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## Rites, Rights and Responsibilities:

an investigation of young people's views on alcohol and rites of passage.

*Report prepared for Newcastle City Council and the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation by the Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health, University of Newcastle*

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## Introduction

The Newcastle City Council's Palais Youth Venue received funding for a pilot project 'rites, Rights and Responsibilities – Passages to Adulthood' from The Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation to look at how youth in Newcastle learn about alcohol, whether it is used as a 'rite of passage' and to explore alternative rites of passage to adulthood. The project would be conducted through interviews with young people and The Family Action Centre was commissioned to work with Newcastle City Council to look at these issues.

The pilot project acknowledges the role that alcohol plays in Australian culture and in young people's transition from childhood to adulthood and in doing so sought to identify and trial new rites of passage that would help to formalise this transition process as well as provide more safety around issues of alcohol use. After conducting the initial interviews and focus groups it became clear to the researchers that while reaching 18 years of age was significant to young people, there were many other significant events and markers around the ages of 17-19 years. Another clear finding from Phase 1 was around the use and purpose of alcohol for many young people and the part it played in a variety of 'rites of passage'. As the young people's conceptions of 'rites of passage' was causing difficulties the methodology of the project was revised in order to better meet the initial aims of the project and also in order to follow the ideas and concepts proposed by the young people themselves.

This report outlines pertinent, current research in the area, the methodology and findings of the pilot study. Recommendations for action at both the local level and the wider policy level are also made.

### Alcohol consumption in Australia

Alcohol consumption is integral to Australian culture and much of the mythology of the Australian way of life is linked to alcohol consumption. There is a strong association between alcohol and celebrations, enjoyment and social activities in Australia (NSW Alcohol Summit Preliminary Background Paper, 2003). Alcohol advertising permeates our media and alcohol is the symbolic and dramatic crutch for much of the character and plot development of our television drama and movies. Within advertising there is strong imagery that portrays people who drink as sexy, glamorous, fun, successful and popular and that alcohol is integral to social acceptance (WHO Ministerial Conference on Young People and Alcohol, 2001). Alcohol, like the scent of eucalyptus, would appear to pervade our national psyche as 61% of Australians consider alcohol consumption to be acceptable (NSW Alcohol Summit Preliminary Background Paper, 2003; Lincoln & Homel, 2001).

### Young people and alcohol

People drink for a great variety of reasons and these range from cultural, social and religious traditions to peer acceptance and the need to deal with individual difficulties. Young people in Australia see alcohol readily accepted as a part of their surrounding culture as well as being a strong part of youth culture. Indeed it has been argued that alcohol is used to support young people's own search for identity (NSW Youth Action Plan 2001 — 2005). By the age of 14, 63% of young people have had their first drink (NSW Alcohol Summit Preliminary Background Paper, 2003). There are some gender differences in how and why females and males use alcohol, although this difference is narrowing. Taylor and Carroll (2001) comment that young women drink as regularly as young men but not yet as heavily.



The 1999 Australian Schools Students' Alcohol and Drugs Survey (NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan 2001-2005) found that at 17 years, 54 percent of males and 44 percent of females were recent drinkers. However, only 6 percent of males and 0.5 percent of females saw themselves as 'heavy drinkers'. It is noted by Lincoln & Homel (2001) in their observational study of over 18s and alcohol-related violence in nightclubs in Surfers Paradise, that the incidence of young males drinking habits represented a large proportion of harmful and binge drinkers. Teenage girls tend to view drinking as more of a social event than teenage boys and also express more concern over the consequences of harmful alcohol use and how others perceive their drinking behaviour (Shanahan et al, 1999, cited in NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan 2001-2005). It seems that while females tend to drink to fit in more easily on social occasions than men, males tend to drink to relax, more so than females (NSW Alcohol Summit Preliminary Background Paper, 2003). There are however figures to indicate that the incidence of binge drinking among young females is increasing.

### Historical Precedence and Rites of Passage

A rite of passage has traditionally been an acknowledgement of the transition between childhood and adulthood and a welcoming of the child into the adult world. 'Adulthood' is clearly defined through its associated legal implications, i.e.; what one is legally able to do once one reaches 18 years of age. However, the practical roles and behaviours expected of a young person once they reach 18 are vague and highly variable. The expectations can depend on such things as: parental support, school or work, level of independence needed, emotional and mental state, etc.

Another aspect of a rite of passage is to give the young person some experiences and knowledge and to pass on wisdom that will assist them in adult life. As there are few formalised rites of passage into adulthood in Australian culture, it could be argued that young people have begun to develop de facto rites of passage for themselves in order to signify their approach to and attainment of adulthood (as represented by turning 18 years of age and the associated legal implications). Arguably the major de facto rite of passage is the consumption of alcohol. Because this rite of passage is informal, there are a number of attendant behaviours that accrue to the consumption of alcohol and have great potential to impact negatively both on young people themselves and society as a whole. These include: binge drinking, anti-social behaviour, risk-taking and drink-driving.

Often young people equate a sense of freedom with their transition from childhood into adulthood, when they will no longer be ruled by the older generations. There are many traditional associations between 'manliness' and alcohol and this association is not without historical precedent. Roberts (2004), looked at 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch youths who were warned of the dangers of excessive drinking, yet drinking large amounts of alcohol was seen as a rite of passage and was clearly equated with manliness. Such attitudes persist in Australia today, where a "bloke" has to be able to "hold his beer" and not "drink like a girl"

The central role that alcohol plays within Australian culture has ensured that young people grow up imbued with the notion of alcohol as a necessary social lubricant. Furthermore, the consumption of alcohol is perceived as an essential aspect of young people's maturation and recreation and high levels of alcohol consumption are an important rite when moving out of childhood (Lincoln & Homel, 2001; NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan 2001-2005). It is little wonder that young people attribute to alcohol consumption the notion of the mysterious forbidden fruit. After all if our parents and our older brothers and sisters "require" alcohol to have a good time why shouldn't we? Lincoln & Homel (2001) found that '...young women see the use of alcohol as a critical rite of passage where they drink to relieve stress and pressure,

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but also as a celebration' (p55).

The literature review for the project looked at the most recent and relevant, predominantly Australian research into alcohol and its role in rites of passage for young people. There appeared to be very little written on Australian youth and rites of passage. One area that has been recognised as a ritual transition is 'Schoolies' Week. This is a week that follows the completion of the Higher School Certificate where young people aged between 17 and 19 years celebrate the finishing of school. This celebration can take place in many different forms, but is mainly marked by going away from home with a group of friends. Winchester et al (1999) looked at the well organised, council supported 'Schoolies Week' celebration on the Gold Coast in Queensland. They discuss that the ritual of 'Schoolies Week' marks the end of school and transition from school to adulthood. They note the role that alcohol plays in this ritual being "Excessive alcohol consumption is a major part of the ritual..." (p68).

In their study to improve safety in and around licensed venues in central city entertainment areas, Lincoln & Homel (2001) supported the notion that alcohol is an overriding element in youthful rites of passage and in doing so acknowledges that alcohol plays a large role in adolescent culture. They discuss how alcohol is used by young people as a 'rite of passage' when moving through transition periods of life, particularly out of school and into the workforce.

It would appear then that while alcohol is intimately involved in 'rites of passage' activities, it is its use (and abuse) in the critical years between 14 and 18 years of age that is of most concern. Part of the rationale of the 'rites, Rights and Responsibilities — Passages to Adulthood' project are the findings that alcohol is encountered and experimented with by young people well before the end of school and well before the legal drinking age of 18 years is attained. Consequently there are many problems associated with that use and abuse. The NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan (2001 — 2005) states that the adolescent transition periods may act as triggers for self-destructive or self-harming behaviours like harmful drinking, illicit drug use or antisocial behaviour.

Responsible alcohol use is a teamed behaviour (Shanahan et al, 1999, cited in The NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan 2001—2005). Alcohol-related problems are likely to be greater where alcohol consumption is proscribed to certain age groups (The NSW Youth Alcohol Action Plan 2001—2005). Conversely, young people are more likely to have a more sophisticated and mature attitude to alcohol consumption if they grow up in cultures where young people are introduced to alcohol consumption at an early age as part of a graduated and supported process, particularly through family modelling (NHMRC, 2001). If appropriate behaviours associated with responsible alcohol use are learnt as part of a rite of passage it would be hoped that the potentially destructive behaviours associated with irresponsible alcohol use could be overcome. Cultural rites of passage are related to passing on the wisdom of a community's elders to their young people in a variety of areas. Without acknowledging the reality of how Australian young people are introduced to alcohol, the Australian 'elders' are missing a crucial opportunity to pass on their wisdom.

A common thread throughout the literature reviewed for this project is the importance of early intervention strategies to assist young people gain more knowledge about alcohol, and understand its potential impact on themselves, their local community and the community at large. Further, that young people may need more community and parental understanding and support with their introduction to alcohol and that this should be done at a much earlier and more realistic age.



Al-Yaman et al (2002) believe that in many instances it may be culturally appropriate for an early introduction to responsible alcohol use. This could even begin during childhood (depending on family values) so that responsible attitudes and behaviours developed during childhood and adolescence might continue into adult life. The NHMRC (2001) acknowledge that there have been limited successes with a few school programs designed to educate young people about alcohol where the aim is to establish low-risk or no drinking as normal and acceptable options.

Lincoln & Homel (2001) comment that early intervention is needed to equip young people with general life skills that include alcohol prevention strategies. The importance of childhood for increasing self-esteem, building resilience and diminishing risk of potential problems that may emerge in adolescence and in later life has been widely recognised in recent years (The NSW Youth Action Plan, 2001 — 2005). The NSW Youth Action Plan (2001 — 2005) suggested that empowering young people to increase their awareness of how to make healthy choices, recognise problems and seek help when needed is crucial in the preventative strategies of alcohol misuse and later dependence. The NSW Action Plan (2001 - 2005) recommends that a supervised, gradual introduction to alcohol is needed. Therefore early childhood and adolescence are seen as an opportune time to initiate young people to practical aspects of alcohol use.

### Research Questions

From the literature review these questions arose:

- What are young people's views on attaining adulthood?
- When do they feel this is achieved?
- How do young people view the celebrations (by both family and peers) associated with achieving adulthood?
- What is the role of alcohol in both attaining adulthood and its celebration?
- Do young people have ideas\_ and/or preferences as to how to celebrate achieving adulthood i.e. a rite of passage?
- What do young people feel are the major influences surrounding their use of alcohol both before and after turning 18 years of age?



## Methodology

The project was conducted in two phases. In Phase 1 focus groups were conducted and in Phase 2 individual interviews were conducted.

### Phase 1 — Focus Groups

**Focus group 1:** Focus groups were conducted in October/November 2005. Participants were 13 volunteer students, aged between 14 and 17 years of age. (See Table 1) Participants were invited to attend the focus group through The Newcastle Palais Youth Venue. Parental permission to attend was obtained for all participants. All participants were attending secondary schools in the greater Newcastle area. A total of five schools, public and systemic Catholic schools, were represented. No other demographic data was obtained from the participants.

FEMALES		MALES	
Age	No.	Age	No.
16	2	14	1
17	5	15	2
		16	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6</b>

Table 1: participants in Focus Group 1

**Focus group 2:** As alcohol abuse is an identified area of concern within the Indigenous community and the concept of rites of passage is an aspect of Indigenous culture, the researchers ran a second focus group for Indigenous youth. Once again participants were invited to attend the focus group through The Newcastle Palais Youth Venue and its contacts in the Indigenous community. A group of 6 girls and 5 boys, aged 14-16 years, attended the focus group accompanied by an Indigenous female youth worker and an Indigenous male youth worker.

**Method:** Qualitative data were collected through focus groups that were conducted by two interviewers (one male and one female) both of whom were experienced in working with and interviewing young people. The focus groups were conducted at the youth venue. The focus groups were conducted under semi-structured conditions using a series of questions (see Appendix 1) that covered the following key themes:

- What constitutes being an adult?
- How is turning 18 celebrated?
- What are 'rites of passage'?
- Is alcohol connected to 'rites of passage' at 18?
- If we had a 'rite of passage' ritual what would it look like?
- How and when are young people introduced to alcohol?
- How could alcohol be introduced to young people in a safe and interesting way?
- Where do the messages that 'getting drunk is a good thing' come from?
- What do the community and young people need to be taught about using alcohol?





Both focus groups were taped and a research assistant transcribed focus group 1. The questions were used as a guide to analyse themes and to structure the reporting of findings.

### **Reflections on Phase 1**

The findings from Phase I were limited. Analysis of the transcript from Focus group I yielded some useful qualitative data, consistent with the literature review. However the conduct of Focus group 2 was problematic due to its timing, the late arrival of participants and group dynamics that could not be overcome by the interviewers. As the quality of the information from Focus group 2 was so poor, it was not transcribed.

Through reflecting on the two focus groups it was felt that the groups of young people under 18 years of age were finding it difficult to step out of their own circumstances and current experiences. They were able to talk about current alcohol use and indeed were very willing to discuss the "horror stories" of their "mate's" experiences. However the concept of a 'rite of passage' was very alien to many and when being asked about how things could be different with regard to being introduced to alcohol the young people had great difficulty putting themselves in different shoes and dissociating with current experiences.

The experiences of the second focus group prompted extended consideration. The original intention had been to separate the boys and the girls and use same gender interviewers with each group. It had also been intended for the indigenous workers to take the lead in asking the questions in order to address issues of trust and confidentiality. Unfortunately the original plan was not carried out due to timing and communication issues. With hindsight it was decided that focus groups were probably not the preferred method when dealing with Indigenous young people.

In consultation with the project's management team it was decided to revise the methodology.

### ***Phase 2 — Individual or small group interviews.***

A second phase was devised for the project. In this phase people aged between 18 and 30 years would be asked to reflect on their experiences of early alcohol use, turning 18 and other issues related to rites of passage activities. They would also be invited to speculate on how some of their experiences might have been differently constructed. Phase 2 was conducted December 2005 — February 2006.

### ***Participants***

Participants for Phase 2 were invited to volunteer to participate through the Palais Youth Venue and personal contacts and were drawn from the general community. Participants were interviewed individually or in groups of 2 to 3 by a female research assistant who has experience in working with and interviewing young people. All participants were from the Newcastle area.

There were 8 participants (2 males and 6 females) aged between 18 and 28 years. (See Tables 2 and 3). There was one Indigenous participant. Participants had attended a mix of selective (2), public (3) and Independent (3) high schools. With the exception of the Indigenous participant all had completed Year 12 and of those 50% had undertaken or were currently enrolled in tertiary education.



FEMALES		MALES	
Age	No.	Age	No.
18	2	18	1
22	1	27	1
23	1		
25	1		
28	1		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 2: Participants in Phase 2 x age/sex

SES	NO
Working class	2
Middle	4
Upper middle	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>

Table 3: Participants in Phase2 x SES of origin

The qualitative interviews were semi-structured and open ended in nature. An interview schedule (see Appendix 2) with questions designed to mirror those asked in Phase 1 guided the interviews but did not dictate the order or wording of questions. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. Two of the interviews were taped. Hand written notes were used for the remaining interviews.

The interview questions covered the following key themes:

- What constitutes being an adult?
- How is turning 18 celebrated?
- What are 'rites of passage'?
- Is alcohol connected to 'rites of passage' at 18?
- If we had a 'rite of passage' ritual what would it look like?
- How and when were you introduced to alcohol?
- How could alcohol be introduced to young people in a safe and interesting way?

The questions were used as a guide to analyse themes and to structure the reporting of findings.



## Findings

The transcriptions of all interviews were summarised and collated into key themes according to the phase of the project in which they were collected.

### **Phase 1**

All participants in phase 1 are aged between 14 and 17 years.

The emergent themes that came from participants answering the questions asked in the focus group are:

### **Turning 18**

People under 18 years of age believe they will feel like adults when they don't need parents/carers anymore, are trusted, are responsible for their own actions, are financially independent and can legally purchase alcohol. There is no clear cut point to feeling like an adult. Celebrating 18 is considered a 'big deal' as it ends legal restrictions. Alcohol is linked to age 18 because of it becoming legal at that age; it is not linked to being an adult.

*"... it's kind of a self-realization thing [becoming an adult]... to show other people."*

*"We will take responsibility for our own actions."*

*"[Alcohol] is a big part, but it 's not, cause most people already drink."*

*"But alcohol only links to 18 because of the legality. But most people drink alcohol when they are 16... or 15."*

*"You don 't really wake up and say 'hey I'm an adult' but its more like, hey I can go to the pub, I can drink, I do this... "*

*"I know that / could live by myself When my mum went overseas I have lived by myself for a month or two months at a time and that was completely fine and I can do all that stuff, but I wouldn't say that I felt like an adult, but I know that I can live by myself and take care of myself "*

*"I think driving made me feel like an adult. Like it was a really cool thing. And if you have a car you can get yourself around and you don't have to ask to go out."*

It is perceived that there is not much difference between how girls view turning 18 to how boys view it.

*"So far I haven't really found much difference between my views and the girls views."*

*"Maybe guys don't think about it as much, but that might be stereotyping or it might not be true."*

*"I think it depends on the individual more so than your gender."*

### **Rites of Passage**

'rites of passage' are seen as marking the transition from one social stage to another. Turning 18 affects individuals differently. There is a sense of a 'rite of passage' to turning 18 as one can now drink legally. A 'rite of passage' in Australia is different for everyone. Participants believed that alcohol is perceived by many members of the community as a part of the 'rite of passage' into adulthood. However, only some participants saw alcohol as a necessary part of



the 'rite of passage' into adulthood. 'rites of passage' in Newcastle are: going to the pub, buying cigarettes, leaving school, driving, going to 'schoolies', going to over 18's gigs, having sex for the first time and marriage.

*"Well, I would consider going to .a pub for the first time [a 'rite of passage ]...legally going to a pub. I don't like pubs, but I would go just to say I have done that now. I must be 18."*

*"Is it a 'rite of passage' when you have that realization of it's all been done? Everyone said it was more fun to do it illegally."*

*"It 's a big responsibility having a driver 's licence. "*

## Perceptions and Experiences of Alcohol

Australia has a drink to get drunk culture. There is no stepped introduction to alcohol...one day you can't drink and the next day you can.

Drinking is generally more controlled at parties where there is an accepting responsible adult available to offer support and monitor people. There are people in the under 18 age group who drink to get drunk and there are people who drink but getting drunk is not the objective.

*"Australia definitely has a drink to get drunk culture."*

*"A friend of mine had this massive, huge party cause their parents were away and there were a lot of people there and everyone was really, really drunk and I ended up feeling like it wasn't safe anymore cause there were people fighting all over the place and smashed glasses. The police ended up coming and clearing people out. I had left before that."*

*"[My guardian] will be there to help [at my parties], like people have gotten sick so she has sat them down and got them water and got some food into them and let them sleep it off a bit. "*

*"Yeah, she's [the guardian] not going around saying stop drinking you can't drink anymore, she's saying have you been drinking water, ... "*

*"I think there is a division when it comes to alcohol and teenagers that there are 2 kinds of people. There are the people who drink to get drunk, well I think that that is a value that they have, that it is the objective to drinking. Why drink if you are not going to get drunk and there are other people who drink because they like it, they have a good time, and they may get drunk but that wash 't the objective."*

## Introduction to Alcohol

People are generally introduced to alcohol through: parties, older siblings, friends, family and drinking is usually done in the company of others. People start drinking at ages 15 and 16. Beginning to drink depends on family, friends and what school you are at.

*"I guess you start about year 9 or year 10 is when you start." "It depends who you hang out with, who you know." "It does depend on which school..."*

*"But you can be introduced to it by your family. Like I know people who drink with their family."*

*"Yeah, a glass of wine with dinner. If you have done that it is not such a big thing to have different forms of alcohol when you are not with your parents."*



Most participants felt that an early introduction to alcohol was a good idea if: it is introduced passively within the family; the mystique is removed by limits being set yet, alcohol intake is not forbidden; an attitude of don't drink to get drunk is built; the way that schools and parents talk about alcohol is changed; young people are taught to use alcohol safely and are taught how to support friends who do get drunk; and there is more trust of young people by adults. If the participants designed a safe and interesting introduction to people from the age of 14 with no legal restrictions they would set it up in a controlled environment with family or somewhere where there are responsible people to look after the young people.

*"I think if you get introduced with your family, like in a passive way, like with a glass of wine over dinner, I think that 's the best way."*

*"But maybe not [giving alcohol to young people] cause you're kind of encouraging it more if you are offering it."*

*"It's a cultural mentality, I mean, it's within everything. You can't just say 'we'll change the age and it will all be ok', I mean, you have to change the way that parents talk about alcohol, you have to change the way schools talk about alcohol, the Palais... "*

*"The schools don't talk so much about alcohol but they do send us to a workshop thing at the PCYC. And instead of telling us why we shouldn't and everything, they taught us how to do it safely and what not to do. {that was good} They taught us how many standard drinks in one thing, what happens if you do have too many, how to keep everything safe, what to do if your friends collapse."*

*"It's just about trust and not abusing the trust and taking responsibility and your values, the way you look at alcohol, whether it is to get drunk or whether it is to have a good time."*

Current information is not realistic as it assumes that young people only start drinking at 18.

*"It's also information with the knowledge that you're not going to start drinking when you're 18, well some people do, but it will either be beforehand or when you feel like it."*

*"Parents have a lot of influence generally, and I think if they realise that kids do get drunk before 18... if they know how to speak to their kids about alcohol."*

## **Who Says Getting Drunk is good?**

Messages that getting drunk is a good thing come from: older people; and the media, particularly TV shows.

*"From older people who relay their stories about how pissed they got on the weekend, it was so much fun and it was so cool... do it."*

*"The media." "Big Brother."*

*"The OC people get drunk on that so it must be cool."*

## **Phase 2**

As anticipated, the older participants in Phase 2 were able to reflect more easily on what they considered possible rites of passage and their experiences with alcohol use during their transition from childhood/adolescence to adulthood. Thus they were able to offer suggestions as to what they believed worked well for them, and others around them, and what didn't.

Key themes that emerged from analysis of participants' responses are detailed below.

## Turning 18

There is no defining moment in becoming or feeling like an adult. Things that make them feel like adults are: working, having sex, legally meeting friends for drinks and having responsible drinking habits, voting, driving a car, not living at home, more experience with the world, financial independence and stability, awareness of others, better judgement, less influenced by others, less drug use and less excitement about the future.

*"Becoming an adult was a gradual thing... it happened over a long period of time. But I thought I was an adult at 18 cause I could legally drink, vote and drive a car." (male, 27y)*

*"When I am no longer financially dependent on my family and I have a few assets of my own [I will feel like an adult]. But I do feel more grown up in some ways...I can judge a situation better, I have more experience. " (female, 23y)*

*"When I am not so dependent on my family [I will feel like an adult]." (female, 18y)*

*"I used to drink much more and much stronger stuff [when I was younger], now I am happy with a couple of beers." (female, 28y)*

Celebrations that mark adulthood were: going to a pub or nightclub, going away with friends, having dinner with friends and family parties for 18th or 21s' birthday celebrations.

*"Alcohol did play a part but it wasn't the main focus. " (male, 27y) "The most exciting thing was going to see a 'girlie ' show." (male, 27y)*

*"I had a party with my family and lots of friends. The people who weren't yet 18 got really pissed and got sick and threw up and stuff. The people who were already 18 didn't get so drunk. It doesn't seem like such a big deal then." (female, 18y)*

*"At all my friends' 18<sup>th</sup> birthday parties there is a ritual of the birthday person having to scull, like a big glass of beer. " (female, 18y)*

## Rites of Passage

'rites of passage' that we have in Australia were identified as: finishing school, finishing university, moving out of home, first time having sex, getting drunk, being allowed to drink legally, not having to sit at the kids table, 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties, driving a car, having a boyfriend/girlfriend.

*"My 'rite of passage' was more about sex ". (female, 22y)*

*"I reckon Alcohol plays a big part in that 'rite of passage' feeling." (male, 27y)*

*"I didn't feel like I passed through a 'rite of passage' when I turned 18, more when I finished school and moved out of home. " (female, 23y)*

*"I have more freedom being 18. I can vote, I don't have to go to school, I can go to good concerts. " (female, 18y)*

*"It is expected of you. In Australia you are allowed to drink when you turn 18, so you must do it." (female, 18y)*

Australia is too individualistic to have one formalised 'rite of passage' for passing into adulthood.

*"Oh, I hate that... 'rites of passage' is so new age, hippie kind of crap." (female, 18y)*

*"There is too much variation in Australia in how people pass into adulthood... it's not very relevant...we live in such an individualistic society." (female, 18y)*



No one had any real ideas what we could consider introducing as a formal 'rite of passage' for passing into adulthood.

## Perceptions and Experiences of Alcohol

The positive aspects of using alcohol were seen as: a social lubricant, a relaxant, fun, opens one up to different ideas and events, puts one socially on a level playing field with parents, tastes good and compliments food, creates a divide between under 18s and over 18s at events like schoolies.

*"I like alcohol, it helps me relax. I feel less inhibited and more open to new ideas and things." (female, 23y)*

*"Drinking is fun. It 's good to loosen up." (male, 27y)*

The negative aspects of using alcohol were seen as: having less inhibitions and doing stupid things, long term health effects, effects on moods, lack of trust around drunken people, lack of control, getting into fights and trouble with police, father vs mate, clouds judgement, being extreme, getting sick, driving under the influence of alcohol, drunken pedestrians, less likely to say no to peer pressure, stops creativity, works to artificially release inhibitions.

*"The first time I got drunk was when I was 17...I hated that feeling of being out of control." (female, 22y)*

*"Well...getting into fights and in trouble with the police, was a negative [of alcohol use]."  
(male, 27y)*

*"When I'm pissed I can act like an asshole ... it does cloud my judgement." (female, 25y)*

*"I feel like most people are influenced by peer pressure. I reckon it takes away their choice of saying 'no'." (male, 18y)*

## Introduction to Alcohol

Participants were introduced to alcohol between 12 and 16 years old. Some were introduced by friends and some by family.

*"The way my family get together is to drink together, but they never drank to get pissed."  
(female, 22y)*

*"We would get small alcoholic drinks with dinner from about when I was 12. When I got older I pushed the limits with friends until I threw up. From there I worked out a happy medium." (male, 27y)*

*"I first tried alcohol when I was 15, at a friends place. My friend's mother wasn't there but she knew we were drinking and was OK about it. I drank too much, got sick and passed out." (female, 23y)*

*"I first drank with friends when I was about 16. My parents knew that I was drinking but I didn't drink with them until I was 18." (female, 25y)*

*"I started drinking with friends when I was about 13 or 14. When I was a bit older some of my friends parents were cool about us drinking at their place. I definitely didn't drink with my own parents until I was 18, but that still feels uncomfortable." (female, 28y)*

*"We were always offered some wine with dinner, even when I was little. I've never really liked it." (male, 18y)*



Ideas for the safe introduction to alcohol were: in a safe environment that is under adult supervision, before others freedoms come in, particularly a drivers licence, family modelling of drinking in moderation, learning about alcohol and trying it through a course, encourage openness rather than creating a mystique to alcohol.

*"Alcohol [use] should be modelled as a relaxant and social lubricant rather than getting trashed for the sake of getting trashed." (female, 22y)*

*"Kids should get a sense of responsibility around alcohol and discover how it affects you before driving. I think there is a huge problem here...kids should be taught much earlier about alcohol. " (male, 27y)*

*"Alcohol should be introduced to kids before other freedoms come in." (female, 18y)*

*"Most Kids get their 'Ps' at about the same time they can start drinking which creates a dangerous combination. " (female, 18y)*

*"People should do a course to learn about it [alcohol] and try it. " (female, 18y)*

*"People should be introduced to alcohol at home, where there is a controlled situation, or with older friends who are responsible." (male, 27y)*

*"Kids need adult supervision "when they are first trying alcohol. They need to feel safe so they can find their limits." (female, 23y)*

*"I think we should be modelling moderation. We need to make it less exciting and secretive... more openness." (female, 28y)*

*"What about taking 10 year olds to the pub on a fieldtrip to watch people get shitfaced. " (female, 25y)*

*"Parents need to be aware that kids do drink and accept it." (female, 18y)*

## **Who Says Getting Drunk is good?**

Advertisements for alcohol were seen as very enticing.

*"... relaxing with beer for men, but ads for women are around harder drinks and it's more about getting drunk. " (female, 22y)*

## **General conclusions from Phases 1 & 2**

There was general agreement among participants from both Phase 1 and 2 that becoming an adult is a gradual thing and that turning 18 only celebrates the practical and legal changes in a young person's life. This time of change is usually marked through the recognition of turning 18 by family and/or friends and alcohol usually plays a part in this celebration.

All participants saw that there are both positive and negative aspects to using alcohol, and believe that there are more negatives than positives.

The age of introduction to alcohol varied between early childhood (within the family context) and 16, with more people being introduced to alcohol through family than through friends.

There was only a slight difference in male and female attitudes and this was about turning 18. Some males viewed females as being more concerned about turning 18 '...because of the sex thing.' Also some participants felt that more girls tend to have goals in place for when they turn 18. All participants did not hold these views as some people commented that they saw these differences as individual rather than gender specific.



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A trend based on the influence of different family's attitudes was noticed. If the family accepted a moderate use of alcohol as a part of their way of life and was open about it then the children seemed to show a healthier attitude toward alcohol. Most young people (but not all) used alcohol at times in socially unacceptable ways, i.e.; binge drinking, yet their overall attitude to alcohol seemed to be not one of rebellion and potential dependence.

It was commented upon by most participants that those under the age of 18 years used alcohol less safely and thoughtfully than those over 18 years of age. It was felt that in general behaviour improved once restrictions were lifted and alcohol was more readily available.

There were no significant differences between male and female views or between the views of people from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Several participants commented on the need for Australian culture to change in terms of not supporting a drink to get drunk mentality. All participants believe that there needs to be an earlier, safer, controlled and more practical introduction to alcohol for young people. This introduction needs to include parents being more open, supportive and trusting of their children.



## Discussion

The Rites, Rights and Responsibilities — Passage to Adulthood project was conceived as a pilot study to look at how young people from Newcastle, Australia experience a 'rite of passage' during their transition from childhood to adulthood at the age of 18 (the Australian legally recognised age of adulthood). The project also attempted to nut out whether there are 'rites of passage' that have the potential to be developed into formalised transition points between childhood/adolescence and adulthood. The study was informed by the knowledge that alcohol is extensively used within Australian society. It is also used, misused and abused (sometimes dangerously so) by young people (Chikritzhs & Pascal, 2004). The question therefore arose as to whether there are better ways to introduce young people to alcohol than those that are currently in place.

As a pilot study the sample was small but diverse and the authors believe that a cross section of young people within the greater Newcastle area was sampled. The participants raised some interesting points and it is these points around which the conclusions and recommendations are based.

### Rites of passage

The concept of a rite of passage to "adulthood" as a single event represented by the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was not generally accepted. Rather the responses from the participants would indicate that the path to adulthood is a complex interplay of factors and events occurring for young people around the ages of 17, 18 and 19 years of age. It was identified by the participants that Australian society is so varied and individualistic that one formal 'rite of passage' celebration to mark 'adulthood' would not be easily identifiable. One of the complexities obviating against a single rite of passage is the wide age range of students in their senior years of schools (some students reach 18 years of age 12 months before their peers).

It became apparent during the interviews that the participants had difficulty imagining alternative 'rites of passage' that would give them a sense of moving into the adult world and taking on adult responsibilities. The main marking of attaining 18 years and of formally moving from childhood to adulthood were through legally recognised rights, that is:

- obtaining a driver's licence
- being allowed to purchase and consume alcohol and cigarettes
- being able to vote.

"Getting your licence" and the consequent freedom of movement (generally achieved between 17 and 18 years of age) was frequently mentioned by participants as the first step in a series of hurdles in the attainment of adulthood.

It was widely recognised by participants that finishing school and completing the Higher School Certificate (in NSW) were markers for moving out of childhood. While many young people celebrate this event with a traditional "Schoolies Week" not all young people mark this time in the same manner. Other significant events such as getting a job and leaving home were cited as examples of behaviours that constituted being an adult but these events were not necessarily celebrated.



It was clear from participant responses that the 'rite of passage' of passing one's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was important as "an excuse for a party" with large gatherings of family and friends and presents being a welcome anticipation. Responses also indicated it was significant in terms of the quantity of alcohol often consumed at 18<sup>th</sup> birthday parties and that "sculling" and "getting pissed" were entrenched markers of a "successful 18<sup>th</sup>".

While alcohol consumption was recognized as an implicit part of many of the events occurring for young people around 17 -18 years of age, participants emphasized the fact that alcohol was encountered, consumed and experimented with long before the legal age of 18 was attained.

### **Alcohol and adulthood**

While alcohol is an intrinsic part of Australian culture its usage is not healthily modelled to children. The young people interviewed for this study were most perceptive regarding the double standards of many adults regarding alcohol use and were understandably cynical of the 'do as I say, not do as I do' stance of many parents regarding alcohol.

The hypocritical nature of many adults' alcohol-related behaviours and the hard line stance of the law were viewed very sceptically by the participants. Most felt that there needs to be a greater recognition by adults of the fact that alcohol is tried by a majority of young people well before they get to the legal age of alcohol consumption. The young people interviewed supported the idea of harm minimisation through a gradual introduction to alcohol with parent, school and authority support and monitoring. They felt that in such a way it might be possible to change the 'drink to get drunk' culture.

There was agreement between many of the projects findings and attitudes and the findings of other research carried out since 1998. There is an element of a 'rite of passage' in young people's transition from childhood to adulthood through celebrating the end of school and having more legal freedoms and alcohol is indeed an integral part of those celebrations. However, while alcohol is used by young people as a part of their ritual celebration this is not their first experience with using alcohol. The concern expressed by the young people themselves is that they are actually experimenting with alcohol well before they have any facts relating to its use and that in many cases they are not adequately taught about alcohol, how to use it and how not to abuse it. They are not learning from the wisdom of their elders at a realistic time.

From the project's findings it appears that there are a great number of factors that influence young people's consumption of alcohol. The most significant of these proved to be family attitudes and peer group influence. Participants identified several areas in which the trust and support of family and/or peers made a positive difference to the manner in which they consumed or participated in alcohol related events.

- When a young person felt trusted by his/her parents and where the subject of alcohol was not totally taboo, they are less likely to experiment with alcohol within an extremely dangerous situation.
- Young people prefer to drink in an environment where they feel safe and there is an adult available for an emergency.



- Young people are more likely to remove themselves from situations where they do not feel safe when they know they can call on parents and/or a trusted adult for assistance e.g. transport.
- Having a responsible and sober friend who would watch over the young person if he/she became heavily intoxicated.

The findings of this project upholds the common perception that young people in Australia do start to drink alcohol well before they reach 18 years of age and that a "drink to get drunk" culture persists among young people. The participants in this study mostly expressed dissatisfaction with and were openly dismissive of many current alcohol education programs, particularly those that failed to acknowledge the alcohol related behaviours of the young people themselves. (It should be noted here that discussing alcohol use within school settings can be extremely problematic given the mandatory reporting structures surrounding teachers in most Australian states.) This situation encourages the secretive nature of much of the early alcohol related experiences of young people and fails to provide or even encourage a safe environment in which young people could discuss good and bad experiences with alcohol and be given vital information about responding to crises involving alcohol.

The proscription of alcohol use prior to 18 appears to often have the opposite effect from the one intended by the law. This law is in place to prevent children and young people from using alcohol. The findings of this project concur with other studies, which indicate that the prohibition of alcohol brings secrecy and mystique to its use and leads to a more dangerous and uncontrolled style of drinking from young people. There is an element of challenge where young people want to 'thumb your nose' at authority by beating the restrictions imposed. In this situation young people tend to drink in unsafe environments, tend to binge or drink larger amounts when they have the chance, and have little education and experience around knowing their limits, dealing with alcohol responsibly and knowing what to do when a problem does arise.

Also of concern are the restrictions placed on teachers (due to mandatory reporting requirements) and the difficulties this poses in discussing alcohol use openly with young people. In NSW aspects of alcohol use are included in the Personal Development / Health / Physical Education curriculum however the effectiveness of the delivery of this part of the syllabus varies greatly from teacher to teacher and from school to school. The general finding from this study was that students learn little of particular use or relevance in these lessons. The one exception was a course at a PCYC mentioned by a participant and with which other participants agreed. The course not only gave information about the effect of alcohol on the body and brain, it also gave information about warning signs for heavy intoxication and how to assist a heavily intoxicated or unconscious person. It is of crucial importance that young people are undertaking education around alcohol in a place where they feel comfortable to discuss their experiences and thoughts.

Realistic programs that enhance young people's abilities and equip them with strategies to recognize unsafe situations and reduce potential harm while drinking are needed. For example, educating young people about the risks of alcohol poisoning, knowing how to manage someone who is drunk loses consciousness. Further, there needs to be an adult education program that informs adults of young people's attitudes to alcohol and how adults can best support young people in a realistic way.



In conclusion, this study found that within the greater Newcastle area most young people celebrate and formally mark the transition point of attaining the legal age of adulthood with family and/or friends. However, the young people interviewed did not see themselves as adults specifically at 18 years of age and the accompanying celebration tended to be more an acknowledgement, even a flaunting of the fact that individuals were now legally allowed to purchase and consume alcohol. Markers of attaining adulthood were more frequently linked to completing secondary education, getting a job and leaving home. Participants were unable to identify, or construct a single rite of passage that would serve as a public acknowledgment of adulthood. Alcohol was accepted as a large part of the celebrations occurring at the steps along the path to adulthood. Participants were very clear that because young people mostly begin encountering alcohol in their early teens there is a need for greater education around the effects of and coping with alcohol.

### **Recommendations**

As alcohol is such an accepted feature of many aspects of Australian life, the promotion of the responsible and "adult like" use of alcohol by government agencies and educators through various forms of media is to be commended. The results of this study would indicate that for many young people legally consuming alcohol and "being an adult" are actually two very different events. Perhaps more emphasis could be placed on the events leading to what young people view as the attainment of adulthood, along side the promotion of harm minimization and education for young people and their parents around the consumption of alcohol.

It is feasible to suggest that a more public acknowledgment of some of the markers of the process of attaining adulthood may assist in the development of a sense of responsibility around 'adult' behaviours for young people. Of course such events would need to be developed in close consultation with young people in order to ensure the event was valued and meaningful to them. Participants cited several milestones that they deemed important. These milestones may lend themselves to a more public acknowledgment and these could perhaps be developed as 'rites of passage' celebrations that include:

- Gaining a driver's license - High school assemblies or work place presentations could be used for presentation of driver competence certificates.
- Reaching the voting age – 'Certificates of adulthood' could be presented to young people for instance at school or in their workplace.
- As purchasing one's first 'legal' drink was mentioned as a significant event (more for the legality of it than the alcohol) there is the possibility of licensed premises providing some form of education for young people around responsible service and consumption of alcohol.
- Attending clubs and over-18 'gigs' is a freedom much anticipated by young people, once again educational programs run in conjunction with such venues may prove beneficial.
- Or, to encompass all these in one, a civil ceremony that acknowledges a young person reaching the crucial point of being accepted as an adult member of our society where all the freedoms and responsibilities that come with that are celebrated.

This study was necessarily restricted to taking a snapshot of a limited number of participants. The authors regard the findings presented here as illustrative rather than representative. The



views of more diverse ethnic groups, adults, parents and carers were not canvassed for this study. Neither culturally based rites of passage nor the efficacy of educational programs (either school or community based) were investigated. We believe that further investigation of the key themes emerging from the study should be addressed with a wider study. The key themes that arose are:

- Are there ways to celebrate turning 18 where alcohol is not a major factor?
- Are formalised 'rites of passage' relevant to Australian culture?
- Are there better ways to be introduced to alcohol than those currently in place (or not in place)?

It is therefore recommended that:

- A more extensive survey of young people's attitudes around the key themes (i.e. markers to adulthood and alcohol education) arising from this pilot study be undertaken. This should include data gathering of young people's preconceptions of alcohol use and how this does or doesn't match the reality of their first personal experience of using alcohol.
- A survey of parents/carers' attitudes to underage drinking and their associated behaviours be undertaken
- Partnerships are created to develop and run an alcohol education program that target parents, schools and young people. Such programs should be realistic and deal with: understanding alcohol and its effects and how to respond appropriately; how young people use it and the role and influence of parental attitudes and modelling of alcohol consumption has on young people.
- Easily accessible information be developed for young people around dealing with the effects of alcohol and the warning signs and actions to be taken in cases of severe intoxication. This could take the forms of wallet sized cards that are distributed in licensed premises.

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## Appendix 1

### ***Phase 1 - focus group questions***

What will be different when you are an adult?

How will you know when you are an adult?

How will you show other people that you are an adult?

What are some of the ways we celebrate when young people become adults?

Do you think you might celebrate differently with your friends to how you would celebrate with your family?

What part does alcohol play in becoming an adult?

### ***Introduce notion of rites of passage***

What are some of the key rites of passage in Newcastle? How safe are these activities?

What could be other rites of passage?

What part does alcohol play in rites of passage?

What are some of the positive and negative consequences of the role that alcohol plays in rites of passage?

How could young people be introduced to alcohol safely? Who? What? Where? Etc.





## Appendix 1

### ***Phase 2 - individual or small group interview questions***

Do you feel you are an adult?

How do you know you are an adult?

How do you show others that you are an adult? How does it feel inside to be an adult?

What has been different for you since becoming an adult? Was there a defining moment? Emotionally and legally?

What are some of the ways we celebrate when young people become adults? Did you celebrate becoming an adult? How?

How did your friends celebrate?

Were the celebrations different with your family than with your friends? Did alcohol play a part in these?

#### ***Introduce the notion of rites of passage***

Looking back would you regard that celebration as a 'rite of passage'? Or did you feel that you passed through a 'rite of passage' in any way? If not would you have liked to?

Do you see alcohol playing a role in 'rites of passage'?

Do you see other things being a 'rite of passage'?

If we had a 'rite of passage' ritual what would it look like?

What are some of the positive and negative consequences of the role that alcohol plays in 'rites of passage'?

When did you first become aware of alcohol?

Was alcohol introduced to you by your family or in some other way?

How could young people be introduced to alcohol safely? Who? What? Where? Etc

## **Rites, Rights and Responsibilities: an investigation of young people's views on alcohol and 'rites of passage'.**

### ***Executive Summary***

This evaluation has been commissioned by the Palais Youth Venue – Newcastle City Council (renamed 'The Loft' in 2006), to provide an independent review of the effectiveness of "*Rites, Rights and Responsibilities*" a pilot project that sought to investigate how, when and where young people in Newcastle were introduced to alcohol.

In 2005 the Palais Youth Venue – Newcastle City Council received funding from the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF) to conduct the pilot project. The topic the project team wished to investigate was whether alcohol formed part of a rite of passage from youth to adult hood. If this were true, were there any other rites that could be developed to replace this ritual to minimize the harm alcohol caused young people during this time? The research team was particularly interested to hear the views and experiences of young people in transition from childhood to adulthood.

In preparing this evaluation report we have given consideration to the following points:

- Was the project team properly constituted?
- Was the project informed by relevant and current research?
- Was the methodology used to conduct the investigation valid?
- Was the methodology selected properly executed?
- Was the project plan followed?
- If not, were there any extenuating circumstances that prevented the project team completing the project as planned?
- Are the research findings valid?

After considering all these factors our conclusion is that: the project team did consist of qualified, competent and experienced researchers; the investigation and framework of the research was informed by recently published and relevant literature; the methodology was appropriate and properly executed; and the findings may be indicative of genuine attitudes and behaviours amongst the population and these are worthy of further research.

However, as the researchers themselves point out, the study involved a very small sample size and was not large enough to draw any definitive conclusions. The focus groups also lacked diversity and some experienced difficulties engaging the participants. To overcome these limitations the research needs to be significantly expanded to achieve any statistical validity.

We also found that the research team did not follow the specified project plan, however, in our view there were acceptable extenuating circumstances which explain their decision to deviate from the plan. These points are explored further below.

### ***Qualified and experienced project team***

The Palais Youth Venue commissioned the Faculty of Health at the University of Newcastle to undertake the research via the Faculty's Boys In Schools Program (BISP) of The Family Action Centre (FAC). BISP team Leader Victoria Clay conducted the research along with

researcher Janine Bendit. The FAC has more than 15 years experience in strengthening "families and communities by developing and implementing programs, undertaking research and training, and creating models of practice that promote sustainability, social justice and community leadership."<sup>1</sup>

### **Victoria Clay**

Victoria Clay (M (Ed) Psych, BA, Dip Ed) is a qualified teacher and registered psychologist with over 20 years' experience in education. She is currently employed by the University of Newcastle. She is the co-author, with Deborah Hartman, of *Boys and Families: Literacy Strengths Resources* and co-authored the *Resilience Identification Resources* and has experience researching and working with young people, particularly young males.

### **Janine Bendit**

Janine Bendit has a Graduate Diploma in Education and certificates in Welfare Work and Relationship Counselling. She currently works as a part-time school teacher in NSW public education working with students who are learning English as a second language, and as a part-time researcher at the Family Action Centre at Newcastle University. In addition to having taught children, youth and adults in Drama and English acquisition, Janine has worked as a relationship counsellor, a community support worker and is an active advocate for environmental issues. She has worked collaboratively on projects carried out by the Boys in Schools Program at the Family Action Centre predominantly on whether there are differences, and what these differences may be, between how boys and girls are taught within the education system.

Both Janine and Victoria are qualified researchers with many years of experience working in the area of social and education research. They are eminently qualified to carry out this research and at all times during the pilot they were responsible for the discussion groups.

### **Literature review**

Prior to commencing the project a literature review of recent Australian research on young people and their attitudes to alcohol was undertaken. This appears as a bibliography in their research report. This literature review reflects the paucity of available research on the relationship between alcohol consumption and rites of passage to adulthood. The available literature however did indicate that alcohol indeed played a big part in the lives of Australian young people and suggested a number of factors as to why this might be so.

What literature that was available however did validate the hypothesis that alcohol can be seen as a de facto rite of passage to adulthood in the absence of more formalized rituals. This provided a solid theoretical basis for the trial and enabled the research team to narrow the study to focus on the use of alcohol by young people as a rite of passage to adulthood. The trial then focused on teasing out the links between alcohol consumption and rites of passage and the potential for using and adapting such rites of passage to facilitate a change in attitudes and values as well as behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/>

## ***Research methodology***

Given the limited nature of the funding for the project, a longitudinal study and/or a largescale survey of large numbers of young people were impractical. Given that the study also sought to interrogate attitudes, values and behaviours, the research team, in consultation with staff from the Palais/Loft, chose to undertake a qualitative investigation via a number of targeted focus groups.

While quantitative methods such as surveys repeatedly identify gaps between knowledge and behaviour, only qualitative methods, such as focus groups, can explain why these gaps occur.\* Focus groups are useful because they do not discriminate between people who do not read and write and they encourage responses from those who may be reluctant to speak or feel they have nothing to say. Focus groups specifically use group interaction as part of the method. Group work helps researchers tap into a variety of communication styles, such as jokes, teasing, body language etc that may shed more light on attitudes to a particular topic and that might not be available through a one on one interview or via a written questionnaire. Everyday forms of communication can tell much about what people think or experience about a particular issue. The down side of such methods is that group norms may inhibit the articulation of dissenting views and the presence of many participants may compromise the perception of the confidentiality of the information gathered. But group work is particularly useful because group participants can actively facilitate the discussion of otherwise taboo subject matters.

Most focus groups use a theoretical sampling model where participants are selected on the basis that they represent a sample of the total population in question or to test a particular hypothesis. Researchers often stress that achieving a diverse sample group is important.

In our view, because the research team sought to explore in detail the attitudes and experience of young people and their use of alcohol, a focus group was an appropriate method to use to conduct this research. For young people under the age of 18 the use of alcohol and their attendant behaviours under the influence of alcohol are taboo topics because of legal and family prohibitions. The use of groups emboldens the participants to share details and explore topics that they might not otherwise discuss. Because the researchers were interested in how alcohol might play a role in a rite of passage ritual for young people it was important to understand as much as possible about what motivates the behaviour and attitudes of young people.

## ***Research execution***

In **Phase I** the researchers recruited a focus group of 8 young people under the age of 18 from youth groups in the Newcastle area. This process was random in so far as no attempt was made to include or exclude any individuals. All who presented for the focus group were included. A comfortable environment was created and refreshments were provided to ease any anxiety and facilitate easy interaction between the participants. These young people came from a variety of backgrounds and were fairly evenly split by gender. No remuneration was offered to any group member in return for their participation and so this issue did not introduce any bias into their response.

Researchers who employ focus groups generally aim for a group size of between 4 and eight members, so this was a good size of group.

The project plan called for a focus group of indigenous young people to reflect not only the diversity of the youth demographic but also in recognition of the problems caused by alcohol in the Aboriginal community. This focus group was organized around a project which the Palais/Loft had been running. The age group of this group was younger than the first. In

addition issues of "shame" and the natural reticence of the focus group members meant that this focus group did not elicit a great deal of information which would contribute to the investigation.

The relative failure of this group caused the research team and the Palais/Loft team to re-visit the investigation process. In an attempt to get a diversity of voices from across the community the researchers also recruited a second focus group of eight young indigenous people from indigenous youth services. This group was not productive and efforts to illicit discussions were abandoned.

In discussions with staff from the Palais/Loft it became apparent that the choice of a demographic within the age range of young people who would be accessing alcohol (mostly illegally) for the first time was problematical in terms of the aims of the project. It was agreed amongst the research team and the reference group that the age group while providing first hand experiences, were unable to simultaneously reflect upon those experiences to evaluate those experiences in terms of ritual progressions.

In **Phase II** the researchers recruited a second focus group of eight young people aged between 21 and 28. This group was did not achieve a gender balance with only one male participant.

The focus group was led through a series of prescribed questions designed to elicit discussion and group interaction. Unlike the focus groups in Phase 1, Phase II focus group discussions were videotaped and transcribed to allow critical evaluation and review of the responses, and particularly the subtext of discussion interaction.

### Variations from the project plan

The research team varied its plan to implement the research in the following ways:

- The focus group of indigenous young people under the age of 18 was abandoned;
- After forming a group of 8 young people under the age of 18 for **Phase 1** the team targeted young people aged 18 — 28 for **Phase II**;
- The research team did not conduct follow-up interviews with parents of the focus groups in **Phase II**;
- There were no one-to-one interviews with focus group participants.

The focus group with indigenous young people was devised to balance the lack of diversity of the first focus group. It was hoped to gather the views of a distinct and separate population and compare the results with the main population. This group was abandoned because of the lack of interaction between the participants and the researchers. While indigenous youth workers who normally work with the indigenous young people were present, this was not enough to ensure an environment where the indigenous young people felt comfortable to discuss their views. Working with such an inhibited group takes time to build trust and engagement with the project. The project team felt they did not have this time and so abandoned the research with this group. The idea to engage this group was a worthy one; however, future research efforts need to plan for more trust and confidence building activities prior to the actual focus group interviews. Using interviewers who are known to the participants may be another way of dealing with this issue.

The reason given by the research team for changing the strategy and recruiting a new focus group of older participants was that participants in the younger focus group were not able to reflect on the issue of 'coming-of-age' or 'rite-of-passage' rituals and symbolism. This was thought to be because of their close proximity to the experience and a lack of maturity to

effectively articulate what the experience meant to them. As this issue was central to the research project the team decided to vary to the project and interview a group from a slightly older age range who would be better able to reflect on these issues.

The reason for abandoning the interviews with parents of the focus group from **Phase 1** was because of the change of strategy to concentrate on an older group of young people. Conducting a second focus group took up the time allotted to interviewing parents. The research team also felt that interviewing parents of the older group was not appropriate because the issue was not an immediate one for the parents given that many years had passed since the events referred to.

The reason given by the research team for abandoning one-to-one interviews was again because of lack of time and also due to the better quality of responses from the participants in the older group. The researchers believed the responses they had collected were indicative of the main issues and felt able to make recommendations for further action and follow-up based on these responses.

### ***Validity of the findings***

The sample size selected for the focus group is very small and it is not possible based on this size to draw any statistically valid conclusions. However, that being the case, the responses from the participants are genuine and well considered and do indicate real areas for further exploration.

In particular, the observation that:

- while alcohol did play a part in formal celebrations of legally becoming an adult it was one of many symbols of adulthood;
- a young persons first experience with alcohol is between the age of early childhood and sixteen, at least two years before they are legally able to do so and some times many more;
- an early introduction to alcohol within the family context and following the example of positive parental modelling of alcohol consumption positively influenced attitudes to alcohol and health;
- The need for a more practical and controlled introduction to alcohol from a younger age to demystify alcohol and better educate young people about the effects of alcohol. The alcohol education course run by the PCYC, attended by some of the project participants, was regarded favourably by the participants and would be a good model to evaluate and potentially expand.

We believe the findings are valid and are worthy of further research.

### ***References***

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