Bright Futures: Megatrends impacting the mental wellbeing of young Victorians over the coming 20 years

Research summary

Introduction

To build a comprehensive picture of the factors set to influence the mental health and wellbeing of young people over the next 20 years, VicHealth commissioned CSIRO to carry out foresight research identifying future opportunities and challenges. The resulting report, *Bright Futures*, predicts a rapidly changing, globalised, culturally diverse, digitally-connected world, requiring successful young people to be skilled, resilient and adaptable.

Through a strategic foresight process CSIRO combined stakeholder and expert consultation, horizon scanning and trend analysis to identify five 'megatrends'. A megatrend is a long-term change that affects societies, governments or economies permanently over a long period of time. Multiple smaller trends were clustered to form the megatrends, which were reviewed and refined through consultation. The trends include geopolitical, economic, environmental, social and technological changes likely to take place over the coming decades.

The five megatrends impacting the mental wellbeing of young Victorians over the coming 20 years are:

The rising bar: a rise in skill and education levels in emerging economies and increased automation leading to a more competitive, global job market.

Global reach: globalisation and digital technology creating a breakdown of traditional barriers changing the way workplaces, organisations, societies, governance structures and individuals operate.

Life's richer tapestry: a more diverse culture, society and consumer market where identification of mainstream is increasingly difficult.

Overexposure online: increasing exposure to wide-ranging online content, privacy breaches and virtual relationships.

Out of the shadows: improved understanding of mental health and wellbeing coupled with a change in service delivery models.

The *Bright Futures* report raises questions about how Victoria can educate and prepare young people to be resilient and adaptable in a world characterised by decreasing job security, the fluidity of globalisation and technology, increasingly diverse societies and over-exposure to the internet.

It points to the fact that the future health and prosperity of Victoria is dependent on building the psychological, social and physical resources each young person needs to meet challenges and take advantage of the opportunities of the future.

A number of studies show that youth is a critical period of social and emotional development, and a time when people can face serious challenges that threaten lifelong mental wellbeing. More specifically, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that around half of 15–17 year olds and two-thirds of 18–24 years olds have experienced a personal stressor related to mental health and wellbeing.

The *Bright Futures* report asks, as the stigma of mental illness recedes, what can Victoria do to improve mental health services, reduce the impact of violence on young people, and develop preventative programs to enhance mental wellbeing?

The five megatrends described in more detail overleaf provide a succinct narrative of the challenges and opportunities for young people in Victoria over the next 20 years, and it is hoped they will inform government, private and community sector efforts to improve the mental wellbeing of young people in the decades ahead.

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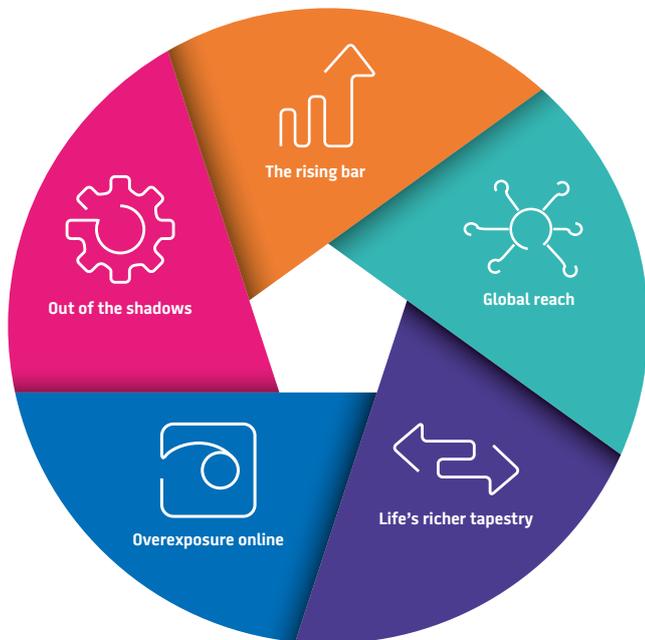
Megatrends impacting the mental wellbeing of young Victorians over the next 20 years

1. The rising bar

Rising skills and education levels in emerging economies, plus the rise of computing power, device connectivity and artificial intelligence, are creating a more competitive jobs market.

Three main driving forces are combining to create this megatrend. First, skills and educational levels are rising rapidly in both advanced and emerging economies, with much steeper growth rates in emerging economies.

Second, information technology is creating increased connectedness of global and regional labour markets. Skill sets in one location can increasingly compete with skill sets in another, as work can be done remotely.

Third, advances in technology and increased task automation are placing many low-skilled, routine and structured manual or cognitive job tasks at risk. Many of the jobs currently held by young people, which do not require qualifications, experience or special talents, may not exist in the future.

These driving forces create a plausible future where entry into tertiary educational institutions and the labour market (which is a ticket to broader participation in society) is more competitive and demanding of higher standards, leading to:

- increased number of young job seekers in Victoria
- the rise of non-standard, portfolio work
- growth in higher-skilled occupations
- global competition for talent
- science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines in demand
- need for balance between cognitive, social and emotional skills.

Will young people enjoy broad-based participation in the economy and society of tomorrow, or will only a shrinking group clear the bar?

2. Global reach

Digital technology and globalisation are breaking down traditional barriers and changing the way organisations, societies, governance structures and individuals operate.

This is creating both opportunities and challenges for young people. The online world is associated with the rise of the start-up culture and the era of entrepreneurs. Existing business models are being challenged by agile, digitally-enabled start-up companies. The costs of trialling a new business model in the online world are reducing and the tools to support rapid scale-up of operations are improving, and the peer-to-peer (P2P) economy is taking hold in markets from taxis and accommodation to banking and recruitment.

The future may see a new breed of portfolio workers who have no fixed abode and sell their skills and knowledge to multiple employers. Online education and training resources allow just about anyone to learn almost any skill at a much lower cost than historic models. Culture, talent, ideas and goods are all flowing at greater speed and volume across national borders.

Young people who learn to operate in the new, agile and connected markets and contexts of the future are likely to have exciting careers and lifestyles based on the following factors:

- increased participation in online learning courses globally
- doubling in student numbers studying outside country of origin
- culture, people and goods flowing across national borders in greater volumes and speed
- the era of the entrepreneur with faster start up models and more agile, responsive businesses
- increase of non-standard, portfolio work arrangements
- constant connection to the internet blurring the boundaries between home and work.

How do we ensure that all young people successfully transition to new models of working and living?

3. Life's richer tapestry

A more diverse culture, society and consumer market where identifying what's mainstream is increasingly difficult.

In the past half-century, Australia has become an increasingly multicultural society and forecasts suggest there will be a much greater spread across multiple nationalities by midway through the current century. The challenges of integration into a new society, especially for refugees, and discrimination against new migrants is an important driver of mental illness in Australia. There have been shifts in the proportion of the population who indicate they have a strong sense of belonging, a decline in the number who report being happy over the past year, and a heightened sense of pessimism in this population group.

Alongside this change, it is predicted that there will only be three people of working age for every person aged over 65 years by 2030 as the population ages, leading to a drop in funding for infrastructure and a rise in the need for healthcare.

There is now a greater diversity in the range of family structures from single parents to blended families, as well as a rise in the number of 'traditional' families where both parents are working. This is leading to more pressure, especially on women, who spend more time than men caring for their children and household while in employment.

The future will see the continued explosion of choices and a myriad of pressures on young people through:

- an increasingly multicultural society and associated mental health issues caused by discrimination
- an ageing population pressuring healthcare services and infrastructure
- an increase in non-traditional family structures and increasing families where both parents are working
- globalisation leading to new opportunities but possibly offset by loss of identity, exclusion and conflict.

What do young people need to successfully adapt to a high pressure world of limitless choice and wide diversity of cultures?

4. Overexposure online

Young people will be increasingly exposed to wide-ranging online content, privacy breaches and virtual relationships.

While digital technology creates exciting new opportunities for young people, it also presents new risks and challenges. In the coming decades, young people will face increased issues associated with cybercrime, identity theft, privacy breaches and various forms of online victimisation (e.g. trolling, harassment, intimidation, bullying). These issues are growing in prevalence in line with growing rates of social media use, e-commerce and overall online communication.

Young people will also be exposed to a wide range of online content which is not vetted to the same extent as conventional television, print and screen media. Young people have an evolving view of privacy that allows them to upload personal information and images to social media sites, either purposefully or inadvertently, which may have implications for the way in which they conduct future relationships.

This material can be persistent and widely distributed by others, with damaging psychological consequences for the individual.

Young people will have virtual resumes, which are beyond their direct control to edit, and there will be an increase in the amount of discoverable personal information relating to individuals.

However, as new risks emerge, so too will solutions. Software tools, training and raised awareness can collectively equip young people to deal with:

- using the opportunities and avoiding the threats of social media
- negative comparison on social media leading to dissatisfaction and mental health issues
- an increase in online gaming and associated violence as well as online bullying.
- increasing use of social media a source of global news
- reliance on digital devices as a way to remember changing the way the brain stores and retrieves information.

Will young people adapt to, and successfully manage, the possibilities and dangers of the virtual world?

5. Out of the shadows

Scientific research will improve understanding and awareness of mental health and wellbeing, and service delivery models will change.

Over time, our understanding of mental health and illness has vastly improved at all levels, from researchers and clinicians to the general population. This is partly reflected in revisions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) used by psychiatrists to classify the complete range of known disorders. Scientific research will continue to lead to improved insights into the causes, symptoms, treatments and preventative measures over the decades ahead.

Additionally, global recognition continues to grow that socioeconomic factors external to the individual, such as poverty, poor education, homelessness, and cultural background, contribute to poor mental health and mental illness.

Consequently, stigma around mental illness is likely to continue to decrease and there will be a stronger focus on preventative measures.

This will be led by, and associated with, programs, policies and strategies by governments, companies and community organisations aiming to improve mental wellbeing, such as:

- new technologies to enable better mental health research and treatment.
- closing the gap between resources spent on physical health and low levels spent on mental health.
- addressing the high suicide rate seen in country areas, Indigenous Australians and young men.
- seeking ways to reduce the leading cause of youth mental health issues; violence in the family home.
- use of digital devices to treat mental illness.

Will our society assume responsibility for youth mental wellbeing and help to build a socioeconomic, political and cultural environment in which mental wellbeing can flourish?

Conclusion

Many of the drivers of the megatrends impacting the mental health and wellbeing of young Victorians over the next 20 years lie beyond the direct control of any single organisation. However, collective efforts across government, industry and community organisations will help manage the risks and harness the benefits of the forthcoming change.

The **'rising bar'** megatrend describes a world where entry into the labour market will involve clearing higher educational and skills hurdles. The challenge is to ensure the rising bar doesn't knock out an already disadvantaged sector of the population who want a job and to be productive members of society.

The **'global reach'** megatrend is about the dissolving boundaries around individuals, organisations and countries. The challenge is to ensure young people are equipped with the aptitude and skills to be agile, connected and able to balance the challenges of portfolio and peer-to-peer work.

'Life's richer tapestry' is about a much more diverse world of cultures, peoples and lifestyles, with an explosion of choice for young people. The challenge is to support and promote social cohesion to ensure this new world is rewarding for all young people.

The **'overexposure online'** megatrend is about the new risks and opportunities arising from the quantity and accessibility of online content. The challenge is to improve our understanding of the issues, and support young people to be more 'streetwise' in the online environment.

The **'out of the shadows'** megatrend heralds a potentially brighter future for the treatment and management of youth mental health and wellbeing. The challenge is to harness the rapidly improving measures to prevent and treat mental health issues and improve the mental wellbeing of young people.

Together, these megatrends describe plausible futures for young people in Victoria. However, the *Bright Futures* report does not prescribe actions. The report raises some emerging questions, which point to one overriding question: How can Victoria educate, prepare, and support young people so that they are ready to take on the challenges and benefit from the opportunities of the future?

It is hoped this material will inform discussion, and help others make wise choices and develop an action plan to build a brighter future for Victoria's young people.