

INQUIRY INTO YOUNG DRIVER SAFETY AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA) is an organisation strategically placed to assist in the development and implementation of Road Safety Programs through its close working relationship with Local Government.

This institute is a representative body for local government and has been in existence, in different structures, since 1905.

Through the Local Government Road Safety Program, which has run since 1993, the IPWEA has been the 'go-between' for the major funding bodies (RTA and MAA) and Local Government Road Safety Officers.

The Road Safety Panel, a stand alone panel introduced by the IPWEA, has membership of several key players in the field of road safety. Panel membership includes the RTA, MAA, NRMA, AITPM (Australian Institute of Traffic Planning and Management), PARSO (Professional Association of Road Safety Officers), Local Government Traffic Engineers and Private industry Consultant Engineers.

The available resources of this Panel place it in the unique position of being able to draw on the input of all members and use this combined knowledge to assist in taking road safety to a new level within council. Identifying and rectifying road safety problems is seen by many to have very different approaches. The membership of the Panel enables this broad range of views to more fully explore these multiple dimensions.

This paper does not represent the entire membership of the IPWEA Panel as many of its members are working through numerous issues regarding their submissions to the Staysafe inquiry into young drivers and do not entirely agree with the need for the IPWEA Road Safety Panel to be involved in this process. However, some members of the Panel, as a stand alone Panel of the IPWEA, are keen to have some involvement in the inquiry into young drivers and education programs. Even if simply to make comment and make the Panel available for future road safety initiatives.

The content of this paper will address certain items of the Terms of Reference which are believed to be avenues where the IPWEA can have an input into the reduction of lives prematurely lost or permanently impaired on NSW roads.

This paper does not contain an abundance of data, there is so much available that this would be superfluous. Neither has this brief paper been referenced but any of the statements made can easily be confirmed if required. It does use some anecdotal evidence to support views expressed. The subjects of education and driving for young people is often fiercely debated as many see no need or benefit from education whilst others involved see this as an essential component. The National Road Safety Strategy 2001-2010 categorising of Safer Roads, Safer People and Safer Vehicles would suggest that the human component is still a major factor in any method of improving drivers and reducing crashes on NSW roads.

Underlying risks and major factors contributing to young driver crashes

One of the major issues with underlying risks is that cause is too often put down to one specific dimension, or the root cause of a crash. For example, many times people are told that speeding is the biggest significant factor in the deaths of many young people. Current TV advertising attempts to emphasise this but does not, unfortunately, address the specific issue it is intended to as it suggests speeding is the issue shown but in reality the cars and drivers in the add may not even be speeding, rather driving in a dangerous manner. Even though speed is a major factor in resulting injury, there is need to go beyond this simplistic approach and address **driver attitude and behaviour** which leads to the speeding. In some situations, when speed limits have been raised, death and injury have reduced. Speed alone is not the underlying factor in some situations.

Many other aspects of what are considered the common causes of crashes cannot be reduced to such singular issues and the need to address the many and varied factors involved is necessary. It is certainly easier to attempt to isolate actions which can be punished or simply altered but what leads to the major aspects of speeding, fatigue, distractions and alcohol is preceded by a decision process which must be addressed.

Engineering and vehicle technology alone will not ameliorate the incidence of young driver crashes in any future projection of data, but they are part of the solution. The issue of how the driver thinks, acts, why these elements are present and how best to get a message to the intended audience is always going to be a major contributing factor. Experience with young offenders has shown that certain messages are not getting through.

By simply stating that the causes of death and injury come down to speeding, fatigue, alcohol and distractions many adopt an attitude of 'heard it all before' whenever discussion of safety is brought up. Most road users could easily point out the major 'causes' of crashes when asked. This has often been done in a similar way that a child recites their times tables- with a mechanical process but no recognition of what is being discussed.

Driver attitude leading to behavioural change is a major component of real change in the reduction of injury and death.

Researchers have stated that much evidence suggests driver training does not reduce death on our roads while those involved in driver training vehemently point to the absolute gains, even in the face of evidence. The reason for this is often etymological, where researchers investigate driver skill training and driver trainers think of behavioural and cognitive skill training. It was interesting to note at the recent Road Safety Education, Research and Policing Conference in Melbourne that many questions asked of presenters who had delivered their strategic plans from their countries, when asked about the place of education, gave dismissive remarks and indicated that education is insignificant in the bigger picture.

The content of instruction to young drivers needs to include cognitive, perceptual and psychomotor skills and distance perception instruction and demonstration. These are discussed with participants in the Traffic Offenders Program but it is not the fact that these elements are discussed that makes them relevant but who is delivering the message. When the participants can identify that the presenter has credibility they are far more likely to listen and even learn.

All advice on the **essential elements of adult learning** indicate that adults will not learn unless they can identify with the subject, learn it in a way they want to and cannot be taught if they don't want to be.

Many assume a 'one size fits all' approach to the road safety message. Most instruction on crash causes comes from people in public office and who are perceived as distant and removed from

the realities of life. This is not a criticism but a perspective repeatedly reflected by participants in both Traffic Offenders Programs and Survive the Drive Programs.

Even research in the United Kingdom in 2003 indicated that for most people safety was way down on their list of what is important on the roads (Only 18% of people considered it important).

Starting to think of programs from this premise will assist with how they are to be presented.

The number of hours a learner driver has to complete has recently gone up to 120 with good justification.

Perhaps it is time to **use even some of these 120 hours** as part of a community based program where young drivers are addressed in a similar presentation to the Traffic Offenders Program in order to gain perspective from those who will have credibility.

Many times young drivers who have already demonstrated risk taking behaviour by attending a TOP will make strong suggestion that the type of educational material presented should be available to everyone before they have the chance to do something wrong.

Even at Survive the Drive programs (conducted through PCYCs and having a similar content to the TOP) young learner drivers have repeatedly asked why the material presented is only optional and not compulsory to all young drivers. This has always come from the young people themselves.

Another significant factor that is constantly being thrown at presenters in Traffic Offenders Programs, Survive the Drive Programs and U-Turn the Wheel Programs (This is conducted in schools for year 11 students and supported by Rotary International) is that it is hard to take any ownership of a **cultural viewpoint on good driving when our society encourages so much risk taking behaviour.**

Alcohol products, as one such example of this cultural viewpoint, are a major sponsor of many events and advertisements on television and all types of media dominate the landscape. There is recent evidence that this advertising is somewhat effective and as such it makes it difficult to then draw the line and say 'you cannot drink and drive or you are a social outcast.' Driving and drinking are more often seen as simply parts of our social make up and to demonise drinking does not always have the impact required. The fact that drink driving is still a huge problem, and that drink driving offences make up 85% of Traffic Offender Programs, indicates the cultural message is somewhat skewed. The answer to this is not a clear one.

The efficacy of young driver education programs and the potential for development and expansion of these programs, subject to proper evaluation

The RTA have several programs which have validation by education experts and these programs go part way toward addressing the multifaceted aspects of risks to young drivers. Although there are many programs currently available within the community, there is always the need for programs which address specific participant's needs.

The **Traffic Offenders Program** (TOP), which has existed in many forms for 15 years, can demonstrate evidence of being particularly effective among those who have already demonstrated a disregard for safety. Many of the agencies involved in road safety have made it clear that this program is not educationally sound and does not have merit. One of the reasons for this perception is that it is called one thing but is, in fact, many.

In rural areas where participants may have to travel a considerable distance to attend a session, and they have to thus rely on someone driving them to this, sessions are made to go for a whole day and all the resources for this day only have to attend for their time slot. This usually means an 8 hour day for the course.

In the city centres, this program runs over 8 weeks at 2 hours a night and thus the total time spent in the city courses is longer than regional.

The Attorney General's Department did get involved in trying to address what a TOP would be but even then it was going to state that a course could be between 8 and 16 hours.

It is obvious that the significant discrepancy in time spent must have an impact on delivery of key components.

Each time a Traffic Offender Program is conducted, surveys by participants reveal a significant number of people who initially began the course to mitigate their punishment but who were also so deeply affected by the program they freely state a significant behavioural change.

On its own, this would be less significant but at one PCYC the licences of those who had completed a TOP were randomly sampled 2 years after the course. These people revealed a considerably lower re-offence rate than the general populace when compared by age group.

Road Safety Officers and PCYC staff often work closely on many road safety issues. If these people were provided resources which allowed them to conduct the TOP with consistency of delivery of each session, research into the effectiveness of this program would be easier to ascertain.

This is the root of this perceived problem. Educationalists believe road safety education must be linked to a curriculum (which is correct) and those working in the areas of road safety such as Police, Paramedics, Advocacy groups and Engineers often believe they can 'get a message across' through what is sometimes considered by educationalists to be scare tactics.

This is not such a difficult or expensive problem to address. With the Department of Education having their own Road Safety Education Officers, a collaborative effort between these people, Road Safety Officers at Councils and PCYC staff, a curriculum document could be developed which would then cover all subjects considered necessary for this program (Work on this has already progressed among the PCYCs). Once the educational requirements of a session were available, this could be provided to whoever was required to deliver the various sessions.

Consistent length of TOP programs, combined with curriculum developed with presenters, presenters paid for from a fund specific to this purpose, not from within their operating budgets, will deliver a program that is currently providing great benefits but which cannot be easily validated through research because of these inconsistencies.

This course has been running in its various forms for a long time, at very little cost to the community. With some management of the program and funding, this could demonstrate a considerable improvement in road trauma.

Other initiatives to improve young driver safety

Mentioned earlier was the U-Turn the Wheel Program which has been conducted in some high schools for some time. This program is sponsored by Rotary International and involves key presenters from the Police, Ambulance, NRMA, RTA and Trucking companies.

The intention of this day is for each presenter to address each year 11 student for one period over the day. By the end of the school day each year 11 student will have been addressed by each of the presenters and the message delivered has been well received by all the schools involved.

As stated earlier, curriculum development for this program, like the TOP, could allow presenters an easier method of bridging the gap between educational value and the experience of presenters. This course follows similar principles to the TOP but all presenters are asked to provide a session plan so there is little or no doubling up on the important issues. The credibility of presenters and the practicality of the sessions has hit the mark with students. They frequently get to provide their input into solving road safety problems themselves.

All presenters state they perceive the value of such a course is incalculable and students always comment on the value of this day as it provides them with opportunity to have input to road safety issues.

With similar coordination to the TOP, as suggested previously, the impact of such a program could be evaluated by simple comparison between school groups who had completed the program and those who had not.

Resources and evaluation for the future

The significant common thread of the above suggestions would be that the resources to allow these learning programs to work are already there.

Road Safety Officers in councils are already involved in many of these 'programs' but there is little to ensure that each one is as easily measurable as the program of the same name performed elsewhere.

If given sufficient resources, Road Safety Officers could work with PCYC officers and Department of Education Road Safety Officers to deliver a consistent approach to the aspects of changing behaviour mentioned.

By also providing funding for the organizations involved the programs could maintain consistency of delivery. More people would be willing to give their time to presenting and a list of presenters from all agencies could be maintained. The problem with many courses is the consistency of delivery because of rotating presenters. Having the curriculum and session plans for any presenter would provide greater consistency of the road safety message whilst still providing people with 'street cred' to do it.

There would need to be a requirement for a training qualification for any presenters. This would provide greater commitment to adhering to a designed program and allow thorough evaluation to be performed.

Conclusions

As this submission is to reveal a desire to be involved in some method of reducing the death and injury of our young people, the programs discussed and concepts are all just that. Details have not been provided but it should be clear that the resources to achieve results are already in place and it should be more a case of 'joining the dots.'

Funding for this is obviously an issue but this should not be something that automatically limits further discussion on this.

Because the IPWEA is strategically positioned to have a close working relation with Road Safety Officers, and the Road Safety Panel is a stand alone group within the IPWEA, there is a perception by some of the members that this Panel could have a significant role in the further development and maintenance of the noted programs.