# Consultation questions – youth policy

**Date: 6th November 2015**

**About you**

**Organisation name:** Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children’s Hospital

**Organisation purpose**: Promoting the health and well-being of adolescents and young adults, through research, health service delivery, community development, youth engagement and education.

**Draft vision**

**Q. What do you think of the draft vision?**

We applaud the state government for the initiative to develop a coordinated youth policy in partnership with young people.

However, the draft vision does not adequately recognise the active role that young people play in shaping their futures. We would suggest the draft vision better emphasise the role of partnerships with young people and highlights the importance of promoting their leadership in creating those opportunities whether they be in entrepreneurship, education, employment or healthcare.

**Draft objectives**

**Q. What do you think of the draft objectives?**

We would suggest strengthening the language around ‘hearing and engaging’ young people. Too often there has been token engagement of young people by government. The language of partnership, empowerment and leadership would be more appropriate.

The remaining objectives do not adequately recognise the active role that young people play in shaping their realities and their opportunities.

We would recommend that the objectives frame the adolescent and young adult years as a time when increasing social and community engagement is an essential aspect of healthy development.

We fully support the emphasis on social inclusion of young people with diverse backgrounds.

**What’s important to young people?**

Young people have identified the following issues as important to youth.[[1]](#endnote-1) Please respond only to those questions of interest to you.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve educational opportunities for young people?**

The world that this generation is entering differs from that of previous generations. This presents extraordinary opportunities particularly in terms of job opportunities and social connections. It also presents new hazards that extend from difficulties in making the transition into a more globalised job market as well as hazards related to mental health and substance abuse. The challenge for the education system is to keep pace with these rapid changes of the world in which this generation is growing up and equip them with the skills needed for their future lives in the workplace, in their own families and in their communities.

Adolescents and young adulthood are key years for achieving higher level cognitive skills. This is also true for higher level social and emotional skills. The acquisition of these skills is very much dependent on the educational and family contexts in which a young person is growing up. It is therefore essential that the education system extend beyond the provision of knowledge and promotion of cognitive skills to also focus on ensuring that social and emotional learning takes place.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve training opportunities for young people?**

Please see response above.

**Q. What do you think should be done to increase employment opportunities for young people?**

The transition from education to employment is becoming more difficult in every country. The realities of the job market mean that young people are commonly the most vulnerable in economic downturns i.e. “last in, first out”. The jobs that were once available for those with a good education, including university degrees, do not exist to the same extent today. Many young people will require a longer time to define their niche within the job market.

There are no simple answers but providing assistance and guidance to young people around areas where there are growing opportunities, e.g. care of the elderly, makes good sense. Providing young people with the incentives, skills and resources to become entrepreneurs and establish their own businesses will also make increasing sense in the future.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve the mental health of young people?**

Many mental health problems have their origins in mid-childhood when typically the first symptoms of many mental disorders emerge. The promotion of emotional well-being begins in these years. It is during this time that experiences of victimisation and abuse are likely to have their greatest effects. Conversely experiences of social support and positive emotional engagement during this time underpin a resilient self-concept. Schools are settings where we could do a great deal more to foster positive emotional development and mental health.

The transition to high school is one point when emotional problems worsen and begin to have a greater effect on school engagement and peer relationships. The transition to high school has been largely neglected in educational policy.

There is little evidence that current approaches to early intervention or prevention have any sustained benefit for mental health problems or emotional well-being. We need greater innovation in our approaches to the mental health of young people and also need to ensure that this innovation is accompanied by adequate evaluation.

**Q. What do you think should be done to tackle alcohol and drug issues for young people?**

Regulation of access to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs remains a cornerstone of our response to this group of problems. In addition to taxation and restrictions on purchase by age and stricter advertising codes, promoting healthy attitudes to substance use among peers is an important strategy. Peer leadership and promotion of healthy role models within school and community settings is an important strategy.

Maintaining a positive engagement with education particularly during the transition to secondary school is a further major protective factor.

Approaches that aim to change social norms, including around adult substance use will also be important. Thus, approaches that consider the way that adults use alcohol, and that unhealthy adult alcohol use is or is not condoned by the media, and prominent sporting codes such as the AFL, are also relevant.

**Q. What do you think should be done to tackle discrimination of young people?**

Mainstream media images of young people commonly emphasise the negative. Too often adolescents are presented as impulsive and unpredictable. We could do much more to promote their creativity, generosity, energy and often remarkable achievements.

More importantly we could do much more to create structures and processes for engaging young people in community life. Promoting civic engagement does not receive much emphasis in the discussion paper but it is the contact between young people and other members of the community that will be the most powerful way to reduce discrimination.

**Q. What do you think should be done to improve public transport for young people?**

Young people are more dependent on public transport than any other age group. Having safe and affordable public transport for young people at times they need to travel would be a very good investment in their well-being. Given that young people disproportionately live in outer suburbs, wider investments in public transport infrastructure will disproportionately benefit the young.

Q. **What else do you think should be done to improve the lives of young people in Victoria?**

Over half of the world’s young people live in the countries to our north and north-west. Promoting cultural and social engagement with those living in our Asia Pacific neighbouring countries would be a further great investment to help young Victorians understand their place and that of their country in this region.

**Q. Any other comments?**

The document could do more to emphasise both what is special about these years (in comparison to younger children and older adults) and what is different about the experience of this generation when compared to previous generations of young people.

Adolescence and young adulthood is a critical point in the life-course that shapes health well-being and social adjustment in later adulthood. Given that adolescents and young adults are the next generation to parent, investments in these years are essential for a healthy start for the next generation. The rationale for investment in these years could be greatly strengthened in the document.

There are unprecedented changes in the forces shaping development across the adolescent and young adult years. Globalisation is shaping health, development and economic opportunities for this generation as never before. Digital and social networking media have created extraordinary opportunities for social engagement but also bring risks for health and social development. Young people are the consumers of tomorrow and marketing to this generation now shapes many aspects of their health, lifestyle and well-being. The new technologies equally present extraordinary opportunities for engaging this generation with broader civil society and with each other. Again the shifting forces shaping social development for this generation could be emphasised more in the current document.

The document gives little detail about the mechanisms by which government will achieve a more coordinated approach to youth. We would recommend the establishment of something like a ‘*youth commission’* with representation from the different government sectors, with young people and their organisations, as well is broader civil society.

We would also support the establishment of more regular data collection and reporting of the health, well-being and social development of young Victorians. Currently there is no body within government charged with the responsibility for collecting and reporting this essential information for policy development.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)