



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

What's Important to YOUth Consultations

Final report

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Organisation

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) works in communities across Australia to alleviate and prevent poverty. The BSL is interested in tackling the causes of poverty linked to the way our society and economy are organised as well as the causes of poverty attributed to the individual and family level. We understand that the experience of poverty includes not only inadequate income but also exclusion from many aspects of social, civic and economic life.

The transition from completing their education to securing work is a significant turning point for all young people. It is a time of social and economic change. In particular, for young people experiencing disadvantage there are significant structural barriers that impact on this transition and their capacity to gain employment, and secure sustainable livelihoods.

In line with BSL's mission to alleviate poverty in Australia, Through School to Work (TSTW) is concerned with young people who are experiencing disadvantage. In particular, this includes those who are service connected (for example: homeless, out-of-home care, under a care order, engaged with the youth justice system), those who are experiencing poverty and financial hardship, and those who are not engaged in education, training or employment. The way in which this disadvantage is experienced is also shaped by gender and sexuality, as young men and women, and young LGBTI people may also face different and interconnecting factors of disadvantage.

The young people sourced to participate in the *What's Important to YOUTH* State Government youth policy framework consultations were drawn from three of the BSL's youth transitions programs, in the Through School to Work arena.

Youth Transitions Program (YTP)

The Youth Transitions Program (YTP) aims to build the capacity of young people aged 15-24 who are disconnected from study, training and/or work. The program provides individual career planning support; exposure to work 'tasters'; links to partnerships and the local community; and connections to other services to support the needs of young people, as well as incorporating a training program with work experience. The program operates in unemployment hotspots in the growth corridors of Melbourne (Laverton, Melton and Craigieburn), and more recently, Frankston.

Education First Youth Foyers (EFY Foyers)

Representing a new model for youth support services in Victoria, the Education First Youth (EFY) Foyers provide integrated learning and student accommodation in mainstream education settings for young people aged 16-24 years, who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Through the foyer, young people are supported to develop education and training pathways that lead to sustainable employment and enable them to flourish. The Foyers are located at Holmesglen TAFE Glen Waverley, Kangan Institute of TAFE Broadmeadows, and GOTAFE Shepparton (operational 2016).

ReSource Program

The ReSource Program, based in the City of Whittlesea, works with culturally and linguistically diverse young people to empower them to make informed decisions about their education, training, employment and volunteering pathways.

Recommendations

The consultation process demonstrated any policy or response designed for young people needs to be well co-ordinated, easily accessible, wraparound, and *genuinely youth-focussed*. While the specific issues and possible responses have been discussed in the body of the report, we feel these higher level recommendations should be considered in design of the whole-of-government youth policy:

- Young people require early intervention and holistic support, as none of the key issues identified by young people could be addressed in isolation.
- It is imperative that government services and institutions designed to meet the needs of people are youth focussed.
- Government and industry need to adopt an integrated approach to effectively connecting young people with transitional pathways.
- Youth policy needs to give privilege to youth voice, and must embrace the mediums which young people use in order to create genuine dialogue.
- The voice of young people should be embedded in the development of policies and government responses to or for youth, rather than sought periodically or tokenistically.

Methodology

These youth led consultations consisted of three youth led semi-structured focus groups and employed an iterative consultation process, comprising of several stages. Prior to the commencement of the consultations, a planning session occurred between the Strategy and Service Development (S&SD) Manager for Youth Transitions and two researchers from the BSL Research and Policy Centre (RPC), to brainstorm the format and logistics of the consultations in order to give the support facilitators a broad framework that addressed the proposal submitted as a starting point. RPC researchers developed a draft ‘session outline’, including suggestions around question design and a schedule, which was then workshopped with the EFY Foyer Student Facilitators at the Kangan Broadmeadows EFY Foyer.

Preparation and Co-design

During this workshop, the EFY Foyer Student Facilitators were provided with an interactive ‘Focus Group 101’ session. Some of the issues that may be encountered during a focus group were identified, along with strategies for facilitating a focus group to ensure all participants have a chance to be heard. Question design was discussed and agreed upon, utilising the set questions outlined by the Office for Youth as a basis. It was decided that each focus group would be led by a pair of student facilitators, for mutual support and set roles for the teams were assigned. These included:

1. Youth Notetaker: records full group discussion/reports (option to swap role half way through focus group).
2. Youth Facilitator: introduces focus group/runs through information sheet, introduces activities and questions (option to swap role half way through focus group).
3. RPC representative: support to youth facilitator, provides support with handouts/logistics, helps keep time/get people on track, offers occasional prompts, and seeks contribution from all.
4. S&SD Manager: distributes information sheets, collects demographics, takes notes on overall themes/key issues and quotes, records dynamics between participants, organises food.

Participants

Participants from three of the BSL’s programs involving young people volunteered for the consultations, including: the Youth Transitions Program, EFY Foyers (Holmesglen TAFE Glen Waverley), and (initially) the ReSource Program. In the absence of available ReSource program participants, the consultations were promoted to young people of CALD background at Whittlesea Youth Services, Whittlesea Community Connections Youth, Outer Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) and Whittlesea Youth Commitment, along with Melbourne Polytechnic Young Adult Migrant English Class (YAMEC) and the BSL Ecumenical Migration Centre. All participants of CALD background came from Whittlesea Community Connections and Whittlesea Youth Services. Participants for this focus group were accompanied by a youth worker from Whittlesea Community Connections.

It was suggested a token of appreciation be given to all focus group participants for contributing their time and opinions. This was provided in the form of a fifty dollar Coles-Myer gift card, at the completion of the two-hour focus group session.

Forum

The program co-ordinators of each cohort were consulted regarding a suitable venue for the focus groups, which was familiar to participants and where they would feel comfortable. Locations were selected based on their recommendations: Laverton Community Hub, Holmesglen TAFE Glen Waverley EFY Foyer and The Edge Youth Services (Whittlesea Council).

Participant information sheet

A participant information sheet (written by a RPC researcher) was read by the student facilitator at the start of each focus group, outlining the context of the project, aims, what is required should they choose to participate, the benefits of participation, anticipated outcomes of the consultations, and whether participants would receive a copy of the report afterwards. Following this, participant demographic information was obtained by a brief survey (see list below).

Format

The format of the focus groups was designed to allow all participants an equal chance to contribute. Participants were directed to break into smaller groups to discuss the questions, distributed on laminated cards to each group with prompts. This provided an opportunity for a large range of views to be heard and for more reserved group members to contribute. One group member would scribe on the notepad provided, before returning to the large group to report back their ideas. Ideas were grouped according to overarching themes and written on giant post-it notes which had been stuck to the walls around the room. Participants were then provided with three sticker dots and directed to vote which three issues they ranked as *most important*. The number of stickers on each issue were tallied, and the most important themes decided for the whole group. Participants were again directed to return to their small groups, this time around one of the giant post-its, to brainstorm what the government should do about this particular issue. Following this, participants would return to the larger group to discuss their responses, allowing the rest of the group a chance to add their suggestions of what the government should do to address this issue, on each of the issues identified. Support facilitators would close out the session with a group discussion of the various ways young people can be involved in this process, often supplementing this part of the session with personal examples of (political) civic participation to generate ideas.

BSL staff adopted a support role to the student facilitators during the focus groups, providing guidance to ensure the session format was adhered to, and time frames were monitored so all relevant questions could be addressed. Following each focus group, the team met to debrief and reflect upon the session. On the basis of those reflections, the consultation questions and format were reformulated where needed to streamline the process for the next session. A final post-analysis session was held at Kangan Institute of TAFE Broadmeadows with all student facilitators to debrief on the process, and agree upon the dominant themes and proposed government responses that emerged from the consultation process for the final report.

Consultation on research design was undertaken with multiple RPC researchers and an RPC research manager with years of expertise in qualitative research and focus groups.

List of questions

1. What’s important to you?
 - Today is your chance to talk about the issues that matter to you. We want to make a list that we can send to the government so they can do something about these things and make better policy and programs for you. This is your chance to be heard.
 - Another way to think about this question is to think about what you need to move ahead in your life and if there are things that are holding you back. Issues that the government should do something about.
 - Would others like to talk about one of the issues and why it is important to them?
 - Are there any issues that haven’t been listed that you want to add?

2. What should the government do about these issues?
 - What should the government do about these issues?
 - What should be their priority about this issue?
 - What else should they be doing for young people who face big challenges in life?

3. How can young people be more involved in this process
 - What is the best way for the government to ensure that they hear what youth want?
 - Would you want to get involved in any of these ways? In which ways?
 - Some other ways to get involved include:
 - Input into policies and programs
 - Participate on advisory groups
 - Work with community organisations
 - Take action with your friends/community/school
 - Would you be interested in any of these? If you wouldn't want to get involved, why is that?
 - Are there other ways the government could get young people involved that would be better for young people like you?

Demographic information

	Method	Total number participants	Age range	Gender	Cultural background Description	Location
Focus group 1	Focus group	7	16 – 21 years	6 – F 1 - M	4 Australian born 3 CALD	GC - 7
Focus group 2	Focus group	10	16 – 24 years	7 – F 3 - M	6 Australian born 4 CALD	M - 10
Focus group 3	Focus group	9	16 – 22 years	5 – F 4 - M	9 CALD	GC - 9
Total		26		18 – F 8 – M	Australian born - 10 CALD – 16	Metropolitan - 10 Growth Corridor - 17

Outcomes

1. What is important to young people

The tables below indicate the broad findings in relation to the question 'what is important to you?' asked of focus group participants. Firstly, participants came up with a list of issues that were important to them. The tables below include all of the issues identified by the young people in each group. Secondly, the issues were ranked for importance by the young people in each cohort, using sticker dots. Participants were asked to allocate a sticker dot to the three issues they considered *most important*. The top three issues for the group were calculated using a frequency count of the sticker dots. The issues were then explored in greater detail to ascertain how the young people felt the government should respond to these issues. The responses were for the most part intertwined, as participants generally discussed how the government could improve the experiences of young people while they were thinking about and discussing what was important to them and vice versa.

Focus Group 1

Group 1 ranked employment as the most important issue they are facing, with 100% of the group allocating a dot to this topic. Primary concerns were around access to employment opportunities without experience, and limited avenues for young people to obtain experience. This was followed by education (57%), with concerns cited about the cost of education, Centrelink recognition of learning, and information regarding education pathways, and the broader category of 'financial' (57%), which was primarily related to concerns about Centrelink, however these were underpinned with issues around agency and access to housing, services, and education.

TABLE 1: Group 1 (Youth Transitions Program) - 7 participants

Themes	Group 1	%
Employment	***** (7)	100%
Education	**** (4)	57%
Financial (general category)	**** (4)	57%
Domestic Violence	** (2)	28%
Housing	** (2)	28%
Transport and Safety	** (2)	29%
Mental and Physical Health	* (1)	14%
Drug and Alcohol	(0)	0%

Focus Group 2

Group 2 ranked housing as the most important issue, with 70% of the group allocating a dot to this topic. Education was second most important with 60% of respondents ranking this as one of their top three issues, followed by health, identifying a number of issues around access to health services and suggested improvements to existing services. It should be noted young people living at the EFY Foyers have experienced or been at risk of experiencing homelessness and as part of 'the deal' for residing at the Foyer, young people are required to engage in education or training for the duration of their stay. In addition, most respondents in this group reported having experiences with mental health services.

TABLE 2: Group 2 (EFY Foyer Holmesglen Glen Waverley TAFE) - 10 participants

Themes	Group 2	%
Housing	***** (7)	70%
Education	***** (6)	60%
Mental and Physical Health	***** (5)	50%

Gender Issues	**** (4)	40%
Employment	*** (3)	30%
Public transport	*(1)	10%
Centrelink/Welfare	(0)	0%
Environmental concerns	(0)	0%

Focus Group 3

Group 3 ranked both education and employment equally as the most important, with 78% of participants allocating a dot to these topics. A number of concerns were identified around transferable experience, both for employment opportunities (experience in their home country not being recognised in Australia) and having their previous education qualifications recognised in Australia, along with confusion and a lack of assistance navigating Australian (Victorian) processes relevant to these areas. Transport was the second biggest issue identified, with 67% of participants placing a dot on this topic. Location specific (outer Northern Suburbs) concerns around the frequency of services and the cost of transport were cited by participants. Transport concerns were correlated with concerns around education and employment, as transport provided a link to both.

TABLE 3: Group 3 (young people of CALD background) - 9 participants

Themes	Group 2	%
Education	***** (7)	78%
Employment	***** (7)	78%
Transport	***** (6)	67%
Health (physical)	** (2)	22%
Racism/Equal Opportunities	* (1)	11%
Housing	* (1)	11%
Leisure spaces	(0)	0%

Summary of Focus Group Findings

Five issues were raised across *all* of the focus groups: education, employment, housing, transport and physical and mental health. Overall, concerns around education and employment were considered the most important issues for participants. 65% of participants allocated a dot to these issues, almost double the other areas. During each focus group, participants expressed concerns about these issues which were specific to their location and personal circumstances, however they were all concerned about: the need for equal opportunities for young people to obtain employment, the need for experience to obtain employment without the means to obtain it, and the cost of education.

TABLE 4: Overall themes from both groups - 26 participants (total)

Themes	Total	%
Employment	17	65%
Education	17	65%
Housing	10	38%
Transport	9	35%
Mental and Physical Health	7	26%

2. What should the government be doing about these issues (possible policy objectives)

Employment

- Young people need opportunities for suitable work experience,
- Young people need access to employment opportunities,
- Young people are concerned about youth wages,
- Young people are concerned with discrimination

Access to experience was a pressing issue for *all* participants, as this was identified as a primary barrier to securing employment. Participants in each group cited not being able to get their 'foot in the door' due to their lack of prior work experience and limited personal networks that could mitigate this. Young people with limited networks found accessing experience very difficult. The young people spoke of the contradiction between employers only hiring people with experience, while being unwilling to give young people the opportunity to gain this experience. Many felt effectively shut out from the job market due to this cycle, and felt the government needed to take initiative to influence industry and facilitate opportunities for young people to systematically address this imbalance.

As soon as you finish X, Y, or Z (education / training) you come straight out and there's some kind of proper link to a job, if they could just somehow work it out with industry or whatever, marry them together. Not just subsidies, cause [sic] it will be like the RTOs, heaps of people will sign up, look like they've got these people on paper – like 711 right now, and it won't be effective. (Male, EFY Foyer student).

Approximately half the young people of CALD background reported that despite having prior experience in their home countries, employers did not seem to recognise this as it was not 'Australian experience', even if it was the same industry / role. This group came up with some ideas for how the government could provide support to overcome this, such as partnerships with industry to provide free short courses to prepare young recent migrants and asylum seekers for their first entry level job. These courses would be linked to employment opportunities through participating employers. Employers could then draw from a pool of motivated young people (those that have completed the training), with the government providing some form of wage subsidy to employers. This would allow this cohort to overcome the initial hurdle of 'getting their foot in the door' while providing them with the locally specific skills employers appear to desire. Another participant suggested the government could fund internships that led to guaranteed employment for recently arrived young people.

Overall, participants in each group felt that the options available to them to source job opportunities were inadequate, and rarely led to employment. Not one participant reported successfully securing employment via Centrelink, an employment agency or online job-seeking sites such as Seek or MyCareer. A number who had changed over to Jobactive Providers from JSAs reported they found the service impersonal, the social workers were largely inaccessible, and the new format of undertaking activities or discussing your circumstances in a group setting made participants uncomfortable. One male from the Foyer group classified them as 'all obligations and no results'. In addition to this, these experiences were often frustrating and /or demoralising:

There's a lot of stigma at employment agencies if you're young and unemployed that you're lazy, I was told by a Centrelink worker in person, 'You are a parasite to the community'. (Female, EFY Foyer student).

Participants felt these services needed to be tailored to young people, suggesting this could be via direct advertising on social media or in youth or community centres. The second focus group suggested government

funding could be directed to the development of a youth-specific employment agency which established links to employers that provided tangible job opportunities, and took into account some of the difficulties young people experience, such as access transport or internet, or lack of phone credit to make calls. Appropriate resourcing and employer engagement was reportedly essential to avoid duplication of the issues experienced with existing services.

Wages for young people and discrimination based on age and / or cultural background were also of concern for the participants. One female from the first group reported the minimum wage posed a barrier to securing employment, highlighting young people are often too old to be considered for an entry level position in retail or hospitality, ‘they really want young-young people because they’re cheaper than 20 years olds’. This concern was echoed by a male from the third group, who felt the minimum wage should be abolished, and wages should be related to skills and competencies, so employers would hire on this basis as opposed to hiring the most cost effective option. Those that were employed highlighted the impact of inadequate wages for young people in casual or part time employment, which they felt the government needed to increase, in particular for those that were independent and responsible for paying for accommodation and other living costs.

If it was something you could actually live off, like, if you’re paying lets say one hundred and fifty dollars a week in rent, for a share-house, and you earn maybe four hundred dollars a fortnight, there’s nothing left to live off of, to pay other bills, pay internet - which is basically a requirement these days, pay for food, transport, and have some semblance of a life. (Female, EFY Foyer student).

One female employed casually at a fast food restaurant reported that she earned just over \$9 per hour, and another participant outlined that when she worked in a similar role at that age she was paid just over \$6 an hour. This was still enough to make a significant improvement to her circumstances, as she reported ‘if I didn’t have a job I’d have nothing’. This was compounded by the fact that one could not complain about pay or conditions, due to fears they were easily replaceable by their employer.

Participants from the CALD group reported they felt discriminated against by employers as a result of having an accent and / or a language barrier. They believed they often did not get through to the interviews stage as employers screened their applications based on having a non-Australian sounding name. One of the group suggested they ‘anglophile’ their names to get around this. Participants from the other two focus groups felt they were periodically discriminated against based on their age, however felt equal opportunity policies would not alleviate this, as employers simply disregard or work around these.

Education and Training

- Young people required appropriate guidance and support to make informed education and training decisions,
- Young people require greater assistance with the costs of education,
- Young people feel all progressive learning should be recognised,
- Better policing of private RTOs is required

Young people in the first focus group emphasised the importance of provisions for young people to access the advice and support they require to make informed decisions about education and training, which correlated with future employment opportunities, as this was not provided by their personal networks. Several participants indicated they were uncertain about what they wanted to do for work or study, however did not know where to go to obtain guidance in relation to this. This was exacerbated by the fact that all were early school leavers who could not access this via school. Although all participants in this group were engaged with Centrelink in some capacity, they felt Centrelink did not provide this service.

One female participant reported that her education choices were determined by Centrelink requirements, reporting pressure to engage in *any* form of education or training rather than options which were suitable and had links to meaningful employment opportunities. Participants from the first and third group felt the government 'expected' young people to go to university and alternatives to this were seen as lesser. One 19 year old male of CALD background echoed this, reporting that his school prioritized pathways to university and did not develop non-academic skills. In addition, he felt schools did not inform students of the alternate pathways into university following school, creating the impression that obtaining a high ATAR score determined your future. Participants from the first group appeared to lack the necessary information to make an informed decision about undertaking a university degree, in particular regarding the cost and processes of fees and obtaining loans. This reportedly discouraged university as a consideration for all members of this group.

Participants from the CALD group identified a need for specialized guidance navigating the Australian education system. They felt educational institutions lacked the knowledge, expertise and facilities to deal with the often quite specific issues of recent migrants. One young male who had been in Australia since secondary school reported he felt the process was compounded for young people who arrived after secondary school, as they did not have an Australian entry (ATAR) score. One male asylum seeker reported that despite having two tertiary qualifications in his home country, and very high marks from secondary school, his (university) application was rejected by VTEC two years in a row without explanation. By chance, he overheard a conversation with another international student and realized that while he had his certificates translated, as he had been advised to do, he had not obtained an equivalency certificate, which was the requirement. He was frustrated that despite speaking with a number of people during this two year process, no-one had informed him of this. He felt that young people who have recently arrived in Australia were somehow meant to just 'know' the various processes involved in applying to university, or getting into a course, or who to speak to about this. A number reported they relied on peer as opposed to professional guidance to obtain this information. In addition to this, participants from this group reported they had different needs and issues depending on which country they came from, and as such a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to international students was not sufficient.

This group suggested the government fund the development of a website or online portal that streamlines all this information and is specifically tailored to international students. This website would link you to the correct avenues to apply for training or further education (VCAA, VTEC etc), how to access fee help or student loans, loan allocations for certain courses, reputable RTOs, and course information. This should be accessible in multiple languages to assist students that have recently arrived who still have not learnt or have limited English.

Participants in each group had concerns in relation to the cost of education, and felt this needed to be a priority for government. One female early school leaver mentioned the cost of public schools was too high, stating her sister's school charged over \$1200 yearly which was a significant expense for her parents. Another from this group reported she had planned to start a hairdressing course, however it cost \$1000, which was *'a grand I don't have'*.

Participants in the second group felt strongly that the cost of education should not act as an inhibitor to learning, with one young male stating

what if there's, like, some super genius kid who can't afford to go to university and just loses his opportunity, and he was the guy that was going to come up with the cure for cancer?

They felt the government should provide free post-secondary education, ban privatization of universities or TAFEs, stop increasing student fees and provide no-interest student loans.

Given many in this group lacked financial and other support from family networks, a number alluded to the high out of pocket costs associated with studying, which were not covered by HECS or HELP loans. Participants in this group believed the government needed to provide additional financial support to young people experiencing disadvantage in order to assist with these costs. Further, this funding should be easily accessible for those who actually need it. Participants from the CALD group identified concerns that HECS or HELP loans were only available for certain courses, and only partially available for others. One female reported that as you will be paying this loan back, you should be able to utilize it for whichever course you would like to undertake. She reported having to change her course selection due to this, as she could not afford the upfront cost. Those who were permanent residents, but were not on humanitarian visas, reported they were required to pay upfront fees unless they were able to secure a scholarship. Overwhelmingly, the underlying message was equity, each group felt the government needed to assist young people who did not have the resources to fund or access education independently and felt the process to attain assistance should not act as a deterrent to further learning.

Participants in the first group felt any form of training or learning undertaken by early school leavers should be recognised by Centrelink (as meeting activity requirements) if it is geared towards future education or employment opportunities. Participants cited the fact that the Youth Transitions Program only met Centrelink activity requirements if they undertook the accredited training component of the program. Group members felt this devalued their participation in the program, and made them less likely to undertake such programs. This group also advocated for changes to course eligibility requirements for early school leavers, reporting the majority of courses require a Year 12 pass for entry, or entry as a mature age student. A number of participants voiced their experience with this situation, reporting it excludes a young people who did not complete Year 12 but are not over the age of 21 (age of eligibility). Participants in group one and two reported there should be no limitations on government subsidised courses if they had already completed a course at the same level, as had it provided employment opportunities they would not need to undertake another course.

Additionally, concerns were highlighted about the unethical practices of a number of private RTOs, and the impact this had on vulnerable young people who lacked the know-how to be discerning about provider selection:

*Countless RTO's pop up, you know, offering Certificate III in complete bulls**t... they give you hope, they almost guarantee you a job, and in particular if you don't understand how the system works they offer you a five month course and you think you're getting an apprenticeship, but it's a pre-apprenticeship, and then you're left with nothing after they get all the money from the government. They'll run a sausage sizzle at the train station in poorer areas, where there's of course all these people with issues, and they say an education will fix this AND you get an Ipad, what are you going to say – no? It seems like a God send. (Male, EFY Foyer student).*

I remember one time this guy called me up, I don't know where he got my number from, called me up for 40 minutes and he was trying to persuade me to do a business management course and I'd get a free laptop. You know I kept saying to him, look buddy, I'm already studying, it's not my field, I'm happy with what I'm doing. It's not just that, even with education providers, the corruption within that system is completely rampant I've had friends telling me it's a 10 week course they rock up for 2 weeks and they're signed off. (Male, EFY Foyer student).

They felt government funding should only be provided to reputable RTOs, and this needed to be heavily policed. They wanted government funding to be directed to providers who would adequately equip young people with the skills required for their particular field / industry.

Transport

- Young people want public transport networks and hours of operation extended,
- Young people want access to free or cheaper public transport costs,
- Some young people want more assistance to obtain their licence

Transport issues were prioritised by a number of participants given its interconnection with access to services, travel to work, education or training, and engagement in leisure or social activities. As such, limited access to transport served as another inhibitor to engagement in education and employment. Participants in the first and third group, who were situated in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, were largely reliant on what they deemed an unreliable and irregular bus service. In addition to this, they reported bus stops were few and far between. As such, many had to walk in excess of twenty minutes to get to a bus stop, with wait times of up to an hour in between services. Female participants cited corresponding safety concerns about the isolation of bus stop locations. In addition, services stopped running much earlier than in metropolitan areas, which participants found restrictive. Participants felt the government needed to extend the working hours of buses, along with developing additional routes and increasing the number of services that run daily. They felt greater pressure needed to be placed on private providers to meet punctuality targets and communicate late or cancelled services. Although participants in the second group had a greater range of transport options available to them due to their proximity to the train station and a wider range of bus services, they too felt the government should extend the transport network (in particular trains), increase the number of train, tram and bus services running daily, and wanted public transport to run 24/7, even if for the later hours it was infrequent.

The cost of public transport was also a problem for participants, and this was exacerbated for those who were in full-time study, or those that were unemployed or underemployed. One participant from the third group characterised it as a cycle, reporting that without employment, he did not have money to put on his MYKI, however this prohibited him from attending job interviews or being able to access employment services, or places like the library where he could use the internet. For those that were underemployed, limited funds in between pay cycles meant getting to work was at times difficult. Some were unable to rely on parents or friends to loan them money, which meant turning down shifts as they could not afford to travel to work. Another male in full time study reported he had travelled from the outer Northern suburbs each weekday to go to university. He stated that even with a concession, his travel costs accounted for a substantial portion of his fortnightly Youth Allowance allocation, and this was exacerbated by the MYKI machines regularly charging him twice when he 'tapped' on and off. A number of other participants from the third group reported similar experiences with MYKI machines, an issue which was magnified due to their limited funds. Several participants from this group reported they were unfamiliar with the process by which to redeem these incorrect charges, and this was often compounded by a language barrier. Participants suggested the government should implement free public transport travel for students and unemployed young people who did not have a car, or significantly reduce fees for people in this category.

Participants in the CALD group reported it was difficult to obtain a drivers licence in Australia, due to the significant number of supervised hours they were required to undertake (a minimum of 120) and the cost of driving lessons. They highlighted their need to be able to access regular, affordable driving lessons to enable them to pass their test, and suggested the government subsidise these for young people who could not afford or access lessons independently. While some participants utilised the VicRoads L2P – Learner Driver Mentor Program, they felt the government should either establish additional programs like this, or increase the number of young people that could access this program, as the waitlists in the outer northern suburbs were lengthy.

Housing

Housing was a concern for participants in each group,

- the difficulties young people face accessing housing.
- inadequate government support for young people that cannot live at home,
- lengthy wait list for public housing,
- insufficient crisis accommodation
- the difficulty and high cost of accessing private rental properties if you are young, experiencing disadvantage and have no rental history.

One participant reported ‘DHS won’t give you a house until your parents actually kick you out’, another two females from this group reported that even if this happens there is still a lengthy process until you obtain secure housing, and if you do obtain it the support ends there. When asked to elaborate on this one stated,

‘they think if they give you a house that’s all you need... like you don’t hear from them after that’.

They indicated that ongoing wraparound support was required in a variety of areas, in addition to just a roof over their heads. Others felt that for those who lack a supportive family unit, the

‘State’s your parents... they’re meant to take you in, but they don’t’.

There was general agreement amongst the group on this issue; indicating participants felt doubly let down, first by their family, and then by the government, who they felt should be supporting them in the absence of family support.

Participants in the second group outlined how difficult it was to navigating the complex, often fragmented service system when you have not been exposed to this before. This was compounded by inadequate crisis accommodation services, where assistance was prioritized to those in the ‘worst-case-scenarios’:

What you were saying about people not knowing where to go to resolve things, because they haven’t had experience, or been through it before, with homelessness, I had no idea where to go or who to talk to , and that was a really bad thing, maybe in the education system, I mean it’s sad that it could be necessary, but they should have some sort of education about what to do if you’re in crisis. (Male, Certificate III).

This ties in to the DHS stuff we were talking about earlier, I applied to live (at the Foyer) a few months before I came here, I was in a bad situation that was worsening but I guess it wasn’t bad enough for me to be accepted, and then things worsened and I got in. So it’s sort of bad how that works but it makes some sense as well, there are other people in dire situations. (Male, high school student).

Participants from the second group appeared to internalize the notion that whoever is in the ‘worst’ situation is the most ‘deserving’ of help. However, at the same time they expressed repeated frustrations around the about the absence of support they received and their feeling that they were totally alone, with only themselves to rely on.

Participants from the first and second group felt the government needed to significantly increase funding to the homelessness sector, along with additional wraparound support for young people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Foyer students felt there should be more ‘places like Foyers’, whereas participants from the first group felt there needed to be an increase in the number of ‘one stop shop’ services, that provided assistance with housing while addressing other well-being concerns.

Participants in the second group reported young people needed to be educated on how to access housing, for those who were not in immediate crisis but were simply leaving their family home, whether this was for study, employment or independence. They felt the government needed to take more active role in assisting young people who were venturing out on their own, particularly for those with limited resources. They suggested some sort of system where the government could provide a rebate to landlords who rented a property to

young people with no rental history. In addition to this, they found the rental assistance allocation laughable, given the cost of private rentals in Melbourne. They suggested the provision of rent subsidies for students and young people experiencing disadvantage, reporting housing was a basic need not a privilege.

Mental and Physical Health

- Young people require additional support for mental health concerns,
- Young people want access to specialist, youth-specific health care services,
- Non-citizens experiencing disadvantage require access to government-funded health care

Participants in each of the groups felt the government needed to take action to ensure equal access for young people experiencing disadvantage to mental and physical health treatment and services. This was underpinned by the notion that health care was a basic right, that should be accessible by all.

Participants in the second group reported the number of sessions available under the mental health care plan is insufficient if you are experiencing a persistent and debilitating mental health condition. They felt access to intensive, free mental health treatment was required, as sometimes seeing a psychologist for hour long sessions periodically was inadequate to meet their needs,

‘sometimes I had (the mental health care plan) and I was in a pretty good place, but when I wasn’t, it wasn’t enough’ (Male, 17 years).

Young people in this group highlighted the need for increased mental health funding, early intervention, targeted and long-term support. One female participant reported education needed to be provided to parents from an early age so they could better identify and respond to their children’s mental health concerns. When asked how to approach this, she suggested schools should run regular, mandatory mental health information nights. She felt this could have a compounding benefit of reducing stigma and enabling young people to access the treatment they need before their condition worsens. This was reiterated by one young male participant who had struggled with mental health issues since his early teens:

I appreciate they put in prevention strategies but it’s almost not until it become too late, like not for everybody, but you know, but it’s not until something becomes a big issue that people will condition gets too bad. I just think that, like you know, the help should be there sooner rather than later (Male, Certificate III).

Participants in this group felt the government should fund specialist youth health service centres, where young people experiencing disadvantage could access a range of health services, not just basic physical health care, including dental, optical, physiotherapy and other specialist services. They reported that while these were accessible via the public health system, there were lengthy waitlists. One female group member outlined she had to undergo a series of neurological scans and tests as they believe she has epilepsy. While these tests were covered by a referral from her doctor, she had to pay to get the report results in excess of two hundred dollars, asking the question:

‘where am I going to find that kind of money? I’m homeless!’.

Two female participants in the CALD group, who had recently arrived in Australia but were not on a humanitarian visa and thus were not eligible for Medicare or a health care card, stated they were currently unable to afford health care as they were unemployed. They felt the government should be able to assist them to access health care until they could find a job. When asked, they reported they were unaware that certain community agencies may be able to help with this, reiterating they felt the government should be able to help. While mental health was not mentioned in this group, and was only referenced by one female in the first group, it should be noted that participants in the second group that spoke extensively about mental health issues live together, and as such may have been more comfortable discussing this topic.

3. How can young people get involved (opportunities for policy or programmatic co-design)

Participants in each of the groups demonstrated a desire to be involved in influencing government youth policy, through their participation in the focus groups. However, they felt they were not 'entitled' to get involved, did not possess the information about how to get involved, or felt they lacked the skills to be involved.

Responses described how shut out of the democratic process some young people feel, either because they are too young to vote, not counted as important on the basis of being a 'tax payer' because they were unable to get a job, or were not Australian citizens.

For me, I feel like I am still a guest in Australia, I can't claim something as I am not citizen here. You don't have the right to ask for something, it's not yours, you know what I mean? I know I'll probably be citizen [sic] one day, but even if you feel like this country is your country, officially you are not citizen [sic], so you can't say for instance, 'why are you doing that', to politician [sic], even if it is your second home. We have a saying in my country, in our language, 'if you are a guest you should be polite'. (Male, Syrian asylum seeker).

I feel Australian, but officially I am not, because I don't have the right to elect. I know that I will be living here forever, but I see how people see me if I ask for something, if I ask someone that is [sic] politician 'do this for me', he will probably say 'you are not Australian, you do not have the right' [sic]. (Male, CALD background).

This notion of 'knowing their place' was specific to participants of CALD background, however one male asylum seeker reported that he subverted this by sharing his opinions with Australian friends that could vote or be politically involved.

Others reported a disconnect with the current political system, highlighting a lack of understanding of what the current government stood for, along with the policies and programs they design and implement. Participants reported that the government appeared removed from their personal experiences and they did not engage with political parties, instead single issues were more meaningful to them.

Participants from each group identified the need to build a relationship between young people and government, in which communication and consultation was embedded, so young people had a consistent voice in government decision making. There were various suggestions as to how this should occur.

It's about asking the right person, if you ask the right politician in the right way they'll give you the right response. The only real way to get that message across is, I guess, to have some sort of relationship with that person, so I guess through things like this (focus group) a relationship can be built and the government can be there so they can hear it out. Cause [sic] there's a difference between listening and hearing someone. (Male, CALD background).

One LGBTI male stated that he felt the best way for the government to understand what was really 'going on' with young people (in particular those experiencing disadvantage) would be to sit and talk with them 'face to face'. He felt in this setting they would not be able to distance themselves from the issues they were facing, or act like it was only a problem for certain 'difficult' young people. He stated it was imperative that the government look into channels to make communication processes more accessible. Another female participant student suggested the establishment of a body of youth leaders or representatives that could advocate to government on their behalf, while being an *accessible* intermediary for young people. Participants felt their input should be integrated as standard practice, rather than in an ad-hoc fashion (such as one-off consultations) in response to particular youth crises. Some expressed a degree of cynicism this would occur due to their experiences to date, with one female participant reporting

'they don't show us that they want to listen to us in the first place'.

Participants reported an interest in the government increasing the avenues by which young people can speak out and be heard. Respondents from each group reported they would be interested in participating in similar opportunities as the youth consultations, although this appeared contingent on whether there was evidence, in the form of (policy) changes, that their views had been heard. A number of participants indicated it could be beneficial to provide young people with the means to contact politicians, stating they were unaware how to locate or contact their local representative, and that they may utilise this forum to have their say. Some were uncertain about the impact this would have,

'they have thousands of people writing to them everyday, so the likelihood of them A - actually reading them properly and then, B - taking it on board... it's small' (female, high school student).

A lack of familiarity with processes by which they could get involved was raised by a number of participants.

What advisory programs? People don't know what those things are or where to link in with them... like most (young people) wouldn't even know you could just email your local MP, we're not educated about that kind of stuff. If there was like a community group where I could go and, like, say issues I would like to advocate on behalf of, I would be happy to do that. The thing is I just don't know how to do that, or where to find one of those things. (Female, University Student).

Social media was referenced in each of the focus groups as a platform through which all participants felt they would be more likely to engage with government. When asked, most participants reported they would be interested in signing petitions on social media. It appeared that motivation increased if the issues were of personal significance, with one male participant of CALD background stating

'it depends what the issue is about, if you really care about that thing, you go for it. So it has to be about stuff that's important to you.

News polls on particular issues were another means by which they felt they would engage, however one participant advised

"not many [young] people read the newspaper, if they used social media we'd be more likely to see it and do them".

One female participant suggested an online portal/website where young people could access information about government policy and platform, along with responding from a youth perspective. This would need to be appropriately publicised so young people knew about it.

Upon reflection during the post analysis session, one of the support facilitators commented that young people experiencing disadvantage have bigger problems to worry about than how they can influence government policy. He reported that

'they're expecting us to give without giving anything in return',

suggesting until the basic needs of this cohort are met, they will not be in a position to invest in policy discussions with government, as this is so low on their list of priorities.

Conclusion

The consultation process provided a wealth of information about the numerous ways young people feel current government responses do not address the barriers they face in relation to engagement with education, training and employment, and which youth services do not meet their well-being needs. Participants felt that none of the issues they outlined could be addressed in isolation, as they were deeply intertwined.

Essentially, the young people we spoke to wanted equal citizenship and access. They identified mechanisms by which they are effectively shut out of the democratic process, and called for the meaningful inclusion of their voices in government policies, programs and approaches which are designed *for* young people.

The young people displayed high motivation during the consultation process to have their voices heard and this is something we believe can be build upon in future policy discussions. The young people wanted to be recognised for their contribution, as we know that involvement in civic participation contributes to feelings of positive purpose in young peoples lives. When provided with the opportunity we found these young people are eager to contribute to society and this should be harnessed. This consultation further strengthened our belief that the voices of young people are important, relevant, and can effect real change.