Response to the Rudd Government’s ‘Towards A National Strategy for Young Australians Discussion Paper’

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In late October 2009 after two years of being in office the Rudd government announced its intention to develop a National Strategy for Young Australians. The accompanying ‘Discussion Paper’ (National Conversation) contains a vision statement, an outline of seven key priorities, 15 questions and a mix of ‘factual’ (ie., statistical claims) and several paragraphs outlining the idea of ‘the adolescent brain’. The Discussion Paper and the proposed process is threadbare intellectually and in policy terms very disappointing.

In my response I provide a brief explanation of this assessment, then make some suggestions. This is not a detailed response, but hopefully makes a contribution to a process that I hope will continue.

The Discussion Paper

There are three key problems with the Discussion Paper. Firstly in identifying the core priorities it veers from one extreme to the other: from of extraordinary abstraction to excessive specificity. Secondly and against consideration of the evidence, or acknowledgement of the critical literature it relies on ‘the adolescent brain theory’ and does so without acknowledging the consequences of such agenda setting activity for policy. In doing so it also relies on and reinforces prejudicial accounts of young people (that they are inherently irresponsible, lack the capacity to make good judgment and high risk takers). Finally there is a noticeable silence on a number of major policy issues and problems. Together the combination of things that are said and omitted means it fails to provide a credible framework of policy options.

1. The seven Core Priorities

The Paper outlines ‘seven core priorities’. Some of these are abstracted and unclear, while other are very specific. In referring to these I add a comment two brackets before making some general observations:
• empowering young Australians in their schools, their TAFEs and their Universities to shape their own futures. (It unclear what is meant by this priority. Does it include the idea that young people participate in or assume responsibility for curriculum design or take on board of management responsibilities? Or is it code for requiring young people to spend even more time in schools and post secondary institutions?).
• supporting young Australians within their families (It is unclear what is being referred to in this statement. What does it say for those young people who are struggling to achieve independent living?).
• mobilising young Australians within their communities. (This is a vague statement. For what purpose are young people being mobilised?).
• enabling young Australians to participate safely and confidently online (While this is a very specific response, it is also unclear what kind of policy is being proposed. Is it making reference to the 3 million dollars already allocated to increase ‘cyber safety’ in schools?).
• equipping young Australians with the skills and personal networks they need for employment (This sounds like a description of the current education system and the ‘education revolution’).
• strengthening early intervention with young Australians to help prevent any problems getting worse and to help young people get their lives back on track (Apart from indulging in
the contemporary vogue for ‘early intervention’ it is ambiguous. What is being referred to in policy terms?).

• establishing clear cut legal consequences for behaviours that endanger the safety of others (This sounds like reference to the current juvenile justice system. My concern is that it draws on popular prejudices about youth as troubled and troublesome and needing a firm hand).

A more detailed consideration of these ‘seven core priorities’ suggests that the Rudd Government is content to rehearse the old mantras and to ‘contain and blame’ (more education, get tougher and more on law and order) which have substituted for a strong whole-of-government approach to youth policy for far too long. Equally disappointing is the reliance on old stereotypes and prejudices about young people.

It is not clear why these ‘areas’ are identified as ‘core priorities’. What is clear is the focus on keeping young people aged 12 to 25 years in some form of institution be it school, training/education or ‘the family’ which is presumably what the translation of ideas like ‘empowering young Australians in their school, TAFE etc ...within their families’ is supposed to mean.

Why is priority given to policies that have the effect of extending ‘adolescent dependence’ while support to achieve independent status is not mentioned?

A proposal to ‘support young people to be independent’ would be a good particularly if it is accompanied by an account of how that can happen. Given the importance of being able to establish independent status for ‘becoming adult’ (that includes independent living, a decent income etc), one might expect to see it as a priority. This is particularly relevant given the difficulties many young people currently experience in coming anywhere close achieving this. (I refer for example to prevailing ‘hostile’ economic climate (GFC), sizeable HECS debts, housing affordability etc one might reasonably expect this to be a priority).

Helping young people secure independent status requires attention to quite practical matters like ‘housing affordability’ which has become an increasingly severe problem in the past few years in recent years. The same can be said about the issue of debt incurred by needing to pay back fees for tertiary education.

Speaking about ‘early interventions’ to ‘prevent’ problems and ‘help young people get back on track’ is to describe the policy problem in a very old fashioned way that reinforces some time-honoured stereotypes that represent ‘youth’ as victims of perpetrators who because they are ‘adolescent’ are full of angst, storm and stress and thereby have a propensity to go ‘off the rails’

Describing a policy problem in terms of young people requiring clarity about the ‘legal consequences’ of bad or risky behaviors that ‘endangers the safety of others’ is to represent young people in a negative light and commits to a ‘law and order’ agenda is deeply worrying. A retreat to ‘law and order’ may win approval from certain media pundits because it feeds-off and fuels negative and unhelpful stereotypes of youth as delinquents, but is not warranted by available evidence. Young people do not commit the serious criminal offences or white-collar crimes that cause such distress and suffering. The challenge for policy makers is to be able to recognise the difference between prejudicial characterizations that affirm and reinforce ‘respectable anxieties’ and consolidate the ratings of talk-back radio hosts and the serious issues that require careful and effective responses by policy makers.

The Discussion Paper is too readily draws on old prejudices and myths is heightened by the surprising use made by the latest fad ‘discovery’, namely the idea that ‘the adolescent brain’ is in some way different (in ways that matter) from those of other humans.

2. The “Adolescent Brain”?

The second key description of the policy problem is embedded in the second page under the heading of the Discussion Paper asks us ‘what do we know about how young people develop?’ In answer it tells us about a recent ‘scientific discovery’ about ‘the adolescent brain’ which reads:

‘What do we know about how young people develop? Over the last decade there has been widespread recognition of early childhood as a time of critical brain development. Investment by government at that stage greatly benefits both the
individual and society. There is growing awareness that adolescence and early adulthood are also important times for brain development. Research shows that the adolescent period of brain development is just as significant as development in the early years (0 to 6).

Brain development during adolescence primarily occurs in the areas that govern learning and socialisation. The areas of the brain responsible for impulse control, decision making, planning and emotions undergo significant changes, reaching full maturity at 25 years. Research indicates that interventions in later childhood and adolescence can improve skills such as perseverance and self control. Later positive life outcomes including maintaining employment and avoiding involvement with the criminal justice system are heavily contingent on the development of these skills.

This research suggests that youth, like early childhood, is a time of key importance in an individual’s development, and that the benefits of focused efforts to supporting young people to develop positively are significant – both for the individual and for Australian society.

My concern with this description is that it not only accepts uncritically claims and research that is highly contested and problematic, it describes ‘the problem’ in a way which if were ever to be taken seriously would have very serious implications for youth policy, the lives of young Australians and the character of our society.

There appears to be a general consensus that MRI and related technologies provide diagnosticians with helpful images of anatomical structures and cognitive processes that can play a role in elucidating the functioning of the human brain. Yet there is no credible scientific research to support the idea advanced by proponents of the ‘adolescent brain’ theory that all young people by virtue of the ‘adolescent brains’ are especially ‘different’, more likely to be ‘risk takers’ or to be ‘anti-social’ ‘irrational’ or ‘immoral’ than any other age cohort. Similarly, the accompanying idea that adults are models of rationality, morality, good judgment and are pro-social is not well grounded. Indeed claims that young people are naturally irrational or anti-social entails the same kind of prejudice displayed by those who spoke of the ‘Jewish brain’, the ‘female brain’ or the ‘Negro brain’ to explain how those groups were both different and problematic.

Questioning the claimed links between the neuro-physiological structure of teenage brains and their social conduct matters because it entails drawing on and linking that neuro-scientific research to widespread prejudicial attitudes and myths about young people.

Such claims highlight the relationship between scientific research, scientism and various social interests and social prejudices. This is an interactive relationship. People wishing to engage in research can be sidetracked by the pursuit of socially prejudiced research agendas. It can involve research in which the questions and methods being used are subverted by the drive to produce research which produces the answers already ‘known to be true’. (One example of this is Herrnstein and Murray’s The Bell Curve (1994) which attempted to link ‘race’ to ‘intelligence’). Here I refer to the possibility of misusing research by misrepresenting or selecting only the elements of that work which suit a particular interest, and by legitimating social prejudices or inequitable treatment of people by appealing to scientific research is an old and dangerous practice.

Critical to claims made about the ‘adolescent brain’ research is the idea that all ‘adolescents’ universally lack rationality, self-restraint and good judgment. Despite claims to the contrary, most young people are normal. Like the rest of the community ‘they’ exhibit an array of normal range of ill-health, criminal behaviour, community involvement, and political or moral beliefs. In respect to crime, young people are less inclined to do the serious and destructive things that cause harm like serious assault, homicide, rape, armed robbery and white-collar crime. These findings are common for Australia, USA and Britain (Home Office 2007, FBI 2007). This is not deny that some young people come under the gaze of police and find themselves in juvenile justice systems, but so too do indigenous people and typically for the same reasons - a combination of prejudice and their high visibility. There is also value in referring to analyses of reports on increases in crimes, and particularly recommendations that to take into account the influence of policing practices and the greater public awareness of what constitutes assault – especially within the family – on those statistics (Bricknell 2008).
It is also worth noting how the capacity of young people to protect themselves by having legal entitlements and rights respected is critical for securing their well-being and safety. As the Victorian government’s *State of Victoria’s Young People* (2007) noted:

‘Young people (aged 12–24) who were consulted in the development of the Future Directions policy linked ‘feeling safe’ and being able to navigate difficult situations with independence and they associated ‘feeling unsafe’ with feeling dependent. Young people also wanted to be able to learn from their mistakes and to utilise this learning to build their independence.’ (2007 P. 124).

It is ill-advised to accept the premise that ‘adolescence’ is an age-based cohort that is uniform and homogenous or that those who fit that category experience the same developments, in the same ways, at the same stage regardless of their different social contexts. If we take ‘teenage brain’ claims seriously then it follows that we should be promoting policy like:
- increasing the voting age from 18 to 23 or 25,
- modifying education practices and various intervention programs because we are wasting our time and resources encouraging young people to learn things that are currently in the curriculum in most schools because their brains are too immature,
- increasing the age of sexual consent and legal liability to 23-25,
- not allowing young people to own property or have a credit card until they are 25,
- keeping young people in the Children’s Court until they are 23 or 25,
- increasing the age at which they can legally drink to 23 or 25,
- increase the age of compulsory schooling to say 23 or 25 (Bessant 2008, pp. 347-360).

The prospects of these becoming a reality may seem laughable until we consider the way in which descriptions of policy problems inform the policy outcome.

I suggest that this approach is problematic not only because it breaches a number of young people’s basic human rights, it is also bad because restricting or prohibiting young people from engaging in activities like those mentioned above is counterproductive. It will mean they lose opportunities to develop intuition through experience, and yet the quality of our intuition is critical for good decision-making: ‘...depends on how well we have reasoned in the past; on how well we have classified the events of our past experiences in relation to the emotions that preceded and followed them; and also on how well we have reflected on the successes and failure of our past intuitions’ (Damasio 2006, xix).

As mentioned above, the implications of the claims made by proponents of the adolescent brain model is to increase the age at which young people can engage in a number of activities that traditionally mark adulthood. The response I propose rests on a different proposition that some young people are at risk not because their brains are different, but because they have not had the experiences or opportunities to develop the skills and judgment which engagement in those activities and experiences supply. This points to a basic problems with ‘adolescent brain’ account that is, it begins with a prejudice (‘they’ are ‘different’ ‘irrational’ and ‘deficient’) and then threatens to expand the civil and social disadvantages which already severely affect too many of our young people.

Finally there are a number of important issues missing from the Discussion Paper.

3. What is missing?

I am trying to limit my response so will focus primarily on the critical or core issues that are missing and which need to be considered if the Rudd government is to come close to developing a decent youth policy.

*Human Rights Issues*
- Lowering the age of voting
- Outlawing age based discrimination
- Outlawing corporal punishment of children and you people
- Giving effect to UNCROC

*Intergenerational Equity*
The demographic issue or the ageing population which has major implications for young
people is not even mentioned. This has profound implications for the immediate future, for relations between the older and younger cohorts, and intergenerational equity.

Attention ought to be given to supporting young people to live independent life’s and not be focused on support for those who remain in ‘the family’ or education.

Moreover, if the government is serious about equity and how that is critical for productivity as well as social justice then why are we not seeing consideration given to tertiary education that does not carry the burden of fees and debts that young people then carry as they attempt to obtain secure income, enter the housing market and establish a family of their own?

There is also the issue of tertiary student hardship. Fee related debt generally constitute only part of the costs associated with being a tertiary student. The financial hardship many students now endure is now well documented. The rising costs of living and burden of financial debt that goes well beyond fees and ought to be a matter of concern for any-one interested in the issue of social equity (The introduction of a ‘HECS’ loans system into the TAFE sector is a further cost shifting ‘development’ for students who are traditionally from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The fact this initiative is occurring in the context of rising youth unemployment raises questions about social equity).

Claims that a causal relationship existed between having a university degree and high income is a crude analysis because it neglects of the powerful influence of other factors like social capital and social networks. In other words, the fact that most households with a university fee debt are amongst the highest incomes, may tell us more about the effect of social class on future career trajectories and life long earnings than it does about the capacity of a degree in itself to produce such an outcome. The fact that the average income of a female university graduate peaks at $842 at age 44-49 and is closer to a male with no qualifications than her male graduate peer reveals much about the influence of social factors like class and gender than it does about the capacity of credential in themselves to produce a return in investment as an argument for HECS and other fees and charges (NASTEM 2008.p5). The correlation between high income and tertiary qualifications also reveals something about degrees as positional goods rather than a source of productivity and high income on their own. In other words credentials in some context may simply provide greater bargaining power than they do a capacity to be more ‘productive’ in ways that increase wealth.

It's also worth noting how this account of ‘private good’ draws on an utilitarian framework, focusing exclusively on economic indicators of well-being, when many other material and non-material factors that influence whether or not we get to enjoy a ‘good life’ or happiness. This rather narrow view of income as the ‘private benefit’ resulting from credentials is worth reviewing given the growing consensus that governments ought to develop more comprehensive view of benefits, progress that go beyond fiscal measures.

Housing affordability - This ought to be a core issue if the government is to support young Australians achieve independent status: Over the past 10 years house prices have increased significantly, on average doubling. Securing a deposit for a home loan has also become an obstacle for many or simply beyond the realm of what is realistic and possible especially for those from a lower socio-economic background.

Poverty - High levels of poverty amongst children and young people as well as high levels of debt (ie., amongst students) is one problem – caused in part by the costs of education. Without access to basic material resources, young people are excluded from having basics like decent housing homes. The lack of financial and other material resources prevent young people living in poverty from participating fully in various educational opportunities.

Age based discrimination is a further reason why many young people are socially excluded.

The quality and availability of basic civic staples (such as publicly available decent education, health and welfare systems) is the further big ticket item that excludes young people from participating in their community.

Missing also from the list of core issues for action is the question of the voting age. If the government is serious about youth participation why is it not identified as a core issue for action?
Finally how might we understand the absence of the climate change issue that is particularly pertinent to young people who will inherit this earth?

Having provided this feedback I would like to say that I believe the Rudd government can make a major long term contribution to a national whole of government youth policy and remain optimistic that this can be achieved.

References.
Victorian Government, Department of education and Early childhood development and the Department of Planning and Community development, 2007, State of Victoria’s Young People, DEECD, Melbourne.