

**GENDER EQUALITY
CONSULTATION SUBMISSION
October 2016**

About VicSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing students in Victoria. The VicSRC's vision is a world where all children and young people have access to education that is student-led, student driven and student focussed. The organisation exists to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET).

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VicSRC Vision

A world where all students have access to education that is student-led, student-driven and student-focused.

VicSRC Mission

The VicSRC is the peak body representing school aged students in Victoria. We strive for a world where all learners have access to education that is student-led, student-driven and student-focussed. We exist to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). The VicSRC provides resources, events, teacher professional development, and support to principals, teachers and students.

Student Voice

The Andrews' Government wants Victoria to be the Education State by building an education system that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage. Student voice is a key part of this because an in-depth understanding of students helps schools develop tailored solutions to meet their needs.

When schools value student voice, it helps students feel accepted within the learning environment and by the school. When there is genuine engagement with student voice it empowers students to take ownership of their own learning and to identify and implement solutions to issue they face.

Student participation in decision-making must play a central role in education because it is a human right, because it assists individuals' learning and growth, and because it informs and supports improvement in education for all. When schools actively engage student voice it ensures students are more engaged with their education, and less likely to become excluded from the education system.

A Gender Equality Strategy for Victoria

In March 2016, in response to the announcement of a Gender Equality Strategy for Victoria, we contributed to the [Youth Affairs Council of Victoria submission](#) about promoting gender equality amongst young people. This submission focused on violence prevention, education, employment, and mental and sexual health, and the need for programming and policy development designed specifically to support and empower young women.¹ We continue to advocate for the recommendations of our original paper.

In August 2016, the Victorian Government released a discussion paper to inform the Gender Equality Strategy, which identified six priority themes for action.

In this submission Victorian students have chosen to focus on: **education and leadership**.

Education

Already-existing systems or programs that challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in education:

Those that break stereotypes:

- 'Like a Girl' – series of video campaigns
- Young Vagabond – magazine featuring stories of young women pursuing their “passions, pushing boundaries and realising their dreams”
- UBS Young Women’s Leadership Academy – nation-wide camp for selected school-aged girls to learn about careers in business, finance and entrepreneurship

¹ We use the term ‘young women’ to refer to anyone aged 12-25 who identifies as a young woman. We also recognise that gender-based discrimination, exclusion and violence affects other young people with a range of gender identities – and that gender-diverse young people show particular strengths in resilience and advocacy for social change. We believe a gender equality strategy must work to prevent and address all forms of gender-based injustice. We do not have the scope to address all relevant issues here, but we acknowledge them wherever possible and would welcome the opportunity to discuss them further. See also YACVic’s work in coordinating the HEY Project and supporting Safe Schools Coalition Victoria.

- Respectful relationships program in health for gender stereotypes - participated in activities outlining stereotypes and asked us how we can change this in our society and future generations
- An engineering camp for females targeted at school-age girls - introducing girls who are interested in the engineering field to different workshops etc to help break down the gender barrier for engineering (that is a predominantly male occupation)
- Women in IT/STEM days – promoting women in science. However, this isn't very effective as there are no discussions and it is often a one-off event. Students only attend for food
- Wellbeing days – discussed gender equality issues, however it's still a one-day program and not effective

Those that promote gender equality in education (with a poverty/developing country focus):

- 'Because I am a Girl' by Plan International – sponsor girls
- 'Do It In A Dress' by One Girl – also breaks stereotypes

Initiatives and strategies that would make the most critical difference in gender equality within education:

- Start targeting girls from a younger age (e.g. early childhood or lower primary) – promote open discussions surrounding gender equality. High school is too late as gender stereotypes have already been established by this age.
- Have a particular focus on young people too and ensure strategies are supported with adequate funding.
- More support for how schools should approach gender equality as there is a discrepancy on how it is being taught in schools. For example, sex education can be a very hit and miss thing between schools and lacks consistency.
- Students learn from peers just as much as schools– utilise this through developing peer-mentoring programs.

- A consistent approach when promoting gender equality so message is continually reinforced – not just one-off days, but an ongoing program (e.g. a week-long camp).
- More science in primary school to promote women being in science from young age.
- Campaigns and workshops that run for a period of time that expose inequality among genders.
- Sport clubs for all genders.
- Ensuring that institutions, especially starting at the bottom with kindergartens, don't facilitate detrimental stereotypes that depict females as inferior or unable to do certain things.
- An open mind.
- Provide numerous programs that introduce girls to opportunities they may not consider due to considering it a male occupation. In the same way, boys should be encouraged to pursue occupations that some may consider 'females' (e.g. nursing) so programs to introduce guys to such occupations should be provided as well. Also, they should work on integrating the genders more in programs, school life, community etc - by segregating, there's more opportunity for gender inequality and stereotypes to develop.

Active student engagement and decision-making in STEM

We support equitable engagement of young women in STEM subjects. However, we would also observe that when young people have been consulted about their own educational experiences they commonly raise concerns about certain subjects and study / career pathways being privileged over others. It is common for students to reflect that they would like to take part in a schooling system where many diverse areas of study and training are offered and valued equally, in areas including arts and vocational education and training.

Students have stated:

'When we are involved in making decisions about our learning, we are more likely to stay at school and to do better. We also perform better at school

*when we are able to choose pathways, subjects and tasks that are meaningful and relevant to us. This kind of student-centred learning, which focuses on our needs rather than delivering set knowledge, helps us become more confident, adaptable, effective learners ... All academic and vocational pathways including VET, VCAL and VCE are important and should be equally valued as useful qualifications in preparation for life beyond school.*ⁱ

Students show higher levels of confidence and achievement when they can take part in meaningful decision-making about their learning and choose pathways, subjects and tasks that are relevant to them. Student engagement can also be strengthened by supporting students and teachers to work together in constructive and respectful environments to reflect on classroom practice and develop teaching approaches which are responsive to a diversity of learning styles.ⁱⁱ

- We submit that any initiatives to strengthen young women’s participation in STEM subjects should be student-led, and informed by the targets identified by VicSRC for strengthening student engagement.
- The Gender Equality Strategy could provide new support for key stakeholders like VicSRC to work with students to foster gender equality in traditionally male-dominated areas of study, SRC, and student leadership programs.
- There are several approaches put forward by VicSRC which might be usefully adapted to promote gender equality in educational settings. These include empowering students to become ‘technology leaders’ within their schools; supporting student action teams to research and recommend solutions to school problems; and supporting student-led sustainability movements, as we will discuss below.

Tech Schools: new opportunities for equitable engagement

The Victorian Government has a particular opportunity to promote a more equitable culture within STEM settings through the delivery of the new Tech School model. The Tech Schools will operate in ten Victorian communities. They will be hosted on university and TAFE campuses, and will focus on ‘leading-edge technology,

discovery and innovation.’ Tech Schools will provide discovery and ‘taster’ programs for Years 7 to 10 students, enrichment and extension courses, and potentially VET courses for Years 11 and 12. These options will be open to students from participating schools in the area. Tech schools are also intended to be learning centres for the wider community.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Gender Equality Strategy could play a useful role here by supporting the advocacy of VicSRC to embed meaningful student voice and ‘two-way’ youth participation in the new Tech School model – and by providing additional resourcing and expertise where necessary to ensure equitable gender representation within this approach. (For details, see ‘Recommendations’.)

Since Tech Schools are also intended to be learning settings for the wider community, we suggest that the Gender Equality Strategy could help facilitate partnerships between Tech Schools, VET or flexible learning providers and relevant community stakeholders to develop initiatives which use the resources of Tech Schools to help promote educational engagement, employment prospects and community connections amongst disadvantaged and marginalised young women – for example through holiday programs, taster courses and targeted VET initiatives.

Student-led sustainability initiatives

Another way the education system might promote young women’s engagement in traditionally male-dominated areas of study, while also benefitting the wider community, is through engaging and meaningful sustainability initiatives.

Over ten years of VicSRC Congresses, student leaders from around Victoria have consistently identified the importance of environmental issues. Students have researched school conservation projects and sustainable school management (e.g. energy and water efficiency, food gardens, native vegetation, recycling, school design and travel plans), and made recommendations for how the Victorian Government could support schools to become more sustainable. Sustainable schools provide opportunities for innovative and meaningful learning by linking real-world issues with practical skills, scientific knowledge, critical thinking, social and

moral development, nutritional knowledge, and pride in one's community. VicSRC have also noted that student-led sustainability work helps students see the value of their own contributions and their own potential as community leaders and educators.^{iv}

We suggest that high quality sustainability education could help to bridge the gap between STEM (and some vocational) subjects which are traditionally dominated by young men, and the fields of student leadership, community volunteering and social activism, where young women are often more prominent participants. When sustainability initiatives are genuinely student-led, they also help to build young women's leadership capacities.

Leadership

Already-existing systems or programs that challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in leadership:

- Mentoring programs – having a female role model is beneficial for both boys and girls to learn that women have the same potential and can achieve as much as men can, if not more

Initiatives and strategies that would make the most critical difference in gender equality within leadership:

- Influential campaigns - breaking down gender barriers and stereotypes by educating females/males that there aren't limitations, above all ensuring that striving for a gender equality in an occupation or aspect of life is done by both genders (e.g in order to break down gender barriers for females entering the engineering occupation, males of that industry must be open to educating and accepting them). Can be done through:
 - ✓ TV advertisements
 - ✓ Radio campaigns
 - ✓ Specific workshops and programs for school-aged students and those starting out in their chosen careers

- ✓ Speakers to events to talk about the issue
- Be open-minded and allow everybody to not be held back by stereotypes; particularly by calling it out when it occurs - take note of when they occur and work together to bring people against the issues
- Acknowledging women appropriately for their achievements and successes
 - ✓ Promote it through mass media to send the message that it is possible for women to achieve great things
- Creating a culture of diversity within workplaces, school environment, etc
- Allocating quotas, in particular within executive positions – it is very effective because it gives women opportunities to move forward. Also encourages organisations to engage in discussions surrounding gender equality
- Promote equal pay as a vital step in reducing the Gender Pay Gap

ⁱ Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC), 'VicSRC Policy Platform: Snapshot Version', June 2016

ⁱⁱ B.J. Babcock, 'Student voice: a study of the impact of increased student voice on student perception of learning environment', Doctorate of Education dissertation, Olivet Nazarene University, 2011, viewed 21 May 2013, http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=edd_diss Lerin 2006; R. Black, 'Overcoming disadvantage through the innovative classroom', paper presented at the Australian Association of Researchers in Education Conference, Adelaide, viewed 29 March 2016, http://www.academia.edu/978586/Overcoming_Disadvantage_through_the_Innovative_Classroom_2006_, 2006, p. 5; M. Fielding, 'Leadership, radical student engagement and the necessity of person-centred education' *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 9 (4), 2006; V. Robinson, *Student-centered leadership*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2011; F. Vavrus, M. Thomas and Bartlett, *Ensuring Quality by attending to inquiry: learner-centered pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa*, International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, UNESCO, Addis Ababa, 2011. Viewed 30 March 2016, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002160/216063e.pdf>; S. Yonezawa, L. McClure and M. Jones, *Personalization in schools: the students at the centre series*, Jobs for the Future, 2012. Viewed 29 March 2016.

https://create.ucsd.edu/_files/publications/Personalization%20in%20Schools.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Victorian Government, 'Tech Schools: A Guide for Your School Community', Melbourne, 2015

^{iv} VicSRC, 'VicSRC Policy Platform', June 2016, written by Anna Drummond and Jen Rose under instruction from the VicSRC. Also Department for Children, Schools and Families (UK), *Evidence of impact of Sustainable Schools*, 2010. Viewed 28 March 2016, <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/00344-2010BKT-EN.pdf>