Australia (South)

Open Access College Middle Years Program

This school aims to provide those who are not able to attend regular schooling with the opportunity to continue their education in the Open Access College. This innovative distance education alternative features mixed-aged grouping, effective use of ICT, and collaborative and individualized learning. All learning within the program is personally tailored to meet the diverse needs of individual students. Individual learning plans are developed for all students, and ongoing contact occurs between teachers and individual students, interdisciplinary themes are developed based on student interests and resources are accessible for each student online to access in their own time. There is evidence that student engagement and wellbeing have increased. Both quantitative and qualitative data reveal improved student engagement and attendance.

Main focus of innovation: LEARNERS, RESOURCES, ORGANISATION

Other keywords*:* equity, technology-rich

General Information

Name of the ILE: Open Access College Middle Years program

Location/Address: A diversity of delivery methods are used including distance learning, however, the college has two campuses at this addresses: Marden Campus, 1-37 Marden Road. Marden, South Australia 5070 and Port Augusta Campus, 59 Power Crescent. Pt Augusta ,South Australia 5700

Website: www.openacess.edu.au

ILE submitted by: South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

Open Access College is an example of innovative education in South Australia. The college caters for students from Reception (5 years of age) to Year 12 level study and is widely acknowledged for its leadership in online learning. A whole college review, conducted in 2009, further established the innovative nature of the school. The review involved restructuring the entire college into a single entity institution, re-examining Middle Years education (Years 7-9) to improve student attendance and achievement, and allow teachers to develop their own learning materials. Several strategies were adopted to improve the learning and wellbeing of twenty-first century middle years students, while catering more effectively for the diverse needs of individual learners in the college.

These include:

- collegial teachers teams of 3-4 teachers for every 21-24 students (operating in groups of around 8 students, small groups or individually);
- teachers taking responsibility for the development of teaching materials, rather than a specialised unit;
- an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum based upon student interests and clearly linked to state curriculum requirements;
- a focus on making better use of technology in student learning; and,
- a more personalised approach to learning characterised by individual learning plans for each student, negotiated student learning, and flexible approaches to teaching and assessment.

The *Open Access College* is a government distance education institution offering all levels of school education to learners who are unable to attend a local school or access the curriculum in their own school. These students may live in a remote location; experience medical or psychological health issues; be restricted in their choice of curriculum; come from families who travel or are based overseas as a result of work commitments; be currently incarcerated in a penal institution; or, have been excluded from their local school. While the diversity of learners enrolled in the college's programs is uniquely challenging, it has provided the opportunity to innovate traditional educational practices.

The organisation of learning at the *Open Access College* is particularly innovative, catering for distance education learners at the Middle School level through methods including:

- Formalised half-hour long telephone or online Centra sessions with individuals or small groups conducted up to 7 times per week.
- Specialised resource materials provided for individual and group work in the form of on line integrated learning programs, internet research guides, and customised/personalised learning materials such as DVDs, CDs and activity kits.
- Face-to face workshops, mini schools, visits from teachers, camps and excursions.

Positive outcomes have already been observed among students in Middle Schooling. There is evidence that student engagement and wellbeing have increased. Furthermore, both quantitative and qualitative data reveal improved student engagement and attendance. For example, Year 9 attendance figures of 69% immediately prior to the implementation of innovative practices rose to 83% in 2010. Assessment tasks submitted since the changes were implemented have been significantly more detailed, reflecting student engagement in higher order thinking. Teaching staff have also reported positive outcomes, including greater feeling of collegiality, professional sharing, and greater enthusiasm for the work during staff meetings.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE
What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

The *Open Access College* Middles Years program aims to:

- support the needs of individual learners through a team approach;
- adopt a student-centred, integrated approach to teaching and learning;
- engage collaboratively in the design of learning programs for students;
- provide an interdisciplinary curriculum;
- develop personalised learning plans for each student;
- differentiate instruction and develop learning materials tailored for each learner;
- ensure all students have access to learning materials and negotiate the delivery mode appropriate to their individual circumstances;
- organise a care program which focuses on the wellbeing of individual learners;
- encourage and support students to reach their full learning potential and highest level of wellbeing.

Learners
Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

The *Open Access College* has over 2,500 students enrolled annually between Reception and Year 12, including adult re-entry students. Two campuses provide services for these students. One of these is located in Port Augusta, a town 300 kilometres north of Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. The other is located within the metropolitan area of Adelaide at Marden.

The student population within the Middle Years program catering for students in Years 7-9 (mostly 12-15 years of age) grows continuously throughout the school year, from around 40 students to between 150 and 200 students. Many are from low socio-economic backgrounds. They may be experiencing mental (16%) and physical health (16%) issues, isolation (7%), exclusion from their local school for behavioural reasons (1%), travelling within Australia (4%) and overseas (3%), reduced curriculum choice at their local school (20%) or they may be at risk of leaving school early (1%) (see Figure below).

Figure 1: Proportion of students accessing the *Open Access College* Middle Years program for reasons related to their particular backgrounds or circumstances.
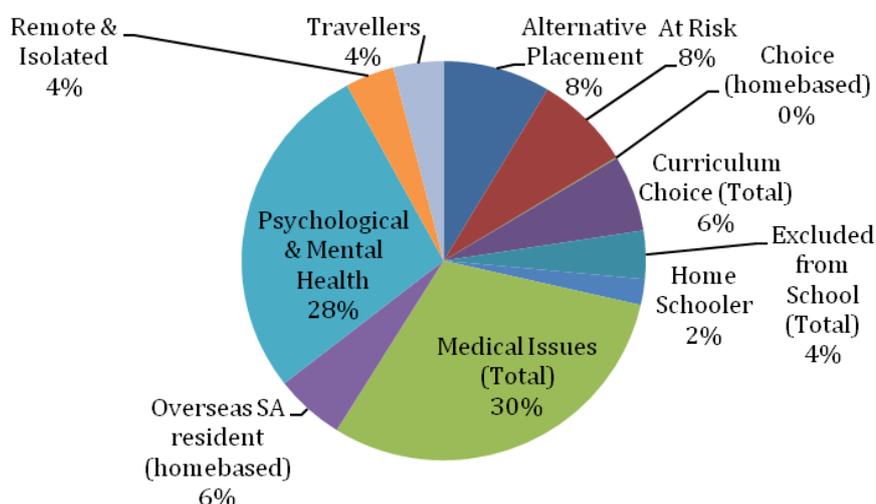
Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

All teachers employed in the *Open Access College* Middle Years program are registered teachers in South Australia with appropriate qualifications in education and teaching. Throughout the year, the numbers of teachers employed changes in response to the growth in student numbers.

At the beginning of the school year, teaching teams of three permanent staff members of the college are responsible for the learning of around 21-24 students. These permanent employees have an interest or experience in Middle Years learning. As student numbers increase, new teams are formed from contract teachers who must have experience in this level of education and an interest in working within the innovative approach of the *Open Access College* Middle Years program.

The teams of Middle School teachers are self-managing. However, their work is overseen and supported by a range of staff in leadership positions. These include a Head of School and Senior Leader (oversees the Middle Years Curriculum, supports the development of online learning materials and supports the needs of students), a Middle Years Counsellor Coordinator (enrols and supports individual needs of students) Quality Pedagogy Coordinators (support the development of an integrated curriculum), and Coordinators or Teacher Leaders (support teaching teams in the provision of technology). The leadership team's charter is to work in collaboration with teaching teams to provide high quality learning experiences for all students. All teachers and leaders are involved in the provision of appropriate technology to support learning.

The dynamic and diverse nature of the staff in the Middle Years program creates a complex environment. As a result, professional learning is thought to be an essential and central aspect of daily work in the college. Professional learning involves:

- co-location of Middle School teaching teams into shared offices in which they can engage in collaborative problem solving;
- formal professional development in issues and techniques relevant to middle schooling and interdisciplinary learning; and,
- formal and informal professional learning in curricular development and technology integration into learning, including use of video-conferencing and resource software such as Moodle and Centra.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Innovative distance education – multi-age grouping, teaching teams and ICT

Learning at *Open Access College* is unlike traditional schooling in the sense that it primarily occurs at a distance, rather than face to face. Learners within the Middle School have contact during six half-hour periods weekly to engage in the curriculum, and an extra half-hour contact period for 'home group' activities related to student organisation and wellbeing. Contact is made in groups of around 8 students studying at Year 7-9 level via Centra (online learning platform). This platform supports voice, text chat, Powerpoint presentations, the use of external applications, linking with websites, teacher demonstration and whiteboard, as well as opportunities for breakout room discussion. All other learning is undertaken individually by students, based upon their personal learning plan, using software such as Moodle, which contains learning resources. Further communication between students, parents, supervisors and teachers occurs via email, phone, post, fax and Skype.

An example of the use of an activity done on Moodle (Toy Shop) is available in annex 1.

Students enrol into the college throughout the year for a range of reasons described in previous sections. Upon enrolment, Middle Years students are allocated to a team of three teachers, each of which will have contact with the student at least twice a week, and grouped with around 8 class mates.
The Middle Schooling team conducts an assessment of each student's literacy and numeracy ability to ensure their needs are well supported. They also work with students to identify their interests and these become the foundation for various interdisciplinary topics devised by teachers. Individual learning plans are developed for all learners to identify their strengths, areas for development and any extra supports required.

The division of work within teaching teams may be along disciplinary lines. For example, one may take responsibility for Mathematics and Science, while another English and Humanities, and a third with responsibility for the Arts. Alternatively, one teacher may engage the majority of students in interdisciplinary activities, while others are doing intensive work with specific students.

Personalised and interdisciplinary learning

All learning within the *Open Access College* Middle Years program is personally tailored to meet the diverse needs of individual students. Individual learning plans are developed for all students, ongoing contact occurs between teachers and individual students, interdisciplinary themes are developed based on student interests and resources are accessible for each student online to access in their own time.

Individual learning plans map the key tasks and tailor learning for each student over time. The flexibility this creates for students is extensive. For example, a student with Aspergers living in a rural location may be unable to work in group environments. The personalised approach at the college allows this students' learning to be tailored such that they receive individualised support, at least in the early stages of this students' re-engagement in learning.

Interdisciplinary topics shape learning in the Middle Years program. They are based on student interests, but still developed by teachers within the bounds of the state's curriculum framework, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework. Learning within these topic units is based upon constructivist pedagogy. Students then undertake some highly innovative learning activities and assessment tasks. They work through regular contact time with teachers and other students, and undertake detailed independent research and assessment which is flexibly accommodated for individual students. Those who study by distance mode are dependent on their personal situations and so may be closely involved in their local community context.

The integrated curriculum adopted by the *Open Access College* Middle Years program is supported by a check list for evaluation of an integrated unit of work which:

- features a central theme that is of high interest and relevance to students;
- is a result of cooperative planning by all team members and their students;
- is based on the SACSA Framework and all key learning areas;
- based on higher order thinking skills;
- provides a rigorous and challenging curriculum for each learner;
- involves cooperative learning experiences with an emphasis on social development;
- allows students to explore personal interest topics within a broader theme;
- encourages a wide range of presentation formats to assess students; and,

- considers relevance to the broader community by the inclusion of 'real' people in the learning process.

An example of the kind of interdisciplinary topics developed is attached to this submission and entitled 'Lady Gaga's Shoes'.

This topic was developed by a teaching team after consultation with students. The attachment show the alignment of the learning with the SACSA Framework, as well as the learning activities and related assessment tasks. Other thematic topics have included 'The Band', 'My Backyard', 'Toyshop' and 'From Desert To Sea'.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

Learning at the *Open Access College* occurs primarily off site in a range of locations, specific to each student, including student homes or schools in rural, remote and metropolitan settings. The *Open Access College* also enrols students travelling within Australia and overseas, and so their learning environments are varied. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to establish study routines, provide a comfortable work area conducive to learning, and allow time for recreation.

In the case of students based at other schools, their school is encouraged to provide a suitable learning space, including appropriate technology. They are also encouraged to appoint an *Open Access Coordinator*, a staff member whose role involves coordinating all Open Access learning within their site and acts as the key contact person between the college and the school.

The Middle Years curriculum is delivered online using Moodle and Centra as the primary delivery platforms. Laptop loan and internet subsidy schemes are provide by the college. Some teachers and students are also trialling iPods within a national pilot program.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

The impetus for innovation at *Open Access College* can be traced to a structural change uniting the college from three separate schools into a single entity across all school education bands, namely early years, primary, middle years and senior secondary. In 2009, this restructuring provided the opportunity for a review of teaching and learning within the college, including the structure of programs offered in the Middle Years of schooling. The innovation which resulted in the Middle Years program (Years 7-9) is the focus of this case.

Prior to the implementation of innovative change in the Middle Years program, there were concerns about student attendance, achievement and the extent to which the needs of learners were being appropriately met. Staffing methods did not necessarily allow students to develop strong relationships with their teachers. Furthermore, courses at all levels had been centrally coordinated by a specialist writing team responsible for the organisation of learning and development of discipline-based resource materials. This method delayed the released of materials by 12-18 months and, as a result, they were easily dated and totally unresponsive to student needs or current events. The materials were heavily based within literacy learning, often inappropriate for large numbers of students, and insufficiently interactive for young adolescents, making use of little technology to support learning.

The review of Middle School learning developed a common understanding of Middle School learners and Middle Years schooling through a review of programs, support strategies and staff professional development. Since 2009, the college has remained committed to achieving positive outcomes for student learning and wellbeing, and has developed greater understanding of Middle Years learning. Significant staffing reforms have meant that teachers now work as members of a team with a consistent group of students.

Middle School innovation at the *Open Access College* is grounded in the following principles.

- A student-centred approach to learning.
- A strong Middle School ethos within the college.
- The central importance of care and an understanding of the needs of individual learners.
- Clear future planning and pathways for students.
- Collegial staff support, collaborative problem solving, as well as knowledge and material sharing within and between staff teams.
- Flexibility in teaching and assessment methodologies and approaches.
- Student involvement in decision making.
- The importance of close relationships with families, students and partner schools.
- The critical importance of close relationships between teachers and students, with all teachers making a deliberate and maintained effort to know all of their students well.
- Collaborative development of the learning program through staff negotiation.
- The importance of teachers engaging in professional learning to improve their practice.

Funding of the ILE
How is it funded?

The *Open Access College* is funded by the South Australian Government, similar to all other public schools, on the basis of student numbers from Reception to Year 12. The complexities of teaching students in settings off site are recognised by a reduction in class sizes by 25%. The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) also supports the development of learning materials by providing additional funding for staff. The *Open Access College* receives additional funding through its Rural Index score to provide programmes which encourage rural and remote students and their families to attend school community and face to face activities.

Learning Outcomes
What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

Assessment and standards

The SACSA Framework provides a structure through which to develop learning plans, assess student progress and report on outcomes achieved. The framework is organised around 8 key learning areas. There are 5 standards based on a series of outcomes in each learning area. When reporting student progress, teachers at the *Open Access College* in the Middle Years program use an A-E grading system, linked to the SACSA performance standards.

A number of students present with learning difficulties. Individual needs and interests are assessed upon enrolment and used to develop an individual learning plan in collaboration with both the student and their parents or caregivers. This learning plan is assessed against SACSA standards and a modified report on student progress is developed with parent support.

Middle Years teachers develop assessment and feedback for students by:

- negotiating the learning program and assessment methods;
- utilising a broad range of techniques;
- continuously gathering evidence of student achievement in relation to the SACSA outcomes and standards;
- working with other team members to ensure consistency of teachers' judgement of learning standards;
- regularly recording evidence of student achievement; and,
- providing regular feedback to student and parent both informally by phone, email and face-to-face meetings, and also formally via interviews and reports.

Outcomes of the innovation

The innovative Middle School program at the *Open Access College* is relatively new and so there is yet to be any significant evaluation of its effectiveness. However, baseline data has been collected using the South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning student engagement matrix. Furthermore, some improvements in student attendance, staff collegiality and so forth have already been observed. Student attendance improved significantly, from 70% in 2009 to 83% in 2010. Submitted assessment tasks have reflected higher order thinking and engagement with learning. Since the innovation was implemented, staff have noted an increased sense of collegiality, professional sharing and greater enthusiasm for the work.

Parent and student satisfaction has also improved. A survey of Middle School students and their parents in 2010 found that as many as 56% of parents thought the team teaching approach was either excellent (41%) or good (15%). Students were similarly positive about the program. In response to evaluations of particular units of work, students have also responded favourably. For example, in regards to a topic entitled 'Lady Gaga's Shoes', one student commented very enthusiastically:

'I really enjoyed the whole unit but if I had to name one activity that I enjoyed most, it would probably be the 'Walk to another Wold' project, closely followed by the Shoe Art and Limericks. I also enjoyed the way that different subjects were integrated into one unit, all sorts of tangents off from the topic. In my point of view, it is a good way to do it, because you get to see how different subjects and skills fit into different aspects of life. Another thing I liked was the lesson in which we presented our work and held discussion with other students'.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE
Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

See *Open Access College* website www.openacess.edu.au

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

Further information regarding the *Open Access College* is available at www.openacess.edu.au

The website contains a number of links which may be of interest, including information for students, parents and staff about Middle Schooling at the *Open Access College.*