

An engagement party for young Australians and everyone's invited



by Petria Rowe, Dusseldorp Skills Forum

For all the talk of new education and training commitments for young Australians, it could be argued that the names and faces of these young people are lost in the discourse. It is time perhaps that policy makers factored young people themselves more clearly into the policy equation.

A recent Newspoll survey of 18 to 24 year olds confirms that, despite sentiments of disaffection among some young Australians, a large majority are positive about their experiences in their final year of school, and of their subsequent experiences, whether in work or study.

They are confident about life in general: whether as students or workers, young Australians say that their expectations are being met or exceeded in the workplace and by schools, TAFE and universities.

All the indications are that the rising generation of Australians feels prepared and is ready and confident to engage in the future. Australia will be a better, more creative and richer place if this confidence leads to a more skilled, inclusive and engaged society.

This is all very good news when there are increasingly strong social and economic arguments for tackling educational exclusion and disengagement.

Since 1999 the Dusseldorp Skills Forum has produced the annual report, *How Young People are Faring*, which looks at the situation of young Australians in learning and work. For the past eight years, despite strong economic growth in Australia, this report has revealed that a significant number of young people remain not fully engaged – that is

not in full-time learning or full-time work.

In May 2006, 540,000 young Australians aged 15 to 24 years were not in full-time learning or work. Of these, approximately 330,000 were unemployed, working part-time but wanting more hours, or not in the labour force but wanting to work.

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Perhaps even more startling are the findings in the most recent ABS *Survey of Education and Work*. While full-time work and study rates among young adults (aged 20 to 24) are at their highest level in two decades, one out of five young adults were not engaged in either full-time work or study. Further, there are 118,000 young adults without Year 12 or a Certificate III qualification and who are either not in the labour force, unemployed, or working part-time but not studying.

Of the 18 to 24 year olds surveyed by Newspoll, one in four did not go down the study pathway after school. Given the choice, two out of five of these young people would have preferred to do some studies. It is concerning that in such buoyant times our young people are not afforded every opportunity to further their learning.

Adding salt to the wound, it is more than unfortunate that TAFE, as Australia's largest post-secondary educator, is not given due recognition as an important pathway for school leavers. The media and aspirational focus has centred upon university at the expense of TAFE. Research undertaken by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum shows that TAFE is as important a destination as university for school leavers.

Young Australians not in full-time learning or work are more likely to experience a range of personal stresses, financial difficulties or issues of personal safety than are other young people. They are also less satisfied with the education they received, their job opportunities and prospects, their finances, their friends and friendships, their

living arrangements and their health. These were the findings in a recent Dusseldorp Skills Forum report, *The Flipside of Gen Y*.

In the light of the current demographic trends in Australia, young people will increasingly play a vital role in the economy as a major source of skilled labour for Australian industry. The education and training of these young Australians will be crucial to future growth.

Whether the optimism and confidence of young Australians is harnessed in the long-term will not only depend on the decisions and investments made today in education, workplace, training and related policies. Individual young people have a personal responsibility to take advantage of those opportunities, and, along with the other stakeholders in the pursuit for higher levels of youth engagement, their decisions need to be measured against public expectations.

The election year provides an opportunity to concentrate attention on bridging the gap between the problems policy-makers are tackling and the solutions they seek. Better policy will emerge if there is integrated rather than piecemeal thinking about the education and training landscape and if connections are made to the needs and voices of young people as the key stakeholders.

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