

Smarter About Drugs: A Conversation Pack 2019 Evaluation

Independently prepared for Australia21, The Australian Lions Drug Awareness Foundation (ALDAF) & Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) by:

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1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

This report documents the findings from an evaluation of *Smarter About Drugs: A Conversation Pack* which was carried out in 2019.

Smarter About Drugs is a unique school drug education resource that focuses on drug policy, rather than drug prevention, and has been designed to be delivered within a range of curriculum contexts, including Legal Studies, Civics and Politics classes, rather than just the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum. Instead of focusing on the health issues associated with drugs, *Smarter About Drugs* seeks to engage students in critical discussions about the role and impacts of drug policy in society and empower them to engage in broader drug policy debates.

This shift in focus is significant because the dominant way most young people learn about drugs (licit and illicit) in schools is through morally-laden (Lupton, 1995), prevention-focused HPE-based drug education. Despite many pedagogical innovations, such education still relies heavily on the provision of information designed to scare young people away from drugs through a focus on their potential health and moral dangers (Farrugia & Fraser, 2017a). Even where didactic forms of teaching have been replaced or supplemented by more interactive, student-centred pedagogical approaches, these are nonetheless overwhelmingly designed to develop student skills in drug *avoidance* rather than in thinking critically about health, drug-related harms and drug policy affects (Bennet, 2014; Farrugia & Fraser 2017a; Leahy & Malins 2015; Malins & Kent, 2020; Midford, 2010).

Not only has such education generally failed to demonstrate compellingly positive shifts in drug use behaviour (Agabio et al., 2015; Stockings et al., 2016), it has also been criticised for failing to give students the tools they need to reduce harm when they or their peers do use drugs (Farrugia, 2020; Leahy & Malins 2015). Concerns have also been raised about its tendency to prevent open discussion about the varied reasons people take drugs (Farrugia, 2014), mobilise stigma and shame (Farrugia 2014, 2017; Leahy, 2013; Leahy & Malins 2015; Malins & Kent, 2020; Meehan, 2017), reduce student trust in the legitimacy of drug information (Farrugia & Fraser 2017a), individualise responsibility for health (Farrugia 2014), obscure the complex socio-structural factors shaping drug-related harms (Farrugia 2014; Leahy 2013; Malins & Kent 2020), reduce empathy (Leahy & Malins), reduce health-seeking behaviours (Munro & Midford, 2001) and reproduce support for dominant prohibitionist

approaches (Malins & Kent 2020; Tupper, 2008). In this context then, *Smarter About Drugs* – with its focus on drug policy, open discussion and critical thinking – offers an exciting, and much-needed, innovation.

The evaluation

During 2019, *Smarter About Drugs* was trialled within two Victorian secondary school contexts: three year 11 Legal Studies classes at an independent girls' school and two year 10 Civics & Citizenship classes at a state co-educational secondary college. This evaluation is focussed on the success and impacts of the program in these contexts, and the potential for it to be used beyond them.

Specifically, this evaluation aims to investigate and report on:

1. the extent to which *Smarter About Drugs* is achieving its stated aims
2. any unintended effects (positive or negative) that *Smarter About Drugs* might be having
3. ways that *Smarter About Drugs* might be improved going forward
4. whether *Smarter About Drugs* should continue to be delivered and extended to other schools in Australia

The evaluation made use of pre- and post- test student surveys, student focus groups, and interviews with teachers and program developers to develop a rich picture of the benefits and limitations of the program as it currently stands, and to devise a set of recommendations going forward.

Findings

Overall, the evaluation finds that *Smarter About Drugs* represents a novel and positive step forward for the field of drug education. Its innovative curriculum model moves away from the paternalistic and expert-driven tendencies of conventional drug education; rather than position students as uninformed and vulnerable, the program affirms the value of participants' pre-existing knowledge and experience and seeks to mobilise and strengthen their capacity for critical thinking and democratic participation. This is achieved through an interactive and collaborative learning experience that engages and benefits both students and teachers.

Specifically, the evaluation found that the program successfully encourages and facilitates:

- open classroom discussion around drug use issues
- open discussions about drugs and drug policy between students and their families
- engagement of otherwise disengaged students in classroom learning
- development of critical thinking skills in relation to the complexity of drug related issues in society, including the social and structural drivers of drug-related problems
- student empathy for those experiencing drug-related problems
- new understandings and trust between students and teachers
- student capacity to seek information and evidence about drugs and drug policy
- student overall motivation and capacity to engage in drug policy debates.

The evaluation also found that the existing *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum pack and Q&A panel forum provide a solid base for meeting the overarching aims and objectives of the program. Furthermore, they have been met with a general level of support and enthusiasm from teachers and students. However, based on feedback from all stakeholders, it is clear that the curriculum pack design, Q&A forums, program delivery processes and evaluation procedures can all be improved upon in order to maximise program potentials.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *Smarter About Drugs* should continue to be refined and expanded to other schools around Australia. Refinements to the program should be based on the findings of this section as well as the findings and recommendations detailed in Section 6.

Recommendation 2: Refine the curriculum pack. Whilst the curriculum pack has successfully promoted student discussion and learning, there is considerable scope for improvement. In an effort to foster student engagement and interest, and better support teachers, the pack could be strengthened by including more stimulating ‘entry-level’ activities, collaborative learning exercises and a greater diversity of recent, relevant case studies. Recognising that each school and class group has its own specific needs, interests and strengths, teachers should be able to implement this material with a degree of flexibility.

Recommendation 3: Provide teachers with support around navigating controversial topics.

It is apparent that the *Smarter About Drugs* program may give rise to sensitive, controversial or personal discussions. Managed effectively, these conversations can make a valuable contribution to students' experience of the program, promoting relations of trust, empathy and understanding. Teachers should be informed of the positive potentials of open communication and supported to handle sensitive conversations comfortably and confidently. Consideration should also be given to how the program might encourage or support schools in providing institutional support to teachers around navigating these issues.

Recommendation 4: Provide students with the tools and resources to find practical harm reduction information should they need it.

Whilst the provision of harm reduction advice is not an explicit aim of the *Smarter About Drugs* program, students have voiced a desire for this form of education. Instead of encouraging teachers to directly give individual advice to students about harm reduction techniques for illicit drugs, which could pose a risk for the teachers, schools and the program, students should be made aware that such techniques and knowledges exist for all different drugs. To this end, it is recommended that the curriculum pack include links to a wide range of support services and websites that offer practical harm reduction information and support.

Recommendation 5: Continue to refine and offer Q&A panel forums.

To maximise the potentials of the Q&A forums, adequate preparation must be ensured. Preparation ought to encompass the spatial arrangement of the Q&A and the stability of any technology use to support it (e.g. video-streams). Students, presenters and discussion facilitators also need to be given sufficient guidance on the nature of the medium and how they can promote and participate in fluid, productive and appropriate discussion.

Recommendation 6: Target the resource to Units 1&2 (year 11) Legal Studies and/or Global/Australian Politics.

To ensure its distinctive value, *Smarter About Drugs* should remain outside of the health curriculum space. Situated within Legal Studies and/ or Global/ Australian politics, the program can retain its focus and objectives whilst building on the learnings accrued through its three-year trial. Year 11 remains a suitable target demographic for *Smarter About Drugs*, particularly given the maturity and life experience of the student cohort.

Recommendation 7: Market the program widely to schools and teachers and offer the program on a self-selecting basis. The level of buy-in from school administration and teachers play a critical role in determining how successfully the program is implemented. By opting for a process of self-selection, with clear information provided about the program's benefits and time commitments, a deeper level of interest, investment and value-alignment is more likely.

Recommendation 8: Provide support to teachers during the program to maximise engagement and solve any potential problems fast. Teachers should ideally believe in the value of the program and feel guided and supported through each stage of its delivery. Establishing early, open and effective lines of communication can play a key role in developing teacher buy-in and facilitating the smooth delivery of the program. Where possible, teachers should be consulted on the medium and frequency of communication.

Recommendation 9: Focus program engagement on the schools delivering the program, rather than the broader community. Whilst the value of community engagement is recognised, it has not proven particularly productive in this instance and may have served to distract from other areas of program improvement. Program developers' energy may be more productively invested into those who are directly responsible for program delivery, including school administrations and teachers.

Recommendation 10: Plan evaluation and continuous improvement processes into the program design. As *Smarter About Drugs* continues to expand, on-going evaluations should be conducted. The methods and procedures for undertaking this monitoring should be as unobtrusive as possible for all involved. To this end, survey methods employed should be entirely online with streamlined linking and consent processes. Focus groups and interviews have enabled rich, complimentary data for the evaluation and should be retained alongside pre- and post- test survey data, for fuller evaluations where resources allow. In other years, lighter forms of evaluation may be conducted to monitor progress and allow for continuous improvement.

2 Introduction

This report documents the findings from an evaluation of *Smarter About Drugs: A Conversation Pack* which was carried out in 2019.

Smarter About Drugs is a secondary school curriculum package collaboratively developed by three organisations: 1) Australia21, a non-profit think-tank founded in 2001 to ‘promote fair, sustainable and inclusive public policy through evidence-based research’; 2) the Australian Lions Drug Awareness Foundation (ALDAF), an organisation founded in 1984 “to promote the prevention of health and social harms related to the misuse of alcohol and other drugs”; and 3) Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP), a national youth-led organisation promoting “evidence-based research, drug policy reform, peer-based education and community advocacy” (Australia21 website 2020).

Smarter About Drugs is a unique school drug education resource that focuses on drug policy, rather than drug prevention, and has been designed to be delivered within a range of curriculum contexts, including Legal Studies, Civics and Politics classes, rather than just the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum. Instead of focusing on the health issues associated with drugs, *Smarter About Drugs* seeks to engage students in critical discussions about the role and impacts of drug policy in society and empower them to engage in broader drug policy debates. It comprises 13 lesson or ‘activity’ plans structured around Bjarne B. Jensen’s Investigate, Vision, Action, Change (IVAC) model (Jensen, 1993), which has been applied widely in health education research where developing student capacity for action is the goal (Carlson & Simovska, 2012; Llargues et al., 2017). The lessons are designed to encourage young people to think deeply and critically about issues associated with drugs (licit and illicit) by exploring their historical, social, political and legal contexts, examining how they affect communities, and thinking creatively about how things could be different in the future through active democratic participation.

Smarter About Drugs is also different to most school curriculum resources as it is youth-led and youth-focussed. Recognising that young people are sometimes the most affected by laws and policies regarding drugs yet also tend to have the least capacity to understand and shape those policies, the resource is designed as a ‘conversation pack’ that seeks to facilitate open two-way dialogue between teachers and students and empower students to be part of a meaningful ‘conversation’ about drugs in and beyond the classroom. *Smarter About Drugs*

also includes an optional interactive ‘Question and Answer’ (Q&A) forum at the end, where students are encouraged to build on what they have learnt by asking questions of a panel of Australian drug policy experts and making suggestions about the policy changes that they, as young people, would like to see implemented.

The impetus for the *Smarter About Drugs Conversation Pack* began in 2014, following a community workshop for young people hosted by Australia21 on the general theme of being ‘Smarter About Drugs’. Due to the success of that workshop, Australia21 established YoungA21, a youth governance group, to develop the theme into a stand-alone educational project. In 2016, Australia21 and YoungA21 partnered with ALDAF to develop a *Smarter About Drugs Conversation Pack* for use in secondary schools. In 2017 and 2018 the pack was trialled with year 11 Legal Studies students at an independent girls’ secondary school in Melbourne. Although no formal evaluation was conducted of these trials, in both cases the curriculum pack was reported to be successful, with students, teachers and the school providing positive feedback about their experiences and expressing interest in using it again.

In early 2019 Australia21, YoungA21 and ALDAF partnered with SSDP and successfully applied for Local Drug Action Team (LDAT) funding from the Alcohol & Drug Foundation (ADF) to refine the *Conversation Pack*, trial it in two secondary schools in Victoria (including the independent girls’ school), and commission this formal evaluation. Given the community focus of the LDAT grants, and their requirement for extensive engagement and consultation with local communities, the project team also established an Advisory Group, comprising teachers and parents from each school, as well as local council representatives, to help inform the trial.

The curriculum pack was then re-designed and mapped against the Victorian curriculum for potential use in Legal Studies, Civics, Politics and HPE classroom settings. Comprised of two booklets, one for teachers and one for students, the new pack’s aims were defined as follows:

- To encourage critical thinking and open discussion about the motivations for, and reasons why, people use alcohol and other drugs
- To facilitate critical analysis of the ways in which policies, laws or rules influence perceptions and behaviours around drugs
- To offer young people the tools to consult evidence, and identify pathways to participate in discussions and debates about drugs and drug policy

Smarter About Drugs was then, in the second half of 2019, delivered to three year 11 Legal Studies classes at the independent girls' school and two year 10 Civics & Citizenship classes (in their Legal Studies rotation of the course) at a state co-educational secondary college in Melbourne's inner east.

This evaluation is focussed on the success and impacts of the pack's delivery to these two secondary school contexts in 2019, and the potential for the pack to be used beyond these contexts. Specifically, this evaluation aims to investigate and report on:

1. the extent to which *Smarter About Drugs* is achieving its stated aims
2. any unintended effects (positive or negative) that *Smarter About Drugs* might be having
3. ways that *Smarter About Drugs* might be improved going forward
4. whether *Smarter About Drugs* should continue to be delivered and extended to other schools in Australia

The report begins with an overview of school-based drug education in Australia, in order to place *Smarter About Drugs* in relation to some of the gaps and limitations that have been identified in this field. The report then details the evaluation research methods, before discussing the research findings in two sections, one focussed on curriculum impacts (for students, teachers and communities) and the other on feedback and ideas relating to curriculum design and delivery. Analysis and recommendations are woven through the findings sections and then summarised at the end of each section. Overall, the report finds that *Smarter About Drugs* offers an important and useful alternative or addition to existing drug education in secondary schools and recommends that it should be further refined and offered to other schools around Australia.

3 School-based Drug Education in Context

School-based drug education has long featured as a cornerstone of Australian drug policy (Munro & Midford, 2001). Since the mid 1960s, the approach has been promoted and mobilised, mainly within secondary school health and physical education (HPE) curriculum, as a key means of reducing, delaying and preventing drug use amongst young people and the Australian population more broadly (Midford, 2007).

Early iterations of school drug education relied heavily on information provision, weighted towards emphasising the negative aspects or outcomes of drug use (Bennet, 2014; Guzys & Kendall, 2006; Midford, 2010). Programs typically made use of shock-tactics and exaggeration, designed to elicit fear, cultivate negative 'just say no' type attitudes towards drugs and deter drug uptake and use (Midford, 2000; 2007). While there was evidence that such approaches were generally good at increasing negative attitudes toward drugs, and reducing intentions to use drugs, at least in the short term, there was little to no evidence they were effective at preventing or reducing drug use itself (Bennet, 2014). Some studies even suggested drug education programs may in fact be leading to increases in illicit drug use amongst some young people (Werch & Owen, 2002), likely because they were fuelling scepticism and intrigue as well as fear.

Over time, Australian school drug education programs have evolved to encompass more varied and refined pedagogical strategies. Prevention of student drug uptake has increasingly been sought through a focus on personal development and skills acquisition, such as building self-esteem or practicing the skills needed to resist peer pressure (Bennet, 2014; Guzys & Kendall, 2006; Lee et al., 2016; Midford, 2000; 2010). Instead of just trying to scare students into saying 'no' to drugs, the focus has shifted to building their 'resiliency', 'self-regulation' and 'courage', and teaching the communication skills necessary in order to 'say no' (Hawthorne, 2001; and see for example NSW Department of Education, 2019).

Despite these improvements, however, there is limited evidence that they have been any more successful at preventing drug use than previous approaches. While some evaluations have shown short-term reductions in drug using behaviour and future intentions to use (Champion, Newton, Barret & Teesson, 2013; Teesson, Newton & Barrett, 2012) effect sizes have generally been small and the overall evidence has been variable (Agabio et al., 2015; Faggiano et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2016; Stockings et al., 2016). Scholars have further questioned

the methodological rigour of evaluations that target school-based drug education, highlighting “substantial problems” with the quality of evidence (Stockings et al., 2016, p. 287).

With recent studies showing that more than a quarter of illicit drug experimentation occurs between the ages of 16–17 years, and that young people between 18 to 24 years are more likely than all other age groups to use cannabis, MDMA and cocaine (Debenham et al., 2019), there is a compelling need for drug education to move beyond the elusive goal of prevention and offer students more practical information about how to manage drug use risks. Yet even though harm reduction has been a key part of broader Australian drug policy since the 1980s, and practical non-judgemental interventions like needle and syringe programs, supervised injecting centres and peer safer-use education initiatives, have saved countless lives, very little in the way of useful harm reduction information has found its way into schools. Although some contemporary drug education programs have been described as incorporating harm reduction (Midford, 2006; Midford, 2007; Munroe & Midford, 2001; Midford, McBride & Munro, 1998), this has usually, in effect, been limited to strategies for reducing alcohol-related harms, rather than those associated with illicit drugs. Students are still generally only being taught skills in how to *avoid* or abstain from illicit drugs, not how to practically minimise harm should they or their friends end up using them.

This concerning failure of school drug education to adequately incorporate harm reduction is perhaps not surprising when we take into account its fraught, morally loaded position at the intersections of prohibition, public health and young people. Drug prohibition and the discourses surrounding it have done a good job of positioning any non-pharmaceutical use of drug as not only criminal but also dangerously addictive, contaminating and a threat to good moral order (Manderson, 1995). Public health, notwithstanding its stake in rational science, has always been underpinned by moral ideals about what constitutes good health and judgments regarding individual moral responsibility for achieving it (Lupton, 1995). And young people – understood as less capable of rational decision-making, prone to experimentation and risk taking, self-focused and hedonistic, and yet existing in some kind of idealised passive, stage of moral innocence – have long been constituted as a group that needs particular moral guidance and protection (Tupper, 2014).

As a direct product of these three broader pathologising and criminalising forms of moral concern, school drug education has, unlike most contemporary Australian school curriculum, resisted more affirmative approaches that might frame young people as capable of deep critical thinking, understanding complexity, and managing competing risks responsibly (Cahill, 2007). Instead school drug education seems to have persisted with an approach involving largely uncritical provision of exaggerated, simplistic and biased information about the moral and health dangers of drugs (Farrugia & Fraser, 2017a). As Farrugia and Fraser (2017a, p. 3, citing Blackman 2004) note:

Drug education discourages critical thinking by providing information only against drugs rather than about them... rather than encouraging critical thought... the process actively selects certain scientific information to engineer scenarios in which adherence to normative health practices is the only rational option.

While seeking to empower students to make the 'right' moral choices about drugs, school drug education has been reluctant to empower them to think critically about those moral choices by exposing them to any information that might show positive or pleasurable aspects of drugs, methods for mediating drug harms, and the socio-political contexts through which those harms emerge (Farrugia 2014; Farrugia, Sear, & Fraser, 2018; Leahy & Malins, 2015; Malins & Kent, 2020; Munro & Midford, 2001, p. 106).

Not only does this approach underestimate the capacities of most young people to engage with complex ideas, it also underestimates the realities of young peoples' lived, and culturally mediated, experiences with drugs (Barratt, Lenton & Alan, 2013; Farrugia et al., 2018). This dissonance is likely to be producing a great deal of scepticism and a reluctance to engage with or take seriously the information being presented through drug education (Farrugia, 2014; 2017). It is also likely to be jeopardising students' trust in their teachers and schools and reducing the chances that those who are already experiencing difficulties with illicit drugs will feel comfortable seeking help from them.

The willingness of students to disclose drug use problems is also likely to be reduced through the shame and stigma that tend to be mobilised as deterrence tactics within drug education. Drug consumption tends to be presented within classroom activities as inherently regrettable, shameful and disgusting (Farrugia, 2014; Farrugia & Fraser, 2017a), particularly for girls and women (Farrugia, 2017). A range of negative stereotypes are also often reproduced about

those who use drugs (Bennet, 2014; Meehan, 2017), including, for example, that they are lazy, selfish, embarrassing, immature, thoughtless, lacking intelligence, violent, deceptive or dangerous. These stereotypes are likely to be reducing student empathy for those who experience problems with drugs and affecting their willingness to offer help. And for those who use drugs, internalised shame may well be making problematic drug use more likely, at the same time as reducing the chances they will feel comfortable seeking help.

By presenting health as an individual responsibility yet failing to give students the tools with which to responsibly manage the health risks associated with their own and others' drug use (Teesson, Newton & Barrett, 2012; Tupper, 2014), school drug education is setting them up very poorly for life ahead. It is also denying them the capacity to see, and intervene in, the kinds of policies that are in fact responsible for the overwhelming proportion of drug-related harm in society. By obscuring the role of the state, via policy, law and law enforcement, in shaping harm, it is quite possible that drug education is working to implicitly reproduce support for existing prohibitionist approaches (Tupper, 2008) and preventing exploration of alternatives (Meehan, 2017).

Young people in Australia are dying each summer at festivals after taking MDMA and other party drugs, not only because they have insufficient knowledge about how to manage the risks but also because they generally have no way to test what is in their drugs, and are often forced to accept a range of increased health risks as a trade-off against getting caught by police sniffer dog operations (Malins, 2019). Similarly, while some of the potential health harms of cannabis use can be mitigated through education of safer use strategies, reducing the chances young cannabis users will develop psychosis might best be achieved by regulating manufacture and supply to ensure a safer ratio between the drug's psychoactive (THC) and anti-psychotic (CBD) components (ElSohly et al., 2016). By focussing only on health at the level of the individual, school drug education works to responsabilise young people for problems that, in many cases, actually require government and societal level fixes.

For many reasons then, contemporary school drug education is in need of urgent transformation (Farrugia, 2018; Farrugia & Fraser, 2017b; Farrugia et al., 2018). This is a call recognised and repeated at multiple levels of government. Both the recent *Parliamentary Inquiry for Drug Law Reform* (2019) and NSW coronial inquest into music festival deaths (State Coroner's Court of New South Wales, 2019) have highlighted the 'vital need' for 'enhanced'

and 'more nuanced' drug education programs. In this context, *Smarter About Drugs* presents an exciting opportunity for innovation because it offers a way to deliver drug education outside of the highly moralised HPE curriculum space, with its narrow focus on individualised health risk and harms, and attempts instead to engage young people with broader 'questions of power, responsibility, ethics and care' (Farrugia, 2017, p.295). By seeking to encourage more nuanced understandings of the complexities of drug use problems in society, as well as more respectful and accurate constructions of students as potentially engaged and politically capable subject-citizens (Farrugia, 2018; Farrugia & Fraser, 2017a), *Smarter About Drugs* may well fill an important gap.

This evaluation, then, seeks to determine the capacity of *Smarter About Drugs* to deliver on these aims and to assess any other impacts – positive or negative – the curriculum might be having. It also aims to examine how it might be improved upon should it be expanded beyond the two trial schools and offered to other schools around Australia. Based on this literature review, it is clear there is a need for drug education to provide more honest, critical and complex understandings of drugs for secondary students, beyond the narrow confines of drug prevention and the mobilisation of individual responsibility for health. As such, a youth-led and policy-focused resource like *Smarter About Drugs* constitutes an important intervention and may well be just the kind of innovation that is needed.

4 Methods

Most school drug education evaluations tend to be conducted by the researcher-practitioners who have designed or developed the intervention, and who therefore have a vested interest in presenting it in the best possible light (Gorman, 2015). Most also tend to only ask questions relating to the extent to which the intervention has moved students toward drug-avoiding behaviours, such as through increased knowledges about drug harms, negative attitudes toward drugs, and drug-avoiding intentions (see for example Champion, Teesson, & Newton, 2013; Lester, et al., 2014; Russell-Bennett, Rundle-Thiele, Leo, & Dietrich, 2013). Few ask questions, for example, about other potential impacts the intervention may be having, such as on drug-related harm, social relations, shame, stigma, empathy or support for prohibition policies. By contrast, this evaluation has been independently conducted by researchers with no investment in the program or organisations beyond the scope of the evaluation contract. It has been designed from the outset to ask questions about the program's broad impacts, including possible unintended impacts – positive and negative – that it might be having on students, teachers and communities.

The research took a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to assess different aspects of the program. It involved six key components:

1. Review of the curriculum materials
2. Quasi-experimental pre-test (baseline) and post-test (follow-up) surveys of students participating in the program
3. Observations of Q&A sessions
4. Focus Groups with a selection of students who completed the program at each school
5. Qualitative interviews with teachers who delivered the curriculum at each school
6. Qualitative interviews with program developers (from Australia21, ALDAF and SSDP)

The pragmatic approach to evaluation adopted here differs from the traditional scientific method in that it seeks to appraise how a specific program is used and to determine the results of that use, rather than seeking to disprove a particular theory relating to a body of knowledge (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Because this evaluation not only sought to measure *Smarter About Drugs'* efficiency in facilitating students' critical thinking and capacity for informed discussions about drug policy, but also sought to identify a range of unintended

effects and to ascertain how the program might be improved, a pragmatic approach was deemed the most suitable.

This pragmatic quasi-experimental approach does not have the same rigour as true experimental design, given that there is no control group and extraneous factors shaping changes cannot be ruled out, including the effects of the baseline survey on the follow-up survey results. An additional limitation of the quasi-experimental design is the difficulty in generalising results to other populations, given that the information collected is subjective and specific to participants recruited into the evaluation and the schools involved. However, these methods can still give a good indication of the impacts of an intervention and are approaches that are widely used in impact evaluations of small-scale educational interventions such as this (see for example Carlsson & Simovska, 2012; Chang, Chang, Lee et al., 2015; Jourdan, Christensen, Darlington et al., 2016; Midford, Cahill, Foxcroft et al., 2012).

A key strength of this research design is the triangulation of data, which can increase the validity of results by allowing for them to be investigated from multiple perspectives (Bamberger, 2012). By combining quantitative and qualitative questions in the surveys, and by triangulating the surveys with qualitative focus groups and teacher interviews, a richer sense of the role of the curriculum pack in shaping any changes can be ascertained than if quantitative methods were used exclusively.

The research methods were approved by both RMIT University's Human Research Ethics Committee, and The Victorian Department of Education and Training.

The Surveys

The baseline and follow-up survey instruments were designed to assess both qualitative and quantitative changes in students' knowledges, attitudes and behaviours following participation in the *Smarter About Drugs* program. The surveys were built using an online survey software tool (Qualtrics), and included a combination of 15 scaled, multiple choice and short open-answer questions. Both surveys included the exact same 15 questions with the addition in the follow-up survey of 13 questions at the end which sought feedback relating to students' experiences of the curriculum and ideas for improvement. The baseline survey was estimated to take approximately 10 minutes to complete and the follow-up survey approximately 15.

Teachers were asked to introduce the research to students at the beginning of their first *Smarter About Drugs* class, forward them the baseline survey web link via email and allow them time to complete it before starting the curriculum. They were asked to similarly allow time for students to complete the follow-up survey at the end of their final *Smarter About Drugs* class.

The surveys were designed so that students' baseline and follow-up survey data could be anonymously linked via a random code emailed to them on completion of the first and entered by them before completing the second. All students were asked to complete the surveys in class, but only survey data from students who had returned signed permission forms (signed by both the student and a parent or guardian) with their linking code entered at the top, would be included in the final analysis. Different but matching versions of the surveys were sent to each of the two schools so that school data could be both separately and collectively analysed.

Nearly all eligible students from the independent girls' school completed the baseline survey in their first classes (62), however due to a communication breakdown the follow-up survey was only administered in one of the three final classes. An error in the way the software provider had set up the follow-up survey to link participant data was also identified at this point, resulting in a new follow-up survey link to be sent to all eligible students for completion about two weeks after their *Smarter About Drugs* classes had ended. 32 of these follow-up surveys were completed, however only 24 of those surveys could be linked to returned consent forms, resulting in 24 usable linked pre- and post-test surveys for this school overall.

At the co-educational state secondary college, unfortunately no usable survey data was obtained. One of the two classes did not run the baseline survey in the first class and while the other class did, they did not run the follow-up survey in the final class, and emailing students afterwards elicited no responses.

Observations of Q&A Panel Sessions

Observational notes were collected by the principle researcher about each of the school's panel Q&A sessions. The researcher was able to observe one of the sessions in person and the other via recorded footage collected by the program developers.

Student Focus Groups

One focus group was held at each school with a select group of students who had completed both the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum and the Q&A panel session, and had been invited or encouraged to participate by their teachers. Both focus groups were facilitated by the principal researcher, audio-recorded, and semi-structured around a range of themes relating to students' experiences of the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum and suggestions for improvements. At the independent girls' school 6 students participated in a focus group that lasted approximately 50 minutes, and at the state school 10 students participated in a focus group lasting approximately 40 minutes. Both involved animated discussions about the curriculum and ideas for improvement, with all student participants contributing to the discussions, resulting in rich data for analysis.

Teacher and Program Developer Interviews

Qualitative semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were also conducted with four teaching staff who delivered the curriculum (all three at the independent girls' school and one of the two teachers at the state school) as well as representatives from Australia21 (2), ALDAF (1) and SSDP (1) who were involved in some way in the design or delivery of the Pack. Interview participants were asked to share their experiences of *Smarter About Drugs* and their ideas on what they felt worked and what might be improved going forward. Interviews were all conducted by the principal researcher and lasted an average of approximately 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Survey data was analysed using the Qualtrics online survey software tool, which enabled the production of graphical and numerical comparative data outputs. Given the small number of survey response combinations able to be used for analysis (24), no changes in survey data from baseline to follow-up will be able to be seen as statistically significant in terms of program impacts. However, the data can still be used to indicate general trends, and by linking it to the focus group and teacher interview data, a compelling sense of the benefits and limitations of the curriculum for students emerges.

Focus group and interview recordings were transcribed and thematically coded using both existing survey themes and emerging themes. Given the nature of focus group recordings, it was not possible to separate out each student's individual contributions to the discussion in

the transcriptions and analysis. Contributions from individual teachers and program developers have also not been distinguished in the report, but simply labelled 'teacher' or 'program developer' in order to maximise anonymity given the small number of participants. Interview and focus group narratives were linked where relevant to survey data and analysed concurrently in order to provide a richer picture of emerging issues and ideas.

The analysis documented in this report has been structured around two key thematic areas: curriculum impacts and program delivery. The first predominantly draws on the survey, focus group and teacher interview data to provide an overall picture of the key strengths and limitations of the program, including any unanticipated effects it may be having. The second focuses predominantly on the focus group, teacher and developer interview data to identify potential benefits and limitations to the way the program has been delivered, and ideas for improving these processes and materials going forward. It also includes a brief review of the evaluation research processes, including the problems that arose in relation to survey data collection, in order to make recommendations regarding future program evaluations.

5 Findings and Discussion A: Curriculum Impacts

This section of the report details the findings of the evaluation in relation to *Smarter About Drugs* success in fulfilling its aims, and any broader impacts the curriculum may be having. It brings an analysis of the baseline and follow-up student survey data, together with focus group and interview narratives, to paint a picture of the ways that the program is shaping outcomes for students, teachers and schools.

The official aims of *Smarter About Drugs* are:

- To encourage critical thinking and open discussion about the motivations for, and reasons why, people use alcohol and other drugs
- To facilitate critical analysis of the ways in which policies, laws or rules influence perceptions and behaviours around drugs
- To offer young people the tools to consult evidence, and identify pathways to participate in discussions and debates about drugs and drug policy

In assessing the program's capacity to fulfil these aims, the research and findings have been structured according to the following components:

1. Facilitating open discussion
2. Facilitating critical thinking
3. Increasing capacity to search for more information or evidence
4. Encouraging participation in broader discussions and debates
5. Additional benefits
6. Summary and recommendations

5.1 Facilitating open discussion

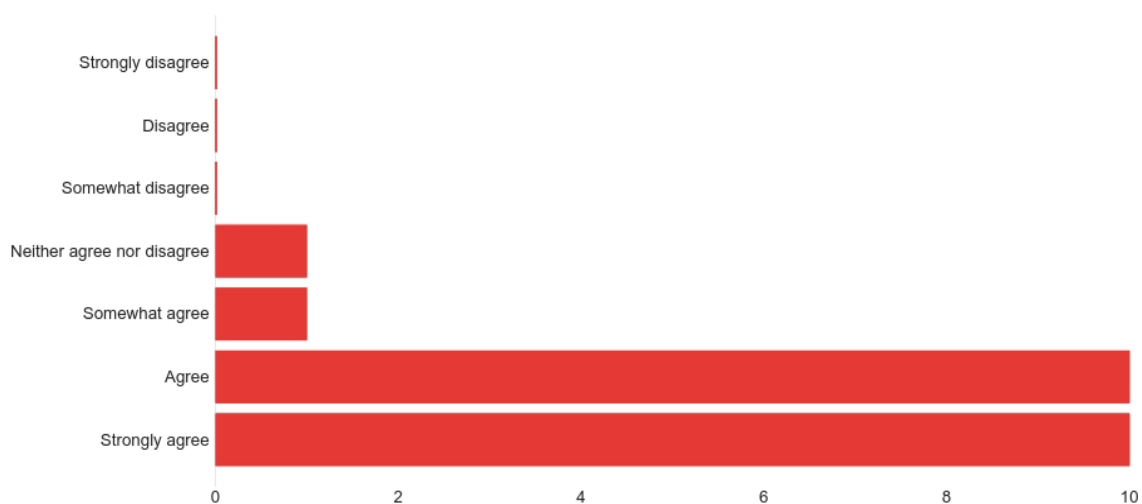
One of the key features of the *Smarter About Drugs* program, and something that sets it apart from most other drug education programs, is its potential to facilitate open discussion and dialogue between teachers and students in the classroom. Teachers are often afraid to discuss drugs, especially illicit drugs, in an open and honest way due to the risk of being accused of encouraging or endorsing their use. As one teacher noted: "*It's an issue that schools don't actually discuss; it's never ever talked about*". School students are also understandably likely to be afraid of discussing drugs openly, given the the risks of punishment or stigmatisation

associated with suspected use. Indeed, students in the focus groups suggested that discussing the topic of drugs in school contexts generally felt “embarrassing”, “scary” or “weird”.

Designed around a series of conversational questions, and positioned within a Legal Studies or Civics context, the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum has been able to mitigate some of these difficulties and create an informal context where students felt more open and comfortable discussing drug use. Teachers reported “spirited discussion” and high levels of engagement amongst their pupils. One noted that “they really do have some very worthwhile things to say and often they don’t sort of have that voice so it’s really good that you actually gave them that voice” (Teacher).

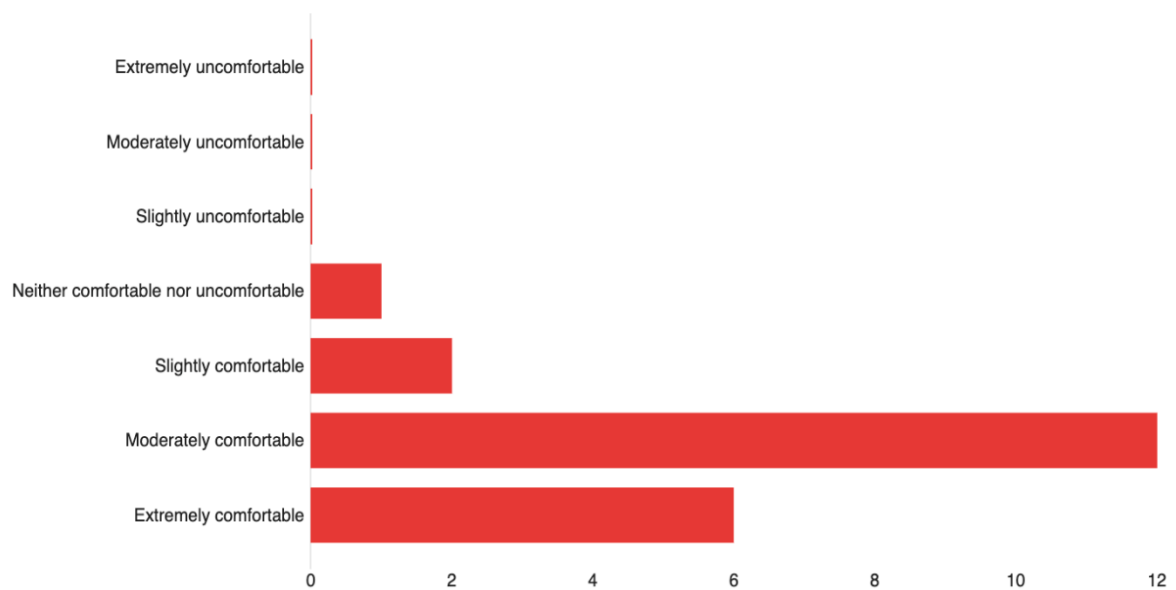
Data from the post-test survey feedback section regarding open discussion in the classroom was generally very positive. Students seemed to think that teachers had done a good job at facilitating open discussion, with no students disagreeing and most agreeing or strongly agreeing (see Table 1).

Table 1. My teacher encouraged / facilitated open discussion about drugs and drug policy in the classroom.



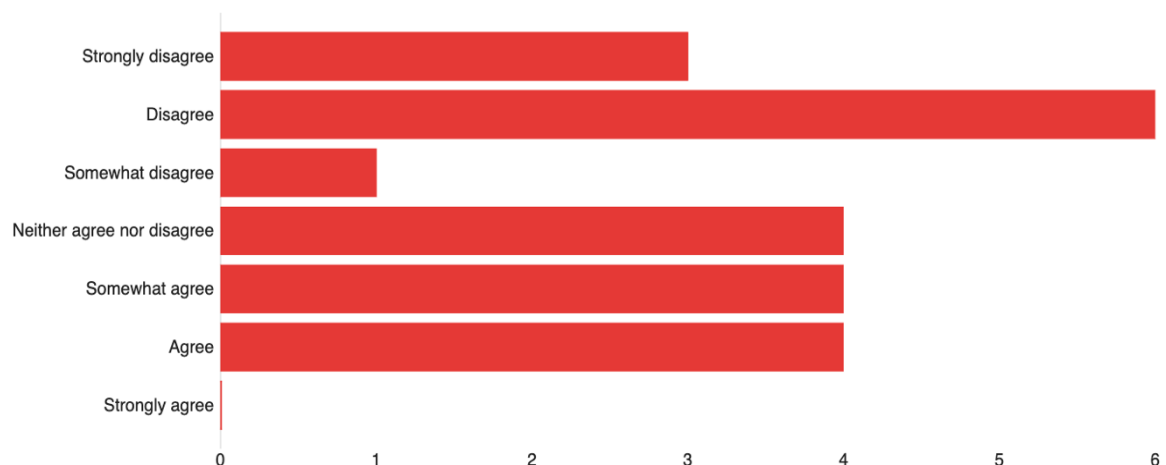
They generally reported feeling comfortable talking openly about drugs in the classroom, with most reporting moderate or extreme levels of comfort (see Table 2).

Table 2. How comfortable did you feel talking openly about drugs in the classroom?



Despite this, however, the capacity for students to be completely open when discussing drugs was still limited, with almost a third agreeing or somewhat agreeing that they avoided saying some things through fear of stigma or other negative consequences (see Table 3).

Table 3. I avoided saying or asking some things about drug use/ drug policy in the classroom that I would have liked to say or ask because of fear of stigma or other negative consequences.



This reticence is not surprising, given the high numbers of students likely to have already used or witnessed the use of alcohol and illicit drugs, and the personal and legal risks that surround disclosure of such activity. It is perhaps instead surprising that more than half of the students

disagreed and did not recall having to hold anything much back from the discussions. However, it does suggest that *Smarter About Drugs* could potentially explore ways that teachers and students might be encouraged to feel even safer engaging in open discussion.

In any case, compared to the ways in which drugs are usually discussed in schools, the program certainly seemed to generate good levels of open dialogue, as described by students in the focus groups:

It brought up a lot of really good conversations. I think it led us to be more open. Our teacher's quite open anyway, but it brought up more of a conversation to discuss these things and I feel that at schools we don't really get to discuss these things quite openly with teachers, but it allowed us to get a better understanding of the world and what's going on and how to be smart about things. It was good for conversation (Student in focus group).

It helps you make your own opinion, but you also can listen to others... I really enjoyed hearing my peers and having an open discussion; I think at this age it's really important (Student in focus group).

The collegial, participatory, and conversational nature of the program seems notably distinct from more traditional 'expert' teacher-driven, hierarchical modes of drug education. Indeed, curriculum delivery was not a 'one way' process but rather a collaborative one where students felt their experiences/ knowledge were valued and could be heard. In this style of teaching, it is not only the students who are engaged in visible learning:

Student A: *I think our teachers almost underestimated how much we've experienced, because they were very surprised by some of the stories that we had... They realised that we have been through stuff and we have experienced stuff and they were surprised... I almost thought they expected us to be like, 'oh my god, what's that?'*

Student B: *Yeah, we were teaching them*

Student A: *We were teaching our teacher*

(Student focus group discussion).

This more democratic and dialogical approach was cited by students as a key strength of the program. It seemed to help foster more active engagement, lend legitimacy to the program, and make students feel more empowered:

I liked that we got to ask our own questions rather than the teachers asking us all the questions and being like – what do you think of this? A lot of it was student-based, which I think was really good because we're the ones that are learning about it. We're the ones that need to know, so we should ask a lot of the questions. The teachers would direct us, but us being able to ask what we've always wanted to - but there's always been the stigma that we couldn't - was really comforting because it was like, you won't be judged on what you ask and you can ask whatever you want (Student in focus group).

I think that I am more educated about drugs and the discussion of drugs. I also think that teachers are now more educated on the issue which makes the students feel more open to discussion without judgement (Student survey response).

Whilst barriers around openly discussing drugs were not entirely eliminated by *Smarter About Drugs*, it is clear that students generally reported much greater freedom and confidence to communicate their ideas and experiences without fear of judgement. For teachers, the program similarly helped establish a relatively neutral learning environment where they felt they could more openly and honestly communicate with students. This kind of positive and reciprocal learning experience is particularly unique within the context of drug education, a field long critiqued for its reliance on didactic teaching methods and fear tactics (Meehan, 2017). In contrast to more paternalistic or 'expert driven' modes of drug education, which may (re)produce stigma and student scepticism (Farrugia & Fraser, 2017), *Smarter about Drugs* may actually help to foster trust and openness between students and teachers. This finding is particularly salient when considering the conditions of help-seeking behaviour amongst young people. As recent research suggests, the approachability and trustworthiness of teachers are key enablers for help-seeking for drug problems during adolescence (Berridge, McCann, Cheetham & Lubman, 2017).

By helping to instil a more engaging and inclusive classroom climate, the *Smarter About Drugs* may also have a broader, positive effect on the democratic capacity-building of schools. As Torney-Purta and colleagues' (2001) research demonstrates, "[t]he extent to which students

experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers has been found to be an even more vital part of civic education” (p. 137). Indeed, studies have repeatedly highlighted that an open classroom climate for discussion is positively tied to democratic values such as political trust and tolerance (Campbell 2008; Dassonneville et al., 2012; Persson 2015; Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Maurissen, Ellen Claes & Carolyn Barber, 2018). The conversational model of the curriculum design and its location within a legal studies, politics or civics context, rather than health context, where evidence and debate are likely to be overridden by the moral imperatives of health, seem to be the key elements driving the program’s success in this measure.

5.2 Facilitating critical thinking

The kind of open discussion detailed above is an important key pre-cursor to the facilitation of critical thinking. Fostering critical thinking requires that knowledge and information is presented in a way that is not didactic but encouraging of questioning and debate. Rather than conveying facts to students who are expected to recall them later, knowledge must be here conceptualised as multiple and fluid: something that can be approached from different perspectives and requires ongoing inquiry and consideration. Comparing *Smarter About Drugs* to earlier drug education they had received, students described its focus on this kind of knowledge as a key highlight and point of difference:

All of the other drug education we’ve got at school and that most schools get is that they show you just horrific videos and horrible pictures of worst-case scenarios and just try and create as much fear, and not that much knowledge, because if you’re knowledgeable about something, they assume you’re going to do it... It’s unrealistic to have programs that are designed purely to just scare people and to stop people ever doing anything drug-related in this situation. I think it was well-designed in that aspect (Student in focus group).

[other drug education] just goes like... ‘don’t do drugs; it’s bad’... ‘Whatever you do or how you use them, it will all be bad’. Whereas this goes into, well... knowledge. It’s just all about knowledge (Student in focus group).

Students gave examples of how *Smarter About Drugs* had increased their awareness of the complexity and diversity of drug problems in society and the reasons for them:

[In previous drug education] we never learned about painkillers, which was so surprising to me, because it's the biggest drug issue, drugs that you can buy legally kill the most people... [previous drug education] never touched on drug issues that affected, I guess, areas where people had a lot of opportunity. It was very much tying in poverty and bad drugs and not being employed and not living a good life, all wrapped in one, and [implying] that if you were an upstanding citizen, then it [drug problems] was kind of irrelevant, which is, I guess – like a cultural class thing as well (Student in focus group).

I think it allowed us to stop pretending that drugs wasn't an issue and imagining that people don't take them because they do and people get harmed by them... I thought it was just a minority and that they were over there, and we were in this [wealthy area] bubble [where] no one did anything or whatever, and... thinking back to myself a year ago, I didn't know any of this (Student in focus group).

We were talking about this homeless guy who went to drugs, but he was beat up by his uncle when he was younger... it's not just like that person gets into drugs and [then] they're stuffed up, it's usually like lots of things... but we read that [initially] and we go: 'drugs: that's why' (Student in a focus group).

I think it kind of empowers us just to think about [drug use] from a deeper point of view and just have a more proper, like more of a proper opinion given that we know I guess a bit more about the whole situation, what is currently being done to help it and what could also be done to help it further (Student in focus group).

I think what's the most interesting thing is, as someone said before, it's like the war on drugs has failed, so probably that issue should be seen as more of a health issue, not a criminal issue... that should be dealt with in society and not condemned or criminalised... that [was]... very interesting to talk about (Student in focus group).

Teachers also noted how *Smarter About Drugs* helped open up student awareness of the realities of others' experiences and situations, outside of the more sheltered existences many of them existed within:

These kids... they live in this [wealthy neighbourhood] bubble... a lot of them have, as everyone does, a lot going on in their lives, but it is a very sheltered, very

nurturing school, very supportive and I think, they sometimes don't have the perspective of what it's like for other people, or other kids growing up (Teacher).

They were asked to think about things... like some of these kids had never thought about stuff which they were presented with, like it was never on their radar (Teacher).

By creating a space for students to more comfortably share their experiences, the curriculum also enabled teachers to learn new things about their students and helped students to see how their peers' realities sometimes differed from their own:

I think [the open discussion] was particularly good because it was just so interesting to see that there's so many people who, this is just something that has never affected their life, they've never thought about before... and then there's other people... people sharing their stories and about how especially addiction has made their family suffer... people who have known someone who has passed away from an overdose or that kind of thing. And it was interesting to see that disparity (Teacher).

[One normally withdrawn student shared her experiences of how] the police actually, you know, harass young people... [and] you know... I think it's good for kids who don't have any experience of that (Teacher).

Overall both teachers and students seemed to generally feel that *Smarter About Drugs* had helped them to develop more complex understandings of drug use issues. Open discussions enabled participants to develop 'deeper', contextualised insights that weighed and incorporated diverse (and sometimes divergent) forms of knowledge, experience and lay expertise. Indeed, participant reports begin to demonstrate more sophisticated understandings of the underlying drivers of drug use and drug 'problems', including an expanded focus on the social, cultural, and economic determinants of health and health behaviours.

Importantly, *Smart About Drugs* empowered students to effectively use this knowledge, to mobilise it to think critically about how drug issues are presented and dealt with in society. In contrast to conventional drug education, which traditionally encourages adherence to established norms and a consensual view of drug policy, the program offered a powerful and

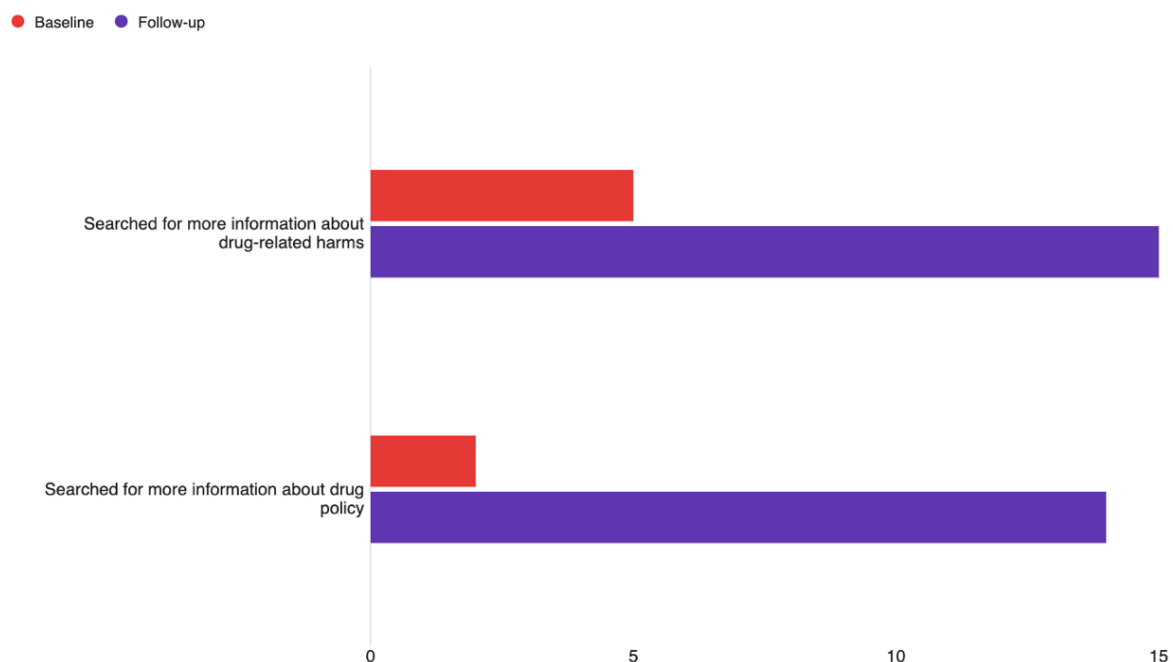
unique space to question how we as a society think about and enact drug policy. These critical thinking skills are likely to prove valuable for students in other areas of study and help inform more active modes of democratic participation beyond the classroom. As Levinson & Brantmeier (2006) assert, “urging critical thinking, not agreement based on internalized authority structures, is essential to nurturing legitimate participants in future contexts of democratic engagement” (p. 334).

5.3 Increasing capacity to search for more information or evidence

Teaching students how to go beyond what is presented in the classroom, and to seek out further information and evidence, is another important aspect of *Smarter About Drugs*. Based around a series of questions for investigation and discussion, rather than a set of facts to be delivered, knowledge-seeking is built into the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum. This ideally makes the classrooms more engaging and dynamic places for teachers and students, but also teaches students critical research skills that they can use beyond the program. Indeed, one teacher commended the program for giving students “*a lot of research skills*’ and skills in ‘*looking at something objectively*” (Teacher).

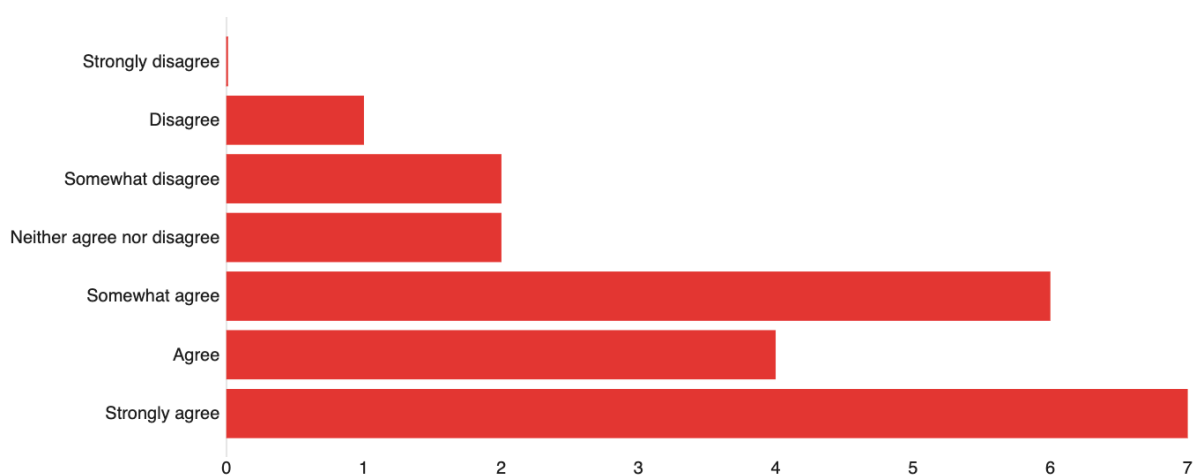
In response to the statement ‘In the last 6 months, I have engaged in one or more of the following actions regarding Australia's drug policies’, data showed post-program increases in relation to both searching for more information about drug-related harms and searching for more information about drug policy (see Table 4).

Table 4. In the last 6 months, I have engaged in one or more of the following actions regarding Australia's drug policies:



Survey data also suggests the vast majority of respondents (77% or 17/22) were also more motivated to seek out information related to alcohol and other drugs as a result of their engagement in the program (see Table 5).

Table 5. After participating in the *Smarter About Drugs* program, I am more likely to seek health information about alcohol and other drugs.



These findings suggest the positive effects that *Smarter About Drugs* may be having beyond the classroom. Indeed, it is apparent that the critical thinking and open discussion facilitated

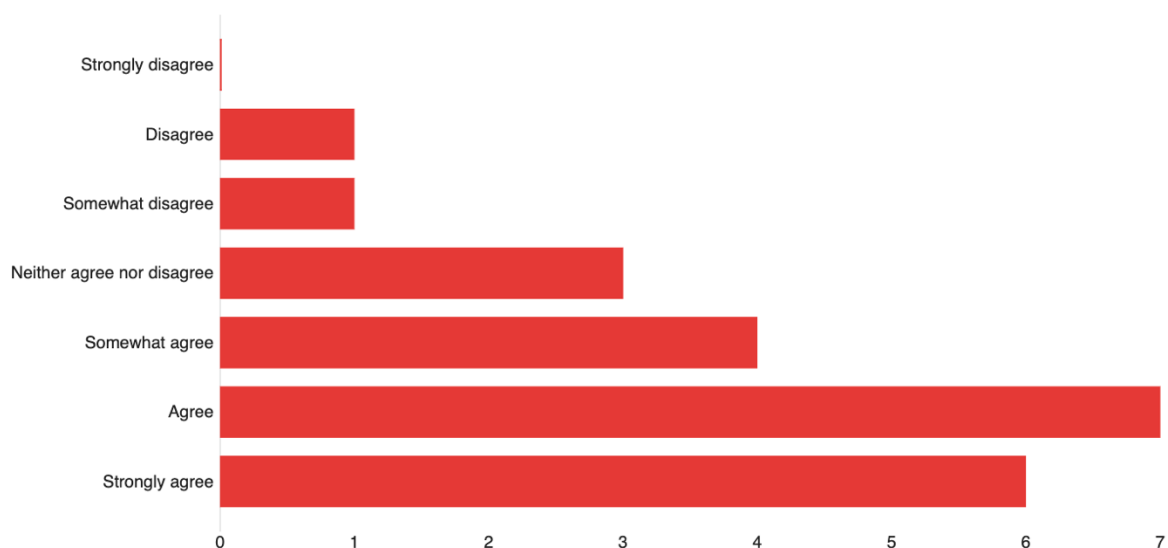
by the program could be inspiring students to undertake independent forms of inquiry and knowledge seeking. As the survey data above reveals, this relates to both health information surrounding drugs and the policy instruments that govern drug use in our society.

5.4 Encouraging participation in broader discussions and debates

A key thing that sets *Smarter About Drugs* apart from other secondary school curriculum, not just in the drug education field but also more broadly, is its explicit intention to get students participating in public policy discussions and debates beyond the classroom. To do this, it needs to motivate students to want to participate in such debates, give them the skills and confidence to participate and foster the belief that their participation will be worthwhile or effective.

Survey feedback data also revealed that vast majority of respondents (80% or 17/22) felt that *Smarter About Drugs* had to some degree motivated them to find out more and/or speak about drug policy (see Table 6).

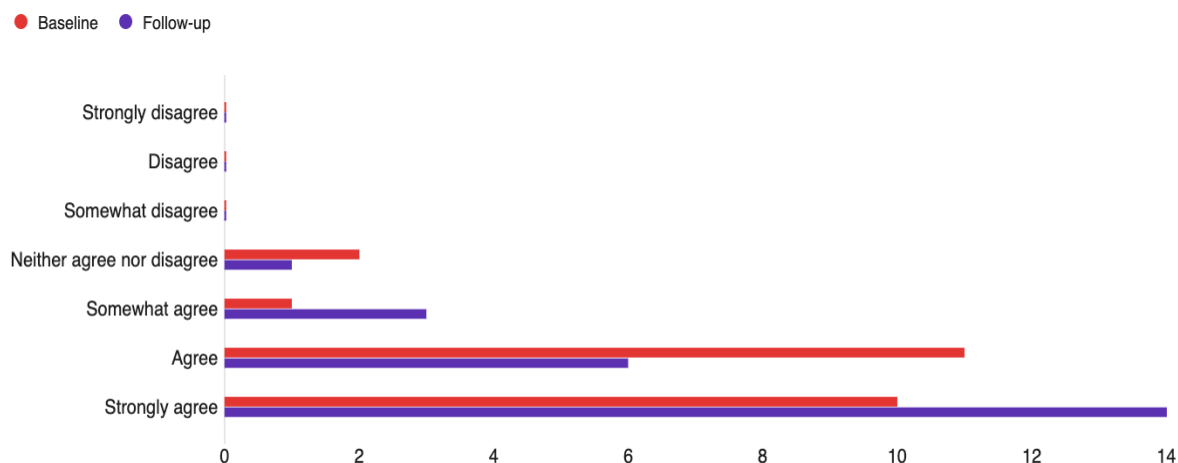
Table 6. The lessons motivated me to find out more and/or speak out about drug policy.



While it is difficult to determine how much student responses here related directly to speaking out, rather than information seeking, it still suggests a positive shift toward wanting to contribute in some way. Indeed, one student expanded on their survey responses to say that having done the program '*makes me want to contribute and involve myself in more discussion revolving around the issue*' (Student survey response).

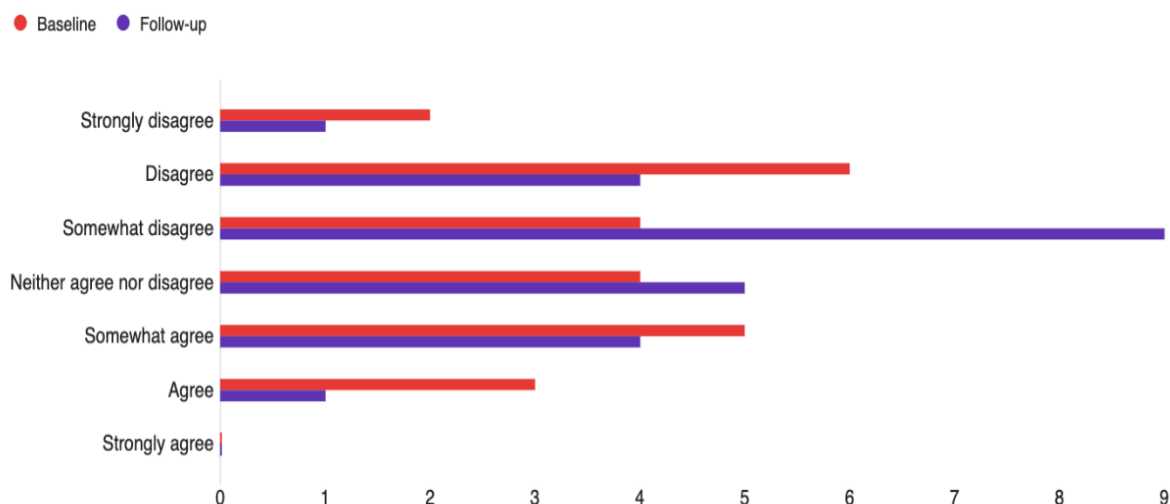
Motivation to participate also generally requires first seeing an issue as important. Data from the student surveys suggest only a very slight overall increase in the average perceived importance of drug policy and drug law reform after completing *Smarter About Drugs* (see Table 7).

Table 7. I think the issue of drug policy and/or drug law reform is important.



Willingness to participate in discussion or debate is also likely to be shaped by the extent to which students feel their contributions will be taken seriously. Survey responses suggest that students have quite diverse views on this question, with a general trend away from more extreme positions being taken before the program and toward more ambivalent positions after. Overall, however, the mean score for agreement went down slightly (3.54 to 3.42) (see Table 8).

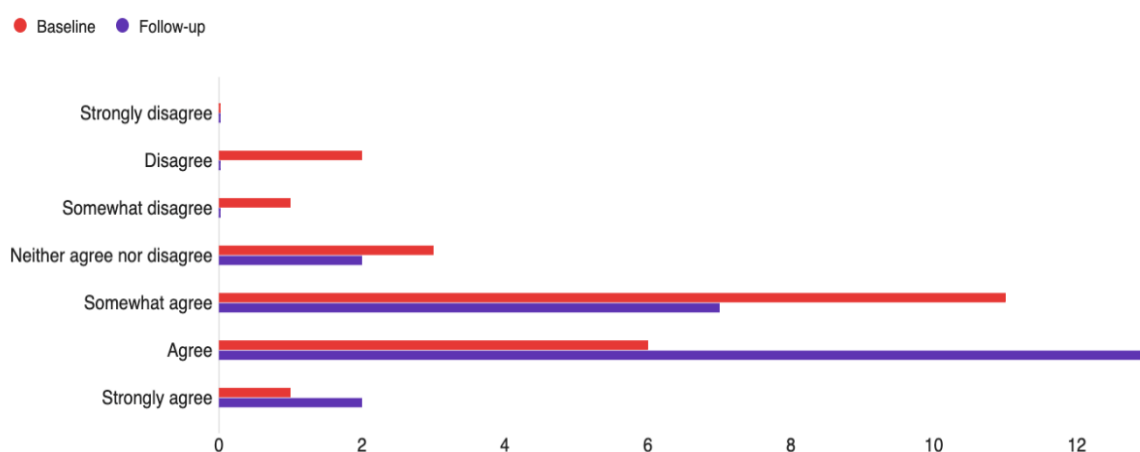
Table 8. I feel that the views of young people are taken seriously in drug policy discussions.



One explanation for this ambivalent shift could be that the program has made previously sceptical students realise there is capacity for them to shape debates while giving those with previously more optimistic views greater insights into the difficulties surrounding drug policy advocacy. If so, this would further support the program's work in encouraging critical thinking.

Another factor likely to shape student willingness to contribute to drug policy debates is the extent to which they feel they have the right tools to do so. Survey data suggests the program had a positive impact on students' sense that they had the knowledge and skills they needed (see Table 9).

Table 9. I feel I have the knowledge and/or the 'know-how' to contribute to discussions about Australia's current drug policies

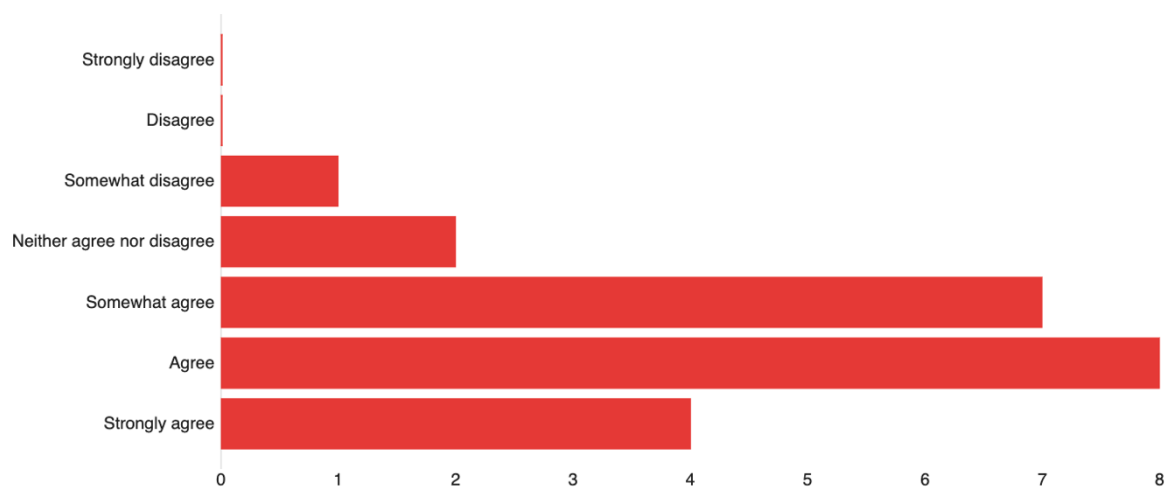


This was also reflected in some of the focus group discussions, with one student saying:

I think because we've learnt about it and we've had discussions in class, it makes me more maybe confident to talk about it with other people because we've learnt how to open up the discussion, like learn about what's going on, ask questions and stuff like that (Student in focus group).

Survey feedback data also suggests that the majority of respondents (89% or 19/22) thought that *Smarter About Drugs* had helped them to know the ways in which they could potentially contribute to policy change (see Table 10).

Table 10. The lessons helped me understand the pathways that exist for taking action to achieve policy change.



In terms of students feeling comfortable contributing to discussions and debates about drug policy however, survey responses were less positive, with average reported comfort levels remaining roughly the same, and even decreasing slightly, in relation to both the statement ‘I feel comfortable speaking openly about drug policy (including with friends, on social media or other forums)’ and ‘I feel comfortable starting a conversation with my family about Australia's drug policies’.

These slight decreases, however, were contradicted by other survey data showing increases in student reports of actual participation. In response to the statement ‘In the last 6 months, I have engaged in one or more of the following actions regarding Australia's drug policies’, data showed post-program increases relating to starting or contributing to a conversation with family or friends (up from 13 to 20) and signing a petition (from 0 responses to 2). Data also showed a decrease in those who reported *not* engaging in any action related to Australia’s drug policy (from 15 responses to 3).

Focus group discussions also seemed to contradict those slight decreases related to comfort, with several students commenting on their newfound capacity to more freely discuss drug policy issues with family members:

I remember when we did [the program], I used to go home and talk to my parents about it and be like, ‘what’s their opinion?’, and their opinions would be so different to mine. I think it would be just like, open for more discussion and be like,

'so why do you think this?', and I'd be like, 'well blah blah blah', and have a healthy debate about it (Student in focus group).

Yeah, it's just really interesting to see how parents and families react to when I say 'it should be a health issue, not a criminal issue', but Mum would be like, 'oh, why is that? Why do you think that?', I share my opinion and she shares her opinion. But I think the ages... the generations and the different ethic, it's really important to talk about (Student in focus group).

I think also it allows me to come home with more knowledge and with my dad or my mum or whatever... I'd be like, 'well drugs are bad, but let me tell you why'... like 'you have to consider things' and stuff, and he'd be like, 'oh that's very interesting that you're learning that'... I think it's also good for the parents... because I think it also opens their mind up too (Student in focus group).

Collectively then, survey data and student focus groups suggest that *Smarter About Drugs* may positively influence the ways in which students conceive of and engage in drug policy debate. Students not only appeared to take the issues of drug policy and drug law reform more seriously following their participation in the program but seemed more motivated to seek out information on these issues. Encouragingly, these findings emerged alongside reported increases in student participation in drug policy related activities, with students going on to engage family members in drug policy discussions and debate.

The amiable, open and nonjudgmental classroom climate fostered through *Smarter About Drugs* thus appears to facilitate more active political participation. This finding is consistent with research on school-based civic education which indicates that students' experience of open classroom discussion may positively influence their civic development and participation in political discussion outside the school (Torney-Purta, 2001; 2002; Campbell, 2008; Martens & Gainous, 2002).

Survey data did, however, suggest that students left the program with a reduced sense that their views would be taken seriously in drug policy discussions. This ought to be considered more closely in future iterations of the *Smarter About Drugs* program. Research suggests that students who feel their opinions are appreciated and who maintain a sense of political efficacy are more likely to become politically engaged (Maurissen et al., 2018; Manganelli, Lucidi & Alivernini, 2014; Pasek et al., 2008). While healthy scepticism regarding policy

processes is important, perhaps the curriculum could also incorporate case studies of instances where young people have successfully influenced policy debates, ideally in the drug policy sphere, but also more broadly such as in relation to climate change. Such examples could provide students with a greater sense of hope that their future efforts will have the potential to generate positive change.

5.5 Additional benefits

Beyond these intended program impacts, a range of additional benefits emerged from the evaluation research. No negative curriculum impacts (harms) for students were identified by the evaluation. This of course does not necessarily mean that the program curriculum did not or will not have any negative impacts for students, but that none were identified through this research. A range of program limitations were, however, identified in the research relating to program design and delivery, which are detailed in Section 6 below.

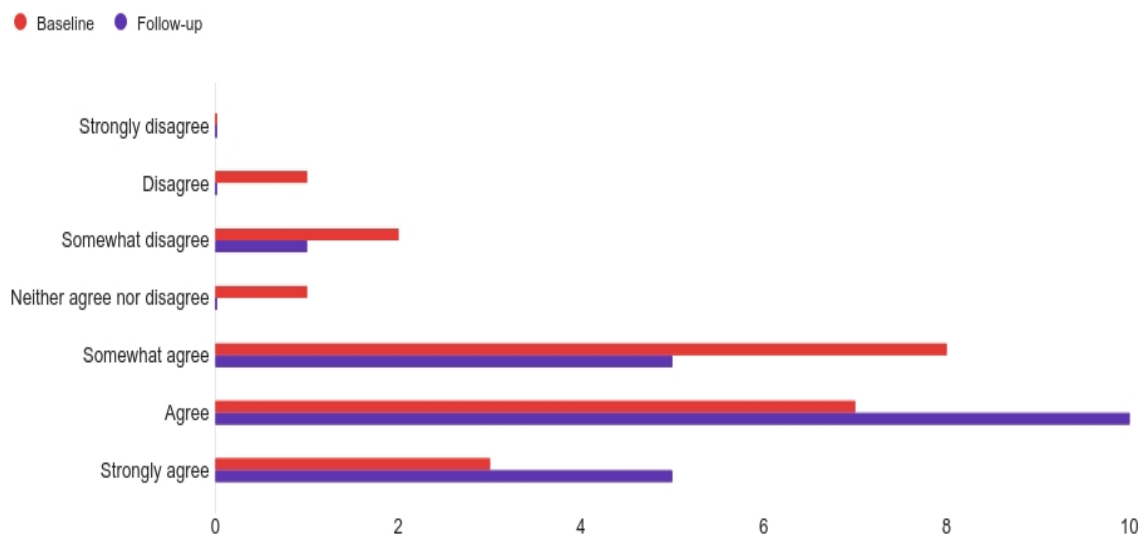
The four additional benefits identified related to the program's capacity to: increase empathy; engage otherwise disengaged students; enhance student-teacher relationships; and enable more open discussions with families.

5.5.1 Cultivating more empathetic responses to drug use

One of the key additional benefits that was identified in this research was the positive capacity of the program to increase empathy toward those who use or experience problems with drugs. Compared to most school drug education, which often seems to deploy stigma as a means of encouraging drug avoidance, *Smarter About Drugs* – as we have seen – fosters more nuanced understandings of drugs, drug use, drug problems and their causes, which in turn is likely to increase empathy.

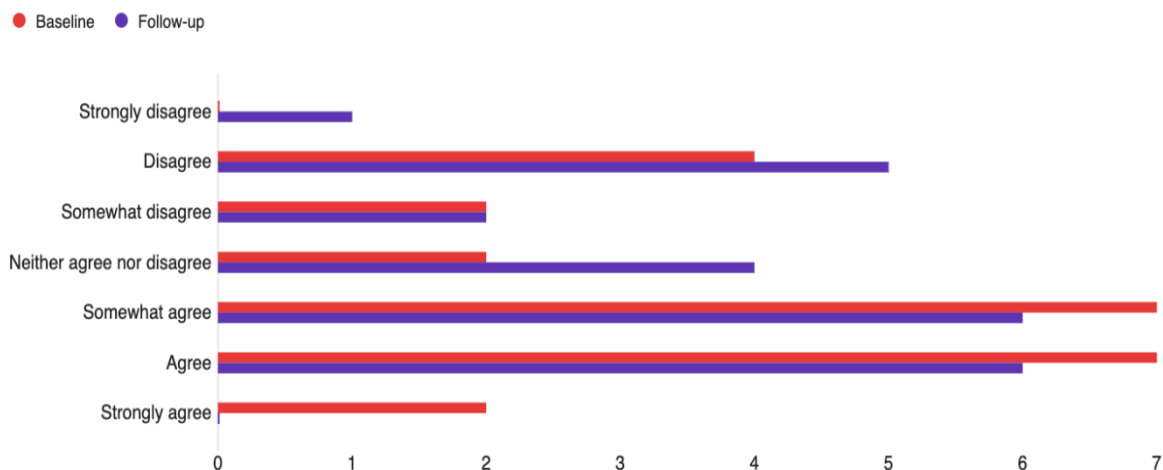
Survey data suggests that *Smarter About Drugs* did indeed improve student empathy, with increases in students both agreeing and strongly agreeing with the statement 'I feel empathy towards those who have problems with alcohol and/or other drug use' (see Table 11).

Table 11. I feel empathy towards those who have problems with alcohol and/or other drug use.



Survey data also showed that the program led to decreases in student support for punitive approaches to drugs (see Table 12), which may also be associated with increased levels of empathy.

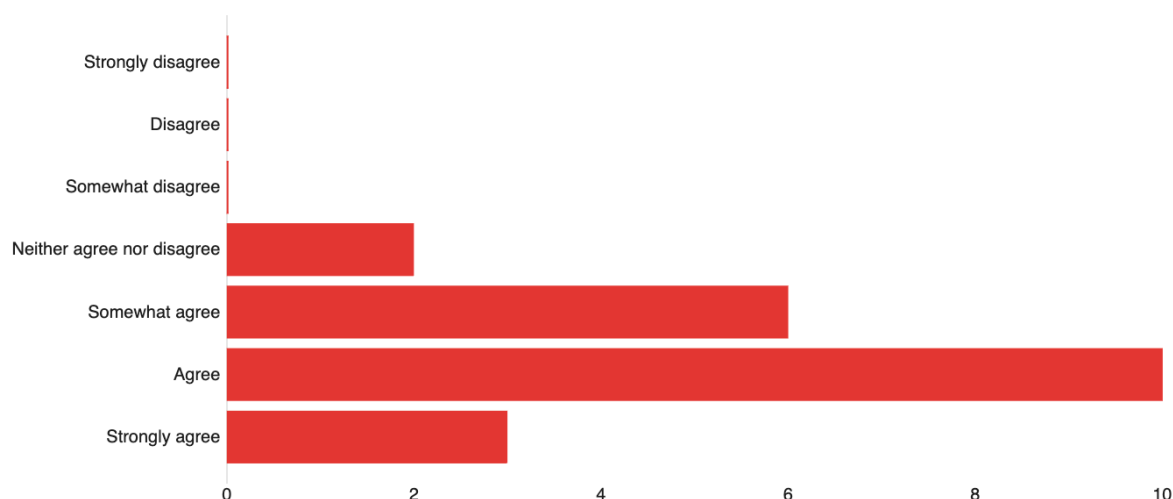
Table 12. Australia’s approach to drug policy should be more prohibitive and punitive.



Indeed the students who responded to the feedback survey seemed to generally feel as though the program had increased their willingness to support problematic drug users, with none disagreeing and 91% (20/22) somewhat agreeing, agreeing or strongly agreeing with the

statement ‘After participating in the *Smarter About Drugs* program, I am more likely to want to help people who are experiencing problems with alcohol and other drugs’ (see Table 13).

Table 13. After participating in the *Smarter About Drugs* program, I am more likely to want to help people who are experiencing problems with alcohol and other drugs.



Student focus group discussions overwhelmingly seemed to support this finding, with students reporting shifts toward more empathetic views:

Before this drug unit, I was like, if I saw a druggie, I'd be like, 'they've obviously committed a crime and they're bad', considered bad, but now from doing this, I'm like – 'their life has either been messed up, like something bad or traumatic has happened' (Student in focus group).

Increased empathy may encourage participation in drug policy advocacy and make students more likely to support others – including friends and family members, as well as other people they come across – who run into trouble with drugs (Malins, Fitzgerald & Threadgold 2006). For those students who are already using drugs, or who go on to use drugs, it is also likely to increase self-forgiveness and decrease shame, which may, in turn, be good for both mental health as well as health-seeking behaviours. As one teacher noted:

those who were frequent users of drugs... it helped them to understand I think in some ways their own lives and where they're own lives are at (Teacher).

While this teacher may well have not been referring specifically to empathic self-awareness, to the extent that the program encourages more complex and nuanced understandings of

drug use motivations and socio-structural factors influencing harm, it is likely that such students will emerge with a less stigmatised and shameful sense of self.

Both survey data and participant interviews indicate that *Smarter About Drugs* has played a positive role in shaping students' attitudes towards people who use drugs. To the extent that traditional school-based drug education has long been critiqued for reinforcing stigmatising and negative attitudes (Meehan, 2017), this outcome ought to be understood as novel and positive; it demonstrates the capacity for drug education to help redress the pervasive marginalisation and discrimination experienced by those engaged in drug use.

Within a drug policy context, these findings have broader implications. As recent research suggests, the stigma and negative attitudes that surround drug use are key barriers to the establishment of pragmatic and productive drug policies (Fraser, Farrugia & Dwyer, 2018; Steven, 2019). Observed increases in empathy and the desire to help those experiencing drug-related problems could, in this sense, not only help to promote more ethical and compassionate policy responses to drug use, but those that are more effective

5.5.2 Engaging otherwise disengaged students

Another interesting impact that *Smarter About Drugs* seems to be having is to increase classroom engagement and participation amongst otherwise disengaged students:

Talking about drugs is like, inherently interesting, kids love it... even my most disengaged kids were like, really on board. And the class was actually almost flipped in a way, because the kids that are sort of more street-smart and may have had more exposure to [drugs], were normally the ones less likely to talk in class, and maybe perhaps less academic, but suddenly they're the most engaged (Teacher).

This [one] kid, that's the only word she said for the whole year, she's pretty withdrawn... never writes anything [laughing] ... [but] she was very fired up about the police (Teacher).

like I've got a pretty curly class this term, and some of the more difficult kids were like super engaged... And they had very strong opinions (Teacher)

As teacher feedback reveals, *Smarter About Drugs* ‘flipped’ the usual classroom dynamic, fostering participation from otherwise ‘disengaged’ and ‘difficult’ students. It is apparent then that *Smarter About Drugs* may challenge some of the structures linked to disengagement and disaffection with learning (McFadden & Munns, 2002; McGregor and Mills, 2011). As McGregor and Mills (2011) argue, teaching environments that prevent disengaged students from sharing their experiences may alienate them from the shared culture of the classroom. By creating the conditions for open, democratic and non-judgemental discussion, *Smarter About Drugs* may destabilise this potential, enabling ‘less academic’ students to contribute their ‘street-smarts’ and experiences with drugs. Within this context, their unacknowledged sociocultural capital is transformed into “worthwhile knowledge” (Allan & Duckworth, 2018; McFadden & Munns, 2002, p. 364).

Enabling disengaged youth a voice within the classroom is critical, in so far as it is understood to facilitate networks of trust, increase student self-esteem and motivation and discourage disaffection (Allan & Duckworth, 2018). This outcome provides as a powerful contrast to the anticipated effects of conventional drug education. Indeed, by way of its morally-charged basis, traditional drug education may serve to silence, exclude and stigmatise already disengaged and marginalised students (Meehan, 2017; Farrugia, 2014). By mitigating this potential, *Smarter About Drugs* also creates opportunities for the ‘disengaged’ individual to reconnect and participate, and to feel like a valued and legitimate part of the classroom. This expanded participation may not only result in broader benefits for the individual but the entire class body. Indeed, by creating a safe space for more varied perspectives and experiences to be shared, both students and teachers are given insight into the diversity of views available on any given topic (Myhill, 2007). As student and teacher feedback indicates, this diversity played a key role in stimulating rich and productive classroom discussions.

5.5.3 Enhancing teacher-student relationships

Reports of increased understandings and relationships of trust between teachers and students more broadly were also identified in the evaluation. Teachers reported gaining greater insights into their students’ lives and the realities for young people more broadly, suggesting this was significant given the importance of their role in many students’ lives:

The drugs, I must say I’m shocked at how widespread drug use is, I’m just and I’m not shocked in a bad way, it’s not a sort of a, I’m just amazed... at the frequency ...

I'm amazed they're so freely available. I'm just staggered actually... I don't exist in that space... and I don't say that as being a bad thing, I think we need to walk into that space and say well this is where we're at. I mean this is a world that these kids live in and we actually teach them, and we're also the most important adults in their life aside from their parents... it's very important (Teacher).

These understandings can help facilitate a greater trust between students and teachers that goes beyond the classroom to pastoral care:

I know my teacher, he definitely learned stuff through this... opened his mind more up to the side effects and how people use it and why people use it... That gave him more of an insight to help us as well. I think this program also doesn't educate just students but teachers, to help us as another person to go to if we need that help without fear of judgement or anything like that (Student in focus group).

The risks for students associated with school-based drug-use disclosure and support-seeking should not be underestimated. Yet by giving teachers a space to show students that they understand the complexities of drug use motivations and problems, and a space where drugs can be discussed more openly without judgement, *Smarter About Drugs* is likely to be – at least to some degree – increasing the likelihood students would feel comfortable seeking help from teachers around drug problems in the future (Berridge et al., 2017).

5.5.4 Enabling more open discussions with family

A similar effect has been documented in relation to student capacities to connect to their families around drug issues. By giving students the tools to have conversations with family members around drug policy, and creating a legitimised rationale for having drug-related conversations, students found this opened up more open and honest conversations with their families around drugs in general:

I can be like, oh you know this, this or that ... and he [my father] would be like, 'oh yeah, I saw that on the news', and we can talk about it more maturely, not just him sitting down and being like, 'well drugs are bad'... not to pretend to me anymore like I'm a child and I can't see these things. It allows for me to have adult conversations with my parents (Student in focus group).

I think before this, it was kind of like, if you were going to ask a question [of your parents], well, why would you ask that because then [they assume] that means you're going to want to go and do it. So I think having it in class allowed me to go home and talk about it, and then, the conversation then would come up naturally and then, if I was to ask that question, it then wouldn't actually be frowned upon because it was in, I guess, an appropriate setting, not that it wasn't appropriate before, but I just think it allowed for more discussion (Student in focus group).

By reducing some of the fear students have around discussing drug issues with parents, including the fear that parents will assume they are asking about drugs because they are using them, *Smarter About Drugs* is likely increasing the chance of more open honest and trusting drug discussions in the future. Given adolescents and parents are reported to face challenges initiating drug-related discussions, this finding reflects a particularly valuable outcome of the *Smarter About Drugs* program (Carver, Elliott, Kennedy & Hanley, 2017). Indeed, the nature of these discussions, as described by students, may have a more directly positive effect on students' drug use and help-seeking behaviours. Research indicates that parent/ adolescent drug discussions between parents and adolescents that is characterised by open communication, comfort and mutual participation are 'protective' against adolescent drug use (Carver et al., 2017; Chaplin et al., 2014; Hight, 2005). They may also help to establish trust and perceptions of approachability, factors considered key markers of help-seeking for drug problems amongst adolescents (Berridge et al., 2017).

5.6 Summary

Smarter About Drugs represents a novel and positive step forward for the field of drug education. Its innovative curriculum model moves away from the paternalistic and expert-driven tendencies of conventional drug education; rather than position students as uninformed and vulnerable, the program affirms the value of participants' pre-existing knowledge and experience and seeks to mobilise and strengthen their capacity for critical thinking and democratic participation. This is achieved through an interactive and collaborative learning experience that engages and benefits both students and teachers.

As this evaluation has shown, the program successfully encourages and facilitates:

- open classroom discussion around drug use issues

- open discussions about drugs and drug policy between students and their families
- engagement of otherwise disengaged students in classroom learning
- development of critical thinking skills in relation to the complexity of drug related issues in society, including the social and structural drivers of drug-related problems
- student empathy for those experiencing drug-related problems
- new understandings and trust between students and teachers
- student capacity to seek information and evidence about drugs and drug policy

While the evaluation did not find that the program necessarily increases students' belief that their contributions to drug policy debates will be taken seriously, it nonetheless found signs that it was increasing their overall motivation and capacity to engage in such debates.

Given the extensive problems with existing school drug education and the urgent need to provide innovative alternatives that increase trust between students and teachers, avoid shame and stigma, provide evidence-based information and increase student capacity to seek advice or support around drug harm reduction or drug-related health issues, *Smarter About Drugs* has clear value as a secondary school curriculum resource and should continue to be refined and expanded to other schools.

As such, the following recommendation is made:

Recommendation 1: *Smarter About Drugs* should continue to be refined and expanded to other schools around Australia.

Refinements to the program should be based on the findings of this section as well as the findings and recommendations detailed in Section 6.

6 Findings and Discussion B: Program Design and Delivery

This section of the report details the findings of the evaluation in relation to the design and delivery of *Smarter About Drugs* and any benefits or limitations that can be identified in the current model. It brings together an analysis of the follow-up student survey feedback data, with focus group and interview narratives and observations of Q&A sessions, to identify any problems with the way the program is currently designed or delivered, and any ways that it could be improved. The findings are divided into the following themes:

1. Curriculum design
2. Managing risk when discussing drugs
3. Harm reduction information
4. Q&A forums
5. Curriculum context and cohort
6. Teacher capacity and buy-in
7. Broader stakeholder engagement
8. Evaluation processes
9. Summary and recommendations

6.1 Curriculum design

As the data and narratives detailed in the previous section suggest, students and teachers seemed generally very satisfied with the kinds of topics, issues and questions being explored within *Smarter About Drugs*. However, some key areas for improvement were identified during the research regarding to the way the curriculum packs are designed and structured.

While students seemed to like the idea of having a curriculum pack to work from, some felt that questions and activities within it were not as engaging as they could have been:

Student A: *The book was good. But I think they were very repetitive. I don't think I was taking much away from it. It was alright to jot my ideas down, but it was more of something I had to do, not something I wanted to just go and write. I couldn't even read my handwriting. I was just doing it-*

Student B: *Yeah, I wasn't going in depth, going 'oh yes, I can't wait to answer that', but then the next page is kind of like, a similar question and it was like, I can*

kind of copy the same answer... I understand it's good to get stuff down on paper, but I think it could have been... I don't know how to fix it, but... I don't know, more of a fun way to-

Student C: *Some of it just seemed a little bit irrelevant*

(Student focus group discussion).

I think the booklet wasn't the greatest. I think the questions in it weren't... Some of them weren't great, but some of them were actually okay if they would change to just be discussion rather than needing to write it down, which I think is what our teachers started to do, because they started using the booklet and then they were like, yeah, let's slowly move away from that (Student in focus group).

Issues regarding the curriculum pack were also raised by teachers from both schools, particularly in relation to the need to begin the program with activities that are more engaging:

Teacher A: I think engagement was a bit of an issue.. like starting off with 'how do we evaluate websites' and stuff was just a killer, it sucked the life out of the classroom.

Teacher B: Yeah. I think it's a really useful skill but, yeah-

Teacher A: It just needs to be gone about in a more engaging way.... And maybe not first.

Teacher B: yeah, not a great way to start the year... It was flat as a tack and then you're on life support.

Teacher A: Basically, yeah.

(Teacher discussion in shared interview).

I don't think it would engage students really strongly by thinking about information literacy in the first lesson... for something like this, you've got to hook them in with the big juicy issues, and a lot of them had very strong opinions about pill testing, and safe injecting rooms, or just druggies in general, so that was more interesting... And in fact, like I've got a pretty curly class this term, and some of the more difficult

kids were like super engaged... And they had very strong opinions, and like I think... if I said, 'alright, you need to critically analyse the bias and representation in these three media articles', they would have fallen asleep (Teacher).

Teachers also noted that the activities in the pack were sometimes confusing, not detailed enough or *'pitched way [too] high, really high'* (Teacher), not just for students but for teachers as well:

I thought there needed to be way more [support], like this [the pack] is very basic. Okay: 'In pairs and groups students research the main actors in international drug policy, these should include UN office on drugs and crime', like I don't quite understand what is being asked of students there. And then... 'in groups, students consider the key IVAC questions'... [or] 'why is Columbian drug policy important to us?', The answer is 'it's not'. Like any 16 year old sitting here is not going to be that interested (Teacher).

It doesn't work without a huge density of knowledge about the different types of drug policy, and asking kids to investigate and then create a vision... Like it's just so, you need thousands of bits of information before you can... start to like announce any sort of sensible vision, 'cause otherwise you're just going to say airy fairy stuff, like all drug users should be helped, or like all drug users should get off the gear... I mean my own personal view is that critical thinking can only really happen once you've got enough information about a topic (Teacher).

Thus, whilst some teachers had initially assumed that the course would be able to be taught *'straight through the booklet'* (Teacher), they quickly found that they had to do quite a bit of work to adapt, rearrange and add to the program:

I'd say, we put in more than I thought we would need to. Like, you go, 'Here's your booklet', you're like, 'Oh, great, the next three, four, five weeks is covered in terms of preparation', but then after that first lesson, we all took stock and we were, 'Okay, we need to do something a bit different here' (Teacher).

So we glossed over activities one to four, 'cause we thought they were more informational literacy, so introducing information about drugs, evaluating information, those seemed like basic informational research tasks, and more

research literacy and information literacy tasks. And we've done quite a lot of that in various subjects throughout 7 to 9, so we thought, well the kids should be reasonably aware of that (Teacher).

For teachers, doing 'something a bit different' took several forms. Strategies included sourcing additional resources and case studies for students, undertaking independent research to better familiarise oneself with the program content, rearranging the activities and developing links to the broader school curriculum:

So we made a decision as a teaching team to basically skip one, two and three... Four we thought would have been covered in Year 8 Health, Year 9 Health... And, then thinking about six, so we did this more as categorising different types of drug use, you know, recreational, addictive, prescription, sporting enhancement or performance enhancement. And then got the kids to try and think about, well 'what should be the role of government and other providers in responding to each different circumstance?' Like, 'should we respond the same way to drug addicts as to people who are using performance enhancing drugs, or people who use them recreationally'? And all that. So that's kind of where we started. Then we more or less followed this as is (Teacher).

It also sometimes entailed the development of more effective pedagogical strategies and spaces:

Teacher A: what I would've probably liked is... because these are discussions that are not of the norm in teaching these sorts of classes... You know, you kind of just wing it and you go off what you know as being the teacher, but around having at times quite difficult conversations and discussions, around facilitating that [so] maybe giving some different ways, like I moved my classroom one side of the school to the other because of the way that the spaces are organised here... maybe some, you know, conversation-starters, or some different ways, so that it's not every lesson the same, sitting there just calling on kids

Teacher B: Yeah, I agree with you.

Teacher A: But it's around, you know, we'll maybe try this as, I don't know, yeah, a roundtable where you give prompts to each student. Just some really practical strategies for running discussions, to vary it.

Teacher B: And not even tied to particular things... Like, just a series of activities that you could use for whatever part.

Teacher A: Yeah, and that was different so that every lesson it didn't feel like you were kind of like, "Okay, and we're going to have a discussion on this today," but running it a bit differently.

(Teacher discussion in shared interview)

I didn't find the pack itself particularly useful... It was more the ways that we deviated from the pack that was beneficial.... I don't think they [the students] found the pack stuff very engaging but some of the conversations we had about experiences with drugs... like, we sort of sat in a circle, because [otherwise] they can be a bit inclined to just talk to each other in little groups rather than as a class. So, we sort of sat in a circle so everyone was sort of facing everyone and could hear and talk and that worked quite well (Teacher).

Some teachers set students the task of coming up with a presentation on a particular drug or drug policy, which they thought worked effectively and fitted well with the aims of the program but also sometimes required more work of teachers:

They had to present on a particular drug, illicit drug... that was fantastic... really interesting (Teacher).

So, they each then picked a topic and we thought the quality of responses were really high... the kids who probably weren't as into it, they tended to go towards medicinal cannabis and the safe injecting centres, but for the ones that were a bit more interested, they picked different topics. But it was really interesting to see some of them take the same topic and look at it from completely different angles, 'cause they had to evaluate it from a range of perspectives and stakeholder perspectives, and then come up with a recommendation for change (Teacher).

So we said the task was to do a comparison of four or five different case study countries, each group researches a single country, and then we present to each other... And that had to be teacher led a little bit, because... like public policy is very hard to read about at the best of times, and public policy documents are normally written so as to be as dry and boring as possible... So finding stuff out like that was really hard (Teacher).

What was clear then was that some level of adaptation and additional work was required to make the program work fluently and productively. Unsurprisingly, these efforts to alleviate the perceived gaps and shortcomings of the *Smarter About Drugs* booklet were at times challenging and resulted in a higher than expected workload for teachers. For some, it also imparted a sense that the success of the program lay firmly on their shoulders:

I think it was better embedded this year but I do think that the rollout of it, it really relied on us as individual teachers coming up with our own links to our curriculum but also to engaging the students... the booklet itself we said before is quite broad and vague... I found that it was probably very broad and that, you know, it was successful predominantly because we had dragged in our own resources that engaged them (Teacher).

The extent to which teachers could invest in this additional labour or reach a level of comfort delivering *Smarter About Drugs* was not uniform. Indeed, teachers identified a number of practical challenges that could impinge on their ability to effectively roll out the program. These included a lack of experience with the materials, topics and processes that underpin *Smarter About Drugs* and already heavy teaching loads:

Between three people [teachers] it was great. If you were the only teacher and a lot of schools only have... some schools only have one teacher teaching that, and that might be challenging to come up with the resources (Teacher).

The other teacher, [who] hadn't taught it before, didn't really know what it was about and I know [they were] quite hesitant to be involved in it because [they] didn't really know what it was about. I'm not sure if that affected the delivery in the class either, but yeah, I'd say given that both [the other teacher] and I had had involvement before, it was probably easier... to take it on the first time, maybe is a little bit daunting (Teacher).

What emerged through discussions with teachers was a desire for greater support and resources. Specifically, teachers commented on the potential value of including case studies with which to help facilitate class discussions and debate. Given a lack of familiarity with areas of the *Smarter About Drugs* content, some teachers also flagged the need for further information on the topics and ideas embedded in the program:

[so it would be good to] include a table of like what responses, or like... here's Portugal, Columbia, USA, whatever, and key features of their drug policy sanctions and punishments for drug possession sanction, function for use or like just like fill in a table... In general I think there needed to be way more information in the pack to like... like some really concrete answers (Teacher).

Reflecting on the structure of the program, some teachers also felt that a greater degree of flexibility would be beneficial, particularly if this flexibility was combined with additional case studies and supporting material:

[what would be good is] possibly less structure. Like, if the pack was just a lot of resources, a lot of case studies and information and stuff that we could refer to and do lessons this way (Teacher).

Having at least some structure in the curriculum, however, may be necessary in order to alleviate the pressure or burden placed on teachers whilst providing them with the confidence, resources and 'know how' to effectively teach the material. Structure, in this sense, not only supports teachers, but ensures they too are familiar with the evidence base through which this program is formed and are able to competently reflect it in their teaching practice. As one of the program designers noted, a level of curriculum structure might be important to ensure the case study materials are taught in an evidence-based way, given the typically problematic nature of most school and drug-educational approaches:

having some kind of structure [means] that teachers learn as well, and that teachers are brought on a journey of understanding as well... [otherwise] it could very easily be used to re-stigmatise or to re-embed existing understandings of policy... because so much in the world of a school and the people who are there, and the young people who are there, are in themselves structured to facilitate certain understandings of drugs (Program Developer).

Indeed, not all teaching staff will necessarily be familiar with, or open to, more progressive evidence-based approaches to drugs, and might bring their own biases to the delivery of the materials:

Like I'm actually thinking of other colleagues here, who may not have phrased it like that though, who would be much more like, 'look at these druggies', you know, 'we don't want to be bloody supporting them to do this', 'blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. 'Well come on kids, what's dumb about this harm reduction policy? Let's look at all the dumb things that go with it'. Like maybe I'm characterising a bit, but... well, you'd get a very different student experience, right (Teacher).

Amongst both student and teachers, there was a shared sense that the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum could be more effectively organised. As the primary device through which teaching was structured, the curriculum pack was unable to facilitate an optimally engaging learning experience. Students variably described the booklet, and the writing activities embedded within it, as repetitive and somewhat tedious. Cognisant of these issues, teachers felt the need to improvise, mobilising their own resources, time and energy to re-structure the program, undertake independent research and introduce more stimulating learning activities and case studies. The effects of an unexpectedly high workload are likely to be particularly pronounced for teachers working in less well-resourced state schools and for those operating without a solid teaching team.

These findings suggest that the curriculum pack would benefit from some fairly substantial refining in order to improve its capacity to engage students and reduce the workload burden for teachers. The following suggestions are made regarding how the pack might be improved:

Recommendation 2: Refine the curriculum pack based on the following suggestions:

Begin the curriculum with more engaging case studies and/or 'entry level' activities.

Focus early on should be placed on generating an engaging, sociable, relaxed and collegial atmosphere that encourages motivation, group discussion and trust. This would ideally encourage student interest in the curriculum and enable them to familiarise themselves with the forms of open discussion and debate that *Smarter About Drugs* seeks to mobilise.

Include more detailed and diverse examples of collaborative learning activities.

These could include, for example, activities involving theatrical performance, video creations, role-playing, posters, writing letters, analysing media articles, generating mock petitions and doing class presentations (see for example: Brookfield & Preskill, 2012). A diversification of activities would likely help increase student engagement throughout the program whilst reducing the need for staff to develop their own material to keep students engaged.

Provide more background information for teachers (and students).

It is evident that some teachers felt inadequately prepared to deliver the program. This not only resulted in perceived need to undertake independent research, but a sense of discomfort at times when navigating and guiding class conversations. Teachers should therefore be given more information and a wider range of resources to help fill any gaps in knowledge and empower them to handle conversations more effectively. As Myhill (2007) argues, to encourage student discussions, teachers need to “be very confident about the topic” and “able to listen to children's responses and ask questions at key points which will help to move the debate on” (p. 59). And when it comes to discussing controversial topics such as drugs, effective preparation by teachers is even more important (Hand & Levinson, 2011). This would also likely enhance consistency in how teachers are approaching the material across different schools, or within schools, and help to ground the curriculum in a strong evidence-base regardless of the biases of the teacher who delivers it. However, it would be important to avoid a situation where the teacher is encouraged to assume the role of an expert, rather than someone on a mutual, collaborative learning journey. As Burbules (1993 as cited in Schuitema et al., 2017) warns, a key threat to democratic student discussion is the existence of a “single authoritative point of view that brooks no challenges and tolerates no participation in directing the course of investigation” (p. 80). And as others note, when teachers strongly regulate the content of the discussion, there is less space for students to voice their own perspectives (Schuitema et al., 2017). As such, it is important not to be too prescriptive or provide too many resources, and it might also be worth considering providing similar background information and resources to students.

Provide a list of recent (and regularly updated) case studies.

Using real-life case studies seemed to work well in the classes to engage students in the types of questions and skills that *Smarter About Drugs* focusses on. Providing yearly updated examples of recent relevant cases studies, while also suggesting that teachers draw on others they come across as well, would help give teachers a head start and reduce their workload. Case examples could be linked to a few key sample topics for discussion, but care would need to be taken to avoid limiting the directions that could be taken.

Reducing the linearity of the curriculum.

It may be worth designing the pack in such a way that there is some flexibility around the order that different topics, questions or activities are tackled. While there could still be a suggested order, teachers and students could be encouraged to move through the activities in the sequence or order that best suits them, in terms of level of experience, course content, student needs, and the direction of student ideas as they emerge.

6.2 Managing risk when discussing drugs

One of the key strengths of *the Smarter About Drugs* program is its capacity to furnish a non-judgemental, safe and neutral platform for students to discuss otherwise highly moralised, stigmatised or taboo topics. Whilst this platform invited the possibility for rich and productive learning experiences, teachers reported several challenges navigating the politically and morally-charged nature of drug-related issues. Indeed, as teachers describe below, effectively managing discussions around drug use and drug policy, whilst also treading lines of acceptability and impartiality, was fraught:

I know, as teachers, we have to be very mindful of, you can't really say your own opinion or you can't, it can be quite strict, but... like, I've never had a problem with it. I don't know, maybe it comes back to your question before around the training and being prepared, and being able to discuss (Teacher).

I think there's a bigger question here about like this is inherently political, what's going on, so putting that into schools is challenging, because we're supposed to be

apolitical, right... But obviously that's never the case, it's like even in the selection of what we choose to teach is a political choice, so... (Teacher).

Teachers sometimes navigated this by conditioning their discussions, by trying to remain as neutral as possible, or by avoiding certain discussions:

I did make a point of saying [to the students] 'Because we're having this chat doesn't mean that, we're not saying, I'm not promoting it' and that's when they made the comment, they're like, 'Oh, well, all we ever get told is don't do it, don't do it, don't do it, but no-one really tells you, not other ways to go about it, but that there are other ways to look at things out there' (Teacher).

I think they're very reasonable fears [around harm reduction]. Like we... we kind of get hounded either way. We get hounded if we don't teach them about it, we get hounded if we teach them about it. It's like, oh, what are you supposed to do? But... I think teaching about drug policy can be done reasonably apolitically. If you – like I know it's challenging, 'cause everyone's sort of got their own view on this, and then it's like it's in the media and all the rest. But I know I really went into this with the idea that these are different options around the world, and here's some pros and cons about all of them. Even this harm reduction model, like I'm on board as well, but I'm just trying to be like objective as possible about it, and it's like okay, it's not always going to be perfect, and there are going to be huge problems with it still, like there's no perfect drug free world out there (Teacher).

I don't think I explicitly talked about pleasurable use... It's a huge risk... I wouldn't feel super comfortable with that, personally. But... Yeah. I mean it just opens us up, exposes us to all sorts of criticism... I mean I can think of like the same thing about condom use, it's basically the same thing. And that conversation is always fraught, so you have to tread very carefully (Teacher).

Beyond managing their own politics, objectivity and the sensitive nature of drug-related topics, teachers also reflected on challenges managing students' personal accounts and experiences. One teacher, citing concerns about both interpersonal impacts for students and potential human services reporting requirements for teachers, explained how they managed to avoid such risks by making it clear to students at the start of the program that personal accounts were not permitted:

That was the one thing I was concerned about, I was waiting for the, 'my uncle, blah, blah, blah', or 'my aunty, blah, blah, blah'. Like, I was just waiting for the stories. And I did try and make it clear at the start that we're not going to be talking about personal histories, or disclose any personal details, including family... So anyway, it didn't happen. But I was a bit worried about that... like if a student did disclose drug use or drug use of a family member, like in front of the whole class, like that's going to have some implications for like, will they get bullied?... Is it serious enough to warrant mandatory reporting to child services? Like all those sorts of things (Teacher).

By contrast, another teacher explained how, despite sensing a level of expectation they could or should avoid personal stories and disclosures, they ultimately found that such discussions were not only unavoidable but also beneficial:

[The program representative said] 'It's not about personal experience', but I felt that you couldn't leave personal experience out... it wasn't like [I said to students] 'Tell me your personal stories about drugs', but I felt that they [the stories] came out naturally. It would have been really hard if you were strict on that and had to shut that down. I don't know how you would really [participate in] a discussion for several weeks around drug policy without delving into your own personal experience and what's going on for you... Because what I gather is that they [the program developers] want to see what young people think, but all they [the students] know is personal experience. So, I guess, I sort of disregarded that [the direction not to elicit personal stories] a little bit... [and] they [the students] were really open. They were like, 'Well, you know girls go to the bathroom during school and during class and vape', and you're like, 'Okay'. But I guess they felt safe enough to say that in that space. It wasn't about trying to dig deep into their own personal stories, but I really felt that you couldn't separate the two. It wouldn't have been so meaningful (Teacher).

As these teachers reveal, the topic of personal drug use experiences and encounters was not only difficult to disentangle from the *Smarter About Drugs* program, but provided a valuable contribution by encouraging engagement, productive discussions and a level of trust between teachers and students. Importantly, however, these kinds of open and

personal discussions were not considered an innate by-product of the *Smarter About Drugs* program. Rather, they emerged in classrooms where students felt comfortable and 'connected' with their teachers:

it was good to have our teachers because I feel like I could talk to our legal teachers about our situations and my personal stories, because I felt comfortable with them. It really depends on the teacher as well. If you're not comfortable with the teacher, you can't have good and open conversations (Student in focus group)

I ask them, "Would you have had these conversations in other classrooms?" and they said sometimes they feel that they would be judged by certain teachers (Teacher)

at least with us in [the focus group] here, we all had good connections with our teachers, but I think people who didn't have very good connections with our teachers probably struggled a bit because they wouldn't have asked questions because they wouldn't have felt comfortable (Student in focus group).

Some students further elaborated on the importance of having a teacher who understood the kinds of things that might be going on for them, and who they could relate to:

[My teacher] knew basically most of what was going on. [They were] like, 'look I'm not going to sugar-coat this, I know that most of you know, most of you have probably experienced all of this'. So that was quite good, because they know the generation; they know what's going on (Student in focus group).

being relatable also helps... I think having people around us that are relatable to us also really, really helps you connect with them and be more open and have a conversation and... to then go 'so how do I?...', 'I don't know if?'... 'how can I approach this safely?', and all this stuff... it's like, we need someone to relate to and to connect to. Having teachers you can relate to is definitely vital, I think, very important (Student in focus group).

The *Smarter About Drugs* program does not attempt to elicit personal experiences of drug use. Nonetheless, it is apparent that such accounts may emerge throughout the course of classroom discussions. Whilst some teachers expressed reservations about the (potentially) sensitive nature of these discussions, both teachers and students perceived them as an engaging and productive component of the program. Indeed, it was apparent that the

personal stories and experiences shared within the classroom enriched student debate, exposed students to more diverse ideas and perspectives and enabled teachers to gain a more intimate understanding of their student group. These findings are consistent with an extant body of teaching literature which suggests the value of personal narratives and experiences as a learning tool (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Levinson & Brantmeier, 2006).

As Zembylas and Kambani (2012) have highlighted though, teachers commonly lack confidence in their abilities to teach and facilitate discussions on sensitive or controversial issues. By providing pedagogical tips or advice on how to navigate these conversations, teachers may feel more comfortable participating in the program and more capable of harnessing them.

It is recommended therefore that the *Smarter About Drugs* program provides more explicit guidance on how they may be handled:

Recommendation 3: Provide teachers with support around navigating controversial topics

It is suggested that the teacher curriculum pack be edited to:

- Explicitly acknowledge that personal experiences may emerge through student discussions and can, when approached appropriately, make a valuable contribution to student learning.
- Provide guidance on how to create a supportive, inclusive and safe learning environment. As students and staff specifically highlighted, trusting, non-judgemental relationships played a critical role in promoting class discussion.
- Flag the potential risks associated with student disclosure and identify avenues for protecting students' emotional safety (e.g. pathways for referrals into school counselling)

6.3 Harm reduction information

When asked if there was anything they thought missing from the curriculum, or would like included in future, the only thing students raised was a desire for the program to incorporate more useful information about different drug effects and about how to reduce harms associated with them. This was a theme that came up frequently in focus groups, with many

students expressing a desire for more information, but also acknowledging the difficulties for teachers in providing it:

What could have been added is, it's not necessary for teachers to discuss this with a student, but I think teaching them specifically what, say if people were to go out and do those hard drugs quite early, I think sometimes it's hard for people to learn first-hand 'that's too much of that', and people get in trouble and that's how people overdose... I was reading something like some girl did MD and now she's dead... but I think if teachers were like... without encouraging them too, being like: 'this is a safe amount... not a safe amount but telling them... like... what's too much for someone?... teaching them like, 'oh, say you're really tired, this will affect you more', and stuff like that, because... people will go out and do stuff... and then they can really, really harm their life... but it's a hard situation because you don't want to influence kids to then go out and do that and say, 'oh my teacher told me this is a safe amount, so I'm going to do it' (Student in focus group).

I feel like it would have been better to have been taught more about how to do it safely, but I know you can't do that because of school and parents, but I feel like if a school says don't do drugs, it's not really going to stop anybody from not doing it, if that makes sense (Student in focus group).

Student A: *We did touch on it [harm reduction].*

Student B: *But it was more like... This sounds bad but it was more like people talking about general experiences and giving their friends advice which, of course, was good but there was no slideshow going... and I think that it's so important because people go out there not knowing anything, and the fact of the matter is that if you take eight Xanax, you can die, it's so easy. There's facts like that that people don't know. I only know that because I had a friend who overdosed earlier in the year and he survived and he was fine, but... I was never taught that in school. I was like, they're anxiety pills, they can't do anything to you except make you calm. And I feel like if we were taught those kind of things, the fact that you have to drink water but you can drink too much water and stuff like that ...*

(Student focus group discussion)

How many caps... if I was told in class: this is a lot, then I'd be like ... well, that's a lot, I'm not going to have that many (Student in focus group).

If I, for some reason, got put into these situations, I wouldn't know how to deal with it. I wouldn't know how to help any of my friends. So, I think it's important for, not even just us doing it, but for everyone to learn that it's not perfect and that you need to learn how to deal with these situations and that they are happening (Student in a focus group).

So, if they're going to do it again next year they should probably schedule out a bigger amount of time to cover it all and then add in some of the health effects (Student in focus group).

Secondary school students are clearly seeking more useful, practical information about how to reduce drug-related harms for themselves and their friends. They are generally not getting this information in their usual drug education classes, and *Smarter About Drugs* offers a potentially useful space for providing it. However, as the students themselves suggest, the risks associated with schools providing such information are very real and would need to be taken into account in any harm-reduction based program enhancements.

Given that harm reduction information provision poses significant risks for teachers and schools, and potentially for the viability of *Smarter About Drugs* as well, perhaps these gaps are therefore not best remedied by introducing more explicit harm reduction advice within the *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum. A better strategy might be to ensure students are aware that such information exists, and that they have the right tools and resources through which to find it. Some of this work already seems to be happening within *Smarter About Drugs*, but perhaps more attention could be given to offering a list of useful reputable resources and links through which students might, if they want to, research the practical strategies they might need to keep themselves and their friends safe.

As such the following recommendation is made:

Recommendation 4: Provide students with the tools and resources to find practical harm reduction information should they need it.

Rather than incorporating information or advice regarding practical harm reduction strategies within the curriculum, or encouraging teachers to deliver this information, include a section at the end of the pack that makes students aware that such information exists and provides them with examples of websites and services they might access to find it.

6.4 Q&A forums

In 2019, one live Q&A panel forum was held for each school following their completion of the curriculum. Some important differences were observed between the two sessions and are worth exploring here.

Independent school Q&A

At the independent girls' school, the forum was held as a video conference, with each of the three panellists live-streamed into the session. The session, which ran for about an hour, was facilitated by one of the program developers in a large classroom of year 11 students and their teachers. The program developer facilitating the forum, began with an acknowledgement of country, and an explanation of the purpose of the session, before introducing each panellist. Students were also given hand-outs with photos and information about each panellist, for them to refer back to and to take notes on.

The students seemed prepared and engaged and eager to speak. While the first question asked was not on topic (relating to protest and police powers), the following questions all seemed suitable and panellists did a good job of answering. The physical separation here between students and panellists did not seem to prevent useful discussions and learnings taking place. At one point in the session, however, there were technical difficulties resulting in the audio not working for a short period of time. Students also did a good job responding to questions from the panellists. Then the forum concluded, the panellists and students were thanked for their time, and a list of referral links were provided on the overhead slides for students should they need support relating to drugs or mental health. The forum overall seemed to be a success, despite the technical issue and initial unrelated question. The one

hour allocated for the session did not seem long enough, however, given the level of enthusiasm that students, teachers and panellists seemed to show for the discussion.

State school Q&A

At the state school, the forum was held in a hall and involved three local drug experts (the panellists) sitting on a stage facing an audience of approximately 33 year 10 students, two program developers and two teachers. A different program developer facilitated the session, which ran for about 50 minutes. After an acknowledgement of country, the facilitator reminded students of the curriculum and the purpose of the forum and gave students some handouts about the program and panellists and allowed them some time to recall the program and chat to each other about what they had learnt. Then they introduced each panel member, explaining their research and work expertise, and asked students to take turns to ask pre-prepared questions of the panellists.

The students seemed relatively disengaged during the panel introductions and then fairly reticent to ask questions. They did not seem as well-prepared for, or enthusiastic about, the forum as would be ideal. There were some long gaps before students volunteered questions, and the facilitator needed to prompt and encourage students at several points. The questions students asked also did not seem to be particularly related to the expertise of the panel members, but the panel did a great job answering them, nonetheless. Many questions seemed to be seeking practical information about the health effects of drugs and which drugs were more harmful than others. It was clear that there was some difficulty for panel members when responding to these questions, in terms of figuring out how to respond in a way that was accurate and useful, yet not seen as endorsing or encouraging the use of drugs within the school context. Sometimes the language and ideas and examples they used seemed a bit too complex or confusing for the year ten cohort.

After several questions and responses, the panellists were then asked by the facilitator to ask some pre-prepared questions of the students which they did. Again, the students seemed fairly reluctant to speak, and the answers they gave were relevant but overall not hugely illuminating. The forum was then brought to a close, the panellists thanked, and a list of referral links provided on the overhead slides for students should they need support relating to drugs or mental health. While it was certainly not without benefit for students, overall the

forum did not seem to have maximised its potential, given the expertise in the room and the effort that went into facilitating it.

Overall analysis

These Q&A forums are, as one developer noted, a significant feature of *Smarter About Drugs* because they are one of the key things that distinguish it from other curriculum offerings:

So the two points of difference [with Smarter About Drugs] really are, one is that we are looking at policy issues, there is a drug education resource that looks at policy issues, and the second is the opportunity to do the Q&A's, and they are the two primary points of difference. So we've got to grasp those and make the most of them and make other people realise what humongous value is potentially there (Program Developer).

In departing from the conventions of traditional drug education, the Q&A sessions employed a dialogic, rather than 'top-down' or paternalistic teaching method (Cahill, 2007). In this sense, students were not simply rendered passive recipients of expert knowledge, but were encouraged to actively engage panellists in a conversational fashion:

That was really interesting. I really enjoyed seeing professionals talk about it as well. I felt like the conversations we had were good. I felt like at the start everybody was a bit nervous. It's understandable and everything, but I felt like once we started to get into it and it started flowing, it was so interesting to hear different aspects like the prison, the police force, the community worker, and it made so much more sense and everything. I really enjoyed that and I would love to do it again (Student in focus group).

As this student relates, the Q&A enabled conversations that were flowing, interesting and informative. Through these discussions, a variety of novel 'aspects' or perspectives emerged that may not have been accessible in the classroom alone. Information presented by guest speakers may also sometimes be seen by students as more influential, impactful or legitimate than that provided by teachers or parents:

Then, I think that's where guest speakers really help, because if someone doesn't connect well with their teacher or doesn't have a relationship with their teacher or whatever, a guest speaker might come across better for someone because they ...

It could be the exact same thing being said, but it's from someone else, and sometimes different people just influence you differently (Student in focus group).

The way they present it as well... That [Q&A panellist] was like... 'I know girls, I know this is what's going on... let me help you out a bit', then we're all like, 'okay'... but if, say, my mum came into my room and was like, 'no you can't do that', then I'm going to be like, 'well I want to'... [but] if it's like, 'okay, let's think about it smart', then I'll be like, 'okay, I'll listen to you,' and you'll have a bigger influence on me (Student in focus group).

Importantly however, discussions that are influential, interesting or fluid are not necessarily a guaranteed outcome of a Q&A experience. A critical element in producing these potentials seemed to be student preparation. Where students were familiar with the Q&A medium, and equipped with adequate knowledge and questions, the sessions ran smoothly:

We've never sort of had that sort of one-on-one sort of concept before. We've never had that sort of, not only was it, they, they were there talking at us, to us, but... There wasn't many of us. And we didn't, lots of us weren't prepared for this and didn't quite know. If you watched these professionally done, they're all professional journalists or all the person who is being interviewed, media-trained and it's like a constant flow because they're eager to ask questions. We weren't prepared for questions, you know. We didn't quite know what we were going into so we were quite apprehensive when it came to asking questions and answering questions (Student in focus group).

the thing that worked well with [the independent school] was the way that they prepped the students (Program Developer).

so where it's worked well we've been able to get the students to think about the questions they're going to ask in advance and share them with the panel, and also get the panel to think about questions in advance to ask the students and actually share those questions so each side has the opportunity to really come to the Q&A prepared (Program Developer).

one of the things that we have not capitalised on to date is, today was an ideal opportunity to say that we had a global policy expert there. Now, the kids if they

had been prepped a little differently... So we have to learn how we prep people, how we inform people, we have to give some guidance... we can say, 'Hey, listen, we've got a golden opportunity here'. Today we didn't do that well enough (Program Developer).

In addition to adequate preparation, the quality of the Q&A facilitators' moderation was also perceived to influence the fluidity and value of the forums:

I'm not convinced Q&A is the best format either. The kids are very reluctant to ask potentially embarrassing questions in front of a crowd, that's always going to be true...I don't know, I personally don't think Q&A's ever really go that well. And the ones I've seen that work really well have like incredibly strong moderators (Teacher).

I think having the teacher also prompt the students to ask questions really really helped, whereas today, the teacher sat back a little more and was more of an observer (Program Developer).

Look, I think it could work, but I don't know, Q&A's have to be tightly managed. And also often with three panellists there's that awkward interplay of like the question might be best suited to one person, but all three feel they have to kind of like chip in their... two cents worth, and so like quite a simple thing ends up taking ten minutes, and then you lose your momentum a little bit (Teacher).

As this final comment suggests, feedback regarding the Q&A forums also extended towards the panellists. Whilst generally the expertise and input of the panellist seemed to be valued and well-received, there were concerns raised that some of the discussion may have been too 'academic', jargon-laden and complex for the student group:

'cause a few times the panel asked questions but they were like 15 sentences long... or very complicated... and I was sort of like, I got to the end of the question and I'd forgotten as well... some of the experts... I just thought their language was jargon-filled and just really complicated... And I had a few kids afterwards who were like, 'what the hell was going on?' The bright ones kept up, but there were a few definitely like struggling. I don't know if you could sense the body language and mood by the end, but they were totally worn out (Teacher).

As this teacher highlights, the complexity of the panellist answers and discussion may discourage student discussion and deflate their mood, energy and desire to contribute. Student engagement levels were also keenly observed by the program developers. In assessing how best to cultivate it, one suggested extending the Q&A sessions to help establish student confidence and invite audience contributions:

We've only ever been able to do an hour Q&A but I think, reflecting on how the few have done, it'd be great to do them for longer, maybe an hour and a half, because often students take a bit of time to settle in and feel confident to ask questions and share. So yeah that's certainly been something we've struggled with, where we've struggled to get them to really engage, but then once they get going you can't stop them (Program Developer).

Whilst extending the duration of the forums could help to build student confidence, the feasibility of inserting a lengthier Q&A into schools' schedules is less clear. Indeed, program developers raised concerns about their capacity to offer individual Q&A forums to schools, particularly as the program expands. In order to make the forums more practical, one developer suggested moving to community Q&A sessions which students could participate in:

I can quickly see that if we get the success that we need to have with Smarter About Drugs, we can't [on that larger scale] do Q&A's like we've done... So... I think there is a very real role for having community-based type Q&A's... outside of just the constraints of the curriculum ... [and] people would hook into [them] live (Program Developer).

This is likely to be an important option to consider in terms of program capacity going forward, and there could certainly be some benefits to enabling students from different schools to participate together in a wider community context, whether via video-link or in person. However large forums like this would clearly reduce the number of students who are able to actively participate in each session, and this should be taken into consideration in any decision.

Summary

When done well, the Q&A forums seem to have the potential to add value to the students' experience of the curriculum. The Q&A disrupts some of the conventions of traditional drug education by inviting them to participate as 'co-investigators' of drug issues (Cahill, 2007). This allows students to occupy a more affirmative role in the learning process, whilst also allowing them access to a diversity of opinions and expertise. While there are some definite areas for improvement in terms of how the Q&A are run, they do seem to have the capacity to offer students the chance to practice participating in real-world discussions about drug policy, to develop skills in communicating their ideas beyond the classroom, to get a sense of what it might look like to one day work in the alcohol and other drugs field, and to see that their views can already have a role in shaping drug policy or practice.

As such, it is recommended that the Q&A forums continue to be offered and refined as follows:

Recommendation 5: Continue to offer Q&A panel forums taking into account the following improvement suggestions:

Continue to offer forums to individual schools where possible but prepare for expansion

A dedicated Q&A forum for each school enables the sessions to be more effectively aligned with the interests, experience and competency of the student cohort. The smaller scale of the panel audience and the familiarity of participating alongside one's student group may also foster the confidence to contribute to group discussions. Nonetheless, as the program expands, the need to group schools together in wider community forums may become more pressing and feasible. A plan should be enacted to service this response, keeping in mind the ideal of continuing to maximise student participation capacities.

Offer the forums as live sessions where possible with video-streamed sessions as back up

To avoid potential technological issues and enhance student engagement, face-to-face panel forums would be the ideal model. However, video-streaming of panellists did not seem to prevent good discussion taking place, so should resourcing limitations make this difficult, video sessions offer a reasonable and workable alternative, provided the technology is available to support it and back-up plans are in place for potential technology breakdowns.

Determine the most appropriate space for each forum

The spatial dynamic of the forum seems to be important, especially for face to face sessions. Having panellists sitting up on stage, separate and above the audience, created an unfortunate hierarchical distance between students and the experts, and did not seem conducive to dynamic interaction. The large hall context, with its poor acoustics, also seemed not ideal for encouraging relaxed comfortable interactions. Using a smaller room, and having panel members sit closer to students, and on same level as them, would likely improve the kinds of discussions that take place.

Provide a section in the pack devoted to preparation for the Q&A forums

Providing greater guidance or support for teachers and students in terms of preparing for the Q&A session will likely maximise the benefits to be afforded by the sessions. There may also be a need to be clearer about the scope of the questions the students can ask the panellists. Given the often taboo nature of drug conversations, to assist students to feel confident asking questions and provide answers in such a large group, it might be worth encouraging them to collectively come up with questions and answers before the session and having some students nominate to provide group questions or answers, rather than individual students having to present something that appears to be their own.

Give advice to panel presenters around how to best pose questions and answers to the specific audience

Ensuring the panel's discussion is accessible and engaging is critical to the success of the Q&A. Panellists may better tailor their responses and discussion if they provided a brief overview of the class' competency levels, as well as advice for avoiding jargon and responding to any potentially tricky drug use related questions prior to the session.

Seek facilitation practices that maximise student participation

The skills required to effectively mediate a panel discussion should not be taken for granted. In order help ensure a fluid and engaging Q&A, the facilitator should be supported with basic advice or tips on how to manage the forum and promote discussion.

6.5 Curriculum context and cohort

The *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum is currently designed to be delivered as a single unit of study, over 13 lessons, within any of the following suggested secondary school courses and cohorts:

1. Year 9-10 Health & P.E
2. Year 10 Civics & Citizenship
3. VCE: Units 1&2 Global/Australian Politics
4. VCE: Units 1&2 Legal Studies
5. VCE: Units 1&2 Health & Human Development

So far it has only been trialled within the second and fourth of these units. Given the work identified above that is needed in enhancing the curriculum resources and supports going forward, a question for program developers to consider going forward will be whether to continue to promote the program to all of these potential cohorts, or to focus energy and attention on enhancing curriculum and program mapping within a key area or areas of strength.

As one of the key potential strengths of this program seems to be its focus on drug policy and socio-structural contexts, rather than health, there is a good rationale to be made for confining it to the three non-health focussed courses listed above. Indeed, the curriculum has not yet been tested in a health context and, given HPE curriculum is still underpinned by the morally-laden imperatives of drug prevention, there may well be risks involved in trying to deliver it within such contexts. The energy of program developers may well be best spent refining the program for the non-health courses listed above, or perhaps even for a single curriculum context, such as legal studies where the program seems to already work very well.

However a potential benefit of keeping the curriculum context wide, is that it could reach a wider cohort of students, including those who may well be more in need of developing the kinds of skills offered. As one program developer noted:

if we're accepting the importance of this gap that we're filling in terms of young people's understandings about drugs and ability to engage in those conversations... [to] only have year 11 legal studies students gaining those perspectives...that might be a particular kind of demographic... I wonder if that

demographic is necessarily the most needing of empowerment in those conversations (Program Developer).

In making these decisions, it will also be necessary to take into account the year level of different course cohorts, and the age group that is most appropriate for the program given their likely maturity, experience and capacity for critical thought. There are clear benefits for example, to teaching this material at the VCE level:

Definitely with that year 11/year 12 age bracket... they'll have read media articles, they might have siblings that go to festivals or parties or someone within one or two degrees of separation has opinions on this and is experiencing this, so it's really, really great to provide a space for that mature conversation (Program Developer).

When asked about the year level they thought the program was most appropriate for, teachers at both schools identified year 11 as the most suitable:

I think in Year 10 they're too young, I think they lack the maturity... The average Year 10 kid who's involved in drug use or sort of exposed to it, they haven't really, they don't have the maturity yet to really reflect on it I don't think, but I think where it's at now like unit two [second half of year 11]... that's a really good age and they're really ready for it (Teacher).

I think it would work well as a Year 11 Legal Studies unit to be honest. Just that extra bit of maturity, thoughtfulness, exposure to the world. I think that would probably be better. Yeah, Year 9 I think would be too young. Just like even with all the understanding of politics and government, and all that stuff, it's all like that takes a while to do it. I think 11 is probably the sweet spot...[and] You won't get it in 12, the curriculum is way too tight (Teacher).

This evaluation raises several considerations regarding the future placement of the *Smarter About Drugs* program within the school curriculum. It is apparent that the *Smarter About Drugs* program operates successfully within the context of *Year 10 Civics & Citizenship 4* and *VCE: Units 1&2 Legal Studies*. Situated within these curriculums, the program has avoided the moralism commonly embedded in HPE-based drug education programs and led to a novel and productive focus on the policy frameworks and socio-structural forces that govern drug

use. Offering the program within a HPE curriculum space would likely limit its capacity to achieve these outcomes, and may create unnecessary risk for the program going forward. There is potential value, however, in continuing to offer the program to the other curriculum contexts in order to extend its 'reach' and enable it to engage student cohorts and demographics that may otherwise be missed by a more targeted program rollout.

Student age should, however, be carefully factored into any curriculum-mapping decision. Students' maturity, level of experience with drugs, understanding of policy and government processes and capacity to critically reflect and debate each seem to play a role in determining success and value of classroom discussions. Also worth considering are the resources capacities of the program development team going forward, in relation to curriculum mapping and ongoing curriculum support.

In weighing these findings, the following recommendation and suggestions are put forth:

Recommendation 6: Target the resource to Units 1&2 (year 11) Legal Studies and/or Global/Australian Politics, based on the following suggestions and rationales:

Move the program firmly out of the health curriculum space

The key aims of *Smarter About Drugs* are not well aligned with the individual health-focused aims of secondary school HPE curriculum. Given HPE's long commitment to morally-driven, abstinence-oriented drug prevention models of good health, attempting to discuss drug policy openly in a HPE classroom is likely to be very difficult, and could easily open the program up to potentially unwanted attention or criticism.

Target the curriculum to VCE units 1&2 (year 11)

The curriculum seems to be most suited to year 11 students, given their life experience and maturity level. Teachers thought that year 9 and 10 students were generally too young to grapple with the critical analysis aspects of the program, and less likely to have sufficient exposure to drug issues to make the course relevant. And at least one noted that the Year 12 units were already too full of essential curriculum to make the program a viable option.

Consider narrowing down to only one or two curriculum space offerings

Attempting to offer the curriculum to too many discipline areas is likely to dilute the aims of the program, and the capacity for developers to map and refine the curriculum in a targeted manner. It is recommended that the program developers put their energy into refining it for either one or two curriculum offerings. Units 1&2 Legal Studies, where it has been successfully trialled 3 years running, is the most obvious choice, with Units 1&2 Global/Australian Politics the next most suitable.

6.6 Teacher capacity and buy-in

The roll out and design of *Smarter About Drugs* was heavily contingent upon teachers. While participating in the program, teachers were required to liaise with the program designers and school leadership, integrate the program into their teaching curriculum, deliver (and in some instances design or modify) the course material and help facilitate the program's evaluation. In practice, this meant that the extent to which individual teachers supported and invested in *Smarter About Drugs*, and had the skills, energy and resources needed to teach it well, made a significant difference to the successful delivery of the program.

For program designers, identifying and developing relationships with teachers willing to 'champion' the program was thus key. In the words of one program designer, 'champions' were those who were not only comfortable with the material, but enthusiastic about the need for, and potentials of, the initiative:

I think we were really lucky with the first school we trialled that we had a teacher that was essentially a champion of the resource, really believed in it, saw the need for it in his class and really took it on board, felt comfortable in delivering the resource and actually dealing with some of those things that might come up in the class (Program Developer).

Securing enthusiastic advocates of *Smarter About Drugs* was important for the smooth and effective delivery of the program. Just as critically, however, champions could also help generate buy-in from schools and parents by mitigating some of the anxieties or concerns a drug education program can provoke:

There was a little bit of, I wouldn't say fear, but a bit of nervousness with the schools being involved. With the first school, because we had such strong support from the teachers, the two teachers who approached us, they were able to convince their leadership team and their principal that it was a good idea (Program Developer).

At the independent girls' school, the program already had a teacher who had been supporting and 'championing' the program for two years prior, and who continued to put effort into building on the curriculum resources throughout 2019. It seems that this energy, investment and strong leadership strengthened the delivery of the program at this school. It also seemed to have created a buffer for the other teaching staff there, one of whom was relatively new – both to teaching and to drug policy issues – and initially expressed less confidence in delivering the materials:

I think we were really lucky with the first school we trialled that we had a teacher that was essentially a champion of the resource, really believed in it, saw the need for it in [their] class and really took it on board, felt comfortable in delivering the resource and actually dealing with some of those things that might come up in the class (Program Developer).

At the state school, however, this deeper level of program investment was missing. While the teachers seemed to be generally supportive of the program, they seemed less satisfied with the process overall. They had found it hard and time-consuming to deliver the program and found that it drained more of their time and effort than they had expected:

The other thing is like it sort of became a little bit bigger every time. Like when we first got the pack we were like, 'okay, we're going to teach this stuff'. And then it was like, 'okay, there's going to be a survey', 'Okay, we're going to need consent forms for the survey', "Oh there's going to be Q&A", 'oh we need consent forms for the Q&A'. 'Oh and a focus group, there's going to be consent forms for the focus group' (Teacher).

For this teacher, a lack of clarity regarding the nature and scope of their participation from the outset, resulted in a sense of frustration of what felt like ever increasing project demands.

This lack of clarity seemed to be in part a result of communication difficulties between program developers and teachers, and poor information flow between teachers within schools. Gaining direct access to teachers was described as a major challenge, one that was not only complicated by busy teaching schedules but by difficult communication channels:

Just generally it was very difficult to get in contact with teachers. They're very busy obviously and they don't I think check their emails all the time, like other professions would do (Program Developer).

The information hadn't really been passed on from the teachers that we actually spoke to, to the teachers who were delivering it... [but] it's also really difficult to know what we could've done differently because we met with the principal and the coordinator and it was just really difficult to get in contact with them (Program Developer)

The lack of clarity was also likely a result of the additional, and hard to anticipate, workload requirements associated with the evaluation component of the trial, and the advisory group that was established to meet the ADF funding agreement (detailed further in section 6.7). As one program developer notes:

it really showed that, I think first of all, teachers are really busy, that bringing on a whole new resource into someone's curriculum is not an easy thing to do. I think the way we asked them to administer the surveys and get consent forms etc. didn't quite work for them. And certainly, asking them to be involved in the advisory group for the ADF purposes was just too much for them (Program Developer).

So I think, like, having in future... like, not just a conversation pack for teachers and some guidelines... but [giving them] a whole pack on what implementing something like this [involves]... having that really clear and crystal clear, and really [getting] buy-in from that at the start (Program Developer).

As the program developers make clear, these contextual constraints affected their capacity to effectively communicate with teachers, coordinate activities and generate teacher buy-in. The existence of a program 'champion' at one school helped to buffer against these pressures, but where teacher buy-in and commitment is lacking, confusion or frustration could easily undermine the program and its effectiveness.

Good clear and consistent communication about program commitments and timelines will be important going forward, as will ensuring a good level of program buy-in at each school early on. As Bennett, Cunningham and Molloy (2016) argue, school-based “health promotion programmes have little chance of success if support from teaching staff is lacking” (p. 53). Establishing a sense of genuine participation and engagement in the program (Bennet et al., 2016; Domitrovich et al., 2008) should therefore be considered paramount. As such, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 7: Offer the program more widely on a self-selecting basis to maximise school-level buy-in

Offering the program to schools on a self-selecting basis would likely maximise school-level buy-in, especially if clear information is provided up-front about what is involved in delivering it. To facilitate school uptake and buy-in, the program will need to be marketed more widely, with marketing materials including clear information about benefits and time commitments involved.

Recommendation 8: Provide early and ongoing support to teachers to maximise teacher buy-in and engagement and to swiftly diagnose and respond to problems

In order to best support and guide teachers through the various stages of program delivery, open lines of communication need to be secured and maintained. When engaging schools during the recruitment processes, program designers ought to assess their organisational structure and communication procedures and, where possible, negotiate direct access to those teachers responsible for rolling out the program. Developers should endeavour to actively ‘check in’ with teachers at least once before, during and after the program. Early discussions should provide teachers with an accurate understanding of what the program will encompass, including the demands, expectations and processes involved in its delivery. Just as critically, teachers should be made aware of the value of the program and how it fits within and complements their existing teaching curriculum. Any concerns teachers have or any apparent lack of buy-in should be identified and addressed early on. Teachers should then be invited to collaboratively determine the medium and frequency of ongoing communication and support.

6.7 Broader stakeholder engagement

The ADF's funding arrangement for the *Smarter About Drugs* expansion during 2019, placed considerable emphasis on broader community stakeholder engagement. There was, for example, an explicit requirement that the program team connect and consult with not only the schools themselves but also parents at the school and local councils. This stakeholder consultation was recognised to have potential value in terms of connecting the curriculum to local issues and health service options:

I think that the involvement of the local councils came with two main benefits. Like one being that we got a sense of... [how] like the issue of AOD, or drugs, plays out in that local community... [and two being] what like health or youth support services might be available (Program Developer).

Yet a range of problems associated by this wider engagement were identified, which predominantly related to resourcing issues and a lack of clarity around the aims and role of the engagement:

So we needed to have like meetings with local councils in the local areas where the two schools were, and I don't think, well all those stakeholders weren't resourced to participate in that kind of engagement, with themselves or with each other (Program Developer)

there wasn't a really, really clear, crystal clear timeline and definition of everybody's involvement (Program Developer).

External engagement placed an additional burden on the program developers and schools:

there was quite a massive, massive amount of like quite tricky stakeholder management in order to have meetings and receive feedback on things that weren't necessarily in line with what could have best happened to rollout the Program (Program Developer)

Teachers are really busy... And certainly, asking them to be involved in the advisory group for the ADF purposes was just too much for them (Program Developer).

Because of resource limitations, ideas to emerge from the wider stakeholder engagement were sometimes unable to be implemented and its potential benefits for the program could not be fully realised:

a parent that came to the meeting... actually provided some advice on how we could extend the Q&A to have another session afterwards for parents to come and to hear a presentation from the students on what they'd learnt. Now that was something that we... well actually the school, didn't really have the resources to follow up with.... even when we put the effort into having a parent engagement strategy the suggestions that came out of that weren't able to be implemented, because of resourcing (Program Developer).

Overall, it seems that the wider external engagement, particularly with Councils, did not necessarily strengthen the program nor contribute to its underlying objectives. Indeed, in some instances it could be perceived to hinder relationships and result in key stakeholder 'fatigue':

I think the added difficulty this year was... engaging with not just the school but other stakeholders including the local councils... which almost kind of added another burden on the schools to go to for example advisory group meetings, and I think it was just too much for the schools this year to do all of those things that we were asking of them... yeah it was just a lot to ask and so in the end some things dropped off (Program Developer).

Engagement also demanded considerable administrative '*logistics and administration*' (Program Developer) work for the program team, siphoning time and energy away from other more critical areas of project management. As one Program Developer noted, it would be more useful:

to focus, first and foremost at the school and first and foremost with the interactions in the classroom... Starting there and having that really well resourced is really important (Program Developer).

Overall, developer feedback indicates that wider community engagement yielded little benefit for the *Smarter About Drugs* program. Funder directives to engage the community were encountered as frustrating, onerous and unsustainable. Indeed, despite an

acknowledged sense that community engagement could be productive, developers were insufficiently resourced to effectuate it. In effect, efforts to meet funders' expectations regarding engagement may have resulted in stakeholder fatigue and may have been an ineffectual use of developer's time.

As such, the following recommendation is made:

Recommendation 9: Focus program engagement on the schools delivering the program, rather than the broader community

Given the limited benefits that seem to have been gained from the engagement with local councils, it seems more prudent for *Smarter About Drugs* to focus its energy on engaging with and resourcing schools who take up the program in future. This may include engaging with the local school community, including parents, if resources allow. If wider community engagement is deemed to be necessary or useful going forward, it will be important for program developers to ensure such engagement is meaningful and sustainable and that the purpose, objectives, scope and demands of the engagement are made clear from the start.

6.8 Evaluation processes

Program evaluations and practices of continuous improvement are important for the efficacy and sustainability of any program or intervention. Evaluation provides a key means of tracking the progress of the intervention and the degree to which it produces desired and unanticipated effects. This knowledge can in turn be used to identify issues in program delivery, facilitate its continuous improvement and strengthen any claims made regarding its positive impact.

The need for ongoing evaluation processes for *Smarter About Drugs* is particularly acute given the age, potentials and ambitions of the program. Indeed, having been implemented within only two schools, and with specific courses and class contexts, it is unclear to what extent the findings produced through this evaluation are generalisable. The program should not be assumed to simply 'plug in' to different school or curriculum contexts with the same effects. As *Smarter About Drugs* expands, it is necessary to monitor how the program adapts to different school, curriculum and classroom environments and how this adaptation transforms its outcomes.

In light of student and teacher feedback, however, and the problems encountered with the survey data collection in this evaluation, future evaluation processes will need to be streamlined. It is apparent that the mechanisms introduced to evaluate the program generated a degree of strain amongst some teachers, particularly for those experiencing heavy teaching loads. As one teacher noted earlier:

It sort of became a little bit bigger every time. Like when we first got the pack we were like, 'okay, we're going to teach this stuff'. And then it was like, 'okay, there's going to be a survey', 'Okay, we're going to need consent forms for the survey'... 'Oh and a focus group, there's going to be consent forms for the focus group... And so after a while I sort of... lost track of it a bit, and I was trying to focus more on the teaching and then... forgot about that (Teacher).

Teachers are also not necessarily familiar with evaluation protocols, or their value:

I was not aware of the importance of the evaluation, and so I didn't really place much emphasis on that (Teacher).

If there are too many procedures involved, without clear and timely communication and teacher buy-in, key processes can easily be overlooked or not properly implemented. The timing of evaluation processes is also important to consider, especially in order to take into account things like holidays and exams:

The major difficult we've had is just timing, this time of year. Like because they're on exams. Like if we had a class tomorrow I could get 90% of the consent forms back, no problems. But we don't, which is annoying (Teacher).

Communication difficulties, a lack of buy-in, overly complicated procedures, and timing constraints all limited the effectiveness of this current evaluation, particularly in relation to the student survey component. The comparative difficulties administering and obtaining survey data at the state school seemed to be largely due to staff there being relatively more overworked and resource-constrained, leading to some communication breakdowns and overall low buy-in to the program evaluation processes. It points to the importance of ensuring good evaluation buy-in and understanding from all teaching staff regarding any evaluation processes early on. This is something that will need to be taken into account in any future evaluation of the program, especially within state and other less resource-rich schools.

Collecting pre-and post-test survey data in evaluations is important if the program's impact on student knowledge, attitudes and behaviours is to be effectively assessed. Deploying interviews and focus groups is also very useful to dig deeper into the qualitative aspects of the program and to make sense of the survey data. However, running these kinds of 'full' evaluations regularly, especially if they are conducted independently, would be costly and resource intensive, - for program developers and schools - and unlikely to be possible most years. Useful feedback about the program in those years can still be obtained from a lighter form of evaluation using feedback surveys administered by program developers after each program completion.

Taking all of these things into consideration, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 10: Plan evaluation and continuous improvement processes into the program design

Develop a simplified and 'light' evaluation model for most years, while retaining a more comprehensive evaluation procedure for others

For most delivery instances, including for the next delivery round, a less resource intensive evaluation approach is recommended. This should consist of surveys, unique for student and teacher groups, that are administered upon the completion of the program. In addition to multiple choice or scale response type questions, surveys should incorporate space for open answer questions as a means of mapping unexpected impacts (positive or negative). For occasional delivery instances, after the program has been run ideally at least one more time, and where resources allow, a fuller evaluation should be undertaken. In these instances, in addition to pre- and post- test surveys, student focus groups and teacher interviews should be incorporated to allow for a richer picture of the program's impacts.

Streamline the evaluation procedures

For both evaluation types, processes should be streamlined to reduce participant fatigue and ensure accurate and timely completion. Students should only be required to complete a single consent form and surveys and consent procedures should be electronic. For linking pre- and post- test surveys anonymously to each other and to consent forms, consider having students to log in with something easy to remember, like a unique combination of their name and school name.

6.9 Summary

The *Smarter About Drugs* curriculum pack and Q&A panel forum provide a solid base for meeting the overarching aims and objectives of the program. Furthermore, they have been met with a general level of support and enthusiasm from teachers and students. There were however, some key areas of design and delivery that were identified in this evaluation as needing improvement and a range of program design and delivery recommendations were presented for consideration. These included:

- Refining the curriculum pack to enhance student engagement and better support teachers.
- Providing teachers with support around navigating controversial topics
- Providing students with the tools and resources to locate practical harm reduction information should they need it.
- Continuing to offer and refine Q&A panel forums
- Targeting the resource to Units 1&2 Legal Studies and/or Global/Australian Politics.
- Marketing the program widely to schools on a self-selecting basis.
- Providing support to teachers during the program to maximise engagement and solve any potential problems fast.
- Focusing program engagement resources on the schools delivering the program, rather than the broader community.
- Planning streamlined evaluation and continuous improvement processes into the program design.

It is clear that there is value in continuing to offer this program and expanding it to broader range of school contexts. These refinements should ensure that it has the best chance of success for achieving its aims.

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