



The Whitlam Institute 2011  
*What Matters?* Competition:

# It's Time To Write

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## Winning Entries

Proudly presented by:

**Whitlam Institute**  
WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

  
University of  
Western Sydney  
Bringing knowledge to life

**Officeworks** 



Margaret Whitlam AO and Yalda Hakim, SBS Dateline Presenter at the Awards Ceremony



Whitlam

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Professor Janice Reid AM

## Message from the Vice-Chancellor

This year's *What Matters?* awards ceremony was held on Thursday August 4. The cold and rain of the preceding weeks had given way to a sunny, almost balmy mid-winter's day.

We arrived in the afternoon to a gently festive mood. The eight award-winning students had been together throughout the day: taking a tour of the National Archives' exhibition, *Shell-Shocked: Australia After Armistice*, which the Whitlam Institute was presenting on campus; participating in a creative writing workshop; and learning the media ropes with interviews and photo-shoots for a TVS program on the 2011 competition.

A number of their parents and a grandparent or two had dropped them off in the morning. Some spent the day strolling round our beautiful Parramatta campus (a significant historical precinct and one of Sydney's more treasured secrets) or enjoying restful chats on the verandahs and under the trees. They then joined the students for morning tea and lunch at the Whitlam Institute and to hear the students present the stories they had written that morning.

The awards ceremony itself was also special, being held in the newly re-opened west wing of the Female Orphan School which is approaching the bicentenary of its construction. The function space in this strikingly restored building filled with the students' families, teachers and principals and other guests.

The stars of the day, in addition to the award-winning students, were two most impressive women: Mrs Margaret Whitlam and Ms Yalda Hakim. Magnificent as always, Margaret Whitlam created a buzz of recognition and affection amongst the students and, it has to be said, those a little older as well. Yalda Hakim who is only in her twenties, is a foreign correspondent, co-host of the SBS Dateline program and linguist, a wonderful role model for the students for her determination, hard work, inquiring intellect and presence which have brought her to the notice of prime time television audiences across Australia. Her personal warmth and her words touched us all.

The *What Matters?* awards ceremony is one of the highlights of our year. Infusing this simple competition is a sense of our common humanity and an optimism that transcends the concerns and the sometimes disturbing matters that these young students canvass so insightfully and elegantly in their essays.

There was something quite moving about this year's gathering and I'm sure most people in the room left thinking our country is going to be in good hands in the years to come.

Read these young Australians' essays and you'll understand what I mean.

**Professor Janice Reid AM**  
Vice-Chancellor  
University of Western Sydney

# What Matters? 2011 Foreword

## Director, Whitlam Institute

Each year the *What Matters?* competition poses the same question to students in years 5 to 12 across NSW and the ACT: just tell us what matters to you in 400-600 words. That's it.

Yet each year the entries we receive are original and fresh. Even when covering the same themes, there is a nuance or a thought that strikes a fresh chord; a turn of phrase that captures something a little different; an experience or a very personal insight that gives the issue a different shade or hue.

And so it was again in 2011.

Among the 1800 young people who submitted entries this year, there was a tendency to be more journalistic in their approach with their writing recording events or providing mini-commentaries rather than adopting a more intimate, personal narrative. You will find something of that in the winning entries assembled in this booklet.

These winning entries cover a broad terrain of subject and style: same-sex marriage; Aboriginal rights; fast food; consumerism, poverty and happiness; Wikileaks; the information explosion. They are thoughtful, insightful, and in several cases beautifully crafted pieces of writing.

It is the writing and the insights from so many young people this simple essay competition offers which attracts such important and such loyal support for *What Matters?*

This is most evident in our Patron, Hugh Mackay, and illustrious judging panel, all of whom keep coming back: *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist and author, Andrew West; crime writer and children's author Jennifer Rowe (aka Emily Rodda); Julie Hare, an editor and journalist at *The Australian*; and Eric Brace from the Literacy and Numeracy Foundation.

Our long-standing sponsor, Officeworks, has again provided a range of support: funding, prizes; and in-kind support for printing and other needs. Officeworks have been instrumental in the growth and development of the competition in recent years and we very much looking forward to continuing to work together.

The Inspire Foundation/ReachOut have also returned with the offer of a special prize for the winner of the year 11/12 category.

The extraordinary growth of this competition in recent years brings with it a number of challenges: financial and practical. We've been particularly fortunate in being granted special funding by the University of Western Sydney (UWS) to meet these demands and to support the continued growth of the *What Matters?* competition. This support is testimony to the importance UWS itself places on encouraging young people to speak up and engage with the issues of the day.

The *What Matters?* competition is inspired by Gough Whitlam's determination to involve the people of Australia in shaping our country's future. His continued interest and support at 95 is greatly valued by all of us as is the presence of Mrs Margaret Whitlam as our Guest of Honour at the annual awards ceremony.

As you read the essays in this booklet, I've no doubt you'll appreciate just why we all think *What Matters?* really is something pretty special.

Eric Sidoti  
Director  
Whitlam Institute  
within the University of Western Sydney

# Message from Officeworks: *What Matters?* 2011 Sponsor

On behalf of everyone at Officeworks, I would like to congratulate the 2011 winners and entrants of the *What Matters?* competition. The quality of the essays was truly astounding and a pleasure to read, and the spectrum of subjects covered never ceases to amaze.

From childhood obesity and farming practices, to refugees and WikiLeaks, it is inspiring to see such a depth of thought and feeling amongst our future leaders.

We would like to commend the hundreds of school children who took the time to write down 'What Matters' to them. The enthusiasm and passion that all students displayed in their submissions is truly an inspiration to us all.

Officeworks is extremely proud of its association with the Whitlam Institute, and is honoured to be involved in an initiative which helps foster a new generation of creative thinkers.

Mark Ward  
Managing Director  
Officeworks



# *What Matters?* 2011 Officeworks School Prizes

Thanks to the generous support of Officeworks, all schools participating in the competition went into the draw for a chance to win one of five Officeworks vouchers valued at \$1000 each.

The winning schools in 2011 were:

Queenwood School for Girls  
St Ives North Public School  
Ravenswood School for Girls  
Karabar High School  
Killara High School

# Message from ReachOut.com

The team at ReachOut.com would like to thank all the participants of the 2011 *What Matters?* Competition. ReachOut.com is a service of the Inspire Foundation – helping young people live happier lives. For more information on how to get involved in our work, visit our new 'Get Involved' section on our website, which is full of opportunities to contribute to the work of ReachOut.com, and ways you can become part of our community. You can look through our feature stories to find out what other young people are doing with us around Australia to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people. We also have a bunch of valuable resources that you can refer to at any time, to help you get involved in ReachOut.com's work.

We would like to congratulate the overall winner of the year 11/12 category MADELEINE BOXALL who will receive the opportunity to create paid content with ReachOut.com as part of our 2012 ReachOut Reporters program. She will join 15 other talented young people from all over Australia for a three day multi-media training program in Sydney to learn how to make content for ReachOut.com.



# What Matters? Patron

Hugh Mackay

It is no exaggeration to say that, each year, reading a selection of the entries for the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters?* essay competition is a source of both inspiration and encouragement.

What's inspiring is your willingness, as young writers, to tackle noble and lofty themes; to be courageous enough to 'tell it like it is'; to be free of cynicism and hypocrisy (those twin cancers that afflict many people as they grow older).

And what's encouraging is that there is such a deep pool of writing talent out there, waiting to be tapped. I have no doubt we shall be hearing more from many of you, and I hope some of you, at least, will give serious thought to the idea of becoming professional writers, whether as journalists, novelists, screenwriters, poets, or bloggers.

To all of you I'd say: *keep writing!* Write something every day; keep a journal of jottings and ideas; keep a scrapbook of things other people have written that move or provoke you. Daily practice is as crucial in writing as it is in sport or playing a musical instrument.

And what will you write about?

Having read your work, I think you already know. All the topics covered by this year's young writers point to a keen appreciation of what matters.

It's so easy to identify what *doesn't* matter, isn't it? As long as you're not struggling with poverty, wealth and possessions don't matter. Power doesn't matter, because our greatest impact on the society we live in is through our personal encounters with other people, not through the positions of power we may hold. (Of course, some people do use positions of power to work for the common good, but seeking power for its own sake can easily corrupt us, so it's a dangerous goal to aim for.)

This may sound strange, but the future doesn't matter, either. Of course it matters in one way, as a reference point, but there's a risk that we can focus so much on the future that we lose sight of how to get there. The pathway to the future is being determined by the way we live today, so anyone who is concerned about our – or the planet's – future needs to live even more intensely in the moment. Our actions, right now, are shaping the kind of society we will become.

Here's another thing that doesn't matter: your personal happiness. We live in a society that glorifies the pursuit of happiness as if happiness is our natural state and we're selling ourselves short if we settle for less. The truth is that an authentically *human* life, is going to expose us to the full range of human emotions – and we would do well to embrace each of them as they come, and learn what they have to teach us. In any case, how would we know what happiness is if we hadn't also experienced sadness, or disappointment, or failure?

Wholeness is what matters; not happiness.

In the end, what matters most is how we handle our personal relationships. That's why I believe it's possible to point to one underlying, unifying principle that matters more than any other. It's the principle that lies at the heart of almost all moral codes, and at the centre of most religious traditions.

I'm talking, of course, about the idea that we should always treat others the way we ourselves would like to be treated.

It's not a complicated idea, is it? In fact, if I gave you the task of coming up with a basic moral principle that, if universally applied, would make the world a better place – any moral principle you like – I'd be prepared to bet this is the one you'd finally come up with.

So the principle is easy to identify; applying it is a bit harder. Ask yourself: how *would* you like other people to treat you? I know the answer, and so do you, because we all want the same thing: to be treated with respect. None of us wants to be taken for granted. We all want to be taken seriously as the unique individuals we know ourselves to be. We all want to be appreciated, acknowledged, noticed and valued.

So if that's how we want to be treated, that's how we should be treating others.

Many of you have touched on this – directly or indirectly – in your writing, but I want to mention three of the most obvious signs that we are treating other people the way we ourselves would like to be treated.

First, *listen attentively*. Listening is a great gift because, when you're listening to someone – giving them your undivided attention – the message you're sending is that you take them seriously as a person. (And if you're not listening attentively, you're sending the opposite message.)

Second, *apologise sincerely*. We all mess things up sometimes; we all do the wrong thing sometimes; we all hurt or offend other people sometimes, even when we don't mean to. If someone hurts or offends you, what do you most want? An apology. So that's what we should be ready to give the people we've wronged – an immediate, sincere and unconditional apology.

Third, *forgive generously*. If you apologise to someone – if you know you have done the wrong thing by them – what do you most want? Their forgiveness. And that's what other people want from you, too. Forgiving is good for the person who forgives, and it's good for the person who is forgiven. (So why are we so reluctant to do it?)

Listening attentively, apologising sincerely and forgiving generously: these are the three great therapies of everyday life – the three things we most want from others and therefore the three things we should be most willing to give them, as well.

Our greatest challenge is to understand and accept each other. Writing – and reading what others have written – is one of the most beautiful and effective ways to achieve that.



Hugh Mackay

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Hugh Mackay is a psychologist, social researcher and author.

# 2011 Winning Entries

OVERALL WINNING ENTRY YEAR 11/12 WINNER	<b>Madeleine Boxall</b> St Catherine's School, Waverley 'People Discriminate, Love Does Not: Why Holding out on Same Sex Marriage is no Longer an Option'
YEAR 5/6 WINNER	<b>Katie Laithwaite</b> Abbotsleigh 'Aboriginal Justice'
YEAR 5/6 RUNNER-UP	<b>Owen Small</b> Crescent Head Public School 'Safety isn't Prison'
YEAR 7/8 WINNER	<b>Gillian Bartlett</b> Concord High School 'SHOULD the TRUTH go UNSAID?'
YEAR 7/8 RUNNER-UP	<b>Flynn Colby</b> Killarney Heights High School 'Tech Head Makes You Dead'
YEAR 9/10 WINNER	<b>Tom Davidson-McLeod</b> St. Mary's Cathedral College 'Lovin' What?'
YEAR 9/10 RUNNER-UP	<b>Krystina Batt</b> Queenwood School for Girls 'Multiculturalism anyone...?'
YEAR 11/12 RUNNER-UP	<b>Sarah Webster</b> Cecil Hills High School 'It's Time'

# 2011 Highly Commended

YEAR 5/6	<b>Alexander Maloof</b> Trinity Grammar Preparatory School 'What matters? It's a matter of respect'
YEAR 7/8	<b>Mashaal Hamayun</b> Sydney Girls High School 'Ignorance: Not A Bliss'
YEAR 7/8	<b>Christine Song</b> MLC School, Burwood 'My Personal Connection with Mozart'
YEAR 11/12	<b>Cassidy O'Sullivan</b> Tara Anglican School for Girls 'We All Need That Glimmer in our Eyes'



OVERALL COMPETITION WINNER AND YEAR 11/12 CATEGORY WINNER

**Madeleine Boxall, St Catherine's School, Waverley**

## People Discriminate, Love Does Not: Why Holding out on Same Sex Marriage is no Longer an Option

Marriage laws intend to unite a couple in a mutual and binding promise of love and fidelity. Over history, however, marriage has divided more than it has united. In nineteenth century England, marriage was restricted to one's own social sphere, reflecting a deeply embedded class divide. Until the 1960's American and Indigenous civil rights movement, laws against interracial marriage revealed a pervading racial prejudice. In 2011 Australia, same sex couples are deprived of their right to marriage, forced to settle for legally inferior *de facto* status or domestic registration. Marriage laws have become a litmus test to diagnose an ailing civil rights agenda. And Australia is in need of treatment.

The 2004 amendment to the 1961 *Federal Marriage Act* inserted six words into the definition of marriage that reflect Australia's pervading, persistent homophobia – '[marriage] is a union **between a man and a woman**'. So why has Australia left marriage equality standing at the altar, so to speak? The great questions of the same sex marriage debate are: what does marriage mean in 2011? Why is marriage reserved only for heterosexual couples?

In our increasingly agnostic society, marriage is less focused on religion and more on the legal protection it affords. Marriage has become a state institution. Moreover, the increasing number of *de facto* and single parents indicates that marriage is no longer simply a precursor to a family, as it once was.

However, this assumption forms the centre of the argument against same sex marriage; marriage is traditionally restricted to couples preparing for a family. Therefore, critics of same sex marriage contend, same sex couples do not apply. Same sex couples cannot conceive naturally. Undeniable fact. However, adoption, surrogacy and in vitro fertilisation – all viable options – enable same sex couples to create families. If couples that cannot naturally conceive should be deprived the right to marry, should we outlaw marriage for infertile or disabled couples?

Beyond conception, critics of same sex marriage suggest that children must have both a mother figure and a father figure to look up to in their early years. But a high incidence of divorce – around forty per cent, according to Relationships Australia – means that a mother plus a father does not necessarily equal a happy family. No parenting structure is perfect. The best any parent can offer is love and devotion, qualities that are not restricted to heterosexual couples.

But even if all same sex couples automatically made inferior parents, marriage cannot be granted or denied on a couple's suitability as parents. This is because marriage unites two people in love. It does not require children or a church. It does not discriminate.

But holding out on same sex marriage deepens a dangerous social divide between gay and heterosexual. In 2011, prejudice is quiet. And Australia's silence on the issue of same sex marriage speaks in volumes, sending an unmistakable, redoubtable message; being gay makes you different, inferior and abnormal. This kind of silent marital segregation harks back to pre civil rights movement America, as aptly put by Ellen DeGeneres, openly gay American talk show host, 'Telling us we can't get married, but can settle for a civil union is like a bus driver saying to a black schoolkid, 'I'll get you there if you insist, but you can sit at the back of the bus.'

The fundamental dividing issue is whether same sex and heterosexual couples are that different after all. The answer is surprising: no. Gay, lesbian and bisexual couples are neither dysfunctional nor inferior in working, learning, living and loving. Same sex couples fulfil the only true criteria of a marriage: love. Australia must take this opportunity to say 'I do' to same sex marriage or we will never leave behind our quiet, entrenched prejudice.



Madeleine Boxall

YEAR 5/6 WINNER

**Katie Laithwaite, Abbotsleigh**

## Aboriginal Justice

The flame flickered against the painted bodies as they gyrated around the Bora ring. Our brothers, the rock, soil and sand. Our sisters, every pretty bush, every shining star and every flame of tremendous beauty. Our ancestors, the ancient, watching over us as a Mother bird to its young; our spirit guardians. Our guardians, with their trunk as rough as the sheer rock face of a cliff. The leaves, as green as a shining emerald, formed a forest of amazing brilliance. The trees, the heart, mind and soul in the after life of a great spirit warrior; the crackling of a fire and its orange hazy glow, singing voices and graceful story telling. Everyone listens to the story, from the birds in their high perches down to the wombats; all are gathered next to the trees listening to how the world evolved.

Generations pass...

Over the horizon they came in enormous floating koorrns with billowing white clouds clinging to them. We watched in awe from our hiding places, confident of our safety. They had pale skin and strange coverings that hid their bodies. The visitors gave us rainbow coloured balls, making strange gestures towards our lands. Fences appeared and if we crossed them, big sticks shot out fire and the person fell with not a sign of life. Once trusting we became very wary of the unwelcome strangers and hoped they would not stay for long. Our hopes were dashed. Their dwellings of stone and wood dotted the shoreline. We heard the shrieks of our ancestors as more and more of the tribe disappeared leaving darkness and despair. The flame flickers around the deserted campfire as we mourn our brothers and sisters.

Generations pass...

The lamps flickered casting dancing shadows against the plain dormitory walls as we fell exhausted into bed after yet another day's appalling work. Many months before, forcefully taken from our families, we had come to a place of harshness and unkindness. Escape, stopped by dogs and fences, lead to punishment. We still remembered our tribes but only just, the memories fading. So we tried to live on, feasting on happy memories to help us through the difficult times. But always we asked ourselves, why us, why were we taken for them, for them who took over our land, for them who killed so many of our tribe with a flick of the hand and not a second thought? Would we ever see our families again?

Generations pass...

The flame flickered from the dancing fire as the elder began to tell the stories; of the whale and the starfish, of the three boys who weren't ready to come back and of the woman who didn't want to marry. As he tells them, I think how lucky I am to experience the apology, to obtain the rights of our land, to explore education and start to get some equality. As much as I like the city life, I crave the chance to know the past, before the white people came; to be able to fend for myself, living off the land. I am not part of the stolen generation with no purpose in life, I have not been treated severely, unfairly and harshly, however, I live with the aftermath as affected as the destroyed land, the misplaced people. It will never be our country again.



Katie Laithwaite

## Safety isn't Prison

The terrifying journey from Iraq, Africa, Afghanistan, Baghdad and Sri Lanka to Australia is made by many thousands of people every year. People flee from their war-torn homes, leaving everything they love behind. Desperate to escape from enemy soldiers, they give their life savings to illegal people smugglers, who cram many people into small vans that will make unsafe journeys through the various countries and border patrols. It is horrible for these passengers to have to crouch in the back of a sweltering pitch black small lorry for days on end with no food or drink, oblivious as to what is happening outside. Only the strongest survive the terrible road trip. Those lucky ones are then shoved into tiny, leaky, rotting boats, to make the boat trip over rough oceans in a desperate attempt to land on Australian soil.

When they arrive in our country, the traumatized asylum seekers are not given a warm bed and a mug of hot chocolate as you or I would after experiencing such horrific conditions. Instead, those who do survive the terrible journey are captured and locked away inside detention centres, a supposedly 'safe' place where the barbed wire fences and security guards do not allow them to access the community. Reports by Amnesty International have stated that there was barely enough room in the overcrowded and unsanitary centres for the children to play, and there is not enough medical care. It is more like a prison than any refugee camp. One man said: 'In Iraq the enemy kills me straight away. Here the enemy kills me slowly, bit by bit until I am gone.'

While the boys and girls and mothers and fathers and grandparents are locked away in the inhumane conditions of our various detention centres, the Australian government runs checks on the asylum seekers' history; making sure that they are genuine refugees, not criminals or terrorists or just seeking an interesting lifestyle. The problem with these checks is that they can last years and years, and many people are unfairly denied access to Australia and are deported back to their original country where their safety is jeopardized. Many people have stated that they would rather kill themselves, which is how much they hate the inside of the bland, concrete walls and how much they fear returning to their homelands.

Australia is a wealthy and successful country, and should be leading the way by observing human rights. Asylum seekers are people and should be given the proper respect and dignity of any other human. It is disgusting that our government would lock these people away as if they have committed a terrible crime by striving to seek safety. They need to be able to access the community so they get a chance to recover. Asylum seekers have come here for a better life and need to be given that.

*There is a better way...*



Owen Small

YEAR 7/8 WINNER

**Gillian Bartlett**, Concord High School

## SHOULD the TRUTH go UNSAID?

*'Which country is suffering from too much freedom of speech? Name it, is there one?'*

Julian Assange

Everyone everywhere has secrets, whether it be that they stole a chocolate bar from the corner shop, or that they smashed mum's favourite vase. It's not only individuals that have secrets though; companies, corporations, organisations, religious groups and even your very own government have secrets too. They have the power to take the truth, wrap it up in some pretty paper, tie a nice big bow around it and add some metaphorical sparkles and glitter, so that people will only see the good stuff and won't ask questions as to what is behind the facade. But what if something else came along, something that was able to rip away the packaging and strip away the untruths, something that was able to expose the immoral things that organisations and governments do 'behind the scenes'. Well, on 4 October 2006 this something was created; it was called Wikileaks.

Wikileaks is a non profit organisation that is dedicated to bringing sensitive governmental, corporate, organisational and religious 'leaks' to the public; it digs up the dirt on governments and dumps the big, putrid mess right where everyone can see; the internet. Incidentally, Wikileaks has been fuelling the media and the world with controversies, such as the 'Iraq War Diaries'.

Wikileaks is all about freedom of information, and the question that many ask, is 'Is freedom of information necessarily a good thing?' Yes, no, possibly, maybe. The problem isn't the question, it's the answers. Many argue that Wikileaks is a big step towards the transparency that every country craves. Then again, many insist that what Wikileaks is doing is wrong. Some say that it depends on what is being exposed, and the importance of that information. And so the incessant arguing began. Wikileaks has caused, is causing, and will cause many problems. Revealing dirty government secrets doesn't come without a price. Not only does it put pressure on Wikileaks itself, but it affects the targeted government, the targeted country, and the international world as well.

What if Wikileaks released some documents that exposed America's hypothetical plans to start a war with Australia? Wouldn't that jeopardise America's and Australia's friendly relations? What if information regarding a major flaw in Japan's defence was sent out to the world? That has to cause some serious problems for Japan's national security. And what if Wikileaks exposed a secret that turned a country against its own government? That could lead to a civil war.

As horrible as those possibilities are, there are a lot of 'what ifs'. Wikileaks doesn't aim to start wars, or to threaten national security; it aims for freedom of information and transparency. People can argue all they want about the moral and ethical intricacies involved in Wikileaks' actions, but their declared intentions are good. Wikileaks has gone a long way to making governments and other powerful groups understand that they have no right to hide what should be free information. These people in power have to stop dressing up, or outright hiding the truth; they are just digging themselves deeper and darker holes with every document that is marked 'confidential' or 'top secret'. Bit by tedious bit the holes have begun to fill. Sure, there might be injuries, losses and setbacks, but in the end we receive a great gift. Truth.



Gillian Bartlett

## Tech Head Makes You Dead

Plenty of times my parents have said to me 'Does it really matter?'. Usually, the answer is no. It does not really matter if I accidentally squeeze BBQ sauce on my sausage instead of tomato, or my brother uses my skateboard without asking, or that I wear two different socks. The 'littlies' in life should not be stressed about, but there are plenty of 'biggies' that should. It does matter that a 13 year old I know can update to an iPhone the day it hits the shops or that the people next door got rid of a perfectly good TV because they couldn't hang it on their wall. Our society has become so obsessed about keeping up with the Joneses that we have totally lost our perspective about what's important. I think the more we have, the more unhappy we become!

When my family and I travelled around Thailand, we visited many of the hill tribe villages up in the north, around Chiang Mai, which was a lesson in how to be happy. The children of the Black Museu had an old plastic wagon that they had tied to a piece of rope and they were taking turns pulling it up and down a hill. In the Long Neck Karen tribe we visited the primitive school and talked to the young girls about how they wore brass rings around their necks. The Lisu sold us their beautiful brightly coloured hats and bags. Although they were from different tribes, all these people had happiness in common. They wore bright smiles and laughed together and sang and worked and ate with family and friends and talked and shared jokes. They were poor and had nothing, but they had enough. These Thai people did not need email to communicate with each other or iPads to tell them how to plan their days or Foxtel to pass the time. They liked the pencils, lollies and band aids that we gave them, but when we ran out, they still smiled and laughed and smiled some more as if to say 'Does it really matter?'.

If Australia is meant to be the clever country, why are we so dumb? Advertising is partly to blame for its strong influence. Just like Adam and Eve were first tempted by the apple in the Garden of Eden, we are tempted by the smooth, white fruit of Apple computers. But we are human beings, with our own brains and our own freedom of choice. We still have the power to deny this pressure and say 'No. I'd rather just have a banana please!'.

There's no depression in third world or war torn countries because they have to concentrate on surviving. In contrast, our suicide rates are increasing. People in Australia work so hard and get so stressed about making money and then buy things that they don't really need and then throw them away in a year because the latest model has come out. The first world countries think they are the smart ones, but they could learn a lot from their third world brothers, just as I learned from those little children in Thailand who had never even seen themselves in a mirror until we showed them the photos we had taken of them on our digital cameras. A simple life equals a happy life.

Technology is great, but not when it makes us stupid. Does it really matter? Yes, this is the 'biggie' that really does!



Flynn Colby

YEAR 9/10 WINNER

**Tom Davidson-McLeod, St. Mary's Cathedral College**

## Lovin' What?

The fast food industry is out of control. The epidemic in childhood obesity, heart disease and diabetes is only one side of this growth industry. The other appalling aspect, that no one talks about very much, is how the fast food industry has corrupted our farming practices. If you dare, venture past the malevolent gaze of a certain Southern Colonel or the papier mache facade of 'I'm lovin' it,' and poke at the husk of the fast food industry; you might be alarmed.

In regards to McDonalds' inane slogan 'I'm lovin' it' I have a question that simply is; 'lovin what?'. Surely love can't be associated with the trends in Australian farming practices: trends that include denying a sow the simple dignity of lying down to succour her piglets.

I'd like you to take a moment and conjure up that age old image of a picturesque farm with great lush fields rolling onto the horizon, with a herd of majestic cows meandering along, chickens clucking around the hillside, ducks playing in a dam, an odd pig or two wallowing in the mud by a barn, and a kitsch farmhouse with smoke billowing from its chimney as the glorious last glimpses of sun duck out of sight. It's everything Farmer Hoggett could hope for. It is also a lie, which exists only on happy meal boxes.

That idyllic image is far removed from current Australian farming practices. In fact, that nostalgic image of the farmer watching his pigs wander about, calling each by name, contributes less than one percent of agricultural produce in Australia today. What instead might be a better thing to imagine is this: a grid of enormous tin sheds, each 15 metres wide and 150 metres long, each holding roughly thirty thousand birds. Let's compare it to an environment we're familiar with, a crowded elevator. An elevator so crowded you can't turn around without bumping into, and aggravating, your neighbour.

Distressed, perpetually clucking chickens, that's the reality for the life of Australia's poultry. These chickens are living lives of 48 days, lives where they don't ever see sunlight, lives where they have less than the area of an A4 sheet of paper to live on. I'm not really sure that 'life' is an appropriate term for the plight of these chickens. From the moment they are born they are essentially corpses, just waiting to be carted off. They are tomorrow's chicken nuggets.

The outlook for cows, sheep and pigs is equally bleak. Grain fed cows in Australia, for example, increasingly spend their short, sad lives literally cramped in shoulder to shoulder. If a cow lies down it is deemed redundant and promptly given a short, sharp visit from a cattle prod to get it moving again. Unfortunately, most of the cows don't have the luxury of a hastened death and have to spend their lives knee deep in their own excrement until they are carted off to the abattoir which recognizes them as so filthy that they need to be treated the raw meat with ammonia, a hospital grade disinfectant. And this says nothing about the immense environmental costs of grain lot feeding.

People have a responsibility to all creatures great and small. We must act to change the way farming practices in Australia are being corrupted for the profit of multi national companies. Think about it the next time a benevolent clown smiles down at you. Think about it, and ask yourself, 'Lovin' what?'



Tom Davidson-McLeod

## Multiculturalism anyone...?

Imagine a dusty, overcrowded room, the stench of pollution and gunpowder burning your nostrils. You attempt to sleep on your scant bed of straw on the floor, encased by the thin, crumbly walls of your shanty house. The rain of gunfire obstructing your thoughts, the sky aglow with white flashes, effulgent silver light penetrating the inadequate walls of your home, your family stirs as you hear screams from the street beyond.

Last week your neighbours were slaughtered in their sleep. Last month your friend was killed in a bombing massacre. Last year your parents were brutally murdered. The Taliban have destroyed your Afghanistan. There is no other choice but to flee, leave your home, your cultural ties behind. Bitter sweet nostalgia burns within you. You must escape with your younger brothers and sisters to a land far away. You must leave everything behind to embrace what little you have left. Afghanistan is no longer your home; the Talibs have obliterated all that was. You must go.

Since 1978, 23,000 refugees have flocked into Australia and since 2008, around 4500 of those have been Afghan refugees. In the past 12 months, Australians have witnessed mass political turmoil between current Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbot as they battled the rocky issue of 'boat people'. The 'boat people' are illegal immigrants arriving to Australia by boat to seek asylum. Recently, they have sparked mass speculation amongst both Australian politicians and Australian citizens with many Australians opposed to the idea. Naturally, the media has sprung to the issue, skewing the facts with unnecessary hyperboles. Although, the unsympathetic community attitudes towards asylum seekers have been found to not be racially motivated nor stem from a lack of compassion. Rather, the fear and speculation revolving around 'boat people' has stemmed from the media and both major political parties.

So, the questions lies: are 'boat people' really a threat to Australians? From a realistic perspective, these 'boat people' coming in to Australia only make up less than 2% of the Australian population. Furthermore, with their arrival in Australia, they are not breaking any laws. Under the International and Domestic Law of Australia, it is legal to seek asylum by boat and nearly all who arrive by boat are genuine refugees. Australia's number of refugees seems almost insignificant when compared to countries such as Germany which has received a 49% increase in asylum seekers since 2008 and Sweden, whose intake has increased by 32%.

The media thrives on creating hype around issues with potential scare factors. It is staggering to discover that Australians are forming opinions based on serious issues of which they understand very little about.

When we watch the news and hear that Australia is being invaded by 'boat people' from abroad, we fail to question the facts and swallow whatever the media feeds us. Similarly, human nature causes us to fear what we do not understand. We seem to be afraid of the different religions, cultures and languages which these people bring with them, yet these are what make Australia so diverse. Australia claims to be a multicultural country, yet we still fear differences which we are not familiar with.

So how can we understand these people flocking to our country? Do we really think about what horrifying conditions they have come from, or do we ponder on the White Australia Policy which has been instilled in us for much too long? Why would we, as a free and equal nation take away people's rights by locking them up in detention centres? These people may bring with them skills to benefit our country which may have otherwise been wasted in oppressed opportunities in their war torn countries. In retrospect, Australia has received waves of immigrants: the Greeks, Italians and Asians alike who have migrated into Australia and brought with them unique foods and customs which Australians have adopted and now refer to as the 'norm'.

Australians need to work towards understanding these people who are taking plight into our country. We must educate ourselves and replace the myths with facts whilst learning to empathise with these people and give them a chance to adapt to our culture, not lock them away and turn a blind eye to them.

Australians need to take a new approach to 'boat people'. Forget about the media, forget about power hungry politicians. Learn to accept these people, not alienate them.



Australia claims to be a multicultural country. To really achieve this, we must move forward to a more accepting and diverse population. Once we learn to empathise with and understand these people, we can look beyond our differences and truly accomplish a successful, diverse and accepting multicultural Australia.

Krystina Batt

## YEAR 11/12 RUNNER-UP

**Sarah Webster**, Cecil Hills High School

# It's Time

Imagine an interconnected world, one where distance is no boundary and limitless information can be transmitted instantaneously at the click of a button.

Incredibly, there is no need to imagine. We live in an era of information. The 21st century is tumbling into a chaotic landslide of emerging technologies, the capabilities of which extend just a few terameters beyond the wildest imaginings of the average human being. We Australians have been given access to a wealth of information resources and fortunately, we have a legal right to freedom of information. We have the power and the means to educate ourselves about anything! Yet, with (quite literally) the world at our fingertips, many of us lack the motivation.

Did you know that nearly 45% of the Australian population lack the literacy skills required to get by in day to day activities? Are you aware that there are more than 11 million abandoned children living in India? The answer for most young people will be a resounding 'no', because they have not been regularly informed of these facts through the teen targeted media.

Conversely, how many times have you been informed that a celebrity has been spotted sipping a cup of coffee with low fat soy milk on a Sunday afternoon? Although I'm certain that this gossip is not as significant as the alarming statistics previously mentioned, various forms of media blatantly disagree. Open any magazine that is popular among teenagers and you will undoubtedly be bombarded with unvarying snippets of gossip!

I suppose the media is just telling us what we want to hear – that we live in a world that is less distraught than we fear, because if these trivial matters can be called 'news', then obviously nothing disturbing is going on, right? Seldom do we hear of the things we don't want to hear about – the detestable issues that are spreading like viruses through ill fated parts of the world. Subsequently, our ignorance is nurturing the abuse of human rights in the hospitable recesses of a Petri dish. It is these issues that we must keep up to date with in order to influence real change.

It's time for the teen targeted media to provide its audience with valuable information that can help us make a difference in the world. Would Fred Hollows have improved the eye sight of hundreds of disadvantaged people if he wasn't aware that people on the other side of the world were needlessly blind?

Disappointingly, many adolescents have become lazy. We settle for a monotonous barrage of gossip when we should be pressuring the media to inform us about important issues.

Imagine what the world would be like if everyone knew about real issues! If two minds are better than one, then almost seven billion minds must be better at solving our problems than the handful that are seated in governments! Perhaps this knowledge would encourage others to follow in the footsteps of Fred Hollows and spark a chain reaction of positive change in the world.

It's unbelievably ironic that we live in a time where there is an endless supply of technology available to do wonderful things with, yet there are still over 1.4 billion people living in absolute poverty!

These are the people that we should be paying attention to. These are our fellow human beings who unfortunately live in a place that has been deprived of the things we take for granted. This is what we need to know because if we aren't reminded of these problems, we will never be able to help.

These are the things that really matter.



Sarah Webster

YEAR 7/8 HIGHLY COMMENDED

**Mashaal Hamayun, Sydney Girls High School**

## Ignorance: Not A Bliss

*It's the holidays and we're sitting in Oporto in Newcastle, with five other families with us. Chatting amicably, we wait for our order to come, when suddenly the door opens.*

*A man comes in with a Caucasian appearance; short blond hair and blue eyes. His tummy slightly bulges over his belt and he's got tattoos running down his arm. Seeing us sitting there, with our hijabs, he suddenly remarks "Looks like the terrorists have invaded!"*

Later on thinking about the experience, instead of feeling angry, I realised I felt pity for those people who don't have the knowledge and make judgements on people.

Australia is regarded as one of the most multicultural societies in the world, yet so many people continue to misunderstand the religion of Islam. Because of what people hear on the news of terrorists wreaking destruction on the world, they think every Muslim is like that.

A year ago on 'Q & A', an audience member from the One Nation Party asked panel members why something wasn't being done on stopping Muslim immigration if Australia's list of terrorist organisations were Islamic. While panellists refused to comment, what that man might have not realised is that, just because some Muslims did horrific deeds, it is not reflective of every other Muslim in this world.

Islam is a religion that promotes peace, not warfare. Terrorist organisations have misinterpreted the Holy Quran (Islamic law) for their own misdeeds. So what you hear from them, stating that this Jihad of theirs is perfectly legitimate, is wrong. Jihad is not 'holy war' as it is often translated into by the West, but is actually translated into a 'struggle'. Whether you are striving to practise religion, spread the word of it or choosing to do what is right, that is the true Jihad of Islam and is known as the 'Greater Jihad'. While armed fighting is a part of Jihad, it is known as 'Lesser Jihad', and is only to be done within strict rules, such as the enemy must start it, innocents shouldn't be killed, wounded enemy soldiers should be treated like one's own and that war is the very last resort. So what you must realise, is that what terrorists are doing can't be even classified as jihad, but as a crime.

Some people might pick a verse from the Quran on jihad and state that this is promoting warfare. But you have to put context in the place of things and realise that at the time these verses were being revealed to their Prophet, Muslims were being persecuted horrifically and killed by the hundreds. And so that is why they were being asked to fight back, just like you would make a stand for yourself if you were being picked on. In today's context, jihad for us would come under 'Greater Jihad' not 'Lesser Jihad'.

Going to a public school, people asked me the meaning behind the hijab I wore. As I responded, they listened with interest to what I had to say. I appreciate the fact that people are trying to learn about it, rather than live in ignorance.

To try and combat this (no pun intended), people should try to seek knowledge on not just Islam but other religions as well. Schools should set up a course for non-scripture students to learn about other religions. The media also has a responsibility to show the truth behind the teachings of religions, not just what mass opinion is. In the words of Martin Luther King Jnr, "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

YEAR 7/8 HIGHLY COMMENDED

**Christine Song, MLC School, Burwood**

## My Personal Connection with Mozart

**Twinkle, twinkle little star,**

One of my earliest recollections was of my mother trilling out a lullaby. Her soft, warm tones lit up the thousands of glistening diamonds that twirled outside my window. If by any chance I was awake after her sleep-inducing spell, I would carefully lift up the curtain, and my mother would help me count them, reaching well into the hundreds before my eyelids collapsed.

**How I wonder what you are,**

A decade has passed, and should you happen to glance at the night sky, you would see a scattering of aeroplanes and an eerie glow that envelopes the city in its clutches. Since 1879, when Edison's incandescent light bulbs first graced New York with their illuminating presence, the modern era of lighting commenced. Since then, cities all over the globe have been supplied with enough 'caffeine' to last through their sleepless nights. Over the last decades, this seemingly endless supply of 'caffeine' has become the mind and works, of light pollution.

**Up above the world so high,**

It is arguable that as our generation enters the 21st century, we require these artificial lights to lengthen our productive days. Everything had its price. Generation Z is the first generation where over two thirds have lost sight of the stars. When our city lights became redundant and profligate (wasting billions of dollars annually around the world), a new type of pollution was born. A relatively new and unknown form of pollution, light pollution, is undoubtedly one of the most pervasive and fastest growing forms of pollution, occurring in over 30,000 cities worldwide.

**Like a diamond in the sky,**

I'm just concerned that I have a smaller chance of seeing falling stars, while astronomers around the world are pulling their hair out and having nightmares about the fabricated lighting up of the sky. This disastrous effect has already ruined several major observatories including the Mt. Wilson's Observatory in California. Perhaps Johannes Andersen, the general of the International Astronomical Union, has a point when he says, 'It's ironic and a bit sad how Photons (particles of light) that have travelled for literally billions of years may get swamped by pollution in the last thousandth of a second before they reach a telescope.' Aren't we swapping diamonds for plastic?

**Twinkle, twinkle little star,**

Light pollution doesn't only affect stargazers. Artificial lighting has forced numerous species of flora and fauna to alter their behaviours, breeding cycles and foraging areas. According to a study published by the Florida Atlantic University, 80% of turtle hatchlings on light polluted beaches die from exhaustion and thirst by navigating towards an artificial light source instead of the ocean. Like an equation, every problem has a solution. World Hour is a solution. If for one hour, everyone flicked off their lights, the amount of electricity saved and the visibility of stars raised are astounding. So why not make Earth Hour a daily thing?

**How I wonder what you are.**

I am generally a selfish creature, and will often be unconcerned over trifling matters. However, I refuse to give up my starlit twilights for neon lights, or change my star counting sessions into aeroplane counting sessions. So I guess this isn't a trifling matter... if you have never seen a sable sky, then you would not know what a blanket of artificial light shields... the very same fragments of light that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart himself appreciated as he wrote one of the most widespread lullabies of all time.

I'm not reaching for the stars here, I'm just refusing to have my personal connection with Mozart taken away from me.

YEAR 5/6 HIGHLY COMMENDED

**Alexander Maloof**, Trinity  
Grammar Preparatory School

## What matters? It's a matter of respect

An old man who once worked as an engineer, now sits staring out a window suffering from Alzheimer's. His room is small, sterile and cold but he doesn't seem to mind. He gazes out onto the street where he sees two young children gleefully skipping and playing chasing. This moment went slowly for the man as it reminded him of all the memories that he had as a lad. A slight trickle runs down his cheek, knowing that his time will come very soon. The lady in the opposing chair once was a teacher and now here she sits in a lonely retirement home. The only thing to entertain her is the sound of her knitting needles clicking against each other; she is knitting a scarf for her grandchildren who she hopes will one day visit her. In my opinion, what really should matter is our respect for our elders in the community.

You will agree with me that older people in our community deserve respect. After all these people once built our roads, taught at schools, nursed sick people, farmed our food and even led our country. You can see, they were once just like us and held important roles in our community. They should not be forgotten and we should treat them all with respect and make sure they are made to feel loved. What matters is how we show compassion and show respect to our elders. Through acting kindly we show the elderly they are loved and still respected. This can be done by a visit to a retirement home or by simply saying 'hello'. School choirs and orchestras could perform for them as a way of saying 'thank you'.

It's a matter of respect. The way we conduct ourselves in front of family and friends is also very important. If we show respect to our immediate family as well as cousins, aunts and uncles we can be more hopeful that respect will be shown to us. Through respecting others we can respect ourselves, and one day we will be respected in return.

Older people provide us with the link to our past history. Their stories are full of adventures and facts about things that no longer exist today. It's important to respect our elders and to show them gratitude and compassion. We need to preserve the history for future generations. Someday we will be elders and be depended on for the stories about society today.

Think how you would feel when it's your time to be sitting staring out a window or when they are your knitting needles clicking together waiting for someone to come and visit. Simply it's a matter of respect.

YEAR 11/12 HIGHLY COMMENDED

**Cassidy O'Sullivan**, Tara  
Anglican School for Girls

## We All Need That Glimmer in our Eyes

I had never understood that suffering could make humans lose that look of humanity from their eyes. I didn't even know there was a distinct look of humanity. I took it for granted. I never knew that your spirit could leave your eyes.

Until I saw her.

Her gaze was do dull, deep, and fixed. The sunlight didn't glint in her irises like the children you see here in Australia. The shocking thought came to me that perhaps she had never laughed. Perhaps she had never been happy.

She was just a girl walking the sun and rain-stained streets of Angkor, Cambodia. But she should have been in a playground somewhere. I should have seen her falling in a heap of laughter or two-second tears at the bottom of a slide, not standing like a limp doll next to that five star hotel.

I felt violently ill to know what was going to happen to her. In our room just an hour before I had read the 'official' rule of not having children under the age of 10 as sexual partners at the hotel. I was in turmoil, I had never been so sick at reading something. And every man I saw on the streets, I began to question his motives for being there. I felt so helpless for not being able to save her, right then. I wanted to take her away.

I'm only a child myself. And those beautiful little Cambodian children, so exploited, cast-off and forgotten, have lost their innocence. It was stolen from them before they knew what the world was – the wings of a dragonfly, ripped away.

But in a sense, I feel as if I have lost my innocence too. No longer could I smile at people on the street without fearing their potential, or look at a group of little girls and wonder vaguely where they were going. I carry a tiny, tiny piece of their suffering within me now.

Innocence is a peculiar thing. Some may view it as naivety or even ignorance in some circumstances. But although ignorance should never be considered positive, it at least allows you innocence.

But I wouldn't have changed seeing that little girl's face for the world. Because next time I tickled my little cousin Rupert to the point of him kicking me constantly, I truly saw what innocence and goodness was in his eyes. They are sea green, and they have flickers of light, and hope.

We can't let the flickers go out of these children's eyes anymore. We need a world of people with their spirit intact.

# What Matters? 2011

## Markers and Judging Panel

The Whitlam Institute would like to thank the hard working markers who undertook the challenging task of reading over 1800 entries in this year's competition. Thanks to their skill and efforts we were able to compile a list of shortlisted entries for consideration by our esteemed judging panel.

The Institute would like to acknowledge the generous support of this year's judging panel. The judging panel freely gave their time and expertise to select this year's winning entries. The 2011 judging panel consisted of:

**Eric Brace**, Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation

**Julie Hare**, an editor and journalist at *The Australian*

**Jennifer Rowe (aka Emily Rodda)**, award winning author

**Andrew West**, author and journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*

## The Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute was established by agreement between the University of Western Sydney and the Hon EG Whitlam in 2000. Its spirit is best captured in Gough's own words when signing the Deed of Gift:

'The greatest contribution that I hope to bestow is inspiration. That the work and causes championed in my parliamentary career and the statesman service that followed, will provide the basis for ongoing research and advocacy from this university into the contemporary challenges that confront and can improve the quality of life for all Australians..' [December 2003]

The Whitlam Institute works as an educator, policy influencer and research institute. We are also home to the Whitlam Prime Ministerial Collection, and the Whitlam Reading Room which houses selected books and papers donated by Mr Whitlam. The collection provides on-line access to papers held both at the Institute and in the National Archives. We maintain an active public education program.

The Whitlam Institute is guided by the 'three great aims' that drove the Whitlam Program of 1972. They are

- to promote equality
- to involve the people of Australia in the decision-making processes of our land, and
- to liberate the talents and uplift the horizons of the Australian people.

## Management

The Whitlam Institute is established as a separate entity within the University of Western Sydney. The use of funds collected to support the future development and work of the Institute is guided by a company established through a deed of trust. The Whitlam Institute Board is politically bipartisan and consists of leaders in academia, business, and government organisations. The Board participates in the strategic development of the Institute.

The current Board members are:

**Geoffrey Roberson** (Chair)

**Professor Janice Reid AM**

**Patricia Amphlett OAM**

**Senator the Hon John Faulkner**

**Dr Kerry Schott**

**Gabrielle Trainor**

**John Wells**

**Nicholas Whitlam**

**Talal Yassine OAM**

**Sandra Stevenson** is the Company Secretary

The Institute is led by Director **Eric Sidoti** with a small team of dedicated program staff. The Prime Ministerial Collection is managed by the University of Western Sydney Librarian **Liz Curach** and a small team of experienced Archivist Librarians.

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