

WARAKIRRI COLLEGE

A FUTURE SCHOOL CHANGING FUTURES



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About Warakirri College

Warakirri College is a Special Assistance School with five campuses in western Sydney and the first independent school in New South Wales to be accredited to deliver the Higher School Certificate (HSC) by Distance Education. The school serves disadvantaged students aged from 15 to 22 years, offering a Year 10 Record of School Achievement (RoSA) and HSC. Each campus has approximately 100 students, with a student to staff ratio of 6.5 to 1.

Initially established as a social impact initiative of MTC Australia, it's a different kind of high school where students are encouraged to be themselves as they study in a flexible adult learning environment. Warakirri College is a registered charity which receives financial support from state and commonwealth governments, so students do not pay fees. Students can be referred from their current school or can apply directly to the college.

Challenges

Warakirri College is striving to meet the current and future needs of young people disengaged from or disenchanted with mainstream schools. Staff and students are working together to break the cycle of welfare dependence, raise students' aspirations, and to change the projected futures

for young people who face the challenges of mental illness and social disadvantage. An ongoing challenge is developing a diverse and rigorous curriculum that sees 30% of HSC graduates receive university offers while meeting the needs of the 80% of students on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD).

Design principles

This case study has been guided by the work of Valerie Hannon and Julie Temperley in their book, *FutureSchool*, published in 2022. What follows is a presentation of three clusters of design principles, and a discussion of how Warakirri College has addressed each of these principles as a means of meeting future needs to guide their evolution.

1. Design principles: Values cluster

The following are design principles that relate to the concept of values. Hannon and Temperley identify five key values that are listed below and summarised in Figure 1.

Purpose driven: *FutureSchools* are themselves focused on the purpose of both individual and collective thriving, and on helping their learners to acquire personal purpose: building their 'why?'

Equity-focused: such schools should work to address inequities and social justice and help young people to do so.

Promoting identity: this principle suggests that each learner's social and culture identity must be nurtured, cultivating a sense of belonging and value.

Strength-based: this principle asserts that the school recognises, celebrates and builds from each (and every) individual's existing assets.

Relevant: this proposes that learning be relevant to the local and global community. 'Work that matters' should be an important feature. (Hannon & Temperley, 2022, p. 30).

Figure 1: Values



Adapted from *FutureSchool* (p. 31) by V. Hannon and J. Temperley, 2022, Routledge.

Purpose driven

The future-focused mission of Warakirri College is central to the school's identity. The school is providing an opportunity for young people disengaged from mainstream education to learn to develop positive relationships, re-engage with learning in its broadest sense, develop knowledge, skills and confidence, and to have the courage of high aspirations.

Equity-focused

With an unrelenting focus on equity and redressing social injustice, the only criterion for enrolment is being in need. Students come to Warakirri due to a broad range of factors including mental health challenges, gender identity, peer relations, extreme social disadvantage, refugee experience, early parenthood, complex family situations, homelessness, an interface with juvenile justice, referral from hospitals, and an inability to enrol elsewhere.

Promoting identity

Warakirri College builds student engagement by cultivating a sense of belonging and value and through developing stable, positive relationships. Staff are trained to understand the effect of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy is a key consideration.

Strength-based

At Warakirri, students are accepted and their strengths acknowledged. It is understood that an aggressive disruptive, angry child is often an anxious young person looking for security and comfort. Forgiveness, faith, hope, and love are actively practised.

Relevant

Students have the opportunity to work on projects that interest them, gain qualifications, and develop skills that will help them transition

to the workplace or further education. Students benefit from access to the MTC (Marrickville Community Training Centre) support network and community organisations.

2. Design principles: Operational philosophy

The following are design principles that relate to the concept of operational philosophy. Hannon and Temperley identify four key philosophies that are listed below and summarised in Figure 2.

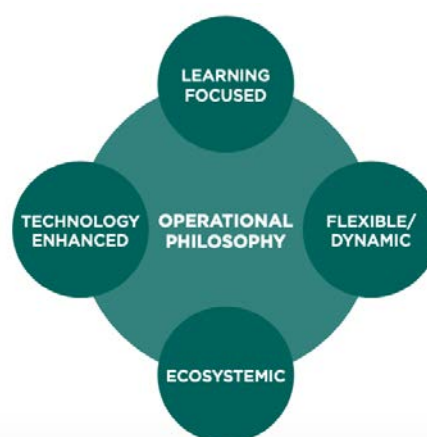
Learning focused: learning is at the heart. Understanding how learning happens, the very best in research on learning sciences, underpin developments. This applies to the adult learning (of all staff) too. This is a critically important principle – and it is not axiomatic by any means in all schools.

Flexible/dynamic: the school should flexibly iterate different modes of teaching and learning to meet the evolving needs of learners and the wider world. In an age of disruption this is an imperative – as schools found out in 2020.

Technology enhanced: *FutureSchools* use technology extensively and responsibly to liberate learning, amplify effective and diverse modalities, and to enable both personalization and collaboration.

Ecosystemic: this principle asserts the school should be seriously porous with many active partners in organizing learning. It will be deeply connected to its local community, and to the global community through technology, to provide richer learning experiences and diverse pathways for learners. (Hannon & Timplerley, 2022, p. 31).

Figure 2: Operational Philosophy



Adapted from *FutureSchool* (p. 32) by V. Hannon and J. Temperley, 2022, Routledge.

Learning focused

Learning is responsive to student needs, with a flexible and dynamic approach that includes the opportunity to learn through distance education as well as through an on-campus adult learning environment. A rigorous outdoor education program is provided. With very small classes and extensive classroom support, students are welcomed no matter their previous record of attendance or behaviour.

Flexible/dynamic

Warakirri operates outside the system, as an independent school without fees. It actively works to remove perceived barriers for students, with a social worker and counsellors provided. Career advice and opportunities are actively given and followed through.

Technology enhanced

By enrolling in Warakirri College's distance education program, students receive:

- flexible learning pathways transitioning into university, TAFE, or the workforce;
- individualised support from a social worker;
- a personalised education program from qualified teachers;
- face to face support often 1:1; and
- an ATAR option.

Ecosystemic

The ecosystem is significantly porous, with partners from a broad range of corporate and not for profit and community organisations. Club grants provide food and excursions for students.

3. Design principles: Learner experience cluster

The following are design principles that relate to the learning experience cluster. Hannon and Temperley identify five key learning experiences that are listed below and summarised in Figure 3.

Personalised: the learner's experience relates to her personal needs, passions and development. These are at the centre: not the institution, the teacher or external bodies of knowledge.

Integrated: the learner experiences meaning through learning that transcends siloes, building relevant connections both within and between disciplines.

Inclusive: the culture is experienced as respectful and welcoming.

Relational: individuals are known, good relationships are the basis for deep learning. Collaboration is the norm.

Empowering: *FutureSchools* build and leverage learner agency, providing opportunities for learners to take increasing responsibility and ownership over their learning. (Hannon & Temperley, 2022, p. 32)

Figure 3: Learner Experience



Adapted from *FutureSchool* (p. 33) by V. Hannon and J. Temperley, 2022, Routledge.

Personalised

Learning is being transformed through intensive individual assessment (for example speech pathology, literacy, mental health assessments, etc) and individualised learning and assessment opportunities which give students enhanced skills and an experience of success as learners.

Integrated

Warakirri means "to grow." To help students grow and achieve, Warakirri College offers an innovative program and a positive and welcoming space. Teachers are there not only to teach but also to help students build confidence, manage other challenges in their life, and work towards their own learning, career, and life goals.

Inclusive

Inclusivity and absence of judgment together with trauma-informed practice are key to enabling learning for students whose adverse childhood experiences or complex family situations prevent the frontal cortex from properly functioning in classroom activities. Giving students an experience of forgiveness, acceptance, and hope encourages them to develop aspirations and achieve goals beyond those of their families and results in heightened levels of post school employment and tertiary education involvement.

Figure 4: Archetypes



From *FutureSchool* by V. Hannon and J. Temperley (p. 69), 2022, Routledge. Reprinted with permission.

Relational

It is understood that relationships must be built so that learning can occur with a culture of respect and inclusion being part of the school's collective ethos. Individuals are known, impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences are addressed. Aspirations are encouraged, affirmed, and supported, with students moving towards independent learning and the acquisition of 21st century skills: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, character, and citizenship.

Empowering

Staff collective efficacy is strong, with a deep understanding that individuals and the team with whom they work make a significant positive difference in the lives of their students, changing the futures of hundreds of young people with benefits that flow to their families and community.

The next part of this case study considers archetypes, which are examples or models of practice.

Archetypes

FutureSchool outlines six areas where schools have explicitly and intentionally determined to make a difference to the future - and are employing the design principles to help them do it. According to Hannon and Temperley (2022), there are six archetypes. These are presented in Figure 4. It is important to realise that not all schools will fit into these archetypes, nor is it expected.

Our human identity

Warakirri College has explicitly and intentionally focused on the sixth archetype identified by Hannon and Temperley by empowering students

to discard a victim mentality and to form positive relationships. Students facing life challenges need safety and acceptance as capable, lovable people. Students see themselves as having agency, identify and achieve goals, and acquire vital social skills so that they can be the best they can be.

Celebrations

Working outside the mainstream way of operating, Warakirri College demonstrates that there are many ways to provide high quality learning and future pathways for young people.

We identify success when we start seeing someone come out of their shell, become socially confident, start developing self-control and self-discipline. These are really important successes that don't show up on an ATAR.
(Carolyn Blanden, Principal Warakirri College)

Engagement and wellbeing

During their time at the College, students develop increased engagement, enhanced self-esteem and a sense of wellbeing. Differentiated programs using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) and individualised assessment opportunities have changed students' self-image as they taste success for the first time in their school lives.

Learning and career aspirations

Many students discover that they can learn, that they can demonstrate what they know and can do and receive recognition as effective learners. Learning engagement improves and career aspirations change. Parents have their first experience of a positive letter or certificate of achievement to stick on the family fridge. Many students are the first in their family to achieve a Year 10 RoSA or HSC, as well as some students being the first family members enrolling in university or achieving their career goals.

Attendance

When enrolled in the mainstream education system, the attendance rate of some students was as low as six per cent. At Warakirri College, students' attendance dramatically improves because they feel safe and affirmed, often making friends for the first time. Some previous school avoiders attend as much as 80 - 90 per cent of the time.

Reflections from the school – 3 actions that are making the biggest difference!

1. Building strong relationships characterised by acceptance, inclusion, encouragement, and forgiveness.
2. Knowing and acknowledging each student's personal context and addressing their social, academic, and physical needs.
3. Giving students an experience of success builds their self-confidence. Supporting the students to meet the school's high expectations encourages them to raise their aspirations to the point where many achieve beyond what they or their families had ever imagined.

The final part of this case study presents a student story.



Indyanna Cullen
2021 Warakirri College
HSC Graduate

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Indy came to Warakirri in 2019. She has a syndrome called

Ehlers-Danlos, which is a mobility disorder causing excessive joint hyper mobility, including reduced joint stability, reduced motor control, increased muscle pain and fatigue. She was regularly rendered to a wheelchair and in immense pain on most days, which in turn impacted her attendance for periods of time.

Indy's experience within mainstream was unsupportive of her condition, and lead to much time away from school, falling behind in her work, leading to anxiety, and frustration with the system. She enrolled at Warakirri in year 10 in 2019, with her desire to just complete her RoSA.

During Indy's time at the college, with the support of all staff Indy was afforded the flexibility she required to manage her condition and complete her school work, Indy began to thrive, her confidence in schooling was renewed. Indy completed year 10 and gained her RoSA and was so motivated that she then stayed on and

completed her senior education with Warakirri and graduated in 2021 with her HSC. Indy enrolled in 2022 into the teaching pathways program at Western Sydney University and now in 2023 is in her second year of her teaching degree. Indy returned to Warakirri as a guest speaker at a gathering in 2022, and during her talk with the students, commented on how Warakirri changed her life, and encouraged all students to grasp hold of every opportunity that the college provides them. Indy's mum was in attendance as Indy addressed the gathering and was visibly emotional and commented,

what an amazing change in Indy. Prior to coming to Warakirri there would have been no way Indy could talk in front of a group like this, such a huge change in her, this would not have been possible without Warakirri and all the staff, now she is going into her second year of Uni!



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With sincere thanks to Carolyn Blanden, Principal, Menzies School Leadership Fellow 2022, Warakirri College, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

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