Inspire Foundation

Mental Health and Workforce Participation:

Responding to the barriers faced by young people

A Submission in Response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Inspire Foundation

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment

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Inspire is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment's Inquiry into Mental Health and Workforce Participation.

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation established in 1996 in direct response to Australia's then escalating rates of youth suicide. With the mission to help young people live happier lives, our flagship program ReachOut.com engages over 500 000 young people aged 14-25 every year.

Young people are at the centre of all Inspire does — as partners in the development and delivery of all Inspire initiatives. Inspire uses technology innovatively to reach young people and build trusted social brands that are a part of their landscape. Inspire's work is evidence-based and underpinned by research and evaluation, conducted in partnership with academic institutions and research centres including the Orygen Youth Health Research Centre at the University of Melbourne and the Brain Mind and Research Institute (BMRI) at the University of Sydney.

Inspire is also the lead partner in the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Well Being (YAW-CRC) which unites young people, practitioners and innovators from over 70 partner organisations across the not-for-profit, academic, government and corporate sectors. The research conducted by YAW-CRC is underpinned by a belief in the strength and capacity of young people and the importance of technology for promoting the wellbeing of young people. The YAW-CRC research and development program will explore the potential of technologies – the role they play in young people's lives, and they ways in which its potential can be harnessed to address many of the social challenges faced by young people and simultaneously mitigate against risks.

In addition to this strong network of academic and research institutions, Inspire co-founded the Technology and Wellbeing roundtable in 2008. The Technology and Wellbeing Roundtable includes an alliance of industry, research, non-profit and government organisations that view technology as an enabler of children and young people. The Roundtable is convened to promote—to all sectors of the community—the positive impact that technology can have on the lives of children and young people. .

The information and recommendations contained in this submission have been developed as a result of Inspire's extensive experience working with young people to deliver effective technology-based programs aimed at improving young people's mental health and wellbeing. This submission will address the terms of reference as they relate to young people, aged 14-25.

Summary of recommendations

1. **That young people be targeted as a priority group for addressing the mental health barriers to participation in education, training and employment.**

2. **That new and emerging technologies – including the internet – been utilised for the delivery of education/training and supported employment programs aimed at increasing the participation of young people with mental health issues.**

3. **That education/training and supported employment programs be developed in close collaboration with young people themselves, along with educators, trainers, employers and mental health professionals.**

Mental Health and Workforce Participation: Responding to the Barriers faced by Young People.

Background & Context

One in four (26.4%) young Australians, aged 16-24 experiences a mental health disorder, with the majority of mental illnesses, including depression, having their onset in adolescence and early adulthood. Experiences of mental health problems such as depression can lead to other serious problems including substance abuse, social withdrawal, a breakdown in family and personal relationships and poor academic and work performance[1].

Simultaneously, for the past 30 years, unemployment rates have been much higher for young people than older adults with adult unemployment being at 5% and young people's unemployment being at 17% (close to 18% for males)[2]. Indeed, in spite of the easing financial crisis, the number of young people who remained unemployed in 2010 was 16%.[3] Young people not in education faced an unemployment rate of 18% in 2010[4]. In addition, the number of fulltime jobs for young people has declined considerably over the past 30 years[5]

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[1] Nguyen, N,. (2011) Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth: Trends in young peoples well-being and the effects of school to work transition, Briefing Paper 27, NVCER.
[2] FYA (2010) How young people are faring, Foundation for Young Australians
[3] As above
[4] As above
[5] As above

Many studies have provided evidence of a consistent association between education and wellbeing[6], while unemployment and disabilities also compound mental health issues[7]. The psychological impact of being excluded from the workforce is greater for young people than older adults.[8] Precarious employment is also associated with poor mental health outcomes[9]. Studies focused on resilience show that coping may be disrupted by a combination of stressors, with the existence of one stressor rendering an individual more vulnerable to the influence of other stressors[10] Education and training opportunities can act as a protective factor against mental health issues.

Accordingly, in view of the fact that young people have high rates of mental illness and experience high rates of unemployment – both of which can compound the other – they must be a prioritized as a group to target in terms of mental health and workplace participation.

Recommendation

- **That young people be targeted as a priority group for addressing the mental health barriers to participation in education, training and employment.**

Strategies to enhance access to and participation in education, training and employment

Education plays an important role in the securing of quality employment opportunities. Many young people with mental health illnesses lack educational qualifications and thus when they do end up in employment, they tend to end up in low skilled and poorly paid employment. While increased participation in education and employment has been shown to improve the wellbeing of young people, precarious and low quality work has been associated with poor mental health outcomes[11]. Greater participation of young people with mental health issues in employment will thus only improve their mental health only if that employment provides a 'meaningful' and 'satisfactory' experience. Accordingly, the delivery of employment, training and education services needs to be facilitated in a way that is accessible and relevant to young people with mental illnesses.

Within Australia and globally, young people aged 15-24 years are online more than any other age group, with 90% of 16-20 year olds online daily, spending an average of 22 hours per week on the internet.[12] They are the early 'adopters' of new technology.[13] For these reasons the development of online education and training programs therefore have the potential to provide a relevant and accessible way for young people with mental illnesses to access education/ training and employment opportunities.

This is especially so with the roll out of the National Broadband Network which has the potential to transform the way in which education and training is delivered by enhancing accessibility to resources and online training, and opening up the possibilities of using interactive and gaming technologies as powerful education tools. Similarly, the internet and associated technologies present considerable opportunity for the creation of more

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[6] As above

[7] Honey, A., Emerson. E., & Llwwellyn, G.(2001) The mental health of young people with disabilities: impact and social conditions.

[8] As above.

[9] As above

[10] As above

[11] Honey, A., Emerson. E., & Llwwellyn, G.(2001) The mental health of young people with disabilities: impact and social conditions.

[12] Nielson (2010a) The Australian Internet & Technology Report – Edition 12, The Nielson Company pg 139

[13] 3Stephens-Reicher, J., Metcalf A., Mangan,C. & Burns, J. (2011) Reaching the hard to reach: how information communication technologies can reach young people at greater risk of mental health difficulties, Australasian Psychiatry, vol 19, pp58

flexible, supportive and tailored job opportunities for young people with mental health issues. However in order for these opportunities to be taken full advantage of, it is critical to ensure that both young people and educators have the necessary skills and capabilities. Moreover, technology needs to be adapted to meet the needs of vulnerable young people so that they can participate online.

More broadly, it is imperative that links be fostered between mental health professionals, educational institutions and employers to support young people with mental illness and to foster a greater understanding about mental health issues for employers and educators. **Inspire's Reachout.Teacher's Network** is a good example of using online methods to engage and inform educators about the issues faced by young people. An improved understanding among employers and changes in attitude towards employing young people with mental health issues is of major importance. Greater co-ordination between services across the mental health sector, employment, and education/training sector will potentially facilitate the participation of young people with mental health issues in employment and education/training.

Finally, as the 'end users' of supported employment and education/training programs, it is essential that young people with mental health issues are genuinely involved in the development of education/training and supported employment programs to ensure there relevance to the needs of these young people.

Recommendations

1. **That new and emerging technologies – including the internet – been utilised for the delivery of education/training and supported employment programs aimed at increasing the participation of young people with mental health issues.**

2. **That education/training and supported employment programs be developed in close collaboration with young people themselves, along with educators, trainers, employers and mental health professionals.**