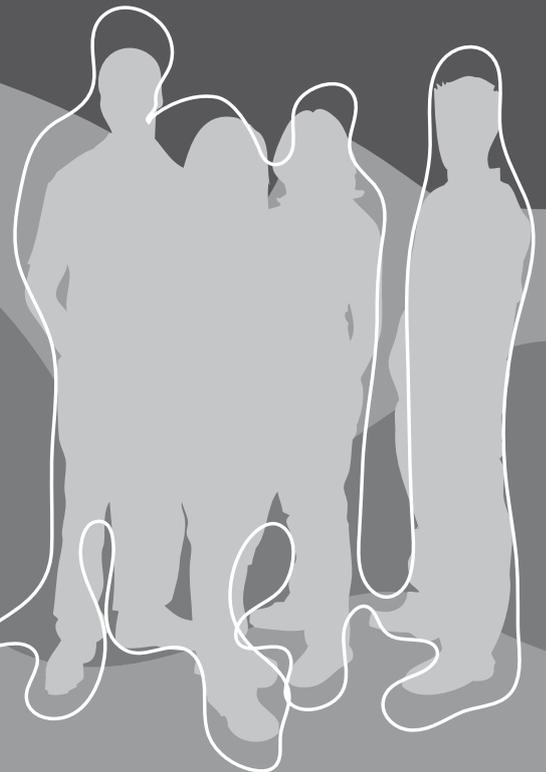# REWRITING THE RULES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision making

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Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS)

CONTENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) has commissioned this research to provide government and community organisations with a framework for youth participation approaches that facilitate the involvement of young people from a range of backgrounds. The research is the first of its kind to be conducted in Australia and examined the following:

- existing opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in decision making

- perceptions and expectations of participation

- experiences of participation

- the strengths and limitations of targeted verses universal approaches to involving young people

- motivations for participation

- barriers to participation

- benefits of participation

- strategies for involving young people from diverse backgrounds.

The research explores the attitudes and experiences of policy makers and service providers, and young people from diverse backgrounds. For the purposes of this project, young people from diverse backgrounds were defined as those aged 12-25 years from one or more of the following backgrounds:

- Indigenous

- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), including refugee and recently arrived communities

- low socio economic backgrounds

- young people who have a disability

- young people who are, or have been, under the guardianship of the Minister (particularly those in foster care).

The research was conducted by a research consortium of the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) as lead agency, in collaboration with Dr Ariadne Vromen (University of Sydney) and the Inspire Foundation.

CIRCA is a social research agency that specialises in conducting consultation with Australians from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds. Dr Ariadne Vromen has published extensively on young people and participation, and is a regular media commentator on the contemporary debate about young people and politics. The Inspire Foundation is recognised as a leading practice example of involving young people in meaningful participation and is regularly invited to advise on the development of youth involvement models for programs, organisations and government.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS FROM THE LITERATURE

The literature review for this project found that participation tends to be conceptualised in a variety of ways, and it was important that the research project did not limit itself to one particular concept or approach. While there is a tendency to conceptualise youth participation in terms of **formal** approaches, such as youth round tables and youth advisory groups (YAGs), the literature review of international youth participation approaches made it clear that it was necessary to go beyond formal notions of participatory decision making. It also suggested including **informal** approaches such as casual chats between young people and service providers, online interaction and

project specific initiatives such as youth radio. Subsequently a broad definition of participation has been used throughout this research to ensure that a wide spectrum of participation opportunities and experiences were explored.

The literature review also found that young people from diverse backgrounds ought not be treated as a homogenous group that will want, or be able, to access universal youth participation opportunities. Instead, in both Australian and international youth participation approaches, young people's different experiences of exclusion and disadvantage often shape targeted youth participation strategies. This differentiation in the existing literature between **targeted participation** approaches that are designed to involve young people from a particular background, or who have shared experiences, and **universal participation** approaches that are designed to involve the general youth population in decision making, was very important in shaping this research project.

The literature review also found that existing youth participation approaches used with diverse groups of young people tend to be dominated by a **youth development** approach focused on enhancing life skills. This is seen especially in New Zealand, Canada and Australia, and in the social inclusion agenda in the United Kingdom/Ireland. The exceptions tend to be when projects develop a strong community development ethos and/or work in partnership with youth oriented community organisations. The existence of exceptions that use a **youth involvement** participatory approach are further explored in this research project.

The most thorough existing research into youth participation looks at policy programs from a range of stakeholder views, including policy makers, youth workers, service providers and young people themselves. It focuses on the communities where young people are located, either of shared geography or shared identity, rather than randomly consulting individual young people. This existing research also highlights the way young people use and adapt technology to create and shape their participation. The methodological approaches in existing international research, with multiple populations, shaped the development of this research project.

METHODOLOGY

A multifaceted and mainly qualitative methodology was used in this research in recognition that the target populations, in particular young people from each of the target diversity backgrounds, can be 'hidden' and difficult to access through quantitative research processes such as surveys. In brief, the research project involved the following key research approaches:

- **Four face-to-face discussion forums with policy makers from government and community organisations.** The forums explored the range of views held by policy makers and decision makers from government and community organisations that interact with, or influence policy that affects the lives of young people from diverse backgrounds. The discussion forums focused on how participation is understood and implemented by government and community organisations. There was also an identification of the barriers for youth participation as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of current approaches.

- **A national telephone survey with 100 organisations that provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds.** The telephone survey with organisations was conducted to complement the qualitative approach of the discussion forums. The survey examined how individual organisations approach and incorporate youth participation into their service delivery. The survey was a partial replication of a compatible survey undertaken in Ireland with youth serving organisations.

- **A Youth Advisory Group (YAG) made up of young people from diverse backgrounds.** The YAG was created for this project to obtain the input and guidance of young people for the community audits research phase which focussed on young people's experiences. The YAG provided an opportunity for young people from a range of diverse backgrounds to share their experiences, ideas and understandings of participation and decision-making processes. In addition, three young people from the YAG supported the community audits by helping to set up, facilitate and document young people's feedback during the community audits.

- **Face-to-face community audits in four locations around Australia, as well as an online audit.** The community audit approach was used to examine the range of local level opportunities that exist for young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in government and community decision-making processes. Also explored was the extent to which young people understand and access decision-making processes, and what were the motivators and barriers for them doing so. A series of case studies were developed during the audits that explored effective practice for facilitating the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Finding 1

The way diversity is framed influences which young people get involved.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Organisations need to expand their understanding of diversity so as to include young people from the five target populations.

- Young people have complex, multi dimensional identities. Organisations need to recognise but not emphasise this.

- Wherever possible, use the terms 'young people from a range of backgrounds' or 'young people with different life experiences' as these are more likely to be meaningful to young people than 'young people from diverse backgrounds'.

Key finding 2

Engaging young people in determining both processes and the content for participatory decision making increases the engagement and commitment of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Involve young people in planning decision-making mechanisms for your organisation or program.

- Invite feedback on the process, as well as the outcomes, and communicate how you use that feedback.

- Don't just expect young people to 'fit in' - be prepared to change internal processes if need be.

Key finding 3

Definitions of participation need to incorporate a range of decision making mechanisms including informal approaches.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Organisations need to recognise and resource less formal approaches for involving young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Diversify the mechanisms used to engage young people. The more varied the approaches, the more varied the groups of young people who are engaged.

- Frame decision-making processes in a way that relates to young people's lived experience.

Key finding 4

Organisations report that insufficient resourcing is the most significant barrier to engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Organisations should look at ways to embed a commitment to youth participation in the *culture* of the organisation. This should be reflected in the organisational values, recognition and support for youth participation at an executive and management level and through appropriate processes, training and support to staff to work with young people from a range of different backgrounds.

- Identify available resources (staff, skills, materials, volunteers) and use these to better involve young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Recognise that not all youth involvement processes are resource intensive, and that less structured, shorter term strategies such as casual chats and the use of online facilitation processes can be more cost effective than longer term approaches to participation.

- Identify opportunities to partner with local organisations that provide services to young people so as to share skills and pool existing resources and expertise.

- Work with young people to identify strategies for accessing resources.

- Plan ahead for the resources needed to involve young people from one or more of the target diversity backgrounds.

- Foster organisation-wide endorsement for youth participation in decision making by promoting the benefits of involving young people from a range of backgrounds in decision making.

Key finding 5

Gradually introducing young people to decision-making processes can assist in ensuring that young people from diverse backgrounds are interested in, and comfortable with participation.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Use a staged introduction to participation mechanisms (particularly formal ones) to ensure that young people can gradually familiarise themselves with new places, processes and people.

- Provide opportunities for young people to learn about decision-making processes before committing to longer-term involvement.

- Support young people from diverse backgrounds to play an active role in decisions that affect their personal lives as this increases their capacity and motivation to participate in wider decision making.

- Work with young people to establish a clear understanding of expectations, roles, and the parameters of the decision-making initiative.

Key finding 6

Participation is most appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds when the focus is on more than just having a say.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure that participation of young people from diverse backgrounds is purposeful, supported and linked to outcomes, rather than inclusion for the sake of inclusion.

- Demonstrate the outcomes of participation processes to young people, acknowledge their contributions, and explain the reasons why some ideas are not realised.

- Limit processes which call for 'representative young people'. Young people from diverse backgrounds should be encouraged to speak from their own experience and not on behalf of others.

- Don't dwell on 'speaking up' or 'having a say' as this deters young people who are not confident public speakers. Instead, promote the opportunity to make a difference, learn specific skills and meet new people.

- Work with young people from diverse backgrounds to identify the issues that matter to them and then create participation opportunities around these issues.

- Don't limit the scope of decisions that young people can be involved in to those deemed 'youth specific'.

Key finding 7

Online mechanisms are under utilised by both government and community organisations, and can provide appropriate and cost effective ways to engage young people from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Utilise multiple and innovative strategies for facilitating participation online and establish these with the input of young people from diverse backgrounds to ensure that the most appropriate and targeted online tools are used, and potential barriers are identified and addressed up front.

- Establish trust with young people by providing evidence online of young people's role in decision making.

- Utilise online spaces that young people from diverse backgrounds already engage with so as to ensure that online decision making takes place in spaces where young people are.

Key finding 8

Actively targeting the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds increases engagement.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Promote opportunities to participate through organisations or intermediaries who are already well known to, and trusted by, young people from diverse backgrounds.

- If using a universal participation mechanism, develop a priority access policy to ensure that young people from a range of backgrounds are involved in decision-making processes. Ensure that the policy is public and its application is transparent.

- Host decision-making processes in spaces that are familiar, and accessible to young people from diverse backgrounds.

Key finding 9

Flexibility and ownership are key to sustaining the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Recognise that young people are experts in their own lives and seek top-down organisational support of processes that encourage young people from diverse backgrounds (and young people more widely) to shape decision-making processes and outcomes.

- Don't assume that young people want to be involved continuously or for long periods of time. Provide flexibility by giving young people opportunities to determine their level of involvement and encourage young people to determine their own terms of engagement.

Key finding 10

The endorsement of participation processes by key community figures can help to engage young people from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure effective promotion of participation opportunities to young people and their communities, including parents, elders and relevant organisations.

- Be mindful of the gatekeeper role that parents, community leaders and organisations can play and address this by working with a range of intermediaries and clearly communicating that participation is open to young people from all backgrounds, not just 'young leaders' or 'high achievers'.

- Work with young people to determine the appropriate level of involvement they want from adults in their communities.

Key finding 11

Determining who is involved helps organisations to identify which groups of young people are not involved.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure that evaluation mechanisms are planned and embedded in youth participation strategies. These should include documenting the profiles of young people who are involved in participatory decision-making processes to better understand where participation gaps exist.

1 | INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Increasingly government and community organisations in Australia are expressing a commitment to incorporating young people into decision-making processes. Often, underpinning this is the notion that incorporating young people's experiences into policy-making agendas leads to the development of more appropriate and responsive policy and programs. With the increase in opportunities for young people to get involved, it is important to keep asking ourselves: "Who is getting involved and who's not? If young people from some backgrounds are not getting involved, what needs to change to make decision-making processes more accessible and effective?"

To help answer these questions and others, NYARS commissioned research to provide government and community organisations with a framework for youth participation approaches that facilitate the involvement of young people from a range of backgrounds.

The research explores the attitudes and experiences of policy makers and service providers, and young people from the following backgrounds:

- young Indigenous people
- young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, including refugee and recently arrived communities

- young people from low socio economic backgrounds

- young people who have a disability

- young people under the guardianship of the minister (particularly those in foster care).

This report outlines the research purpose, process and findings and concludes with a series of effective practice principals to assist policy makers and service providers to engage young people from a range of backgrounds in decision-making processes.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This research is the first of its kind to be conducted in Australia and aims to provide the government and community sectors with a framework for youth participation approaches that facilitate the involvement of young people from a range of backgrounds. To inform this framework, the research examined the following areas:

- existing opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in decision making

- perceptions and expectations of participation

- experiences of participation

- the strengths and limitations of targeted verses universal approaches to involving young people

- motivations for participation

- barriers to participation

- benefits of participation

- strategies for involving young people from diverse backgrounds.

PROJECT PROCESS

The methodology adopted for this project was broad based and multistaged to ensure that the research was inclusive of perspectives from the following key stakeholders:
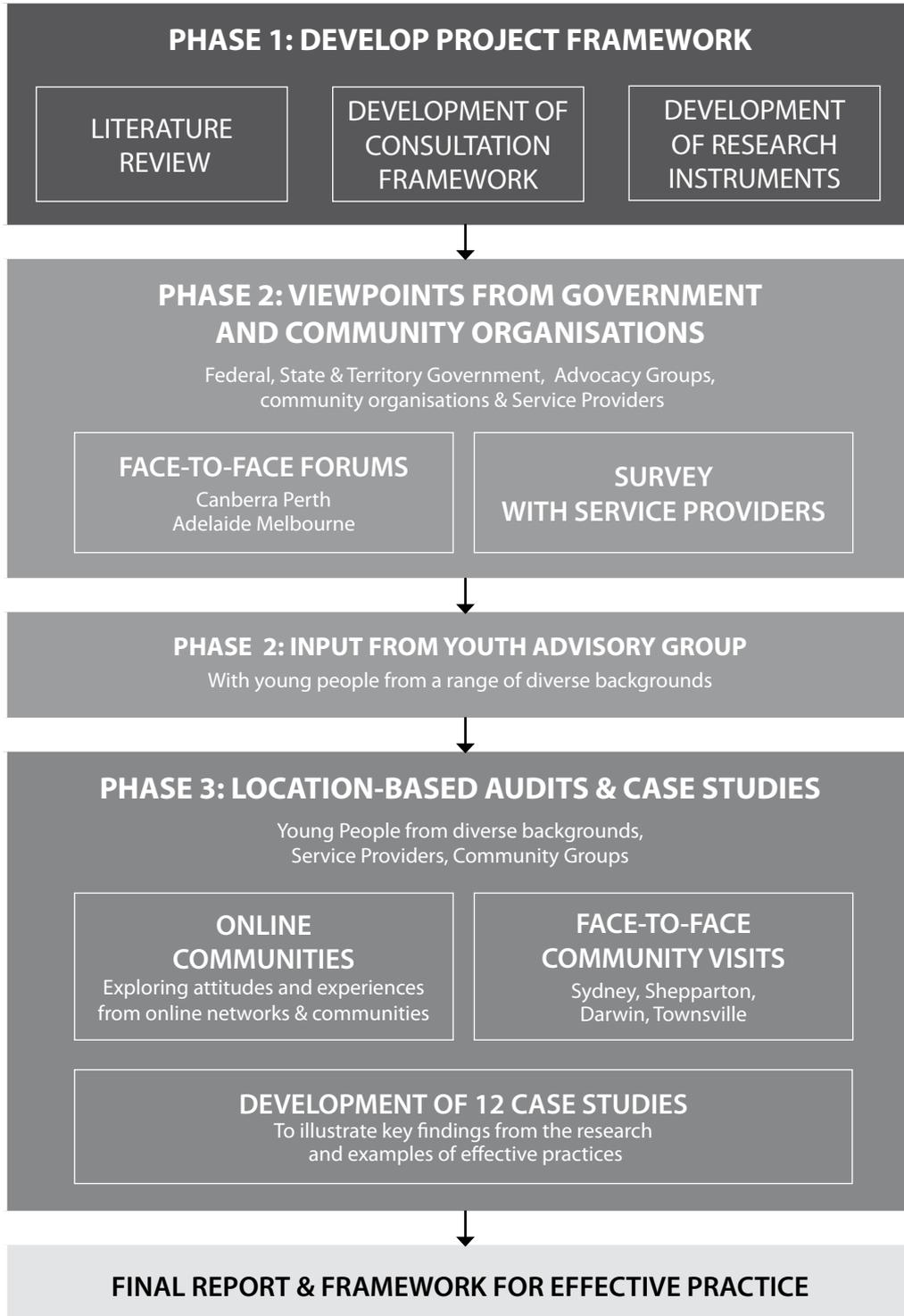
- young people from diverse backgrounds

- organisations that provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds

- high level decision makers from government and community organisations which have a responsibility for policy or programs that affect the lives of young people from diverse backgrounds.

A multifaceted and mainly qualitative methodology was used in recognition that the target populations in the investigation, in particular young people from each of the target diversity backgrounds can be 'hidden' and difficult to access through quantitative research processes such as surveys. In short, the research project involved the following key research approaches:

- a literature review

- face to face discussion forums with policy makers from government and community organisations

- a national telephone survey with organisations that provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds

- a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) made up of young people from diverse backgrounds

- face to face community audits in four locations around Australia, as well as an online

- a series of case studies that explore effective practice for facilitating the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

Figure 1 illustrates the multifaceted nature of the methodology and provides an overview of how each research phase was used to build on, and develop, findings from previous phases.

FIGURE 1: Research methodology

PHASE 1: DEVELOP PROJECT FRAMEWORK

LITERATURE REVIEW	DEVELOPMENT OF CONSULTATION FRAMEWORK	DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

PHASE 2: VIEWPOINTS FROM GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Federal, State & Territory Government, Advocacy Groups, community organisations & Service Providers

FACE-TO-FACE FORUMS
Canberra Perth
Adelaide Melbourne

SURVEY WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

PHASE 2: INPUT FROM YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP

With young people from a range of diverse backgrounds

PHASE 3: LOCATION-BASED AUDITS & CASE STUDIES

Young People from diverse backgrounds, Service Providers, Community Groups

ONLINE COMMUNITIES
Exploring attitudes and experiences from online networks & communities

FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNITY VISITS
Sydney, Shepparton, Darwin, Townsville

DEVELOPMENT OF 12 CASE STUDIES
To illustrate key findings from the research and examples of effective practices

FINAL REPORT & FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

The research approach was also unique in that it involved young people, through a YAG, in the development of the community audit methodology. The YAG recruitment process deliberately invited interested young people to participate, noting an interest in, but not limiting participation to, the diversity groups mentioned in the terms of reference. Young people were able to bring a range of knowledge and skills to the role because the purpose of the YAG was to inform the research framework, without focusing solely on those young peoples' experiences of being Indigenous, vision impaired or having been in care.

In addition, the research team looked for opportunities to involve young people in the delivery of the community audits. In three of the four community audit locations, a YAG member was involved in the set up and implementation of the workshops, a process which increased researchers' ability to access suitable young people, identify relevant organisations to host the workshops and engage more effectively with participants during the workshops. Young researchers' input was particularly valuable in ensuring that the workshop process was adapted to the local context and participants. The use of young people who lived in the geographical audit locations made it possible to encompass local knowledge during the set up and delivery of the workshops and provided an illustration of the benefits that involving young people can bring to a research process.

KEY DEFINITIONS

This section outlines the key definitions that underpin this research project and provides an overview of the rationale behind each term. It is important to note up front that terms such as 'young people' and 'youth participation' are multifaceted concepts, however, for the purposes of the research it was necessary to identify one definition so as to clearly communicate the research purpose and process to participants. That is not to say that the definition was set in stone at the outset of the project. Instead, the chosen terms were discussed with young people and government and community organisations with the aim of ensuring that the language used in the research process was appropriate and inclusive.

Young people

For the purposes of this project, young people were defined as those aged 12 to 25 years. While the age range assigned to 'young people' differs, 12-25 years-of-age is commonly used in Australian youth policy to frame young people, and as such was most appropriate for this research project. This definition allowed the research to

explore participation in the context of differences in life pathways and helped to expose some of the contradictions between young people's wants and needs and the age brackets specified by organisational programs.

It was important for the research to involve young people from a broad range of backgrounds in recognition that age-based trajectories, or markers, in both public and private life are not as predictable as they once were. Recent Australian research that explored young people and life course transitions, such as relationship formation, leaving the family home and house ownership, found that these are not being experienced universally, in the same way, or even by the age of 25, the age often used as the categorical entry-point into independent adulthood.

Young people from diverse backgrounds

For the purposes of this research the term 'young people from diverse backgrounds' has been used to describe young people from one or more of the following backgrounds:

- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds including refugee and recently arrived communities

- Indigenous young people

- young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds

- young people with a disability

- young people under the guardianship of the minister (particularly those in foster care).

These target populations were identified by NYARS as of interest to the research. The research team understands the broad range of experiences and identities that exists within each of these diversity groups, and acknowledges the limitations of assigning definitions to particular groups of young people. As well, the research team understands that young people may identify with several of the 'diversity' categories identified above.

Also, the research team accepts that diversity stretches beyond these five target groups, however, to ensure that research participants fully understood the scope of the research, it was necessary to assign a definition to diversity. Throughout the research, the research team were conscious not to categorise participants based on a limited definition of diversity and in some of the consultation processes the term 'young people from a range of backgrounds' was also used.

Participation in decision making

A broad definition of participation has been used throughout this research to ensure that a wide spectrum of participation opportunities and experiences were explored. While there is a tendency for people to conceptualise youth participation in terms of formal approaches, such as youth round tables and youth advisory groups, due to the diverse range of young people targeted for this research, it was necessary to go beyond formal notions of participatory decision making to also include approaches such as casual chats between young people and service providers, online interaction and project specific initiatives such as youth radio.

The literature review for this project found that participation tends to be conceptualised in three main ways. Firstly, as individual, institutionalised acts that people do by themselves to try to influence political outcomes. Secondly, as a type of group or collectively based action, usually undertaken on a voluntary basis that can influence government or general public opinion. Thirdly, as something that governments and other formal organisations foster by including groups (such as young people) overtly within decision-making processes. Given that participation can be conceptualised in a range of ways, it was important that this research did not push one particular concept. Instead, participants, both young people and other stakeholders, were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of participation in decision making to identify overlaps and any areas where confusion might arise.

Throughout the report, the following terms are used to differentiate between approaches to participation:

- **formal participation**—the use of structured and usually longer-term approaches to involving young people in decision making which are typically executed through formal policies. For example, youth round tables, youth advisory groups, youth parliaments and structured consultation such as surveys or focus groups

- **informal participation**—the use of mechanisms that have no or a 'loose' structure, are 'casual' in their tone, require limited planning and resources, are quite often short-term and are usually not executed through formal policy. For example, casual chats between service providers and service users, one-off discussion groups and youth-led participation

- **targeted participation**—approaches that are designed to involve young people from a particular background, or who have shared experiences

- **universal participation**—approaches that are designed to involve the general youth population in decision making.

The Research team

This research was conducted by a research consortium of Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) as lead agency, in collaboration with Dr Ariadne Vromen (University of Sydney) and the Inspire Foundation. This is a unique collaboration that brings:

- expertise conducting research with young people and diverse communities across Australia

- academic rigour, subject expertise and a thorough contextual understanding of the project

- extensive expertise working in partnership with young people and the practical application of youth participation models.

CIRCA is a specialist agency with a proven track record of carrying out complex research tasks involving diverse Australians, with direct experience conducting research in almost 100 Indigenous communities and 40 language groups across Australia. CIRCA has over 14 years experience conducting research at departmental and community levels in this unique sector.

Dr Ariadne Vromen brought to the project a thorough understanding of research in the areas of political sociology and political participation. She has published extensively on young people and participation, and is a regular media commentator on the contemporary debate about young people and politics.

The Inspire Foundation brought a thorough understanding of issues affecting young people and worldwide leading practice in engaging hard-to-reach young people. The Inspire Foundation is also recognised as a leading-practice example of involving young people in meaningful participation and has been regularly invited to advise on the development of youth involvement models for programs, organisations and government. The Inspire Foundation has a demonstrated commitment to promoting and extending the role of young people within the organisation, as well as in the community.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW ON YOUNG PEOPLE, PARTICIPATION & DIVERSITY

The purpose of the literature review was to identify the major arguments and findings in existing research on participation by young people from diverse backgrounds, in Australia and elsewhere. The literature review subsequently shaped the operationalisation of the research questions and choice of methodologies in this research project. The literature review is in four main sections. First, there is a brief statistical overview of the multifaceted experience of diversity among Australian young people. Second, it introduces academic literature on participation to show how the concept is multidimensional. Third, the review narrows the focus to concentrate on academic literature on youth participation and demonstrates that it has two major traditions: youth development and youth involvement approaches. And lastly, there is a survey of how youth policy practitioners have utilised youth participation strategies in policy making in both Australia, and in other comparable liberal democracies, to include young people from diverse backgrounds. In summarising the literature review, implications for the research project are explored.

AUSTRALIAN YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Existing literature on young people's participation often treats young people as a homogenous group having the same experiences and interactions with decision makers in their communities and with government. This research project is predicated on the idea that there is no single understanding of being young and therefore generalisations about the universal social, economic and political experiences of young people are not useful. Instead, this research seeks to understand the participatory experience of diverse groups of young people in Australian society today. It is essential, therefore, to examine diversity in young people's experiences by contextualising participation for young people from a range of backgrounds including: young Indigenous people; young people with a disability; culturally and linguistically diverse young people; young people under the guardianship of the Minister; and new and emerging communities of young people. This project also looks at how gender and socio economic status crosscut these other facets of identity and whether they also shape or predetermine young people's participatory experiences.

In the Australian context there has been some suggestion that traditional approaches to youth participation, such as those that rely on advisory committee structures, are exclusive and tend to be utilised by only well resourced young people who have been encouraged to become leaders within their communities. For example, Singer and Chandra-Shekeran (2006: 50) argue that "such processes exclude all but the most high achieving young people" and that more targeted, relevant and specialised forms of participation need to be created to include and engage refugee and migrant young people (also see CMYI 2001; Land 2003: 29). Research such as this also critiques the predominance of the youth development approach in existing youth participation approaches with diverse or marginalised young people (White and Wyn: 92-96). That is, these groups tend to be treated as marginalised, at risk, and in need of targeted intervention, and are less likely to be portrayed as having agency over decision making in their own lives. While acknowledging that there are real issues of disadvantage for many Australian young people from diverse backgrounds Singer and Chandra-Shekeran (2006) argue that youth involvement type principles should underpin participation strategies with young people from diverse backgrounds. Based on their research with refugee young people they see that this approach would make policy and decision making more empowering and enabling.

For the purposes of this research it was important to gain a statistical understanding of young people in Australia today, so as to gauge whether participation agendas are reflective of the diversity that exists within the youth population. Most Australian Government agencies tend to define young people in age specific terms and generally use the range of 15–24 years (see **www.aihw.gov.au/childyouth/index.cfm**). There is a broader debate in academic literature on the accuracy and use of age ranges for classifying young people due to the changing nature of young people's transitions and pathways into independence, as well as the idea of a shared generational experience (see White and Wyn 2008: 10; Hillman and Marks 2002). However, these debates are beyond the scope of this research.

For the purposes of this research, young people have been defined as those aged 12–25 years, however due to the Australian Bureau of Statistics segmentation, the following illustrative data relates to young people aged 12–24 years. Please note that the data used here is not definitive for all of the young people of interest to this research as extensive data is not available for some population sub-groups.

- Those aged 12–24 are about 18 per cent of the Australian population, and this is approximately 3.7 million young people (1.9 are young men and 1.8 are young women) (AIHW 2007: 5).

- The Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory have the highest proportion of young people in their populations (just over 20%). But most Australian young people (over 57%) live in the most populous states of New South Wales and Victoria (AIHW 2003).

- Nearly 70 per cent of young people live in major cities, another 20 per cent live in inner regional areas and around 10 per cent live in outer regional or more remote areas (AIHW 2007: 6).

- The median age for the Australian population is 35, for Indigenous Australians it is 20. This reflects both high fertility rates and high mortality rates among Australia's Indigenous population (AIHW 2007: 6).

- There are estimated to be about 117 000 Indigenous young people and they make up 26 per cent of the total Indigenous population in Australia (AIHW 2007: 143). Indigenous Australia is a young and growing population. It is estimated that 40 000 young Indigenous Australians will turn 16 within the next three years (DEWR 2006). A majority of Indigenous young people (56%) live in New South Wales and Queensland. In the NT 38 per cent of young people are Indigenous (AIHW 2003).

- About 9 per cent of young Australians aged 15–24 are estimated to have a disability, with proportions of young men and women being the same. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines a disability as the presence of one or more of 17 restrictions, limitations or impairments that has lasted for six months or more and restricts everyday activities (AIHW 2007: 15).

- The largest subtype of disability for young people is an intellectual, behavioural or developmental disability (19%). This category is gendered with twice as many males as females. The next two largest subtypes are psychiatric conditions (18%) or musculoskeletal disorders (14%) (AIHW 2007: 17).

- The most commonly reported activity restrictions were limitations in the ability to undertake schooling or employment, followed by limitations in mobility, communication and self care. Young people, with a disability are less likely to have completed Year 12 schooling than young people without a disability (67% compared to 83%) (AIHW 2007: 16-7).

- About 7 000 young people are estimated to have some form of hearing impairment and about 9 000 have a visual impairment (AIHW 2007: 17).

- The vast majority (84%) of young people were born in Australia. Of the over 455 000 born overseas around two thirds were from mainly non-English speaking countries. The most common countries of birth were China, Philippines, India, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia (AIHW 2007: 7). It is estimated that 330 000 young people speak a language other than English at home (Francis and Cornfoot 2007: 7).

- Around 20 per cent of young people aged 15–24 are second generation Australian, that is, they have either one or both parents not born in Australia. The largest numbers were from the United Kingdom (34%), then Italy (16%) and Greece (9%); 6 per cent of second generation young people had parents born in Asia (Pitman 2003: 18).

- In 2000/2001 about 3900 refugees aged 15–24 came to Australia. Overall there are an estimated 16 000 to 20 000 young people with refugee experiences in Australia (Pitman 2003: 19-20).

- The numbers of children in Australia in care are rising. In 2007 there were 29 400 children admitted to care and protection orders across Australia. Indigenous children and youth are admitted to care and protection orders at more than seven times the rate of non-Indigenous children. In the same period there were an additional 28 400 children in out of home care, and the rate for Indigenous young people was eight times that of non-Indigenous young people. Across Australia

50 per cent of those in out of home care were in foster care; and a further 44 per cent in relative or kinship care (AIHW 2008: x-xi)

- Among 15–19 year olds 52 per cent are in school, 17 per cent are in tertiary study, 16 per cent work full-time, 7 per cent work part-time, 4 per cent are unemployed and 4 per cent are not in the labour force. Those not in the labour force are those who are not actively seeking work and include carers, young mothers or those who have a disability or illness. Almost twice as many males (22%) as females (12%) are in full-time work in this age group.

- Among 20–24 year olds 25 per cent are in tertiary study, 50 per cent work full-time, 11 per cent work part-time, 5 per cent are unemployed and 9 per cent are not in the labour force. Young women (28%) are more likely than young men (23%) to be in full-time study but young men (60%) are more likely than young women (45%) to be in full-time work.

- Important groups that are potentially at a disadvantage are those young people neither in full-time work or full-time study. In 2006 16 per cent or 219 100 teenagers were in this category; as well as 24 per cent (349 100) of young adults aged 20–24. Teenage unemployment has been falling and part-time work has been increasing over the past twenty years. This suggests that there may be young people who are under-employed. School completers are relatively advantaged in terms of these education and labour force destinations (all figures on work status from ABS 2006).

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION

Participation tends to be conceptualised in three main ways. First, as individual, institutionalised acts that people do by themselves to try to influence political outcomes. Second, participation is a type of group or collectively based action, usually undertaken on a voluntary basis, which can influence government or general public opinion. Third, participation is something governments and other formal organisations foster by including people and groups overtly within decision-making processes. These three ways of understanding participation are often used interchangeably in both academic and policy practitioner literature, despite the fact that they entail significantly different approaches to becoming involved in politics and society. This tendency to conflate all forms of participation has serious implications for the subsequent recognition of young people's capacity or entitlement to shape policy outcomes that will affect their everyday lives. That is, different approaches to understanding participation are more or less prescriptive in both recognising *how* young people are

currently involved in government and community decision making, and for making suggestions on how they *ought* to be involved in the future.

Individualised forms of participation include signing petitions, boycotting, writing letters or donating money. People can participate in these ways without an institutional or group structure and increasingly can do so within their own homes, such as by signing a petition online. Participation as collective action is activity undertaken with others, in a formal or informal group structure, to achieve a shared goal or interest, often for the creation of social and political change. This can be through activities such as joining local community or volunteering groups, a political party, an environmental group or attending a protest.

Participation also occurs when community members are involved in consultation processes as part of community and government decision making. The debate about consultation and participatory mechanisms as a tool of policy making has heightened in recent years. Some see consultation as necessary for government accountability, but tend to view the process with cynicism and argue the promotion of participatory governance can be a "populist red herring" (Sandercock in Bishop and Davis 2001: 175). Others have suggested that the dilemma for those that choose to participate in these processes is that governments could co-opt them into giving public support for positions that they do not really support. These analysts see consultation as a compromised political process as it is "a crucial mechanism for successive governments to 'neutralise' conflict so that it is not made public" (Everingham 1999: 139). A third view values consultation and participatory governance in of itself as it broadens the potential for active citizenship, increases the range of political actors, and forces the state to be democratically accountable to society (Wiseman 2004; Carson 2001; Carson and Gelber 2001). There has been very little systematic evaluation of the Australian utilisation of government-led consultation and participation processes. There has also not been significant research on the views of those who involved in participation programs: both decision makers and citizens.

In this literature review the increasing occurrence of participation initiatives is highlighted to understand how this new approach to governance offers both opportunity and constraints to young people from diverse backgrounds. This review mainly focuses on formalised forms of participation but will make incidental reference to research on young people's individualised and collective action based forms of participation (for an overview of individual and group based participation by young people see Land 2003; & Vromen 2003).

YOUTH PARTICIPATION: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH INVOLVEMENT APPROACHES

Government and community organisations alike are increasingly using 'youth participation' as an organisational strategy to develop processes such as community building and active involvement in the work force. Federal, state and local levels of government increasingly utilise youth advisory committees, such as the National Youth Roundtable and its state and local equivalents, to input into youth policy and realise youth participation. These strategies are aimed at young people aged about 15 to about 25 who are making the transition from adolescence into adulthood. There is often a focus on how the capacities of young people can be enhanced by participatory experiences in their transition toward 'full' and active citizenship (Bessant, 2004: 390). Skills development, experience in decision-making processes and a 'good work ethic' are seen as fundamental in creating the necessary conditions for young people to transform into 'good citizens' (Kirby et al 2002).

In these approaches youth participation is also a component of new forms of participatory governance that enhance both democracy and facilitate appropriate policy-making (Edwards 2001). Many youth participation advocates critique most consultation mechanisms, including some advisory committee structures, labelling them as tokenistic forms of participation for young people (Matthews 2001). Instead, there is increasing emphasis on partnerships between young people and older people where power is often delegated to young people for decision making in areas relevant to their lives (Wierenga 2003; Sheir 2001). Different levels or models of youth participation have been identified (Hart 1992) but they have a common end point that focuses on partnership and power being shared between governments (or other powerful organisational forms) and young people. For example, Shier (2001) defines participation on a continuum along five levels: children and young people are listened to; children and young people are supported to express views; children and young people's views are taken into account; children and young people are involved in decision making; children and young people share power and responsibility for decision making.

Overall, there is not a homogenous view in the academic and practitioner literature on how to implement youth participation strategies, or even on what the most appropriate and meaningful outcomes are. There are, however, two discernible approaches that represent distinctive constructions of young people, participation and decision-making processes. These are the youth development and the youth involvement approaches.

Youth development

Within the youth development literature, youth participation is commonly used as an intervention strategy, or a strategy for enhancing the benefits of other programs and interventions (such as those aimed at employment, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, welfare recipients for example). Increased interest in understanding how 'positive development' occurs has resulted in the identification and promotion of youth participation as an intervention strategy that promotes positive development in young people (Jarrett 1998; Larson 2000; Catalano et al 2004). The youth development approach to involving young people has been particularly influential in the USA (Larson et al 2005), and was also utilised in Australia at the federal level through the Ausyouth strategy (**www.youth.gov.au/ausyouth**).

Youth development models generally emphasise youth participation as a key strategy in enabling the development of key skills, such as initiative and self-determination, as well as emotional, social, cognitive and behavioural competency (Jarrett 1998; Larson 2000; Catalano et al 2004). Thus youth development places an emphasis on how young people can be both supported and guided in their transition from adolescence into adulthood and subsequently buffered from the threats of drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, mental illness and other potential social problems. In other approaches, youth development models also promote youth participation as a mechanism for maximising the benefits of youth oriented projects and programs. Participation can be seen as a way of consulting with service users, ensuring that they are aware of the objectives of the program and encourage ongoing investment of resources such as time commitment and finances (Sinclair, 2004).

Youth development approaches often focus on at-risk young people and construct programs that build young people's capacities to cope with risky and threatening transitional environments. While there is often a need for state intervention in providing assistance and support to disadvantaged young people, there also exists a critique in the literature of this type of construction of young people as 'at risk'. For example, Kelly (2003) argues forcefully that there is an institutionalised mistrust of young people embodied in a concern that particular groups of young people "pose a certain dangerousness - to themselves and others". It is this sense of risk, fear and uncertainty that drives interventionist youth development policy agendas (175). Kelly suggests that the problem with a policy approach that is predicated on fear and regulating risk is that groups of young people differentially experience this mistrust; and that it is clearly structured along class, gender and ethnic lines (177).

Youth Involvement

Youth Involvement takes a different approach to youth participation. Most analyses in the youth involvement approach, similar to the youth development approach, recognise the role that individuals play as consumers in informing program or policy development, and that participation leads to the development of an individual's skills, knowledge and experiences. However, in youth involvement analyses there is a significantly different emphasis on how the benefits to young people have broader social outcomes and lead to social and political change. This means that the youth involvement approach does not focus solely on change in young people themselves but argues that through participation and community development, or social capital type processes, young people are able to change policy making, organisations and society (White and Wyn 2008: 108-112).

The youth involvement approach can also be distinguished in the literature from the youth development approach due to the emphasis that it places on prerequisite principles of equality and justice necessary for appropriate youth involvement (Kaplun 1995; Hart 1992; Ewen 1994). There is an emphasis on the opportunities and constraints for young people exercising their *right* to participate in decision-making processes that affect them (Bessant 2003). Social justice outcomes of youth involvement, such as the capacity to strengthen democracy and become engaged through civic participation, are emphasised.

Using a youth involvement level of analysis Kirby and Bryson (2002:5) have examined how young peoples' participation is evaluated and find that:

> *[W]hilst young people are increasingly being involved in participatory projects, the evidence from existing evaluations is that they are still having little impact on public decision making, although this varies across contexts and between different types of organisations. Few evaluations have looked at the quality of the decisions made (or influenced) by young people.*

Therefore despite an increasing up-take of youth participation strategies, particularly in local and state government and the community sector both in Australia and other liberal democracies, there is very little documentation of the impact that youth participation has on organisations and communities (Matthews 2001). In recent years, researchers in the United Kingdom have led a move to assess the impacts of youth participation on organisations and the broader community. For example, recent research conducted by Kirby has sought to investigate and document effective practice in youth involvement in the United Kingdom and to identify what leads to beneficial outcomes for both young people and organisations (Kirby et al 2003). What is known

from existing research is that in particular circumstances youth participation: improves services and enhances their ability to adapt to changing needs (implying that resources are maximised); improves service development and client support; increases use of services; and increases participatory practice (Kirby et al 2003). Sinclair and Franklin also found that participation of young people in decision making led organisations to make "more accurate, relevant decisions which are better informed and hence more likely to be implemented" (Sinclair and Franklin cited in Sinclair 2004:108).

YOUTH PARTICIPATION PROGRAMS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN AUSTRALIA AND COMPARABLE COUNTRIES

This section of the literature review will focus predominantly on the research reports and policy documents that have been generated by practitioners of youth participation policy and research. It will surmise whether a mainly youth development or youth involvement approach (or another type) has been used in incorporating participation by young people from diverse backgrounds into policy and decision-making. It will look first at both the Australian federal and state level contexts and then look at comparable programs in other similar English-speaking liberal democracies. This includes: the United Kingdom/Ireland, Canada and New Zealand. The Australian approaches are compared to these broader international trajectories because this research will be both informed by methodological approaches used in international research and will highlight innovative approaches to participation for young people from diverse backgrounds.

Australia

All Australian state and territory governments, and the Australian Government, tend to have some form of *formal* youth participation implemented predominantly through a type of youth advisory committee auspiced by the relevant government youth-serving agency. Youth Week is an overarching event that occurs each year in April (it commenced in 2000) and includes a broad range of youth specific events rather than formal participation initiatives (see **www.youthweek.com/about.html#**). For example, events include exhibitions, dance parties, forums, sporting activities, and localised community events. Youth Week is a wholly inter-governmental event but is auspiced by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace

Relations (DEEWR). At the federal level a new Minister for Youth, the Hon Kate Ellis MP, was announced subsequent to the 2007 election. There had not been a minister for children and young people since 2004.

However, in practice issues that are dealt with, and the level of integration of youth policy making with other policy areas, differs state to state, and nationally. Indeed, the autonomous capacity of youth policy making agencies also differs widely across the country. In some places youth affairs is part of broader community service portfolios (for example, Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria); in most places children's and youth services are now in separate agencies (except for Tasmania); and in several states there are also now independent Commissions for Children and Young people (for example, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania). Most states and territories have majority government funded, independent youth peak advocacy bodies (for example, YAPA in New South Wales, YACVic in Victoria, YACWA in Western Australia, YACSA in South Australia, YNOT in Tasmania, YANQ in Queensland, and the Youth Coalition of the Australian Capital Territory), but there is no longer a funded youth peak body at the federal level (AYPAC was defunded in 1998). While there has not been a systematic comparative review of the implementation of youth participation policies in Australian governments, a cursory investigation here reveals that there are differences in approach between either a youth development or youth involvement emphasis. Note that one area where there is existing research is at the local government level, and this level of government has produced innovative youth participation mechanisms as it is more routinised and often linked with community development ideas (Saggers et al 2004: 99-105; Nabben 2007).

New South Wales was the first state to establish an independent Commission for Children and Young People in 1998. It reports directly to New South Wales parliament, and presents its mission as: researching and monitoring trends in children's welfare, safety and wellbeing; advising government agencies and community organisations; informing and educating children, the community and professionals; and conducting inquiries into issues important to children (**www.kids.nsw.gov.au/about/#who**). The commission's work is underpinned by principles of the rights of children and young people to participate in decision-making processes that will affect them; and it was one of the first organisations to publish guides on youth participation: *TAKING PARTicipation seriously*.

The two other states demonstrating a major commitment to a participatory youth involvement approach are Queensland and Victoria. However, they differ in where the impetus for youth participation is located. Queensland's innovative work is centred on parliament such as through the *Voice and Votes* report (LCARC 2006); and its

government led youth site *generate* (**www.generate.qld.gov.au/**). In contrast, in recent years Victoria has been building links and complementary work on youth participation between the youth serving government agency and the independent peak youth advocacy body, YACVic. The *Taking Young People Seriously* handbooks, produced in 2004, were a series of resources exploring young people's participation in their communities. They were developed by YACVic and the Office for Youth, Department for Victorian Communities as the product of a partnership project called Participation in Practice (see **www.yacvic.org.au/pages/policy/participation.htm**). The 2005 Victorian State Government youth policy document *Future Directions* is also underpinned by a youth involvement approach that commences with a commitment to increasing the number of young people "who contribute to their communities and make a difference" (Office for Youth 2005: 5).

One theme underpinning this research into participation by young people from diverse backgrounds is to identify how attempts to create equality, underpinned by ideas of both sameness and difference, are used in distinct policy agendas. For example, in Australia there are several Indigenous specific youth participation programs at both the federal and state level that aim to provide equal representation for Indigenous young people in decision making. Until recently these programs tended to be separate from mainstream youth participation policy agendas, but the extent and possibility of integration needs further scrutiny (for example, Munro and Tyhuis 2003 has a detailed list of opportunities for participation by Indigenous youth as well as biographies of young Indigenous leaders). However, there seems to be a new approach operating to attempt to 'mainstream' Indigenous youth issues. For example, the National Youth Indigenous Leadership program was consolidated with the National Youth Roundtable in 2007. It has 45 members, increased from 30, and includes up to 12 Indigenous members.

In contrast the Victorian Government through the Department for Aboriginal Affairs and the Department for Victorian Communities funds the independent body, the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council. This includes 20 Indigenous young people who meet together regularly to talk about issues of importance to them. They are supported by a reference group that resources them and aids communication with community and government decision makers. In addition, Victoria also has a government funded organisation, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, while not a consultation body solely run by young people it has a steering committee made up of young people with disabilities that decides on issues and campaign initiatives. These two initiatives demonstrate that approaches to representing the views and experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds within government and community decision-making in Australian Government are far from homogenous. These two

initiatives are different from the National roundtable idea in that they are targeted and young people are given more scope to set the agenda for participation.

Examples in other states include Tasmania where government funded research has been undertaken into young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, such as refugees, culturally and linguistically diverse young people and young people with disabilities (**www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/ocya/publications.html**). With its unique high population of Indigenous youth, the Northern Territory has used a range of initiatives especially less formal participation and consultation processes to bring together both Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people (for example, City of Palmerston consultation with youth **www.palmerston.nt.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/2006_Youth_Consult_-_Final_Report.pdf); and** has a youth-led Multicultural Youth Council.

United Kingdom and Ireland

The United Kingdom has a well-constructed policy framework that incorporates youth participation principles into most policy development and delivery (**www.everychildmatters.org.uk**). Many of these programs address the inequality and social exclusion experienced by marginalised and disadvantaged young people, and there is also a strong focus on multi-agency coordination and delivery of services to meet the diverse needs of young people. In March 2005, the first Children's Commissioner for England was appointed, to give children and young people a voice in government and in public life. Further, *Participation Works* is an online gateway launched in October 2005, funded by the Department for Education and Skills. It is designed to improve the way practitioners, organisations, policy makers and young people access and share information about involving children and young people in decision making, and works in partnership with major NGOs involved with children and young people. These include: British Youth Council; Carnegie Young People's Initiative; Children's Rights Alliance; and Save the Children-England (**www.participationworks.org.uk**). There is a clear social justice oriented, youth involvement approach underpinning the United Kingdom's policy work on youth participation. However, the complementary focus on social inclusion of diverse groups of young people (especially the socio economically disadvantaged, young people with disabilities and young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds) incorporates more of a skills oriented youth development focus. For example, the Positive Futures program is ostensibly about encouraging diverse, or marginalised, young people to engage with their local communities through team sports. But the evaluation of the success of this program is focussed on youth development outcomes such as skills building, increasing employment opportunities and decrease in drug use (**www.positivefuturesresearch.org.uk**; Bain 2002).

In recent years there has been more sustained focus on evaluation of the United Kingdom's use of youth participation policy principles and the subsequent policy initiatives. In one major study of youth participation through youth councils, Matthews (2001) conducted interviews and focus groups with a range of young people. This study located some successful youth participation mechanisms but found that these were characterised by both young people being enabled and adults relinquishing power. This means that traditional processes of youth work and engagement with the public were challenged. Matthews suggests that while some youth and community workers are comfortable with the process "many others who have yet to be won over and may be highly resistant to change" (316). Examples include teachers, residential care staff and local government staff.

Matthews also demonstrates that the young people involved tended to be, and indeed see themselves as, unrepresentative of the diversity of young people (2001: 316). One interviewee acknowledged:

> "We're all from middle class families. I think that's the reason we don't get people from not very good backgrounds. They see us as all stuck up snobs… a kind of stereotypical thing I think. They should just forget about that, they ought to come and say"
> **(female aged 16)**.

Matthews suggests that there is a danger in not encouraging diversity among participants as the interests of the "vociferous, articulate and confident" will be advanced at the expense of others (2001: 310). Echoing other research reviewed here, Matthews argues that the lack of homogeneity among young people needs to be understood, and multifaceted methods and structures developed (316). He does not, however, address whether diverse youth should have their own distinctive structures, such as their own youth councils, or whether they should be further integrated with a broader range of young people.

There has also been research into the participation undertaken by particular groups of young people. For example, the Scottish Executive funded in-depth interview research into the participation of young people in care and concluded that young people were interested in being involved in the decisions about their care but that participation needed to be understood as occurring both inside and outside formal meetings. The report suggested that:

> The official meetings, hearings (and background forms) are imperfect vehicles for eliciting the candid feeling and views of children – and for ensuring that participation of children in decision making
> (**Children in Scotland 2006**).

Other research has argued that young people need to be involved in identifying the issues of importance to them and setting the agenda for successful youth projects, as has been found to work with rural youth (Bain 2002). Cavet and Sloper (2004: 287) state that participation work conducted with disadvantaged young people, especially those with disabilities, needs to be carried out in an inclusive way so as to fully capture the distinctive experiences of young people with disabilities. They also suggest that their views must be analysed and reported separately so as not to subsume the views of children with disabilities in overall messages about young people's participation.

These research projects also demonstrate that there are other ways of facilitating young people's participation beyond youth consultative groups or formal public meetings. Badham (2004: 149-150) contends that participation by young people with disabilities was most successful when their views were respected, there was a trusting relationship between the participation workers and young people, and when there were ongoing and long-term campaign and lobbying strategies on the issues raised by young people. This project was distinctive in that young people communicated with decision makers primarily through the use of multimedia and made a video that had wide distribution – a communication mechanism they selected. Further, Whyte et al (2005) engaged Scottish young people on the issue of radioactive waste management primarily though using information and communication technology (ICT). They found that young people were motivated to become involved partly due to the novel way of using ICT within organised group activities. They also argued that facilitators and informed experts (or use of background facts) are needed to lead both face-to-face and online discussion. The types of ICT tools for engagement that they list include: blogs; live question answer panel with streamed video; video interviews; live question answer panel in a chat room; games such as online quizzes or decision-making games; discussion boards; questionnaires and opinion polls; interactive issue maps; and frequently asked question (FAQ) lists.

Much of the United Kingdom/Ireland based youth participation research undertakes survey or interview research with young people. However, there is also some research that focuses on other stakeholders in youth participation – including policy makers and policy practitioners. One Irish study (McAuley and Brattman 2002) conducted both a small number of in depth interviews and a survey with statutory agencies and NGOs working with young people. All of those surveyed agreed with the principles of consulting with young people as it was seen as their basic right to be heard. The respondents also saw that the process of consultation could act as an inclusive process, and garner support for policy interventions among socially excluded and marginalised young people. For example, this capacity of youth participation by disadvantaged young people to both legitimise and make appropriate policy is seen in this quote:

If things are given to people as a fait accompli, particularly teenagers, there's always a reluctance to accept whereas if they're involved in the process, there's a buy-in. If you get agreement and consensus, then you've a better chance of achieving the outcome you want out of whatever you're trying to do in policy terms. So, I think there is a value in it. Definitely. Sometimes there's a gap between policy makers and the local reality on the ground, particularly for disadvantaged people. I see it all the time. What people would be saying is 'Oh, this formula would be the formula that we'll put in place.' It mightn't be what's needed at all (Public policy-maker at national level (McAuley and Brattman 2002, see **www.youth.ie/content/download/595/3733/file/Hearing%20Young%20Voices%20-%20Full.pdf***)*.

The United Kingdom based Carnegie Young People's Initiative is a particularly interesting and important philanthropic foundation that attempts to increase the influence children and young people have over decisions that affect them (**www. carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi**). For example, the Taking the Initiative Series funded youth advocacy organisations to do research and map activities that promoted young people's involvement in public decision making across the five countries of the United Kingdom and Ireland. It looked at programs led by national and local governments, and in the policy areas of education and health, and was illustrated by case studies. The research projects in Scotland and Ireland both surveyed organisations that work with young people to find that the vast majority (90 per cent in Scotland and 70 per cent in Ireland) have directly involved young people in decision-making; in Ireland 50 per cent of these organisations worked with disadvantaged young people (National Youth Council of Ireland 2001; Children in Scotland 2001). While these mapping projects provide possibly outdated analysis (as change and development in this policy area seems quite rapid) they do demonstrate that the commitment to involving young people in decision making is widespread in the youth sectors in United Kingdom/ Ireland. There is, nonetheless, less information available on how these organisations recruit, engage and retain young people from diverse backgrounds in their participation initiatives.

Canada and New Zealand

Canada and New Zealand provide worthwhile comparisons to Australia in that they have similar Westminster derived traditions in policy making and have similar multicultural and Indigenous population bases. Somewhat surprisingly they both have similar approaches to youth participation that prioritise youth development models. There is very little research work or policy practice in either country that uses a youth involvement approach. This demonstrates that among the liberal democracies investigated here, United Kingdom and Ireland provide a much more nuanced and

advanced discussion of the role of young people from diverse backgrounds in youth participation initiatives.

In New Zealand the main government agency governing young people (aged 12–24) is the Ministry of Youth Development (established in 2003 and successor of the Ministry of Youth Affairs) that sits within the Ministry of Social Development. The major policy program – Aotearoa Youth Voices supports four main planks for youth participation: a youth advisory group based in the capital Wellington; the PROVOKE project which supports young people to have their say at school; a local government project which is creating participatory opportunities at the local level; and the triennial youth parliament (**www.myd.govt.nz/ayv/**). Most programs seem to be targeted at young people in general and not targeted at young people from diverse backgrounds, such as Maori young people. However there is a level of integration through the symbolism used that incorporates Maori language and imagery.

Policy making for youth participation in New Zealand is clearly underpinned by a youth development model. For example, the introduction of a policy document *Connecting with young New Zealanders* includes the following:

> *We use a youth development approach. That's about how government and society can support young people to develop the skills and attitudes they need to take a positive part in society now and in the future (***www.myd.govt.nz/ YouthDevelopmentStrategyAotearoa/youthdevelopment.aspx***).*

Canada does not have a specific youth affairs portfolio at the federal level and their childhood and youth level policy is made under the auspices of the major health agency (Caputo 2000). There is also a focus on connecting diverse, especially Indigenous, young people under the federal Indian and Northern Affairs portfolio. Following a youth development focus, youth engagement programs are particularly linked with health outcomes or fostering skills for employment (see Centre for Excellence for Youth Engagement, **www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/allchildren_ touslesenfants/centres_you-eng.html**). There are also youth advisory council structures at the federal and provincial levels, with a particular focus on Aboriginal and Inuit young people (for example see **www.niyc.ca/news.php**). One distinctively Canadian facet of youth participation was a national Environment Roundtable, although this seems to have been recently defunded (however see **www.pch.gc.ca/ pc-ch/sujets-subjects/jeune-youth/index_e.cfm**). There is a website called the Youth Cyberstation that promotes volunteering among young people. This also has an employment skills and developmental focus with very little mention of enhancing democratic rights and engagement or young people's decision-making capacities (see **volunteer.ca/en/node/1904**).

Particular provinces in Canada have engaged in deliberative democracy through utilising citizen's juries and deliberative polls with citizens. In 2005 a deliberative forum, or 'dialogue', with 144 randomly selected young people aged 18–24 was auspiced by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) a research focused community organisation. It was held as a response to 'democratic malaise' among Canadian youth. While the forum raised issues of importance to young people such as employment opportunities, its discussion of youth participation was mainly about increasing voter turnout and increasing access to government and policy-making information. There were no statements about young people's entitlement to involvement in government and community decision-making processes (Mackinnon and Watling 2006; for CPRN's extensive youth focused research see **www.cprn.org/theme.cfm?theme=102&l=en**). These examples from youth policy makers and practitioners in Canada substantiate the academic arguments that there has been a retreat from active citizenship and participation polices for young people in Canada (Stasiulis 2002).

Implications for the research

This literature review of youth participation experience in Australia and in other comparable liberal democracies has shown a number of factors that were taken into account in this research project. These include the following literature review findings:

- Young people from diverse backgrounds should not be treated as a homogenous group that can share universal youth participation opportunities. Instead their different experiences of exclusion and disadvantage often shape targeted youth participation strategies. For this research it means asking young people how they identify with, and understand, both particular categorisations of young people and participation processes in general.

- Youth participation approaches used with diverse groups of young people tend to be dominated by a youth development approach focused on enhancing life skills. This is seen especially in New Zealand, Canada and Australia, and in the social inclusion agenda in the United Kingdom/Ireland. The exceptions tend to be when projects develop a strong community development ethos and/or work in partnership with youth oriented NGOs (such as in Victoria). The existence of exceptions that use a youth involvement approach could be further explored in the Australian context.

- The UK is the path leader in integrating youth participation into many areas of policy-making and delivery. The philanthropic organisation the Carnegie Youth Initiative has been central to these developments. Further investigation into the Australian context would be useful in identifying examples of best practice.

- The most thorough research into youth participation looks at policy programs from a range of stakeholder views including policy makers, youth workers and young people themselves. It focuses on the communities where young people are located, either of shared geography or shared identity, rather than randomly consulting individual young people. This research also looks at the way young people use and adapt technology to create and shape appropriate participatory opportunities. These methodological approaches with multiple populations can be replicated into Australian based research inquiry.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this project was broad based and multi-staged in an effort to investigate the views and practice of different stakeholders in the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds. A mainly qualitative approach was chosen because of the nature of the hidden and distinct populations targeted in the research, namely the following groups:

- young Indigenous people

- young people from culturally diverse backgrounds

- young people from low socio economic backgrounds

- young people who are, or had been, under the guardianship of the Minister

- young people with disabilities.

The research methodology used four processes, each with complementary but distinct research designs, sampling, and research tools. The four stages of the methodology were:

1. Discussion forums with government and community policy makers

2. Telephone survey with service providers

3. Youth Advisory Group

4. Community audits with case studies.

The literature review illustrated that there is very little existing research on participation of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making in the Australian context from which to generate a study based on making quantitative generalisations. The existing research on youth participation as a policy program is predominantly from the United Kingdom and invariably uses a case study approach, based on either service delivery or policy evaluation. Neither of these approaches would have been wholly sufficient for this project's research agenda. The community audits, however, are a development of a case study approach but the single cases are locations, and include more detailed case studies of local organisations. In addition, an existing survey study with Irish youth service providers was adapted to provide a quantitative picture of how organisations include young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making. Traditional research into individual participation tends to rely on survey-based approaches to targeting broad populations of young people. For this project on young people from diverse backgrounds who often experience marginalisation this would have been inappropriate. Instead the choice was made to access the voices and viewpoints of these Australian young people through several means, including the YAG, online forums, and the location based community audits that were mediated by both local young people and local service providers.

The qualitative and quantitative methodologies of the research are outlined in this section with a focus on the aim, process, participants and the rationale behind each methodological stage.

DISCUSSION FORUMS WITH GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY POLICY MAKERS

Aim

The forums explored the range of views held by policy makers and decision makers from government and community organisations that interact with, or influence policy that affects the lives of young people from diverse backgrounds. In particular, the discussion forums focused on how participation is understood and implemented by government and community organisations, as well as the effectiveness of current approaches.

Process

Four discussion forums were held in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra and Perth during February and March, 2007. Each discussion forum ran for two hours and used a combination of large group discussion and smaller group exercises to illicit feedback on the key themes of the research. The discussion forums were facilitated by Doctor Ariadne Vromen and output was recorded by a member of the research team. Discussions were also audio recorded, to allow the research team to revisit the data throughout the course of the research.

Participants

There were 63 participants in total with the groups ranging in size from 12 to 20 participants. The initial sampling process carefully included a range of community organisations and government agencies that interact with young people generally, as well as those that serve the diversity populations targeted in the research (Indigenous, CALD, disability, low socio economic status and those under guardianship of the state). An extensive list of participants were invited in each of the forum locations with the expectation that response rates for such a targeted population would be at the most 50 per cent. In some locations (mainly Perth and Adelaide) there was a much higher acceptance rate of the invitation, leading to large forums on the day.

The overall split between Australian Government agencies, state/territory government agencies (including statutory authorities), and community representation was:

- six Australian Government participants (all in Canberra)

- 32 state and territory government participants and

- 25 community organisation participants.

Participants from government agencies were the majority in three of the four forums, the exception being Melbourne where community representation was highest.

Rationale

Discussion forums were chosen as they provided a mechanism for engaging a cross section of decision makers from a range of policy areas. Also, discussion forums were chosen as they focus on debate, discussion and consensus rather than individuals' experiences. Methodologically, the forums were similar to qualitative, in depth focus groups in the way they were structured and the way discussion was facilitated. Participants were encouraged to discuss broad questions, debate their meaning

and provide examples of their application. This method was considered the most appropriate for facilitating a discussion on participation in governance/policy-making processes, providing insight into the range of experiences and attitudes of government and community organisations across Australia.

Discussion forums were chosen over a number of other methodologies including questionnaires as the group dynamic made it possible for people to develop ideas by 'bouncing' off one another, and enabled participants to share experiences and gain a deeper understanding of these complex areas. Questionnaires were not suitable for this stage of the research as they would have limited output to surface information and would have required that researchers know all the categories of responses in advance. While questionnaires have breadth to include more participants and ask more questions, they were not appropriate for this phase of the research as they would not have provided the complex and in depth level of information that the forums elicited.

Young people were deliberately not targeted as the focus was on the opinions and views of government and community organisations who are often the most powerful and well resourced actors in establishing participation initiatives. There were, however, some young people as participants in the forums but they were there because of their employment, including those working in youth peak bodies, community service providers and government agencies.

TELEPHONE SURVEY WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS

Aim

A telephone survey with organisations that provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds was conducted to complement the qualitative approach of the discussion forums. The survey examined how individual organisations approach and incorporate youth participation in their service delivery. The survey was a partial replication of a compatible survey undertaken in Ireland with 104 youth serving organisations (see National Youth Council of Ireland 2001).

Process and Participants

The sample included 101 organisations that provide services able to be accessed by young people from diverse backgrounds. Interviews were conducted over the telephone during March 2007. In summary, the sample included a range in terms of:

- **service users,** with most organisations providing services to young people generally, or to people from diverse backgrounds

- **organisation size,** with half of the sample being small organisations and a third medium sized organisations

- **service type,** with organisations providing services in a range of areas including advocacy, individual or family support services, education, cultural activities, sport and recreation, and housing assistance

- **jurisdiction,** with organisations from all Australian states and territories included

- **scope of delivery,** with an almost even split between services that provide local, regional and state/territory services.

Rationale

The survey was useful as it provided a quantitative picture of the extent to which young people from diverse backgrounds are included in decision-making processes. It also enabled comparison across organisational types and participation mechanisms. The survey provided the research project with extensive information on the following themes:

- Opportunities for participation and the extent to which young people from diverse backgrounds are involved in service provider's decision making.

- Types of decision making mechanisms and tools that organisations use to engage young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

- Types of decisions that organisations involve young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Perceived purpose, benefits and barriers of the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes.

- Ways in which an organisation's size, service audience and location can affect participation.

- Prevalence of 'priority access' policies that ensure young people from diverse backgrounds are involved in decision-making processes.

YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP

Aim

A Youth Advisory Group (YAG) was created for this project to obtain the input and guidance of young people into the community audits research phase, which involved young people. This was to ensure that the audit approach was appropriate for the target groups involved in the research. The YAG provided an opportunity for young people from a range of diverse backgrounds to share their experiences, ideas and understandings of participation and decision-making processes.

Process

The input from the YAG was obtained through an online forum and a face-to-face workshop. The online discussion forum was established through the Inspire Foundation's website **www.actnow.com.au** to provide a medium through which YAG members and the researchers could discuss the research development and findings. The online forum was secure, meaning that only YAG members and research team members had access. Each week, YAG members were asked to contribute their ideas, experiences and feelings on a range of issues relevant to the research themes. The discussion topics were designed to explore young people's definitions and experiences of youth participation with particular focus on the relationship between diversity and participation. Some of the questions replicated themes explored in the government and community policy-maker forums.

During the workshop the YAG provided a comprehensive overview of their geographical and interest-based communities. The YAG's discussion of the 'purpose' and 'meaning' of participation, as well as provision of lists of organisations and opportunities to participate informed the community audits. Additionally, the YAG provided valuable advice that assisted in designing the community audits process. This included:

- the use of the internet by YAG members for work, study, social and entertainment purposes but not, to a large extent, participation

- importance of meaningful participation in terms of feeling connected; need to see evidence that their participation makes a difference, and preference for face-to-face decision-making processes.

Participants

The YAG involved 13 young people from a range of backgrounds, including:

- all five target diversity groups

- a cross-section of ages between 18 and 25 years

- both metropolitan and regional areas

- three of the four community audit locations (Shepparton, Parramatta and Darwin)

- both young men and women

- a range of experiences in relation to education and employment.

Rationale

The YAG provided a mechanism for involving young people from the target backgrounds in the design and implementation of the community audits framework to ensure that the methodology was appropriate and inclusive for a range of young people. Working with the YAG allowed the research team to better understand young people's perceptions of youth participation, and identify suitable language to use in the community audits, as well as appropriate services to use so as to ensure that young people from a range of backgrounds were engaged in the community audit stage. The YAG also provided a tool for understanding some of the challenges that researchers might experience during the community audit process as well as ways to overcome these. In this way, working with the YAG prepared the research team for engagement with young people during the community audit stage.

COMMUNITY AUDITS WITH CASE STUDIES

Aim

The community audit methodology was developed to examine the range of local level opportunities that exist for young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in

government and community decision-making processes, the extent to which they are accessed, and motivators and barriers for participation.

Process

The community audit process focused on the experiences and attitudes of young people aged 12–25 years who identified with one or more of the five diverse backgrounds targeted in this project. It also included the views of practitioners and local service providers where appropriate. An online audit examined the interactive and participatory opportunities available for young people on the websites of 64 government and community organisations.

Three main research approaches were adopted in each of the four geographical audit locations to ensure in depth information was collected that documented young people's everyday experiences and perceptions of participation and decision-making opportunities. This included:

- An extensive pre-visit documentary analysis identified formalised processes that facilitated young people's involvement in decision making within government or community organisations. This included local governments, youth services, youth health services, and diversity specific services.

- Qualitative in-depth interviews with young people and service providers.

- Fun and interactive workshop and consultation processes with young people, which were conducted in an environment that was comfortable, accessible and safe. Workshops were designed to engage young Indigenous people, and young people from CALD and/or low socio economic backgrounds. The workshop format involved a number of 'stations' each with a different and innovative research activity including: focus group discussions; projective exercises; role plays; photo language; and sentence completions.

The online audit used website functionality and content analysis to determine the scope of online decision making opportunities for young people, with an online discussion forum with young people from a range of diverse backgrounds.

Accessing case studies was also a part of the community audit process. The intention of the case studies was to present deeper insight through detailed examples of a range of types of effective participation involving young people from diverse backgrounds. Exemplar organisations were identified and examined during the community audit stage, and the write-up used interviews conducted with both young people and service

providers and other information collected during the community audits. The list of case studies included in this report is below:

- SHAK Kids' Advisory Taskforce (Northern Territory)

- CREATE Foundation's Youth Consultant program (national)

- Academy of Sport, Health and Education's Student Council (Victoria)

- SA Migrant Resource Centre's Refugee Youth Reference Group (South Australia)

- Cutting Edge Youth Service's Cultural Fashion Parade Project (Victoria)

- Multicultural Youth Council of NT (Northern Territory);

- Youth Participation Workers Network (Victoria);

- National Youth Week (national);

- 6eba Ethnic Radio's Youth Programs (Western Australia);

- Reach Out! Online youth programs (national)

- Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service's Individual Advocacy program (New South Wales)

- Social Networking websites.

Participants

The participants in this community audit process came from four geographical locations that were chosen to include: a spread of states and/or territories; both metropolitan and regional centres; different sized populations; and youth populations from a range of the target diversity groups. Analysis of census data was used to determine the following locations that met these criteria:

- Shepparton in regional Victoria

- Parramatta in Western Sydney, NSW

- Townsville in regional Queensland

- Darwin in the Northern Territory.

Forty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with young people. There were 11 participants in Shepparton, 16 in Parramatta, eight in Townsville and 11 in Darwin. An additional total of 78 young people participated in interactive workshops as part of the

community audits. There were 29 participants in Shepparton, 26 in Parramatta, 13 in Townsville and ten in Darwin.

Rationale

It was important to develop a methodology that tapped into a geographic sense of place rather than primarily studying individual experiences of participation. From the existing literature on youth participation it is clear that the local institutions where people live play a large role in facilitating and creating opportunities for young people's participation. Therefore these community audits provided an innovative approach to studying participation by locating young people within their everyday spaces of home, work and community.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

While at every stage of the research project consideration was given to the issues of access, voice and representation in constructing samples and research tools, challenges remained. The main challenges to the project included:

- A lack of representation of a full range of young people with disabilities in the YAG or community audits. The research project team was flexible and found that one on one interview processes were more appropriate for interviews with young people with disabilities rather than participation in a broad-based workshop. However the issues faced by young people with intellectual disabilities in particular have not been fully captured by this research approach.

- In choosing a mainly qualitative approach it was the research project's intention to reveal existing experiences and practices of participation in government and community decision making. It is impossible to generalise to the experiences of all young people, or all young people from diverse backgrounds especially. A major emphasis of this research design, and the subsequent analysis, is that diversity matters and targeted mechanisms are often needed to provide voice to some of the most marginalised members of society. In doing this it is not possible to claim that the young people included in the research are representative of all possible experiences. This is a conundrum for most formal and informal participation mechanisms and for organisations trying to include a wide range of voices and opinions in their decision-making processes. For example, while the researchers worked with intermediaries (such as youth workers, disability support workers, educators) to identify suitable participants there were challenges accessing particular groups of young people in some of the audit locations. However this

approach was rarely able to access young people who were not service users. The exception was in Darwin where, recognising that many young Indigenous people do not access services, researchers went out with staff from Mission Australia on their 'night beat' to interview young Indigenous people in 'their space'.

- Group discussion processes were used in the forums of government and community policy makers, during the YAG, and with young people during the community audit workshops. This was a successful research technique as it generated discussion and a sense of shared ideas and experiences among the participants. Topics of discussion that the researchers may not have identified in advance were raised in this group format and are a distinct advantage of this methodological approach. However, recording and analysing this material to present individual viewpoints is challenging and this is reflected throughout the analysis in this report.

- During the documentary analysis phase of the community audits the researchers found that accessible documentation and information about organisations' participatory processes was limited, particularly for smaller community organisations. The researchers had to adopt a range of additional processes to ensure the information was collected, such as: contacting state based peak youth organisations to identify examples of youth participation initiatives in each community audit site; telephoning key organisations in each location to consult staff about their youth participation practices; and asking these organisations to identify other local examples of youth participation. Even this was not straightforward as there was not a universal view among these local service providers on what youth participation meant to them. Often 'participation' was interpreted as participation in youth programs, rather than in decision-making processes. In some organisations, it was seen to mean economic participation. This confusion made it challenging to outline the key aims of the research, and added considerable time to the 'set up' phase.

4 | VIEWPOINTS FROM GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

This section outlines the findings from the discussion forums and the telephone survey with service providers. The discussion forums and the survey were designed to obtain an overview of the perceptions held by policy makers, decision makers and service providers who interact with young people from diverse backgrounds. Because of their proximity to young people from diverse backgrounds, these groups are in a unique position to answer questions about the construction and effectiveness of youth participation initiatives for engaging young people from diverse backgrounds.

DISCUSSION FORUMS WITH GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY POLICY MAKERS

This section of the report focuses on the viewpoint and practices of policy makers from both government and community organisations. This part of the research was important because it revealed how policy makers' attitudes and experiences of

participation shape both the opportunities and barriers for participation by young people from diverse backgrounds. The analysis of the forums is in three sections:

1. An overview of how participation was understood.

2. The perceived barriers to participation.

3. Best practice and key recommendations for participation by young people from diverse backgrounds.

As background, the four discussion forums were held in Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne and Perth, and used group discussion to explore the complex understandings and practices of youth participation in Australia. Case studies from the United Kingdom were also used as a tool to engage forum participants in a discussion about barriers and effective practice for involving young people from diverse backgrounds. The benefit of using case studies was that they provided a concrete talking point for participants who were from a wide range of policy areas. Overseas case studies were chosen as these were non political and new to participants. The two cases used in the discussion forums were:

*   *Ask Us:* a formal consultation and participation exercise used with young people with disabilities.

*   *The Black Environmental Network:* a participation project involving young Muslims in an environmental project.

Both these case studies are referred to throughout this section. In short, there was broad consensus on the strengths and weaknesses of the case studies across the four forums. Overall, participants praised the cases because they were youth-led, targeted at specific populations of young people, and used multimedia. The identified weaknesses were: resources, timing of projects, and meeting objectives. Pertinent discussion of the cases studies has been integrated into analysis in the sections on barriers to participation, as well as providing examples of best practice in participation.

Understanding 'Participatory Governance'

The incorporation of youth participation and decision-making initiatives within the policy process strengthen representative institutions, and demonstrate a shift towards an ideal of participatory governance (Edwards 2001). The discussion forums were designed to gauge whether government and community policy makers agree on the starting point for these new participation centred initiatives. The government and

community policy maker forums all started by asking participants to define what participatory governance meant and the sort of processes it encapsulated.

In all four forums there was debate about the usefulness of participation initiatives in general, and government involvement in youth participation in particular. It became clear that there were two types of understandings arising in the discussions:

- participation from a community/grassroots perspective

- participation as a government directed initiative.

Alternatively these views could be labelled as 'bottom-up' policy-making views versus 'top-down' policy making. These views did not divide neatly into being presented by participants from community organisations as opposed to those from government. Many forum participants saw this distinction as the reality of the way participation was currently practiced in Australia. No single, or possibly socially acceptable, viewpoint on the usefulness or otherwise of participation prevailed in the forums. In most of the forums there was vigorous debate and deliberation on what these abstract concepts meant in practice for governments and community organisations.

The top-down perspective

The discussion that reflected top-down views of participation was underpinned by a concern with how organisations, either government agencies or community organisations, need to direct and control, and sometimes change, participation initiatives. The two main themes in this discussion were:

1. Institutionalisation of formal participation processes by decision-making bodies

For example, a government representative in the Canberra forum stated that the only way participatory governance would become successful is if it was structured and formally recognised. Another participant in Canberra argued that it needed to have the capacity to be a 'final decision-making' process. In Melbourne a government representative saw that institutionalisation of participation processes could improve outcomes; their example was that in health organisations if people have a say it leads to positive health outcomes.

A related viewpoint was offered by a community organisation representative in Melbourne who saw that for participation initiatives to be truly effective they need to reflect the governance structure of the auspicing organisation; and that decision makers need to both ask and be convinced that it is appropriate to encourage participation.

2. *Changing existing processes of participation to provide more 'open dialogue'*

For example, a government representative in the Canberra forum suggested participation needs to involve hearing, listening, understanding and adapting to participant needs. This was echoed by forum participants in Perth who called for more open dialogue, as well as the creation of new ways of consulting with young people.

The most extensive discussion about government-led processes was found in the Canberra Forum, probably influenced by being the only location where there was a mix of federal and territory government participants, as well as participants from community organisations.

The bottom-up perspective

Forum participants from both government and community organisations presented a community-oriented and bottom-up perspective focused on ownership by the individuals who are involved in the participation process. This was in contrast with discussions that prioritised the ownership by organisations that auspice participation initiatives. The discussion ranged from statements about the necessity to actively include the subjects of decision making, to a focus on specificity, diversity and the need for representativeness. The three main themes underpinning the bottom-up perspective were:

1. *A need for strategies that provide opportunities for a broad and representative group of people to have input into decision making.*

For example, in Adelaide a forum participant stated that participation should not be limited to leaders, but include representative cross sections of the community. And a representative from a community organisation in Canberra suggested that it was important to include those who are difficult to access, or are 'out of the system'.

2. *Acknowledgement that the needs of policy makers are not always aligned with the needs of participants.*

For example, some forum participants suggested that participation processes could not be designed with just the decision makers' needs taken into consideration. A forum participant in Perth suggested that processes need to be tailored to the needs of specific social groups and in the case of young people, participatory processes should use structures, concepts and language that appeal to young people.

3. Recognition that existing participation initiatives are sometimes limited by a lack of time and resources, and lack of youth ownership.

For example, a forum participant in Adelaide commented that developing ownership for the participants of the process is key and that this would encourage people learning about and understanding the participation process. Others talked about limitations on resources and time and this is explored further below.

In Melbourne and Adelaide a grassroots oriented discussion about both representation and diversity dominated this section of the forum whereas in Perth it was more balanced among the large group of forum participants.

Overall, discussions about the abstract concept of participatory governance reflected the existing research literature on youth participation that lacks a singular understanding, or agreed view, of participation. There was overlap between labelling participation as something individuals do, either by themselves or collectively, and participation as a part of policy making and organisational processes. Many forum participants discussed these facets of participation (individual participants and organisational processes for facilitating participation) as interdependent. Others maintained an emphasis on questions of representation and voice in participation processes.

Barriers to Participation

After the discussion on understandings of participatory governance the participants were asked to identity the barriers that prevent or restrict participation in everyday organisational practices. One comment identified that participation initiatives often came with unrealistic expectations about fully integrating young people into decision-making processes:

> *"With youth participation we ask it to do everything. There is an expectation that we achieve everything, rather than thinking this is one process for people to be engaged [in]"* (**Melbourne, community organisation representative***).*

There are two suggestions in this quote. First, that it is not always possible to clearly identify the immediate benefits of participatory processes, and that they need to be normalised within a broader set of strategies in an organisation's approach to decision making. Second, that youth participation as an approach can sometimes be abandoned too early if it is judged to be ineffective, or expectations are not immediately met.

However, this analysis was unique, as most forum participants in the four locations stated that even though participation was worthwhile there were some insurmountable

barriers to its successful implementation. The responses were divided into two main fields: that barriers were endemic to broader systems of governance, or that the barriers were related to the social position of young people and their attitudes about participation.

Barriers based in current practices of government and other decision makers

Five types of barriers to effective participation were identified as being in the domain of governments and decision makers.

*1. **Limited financial resources.***

For example, a participant in the Melbourne forum pointed out that it takes time and money to involve young people properly. The question of resources was also raised in consideration of the two United Kingdom based case studies. Many participants thought that the three year process used in the formal *Ask Us* case study which targeted the involvement of young people with disabilities would have been expensive. Similarly, it was also argued that the *Black Environment Network* case study which took Muslim young people from Wales to Spain on an environment participation project would have been very resource intensive for the benefit of a small group of participants.

*2. **Ineffective networks and knowledge exchange between government, communities and young people.***

For example, there was an extensive discussion during the Perth forum on whether government, communities and young people were sufficiently connected through networks to be able to make participation work. One community organisation representative pointed out that service providers were those who work most closely with young people but were not connected to high level decision makers within government. Another suggested that government agencies are not really aware of existing bodies of young people and therefore do not tap into them. A government representative in Perth pointed out that networks and cooperation between government agencies that worked with young people was rare.

*3. **Difficulty changing institutions and sharing power***

This was one of the major barriers identified, suggesting that successful participation initiatives with young people often challenged decision makers and institutional structures to change. It was noted by Melbourne forum participants that it was perceived as risky and difficult for organisational structures to change, or even share power, with young people. A representative from a Perth community organisation also pointed out that this barrier exists because government organisations do not fully

recognise the power differential between them and young people, nor do they take it into account when planning and implementing consultative processes. Similarly, in the *Black Environment Network* case study from the United Kingdom one of the criticisms was that it was hard to see that the organisation was sharing the vision of the project with young people, and thus it was not sufficiently youth led.

4.   *The static nature of institutions and lack of flexibility.*

Several forum participants pointed out that many organisations that use participation processes were not flexible in their approach, and commonly felt that that one approach to participation would meet all group's needs. In Adelaide it was pointed out that this lack of flexibility is seen when organisations routinely expect young people to come to them to be consulted rather than going to where young people are. A participant in Melbourne extended this point by suggesting that participation is often too focused on individual young people who are expected to change and fit in with organisational systems, but organisations rarely change their systems to meet young people's needs.

5.   *The difficulty of creating and acting upon outcomes from participation processes.*

Government representatives in Canberra and Adelaide suggested that a significant barrier is the tendency for organisations to focus on the design and implementation of the participation process, rather than the follow through to meet outcomes, objectives or intentions of participation processes. For example, one participant pointed out that participation is under utilised as organisations do not know what to do with output. Another argued that organisations might not want to consult with young people because it requires them acting on the outcomes of consultation. This barrier of needing to have real and tangible outcomes from participation was also seen as an inherent weakness of the two case studies. The *Ask Us* case study was criticised for having limited policy outcomes for young people with disabilities. It was asked whether providing more accessible public space was the same as increasing equity or improving service delivery. Similarly, the *Black Environment Network* case study was criticised for having no guaranteed or generalisable outcomes for more than the immediate participants in the project. It was questioned how a one-off project could feed into wider government and community decision making.

Barriers based on young people's attitudes and their social position

The forum participants offered explanations for barriers to participation based on the difficulties presented by young people themselves, rather than an intransient and inflexible system focussed on outcomes. The three main types of responses pointed to young people's lack of knowledge, time, and resources, and their political cynicism.

1. *Young people's lack of knowledge of how decision making and participatory processes worked.*

Several forum participants saw that young people simply did not understand enough about the way participation and decision-making processes, and bureaucratic systems, functioned and this prevented them from getting involved. A representative from a community organisation in Canberra also pointed out that it was difficult to expect some young people from diverse backgrounds, such as those from new and emerging communities, to have an understanding of the government system. They commented that a targeted approach that increased participants' knowledge of processes and of government would be needed to accommodate them.

2. *Life experience barriers to including a diverse range of young people.*

This extends from the last point in that young people from diverse backgrounds face particular barriers to becoming engaged in participation and decision-making processes. It was noted by forum participants in Canberra that young people from low socio economic backgrounds and newly arrived young people may have a lack of schooling and this is a barrier to understanding their rights to participate. Further, this group of young people would find costs associated with participation a significant barrier. This could include not having access to a car or not having a driver's licence.

A lack of time was also identified as another barrier. For example, it was stated in the Melbourne forum that some young people have responsibilities that prevent them from participating, for example young carers who find it difficult to get respite. Community organisation representatives in Adelaide pointed out that initiatives or organisations that targeted diverse groups of young people faced two barriers: first, that involving young people effectively requires building strong relationships and trust; and second that young people do not identify with the 'labels' that organisations and/or society assign them and this may contribute to involvement being less appealing. For example, some community organisations that work with young people in care find that this group do not want to identify as 'young people in care'.

3. *Young people's cynicism about, or lack of commitment to participation processes.*

This barrier could be related to a lack of knowledge about participation opportunities but extends beyond the earlier barrier by linking with what organisations perceived as young people's inherent suspicion or cynicism of government-led participation processes. An Adelaide forum participant suggested that young people simply do not want to be involved in formal participation processes. A Melbourne forum participant stated that most young people did not want to get involved as they saw that the process was dominated by one group of young people—the university arts and law students—in other words, well educated, middle class young people. Other forum

participants saw that cynicism was also borne of past involvements in consultation and participation exercises that did not demonstrate actual outcomes to the young people that had become involved. A government representative in the Perth forum labelled this as 'consultation fatigue' and indicated that this was especially true for emerging communities who have more pressing issues such as housing, settlement or schooling.

Barriers to participation by young people from diverse backgrounds.

The barriers to participation for young people from diverse backgrounds predominantly develop the ideas listed in the previous section. However, some important points were raised about representation barriers within existing participation initiatives. That is, while existing processes of participation can sometimes be inflexible there is also active recognition of particular circumstances that arise when attempting to be more inclusive of young people from a broad range of backgrounds. Some reasons discussed here are cultural, some are about young people's confidence and others suggest that the level of specificity needed can inhibit the process itself.

A representative of a community organisation commented in the Melbourne forum that there are cultural issues which impact on the involvement levels of Indigenous young people. For example, during general consultations with Indigenous people, young people are often not specifically included, are not allowed to participate, or are not heard. Then, in general participation approaches with young people, Indigenous young people may not be invited, or may not be interested in participating, which can contribute to this group of young people being overlooked.

The most extensive discussion of the barriers faced by young people from diverse backgrounds occurred in the Adelaide forum. Here issues were raised about the issues of representation that created problems inherent to many youth participation initiatives. Questions were raised by community organisation representatives of the need 'to be aware of how people select young people'. A government agency representative suggested that selection is sometimes driven by tokenism and that questions need to be asked about whether individuals from diverse backgrounds can speak on behalf of the communities they come from. A community organisation representative responded by suggesting that it is crucial to not simply select the 'confident, articulate and naturally identified leaders', even though some are passionate participants they can become over used within participation processes. This forum participant argued that it was important for young people from diverse backgrounds to be financially compensated, and for the process to be flexible in involving a representative group of young people.

Another community organisation representative in Adelaide raised the issue of how organisations generalise among groups of young people because of the convenience. Their example was how organisations tend to consult people with a physical disability as opposed to intellectual disability, and while they acknowledge that it is difficult to consult with people with a range of disabilities, it remains important, but under practiced.

Best Practice for Participation Processes

Mention of 'best practice' occurred throughout the forum, especially during the case study discussion, but a specific discussion also concluded the forums and is summarised below. Government and community policy makers emphasised three overarching principles to effective practices for involving young people from diverse backgrounds: that it be youth led; have a long-term organisational commitment; and be creative. It is important to note that these principles all represent a youth involvement ideal of youth participation rather than one that emphasises the development of skills and capacities of individual young people. Long-term, youth centred, creative agendas are at the centre of a youth involvement approach demonstrating that government and community policy makers see this participation approach as 'best practice'. Three factors for achieving best practice were identified:

1.   Successful participation needs to be youth led.

Forum participants generally felt that young people needed to have a sense of ownership of participation and decision-making processes both to sustain their own involvement and to ensure an initiative's success. Many participants emphasised that a successful approach included 'going to where young people are' rather than always expecting them to come to agencies or organisations to participate. An Adelaide based community organisation representative pointed out that decision makers going to young people's spaces could help ensure that a range of young people can be involved.

Two other community organisation representatives in Adelaide focused on the importance of young people's existing network and peer-to-peer mentoring, in that their use could 'break down the mistrust' of government agencies. Perth forum participants stated that it was incumbent to make sure participation initiatives focussed on 'young people's needs' and that organisations keep abreast of young people's issues 'as they change so quickly'. Thus the suggestion was for successful processes to be youth led—for example, 'Let them consult with us and set the agenda'.

These sentiments about the importance of youth-led and youth issue centred participation were also reiterated in the discussion of the case studies. Participants

saw that community organisations were more likely to foster this approach than government agencies and that the *Ask Us* case study used a format that was useful to decision-makers because community organisations were able to foster cooperation. The *Black Environment Network* case study was also praised as it was not a participation initiative targeted to perceived issues of disadvantage but instead on youth oriented issues of common interest: the environment and public spaces. Other points were made that this program was youth centred because it had a gender balance and experiences were discussed bilingually. Further, young people from Wales were connecting with young people in Spain and this was interpreted as providing young people with the capacity to set the agenda.

2.   Successful participation is long-term and purposeful.

This recommendation for best practice refers predominantly to how organisations incorporate participation initiatives. That is, for participation to work, organisations need to have a long-term commitment to their success and a clear sense of purpose. This needs to be agreed upon by, and clear to, all participants: both organisations and young people from diverse backgrounds.

For example, a community organisation representative pointed out in Melbourne that participation is purposeful when it is linked with decisions that will have meaningful impacts on young people's lives. This participant also stressed that often the best participation initiatives were 'very local'. Forum participants also praised the *Black Environment Network* case study because it was linked into issues meaningful to young people, and could be perceived as non-threatening as it was not directly political. Instead it built confidence to express opinions among the young people engaged in such participation projects.

Forum participants also stressed that participation as an ideal has to have a long-term organisational commitment. A government representative in Melbourne suggested that participation should not be a simple 'one-off' event but that it required a systemic and sustainable approach to participation. One way of making participation sustainable was to have a range of stakeholders involved and committed to the process. A Perth forum participant stated that best practice includes service providers as intermediaries in the recognition that they have already established relationships with young people. Similarly the *Ask Us* case study was praised because it was a long-term project with sustained contact between young people with disabilities and service providers over time. It was suggested that the trust and recognition of mutual benefit between adults with decision-making power and young people strengthened the process.

Other forum participants noted that best practice was also about ensuring that outcomes were clear to all those who were involved. For example, a Canberra forum

participant pointed out that effective practices both ensure that participants believe their perspectives are listened to; and subsequently demonstrate how participants' ideas are incorporated in decision making. The idea of an 'effective feedback loop' to participants about the status and outcomes of their input was also emphasised by a government representative in the Canberra forum. In response to the *Ask Us case study*, forum participants praised responses given after consultations as young people with disabilities were shown how their involvements had an affect on creating more appropriate services and consultation mechanisms.

3.   *Participation needs be creative and fun for young people, and use media such as the internet.*

During the forums it became clear that many policy makers who had been involved in successful participation initiatives saw that a crucial dimension was that young people found them to be worthwhile, and often this was as a result of a fun or a creative process. Forum participants believed that best practice was using a range of participatory tools and creating opportunities for participants to be creative and have fun. An Adelaide forum participant saw that by focusing on the fun aspect, such as through using a community arts process, it was possible to show young people from diverse backgrounds 'what was in it for them'. Participants in Perth associated fun and creativity with emphasising informal processes and that these ought to be used wherever possible. Furthermore, the *Ask Us* case study was praised because it used a range of participation approaches including informal ones. Similarly, *the Black Environment Network* case study used travel and this could be both fun, and broaden horizons for young people from diverse backgrounds.

The second dimension of best practice identified was the use of multimedia such as video diaries, and the Internet to engage young people from diverse backgrounds in participation. A Canberra-based government representative commented that online technology has definitely become a useful participatory tool, but they cautioned that to be used successfully it needed to be linked to face-to-face involvement as well. The *Black Environment network* case study used technology including video diaries and the Internet. Forum participants recommended this use of the medium for telling stories and creating a voice for young people. This approach was seen as innovative, as well as more interesting and engaging than a written report. Similarly the *Ask Us* case study was praised because of its use of multimedia and CDRom production enabled young people with disabilities to speak out, and that hearing their views so directly would have been very powerful to the viewer. It was also seen as important as they *chose* to express themselves this way.

Targeted and universal participation initiatives for young people from diverse backgrounds

Forum participants were also asked specifically about the value of targeted versus universal participation initiatives. That is, a participation exercise focused specifically on young people from a nominated diverse background rather than a universal program with representation of diversity. Participants generally supported an increased use of targeted mechanisms that were specific to goals and policy initiatives. While overall this discussion maintained the youth involvement approach of the previous section, it was clear that many young people from diverse backgrounds were perceived to be disadvantaged and a youth development approach was also seen as useful. There were, however, some strong defences of the universal youth advisory council model due to both practicality and representativeness. One Adelaide Government representative pointed out that in thinking about targeted mechanisms it was crucial that organisers were mindful that young people are representing themselves, not a group of young people or a broader diverse community.

Several examples were provided of where forum participants had successfully used a targeted approach to involving young people from diverse backgrounds. A government representative at the Canberra forum said that they had established groups of young people who are experienced in youth participation to mentor incoming participants from newly created groups. An Adelaide community organisation representative said that they bring together diverse refugee groups, that the participants enjoy it and that the cross-cultural interaction is beneficial. They did acknowledge that in some circumstances, with some particular issues, a more targeted approach would be necessary. For example a Melbourne based community organisation representative said that they needed to use bilingual facilitators who were employed to consult with the community and then feed this information back. This approach was useful because bilingual facilitators were able to go beyond the community's 'gatekeepers'.

In extending the idea of going to where young people already are, an Adelaide community organisation representative described their varied approach that included a youth action group, youth camp, and annual festivals. When asked to consult with young people, this community organisation used a strategy of tapping into existing activities and events to engage with young people. They also suggested that linking into 'what is there' can be cost effective.

A Perth community organisation representative had indicated that because young people from low socio economic backgrounds are often disengaged from services, the starting point for participation needed to be linked to the immediate needs of the young person. It was on that basis that their ability to be engaged and involved in decision making should be targeted. Another participant in the Perth forum also reiterated that it was imperative that participation initiatives recognise the difficulties that young people face in relation to becoming and staying involved. Their example was that a recently arrived refugee young person may be settling into school, learning a new language, finding work, navigating Centrelink and therefore will not have time or energy to voluntarily participate.

TELEPHONE SURVEY WITH SERVICE PROVIDER ORGANISATIONS

A telephone survey was conducted with service providers to complement the group discussion and qualitative approach of the forums. The survey examined how individual organisations approached and incorporated youth participation in their service delivery. The survey was useful because it provided a quantitative picture of the extent to which, and how, young people from diverse backgrounds are included in decision-making processes. It also enabled comparison across organisational types and participation mechanisms.

The analysis of the telephone survey is in three sections:

- participation approaches used to involve young people in decision-making

- motivations for and the benefits in engaging young people in decision making

- perceived barriers to the inclusion of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Comparisons between different organisational types are made throughout this section of the report. One of the most significant comparisons made is between youth-serving organisations; diverse youth-serving organisations and diverse community-serving organisations; as well as between government and community organisation service providers.

Participatory approaches used to involve young people in decision making

The survey was used to gauge the extent to which service providers were already incorporating participation mechanisms to include young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes. The survey also differentiated among a range of participation mechanisms including both formal and informal approaches to participation. The most common methods used to engage young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes were informal chats (48%), followed by formal-participation processes of surveys (31%) and youth advisory groups (31%). While informal chats were also the most common method for involving both young people from diverse backgrounds and young people more generally in decision-making processes (48%), organisations were less likely to use formal structures such as youth advisory groups and surveys when they were trying to engage young people from diverse backgrounds.

A range of other mechanisms were identified by organisations including activity based workshops and arts based processes (for example, writing, drama, music or dance), however, less than 10 per cent of organisations used these to engage young people from diverse backgrounds so these mechanisms are not detailed in the following tables. Table one below reveals the importance of informal participation mechanisms, such as service providers approaching individual young people for feedback through ad hoc and informal chats.

Table 1: Comparing participation mechanisms used to engage young people

Participation Mechanism	Organisations that engage young people from diverse backgrounds (N=91)	Organisations that engage young people generally (N=100)
Informal chats	48%	48%
Surveys	31%	39%
Youth advisory groups	31%	47%
Individual interviews	21%	26%
Youth forums	29%	31%
Individual interviews	23%	26%
Online technology	13%	15%
Regular meetings	12%	25%
Young person sitting on board	8%	16%
Online technology	12%	15%

Furthermore, organisations that provide services to diverse communities were even more likely to use 'informal chats' as a way of engaging diverse young people's input (58%), when compared with organisations that delivered services to young people (where 43% utilised informal chats). Organisations that delivered services to young people were more likely to use formal and structured mechanisms such as youth advisory groups, youth forums and surveys. This can be seen in table two.

Table 2: Preferred participation mechanism for organisations that provide services to young people and wider diverse communities

Participation mechanism	Organisations that provide services to young people (N=37)	Organisations that provide services to people (all ages) from diverse backgrounds (N=31)
Informal chats	43%	58%
Surveys	35%	23%
Youth Advisory Groups	43%	19%

'Informal chats' were also the most common method used by both government and community organisations to engage the input of young people from diverse backgrounds. Government organisations were far more likely to use formalised processes such as youth advisory groups and surveys to engage the input of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making than community organisations as can be seen in table three. This is probably attributable to two factors: one is that government organisations generally have more resources at their disposal for formalised and ongoing youth participation mechanisms; and second that, as the literature review revealed, Youth Advisory Group structures have become the norm for implementation of youth participation in Australia and elsewhere.

Table 3: Differences in participation mechanisms between community and government organisations

Participation Mechanism	Community Organisation (N=68)	Government Organisation (N=22)
Informal Chats	50%	45%
Surveys	28%	41%
Youth advisory groups	26%	41%

Organisations that provided services in capital cities were also more likely to use formal structures such as youth advisory groups and surveys, than organisations providing services outside of capital cities, which tended to use informal chats to facilitate the input of young people from diverse backgrounds. This is illustrated in table four. Here geography, as well as resources, may be a factor for the use of Youth Advisory Group more so in capital cities. It is also possible that services outside of capital cities have a more stable and regular client base and are able to build up the trust relationships necessary to rely on informal chats as an ongoing youth participation mechanism.

Table 4:   A comparison of participation mechanisms by location

Participation mechanism	Services in capital cities (N=64)	Services outside of capital cities (N=27)
Informal chats	45%	56%
Surveys	25%	44%
Youth advisory groups	38%	15%

Organisations were asked how often they involved young people from diverse backgrounds in four categories of decision making:

1. Operational, that is, decision making with respect to the day-to-day provision of activities and services for young people by the organisation.

2. Managerial, that is, decision making regarding overall management of the organisation including allocation of resources, planning and evaluation.

3. Political, that is, decision making by the organisation that relates to the public policy arena.

4. Financial, that is, decision making relating to fundraising or other aspects of the organisation's financial activities.

As can be seen in table five, organisations were most likely to involve young people from diverse backgrounds in operational decision making (82% said they did so either often or sometimes). There were similar responses with regards to involvement in managerial and political decisions (around half involving young people sometimes or often), whereas organisations were least likely to involve young people in financial decision making (52% said that they had either 'never' involved them or did so 'rarely'). These findings are interesting in that they suggest young people are seen to have the largest stake when it comes to the everyday service delivery provided by organisations, and least when it comes to financial activities. To some extent this is not surprising as

young people are most likely to come into contact with the service dimension of the organisation. However it also reveals that youth participation is rarely utilised through the whole of an organisation from the 'top down', that is, from managerial and financial decisions to the operational everyday decisions.

Table 5:   Young people from diverse backgrounds' involvements in types of decision-making processes (n=91)

Type of decision making process				
Frequency	**Operational**	**Managerial**	**Political**	**Financial**
Never	7%	20%	16%	24%
Rarely	11%	21%	29%	33%
Sometimes	40%	34%	23 %	27%
Often	42%	22%	26%	12%

Nevertheless, the size of the organisation appears to influence the extent to which young people from diverse backgrounds are involved in financial decision making. Forty percent (40%) of surveyed organisations with over 11 staff said that they 'rarely' involved young people from diverse backgrounds in financial decision making, whereas only 27 per cent of organisations with ten or less staff answered 'rarely'. Of the 12 per cent of organisations that said they involved young people from diverse backgrounds in financial decision making 'often' nine were small organisations with ten or less staff and only two had over 11 staff. This suggests that it may be more difficult for larger more routinised and bureaucratised organisations to involve young people from diverse backgrounds in financial decision making; or conversely that small organisations with limited staff and resources and using informal chats as participatory mechanism will consult young people on all dimensions of the organisation's service delivery simultaneously. Whether the organisation was a government or a community organisation did not influence how frequently the organisation involved young people from diverse backgrounds in each of the four areas of decision making.

Motivations for engaging young people in decision making

Respondents were asked an open ended, multiple response question about the main purpose for engaging young people in decision making. The results of this survey are contained in table six. Fifty-six percent of surveyed organisations said that the main purpose for engaging young people's input in decision-making and participation processes was to improve service delivery or policy/program development. Other significant motivations were increasing organisational understanding of young people's perspectives and experiences (25%) and ensuring that young people were able to exercise their right to be involved in decisions that affect them (23%). Interestingly, being inclusive (7%) and respecting diversity (5%) were not seen as major reasons for involving young people in decision making.

Table 6:   The main purpose of involvement

Main purpose for involving young people in decision making	% of respondents N= 100
To improve service delivery or policy/program development.	56%
To increase organisational understanding of young people's perspectives and experiences.	25%
To ensure young people are able to exercise their right to be involved in decisions that affect them.	23%
To increase young people's ownership over the service.	19%
To increase young people's engagement in the service.	18%
To provide an opportunity for young people to develop their skills and ability to participate.	10%
To be inclusive.	7%
To respect/support diversity.	5%

Smaller organisations with ten or less staff were even more likely to cite the improvement of the service and/or program delivery as the main purpose for involving young people (62%) when compared to larger organisations with 11 or more staff (49%). Sixty-one percent of community organisations responded that the main purpose for involving young people in decision making was to improve service delivery or policy/program development whereas only 39 per cent of government organisations responded similarly. Interestingly government organisations were half as likely as

community organisations to say that the main purpose for involving young people was to increase organisational understanding of young people's perspectives and experiences (13% and 28% respectively). Organisations that provided services to young people were far more likely to see the main purpose of young people's involvement to be linked to young people's right to exercise influence over decisions that affect their lives (25%) when compared to organisations who serviced broader diverse communities (9%). These findings reveal that the reasons for implementing youth participation processes within organisation are not homogenous or standardised. That is, while a majority of organisations did believe that young people's involvement could help improve the everyday delivery of services, secondary reasons for involvement show varied approaches. That is, they are based on issues of adequate representation and the right of young people to be involved, and increasing the capacity of organisations to understand and learn from young people's experiences; to more abstract participation concepts such as respecting diversity and being more inclusive.

When asked, "who benefits from young people's involvement in decision making?" 75 per cent of surveyed organisations said that the young people involved in the decision making processes benefited, 55 per cent said service users and 43 per cent said the organisation benefited. The results of this survey are contained in table seven. These findings are interesting to interpret in that it has already been shown that a majority of the organisations surveyed state that the point of including young people is to improve the service, but a minority see that it is the organisation that ultimately benefits form this inclusion in participation processes. Instead it is the young people as either participants or as clients of the services that a majority perceive as benefiting from youth participation within organisations.

Table 7:   Perceptions about who benefits from young people's involvement

Who benefits from young people's involvement?	% of respondents n=100
Young people involved	75%
Young users of the service	55%
Organisation	43%
Community	42%
Staff	32%
Service users	10%
Future service users	7%

Organisations that provided services generally to diverse communities were even more likely to agree that the young people involved benefited from the involvement (83%) when compared to organisations that provided services specifically to young people (60%). Similarly, organisations that provided services to young people were more likely to see youth participation as benefiting the organisation (48%) than organisations providing services to a broader age range (40%). This may indicate that organisations that provide services to young people are more likely to perceive youth participation as a two-sided relationship that brings meaning to the organisation as well as participants, whereas organisations that provide services to a wider age group may perceive youth participation more in 'youth development' terms where the benefits lie predominantly with the participant. Thirty percent (30%) of government organisations agreed that their organisation benefited from youth participation, whereas 47 per cent of community organisations said the same. This may indicate that community organisations are more flexible than government organisations in incorporating youth participation ideas and see the value that youth involvement brings to their organisation. Further emphasising this the data suggests that smaller organisations are more likely to perceive youth participation as beneficial to their organisation. Forty-nine per cent of organisations with 10 or less staff said that the organisations benefited, compared with 36 per cent of organisations with 11 or more staff.

This research was also interested in finding out how young people, and young people from diverse backgrounds in particular, are enabled by organisations to participate. The results of this survey are contained in table eight. Eighty-seven percent of surveyed organisations said that they provide support for young people from diverse backgrounds who contribute to decision-making processes. The most common forms of support fell into two main categories:

- Skills development, such as through mentoring and training.

- Financial support, including transport and accommodation costs, payment and honorariums.

Fifty-four per cent of organisations provided 'other' forms of support through non-monetary reimbursements for their time and input, including movie tickets, food vouchers, gift vouchers, and covering the cost of conference registration. Organisations also listed that they provide young people from diverse backgrounds who participate in decision-making processes with 'emotional support', 'guidance' and 'encouragement'.

Table 8: Organisational support for young people's participation

Type of support provided n=79	%
Mentoring	32%
Training	32%
Transport and/or accommodation	28%
Honorariums/payment	24%
Written materials	11%
Support to access technology	10%
A carer	8%
Interpreter/translator	6%
Grants	3%
Other	54%

Organisations that involved young people through informal participation processes, especially community organisations, were more likely to provide mentoring as a support option for young people from diverse backgrounds (38%) when compared to organisations that used more formalised approaches such as youth advisory groups (19%) and surveys (20%). There were several differences when analysing the results for organisations that involve young people through youth advisory groups that reflect the high level of organisational resources and support needed for these formal participation initiatives.

These organisations were more likely to provide *training* to participants (42%) than organisations that involve young people through surveys (24%). They were also almost three times more likely to provide *financial support* through reimbursement for travel and accommodation costs (42%) than organisations that use informal processes (15%).

Youth advisory oriented groups are also more likely to provide support through honorariums or payment (35%) than organisations that use informal processes (13%). Similarly government organisations were more likely to provide payment or honorariums as a form of support (48%) than community organisations (14%).

Organisations that provided services in capital cities were more likely to support participants from diverse backgrounds through mentoring (36%), training (36%) and transport/accommodation reimbursement (32%) than organisations providing services outside of capital cities (20%, 20%, and 15% respectively).

These responses suggest that organisations that use formal participation mechanisms to involve young people from diverse backgrounds, such as youth advisory groups, are able to allocate more resources to providing support to these young people than organisations that use informal mechanisms. This is an area that will be explored furthered in the community audits, to better understand the costs to organisations of formal versus informal participation approaches to involving young people in decision making.

Perceived barriers to including young people

In this research it was recognised that the introduction of youth participation processes in service providing organisations is rarely straight forward and the research was thus interested in identifying the perceived barriers to including young people in decision making. Respondents were read a range of barriers and asked to rate these in terms of how significant they perceived these to be for their organisation. As table nine shows, the most significant barrier to involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making was perceived to be a lack of resources and time. Almost half (44%) of surveyed organisations saw this as a significant barrier and 34 per cent said it was somewhat significant. The next most significant barrier was a perception that there is a lack of interest on the part of young people from diverse backgrounds (17% thought this is significant and 38% said somewhat significant). The least significant barriers were duty of care issues and a perception by adults that young people from diverse backgrounds can not make a valuable contribution, in that almost 60 per cent of respondents said that each of these were 'not significant' barriers.

Table 9: Barriers to involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes (base n=101)

	Significant	Somewhat significant	Not significant	n/a
Lack of resources and time to devise, implement and evaluate participation.	44%	34%	18%	5%
Lack of interest on the part of young people from diverse backgrounds to become involved.	17%	38%	39%	7%
Existing decision making structures not flexible enough to accommodate young people from diverse backgrounds.	12%	37%	45%	7%
Training staff to involve young people from diverse backgrounds is difficult.	10%	41%	45%	5%
Lack of support for young people from diverse backgrounds.	15%	34%	45%	7%
Adults do not think young people from diverse backgrounds can make a valuable contribution to decision making.	19%	16%	57%	8%
Duty of care issues .	7%	30%	55%	8%

As shown above there are three other barriers where responses are polarised, with similar numbers indicating that the barrier is significant/somewhat significant and not significant:

- Existing decision making structures are not flexible enough to accommodate for young people from diverse backgrounds (49% significant/somewhat significant, 45% not significant)

- Training staff to involve young people from diverse backgrounds is difficult (51% significant/somewhat significant, 45% not significant)

- There's a lack of support for young people from diverse backgrounds (49% significant/somewhat significant, 45% not significant).

About one third of all respondents indicated that six of the seven barriers were 'somewhat significant', suggesting that despite some barriers being seen as 'not significant', overall, organisations identify that there are multiple barriers in

organisational processes to involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making. Table ten examines whether different types of organisations place significance on particular barriers to involving young people from diverse backgrounds. For ease of analysis there are three organisational types examined here: youth serving organisations; young people from diverse backgrounds serving organisations; and organisations that serve people with diverse backgrounds.

Table 10: Significant barriers to involving young people from diverse backgrounds by organisation type (base n=99)

	Youth	Diverse youth	Diverse community
Lack of resources and time to devise, implement and evaluate participation.	43%	33%	54%
Lack of interest on the part of young people from diverse backgrounds to become involved.	15%	21%	17%
Existing decision making structures not flexible enough to accommodate young people from diverse backgrounds.	10%	17%	11%
Training staff to involve young people from diverse backgrounds is difficult.	13%	8%	9%
Lack of support for young people from diverse backgrounds.	8%	13%	26%
Adults do not think young people from diverse backgrounds can make a valuable contribution to decision making.	10%	21%	29%
Duty of care issues.	3%	8%	11%

The above table shows that the more targeted an organisation is (those serving young people from diverse backgrounds) the less likely it is to see any of the barriers to participation as significant. The main exception is the likelihood of identification that existing decision-making structures are not flexible enough for young people from diverse backgrounds. Another interesting finding here is how organisations that work with broader age range of diverse communities see barriers such as lack of resources, lack of support and lack of adult recognition as more significant barriers than other organisation types. This implies that these organisations see providing decision-making opportunities to young people within their communities as sometimes in conflict with other, older sections of the community that they work with. This suggests that when

resources are limited for organisations that service diverse communities they are less able to actively include and target young people for participation initiatives.

Community organisations were more likely to indicate that a lack of resources and time was a 'significant' barrier (47%) than government organisations (35%). This suggests that community organisations are more likely to perceive that they are limited by a lack of resources, funding or staff time in generally facilitating the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds.

In further examining whether particular organisational types cited particular barriers as significant, it was found that organisations that involve young people in decision making through mechanisms such as 'informal chats' and surveys were more likely to report that a lack of resources and time was a 'significant' barrier (58% and 54% respectively) when compared with organisations that involved young people from diverse backgrounds through youth advisory boards (30%). This suggests that 'informal chats' and surveys may be perceived as cost-effective ways to involve young people in comparison to more formal approaches such as youth advisory boards. It is difficult to identify here whether particular participation mechanisms are chosen because they are less expensive to organise and sustain or whether they are simply chosen as most appropriate for the organisation.

KEY FINDINGS FROM CONSULTATION WITH GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY POLICY MAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

The discussion forums with government and community policy makers and the survey with service providers pointed to a number of key findings about current perceptions of youth participation, existing approaches to involving young people from diverse backgrounds, barriers and effective practice. Following is a summary of the key findings that emerged from this phase of the research.

Perceptions of participation

Generally, among policy makers and service deliverers there is an awareness of and commitment to, youth participation mechanisms that include young people in decision-making processes. However, there is not a homogenous view about whether formal or informal mechanisms, or those that are targeted or universal, are most

useful in including broader populations of young people. Participation is framed by government and community decision makers in two main ways:

- A top-down approach to participation which focuses on institutionalised or formal participation processes lead by decision-making bodies.

- A bottom-up approach to participation which acknowledges that the needs of policy makers are not always aligned with the needs of participants and recognises that existing participation initiatives are sometimes limited by minimal time and resources, and lack of youth ownership.

Most service deliverers see youth participation as chiefly important to the young people involved, and involve them in everyday operational decision making thus mainly adopting a youth development standpoint. This suggests that youth participation as a youth involvement process challenges the nature and routines of organisations, and requires large-scale cultural change to be implemented successfully.

There are differences between what government and community policy makers see as important to 'best practice' participation (that it is youth-led, creative and purposeful participation) and what is happening on the ground in services that work with young people from diverse backgrounds.

Current approaches to involving young people from diverse backgrounds

There is recognition amongst government and community decision makers, as well as service providers that many existing participation mechanisms, such as youth advisory groups, are not representative and inclusive of young people from diverse backgrounds.

For service providers that work with young people, informal participation processes such as chats with service users are the most widely used mechanism and play an important role engaging young people from diverse backgrounds. Whereas government organisations are most likely to use formal mechanisms such as youth advisory groups and surveys.

Organisations were most likely to involve young people in operational decision-making with respect to the day-to-day provision of the organisation's activities and services for young people. Young people were least likely to be involved in financial or managerial decision making. Small organisations are slightly more likely to involve young people from diverse backgrounds in all kinds of decision making.

Smaller organisations are more likely to involve young people from diverse backgrounds than larger organisations, perhaps because the more rigid organisational structures of larger organisations provide less flexibility to accommodate for the needs of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Generally, service providers offer support (in the form of financial support or skills development) to young people from diverse backgrounds in relation to decision-making opportunities. In particular, organisations that use formal decision making are able to allocate more resources to providing support given that a limited number of young people are involved.

Barriers to involving young people from diverse backgrounds

For government and community decision makers, the barriers to involving young people generally, as well as young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making are:

- Limited financial resources of community organisations and government agencies to establish effective participation processes.

- Ineffective networks and knowledge exchange between government, communities and young people.

- Difficulties of changing institutions and sharing power and thus the static, inflexible nature of institutions.

- The difficulty of creating and acting upon outcomes from participation processes.

- Young people's lack of knowledge of how decision-making and participatory processes work.

- Life experience barriers to including a diverse range of young people.

- Young people's cynicism about, or lack of commitment to, participation processes.

For service providers, the most significant barrier is a lack of resources and time, particularly for community organisations. Other significant barriers are:

- A perception that young people from diverse backgrounds are not interested in getting involved in decision making.

- Lack of flexibility in the existing formal decision-making mechanisms to accommodate for the needs of young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Difficulty equipping staff to involve young people from diverse backgrounds.

Motivations

Primarily, services involve young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making because they believe it can improve service delivery or policy/programs. Respecting diversity and being inclusive are not significant motivators for involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

Interestingly though, service providers think that the party that most benefits from the involvement of young people in decision making, is the participants, suggesting that there is a gap between expected benefits (improved policy/programs) and actual benefits (personal benefits for participants).

Effective practice

For government and community decision makers, effective practice for involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making is based on initiatives being:

- youth led

- long-term and purposeful, rather than generalised

- creative and fun for young people, and uses media such as the internet

- targeted participation mechanisms are most useful for involving young people from diverse backgrounds.

5 | COMMUNITY AUDITS: OPPORTUNITIES, PERCEPTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

The community audits were conducted between May and August 2007 in four geographical locations: Parramatta (New South Wales), Darwin (Northern Territory), Shepparton (Victoria) and Townsville (Queensland) as well as 'online'. The purpose of the community audits was to explore the range of opportunities that exist for young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in government and community decision making. The audits also enabled researchers to tap directly into the attitudes and experiences of both young people and practitioners by specifically exploring effective practice as well as barriers to participation.

The community audits allowed a location by location examination of opportunities and experiences of participation. Areas with large populations of young people from a particular background were more likely to have services that targeted these populations, and were also more likely to have initiatives which targeted the involvement of particular groups. Whereas location did not influence the type of participation opportunities on offer, as both universal and targeted participation opportunities were available in all four locations.

The following two chapters present the findings from the community audits by looking at the opportunities, approaches, perceptions, motivations, barriers and effective practice in youth participation with a particular focus on the experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds. Case studies are provided throughout chapters five and six to illustrate key findings from the community audits and to provide examples of key aspects of best practice youth participation models that facilitate the involvement of young people from diverse communities.

OPPORTUNITIES AND APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATION

Since the involvement of young people from the target diverse backgrounds was often limited, this section of the report focuses on opportunities for young people to participate more broadly, and where possible, references participatory initiatives that directly involved young people from diverse backgrounds. Many organisations and initiatives that were reviewed in audit are examined in the text, and 12 are looked at in more detail in the case studies.

The research identified a range of mechanisms used by services to engage young people in decision making processes, which can be grouped as follows:

- formal

- informal

- project based

- online

- universal

- targeted.

Whilst different mechanisms have been identified, some organisations utilised a combination of approaches, for example using project based and formal mechanisms. The research also found that while participation opportunities generally take place offline, there are some examples of innovative practice using the internet to engage young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making. This section provides an analysis of the types of opportunities that exist, the extent to which young people from diverse backgrounds are involved and insights into the challenges and opportunities when working with different groups of young people.

Formal Mechanisms

Formal participation processes included one-off activities, such as focus groups; interviews; youth forums; and surveys, and ongoing mechanisms, such as youth advisory boards; youth representative positions; youth consultant or ambassador programs; and membership models (for example when young people sign up as members to an organisation, entitling them to decision making such as voting rights at the Annual General Meeting).

In chapter three, we discussed the main methods used as reported by government organisations as informal chats, surveys and 'youth advisory groups'. However, the community audits found that in the government sector (state/territory and local) the Youth Advisory Group model was generally the only model utilised, sometimes supplemented by formal consultation such as focus groups. Examples of government organisations utilising a Youth Advisory Group model, as identified through the community audit process are included in table 11.

Table 11: Examples of formal participation approaches run by government organisations

Jurisdiction	Initiative
Parramatta City Council	Parramatta Youth Advisory Committee
Darwin City Council	Youth Advisory Group
NT Office of Youth Affairs	Youth Minister's Roundtable of Young Territorians
Townsville City Council	Townsville Youth Council

Formal approaches can also be distinguished within larger 'events-based' initiatives such as National Youth Week (NYW). NYW is an important case in this research because of its breadth and profile. It places youth specific events onto the agenda, features ad hoc forums for youth participation and engagement, and involves young people in the planning and execution of NYW through a national planning group. The following case study explores youth participation in NYW.

CASE STUDY 1—National Youth Week

NYW commenced in the year 2000 and occurs each year in April. It is a wholly inter-governmental event but is auspiced by the Australian Government Department for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) (note that the auspicing agency has now changed to the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations). It includes a broad range of youth specific events rather than formal participation initiatives (see **www.youthweek.com/about.html#**). The national planning group is made up of a young person from each state (often an existing member of a state based youth advisory council) who assists a staff member from each of the federal, state and territory governments and is in all aspects of planning, developing, implementing and promoting NYW.

Young people are also involved in local NYW events. Events include exhibitions, talent competitions, dance parties, gigs (for example band competitions), forums, arts and culture workshops, sporting activities (for example, skating competitions), and other localised community events. These events are predominantly funded by state governments and auspiced by local governments. For example, for Youth Week April 5-13, 2008 the Victorian Government offered grants of up to $2000 to help with the staging of events in Victoria, to assist young people develop valuable skills and encourage community participation. Applications had to be supported by a local council, community organisation or school who managed the funds. The Office for Youth published the list of 81 successful 2008 grant recipients. About 55 per cent of the events were in regional or rural areas of Victoria, and most of these were sponsored by local councils. Those that were not, tended to be auspiced by local health and community services. The majority were generalist events aimed at all local young people, exceptions that targeted young people from diverse backgrounds included an event aimed at young parents, and others aimed at local Indigenous young people. The metropolitan events were auspiced by a broader range of organisations beyond local councils. There were more diversity specific organisations represented such as, at the state level, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service and Centre For Multicultural Youth Issues and locally, for example, the Disability Opportunities Victoria, Ethnic Youth Council and the Koori Programs Unit at a local TAFE (see **www.youth.vic.gov.au/**).

In further examples, based on available information, South Australian Youth Week funding is administered through local Councils participating in the state's Youth Advisory Committee program. In the Northern Territory a grant management scheme is run through the Office of Youth Affairs. In Queensland the Office for Youth provided Youth Week grants to a total of $95 000 shared amongst the ten departmental regions of the state, and among community organisations, local councils and groups of young

people. The New South Wales Government invites local councils in New South Wales to jointly fund Youth Week activities in their area, up to a maximum of $2500 per council area. The funding agreement requires councils to involve young people in all aspects of Youth Week, including the planning, development and management of activities. In Youth Week 2007, all 152 councils in New South Wales supported events and activities in their local government area. More than 3500 young people across the state were involved in the planning, development and running of around 1000 events and activities, which over 190 000 young people attended or participated in (see **www.youthweek.nsw.gov.au/content/about-youth-week/**).

In the absence of available evaluations of NYW, several critical questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the role of the National Planning Group, which is formed by an intergovernmental body and also has youth representation in directing, funding and marketing NYW? Is Youth Week, as an avenue for youth participation, sustainable? How uniform is the experience of Youth Week across states and even across regional and metropolitan local government areas within states? It is also difficult to determine what it means to emphasise that Youth Week events are 'run by and for young people' when in most states it is necessary that any funding be administered by an incorporated organisation or a local council. Despite direct involvement of young people 'on the ground' in Youth Week activities, Youth Week itself is primarily an example of a top down model of youth participation. Additionally, it is not clear to what extent Youth Week is able to successfully combine both universal and targeted approaches to ensure that young people from diverse backgrounds are consistently participating in all levels of decision making.

Formal participation mechanisms are also popular amongst non government and community organisations. For example the community audits (including the online audit) found the following examples of formal participation opportunities; as set out in table 12.

Table 12: Examples of formal participation approaches run by community organisations

Organisation	Initiative
Youth Affairs Council of South Australia	Youth Participation and Action Group who advise the Policy Council
Youth Disability Advocacy Service	Youth Steering Committee
Academy of Sport, Health and Recreation	Student Council
The Red Cross	The SHAK Kids Advisory Taskforce
Lead On	Youth Advisory Board
Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory	Youth Council

Informal Mechanisms

In the community sector, there were a range of informal approaches used depending on the young people targeted for involvement. These were almost exclusively approaches led by adult practitioners such as casual chats, spontaneous meetings, and brainstorming ideas and discussions around program or service development in case work meetings.

Generally, amongst youth services for young people from low socio economic backgrounds informal consultation mechanisms such as casual chats were the preferred mode. Examples of informal participation processes in the community audits are contained in table 13.

Table 13: Examples of informal participation approaches

Organisation	Mechanism
Government youth websites	online feedback tool
Wombat Housing and Support Service (VIC)	online feedback tool
Holroyd Youth Service	Casual chats with service users facilitated by youth workers
Granville Multicultural Community Centre	Casual chats with service users facilitated by youth workers
Anglicare - Parramatta	Fortnightly BBQ to facilitate discussions between youth workers and young people from low socio economic backgrounds

In the disability sector, some organisations such as the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service in Parramatta and Total Recreation in Darwin involved clients in organisational decision making through a membership model, with all members invited to attend the Annual General Meeting and vote on organisational decisions. However, this did not translate to high levels of involvement by young people with disabilities (or people with disabilities more widely). Services indicated that a more useful way to facilitate youth participation was through the case work model, where support workers used accumulated feedback gained during discussions with clients to inform program choices for individuals. As discussed in the following case study, staff from the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service in Parramatta used one-on-one sessions to discuss participant needs, gauge feedback and identify areas where clients could become more involved in services or programs.

CASE STUDY 2—The Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service, Parramatta (New South Wales)

The Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association (MDAA) established in 1994, is the peak body in New South Wales for people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) with a disability. MDAA aims to promote, protect and secure the rights and interests of people from NESB with disabilities, their families and carers.

Young people from NESB who have a disability can be involved in MDAA's decision-making processes through a number of mechanisms:

1. Membership—members are invited to Annual General Meetings and have voting rights.

2. Individual Advocacy—MDAA's individual advocates provide individual support to people with disability, including young people, to ensure their rights are recognised and respected.

3. Management Committee—a group of members of differing ages and experiences who oversees MDAA's activities.

4. Regular consultations—often in collaboration with government and non-government agencies on major issues concerning people from NESB with disability.

5. Consumer Forums—an information sharing opportunity for people from NESB with disability and their families.

6. Strategic Planning consultations—where MDAA's membership and consumers are invited to give ideas about future directions of the organisation.

This case study profiles the individual advocacy model as an example of how one-on-one advocacy support can be used to link young people from diverse backgrounds into organisational decision making.

The research indicated that young people who have limited opportunities to make decisions about their personal lives are less likely to contemplate, or get involved in, decision-making processes that relate to service delivery. At MDAA, one-on-one advocacy sessions are used to support consumers so they can make decisions that affect their own lives and get their needs met in areas such as housing, immigration, education, employment and accessing disability services. An Individual Action Plan is developed with the individual which sets out actions, timeframes and responsibilities.

This approach is an effective way to facilitate the involvement of young people with a disability in decision making in three main ways. Firstly, individual sessions allow both the advocate and young person to address specific needs, and allow the young person to be heard in a way that would not be possible in a larger group dynamic. Secondly, the individual advocacy model works towards giving young people the authority and support to address their needs, which the research showed was a precursor to participating in wider decision-making processes. Thirdly, working together with young people gives them an opportunity to learn about the purpose, process and outcomes of decision making first hand. This knowledge and skills development process can assist in preparing young people for increased involvement in programs and decision-making processes.

For example, at MDAA, one young NESB woman with a disability spoke about how the positive experiences of self advocating had increased her understanding of the role of disability advocacy more widely, and had lead her to take on additional responsibility as a volunteer with MDAA, and later on, as a member of the management committee. As highlighted by one advocate from MDAA:

> *Engaging the young person in an equal partnership was the first step in empowering her later involvement in organisational decision making.*

This approach also has the added benefit of gathering clients' input during service delivery, eliminating the need for clients to organise additional visits to the service for decision-making processes, and eliminating the travel barriers that exist for some young people from diverse backgrounds.

In some instances, formal procedures, such as annual feedback questionnaires were also used to gauge feedback from participants, but largely young people who had a disability had very few options for direct involvement in decision-making processes.

Some organisations, such as the Inspire Foundation (Reach Out!), the Youth Action Policy Association of New South Wales, the Multicultural Resource Centre of South Australia and the CREATE Foundation utilise formal and informal participation processes. For example the Reach Out! project has a formal, three-tiered youth participation program which includes a Youth Advisory Board, Youth Ambassador Program and Youth Leaders Program. Around 45 young people each year are invited to sit on an advisory board where they provide guidance on the development of the service, and contribute content. The boards sit for a term of ten weeks after which young people are invited to become youth ambassadors. As youth ambassadors they work closely with staff on all aspects of the service, including website content and new interactive functionality (such as the Reach Out! Central game), marketing and promotions, fundraising and recruitment. Once a year Youth Ambassadors can also nominate to do the Youth Leaders Program whereby they mentor new Youth Ambassadors and place a leadership role in special youth-led projects.

However, informal youth participation is also facilitated via interactive website features on **www.reachout.com.au** and **www.myspace.com**. Informal participation occurs via community forums and discussion boards, feedback forms, polls and invitations to contribute text and multimedia content.

Online mechanisms

The online audit demonstrated that despite the potential for interactivity, the most common function of a website is to provide text-based information. Despite significant technological advances in the functionality and, in particular, the level of interactivity that can be produced via the internet, few websites facilitated 'many-to-many' communication, such as interactive forums, discussion boards or wikis (user generated content). Sixty-four sites were analysed in the audit and table 14 gives a simple overview of the kind of interactivity incorporated into sites. Percentages are rounded to the nearest decimal point.

Table 14: Summary of online interactivity

Type of interactivity	Total (n = 64)	Govt Sites (n = 12)	Non Govt (n = 52)	Targeted (n = 37)	Universal (n = 27)
Creative Posting*	17%	8%	19%	11%	22%
Closed forum (site members only)	16%	0	19%	8%	18.5%
Public discussion board	17%	17%	17%	11%	22%
Voting/polls	12%	17%	11%	0	30%
Feedback	25%	17%	27%	24%	22%
Blogs	12.5%	0	15%	8%	18.5%
Two or more features	20%	17%	21%	11%	33%
None	41%	83%	31%	30%	37%

* A creative posting was defined as any text-based story, image, video or other multi-media upload (such as a game).

Whilst the majority of sites (62.5%) had some kind of interactivity, this was most likely to be a feedback form whereby young people could communicate to the organisation, but with no guarantee of what, if any, the response would be.

The government websites considered in the audit were universal sites, and no targeted online strategies were evident. Overall, government sites were least likely to have interactivity with only 17 per cent of government youth-oriented sites having some interactive component. However, those that did had multiple forms of interactivity. The audit of online youth participation opportunities revealed that government organisations make limited use of the internet to facilitate participation by young people in decision making, and while almost all federal and state government youth sites make explicit mention of youth participation these websites, with few exceptions, are designed to communicate information to young people, rather than facilitate dialogue between policy makers and young people. Many of these sites have limited or outdated information. Where they advertise opportunities to 'get involved' these are infrequent (such as the National Youth Round Table) and usually refer to taking part in youth development programs (such as OzGreen, 'youth development' or 'leadership programs'). Several opportunities to foster dialogue between young people and

members of parliament using online forums or instant messaging have been identified (see for example, *Building a Better Future for Young Territorians*: **www.nt.gov.au/dcm/ youth_affairs/youth_policy.shtml**) but not yet implemented. However, there are two notable exceptions which demonstrate how universal and targeted strategies can be executed online: **www.generate.qld.gov.au** and **www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au**.

YouthCentral, the Victorian Government youth website, is a universal approach to youth participation and is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it engages young people as 'roving reporters' who research and produce content for the website that relates to youth issues in Victoria. Secondly, it uses multimedia content including pod casts, video and polls to engage more widely with young people. In this way, young people are content partners in YouthCentral. Although the content is moderated by staff, young people are able to creatively communicate their views and experiences using a variety of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). This provides the Victorian government with a unique opportunity to hear directly from young people but there is no mechanism for multi-party discussion or deliberation.

Generate, the Queensland Government youth website is notable because, unlike other government sites, it provides specific feedback, in the form of reports and web updates, that demonstrate how young people's views have been considered in policy making. In this way, the government is able to share the outcomes of consultations involving young people. Young people's views are solicited through a range of different online mechanisms including forums, polls and feedback forms, and the outcomes of these consultations are clearly communicated via the site. Below is an example of a targeted online consultation on the Murri Court. Young people, particularly those from Indigenous backgrounds, were invited to contribute their views online. Response summaries and updates on the outcomes of the consultation are posted online. **www.generate.qld.gov.au – online consultation 'Review of the Murri Court'**

During 2001–2004 Generate also hosted online chats between Ministers and young people. This initiative has been discontinued and despite an indication that it will continue online discussions between members of parliament and young people via the Generate website have not resumed.

With the exception of youth-led sites (including sites where young people partner with staff in decision making) the main aim of interactive content was to communicate information from the site to young people, rather than to solicit young people's direct input into decision making. In other words, the majority of youth websites are designed to communicate information *to* young people, rather than utilise online technology to facilitate young people's participation.

Non-government and community organisations also make limited use of the internet to facilitate the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds. This is despite the increasing use of the internet as a communication tool, and as a tool to deliver initiatives and services. For many services, the internet is a vehicle for information and is not used to facilitate young people's direct input into the organisation or initiatives. Nevertheless, some websites state that young people are involved in decision making and these organisations use the internet to promote opportunities for youth participation, such as calling for young people to become members, nominate to management and board positions, join youth advisory boards and signing up to participation registers. For example, the Centre or Multicultural Youth Issues in Victoria, use the internet to promote a variety of participation opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) young people and young people from refugee and newly arrived communities.

The most common form of online participation on government and non-government sites alike was through feedback forms. However, some sites were utilising the internet to create direct dialogue and encourage the views and opinions of young people to inform service development and delivery or policy development. Examples of innovative online practice can be found at: Youth Action Policy Association (NSW) and the Youth Justice Coalition, (**justiceyouth.blogspot.com/**), the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (VIC) (**www.ydas.org**), and ActNow (**www.actnow.com.au**). These initiatives incorporate blogs, polls and user generated content into universal and targeted youth participation strategies. For example, **justiceyouth.blogspot.com/** is set up to engage directly with young people who have had experience with a range of law enforcement agencies and courts. Another example of an innovative approach to involving young people from a range of backgrounds in online decision making is the Reach Out! Program, as outlined in the following case study.

CASE STUDY 3—Reach Out!—an online mental health service, national

Reach Out! provides an example of how organisations can utilise technology to facilitate participation. Young people have been involved with **Reach** Out! since 1999 through the Youth Participation Programs. Reach Out! provides information, support and resources to improve young people's understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, increase coping skills, and facilitate help-seeking behaviour. In the past, the service has predominantly utilised formal participation mechanisms such as youth advisory boards, ambassador programs and internships. Young people contribute to discussions on program development and contribute to producing text and multimedia content, fundraising and marketing campaigns and events, research and policy activities and staff recruitment. Different mechanisms enable young people

to take on different levels of responsibility: the Reach Out! Youth Advisory Board is largely staff led, while the Reach Out! Youth Leaders program is largely youth led.

An anonymous online application process, online forums and face to face workshops have helped engage young people with mental health difficulties and from low socio economic backgrounds who often do not have the confidence to apply to take part, and typically require longer periods of time to develop trust in staff members and the organisation. Internally, Reach Out! staff have had an explicit commitment to diversity in their selection processes, seeking to ensure that equal numbers of male and female young people with disabilities, mental health issues, from rural and regional settings and from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds are selected.

However, in the past 12 months staff had become aware that more applications are being received from young people who have high levels of education and experience in other decision-making mechanisms (for instance, as members of school councils or local government youth advisory committees). Fewer young people experiencing marginalisation, fewer males and fewer young people from diverse cultural backgrounds have applied. In response, the initiative has began to utilise more informal mechanisms and project-based participation in order to reach a wider range of young people.

Strategies for informal participation include:

- utilising social networking sites such as MySpace where young people who do not identify with mental health issues might hang out. Reach Out! has also been able to target Indigenous young people and recently arrived or refugee young people, by tapping into social networking sites that are frequently used by particular groups of young people. For example, Indigenous young people tend to use Bebo rather than Myspace

- inviting public forum users to contribute to decision making processes

- incorporating regular polls and program delivery discussions on the website

- creating project teams to work on specific aspects of program development and delivery such as the development of Reach Out! Central, an interactive program designed to help young people explore how their thinking, behaviour and feelings all interact with each other and influence their mental health.

Project-based models

Project-based approaches were also noted, whereby young people worked on specific projects, thereby directly participating in agenda setting and decision making. These often utilised a working group model as part of a specific project and were usually one off, youth oriented events such as music concerts. Cultural events were common examples, particularly amongst services that worked with young people from CALD backgrounds. For example: in Parramatta, the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service engaged young women with a disability to develop and deliver an event aimed at raising awareness of cultural diversity; and in Darwin, the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory organised, promoted and hosted an event designed to display cultural diversity and bring a range of young people together. As seen in the case study below of a youth service in Shepparton, project-based models can be effectively used to engage with young people from particular backgrounds. This approach also facilitates *community engagement* with the issues that matter to those particular young people.

CASE STUDY 4—Cultural Fashion Parade, Cutting Edge Youth Services, Shepparton

The Cutting Edge Youth Services Cultural Fashion Parade is an example of project-based participation. Cutting Edge Youth Services is run by Uniting Care with the aim of enhancing personal and social development, life skills and community participation for young people in Shepparton and its surrounds. Cutting Edge also provide crisis support and counselling for young people and are a referral point to other services.

In 2007 Cutting Edge Youth Services supported local, young, Muslim women, from Arabic, Afghani and African backgrounds, to run a fashion parade. The aim was to engage young Muslim women in a culture-sharing process with the non-Muslim community, to address misconceptions about Muslim culture and increase inter-cultural understanding. A project team led by young Muslim women was formed as a result of informal consultation between an Arabic speaking staff member and young Muslim women who visited the youth service:

We were just talking and we came up with the idea (Project participant).

The project team chose to run a fashion parade because it provided a fun and interactive format in which to communicate information about cultural practices. As one project participant put it:

We wanted to tell Australian people that we're different to what you think.

Participation was open to any interested young Muslim woman and the centre promoted the opportunity verbally through the Arabic speaking staff member, who targeted young Muslim women she believed would be interested.

The group was responsible for decisions about the location, content, format and promotion of the event, and participants believed that they had a large amount of autonomy over project related decision making. The process was described by one project participant as:

> We decided to do it. We made a (meeting) to decide what clothes to do and what parts we want to show them…We decided to make a table of Iraqi food. (Project participant).

While the Arabic speaking staff member was actively involved in the project, her role was as an advisor and intermediary between the group and the service. Participants valued her contribution because she had skills and understanding that helped the project, particularly in terms of administration.

This research finds that many young Muslim women will not participate in universal participation processes because of cultural expectations influencing how men and women interact.

> We can't do groups with men…I can't be free. I don't feel comfortable (Project participant).

The Cultural Fashion Parade addressed this issue by limiting participation to young women. This initiative demonstrates how projects tailored to accommodate for cultural needs can challenge barriers to participation experienced by particular groups of young people. In this research many young women from Muslim, Middle Eastern and African backgrounds reported that parental consent/support is necessary in order to take part in a broad range of activities. To ensure the women's participation, the Arabic speaking staff member contacted parents to explain the nature of the activity and to discuss questions or concerns raised by the participants' parents.

The Cultural Fashion Parade is an example of the use of a targeted, project-based initiative to successfully engage a particular group in decision making affecting a wider community issue. This initiative specifically sought to address cultural misunderstanding. It provided young Muslim women with the opportunity to influence how they are represented and received by the wider community. This initiative also demonstrates how organisations can use common interests, in this case fashion, as a way to engage young people from diverse backgrounds.

The Cultural Fashion Parade project also demonstrates how an initiative designed to involve young people in project specific decision making can equip participants with skills and understanding that support participation in wider organisational decision making. Young Muslim women involved in this project increased their confidence to speak in public, contribute to discussions, negotiate ideas and work collaboratively towards a common goal.

Another innovative example of a project-based participation model is the Africa the Beautiful radio program run by 6EBA in Perth, which uses radio as a mechanism for communicating

CASE STUDY 5—6EBA Community Radio—Africa the Beautiful, (Western Australia)

6EBA radio, established in 1990 is Perth's only full time ethnic radio station. It broadcasts in over 80 languages and provides programs for a range of audiences including ethnic communities, Indigenous audiences, seniors, young people and Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH). 6EBA is committed to involving young people in community radio and each week, around 20 hours of radio are produced and presented by young people.

In 2007, 6EBA established Africa the Beautiful, a two hour radio program produced and presented by young people from African backgrounds, to showcase African culture and provide an opportunity for young people to shape public perceptions of African culture in Perth. The program was established in recognition of the fact that while African communities in Perth were increasing, there were very few opportunities for young people from these communities to celebrate their cultures, share stories and influence perceptions of their culture. 6EBA also believed that by involving young people in the production and presentation of the program, they could increase their appeal amongst young African audiences:

> Youth listen to youth…Youth don't listen to older people...they just relate better to (the presenter) because she's their age and she has the lingo (Program coordinator).

The program is produced and presented by a team of three young people aged 21–29 years from African backgrounds, with production support provided by a 6EBA program coordinator. Content includes interviews with people from African backgrounds (both young people and older people), travel stories, folk stories, country profiles and music.

The interview component is of particular relevance to this case study as it provides an example of an innovative way to facilitate young people's participation in public agenda setting. Young people from African communities share their stories about migration and living in Africa and Australia, and by doing so have a mechanism to

influence public perception about African culture. Essentially, the interview component provides an avenue for young people to speak up in a context that acknowledges diversity and celebrates their culture. For example, Africa the Beautiful welcomes people who have strong accents, something which could be a barrier to involvement in other stations' radio programs. The only prerequisite is good English language skills and a willingness to share:

> We love the accents. As long as you're clear, you can come on air…People are telling their stories in voices that are not educated, but they are full of expression (Program coordinator).

African the Beautiful provides an example of how using intermediaries can help to ensure that participant bases are broadened to involve young people with a range of experiences. The presenters from Africa the Beautiful recruit participants for the interviews through a range of avenues including: contact from listeners through email and phone calls; intermediaries such as the African Community of Western Australia and Migrant Resource Centres; personal networks; and more recently, through online social networking sites such as Facebook.

The presenters from Africa the Beautiful have also recognised that some young people from African backgrounds find it difficult to get directly involved in the radio program, and addressed this by using strategies that take the radio program to where young people are. For example, during Youth Week 2008, Africa the Beautiful was broadcast from a high school in Mirrabooka, an area of Perth with a high population of people from African communities, with the aim of opening up participation to young people who may not usually contribute to program content:

> We're going out to Mirrabooka. We're not just sitting here…We're actually going out there otherwise we wouldn't know they were there (Young presenter).

Africa the Beautiful demonstrates how tapping into an area that young people are already interested in, such as radio, can help appeal to, and engage, young people from diverse backgrounds. According to one of the young people involved, radio is a natural fit for young people because it's already part of their lives, and it provides immediate and tangible outcomes and acknowledgement for participants:

> You get that feedback straight away. You get a text message back from your friends saying they heard you…It's immediate (Young presenter).

> It's instant, it's fun, it's not contrived, it's something they listen to… (Program coordinator).

The research finds that in the community audit locations (including online) a range of approaches are used to facilitate youth participation in government and community decision making. The limitations and benefits of the approaches described above are now discussed according to whether they take a universal or targeted approach, or whether they use priority-access policies. Universal approaches to participation are those that make general invitations to participate to the wider youth community. Targeted approaches are those that focus on particular groups of young people, based on geographical location, gender, cultural background, religion, special needs and so on. Priority access policies are usually found within universal processes and they seek to ensure participation of particular groups of people by giving them special privilege in selection processes on the sole basis of background.

Universal mechanisms

In this section we examine examples of universal youth participation initiatives—those designed to involve young people generally—the extent to which they engage young people from the target diverse backgrounds, and the limitations and benefits of this approach.

In each of the community audit locations, there were a number of universal youth participation initiatives. While a limited number of these engaged CALD and Indigenous participants, there was generally very low representation of young people from each of the identified diversity groups. There were very few examples of universal youth participation initiatives that involved young people who had a disability and very few examples where young people who had been under the guardianship of the Minister were involved. Young people from low socio economic backgrounds were also under-represented, and where CALD and Indigenous young people were involved, they tended to be from middle class and well educated backgrounds. One example of a universal participation program that has engaged a diverse range of young people, from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, young people with disabilities and those who have been in care is Reach Out! (refer to case study 3). The Reach Out! Youth Advisory Board uses priority access policies to try and ensure that a diverse range of young people participate in any one board. For example, the application process gives young people the opportunity to disclose their cultural background and experiences, and preference is given to applicants from under-represented backgrounds (for example, young Indigenous applicants, young men and young people who have been in care). Additionally, because young people choose how much information is disclosed during the application process, it is also possible for young people to be selected without staff having prior knowledge of any 'background' or 'identifiers'. The nature of the site (mental health) means that young people will often disclose a mental health or

personal issue (for instance, homelessness, sibling with a disability, experience of care) after they are selected.

Organisations in the community audit sometimes implied that their initiatives had diverse representation, but could not identify any, or many, members from the five target groups. For example in Shepparton, Victoria, one organisation that described itself as involving a diverse range of young people, had no participants that identified with the target diversity categories, bar one young Indigenous person. Organisations tended to illustrate diversity in their youth participation programs on the grounds that young people of different ages were involved, as well as young people from both high school and university. The community audits found that while organisations believe they engage a diverse range of young people, there is often no, or low, involvement of young people from the five diversity categories.

In particular, universal approaches to participation often fail to engage young people from low socio economic backgrounds in decision making processes, with the community audits revealing that very few universal youth participation initiatives involved young people from low socio economic backgrounds. Where organisations reported the involvement of young people from low socio economic backgrounds, they emphasised that it was uncommon. For example, one youth involvement initiative in Townsville, Queensland, said that of the 12 young people involved only one was from a low socio economic background.

Although universal programs may have some work to do in order to ensure the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds, some young people— particularly those who were involved in the YAG, reported that universal approaches were preferable to targeted approaches because they didn't 'pigeon hole' people. Several felt that one of the biggest barriers to diversity in youth participation were attitudes about the 'diversity categories' and 'youth' more generally. For example, the use of diversity categories, such as 'disability', were seen as quite problematic. One of the YAG participants noted that though she had a significant physical disability, she had always been a part of the 'mainstream' community and so she identified more with being a woman, or a university student than she did as a person with a disability.

Targeted mechanisms and the use of priority access policies

The research found that there were relatively few targeted programs (those specifically designed to engage young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making processes). However, where targeted programs did exist, they appeared highly successful, both in terms of engaging young people from particular backgrounds, and delivering outcomes for the program or service, as well as for the participants. The community audit identified the following examples of targeted initiatives:

* the Student Council at the Academy of Sport, Health and Education (Shepparton) – designed to involve Indigenous students

* the Youth Consultant program run by the CREATE Foundation (Parramatta and Darwin) – facilitating young people in care to consult with other young people in care and advise the foundation about young people's attitudes and concerns

* the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory – facilitating the input of young people from culturally diverse backgrounds into youth projects and multicultural affairs

* Out Loud run by the Queensland Department of Child Safety (Townsville)

    – designed to involve young people in care in Townsville in advocacy and consultation.

The Out Loud program run by the Queensland Department of Child Safety in Townsville provides an example of how targeted initiatives can engage a group of young people in a way that universal strategies can not. Out Loud was formed as a way for young people who had been in care to meet regularly, discuss ideas and organise activities designed to meet the needs of young people in care. It partly arose from a desire for an autonomous space where young people could discuss their experiences and ideas separate from their foster parents or support workers. According to one participant, a key motivation for becoming involved was the opportunity to collaborate with other local young people living in care.

All of the targeted initiatives identified in the community audits utilised formal youth-participation mechanisms. However, informal youth participation through case work meetings or as adjunct to social activities run by youth services also appears to assist in targeting the participation of specific groups of young people, particularly young people with low socio economic status or who are in care. For example, Anglicare in Parramatta facilitate discussions about program improvement through a regular BBQ

that is attended by both youth workers and young people, many of whom are homeless or from low socio economic backgrounds.

In general, targeted organisations and services were more likely to utilise targeted strategies than agencies servicing the general youth population, which rarely had targeted initiatives. The research also examined the extent to which community and government organisations used priority access policies to increase the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds. A 'priority access policy' was defined as a documented process designed to prioritise the involvement of young people from a particular background. For example, the New South Wales State Student Representative Council (SRC) has two places assigned to young Indigenous students to ensure that the SRC reflects the perspectives of young Indigenous students.

The use of explicit or formal priority access policies was not common practice in any of the community audit locations. However, it was more common for organisations to use 'unwritten' processes such as selection processes that were weighted so as to include young people with a range of experiences. Both government and community organisations acknowledged the importance of involving a cross section of young people that reflects (as best as is possible within a small group) the demographics of the local community. For example, a community development officer from one local council stated in relation to its Youth Advisory Council that:

> *Membership is open to young people aged between 12–25 years that live, work, study, or frequent the (local government area). Membership should reflect a diversity of age, gender, Aboriginality, ethnicity, disability, education level, employment status and geographic location.*

While this was a stated aim of the group, the council did not ask young people to identify as being from a particular background during the application process, or while serving on the youth council as they felt it was "*crucial not to segregate young people.*" Lack of data collection on participant backgrounds by organisations and services makes it difficult to assess actual levels of diversity in young people's participation. In addition, many indicators of diversity are not always easily visible or disclosed by participants, such as Aboriginality, intellectual disability, mental health issues or socio economic status. By not asking young people to identify their backgrounds, organisations are sometimes unaware of the groups that are involved, or those who are routinely left out or excluded.

Though some organisations stated they used 'unwritten' processes to ensure that particular groups of young people were involved, these were not transparent and did not hold staff or organisations accountable for ensuring that diversity was a priority. This was most noticeable amongst formal participation approaches which often had

complicated application processes. For example, the selection processes for a number of local government youth councils gave 'unwritten' priority to one of the diversity groups, but this was not promoted to young people, which mean that young people from diverse backgrounds had no way of knowing that a priority process was used.

However, there were some examples of organisations utilising targeted publicity for youth participation opportunities to ensure that decision making processes are inclusive of young people from a range of backgrounds. For example, the Parramatta City Council promoted its youth advisory body through organisations that provided services to young Indigenous people, CALD young people and young people from low socio economic backgrounds. However, the research found that this strategy is not always successful. In the case of Parramatta City Council, this method had not been effective for engaging young Indigenous people and at the time of the interview, the council was assessing alternatives.

The research suggests that organisations not only need to target promotion, but also approach services and individuals that are already directly connected to young people from diverse backgrounds and who are in a strong position to endorse or promote involvement opportunities. A successful example is the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory (see case study 7) where a consortium of organisations that worked directly with young Indigenous and CALD people were involved in promoting a youth forum event. The involvement of staff from services that already worked directly with young people from these groups resulted in high levels of engagement by both Indigenous and CALD young people.

In universal approaches catering to a broad range of young people, a staggered approach to targeting young people from particular backgrounds can be effective. For example, the Coordinator of the Youth Advisory Group for Darwin City Council indicated that while it was not possible to include young people from all diversity groups all the time, involvement of young people from particular backgrounds could be targeted in waves.

> From time to time we get Indigenous young people. It comes in spurts. There are currently two Indigenous young people on the Youth Advisory Group. There have been more previously and we've identified it as an area to look at. That's where we'll put the next push…It's cyclical (Darwin, practitioner).

The research found that it is common practice for organisations that provide services to particular populations to utilise targeted approaches to youth participation (Disability organisations seek young people with disabilities to participate) and organisations servicing the general youth population used a universal approach. The value of participation strategies that target particular groups within the youth population

was not considered a priority for organisations that provided services or made policy decisions about the broader youth community. There was a general perception that organisations that provided services to the broader community did not have a responsibility to focus resources on the involvement of a particular group.

The benefits and limitations of targeted mechanisms

The research investigated the effectiveness of targeted initiatives (those designed to involve a particular sub group of young people) versus universal initiatives (those designed to involve young people more generally). Unfortunately, the low incidences of targeted initiatives in the audit locations made it difficult to broadly evaluate their effectiveness, however, qualitative data highlighted a number of significant findings.

Firstly, organisations and young people agreed on the value of youth specific decision-making processes. Strategies to facilitate youth participation are seen as more inclusive, suitable and accessible to young people than mainstream community involvement processes (such as committees, public consultations and calls for submissions). One young CALD woman felt that a targeted 'youth only' process could provide better opportunities for young women to be involved in decision making than general community processes:

> In the Iraqi community there's not many opportunities to be involved in decision making because the decisions are made by the older women. When they talk, they won't let us say what we want (Shepparton, female).

In particular, young people felt that there was benefit in segmenting participants by age because people of different ages have "different ideas and different things they like" (Shepparton, CALD young man). While feedback about the most appropriate age divisions differed, what was apparent was that some young people felt that it was not beneficial to include participants from a broad spectrum of life experiences on the grounds that it made it difficult to relate and hindered decision making processes. There was also some suggestion that integrated youth involvement processes did not allow the issues or concerns of particular groups of young people to be heard. For Indigenous young people this meant that issues specific to their experience were not addressed:

> When there is an amalgamated version, Indigenous issues get drowned out (Darwin, male).

Other young people though, indicated that a broad spectrum of life experiences was beneficial to decision-making processes and would make involvement more appealing:

> Mix the groups together so that people want to go (Shepparton, male).

A number of advantages of targeted initiatives were identified by both young people and organisations, including:

- increased potential to use mechanisms that meet the needs and address barriers specific to that group

- improved access to information and better outcomes for decision-making processes. For example: "It can be used to debate issues specific to young people from Indigenous backgrounds" (Darwin, young Indigenous person)

- increased ability to address cultural issues. For example, gender specific groups would provide a more culturally appropriate participation environment for young people from some CALD backgrounds

- increased opportunity to connect participants to leaders and role models who share similar life experiences.

PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION

There is clear evidence that young people's understanding and attitudes towards decision making is often very different to practitioner and service provider understandings. How practitioners conceptualise participation shapes the kinds of participation opportunities that are available, which in turn affects which young people participate and how. The research also found that young people's perceptions of participation also influences who gets involved and how. We begin by looking at the different ways that participation was conceptualised by young people and practitioners in the community audit locations before exploring what motivates young people from diverse backgrounds to participate.

Young people from diverse backgrounds' perceptions

This section explores the major factors that influence how young people from diverse backgrounds perceive and experience opportunities to participate in government and community decision making.

'Participation' is an unfamiliar and abstract concept

In the course of the YAG and in the community audits, young people from diverse backgrounds were consulted about their perception of the meaning of participation in decision making. Generally, participation in decision making was a difficult concept for the young people in this research to define. A large proportion of participants,

particularly those who did not have direct experience with decision-making processes, struggled to describe what participation in decision making involved. Many participants found it difficult to differentiate between the concepts of 'youth participation' and 'youth development', with some participants, particularly those who had recently been involved in youth development processes, perceiving them as one and the same. While this is likely due to some similarities between the two approaches (both can involve goal setting, skills development and action planning), it also indicated that youth participation is a relatively new concept to many young people from diverse backgrounds.

Young people who had been directly involved in formal decision-making processes were more well versed with the concept of decision making and perceived it as meaning having a voice, deliberation and discussion, teamwork, having a choice, making correct decisions, taking action and giving something back to the community. For example, one young woman from Townsville who described herself as "a compulsive volunteer," had been involved in a number of decision-making bodies and said that decision making was:

> An empowering thing…about giving back to the community and having my voice heard.

Amongst participants with less, or no, direct experience in decision making, speaking up, stating an opinion, giving people a voice and having a say were seen as the cornerstones of participation. However, for some it was not enough to simply have a say, with meaning gained from ongoing and active involvement. According to an Indigenous young man:

> Participation is not just about putting your views out there, but also being involved in the outcomes (Shepparton, male).

Seeing tangible results of participation is of critical importance to young people who prefer participatory processes that result in visible outcomes - such as an event or a product. Making a difference is a significant motivator for young people from a range of different backgrounds.

Perceptions of participation are linked to 'identity'

Identity is an important factor influencing the way that young people perceive and experience participation in community and government decision making. Two dominant themes related to identity emerged in discussions with young people. The first is that decision making is often perceived to be something that is 'for others'. The

second is that participation is often constructed as an individual activity, whereas for many young people, it is tightly linked to culture and community.

Participation is 'for others'

The young people in this research communicated a general sense of disempowerment in relation to decisions that affected their lives. Young people who participated in the community audits echoed the views expressed by members of the YAG, that socially accepted ideas of what constitutes 'youth' impacted on their experiences of participation in decision making. Many YAG members felt that in general, young people's views are not always taken seriously, that decision makers are influenced by negative stereotypes of young people, and assumptions that if young people aren't participating (or don't know about opportunities) then they are apathetic. It was also suggested that many opportunities to participate are not promoted or made known to young people from diverse backgrounds. As such, there were few areas where young people (especially those aged under 18) felt that they impacted on decision-making processes that affected their lives. Instead, many young people felt that decisions were made by (adult) others. For example, decisions at home were made by their parents, decisions at school were made by teachers, and decisions in the wider community were made by government organisations and businesses.

Furthermore, where there was youth participation in decision making, young people across the five diversity groups indicated that being involved in decision-making processes required a certain level of self confidence and public speaking skills. They felt that it was these factors, rather than an individual's background per se, determined the extent to which they might be involved. Young people felt that those most likely to get involved in decision-making processes were young people who were "happy with talking" and "outgoing". Indigenous young people, in particular demonstrated shyness which they felt to be a barrier to participation:

> *Not many people really get up and say what they're thinking because of shyness (Darwin, female).*
>
> *They [the people who are involved] are the people that are confident and able to stand up for what they believe in. They don't get nervous or anything like that (Darwin, male).*

Nevertheless, there was strong evidence to suggest that cultural background does impact profoundly on ideas about who should 'have a say'. Indigenous participants reported that they found it particularly difficult to be heard in decision making, and as a result some had resorted to using 'aggressive' tactics to communicate messages. As one young Indigenous person from Parramatta stated: "I have to scream to be heard." The Director of the Academy of Health, Sport and Education in Shepparton,

who works closely with Indigenous young people explained that there is a tendency for some Indigenous people to associate 'speaking up' with aggressive communication because "the ones that get heard are usually communicating aggressively." This type of behaviour is often interpreted as anti social or counter productive to group decision-making processes and may hinder individuals' ability to initiate or maintain involvement. It is not surprising then, that some young Indigenous participants reflected on their own personal experiences of participation in decision making negatively:

> *"There is always someone in the way" and it is about "being pushed into a corner."*

The views of the research participants demonstrate that they are also sensitive to mainstream understandings of capacity and difference and that this affects their views about who can participate in decision making. As one young man with cerebral palsy explained:

> *People think that people with a disability don't have the right to make decisions for themselves (Parramatta, male).*

 This perspective reinforces the views of members with disabilities on the YAG to this project. YAG members felt that one of the biggest barriers to diversity in youth participation were attitudes about the 'diversity categories' and 'youth' more generally. The use of diversity categories, such as 'disability', was seen as highly problematic. In this way, participatory opportunities have the potential to challenge prejudice when young people are invited to participate in decision making on a range of issues (not just those related to being 'young' or 'having a disability'). This dialogue can challenge stereotypes and beliefs about what issues particular young people, or should, be concerned about. Some young people with disabilities reported that although they felt like they had the right to take part in decision-making processes, the wider community did not agree and that there were very few opportunities for them to 'test' this theory. A young man with a physical disability felt that:

> *It's hard because I don't really find myself in a decision-making position (Parramatta, male).*

There was evidence to suggest that young people who participate in decision-making processes for government and community organisations were more likely to be practiced at making decisions in their personal lives. Conversely, young people with fewer opportunities to make active decisions in their lives do not conceptualise or seek out opportunities to contribute to decision making processes designed to benefit the wider community. This has particular implications for younger people (under 15 years), as well as people with intellectual and/or physical disabilities for whom many decisions are made by another party (for example, a parent or carer).

In general, young people believe that decision making is largely an elitist practice, particularly accessible to middle class young people. According to one young Indigenous person who had been involved in a range of decision-making processes:

> *The vast majority of programs for involving young people in decision making or advocacy are pitched at middle class, well educated people (Darwin, male).*

He argued that young Indigenous people had to overcome both cultural and economic barriers to participate in decision making. From his experience, the young Indigenous people involved in decision-making processes were usually from middle class backgrounds and were active in secondary or tertiary education, and this made it easier to transition into what he described as "inherently non-Indigenous" processes. This observation was supported by findings in each of the audit locations where stakeholders indicated that young people who were involved in universal decision-making processes tended to be well educated and articulate. He felt that while "the cultural divide is bigger then we expect," it was the economic divide which really prohibited many young people (particularly Indigenous people) from taking part in decision-making processes.

Decision making is a community experience rather than an 'individual activity'

"Bringing people together" was identified as a significant component of participation in decision making. The community audits found that there was an expectation that participation in decision making would result in stronger relationships between participants as well as more general reconciliatory processes. This was particularly apparent amongst young people from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds as well as young people who had a disability. For one young Indigenous woman, participation was about "…people coming together as one" (Darwin, female). In Darwin and Shepparton, Indigenous and CALD participants articulated that the involvement of a range of young people in decision-making processes had the potential to increase social harmony, especially between conflicting cultural groups.

The research also found that it is important to recognise culturally specific views on the role of families and communities when developing youth participation approaches. Feedback from young Iraqi women in Shepparton indicated that consulting elders, in particular parents, was a key part of the decision-making process especially in relation to lifestyle decisions such as whether to take a part time job and which subjects to study. Young Congolese men in Shepparton also spoke about the importance of engaging the wider Congolese community in decision making, and a preference for consulting with their community before putting forward a particular opinion.

Participation in decision making was rarely seen as an individual right, reinforcing the notion that decision making is seen by some as a community owned process.

For Indigenous young people, the relationship between community and culture is also a core part of the participatory decision making experience. Indigenous young women highlighted the connection between participation in decision making and cultural or community identity:

> It's about your beliefs. It's cultural…and spiritual (Darwin, female).
>
> It's about dreaming and culture (Darwin, female).

This finding has important significance in conceptualising young people's participation. Mainstream approaches to youth participation are currently conceptualised as activities where participants act on their own behalf, and the research has shown that this could be problematic for young people from communities that consider the involvement of the wider community as a key component of decision making. The Multicultural Resource Centre of South Australia has developed a range of youth participation mechanisms that empower young people to participate, within the family and community setting.

CASE STUDY 6—Young Refugees Network, Youth Reference Group and Young Women's Action Group of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia

The Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia (MRCSA) has three formal mechanisms it uses to facilitate the input of young people from CALD backgrounds in decision making and agenda setting. Firstly, in 2000, the MRCSA established the Young Refugees Network. At the time, over 50 per cent of new arrivals to the state were under the age of 21 and the centre was quick to recognise that refugee and newly arrived young people played a valuable role in supporting their families and communities to settle in Australia. The network was established as a mechanism to: bring these young people together; provide them with resources; develop new skills; and provide points of entry to employment, education, sport, recreational and cultural activities. The network acts as an informal mechanism to link young people to other opportunities, including opportunities to participate in decision making.

Secondly, the MRCSA also runs a Youth Reference Group to provide young people with opportunities to advise the MRCSA board and contribute to decision making related to the MRCSA programs.

Thirdly, the MRCSA runs a Young Women's Action Group. Over time, it also became apparent that emerging communities in South Australia included many young

unmarried mothers so the MRCSA established the Young Women's Action Group to ensure that the MRCSA understood and could meet their needs. Group members are trained and supported to mentor other newly arrived unmarried mothers and work with MRCSA workers to ensure organisational decision making is informed by their views.

The MRCSA also resources youth initiatives that support leadership training for young people in new and emerging communities; assists their participation in advocacy and engagement with the broader youth sector; and supports them to enter into mainstream arts activities and sport. Young people take part in conferences, undertake leadership activities in their own communities, and participate in arts-based activities such as exhibitions and performances that promote understanding of issues that are important to young people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

The MRCSA effectively utilises a staged approach to participation, providing informal participation via network activities, as well as more formal processes of the Youth Reference Group and the Young Women's Action Group. According to the Director of the MRCSA, the network provides a way for young people to connect to the organisation, develop relationships and learn about what are often unfamiliar and confusing decision-making processes, both at the MRCSA and in the wider community. The Youth Reference Group and the Young Women's Action Group are effectively the 'next stage' in facilitating young people's participation in more formal decision-making forums. The Young Women's Action Group is also a strategy to encourage more young women to get involved, recognising that, for cultural and religious reasons, some young women are deterred from participating in mixed gender groups. However, the centre is an 'inclusive' organisation and all ethnic groups, as well as males and females, are encouraged to participate at all levels.

The MRCSA uses an 'empowerment' approach, involving young people in the development and delivery of its youth program. According to the Director of the MRCSA, an empowerment approach requires that organisations:

- allow young people to organise and conduct the decision making

- find resources and allow the young people to realise their plans

- promote their engagement with mainstream organisations and networks

- support a community development approach – which is both intercultural and intergenerational.

As such, the MRCSA also supports young people to participate in wider community forums and to work collaboratively with other groups in the community. For example,

seven young people were recently nominated to the South Australian State Youth Parliament for 2008. Young people from the MRCSA have also worked in community projects with local police promoting cultural understanding and recently produced a performance that will feature in the Adelaide Fringe Festival.

Participation leads to 'whole-of-community' benefits

Young people, regardless of background, identified three main beneficiaries of their involvement:

- other young people (in particular users of the services they were assisting)

- the wider community (including people who were a range of ages)

- participants.

Young people believed that the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making would most benefit other young people from similar backgrounds, especially those who might use services or be affected by the decisions made. They felt that input from a range of young people was seen to strengthen decision-making processes and outcomes and was perceived as a fair, inclusive and equal approach to decision making.

Additionally, a number of wider social benefits were referenced, in particular: increased understanding of difference and empathy within communities. This held particular importance for young people with disabilities who felt there was a broad misunderstanding about what issues might concern them (that is, only issues related to their disability). Similarly, participants from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds felt that one of the most significant benefits of youth participation was increased cross-cultural understanding within the community. Young people also felt that it would result in increased happiness for young people, reduced racism and race driven conflict, better job and education opportunities for young people, reduced crime, fairer policing and improved service delivery for young people. In turn, they felt that their community would be seen as a "popular community," that less young people would leave and that the entire community would benefit through population growth. For example, amongst participants from the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory, there was evidence of increased cross cultural understanding and empathy, as outlined in the following case study.

CASE STUDY 7—The Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory, Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory, Darwin

The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT) is the peak body dedicated to advocacy and representing the interest, concerns and aspirations of Territorians from CALD backgrounds, particularly newly arrived migrants and refugees.

In 2007, the MCNT established the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory (MYCNT) to increase young people from CALD backgrounds' involvement in MCNT's advocacy work. The council consists of 12 young people aged 16–25 years, from a range of cultural backgrounds.

The purpose of the MYCNT is to:

- identify and respond to issues that are important to young people from CALD backgrounds

- organise activities that integrate young people from diverse cultural backgrounds

- contribute a youth perspective to policy development in MCNT and multicultural affairs more widely.

While the use of a youth advisory model to engage young people from diverse backgrounds is not a new strategy, there are several factors which set the MYCNT apart in terms of the ability to engage a cross section of young people.

Firstly, the MYCNT was the product of an ongoing project between a number of key agencies including the MCNT, Melaleuca Refugee Centre, Mission Australia, the Red Cross, and Northern Territory Police. These agencies worked together to host a forum designed to increase cross-cultural understanding and reduce violence between groups of young people from different cultural backgrounds. By working together, organisations were able to involve a wider range of young people in the forum from which the MYCNT emerged.

Secondly, the MYCNT was founded on a principal of 'youth ownership' which meant that members were responsible for establishing the direction, projects and terms of involvement of the council. The research found that this philosophy played a significant role in motivating and sustaining young people's involvement in the council, as articulated by the Project Officer who worked with the MYCNT:

> If it's something they're interested in and they can see it's their thing, not somebody else's, they'll commit.

By allowing young people to determine the decision-making processes used in the council, participants established a strong sense of ownership over the outcomes as well as the means used to arrive at them. As the Project Officer explained, this often required the MCNT to step back and let young people learn from direct experiences.

If they get it wrong, let them get it wrong and learn from it next time (Project Officer).

Thirdly, the MYCNT provides an example of how project based decision making can be used to prepare young people for contributing to wider organisational or policy related decision making. The initial project chosen and implemented by the MYCNT was a multicultural concert and disco aimed at integrating young people from a range of backgrounds. Organising and running this event equipped the MYCNT with tangible outcomes, a collective sense of achievement, an understanding of MCNT processes and experience working as a team, all of which readied the participants to contribute to broader decision-making processes. Significantly, working on a project that engaged a range of young people also strengthened the MYCNT's connection to the multicultural youth community.

Because they've had their concert…they're in a better position to speak to young people and have a stronger voice over the next 12 months (Project Officer).

Regardless of background, many young people who participated in this study also thought that participation in decision making leads to personal benefits:

Young people who are involved in decision making will get further than those who don't make decisions (Shepparton, young person).

Personal benefits were often defined as: the acquisition of new skills and/or knowledge; the development of new friendships; increased self confidence and self awareness; heightened motivation and inspiration; a common sense of achievement; and a 'flow on' effect to further opportunities.

I feel like I'm moving towards a goal and a better life (Darwin, male).

It (decision making) is a good thing to socialise (Darwin, female).

I met a lot of interesting people…it opened up a lot of other opportunities …I wasn't just some random youth, I was a member of the Youth Round Table (Darwin, male).

Many of the young people who participated in the community audits expressed a sense of personal achievement, and valued the increased access to new experiences, networks and opportunities that participation provided. While young people from a range of backgrounds believed that participation should be empowering and improve

their skills and confidence, there was a sense that they needed to already be 'leaders', or be 'stable' and knowledgeable in order to legitimately take part:

> *Young people who are involved in decision making are leaders, brave, and feel really strong about what they have to say (Shepparton, young person).*

Across each of the groups, feedback indicated that participation in decision making was linked to "making the right decisions," being correct (or opinionated) and fighting for something. It also meant taking a certain level of responsibility for one's actions.

Service providers and practitioners' perceptions

The research found that, amongst service providers and practitioners consulted in the community audits, there is a wide range of views on the meaning of participation in decision making. These varied according to whether or not organisations had formal processes in place or not. Some organisations interpreted 'participation in decision making' to mean engaging young people in unstructured feedback processes such as casual chats. Whereas others, particularly government organisations, perceived participation to be engagement in formal decision-making processes such as youth advisory boards. In general, the focus was on process, rather than purpose.

In each of the community audit locations, initial contact with local service providers indicated that participation in decision making is often conceptualised as program participation or economic participation. Many services confused participation in decision making with participation in programs (for example, sports programs or skills development programs), while others interpreted it as economic participation (for example providing programs to help a young person gain employment). Organisations that used a casework model tended to interpret participation in decision making as a young person's ability to make decisions for him or herself. For example, a number of services outlined personal goal setting processes as the way they involved young people in decision making.

Organisations with current youth involvement initiatives clearly articulated principles of youth participation. Many youth serving organisations considered programmatic or economic participation as the primary activities which young people should be supported to engage in. For these services, participation in decision making was perceived to mean:

- giving young people increased control over decisions that affect their lives

- providing feedback on the progress, impact and outcomes of young people's input

- establishing and facilitating structured processes that enable young people to input into decisions about program delivery (for service providers) or policy (for government organisations)

- accessing information about the attitudes and behaviours of young people to inform organisation decision making.

The research found that some organisations (particularly those that provide direct support to young people from the target diversity groups) engaged young people in unstructured feedback processes, as they were effective tools for young people to generate ideas and give feedback to service providers in a way that was non-threatening and familiar. For example, consultation with members of the Holroyd and Parramatta Youth Workers' Network (HAPYN) demonstrated that in the Parramatta area, it is standard practice to use unstructured feedback processes to collect a range of young people's input into program decision making. As youth workers from the HAPYN put it:

We just talk with them on what they want and need.

(We use) small talk…just sitting around and having a casual chat with the guys.

We're constantly talking to young people.

According to the youth workers, the main reasons for using this method as opposed to a more structured approach were:

- facilitating regular, casual conversations is relatively easy as opportunities present frequently during work with young people

- adjusting to the needs of young people is easier on an individual basis

- having regular conversations with young people as part of service delivery (for example, during drop in) does not require getting a group of young people who may have different schedules and availability together

- casual conversations with service users does not require additional resources or funding.

In comparison with young people's perspectives, interviews with practitioners indicated a different perception of who benefits from input from young people from diverse backgrounds. Beneficiaries were seen to be:

- service users;

- organisations

- participants.

Like young people, practitioners also identified participants and service users, especially those from diverse backgrounds, as the major beneficiaries of involving a cross section of young people in decision making. However, unlike young people, service providers and practitioners felt that the involvement of young people from a range of backgrounds most benefited the organisations and services themselves, since inclusive participatory processes were thought to increase service reach and effectiveness. Some services also indicated that involvement of a range of young people was beneficial as it made work duties easier and provided access to a range of young people for consultation purposes. The Academy of Sport Health and Education's Student Council provides a case study of how the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds can be instrumental in improving service delivery, in this instance, increasing enrolment numbers.

CASE STUDY 8—Academy of Sport, Health and Education student council

The Academy of Sport, Health and Education (ASHE) was established in 2004 as an innovative response to low participation of young Indigenous people in formal education. The aim of ASHE is to create pathways to further education and employment opportunities for its students with a particular focus on Indigenous young people aged 16–25. It is a Melbourne University initiative.

The ASHE student council was introduced in 2006 to involve ASHE students in the development of the academy, with a particular focus on strengthening the academy community and culture. The student council typically involves between 5 and 10 students and is responsible for a range of recreational, social and communications related activities, as well as playing a role in decisions about service development that have lead to improved recruitment and retention at ASHE.

For example, in the first term, 12 full time students were enrolled in ASHE, and by 2007 this had increased to 67 full time students, partly due to the involvement of the ASHE student council in promoting courses and encouraging enrolment. Originally, ASHE staff recruited future students through an annual information night and open day, but found it to be an unsuccessful strategy for recruiting new enrolments. ASHE then approached the student council for ideas, and devised a new recruitment strategy which involved employing two students (one male and one female) to door knock in the local area to promote ASHE during the summer holidays. According to the director of ASHE:

> Our students became our enrolment officers. We went from 35 students after a hard slog to over 60—there were people just coming through the door.

The Director argues that the student's involvement in developing and implementing the recruitment strategy was successful because:

> They knew better than any of us where the other young people were. We use their leadership, their skills base and their knowledge—which in some ways far outweighs ours, especially when you're talking about young people!

At ASHE a commitment to doing what is in the best interests of the students includes involving them in decision making in order to better understand, and meet, their needs. As a relatively new organisation, ASHE has been able to incorporate young people's participation into decision making from the outset. However, the student council model has taken some time to gain credibility amongst students. The director explained that:

> When we introduced student council, there were students who said 'what does a student council do?

Nevertheless, because young people are enrolled at ASHE for a period of time, there is the opportunity for them to learn about the student council and develop the skills and confidence to take part. This is facilitated by the ASHE philosophy whereby education is not just about class-based learning, but also about supporting students' personal development, wellbeing and the choices that they make. The student council at ASHE demonstrates how a formal participation process can be utilised in a supportive environment where young people have opportunities to develop trust and confidence in the process.

The ASHE student council demonstrates that if young people are given the opportunity to really shape the outcomes of decision-making processes, the process and its outcomes are likely to strengthen group cohesion and foster a sense of pride amongst participants.

For example, in 2007, the ASHE student council were responsible for organising and running the ASHE annual dinner for students and family members, which was a huge success, and seen by both participants and ASHE as a significant student council achievement. Particularly noteworthy, was the feedback from the ASHE director that student council members established a ticketing system that did not discriminate against students from large families. Rather than students receiving an arbitrary number of invites as was originally planned, students were asked to RSVP by name for the people they would like to attend the dinner with them.

> The whole process just keeps you in touch with the way the students are thinking which is so crucial to ASHE. Without students engaging with the program on a consistent basis, this enormous potential we have at ASHE simply could not be fulfilled. Much strategy

goes into maintaining the commitment and energy levels among the students but the council is absolutely crucial to this process (ASHE Director).

ASHE Program Coordinator Phillip Guthrie has been responsible for the ongoing development of the ASHE Student Council and describes the journey as follows:

It's been a journey to get where we are with the council…2006 we staged four to six meetings and last year that grew to ten meetings, a planning day, a community event and a leadership camp…We want students aspiring to be part of our council as they are the heart and soul of the organisation.

During 2007, ASHE student councillors:

- determined the weekly timetable for classes at ASHE as part of a planning day

- determined a process for allocating student uniforms which required students to achieve certain participation milestones before receiving certain uniforms

- assisted the nearby Cummeragunja mission in planning and staging its annual kids' Christmas party, including sourcing presents for the young children from the mission and hosting activities

- planned and delivered the annual ASHE graduation.

These are fundamental decisions and responsibilities these students are taking on, admittedly in supported fashion, but this is showing in the ever strengthening structure we are building here at ASHE (ASHE Program Coordinator).

The ASHE student council is also an illustration of how young Indigenous people's participation in decision making can increase participation in other areas such as education or employment. Of the six students who participated in the ASHE student council in 2007, five completed their study requirements with two going on to secure casual employment with ASHE as a teacher and a student support officer.

The community audits found that participation of young people is often predicated on the willingness of adults in organisations to create spaces for them to voice their views. The rationales presented by services for involving young people from diverse backgrounds were:

- groups that involve a range of people provide broader perspectives, are more effective and have better outcomes for service development

- young people are a resource and possess knowledge about the best ways to meet young people's needs

- involving young people from varied backgrounds gives decision-making processes more legitimacy in the public eye

- involving young people from a range of backgrounds increases their skills development and builds confidence.

There is a general acknowledgement that ensuring the participation of diverse groups brings benefits to organisations and services, to participants and to the wider community of young people.

MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

This section examines the factors that compel young people from the target diverse backgrounds to initiate and sustain involvement in decision-making processes, as well as the factors that motivate service providers to engage young people from a range of backgrounds.

Though the research engaged with a wide range of young people, many of whom had not participated in formal decision making, consultation was also conducted specifically with young people from each of the target diverse backgrounds who had been involved in decision-making processes. These young people were asked about the factors which had motivated them to get involved. Three main themes emerged: the opportunity to create positive change; learning new skills; and building new friendships. These main themes are discussed in detail below.

Create positive change, especially in relation to negative past experiences

The most commonly identified reason for getting involved in decision making was a desire to contribute to a process of change which would result in improved outcomes for young people and the community. Young people saw participation as being about "making a difference," "giving something back" and improving the world around them. This was often in relation to a personal experience. For example, a young woman had been motivated to get involved in the Multicultural Disability Advocacy Service to play an active role in increasing community awareness and understanding about the experiences and challenges faced by people with a disability. She spoke about a series of negative experiences from her own life and a desire to ensure that these events were not repeated for other young people in similar situations. While young people's interests were not limited to issues that affected them directly, regardless of background, they often identified issues that related to their everyday experiences.

For example, young mothers wanted to increase the amount of 'family friendly' public space in Parramatta, one young man with a disability wanted to increase the number of disabled parking spaces in his town and young Indigenous people in Shepparton wanted to make policing practices fairer for Indigenous young people.

Learn new skills and gain new knowledge

A significant motivator for getting involved in decision making was a desire to participate in new experiences and learn new skills and information. As one young person stated:

> *You get to see and hear lots of different opinions and views. Sometimes those views can have a strong effect on you. Sometimes they can change what you think of people (Darwin, male).*

Undoubtedly, involvement in decision making was seen as a way for young people to develop their understanding of others, themselves and their worlds. For example, in the community audits it was common for young people who had been involved in decision-making processes to link their involvement to an increased understanding of how organisations are run, and the role of decision-making processes within organisations, as well as increased self confidence and speaking skills. As one young CALD woman from Townsville stated in relation to participating in group discussions:

> *At first I was intimidated but I've gotten used to it and I'm happy to speak up.*

Feedback from young people also suggested that participation can reframe the way that participants see their communities and their worlds. For example, one young Indigenous man's reflection on his community illustrated an increased sense of pride and ownership.

> *I ride past the skate park and see it and think 'I was on the youth council that organised to build it' (Townsville, male).*

Meet new people and make new friends

Social benefits were also cited as a motivation for getting involved in decision-making processes, particularly amongst younger participants and those who were more socially isolated such as young people with a disability. Older participants, while also motivated by the opportunity to develop new friendships were also interested in meeting community leaders, and networking with decision makers to further their own career prospects. This was particularly apparent for young people who were already involved in decision-making processes. For example, one 19 year old CALD woman in Townsville who had been involved in a number of decision-making processes felt that a significant

benefit of involvement in advisory groups in her area of interest (medicine) was to meet senior level decision makers from the medical sector. Similarly, a 24 year old Indigenous man said of the benefits he had gained from involvement in a government youth advisory body:

A lot of the benefit that I get out is because it goes onto my CV (Darwin, male).

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY AUDITS—OPPORTUNITIES, PERCEPTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

This section provides a summary of the key findings that emerged from the community audits phase, with a particular emphasis on:

- perceptions of participation
- current Practices
- involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds
- motivations.

Perceptions of participation

Service providers' perceptions of participation are largely framed by the methods they use to engage young people, and as such a range of perceptions exist. While the government organisations tend to frame participation as a formal process, it is important to recognise that numerous other informal and ad hoc approaches, such as casual chats between youth workers and young people are used to gather feedback for program development. Because participation is perceived in a number of ways, it is a difficult concept to communicate to organisations and care needs to be taken to ensure that less formal initiatives are not sidelined, particularly since they are commonly used to engage young people from diverse backgrounds.

According to young people from diverse backgrounds, participation in decision making is a difficult concept to grasp, particularly if they have had limited opportunities to influence decisions in their personal lives. (for example, young people under 18, young people who are in care, young people with disabilities).

Participation in decision making is about more than just having a say. It is about having an impact, seeing tangible outcomes and contributing to a process of change.

Participation is seen by young people from diverse backgrounds as an elitist practice for 'others': either adult others, or young people who have different skills or life experiences to them. This is particularly acute in relation to formal participation mechanisms where young people from diverse backgrounds indicated that those who were involved were the opposite to them: educated, well spoken and confident.

Young people from diverse backgrounds felt that if participation processes were accessible to a range of young people, they had the potential to increase social harmony and intercultural awareness.

Contrary to mainstream perceptions of youth participation, where young people are seen as acting on their own behalf, young people from diverse backgrounds often saw decision making as a process requiring the involvement of other key community members, such as community leaders or elders. This was particularly true for some CALD young people and Indigenous young people.

Organisations and young people from diverse backgrounds agree that youth specific participation approaches are more inclusive and accessible to young people than generalist mainstream community involvement processes. Similarly, targeted participation processes provide further ability to address the needs of particular groups of young people. For example, gender specific groups are more appropriate for some young Muslim women, and Indigenous specific groups provide a forum for tailoring content and processes to the interests and needs of participants. That said, there is no one-size-fits all approach, and effective practice requires involving participants in decisions about the scope, size and processes used.

Universal youth involvement processes can be perceived as less relevant to young people from diverse backgrounds as they don't provide a forum to focus on issues and/or experiences that are particular to young people from the target backgrounds.

Generally, organisations and young people from diverse backgrounds agreed that the responsibility for participation lies initially with organisations that have a responsibility to ensure that participation processes are resourced, well publicised, appropriate and accessible to young people from a range of backgrounds.

Current approaches to involving young people from diverse backgrounds

The way that organisations conceptualise participation shapes the kinds of opportunities that are available, which in turn, affects which groups of young people are involved and how they are involved. Organisations utilise a number of approaches

to involving young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making including: universal approaches; targeted approaches; formal mechanisms; informal mechanisms; project specific approaches; and online mechanisms.

Government organisations are most likely to use formal, universal mechanisms, such as the youth advisory model to engage young people, and rarely have initiatives targeted at young people from diverse backgrounds.

Service providers that work directly with young people, such as youth services, are most likely to use informal participation approaches such as casual chats between youth workers and young people from diverse backgrounds. These are most likely to be initiated and facilitated by adult staff, but can also be 'bottom up' initiatives.

Services that use a case work model, most commonly use individual case work sessions to illicit information from young people about program development and delivery;

Organisations that provide services to particular populations, (for example, Indigenous young people or young people from low socio economic backgrounds) are more likely to use targeted participation strategies than organisations servicing the general youth population. The value of participation strategies that target particular groups within the youth population was not considered a priority for organisations that provide services/ make policy decisions for the broader youth community. Nor did these organisation feel that they had a responsibility to focus resources on the involvement of any particular diversity group.

Despite the growing availability and accessibility of interactive online tools such as user generated content, blogging, discussion forums, social networking sites and file sharing technology, the internet is largely underutilised to engage young people from diverse backgrounds (and young people more generally).

With few exceptions, organisations, particularly government organisations, use websites to communicate information to young people rather than facilitate young people's participation in decision-making processes.

Despite an intent to involve young people from a range of diverse backgrounds, universal approaches rarely translate to actual involvement of young people from the target diversity groups.

In particular, young people with disabilities are particularly absent, as are young people from low socio economic backgrounds and young people who have been under the guardianship of the Minister. While the involvement of young Indigenous people and

young people from CALD backgrounds is marginally higher, they are usually from middle class backgrounds, and are well educated, confident and articulate.

Despite no or very low involvement of young people from the target diversity groups, organisations that oversee universal participation initiatives believe that they involve young people from a range of backgrounds, based on the grounds that they involve young people from a range of ages and education backgrounds (for example, young people participating in high school and university). This is worrying, as it suggests that diversity populations such as young people with disabilities, young people in care and young people from low socio economic backgrounds may be overlooked by organisations when they are assessing the representativeness of their initiatives.

The level of participation of young people from a range of backgrounds is often difficult to determine because organisations don't use processes for identifying experiences of participants. This is particularly problematic for indicators of diversity that are not always easily visible, such as Aboriginality, intellectual disability, mental health issues or socio economic status.

Targeted initiatives are much more successful in engaging young people from the target diversity groups than universal approaches, most significantly because they use targeted publicity and intermediaries to raise awareness of participation opportunities. That said, targeted participation does not suit all young people from diverse backgrounds and organisations need to remain mindful that some young people do not want to be 'pigeon holed' and would rather participate in universal decision-making processes.

Formalised priority access policies are not widely used, however 'unwritten' policies, such as weighted selection processes are used. These however, are problematic as they are rarely visible to young people, are not transparent, and don't hold organisations accountable to involving young people from a range of diverse backgrounds.

Given that it is not feasible for universal participation mechanisms to involve all young people, all the time, organisations can adopt strategies that stagger the participation of priority groups. Again however, it is important that this is visible to young people from diverse backgrounds, transparent and that organisations are accountable.

Motivations

While young people from diverse backgrounds are interested in personal benefits such as increased skills and social networks, the main motivation for getting involved is the opportunity to make a real difference and arrive at tangible outcomes that have relevance to young people from diverse backgrounds.

Young people from diverse backgrounds were most driven to be involved in participatory processes that related to them personally, and as such it is important that organisations understand what issues are of important to populations whose participation they seek.

6 | COMMUNITY AUDITS: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Young people in the community audits were asked to discuss the reasons why they would not or could not participate in government and community decision making. Although there are many examples of effective practice, there are particular barriers to participation that young people from diverse backgrounds face. These barriers are explored below.

Individual Barriers

Low self esteem or social 'shame' restricts participation

According to young people, one of the most significant barriers identified was a fear of being shamed or ridiculed by friends, family or the wider community for 'speaking

up' or doing something differently. This was particularly true for young Indigenous participants who across the four locations, identified a sense of shame as the most restrictive barrier. The Director of the Academy of Sport, Health and Education explained that:

> *The shame comes into it cause you might say something and it's not going to be the right thing or you might get put down for it (Shepparton, practitioner).*

This complicates the experience of participation in decision making for Indigenous young people as they may not want to put themselves in a position where they might be made to feel wrong or stupid or inadequate, or feel that they're in 'the spotlight'. As one Indigenous young person from Darwin put it:

> *There is also a problem of getting enough people who want to do this sort of thing. Lots of people think this stuff is a shame job...They don't do it because it's not cool (Darwin, male).*

To compound this, young women from Indigenous and African backgrounds noted that peer pressure from friends and boyfriends can negatively affect their participation. An Indigenous young person suggested that:

> *Young people drop out of being involved cause of social pressure from their boyfriend or girlfriend (Darwin, female).*

A sense of shame or embarrassment was linked to low self confidence with some participants from Indigenous backgrounds expressing low self worth:

> *I don't think my ideas are good enough (Shepparton, workshop participant).*

In this way the research indicates that young people from Indigenous and refugee backgrounds are disproportionately affected by negative stereotypes, social prejudices and misunderstandings.

Young people from diverse backgrounds are reluctant to commit to long term or inflexible initiatives

Interestingly, feedback from young people suggested that the length of participation influenced the likelihood of young people from diverse backgrounds participating. Participants indicated that more 'long term' programs that required continued commitment (such as attending regular meetings) were often perceived as "too difficult" to commit to. Young people who attended youth centres were most likely to give this response, and said that the aspect they liked most about 'drop in' programs was the lack of responsibility, particularly in comparison to other parts of their lives

such as school and work. One young man from a low socio economic background said that the reason he liked drop in sessions was because it was:

> *Just laid back…you don't have any responsibilities here…you don't have to be here if you don't want to (Parramatta, male).*

This feedback poses an interesting question for services that facilitate youth involvement strategies. Some organisations are of the opinion that long term involvement is more meaningful to young people on the basis that it provides an opportunity for participants to witness the results of their input. However the research suggests that long term participation can be a deterrent to involvement. Feedback from some young people suggested that the most effective compromise is a flexible approach where participants are responsible for defining their levels of participation.

Mistrust or lack of faith in organisations, especially government organisations

Young people, particularly those from low socio economic backgrounds demonstrated distrust of organisations, in particular government departments and agencies, and were of the belief that organisations did not care about their input into decision making. Young people from lower income backgrounds thought that their contributions would not be heard, respected or utilised—that is, that participation was 'useless' and that their input would not lead to change.

> *They (the Department of Housing) don't meet our needs with housing so why would they involve us in decision making…they don't really care about us (Parramatta, female).*

> *To the government, we're just a number…they don't give you a go (Parramatta, male).*

These quotes highlight a deep distrust of government organisations. Service providers acknowledged this as a significant barrier to participation and one Indigenous service provider suggested that developing a two-way relationship with participants was key to sustained engagement in any program.

> *Every time they get let down it's like this is the norm. (Organisations) promise to do something and they don't, and in return (young people) give you little respect. The rationale is that we don't let them down…when we ask them to do something they do it because it's a two way thing (Shepparton, practitioner).*

Pressure to make the right decisions

Across the five diversity groups, feedback highlighted that young people from diverse backgrounds were concerned about making the wrong decisions, and they often chose not to be involved in a participatory decision-making process, rather than risk the consequences of making a wrong decision.

> *I'm not that good in decision making because sometimes I might be wrong (Parramatta, workshop participant).*

While participants found it difficult to articulate what constituted a 'right decision,' they perceived that wrong decisions could lead to situations which were uncomfortable or embarrassing.

Some participants indicated that it was particularly important as a member of a minority group to make the right decisions, largely due to a belief that 'wrong decisions' were more noticeable. For example, one young man with a disability felt that as a young person with a disability, he needed to seen as correct to earn others' respect, suggesting that fear and stigma associated with particular backgrounds can create a double barrier to participation for many young people.

> *If you've got a disability, you've got to be perfect…When I make a bad decision people look down on me cause of my disability. If a normal person did the same thing, people would look less at them (Parramatta, young man with a disability).*

Additionally, for some young people, particularly those from Indigenous backgrounds, decision-making processes are associated with conflict and disagreement. Many of these young people reported actively avoiding decision-making forums for fear that it might be interpreted as disrespecting or offending elders.

Systemic Barriers

Education level and socio economic status

As previously discussed, the research found that young people from low socio economic backgrounds perceive youth involvement processes (such as youth councils/tables) as elitist and for people with economic resources. For example, one young man with a disability indicated that:

> *If I was rich it would be easy to have my say…people with money have more say (Parramatta, male).*

The perception that wealthy people have more influence on decision making was widely held by young people from low socio economic backgrounds, and some young

people with disabilities, for whom participation in group decision-making processes is often also reliant on access to costly equipment or software.

The research also found that people from low socio economic backgrounds and those not engaged in formal education were less likely to know about opportunities to get involved in decision making, perhaps as these were routinely advertised through avenues that may not reach these young people (such as schools, newspapers and word of mouth). Other barriers, such as a sense of shame, were linked by Indigenous young people to low levels of education. It was felt that school participation provided Indigenous young people with opportunities to develop the skills and confidence to articulate ideas, express opinions and overcome low self esteem, suggesting that young Indigenous people who are engaged in education may find it easier to participate in decision-making processes than those who are not engaged in education. However, services that account for, and address, 'the shame factor' when working with Indigenous young people who are not engaged in education, can also foster participatory practices.

Lastly, young people who come from low socio economic backgrounds often have other more pressing issues to deal with, such as securing accommodation or employment, or paying off debt. This was certainly the case for some of the young people involved in the research who indicated that getting involved in a decision making process was low on their list of priorities. For a member of the YAG to this project, the ability to regularly participate in online and face to face discussions was often undermined by lack of permanent address, and the frequent need to spend time securing accommodation.

An over reliance on formal decision-making mechanisms

The research found that universal formal mechanisms are typically populated by young people who are high school students, middle class, with strong public speaking skills and a tendency to be 'high achievers'. Service providers (both community and government) identified a series of barriers that prevented young people from diverse backgrounds accessing and participating in youth advisory group processes:

- Involvement in a youth advisory group takes a considerable amount of voluntary time and usually requires young people to commit long term. Terms for local government youth advisory council in the audit locations were between one and four years. This level of commitment was seen as 'a big ask' of young people generally, but more so for young people from diverse backgrounds who regularly have insecure living arrangements and employment and are more likely to live 'day-by-day'.

- Government systems, bureaucratic procedures and formal decision-making processes are unfamiliar to young people from diverse backgrounds, particularly young Indigenous people, young people who have recently immigrated to Australia and young people from refugee backgrounds.

- Government organisations rely heavily on the education system to promote opportunities for young people to get involved in decision-making processes, indirectly contributing to low levels of awareness amongst young people who are not engaged in formal education, particularly young Indigenous people and young people from low socio economic backgrounds;

- Application processes used to select membership of youth decision-making bodies are often complex, multi layered and require high literacy levels and good English language skills. For example, acceptance to one local government Youth Advisory Council required participants to complete a lengthy written application and participate in a panel interview to be approved by the council.

- In Darwin, some service providers found it difficult to engage transient young people in decision-making processes, especially those that were more long term. The most transient group was young Indigenous people.

Another criticism was that established youth-participation mechanisms promoted the involvement of a small number of young people and that decision-making opportunities were concentrated amongst these young people at the expense of involving a broader range of young people, especially those from diverse backgrounds.

We have a big event (here) but as far as I know the only people who have input into that is the Roundtable. I'd prefer it to go out to all young people. Usually it's a select few who want to get involved (Darwin, male).

Policy Barriers

The research reveals a number of significant tensions between the views on the participation of diverse group of young people demonstrated in policy documents, forums with policy makers, the service providers survey, and the views of young people themselves. These particularly related to the purpose of participation, modes of participation and how participation is represented publicly.

Young people's definition of participation is different from that held by many service providers and policy makers. This means that community and government organisations often employ strategies and models of youth participation that do not

resonate with young people. The following groups were particularly unfamiliar with and experienced specific barriers to, participation in formal decision-making processes:

- 15–17 year olds

- newly arrived young people

- young people with a disability

- young people from low socio economic backgrounds.

Top-down approaches to participation promoted in policy documents and by policy makers (Chapter 4) are often manifest in formalised participation processes which are unappealing, intimidating or 'uncool' to many of the young people who participated in this research. A predominant focus in policy on individual choice in participation contrasts sharply with the views of young people who see participation as linked to culture, community and identity. In addition, the emphasis on being a 'representative' is unappealing or intimidating to many young people who feel a sense of shame or fear in voicing their opinions. Emphasising the individual's responsibility to 'get involved' can fail to acknowledge that young people say they are often unaware of what opportunities exist. Young people from a range of diverse backgrounds noted that not knowing how to get involved, or where to go to get involved was, a significant barrier.

> A lot of kids don't know they can get involved. They don't know the programs are there or that they can get involved (Darwin, young woman who had been in care).

In many cases, young people expressed a genuine interest in getting involved in decision-making processes, but were not confident about how to get involved.

Grass-roots or bottom-up approaches (such as those promoted by the Victorian State Government) can facilitate more informal, youth-led participation, but do not completely address the barriers to participation created by cultural or structural factors that disproportionately affect particular groups.

Resource-related barriers

Though many barriers to participation were identified by services providers and government organisations, the most common was a perceived lack of resources or poor-resource allocation. Practitioners believed that this compounded the effects of other kinds of barriers to participation (such as lack of schooling, economic resources and confidence or trust in public institutions) experienced by young people from a range of backgrounds. In general, the lack of resources, or poor resource allocation, was believed to contribute to the following:

- difficulties managing the significant self confidence issues amongst young people from the diverse backgrounds, and the specific needs relating to the wellbeing of particular young people (such as drug and alcohol use, housing, employment, learning English).

- difficulty adjusting processes to meet needs such as literacy levels, language proficiency, reduced mobility, vision impairment and varied understanding of processes.

- difficulty engaging young people who are outside of the formal education system.

The research found that creative strategies can help to address resource related barriers, for example, the Youth Participation Network, established in Victoria as a mechanism for organisations to collaborate on youth participation, share information and promote opportunities for young people to participate.

CASE STUDY 9—Victorian Youth Participation Network

The Victorian Youth Participation Network was established in 2005 in response to a need identified by individuals working to promote young people's participation in decision making and service development. Many were working in isolation and recognised that some of the challenges they were facing could be addressed through networked support and advice from others. The network comprises individuals from a range of non-profit, local and state government organisations and meets bi-monthly to provide a forum for critical reflection and exploration of new and innovative strategies for promoting young people's participation. The network is open to any individual, regardless of age or role, interested in critically reflecting on the nature of youth participation. The network recognises that those who promote and engage in youth participation practice come from a range of backgrounds and life experiences and work in a variety of roles and settings. Secretariat support is provided to the network by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic).

The network's terms of reference describe the group as a 'community of practice' which provides an opportunity for members to:

- reflect on the nature of youth participation and to look at the structures that restrict or enable participation.

- critically reflect on their practice in a safe and supportive space, sharing their successes, challenges and learnings.

- collaborate to support young people's participation in community, organisational and government decision making.

- explore new and emerging concepts in the area of youth participation.

One of the issues frequently explored by the network are the challenges of promoting young people's participation in organisations which may not fully grasp the concept, nor recognise its significance. By sharing effective strategies for overcoming this, practitioners have been able to explore new opportunities and maintain motivation and enthusiasm in challenging circumstances. The network has convened two public events, one which explored the nature of youth participation and another which looked at the effectiveness of 'youth reference groups' as a participation mechanism. The second event confirmed that while many organisations were establishing Youth Reference Groups they were not always the most effective mechanism for facilitating participation, particularly of diverse groups of young people. It was suggested that further professional development is needed to ensure that agencies have a range of 'tools' or 'mechanisms' that they can draw on in their practice.

Participation by young people from diverse backgrounds is a frequent topic of discussion, and the network has dedicated a future 2008 meeting to sharing experiences and learnings in this area. The rationale behind dedicating a meeting to discussing this topic was that many of those who directly engage young people from diverse background are unable to attend the bimonthly meetings. Many are part time staff or working in a role where their time to regularly engage in such a network is limited. Having a dedicated meeting allows the network to bring these individuals in, drawing on the resources of those most experienced in working with young people from diverse backgrounds. Young people themselves will also be supported to engage in this meeting.

This case study reinforces the findings from the survey with service providers that emphasises the need for support and resources, as well as exploring a range of appropriate participatory mechanisms to successfully involve young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes. The case also demonstrates that, at least in one Australian state, youth participation as a policy approach is becoming institutionalised into practice through the formation of groups that share knowledge.

For community organisations, there were also a number of additional barriers that related to funding structures, staffing and client needs:

- Funding conditions that specify that organisations work with one particular group prevent the inclusion of young people from other backgrounds. For example, one organisation wanted to include both Indigenous and CALD young people in its initiatives but as program funding was spilt it was difficult to identify opportunities to engage young people from both backgrounds.

- High staff turn over in the community sector, particularly amongst youth workers and support workers made it difficult to retain corporate knowledge, build trust with young people and maintain consistency in participatory processes.

- A focus on 'personal development' programs discouraged the creation of group decision-making processes. Service providers indicated that programs were often structured around individual needs and there were no resources allocated to establish communal decision-making processes.

- Distrust of unfamiliar processes, organisations or people and a general perception that organisations don't take young people seriously.

Barriers that disproportionately affect particular groups

The research also identified a number of barriers that were specific to, or particularly apparent amongst, young people from a particular diverse background.

Culturally inappropriate decision-making processes and lack of understanding amongst parents and the community

Consultation with service providers identified parental attitudes as a barrier to engaging young people from some CALD groups, particularly young African people and young women from Muslim backgrounds. Services indicated that involvement was contingent on parental endorsement, however it was often challenging to communicate with parents due to language and cultural barriers.

The views of young people with disabilities and service providers indicated that parental attitudes were sometimes a barrier to accessing participatory decision-making opportunities. A number of young people with disabilities across three locations felt that their parent/s would not support their involvement in a decision-making process. The reasons for this differed, but included factors such as:

- parents did not believe that their children had the capacity to be involved in a decision-making process.

- dependency on parents to provide transport and/or support and a perception that parents would not be willing to take up this role.

- a fear of upsetting or disrespecting parents.

Services indicated that as legal guardians, parents of young people with intellectual disabilities were used to routinely making decisions for their children and in some cases

services felt that many parents underestimated the decision-making capacity of their children.

Being labelled as 'disabled', 'refugee' and 'different'

The research looked at the strengths and limitations of universal and targeted decision-making bodies and identified that for some young people being identified only because of one particular aspect of their identity (such as having a disability or being a refugee) was a disincentive to participate.

For example, some young people with disabilities reported that the prospect of meeting other people with disabilities is a deterrent for getting involved. This was most apparent for one participant who had been born without a disability, but at the age of twenty had very limited motor and speaking skills.

> I don't like seeing other people with disabilities because I used to be normal. It makes me upset seeing them (Parramatta, male).

Similarly, young people from refugee backgrounds and particular CALD backgrounds (such as young people from the Middle East and Africa) often felt socially isolated and stigmatised when only identified as 'refugee' or 'African'.

While these views do not reflect the opinions of all young people, they demonstrate that young people have multiple dimensions to their identity and that priority or targeted approaches can be experienced as limited and reinforce other existing barriers or stigmas.

A lack of knowledge/resources to work with young people with a disability

Services rarely have the knowledge, experience or resources to involve young people who have a disability in decision-making processes. The research found that involving young people who have a disability requires changes to timing and venues and is likely to require additional support, equipment and funding. Young people with disabilities frequently questioned the ability of community and government organisations to involve them effectively and were not convinced that organisations would provide the resources they needed to support their involvement. The following resources were given as examples of resources that young people with disabilities might need to participate meaningfully:

- disability accessible venues/facilities

- funded transport

- funded carer/support person

- printed and internet resources that are sensitive to vision impaired young people

- communication aids such as pictograms, electronic speaking aids, screen reading software, interpreters.

Most importantly, attitudinal change on the organisation's part was seen as a prerequisite for involving young people with disabilities. Many participants were of the opinion that organisations have limited understanding of disability issues and limited experience interacting with young people who have a disability.

They think you have a disability and can't do anything (Parramatta, female).

It was also felt that youth participation activities tended to be designed with able bodied young people in mind and quite often their focus (for example, an under 18 dance party or sporting event) or location (for example, a non wheel chair accessible venue) actively excluded people with physical or intellectual disabilities.

A lack of staff from diverse backgrounds

Organisations reported that a lack of staff that identified with the five diversity backgrounds was a barrier to engaging young people from these groups. In particular, services indicated that an absence of Indigenous or CALD staff, despite having high number of Indigenous and CALD clients, impacted on organisations' ability to engage young people from these groups.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING AND SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

An important focus of the research was the exploration of factors that engage and sustain the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes. Below we present the findings from the community audits on effective practice in engaging diverse young people in community and government decision making.

Young people who were involved in decision-making processes were consulted about the factors that they felt worked best, while young people who had not been involved

in decision making identified factors that would compel them to get and stay involved in decision-making initiatives. The key findings reveal that there are some strategies that support youth participation of young people in general, and some which are of particular relevance to young people from specific backgrounds. The strategies are arranged in terms of how they support and strengthen the purpose, process, and outcomes of participation in decision making by young people from diverse backgrounds.

Strategies that strengthen the purpose of decision making

Enable young people to set agendas as well as participate in decision making

It is not uncommon for current youth participation initiatives to focus decision-making input on youth specific areas such as the development of recreational activities, or issues affecting particular groups, such as access or public space. Young people who participated in a number of the workshops in the community audits indicated that, while interested in issues relating specifically to their 'diversity group', they were also interested in broader social issues that affected their lives and their communities more generally. Across the four audit locations young people from a range of backgrounds demonstrated an interest in contributing to decisions about:

- employment and education options

- increased cultural acceptance and the reduction of inter-cultural conflict

- safer public spaces and fairer policing practices

- decreasing discrimination and ensuring equality with racism cited in particular

- reduced teenage pregnancy.

Ensure effective promotion of participation opportunities to young people and the community, in particular: parents, elders and relevant organisations.

Many young people in this study said they did not know of any opportunities to get involved in government or community decision making that were available to them. Youth participation initiatives, such as those run by Reach Out! and the CREATE Foundation utilise a peer-education model to promote participation. Young people play an important role in raising awareness of participation opportunities amongst their

peers, particularly those who may ordinarily not seek out or have the confidence, skills or faith in the process to put their hands up.

Services also reported the importance of fostering commitment in all staff within an organisation to diversity in order to strengthen their ability to reach and work with young people from diverse backgrounds:

> You'll need all staff on board from top down (Darwin, youth development worker).

This requires developing a 'whole-of-organisation' understanding of the value and purpose of involving young people from a range of backgrounds in decision making, with services stressing that initiatives need to be endorsed by all tiers of management.

Amongst Indigenous and some CALD groups, (in particular those from African and Middle Eastern countries) participation by young people in decision making was often not understood or valued by parents. For example, one young woman said that her parents would not allow her to participate because they would see participation as a waste of time. Others said that their parents valued education and getting a job over community participation. Feedback from young people in Shepparton highlighted that community leaders have significant influence and could assist services in identifying and recruiting young people from a range of backgrounds. However, other young people and services felt that community leaders can sometimes act as gate keepers, restricting the involvement of some groups of young people. Despite this, practitioners stressed the value of investing time in communicating the purpose, value and benefits of participation to practitioners, parents, elders and community support workers, and developing ongoing relationships with them.

Strategies that strengthen effective decision-making processes

Invest in creating appealing processes

Across all diversity groups, young people stressed that decision-making processes needed to appeal to young people from diverse backgrounds and that this was most easily achieved through the inclusion of fun activities, the use of incentives, and the use of youth friendly language and spaces.

Young people from a range of backgrounds said they would be attracted to opportunities that look interesting and that highlight what is in it for participants. They emphasised that to appeal to a diverse range of young people, opportunities to participate have to be promoted in the right places, and wherever possible, organisations need to go to where young people are. In other words, young people

are often already engaged in services, youth-led projects, community and issue based organisations and they suggest that participation opportunities should be promoted through these channels. For groups of young people who may be less engaged with services (for example young homeless people), the key lies in identifying trusted intermediaries (for example outreach workers) who understand how to promote opportunities in a way that is appealing to the target audience.

Young people valued the inclusion of fun as a component of decision-making processes. While individual perceptions of what constituted 'fun' differed, in general terms it was seen to be processes that promoted laughter, social interaction, entertainment, new and diverse experiences and the potential to establish friendships. Almost unanimously, young people stressed that decision-making processes need to include fun activities if they are to appeal to young people from diverse backgrounds.

Food was the most popular incentive and was seen as a tool for boosting participation and bringing people together. In particular, food was identified as an effective incentive for young people from low socio economic backgrounds, recently arrived young people and Indigenous young people. Meals that facilitated social interaction (such as BBQs) were preferred as these were seen as interactive and fun.

CASE STUDY 10—The SHAK Kid's Advisory Taskforce, The SHAK Recreation and Development Centre, Darwin (Northern Territory)

The SHAK Youth Recreation and Development Centre, situated in Darwin's northern suburbs, is run by the Red Cross with the aim of providing a "safe haven for all kids" (**www.beanbag.net.au/shak/sub10.cfm**). Around 200 young people from a range of backgrounds use the service each week, with high numbers of Indigenous young people frequenting the service. Programs offered include a drop in service, sports, excursions, holiday programs, camps and an internet centre.

The SHAK involves young people in decision making through the SHAK Kids Advisory Taskforce (the SKAT) which was started in 2002. The initiative is founded on the notion that service users themselves are in a strong position to determine the needs of young people in relation to programs and service development.

> It's a drop in centre for youth so it will be better if young people decide what happens (Male participant).

According to the SKAT procedures, which were developed by young people, the purpose of the SKAT is:

> To maintain a group of 7 to 12 young people who will have input into ensuring the SHAK is a relevant and vibrant youth service.

SKAT members contribute to decisions about upcoming activities, excursions and camps, and are also involved in planning and running fundraising activities such as the canteen, car washes, market stalls, and raffles. Most of the funds that the group raises are used to finance and realise future SKAT projects.

> *We decide what to spend the SHAK's money on, where to have our camps, what excursions to go on…We organise excursions, discos and when famous people are going to come…We do posters for discos, we help at the discos, we work the canteen (Male participant).*

The SKAT is loosely based on an advisory group model with designated roles such as chairperson, vice chairperson and administrator, and involves between 7 and 12 young people aged 11–21 years who are users of the SHAK service.

Participation is open to any interested young person on condition that there is a space available. Participants are from a range of backgrounds including Indigenous young people, young people from recently arrived communities and young people from low socio economic backgrounds.

The SKAT provides an example of an initiative where a traditionally formal mechanism (the youth advisory model) has been deformalised so as to ensure that the decision-making process is both appealing to a range of young people, and productive for participants. Meetings are held regularly and SKAT members have designated roles. However factors such as a loose format, a low-key environment, and food help to ensure that the overall tone of the meeting remains casual:

> *It's more fun than sitting around the table writing and having conversations that never end (Male participant).*
> *They've got to be able to joke around and laugh and interact with each other (Adult facilitator).*

The SKAT illustrates the importance of participation mechanisms having clear mandates and outcomes.

> *Have lots of fun, do lots of activities. We're going to do a spray painting thing with positive comments (Male participant).*

Participants in the SKAT emphasised that actually implementing ideas is important for sustaining engagement, particularly amongst young men.

The SKAT also provides an example of how incentives can be used to promote engagement in decision making, and ensure that processes maintain a decision making focus. For example, SKAT participants use their incentive (pizza) to help manage the timing and decision-making processes effectively. As the adult facilitator explained:

> *When they start to muck up too much or start wasting time, the chairperson will say: This is eating into our pizza time.*

The SKAT provides an excellent example of how gradually introducing young people to decision-making processes helps to demystify decision making, and address barriers such as a lack of awareness, anxiety about the process or shyness. The SKAT has a visitation system where young people who are interested in learning about the SKAT can sit in on any fortnightly meeting to watch how meeting procedures work, familiarise themselves with decision-making processes and determine whether they are interested in future participation.

> *After the first few weeks [observing] I decided to get involved. We tell them stuff. They ask us what we want to do….it's alright eh?…You know what's happening. (Male participant).*

In this way, the SKAT uses a staged approach to introduce young people to decision-making involvement which the research found helped to warm young people who might not ordinarily participate to decision making.

At the other end of the process, young people who have been involved in the SKAT are encouraged to use the skills they have obtained in wider community decision making, in particular, through the Red Cross Youth Education Services Advisory Committee.

As with other case studies, the SKAT provides an illustration of how the involvement of a diverse range of young people leads to increased cross-cultural understanding and empathy. As articulated by one SKAT participant:

> *We learn about different cultures and how they deal with things….(He) does things pretty weird and I've learnt about his culture. He's African. He's done a lot of good things for the SKAT.*

Other incentives such as gift vouchers, clothing, movie passes and tickets to sporting events were also suggested as motivators and to reimburse young people for their time and effort.

Personal acknowledgement of input and recognition for past achievement were also identified as strong incentives for maintaining voluntary input and encouraging participation by new individuals. Equally important were processes that explained to participants why their ideas were not utilised. Young people acknowledged that not all input could be acted on, but requested that organisations explain why particular ideas/feedback was utilised while other input was not.

Provide a staged introduction to participation

The research identified two main reasons for why a staged introduction to participation is likely to engage and sustain the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds. Firstly, many young people who participated in this research report needed time to understand what 'decision making' involved and how they could participate. Successful approaches use a tiered approach to gradually introduce information about decision making and clearly outline boundaries and expectations:

> *If you know what exactly it is about, you are more likely to care about it and contribute (Darwin, workshop participant).*

A gradual introduction to decision making had encouraged ongoing involvement in a number of young people from varying backgrounds. A young person involved with the SHAK Kid's Advisory Task Force in Darwin described this as:

> *At first it was free pizza. Then it started being about making the place better.*

For others, it was important to have an opportunity to take their time to get to know a program or process and decide if they want to continue participating.

> *To start off with I needed something to do. I started enjoying it after a while and keep coming back (Townsville, male).*

Not feeling pressured to make a commitment from the outset and having small milestones where they can take on more responsibility helped this young person to make a longer term commitment to the CREATE Young Consultants program.

Many young people in care experience multiple barriers to participation due to their backgrounds and experiences of abuse and neglect, poverty and social isolation. For example, children and young people from Indigenous backgrounds are eight times more likely to be in out of home care than the general population (AIHW, 2008) and most young people in care are in school and do not have an income other than Centrelink payments. These barriers are exacerbated by a decreased level of stability in their day to day lives, and a lack of decision making ability over some of the most critical decisions made about their lives (for instance, what out of home care is provided for them and who they are fostered by). This means that many young people in care feel extremely disempowered and distrustful of authorities who make decisions about, but not with, young people in need of out of home care. As demonstrated in the following case study, CREATE has a philosophy where young people can be involved at different levels and offers stepping stones to the young consultant program.

CASE STUDY 11—CREATE Foundation Young Consultant Program

The CREATE Foundation works closely with young people who live, or have lived, in foster care to effect positive change within the care sector and to achieve better outcomes for young people. According to the organisation website:

> CREATE believes in the spirit of youth participation and as such is run by, with and for children and young people in care.

This is achieved through a continuum of participation opportunities through which young people can actively choose the level they want to be engaged at.

In practice, young people have participated in several formal and informal ways. For instance, young people participate in determining and developing the service, advocacy, policy and research activities at the CREATE Foundation by:

- contributing content to the CREATE website for young people

- training as young consultants are trained to provide internal and external training to case workers, foster carers and agency workers

- attending the national Face to Face forum where a range of stakeholders, including young people, share knowledge and make decisions on how to improve services to young people in out of home care

- Sitting on the CREATE board of directors.

Typically young people come to CREATE through care-related services. They then are recipients of CREATE programs designed to empower young people through skill and personal development and workplace training. Young people are then encouraged to become providers of CREATE services by working as young consultants.

The young consultants program is the main mechanism for youth participation. Although the foundation acknowledges that the largely formal nature of the model can create some barriers to participation, there is a commitment to identifying and addressing the gaps and challenges. For instance, young consultants are paid for their time, they receive significant resources and support for their activities and a culture of participation is actively fostered at the organisation. This means that young people are valued and respected for their contributions.

The New South Wales CREATE centre coordinator has identified that Indigenous young people and young people from CALD backgrounds may still experience barriers to participation at CREATE. Nevertheless, the advantage of the continuum approach, particularly for young people who require out of home care, is that it:

- builds on young people's skills and knowledge and supports a transition, in young people's own time, to other forms of community and government decision making

- it is based on young people's own needs

- it is voluntary—young people choose to participate—it's not forced upon them.

Secondly, in order to engage and sustain the participation of young people from the target backgrounds, organisations must foster a high level of trust both in, and with, young people. Young people with disabilities, who had not participated in formal decision-making processes, suggested that a staged approach to participation would also facilitate a staged introduction to meeting other participants, which would increase their comfort levels and make them more inclined to actively participate in group discussions. One young woman with a disability explained that:

> People need to introduce themselves…provide time for participants to get to know each other (Darwin, female).

Young people with disabilities recommended that prior to taking part in a decision-making process such as a meeting, all participants meet with the aim of getting to know each other.

Lastly, a staged introduction to participation processes was recommended as a way to draw in young people who might be opposed to getting involved and normalise meeting procedures and venues. According to one young man who had been in care, some young people are resistant to getting involved in processes where they might be 'controlled'. Gradual introduction to formal or unfamiliar decision-making processes and environments (council chambers or government offices) can help to breakdown fears and increase young people's confidence in the process and the organisation.

Young people reported feeling comfortable about initial processes taking place in a familiar space (such as a youth centre or a pool hall) with one young person explaining:

> Don't have the first formal meeting in a room. Do it in a pool hall. People are already comfortable with the surroundings. Then for the second meeting you can change the location (Townsville, male).

Young people from a range of backgrounds indicated that as they gained confidence and built trust with the host organisation, they became more comfortable about attending meetings hosted in alternative, more formal venues, such as the local council.

Use informal and flexible processes

Many young people indicated a preference for informal approaches to decision making on the premise that they were more appealing, easier to take part in, less intimidating and in some cases more productive. For example, at the SHAK in Darwin, young people who used the service were involved in making decisions about program content through an informal voting process. One Indigenous young person provided the following example:

> For boys' night we make a decision about what we want to do by voting. We make a plan for a few weeks away. After a few weeks we vote again (Darwin, male).

In particular, young people who visited youth centres tended to prefer processes that were laid back and ad hoc in nature as they were seen as more engaging and less intimidating than formal approaches.

> It's more fun than sitting around the table writing and having conversations that never end (Darwin, male).

Informality is not just about making things 'easier' or 'more fun' for the sake of it. Rather, young people are invited to 'own' both the content and the process of decision making:

> More people would be interested if it was informal. If it was formal I think people would say they have better stuff to do (Darwin, female).

> It should be both (informal and formal) because some people won't rock up to a formal meeting (Parramatta, female).

Where young people see relevance to their lives—in all aspects of the process: atmosphere, relationships, activities, role and outcomes—they are more likely to consider participation opportunities as a priority.

A lot of people don't like surveys because it takes up too much time and it's boring. Young people don't care about things on paper…you've got to involve them in practical things (Parramatta, female).

While feedback mechanisms such as surveys were seen by some as effective tools, others indicated that they were boring and discouraged young people from engaging. Not seeing the relevance or knowing the outcomes can contribute to these beliefs that a survey is not practical.

Generally, formal meetings such as board meetings, were seen by many as an ineffective way to involve young people in decision making.

> I don't like meetings, but programs and workshops I'd get involved in (Darwin, female).

However, not all young people felt the same about the format that processes should take. Feedback from Shepparton suggested that young Indigenous people from the Academy of Sport, Health and Education liked the formal approach with scheduled student council meetings, designated roles and time frames. Similarly, a young Indigenous man from Darwin felt that it was about balancing a combination of both formal and informal processes and ensuring that the underlying purpose of the event was decision making:

> It's nice to have a chat over the barbie, but you don't usually say anything serious. It's more about your lives. They don't remember why they are there. If they are at a meeting they do the meeting talk first then at the barbie they'd talk about it a bit more (Darwin, male).

Informal and formal processes can play different roles in facilitating young people's participation in decision making. In some circumstances, informal processes serve to engage young people and build their confidence in the organisation or service, and to conduct initial consultations that help to set agendas for future, more formalised decision-making processes. What was clear, though, was that young people wish to determine their own level of involvement—and value services that accommodate varying levels of commitment. For example, young people who were involved in the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory reported that one of its strengths was the flexible terms on which they were involved, stating that they were able to participate when they had the time and less when they had competing commitments such as school exams. The obvious limitation of this approach is that it is reliant on young people stepping up to determine their own levels of involvement and risks overlooking individuals who are less inclined to commit or engage in the first place.

Practitioners also identified flexible and informal practices as success factors in effective practice. They identified using relaxed venues, casual dress, informal language and flexible formats as effective for engaging young people from a range of backgrounds, and for sustaining involvement. In the words of a youth worker from the Holroyd and Parramatta Youth Worker's Network:

> Don't call it a consultation process. Let them shape it.

For practitioners, 'flexible processes' also referred to using a diverse range of strategies. Put simply by a Youth Development Officer in Parramatta:

> If you use a diverse range of strategies, then you'll get a diverse range of young people.

Diversifying strategies assists in addressing barriers and can help cater for the range of needs presented by young people who come from varying backgrounds.

Finally, practitioners felt that incorporating young people's communication styles into participation processes supported effective practice. For example, using Short Message Services (SMS) and informal and familiar language was considered a good method of engaging with young people.

Ensure appropriate resources

Practitioners and young people emphasised that service providers need to dedicate sufficient time and resources to appropriate processes for engaging with young people from diverse backgrounds. Organisations need to have adequate resources, staffing and time to support the involvement of young people who have varying life experiences, physical support needs, language skills and self confidence. The community audits identified three kinds of support that should be available in order to effectively engage and sustain participation of young people from diverse backgrounds:

1. **Financial support**—covering the cost of involvement and wherever possible identifying opportunities to compensate young people for their involvement (either through incentives, payment or celebrative events).

2. **Practical support**—information and training to equip young people with the skills and knowledge to participate.

3. **Personal support**—support physical needs, positive relationships and self confidence.

Ensure that the emphasis is not only about 'having a say.'

Young people preferred approaches that utilise a range of activity-based and outcome-focused processes over those that focused mainly on spoken processes, such as meetings or forums. This was largely because these processes were seen as more engaging and interesting for participants. In addition, activity-based processes helped address shyness or low self confidence that can prevent many young people from diverse backgrounds from getting involved. By communicating that processes will not only be focused on articulating ideas and opinions, the prospect of getting involved can be made less daunting from the outset. Nevertheless, young people valued opportunities with a discussion-based component but urged organisations to think creatively and incorporate other more interactive activities that are relevant to young people's lives. In particular, meetings were seen as uninteresting and needed to be blended in with other types of activities such as meeting community leaders, sharing a meal, attending sporting matches or seeing a movie. With regard to young people from

diverse backgrounds, these activities should be culturally relevant and based on young people's own perceptions of what is important and what is participation.

Young people value the input of adults but are cautious about their level of input

Across each of the five diversity groups, young people acknowledged that 'adults' play an important role in the decision-making process, especially in relation to the provision of information, administrative support and guidance. Youth workers, teachers, counsellors, parents and community elders were identified as helpful to the decision-making processes. However, opinions were split about what constituted appropriate levels of involvement with some young people indicating that there was a risk that over-involvement by adults could infringe on decision-making processes and inadvertently undermine group decision-making processes.

> Adults think that kids don't know what they want. They think that because in principal, kids are supposed to be immature. It's a stereotype (Darwin, young female from low socio economic background).

In these instances, some young people seemed hesitant about involving 'too many' adults in the process and were supportive of 'youth only' decision-making processes. Others believed that young people and youth workers could work compatibly and suggested that the presence of community leaders also assisted in making participants more comfortable. Indeed, as outlined in chapter five, for particular groups, locating youth participation in the context of familial or community decision making meant that adult participation was taken as a positive given. What was clear was that young people appreciate the initial involvement of people they know (either younger people or adults) as this assists in building confidence and making the experience of participating less intimidating or overwhelming, however the need for this support may diminish as groups gain skills and momentum and adults and organisations need to be ready to step back.

Ensure appropriate timing and place for participatory activities

The research explored both online and offline spaces for participation and considered the notion of timing in relation to different places where participation in decision making can occur. Most young people who participated in this research felt that many physical places where adults typically made decisions were not welcoming to young people. This was compounded by the fact that many workplaces, organisations and public institutions operate during hours that are not necessarily convenient for young people. In Shepparton, it was felt that consultative meetings hosted at the council

chambers made young people feel apprehensive about attending, whereas meetings held at a youth service, a skate park or a familiar social space such as the mall were seen as non threatening, more accessible and more likely to facilitate inclusiveness.

A number of venues were identified as spaces to engage young people from particular backgrounds. For example, soccer grounds were seen as a good space to engage young men from CALD backgrounds, in particular, those who have recently arrived in Australia. For young people with disabilities, considering the impact of place based on access is crucial. For example, the venue would need to be wheelchair accessible and centrally located so that young people could take taxis, or alternatively get their parents or guardians to drop them off.

Running processes at suitable times and for an appropriate length of time were also identified as important factors to successfully engage young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes. However, the research found that a one size fits all approach is unlikely to meet the needs of young people from a range of backgrounds. Rather, it is important that services interested in engaging young people from diverse backgrounds are familiar with the lifestyles of the young people they are trying to engage, and plan decision-making processes accordingly. For example, hosting meetings at night is likely to be problematic for young people who live far away from the venue and need to take public transport to and from meetings.

The research identified that 'timing' also refers to the differing lengths of time that young people from diverse backgrounds need to process information and participate in decision making effectively. Workshops conducted during the community audits found that diversity also influences the rate at which different young people understand and complete tasks. Working with differences in language, levels of literacy, and attention spans can all impact on how decision-making processes work and how they are experienced by different young people. In particular, the research found that young people with disabilities may need longer time frames to participate in decision-making processes. As one young woman with an intellectual disability stated:

Having people with disabilities will make it more slower and other people will like to be fast (Darwin, female).

Young people with disabilities did not want to slow the group down, and whilst one disability service believed this to be inevitable, there were processes which organisations could use to streamline the involvement process including:

- contact with staff or organisations that have a strong understanding of disability issues

- a commitment to making the involvement process genuinely participatory (including committed resources, staffing and time)

- the provision of pre and post meeting briefings for young people with intellectual disabilities.

Additionally, the internet was noted as a space where many young people feel comfortable participating. However, this was not a generic consensus and levels of comfort and internet access are experienced differentially amongst young people from diverse backgrounds, as well as amongst young people with seemingly similar sets of needs and experiences.

For example, amongst young people with disabilities, usage patterns varied enormously. Some young people with physical disabilities found that the internet created opportunities for them to develop relationships with a range of people (especially people without disabilities), connect to a wider community, communicate more freely and learn new information/skills. However, other young people with physical disabilities found using the internet cumbersome and preferred face-to-face communication. The nature of a young person's disability affects the extent to which the internet is an effective tool for addressing barriers. Access to technological support tools (such as screen reading software) and communication preferences need to be considered in determining the suitability of the internet to engage young people with disabilities in decision-making processes.

Some young people felt that the internet provided a way of facilitating the participation of young people who were shy or felt a sense of shame. A young person who had been in care explained how he felt more confident participating online:

You could make yourself anonymous so you wouldn't be embarrassed to say anything. People tend to say more personal things online because they aren't looking at the person (Darwin, male).

In this way, the anonymity of the internet was seen as an advantage by some, especially if they wanted to disguise particular characteristics about themselves. For example, one young man with a severe physical disability said that one of the reasons he liked using

the internet was because it masked his disability, allowed him to build judgement free friendships with other people and helped him live a 'normal' life.

The internet is also a culturally relevant place for most young people, in particular, social networking sites play an important role in their lives. Sites such as **www.myspace.com** and **www.bebo.com** were extremely popular amongst particular groups of young people. The research also found that there are cultural preferences in site selection, for example most Indigenous young people reported using Bebo rather than MySpace, as did many young people from recently arrived communities. This is most likely because the interface is simpler and it is already utilised by their friends and families.

> *(Because) you can contact all your friends especially those you haven't seen for a while, and keep in touch with family (Darwin, young Indigenous male).*

This is a significant finding for the research because it suggests that by understanding which social networking websites are most utilised by young people from the target backgrounds, services and practitioners can better target promotion to these audiences.

There is evidence that local councils and youth organisations are increasingly using social networking sites to engage with young people from a range of backgrounds as discussed in the following case study.

CASE STUDY 12—Social Networking Websites

Whilst there is limited evidence of the impact that utilising social networking sites has on increasing and supporting diversity in young people's participation in government and community decision making, it is included here because it is a popular emerging area of practice. Social networking sites such as Bebo and MySpace are increasingly used by young people, with MySpace recording 2.1 million Australian members (Sydney Morning Herald, 2007) in January 2007.

MySpace and similar sites are increasingly utilised by local councils as a tool for communicating with young people. A search on Myspace using the terms 'youth council Australia' finds 1360 sites for local youth councils and youth representatives on local councils. Some examples include: Ipswich (Queensland), South Gippsland (Victoria), Kalgoorlie-Boulder (Western Australia), Broken Hill and Canterbury (New South Wales). The extent to which these sites are able to engage with a diverse range of young people is not clear, though some sites explicitly state that they seek to involve "a diverse range of young people" (**www.myspace.com/canterbury_youth_council**).

In general these sites are used to promote activities for young people in their local area, but they also call for young people to participate in different forums, events and to share their views on different local issues.

Reach Out! is a youth initiative that has used social networking sites to increase the involvement of young people. In May 2006 young people created a ReachOut! MySpace page (**www.myspace.com/reachoutaus**) as a strategy for communicating with young people who were not yet aware of the service, or who wouldn't be drawn to a 'mental health' website. Young people are able to contribute to decision making at Reach Out! via MySpace by commenting on aspects of the service, contributing to discussions, and voting in polls to influence the topics of new content, such as PodCasts. The Reach Out! MySpace has 5040 'friends' (young people who link to the space and offer 'friends' status), but as with many online strategies, the service does not analyse statistics on who these young people are. According to the Reach Out! Youth Programs Coordinator, most of the Reach Out! friends are people who have never heard of, or visited, the Reach Out! site before. But data on member profiles does not provide sufficient information to determine the extent to which this strategy reaches young people from particular backgrounds.

The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils Australia (FECCA) has recently started using Facebook to engage with young people (**eccnsw.blogspot.com/2008/01/ culturally-div erse-youth-of-australia.html**). Set up at the end of 2007, the Facebook group has 117 members and according to the webpage: "…Is designed for young people across Australia from diverse cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas about what issues are important to them." Because the web strategy is so new, it is difficult to measure the impact that this initiative has had on facilitating CALD young people to participate in decision-making processes. But it is one to watch.

Whilst social networking sites provide an opportunity for organisations to connect with young people from diverse backgrounds, insufficient data exists to really test whether or not this is the case. Organisations considering utilising a social networking strategy to increase their engagement with young people should ensure they build evaluation mechanisms into their strategy to test whether the internet links them with diverse young people, or extends the reach of more traditional youth participation processes.

Ensure youth participation leads to tangible change

The most significant finding from this research that relates to outcomes is that the end product of young people's participation must be communicated to young people. Whether engaging in formal, informal or project-based participation mechanisms, young people express a desire to understand the tangible outcomes of their involvement. They also express a lack of interest where they feel that their participation has been ineffectual or tokenistic.

Practitioners suggested that to build a culture of mutual obligation, organisations must acknowledge which aspects of their business they are prepared to allow young people to contribute to and clearly communicate these to participants at the outset of involvement. A youth development officer who worked with the Multicultural Youth Council of the Northern Territory was emphatic that:

> *You need to explain which (decision making) areas are negotiable and which are not.*

The student council at the Academy for Sport, Health and Education in Shepparton (see case study 8) provides a good example. The student council was responsible for organising and hosting the annual presentation night and the director indicated that the upfront provision of information about the budget and scope of the event was crucial in ensuring that young people were in a position to make realistic and practical decisions for the planning the event.

Organisations must demonstrate that young people, regardless of background, can have a real impact on organisational or policy decisions, that their ideas are heard and seriously considered. While this is recognised as a key principal of youth-participation processes generally, this research finds that providing young people with feedback around the outcomes of their participation was of particular importance to young people from diverse backgrounds who, in many cases, may already have high levels of distrust in services and governments.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY AUDITS: BARRIERS AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

This section provides a summary of the key findings that emerged from the community audits phase, with a particular emphasis on:

- barriers that affect young people from diverse backgrounds generally

- barriers that affect particular groups of young people

- effective practice.

Barriers that affect young people from diverse backgrounds generally

The following barriers affect young people from each of the five target diversity groups.

Individual barriers

- Low self esteem and a fear of being ridiculed stops young people from getting involved, particularly young Indigenous people.

- Long term involvement is a turn off. Contrary to a perception that long term involvement is more meaningful for young people, young people from diverse backgrounds are reluctant to commit to long term involvement, particularly if they are not sure where they will be in the near future. This is particularly true for transient communities such as young homeless people, young people in care and young Indigenous people.

- Young people from diverse backgrounds often do not trust organisations, particularly government organisations and they need to be convinced that organisations are not going to let them down.

- In universal mechanisms, young people from minority populations often feel immense pressure to make the right contributions or decisions as they feel that they will be judged on any 'mistakes' they make. Similar, the emphasis on being a representative is unappealing or intimidating to many young people from diverse backgrounds who feel a sense of shame voicing their opinions.

Systemic barriers

- For organisations, a lack of resources, or poor resource allocation was the most common barrier to involving young people from a range of backgrounds, and was

seen to compound the effects of other barriers such as a lack of schooling, low English language skills or low self confidence.

- There is a dependence on using the education system to promote opportunities to get in formal decision-making processes and organisations, particularly government organisations are not reaching young people from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from low socio economic backgrounds and those not engaged in formal education.

- There is an over reliance on formal, universal decision-making approaches such as the youth advisory group model, which are not successful in engaging young people from a range of diverse backgrounds as they:

  – are typically populated by young people who are high school students, middle class with strong public speaking skills and a tendency to be high achievers

  – often have involvement, with only a small number of young people participating and are not linked into other organisations or the wider youth population

  – use procedures which are either unfamiliar or unappealing to young people from diverse backgrounds

  – use application processes that are complex and time consuming and often rely on high level written skills

  – Use processes which are often structured in advance of young people's involvement and incoming participants have very little room to shape processes.

Barriers that affect particular groups of young people

The following barriers affect young people from one or more of the target diversity groups:

- Services rarely have the knowledge, experiences or resources to involve young people with disabilities in decision-making processes, and for this reason often do not target the involvement of this group.

- Social shyness and a concern about speaking up can deter young Indigenous people in particular from getting involved in decision-making processes.

- For young people with disabilities and young refugee people, being identified only because of one particular aspect of their identity (such as having a disability or being a refugee) is a disincentive to participate, and services need to take this

into consideration in the way they communicate with young people from these backgrounds.

- Staffing influences organisational ability to target and work effectively with particular groups and because organisations often do not have staff who identify as Indigenous, CALD or as having a disability, these groups can be overlooked in participatory initiatives. This is less of an issue for backgrounds that are less visibly apparent such as having been in care, or having been from a low socio economic background, although having staff with these experiences would no doubt increase organisational capacity to engage young people from these backgrounds.

Effective practice

The research identified the following as effective practices for engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes.

- Acknowledge that effective decision making can occur through informal as well as formal processes, can take place in a range of spaces and through a variety of communication technologies.

- Provide sufficient resources for engaging and supporting young people from diverse backgrounds and look for opportunities to partner with organisations that have existing skills and capacity. (for example, Disability Support Services);

- Enable young people to set agendas and shape processes, as well as participate in decision making.

- Ensure effective promotion of participation opportunities to young people and their communities by including parents, elders and relevant organisations, and work with young people to determine the level of involvement they would like from adults in their communities.

- Invest in and create processes that are appealing and based around issues of importance to young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Host decision-making processes in spaces that are already familiar to young people from diverse backgrounds as this is more appealing at the same time as addressing travel barriers.

- Acknowledge the importance of, and adequately resource, activities that add fun to decision-making processes, and involve young people from diverse backgrounds in determining the nature of these activities.

- Provide a staged introduction to participation mechanisms (particularly formal ones) so as to ensure that young people can gradually familiarise themselves with new places, processes and people;

- Use informal processes wherever possible as these are generally less intimidating and more appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds, and use informal modes of communication such as text messaging to communicate with participants;

- Ensure that the emphasis is not only about 'having a say'. Use inclusive language when communicating about participation opportunities so as to clearly communicate that participation is for everyone, and young people don't need to be 'youth leaders' or 'high achievers' to get involved;

- Don't assume that young people want to be involved for long periods of time. Provide flexibility by giving young people opportunities to determine their level of involvement and involving young people in determining their terms of engagement (for example, length of involvement, minimum requirements);

- Target publicity as this leads to increased involvement by young people from diverse backgrounds, particularly if administered through services or intermediaries who are already well known to, and trusted by, young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Directly address the gatekeeper role that intermediaries might play by working with a range of organisations and clearly communicate that participation is not just open to stand out young people.

- Ensure that the outcomes of decision-making processes are clearly communicated to participants from diverse backgrounds, and invite feedback.

The potential of the internet to engage young people from diverse backgrounds

- Young people already utilise the internet to engage with their peers and to search for information and support, and many see the internet as an attractive place to participate in decision-making processes. However, internet use is shaped by young people's backgrounds and current contexts. Culture and physical capacity (impacted by both disability and economic resources) are two determinants of young people's access and use of the internet. When young people's internet use is well understood, it can facilitate targeted programs to facilitate the involvement of particular cultural groups. For example, Bebo could be used to promote opportunities to involve Indigenous young people in decision making.

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a summary of the key findings of the research and their significance for government and community organisations, as well as recommendations for effective practices that will assist in securing the sustained input of young people from a range of backgrounds in decision-making processes.

Overall, the research has demonstrated that although government and community organisations that run formal youth participation mechanisms (such as youth advisory groups) support the idea of involving a range of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes, this has not translated to widespread involvement of young people from the following backgrounds:

- young Indigenous people

- young people from culturally diverse backgrounds

- young people from low socio economic backgrounds

- young people who are, or have been, under the guardianship of the Minister

- young people who have disabilities.

Young people who identify with one or more of these backgrounds tend not to be involved in formal decision-making mechanisms, and if they are involved, they are likely to be from middle class families and be engaged in formal education. That is not to say that these groups of young people are not at all involved in decision-making processes. The research found that organisations, particularly those that work directly with young people from the target diversity groups use a number of informal processes to engage young people in decision making about projects, programs and organisational change. For example, casual chats, regular gatherings that have a social component such as BBQs and online discussion forums.

KEY FINDING 1

The way diversity is framed influences which young people get involved.

There is a tendency for government and community organisations that run formal youth participation mechanisms to describe their youth representation as diverse, despite low, or no, involvement by young people from the five target diversity groups. Participation of young people from diverse backgrounds is often equated with the involvement of young people from a cross section of ages and varying educational experiences, and rarely expands to include young people from the five target populations. If organisations continue to frame diversity in terms of age and educational experience only, young people from the target backgrounds are unlikely to find out about, or get involved in, decision-making opportunities.

Talking about diversity categories in the context of young people's participation is challenging, and the use of inappropriate descriptors can limit young people's involvement. Young people often identify with a range of backgrounds and don't want to be pigeon holed, particularly if the descriptor has the potential to be interpreted negatively.

Recommendations for effective practice:
- Organisations need to expand their understanding of diversity so as to include young people from the five target populations. This will increase organisational ability to reflect on the level of representativeness of youth involvement mechanisms, and to identify groups of young people who are consistently under represented.

- Young people have complex, multidimensional identities. Organisations need to recognise but not emphasise this. Given that the use of descriptors was seen by

young people from diverse backgrounds as restrictive, organisations need to be cautious about the language they use when targeting particular groups of young people, and should avoid language which can be interpreted negatively, such as 'refugee young person,' and 'at risk young person'.

• Wherever possible, refrain from using terms which young people do not relate to such as 'diverse backgrounds,' 'culturally and linguistically diverse' and 'low socio economic background'. The terms 'young people from a range of backgrounds' or 'young people with different life experiences' is more likely to be meaningful to young people than 'young people from diverse backgrounds'.

KEY FINDING 2

Engaging young people in determining both processes and the content for participatory decision making increases the engagement and commitment of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Decision-making processes are often determined by organisations or program staff. As a result, they often suit the needs of the organisation, but not necessarily the young people who they wish to involve. Where organisations involve a diverse range of young people in developing a process and the terms of reference for their participation, uptake and the contribution that young people can make is increased.

• Involve young people in planning decision making mechanisms for your organisation or program.

• Invite feedback on the process, as well as the outcomes, and communicate how you use that feedback.

• Don't just expect young people to 'fit in'. Be prepared to change internal processes if need be.

KEY FINDING 3

Definitions of participation need to incorporate a range of decision-making mechanisms including informal approaches.

There is a tendency for organisations, particularly government organisations, to interpret youth participation as the involvement of young people through a structured and formalised mechanism, such as a youth advisory group. The research demonstrated that young people from diverse backgrounds are unlikely to be involved in this type of mechanism, and that informal approaches are more effective because they are less intimidating and more appealing to young people from the target backgrounds. Some examples of informal mechanisms include: casual chats between service providers and young people; social experiences which provide opportunities for 'chatting' such as BBQs or excursions; projects specific involvement and the use of online tools such as discussion forums, social networking sites and polling.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Participation in decision making should not be limited to the idea of participating in formal, structured processes. Organisations need to recognise and resource less formal approaches for involving young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Diversify the mechanisms used to engage young people - the more varied the approaches, the more varied the groups of young people who are engaged.

- Frame decision-making processes in a way that relates to young people's lived experience. This means that the process and the themes under discussion are relevant to young people's lives.

KEY FINDING 4

Organisations report that insufficient resourcing is the most significant barrier to engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision making.

There was a perception amongst policy makers and service providers from both government and community organisations that involving young people from diverse backgrounds is resource intensive, and this was often the most significant barrier preventing organisations from involving young from a range of backgrounds. There is no doubt that because of the needs of young people from diverse backgrounds, their involvement is often reliant on additional resources (for example, interpreters, disability support workers, technological aides), however some involvement mechanisms are less resource intensive than others, and rather than falling back on the 'lack of resources' excuse, some organisations could benefit from being more creative with the resources on hand.

Recommendations for effective practice

- Organisations should look at ways to embed a commitment to youth participation in the culture of the organisation. This should be reflected in the organisational values, recognition and support for youth participation at an executive and management level and through appropriate processes, training and support to staff to work with young people from a range of different backgrounds.

- Identify the resources available (staff, skills, materials, volunteers) and use these to help identify ways to better involve young people from diverse backgrounds.

- Recognise that not all youth involvement processes are resource intensive, and that less structured, shorter term strategies such as casual chats and the use of online facilitation processes can be more cost effective than longer term approaches to participation.

- Identify opportunities to partner with local organisations that provide services to young people so as to skill share and pool existing resources and expertise.

- Work with young people to identify strategies for accessing resources.

- Plan ahead for the resources needed to involve young people from one or more of the target diversity backgrounds.

- Foster organisation-wide endorsement for youth participation in decision making by promoting the benefits of involving young people from a range of backgrounds in decision making.

KEY FINDING 5

Gradually introducing young people to decision-making processes can assist in ensuring that young people from diverse backgrounds are interested in, and comfortable with participation.

Young people from diverse backgrounds are often unfamiliar with decision-making processes, intimidated by the prospect of speaking up in front of others and unsure about what is expected of them as participants.

For young people who do not have many opportunities to shape decisions in their personal lives (for example, in relation to housing, study, employment, social activities) the idea of participating in a decision-making processes about program or policy change is foreign and not a priority. This is particularly true for younger people (aged 12 – 16), young people from some CALD backgrounds, young people in care and young people with a disability, for whom adults (such as carers, teachers, parents and youth workers) are often responsible for key decisions that affect their lives. The research found that by increasing young people's involvement in decision making that affects their every day lives, service providers were able to equip young people with the skills, understanding and motivation to participate in wider decision-making processes.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Use a staged introduction to participation mechanisms (particularly formal ones) so as to ensure that young people can gradually familiarise themselves with new places, processes and people. For example, organise an event which helps participants to get to know each other before commencing the decision-making process, or host the initial meeting in a space that young people are familiar with, and then once trust is established, consider hosting the meeting in a less familiar location (such as a local council).

- Provide opportunities for young people to learn about decision-making processes before committing to longer term involvement. For example, hold open decision-making processes (such as meetings) so that interested young people can watch and get a feel for how decision making takes place.

- Support young people from diverse backgrounds to play an active role in decisions that affect their personal lives (for example, about education, housing, employment, budgets), as this increases their capacity and motivation to participate in wider decision making.

- After an initial introduction to participants and processes, work with young people to establish a clear understanding of expectations, roles, and the parameters of the decision-making initiative. Provide an opportunity for young people from diverse backgrounds to shape these, rather than locking in the rules of engagement before the project commences.

KEY FINDING 6

Participation is most appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds when the focus is on more than just having a say.

'Speaking up' or 'having a say' can actively deter young people from diverse backgrounds who are not confident or comfortable with public speaking, as can the idea of having to 'represent' other young people who have similar life experiences.

Participation is most appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds when it is focused on having an impact, seeing tangible outcome and contributing to a process of change that gives something back to participants' communities.

Processes that address issues related to difference or disadvantage but also allow young people to address a range of community or social issues are likely to be more appealing to young people from diverse backgrounds than initiatives with a singular or youth specific focus.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure that participation of young people from diverse backgrounds is purposeful, supported and linked to outcomes, rather than inclusion for the sake of inclusion.

- Demonstrate the outcomes of participation processes to young people, acknowledge their contributions, and explain the reasons why some ideas are not realised.

- Limit processes that call for 'representative young people'. Young people from diverse backgrounds should be encouraged to speak from their own experience and not on behalf of others.

- Promotion of opportunities to participate in decision making should not be centred on 'speaking up' or 'having a say' as this deters young people who are not confident speaking in public. Instead, promotion should highlight the activities that motivate young people from diverse backgrounds to take part in decision making, especially the opportunity to make a difference about issues of relevance, learn specific skills and meet new people.

- Work with young people from diverse backgrounds to identify the issues that matter to them and then create participation opportunities around these issues.

- Do not limit the scope of decisions that young people can be involved in to those deemed 'youth specific'.

KEY FINDING 7

Online mechanisms are under utilised by both government and community organisations, and can provide appropriate and cost effective ways to engage young people from diverse backgrounds.

Currently the internet is used to communicate information to young people, rather than facilitate their involvement in decision-making processes, particularly amongst government organisations. With the rise of Web 2.0 (and the growing availability and accessibility of interactive online tools such as user generated content, blogging, discussion forums, social networking sites and file sharing technology), the internet provides a cost effective way of engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes on their terms and their 'turf'.

The internet can challenge some of the barriers to participation in decision making experienced by young people, for example: concern about speaking up in a group; concern about being judged on the basis of ethnicity/disability/age; travel barriers; and mobility barriers (only in conjunction with other technology aides). However barriers such as not being taken seriously; not knowing about participation opportunities; and not having the power to influence decisions are not overcome per se by the use of the internet. Encouragingly though, while some groups of young people from diverse backgrounds may still have limited access to the internet, the research indicated that social networking sites are commonly used by young people from each of the five target backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Utilise multiple and innovative strategies for facilitating participation online and establish these with the input of young people from diverse backgrounds to ensure that the most appropriate and targeted online tools are used, and potential barriers are identified and addressed up front.

- Establish trust with young people by providing evidence online of young people's role in decision making. For example, publicise the outcomes of current and past decision making input by young people online and look for opportunities to profile participants from a range of backgrounds.

- Utilise online spaces that young people from diverse backgrounds already engage with so as to ensure that online decision making takes place in spaces where young people are. For example, **Bebo**, the social networking site is widely used by young Indigenous people and provides an avenue for targeting participation.

KEY FINDING 8

Actively targeting the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds increases engagement.

Targeted participation processes provide organisations with increased ability to address the needs of participants, and are more likely to allow young people to focus decision-making processes on issues that are of personal importance to them. However, organisations that provide services for youth more generally do not utilise targeted participation processes as they often feel that involving young people from particular backgrounds is not a core responsibility. As such, there is a need for organisations that use universal mechanisms to actively target young people from diverse backgrounds.

Targeting the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds increases the likelihood that they will be involved in universal mechanisms. The most effective way to target involvement is by promoting participation opportunities through intermediaries that have close contact with young people from diverse backgrounds.

 The research found that formal priority access policies (those designed to ensure the involvement of particular groups of young people) are not widely used. It is more common for organisations to have 'unwritten' processes that prioritise involvement, however these are rarely visible to the young people they target, are not transparent and don't hold organisations accountable to involving young people from a range of backgrounds.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Promote opportunities to participate through organisations or intermediaries who are already well known to, and trusted by, young people from diverse backgrounds.

- If using a universal participation mechanism, develop a priority access policy to ensure that young people from a range of backgrounds are involved in decision-making processes. Ensure that the policy is public and its application is transparent.

- Host decision-making processes in spaces that are familiar to, and accessible by, young people from diverse backgrounds. Move decision-making processes to spaces that young people from the target diversity backgrounds already frequent (for example, soccer grounds, local youth services, skate parks).

KEY FINDING 9

Flexibility and ownership are key to sustaining the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds.

It has been widely documented that one of the best practice principles of effective youth participation is the provision of opportunities for participants to shape processes and influence outcomes. Participation with young people from diverse backgrounds is no different. In fact if anything, ensuring that participants have sufficient room to influence decisions and outcomes is more important because many young people from diverse backgrounds are starting from a platform of distrust and scepticism. To develop trust and sustain participation, it is crucial that organisations ensure that processes and goals are developed in conjunction with young people and if possible, participants are given the space to wholly shape decision-making processes and directions. Some organisations are hesitant about this as it requires letting go of some control and can be perceived as risky.

Flexibility is also a necessity for engaging and sustaining the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds, because there can be a level of uncertainty about the future which can influence their willingness to commit to long term participation processes. Like young people more generally, young people from diverse backgrounds have competing and fluctuating demands on their time, and sustained involvement is often linked to the opportunity to opt in and out of decision making as time permits.

Recommendations for effective practice:

Recognise that young people are experts in their own lives and seek top down organisational support of processes that encourage young people from diverse backgrounds (and young people more widely) to shape decision-making processes and outcomes

Don't assume that young people want to be involved continuously or for long periods of time. Provide flexibility by giving young people opportunities to determine their level of involvement and encourage young people to determine their own terms of engagement (for example, length of involvement, minimum requirement).

KEY FINDING 10

The endorsement of participation processes by key community figures can help to engage young people from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds.

Contrary to mainstream perceptions of youth participation, where young people are seen as acting on their own behalf, young people from diverse backgrounds often saw decision making as a process requiring the involvement of other key community members such as community leaders or elders. This was particularly true for some CALD young people and Indigenous young people.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure effective promotion of participation opportunities to young people and their communities, including parents, elders and relevant organisations.

- Be mindful of the gatekeeper role that parents, community leaders and organisations can play and address this by working with a range of intermediaries and clearly communicate that participation is open to young people from all backgrounds, not just young leaders or high achievers.

- Work with young people to determine the appropriate level of involvement they want from adults in their communities.

KEY FINDING 11

Determining who is involved helps organisations to identify which groups of young people are not involved.

Many organisations that currently involve young people in decision-making processes do not ask young people to identify their backgrounds or life experiences on the grounds that this may send the wrong message to participants. While asking young people about their life experiences needs to be handled with care so as to ensure that young people don't feel 'boxed,' it is equally as important for organisations to understand which groups of young people are continuously represented and which are not engaged.

Recommendations for effective practice:

- Ensure that evaluation mechanisms are planned and embedded in youth participation strategies. These should include documenting the profiles of young people who are involved in participatory decision-making processes to better understand where participation gaps exist.

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9 | APPENDIX

This appendix to the Methodology chapter is in two sections. First it provides more detailed and tabulated information of the participants in the four stages of the research project. Secondly, it provides a rationale for considering this research project's methodology as a participatory approach.

1.   DETAILED INFORMATION ON RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Government and community policy-maker forums

A brief questionnaire was distributed at the end of the forums to assess the participant's involvement in participation initiatives and to gather their feedback on the forum itself; 38 (23 from government agencies and 15 from community organisations) of 63 (thus 60%) of participants completed a questionnaire. This response rate was unforeseeably hampered by most participants in Canberra not having time to fill in the forms. Table one lists twelve common participation and consultation initiatives and shows the proportion of organisations that had used each type of initiative (four organisations did not consult young people at all). This table shows that public meetings, youth advisory groups and informal chats were the most popular initiative used by government agencies, while NGOs were most likely to have used youth advisory groups and surveys.

Table 1:   Consultation methods used by forum participants: government organisations and NGOs

Method of consultation	% State agencies who did n=23	% NGOs who did n=15
Public meetings	76%	54%
Informal chats	71%	62%
Youth advisory groups	71%	92%
Youth conferences	57%	62%
Surveys	52%	77%
Online technology	52%	31%
Activity based workshops	48%	62%
Individual interviews	38%	46%
Regular meetings	33%	54%
Games, writing, visual arts	29%	46%
Young person on board	29%	54%
Suggestion box	24%	8%
No consultation	5%	5%

Survey with service providers

Given the huge number of organisations that provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds, and the lack of existing databases, it was not possible to conduct a random sample for the survey. Instead, the sample was purposive and was structured to ensure that it provided a range with regards to type of service provider (government and community organisations); location (regional and metropolitan); jurisdiction (all state/territories), and organisational size. Four main categories of service providers were identified and surveyed:

• organisations that provide services specifically for young people

• organisations that provide services specifically for young people from diverse backgrounds

• organisations that provide services for people from diverse backgrounds (generally as opposed to youth focused)

• government departments that influence service delivery for the above stated organisations.

The sample was also constructed with four assumptions in mind. First, that young people from diverse backgrounds are clear stakeholders in the services delivered by these organisations and likely contenders for 'community-participation' processes. Second, that many community involvement processes are centred on 'service delivery' so this population was likely to 'turn up' incidences of diverse young people's involvement. Third, service providers, as an organisational category were less likely to be consulted during the face-to-face forums so gauging their feedback through the quantitative survey was especially relevant. Further, while not strictly considered as 'service providers' government departments/agencies in some cases provide services to young people from diverse backgrounds and ought to be included.

The sample of relevant organisations was built using: appropriate networks within the jurisdiction of NYARS members; established networks including CALD and Indigenous organisations as well as youth organisations; and online identification of relevant organisations. The following quotas underpinned the final sample selection:

- at least 20 per cent of organisations serviced regional/rural or remote areas

- all states/territories were represented (at least n=10 from each state and at least n=5 from each territory)

- organisations of different sizes were represented (at least 20% less than 50 staff).

Table 2:   Profile of telephone sample

Characteristic	Percentage %
Service Users	
Provide services to young people	87%
Provide services to young people from CALD backgrounds	85%
Provide services to young people from low socio-economic backgrounds	84%
Provide services to young people with a disability	75%
Provide services to new and emerging communities	74%
Provide services to Indigenous young people	68%
Provide services to young people who had been in guardianship of the Minister	62%
Organisation type	
Non-Government Organisation	75%
Government Organisation	23%
N/A	2%

Size	
Small (10 staff or less)	53%
Medium (11 – 40 staff)	32%
Large (More than 40 staff)	15%
Service type	
Information and Advocacy	85%
Individual or family support services	68%
Education Services	58%
Cultural Activities	58%
Sport and recreation	56%
Housing assistance	54%
Health	41%
Employment	38%
Other types of services	33%
Location	
Capital city	72%
Regional city or town	27%
Remote community (1)	1%
Jurisdiction	
NSW	18%
QLD	8%
VIC	16%
SA	15%
WA	11%
NT	8%
ACT	4%
TAS	11%
National	10%
Scope of service delivery	
Local	29%
Regional	28%
State/Territory	31%
National	13%

(1) The small number of organisations based in remote locations was due to the difficulties in contacting organisations based in remote communities, and a low response rate amongst these organisations.

Youth Advisory Group (YAG)

A targeted online marketing approach was used to ensure that young people from the identified diversity groups were made aware of the opportunity to take part in the YAG. A flyer and an expression of interest form were distributed via email to over 50 relevant networks and organisations. To ensure that targeted organisations had received notification and to encourage them to promote the opportunity to young people CIRCA conducted a follow-up phone call to most organisations. There was significant interest and organisations were largely supportive of the project and were happy to assist in promoting young people's participation through the YAG.

The expression of interest form was designed to be brief with questions that focused on demographic information rather than skills and experience to ensure that interested young people were not 'scared off' by a lengthy application process. Participants were given a three week window to email or fax their expression of interest forms. In total, forty-four expressions of interest were received. The most positive outcome from the recruitment approach was not the number of young people who expressed interest, but their relevance to the YAG and the research project. In particular, a higher than expected response from young Indigenous people was received, as well as young people who had been under the guardianship of the Minister. A summary of the YAG member profile is provided in Table three.

Table 3:   Profile of YAG members

Age	State	Metro/regional	Background	Gender
17 = 1*	QLD = 1	Regional = 4	Indigenous = 5	M = 8
18 – 21 = 5	ACT = 2	Outer metro (e.g NSW central coast) = 3	CALD = 2	F = 5
22 – 25 = 7	VIC = 1	Metro = 6	Disability** = 3	
	NT = 1		Had been in care of the minister 2	
	NSW = 9		Low Socio economic = 2	

*Was accompanied by a parent for duty of care purposes

** Disabilities included cerebral palsy, vision impairment and acquired brain injury

Determining whether a YAG member was from a low socio economic background was difficult as it was not appropriate to ask about the individual's economic status. While the table indicates that there were two participants from a low socio economic background, it is likely that a number of other participants also fitted this profile.

Community Audits with Case Studies

Diverse geographical locations from around Australia were selected to examine approaches to youth involvement and the factors that influence effective or ineffective engagement of young people from diverse backgrounds. The following locations were chosen:

- **Parramatta, Sydney NSW**—urban area, high Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) population (including emerging communities), young people in care populations, high youth population from low socio economic backgrounds, high number of services for people under the guardianship of the Minister;

- **Darwin City, Northern Territory**—regional capital city, high Indigenous population, high CALD population, high number of services for young people;

- **Shepparton, Victoria**— regional centre, large Indigenous population, CALD presence including recently arrived and refugee young people, significant population from low socio economic background; and

- **Townsville, Queensland**—regional centre, large Indigenous and CALD populations, services for young people in care.

In addition, at each location, there were populations of young people with disabilities and disability service providers.

Before visiting each of the community audit sites, a documentary analysis was conducted to identify formalised processes that facilitated young people's involvement in decision-making within government or community organisations. A 'formalised process' was defined as an initiative, project or mechanism used to engage or consult with young people about programmatic or policy decisions. Documentary analysis was used primarily to identify the extent and nature of decision-making opportunities available to young people, as well as additional information about organisational philosophies and understanding of youth involvement. For each location, a list of services that provided programs for young people from diverse backgrounds was identified. In each location, the following services and organisations were examined:

- Local government;

- Youth services (such as youth centres, housing services, employment agencies, settlement services, youth refuges);

- Youth education/training services (such as secondary schools, universities and TAFE);

- Youth health/well being services (such as medical services, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, sports and recreation services); and

- Diversity specific services (such as disability support services, Indigenous health services, ethnic community councils).

An important part of the community audit process involved consulting with young people from diverse backgrounds about their perceptions towards and experiences of participatory decision-making processes. Similarly, the community audits provided an excellent opportunity to consult with other stakeholders (including youth workers, support workers, program managers and policy officers) who work with young people from each of the diversity groups. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people and stakeholders in each geographical location, including:

- Young people from diverse backgrounds (including those currently engaged in formalised decision-making processes and those who were not engaged); and

- Staff involved in coordinating either formal or informal decision-making processes-both community and youth specific.

Table four provides demographic details of young people who participated in in-depth interviews and mini groups and table five lists the exemplar services that were consulted in each location. Many of these services have also been detailed in the case studies contained within the report.

Table 4:   Community audits: Interviewing young people

		Number of young people			
		Shepparton	**Parramatta**	**Darwin**	**Townsville**
Total number of participants		11	16	11	8
Involvement in formal decision making process*	Involved	2	6	7	3
	Not involved	9	10	4	5
Gender	Male	8	4	7	6
	Female	3	12	4	2
Age	14 or under	0	0	2	0
	15 – 19	6	6	4	4
	20 – 25	5	10	5	4
Background	Indigenous	1	0	4	3
	CALD	6	10	1	1
	Low SES	0	8	5	1
	In care		1	3	2
	Disability	5	5	2	2
Multiple backgrounds**	Identified with 2 or more backgrounds	1	8	6	1
Education and employment	High School	4	3	2	1
	TAFE/College	2	0	3	4
	University	0	1		1
	Not studying or employed	5	10	3	2
	Employed	0	2	3	0

* This refers to a process that is endorsed by an organisation and occurs regularly. ** In many instances young people identified with a number of the diversity groups. This data indicates the number of young people who openly identified with two or more of the diversity groups. It is likely that some young people did not indicate backgrounds such as low SES.

Table 5:   Community audits: Targeted consultations with exemplar local services

	Shepparton	Parramatta	Darwin	Townsville
Organisations consulted	ASHE – Academy of Sport, Health and Education	Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association	NT Office for Youth	Townsville City Council
	Shepparton Shire Council	Parramatta City Council	Darwin City Council	Department of Child Safety
	Cutting Edge Youth Services	Create Foundation	Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory	Townsville Migrant Resource Centre
		High school		
		Granville Multicultural Community Centre	Total Recreation – facilitates the involvement of people with disabilities in sport and recreational activities	Black Youth Voices Incorporated
		Baulkham Hills, Holroyd and Parramatta Youth Workers Network		Lead On – Bendigo Bank Youth Development Program
			Department of Justice	
			Create Foundation	
			Mission Australia	

Service providers identified young people, whereas stakeholders were identified through the documentary analysis process. All interviews required active consent. For young people aged 17 years or under, the consent of the young person's parent or guardian was sought in advance. Depth interviews were used to engage groups of young people that were less likely to attend the workshop, in particular, young people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities, young people who had been in care and young parents. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face during the site visit, however, where this was not convenient for the participant, a phone interview was organised. Each interview was an hour in length and to ensure that young people felt comfortable and supported during the interview process, participants were invited to bring a carer, parent, friend, guardian or youth worker. Advice was sought from services about the most appropriate method for consulting with young people and where advised a paired interview or a mini group discussion was conducted.

Workshops were also run with young people from diverse backgrounds in each location. The workshops were designed to bring larger numbers of young people together for a fun and interactive consultation process in an environment that was comfortable, accessible and safe. In particular, workshops were designed to engage young Indigenous people, and young people from CALD and/or low socio economic backgrounds. Local organisations were approached to assist researchers in recruiting young people from specific diverse backgrounds, with a particular aim of engaging both young people who were already involved in decision-making processes, as well as those with less experience. In most instances the workshops were tailored to cater for one to two of the five identified diversity groups. For example, in Shepparton, one workshop was run through an Indigenous organisation with the aim of involving young Indigenous people, and the second workshop was run through a local youth service that provided services to clients from CALD and low socio economic backgrounds. This approach also ensured that the research process had the capacity to support varying needs of participants such as low literacy, shyness and differing levels of English language proficiency and explore issues and experiences particular to each diversity group.

Table 6: Community audits: Organisations involved in workshops

Location	Workshop 1 - Targeted Indigenous young people	Workshop 2 – Targeted CALD and low SES young people
Shepparton	**Academy of Sport, Health and Education**, a branch of Melbourne University that uses participation in sport to undertake culturally appropriate education and training for Indigenous students. **Rumbalara Netball and Football Club,** the local Indigenous Cooperative that provides a range of sporting, health and development programs to Indigenous people.	**Cutting Edge Youth Service,** works with both rural and regional young people aged 12–25 years including young people from newly arrived, refugee and migrant backgrounds as well as same sex attracted or gender diverse young people. **Brayton Youth and Family Services** provides homeless young people aged 14–25 with the support required to make a successful transition to living independently.
Parramatta	**Nicholii Cottage Neighbourhood Centre,** a youth centre for young people who live in public housing in Wentworthville. Many clients are from Indigenous backgrounds.	**Granville Youth Centre,** a youth centre that runs drop in services as well as workshops and homework help. Many of the clients are from CALD backgrounds, particularly recently arrived young people from Africa. **Granville Multicultural Community Centre** provides a range of welfare services including settlement services and youth services. Works closely with refugee and recently arrived communities.
Darwin	Local service providers advised that in-depth interviews were the most appropriate way to involve young Indigenous people from low SES backgrounds, so a series of in-depth interviews were conducted in place of a workshop.	**The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory** has a youth council and extensive networks in the CALD community in Darwin.

Townsville	**Shalom Christian College,** a boarding and day school for Indigenous students from Queensland and the Northern Territory.	**Townsville Migrant Resource Centre** provides settlement services to newly arrived communities. **Townsville High School** has a large population of CALD students.

Participants for the workshops were recruited through word of mouth promotion where services encouraged young people in the target audiences to attend, and through the use of flyers designed by one of the YAG members. A separate flyer was designed to appeal to young men, and another for young women on the recommendation of a member of the YAG. It was felt that different imagery needed to be used to appeal to each group. To broaden the reach of the research, young people were encouraged to invite friends to the workshop, which also helped to ensure that the research environment was safe and young people felt comfortable contributing. Young people from each of the target diversity groups participated in the workshops. However, young people with disabilities were primarily consulted through in-depth interviews, as this was a more appropriate method to accommodate their complex needs.

The profile of workshop participants was:

- a total of 78 young people participated in this stage of the research. There were 29 participants in Shepparton, 26 in Parramatta, 13 in Townsville and ten in Darwin

- more than half (52%) were young people aged 15 to 17 years, 20 per cent were under 15 and 18 per cent aged 18 to 20. There were very few participants over the age of 20 (6%), most likely due to a number of workshops being hosted through organisations with younger client bases

- there were more male than female participants, with 54 per cent male and 46 per cent female

- altogether, 44 (56%) of the participants were born overseas. The most common place of birth was Sudan (ten participants), followed by Iran, Iraq and Sierra Leone (7 participants each)

- there were 21 (27%) participants from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island background

- due to the young age of the participants, most of them had not yet completed secondary school, with 43 per cent having completed Year 10 or Year 11 and 34 per

cent still completing Year 9 or under. Only 18 per cent had finished Year 12 and 1.3 per cent had a technical or tertiary qualification

- the vast majority of participants were not working (75%), most likely due to their age and enrolment in full time study. Of those who had a job, 13 per cent were casuals, 9 per cent were working part-time, and only 3 per cent were working full-time

- 15 per cent (12 participants) were or had been under the guardianship of the Minister

- it was not possible to determine the socio economic status of workshop participants, however organisations that provided services to young people with low SES were used in the recruitment process so it can be assumed that many were from low socio economic backgrounds

- young people with disabilities were consulted through in-depth interviews and as such the involvement of this diversity group in the workshops was not targeted.

Feedback from the YAG had indicated that the workshop format needed to be informal and fun to ensure high attendance and to reveal how young people related both to each other and to 'adult decision makers'. A range of activities were used to accommodate for differing participant needs with regards to English language skills, numeracy and literacy and differing attention spans.

Further, a content and functionality analysis of 64 Internet sites was conducted with the aim of identifying the scope and type of online decision making opportunities available to young people from diverse backgrounds. Sites included in the online audit were run by:

- organisations that provide services or advocate specifically for young people

- organisations that provide services or advocate specifically for young people from diverse backgrounds (as identified in the tender)

- organisations that provide services or advocate for people from diverse backgrounds (generally as apposed to youth focused)

- government offices for youth.

A content analysis framework was used to identify the types of online opportunities used by organisations to engage the input of young people. The framework utilised a broad definition of participation, including content production, online polls, feedback forms, forums and user-generated content. Subsequently an online forum with 13

young people recruited through the audited organisations was conducted. The purpose of the online forum was to engage young people from diverse backgrounds, who are active online, in a discussion about the political issues that matter to them and on using the internet to participate in government and community decision making.

2. A REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS AS A TEST OF DIFFERENT WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

This project has incorporated the principles of youth participation (empowerment, purposeful participation and inclusiveness (see YacVic, 2004) into the research methodology. This is most evident in the inclusion of a YAG, the workshop and group interview methodologies and the use of an online focus group. By reflecting on the research process itself some key insights and questions regarding the barriers and enabling factors to youth participation for young people from diverse background have emerged.

YAG

The YAG recruitment process deliberately invited interested young people to participate, noting an interest in, but not limiting participation to, the diversity groups mentioned in the terms of reference. Young people were able to bring a range of knowledge and skills to the role because the purpose of the YAG was to inform the research framework, without focusing solely on those young peoples' experiences of being 'Indigenous', 'vision impaired' or 'having been in Care'.

Involving young researchers

In three of the four community audit locations, a YAG member was involved in the set up and implementation of the workshops, a process which increased researchers' ability to access suitable young people, identify relevant organisations to host the workshops and engage more effectively with participants during the workshop. Young researchers' input was particularly valuable in ensuring that the workshop process was adapted to the local context and participants. The use of young people who lived in the geographical audit locations made it possible to encompass local knowledge during the set up and delivery of the workshop and provides an illustration of the benefits that involving young people can bring to a research process.

Workshops and group interviews

Workshops and group interviews in the community audits, located at youth centres, service providers (such as Anglicare) and diversity specific service providers (such as migrant resource centres and disability services) were intended to tap into the 'everyday' lives of young people and to investigate the informal forms of participation that had been raised by the YAG as being of importance. Hosting workshops through these venues was an effective way to engage young people from the target diversity backgrounds with at least eight participants attending each workshop. Further, targeting the involvement of a particular group of young people (for example, Indigenous or CALD young people) ensured that the workshop was tailored to the specific needs of this group. For example, in Shepparton running an Indigenous specific group allowed researchers to explore issues that were particular to the Indigenous community. It should be noted however that in some instances workshops could have been further tailored to the needs of participants. For example, it would have been beneficial to host two gender specific workshops with CALD participants in Shepparton in acknowledgement of cultural factors which could prevent young women from 'speaking up' in a mixed group.

The workshop model was chosen as it provided a more interactive, versatile and fun way to engage young people in the research process, compared with focus groups or interviews which concentrate on conversational feedback. Generally, participants engaged for the entire length of the workshop, suggesting that the format appealed to a range of young people and was an enjoyable process. The activities were designed to retrieve feedback through varied means (timelines, projective exercises, sentence completions, and photo language) to cater for a range of literacy levels and learning styles. In particular, young people who were less confident giving conversational feedback were able to contribute through smaller group discussions and self complete activities. The willingness of young people to participate in the activities suggests that this process was an effective way to engage a group of young people in the research.

However, there were a number of instances where participants found it difficult to take part in written activities. In these instances, researchers worked with participants to scribe their feedback or other young people (usually friends) assisted them in completing the activity. Generally researchers had consulted staff who worked with the participants to identify potential literacy/language difficulties, however this information was not always complete and in some instances it was difficult to cater for the needs of participants. An improved process would provide an opportunity for researchers to identify the needs of each participant and adjust the activities accordingly.

It was clear from the workshop process that incentives are vital for engaging young people in research processes, and for ensuring that the process has a social/fun component. Participants clearly valued the $30 gift voucher they received at the close of the workshop/interview and indicated that this and food had been a significant factor in their decision to attend the workshop.

Online focus group

The online focus group was distinguished by several factors which provide insight into the usefulness of the internet in facilitating participation by young people from diverse backgrounds:

- credibility: The credibility of an organisation, as well as the content posted on the site was very important to them

- trustworthiness: Young people need to trust the actions of the organisation before interacting online. This meant knowing what is done with your opinions or content. Several said that if they could see evidence of how their views were used, then they would participate in online forums run by government

- functionality and navigability. Sites which made it easy to find relevant information and 'pathways' to having a say were preferred over those which were 'clunky', or difficult to use.

The experience of running the online focus group as part of this project reinforced these factors. All of the young people who contributed had heard of or experienced Inspire Foundation initiatives and, therefore, had some level of familiarity and trust with the organisation. Lack of time and opportunities to establish a level of credibility with a wider and more diverse range of young people may have contributed to the limited number of applications and the drop-out of three young people. Further, it should be noted that differential skills and access to technology influence some young people's ability to participate via the internet. For example, this research has found that some young people may experience specific challenges related to fine motor skills impairment, literacy levels and restricted access to the internet.