



## Harnessing the power of perception

### Reducing alcohol-related harm among rural teenagers

The first major Australian trial of an intervention to reduce alcohol consumption among young people by providing them with accurate information about their peers' alcohol consumption levels has produced promising results. Findings from the initial phases of the Social Norms Analysis Project (SNAP) are contained in a paper published in the June 2008 edition of *Youth Studies Australia* (v.27, n.2, pp.26-35). This paper was written by SNAP researchers Clarissa Hughes, Roberta Julian, Matthew Richman, Ron Mason and Gillian Long.

SNAP is being conducted by the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) and the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) at the University of Tasmania, and involves students in Years 7–10 from four rural public high schools in southern and western Tasmania. The trial uses a Social Norms approach, which is based on the assumption that "young people's perceptions of their peers' behaviour and attitudes influence their own drinking behaviours". SNAP aims to reduce alcohol-related harm among students at participating schools by identifying and correcting students' overestimations of their peers' alcohol consumption.

The ongoing trial involves four phases: 1) data collection about students' alcohol use and attitudes, 2) data analysis and the selection of "positive, data-based 'key messages'"; 3) the dissemination of key messages to students through school-based publicity campaigns, and 4) an evaluation of the impact of the publicity campaign in terms of "recognition and understanding of the message, changes to norm perceptions and resultant changes in behaviour among the target population".



In the initial phases of the trial, which involved collecting and analysing survey data from 509 students, researchers found that "students significantly underestimated the proportion of their peers who rarely or never drink alcohol, and significantly overestimated the proportion who frequently drink to excess". A strong relationship was also detected between "students' self-reported rates of drinking and drunkenness and their perceptions of the equivalent rates for their friends". Researchers are optimistic that subsequent results will confirm the Social Norms approach as an "effective, evidence-based model" not only for addressing alcohol-related harms, but also for addressing other health and social issues affecting young Australians.

### EXTRACTS FROM YOUTH MONITOR

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#### School productivity under the microscope

Australian National University economists Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan have completed a study measuring the productivity of Australian schools over time, finding that despite increases in funding, which has meant increased access to technology and smaller class sizes, literacy and numeracy levels among 13- and 14-year-old students have remained virtually unchanged in the past 30–40 years. The study, *How has school productivity changed in Australia?*, analysed data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. In response, Mary Bluett, president of the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union, said that school productivity needed to be measured on a wider basis than just literacy and numeracy levels (11/02/08: *Age*, p.3; *Herald Sun*, p.10).

#### VCAL making a difference to at-risk students

The first-ever study into the attitudes towards school among students enrolled in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning – the relatively new vocational alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education – suggests that VCAL students experience low levels of school-related stress and high levels of wellbeing. 'These are the very kids in other settings and in the previous school system who would have been stressed, would have been dropped out or were failing,'

# Abstracts from recent education-related youth research papers

## Predicting psycho-social consequences of homophobic victimisation in middle school students

V.P. Poteat & D.L. Espelage, *Journal of Early Adolescence*, v.27, n.2, 2007, pp.175-91.

The relationship between homophobic victimisation and negative psychological and social outcomes was explored in this year-long study of 143 students (74 male) from a middle school in central Illinois, USA. Participants completed surveys at two time points. **These surveys measured the extent to which students were called 'homophobic epithets' by their peers, and levels of anxiety and depression, school belonging, personal distress and withdrawal.** Hierarchical regression analyses found that students subjected to homophobic victimisation experienced 'significant psychological and social consequences' as a result of this victimisation. These consequences differed according to sex: males were more likely to experience 'higher levels of anxiety and depression, personal distress and lower sense of school belonging' as a result of homophobic victimisation, while females were more likely to experience higher levels of withdrawal only. Findings highlight the serious nature of homophobic victimisation among students, despite teachers and administrators sometimes perceiving this behaviour as merely 'harmless banter' between friends. Further research would benefit by analysing findings according to student sexual orientation.

## Parenting styles, coping strategies and the expression of homesickness

K.S. Nijhof & R.C.M.E. Engels, *Journal of Adolescence*, v.30, n.5, 2007, pp.709-20.

The relationship between parenting styles and the experience and expression of homesickness among first-year college and university students was explored in this Dutch study. Questionnaires measuring parenting style and level of homesickness, and subsequent problem behaviours and coping strategies were completed by 670 first-year college and university students aged 16–25 years (414 female). Data analysis indicated that students whose parents employed authoritative or permissive parenting styles experienced stronger feelings of homesickness than students with authoritarian or uninvolved parents. However, students with authoritative or permissive parents were more likely to employ effective coping strategies (such as support seeking and problem solving) to deal with feelings of homesickness, while those with authoritarian or uninvolved parents were more likely to express feelings of homesickness through internalising or externalising problems and used less effective coping strategies. Further research on this topic could benefit from a longitudinal design and by gathering data from both students and parents.



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said Melbourne University researcher Dr Erica Frydenberg who, with colleague Zoe Ganim, studied 157 students enrolled in VCAL (*Age Education* section, 3/03/08, p.3).

## Staying in school increases apprentice success

Apprentices who complete Year 12, undertake relevant work experience and take vocational subjects while at school are more likely than other apprentices to persist beyond the first year of their apprenticeship, according to a study conducted by researchers Angela Hill and Leanne Dalley-Trim. Female apprentices and those undertaking apprenticeships in the construction industry were more likely than other apprentices to drop out within their first year of training (*Daily Telegraph*, 26/03/08, p.16). See March 2008 YSA, v.27, n.1, pp.36-42 for details of this research.

## Late start might be best for teens

Swinburne University researchers studying the sleeping patterns of 310 Year 11 students have suggested that high schools consider later starting and finishing times to improve students' wellbeing and academic performance. The study found that while adolescents became sleepy later in the evening than younger children, they still needed the same amount of sleep, and on average slept around 75 minutes less on school nights than on other nights. Early school starting times therefore led to sleep deprivation and poor academic performance among adolescents. In NSW, around 45 public high schools and senior colleges are trialling later starting and finishing times as a result of these findings (3/04/08: *Mercury*, p.3; *West Australian*, p.11; 4/04/08: *Age*, p.3; *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.3; *West Australian*, 16/04/08, p.8; *Sun Herald*, 20/04/08, p.30).

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