



The Hon. Bronwyn Pike, MP  
Minister for Education  
Minister for Skills and Workforce Participation  
GPO Box 4509  
Melbourne Vic 3001

11<sup>th</sup> June 2010

Dear Minister Pike

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute our ideas and experience into the discussion about the youth transition system in Victoria through the *Stronger futures for all young Victorians: Discussion paper on the youth transitions system*.

**Organisational credentials:**

The Upper Yarra Community House (UYCH) is an advanced community based organisation that provides a range of programs and services. Registered with the Victorian Registrations and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), the UYCH currently delivers accredited training in a variety of vocational areas to the broader community. These include automotive, hospitality, horticulture, home and community care, information technology and many more. UYCH is based in Yarra Junction, east of Melbourne. The Upper Yarra region is significant for the level of disadvantage experienced by many members of the community, in particular social and geographic isolation. In order to facilitate effective training and education for our students, program delivery must incorporate an awareness of and empathy with the cultural environment. Recognition of the barriers to learning experienced by many students has resulted in the development of diverse range of social support programs. This integrated service delivery model is the major strength of UYCH programming.

UYCH operates several venues across the Yarra Valley including a number of classroom and training sites, the Cerini Centre in Warburton, offices and programs in Healesville and Warburton, as well as our main training centre and administration office situated in Yarra Junction. Due to growth, the UYCH is currently investigating training sites in the LGA's of both Knox and Maroondah, as well as expansion within the Shire of Yarra Ranges.

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UYCH has pioneered alternative education provision for young people at risk in the Eastern region of Melbourne for almost twenty years, and has increased its focus on developing and delivering on-site youth specific programs, and school intervention programs over the last decade. This provision started within the organisation during the early nineties with the development of certificates in occupational studies in both hospitality and horticulture, and has grown into the broad scope of provision that occurs today.

The demographic of the Upper Yarra region was the catalyst for strategic direction taken by UYCH in service delivery, and the unacceptably high numbers of young people at Upper Yarra Secondary College who were not reaching Year 12 was the basis for the development of alternative education programs for this cohort. Currently UYCH has partnerships with ten secondary schools.

Examples of the programs developed by UYCH specifically for young people include STEP Ahead, in partnership with Upper Yarra Secondary College, and Real English and Maths, designed for early school leavers to obtain the equivalent of a Year 10 pass. UYCH was the first Adult Community Education (ACE) provider in Eastern Melbourne to become registered to deliver VCAL and this has provided participating students with the opportunity to complete their schooling at Year 12 level.

UYCH has made a significant contribution to the way schools and ACE providers work together, both locally and across the State. UYCH was a key partner in drafting the policy that led to the development of the ACE and Schools Partnership Program policy guidelines, which provide for the movement of funding to support young people going from a school to an ACE learning environment. UYCH also developed a professional development training program for ACE providers wishing to engage and provide educational services to disengaged and disconnected young people. *“YETI” Youth Education Training Initiative* was funded by the Eastern Regional ACFE Council and UYCH delivered this program for a number of years to providers in the region. UYCH was recently awarded a Youth Connections contract, in partnership with EMR Options, and has delivered the Jobs Placement Employment and Training (JPET) program since 1998 across the Shire of Yarra Ranges.

UYCH provision of services to young people at risk is firmly based on an understanding of the social, cultural, geographic, economic and educational features of the region and the impact of these features on young people and their families who reside in the region. UYCH service delivery goals are to assist young people to achieve:

- The establishment of a stable lifestyle
- Attainment of life skills
- Re-establishment or strengthening of family links
- Participation in education through pre-vocational and vocational training in preparation for and support on entry to the work place.

The underpinning principles behind program design and delivery for young people is to:



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- Provide a supported pathway option for young people within an environment where they have built positive relationships
  - Augment the ability of the organisation to support young people in mainstream education, training and employment settings making for improved long term outcomes for participants
  - Provide the opportunity for the participants to move into unfamiliar learning environments while maintaining contact with and the support of a familiar worker who is aware of the full range of their needs and issues.
  - Facilitate the long term involvement of the participants in the full range of services available to them through the local network partners
  - Allow for long term tracking of disadvantaged individuals who may otherwise be lost from the system. This tracking will provide an opportunity to monitor the stress points within the transitions through and between services which may otherwise result in disconnection from education or training.

### **Youth Transitions:**

We have many years' experience in providing alternative education options for young people, working closely with schools and government in the Eastern suburbs, and our own research and reflective practice. Because of this, we are in an excellent position to provide a well informed view on the requirements for a system which provides educational opportunity for all young people - those who have reached the legal school leaving age, and those who haven't; those who are engaged in learning and those who are not. Our particular focus is on those young people 19 years and under who "should have attained, or be in the process of attaining an initial qualification that provides a strong basis for further education or employment<sup>1</sup>."

Research indicates a clear expectation in existing government policy at state and commonwealth levels that compulsory schooling will take place within the school system<sup>2</sup>. Whilst we agree that schools provide adequate (and in many cases excellent) education for the majority of young people, we feel that this discussion about improving the transition *system* needs to recognise and consider that:

- External organisations, particularly those such as ACE providers which are firmly rooted in their local community, have something to offer *all* students as a means of broadening program offerings; and
- Properly resourced, ACE organisations provide a valid alternative for those young people under 17 for whom school cannot provide what they need

It also needs to consider this not so much as a separate system (the "current youth transition system" referred to in the discussion paper) but as a way of better integrating the current systems so that there is greater flexibility in planning and provision of learning options that suit the individual needs of young people; for example between funding models (schools, VET providers), curriculum (general education

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<sup>1</sup> DEECD, 2010, *Stronger futures for all young Victorians: discussion paper on the youth transitions system*

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, S., 2008, *Young people's education: finding school and a place in community*



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qualifications, school curriculum), reporting results (retention and completion rates, assessment outcomes) and teaching practice (andragogy, pedagogy).

At present, we see little indication of a “current youth transition system”, apart from the progression of young people from primary to secondary school, then from secondary to further education, work or unemployment. A “system” implies that there is some kind of order and consistency, which is true of this movement to a point; however our experience is that the successful development of a range of learning options which will *keep a young person engaged in education and training until they complete year 12 or equivalent* is highly dependent on the partnerships that are created between schools and external organisations such as ACE providers, which in turn can depend on the uptake of opportunities as they are presented, and the resources, relationships and attitudes that allow this to happen.

The changes made in Victoria to align the compulsory school age to that agreed by Council of Australian Governments (COAG) on 2 July 2009, that is:

- a mandatory requirement for all young people to participate in schooling (meaning in school or an approved equivalent) until they complete Year 10; and
- a mandatory requirement for all young people that have completed Year 10, to participate full-time (defined as at least 25 hours per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17<sup>3</sup>

begin to recognise that there is more than one way for young people to achieve their learning goals. The critical points here are:

- How the ‘approved equivalent’ is defined and managed; and
- Stronger recognition of ACE as a legitimate provider of vocational education and training, along with TAFE institutes, traineeships and apprenticeships.

These are both areas where a more systematic approach and stronger framework would provide a more robust movement of students between the existing educational sectors.

In terms of the transition milestones identified on page 3 of the Discussion Paper, we believe that a crucial milestone has been omitted, and that is *the movement of children from primary to secondary school – the transition from junior to middle years*. This transition consistently provides challenges to the majority of young adolescents, as students face physical and social disruption and entirely new learning content and delivery style (Brennan, 2008). A change of this scale would be hugely disturbing at any time of life but during early adolescence it is exacerbated by the developmental challenges faced by all young people.<sup>4,5</sup> We believe this is a time when young people who are already struggling will find it

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/reviewleg\\_minimumage.htm#1](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/reviewleg_minimumage.htm#1)

<sup>4</sup> Vinson, T., 2005, *Good Transitions: Through the eyes of primary and secondary principals*, Faculty of Education, University of Sydney



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particularly difficult to keep their learning journey on track. We know from our own experience, and anecdotally from other ACE providers, that children as young as 12 are presenting to alternative education sites on a disturbingly regular basis.

Research clearly indicates that for most disengaged learners, their disconnection from school is a culmination of events in their lives. We believe this is exacerbated by the movement from primary to secondary, which should be recognised as a crucial transition milestone and must be included in any development of a *youth transition system*.

### **Discussion themes:**

#### 1. Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the post-compulsory years

Our own experience, and that of other educators and youth support workers, is that many of the signs of disengagement in young people are manifesting themselves in primary school. Included in these indicators are low levels of literacy and numeracy.

We agree that improving literacy and numeracy skills is crucial for young people in assisting them into sustainable employment and a more active community life. We also believe that in many cases, young people are moved up a year level when they have insufficient literacy and numeracy skills to cope. These issues should be formally identified in the Year 5 NAPLAN test, and additional support provided in the form of an Individual Learning Plan which identifies internal and external resources for that young person, including welfare services.

Consideration also needs to be given to the way literacy and numeracy is taught at school. We have found from our own experience that making it much more 'real' gives vastly improved results. For example:

- Giving literacy and numeracy a sense of place outside the classroom, such as reading a web page, communicating through social networking, purchasing items online, listening to and understanding television and radio current affairs
- Development of literacy and numeracy streams based on specific industries
- Use of new and varied technology that interests young people and basing lessons around this

We believe that *all* teachers should have an appreciation of the importance of literacy and numeracy, regardless of what subject they are teaching, and that this should be a more important component of their teacher training.

Focusing on strengthening the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in the *post-compulsory years*, as suggested on page 15 of the Discussion Paper is like trying to catch the horse after it's bolted – this is

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<sup>5</sup> Longaretti, L., 2006, *School Transition: Aspirations and inspirations*, paper presented at the AARE Conference, Adelaide, Nov 2006



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focusing on the wrong end of the problem. We believe that in the majority of cases, the issue of low literacy and numeracy could be resolved if it was identified and managed at a much earlier age.

## 2. Support for making informed education and training choices

Many young people, particularly those who are disengaged, don't have a clear career path in mind so making informed education and training choices can be difficult. Our observation is that for many young people the notion of 'a career' is not something they connect to; rather they prefer to think about it in terms of the 'world of work' or 'work opportunity'. Some key points from our own experience are:

- The 'world of work' should be part of every subject, rather than developing a separate careers curriculum
- Incorporating workplace visits from year 7 so that students have an opportunity to experience a greater range of industries, thus 'normalising' the expectation that work will be a part of their future
- Work experience should begin earlier and be better planned and implemented so that it provides a more realistic picture of the workplace; for many young people work experience is something they, and the employer, endure rather than benefit from
- Careers advisors must have tertiary qualifications in careers counselling and a breadth of current industry experience and/or networks
- Schools must be resourced so that careers advisors can focus on this role, rather than it being an add-on to a teaching load. This includes developing relationships with local business and industry and encouraging their involvement with the education providers at whatever level they are able, such as provision of well supported work experience, student mentoring
- Careers advisors must be available to other education providers as part of a young person's individual learning plan

## 3. Arrangements that support and encourage young people to complete qualifications

It is our view that the structure supporting and encouraging young people to complete qualifications needs to provide greater acknowledgement of ACE providers as partners in a range of alternative programs which could potentially be delivered through the entire learning continuum – not only for those young people for whom all other options have been exhausted. For example, an ACE provider may run community-based arts project which is particularly innovative and may be relevant for a group of students undertaking art at school. This may mean that the students go to the ACE provider for a portion of their program through a partnership agreement with the school. Of course, ACE providers play a crucial role in providing general education qualifications, VET, VCAL and VCE to disengaged young people in a highly supportive environment.

## 4. Systems that assist students to move effectively between courses, institutions and sectors



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As discussed earlier, there must be greater flexibility for a young person to move between sectors in such a way that funding is equitably distributed, recognition is given for learning outcomes achieved in an alternative learning environment, and there is greater consistency between teaching styles. Greater support for shared professional development opportunities and sharing of best practice would increase staff skills and also increase understanding and trust between sectors.

As an example of an effective system which could be more broadly utilised, UYCH has developed an extended database tracking system which records both the entry profiles of the participants, and the achievements made during the program. This, in conjunction with the hard copy case note system allows for comprehensive information gathering regarding the needs of young people, their barriers to successful participation in mainstream education and training, and the strategies which are successful in achieving a positive outcome.

#### 5. Opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training

We believe that there will always be a need for alternative education settings to provide for those young people for whom school is not the best option. Alternative settings need to be connected in some way with a school, although not necessarily physically. We recognise the current work being undertaken by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development into developing a framework of flexible learning options, which includes recognition of programs offered by external organisations for those young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement from school; we feel that the results of this other discussion needs to be considered as part of a system-wide development.

As a current provider of Youth Connections, in partnership with EMR Options, we are working closely with schools in the Outer East LLEN area, as well as other education providers, youth services, welfare agencies and other relevant organisations. In delivering Youth Connections, we follow the same principles as those described on page 2 of this response. We firmly believe that engagement of a young person involves all aspects of their lives, and this is the approach we take in the delivery of Youth Connections.

Thank you again for the opportunity to have input into this policy development.

Yours sincerely

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