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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## **Part A. Survey of the scope of retreats and retreat-like activities in secondary schools**

The 49 respondents were key school staff with overall responsibility for school retreats.

**A2.1 The prominence of retreats and retreat-like activities in Catholic secondary schools.** There is a high participation rate in retreats in the sample of 42% of the Catholic secondary schools across the seven participating dioceses. 84% had year 11 retreats and 90% year 12 retreats, together with a range of retreat/personal development-like activities from years 7 to 10.

**A2.2 Retreat Formats.** By year 10, the *Live-in* retreat at an off-campus site was the most common format. The *home-grown* school retreat program was most prominent where the school staff were responsible for all aspects of the retreats. While there is evidence of a retreat program legacy from the travelling retreat teams which had been sponsored by the Religious Congregations, independent youth ministry teams (such as *NET Ministries*) are now being engaged to run some retreat programs. The youth ministry teams commonly followed a *personal faith testimony* approach.

**A2.4 Positive appraisal of retreats by retreat coordinators.** Key school staff responsible for the coordination of retreats strongly endorsed their value at personal, social and religious levels. They also considered that there was strong support from the school executive, as well as good support from school staff who were not involved in retreats. 11% indicated that poor support from non-retreat staff was still an issue. 56% considered that the integration of retreats within the overall school timetable remained a considerable problem.

**A2.4 The place and role of priests in school retreats.** This was identified as a significant issue both because of the problem of the availability of priests for retreat involvement, and because of problems about the suitability of some priests for retreat work. It was considered that to work effectively in a school retreat, priests needed to be in harmony with the views, purposes and practices of the retreat staff; and they needed to be in tune with, and able to communicate with, young people.

## **Part B. Survey of the views of teachers involved in the conduct of retreats**

The respondents were 269 teachers from 40 schools – 53% were women and 47% men.

**B2.1 The experience of retreat personnel.** There is great depth of experience in the school staff who conduct retreats. There was a relatively even frequency of numbers across all the age groups, with 22% aged under 30. 67% had more than five years experience with retreats, and 20% had more than 20 years experience. About one third volunteered for retreat work; another third were invited to join retreat teams; and the remaining third participated because it was a requirement of their position in the school.

**B2.2 Positive affirmation of the place of retreats within Catholic school religious education.** There was a very strong endorsement of the value of school retreats by retreat teachers. Nevertheless, 26% considered that because of a range of contextual factors, the future of retreats in Catholic schools remains somewhat uncertain at present.

**B2.3 Strong endorsement of the personal, social, spiritual and religious purposes of retreats.** The retreat teachers registered strong agreement with most of the 18 items on the general purposes of retreats, with levels of agreement ranging from 100% for the most popular item, and with 16 items above 60% agreement. In rank order, the four most strongly affirmed purposes were:-

1. A valuable opportunity for personal and spiritual reflection;
2. A chance for personal review of life (thinking about the beliefs and values that affect personal life);
3. The experience of ‘time away’ from, and ‘time out’ from students’ normal life routines at home, school and socially;
4. To help students learn from sharing at a more personal level.

Next in rank order were three formally religious purposes, followed by two personal development purposes, and then six religious purposes. The lowest ranking purposes were “Encouraging young people to become active members of a parish” (24% agreement) and “An opportunity for counselling on personal problems” (29% agreement). These two low rankings were not questioning the value of either encouragement to participate in the Church or counselling – but they were signalling that the retreat was not considered to be an appropriate place for such approaches.

**B 2.4 Adequate preparation for, and follow up to, retreats.** In general, respondents said that there appeared to be adequate preparation before, and follow-up after, retreats. 43% indicated that preparatory work with students was undertaken before the retreats. 87% affirmed that the *sharing of personal insights* was a key dynamic to the retreat. 35% considered they should encourage students to relate to retreat teachers on a first name basis, while 44% disagreed – there was a polarisation of views on this question, one that the researcher considered to need resolution in favour of the disagreement position.

**B2.5 Positive valuation of the range of activities on retreats.** Participants made valuations of 38 different activities that have been used on retreats. In general, there was a strong positive endorsement of the value of most of the activities. The frequency of the use of different activities could not be measured. **26 activities were rated in the valuable to very valuable range.** Of these:-

- 15 were collectively in the personal and reflective/prayer categories;
- 4 were in the other inputs and activities category;
- 3 related to staff inputs;
- 2 related to friends;
- 2 related to retreat organisation.

**B2.6 Positive valuation of the personal learning processes in retreats.** Retreat teachers strongly endorsed the importance of personal learning processes in retreats, with 10 of the 12 items on this topic showing total agreement above the 90% mark. In general, emotion and euphoria were considered to be natural healthy parts of retreats; but 33% considered the possibility of emotional manipulation by teachers as a potential problem.

**B2.7 Positivity about a healthy level of personalism in small group discussions.** The participants perceived a healthy level in the sharing of personal insights in small group discussions, but they were aware of the need for freedom on the part of students and of the need to protect privacy and to avoid attempts to generate excessive emotion. Half the retreat teachers considered that personal groups were not appropriate places for discussing personal problems.

**B2.8 Positive valuation of the religious dimension of retreats.** 80% of the retreat teachers considered that the religious dimension was given adequate attention during the retreats, and that they were valuable in helping young people grow as persons and in enhancing their personal spirituality. There was polarisation in views about the need for a priest to celebrate Eucharist and Reconciliation.

**B2.9 No significant concern about potential issues and problems with the conduct of retreats.** While the retreat teachers agreed about the presence of a number of potential issues and problems, there was no evidence of serious concern or alarm about them. 30% agreed that mobile phones and electronic equipment created difficulties, while 60% indicated that students’ staying up late continued to be a persistent problem.

**B2.10 A satisfactory level of consensus about the value of retreats in the whole school staff.** Responses to items in this section suggested that adequate information for all staff about the purposes and practices of retreats, together with efforts to minimise disruption to the school timetable, may help in sustaining a high level of staff consensus about the value of retreats. The views of staff who were not involved in retreats need further investigation.

**B2.12 Retreat teachers' high level of personal satisfaction with the demanding work of retreats.** 83% considered that their work in retreats went above and beyond the normal demands of school teaching because it was tiring, as well as physically and emotionally demanding. Their principal motivation for sustaining this commitment was their interest in promoting the personal, spiritual and moral development of students – it was the perceived value that the retreats held for the lives of their students that helped them feel that their commitments and personal efforts were worthwhile.

**B2.13 The need for retreat training for teachers and for the further resourcing of retreats.** More than 70%

of the retreat teachers endorsed the need for more systematic retreat training for school staff, and for ongoing professional development for experienced retreat teachers. Explicit documentation about retreats was regarded as more important at school level than at diocesan level.

**B2.15 Differences between the views of retreat teachers according to gender, age and experience.** In general, results showed substantial homogeneity in the views of retreat teachers no matter what their gender, age or experience levels. Differences in views were both few and small in size. For example: In these respondents, there is no evidence of any substantial differences between the views of male and female retreat teachers. (Statistical differences at  $p < .05$  were noted for only 12 of the 152 items).

### **Part C. Survey of the views of teachers not involved in retreats**

The respondents were 159 teachers from 32 schools – 71% were women and 29% men.

**C2.1 Sample of teachers who were not involved in retreat work.** 55% already had experience in the conduct of school retreats; hence it might be anticipated that they would have similar views to those of the teachers who were currently involved in retreat work. This was not a homogeneous sample of teachers who had never been on a school retreat.

**C2.2 Close similarity to, and consistency with, the views of the retreat teachers.** The pattern of responses of the non-retreat teachers was similar to that of the retreat teachers as noted above in Section B. But their valuations of retreats, while positive, were not as strongly positive as were those of the retreat teachers. In all but four of the 54 items in common, the non-retreat teachers had lower means, with the differences in means for 30 items being significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

**C2.2 - C2.3 Positive views of the personal, social, spiritual and religious dimensions of retreats.** School staff not involved in retreats showed a high regard for the contribution of retreats to young people's religious education in Catholic schools as well as for their potential for promoting personal and spiritual development. Similarly, they also positively endorsed the statements about the nature, purposes and practices of retreats.

**C2.4 Positive views about the selection of staff for retreat work.** While registering positive responses about the selection of staff for retreat work, the non-retreat teachers were somewhat polarised in their views about the appropriateness of selection criteria. They showed a significantly higher level of concern about the criterion of "readiness to share at a personal level with students".

**C2.5 Similar positive views to the retreat teachers about the psychological dynamics of retreats and about potential problems/issues.** Mirroring the pattern of response of the retreat teachers, those teachers not involved in retreat work affirmed the importance of personalism as a valuable part of retreats and did not see this as a noteworthy issue.

**C2.6, C2.7 Positive views of the level of whole staff consensus about the value of school retreats and about the future viability of retreats.** On these questions, the non-retreat teachers had similar responses to those of the retreat teachers. This indicated their view of a healthy level of staff consensus about the valuable place of retreats in the senior school, while there was some evidence they thought that achieving consensus required further work. They registered similar responses to the retreat teachers about factors that might affect the future viability of retreats in the school timetable – while acknowledging the timetable difficulties, these were accepted because they were justified by the importance of retreats. Similarly, they endorsed the need for professional development for teachers and for the resourcing of retreats.

### **Part D. Survey of the views of senior students**

The respondents were 1500 students from 29 secondary schools.

**D2.1 Characteristics of the sample.** 56% of the students were female and 44% male. 73% identified as Catholic, 10% as another Christian denomination, 3% as a non-Christian religion and 13% identified as "No religion". There is some consistency between this pattern and the overall Australian figure of about 30% of Catholic school students not being Catholic. 1034 (72%) indicated that they were year 12 students and 407 (28%) year 11 students.

**D2.2, D2.3 Positive valuation of the place of retreats within Catholic school religious education and of their personal, social, spiritual and religious purposes.** While consistently not as positive as were their teachers, the students affirmed items about the value of retreats as a special, reflective opportunity that was not

possible in the classroom religion curriculum. Clearly, they regarded the retreat as valuable for them personally. As might have been anticipated, students strongly affirmed the purposes that were about personal/social development, and the first six of the 18 items about purposes in order of student priority were in this personal/social category. 72% considered that the retreat was just as valuable for students who were not Catholic. While not as highly rated as the personal development purposes, the religious purposes were affirmed by a majority of students ranging from 72% to 62% across these items. While differences were noted, the overall pattern showed a degree of congruence between the views of students and those of retreat teachers.

**D2.4, D2.5 Positive rating of the retreat experience and of the various retreat activities and resources used in retreats.** The students' regard for the personal and spiritual value of the retreat was complemented by their view that it was a very enjoyable experience away with their friends. They showed more concern about food and venue than did the teachers. In their valuation of retreat activities, the students, while positive, were less positive than were their teachers. For example: only 4 activities were rated in the 'valuable to very valuable' range, in contrast with 26 ranked that way by the retreat teachers. For the students, the two highest ranking items had to do with 'being with their friends'. The third ranked item was about staff sharing their personal stories as a stimulus for personal sharing in the small groups (Staff input category). The fourth-ranked item was 'time for student private reflection' (Reflective/prayer category). Some of the *standout items with positive differences in priority* (ranked more highly by students) were 'Students talking with their friends', 'one-to-one discussions in pairs', 'full length feature film', 'creative activities - art, drama etc.', 'outside guest speakers', 'rotation around workshops', and 'whole group forums'. By contrast, the *standout items with negative differences in priority* (ranked much lower by the students) were for 'whole group prayer', 'celebration of mass', 'stating the discipline policy', 'introductory explanation of retreat purposes', and 'writing in a personal journal'.

**D2.6 Student affirmation of the personal learning processes in retreats.** The students affirmed the personal learning processes in retreats even though their mean scores for the pertinent items were noticeably lower than those of the teachers. The retreats generally, and group discussions in particular, were regarded highly as opportunities for personal learning. And this was consistent with the theory of personal learning in groups discussed in chapter D2. The community experience was perceived to be a valuable part of this dynamic, together with its healthy emotion and euphoria.

**D2.7 Affirmation of the level of personalism in group discussions.** While generally, the pattern of student affirmation of personal sharing in the discussion groups was similar to that of the retreat teachers, there is some evidence that students may have been experiencing and interpreting the personalism in the groups somewhat differently from the teachers. They liked personal discussions, but a number showed they were unhappy about a perceived expectation that this was a required level of performance – or that teachers were 'steering' them in this direction. Nevertheless, the students were more positive about the emotionality in group discussions than were the retreat teachers. The researcher raised questions about the extent and appropriateness of the use of the theme 'telling your personal story'.

**D2.8 Student affirmation of the religious dimension of retreats.** Student valuations of items about the religious dimension of retreats were positive. But these were noticeably lower than the valuations of the religion teachers. These results are understandable in terms of the degree of secularisation of most students in Catholic schools. While ensuring an adequate religious dimension to retreats is important, it is considered inappropriate to try to judge the overall effectiveness of the retreat exclusively in religious terms.

**D2.9 Students' views of potential issues and problems with retreats.** The students showed a *higher level of concern* about potential problems in retreats than did the teachers for the following items:- length of sessions; emotionality in groups; some artificial and deliberate generation of emotion; psychological pressure to contribute personally in group discussion. They showed *lower levels of concern* than retreat teachers for three items:- mobile phones and texting as a distraction; staying up late affecting participation the next day; and potentially excessive emphasis on personal problems in group discussions.

**D2.11-2 Differences between the views of female and male students.** Across all aspects of retreats, in 108 of the 113 items, female students recorded more positive valuations of retreat purposes and practices. For 93 of these, the differences were statistically significant. That female students were more appreciative of the retreats than males may be yet further evidence that in general, women tend to be more religiously inclined than men. Perhaps too, women are more attuned to the personalism which was regarded as a fundamental part of retreats. Possibly the 'time away with friends' factor may have been more positively influential on the female students' experience of retreats.

**D2.11-3 Differences in student views according to religious identification.** As regards valuations of the purposes and practices of retreats, there were few differences between the responses of Catholic and other Christian denomination students. In a number of instances, the other Christian group had higher item means than the Catholics. The Catholic and other Christian denomination students tended to respond to questionnaire items as if they were a single homogeneous group. The greatest differences in valuation of retreat purposes/practices were between the combined Catholic/Christian group and those who identified as no religion. The valuations of the non-Christian students tended to be in between those of the combined Catholic/Christian group and the no religion group. Nevertheless, the evaluations of non-Christian and no religion groups of students were still reasonably positive.

**D2.11-4 Year 11 students' more positive valuations of retreats than year 12 students' valuations.** For 64% of the 113 questionnaire items, the Year 11 students registered higher levels of agreement than did the 12 students. One possible explanation is that the retreat experience is a novel one for year 11 students. And perhaps the additional life pressures of year 12 students might also have been a factor. There might also possibly be some difference in religiosity.

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