

The Academy kicks goals for students' career paths

A curriculum which aligns with students' passion is winning, **ET Staff**



Everything at The Academy revolves around football – AFL, the right type – the curriculum is delivered within a football context, The Academy's feel is similar to a football club's; casual but focussed and competitive and then there's the football, lots of football.

So, if you're a footy obsessive The Academy is a great place to be. The students seem to think so, since The Academy started in 2017 there has been one cohort through and all of them – after initially entering the school uncertain of their future – either completed the program graduating with a VCAL quali-

cation, or successfully transitioned into another pathway that was best suited to them. It's an example of the good things that can happen when a curriculum is closely aligned to the students' interests.

"We like to think that we have achieved 100% engagement," says The Academy's cofounder Luke Surace.

The students attend from Years 11 and 12 and represent an elite group of up and comers who are in with a good chance of playing at the AFL's top level. While a footy career is a focus at The Academy so is completing an education, whether that involves going to university or learning a trade.

The other cofounder Alex Rance has achieved a place at the very top of the game. He currently plays for Richmond and has been at the AFL's highest level for 11 years which is some feat. Rance brings that perspective and insight to the school's culture and processes while Surace has spent a career in education and training.

"From my own experience and of others around me I felt as though something was missing, and that there needed to be a more holistic approach to education which would let us understand ourselves better and prepare us for a life outside of football," says Rance.

Rance has obviously spent a lot of time thinking about the nature of success in elite sports, an excerpt from a blog he wrote says a lot; 'When you're in your formative years of becoming a professional footballer, there are lots of different opinions, coaching points and personal critique that are heaped on you by others who want to comment on the way you play your game.

"The important question is – who do you actually listen to? Really there is no correct answer to that – the key is a balanced perspective and a constant emphasis on the positive.



'I found that the key to me having success was being confident in the player and person I was, no matter the task or opinions thrown my way... easier said than done.'

It's valuable, insightful stuff and advice that comes from a man who's been there and done it all so The Academy's students are likely to listen.

Boys can be difficult, there are many who are doing well at school but there are many who aren't; they're uninterested, they're falling behind and then falling into trouble.

There are plenty of statistics which back that up; almost 40% of students are disengaged from school and while maths and science continue to be bright spots, for boys things tend to drop off when secondary school starts, markedly in reading skills which underpin most learning.

The reasons are many but one glaring one is the way education is presented, specifically the one size fits all approach which hasn't seen much change in a very long time. Winning engagement through a curriculum that is written around students' passions seems logical and that's the centrepiece of The Academy's approach.

It's not just boys though, physically orientated students often aren't a great fit for regular schooling and with that in mind The Academy's long term vision is to introduce a girls' program, which would operate separately to the existing campus but follow a similar model.

Curriculum was written in consultation with experts in the field, everything is presented within the context of the game; maths questions will revolve around training results and match statistics, discussions around ethics centre on controversies like the Essendon drug cheating scandal which was a massive story in Melbourne and led to the disgrace of one of the sport's all-time greats in James Hird.

Without drawing too long a bow, because the curriculum and form of The Academy comes from a professional perspective it helps to smooth the transition between education and career.

It's very important that boys who aspire to playing elite football have a fall back, the selection process is very unforgiving. Surace says that around 10% of students at The Academy will go on to play football at the elite level, so not many.

'Football takes the critical years of your life from 17 to 20 this is the most important period of education when most are looking at going into university or an apprenticeship,' he says.

The Academy engages with surrounding schools and their

career advisors to recruit suitable students and word about The Academy and the work they're doing has got out.

'Often schools will contact us and say that they have a student that would be suited to The Academy,' Surace says.

There is currently one campus in Essendon (Melbourne) and a Geelong campus set to open in 2020. The atmosphere is relaxed, class sizes are small and the overall student cohort is limited to 150, the boys sit on bean bags, there's a kitchen and much time spent outdoors.

In the final six months at The Academy, students take part in the Launch Pad program, designed to lift the stress and anxiety of leaving school and going on to tertiary or apprenticeships.

Launch Pad works with Victoria University and students who complete it will meet the Admission requirements for a number of undergraduate degree courses at Victoria University like a Bachelor of Education Studies or Bachelor of Physical Education and Sport Science.

Given The Academy's success in helping boys to stick with senior school they have made for some very happy mums and dads; 'We've had parents say to us 'you've changed our kid completely'', Surace says.

The Academy is transitioning to an independent school model. The establishment and operation of The Academy as a school is subject to registration being granted by the VRQA.

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