

**INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ALCOHOL
ABUSE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW**

Organisation: YMCA NSW

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YMCA NSW THINK TANK SUBMISSION

Strategies to Reduce Alcohol Abuse Among Young People in NSW



YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

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The YMCA Think Tank – Introduction

YMCA Youth & Government (Y&G) is a suite of programs that nurtures the potential of young people to lead, connect to their community and be advocates for causes they are passionate about. Y&G programs are more than just “youth leadership programs” – by connecting to real life government and policy processes, Y&G empowers young people to engage with legislation and make a tangible difference to the issues affecting their communities and New South Wales. The YMCA Think Tank is a Youth & Government program.

The YMCA Think Tank is a collection of youth-led events that give young people, aged 12 – 24, the opportunity to make a direct impact on issues in NSW through direct submissions to parliamentary and Government inquiries and consultations and through small-scale action projects. The YMCA Think Tank hosts two types of events: Policy Working Days and Action Days.

A Policy Working Day was held on the 8th of December 2012 on the Standing Committee on Social Issues’ Inquiry into strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW. Twenty-five young people, aged between 15–24, attended the Think Tank. 55% of attendees were female, 50% of attendees were from metropolitan Sydney with young people attending from as far as Lismore and Wagga Wagga. 20% of attendees identified as being from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Those in attendance dictated the topics to be discussed, based on popular voting and informal “town hall” style debates. Other opinions were sought over social media platforms, including Twitter, when young people could follow the debate and contribute their opinions using the hashtag #YPThinkTank.

For further information, please contact:

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YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



The YMCA Think Tank—Submission Background

Young people at the Think Tank readily identified a whole range of issues surrounding alcohol and young people, indicative of a generation who are impassioned and dedicated to breaking down the stigma surrounding young people and actively contributing to the debate about issues that affect them most.



This evidence shows that alcohol abuse in young people is a problem that is both widespread and highly problematic in terms of a comprehensive policy approach. YMCA NSW commends the Committee for the interest they have shown in a problem that is identified as an issue not only by adult citizens across the state but also, importantly, by the young people of NSW.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



The YMCA Think Tank—Submission

The following submission details what young people in NSW think about alcohol abuse within their demographic, particularly along the following terms of reference:

1. The effect of alcohol advertisements and promotions on young people including consideration of the need to further restrict alcohol advertising and promotion;
2. The effectiveness of alcohol harm minimisation strategies targeted at young people;
3. The role of parents and family units in reducing alcohol abuse and regulating alcohol consumption amongst young people; and
4. The effectiveness of current education schemes and syllabi on reducing alcohol abuse amongst young people.

The Think Tank has made a number of recommendations through-out this paper.

This paper was written by the following young people:

- Istiak Ahmed, 18, Glenfield
- William Berthelot, 17, Bilgola Plateau
- Hayden Gray, 16, Weston
- Anne Wang, 15, Randwick

The Think Tank was convened, and the submission supported, by Elle Morgan-Thomas, 24, and Geeth Geeganage, 19.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Submission: Alcohol Advertisements and Promotions

Participants at the YMCA NSW Think Tank had strong opinions about alcohol advertising and promotions within NSW, and their unique perspective on these issues, a product of their ages and outlooks on life, offer much important information for the Committee.

Young people felt targeted and “picked out” by alcohol advertising and promotional materials in New South Wales, despite the laws designed to protect them from this. Young people readily identified a “strong drinking culture amongst youths who perceive a link between alcohol consumption and having a more enjoyable time with their friends”. It was the opinion of those young people present that it was this culture that was being “tapped into” by marketing managers of various alcohol beverage companies, who have identified the youth demographic as a vast and important target market. Think Tank participants widely advocated that stricter and better regulated advertisement standards in NSW, as they felt it one of the key factors in reducing binge drinking amongst young people or minors.

Think Tank participants felt targeted by major alcohol beverage conglomerates, whose cleverly-planned marketing campaigns are essentially aimed directly at enticing young drinkers to consume higher levels of alcohol. The consensus of the group was that advertising that portrays excessive consumption as a glamorous lifestyle choice was the most influential in their age demographic. Young people found the use of this imagery in persuasive advertising to be “morally abhorrent”, as marketing a substance that is known to cause substantial liver tissue damage to young people as a responsible life choice is completely inappropriate.

There was also widespread condemnation amongst the group of low percentage of alcohol drinks, commonly referred to as ‘alcopops’, being marketed towards younger people as a “fun” alternative that is safe to consume in high quantities. Current advertising and marketing codes of conduct regulated by the Advertising Standards Bureau appear to be ineffective in curbing the promotion of these beverages to underage or young drinkers. Young people cited concern over current laws that only regulate the advertising of alcohol during children’s viewing hours of 9:30am – 12:30pm and 3:30pm-6:30pm. Young people feel it is important those other hours of television advertising are regulated – young people, particularly teenagers, watch television outside these hours on a regular basis.

The participants also felt that an excessive focus on television advertising alone was unproductive – young people are increasingly targeted in other ways, including in newspapers and magazines, on the internet, on social media, and even on billboards and advertisements plastered across the routes they travel regularly between home, school, work and extra-curricular activities.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



In a recent report conducted by the UNSW Business School regarding alcohol marketing and viewer responses, over 230 of the 2000 candidates approached conveyed that alcohol advertisements and promotions had become increasingly geared towards younger people, with the intent of trying to persuade them to start drinking at an earlier stage. Such raw statistics paint a very concerning picture regarding alcohol advertising in NSW. Young people at the Think Tank event identified this advertising as a key factor in the 13% increase in underage drinking over the past four years that has been recently identified by NSW Health.

Young people strongly believe that alcohol advertising rules should be considerably more stringent and less easily evaded. Think Tank participants cited the example that the legally required “Drink Responsibly” insignia on alcohol advertising is consistently underutilised, and is often shifted to the bottom of the screen or advertisement, thereby minimising effectiveness. Despite what appears to be adherence to advertising codes, the behaviour of these companies suggests a blatant ignorance of their duty to advertise responsible consumption of alcohol.

Young people also felt that they were increasingly targeted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Social media promotions have become widely utilised by various alcohol companies, including the “big wigs” of the alcohol industry – Diageo, SAB Miller, Lion, Suntory Holdings and Coca Cola Amatil. It is interesting to note that the majority of young people in attendance were unable to identify major alcohol suppliers by name, and were unlikely to associate the brands of drinks they have heard of most with the companies that are selling them. Social media is often seen as ‘free advertising’ space, as statuses, retweets and mentions multiply the “reach” that promotions have on consumers. Unfortunately, however, as a large proportion of the users of these social media platforms are aged 15 to 25, these social media promotions have had a disproportionate effect on young people. These advertisements offer feature games, competitions, prizes and lifestyle offers that not only continue to perpetuate the “glamour” of these products, but are also often completely warning-free and disproportionately attractive to young people. Furthermore, young people feel that the Government engages inadequately on social media sites, and cited several examples of the absence of government departments on social media, indicative that perhaps the Government “does not know how to relate to young people”. Young people feel that if they can have ready and easy access to their local representatives, as well as state and federal Members of Parliament, on social media, that they should be able to contact government departments as easily. They also felt that an increase in the utilisation of social media sites by government-sponsored advertising that seeks to inform young people of the dangers of alcohol would be absolutely effective and welcome by young people.

There was also concern raised about sponsorships of major events, including sporting events, by alcohol companies and brands, and endorsements of those same brands and beverages by sports stars or “celebrities”, whose “opinions” matter more to teens and young people who idolise these alleged role models. The impact of such influence and persuasion, which is done purposefully by alcohol companies, cannot be understated. Young people had the perception that this area of alcohol advertising was almost entirely unregulated.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Recommendations: Alcohol Advertisements and Promotions

On the day, the Think Tank made several recommendations to the State Government, by way of the Committee. The YMCA NSW Think Tank recommends that:

- The Government create a stricter code of conduct for advertising and promotion of alcohol on television, including:
 - ◆ Limiting the ability of alcohol companies to advertise on this medium during hours most watched by young people and children;
 - ◆ Enforcing the effective use of the “Drink Responsibly” insignia;
- The Government strictly regulate those beverages that alcohol companies have designed and marketed towards young people, including but not limited to:
 - ◆ A ban on advertising these beverages in teen or young adult magazines;
 - ◆ A ban on youth-targeted bottles, labelling, in-store displays, or promotional materials, where the colours and pictures associated depict excessive consumption or obviously youth-targeted marketing;
 - ◆ A ban on billboards and public displays that depict “alcopops” or alcoholic consumption, particularly close to schools;
- The Government have anti- alcohol abuse advertisements and separate ‘drink responsibly’ advertisements, aiming specifically to combat youth alcohol abuse and the glamourisation of excessive alcohol consumption;
- The Government create a greater presence in the social media platforms with active anti-binge drinking campaigns, directed primarily at young people;
- The Government work collaboratively with the major sports codes across the state to minimise overexposure of young people and children to alcohol advertising.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Submission: Harm Minimisation Strategies

Overall, young people that participated in the Think Tank were extremely critical of current harm minimisation strategies. Alcohol consumption in a social setting is seen as an acceptable and normal part of Australian culture, not just amongst young people, and participants felt this cultural setting to be the crux of the problem – minimisation strategies are too frequently focused on abstinence, which is not only perceived as too “extreme” by young people, but is also failing to change this widespread culture. Young people feel it’s important that the message that alcohol can be used in a safe environment and at responsible levels without serious harm to oneself, friends and family and the wider community be made more widespread. Young people want the realism and factual accuracy of strategies that depict the realistic dangers of alcohol in a way that is not in total condemnation of drinking, as the lure of something seen as forbidden or harmful can easily make alcohol appear more appealing to young people.

Too often, young people equate having a fun night out at a party to excessive drinking to the point of impairing bodily functions, vomiting, loss of consciousness and alcohol poisoning. Repeated binge drinking on a regular basis can also have severe long-term physical and mental consequences. Factors such as peer pressure, lack of education and boredom also exacerbate binge drinking and alcohol abuse. In light of this, Think Tank participants felt that effective harm minimisation strategies would ultimately restore a sense of respect and moderation for alcohol consumption, deter young people from binge drinking and make them better equipped to deal with emergencies and situations arising from alcohol abuse.

Young people felt that government-sponsored “negative advertising”, or public awareness campaigns, could go further in fostering the message of responsible drinking. Several examples of what would make an “effective” campaign were discussed. One popular idea was an advertisement that shows the difference between two people at a party; one who drank in moderation, had an enjoyable evening and was able to get up the following morning, act as normal, and not “lose” a whole day; the other person who wakes up feeling hung-over and finds images of themselves on Facebook vomiting or doing something equally shameful, which they cannot even remember happening. Interestingly, young people at the Think Tank event were not actually averse to the concept of introducing shame in campaigns against irresponsible drinking – they believed that shame was the ultimate driver behind making decisions, and that the negative repercussions of irresponsible drinking are actually shameful, and should therefore be depicted as such. They were firmly of the belief that if ads are realistic and take away the glamour of drinking, young people can be swayed, as it no longer looks “cool”.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Additionally, young people felt that advertisements also needed to address practical concerns that young people have in relation to alcohol. For instance, campaigns could focus on flow on effects of binge drinking such as unsafe sex and compromised decision making, drink driving, alcohol related violence, mixing alcohol with other drugs and drink spiking. Messages should be simple and memorable such as having something to eat before drinking. Common fears should also be broken down- young people are sometimes afraid to call Triple Zero in an emergency if underage illegal drinking has occurred, for fear of legal or parental consequences, which must not prevent young people from seeking medical attention in dangerous situations. These ads must make young people more able to deal with alcohol related situations and help them to make decisions to prevent harm.

In addition, advertisements targeting young people should also be distributed on social media sites, and should be optimised for those modes of communication most commonly used by young people, for example on YouTube. Think Tank participants were overwhelmingly supportive of the recent anti-drunk driving campaign in New Zealand, colloquially known as the “Ghost Chips” ad that went viral on social media and was quickly seen around the world. Young people in NSW would like to see their government agencies taking an equally modern and forward-thinking stance in their advertising campaigns, and were quick to admit that they thought the message of the Ghost Chips campaign sunk in more quickly and was more memorable as a result of the popularity of the ad. Another example of effective anti-advertising cited by participants was Metro Rail’s “Dumb Ways to Die” campaign, which also reached international social media stardom, and introduced the concept of “shame” and stupidity into crossing the tracks or ignoring Metro Rail recommendations in a way that was effective and catchy, instead of insulting.

It was also discussed on the day that many young people feel a legal disincentive towards unsafe drinking, particularly in the case of the zero tolerance L and P plate license restrictions. Their behaviour can also be changed by the simple presence of police as was effectively highlighted in the “Every Police Car is a Mobile RBT” campaign. Increased police presence at major events, music festivals, schoolies etc. can be essential to mitigating a situation. Furthermore, laws related to alcohol such as those taught in RSA courses must be enforced. The cooperation of all stakeholders is required to make sure laws put in place are working.

Ultimately, young people felt that there was a problem first and foremost with the accessibility of alcohol. Think Tank participants felt that alcohol free zones and bans in public places have been effective in getting alcohol off the street and creating a safer environment for the wider community. They also wanted to see uniformity and enforceability of purchasing limits at major sporting events and music festivals. Additionally, young people felt that the concept of a “lock out” or compulsory alcohol-free period in the last hour of opening in bars, pubs and clubs were both worthwhile ideas, often acting as a “sobering” time prior to people heading out onto the streets. Young people felt that the ultimate way to block access to alcohol for young people was higher taxes and prices on certain alcoholic beverages, as young people are often particularly price sensitive.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Young people at the Think Tank also felt that current right of refusal laws of not serving drinks to an intoxicated person must be better enforced, perhaps with more police presence in and near bars, and a tightening of the publican's duty of care. There should be harsher consequences for bartenders and publicans for breaching alcohol selling and serving laws. The RSA system should be revised, as current online courses seem tokenistic and inadequate. Several of the participants of the Think Tank had completed an RSA course, and found them perfunctory and useless. Preferably, training should be done in person. Young people had plenty of suggestions for making bars, pubs, clubs and the surrounding areas more safe, including random additional I.D. checking inside venues. Bartenders could also offer water or non-alcoholic beverages in between drinks - often a simple offer can make people consider the option. Young people also pointed to the success of the recent "Plan B" campaign that encouraged better planning for your night out, in case you have too much alcohol to drive, and so people aren't wandering aimlessly and drunk on the streets. Breathalysers should be available inside bars so that people can test their BAC before choosing their "Plan B". What young people found hardest about that concept was the lack of public transport options available later at night, and they strongly believed that this lack of options often pushed people into cars. A small proportion of the young people at the Think Tank also suggested that bars should use rubber "soft fall" (similar to children's playground mats) outside to reduce injuries in a violent situation – the group became divided over this issue, split between preventing people from being drunk enough to fall over and hurt themselves or to fight other people, and protecting people that do end up in that situation.

Young people also highlighted youth boredom as a key factor in alcohol abuse, and strongly believed that the best harm minimisation tactics involved providing alcohol-free recreational activities for young people. Higher levels of boredom proliferate the belief that alcohol and boozy parties are the only way to create a fun social atmosphere. Once young people find an extra-curricular activity or a job they are passionate about, the added responsibility and reduced free time can lead them away from irresponsible drinking. Local councils and community clubs need to work to create activities for youths such as publicizing volunteering opportunities and holding activities at the local library, sports centre, beach and park. Many activities held during National Youth Week in April each year could be run on a more frequent basis such as policed alcohol-free public discos for under 18s only.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Recommendations: Harm Minimisation Strategies

On the day, the Think Tank made several recommendations to the State Government, by way of the Committee. The YMCA NSW Think Tank recommends that:

- The Government focus on sponsored campaigns and Public Service Announcements that address the following:
 - ◆ Responsible consumption instead of total abstinence
 - ◆ The concept of shame resulting from poor decisions made under the influence of alcohol
 - ◆ Breaking down fears and misconceptions about alcohol, consumption, and seeking help
 - ◆ Planning your night out better, and having a “Plan B”;
- The Government increase legal disincentives for excessive alcohol consumption, including driver’s license restrictions, and changes to RSA laws and the publican duty of care; and
- The Government combat youth boredom and lack of activities which push young people towards parties, drinking and excessive consumption.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Submission: Parents and families and their role in reducing consumption

Young people at the Think Tank felt that one of the most untapped strategies for reducing alcohol abuse in young people is parents and families, and the role they play in influencing young people's alcohol consumption. The influence of parents and families on young people cannot be understated. Parents should be encouraged to take responsibility and care to ensure that their children are not culturally normalised to believe that drinking is the only way to socialise or to have fun. The recent campaigns by DrinkWise Australia in educating parents about the dangers of underage drinking have only been moderately effective, with no real emphasis placed on the fact that alcohol is presented as culturally normal. In line with young people's concerns about the cultural embeddedness of alcohol abuse, this must be addressed as a matter of priority. It would seem that in many cases, young people become alcohol abusers or binge drinkers due to their early contact with alcohol.

Young people at the Think Tank felt that the best way to overcome these familial problems associated with the normalisation of alcohol was to encourage "active guidance" by educating parents in how to provide advice to their children on alcohol and alcohol issues. Young people even went so far as to suggest that parents simply taking the time to sit down and watch an episode of Kings Cross ER with their children would provide ample evidence of the negative repercussions of excessive consumption, and would provide a space for that conversation about responsibility and consumption to take place.

There was overwhelming support for moving the focus from blame and punishment of parents and guardians to support, solutions and education. A focus on strengthening the family unit and the bonds between parents and children, coupled with greater resources and education for parents, will be the way to make an impact on young people at the ages where they are the most vulnerable to cultural and peer pressures. Young people felt that the best ways to reach out to parents and get them to start educating their children about alcohol was to use traditional mediums, such as television, radio and newspapers, and to perhaps even reach out to parents at work by holding forums or workshops on the issue in business districts at lunchtimes, and by offering pamphlets and informational leaflets to parents at schools and or in the mail.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Recommendations: Parents and families and their role in reducing consumption

On the day, the Think Tank made several recommendations to the State Government, by way of the Committee. The YMCA NSW Think Tank recommends that:

- The Government create and distribute information, in various forms and across various types of media, relating to young people and alcohol, but targeted specifically towards parents of young people; and
- The Government review current punishments in place for parents who supply alcohol to their teenagers, and take into account the importance of education of parents over punishments and blame in the making of future laws.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW



Submission: Current Education and Syllabi about Alcohol

Young people were overwhelmingly of the opinion that current education for young people about alcohol is simply not as far-reaching and effective as it needs to be. However, young people were the first to admit that education has certainly come further in the past few years than ever before. Young people felt it important that education focus on the basic facts, for example, emphasising that regardless of how “cool” or sociable it is, alcohol is an intoxicant that affects a wide range of structures and processes in the central nervous system. Young people feel that not enough emphasis is placed on the consequences of alcohol abuse, and that there is too much of a focus on the mechanics of alcohol consumption as opposed to what can happen when things go wrong.

The New South Wales Department of Education attempts to teach their students about the dangers of alcohol and the outcomes that can occur from alcohol; however, this does not change the student’s mind of drinking socially or otherwise. Young people felt that education was ultimately limited in its effectiveness because, in an environment in which many competing messages are received in the form of marketing and social norms supporting drinking, and in which alcohol is readily accessible, education programs can have positive effects, including increased knowledge and improved attitudes, but will generally have no sustained effect on behaviour.

Think Tank participants were happy to share their views about their experiences with education about alcohol and alcohol abuse. Young people found the following the most useful of their experiences:

- “Celebrate Safely” forums and workshops which teach young people how to plan and host safe parties and events;
- The popular presenter and alcohol educator Paul Dillon, whose programs and forums were overwhelmingly popular amongst the group;
- Crossroads program, but only where it is delivered by someone experienced and trustworthy – 20 out of 22 participants preferred that the program be delivered by a doctor, police officer or other “trusted person”, as opposed to a teacher, which young people said felt “awkward” and hindered their participation;
- Tangible examples of how alcohol affects you: several participants described activities they participated in - such as wearing specially devised glasses designed to mimic the effect of “beer goggles”, and hands-on activities about how much a standard drink is - and rated them as very effective; and
- Anecdotal or “heart-based” education, for example, stories about people who have had alcohol poisoning, been involved in a DUI, or have had a negative experience – several participants cited their most memorable things about alcohol being the stories a police officer has told them about drunk drivers who have killed their friends, families or strangers because of bad choices;

As a result, we are given a clear indication of what does not work for alcohol education for young people, including but not limited to the following:

- Having education or training delivered by a teacher instead of a perceived “expert” or someone with whom the students do not have a relationship i.e. a qualified “stranger”;
- Having education that is lecture-style, or that offers excessive quantities of information without putting that information into a practical format or into perspective;
- Having education that is the same content delivered over and over again year-on-year – students admitted to “switching off” when they heard something repeated, highlighting the importance of having one chance to get this education right; and
- Lack of adaptability or flexibility in the delivery of information, including “one size fits all” approaches, failing to tailor the information to the group, and failing to present the information in an interactive, interesting and useful manner.

YMCA Think Tank Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Strategies to reduce alcohol abuse among young people in NSW

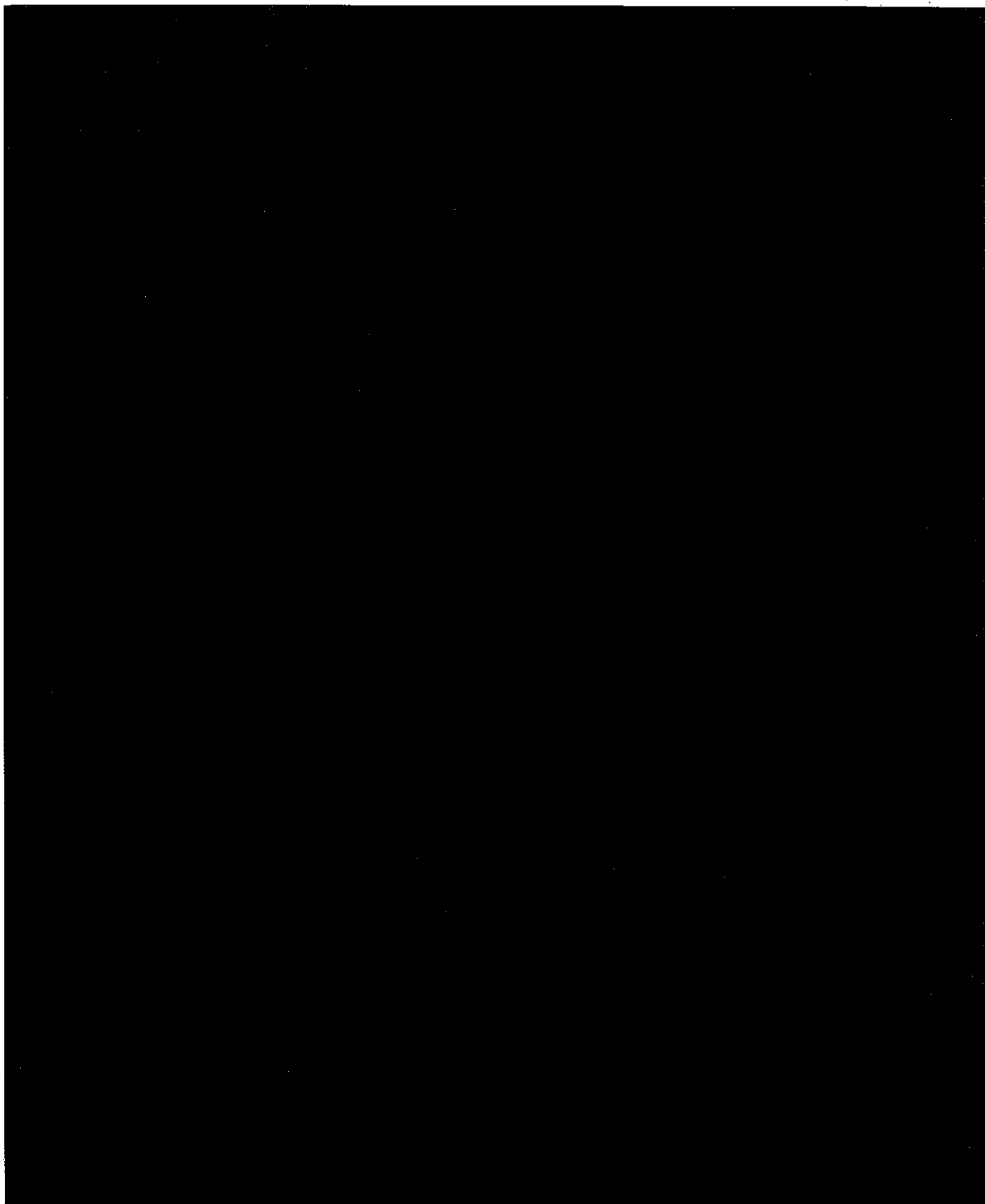


Recommendations: Current Education and Syllabi about Alcohol

Young people at the Think Tank recommended a comprehensive overhaul of the alcohol education aspects of the syllabus in NSW such that the above observations are taken into account. Young people felt they are being treated like children, and are sick of being lectured at, and speak of frustrations at feeling like they are unable to be candid with their teachers who are delivering the current syllabus.

On the day, the Think Tank made several recommendations to the State Government, by way of the Committee. The YMCA NSW Think Tank recommends that:

- The Government overhaul the alcohol education aspects of the current PDHPE syllabus to make this education more flexible and useful;
- The Government employ the assistance of noted experts and those that young people consider “useful”, such as police officers, doctors and community outreach officers, in the development of a new syllabus and a new format of presenting the information of the new syllabus; and
- The Government place an emphasis on interactive and engaging learning processes over rote learning or lecture-style information delivery.



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