

NSW Ministry Health

Evaluation Intervention Innovation Fund

Summary of key findings and implications for policy and practice

Project title Engaging pre-service youth in AOD care: Evaluation of the Street University Engagement Program

Lead investigator and organisations

Joanne Bryant, Rebecca Gray, Elena Cama, Limin Mao. Centre for Social Research in Health UNSW
Naomi Noffs, Mark Ferry, Ted Noffs Foundation

Other investigators and organisations

Background and Rationale – what problem were you solving?

Those working in the youth, health and welfare sectors know that there is a group of young people with significant needs that are often missed by or excluded from existing services. These young people tend to have volatile histories with family, school and other institutions, and report problems with mental health, substance use and crime. Often called, 'pre-entry' or 'pre-contemplative' (according to Stages of Change models), these young people are seen to be on trajectories that could require significant service intervention. Street University is a unique program designed to attract and retain these young people in a service environment and provide them with a safety net, life skills development and, when required, therapeutic intervention. Its aim, ultimately, is to act as early intervention for this vulnerable group of young people and, wherever possible, prevent more serious issues arising.

The Street University model has not been previously evaluated and this research provided important evidence to further develop it. The evaluation sought to provide constructive advice to further develop the Street University program and to consider its potential for translation to other settings. The research specifically examined the effectiveness of the engagement program in engaging hard-to-reach young people, and in maintaining engagement with them over the longer term. It also sought to describe the aspects of the program that are most attractive and successful according to young people; and to ascertain the impact of the engagement program on young people's substance use, mental health, and criminal involvement, along with other important social outcomes.

Summary of Key Research Findings

Introduction

Aims

This research aimed to describe the capacity of the Street University program to attract and retain difficult-to-reach young people, and document the impact of their participation in the program.

Research Question/s

How well does the Street University program capture pre-service young people and what aspects of the program are most attractive to them? What is the impact of the program on young people's social and health outcomes, including their substance use, mental health and criminal involvement?

Research design

The evaluation draws on three data sources: 1) a quantitative prospective cohort study of new entrants to the Street University engagement program conducted in 2018-2019 tracking attenders over a six-month study period and using non-attenders as a comparison group; 2) Street University service data collected from young people taking up therapeutic services at Street University between 2015 and mid 2019; 3) qualitative interpretive data collected through in-depth interviews with Street University staff and long-term clients.

Results

The Street University engagement model has a significant capacity to capture marginalised and 'pre-service' young people and retain them in a service setting over the long term. The cohort study revealed that an impressive 63% of new entrants to the program returned at least once during the six-month study period, and more than half of them (54%) returned at a high frequency of weekly or more often. These participants fit the expected profile of pre-service young people and reported considerable levels of clinical need: for example, probable mental illness was reported by 35%, and concerns with substance use by 47%. Importantly, this study identified the Street University program factors that clients and staff perceived as beneficial for clients. These included the provision of a safe and inclusive space, the opportunity to develop positive relationships with adults, and the availability of activities that are appealing and attractive. It was also considered important that the program employs these mechanisms over the long term to ensure that young people are sufficiently supported in their social, emotional, material and therapeutic needs.

Qualitative data identify how the Street University model supports the learning of important life and technical skills for young people, by providing a safe and inclusive space that celebrates youth culture and offering opportunities to develop positive relationships with adults.

Cohort data and Street University service data indicate that young people who participate in counselling activities experience rapid, significant improvements in their psychological distress, problematic substance use and criminal activity. However, work is required to identify those young people from the population of program clients who need counselling in order to connect them with appropriate services. Currently, the data shows that a high proportion of clients participate in engagement activities (hanging out with friends 89% and staff 40% and using the computers 48%) but fewer take part in therapeutic counselling for their substance use or mental health (8% and 13% respectively) despite the high need for these services (by 35% and 47% as identified above). This may explain why there were no measurable decreases in psychological distress, criminal contact, and problematic AOD use among the cohort over the six-month period.

Overall, the model intervenes positively in the lives of pre-service young people who take up therapeutic intervention, and has *excellent potential* to do so among the wider population of its clientele, if work is done to increase the capacity of the program to systematically identify young people in need.

Implications for policy and practice

List any changes that have been made the service/program as a result of this study (list)

Our recommendations with respect to program changes include:

- Develop clearer systems within the program model that serve to identify young people in need of therapeutic intervention.
- Increase the therapeutic and clinical skills of staff who work in engagement roles to improve their capacity to identify young people in need of intervention, especially as these staff are eager to gain these skills.
- Clarify the outcomes of the program with staff ensuring that they see therapeutic intervention as a primary goal (for those young people who require it).
- Further develop the help-seeking skills of young people, especially since help-seeking is identified by young people as a valuable skill that they gained through their participation at Street University. This could better support efforts to link young people to therapeutic activities if they need it.

Wider implications for policy (list)

- Street University's engagement activities are impressive in their capacity to attract and retain marginalised pre-service young people over the long term. These should be continued and rolled out to other settings.

Wider implications for practice i.e. services and programs(list)

Currently in NSW most or all AOD therapeutic interventions for young people are administered through residential settings and are offered to young people who have developed significant and ongoing substance use problems – that is they are seen to have reached ‘rock bottom’. The Street University model offers an exciting and novel opportunity for early intervention which will prevent young people needing to exhibit significant AOD problems before obtaining treatment. Noffs Foundation are experts in providing AOD clinical therapy to young people, and the findings of our research show that this therapy can be administered in high-quality drop-in settings and does not need to be confined to residential rehabilitation.

The Street University model has an impressive capacity to capture young people that are missed by other service models (these young people are often called pre-entry or pre-contemplative), and keep them engaged over the long-term by building trust, providing a safety net, and offering them skill-building opportunities that matter to them. While the model requires fine-tuning in order to ensure that clients with therapeutic needs are identified and directed to counselling, it has enormous potential for early intervention in a space where there is currently little service provision. The Street University model is unique to Noffs Foundation, and is currently running in NSW and Queensland, but will be of interest to policy makers and service providers in other Australian states and internationally.

Research Impact

Has this research study led to further investigations or collaborations that led to other funding applications?

YES

NO

If yes, please detail what further investigations or collaborations this research study has led to.

Add an appendix of a list of all dissemination activities of research findings (e.g. conference, publications, media and presentations to key stakeholders).

Dissemination activities are still under consideration since the data analysis and report writing have only been recently completed. However, Noffs is collaborating with CSRH (and others) on an ARC Discovery grant focussed on a related matter. The grant is currently under review and will examine continuing care and post-treatment experiences of young people exiting residential rehabilitation. The research is aimed at building new evidence to support the development of continuing care programs in NSW and Victoria.

Please send completed reports to:

Dr Fadil Pedic, Manager, Strategic Research and Evaluation, Alcohol and Other Drugs, Clinical Quality & Safety

Email: Fadil.Pedic@health.nsw.gov.au

For any enquiries please call Fadil on (02) 9461 7639