that had previous primary roles as ACE providers<sup>4</sup>. The extent to which these other Alesco-type initiatives, including in Wollongong, Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst and Dubbo resemble or extend upon WEA Hunter's original vision forms part of the current investigation.

By 2016, the newly established WEA Hunter Foundation (WEA, 2016; Alesco Learning Australia, undated) aimed:

... to secure resources which will reconnect disengaged learners with the positive experiences and outcomes of education. ... The Alesco environment offers young people the opportunity of taking part and responsibility in forming an individual learning journey to attain their high school qualification. This personalised and flexible approach where students are treated as young adults has enjoyed much success both in Newcastle and many other communities around NSW and Victoria.

WEA Hunter Foundation (January 2016, p.1) recently created an *Alesco Establishment Package* designed to assist organisations with their preparation for 'Making a School'. This package seeks to provide:

... real and practical assistance in identifying the philosophical base of this educational model, associated policies and procedures, programing, curriculum development, student planning, registering and accrediting a school and much more. (p.1)

Alesco Learning Australia (undated, p.1) has recently positioned Alesco as 'the inclusive, innovative and personalised education model'.

*What is known from about Alesco Senior College post the 2009 research?*

The Alesco Senior College Annual Reports (ASC, 2013; 2014) summarise some recent changes, initiated in part due to flow on effects of an increase of the school leaving age to 17 years in New South Wales in 2010. In essence, a number of schools across New South Wales, in this case in the greater Newcastle region, had successfully

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<sup>3</sup> This move to become Alesco Senior College and place more emphasis on being 'a senior campus' occurred in 2013 along with a change of Principal.

<sup>4</sup> Skillset in Bathurst is an exception, where the Alesco program is based out of a Group Training Provider.

assisted more younger students to remain engaged in the school setting, leading instead to greater attrition rates within the more senior ranks (ASC, 2013). This led ASC in 2013 to put the Year 9 program 'on hold' and put 'more energy into' the Year 10 to HSC (Higher School Certificate) cohort (ASC, 2013, p.4). In 2013 an HSC VET subject was also trialled. By 2014 (ASC, 2014, p.5) a new school-based 'transition' program had been developed focusing on a 'Year 9 pattern of study' focusing on literacy and numeracy skills.

## ***Wollongong***

### *The broad context for learning in Wollongong*

With a population of approximately 200,000 people, Wollongong was known in the past for its heavy manufacturing base. The city's industry sectors now include IT, business services and finance, education and research, logistics, health and aged care and tourism. Like Newcastle, the city of Wollongong and the broader Illawarra region has its own highly regarded university and most services available in many Australian capital cities.

### *About Alesco Illawarra*

Alesco Illawarra '... is a registered and accredited non-denominational, independent secondary school, operating under the auspices of WEA Illawarra'. The *Alesco Illawarra* page on the WEA Illawarra website notes that it offers:

... an alternative education option [for young people who] are eligible for Stage 5 [Year 11] or Stage 6 [Year 12], ... are unsuited to continuing ... education in a traditional school or at TAFE, but are ready and willing to take responsibility for [their] own learning and future.

The Alesco Illawarra program is included as one of six options on the 'Lifestyle Courses' page of the WEA Illawarra website, as well as via a separate tab on the front page. That tab leads to a 'Student Welfare Program' heading including the following information:

Our job is to help you believe in yourself and to realise that you can shape your future and choose what it will be, regardless of what has come before. We employ a qualified and experienced Youth Support Worker who works with the teaching staff to provide individual support for you to keep you involved at the Learning Centre and work on any issues inside or outside of school, which might be getting in the way of reaching your goals. The services available through the Youth Support Worker are provided with funding assistance from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations under the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program.

'Inclusive education for all' is a key part of the Alesco Illawarra's espoused philosophy:

Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning. Inclusive schools are those 'which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to

individual needs'. This inclusive orientation is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Alesco Illawarra strives to achieve educational systems and programs designed and implemented to take into account the unique characteristics and needs of every young person. To further enhance this learning, staff work collaboratively with agencies within the wider community to provide opportunities to enhance student wellbeing. (Alesco Illawarra, 2016)

Alesco Illawarra's espoused core values (Alesco Illawarra, 2016):

... are reflected in the management and operation of the school and participation of students, with the Student Code of Conduct, positive behaviour framework and pastoral care revolving around the core value of Respect.

In practice, the word 'Respect' is prominently displayed as a visual reminder to staff and students around the school. Teachers in the school are also encouraged to embody teaching and learning approaches that come out of two sets of espoused 'guidelines for learning'.

The first set of guidelines are the *Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Guidelines* (CAST, 2011), originally developed by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the US in the early 1990s. The guidelines are underpinned by a belief that the 'goal of education is the development of expert learners, something that all students can become' (CAST, 2011, p.6). UDL claims to set 'higher expectations, reachable by every learner' (CAST 2011, p.7). The UDL framework has three underpinning principles: it anticipates multiple options for:

- representation of information
- action and expression, and
- student engagement.

The second set of espoused guidelines employed by Alesco Illawarra come out of trauma-informed school theory and practice (ACF, 2010; CSC, 2007), underpinned by an assumption that young people recovering from the harmful effects of stress trauma:

... cannot easily adapt to and change their environment. Their environment and the people in it must adjust to help them.

What both guidelines have in common is that the teaching, curriculum and environment should ideally be adapted to the different needs of learners, rather than the other way around.

## ***Albury-Wodonga***

### *The broad context for learning in Albury-Wodonga*

Albury–Wodonga, total population of around 100,000 people, incorporates the twin Australian cities of Albury and Wodonga, separated geographically by the Murray and politically by the state border. Albury to the north is slightly larger and in New

South Wales, while Wodonga to south is in Victoria. As a significant regional conurbation, the twin cities provide the main retail, commercial, administrative, light industrial, cultural and logistical services for the region on both sides of the state border. Albury-Wodonga has regional campuses of both Charles Sturt University and La Trobe University.

### *About the Albury Wodonga Community College*

Albury Wodonga Community College (AWCC) publicly positions itself as:

... one of the largest Adult Education Centres in non-metropolitan Australia. It caters on average [for] 6,000 people annually through a broad range of learning activities. ... Over the years the Albury Wodonga Community College has maintained a unique position as a cross-border education provider, registered in Victoria and New South Wales as an ACE provider and RTO. The AWCC supports other smaller Victorian rural towns with Affiliated Centres who maintain their local autonomy.

Straddling the state border presents the College with significant challenges but also opportunities. AWCC established two alternative independent schools, first in Wodonga in 2006, and in 2010 in Albury. Since 2010 both the Albury and Wodonga sites have been offering the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and a modified NSW curriculum. Now badged collectively as the *Albury Wodonga Community College Independent School*, discussed in more detail below, the school retains several Alesco-type attributes using a classroom-based delivery method and additional teacher and welfare support.

Where AWCC diverges is that it has also created a non-school-based, flexible learning model that is separate from (and to some extent complementing and competing with) its Independent School, delivered in home and community settings with a one-on-one coach. This innovative and popular program badged as *2cool4school (2C4S / 'Too Cool for School')* was included as a minor part of the current research evaluation. This strength-based program, discussed in more detail below, is targeted to young people aged 15-26 years. It has its pedagogical origins in the *Lifeworks* program, originally developed and implemented over a decade ago in New Zealand. 2cool4school is based around two lower-level, nationally accredited VET qualifications: the Certificate of General Education for Adults and the Victorian Certificate in Transition Education<sup>5</sup>.

The final distinctive difference from other Alesco-type schools is that AWCC has relatively more space and access to resources for its *Independent School*, including teaching spaces, particularly on its Wodonga site than other Alesco-type schools. Unlike in Wollongong, the *Independent School* and *2cool4school* are very prominent on the front page of the AWCC website. The Independent School also has a comprehensive and recent *Business Plan 2016* (King, 2015). Both the 'in school' and

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<sup>5</sup> The 'Victorian Certificate in Transition Education' was being 'trained out' by the end of August 2016.

'out of school' models adopted by AWCC were systematically examined by means of a comprehensive, internal, mixed method study by Wangman (2013).

#### *About the Albury-Wodonga Community College Independent School*

King (2016, p.2) notes that the AWCC Independent School is classified by the Australian Department of Education as a special assistance school, catering for the most socio-economically disadvantaged youth aged 14 to 19 years in the Albury-Wodonga region. The Albury Campus has BoSTES (Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards) registration and accreditation to deliver New South Wales Year 9-12 programs. The Wodonga campus is registered by the Victorian Registration and Quality Authority (VRQA) to deliver Years 11 and 12. Flexible delivery of curriculum including the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is offered using the facilities of both campuses.

The stated aim of both Independent Schools is to re-engage students in a safe and welcoming environment with learning that is meaningful (King, 2016, p.2). Students are encouraged to complete a (NSW) RoSA (Record of School Achievement<sup>6</sup>) and/or go on to complete a senior secondary qualification.

#### *About 2cool4school*

Whilst it started small, by July 2014 2cool4school had expanded to over 650 secondary level learners in Albury-Wodonga, Mildura, Shepparton and Wangaratta (Colquhoun, 2014).

2cool4school has its own semi-independent organisation and staff on a separate site. In part this is because it has to manage the distribution of kits and organisation of decentralised tutors that are a key part of the delivery mode. In part it is because of the increased requirements and obligations from both state and national government agencies to report: via audits, accreditation reviews and documentation associated with assessment, program and provider registration. 2cool4school has become a very large undertaking, growing from five student enrolments in mid 2012 to over 2,000 students across multiple sites and regions by July 2016. Around two thirds of these students (65% were in the age range 15-19 years).

### ***Bathurst***

#### *The broad context for learning in Bathurst*

Bathurst is a large regional city of around 35,000 people in the Central Tablelands 200 km west of Sydney. Bathurst's economy is broad-based with a strong

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<sup>6</sup> RoSA, implemented in NSW in 2012, enables eligible students who leave school before completing their HSC (Higher School Certificate) to receive a cumulative credential stating which Stage 5 and 6 courses were completed and attempted.

manufacturing industry, large education sector and government service sectors. Bathurst has the main campus for Charles Sturt University that operates from several other large regional campuses across New South Wales.

#### *About Skillset in Bathurst*

Skillset consists of three mainly co-located arms with a common CEO: *Skillset Environment and Corporate*, *Skillset Workforce* and *Skillset Education*. The Education business unit delivers two youth focused services, *Skillset Youth Connect* and *Skillset Senior College*. The Flannery Centre that houses the main, Bathurst operations including the Skillset Senior College is an ultra-modern, energy efficient eco-building on a picturesque, landscaped site on the edge of Bathurst below Mount Panorama.

While Skillset was originally established in 1982 as a Group Training Provider (GTO), 2014 it became clear that the organisation needed to diversify its range of services to remain relevant and financially viable. It was also clear that there was a growing cohort of young people 'falling out' of mainstream education. Informed by both organisational and community needs' Skillset decided to withdraw from the RTO sector and realign to deliver higher impact and more needed secondary education services in the region. This rapid transition process was greatly assisted by advice and mentoring of WEA Hunter in Newcastle.

#### *About Skillset Senior College*

Skillset Senior College began with 34 Year 10 students for Term 1 2015. By 2016 it had approval for Year 11, and plans to enrol as many as 75 senior school students to HSC level by 2017 (*Skillset Annual Report, 14/15*, p.4). Skillset has now gained accreditation to deliver Year 10 through to Year 12.

Skillset Senior College positions itself as 'An innovative senior school with a focus on wellbeing and personal achievement'. Its espoused aim is '... to educate young people of the central West region who may have been unable to find success in a conventional school environment'.

The Senior College espouses four 'important differences' (Skillset Senior College, brochure):

1. The student is at the centre of the education plan.
2. There is rigor in the educational program, with the best possible educational outcomes, regardless of chosen pathway.
3. Students have the opportunity to experience an adult learning environment in a different educational setting emphasising, mutual respect and responsibility.
4. Students are welcomed who have been unable to find success in a conventional school environment.

By April 2016 there were approximately 60 enrolments, 34 at Year 10 level and 26 at Year 11.

## **Dubbo**

### *The broad context for learning in Dubbo*

Dubbo is a medium sized regional city of around 37,000 people that services a large inland region of western New South Wales. The main industry sectors include retail, health, manufacturing, transport, tourism, education, construction, business services, agriculture, and government services. There are 20 schools and secondary colleges in Dubbo including the Dubbo School of Distance Education. Dubbo is also home to one of the regional campuses of Charles Sturt University.

### *About Western College*

Western College is a not-for-profit, community college that has been serving the educational and training needs of the western region of NSW for more than half a century. In 2016 the College website notes that:

The breadth of our training and education includes everything from personal interest courses to accredited vocational training, from individual units to full nationally endorsed qualifications up to Diploma level. We now also offer a three pronged approach to re-invigorating and re-engaging youth to education through our Alesco, Baby on Board and Transition Programmes.

### *About the Western College Alesco Learning Centre*

The Western College Alesco Learning Centre in Dubbo commenced operations in July 2014, completing a second BoSTES (NSW Board of Studies) inspection in 2014 with the assistance of WEA Hunter Foundation (WEA, 2014). Whilst its main campus is in a major wing and offshoots of the Western College Dubbo, it also runs a small Alesco campus in the nearby rural town of Wellington.

The Alesco Learning Centre publicly positions itself as providing ‘an environment that nurtures personal, academic and vocational growth’. Like the Alesco provider in Wollongong, it uses what it calls the Alesco ‘Circle of Respect’ to espouse the values of acceptance, learning, empathy, safety, commitment and opportunity.

The Alesco Learning Centre (ALC) grew quickly during 2015, with a total of 133 enrolments during the year. At the end of 2015 enrolment stood at 99 students (Western College, *Annual Report 2015*, p.25).

## **Young people’s ‘Cameos’**

Fourteen young people have been selected from narrative data collected across all five Alesco-type school sites, effectively to allow these young people to ‘tell their own stories’ about their learning experiences, interests and trajectories. Mostly in

their own words (but with actual names replaced by pseudonyms), these 14 snapshots or 'Cameos' illustrate the diverse factors and circumstances that have led some young people to the point at which they were interviewed. All except 'Kristen' (an ex-Alesco student) were interviewed as current students in Alesco type schools in May 2016.

Illustrative quotes and key themes illustrated by the 14 Cameos that follow are summarised in Table 8.

*Table 8 Key situational characteristics and key themes illustrated by each Cameo*

Names, ages	Illustrative quotes	Key positive themes
Paul, 18	On track to a trade: <i>'It works because it's whole'</i>	Holistic approach
Anna, 16	With a mental illness: Before, <i>'I was bullied a lot'</i>	Controlling bullying
Kristen, 20	<i>'It's just a kind of bond that sticks'</i>	Encouraging bonding
Emma, 19	Here, <i>'I'm given the trust and respect I ... deserve'</i>	Focusing on respect
Steph, 17	<i>'It's helped me gain more focus'</i>	Improving focus
Chloe, 18	Here, <i>'I'm not just in the crowd'</i>	Individual attention
Brodie, 15	<i>'Here I feel comfortable and I'm willing to learn'</i>	Feeling comfortable
Brad, 16	Here, <i>'You're a human being, not a number'</i>	Person-centred
Renae, 16	<i>'I actually feel good about myself'</i>	Feeling good
Annette, 15	<i>'I actually <u>talk</u> here'</i>	Being acknowledged
Emily, 16	<i>'Here, they put your mental health first'</i>	Mental health focus
Skye, 16	<i>'This school was a whole, big family'</i>	Being inclusive
Laurie, 16	Here, <i>'I'm treated maturely'</i>	Treated maturely
Jack, 16	<i>'I was always getting into trouble'</i>	Not for all students

Any information that might help identify the site and/or the individual has been removed to ensure confidentiality. Interviewee survey data have been used, where informative, to tease out the narratives from the original transcripts. In a small number of cases, the original sentence order has been changed and some 'asides' have been removed in order to improve the flow of the narrative, but the original words and 'voice' have been retained.

### *Paul*

Paul is 18 and in Year 12. As for almost all of the students interviewed, Paul really enjoys and greatly prefers learning at the Alesco-type school than at his previous 'mainstream' school.

It works for me because it's a whole - it's a better environment than a mainstream school [where] you have people pretty much forcing the work down your throat. [Here] they give you lots of lenience to be able to do it on your own and at your own pace. You don't have to worry about people trying to pressure you into doing it when they want it to be done, because they know that you might not be able to complete it in the right time and stuff. It's good.

[At my previous school] I was a bit disruptive and stuff in class. Every time that something went wrong, like, they'd just instantly pin it on me because [they thought] I was the one that was disruptive. Nine times out of 10 it probably wasn't me, like [it was] the other kids in the class. ... There's heaps more pressure in mainstream school

than here, like, they just keep on your back, like, "Do this, do that, do this, do that." It's a lot harder ... at a mainstream school. You don't always need pressure to do well. If you know where you're going with your life then you don't really need their pressure to be able to stop you.

The teachers here are - they're a lot nicer and they're not as harsh on the kids. Like they'll help you out if you need help, like, after school they'll let you stay back and they'll work with you. At other schools they would just pass it on to you, like [saying], "Yeah, go home and do that." But here they'll ... sit down with you for an hour and just help you out with it. ... It works because you've got a say in what you are doing. ... All the people that go here, we're not all bad, like, we've all had issues that affect how we see the mainstream environment.

I'm going to go to TAFE when I finish Year 12 [to do] a metals course or a woodwork course or something. I wouldn't mind getting a trade in [a] building sort of atmosphere. I really enjoy building, putting stuff together. That's my sort of thing. That's good. I don't want to go to uni because there's not much that I'm interested in at uni at the moment. But I'd like to have a trade behind me. So, say, if I did move on to anything better in my life, then I've always got that trade to fall back on.

My dad is the only family that I've got really. Yeah, he loves [this school and that] I come here. All the teachers from when I went to mainstream they used to ring him up and say that I was doing bad and, like, had issues, getting all worked up. It was getting him to a really bad state. So then they found out about this programme and I come here and he says that what I'm doing is very good and he's really proud and he likes where I'm going with my life instead of where I could have been going.

Clearly the Alesco-type school has worked for Paul, with less pressure but much more holistic support.

### *Anna*

Anna also strongly agreed that she really enjoys and prefers to learn at the Alesco-type school. At her previous school Anna, now age 16 said she:

... was bullied a lot and the teachers didn't really understand about my mental illness [depression and anxiety] ... and a heap of other stuff. ... I had really bad grades and I just wouldn't go to school because I was scared that someone would do something mean to me. My mum found out about Alesco and I just thought that it was a good opportunity to come here [at] the beginning of last year for Year 10. I feel a lot better here. It's a really safe place. I feel very happy. If I didn't come [here] I would have completed Year 10 to just get old enough to be able to [leave school and] get maybe an apprenticeship or a full time job or go to TAFE, because I just couldn't stay at my old school. It was too much.

[This] is a very good school. For a lot of young people it is a last hope at a proper education. They come here because they want to actually get an education so they can finish school and try to get the job that they want to pursue when they're older. It's a safe and happy environment where everyone is just pretty much a family and everyone's really supportive and kind and nice and just. It's a great place and a pretty decent school.

I'm not really sure where it's all headed [for me] just yet. But I really want to pursue my dream of singing because that's what I love to do. It makes me feel free. ... A lot of people have said that they cried because my singing is so good, which makes me feel amazing.

### *Kristen*

Kristen, an ex-Alesco-type school student finished Year 12 two years ago and is now at university. She looks back on why the school and the experience worked for her.

I think, compared to mainstream programs, having a smaller group of students is something that works really well. I think the small amount of teachers compared to a mainstream school allows you to form a bond with the teachers and build a good relationship. ... That, I think, improves your education as well in the way that you work in a classroom.

Before [Alesco] I was doing home schooling. I started [at Alesco] in 2012 and before that I did Years 7 to 10 through home schooling. When I was younger, my mother passed away and since then I developed really bad anxiety and I wasn't going to school at all. My anxiety got so bad that we decided that home schooling might be a better option. ... At the end of Year 10, I wasn't travelling very well doing home schooling. I was falling behind a lot and not achieving as much as I would have liked. I found out about this school through a friend and came to Alesco and .... I had great experiences here.

The transition from an Alesco-type school to university was quite daunting.

The school environment is quite small. One of my classes by the end of the year only had four students in the class so it was a big change [at university]. It was quite anxiety-provoking going to university with thousands of students there, but it was just something that I just had to adjust to, because I knew that I wanted to be at uni. But it was a really big change.

Even though it probably does create more of a challenge for bridging into university or other courses, at the time [the Alesco-type school] is quite helpful, being in that small, close environment and having that one-on-one time and sort of getting as much knowledge and help out of the teacher as possible.

They really care [at Alesco] and you form these bonds with the teachers that last longer than just when school finishes. It's a long-lasting bond that you make with the teachers, I think, because they've had such a big impact on our lives, and I guess in some way we've had impacts on their life. It's just a kind of bond that sticks.

### *Emma*

Emma, now age 19 and in Year 12 has a definite plan for future post-school study at TAFE or university in nursing, the sciences or early childhood education. Emma strongly agrees that she prefers learning in an Alesco-type school setting.

I was living [interstate] with my mum and [siblings]. I had some problems with the school I was going to and [also family problems]. I stopped going to school completely.

... I ended up moving here with my dad and the first thing I tried to do was to get back into school but we had some problems with the TAFE and Centrelink.

I feel like what I've gained most from this school is that I've been given a lot more help [than at most mainstream schools I went to] where it's needed and I've been given a lot more trust. At most [other] schools I felt I was shunned out because they'd tell me I'm nothing but another child. Here I'm treated as an individual, I'm given the trust and respect that I believe I deserve. ... Everyone is going to help each other out and stuff [here] and, I think that all plays a big role.

I still have a few problems with my mum's side of the family, but, other than that with my schoolwork being on track, I'm a lot healthier mentally and physically then I used to be. In fact with my family [I'm] in a lot better way.

### *Steph*

Steph is now age 17 and strongly prefers learning at the Alesco-type school than at her previous school.

I finished my Year 10 [at a previous school] and I was told that they weren't doing any Year 11 classes, so I had to school learn. My stepdad's counsellor gave me a thing about Alesco and I applied, so I came here. Now all good. Going heaps good. It's a warm environment, there's no school uniform. It's on a first name basis. I think it's nothing really formal but, it's decent. ... I've gained the ability to actually attend class and focus in class because there was a lot of times [before] I wanted to quit class.

I'm thinking [when I leave school] of doing something jobwise, either counselling or with the government or something, or I'll do an apprenticeship. I'm getting the help I need here. In the past in mainstream schools I wasn't really getting the help that I needed. It's just a lot easier here because there's less students, there's more staff and it's a lot easier for them to say, "Hey we've heard of something going on: I'll help you," or [they'll] come sit down next to me and ask, "What's going on? Do you need help with your life or what do you need help with?" It's helped me gain more focus because I know if I do need help there's always someone that will be able to.

### *Chloe*

Chloe, now age 18 also really enjoys learning at an Alesco-type school and strongly prefers being here than at her previous school.

I had to change schools in Year 11 because I moved. [That was] difficult because I was already in second term and I wasn't getting accepted into a few schools that I tried to get into. I wanted to go to [another alternative school] but then I got told about this one because it's similar but on a smaller scale or something. So, I gave it a shot and been here ever since.

I reckon my attendance has improved. I feel when I used to go to school I used to hate getting up to go, just getting ready. But, now I actually don't mind. It's kind of nice going to school. You can actually have conversations with the teachers and tell that they actually care, not just pretending. Pretty much just stress free. I feel like my actual opinion is valued here and I'm not just in the crowd.

I will be done with school as I finish this year and hopefully gain a job in the city somewhere. I'd like to study a business course and own my own business in retail or beauty.

### *Brodie*

Brodie is age 15 and in Year 10. Like most other students interviewed, she strongly prefers to learn at the Alesco-type school than at her previous school.

I like the fact that we are treated like humans here instead of just things that have to be taught. And I like the fact that we have so much freedom and there's not that much bullying here, where at other schools there is severe bullying. I love it how we don't have to worry about uniform. If we [didn't] have the right uniform [at a previous school] we used to get into massive trouble. If we had different coloured shoelaces we used to get sent home and get proper ones. I just didn't want to learn at my other school because I didn't feel comfortable, where here I feel comfortable and I'm willing to learn.

In some ways it's good that it's small, in other [ways] it's bad. But I do like the fact that it's a nice small school, you know where you're going. You won't get lost. There's not thousands of kids wandering around. You don't have to think, "Oh God, what am I going to do walking around all by myself with thousands of people around me?" You don't have to worry what other people are thinking at this school, where other schools you do. [The disadvantage is] there's not that much to do. All we really have is a car park at the front and that's it. I would like a nice playground or something just to hang around, some grass area so we can get a football or something and just play some games.

### *Brad*

Brad, now age 16 and in Year 10 is at an Alesco-type school because of previous issues with 'detention and disrespect'.

[I got] detentions for the littlest things and I hated it. I didn't have very many teachers that liked me. I didn't have very many students that liked me. Here everything's different: a lot different. I have more freedom. I'm allowed to go to the shop and get a drink without getting suspended. Stuff like that. Everything's good.

It's more relaxed. The rules are more relaxed. The teachers talk to you like you're a human being, not a number. The students here they're nicer. You get along better because there's not as many people walking around and that. You get a chance to have a conversation. Back at my other school you'd just constantly walk around, walk around and walk around. You'd have people budging [= shoulder barging] you and that. Not everything's going to be perfect [here] but it's a lot better than more of the mainstream [schools].

### *Renae*

Renae is now 16 and currently in Year 10 in an Alesco-type school.

I was going to [a previous school] and then things just went downhill from there and I couldn't be at school. I was getting really badly bullied and it got to the point where the teachers wouldn't do anything for the problem. It got to the point where I lost it and mum rang the school and was like, "I'm just going to take my daughter out of it." We went to all the other mainstream schools ... and all that and they would not take me.

I'm finding [the Alesco-type school] better than any other school I've been to. I think it's because there's not many students that go there ... and there's not much bullying going on. Everyone gets along because they've all been through pretty much the same thing. I think it's [good] because we don't have homework and we get the stuff done at school. Because there's not many people in class, you can still concentrate doing homework. I actually feel good about myself because I'm around people that have kind of gone through what I've gone through and they understand what I'm feeling. I can go home and not sit there and worry about if they like me or not. It makes me feel better.

When I leave school I want to be a tradie or a hairdresser. I've always loved building stuff. So I want to have a look at courses. I want to do all of them. Dad laughed at me when I said it. Just because I wear makeup and nails, they're like, "You're not going to do that". I kind of feel like I'm the guy of the family. ... Once I turn 19 or 20, I want to go and get my truck licence.

### *Annette*

Annette, now age 15 really enjoys learning at the Alesco-type school and has her sights set on working beyond school in 'new media'.

I was at [another school] which is a few hours away. My old school was awful. It was so bad. I had really bad anxiety, depression. I'd have freak-outs at school, and they'd just suspend me for it. [Some] teachers didn't even come to class. They'd ... just tell us that we can leave because they don't want to teach, and it was pretty bad. Now I just catch the bus to and from school. Every morning at 7am.

Basically, I got kicked out of most of the schools [nearer to where I live] because of how bad everything got. The only other school that I could've gone to, I wouldn't have liked, because I had to blank my piercings and coloured hair and everything. Then, I was going to another school about an hour away from where I live, and then mum found out about [this school] so I ended up coming here. Mum kind of told me, "This is where you have to go", so it just happened. This school's pretty good. It kind of sucks having to get up so early and stuff but I'm getting a better education. I wasn't getting an education at all before.

I'm having treatment for anxiety and depression. I'm getting put back on medication soon and I am in counselling and therapy and stuff. I [still] have panic attacks [here] but instead of just suspending me and telling me to go home, they actually talk to me and ask me what's wrong and call my mum, tell [her] that I'd need to go home but I can come back the next day, that I'm not suspended for a week, [not] put it on my

record and stuff, which is what was happening at my old school. I'd have a panic attack in class, I'd get suspended for two weeks. Then I'd come back to do tests and I'd fail my tests, so then I'd get kicked out of school.

This school is very different. I actually talk here. At my old school I just shut myself down. I literally didn't talk to anyone except for [a few] friends I had there and my boyfriend. The only time I really talked to them was if we were ditching class to go do stupid things we really shouldn't have been doing. Besides that, I never spoke to anyone. When I left there I had to talk to one of the teachers. She said it was the first time she'd ever heard me speak and I'd been going there for over three years.

[When I leave school] I want to be a professional You Tuber. Well, I've actually already started. I've already got a YouTube Partnership, and have a channel with videos and everything.

### *Emily*

Emily is now 16 and really enjoys learning at the Alesco-type school. As she succinctly and passionately wrote across her survey form, "I'd like to be *capable* of going to a "mainstream" school and feel as good as I do here". Emily has high hopes of going to university to do a degree and become a travel writer or freelance journalist, but secondary education has not been straightforward.

I've been to mixtures of public and private schools [since Year 7], and to me, I've just never had the correct support, or never really felt like I fit in in the right environment. I always made friends at school and all that sort of thing, but I never felt like the teachers were truly invested in my wellbeing, apart from, you know, the mark that I got on the piece of paper. So I love [this school]. I had depression since I was about thirteen. Yeah, and I've never really felt supported in a school community until coming here. Here, they put your mental health first before your academic result. So the first thing when you get to school is how you're doing and how you're feeling, that sort of thing.

The changes that I've made [since coming here] are pretty great. I've gone from, last year I didn't attend school at all. I took the year off. Now I'm able to study for exams and that sort of thing. I've gone from sort of rock bottom, to being able to say that I'm genuinely happy. I would give [this school] a lot of credit for that.

The environment here is amazing. I reckon it's because so many people have come from similar circumstances. Everyone's here for a similar reason. ... Everyone is more open about talking about mental health and all that sort of thing and it's like not a taboo subject.

### *Skye*

Skye is aged 16. Her completed survey form provided evidence of relatively low written literacy.

At [my previous school] every day, like every minute of the f-ing day, sorry, I was being bullied. I found out that my so-called 'friends' there would also be talking shit about me. So, yeah, it was a terrible place. The teachers did jack shit about it. They

would never do anything about it. Even my mum threatened the school to go to the, what's it called, the school council or something. But that's when my mum got me out of the school. Last year, this school was a whole, big family. There were no fights.

[Here at the Alesco-type school] it's really different [from my previous school]. I don't want to die, and I don't actually want to physically really hurt people. So I'm quite a bit more happier, but yeah, I'm still like depressed, coz shit's [still] going on in my life.

I refuse to go and get counselling. I am a lot better. Because when I was at [a mainstream school], I really did not want to go to school. Every afternoon I would go home crying. I was really depressed and I'd always make out that I'm really sick so I wouldn't have to go. Within my first two classes I'd try and get out of school. If I got really angry, I refused to fight anyone, because, if I fought someone I would black out. I fought my sister once and I blacked out and I made her start bleeding because I was really angry. So I refused to fight. But if I'd get angry I would always leave. Like, when my dad was alive I would always go to his house, because he would always calm me down. Now, I am a lot happier, but when I am sad, I can't go to my dad's anymore. My mum is the only other person I'd talk to [but she works late] so [I'm often] home by myself. So I feel all alone. I'm still a lot happier than I used to be. That's thanks to this school. I always have [a particular teacher] to talk to. She's always there for me.

She's the only teacher that I have been talking to about my personal life. She's a good teacher, like, so I now have a chance for uni. I have a very big wish list on ... what I want to be, but I'm not the smartest person ever. I have gotten smarter since I left [my previous school]. I used to get Ds and Es and now I'm getting Bs.

### *Laurie*

Laurie is now 16, really enjoying the Alesco-type school and with a clear post-school plan. But it was not like this at his previous school.

The teachers were not exactly the best to get along with. Nor were the students there. I was friends with most of the students but there was always the occasional person you would avoid. Then, towards the end of the year I started falling into the wrong crowd. I had problems with anger and stuff. I wasn't really being treated maturely by the teachers. ... I was always being talked down to as if I was a child. So I had a bit of a disagreement with a teacher at the end of the year that caused me to almost get suspended or expelled. So I made the wise decision to grow up a little bit, take more responsibility, to go forward in my education instead of going back and knowing I had that sort of issue on the back of my neck all the time.

Then, a few weeks before school was starting back, mum found [this school] on Facebook and so we had an interview with [the Principal] and that. [The Principal] accepted me in and so far it's been better than the last four years of high school I've had combined. So I'm getting wiser and better. I'm treated maturely. The teachers can relate to certain things, have certain likes that you have, always have that sort of connection between not just being teacher and student but also being something outside of that.

Laurie wants to work in security post-school, but is concerned, based on his experience at the Alesco-type school, that to ensure success they need to 'take in the right people' and carefully manage those who deliberately 'stuff around'.

Taking in the right people [at this school] is important. People who actually would like to learn and actually deserve to. I completely agree that everyone deserves the right to an education, but some people are given that right and they throw it around and abuse it. They need stronger discipline as well. They just let people get away with anything. There's a group of students [here] that want to learn, that want to be here, that want to succeed, that aren't going to stuff around with the teachers or the work and actually get on. Whereas there's also that minority that happens to say, "Oh, stuff it, [we'll] do whatever we want. We won't get in trouble". I think the word has got around that this is the easiest place.

### *Jack*

Jack is a very angry and aggressive 16-year-old boy, even during the interview. While he disagreed in the survey that he 'really enjoys learning at the Alesco-type school', he agreed that he would definitely prefer to learn at this school than at his previous school, where he '... was asked to leave. I was just always getting into trouble: smoking, drugs, fighting, not going to class leaving school'.

Jack was disruptive, rude and aggressive to other students and inappropriately derogatory of some of the school staff during the interview. Several interview responses suggested anger management and likely mental health issues. When asked what might be improved at the school Jack said:

What I want to do, right, I want a room where it's like soundproof: I want a room where you can't smell nothing. So like you can't see anything coming under the doors or nothing and the teachers are not allowed to come in there.

Jack revealed he had very recently:

... been in trouble with the police. I was pretty high. Took my [relative's] car for a drive, yeah. So the coppers tried to pull me over. So then I pulled over, then the cops came up behind me, then they got out of the car and started walking to me, then I took off and engaged in a police pursuit [which] went for about ten minutes. It was scary. I was scared for my life. I thought my dad was going to murder me. Then I got back to the police station and then I had to sit in the cells for like eight hours, you know long that was? They didn't even give me a feed! I got done for possession of marijuana, driving without a licence ...

When asked what his plans were post-school, Jack said:

I'll be a diesel mechanic, work in the mines, or the army. Then I want to work for five years, then I want to save up all my dosh. Then I want to go to a business that no one else and that know about, it's highly confidential. I'll be set for life.

Jack, it seems from this narrative, at this point in his life, was far from stable or 'set for life', and unwilling to compromise. As Laurie alluded to in the previous cameo, Alesco-type school programs can't and won't work for every young person. There is evidence here that Jack's experience at this Alesco-type school, despite its best

efforts, may not turn out positively: either for Jack or without adversely affecting the safety, learning and wellbeing of other students and staff.

As a welfare worker put it in another Alesco-type school with a zero tolerance to violence, bullying, harassment, as exhibited by Jack:

Alesco does not work for young people who aren't ready to make positive life changes and who aren't ready to give education a go; to let people help them. So whatever's not worked for them in the past, there has to be an intrinsic motivation within the young person to make this different. They have to make it work. So if someone else is pushing them to be here or their health or mental health is just too acute, we don't have the resources for that either. We're not a therapeutic centre: we're first and foremost a school. So there's got to be a young person's willingness.

So we don't tolerate violence, bullying, harassment. We expect young people to behave like an adult. When they don't it's just that, "This isn't working for you." It's an opportunity for the young person, you know, it comes back onto them. "Is it working for you?" "Well, no it's not." "You know, if you really wanted to be here you would be here, but you're obviously not. So maybe it's not your time. Come back." I think that [principle] has made a huge difference to the behaviours in the school. We honestly have to say "Zero behaviours".

## Crosscutting themes

This section provides 17 persistent, 'crosscutting' themes found in the interview data that are common to or are illustrated in several interview sites, either by several young people or stakeholders, or by both.

These crosscutting themes are listed below in Table 9, listed in order of importance in terms of the way they inform the research questions about what factors are at play shaping participation in these five Alesco-type school communities.

*Table 9: Crosscutting themes related to the key research question*

<b>Cross-cutting themes as they apply to the Alesco-type schools</b>
<i>Significant enjoyment of learning, much more so than at previous schools</i>
<i>A strength-based and solution-focused approach</i>
<i>Mental health, anxiety and bullying: common factors impacting on young people</i>
<i>A chronic failure of 'mainstream' schooling for some young people</i>
<i>The flexibility (and limitations) of being small, safe, permissive and 'too easy'</i>
<i>The importance of student welfare, ensuring all students are safe, respected and well</i>
<i>The centrality of student identity, voice, and consultation</i>
<i>The high proportion of Indigenous students compared to mainstream schools</i>
<i>Difficult colocation of 'second chance' education with ACE</i>
<i>School positioning and pedagogy a 'balancing act' between CEO and Principal</i>
<i>A desperate need to effectively monitor multiple outcomes from <u>all</u> NSW schools</i>
<i>Problems posed by limited curriculum choice, resources, staffing and grounds</i>
<i>Smoking a divisive issue</i>
<i>A dilemma about school attendance</i>
<i>School reputation in the community important to monitor and improve</i>
<i>Concern that selection policies might be too permissive at the margins</i>
<i>Common elements of parental guidance and use of Facebook in school selection</i>

What follow are short expansions of each of these 17 crosscutting themes, illustrated where useful by illustrative narratives.

*Significant enjoyment of learning, much more so than at previous schools*

The survey data as well as the interview data illustrated above in all of the individual cameos confirm that almost all interviewees now ‘really enjoy learning’ at the Alesco-type school, much more so than at previous schools. This lack of enjoyment and anxiety associated with what young people consistently call ‘mainstream’ schools follows a concerning, common pattern. In almost all cases, young people report a previous ‘rocky’ and broken pathway through secondary learning, characterised by increasing disappointment, lack of success and disengagement, often associated with bullying and anxiety.

*A strength-based and solution-focused approach*

As a welfare worker in an Alesco-type school succinctly put it:

Alesco's model is based on a strength-based approach and solution-focussed theory because we don't judge a person on their past. The past stuff, while it might have got them to where they are now, that doesn't define them. They are an individual that's full of capacity, strength, greatness, and we harness that. We find a positive and we strengthen that, you know, we don't get caught up in pathologising or labelling them or defining them through their self-harm history or their background of depression or their background of abuse. We see them as who they are and we see them full of opportunity and possibility. Yeah. That's what's great about this place.

*Mental health, anxiety and bullying: common factors impacting on young people*

The narratives in most of the cameos in the previous section confirm that acknowledging and addressing mental health issues at an individual level, by both welfare workers and teachers, is a critical part of what defines an Alesco-type school.

As one teacher bluntly put it:

All students, for want of a better expression, suffer from something. It ranges from kids who are DoCS kids – Department of Community Services. Kids who have been in jail, through to kids with high anxiety, high depression, they self-harm.

*A chronic failure of ‘mainstream’ schooling for some young people*

The overall picture in each site is of a perceived hierarchy of schools with private schools at the top, ‘mainstream’ public schools in the middle, and Alesco-types schools close to the bottom. This apparently wide range of ‘choices’ in the educational ‘market’ has, for most young people interviewed, typically been progressively narrowed and then almost totally closed by very difficult family and personal circumstances, with the Alesco-type school becoming the last or only viable or comfortable choice for many young people.

There is copious evidence from all of the data of a chronic, successive failure of 'mainstream' public (and sometimes private) schooling for some young people. Given the very difficult circumstances, routes (and sometimes unwise choices) that have led many young people to the Alesco-type school through mainstream school failure, life and family circumstances and choices, it is unfair, invidious and impossible to directly compare their outcomes from an Alesco-type school with mainstream school outcomes. In every case, the community, government, family and social costs of these young people having *no* option other than an Alesco-type school is likely to be much greater than the cost of providing the 'alternative', typically positive Alesco-type school experience.

*The flexibility (and limitations) of being small, safe, permissive and 'too easy'*

Being small, Alesco-type schools provide social and pedagogical contexts where young people can and do feel safe and supported. Given that these schools tend to be a 'last resort' for some (but not all) students, the consequences of not admitting (or expelling) some students tend to be very grave. Given the valuable per capita funds that students attract for the host institution as a consequence of their enrolment, there are budgetary and staffing implications of discontinuing any students, and of being as flexible as is feasible within the funding guidelines about absenteeism. There are also serious implications for both for teaching continuity and effectiveness for all students.

This can and does sometimes lead to a very permissive attitude in relation to student attendance. It can be simpler and easier for teachers and the school to accept high levels of absenteeism, which also simplifies and assists those students who regularly attend and really want to learn. This sub-theme is separately teased out in a later theme, 'A dilemma about school attendance'.

A desire to learn and effort to succeed are integral factors associated with student success in any school, particularly in a competitive, meritocratic, mainstream education system beyond school. Making courses or programs 'too easy' or reducing expectations (or making them too hard) can both have negative, longer-term consequences for young people, who will be competing for sometimes scarce work, apprenticeships, VET courses or higher education places. Success, as measured just in academic scores or vocational prerequisites is likely to be limited for many students by limited curriculum choice from Alesco-type courses and the risk that they will not necessarily 'master' the 'standard', state-mandated school curriculum.

*The importance of student welfare, ensuring all students are safe, respected and well*

The persistent message from interviews with staff and students is that student welfare is critically important to attract, engage and ensure that students get what they want out of their upper secondary education in this 'alternative' school setting. Being and feeling safe from bullying, respected by and respectful of other students

and staff and being well, physically and mentally, must remain an important underpinning concern. As one welfare worker put it:

We kind of nurture a young person's wellbeing. They're here for a reason. 'Mainstream' hasn't worked for them and we give them an opportunity to start fresh, to feel safe, to be themselves. I think it's very individualised. We take each young person on their own merit. We treat them each as individuals and it's a choice. So that's what works well; we give these young people choice in a world where young people don't have many choices. That's empowering. We see it makes a huge difference in the lives of these people. Yeah, it changes their life, which is pretty spectacular.

As one school Principal put it, being and feeling safe is critically important.

If you promise them something and don't deliver they'll soon work you out that you're a fake: they need to feel safe. I think the young people feel very safe here. I think it's very easy to allow bullying into a school. We manage the little petty stuff extremely well, which a lot of schools don't have time for. But it's the little petty stuff that becomes bigger bullying stuff.

So in a mainstream [context] I guess that would probably be, "Oh, don't worry about it," and just go off. Here we take that very seriously and we say, "Well, let's get onto that and let's manage that. Do you want to talk to them? How do you want to handle that?" And the young people here feel very comfortable in being able to come and speak to someone if someone's not nice to them. And we do put that stamp on it really quickly. It's part of our policy. We don't shirk that at all. We're very strong on that. I think the kids here feel really safe about it.

### *The centrality of student identity, voice, and consultation*

Students interviewed during this research were very aware and understanding of the pressures and shortcomings of their relatively small Alesco-type school, its resources staff and management. There appears to be an opportunity to improve student voice and involvement in each Alesco-type school. It would be wise to consider how to, in a standard and respectful way, consult with students to gauge their opinions and involve them in solutions to problems and dilemmas as they arise.

As one teacher put it:

I just think the student is the centre. I don't think that happens in mainstream. I think there's too many young people in mainstream to become student-centred. I think we get the opportunity to see young people complete schooling that may never ever get a chance. So it's giving young people a chance that no one else may have given them. And we don't give up on them.

An Alesco-type school Principal stressed the importance of being consulted and valued.

I think that the young people here need to feel valued. They need to offer: you need to ask them for feedback. They need to feel that they've got an input into the classroom. I think if you just walk in and become, "I'm the teacher. You're the student. This is what we're going to do," I don't think that works here because the young people feel unvalued. You need to talk to them about what you're going to do. "This

is what we're going to do today guys, What do you think?" And they say, "Oh, that sounds really good," or, "That was really boring."

You need to always get feedback from the students and you need to reflect. I just think going in and saying, "This is what we're doing": it doesn't work here. Power and control relationships do not work. You have to have variety but you have to talk to the young people throughout the whole year of teaching or whatever subject you're teaching. You have to get the feedback, and you have to get that constantly. You have to say, "How did that work? What about if we do it this way?" I think that's very important to our young people. If they don't feel valued they straightaway let you know, "That's mainstream." So if it's aligned with mainstream it doesn't work. They pick up on that very quickly.

### *The high proportion of Indigenous students compared to mainstream schools*

Even a superficial examination of the My School data in Table 3 confirms a significant increase in the proportion of Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) young people in all Alesco-type schools compared to mainstream and private schools. On average, across seven Alesco-type schools for which Indigenous enrolment data were available (from 2015 via the My School website), close to one quarter (24%) of all Alesco-type school students were Indigenous. One explanation is that mainstream schools are failing for Indigenous young people. Another explanation is that Indigenous young people are positively attracted to the alternative opportunities created to learn in Alesco-type schools.

One related explanation from the interviews was that Alesco-type schools were not discriminatory, because all students are equally treated and regarded. As one staff member (fairly baldly) put it:

I think that because we accept them. I think because here there's no white and black, they are all students and it doesn't matter if you're black mouthing off or white mouthing off: you're treated the same way which is basically, "Pull your freaking head in."

Alesco-type schools such as in Dubbo with a very high proportions of Indigenous students (70 per cent in 2015) provide an opportunity and reason to increase the involvement and paid employment of appropriately trained and experienced Indigenous staff in all areas of the school. As one non-Indigenous teacher put it:

Most of our SLSOs [Student Learning Support Officers] are Indigenous. I think it's very important because they talk to the kids in the language that they're used to, and that can be swearing at them or whatever. I can't do that. ... Who they are gives them a benefit and road in, a way of communicating.

### *Difficult colocation of 'second chance' education with ACE*

In three of the five school Alesco-type school sites, the school for young people is mostly co-located within the main ACE (adult and community education) campus. While desirable in terms of opportunities for intergenerational learning, and taking up class space and capacity otherwise unused due to cuts in government VET and

ACE funding, in practice some (but not all) of the schools would appear to have a negative effect on the reputation of the ACE provider. Providing an environment also conducive to older adults and particularly to professional and business-oriented learning.

*School positioning and pedagogy a 'balancing act' between CEO and Principal*

In several of the Alesco-type schools there appears to be a mismatch or lack of congruence between the views of the College CEO, School Principal and/or other senior staff in relation to one or more of the school pedagogies, direction, siting, relationship to other programs, student recruitment and desirable future. Given the small size of the schools and the importance of projecting a common, positive coherent vision, the staff, the students and the community, there is a strong case for these differences to be acknowledged and addressed by the College CEO and School Principals.

*A desperate need to effectively monitor multiple outcomes from all NSW schools*

Unlike in Victoria, almost no Year 12 outcome data were publicly available for this study (e.g. via the *My School* website) for *any* New South Wales secondary school. In the absence of such data<sup>7</sup>, it is impossible to know or validly compare what outcomes an Alesco-type school, *or any other* schools in New South Wales are producing. Instead of waiting for this monitoring process to become prescriptive, Alesco-type schools might take the lead here and institute a common post-school survey that not only charts work and study outcomes for ex-students, but that also includes important attitudinal and wellbeing data for young people who complete *and also do not complete* their school courses. School education systems might learn more by consulting those who do *not* successfully complete (and sometimes actively resist) school, than those who may have had the resilience to complete and experience school in a disengaged state - and to suffer that experience in silence.

*Problems posed by limited curriculum choice, resources, staffing and grounds*

All Alesco-type schools are so small that curriculum choice and access to resources and fully qualified and experienced staff at higher year levels in the school are significantly curtailed. This is not a criticism, but an important observation that will always make it difficult for Alesco-type schools to argue that they might become 'schools of first choice' for most students and families. All Alesco-type schools in this study have a serious shortage of resources and spaces suitable for hands-on learning, as well as a desperate shortage of comprehensive recreational and outdoor facilities. This limitation also provides some opportunities, as one teacher of a hands-on subject noted:

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<sup>7</sup> Catholic College Wodonga (since it is in Victoria) is the only secondary college in Table 3 with Year 12 outcome data. If the same study had been conducted in Victoria almost all schools would have publicly available Year 12 outcome data.

With our tools and stuff they're more portable and we pull out what we need when we need it. It can provide limitations in certain projects or experiments where we can't do it the way that we've been trained or the way that is most common practice. So we sort of have to be a little bit more creative with certain things.

But it also allows us to sort of connect it to real life scenarios a little bit easier because these students ... potentially have access to the same things here that they might at home or at a friend's place or something like that. So instead of it being like, an industrial lab or an industrial workshop, we're showing them how to do things with probably more accessible tools and items.

### *Smoking a divisive issue*

Smoking in all Alesco-type schools is currently tolerated to a greater or lesser extent by students in well defined, typically outside or in nearby, off campus areas. One school welfare worker summarised the dilemma and the divides this tolerance causes on a wide range of fronts.

I strongly believe it needs to change. I think if we say we're a school about a young person's wellbeing and welfare then we shouldn't be allowing them to smoke. That's my view. I know originally it came from a place of, "We're a school of choice and they're going to smoke anyway, so why not know that they're safe here and have them where we can keep an eye on them and they're not out the front loitering".

I get that. I get all that. But that was [a long time ago]. We're in now 2016 and the world's changed. You can't even smoke at universities or TAFE. So I fear that we're doing them a disservice now because we're not preparing them for what's after [this school] in the real world where smoking is not acceptable. ... But this issue does divide the students and that's really sad.

The issue of where and whether smoking is or should be tolerated on or off campus clearly divides and concerns some students and staff. In all Alesco-type schools *non-smokers* comprise a significant minority of all students enrolled. Given recent changes in community attitudes, knowledge of direct and indirect health impacts of and legalities related to the risks of smoking, and the progressive banning of smoking from most other public and private places and organisations, Alesco-type schools might reconsider whether any tolerance of smoking on site is defensible.

There is no doubt however, that changing the rules for existing students will not be simple without considerable disagreement and trauma, given that the relatively permissive attitude to smoking is one of the Alesco-type school's important attractions to some young people.

### *A dilemma about school attendance*

In part by virtue of the cohort of young people who select or find themselves at an Alesco-type school, absenteeism ranges from common to rife. It causes significant issues for continuity of teaching at the higher levels in each of the schools. As one

staff member put it, “It does slow everything down to a point where if I’m actually meeting all the outcomes I’d be surprised. I don’t know if it’s possible.”

Another staff member on another Alesco-types school site noted that he/she had coped with the problem by reframing both his/her task and the nature of the school.

I have to treat this as not a ‘normal’ in inverted commas school, it’s a ‘special assistance’ school. In every school when students don’t complete the work they hand out ‘N awards’. Well what’s the point of handing out N awards in special assistance school? Therefore I’m just going to give them all a go, and lo and behold just because I’m letting it go longer means they’re completing the work and they’re not stressing over uncompleted work. It might take me five weeks longer, so be it.

I’m not bothering handing [N awards] out because I’m extending it so that they *can* complete, You [normally] have to hand out three [N awards], you have your first one, you’re given two weeks, then you’re given a second one and you’re given two weeks. Then the third one, and after that it’s a zero for the course. It had been indoctrinated into me that we are a school, we follow a program, this is what [it] says you have to have as a scope and sequence and you’ve got to cover so much and compress it. These kids can’t cope with the compression. It’s just going to take a little bit longer.

#### *School reputation in the community important to monitor and improve*

It has taken the first Alesco school in Newcastle many years to build a positive and cooperative relationship with other schools across the region it serves. In a veritable ‘ecosystem’ of school pathways and choices in larger cities such as Newcastle and Wollongong, this process of relationship building with other schools is important and always ongoing. On some newer sites such as Bathurst and Dubbo there is considerable progress to be made even to be *acknowledged and included in school meetings and conversations* as a viable local secondary school option. In several newer sites there is evidence that, rightly or wrongly, new Alesco-type schools have already earned a poor or negative reputation across some parts of the community, that includes but extends well beyond the school.

#### *Concern that selection policies might be too permissive at the margins*

There is evidence of some cynicism that some Alesco-type schools, like many other education market-based systems, risk (colloquially) being more about money for ‘bums on seats’ rather than being mainly about student learning or wellbeing. In some cases where absenteeism is endemic or poorly monitored or addressed, this cynicism might instead be about money for ‘bums *not* on seats’. These perceptions and concerns about being too permissive with inappropriate students and/or absenteeism have trickled through to some students and stakeholders interviewed in several school sites included in this research, including to some school staff. As one staff member put it, “This school does not work for ‘high end’ kids”.

## *Common elements of parental guidance and use of Facebook in school selection*

It was striking in both the survey and interview data that in general, most young people enrolled in Alesco-type schools had the strong support of at least one parent for their alternative school choice. Many used the term collective 'we' when referring to the way the choice was made to 'move on' from one or more previous mainstream schools. In several cases Facebook was used to obtain information and inform the choice about an Alesco-type school.

## **Possible improvements**

All interviewees were specifically asked how the Alesco-type school might be improved. Six emergent themes, summarised in Table 10, were common across all or most school sites. Several of these themes are reinforced by (or related to) themes identified above. Other themes specific to particular school sites are included in five separate *Site-specific Reports* designed for use in internal school planning and development.

*Table 10: Themes related to possible school improvements*

<b>Possible Alesco-type school improvements</b>
<i>Adapting and learning with constantly changing cohorts and circumstances</i>
<i>The need for a common, agreed purpose, by provider, management and staff</i>
<i>More opportunities and resources for hands-on teaching and recreation</i>
<i>Clearer boundaries (and disciplinary consequences) for what is not acceptable behaviour</i>
<i>Appropriate training and counselling to support and retain staff</i>
<i>More sharing of experiences, problems, solutions, staff and resources across sites</i>

### *Adapting and learning with constantly changing cohorts and circumstances*

Experienced Alesco-type school staff observed that the nature and changing size of student groups and cohorts across year levels each year and cannot always be foreseen or strategically planned for. This and unexpected staffing changes requires the schools to be nimble and creative in terms of staffing succession, curriculum, resourcing and timetabling. As one welfare worker put it:

You can't be too rigid here. You've got to be flexible because you do not know what the next day's going to bring. Because we're such a small school and we have this real community/family feel where everyone knows everyone, everyone's affected when there's a drama or a crisis. So you've got to be flexible as a staff member. You can't go in with your own agenda. You've got to adapt.

### *The need for a common, agreed purpose, by provider, management and staff*

While it is possible to create a common template and procedures that might work on one Alesco-type school site, it is difficult to create and transfer 'a one size fits all' template or 'recipe' that fits or works across all existing sites or to new sites. There would appear to be tensions and difficulties in expecting *not* to have to considerably shape the original Alesco-model for new sites, student cohorts, Principal and staff pedagogies and provider types.

### *More opportunities and resources for hands-on teaching and recreation*

Whilst understanding of the limitations imposed by the relatively small size of the schools, students and staff were universally supportive of more resources and spaces for hands-on teaching. There was also a consistent call for more facilities for both indoor and outdoor recreation.

### *Clearer boundaries (and disciplinary consequences) for what is not acceptable behaviour*

Students themselves were well aware of and concerned by the lack of clear behavioural boundaries. They also suggested in some providers that there was a disincentive in the funding model to reject or exclude some students, despite the problems they were creating for other students and most staff through antisocial behaviour and/or chronic absenteeism.

### *Appropriate training and counselling to support and retain staff*

Given the considerable stresses of the work involved as compared to 'mainstream' teaching and welfare work, considerable importance needs to be attached to training, counselling, supporting and retaining appropriate and effective staff. Wherever staff *are* underperforming, being debilitated or struggling to cope even *with* this support, attention needs to be given to counselling or assisting such people to find more appropriate roles or employment.

### *More sharing of experiences, problems, solutions, staff and resources across sites*

Teaching tends, even in mainstream schools, to be an isolating experience unless school staff and associated support teams are appropriately supported and managed. Alesco-type schools experience a combination of additional stresses, strains and problems not common to all mainstream schools or teaching. Consideration might be given to some form of staff exchange between sites in order for them to see and experience common problems and locally effective, other solutions.

It is important to add that an annual and very valuable Alesco-type school conference is already held for teachers and executive staff (in 2016 it was hosted by Wollongong, but previously it had been in Newcastle). Staff who attend regard it as 'a great way to exchange ideas and look at examples of best practice'. It might be that future conferences 'open up' to help inform staff from key feeder schools and to other stakeholders in the wider Alesco 'family'.

## Summary and Conclusions

This mixed method research evaluation was focussed on five relatively small, Alesco-type 'alternative', 'independent' schools in five regional New South Wales<sup>8</sup> cities. It relied mainly on 'the voice' and perceptions of students collected through on-site group interviews complemented by a brief student survey. These data were supplemented by group interviews with staff and other stakeholders on each site. A total of 49 audio-recorded group interviews were conducted with a total of 55 students and 55 stakeholders. The focus of the interview questions to students, school staff and a small number of other stakeholders (ex-students, parents and external stakeholders) on each site was about what was working (or not) in the Alesco-type school and why, as well as about what might be improved. All 13+ hours of interviews were fully transcribed and analysed for themes. Pre-existing documents and numeric data about each Alesco-type school were collected and examined from each school site in an initial site visit in order to establish context for the interviews, conducted during a follow up visit during May 2016. Consistent with standard ethical practice, all information that might identify individual interview informants has been removed and edited from this report.

It is clear (but unsurprising) from the data collected across these five sites that not all schools are at the same point in terms of 'bedding down' the espoused Alesco model in practice, mainly because of their different histories, locations, school contexts, management, staff and student cohorts. The Alesco-type schools established approximately a decade or more ago in Newcastle, Wollongong and Albury-Wodonga are significantly more 'bedded down' in terms of their local and regional communities understanding and supporting them as viable and valuable schools, as well as in terms of their student, staff and curriculum development, stability, maturity and sustainability, in comparison to those very recently established Alesco-type schools in Dubbo and Bathurst (commenced in July 2014 and 2015 respectively).

All five schools have implemented most (but not all) of the key elements of the Alesco-type, alternative, independent school model originally developed and since franchised to these five (and several other) New South Wales schools by the ACE (adult and community education) provider, WEA Hunter in Newcastle. The more recent Alesco-type schools are understandably prone to regard their schools as 'works in progress', as they valiantly strive to not only understand, transfer and successfully adapt the original Alesco model to their different community contexts and student cohorts, but also to become better understood and supported as a legitimate school alternative by parents, teachers and the local and regional educational communities.

Longer established Alesco-type schools and their staff, such as those in Wollongong and Albury-Wodonga, by contrast, have a longer and deeper experience of the

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<sup>8</sup> The Albury-Wodonga Alesco-type school operates across the NSW-Victorian border.

original Newcastle Alesco model, and are therefore in a better position, with relatively stable staff and student cohorts, to experiment and innovate with new ways of comprehensively supporting students, sequencing their curriculum and implementing alternative pedagogies which are consistent with or complementary to the original Alesco model. In many school sites it is a constant challenge to maintain consistent, positive communication between the respective College CEOs and School Principals, and to retain experienced and appropriate teaching and welfare staff able to commit to the holistic learning and wellbeing needs of a dynamic and very challenging student cohort with relatively limited resources. This report's sub-title, *Here, everything's different* acknowledges that these and many other aspects of the Alesco-type school model *are* very different and more challenging, typically requiring ongoing and significant adaptation and compromise for both students *and* staff.

Historic and contextual site-specific differences aside, students at all five Alesco-type schools are consistent in their strong agreement that they prefer to learn locally and now really enjoy learning at their school. Almost all students at Alesco-type schools participate with the strong support of a parent or guardian. In general, students are positive about doing future post-school study to improve their lives and employment prospects. Most students disagree that they would prefer to learn in what they consistently refer to as one or more previous 'mainstream' schools.

Students also consistently report very similar reasons why the Alesco-type school now works for them. Most students felt relatively 'lost' in and uncared for in their previous, typically large, mainstream schools. Many had been bullied; a significant proportion had been dealing with longstanding mental health or 'family issues', and most had been at significant risk of not continuing or positively achieving at a mainstream school.

Staff and students both liked the fact that their Alesco-type school was relatively small and felt safe, and that student wellbeing was regarded as being more important than raw academic achievement. Some staff and students were concerned that their school may be 'too easy' and too permissive, particularly in relation to student attendance and smoking, but in some instances also in admitting and tolerating students whose behaviour was perceived as antisocial and/or not conducive to their own or other student's learning. Both students and staff acknowledge that the Alesco-type school model, as compared to mainstream schools, offers a relatively limited curriculum and timetable choice, and forces necessary compromises in terms of school resources, staffing diversity and opportunities for recreation.

The Alesco-type school model is very successful in embracing and attracting students who mainstream schools, for a wide range of reasons, have failed. The high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (on average around one quarter [24% in 2015] of all enrolments across seven Alesco-type schools in New South Wales) is notable. The difficulty is that many students continue, even in an

Alesco-type school setting, to experience a range of ongoing personal, family and community issues that adversely impact on their commitment to learn, their school attendance and behaviour. All three issues can and do have implications for the continuity and effectiveness of learning and teaching and the image and reputation of the school within and beyond the wider school community, including the adult learning provider in which all schools are administratively embedded.

All five Alesco-type schools, through the government funds generated by school enrolments, have positively and significantly contributed to the business side of the institutions that embed them, at a time when vocational and ACE students and funding have been significantly reducing. The dilemma is that there is a financial (as well as a professional, personal and moral) disincentive *not* to enrol (or to later abandon) any students for whom the Alesco-type school has been a school of 'last resort'. In some schools there is therefore a risk, albeit at the margins, that highly principled attempts to support and give all students a 'final chance': to enrol, remain 'on the books' after significant absenteeism or after serious antisocial behaviour, might err on the permissive side for a very small number of students.

The question of how effective these five Alesco-type schools actually *are* in terms of their student outcomes (measured by school attendance or retention, post-school study and work) compared to 'mainstream' or even 'like' schools is very difficult to answer, given the total absence of comparative commencement or outcome data from My School for almost all New South Wales Schools. Even if these data were available, it is likely that direct comparisons would be invidious and confirm the obvious: that Alesco-type schools towards the 'bottom' of the 'private then public' school choice hierarchy will always have more limited outcomes, conventionally measured, given the very challenging, already disadvantaged nature of their student cohorts. The irony in any direct comparison is that most Alesco-type students will already have been damaged and/or rejected by one or more of the nearby mainstream schools.

The pedagogical success of the arguably innovative Alesco model may be limited to a degree by the decision of all five schools to continue to offer and direct students towards the relatively bland and typically limited, 'mainstream' Higher School Certificate (HSC) curriculum and certification options as accredited by the New South Wales Board of Studies (BoSTES). The reasons for deciding to remain within BoSTES control are two fold. First, it is about perceived student and parent choice for a state-recognised qualification and outcome. Second, there is the desire for the independent school to receive mainstream student funding.

The dilemma about remaining tightly 'boxed in' by what results in a relatively limited and poorly resourced, mainstream curriculum choice in an otherwise very caring Alesco-type school setting is that the underpinning design of the original Alesco vision was and remains radical and different. Alesco is a student-centred, strength-based learning and teaching model. Alesco's strength, and arguably one of its weaknesses, is that it seeks to go well beyond the bounds and pedagogies of

mainstream curriculum and its anticipated accredited mainstream curriculum outcomes: to build life skills, adaptability and resilience for a wide range of students, including but beyond those who are disengaged and disenfranchised by previous life chances and choices. From its original adult and community education base, Alesco optimistically seeks not only to transform young people through a coherent, alternative school pedagogy and care network, but also to influence and change the nature of mainstream school education.

The wider application and success of the original Alesco-type school model (or indeed any other 'alternative' school model) to other alternative independent schools depends very much on all parties: College CEO, School Principal and staff understanding, interpreting and adapting the model to very different local cohorts and circumstances. There is a need for all schools to carefully define and monitor a range of desirable and acceptable students, student behaviour, attendance and outcomes, and for both staff *and students* to share and document their problems, experiences and solutions both within and beyond the very useful, current annual Alesco conference.

In conclusion, a number of positive characteristics, consistently illustrated by the student 'Cameos' in this report, were seen to be an essential part of the Alesco-type approach. These characteristics include the non-tolerance of bullying, acknowledgement and attention to the many 'outside of school' factors, encouragement of student and staff bonding, the focus on respect and making students feel comfortable. Individual and person-centred attention, being inclusive and being treated maturely are cornerstones of the espoused Alesco approach, that lies very much at the intersection between welfare and learning.

A number of crosscutting themes were identified in both the student and stakeholder interview data. Students and staff responded positively to and significantly enjoyed the strength-based, solution-focused approaches to learning associated with the Alesco model. For most students, there was a clear acknowledgement that mainstream schooling had failed them, by not addressing bullying, not acknowledging and celebrating their individual strengths and differences, particularly their individual and different, holistic learning and wellbeing needs. Mainstream schooling was widely regarded as having exacerbated their anxieties and not properly accommodated to or acknowledged pre-existing and ongoing mental health, personal and family problems. The decision to move school and finally come to an Alesco-type school was typically instigated by a series of school-related crises, and was usually collaboratively investigated and subsequently strongly supported by a parent or guardian.

Students and staff have bravely and honestly shown through this research evaluation that they are acutely aware *and understanding of* the inherent strengths and weaknesses of their schools and the espoused and applied Alesco model, as well of ways the innovative model might be improved for future students in future sites.

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