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# Green Collar in Australia - A Student Perspective



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Report to Dusseldorp Skills Forum

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## 1. Main Findings

**Young people are very aware of environmental issues and concerns - but these are not their most pressing concerns**

High school students are very aware of environmental issues and concerns. They get a lot of information from a range of sources - school, TV, internet, advertising, parents. There is little need for basic information or general awareness-raising. They are concerned, sometimes irritated, by the barrage of bad news.

However, these issues are not commonly part of young people's informal friend-to-friend conversations - they are not immediate, pressing or personal. Environment is not 'top of mind' but it is close.

**They are hungry for credible, quality, big picture, action-oriented information/resources**

However, young people are hungry for clear, high quality, accurate, big picture and credible information on long term environmental issues, especially on whether and how to respond. They would respond to clever, engaging narratives that speak to their concerns and use their language. They appreciate information from trusted sources. Parents and teachers are important influences.

*"(Climate change is important because) we are not climate changeable"*

*"We want the facts"*

*"It's a world where we have to live"*

**Most young people care, but many are uncertain whether personal action will make a difference**

Most young people do care and want to do something but many are uncertain that their own personal action will make much difference. They need to connect to a bigger picture, and have confidence that concerted action will make a difference. Some young people need to be shown that little steps do matter, so they can afford to care. It would be valuable to demonstrate how personal, local action can produce a larger collective result.

*"Is it really true that catching a bus will make a difference, I really want to know?"*

### Schools and teachers matter - but much more could be done

School is a significant potential site for awareness and activism, though underdeveloped. In the formal curriculum, subjects such as geography and science are common focal points for learning about environment. Yet many other subjects contribute. However, young people's reception of environmental knowledge and motivation through the curriculum is very uneven.

*"We are in school five days a week, so it must start here"*

More than the formal curriculum, young people's interest and motivation appear to be triggered by positive, informative and enthusiastic teachers. Students readily nominate the enthusiastic environmentalists among their teachers. They appreciate good role models, but are quick to point out the gaps between espoused principles and poor practice.

*"My roll call teacher (is the most enthusiastic environmentalist), she teaches English"*

The school environment itself is under-utilised as a site, a catalyst, for student environmental learning and action. Lots of small environmental initiatives are happening (recycling, energy saving) but there is huge room for improvement in student participation in environmental activity on site. Many of the school initiatives do not involve students themselves.

### They can understand 'green jobs and skills' but environment is NOT a grounds for career choice

Students have some sense of what 'green' jobs, careers and skills might be. However, their understanding of environmental practices in workplaces and business is poor. They tend to translate simple home-based practices into the work context (turning off lights, recycling paper).

They strongly resist the notion of choosing a career on environmental grounds. They see environmental action as hobby, lifestyle, personal interest, rather than a job, career, skill.

The concept of a 'green career pathway' is not at all evident in schools. This new message would have to be created from scratch, perhaps introducing the general notion of green skills/jobs as a smart career choice, or working more from the 'lifestyle' motive ('living well, living smart, being connected').

*"I want to be environmentally friendly, but not as a career"*

*"You have to have a passion for a job, not just because it's green"*

### **Young people are prepared to act environmentally, but not to go out of their way**

When it comes to social responsibility and interest in improving the environment, most would be prepared to act on this. All other things being equal (or near equal) most would go greener; choose a job with a green tinge, a workplace that was environmentally friendly. This dimension is certainly part of their moral/ethical/social universe. But it is, by no means, the primary motivator for job and career choices.

### **There are ways to engage students more in environmental activity**

The key drivers for young people's involvement in the environment are simple and straightforward:

- the natural world is 'our world' and it is under threat
- they want to do the right thing, by each other and future generations
- they are interested in taking little steps to live better, greener - both from an ethical and personal perspective
- They respond to positive messages from parents and teachers.

For those who are concerned about engaging young people at school, the focus needs to be more on processes - how the invitation to learn more and do more is communicated.

Students want practical, hands-on experience, 'getting out' into the environment. 'Getting outside' was a powerful theme - engagement, beyond the classroom, in the 'environment' itself. They fondly recall their experiences at primary school. They want to do 'real' and 'relevant' activities. They enjoy peer discussion, and want lessons to be engaging, fun. Big community-wide events (Earth Hour, Clean Up Australia) are valuable and memorable.

On school and workplace opportunities, students need to see, touch, feel, to build awareness, motivation and skills. They also need to see how their own local, personal actions will contribute to the larger picture.

## 2. Background and methodology

Dusseldorp Skills Forum commissioned Ian Colley from *Make Stuff Happen* to explore student perspectives on ‘green collar’ careers. This project involved focus groups among secondary school students in seven government and non-government schools in May and June 2008.

The aim of the project was to gauge the level of understanding and excitement among young Australians about careers with a sustainability focus. DSF was keen to develop qualitative insights into what excites secondary students about the environment and how this relates to their job aspirations. The project explored how to support the successful transition from school to work for young Australians who are interested in sustainability. It also explored what resources and approaches are being used in schools to teach relevant skills and create clear career pathways.

DSF hopes the results can assist both industry and educators by allowing them an insight into the minds of Australian youth on the issue of sustainability in the workforce.

The project involved 1-1.5 hour group discussions, workshop-style with active participation. Seven workshops were conducted at seven different school sites with approximately 8 participants in each session. Students were from Years 9-12 and drawn from a variety of subject areas, including vocational and science units of study.

Interviews were also conducted with schools’ careers educators and some other school personnel to determine and document their understanding of green collar jobs and pathways, whether they see a change in student demand in this area and if so, what information is needed to foster this interest.

While the interviewer made a concerted attempt to arrange an ‘average’ group from each school, the schools tended to put a ‘best foot forward’ and nominate reasonably articulate students. However, the students were by no means ‘environmental activists’ and had a wide range of views about environmental issues and their roles and responsibilities in addressing environmental concerns.

The following table shows how many students were involved in the focus groups, where they were located, and what kind of school they attended.

Total number of students interviewed	56
Number of schools involved	7
Average size of focus group	8
School year	Years 9 - 12 Majority drawn from Years 10 - 11
Gender breakdown	Five co-educational schools - with even numbers of boys and girls in focus groups Two single sex schools - one Catholic boys' secondary school; one Catholic girls' independent school
Location of schools	1 coastal metropolitan fringe 1 central west regional NSW 2 outer western Sydney 2 inner Sydney 1 mid western Sydney

*More details on the type and nature of schools and the student composition of the focus groups are at Appendix A.*

## Green focus

Only two of the seven schools visited had a strong, school-wide, environmental focus. In the first (a public high school), the Principal was very important in creating and sustaining this commitment. In the second school, the environmental focus appeared to be a reflection of a strong social justice ethos that permeated the school culture. The Principals of these two schools were supported by a number of committed teaching and ancillary staff who drove environmental activities across the school. In the other five schools, there was poor to average interest and enthusiasm on environmental issues across the whole school, though there were numerous environmental initiatives occurring, many interested teachers, and some active students.

## The discussion

Without exception, the focus group discussions were highly engaging, often noisy, and sometimes hilarious. We made a deliberate attempt to set the tone towards enjoyable and engaging, despite the seriousness of the topic.

While we had a script for the sessions, with a number of specific questions, we did not follow the script in detail. Given the fluid nature of the sessions and the general exuberance of the students, we tended to cover the major bases by following and pursuing the various responses and themes the students raised during the conversations. The students enjoyed having their say in a small group context; the presence of teachers in two of the groups didn't inhibit them at all. Students were honest, often very frank

about their own shortcomings and voluble about opportunities and constraints in their schools.

A draft of the prompt questions is attached at Appendix C.

### 3. Awareness, care and action

#### 3.1 Young people’s position on environmental issues

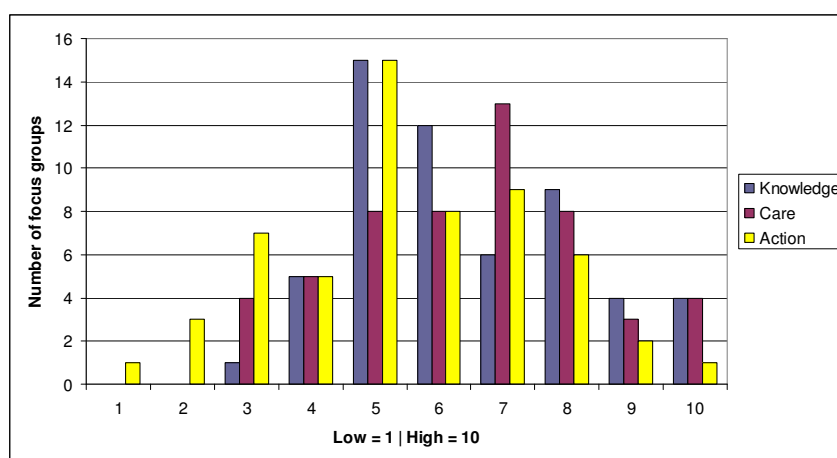
As part of the focus group, students were asked to rate their responses to three measures of interest (along a ten point scale from low to high) on:

1. knowledge and awareness of environmental issues;
2. how much they cared about environmental issues;
3. what they were doing about it.

The following ratings summarise their responses.

	Low										High
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Knowledge			1	5	15	12	6	9	4	4	
Care			4	5	8	8	13	8	3	4	
Action	1	3	7	5	15	8	9	6	2	1	

Table 1: Self rating on environmental issues - across all focus groups



The following three sections focus on each of these themes in turn - awareness, care and action.



### 3.2 Knowledge and awareness - News in the teen world

Most young people are quite aware of environment issues and have reasonable knowledge of these issues. They rate their own knowledge and awareness of environmental issues as middling or just above, and a minority rate their level of knowledge and awareness as high.

While the environment is not top of mind, it is not far behind. When asked to report on current news and issues they mention wars, politics, weather, natural disasters, celebrities. Talk amongst friends mostly revolves around sport, girls/ boys, and the more sensational news items of the day, not the environment. But the environment is certainly on their radar. It is increasingly part of everyday life - in the news, on TV, at school, in families. Therefore, while environmental concerns are percolating through the various layers of our culture, they did not appear to be personal, immediate and peer-related for the majority of young people attending these focus groups. Students do not often discuss the environment in their own informal day-to-day conversations.

When asked, they can easily identify a wide range of environmental issues - climate change, global warming, drought and floods, petrol prices, renewable resources, hybrid cars, greenhouse gases, rising oceans, Kyoto, Al Gore. They quickly articulate many of the key concepts associated with environmental awareness. However, 'carbon' concepts - such as carbon footprint, carbon build-up - were rarely mentioned.

They are also aware of the importance of the environment and the scale of potential challenges from environmental changes. One response illustrates this: "Drought...if it happens on a bigger scale it would be devastating."

Many of these students had a simplistic explanation of global warming; a kind of pop fiction version, linking global warming to holes in the Ozone layer, for example.

They are very keen to have accurate knowledge and the big picture. They want 'the facts'. Some questions they asked include: Is global warming caused by humans? Can it be solved? What is the real scale of the threat? Will my little actions make a difference?

### 3.3 We Care...But

Unlike their self-ratings on action and knowledge, the ratings given to 'care' are more evenly distributed from moderately low through to very high. They are also higher than knowledge and action, suggesting an affective basis for doing more and knowing more<sup>1</sup>.

"It's our world"; "it's our future"; "people are suffering even now", and "you can't only care about this generation" are just some of the comments made in the groups. It was apparent that many young people care about these issues, and a few care a lot.

For example, one student from the Western Suburbs spent a lot of his weekends in the Blue Mountains and the environment was a strong personal interest. The activist group from the Catholic independent girls' school was probably the most highly motivated to be involved and had a strong sense of their own efficacy in such involvement.

A few were honest that they didn't care very much, but were still aware of the general issues surrounding climate change ("The most important person is yourself").

However, for many of these young people, environment is not the most personal or immediate concern ("school is my concern", "I don't really think this will happen to us, our family" "Australia is clean and nice so not much needs to be done").

Some students expressed a sense of resignation ("Too much on a global scale to do anything", "I can't be bothered"). There was a suggestion of disavowal or disconnection amongst some of the students attending these sessions. Some shirk personal responsibility by attributing responsibility elsewhere (China, overseas) or into the future. The most common expression of this a kind of disavowal is along the lines of: "because I can't do anything, I can't care", "we do kind of care, but not much we can do". In other words, such expressions may result more from a sense of powerlessness than indifference.

Some groups were asked about their feelings in relation to environmental threats. The common first response was interesting. They felt annoyed and irritated. One explanation is that some of this annoyance was due to a sense of others' irresponsibility ("there are really simple things they could do to change it but they can't be bothered"). For some it might have been about why young people have to take responsibility for this when they didn't create it ("How long has it been around, why didn't people before

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<sup>1</sup> Though, a skeptic would argue that it's hard for young people to say they don't care, despite the frank tone of these focus groups

us do anything?”). However, the most likely explanation was because of the incessant bad news (“they won’t shut up, bad stuff, depressing” “annoying how everything is related back to this one issue” “the teacher said if it keeps going this way the world will end in 50 years...err...well...hang on!”).

Others noted they were sad, guilty, anxious, and scared.

### 3.4 Taking Action - From little things, big things grow

The action ratings were lower than knowledge and care - realistically suggesting that action is the more challenging than knowing or caring. Unlike the care and knowledge ratings, four people rated themselves ‘very low’. A minority rated high, and mentioned others who were active (“My sister practically sits in the dark, always turning off lights”).

When asked what they were doing about these issues, a number of specific activities were mentioned - turning off lights, recycling, choosing to walk, short showers, water tanks, energy efficient appliances.

Most activities centred on the home, or related to personal choices such as transport options and product choices. A few of the farm kids knew of sustainable business practices on the farm (“we direct drill, less damaging on soil”). Some young people were engaged in activities at school. For a few, simple environmental actions had become a habit.

It appears that for many young people doing some ‘little things’ was motivating and gave them a sense of achievement.

Some of these initiatives were undertaken by the students themselves without parental or teacher pressure (“I made my parents put new light bulbs in their business”), although there were plenty of examples of parents setting the tone. Parents were a very important source of influence and motivation on young people’s care and action.

Some simply do not do anything or want to and a few of these youngsters think this is the norm (“In all honesty, no one wants to be inconvenienced, or have to go out of their way”).

There are mixed messages on the value and impact of such activities. Most say it is important to act personally (“every bit helps”). But some are unsure if their small and localised actions will make a difference. Others, however, are willing to engage in suitable activities even if they are not convinced that their own efforts will matter (“we can do little things, but can’t make a big difference”, “Little things won’t solve it but it helps”, “Is it really true that catching a bus will make a difference? I really want to

know”, “amazing thoughts of how you can change the world but it always comes down to what you can do in your own area”).

There was a strong though not straightforward connection between care and activity. For many, care was a motivation for action. For others it was not necessarily so (“I’m not involved but do have worries”). Some were defeatist or just not sufficiently motivated (“try but can’t be bothered continuing”). For some, there is a belief that if you can’t do anything on the big pressing issues, it’s easier not to care at all, a kind of resignation (“don’t care ‘cause they can’t do much”). This was definitely evident but not an overriding sentiment. A majority thought it was important to take the little steps anyway.

In some cases, the students noted that it was ‘the other students’ who don’t care (“We try to get the message out there, but a lot of students don’t care enough to listen”, “It is a concern when some don’t care at all”). The most common expression of this was littering at school. While there is some evidence that it is not ‘cool’ to talk environment to friends, the students were quick to point out that on this big issue, ‘cool’ doesn’t matter (“It shouldn’t be about cool, it’s too important for that”).

### Areas of disagreement

The students are quite aware of the tension points and the controversies associated with environmental threats. There is some disagreement on a number of key issues:

- Whether science and technology can just ‘fix it’ (especially without all of us having to take action);
- Whether little/personal steps will be enough to address the magnitude of the problem
- Whether global warming is a natural or human-induced event. In the main young people think that humans are mostly responsible for global warming though a small number talked of “natural cycles” “scientists disagreeing” “some are natural cycles but we’re causing most of it”
- Whether environment and economy are opposed/hostile forces.

These differences are not unique to these young students; they would be mirrored across any adult community.

When asked who is responsible for solving the problem, a couple of groups named world leaders, countries and high profile organisations (China, UN, governments, big companies). However, all admitted that it was “everybody...us”.

## 4. Environment at School

### 4.1 The curriculum

For Years 9 and 10 (and mentioned by students in later years as well), Geography and Science are the courses most commonly (overwhelmingly) quoted as the main source of information about environmental issues and concerns.

While geography was often mentioned, there were strong differences in how effectively the message on environment came through in geography lessons. For some it was a minor matter (“we’ve spent just 45 minutes on waste development”); for others geography was an important source of information. However, there were some comments about geography lessons indicating that there was lots of information given but nothing that inspired them to delve more deeply. From one focus group, a collective sigh of boredom about excessive lecturing about waste, was aired. There were mixed reports on the quality of teaching from “brilliant” to “we get a better perspective watching the news’.

In the senior school years, with the inclusion of additional elective courses, there were fewer commonalities. Courses that students mentioned included Metalwork, Business Studies, Legal Studies, Biology, Agriculture, Primary Industries, Chemistry, Food Technology. Students who did Agriculture noted strong and direct environmental themes (“first hand view living on a farm”). Construction was mentioned in one school but reviewed with almost no environmental implications. Design and technology did not get mentioned as much as would be expected, suggesting that the more skills-based generic courses did not take the opportunity to integrate sustainable practices into lessons. While VET courses featured in the activities across these students, there were not many references to environmental issues, apart from perhaps Primary Industries. However, there may not have been enough numbers of students in these focus groups doing common VET subjects to identify common themes.

It appears that environmental themes permeate many aspects of the curriculum, though reception of these themes by students is uneven.

One very significant finding is that students’ attention to and reception of environmental themes appears to be strongly related to a particular teacher’s enthusiasm and energy<sup>2</sup>. In the minds of many students, environmental awareness related to the curriculum appears to be less a

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<sup>2</sup> Other Australian experience (from AUSSI and the Victorian sustainability initiatives) confirm that ‘passionate staff’ are a major contributor to best practice environmental initiatives.

function of formal content than teacher interest and enthusiasm (though certain topics are a ready springboard into environmental awareness). All students could name ‘the’ teacher (or teachers) at school who was the strongest environmental proponent. Generally these teachers were admired as people who communicated their enthusiasm (though sometimes, went a bit too far). It was not necessarily the science or geography teacher (“our roll call teacher, and she teaches English”), though science and geography teachers perhaps had more scope to discuss and elaborate on environmental issues. Unlike more distant role models (such as sports idols, musicians, movie stars, Al Gore) these teachers were much more powerful influencers and motivators - their personal and immediate presence in the lives of students made them very important.

## 4.2 Beyond the curriculum

Students were invited to discuss options for environmental awareness and activity outside of formal subjects.

Many students mentioned explicit activities around energy saving (“Turning off lights”), water tanks, clean up activities, recycling. Yet, the overall level of focus and activity was poor to middling.

Of the seven schools visited, only two of them had a strong, school-wide, environmental focus. This translated into a wide suite of activities, including building and infrastructure project with high environmental standards. This focus had an impact. At both schools, many of the teachers and other staff<sup>3</sup> were very involved in environmental activities. Both focus groups readily reported on a list of initiatives, across the whole school community. The ‘Action Group’ students at one school had undertaken a number of explicit environmental promotion activities. A strong social justice culture nurtured their activism, and gave them a strong sense of effectiveness. Yet, at least for one of these schools, even where a strong school-wide commitment existed, it did not necessarily have a direct impact on every student. Some students noted that they had missed out, or not connected with, many of the highlight environmental activities in the school (“we were supposed to have helped with the solar panels, but didn’t really”, “I haven’t even seen the boardwalk”).

At another school, the students felt their interests and activism around environmental activities was actually discouraged by the school executive, in favour of more traditional academic priorities.

The students readily reported on larger school-wide or community-wide activities such as Clean Up Australia, Plant a Tree, Earth Hour. These were memorable activities, important and powerful for many students. It is likely that this awareness is not only a consequence of the specific

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<sup>3</sup> At one school, the catering lady championed the school’s recycling commitment

meaning of the activity but also the breadth of student/community involvement.

Primary school was often fondly recalled for its environmental activities. Students rarely articulated this as a curriculum issue (in other words, the specific constraints on high school teaching which are a product of intensive curriculum demands - a constraint very much in the minds of teachers and school executive staff). Students interpreted the difference between primary and secondary schooling as one of size and intimacy, with a focus on the environment generated through direct hands-on activities (“primary schools are smaller, you know what is going on”), and close relationships with teachers. Sometimes it was about older kids being too ‘cool’ (though this was not seen as a significant barrier to involvement (“Just do what is right, you get respected”).

Unlike teachers, other students were rarely identified as ‘hot’ on environmental issues, though there were a couple of exceptions. This probably says more about the authority and visibility of teachers (and students were very aware of teacher’s role modelling responsibilities and their failings - “teachers leave the lights on”). More commonly these focus group students suggested that other students cared less than they did when it came to the environment (“they drop their rubbish everywhere”, “lots of littering, the kids don’t care”). Littering by students was a common enough complaint to become an activist concern in its own right.

## 5. Green jobs, careers and skills

### 5.1 What is ‘Green’ work

Many students had some job experience (mostly in retail and hospitality jobs) so the notion of a job or career was not completely remote. While only a minority seemed certain of their career direction, most were thinking about their careers at least in terms of subject selection and education/training pathways.

The focus groups were asked to report their views on ‘green jobs and green careers’. There was a pattern in the order of responses and plenty of pauses as they thought about these areas. In the first instance they mentioned jobs related to the natural environment - jobs working with plants, trees, gardener, jobs in the bush, marine biology, agronomist, farmer<sup>4</sup> and park rangers. Then they identify jobs with an environmental tag such as environmental scientist, environmental engineer. They quickly move on to urban and built environments - solar power installer, nuclear

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the country students see farming as a career that is ‘genuine’, ‘authentic’. Their teachers noted that farming parents were discouraging them from such careers.

power industry. A few mentioned public transport (in fact transport itself - cars, buses, trains, walking - was a common currency, highly accessible, way for students to think about environmental concerns). Some automatically think green is about Greenpeace or greenies<sup>56</sup>.

Then people realised that these jobs can be almost universal - government jobs, new technology, science, law, advertising. They do understand, with or without prompting, that most jobs could have a 'green tinge'. In other words, environmental awareness and activities are universally applicable.

They find it harder to think about green workplaces, though when prompted around their current casual jobs, many see the link ("McDonalds does a lot of recycling"; "newsagent...put the old Xmas cards in a box..."). Students' mental model of such workplaces appears to be through a simple translation of domestic experiences onto work settings - energy saving (switch off lights), resource conserving (water) etc.

A few students understood how 'greener' workplaces and businesses might do better than less green businesses ("if you see someone who doesn't care about the environment, then imagine how they might treat a client", "they will sell more stuff", "the business is more likely to get on the news").

## 5.2 Green jobs and careers for me?

The students were asked about whether they themselves would be interested in green jobs, careers or green skills.

Very few were straightforwardly interested in doing green jobs (although one said "I would love it").

In thinking about career choices, they often start with their personal interests, even passions. They review the big motivators: money, location, qualifications, opportunity, training, status, security, family.

The most common, almost universal response, even among the more environmentally active and caring students, was that jobs and environmentalism are separate worlds. Jobs and careers are for themselves, and environmentalism is a lifestyle, a hobby, a personal interest ("careers and environment don't mix", "learning a job is different from school...got to commit for forty years").

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<sup>5</sup> He noted that there were "more green dollars around for schools" than other sources of external funding.

<sup>6</sup> so the word 'green' itself might be politicised for some, though this not a common response.



It is very clear that they do not think about jobs and careers in terms of environmental issues. More significantly, they think of environmental activity as a hobby, a lifestyle rather than a career or skill choice.

With some prompting, they could understand the relevance of acquiring some general 'green' work skills in a range of generic jobs. One group pointed out that there will be more demand for traditional jobs (doctors etc) if the environment gets worse.

When it comes to social responsibility and interest in improving the environment, most would be prepared to act on this. All other things being equal (or near equal) most would go greener, choose a job with a green tinge, a workplace that was environmentally friendly ("this generation is concerned about environment, less about money, more satisfied lives, more social 'memes'"). This dimension is certainly part of their moral/ethical/social universe ("When I grow up...can still be involved in groups...even if career isn't related to environment"). But it is, by no means, the primary motivator for jobs and careers.

In conclusion, there is something quite conservative, risk-averse, mainstream, practical and immediate about the way young people think about choosing jobs and careers.

### 5.3 Environment and economy

Some young people think that the environment and the economy are at loggerheads. The typical comments were those such as "money is a cause of environmental problems", "BHP will make millions of dollars and not contribute to the environment". A few sophisticated students were aware of the complex economic decisions involved in environmental action ("our country's wealth is gained by exporting, environment would be better but our country would not survive...China is massive", "you might be making money selling sheep to Arabia, but they don't want to buy because of mulesing", "the more environmentally friendly we're becoming, the more developing nations are becoming poorer").

A few saw that environmental sensitivity could be an economic opportunity. Some seem aware of the community/consumer appreciation of green businesses and are "more likely to sell their products", "the business is more likely to get in the news". In the main, this was not a cynical or negative assertion, they thought this was good.

For a few tough-minded sceptics (not common, but perhaps important even for this age group), ‘greenwash’ was an issue. They were concerned about false assertions on environmental for commercial gain. For products and services, they wanted credible messages from an authoritative source, and won’t be sucked into a marketing spiel. Unprompted, the Heart Foundation tick concept was suggested for green products and green processes.

A reasonable number drew long term conclusions about the importance of balancing economic and environment interests (“might cost more to run, but in the long term...”, “there’s no point fixing things short term”). Some saw the economic and environment as interdependent. There was a suggestion that the country students are more likely to think this way.

### **A premium on green skills?**

The students were explicitly prompted with a story about how climate change might put a very high premium on green skills in the future (eg ten years from now). They found this a bit difficult to understand at first. When made clearer, it did not seem to shift their views of their own career choices. They did, however, show an inkling of understanding that green skills might be a ‘smart’ long term career move. Yet they had almost no sense of the way in which individuals might position themselves to anticipate and take advantage of such strategic/structural shifts in the labour market. It was a real challenge to make a personal, intellectual or practical connection to shifts in future career structures (especially with detail and nuance). This is not a surprise given their limited connection to workplaces. But it means that the argument about long term career prospects on the basis of ‘green skills’ will not find an easy audience.

There appeared to be little awareness of or capacity to articulate and respond to the notion of green career pathways. Their involvement in career planning and career awareness generally was limited enough without this (much) more specialised inflection. The green ‘pathways’ concept was of no particular use, it is too remote.

## **6. Engaging students - young people’s views**

At a couple of points in the discussion (both on schools and careers) the students were asked for their advice on how to communicate to and motivate other students about environmental issues and green skills.

The want the facts, but not just being preached to. They want as much first hand experience as possible (“Show them what is going on, like we did at Warragamba Dam”).

Parents and schools are important, they said. The message on environment should certainly start in school.

On school and subject areas they remarked on: inspiring teachers, staff that 'lead by example', practical and hands-on activities (Questacon, competitions, the vegetable patch), doing real and relevant activities, peer discussion ("workshops...have my friends involved"). Make it fun. Be positive, focus on solutions ("Show the benefits. If everyone does something little it can create awareness").

'Getting outside' was a powerful theme - engagement, beyond the classroom, in the 'environment' itself.

They acknowledged many alternative sources of information to teachers and courses - movies and television are still very important as a source of information and catalysts for discussion, though not necessarily the evening news. "TV is big", a number of students said (and teachers made reference to programs like 'Totally Wild' and Adventure Channel documentaries). The internet was often mentioned, in all its many youth-friendly guises: chat, wikis, pop ups, YouTube, MySpace. One student suggested putting environmental themes into online games ('rebel tree planters'); Sim City was also mentioned as a possible vehicle.

They were keen to get the facts through sources they know and respect. They were interested to see more powerful forces show the flag for the cause (the pope, religion). They thought that messages to young people should use young people and have a youthful look and feel ("use things that are going to interest young people...get teens in, use a graffiti look", "make movie characters green so people aspire to be like them", "if you see your heroes/celebrities doing it you'll get inspired", "young people should have a bigger voice").

Community events are important - especially the large-scale activities like Clean Up Australia and Earth Hour<sup>7</sup>.

In general, students are keen to see, experience and explore green work. "Show them what is going on, not just hear about it".

## 7. Concluding comments

### Awareness, care and action

High school students are very aware of environmental issues and concerns, though these issues are not commonly part of young people's informal friend-to-friend conversations. They get a lot of information from a wide

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<sup>7</sup> Though a number of students asked why is this limited to one hour? Why have they still got their lights on?

range of sources - school, TV, internet, advertising. They have no need for more general information, or highlighting of environmental issues. However, they have a slightly simplistic interpretation of climate change and global warming, and specific 'carbon' concepts, like carbon footprint are rarely mentioned.

In the main, they are interested in the environment, though it is not the most pressing, 'top of mind' issue for them. It is not personal, immediate, or highly visible in informal peer-to-peer interactions.

They are concerned, sometimes irritated, by the barrage of bad news. There is a small danger that, because of consistent bad news on environment, there is a temptation for young people to 'switch off'. Proposals for further focus on environmentalism needs to anticipate and work with the current level of annoyance and irritation about environmental issues. It may be that these feelings need to be acknowledged and addressed directly or indirectly, through stories of positive, successful action.

Most young people do care and want to do something. It appears that for many young people doing some 'little things' is motivating and gives them a sense of achievement and connection. However, many are also uncertain that their own personal action will make much difference. There are mixed views on the value and impact of these little steps<sup>8</sup>. Some young people can't afford to care because they don't think their personal action will make a difference. Their indifference is a consequence of powerlessness and resignation.

There is a strong need to reinforce and consolidate the message that small steps do matter. Students are also hungry for some connection between their 'little' contributions and a bigger picture, to have confidence that concerted action will make a difference. There needs to be a strong message about the positive steps young people can take to change their (our) world. It would be valuable to demonstrate and invite them to experience how personal local action can produce a bigger collective result. Messages need to be positive, practical and solution-oriented. For instance, that action on environment is about smarter, more connected, living and working.

Instead of dismal talk, these youngsters would respond to clever, engaging narratives that speak to their concerns and use their language and iconography. The internet is a valuable resource (in its many youth-friendly guises: chat, wikis, pop ups, YouTube, MySpace, online games).

Young people are hungry for clear, high quality, accurate, big picture, credible and action-oriented information on long term environmental

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<sup>8</sup> Though some young people will take positive steps in any case, even if they are not sure the real effect of their actions.

issues, especially on whether and how to respond. They were keen to get the facts through sources they know and respect. They were interested to see high profile and powerful forces show the flag for the cause (the pope, religion, celebrities).

For a very few sceptics 'greenwash' was an issue - false marketing of products with green credentials for commercial gain. They want a credible message and from an authoritative source, and won't be sucked in by marketing spiel.

Parents and teachers were very important influences (role models) for these young people.

### **The School Environment**

School was a very important site for environmental awareness and motivation but it is underdeveloped.

In the formal curriculum, subjects such as geography and science are common focal points for learning about environment. Yet many other subjects contribute. It appears that environmental themes permeate many aspects of the curriculum, though reception of these themes by students is uneven.

More than the formal curriculum, young people's interest and motivation appear to be triggered by positive, informative and enthusiastic teachers<sup>9</sup>. Students readily nominate the enthusiastic environmentalists among their teachers. They appreciate good role models, but are quick to point out the gaps between espoused principles and poor practice.

The school environment itself is under-utilised as a site, a catalyst, for student environmental learning and action. Lots of small environmental initiatives are happening (recycling, energy saving - turning off the lights) but there is huge room for improvement in student participation in environmental activity on site. Many of the school initiatives do not involve students themselves.

Even in schools with strong environmental credentials, students need to connect more immediately to their own teachers and to some hands-on activities in the school. This conclusion echoes the 'best practice' guidelines promulgated by bodies such as AUSSI that highlight the importance of whole school commitment and wide student participation.

### **Green Jobs, careers and skills**

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<sup>9</sup> Though young people probably undervalue the importance of curriculum, as the underlying structures are less evident to them compared to the more visible role of the teacher (who embodies this curriculum)

Students have some sense of what 'green' jobs, careers and skills might be. However, their understanding of environmental practices in workplaces and business is poor. They tend to translate simple home-based practices into the work context (turning off lights, recycling paper).

They strongly resist the notion of choosing a career on environmental grounds. They see environmental action as hobby, lifestyle, personal interest, rather than a job, career, skill.

When it comes to social responsibility and interest in improving the environment, most would be prepared to act on this. All other things being equal (or near equal) most would go greener, choose a job with a green tinge, a workplace that was environmentally friendly. This dimension is certainly part of their moral/ethical/social universe. But it is, by no means, the primary motivator for job and career choices.

The green career pathway concept is not visible in schools. There appeared to be little awareness of or capacity to articulate and respond to the notion of green career pathways. Students' involvement in career planning and career awareness generally was limited enough without this (much) more specialised inflection. At this point, the green 'pathways' concept is too remote for school students.

However, given the above conclusion, it may be premature to introduce a highly developed/detailed green pathway resources across the board. It might be useful for the few, those rare students who are highly motivated towards green careers. There may be room for more general, background, awareness raising messages at this point. For this larger cohort, 'the many' options might include:

- a) Creating a message that introduces the general idea of green careers and skills as a 'hot' career move (smart, connected);
- b) work on the 'lifestyle, interest' side, but still introduce these under a 'skill' theme so that the message can be taken up and used when it becomes relevant ('living well' living smart', 'being connected').

## Engaging students - drivers

The key drivers for young people's involvement in the environment are simple and straightforward:

- the natural world is 'our world' and it is under threat
- they want to do the right thing, by each other and future generations
- they are interested in taking little steps to live better, greener - both from an ethical and personal perspective
- They respond to positive messages from parents and teachers.

For those who are concerned about engaging young people at school, the focus needs to be more on processes - how the invitation to learn more and do more is communicated.

Students want practical, hands-on experience, 'getting out' into the environment. 'Getting outside' was a powerful theme - engagement, beyond the classroom, in the 'environment' itself. They fondly recall their experiences at primary school. They want to do 'real' and 'relevant' activities. They enjoy peer discussion, and want lessons to be engaging, fun. Big community-wide events (Earth Hour, Clean Up Australia) are valuable and memorable. They would enjoy competing against other schools/students. They want more of a voice, more ownership.

For boys in particular, cars were a natural topic for debating environmental themes. Though transport, mobility in general was a very accessible way of thinking about environmental concerns.

How would this translate into practical activities at school? There are many possibilities, many of which have been tested on school sites around the country - environmental auditing/monitoring, renewable energy initiatives, water tanks, recycling. The crucial issue would be to involve students in the design, implementation and monitoring. They enjoy real and relevant community-based activities. There are some hints that political activity could be included in the picture.

On school and workplace opportunities, students need to see, touch, feel, to build awareness, motivation and skills. They also need to be shown how their own small actions can contribute to the larger picture.

## 8. Appendices

- a. Schools and focus groups
- b. Transcripts of the focus groups
- c. Interview script