

Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs) a long term review

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Abstract

Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs) emerged during the 2000s as a social support strategy to assist young people attain their driver licence, often for purposes of employment.

With the 2007 increase in mandatory supervised driving hours for young people in NSW to 120 hours, LDMPs were seen as a good option for meeting a need amongst some disadvantaged young people who had difficulty accessing supervising drivers and/or vehicles.

In 2009, Youthsafe comprehensively reviewed the issue, including completing a literature review; conducting Australia wide surveys and interviews with key stakeholders; and running public seminars.

This preliminary work resulted in an enquiry service established by Youthsafe and supported by Transport for NSW. A 'Tool kit for developing Learner Driver Mentor Programs' for community professionals planning and running LDMPs was then published by Youthsafe in 2012.

Greater on-road driving experience for learners has proven to be significant in reducing young driver deaths and injuries. For this reason Youthsafe's 'Tool kit' was specifically designed to reinforce the road safety benefits of supervised driving, as well as providing practical guidance for the conduct of LDMPs. Youthsafe's mentor training programs and co-ordinator networking sessions likewise focus on road safety.

This paper presents:

1. A snapshot of the nature of issues relating to the supervised driving support needs of young people and LDMPs over a 5 year period.
2. The factors identified as critical to the effective functioning of community based LDMPs.

Introduction

In road safety circles it is well understood that the Learner driver stage involving supervised driving is the safest phase of any licensing system, whereas the first months of unsupervised or solo driving are the most dangerous¹, particularly for young novice drivers under 25 years of age. Further, it is clear that substantial supervised driving experience during the Learner driver phase provides a safety advantage that carries over into the unsupervised driving stage².

¹ Senserrick, T. (2009). *The importance of experience*. Paper presented at the 2009 Learner Driver Mentor Program Seminar, Sydney.

²Williams, A., F. (2007). *Contributions of the components of graduated licensing to crash reductions*. Journal of Safety Research., (38) 177-184.

In recognition of this, many road transport authorities in Australia and overseas have introduced a minimum number of supervised driving hours as a requirement before moving to the unsupervised or solo licence stage. The NSW Graduated Licensing Scheme includes a requirement for Learner drivers under 25 years of age to complete 120 hours of supervised driving before they are allowed to attempt the Driving Test which, if successfully completed, entitles them to a Provisional (P1) licence.

However there are a number of young people who experience significant difficulty in accessing a supervising driver and/or vehicle to gain the required supervised driving hours as a Learner. This is particularly so in lower socio-economic communities, rural and remote communities and Aboriginal communities. There are also some young people who would not normally be considered disadvantaged that have some difficulty accessing a supervising driver and/or vehicle, for instance those with parents who do not have a licence due to disability (eg blindness), some young people from single parent families and some young people with a number of siblings of sufficient age to start driving around the same time. Without a licence these young people are often further disadvantaged, typically in terms of gaining access to education, employment and other support services and there is increased risk of social isolation.

Learner driver mentor programs (LDMPs) started emerging during the 2000s, primarily as a social support strategy to assist those from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain a licence to drive independently, generally an adjunct to programs developed to assist young people gain employment when lack of a driver licence was identified as a barrier to employment. Over time LDMPs started being set up to assist young people gain a P1 licence as the primary objective.

LDMPs are community based programs serving the local area and/or defined target audience within a discrete geographic area, often run by not-for-profit bodies and sometimes involving local Councils. Typically there is a co-ordinator who organises a group of volunteer mentors to provide supervised driving for Learners in the program.

There are significant benefits associated with LDMPs but also risks. Youthsafe has explored these over the past five years and identified various factors that contribute to the effective functioning of LDMPs.

Review of LDMPs

Since 2009 Youthsafe has undertaken a range of activities which constitute ongoing review of the status, development and operational issues for LDMPs in NSW. Youthsafe has also responded to identified needs to provide support for LDMPs, within budgetary constraints.

Activities of an exploratory nature undertaken by Youthsafe include the following.

- In 2009 a literature search was undertaken to assist in identifying LDMPs operating in Australia.
- Follow up on the literature search included telephone interviews with contacts for identified LDMPs, or electronic surveys where telephone interview was not possible.
- A seminar was then organised by Youthsafe to explore the different LDMP models and implementation issues.

- A report on the outcomes of the literature, telephone interviews/electronic surveys and seminar was produced and distributed to interested bodies.

Much of this early work was undertaken with support from the NSW Motor Accidents Authority.

Subsequent to this early activity Youthsafe established a register of NSW based LDMPs to monitor changes in the number of operational LDMPs; locations in which LDMPs operate; criteria for acceptance of program participants; and program contact details. At the same time a log of enquiries was established and maintained by Youthsafe recording who was making enquiries eg young person/parent wanting help or organisation running or interested in running a LDMP; the nature of the enquiry; and response provided. The Centre for Road Safety Transport for NSW call centre directs all LDMP enquiries it receives to Youthsafe, as well as calls coming directly to Youthsafe.

In 2012, with funding from the Centre for Road Safety Transport for NSW, Youthsafe commenced a further investigative project to identify LDMP support needs and options for enhancing the road safety benefits of LDMPs.

This project involved 10 NSW based LDMPs in the following.

1. An initial electronic survey which collected descriptive information about each program; target audiences; operational details; barriers and enablers; and any other issues relevant to the program.
2. A one to two hour face to face or telephone consultation which further explored how services were initiated; current operations; mentor training; supports and resources available to the program; issues that confronted the program; and possible strategies for addressing difficulties encountered by the program.

Key Findings

During the initial literature search a total of 32 LDMPs were identified Australia wide. Information was collected on 30 LDMPs through 21 telephone interviews and 3 electronic surveys. At the time of the interviews/surveys 22 of the 30 LDMPs were identified as operational and 8 had ceased to operate. Of the operational LDMPs 6 were located in NSW – 2 in Sydney and 4 in regional areas of NSW.

The register of NSW based LDMPs maintained by Youthsafe shows that currently (in 2014) there are 32 LDMPs, including 13 programs that come under the umbrella of a funded research project being conducted by The George Institute. In Sydney there are 8 LDMPs and in rural areas of NSW there are 26 LDMPs.

Of the currently operating LDMPs 5 are open to anyone experiencing difficulty accessing a supervisor and/or vehicle; 5 are open to anyone experiencing difficulty accessing a supervisor and/or vehicle but also expressly mention Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; 15, including all services under The George Institute umbrella, specifically address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and 1 LDMP specifically addresses migrant and refugee communities.

Young people under 25 years of age constitute the majority of LDMP service users and some LDMPs include an upper age limit in their eligibility criteria. This is consistent with the relatively higher proportion of Learner licence holders under 25 years of age and the more stringent requirement of 120 hours of supervised driving for Learners in this age group in NSW.

The in depth consultations with 10 LDMPs identified the following issues as common for LDMPs.

- Learners - the program focus and measures of ‘success’ tended to be on licensing outcomes rather than promoting safer driving behaviours in novice drivers, in part due to the high demand on LDMP services and also priorities set by program sponsors.
- Mentors - many LDMPs expressed difficulty in recruiting, training and retaining mentors and often found it hard to clarify the role and expectations of the mentoring relationship between mentor and young person. Also most LDMPs did not provide mentors with thorough training, particularly regarding working with disadvantaged youth in relation to driving, encouraging low-risk driving behaviours and promoting road safety messages.
- Program Management - a dedicated program coordinator was shown to be critical to the overall effectiveness of a program. The coordinator’s ability to create partnerships with stakeholders and sponsors as well as manage the day to day operational needs of the program was important. Experience, salary and time committed to the program were all factors that contributed to a coordinator’s ability to manage a LDMP well.
- Funding – ongoing financial support was critical to the sustainability and viability of LDMP programs. Larger organisations appeared to have more resources and access to funding bodies than did smaller programs. It was also found that LDMPs with an established profile in the community had a greater capacity to obtain funding.

Youthsafe Support for LDMPs

The register of NSW based LDMPs and enquiry log has been of assistance in handling LDMP enquiries. However the majority of calls from the community are young people or their families looking for assistance with supervised driving and for many there is not a program in reasonable proximity, or there is a waiting list, or on occasion the young person does not fit the eligibility criteria for a nearby program.

Youthsafe is more readily able to provide a positive response to enquiries from current and prospective LDMPs. These enquiries generally relate to operational issues, training or networking options.

In response to needs identified by LDMPs, and with support from the Centre for Road Safety Transport for NSW, Youthsafe produced a ‘Tool kit for developing learner driver mentor programs’ in 2012. This guide provides practical, on the ground information and advice for LDMP operators including topics such as:

- The road safety benefits of supervised driving.
- Qualities and role of mentors, as well as strategies for recruiting, screening, supporting and retaining mentors.
- Working with young people, as well as strategies for engaging, supporting and retaining Learners.

- Preparatory work including project planning, needs audit, identifying potential stakeholders and partners, involving driving instructors.
- Managing a LDMP including bookings, budgets, seeking sponsorship, risk assessment, legal and insurance matters, safety and security, complaints handling and grievances.
- Record keeping and privacy including Learner log book, vehicle log, learner and mentor contact details, licence information, consent forms and checks.
- Evaluation and sustainable programming.
- Sample checklists and forms.
- Case studies.

Further Youthsafe responses to address needs identified by LDMPs include:

- Networking meetings for LDMP co-ordinators.
- Development and delivery of training for mentors - provided on a cost recovery basis.
- Youthsafe registration for Work and Development Orders (WDOs) which allows people with unpaid fines to participate in a LDMP to pay off their fine, either as a volunteer mentor or Learner driver – individual LDMPs do not need to register for WDOs as Youthsafe's registration can be accessed by all LDMPs in NSW.

Discussion

Well planned and implemented LDMPs afford benefits beyond helping individual Learners gain a licence and the advantages a driver licence brings to a young person. Road safety benefits can be achieved when mentors are equipped to reinforce the intent of supervised driving and foster safer driving behaviours in young people who are still over-represented in crash data, despite decreased crash involvement in recent years amongst novice drivers in NSW. In addition there are wider social benefits with opportunities for communities to develop a sense of engagement through volunteering and to provide positive role modelling for young people. Longer term there is also potential capacity building in disadvantaged communities as the numbers of licence holders grow and they in turn are in a position to supervise other new Learners.

Conversely LDMP social support objectives can also reach young people who may not currently participate in GLS and drive unlicensed. Often these young people do not have family or others supporting them to be compliant with licensing requirements.

There has been significant growth in LDMPs in NSW over the last five years, but as yet the need for support with supervised driving amongst disadvantaged youth has not been adequately met and the full potential of LDMPs to support equity of access for disadvantaged communities not realised.

In large part scarcity of funding is a contributory factor despite the fact that for a modest investment LDMPs can harness significant 'in-kind' support from local communities. This includes tapping into teams of volunteer mentors and engaging local people and businesses to assist with vehicles, maintenance and other running costs. Lack of ongoing funding for co-ordinators is the main reason LDMPs cease to operate in NSW. The four most recent closures of LDMPs in NSW were all due to funding issues.

Victoria provides cost indicators for sustaining a network of services with funding commitments in the order of \$3M per annum being made for three year periods providing a greater degree of stability for Victorian LDMPs and successful operation of a network of

community services. In Victoria there is a co-ordinated and structured overarching program called L2P that incorporates 55 LDMPs in local communities. L2P is managed by VicRoads and is also supported by the Transport Accident Commission (TAC).

One of the key advantages of LDMPs in NSW is the high level of flexibility for each LDMP to be developed and operate in a way that best suits the particular needs of the local community. For instance, eligibility criteria vary between different LDMPs according to assessment of local need. However it is critical that the advantages of local community based services are also backed up with a common source of information and support to reduce duplication of effort and achieve cost efficiencies in a climate of scarce resources. In addition common branding, such as the overarching L2P brand for Victorian LDMPs, is an approach that could assist in raising the profile of LDMPs in local communities in NSW, particularly some of the smaller LDMPs that do not have the backing of large charities and the associated benefit of community recognition of those names.

Through the investigative and responsive support work undertaken by Youthsafe over the last five years, a sound understanding has been developed of the profile of LDMPs in NSW; the road safety and social benefits derived from LDMPs; and the factors that contribute to effective and efficient operation. Still there is potential for further growth in this arena and opportunities for program evaluation beyond attainment of a P1 licence as the sole measure of success for LDMPs.