

There is quite a widespread view that a youth crisis exists in Australia. Rates of youth unemployment, homelessness, suicide and drug-taking, which so far show few signs of decreasing, are obvious indicators supporting this view. There is also a body of research that suggests that a fairly high percentage of young people are generally alienated from mainstream society and they lack hope about the future.

Whether or not we accept the idea of a crisis, it seems undeniable that a growing number of young people have very uncertain futures with reduced opportunities to live a satisfying, safe and productive life in the present, and declining prospects for doing so in the future. While this is not the whole story, it is estimated that about 15 per cent of young people are at risk of failing to making an effective transition to adulthood because they have no attachment or a very tenuous attachment to employment, education or training (Freeland 1996).

### **Impact of changes on young people**

The present situation, crisis or not, results primarily from the impact of social changes and political and economic policies which are beyond the control of young people themselves. Young people have been hard hit by worldwide structural changes in employment and the nature and organisation of work. Demographic and social shifts over the past couple of decades mean that their relationships, employment patterns and futures are much more unstable and insecure and less predictable than those of their parents (McDonald

# *Proposal for a National Civic Service Scheme*

*ROBYN HARTLEY is a co-author of a recently published report that examines whether a scheme of youth community service could make a positive contribution to some of the problems faced by young people today. Here she presents the background to the report and some of its arguments and main findings.*

1996). Young people are growing up in a society where important public and community infrastructures continue to be eroded, and where excessive concerns with consumerism and with self tend to be promoted.

The Commonwealth government has taken some positive steps and responded to some of the specific problems. For example, the Prime Ministerial Homeless Taskforce was set up soon after the Howard government came to power and pilot programs are being established and evaluated. An integrated range of programs is being set up under the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, including the information and communication program to be undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

However, so far, no real solutions are being offered for the major problem of youth unemployment. The youth work-for-the-dole scheme appears to have quite wide support from both adults and



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young people but it does not address the real issues of jobs for young people. The scheme will not produce more long-term employment and it has a limited training focus. Elements of compulsion are punitive and inappropriate when jobs are not available. All the evidence points to the fact that the majority of young unemployed people want to work. Compulsion could lead to further loss of self-esteem for some young unemployed people. In addition, concerns

have been raised about the industrial consequences of the work-for-the-dole scheme and its possible violation of human rights (Bessant 1997).

It is understandable that young people would prefer to be doing 'something' rather than 'nothing'; the debilitating and personally damaging effects of unemployment are well documented. It is also understandable that parents would prefer their children to be active rather than passive or with time on their hands. However, rather than working for the dole, what are needed are real jobs or freely chosen alternatives that are equally socially valued by the community.

Some of the recent proposed changes to youth allowances, such as the availability of rent assistance for students and general simplification of a previously complex system, will benefit some young people. However, the overall shift to parents being expected to take greater financial responsibility for their older children will exacerbate

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problems for families who are already struggling to make ends meet. It will put further strain on family relationships and leave some young people feeling frustrated, hopeless and cynical. There seems to be no recognition by the government that these additional pressures are likely to increase levels of homelessness, violence and suicide, running counter to other positive initiatives it is taking. Education and training institutions will also be put under severe and possibly unrealistic pressures in trying to meet the expectation that all young people be in education, training or employment.

Broader issues concerned with young people – their place in society, their role as citizens, and their contribution to shaping the future – are not yet on the government agenda for debate.

## **A meaningful role for young people in society?**

The report, *Opting in to Active Citizenship*, produced by RMIT's Centre for Youth Affairs Research and Development, and funded by The Myer Foundation, discusses a different approach to youth issues – namely, the contribution that may be made by a voluntary, non-military and universal (rather than targeted)

national program of youth civic or community service.

The report draws on the views of a variety of groups and individuals regarding the philosophy, design and responsibility for such a scheme. Discussions were held with representatives from service organisations, welfare groups, conservation groups, youth organisations and local government youth workers. Six groups of young people in Victoria, from state and private schools and a work preparation program, as well as some individual young people in employment, were consulted. Students and employed young people also took part in a Search Conference held in Melbourne and attended by local government representatives, youth workers, employers and several teachers and school principals. A literature search and attendance of one of the researchers at the Third Global Conference on Youth Service provided additional information about programs in other countries.

Most responses to the general problems of young people who are alienated and/or in crisis are calls for more prevention measures or for more assistance. These responses are both understandable and necessary. However, there

often seems to be a vital element missing – that is, a means of providing young people with opportunities for genuine involvement with something beyond themselves, and with experiences through which they can develop commitment and a sense of purposeful involvement in employment, education and, indeed, life itself.

The report argues that a well planned and organised scheme of civic or community service could provide young people with practical skills and experience and has the potential to provide the missing element – a sense of connection to a wider 'common good'. It could therefore have positive outcomes for young people and for society.

The idea of civic or community service is not new and Australia has a relatively strong culture of voluntary adult community service. The idea of youth service is not, however, as well developed as in some other countries. Across the world, systems of youth service, some more organised and nationally coherent than others, are an accepted part of a number of contemporary societies that are otherwise quite diverse. These schemes have developed according to different

historical, social and cultural circumstances.

The rationales underlying youth service vary and programs are very diverse. The *Opting in to Active Citizenship* report examines the different rationales and briefly outlines programs in several countries. Some are firmly based on voluntarism, others offer various forms of support and remuneration and provide a living allowance. Some programs have a strong conservation focus; others provide opportunities for young people to become involved in a very wide range of education, health, conservation and other activities. They may be locally, regionally, nationally or internationally based. The balance between government and community financial and other support varies.

Despite this diversity of purpose and organisation, there is enough international consensus for some shared principles to be recognised, to form the basis of an international association (the International Association of National Youth Service) and to provide the motivation for three international conferences to date. The Third Global Conference on National Youth Service was held in Port Moresby in 1996.

The statement of principles adopted by this conference noted that the benefits of community service schemes to individuals include increased awareness of the needs of others; new skills; a clearer sense of career options and interests; increased self confidence, self esteem and social maturity; leadership and teamwork skills; and increased awareness of cultural origins. The conference also called for countries to work towards a 'paradigm shift' whereby they 'give as much emphasis to national youth service in the 21st century as given to military service in the 20th century'.

Some commentators argue that youth service could become a new institution having a comparable value to and sitting alongside participation in education and employment. They suggest that it can provide important experiences and skills for young people in an era when entry into full adult citizenship is being postponed, when connections to community are reduced, and when the general climate of individualism may lead to emotional over-dependence or emotional isolation, rather than to a positive inter-dependence between people and groups.

A cynical view of youth 'service' is that it is primarily a means of mitigating unemployment, of providing young people with opportunities to engage in socially useful activities (paid or unpaid) when opportunities for paid work are not available. Some work-for-the-dole schemes are a case in point.

However, advocates for youth service argue there are clear

distinctions between service and employment, and that youth service is not an employment program. First, well-organised service programs consciously and intentionally expose participants to a variety of views and experiences and encourage reflection on those experiences. Second, service involves a contribution to something beyond the individual, at a community, regional, national or international level. Although service programs include training and employment-related skills, civic service has a value in its own right – see, for example the discussion at the Wisconsin conference of national youth service in 1992 (Eberley 1996). The fact is that there have been calls for youth service programs long before high youth unemployment became a feature of many contemporary societies.

In its consultations with young people and adults, the RMIT team found that some underlying principles of youth civic service such as notions of active citizenship, youth community participation, the need for a sense of meaning and belonging, responsibility, and valuing the contributions of young people were widely accepted.

However, there was considerable ambivalence about, and some outright rejection, particularly by young people, of the terms 'civic' and 'service'. In fact, finding the right words to talk about such a scheme is quite difficult as so many possible terms have connotations which have little to do with the type of scheme which is being discussed – 'community service' orders, for example, are part of the



Commissioned by The Myer Foundation, *Opting in to Active Citizenship*, by Robyn Hartley, Elizabeth Hartnell-Young and David Maunders is published by the Centre for Youth Affairs Research and Development, RMIT, 1997. It is available from RMIT, PO Box 71, Bundoora, Victoria 3083 for \$16.00. Phone: (03) 9468 2920.

juvenile justice system. To have widespread appeal, the publicity and promotion for such a scheme would need to have substantial input from young people themselves.

It was clear that young people favoured a scheme that could give them accredited skills and that offered a range of incentives for participation. Suggestions for incentives included a credit for HECS payments, cash payments at the end of service, references, statements of skills and competencies attained, opportunities to learn the skills of project management and leadership, achievement of personal goals and recognition of service by potential employers. Young people also favoured a flexible scheme that provided part-time and full-time service for varying lengths of time.

The views expressed in the consultations led the RMIT team to suggest that activities might fall into one of two areas. Young people could choose from a range of

pre-planned and designed options (in much the same way that they choose an education course or a leisure activity). Such activities might include community improvement or conservation, service or assisting with the operation of the civic service scheme itself. Alternatively, activities could be suggested and developed by young people themselves, with varying amounts of input from advisers or mentors if and when necessary. Young people had plenty of ideas about the sorts of service activities they would like to be part of.

### **Organising and implementing a youth scheme**

The *Opting in to Active Citizenship* report suggests possible ways of organising a scheme and considerations for making it work. Young people's input at all stages of planning and implementation would be crucial. The scheme would need to be flexible enough to appeal to a wide

range of young people and be inclusive of different groups. It would need to be universal and not targeted at the unemployed or disadvantaged for it to avoid stigmatising young people and to affirm that all young people are valued and have the potential to contribute.

To attract a full range of young people, some form of payment or allowance would be essential. As civic service would involve young people in supervised and often demanding work, it is difficult to justify allowances being linked to parents' income as proposed in new arrangements for the Youth Allowance. This would significantly devalue how young people saw their contribution and discourage the involvement of young people not from lower income groups.

Above all, a scheme would have to provide serious and important work. In the words of one young woman: 'Real' is the key word; it needs to be about real life, a real contribution, real work, real interest, real benefits and real involvement'.

The report suggests that although the infrastructure for a national civic service scheme would need to be put in place (and it is difficult to see how this could be done without some government financial support), there are plenty of opportunities to complement and build on existing programs of community service, through service organisations, voluntary associations, youth organisations, local government, schools and other educational institutions.

### Conclusion

A youth community service scheme is not a panacea for all the complex social and cultural shifts that are currently impinging on young people. However, a well organised voluntary and flexible youth civic community service scheme, which included a significant role for young people in its planning and implementation, could go some way to signalling to young people that they have an important contribution to make. It could provide them with real skills and experience, promote a sense of their

'agency' in the world and give them a sense of connection and belonging.

Such a scheme also offers an alternative to the concept of mutual obligation that is at present being promoted. The current notion is that if society, through the social security system, provides unemployed young people with an allowance, then young people have an obligation to give back to society in the form of work for the dole, an obligation that could be legally enforced. The basis of the type of scheme discussed here is that the state has an obligation to its citizens to provide them with opportunities to participate and contribute, that service is a form of contribution and a vital part of citizenship, and that there is both a personal and a wider societal benefit in contributing.

A youth civic service scheme would not absolve governments and the community from the need for sustained and continued efforts to ensure that young people have a variety of employment opportunities. However, the reality of young people's lives is that linear pathways are no longer the most common patterns which young people follow after leaving school (Wyn and White 1997). The largest percentage follow a mixed pattern of placing equal value on a range of activities or goals, including work, study and other activities. Taking part in a scheme of youth civic service could well be an important part of these patterns.

The *Opting in to Active Citizenship* report concludes that the idea of a national scheme of youth civic service

which is voluntary, available to all young people regardless of their current work status, inclusive, young-person centred, flexible, and developed to complement existing initiatives, warrants serious exploration at all levels of the Australian community. Young people must have a major part in the discussions. A short-lived program tied to the government of the day would not be very useful. What is needed is a scheme that is widely accepted, valued and recognised in the community.

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## INFORMATION ON NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE

The National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, located at the University of Tasmania, Hobart, has compiled a select bibliography, an extended bibliography and a list of information sources concerning national youth service.

They are available from the National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, GPO Box 262-64, Hobart, Tasmania 7000 Australia. The extended bibliography, which will be regularly updated, is also available on the Internet at <http://www2.educ.utas.edu.au/ncys/biblio/index.htm>