



Australian Youth
Affairs Coalition

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**Submission to the Evaluation of the
Australian Youth Forum**

August 2011

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The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's non-government youth affairs peak body, which seeks to represent young people aged 12-25 and the sector that supports them.

AYAC boasts a growing membership of State and Territory Youth Peak Bodies, National Youth Organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who are all passionate about creating an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

AYAC aims to:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia
- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and an international level
- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged.
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society, to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society
- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to Governments and the broader community
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field

AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms, which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

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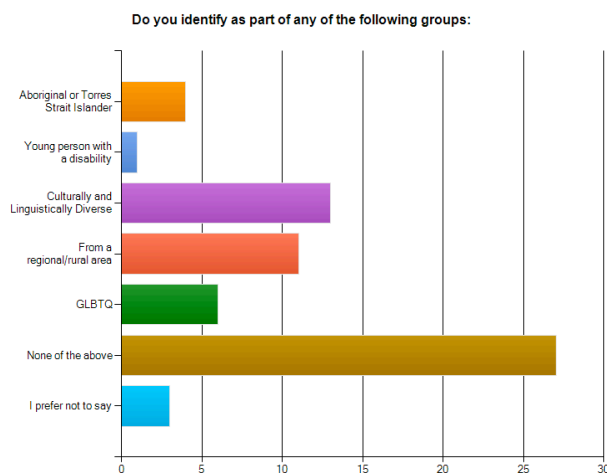
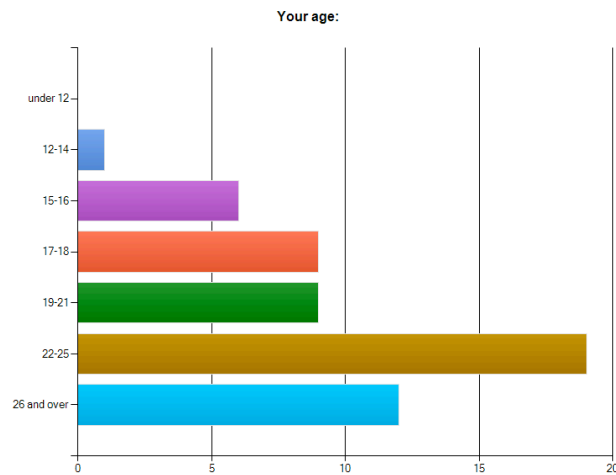
Introduction

There is widespread recognition among youth advocacy organisations and young people themselves that there is a critical need for young people to be able to engage in government processes and have more of a voice on issues that affect or concern them. The aims of many youth participation initiatives may be noble however often the aims fall short in the process, mode of engagement and expectations that are set from the beginning. The recent *Listen to Children: NGO CROC report* highlighted the importance of young people representing themselves at the highest level of government. It is only through meaningful engagement that there will be a shift to value and prioritise the engagement of young people.

In line with one of our key guiding principles and the values that underpin our work, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition sought the views of young people through an online survey entitled *AYF Evaluation Survey*. The results of this survey form the basis of this submission.

The AYAC survey results canvassed the views of 56 people from across Australia with 78% of the respondents aged between 12 and 26.

Young adults 22-25 represented the largest group of respondents to the survey (19%).



The views of young people living in every state and territory across Australia were reflected in the results.

A number of respondents identified themselves as belonging to particular disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, people living with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse, from a regional or rural area, and GLBTQ.

Involvement with the AYF

Of all the respondents to the survey, only 51% said that they had actually heard of the AYF. Further, just 40% of all respondents said that they had been involved in any AYF activities. When asked what kind of involvement they had with AYF's activities, 59% said they had connected via the AYF Facebook page, with 50% saying that they had read comments on "Have a Say" discussion topics, attended an AYF event/workshop, and/or had filled out an AYF survey online. 40% said that they had attended a youth event sponsored by the AYF.

36% of those who had been involved in AYF activities also said that they had voted on an idea on the online forum, 32% reported that they had added comments to the "Have a say" section of the website, and 27% had been involved in the AYF Steering Committee.

AYAC asked survey respondents to rate how well the AYF connects young people with government, in particular how effectively young people are engaged in giving feedback on policy and decision making. 62% of those who answered the question said that the AYF engaged young people well or satisfactorily, with 37% saying that the AYF did not fulfil this function well.

AYF online presence

When it came to rating their experiences using the AYF website, respondents largely found the "Have a Say" Discussion topics and the "What's On" sections informative and useful, and reported that overall the website was easy to navigate. However, 55% of respondents said that they did not understand where their feedback went. Another 69% said they did not regularly check the AYF website for new information.

Overall, the most useful sections of the AYF website were considered to be the "Have a Say" Discussion topics, the AYF News section and the "What's On" section.

Improvements to the AYF

90% of those who answered the survey said that the AYF could improve the way it engages with young people. Many respondents said that the AYF needed to publicise its initiatives and efforts more widely so that more young people (particularly those in regional areas) could be included.

Many respondents questioned the AYF's reliance on one-off events and conferences and recommended that AYF participation and engagement should be consistent and its presence be felt nation-wide. Some suggested that the AYF conduct dedicated school / university visits. Others suggested that consultations, brainstorming days and regular events were needed. Still others suggested that utilising existing online spaces and social media platforms that young people actually use, rather than relying on what one respondent described as "an out-dated and useless website" to engage young people. A few

respondents suggested that the AYF support and utilise the Youth Engagement Steering Committee better by giving them the tools to educate and equip other young people to participate in public debate.

“I think that the committee members need to have a stronger identification for the community, getting the promotion out there to education, have them as real ambassadors.”

– Survey respondent

“Have more of a physical presence in schools, youth organisations and government departments. It is a great way to engage young people but if young people don't know about it and don't know what AYF is then we are less likely to engage with it.”

- Survey respondent

Several respondents were critical of the reliance on online discussion and wanted to see more genuine, in depth and well-publicised consultations with better follow-through.

“Topics and questions seem to be set by the AYF rather than being set through a grass-roots discussion. A bottom-up approach would be more empowering for young people involved. Often the Ministerial responses are very vague and make no firm commitments.”

– Survey respondent

Others suggested broadening the scope of the AYF's approach to consultation by connecting with the NGO sector.

“[The AYF needs] more collaborative approaches to youth consultation, involving the youth sector and youth NGOs more in the processes and supporting their work.”

- Survey respondent

A large proportion of respondents (56%) did not have a good understanding of where their feedback went and wanted a clearer indication of how contributions to discussion topics were passed on to decision-makers through governmental mechanisms. One respondent wanted the AYF to supply examples of how such contributions have been used to actually affect government policy (or at least the policy development process). To improve engagement with the government through the Minister to show where the information is

going, another respondent suggested that the AYF should ask the Minister for Youth to respond to each topic/issue that is discussed on the website.

“The Minister For Youth, needs to be more involved in the AYF - it is the only way it will work. He needs to show young people he cares more and he needs to respond. We’re trying to change Australia, and it’s no good sitting behind a desk, not changing. He is a good Minister though, and I applaud him. He just needs to connect more in the communities where young people are.”

- Survey respondent

Conclusion

As a group, young people experience persistent, systematic disadvantage, discrimination and unequal access to power and influence. They are routinely excluded in decision-making, and their experiences and ideas are often not heeded by policy-makers. Yet, we know that young people are a diverse and dynamic group in the Australian community who have a unique ability to tackle serious issues that affect them and those around them. They can be critical partners in informing decision-making processes and encourage governments to think laterally about how to solve complex problems. As such, AYAC supports the AYF’s goal that young people be supported to directly engage with decisions that affect them, and believe that their input should be routinely used in the development of public policy.

From AYAC’s survey, there was recognition among respondents that the AYF is still growing and that overall, it is a good concept. Given more time and additional reform - and with the continued support of DEEWR - it has the potential to grow and to truly connect young people with government. However, the AYAC survey revealed real and timely questions about whether the AYF provides the most effective model for engaging young people in government policy and decision-making.

The AYF’s stated aim is that the outcomes of the AYF activities and online discussions be analysed and fed through to the Office for Youth and AYAC. However, the focus on building website participation was criticised by AYAC’s survey respondents, with many young people saying that this model of youth participation was not responsive enough to young people.

Many respondents complained that the AYF was not connecting well with young people who are not traditionally engaged with consultation mechanisms, and that it needs to ‘go where young people are’. Greater awareness-raising and more varied and multi-faceted consultation strategies – such as social media platforms and regular face-to-face engagement – would help the AYF be more responsive to young people’s ideas. They recommend a more multi-faceted approach to consultation and engagement with young people.

Furthermore, the survey responses showed that the AYF’s processes could be improved if it provided a clearer feedback mechanism in channelling the information from the AYF to the relevant government agencies. There must be legitimate evidence that young people’s views are actually going somewhere and making a measurable difference on public policy issues.

The survey respondents also suggested that the Minister give clearer recognition of - and direct comment on - the issues raised by young people through the AYF.

“As the AYF is a government project, it limits its ability to criticise areas that need addressing - this limits its capacity to advocate/lobby for young people. Transparency is important as to what is done with the information collected at forums and what impact they hope to make with the information.”

- Survey respondent

The survey responses raised real questions about the approach the AYF has taken in relation to youth engagement in public policy. Some respondents wanted to see the AYF engage in more collaborative approaches to youth consultation, involving the youth sector and youth NGOs.

AYAC’s survey results show that there is a larger question to be answered on the overall approach taken by the AYF in building genuine youth participation in government - one that is influential and effective. AYAC looks forward to ongoing collaboration with the AYF to ensure this can occur.