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## Young Australians' views of the future

# Dreams & Expectations

Young people's visions of the future offer an insight into their hopes and fears about life, and may have important implications for them personally and for society. **RICHARD ECKERSLEY** discusses the findings of the ASTEC Youth Partnership Study.

**N**UMEROUS SURVEYS suggest that young people today are cynical, pessimistic and disengaged (Eckersley 1995, 1996). Not all of them, to be sure, but enough for these attitudes to be seen as a generational characteristic. Too often, this outlook on life is seen as a reflection on modern youth; it should, instead, be seen as a reflection on modern society and its culture.

A new study of young people's views of Australia's future shows that young Australians have a capacity for idealism, altruism and optimism about the future, that needs greater recognition and encouragement. If we are to harness their energy and enthusiasm

to the task of building a better nation, then we will have to strengthen that capacity.

The Youth Partnership Study was carried out under the auspices of the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council (ASTEC) as part of its larger *Future needs 2010* foresight program (ASTEC 1996). The partners included scientific, educational and youth organisations. The study involved a series of eight scenario-development workshops involving a total of 150 young people, most aged between 15 and 24 and from a variety of backgrounds, and a national opinion poll of 800 young Australians in this age group.



The project's aims were to explore young people's views of probable and preferred futures for Australia in 2010; and the key issues shaping these futures, particularly the role of science and technology. This paper focuses on the broader "futures" findings and what they mean.

### Overview of results

The future most young Australians want is neither the future they expect, nor the future they are promised. Most do not expect life in Australia to be better in 2010. They see a society driven by greed; they want one motivated by generosity. Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, material wealth and competition, and more on community and family, the environment and cooperation.

The workshops suggest most young people see the future mainly in terms of a continuation or worsening of today's global and national problems and difficulties, although they also expect some improvements. Major concerns included: pollution and environmental destruction, including the impact of growing populations; the gulf between rich and poor; high unemployment, including the effect of automation and immigration; conflict, crime and violence; family problems and breakdown; discrimination and prejudice; and economic difficulties, including the level of foreign debt.

The national poll allowed the issues that emerged from the workshops to be put to a representative sample of young Australians. The poll indicated optimism is more common among young people than the workshops suggested, although the belief that life would improve, globally and nationally, remained a minority position.

Asked to choose which of two statements more closely reflected their view of the world in the 21st century, more than half (55%) chose: "More people, environmental destruction,

new diseases and ethnic and regional conflict mean the world is heading for a bad time of crisis and trouble." Four in ten (41%) chose: "By continuing on its current path of economic and technological development, humanity will overcome the obstacles it faces and enter a new age of peace and prosperity."

About a third (35%) believed Australia's quality of life would be better in 2010 than it was now, with 34% saying it would be worse and 29% that it would be about the same. Their views on a range of nine specific aspects of Australia's future, ranked according to the degree of pessimism expressed, are shown in Table 1.

Three-quarters (74%) did not think Australia would be involved in a major war that directly threatened Australia between now and 2010 (18% believed it would).

Generally speaking, pessimism increases with age, with those in their 20s more negative than those in their teens. Only 38% of those aged 22 to 24 opted for global "peace and prosperity", compared to 47% of those 15 to 17; and only 27% of the older group

employment situation would improve dropped by almost half, from 43% of 15- to 17-year-olds, to 22% of 22- to 24-year-olds.

Students tended to be the most positive and the unemployed the least positive about the future of both Australia and the world, although this could also reflect an age effect. (White collar workers were about as negative as the unemployed about Australia's future.) These results suggest young people become less optimistic as they become better informed, and leave the security of school and home to venture out into the wider world of adulthood and independence.

Males were more optimistic than females about Australia's future, with 40% opting for a better quality of life in 2010, compared with 29% of females, while 29% of males and 39% of females thought the quality of life would be worse. More females than males felt things would get worse in all but one of the nine specific issues. Males were also slightly more optimistic about the world in the 21st century, with 43% choosing "peace and prosperity" and 53% "a bad time

Table 1: Young people's pessimism/optimism ranking of aspects of Australia's future

Per cent believing aspect will	get worse	get better	stay the same	don't know
Crime and violence	68	12	19	1
Environment	57	27	15	1
Gap between rich and poor	50	12	34	4
Unemployment	41	34	23	2
Economy	36	31	28	5
Family life	31	25	41	3
Health	27	40	31	3
Racism	21	48	29	1
Justice and fairness	18	39	40	3

thought Australia's quality of life would improve, compared to 39% of the younger group. Older youth were more pessimistic on all but one of the nine specific issues (the exception being the environment). Some of the shifts were pronounced: for example, the proportion believing the unem-

of crisis and trouble", compared with, respectively, 40% and 58% of females.

Asked to nominate which of two positive scenarios for Australia for 2010 came closer to the type of society they both expected and preferred, almost two-thirds (63%) said they expected "a fast-paced, internationally

competitive society, with the emphasis on the individual, wealth generation and enjoying the 'good life'. However, eight in ten (81%) said they would prefer "a 'greener', more stable society, where the emphasis is on cooperation, community and family, more equal distribution of wealth, and greater economic self-sufficiency" (these are not the complete scenarios read to the poll respondents). About a third (35%) expected the latter, and 16% preferred the former.

Not surprisingly, science and technology are a common feature of future scenarios. It is commonly believed that young people are comfortable with new technologies and adapted to the fast pace of technological change. However, the study found that while they acknowledged the potential of science and technology as a powerful tool in achieving a preferred future, young people did not believe in technical fixes to our problems, and were very concerned about the future impacts of scientific and technological advances (with females being more negative than males).

The study shows that young people's views on science and technology are embedded in a broader social context, which changes markedly between their expected and preferred futures – that is, what they expect and want implies different scientific and technological priorities and needs. For example, they *expect* to see new technologies used further to entrench and concentrate wealth and power; they *want* to see science and technology used to create closer-knit communities of people living a sustainable lifestyle.

Thus they saw the potential for advances in information and communications technologies to facilitate the creation of overlapping communities – virtual and real, global and local. And they saw the possibility of a sustainable way of life through greater use of alternative energy technologies and renewable resources.

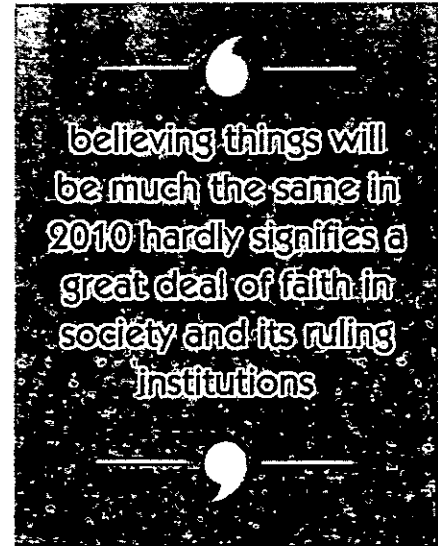
The responses to poll questions about science and technology show that:

- just over a third (38%) believed science and technology have had more benefits than disadvantages, with 51% believing they have had equal benefits and disadvantages and 9% more disadvantages than benefits;
- they believed science and technology offered the best hope for meeting the challenges ahead (69%), but also that they were alienating and isolating people from each other and nature (53%);
- a majority (58%) believed that computers and robots were taking over jobs and increasing unemployment, while a third (35%) believed that they would eventually take over the world;
- they were more likely to think that governments would use new technologies to watch and control people (78%) than they were that new technologies would strengthen democracy and empower people (43%); and
- they expected science to conquer new diseases (87%), but not that it would find ways to feed the growing world population (39%), or solve environmental problems without the need to change lifestyles (45%).

### What the findings mean

What young people's perspectives on the future mean and what effect this outlook has on them personally and on society remain conjectural. The project did not explore young people's views about their personal futures. Other surveys suggest most are optimistic about what the future holds for them personally, although some recent research suggests this personal optimism also declines as adolescents grow into adulthood.

The WA Child Health survey (Zubrick et al. 1995, p.39) found that while most adolescents were happy with their lives, felt confident things would improve in the future, and believed their life had purpose and meaning, there was a ten-percentage-point decline in positive responses between ages 12 to 14 and 15 to 16. If



the trend continues, a positive outlook would be a minority position by the time young people reach their 20s. Recent qualitative research on young people's personal concerns and aspirations for the future supports this possibility (Australian Commission for the Future 1996). It found that, "at 15 youth are optimistic and positive. By 25 many have become somewhat disillusioned and rudderless".

The expectations of the future revealed by the ASTEC study and other research may not necessarily reflect what young people actually believe the future will be like. They might also reflect:

- what researchers are looking for (especially in the case of earlier studies focusing on fear of nuclear war);
- the group dynamics of the research processes which bias discussion towards strongly held and usually negative views;
- young people's flair for the dramatic;
- superficial and stereotyped images of the future picked up from films and television;
- stories about alternative futures, including those young people want to avoid;
- apocalyptic myths about "the end of the world", which have always been part of human mythology, including most major religions

(this again relates especially to fears about global catastrophe such as a nuclear holocaust); and

- ways of expressing anxieties and concerns about the present (by projecting them into a fictional future they can be described in more concrete terms).

Also, some will want to dismiss young people's views as naive and ill-informed, their preferences as mere "motherhood" statements that no-one could disagree with. All of these factors may well come into play in young people's vision of the future (although the "motherhoods" are, in part, a product of distilling the findings into a few, broad statements, which do not do justice to the richness of the workshop discussions).

However, to disregard the study findings on these grounds would, I believe, be a mistake. The concerns of young people are understandable and usually valid; some issues are part of their personal experience and all are being discussed and debated by experts and commentators. There is no compelling reason why they should not have these dreams and expectations about the world they will inherit. Indeed, theirs might well be a clearer, fresher view of the future which we would be foolish to ignore.

Another issue is the apparently different degrees of pessimism/optimism revealed by the workshops (and other qualitative surveys) and the poll. Opinions differed among the partners on the interpretation of the poll results. Some argued that "get better" and "remain the same" responses on Australia's future, taken together, indicate a fairly positive outlook among young Australians.

On the other hand, I believe we can draw little comfort from the "same" responses for the following reasons: a belief in progress, in improvement, is central to our culture; a dominant feature of political debate over the past decade has been that Australia has to go through a difficult period of adjustment that will lead to a better future - "the pain before the gain"; surveys indicate considerable unease

These scenarios, arising from the Youth Partnership Study workshops, were written by a group of post-graduate science communication students. They reflect, in an imaginative, fictional form, many of the concerns and hopes expressed by young people.

## Scenario of the expected future

### Better Days?

I slowly drifted from the green landscaped dreams of my past, out of the anaesthetic, and reality hit me once again.

The Teflon-coated titanium stomach replacement operation was a success, considering the not-quite perfected technology. At last I could digest the synthetic food. Real food disappeared after the inappropriate agricultural practices of the '90s. It's been over a decade since I had that last apple.

As I left the hospital, I put on my UV-Outerz (cheaper than having skin cancers removed) and boarded the cramped bus for the ride home. The yuppies in their pretentious Petrol cars don't have to put up with computer-driven electric transport. The fare was registered to my account after the DNA analyser sampled my breath.

Peering out the window through the hazy atmosphere, the filthy, concrete monstrosities of the urban landscape filled me with sadness. Even the stumps of trees had been scavenged for the black market. Wood is the most valuable commodity now, used for open fires by the top executives at exclusive parties. Wood to burn - the irony!

We drove around the walled outskirts of the part of town inhabited by the information-rich. None of those smug Gen-enhanced (genetically engineered people) ever have to put up with the conditions we suffer.

The slums, overpopulated streets of lonely and anonymous people, appeared on the left. Bored by their stagnant lives, they find solace in the heroin patches on their necks - escaping as I had earlier with the anaesthetic. The government overlooks the problem, putting profit before people.

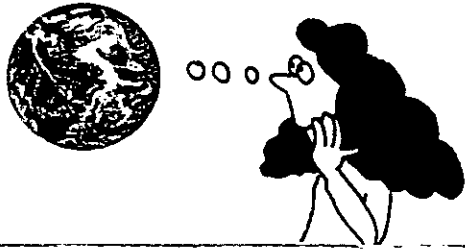
The turning point was probably the Timor Gap oil war of '96, the catalyst for the Indonesian invasion of Australia. With finances being sucked up by the military technology, there was nothing left for alternate energy resources, greenhouse control or sustainable development. We may have won the war, but we lost the environment.

I was abruptly woken from my daydream to be ejected from the bus at my programmed destination. Seeking refuge from the incessant rain, I dodged the puddles below the acid-rain holes in the deteriorating awning. I walked into my building, caught the lift to the 182nd floor and entered my box of a room.

Greeted by my row of computers, I quickly logged the experience of my operation on the Internet. My local community was waiting to hear the results - we're very close in this part of town.

I flicked my terminal over to the news and went to try out my new stomach. As I prepared the meal, I could faintly hear the day's headline "...The President announced today that Australia would not follow France's lead in banning nuclear testing..."

An advertisement flash interrupting the news caught my attention. 'The lottery for the new intake of Leavers to Mars is about to be drawn...' Tomorrow could be a good day.



## Scenario of the preferred future

### A Day in the Life...

Today we found out all about the new ozone blanket. My teacher says that in 1998 everyone drove their own petrol cars and wore gas masks all the time 'coz of huge smogs. Doesn't that sound silly? And guess what! I finally finished my Worldlink Internet project. I can now attend virtual classes with Selah and Bill in Rwanda once a week! Joanne and I are helping to build the solar generator for the community creche. Oh, and can you check the Compmail from school tonight - they want to know if we can help with the indigenous arts festival next Sunday.

I smiled as Chi enthusiastically recounted her morning at community school. Each day she emerged with a feast of newfound knowledge to share. Education today knows no bounds!

How strange it feels to have our children recall with such bewilderment the blind actions of the generations before mine. Today's young people can only muse over the global disharmony before the Great Panic of Year 2004, when things culminated at a crisis point. Global war was imminent, poverty was emerging as the calling of the majority and food, fuel and even clean air were becoming luxury resources. Say "goodbye" to history...

Chi and I were making our way home from the weekly gathering of our local community unit where we meet to discuss the progress of the region's crops and report on emerging community needs. Things are going well. We have secured the local government's support for the region's latest hemp fibre processing plant and the new windpower instalment is a wild success.

An electric bus rolled silently past us.

The beaming sun shared its warmth with the green, fruit-laden landscape of our street. The solar panels lining the curbs glistened and sparkled in appreciation of its energy. After years of unpredictable weather and hazy skies it was comforting to feel assured that our world was slowly recovering from the environmental torture of the past.

Every fertile space was blooming with food for the region's consumption. We happily munched on the apples that we had picked from the street orchards. In anticipation of supper, I collected some beans, ripe and ready to eat, from a corner plot. Collective "Yo" were preparing the street's meal today. The latest genetic strains of high nutrient, organic produce were always the most popular menu choice.

I too felt enthused by the day's activities. At home, I had spent a productive morning logged onto Compuwork. Jules, my jobshare partner, was thrilled at our progress. My body was feeling rejuvenated. The cancer which once plagued me, spawned by the carcinogens rampant during my childhood, had finally been eradicated by the new treatment.

At home, the members of our family unit were immersed in the latest interactive home entertainment offering - cyberparty. Chi outpoured her day's excitement to her other two guardians, Lola and Sadam, with undiminished pleasure.

As we sat down to eat, the Cyberreal news flashed on at our request. "President Josephine commends the success of the Middle Eastern-USA agriculture project... and announces a breakthrough in the continuing dissolution of the North/South divide."

about conditions in Australia today (as also demonstrated in this year's Federal election results); and many of the specific issues canvassed rank among the greatest *current* concerns of young people. Thus believing things will be much the same in 2010 hardly signifies a great deal of faith in society and its ruling institutions.

We need also to bear in mind that we are comparing a ten-minute phone interview that came out of the blue with, in the case of most workshops, two days of sustained discussion and thought.

### The impact on young people

Having concerns about the future is not the same as being fearful; young people may feel angry as often as worried. And expressing concerns is not to suggest they spend a lot of time actively thinking about these issues. However, this does not mean the outlook on life and expectations of the future revealed in this and other studies are not having an impact.

One researcher has suggested that people's response to concerns of global catastrophes "is not to cry out or ring alarms. It is to go silent, go numb" (Macy 1983). She suggests this "numbing of the psyche" takes a heavy toll, including an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life. Energy expended in suppressing despair "is diverted from more creative uses, depleting resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies".

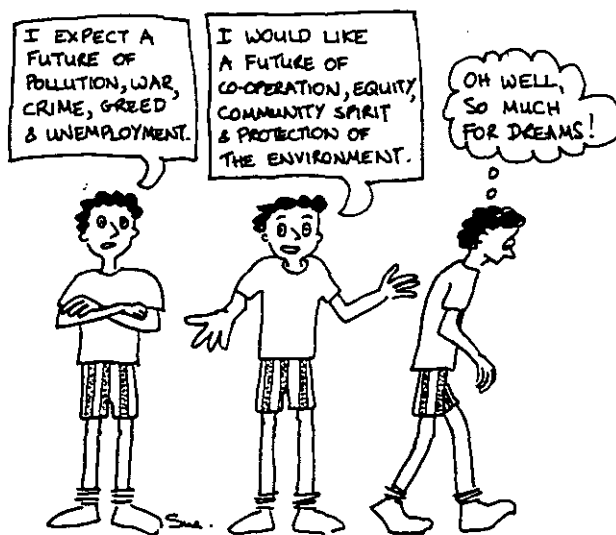
Other researchers have warned that this expectation of the future among young people could produce cynicism, mistrust, anger, apathy and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals or lasting commitment (Eckersley 1988). Many surveys of youth attitudes and values, in fact, show these traits are common among young people today (Eckersley 1995, 1996).

I have also argued (Eckersley 1988, 1992 & 1995) that concerns about the future, and the corresponding lack of a coherent and appealing vision of where we are heading as a society,

could also be contributing to the serious, and in some cases worsening, social and psychological problems among youth, including suicide, drug abuse, depression, eating disorders and crime. The failure to provide a broader cultural framework of hope, meaning, purpose and identity in young people's lives could be weakening their resilience, making them more vulnerable to these problems.

### The implications for Australia's future

The lack of hope for the future reflects the mistakes of the past, the problems of the present and the challenges of the future. But it also suggests a failure of vision, a failure to conceive a future that is appealing and plausible and able to serve as a focus and a source of inspiration for both individuals and society.



Pessimism about the future is likely to affect young people's approach to key aspects of society, including citizenship, education, training and work, so jeopardising Australia's future success. Australians can only meet the formidable economic, social and environmental challenges facing them if they have the necessary social cohesion, will and vision to address these issues.

One result of the discrepancy between expected and preferred futures appears to be a tension between realism and idealism in the hearts of young Australians. Their preferred future reflects values and priorities different from those that they themselves appear to hold, suggesting they are adopting attitudes they believe are demanded by the world they live in and the future they expect – not those needed to achieve the world they want.

It is likely that this also holds true for many older Australians. It suggests the 2010 time frame of the study – one that includes a transition to a new century and millennium and the centenary of Australian Federation – will be marked either by a fundamental reappraisal of community values and national goals and priorities, or by increasing levels of resentment, disenchantment and disengagement.

To the extent that young people are optimistic about the future, the ASTEC study shows this optimism rests, at least in part, on the expectation that the realignment will occur.

If the issues raised in this study are not addressed, Australia will, at best, perform far below the standard of which it

is capable, in every sphere, domestically and internationally. At worst, Australian society could see increasing evidence of social dysfunction, including extremism and unrest. The study suggests that many young Australians already feel they owe little allegiance to society. Many may continue to work within the system, but they no longer believe in it, or are willing to serve it.

It might be argued that people have always had visions of an ideal world and these have always been beyond the reach of reality. There are two considerations here: first, people's expectations that things should get better, that humanity should progress; and, second, whether the gap between ideal and real is perceived to be widening or narrowing. The findings of this and other studies indicate the dominant perception is that the gap is widening.

In her book, *A Distant Mirror – The calamitous 14th century*, Tuchman (1989) says that the century has been avoided by historians because it could not be made to fit into a pattern of human progress. The Black Death, which killed a third of the population between Iceland and India, was only one of the century's problems. It was a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age – quite simply, a bad time for humanity. Tuchman notes that a gulf had opened up between Christian beliefs and the conduct of the Church, and between the ideal of chivalry and the behaviour of the nobility, and comments, "when the gap between the ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down".

### Responses

The results of the Youth Partnership Study can be seen as an indictment of modern western society, as evidence of its growing failure to deliver what people need and want. Alternatively, they can be viewed more positively as opening the way for an emerging new order, for what one leading futurist has called "whole-system change" (Harman 1995).

In determining our response to this situation, I want to offer several suggestions, some general and some specific. First the general: one of the most questionable, but largely unquestioned, assumptions of our times is that people and societies can adapt to the pace and extent of change taking place, and the accompanying uncertainty and insecurity.

One way we can cope better, given

the inevitability of rapid change, is by building "zones of stability" into our lives: spiritual beliefs and family life are two crucial areas. Another is to develop a clear vision of where we want to go as a society, so that we better manage change towards realising this vision, and do not feel we are at the mercy of changes beyond our control and not in our interests.

The specifics concern government, media and education; these are not minor changes in processes or roles. All are being discussed at various levels, but they need to be pushed higher up the agenda of public debate and political action.

**Government:** The processes of government, in the broadest sense, need to be reformed so that they are more flexible and responsive to major shifts in community values and priorities. Existing processes were never designed for "whole-system change". Reforms should aim to influence the behaviour of voters, as well as politicians and bureaucrats. Changes to the voting system such as proportional representation, reducing the voting age, citizens-initiated referendums, and more systematic mapping of public opinion are among the initiatives that have been proposed.

**The media:** Never before have ordinary citizens had to confront and take responsibility for so many major issues, national and global, or been exposed to so much information about these issues. This situation imposes a tremendous responsibility upon the news media, one which they are profoundly failing to acknowledge. Their perspective is too limited, often trivial and frequently negative, with too much emphasis on conflict and calamity.

The media need to look closely at the sort of evidence I have cited and its implications of their culpability. Perhaps more than anything else, we need the news media to take on a more positive and constructive role if we

are to meet the challenges of the next century. The same applies, but in different ways, to the entertainment media. The mass media have become the most powerful force in modern culture, and as such have a major influence on our ability to articulate and attain a preferred future.

**Education:** More must be done in schools to instil in young people a greater sense of optimism about the future, a conviction that the future is theirs to shape, and the faith in themselves needed to tackle this task. This surely should be a fundamental task of education today. If children lack these qualities, everything else in education – whether it is providing basic literacy and numeracy, instilling a love of learning or developing vocational and life skills – becomes devalued and harder to achieve; we cannot provide a convincing answer to the question, "for what?".

What most delighted and encouraged those of us who ran the scenario workshops was the energy and enthusiasm of most (but by no means all) of the young people who participated, and the idealism and altruism that shone through when they had the opportunity to discuss their preferred futures. They became more aware of what could be changed, and of their responsibility to play a part in making this happen.

We need to tap into and nurture this capacity. As the former Prime Minister, Mr Keating, said in a message to a New Leaders Forum in December 1994:

*One of the great challenges we face as a nation is to generate a deep sense of optimism within our young people. We need to do that because without optimism, without a sense that we do have the wherewithal to build a better future, we will find no reason to build that future.*

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