



Australian Youth  
Affairs Coalition

**Where are you going with that?**

*Maximising Young People's Impact On  
Organisational & Public Policy*

## Acknowledgements

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## About The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

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 promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society and 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 that they have access to mechanisms which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

More information about AYAC and its work can be found at our website <http://www.ayac.org.au>



## Executive Summary

'Where are you going with that?' is a question often asked by young people who are engaged by organisations and government in consultation. They want to know where their views are going and whether or not they have a real opportunity to impact on change.

This report is the culmination of an exploration of young people's inclusion in decision making, their experiences and their perceptions about to what level their ideas have been heeded by policy makers.

In addition to looking at young people's perceptions, the report takes an important step forward in looking critically at youth participation practices by attempting to identify barriers that prevent young people's impact on policy and how organisations can evolve to be more open to young people's views.

Our research found that much of the work previously undertaken in relation to youth participation both in Australia and globally focuses primarily on clearly articulating what effective participation looks like. This manifests itself in a wealth of literature and toolkits available to assist youth participation practitioners to design and implement strategies that have a greater ability to engage wider and more representative groups of young people in decision making.

Despite the strong emphasis on utilising effective practice, there is little evidence readily available to suggest that young people's views are making a measurable difference both in the organisations they are engaged with or on wider public policy issues.

It is important to note though, that young people consulted as part of this project strongly indicated that they felt non-government organisations were significantly better at following through on their ideas. Whilst tangible evidence of this was hard to come by, the anecdotal evidence suggests that government bodies have a lot to learn from their non-government counterparts.

Our work highlights the importance of the development of measurement tools that assist organisations with monitoring how much impact young people are having on issues they are consulted on. In Australia, there is a lack of tools that assist in measuring or monitoring policy impact and in most cases we rely on informal evaluation processes. To provide legitimate evidence to young people that their views are actually going somewhere, we must consider working toward the design of a measurement tool of this nature.

Our research identifies a number of significant barriers that must be addressed if young people can be assured their views will have a tangible impact on decision making processes. This includes a focus on supporting and empowering young people to take on positions of power, dealing with resistance from older generations to young people's views and ideas, and a greater emphasis on ensuring young people and youth participation practitioners clearly understand policy development processes.

We know young people are a diverse and dynamic group in the Australian community and 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 organisations and government bodies to think laterally about how to solve complex problems.

This ability and willingness of young people to be involved in decisions that affect them and their peers is commendable. Those who seek to engage young people in these processes must not only be open to their inclusion, but must be able to justify that young people have an ability to affect change.

This report is the start of a conversation toward a community that engages young people whilst actively pursuing and valuing their ideas.

## Recommendations

As a result of critical consideration of the consultation findings, complemented by our literature review, AYAC makes the following recommendations for organisations and government bodies which are looking to maximise the impact of young people's views on policy development.

### Help young people understand processes

1. Reduce the length of and simplify policy development processes and clearly articulate opportunities for young people to contribute
2. Use organisational diagrams and visual tools to assist young people to understand the policy development process and clearly articulate the intended length of the consultation process
3. Be honest about limitations that may prevent young people potentially impacting on organisational policy
4. Commit to providing young people with consistent feedback throughout the process and ensure that outcomes achieved are communicated to young people
5. Actively reduce the use of confusing language and design consultation mechanisms that are suited to young people
6. Consider formalised training for youth participation practitioners focused on educating them about policy development and legislative processes

### Embed young people's needs

1. Make a strong commitment to young people's inclusion by embedding youth participation principles in all organisational documents, including strategic plans
2. Empower young people to generate ideas within the organisation and where appropriate, provide young people with the opportunity to produce policies of their own for consideration by executive level decision makers
3. Inform participation practices with literature and resources available in relation to young people's inclusion
4. Clearly define what youth participation means in your organisation and ensure all stakeholders are informed of your commitment to it

### Support young people in positions of power

1. Create opportunities for young people to contribute to high level governance decision process, including ensuring young people are represented on boards, and provide them with adequate support to fulfill their responsibilities
2. Actively pursue opportunities for young people to network with and raise issues directly with policy decision makers and politicians

### Effective youth participation practice

1. Be open to using non-traditional methods of engagement and actively develop solutions to barriers faced by young people in accessing consultation mechanisms
2. Design and deliver multi-faceted consultation strategies with the focus on engaging young people not traditionally engaged with consultation mechanisms
3. Do not confine young people to traditionally identified 'youth issues' and actively pursue opportunities for young people to provide feedback on all issues under consideration by your organisation or the wider community

### Tackle change resistance

1. Develop training focused on increasing people's perception of young people's ability to contribute to decision-making processes within their communities
2. Develop training focused on empowering young people to deal with change resistance in organisations and the wider community

### Measuring and evaluating success

1. Develop sound measurement tools that monitor young people's policy impact
2. Develop a central catalogue of resources and best practice examples that youth participation practitioners have ready access to

## Introduction

Across the country, young people participate in numerous consultation processes considering policy issues that affect them and their community. This occurs in various ways, whether it is as part of consultations that have national significance including the National Youth Roundtable and more recently the Federal Government's 2020 Youth Summit, or more localised mechanisms such as Student Representative Councils or Youth Advisory Councils.

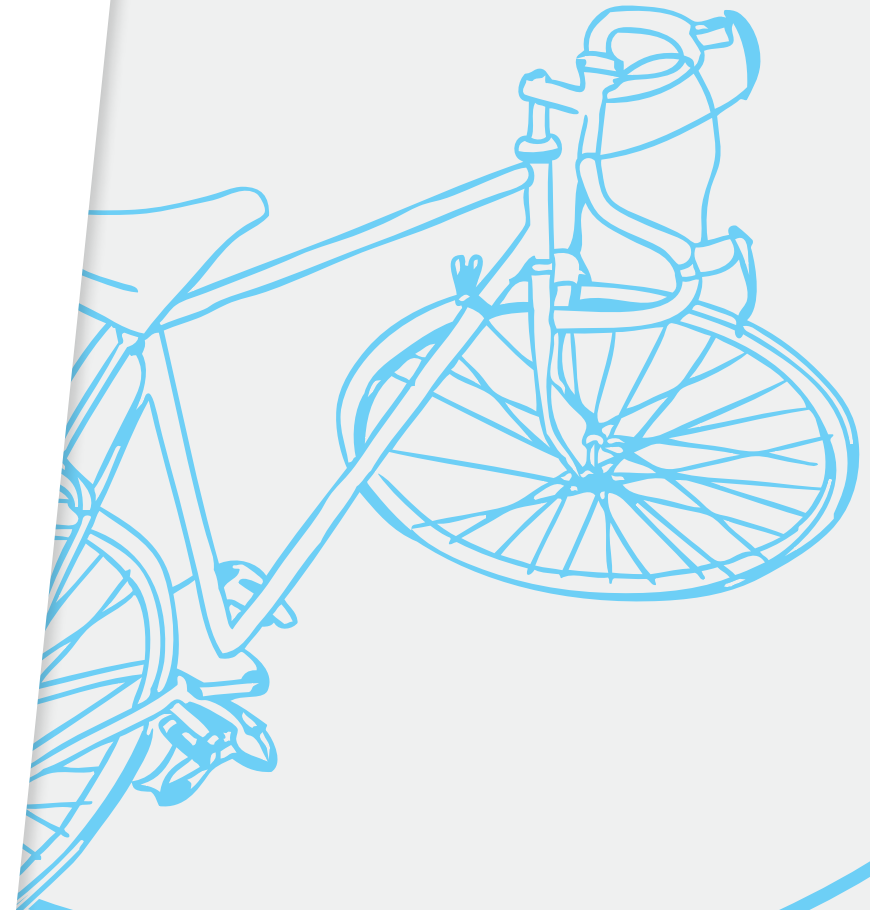
In Australia, many of these processes have successfully engaged a wide range of young people in critical thought and conversations about prominent youth and community issues. Likewise, work has been undertaken by numerous organisations and researchers focused on identifying the most effective processes for ensuring high participation rates of young people.

As a result of this work, youth participation practitioners now have available to them clear guidelines for improving processes for youth participation to ensure that young people are actively supported and engaged in decision making in ways that avoid tokenism. This understanding in Australia of *what works* and *what doesn't work* when involving young people in decision making has led to processes, which in many cases, are rigorous, supportive and effective.

This commitment by government and non-government organisations to improving existing mechanisms and developing new mechanisms that ensure young people are actively included in decision making in the Australian context is commendable. However, it is important that we now move to the next step, by evaluating and monitoring the impact the views of young people actually have on policy and legislative change.

**'Where are you going with that?'** is a question often asked by young people but rarely answered by those who operate youth engagement strategies. Are the views young people are sharing within youth engagement processes having a real impact on policy and legislative change?

As the national peak body for Australian young people and those who support them, AYAC has an important role in monitoring policy change and its impact on young people's lives. As a result, our first piece of research after receiving Federal Government funding is focused on this next step in the youth participation process – by asking, **"How can we maximise young people's impact on organisational and public policy?"**





## ***Research Objectives***

**In undertaking this research project AYAC aimed to:**

- **Identify relevant national and international literature surrounding youth participation and effective models of engagement**
- **Highlight organisational successes in designing and implementing effective youth engagement strategies**
- **Enhance understanding of what works and what doesn't when engaging young people in decision making processes, by:**
  - Identifying the potential or possible impacts of different youth engagement strategies
  - Identifying the actual impacts of different youth engagement strategies
  - Identifying obstacles or challenges faced by organisations and by young people in ensuring young people's views impact on policy
- **Identify literature and evidence that focuses on the level to which young people's views are impacting on public policy**
- **Identify how organisations and government can alter practices to ensure young people have a distinct and real opportunity to impact on public policy**

## Methodology

AYAC's aim in undertaking this research is to begin to address the following questions of national significance:

- **Do young people's views actually impact on and help to shape policy developments?**
- **What models are most effective in taking young people's views and ensuring they flow into policy change?**
- **Are young people really being heard?**

After an initial exploration of these questions, an in depth case study approach was deemed appropriate and adopted for this study. This approach lead to the exploration of the successes of different models whilst generating further insights from the feedback received from consultation participants

AYAC chose to critically analyse four (4) prominent youth engagement strategies currently or previously undertaken in Australia. Within this sample group it seemed appropriate to examine engagement strategies used by both non-government and government organisations, however as no government bodies formally agreed to participate in the research, we instead focused our analysis on four (4) key non-government youth engagement programs which had both state and national significance.

From these four (4) bodies, AYAC undertook a series of phone and email consultations with sample groups involving five (5) representatives from each organisation. We spoke with three (3) young people (aged 12-25) who had been participants in youth consultation programs and two (2) staff members responsible for facilitating or managing the youth consultation programs.

These interviews focused on generating qualitative data from representatives in regard to how they monitor youth engagement strategies

and documenting their insight about how processes could be improved or supported in order to maximise the impact of young people's input into public and organisational policy.

Where possible, data for each of the case studies was cross checked by interviewing numerous people from each program, including youth participation practitioners, executive level employees and importantly, young people themselves. This variety of accounts added depth and different interpretations to the findings.

All of the interview participants and their organisations were provided with the opportunity to remain anonymous, with AYAC keeping consent forms and transcripts of the interviews undertaken. The interview questions focused on experiences of youth engagement strategies, their experiences of barriers and obstacles and insights into implementing feedback from young people.

To further inform the project, interviews were also held with five (5) policy makers and researchers who have had experience of undertaking youth engagement strategies.

Data from the interviews has been analysed thematically and work shopped by AYAC staff in a series of meetings. This process provided both core themes for discussion and helped us to establish questions for further reflection.

As well as the data from the interviews, a review of available literature on youth engagement strategies and policy impacts complemented our research. A list of useful resources for youth participation practitioners and recommendations for organisations wishing to improve internal participation processes are included in this report.

As a result of AYAC's ongoing commitment to the inclusion of young people, young people have been involved at all levels of the development and delivery of this research.



## ***Approach To The Literature Review***

The approach taken in reviewing literature for this project included:

- **Seeking documentation available in libraries and electronic databases of State and Territory peak youth organisations**
- **Web searches of national and international non-government bodies and government authorities whose primary business is working with young people and/or engaging young people in decision making**
- **Asking consultation participants to alert AYAC to resources they have used to inform their youth participation practices**
- **Reviewing reference lists of significant research, especially the comprehensive literature reviews undertaken by Collin (2008) and Testro (2006).**

Whilst previous research proved relevant to this project in terms of providing framing tools, little of this research actively or comprehensively deals with the premise of monitoring and evaluating the impact of young people's views on policy development. That said, it is vitally important that youth participation practitioners are aware of the available research.

It was our aim in carrying out this review, to identify central themes and to avoid duplication of work already undertaken.

It must be noted that this project has not addressed strategies of youth participation where the primary method of engagement is via the Internet.





## Approach To Consultation

To understand what works and what doesn't in ensuring young people's views have a strong impact on policy, we must talk to those who regularly experience and facilitate youth participation practices. It is also essential that we provide young people with opportunities to think critically about how they believe current practices could be improved. This will maximise the chance of generating change within organisations and in the wider community.

Young people and youth participation practitioners were encouraged to think critically about models of participation in their organisation and to reflect on their experiences in order to generate ideas about what they see as being vital components to ensuring young people's voices are not only sought but are actually translated into policy.

Key questions considered by consultation participants included:

- To what level does their organisation prioritise young people's inclusion?
- Whether or not the opportunity for young people to share their views through consultation has genuinely lead to change in the organisation?
- What evidence exists that young people's views have impacted on policy change within their organisation?
- What barriers and limitations prevent policy impact?
- What could assist organisations in monitoring young people's policy impact?

With consultation participants taking the opportunity to speak candidly about the questions, a number of common themes for consideration were generated and discussed. This has resulted in a series of recommendations that can be used by organisations and government bodies who seek to engage young people, to further inform and improve their practice.

As a result of undertaking consultations and the literature review, AYAC has identified a number of key themes that are vital to informing and improving youth participation with view to maximising policy impact, including:

- Defining youth participation and practice
- What is 'policy impact'?
- What barriers prevent policy impact?
- What can organisations do to achieve policy impact for young people?

## What Is Youth Participation?

*'Youth Participation is about developing partnerships with young people so that they may take a valued position and role within our community and are able to be actively involved in the decision making processes that affect them'* (St John Ambulance, 2007)

### Defining effective participation

Much of the work undertaken by researchers and organisations surrounding youth engagement in decision-making has focused primarily on defining participation and designing effective models for including young people. This definitional work acts as a critical basis for youth participation practitioners and organisations wishing to support young people's involvement.

As a result of this work there is a significant bank of knowledge both in Australia and internationally that clearly articulates the most effective ways of ensuring young people's involvement in processes of decision-making are genuine rather than tokenistic.

Seminal work undertaken in this area are a number of participation models including:

- ***Eight Rungs on the Ladders of Citizen Participation – Arnestein (1969)***
- ***Westhorp's Continuum – Westhorp (1987, p.3)***
- ***Hart's Ladder of Participation – Roger Hart (1992, p.7)***
- ***Pathways to Participation (Howard, Newman, Harris and Hardcourt, 2002, p.5)***

All of these models have been critiqued for their limitations (Bridgland-Sorenson, 2006, p. 136-138).

However, their pervasiveness throughout youth participation literature suggests they remain an important foundation for a critical analysis of youth engagement and participation strategies.

In particular, *Hart's Ladder of Participation* (1992), which is viewed as being an adaption of the critical components of other models, has been embraced by numerous organisations across Australia, notably including a number of state and territory peak youth bodies (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2004 & Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, 2002). A full list of models of participation, as well as a critical analysis of these can be found in the NSW Children and Young People's Commission's report *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously* (2003, p. 9-14).

As a basis for the development of youth engagement strategies, *Hart's Ladder* (1992) has also encouraged evolution toward clearly articulating a definition of what 'youth participation' means in practice. Whilst there is no one accepted definition of 'youth participation', Kirby (2002) asserts that youth participation is a multi-faceted concept that at its centre, focuses on involvement in decision making within the public sphere (government and organisational policy), self-determination in the private sphere (e.g. personal decision making in families) and in its simplest form through integrated daily participatory approaches (e.g. encouragement of democratic thought in curriculum).

Holdsworth (no specified date) further expands Kirby's definition by suggesting that:

- **Participation is a term used in youth research, policy and practice to denote the role of young people in decision-making and action within personal, social and political domains.**

- **Distinctions can be drawn between: private participation, or personal decision-making, and public participation, which is more social.**

- **'Participation' can have both broad and narrow meanings, such as:**

1. *The inclusion (or exclusion) of young people, whether in the labour force or in society in general;*
2. *Young people's engagement in activities organised by others, including for example, voting in elections;*
3. *Formal processes of decision-making e.g. young people serving on boards and committees;*
4. *Community activism by young people.*

Despite the readily available wealth of literature suggesting the importance of youth participation, alternative perspectives do exist, including Prout (2000) who suggests that the general convergence towards promoting young people's inclusion is a form of social control which centres on young people's future as adults rather than their needs now. Similarly, many commentators have suggested that the push for youth inclusion and engagement has not been a genuine attempt to empower young people, but merely an adult driven agenda (Bessant, 2004)

These alternative perspectives are important to be aware of, but in contemporary Australia, many of these claims have been debunked particularly with the recent emergence of a significant number of youth-led organisations emerging as powerful voices in policy development at a national and global level. These include organisations such as the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Left Right Think Tank and the OakTree Foundation.

## What Youth Participation Looks Like In Practice

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2004) outlines three critical principles underlining effective youth participation practice:

- **Empowerment:** Young people having greater control over their lives through participation
- **Purposeful engagement:** Young people taking on valued roles, addressing issues that are relevant and influencing real outcomes
- **Inclusiveness:** Ensuring that all young people are able to participate

There are numerous examples of non-government and government bodies committing to actively supporting young people's involvement by following principles of this nature, some more successfully than others.

Generally speaking, much of the work that occurs in the government sphere surrounding youth participation is centred on traditional methods of engagement (Bridgland-Sorenson 2006), including advisory groups, forums, conferences and surveys. Whilst these mechanisms have proven success in engaging young people, they also face critical limitations in attracting a diversity of young people due to their formal and often confronting nature.

One of the greatest challenges faced by organisations hoping to engage young people is the difficulty in designing strategies which attract a wide diversity of feedback from different groups. Historically both non-government and government organisations have been criticised for only consulting with well educated, already empowered young people, often missing the needs of disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people.

The non-government sector and in particular, direct service providers to young people, are at the forefront of moving away from traditional methods of engagement towards designing innovative, creative and alternative strategies that empower young people to discuss, generate and implement ideas that they believe will assist with creating a better community for them and their peers.

Whether they use traditional or non-traditional methods, the non-government sector across the country has demonstrated an ongoing ability to recognise the value of participation and the benefit that such strategies can have for young people's confidence and skill development. Unfortunately this has not historically been true of Federal Government initiatives, which in many cases have been seen as ostensible and tokenistic (Bridgland-Sorenson 2006).

## Methods Of Engagement

Methods of engagement vary across the country and have evolved to meet the different needs of young people participating and the capacity of the organisations that seek to involve them.

The NSW Department of Local Government's report, Council Staff and Councillors' Views about Youth Consultation (adapted by Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia 2010, p. 11) summarises known methods of youth participation and alerts youth participation practitioners to the positive and negative aspects of each. This matrix is a useful tool for youth participation practitioners who may not be aware of different methods of engagement, or may be looking to improve current practices.

Examples and case studies of each of the mechanisms listed can be easily found via the toolkits and research listed later in this report.



Mechanism	Advantages	Disadvantages	Suggestions
<i>Youth Council</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enables easy ongoing access to a group of young people</li> <li>Allows young people to learn about local government operations</li> <li>Ongoing skill and confidence building</li> <li>Assists access to other youth groups through membership</li> <li>Can assist in other youth consultations and help facilitate the participation of other young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May not represent all groups of young people in the community and can discourage the participation of marginalised groups</li> <li>Requires considerable staff resources to support the group</li> <li>Requires a regular ongoing commitment by young people which can be difficult for individuals with work and educational commitments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Should not be used as the only means of consultation</li> <li>Important tool for facilitating wider consultation directions and objectives</li> <li>Essential that adequate support is provided, but only to the extent that it is used to empower young people</li> <li>Formal links with local government need to be established</li> <li>Allocate separate budget to enable the youth council to implement some of its decisions</li> </ul>
<i>Non-ongoing youth committee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enables young people to see a project through from beginning to end</li> <li>Participation is limited to the project's timeframe and can help to maintain ongoing participation in other forms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The nature of local government bureaucracy means projects can take a long time to implement thereby limiting the immediacy of outcomes and the ability of such a consultation mechanism to work for young people</li> <li>Tend to be dominated by high achievers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project needs to be of interest of young people</li> <li>Explain the council process and associated time lags</li> <li>Include tasks that do not require council approval</li> <li>Reinforce the young peoples' achievements</li> </ul>
<i>Youth Audit</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gauges views of everyone in the community about the issues facing young people</li> <li>Provides constructive strategies on how facilities can be improved</li> <li>Assists in mediating an outcome that meets the expectation of all members of the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Requires detailed survey and professional facilitation</li> <li>Nature of a survey may marginalise young people with learning difficulties and lower literacy levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project needs strong facilitation to define initial audit parameters</li> <li>Methods for consulting disadvantaged and marginalised youth must be employed to ensure the audit represents the views of a range of young people</li> <li>The participation of local business is central to the success of such a project and thereby it must be secured</li> <li>Questions should be largely limited to closed ended questions or rating scales</li> </ul>
<i>Youth Forum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One-time commitment</li> <li>Can involve larger and broader representation of young people in the community, increasing the credibility of the information gathered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to get young people to attend</li> <li>The size of the group may mean participants are reluctant to share information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young people should act as facilitators to encourage participation. Youth workers should be there to assist young people</li> <li>Adults attending should be limited</li> <li>Length of program should be designed to encourage increased participation of young people and encourage increased flow of ideas and opinions</li> <li>Seek cooperation from schools to make it easier for school aged young people to attend</li> </ul>
<i>Focus Group</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful for detailed analysis on defined projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May not be representative of all young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus groups need to be targeted to particular issues</li> <li>Focus groups should be used as a tool for identifying and developing larger consultation</li> <li>Need to be non-judgmental</li> <li>Facilitators should either be young people or people with expertise in youth consultation</li> </ul>
<i>Direct Consultation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Useful for obtaining detailed views</li> <li>Particularly useful for feedback on provision of services</li> <li>An opportunity to develop and strengthen relationships with young people.</li> <li>Improves future consultation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time consuming</li> <li>Represents individual views</li> <li>Information may not always be free and frank because of the power relationships between staff and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff need to be able to relate to young people</li> <li>Young people need to feel comfortable</li> <li>Should be used only as a guide for wider consultation</li> </ul>
<i>Indirect Consultation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information provided may have otherwise been unattainable by the council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The views are those of people working with young people and may not accurately represent the actual views of young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential that such consultation is included as part of wider direct consultation with young people to be of value</li> </ul>
<i>Self-Completed Survey</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An excellent source for obtaining views from a large cross-section of young people, particularly with reference to preferences for possible options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to determine whether views represented are serious. Young people may not take the survey seriously or provide socially acceptable responses</li> <li>Literacy abilities will define participation</li> <li>Respondents may be limited to particular groups of young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surveys should be short</li> <li>Simple language should be used</li> <li>Questions should be largely limited to closed ended questions or rating scales</li> </ul>

## Young People's Impact On Public And Organisational Policy

**'I think it is very important to identify how much impact [young people's views] are having. Young people need to know their views aren't just being listened to but also acted on'** Consultation participant

### What is 'policy impact'?

**Policy impact** can loosely be defined as 'having had a consequential, measurable change on the direction of a particular issue' (Overseas Development Institute, 2004).

In the Australian political arena this can manifest in many ways, including community feedback resulting in Government altering its position on a relevant issue, stakeholders being consulted on issues relevant to their needs, the work of peak bodies advocating for change in policy, or as the result of lobbyists representing the interest of their clients to government.

In the youth participation context, policy impact focuses primarily on whether young people's views, shared through various mechanisms of engagement, have had real and tangible influence on legislative change or organisational policy.

### Young people affecting policy

The idea of young people being directly involved in decision-making is not a new one in Australia, having been deemed important in the 1980's as a central part of program design in the non-government sector (Australian Youth Foundation, 2006).

It was not until Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 that there was a strong movement towards including and empowering young people to be part of policy development at a strategic level within government.

In particular the Convention states:

*Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (UNCROC, 1989)*

Most of the easily identified youth participation strategies implemented in Australia have been those undertaken by government departments. That's not to say that the majority of participation work occurs in the government sphere, but suggests that

government initiatives have often had greater access to resources for project promotion. Additionally, evaluations of youth participation processes within non-government organisations are often not readily shared in the public sphere. As a result, many of the prominent methods for engagement are more traditional in nature, such as one-off focus groups, surveys and forums.

Such traditional methods have been problematised by Wierenga (2003), Bessant (2004) and Bridgland-Sorenson (2006), who suggest that often these methods limit genuine participation, due to constraints associated with government bureaucracy.

As a result of attention focused on ensuring young people are actively supported to be part of decision-making processes in their community, a growing wealth of information, toolkits and resources are available to youth participation practitioners wishing to inform and improve their practice.

Several organisations have developed participation frameworks and guidelines designed to assist youth practitioners and young people to design strategies to ensure maximum participation from diverse groups of young people. Essential to the design of these frameworks has been a critical analysis of the tangible and systemic barriers young people face in participatory processes. Some of the key literature in this area of thinking includes:

- **Taking Young People Seriously handbooks (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2004)**
- **Involving Children and Young People - Participation Guidelines (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2009)**
- **Child and Youth Participation Resource Guide (UNICEF, 2010)**
- **Telling the Emperor - A Guide for Young People and for Organisations (Office for Children and Youth Western Australia, 2000)**
- **Rewriting the Rules for Youth Participation, Inclusion and Diversity in Government and Community Decision Making (Bell, Vromen, Collin, 2008)**
- **Hear By Right: Standards Framework for the Participation of Children and Youth (National Youth Agency United Kingdom, 2008)**

Whilst these frameworks are important tools for youth participation practitioners and actively assist with improving the possibility of young people's views impacting on and shaping organisational and public policy, there is little literature that centres on ensuring that genuine policy impact occurs.



## **Evidence Of Policy Impact**

Without a formal tool for measuring the impact of youth engagement strategies, identifying and communicating change is very difficult. In the absence of such a tool we rely on anecdotal evidence of policy evolution and change.

In regard to public policy, measuring 'policy impact' of engagement strategies is particularly difficult because decision makers and politicians are often unlikely to indicate who has influenced the decision making process due to an unwillingness to transfer power or agency to particular stakeholders.

Consultation participants indicated that there were numerous examples of how youth engagement strategies had influenced change within their organisations. These included the progression of organisational policy or procedures, the inclusion of young people's views in executive level decision-making and greater investment by organisations in youth engagement.

One significant benefit that is easily identifiable in this sphere is the high level skill development and confidence building young people are often afforded in non-government strategies due to a strength based approach to young people's inclusion.

There does exist anecdotal evidence that Federal youth engagement mechanisms at least have some basic influence on decision making through their mention in Parliamentary Hansard (Parliament of Australia and Parliamentary Committees, Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009).

Without a method of measuring and monitoring how young people's views have directly influenced decision making, we are doing the young people who participate an injustice as we are not quantifying or qualifying their impact.

## What Are The Barriers Preventing Policy Impact?

*'The main barrier that I feel is the amount of support from those that are older. Older people don't like change, but the common idea that Gen Y have is that change is good. Older people don't really get that change is a good thing and needs to happen because they are so set in their ways'*

Consultation participant

### Understanding The Process

Policy development processes can often be confusing and protracted, taking considerable time from the point at which stakeholders are given the opportunity to comment, to the outcomes being communicated. This is particularly true of government processes, which often need to go through approval processes at various bureaucratic levels.

Within these policy development processes, there are often several opportunities for stakeholders to impact on decisions, whether it is through actively lobbying decision makers, participating in consultations or pursuing other avenues of having their voice heard.

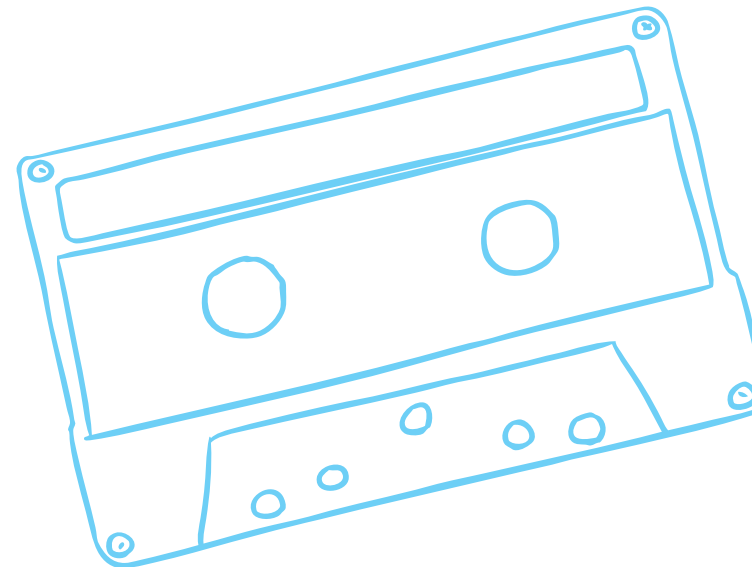
Due to the often complex nature of organisational and public policy progression, it is essential that the process be clearly and truthfully articulated to young people who are engaged, with a focus on:

- Identifying where young people fit into the policy development process
- Identifying and clearly articulating to young people the ways they can actively pursue their agendas and ideas
- Being honest about the length and breadth of the policy development process
- Being honest about the likelihood that young people's views will have an impact on the process
- Ensuring young people are provided feedback on a regular basis as to the progression of issues
- Communicating the outcome of the process to young people

Ensuring young people understand the policy development, legislative and consultation processes is vital to young people feeling genuinely included in decision making and maximising the potential for their views to have a significant impact.

*"... the flurry of the organisers to put together the event did not translate into a flurry of post-event activity to actually incorporate the recommendations into decision making processes and developing a timely and comprehensive government response. As a participant who applied on the basis of the commitment of follow up on feedback, this was highly disappointing"* Consultation participant

Other feedback stated that government bodies in particular, need to simplify and streamline their policy development processes to reduce misunderstandings and frustrations felt by young people. Similarly, consultation participants identified that the language used was often confusing; that traditional methods of engagement, such as meetings and forums, were not suited to young people and that facilitators did not operate in ways that helped young people to feel comfortable.





## Confining Young People To 'Youth Issues'

Young people consulted indicated that too often when participating in consultation mechanisms, they felt confined to commenting on issues that had been deemed by adults to be 'youth' related.

Young people stated that confining opportunities for providing feedback to these traditionally identified 'youth' issues, diminished their experiences and thoughts on other areas critical to their community. This also limited their opportunity to impact change in a much broader spectrum of issues, which shape their lives and the lives of their peers.

This issue is most candidly addressed by Heath (2006) in his book *Please Just F\*\*K Off It's Our Turn: Holding Baby Boomers To Account*, where he suggests that in Australia, the ideas and energy of young people have been systematically ignored, due to adults perceiving young people's views to be less worthy of consideration in policy debates and in the wider community.

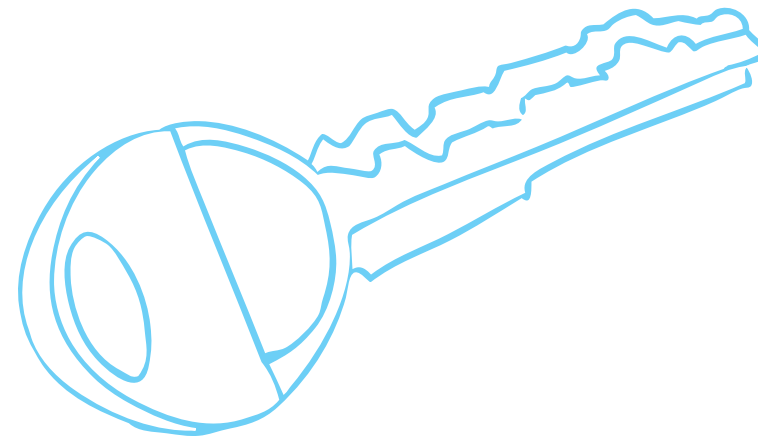
Many members of the Australian community view young people as simply 'developing' into adulthood. This leads to an outdated distinction between 'young people' and 'adults', which fails to recognise young people as contributing, independent and engaged citizens. This view also informs the way young people are treated and engaged by organisation and government bodies.

Many young people have informed, worthwhile opinions on 'adult' issues such as taxation, yet find they are not consulted on numerous elements of legislative and organisational reform, as these have been considered irrelevant to the lives of young people.

***"If youth consultation is confined to areas traditionally seen as 'youth-related', this process cannot claim to be relevant and meaningful. Consultation strategies do not reflect reality if they limit young people's participation to commenting on issues such as graffiti, recreation activities and public transport. In reality, many young people may not have any experience or insight into traditional 'youth-issues' and may be better placed to comment on broader topics that affect all Australians."*** Consultation participant

A change in the common perception of young people and their behaviours is needed. Young people have far more experience in making critical life decisions than they are often given credit for.

Young people must be consulted on those areas that they themselves deem to be important for their lives and their community, as opposed to those areas that policy and decision makers *think* are relevant to young people. Many young people work, pay taxes, drive, vote (when they turn eighteen), rent or own property, frequent restaurants and shopping centres, volunteer, pay bills and participate fully in public life.





## Achieving Cultural Change

Whilst originally not a focus of this project, young people and youth practitioners identified significant difficulties with organisational cultures. Difficulties in dealing with change resistance were very strongly expressed in the feedback we received. Overcoming these problems is vital in ensuring young people's views have an impact on policy outcomes.

Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair (2003) suggest that embedding a culture of listening and responding to young people is vital to improving service delivery and organisational performance. Similarly Testro (2002, p. 7) suggests that a 'whole of system approach is required to translate a commitment to participation into practice and to affect change'.

Dealing with resistance toward youth inclusion presents itself as the number one critical issue that limits the impact of young people's views on public policy and organisational change.

***"One of the largest problems young people in our organisation experience is the inability of some adults to take young people seriously and give them a fair go."***  
Consultation participant

Young people bring fresh, inventive and innovative ideas to the table. For these to be stymied by resistant attitudes toward change, ultimately may prevent organisations from progressing their objectives

Training and professional development was identified as a key strategy to deal with resistant attitudes toward young people's participation and change. This should focus on:

- Training targeted at encouraging positive attitudes toward managing and implementing change in organisations which should ideally be designed, developed and delivered by young people themselves
- Training targeted at young people and youth participation practitioners to assist them in dealing with negative attitudes towards the inclusion of young people

## Maximising young people's impact: What can organisations do?

*'...where young people point out serious issues which threaten the long term sustainability of an organisation, to fail to act on those concerns demonstrates that young people's views are not being taken seriously or properly understood.'* Consultation participant

### Embedding Young People's Needs

Youth participation practitioners consulted for this report indicated that organisational documents which embed the necessity for young people to be actively included in the organisation, were vital instruments in ensuring young people's views had maximum potential impact on policy development processes.

All organisations consulted indicated that they had in place, policies and procedures that informed their design of participation practices, which were informed by research and by young people's views. This evidence-based approach ensured that practice development was informed on an ongoing basis and evolved where necessary to ensure young people were genuinely included in the organisation.

A number of salient strategies for ensuring organisational policy and procedures reflected young people's needs include:

- **That young people's inclusion is entrenched at a strategic and business planning level**
- **That organisations clearly articulate what youth participation means within their organisation and that this is communicated to all stakeholders**
- **That guidelines or principles for youth participation are developed with young people, with commitment by all staff**
- **That organisations develop youth participation plans over an extended period and evaluate the success of these mechanisms on a regular basis**
- **That young people are actively supported to generate internal and external policies for consideration by employees and executive-level decision makers**

## Multi-Faceted And Flexible Approaches

Consultation participants highlighted the need for more flexible and varied approaches to be used by organisations attempting to engage with young people, as well as an openness to alternative engagement avenues that are more accessible to young people.

Traditional methods of consultation such as forums, seminars, surveys and submissions can be quite dry and old-fashioned for young people, who may also be unfamiliar with the often established rules of engagement that go along with each of these methods.

In order to make contributing to a consultation more attractive and accessible to young people, organisations have to consider using new or alternative engagement methods. A major consideration is how appropriate these methods are, particularly with regard to accessibility, time commitment, functionality, cost, whether the process can occur independently, or whether the young person will require additional support.

Considering the numerous barriers that young people face in accessing traditional methods of consultation and engagement, organisations must be flexible, so that they understand and energetically embrace new methods of seeking input and feedback from young people. This is particularly the case with new online methods and social media tools.

The majority of consultation participants stated that their respective organisations utilised multi-pronged consultation strategies. This was vital to ensuring a diverse, more representative group of young people were included and further increased the opportunity for maximum impact on policy development or organisational change.



## Young People In Positions Of Power

***"I feel that a lot of people underestimate young people. They don't realise that youth have a voice and an opinion and that it does matter."***

Consultation participant

Whilst generally positive about their experiences of consultation, the majority of the young people consulted expressed a sense of feeling underestimated by many people within the organisations they were involved in, as well as by government and the wider community.

They felt frustrated and dismayed by both processes and practical barriers, which diminished their skills and passion. In particular they highlighted a strong concern that high level managers and bureaucrats lacked a commitment to engaging young people as equal stakeholders in decision making.

***"I think a significant barrier is the capacity of managers/directors to believe in the ability of young people to responsibly perform in a senior decision-making role. I think most senior managers don't realise that, if well supported, a young person can have a very valuable and insightful contribution to make to a discussion at, for example, a board table. Often it is not until such managers are actually faced with an articulate, intelligent young person that they realise the amount that can be achieved by including young people in decision-making."*** Consultation participant

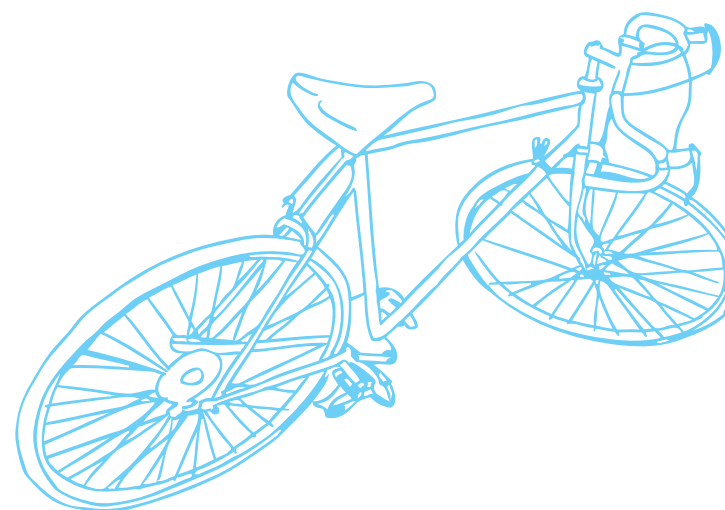
What's heartening is that the young people believed the level of support they received from designated youth participation practitioners empowered them to rise above the presumption that they lacked the ability make strategic organisational decisions.

A key element for overcoming the challenge of being underestimated was that young people were given an opportunity to participate in high-level governance structures and decision-making processes within organisations. Many of the consulted organisations reported that they had designated youth positions at board level.

The emergence of numerous organisations generated, led, and managed by young people demonstrates young people's unique ability to act dutifully in regard to their legislated responsibilities on boards, but also to think insightfully about how they can use their power to make clear and distinct decisions about the future of their organisations.

Ensuring young people are afforded opportunities to operate within decision-making processes in organisations is not as easy as simply designating positions. Young people who are placed in these roles must be provided with adequate and sustained support to undertake their roles, with special consideration that young people often have different needs and time commitments to adults. For example, they may need further advice on making fiscal decisions. Importantly, they may need financial support to travel to and from meetings or to meet other costs associated with their involvement at this level.

Young people also indicated that representation at board or executive level often afforded them the opportunity to network and raise issues directly with politicians and public policy decision makers. This is an opportunity that they felt was vitally important to ensuring change in how young people and their views are perceived.



## Evaluating Success

Monitoring the impact and successes of youth participation practices is a relatively new area of research in Australia, with the majority of assessment tools having been produced in the United Kingdom.

That said, there is an emerging desire to ensure youth participation practices are complemented by rigorous evaluation methods, which articulate how the mechanisms are beneficial to organisations and governments, and also how valuable these mechanisms are to the young people who become involved in them (Testro, 2006, p.7).

Evaluation is also becoming vitally important for organisations that provide services to young people, as governments point to a greater focus on the need for evidence based practice.

One explanation for the limited information available in Australia in relation to assessment tools or evaluations of youth participation practices is that many bodies who commission evaluations of their programs may hesitate to make them publicly available. This is true of the National Youth Roundtable, run by the former Department for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, who on several occasions embargoed program evaluations (Bridgland-Sorenson, 2006) due to their critical commentary on the former Federal Government.

The Foundation for Young Australians has been a leading force in actively evaluating young people's inclusion in decision-making and program design, as well as the Inspire Foundation. Both of these readily shared the results of service delivery evaluations.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2003) has developed *Checking the Scoreboard*, a publicly available resource tool that assists organisations with monitoring how effectively young people are included in decision making. Similarly the United Kingdom organisation the National Youth Agency (2005) has developed *What's Changed?*, an assessment tool that considers whether young people's views have resulted in change, and Family Health International (2010) have developed *Youth Participation*

*Guide: Assessment, Planning and Implementation*, a comprehensive guide to designing and evaluating participation practices within the public health domain.

Testro (2006) suggests that the development of minimum standards that assist in evaluating youth participation practices could be a key way forward to ensuring program design and community decision-making is reflective of the views and needs of young people.

St Leger and Bell (2007) suggest that evaluation strategies which focus on ensuring young people are involved at all levels of the development, implementation and evaluation of programs, increase young people's sense of ownership of projects. This greater ownership has positive benefits because such strategies have a greater chance of achieving positive and sustainable outcomes.

Much of the evaluation work undertaken in Australia and internationally has focused on small scale mechanisms of youth participation. There is little evidence to suggest that mechanisms which have national significance in Australia have been critically analysed (Bridgland-Sorenson, 2006).



## Evaluating And Measuring Impact

The majority of youth participation practitioners consulted, reported that they used informal procedures for monitoring how young people's views had been incorporated into policy within their organisations.

Generally, these instruments of evaluation manifested themselves as internal reviews; opportunities for young people to feedback at the end of processes or after seeing policy results; and most simply, young people being provided with the opportunity to comment on youth participation practices through surveys.

***"[We do monitor] although not in any formal way. In order to ascertain the views of young people on certain topics [we] will often conduct research and report the results back to the relevant part of the organisation. This might be pre or post policy change for example. If advice has not been taken on [young people] will continue to lobby for change as appropriate"***  
Consultation participant

Some of the organisations consulted had engaged external consultants to evaluate participation practices, although these evaluations focused primarily on the experiences and feelings of young people about process issues, rather than whether or not their views had been a catalyst for change in the organisation.

In addition to these instruments, youth participant practitioners noted that they actively informed and improved their engagement strategies by collecting best practice examples and toolkits produced by other organisations. This was often difficult due to the lack of a central database.

A less fragmented approach to sharing internal evaluations and assessment tools is needed. This should ultimately result in improvements in youth participation practices and their impacts. Participants felt that a vital tool for improving practice would be the development of a central catalogue of program evaluations, research and publications that youth sector organisations actively contributed to.

As a result of the lack of measurement tools focusing on identifying the level to which young people have impacted on policy or legislative change, there is little evidence beyond anecdotal stories from young people available within most organisations.

All participants indicated that they felt a critical way forward was the development of rigorous measurement tools both within organisations and government, which monitored over time, the extent to which young people's views were impacting on organisational policy, public policy and critically, the attitudes of those within those organisations.

Importantly, it was identified that a tool of this nature would be useful to young people passionate about ensuring their organisations and government were accountable to the views young people gave.

***"Evaluation is essential. Young people want to know where their thoughts and ideas are going and whether or not they have made a difference. We need to be accountable."*** Consultation participant

Integral to the validity of the design of such a policy impact measurement tool, is that young people would be dynamically engaged in its development.



## ***Gaps For Further Research:***

In undertaking this project, a number of research questions have been identified as needing further exploration, including to:

- **Examine whether young people's views being shared through consultation mechanisms are positively impacting on the attitudes of adults, and whether adults are actively pursuing young people's ideas**
- **Examine the perceptions of politicians and government policy makers toward youth participation**
- **Examine whether young people who have participated in consultations mechanisms feel they have a greater capacity to impact on other decision making processes occurring around them**
- **Identify training and educational modules for workers in organisations to challenge potentially negative attitudes to young people's participation and inclusion**
- **Develop evaluation tools suited to organisations which facilitate consultation and youth participation practice on a large scale, and/ or for programs that have national significance**
- **Examine how organisations can better share resources and evaluation tools used internally in order to better inform practices across the youth sector**
- **Examine over the long term whether or not young people's views are translated into policy or legislative change**



## Resources & Publications

### Resources to assist with developing your youth participation practice

*"Government bodies often limit young people's involvement to 'youth issues', where clearly there are a range of policies and procedures that affect young people, which they are not properly consulted about. In my experience there are some organisations that have 'theories' about how to engage young people that aren't based on a lot of solid evidence or a track record of successful youth engagement."* Consultation participant

### Participation toolkits and guidelines

**Taking Young People Seriously handbooks**, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2004)

[http://www.yacvic.org.au/sector/detail-participation.chtml filename\\_num=258084](http://www.yacvic.org.au/sector/detail-participation.chtml filename_num=258084)

*A series of three handbooks to assist with increasing the capacity of your organisation to engage effectively with young people.*

**Involving Children and Young People - Participation Guidelines**, Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2009)

<http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/content/Participation%20Guidelines.aspx>

*Guidelines to assist organisations and government to actively support children and young people to actively participate in decision-making*

**How to Build a Culture of Participation**, Participation Works (UK)

<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/resources/how-to-build-a-culture-of-participation>

*Information and practical ideas about how to embed participation throughout your organisation in a way that brings about change*

**Child And Youth Participation Resource Guide**, UNICEF

<http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/index.html>

*A resource guide for youth participation practitioners involved in promoting child and youth participation in government, community-based organisations, youth-led organisations*

**Telling the Emperor** - A guide for Young People and for Organisations, the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia and the Office for Children and Youth (2000) Young Person Guide, <http://www.youth.wa.gov.au/MS/LMSfiles/dcdguitellingtheemperorforyoungpeople050216.pdf>

Organisation Guide,

<http://www.youth.wa.gov.au/MS/LMSfiles/dcdguitellingtheemperorfororganisations050216.pdf>

*A two-part guide to developing effective strategies for engaging young people in organisations. Part one is targeted at youth participation practitioners and part two is for young people who are hoping to get involved in decision making.*

**Rewriting the Rules for Youth Participation**, Inclusion and Diversity in Government and Community Decision Making

[http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/B05B1B75-94E6-4414-8391-CA9908FA1975/24003/08212NYARSpublishation1\\_Inclusionanddiversity\\_webaw.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/B05B1B75-94E6-4414-8391-CA9908FA1975/24003/08212NYARSpublishation1_Inclusionanddiversity_webaw.pdf)

*Provides government and non-government organisations with a framework for inclusion of young people. Uniquely this report focuses on engaging young people from diverse backgrounds*





## Resources & Publications (cont.)

### Evaluating youth participation practices

**Hear By Right: Standards Framework for the Participation of Children and Youth**, National Youth Agency United Kingdom (2008)

<http://nya.org.uk/catalogue/youth-work-activities/hear-by-right-1>

*Framework to assist with evaluating participation levels within your organisation. Assists with ensuring your methods are linked to evidence of impact for young people who participate as well as the lives of other young people in the community.*

**Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, Planning, and Implementation**, Family Health International (2005)

<http://www.fhi.org/NR/rdonlyres/ebkyfq457543z3syxil34v7a7rjos4ard-7pi5fc5ornfppvqguthriiaepjnhlehnbflnrf6eviwlf/AcknwL0110enyt.pdf>

Evaluation Toolkit for youth participation practitioner, focused on involving young people in health education programs.

### Case studies and best practice

**Hearing Young Voices**, National Youth Council of Ireland (2003)

[http://www.youth.ie/publications/research\\_and\\_policy\\_reports/hearing\\_young\\_voices\\_2003](http://www.youth.ie/publications/research_and_policy_reports/hearing_young_voices_2003)

*Examines how barriers preventing youth participation can be overcome with particular focus on engaging young people from disadvantaged backgrounds*

**Alive and Motivated: Young People, Participation and Local Government**, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (2004)

[http://www.deewr.gov.au/Youth/Programs/NYARS/Documents/AliveMotivated\\_C.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Youth/Programs/NYARS/Documents/AliveMotivated_C.pdf)

*Report centres around how the inclusion of young people can be strengthened at a local level*

**What Works in Youth Participation: Case Studies from Around the World**, International Youth Foundation (2002),

[http://euroopa.noored.ee/files/what\\_works\\_in\\_youth\\_par.pdf](http://euroopa.noored.ee/files/what_works_in_youth_par.pdf)

*Series of articles assessing youth participation strategies used across the world*

**Involving Young People: Documenting Youth Participation Strategies for Newly Arrived Communities**, Centre for Multicultural Youth (2001)

[http://www.cmy.net.au/Assets/160/1/BP\\_Youth\\_participation.pdf](http://www.cmy.net.au/Assets/160/1/BP_Youth_participation.pdf)

*Identifies a number of best practices examples for engaging young people from diverse backgrounds*



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