

Title

L2P – learner driver mentor program: extending driver licensing reach in disadvantaged communities

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Abstract

There is growing interest in strategies to improve driver licensing rates amongst disadvantaged communities. This is particularly the case where graduated licensing systems are introduced that result in more stringent learner experience and drive test requirements.

In Victoria, the state government provides funding through the Transport Accident Commission for the VicRoads L2P – learner driver mentor program. The program is open to all disadvantaged Victorians under 21 who hold a learner permit, including young people from indigenous, culturally diverse and transport disadvantaged backgrounds. It offers supervised driving experience to 1,800 learner drivers per annum, who would otherwise be unable to gain the 120 hours driving experience required under Victoria's Graduated Licensing System.

L2P addresses road safety issues amongst disadvantaged young people through increased compliance with the Graduated Licensing System, attitudinal and behaviour change. The L2P – learner driver mentor program also has potential positive impacts on employment, social connection and psychological wellbeing.

The presentation will provide the background and objectives of the program; describe the model and its establishment across Victoria; and detail program performance and evaluation outcomes to date.

Keywords

Learner driver, volunteer, mentor, graduated licensing system, young driver, disadvantaged, indigenous, culturally diverse

Introduction

In 2007 Victoria introduced a new Graduated Licensing System (GLS) to improve young driver safety. Provisions included the capacity to obtain a learner permit at age 16 rather than 17, a 12 month minimum holding period for under 21 year olds and a requirement for this cohort to gain 120 hours on road experience prior to taking a probationary licence test. A two-stage, four year probationary licence was also introduced. The GLS was expected to reduce Victorian young driver injuries by up to 800 per year, and result in 12 fewer deaths.

The L2P – learner driver mentor program was initiated as a result of the newly-introduced 120 hours on road experience requirement. It was recognised that while most learners would be able to gain 120 hours experience, some community members would struggle because they lacked a vehicle, a supervising driver or the means to purchase paid instruction.

VicRoads identified a group of 3,000 young people per year who were likely to be most disadvantaged by these new requirements, and developed potential policy responses. Through this work pilots were established to trial a volunteer mentor scheme, in which fully licensed community members provided supervised driving experience to young people disadvantaged by the on road experience requirements. The Victorian Government subsequently determined it would provide \$9 million funding through the Transport Accident Commission to establish the L2P - learner driver mentor program.

Objectives

There are two primary L2P objectives:

- Improved road safety through compliance with the GLS requirements, leading to reduced unlicensed driving, crash and injury rates.
- Equal opportunity for young Victorians to obtain a driver licence.

In establishing a volunteer mentoring program, VicRoads recognised the potential benefits of L2P extended beyond road safety and driver licensing. As a result, three secondary L2P objectives were identified:

- Improved access to employment opportunities
- Enhanced mobility, and
- Opportunities for increased social connection

The secondary objectives are particularly salient for rural, culturally and linguistically diverse and indigenous communities, where lack of a driver's licence can cause particular hardship.

Model

The L2P model is a community-based volunteer mentor program, built from the pilot projects established while the GLS was in development. L2P provides learner driving practice in an ANCAP four or five star car under the supervision of a fully licensed driver. There are a number of reasons for the use of volunteers:

- Experience on road makes the critical difference to road safety outcomes for young people, rather than teaching or instruction
- Professional driving lessons would be very expensive for government to fund
- Volunteerism develops new skills, enhances social connection, personal satisfaction and a sense of well being for the volunteers
- Being mentored delivers on road experience, but extends to providing a stable adult role model, opportunity for stronger social connection, confidence, goal direction and importantly improved road safety attitudes and behaviour

The funding model structures in community engagement and sustainability through requiring the formation of broad based Steering Committees, a partnership approach to working with local government and community service organisations and local community ownership through sponsorship, donations and in kind contributions. Local government is the principal auspice body for L2P programs, and councils work with community agencies, government

bodies, police, local businesses and other stakeholders to run L2P programs. Local government operates or sub-contracts the program, with each program having an L2P Coordinator to manage implementation and delivery.

VicRoads funding covers L2P Coordinator salaries and some operating costs. The remaining costs are covered by in kind contributions, donations and sponsorships sourced by L2P programs and Steering Committees.

Supervising drivers register as volunteers with the L2P provider and undergo police, Working with Children and driver licence checks. They receive 10 hours training designed by VicRoads and delivered by a TAFE provider. The training program resources volunteers on young driver issues, how to work with disadvantaged young people, road rules and conducting supervised driving sessions according to the four stage approach to learning to drive.

Learners are assessed for eligibility by L2P Coordinators before acceptance into the program. They receive up to 7 lessons from driving instructors, initially to ensure they are safe on road and ready for mentoring, and subsequently to assess progress or troubleshoot issues.

Reach

To date VicRoads has funded 55 programs spanning 60 of Victoria's 78 local government areas, or three quarters of the state. All have launched and are operational. Although initial funding for the L2P program was due to cease progressively from February 2012, the Victorian Government announced in February that it would fund L2P for a further three years commencing 1 July 2012.

The total capacity of the L2P program is 1,800 young people per annum. Given that young people enter and leave the program for a range of reasons, working capacity is estimated to be 1,500 to 1,600 people actively engaged in on road driving experience.

The trained volunteer mentor target is 1,800, to allow 1:1 matching with learners plus additional capacity to cover leave, illness and departure of mentors. Capacity will be achieved in 2012.

To 31 March 2012 the program delivered approximately 60,000 hours of on road experience and 400 probationary licences. In the March quarter 11,000 driving hours were delivered and 71 licences. These figures are increasing as all programs build capacity.

There were 1,300 active learners and another 600 waiting to start driving. Over 1,050 mentors were trained and actively supervising learners, with 460 waiting to be matched. Many mentors supervise more than one learner, and take on a new learner when their current match leaves the program. Learner turnover for the quarter was 13%, mentor turnover 1%.

Focused L2P Programs

While all L2P programs accept only young people who can demonstrate disadvantage with respect to gaining a driver licence through the GLS process, a number of programs further specialise in particular areas of need.

Two programs assist metropolitan Department of Human Services clients in the youth justice and supported accommodation systems. These young people have often experienced severe long term disadvantage, have offended or are at risk of offending, have high risk of crash involvement, have limited community support at best and in the case of young people in supported accommodation are in transition to independent living.

In comparison with other L2P programs, intensive individual work is required to engage and prepare these young people for L2P since they have many experiences of failure and may be unused to the regular long term commitment required to benefit from L2P. These participants often also have issues accessing identity documents and therefore gaining a learner permit in order to participate in the program.

L2P has proven very successful for this client group. Once engaged, they often accumulate on road experience very quickly, and Departmental officers report that participants have successfully left care, engaging with education and employment. The Department of Human Services views L2P as highly normalising for its clients, and one of the most positive experiences they have whilst in state care.

The Wellington and East Gippsland Shires L2P program focuses on local indigenous communities. There is clear demonstrated need in the area and strong local support for the program. It is conducted by Mission Australia, which has extensive networks and is also very effective at obtaining sponsorship and donations. The program is managed by a highly visible and respected Aboriginal elder.

Mission Australia also conducts the Ignition learner permit program and the Aboriginal Driver Education Program. These programs leverage each other and contribute to an integrated approach to driver licensing for indigenous communities. People on low incomes, with a disability or other disadvantage are also eligible.

The availability of these programs enhances L2P by encompassing legal support and assistance with identity issues; literacy, numeracy, IT and financial management training; car ownership and maintenance education; traffic law and road safety education; financial support; and linkages to health, employment, training and community participation services.

While all programs are expected to cater for local community need and a number of programs are located in areas with high cultural diversity, one L2P program focuses primarily on CALD communities. This program is managed by the Southern Ethnic Advisory and Advocacy Council in Melbourne. It has been strongly subscribed and can boast successes across a range of cultural groups, including more recently arrived African communities. The agency's strong connections and expertise with culturally diverse communities are key drivers of this success, aided by an excellent coordinator.

On average, 10% of L2P participants are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) or indigenous backgrounds. The success of L2P in addressing the needs of diverse communities referred to above is replicated in programs across Victoria, with each program seeking to identify and engage those young people most in need.

L2P has an entry cut-off of 21 years of age, because from this age Victorian learners are not required to gain 120 hours on road experience. Older disadvantaged learners, particularly

those from migrant and refugee communities, may still struggle to gain a driver licence due to limited access to on road experience or challenges in negotiating the licensing system.

The Transport Accident Commission has previously provided funding for organisations such as Adult Migrant Education Services to develop programs based on the L2P model for older learners. These initiatives are now being replaced with a partnership between the Transport Accident Commission and the RACV, to deliver the RACV New Arrivals Road Safety Program. This program provides limited funds to access driving lessons, road safety seminars or volunteer mentor training.

Learnings and Evaluation

Setup

A key learning from establishing 55 L2P programs is that local communities require considerable setup time. L2P providers are given 6 months from initial funding to establish the program and have learners on road. This is in recognition that the formation of partnerships, program development, recruiting and training volunteers, engaging learners, seeking sponsorships and vehicles, and a range of other establishment tasks are time consuming. A significant amount of pre-work to establish the need for an L2P program is also necessary. Implementation support is therefore a critical success factor, and VicRoads provides Field Support staff who travel across the state to ensure L2P programs establish and operate successfully.

Operating Model

There is no set formula for a successful L2P operating agency. Smaller agencies experienced in working with volunteers or young people have clear strengths in these areas, but may have limited management or administrative resources. Local government usually has a robust resource base but may not always have functions within which L2P is a natural fit. Some providers possess strengths and conduct activities that complement L2P extremely well.

Across 55 L2P programs there are numerous variations in operating models, strengths and limitations. The common element is that the partnership approach strengthens L2P development, implementation and operation. Engagement of key community stakeholders brings a range of resources and expertise to L2P programs, maximising the strengths of providers and bringing solutions to address any challenges and limitations. L2P would have been less successful without this high level of local community engagement.

In some cases Steering Committees have struggled to maintain energy and attendance once funding has been granted and the program established, as this was the main focus. It is important to proactively manage these issues, re-focusing the committee on operational support and if necessary revising Committee membership.

Training

The VicRoads designed 10 hour volunteer mentor training course is also a critical element of the L2P program. It covers road safety content, mentoring issues, skills training and an on road drive component. The training provides an opportunity to deliver key young driver road safety messages, the four stage model for learning to drive, mentoring and coaching skills and

the capacity to assess suitability of trainees to become volunteer mentors with the program. Volunteers report a significant increase in confidence in the supervising driver role as a result of the training.

Program Options

Although the L2P program is designed to operate within a particular framework and funding environment, there is capacity to apply the fundamental principles to different situations provided program design is appropriately modified. While partner buy in and support is essential regardless of model, funding levels, coverage and the nature and extent of support are potentially all amenable to alternative approaches.

While an extensive statewide program is unlikely to be sustainable with seed funding, a program targeting specific local areas potentially is. Given the early pilots for L2P focused on a voluntary program operated by a Rotary Club and an initiative by one council, there is scope to tailor learner driver mentor programs to suit available funding and local support.

Another low cost alternative is to publish materials on the web for local groups to use in establishing and running a volunteer mentor driving program.

Funding a training component plus other selected resources is another potential limited cost approach.

The level of funding applied to each program component is another policy decision. VicRoads pays for local coordinator salaries and a share of running costs, but not vehicles or equipment. This could be reconfigured to suit differing requirements.

Particular ages, cultural groups, areas of highest transport disadvantage and so on can be targeted and this might be the most appropriate way to manage limited resources.

Funding driving lessons is likely to prove a considerably more expensive alternative than a volunteer mentor program, and lacks the community benefits that accrue from a mentoring program. Funding limited lessons for specific purposes may have some benefits. As noted above, the L2P program funds a limited number of professional instructor hours to ensure new participants are safe to be placed with volunteers on the road network, to periodically check progress and to troubleshoot particular issues.

Providing increased exemptions from the required number of on road hours is a low cost option, but is difficult to support since it runs counter to goals of improving young driver safety.

Evaluation

A qualitative evaluation was completed in late 2010, utilising information collected from a small number of steering committees, coordinators, volunteers and learners. This evaluation indicated:

- Young people in the program experienced a range of disadvantage and came from diverse backgrounds
- They reported prior unlicensed and unsafe driving practices, which had ceased since starting L2P

- Road safety attitudes and behaviours had also improved
- Mentors come from a range of backgrounds and have varied motivations
- All stakeholders felt there were very positive outcomes across road safety, self esteem, life skills and goal direction
- The partnership model, one-to-one mentoring, coordinator support, vehicle accessibility and community goodwill all contribute to the program's success

VicRoads and the Transport Accident Commission plan to conduct a quantitative evaluation of L2P in the second half of 2012.

Conclusion

The L2P – learner driver mentor program has gained very high community acceptance, with take-up spanning 60 local government areas across Victoria. A number of additional local government areas have indicated they would access L2P if funds were available.

The partnership approach between government, community and local businesses is a key strength of the L2P program. It has fostered community acceptance and commitment to L2P, ensured broad reach and provided valuable support for the establishment and ongoing operation of local L2P programs.

L2P is providing opportunities for learner practice and licensing, but has other benefits for disadvantaged community members including improved road safety, social and employment outcomes.

The L2P model is adaptable across a range of community groups, and works well if key success factors are present.