

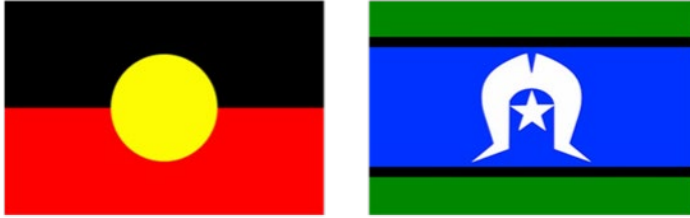
# **THE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOUNDATION: ANIMAL – HUMAN EMPATHY IN A YOUTH ALCOHOL AND DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAM**

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# Acknowledgement of Country



Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/Yugarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

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# Executive Summary

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**The dogs would run in and they would greet people who were just sitting around, watching TV, sitting around outside or playing pool (Jess, p. 5).**

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Alcohol and other drug use among young Australians continues to be a complex issue, leading to poor overall health, wellbeing and social outcomes if not addressed early (AIHW, 2021). Continuity of care and prolonged engagement in treatment programs for substance abuse is a strong predictor of outcomes. As a result, retention and continuity of engagement is an important goal of any treatment program. The social influence model of intervention, including school, parent and community, has been widely used, although there is need for investigate specific programmes to determine the most effective programmes (Midford, 2010).

In this research we introduce the human – animal bond, profound and powerful, to determine its effectiveness in a community outreach program in youth focused AOD residential care. We already understand the significance of a human-animal bond. Pet owners recognise a range of benefits, including improved mental health and wellbeing (RSPCA, 2021). In addition, animals are being used extensively in health and education to improve human wellness and promote compassion towards animals.

The connection between humans and animals, the human-animal bond, is profound and powerful. However, little research has taken place with programs that integrate human and animal-assisted wellbeing ethics (Lerner, 2019).

The aim of this research is to investigate how an animal-assisted community outreach program could enhance a youth AOD residential rehabilitation program with young adults, aged from 18 - 25 years. The animal-assisted wellbeing program is run by The Unconditional Love Foundation (UCLF) and facilitated by colleagues with over 40 years of experience in education and learning programs with animals. Animal ethics and human ethics approval was obtained from Victoria University and consent from Uniting Vic Tas to conduct the research in their residential facility.

Outcomes for young people still require future research to provide evidence of effective intervention programs to the broader AOD sector that address the complex needs of young people seeking treatment. Calls for evidence of rehabilitation that support young people to make positive change, improve overall health and wellbeing and to reduce any drug related harm, to the individual or the social order. The UCLF stepped into the space, based on existing relationships with Uniting Vic Tas and to trial their work and introduce the human-animal bond in a residential setting to enhance and complement their work with young people aged 16-25 years of age.

The research investigated the question, how does the human-animal bond enhance alcohol and other drug usage treatment programs for young people in a residential care program?

The research aimed to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they are a priority group for access to the Uniting Vic Tas program, but this proved difficult and should be the focus of future research. The research includes pre and post surveys and group discussions/interviews and provides evidence of flexibility, an environment of safety and respect between the young people and the UCLF program. The program shows how the human – animal bond contributed to connection, trust and relationship building.

## Background and context

The impact of alcohol and/or other drug use can be widespread, affecting the physical, mental health of an individual, their relationships, capacity to create community connections, education and employment (Uniting, 2024).

The aim of the research is to focus on young people, aged 16-25 years of age, to investigate how an animal-assisted, community education program enhances the treatment programs in an alcohol and other drugs (AOD) youth residential Centre.

The Unconditional Love Foundation (UCLF) program is based on the bond between humans and animals that creates connections that can help people develop a better sense of self-worth and trust. Animal-assisted programs also help to stabilise emotions, promote communication skills, self-regulation and socialisation skills. The Unconditional Love Foundation (UCLF) aims to enhance human and animal wellbeing by creating moments of real connection and joy (<https://www.uclf.org.au>).

Uniting Vic Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church, delivering services and programs across Victoria and Tasmania (<https://www.unitingvictas.org.au>). The organisation works with and supports those who use alcohol and other drugs.

It should also be noted that both organisations are committed to the profound and powerful nature of the human – animal bond.

The UCLF delivers its' program in classrooms and community groups. The animal-assisted and trauma-informed program is designed in consultation with educators, carers and community leaders to help participants:

- Achieve positive emotional and mental health
- Boost confidence and communication
- Enhance concentration, self-regulation and learning ability
- Build strong relationships and social connections
- Engender empathy

This research aims to investigate how the UCLF model works in a youth AOD treatment program, creating an environment of safety and respect, changing behaviours, building client self-esteem, confidence and competence through skill acquisition, and strengthening the connection between animals and people. The overall aim is to examine how the UCLF

program enhances the treatment programs at The Uniting Vic Tas, Gippsland Youth Residential Rehabilitation Unit (GYRRU) creating an optimal opportunity for skills to be secured and sustained for young people.

We already understand the significance of a human-animal bond. Pet owners recognise a range of benefits, including improved mental health and wellbeing (RSPCA, 2021). In addition, animals are being used extensively in health and education to improve human wellness and promote compassion towards animals. However, little research has been undertaken in AOD environments that offer specialised, residential support for young people:

The UCLF Program (the Program) is built on the strength of the human bond and the understanding it can improve health and wellbeing. The UCLF runs programs in a number of settings, with the aim to create real impact, connect with animals and support human-animal wellbeing (<https://uclf.org.au>). The UCLF, *Animal Connections* program aims to:

- Model and create an environment of safety and respect;
- Build client self-esteem, confidence and competence through skill acquisition;
- Strengthen and celebrate the connection between animals and people; and
- Change behaviours in people to improve the lives of animals and humans.

The Uniting Vic Tas, Gippsland Youth Residential Rehabilitation Unit (GYRRU) has engaged the UCLF to run their animal-assisted, community education program alongside their residential program. The GYRRU runs a 12 – 16 week AOD residential program for young people aged 16-25 years to set goals, develop plans and learn skills, addressing their AOD usage while building life skills in a safe and nurturing environment. Maximum occupancy at the GYRRU is 20 and sessions run with a maximum of 10 young adults. The program at the GYRRU is based on Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) principles addressing the stages of skills training, acquisition, strengthening, and generalization (Swales & Dunkley, 2020).

## Methodology

The aim of this research was to undertake a case study (Davey, 2019) approach to an animal-assisted program with young people involved in an AOD residential rehabilitation.

Uniting Vic Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church, delivering services and programs across Victoria and Tasmania (<https://www.unitingvictas.org.au>). The organisation works with and supports those who use alcohol and other drugs.

Uniting Vic Tas offers a youth alcohol and drug rehabilitation service, tailored for young people aged 16-25 years of age, in regional Victoria. The Gippsland Youth Residential Rehabilitation Program (GYRRU) is the focus of this research.

As young people entering the program often have complicated relationships with family, carers, or guardians it is difficult to obtain parent consent for those aged between 16-18. As a result, the research engaged with young adults aged 18 – 25 years who are able to give informed consent. The research will also engage GYRRU staff and the UCLF facilitators to capture a breadth of evidence of the impact.

With multiple, competing factors and influences in the newly established centre care has been taken not to over represent the impact of the animal-assisted program but rather to demonstrate the potential that exists and to contribute to a body of evidence and knowledge around the impact of an animal-assisted wellbeing program.

Research ethics was obtained by the Victoria University Animal Experiment Ethics Committee and Victoria University Human Research Ethics. The two dogs were supervised by their owners at all stages of the research.

The research was undertaken on site at the GYRRU. The UCLF program had been running for 12 months, visiting the site and engaging with young people. The attendance numbers varied with young people often having conflicting commitments. The GYRRU was also evolving as a new centre.

The Lead Researcher attended two sessions, which ran for approximately 60 minutes each. During this time the researcher observed the young people's movement in the space, interaction with dogs, the UCLF facilitators and GYRRU staff. Following the session, young people and staff were invited to complete a survey and/or interview. These were undertaken in a quiet space at the GYRRU. Following the sessions, the UCLF facilitators and GYRRU were interviewed over zoom.

A synthesis of all data is included in the Findings for this report before a discussion that presents an investigation of the overarching research question:

*How does the human-animal bond enhance programs for young people in a residential AOD care program?*



## Findings

### Connection

Residential AOD treatment offers an opportunity to create a connection between young people and AOD workers or other significant adults involved in their treatment (Caluzzi et al. (2023).

*Because the reality is for a lot of them, they will go back to where they came from. That is unfortunate, but that is a reality. What we tend to try to do as well, is to try and link them – Like, my role as the Manager is for our program to link people into sustainable community supports. Looking at that, we fit them into a biopsychosocial model of health (Liam p. 6).*

In addition, many young people have been stigmatised as a result of their behaviours:

*Having a love and a connection, because for a lot of the young people coming through this program, they were very isolated – very judged in communities – a lot of those, 'addicts' is the word often used, is yeah, very judged, and very segregated from mainstream community, and often didn't have those connections (Liam, p. 1).*

Little is known though about the human-animal bond and its capacity to create this connection for young people in AOD residential care and whether it has a positive impact on their capacity to learn. What is evident in this research is that young people, the adults who support them, and the facilitators from The Unconditional Love Foundation believe in the animal-human bond and how it can engage who use AOD rehabilitation to change behaviours:

*We completely believe in the power of the human-animal bond, and that is a connection. And one of the more modern philosophies around addiction is that a lack of connection is a hugely contributing factor. So, with those two ideas meshing together, is that providing the animals to come in and to provide, both some connection, and some joy – (Jess, p. 2).*

### Human – animal relationships

AOD workers may be the 'closest relationships young people with substance use problems have' (MacLean et al., 2013, in Caluzzi et al., 2023, p. 1695). Yet, connecting young people with animals may introduce another significant relationship for young people in AOD rehabilitation:

*We're hoping young people realise if you've got an issue, a problem, instead of turning to substances, what other things? So, if you've got a pet you've got someone to take care of, someone who'll give you that loyalty, someone you can go and exercise with. I think it helps. Most will come,*



*like I said, with an animal story, but some may not have ever had a pet. It's opening that idea up to them (Nicole, p.2).*

Many of the young people had pets who were being cared for by family members or friends while they were in the Unit:

*The stories that have affected them about pat animals or where their animals are now. Because on a number of occasions their pets are no longer staying with them, they were in the care of family or ex-partners (Alice, p. 4).*

Others though still found a way to engage in the discussions by reflecting on friends or relations who have/had pets:

*I don't think – I'm trying to remember – there may have been one or two people that didn't have pets themselves, but they would then start talking about their dad or friends who would have animals, because they wanted to join in the discussion with the rest of the group as well which I think was really good (Jess, p. 5).*

## **The young people**

The young people who enter the Unit for AOD rehabilitation have varied and often complex life experiences. It would be unjust to stigmatise them further by focusing on the complexity of their lives but sharing an overview helps to demonstrate the unique nature of the Unit and the impact of the UCLF program:

*the reality is you can place these young people into work, or into study, but if they're unable to sit still for five minutes, or unable to sit in a room, or unable to communicate their needs, or get along with other people that are in there, it's not sustainable. ... So again, as part of their learning was able to be able to be grounded and discuss needs and be able to concentrate. These are the fundamentals to any form of learning or engagement in work. (Liam, p.4).*

## The dogs

Not surprisingly the dogs play a significant role in the success of the UCLF program:

*Table 1:*

Jess p. 2	Our dogs are well-trained, temperament tested pet animals, but they are real dogs – they bark at a magpie – they'll go and sniff a barbecue if there's a barbecue outside, and they do provide that lightness.
Jess p. 6	The fact that the dogs run in with clearly relaxed body language – they're running in, they're wagging their tails – they're pulling to get in the door – they're choosing to go up to people – we're not dragging them over to people for a pat, and interaction.
Jess p. 9	So, I think again that dog being so, they love everybody, they're non-judgemental – you're a human, you've got pats, you've got treats – you're a bit of all right in their eyes – I think that is quite powerful as well.
Alice p. 5	<i>I think for some people there was - they definitely felt some confidence, and just the dogs aren't judgy, so if they get a dog to shake their hand or drop or spin or - that can sometimes be enough to just go, "Oh, I got that dog to work with me and build that relationship.</i>

## The program

The UCLF aimed to introduce the human – animal bond to create an optimal environmental for young people to acquire new skills that can be secured and sustained. The program was to be undertaken as weekly multi visits that were designed to connect, educate, and empower. They were designed to focus on positive, respectful interactions and joyful, experiences, with the animal focus on empathy and well-being. The aim was to allow the young people to experience the joy of animal interactions without the responsibility of full-time care.

The program resulted in positive experiences, see below, but there were a number of challenges that needed to be overcome:

*It probably took a little bit longer– was about after three months that we started to see - because we were going fortnightly, what we started to see was that we weren't getting the long-term residents, it was nearly every four weeks they were totally new, and maybe across the seven, eight weeks we might have one or two young person who'd stuck it out.  
(Maggie, p. 4).*

Modelling good behaviours to demonstrate how human should interact with dogs was central to the program:

*I think there were some aha-moments for the young people when we showed them different ways to do things because I think that - and I may be over generalising, but we learn from our environment and a lot of those young people learn through aggression and rules and they don't have a lot of confidence in - because they've been whacked and screamed at and that's how they do that. So, I think what we show them is that there is another way, and not by overtly saying, "You shouldn't yell at your dog or put your dog on a choker chain," but just by demonstrating it. (Maggie, p. 11).*

With limited experience bringing the dogs into a residential AOD Centre, there was a level of anxiety for the UCLF facilitators:

*The original plan was for weekly visits, but because the centre was brand new, and had just opened, with all the layers from COVID, and building permits, and all the things that happen when you're opening something of that scale (Jess, p. 4).*

Challenges for the UCLF facilitators included the churn of young people through the Centre, the need for them to re-establish themselves in each session, the absence of any real norm or consistency for the young people in the AOD Unit, young people with fragmented lives and complex learning experiences that have reduced their concentration span. Adjustments from the original program included:

*Sometimes a more structured program, which had worked really, really well when we'd done that in the adult day release program (Jess, p. 3).*

*You had to come with a bit of a menu and really sort of roll with the energy and the individuals on the day (Jess, p. 30).*

*We decided then to just go with the flow and do a lot more of that, just come in, walk around, chat with the young people, sit with them doing jigsaw puzzles than run a session (Maggie, p. 5).*

*We were thinking that the sessions would go for an hour, but we really found if we could get between 20 and 30 minutes that was pretty much the prime time (Jess, p. 5).*

Flexibility was the key to engagement and connection with the young people:

*It was always different and a mixed bag on the day, so we changed from a semi-structured skilled knowledge-based kind of session outline to let's see what we have when we get there and then build around that, which seemed to work a lot better and got a lot more engagement for a longer period of time. So it was good to have that flexibility and change the goals*

*midway through to get, I think, a better understanding and better outcome for the young people in terms of engagement and things (Alice, p. 1).*

Despite the amendments to the original program, the Centre Manager was more than happy with the delivery of the program:

*[The program] wasn't just for the young people – It was really important for staff to witness that, to actually provide further empathy for them, and understand there was more to the young people than their [past] (Liam, p.4).*

*I haven't seen any of our young people engage post a group more so that we did with The Unconditional Love Foundation. Hanging back, remaining with the facilitators, but more so remaining with the dogs. So, they were the highlight of the program, which really sums up what I've said thus far, that it was about having that connection and love (Liam, p. 2).*

## **Building relationships**

While there were many challenges for the adults running the program, adult from the UCLF and AOD residential centre identified considerable benefits for the young people who attended.

Assistance with court appearance:

*She [young person] was just talking about how the dog has been helpful when she'd been to court and supporting her and she talked about abuse and I just thought wow, that's pretty powerful (Jess, p. 9).*

The non-judgemental nature of dogs:

*I was thinking again about that dog being so, they love everybody, they are non-judgemental – you're a human, you've got pats, you've got treats – you're a bit of all right in our eyes – I think that is quite powerful as well (Jess, p. 9).*

*Emotions are similar to humans to get that connection and a level of understanding that dogs and animals aren't that very different to us (Alice, p. 1).*

*But even if they sat in the room and whether it be on the floor, on a chair, on a number of occasions they just would sit there giving Archie and Bailey a pat on the head. And that's all they needed. And if that's all they needed then that's all they needed. That even in itself is success (Alice, p. 4).*

A personal reflection of animals in young people's lives:

*You get people disclosing things about different ways they've been with their animals or just those stories – those heart stories, about memories of their pets or where their animals are at the moment (Jess, p. 3).*

*but during those times of stress or change, their relationship with us and the staff that we saw was always kind of the same, because we didn't change. We were the constant, which I think helped more than anything else (Alice, p. 8).*

*Pet therapy in general, brings out a sense of vulnerability in the young people that's very hard to get to at times, and start talking about their own experiences. As I said, at times we can struggle to get, hear, much about what their life is like outside of correctional facilities, or anything, but with the dogs, the dogs can flush a lot of stuff out. Yeah, I just think that it's good for mental health. It triggers other parts of our mental health that we don't normally tap into (Paul, p.2).*

Safety and respect:

*Building an environment of safety and respect, I do think you'd notice that they seem to respect each other's pet story, or dog story. It's almost like in a normal group they can talk all over each other, but in animals they don't. Whether animal stories are more interesting, or they don't want to get loud and yelling in front of the dogs, yeah (Michelle, p.3).*

*I think it's a bit like that vet clinic waiting room thing is that having happy dogs that obviously have a good relationship with us, that also, I think, gains trust – Like, if the dog loves you, maybe you're okay. I think you get a bit of credibility from the fact that, "Well, your dog thinks you're the ant's pants – The dog thinks you're trustworthy. (Jess, p. 9).*

*Sharing stories with each other, it just builds on that connection and then thus the respect builds, and then they have that sort of safety, I don't know, just with the connection with each other. They feel if they open up about something like this, and the feedback is great, then they will then feel safe to do so with other things. It's a great stepping-stone (Beth, p.3).*

## Learning

A key component of the UCLF program was to compliment the environment in the AOD residential unit and create an optimal environment for young people to learn and acquire new skills in way they felt secure and connected. Changing expectations was important for the UCLF facilitators:

*I think our measurement of success with the program would be in terms of length of engagement and how long they stayed. So over that – over the period, if we got half an hour of engagement that was a win and we found out that that was kind of a point where we would lose them (Alice p. 2).*

Recognising the role they played alongside other GYRRU programs:

*I don't think it was wholly due to us. I think it was the facility and the program that they're running down there as a whole. And I think we were a part in helping towards that overall goal for those young people. So I'm going to say yes, we played a part, but I think all of the other people at Uniting and the programs, we're all one big team helping to support the young people (Alice, p. 7).*

The animal connection with young people and AOD residential support:

*I have never seen such an impact in my entire career that has more so than what I've seen with animal connection with our clients. And if there is anything that I've learnt from this, it is the importance of having that within residential settings or any form of setting for people that are struggling with addiction or mental health. We're seeing that in all areas, through equine therapy – we're seeing that through the psychology – we're seeing that through our registered support animals (Liam, p.6).*

*Yeah, I think it's possible. I just think bringing in the animals, like the dogs, like Charlie and Scout, I've seen massive improvement when clients are going through a rough day or there's just stuff going on. It's allowed them to get out of their head, just focus on the animals that are there and it always seem to lift everyone's spirits (Jess, p.7).*

Breaking down the barriers:

*I think so, because with having this program it breaks down those barriers as it incites the conversation. I think with them, with the barrier being broken down, that they're more open to talk about education and stuff like that. I think so, yeah. I think it does impact a lot (Beth, p. 3).*

## **Survey data – young people and AOD Centre staff**

In addition to interviews with UCLF and AOD Centre staff we wanted to capture the young people's experience. Having just completed a session with the UCLF facilitators and dogs they did not want to spend an extended period in an interview. So, instead of capturing their experience both qualitatively (by interview) and quantitative (by survey), we sat down separately with three young people, to complete a pre-determined survey, see Appendix A.

Table 2 – Young people reported that the animal-assisted program helped them to:

	A lot	A little
<b>Build an environment of safety and respect</b>	3	
<b>Skill acquisition</b>	1	2
<b>Build emotional intelligence</b>	2	1
<b>Building self-esteem</b>	2	1
<b>Build confidence</b>	2	1
<b>Build competence<sup>1</sup></b>	2	
<b>Build empathy</b>	3	
<b>Strengthening relationships with others</b>	2	1
<b>Strengthen the connection between animals and people</b>	2	1
<b>Change your behaviours</b>	3	

Table 3: Young participants

Male	18 years	Engaged in more than 3 AOD treatment programs	The animal-assisted program helped them to engage in the AOD treatment program	Had an animal or pet between the ages of 10-16	Aims to look for a job and live with friends after the AOD program
Male	20 years of age	Engaged with 2-3 programs AOD programs previously	Helped him to engage	Had a pet or animal under the age of 10	Aims to look for a job
Non binary	21 years of age	Engaged with 2-3 AOD programs previously	Helped engagement	Had a pet under the age of 10	Aims to further education, look for work and live with friends

A number of staff also completed the survey instrument rather than engage in an interview for the program.

<sup>1</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> young participant was unsure of the meaning of competence so chose not to respond



Table 4 – Staff at the Centre reported that the animal-assisted program helped young people to:

	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little
<b>Build an environment of safety and respect</b>		3		
<b>Skill acquisition</b>		2	1	
<b>Build emotional intelligence</b>	2		1	
<b>Build self-esteem</b>		1	1	1
<b>Build confidence</b>	1		1	1
<b>Build competence<sup>2</sup></b>		1		1
<b>Build empathy</b>	1	1	1	
<b>Strengthen relationships with others</b>		2		2
<b>Strengthen the connection between animals and people</b>	1	2		
<b>Change behaviours</b>		2	1	

Table 3 - Staff

Female	20-30 years of age	Worked with young people on AOD program for less than 12 months	Increased engagement
Female	50-60 years	Worked with AOD and young people	
Male	Not disclosed	Worked with AOD and young people for less than 12 months	

<sup>2</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> young participant chose not to respond to this statement

## Discussion

The animal-assisted wellbeing program was introduced into the GYRRU in the early-stage development of this brand-new, government funded program. As a result, the UCLF programme was trialled as programmes were being scoped and introduced. An additional challenge was the regional location, necessitating a 4 ½ hour round trip for the UCLF facilitators and their dogs.

The complex life experience and needs of the young people in residents at the GYRRU was another challenging factor. Many had not learnt how to sit to communicate their needs or to get along with other people. In some instances, a young person's attention span was less than five minutes. The absence of basic learning skills made it difficult for the UCLF facilitators as they developed educational and learning plans for their sessions.

Importantly, the UCLF facilitators adopted a flexible approach, engaging in conversation with the GYRRU Manager and revising the delivery and expectations of their sessions. In doing so, they have created valuable insights and learnings into the value and impact of the human-animal bond in a youth focused AOD environment.

Flexibility was vital and was demonstrated in a number of ways. The content delivery was revised to have a clearer alignment with the educational stages of the young people. Young people were allowed to move in and out of the space, sit where they felt most comfortable. The session was reduced to a 30-40 minute period.

We can see in the survey responses the UCLF created an environment of safety and respect.

One of the strongest outcomes from the research case study was the presence of connection, trust and relationships between the dogs and young people. While the three important social influences take considerable time to build in human – human relationships the two UCLF dogs, showed how quickly the human – animal bond can develop.

A moment to pat, or feed or just lie down with a dog was all that was needed for some of these young people to move from an agitated pre-session state to one of calm.

By extension, the connection, trust and relationship with the dogs enabled young people to open up about their lives, their AOD use and future desires. For some, that meant sharing experiences with animals from childhood and others who were missing their pets while in the Centre. GYRRU staff and management all reflected that this level of openness was absent from other programmes at the Centre.

The art of learning is often measured by numbers or statistics that show a student has achieved a certain task. In this the research was guided by an open question around to examine how programs enhance/assist/impact learning. Importantly, in this case study, the findings clearly show that the UCLF programme had a positive impact that was not just about enhancing, assisting or impacting as the findings show that the human-animal bond has its own significance in this space:

*This was something that was imperative in a post-modern program – a progressive program bringing in empathy and care (Liam, p. 10).*

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## Appendix A

Table 5: Interview participants – pseudonyms allocated

Jess	The Unconditional Love Foundation Facilitator
Maggie	The Unconditional Love Foundation Facilitator
Alice	The Unconditional Love Foundation Facilitator
Liam	AOD Residential Centre, Staff
Nicole	AOD Residential Centre, Staff
Paul	AOD Residential Centre, Staff
Beth	AOD Residential Centre, Staff

