

What's Important to YOUth

YACVic Final Report: Portland

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Organisation	The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria.
Recommendations	<p>1. The Victorian Government should regularly connect with young people in rural and regional areas</p> <p>Young people in both focus groups said they had little or no contact with the Victorian Government and would like more involvement and engagement. Young people suggested that government use social media to disseminate information to them. However, young people felt meaningful and effective engagement could only come via contact with a real person: a Victorian Government representative who would consult and work with them four to six times a year to provide the government with a regular update on local youth issues. Young people felt this would demonstrate the Victorian Government's genuine interest in engaging with them.</p> <p>2. The Victorian Government should provide more comprehensive social and emotional educational programs in schools</p> <p>Young people in both focus groups agreed that the Victorian Government should provide mandatory, comprehensive education around social and emotional issues (i.e. sexual health, mental health, drugs & alcohol, bullying, discrimination, etc.). Participants reflected that they had received some education about some of these issues, but this was not timely, comprehensive or on-going (e.g. sex education one year but then nothing for the next two years). Young people also suggested that social and emotional education should commence in early primary school and be on-going until the completion of secondary school so that students can learn age-specific and appropriate information and increase their learning as they develop physically, socially and emotionally.</p> <p>3. The Victorian Government should provide more diverse opportunities for youth participation and engagement in regional areas</p> <p>Focus group participants felt there was little to do in their communities for young people and that opportunities for community involvement and/or youth leadership and participation in decision making were minimal. Some young people also expressed a frustration that leadership positions (especially in mainstream schools) went to students who were already empowered; they felt this additionally marginalised young people considered to be 'bad students'. Participants suggested the government invest in funding and resources to create a range of activities, clubs and leadership and participation opportunities for young people in regional areas for to engage with their community and decision-makers, and that these initiatives be youth-friendly and action-focused to maintain momentum and motivation for young people.</p>

Methodology

On Tuesday 13 October 2015, YACVic undertook two focus groups in Portland:

1. six students enrolled in the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement Program, conducted on-site at the program's venue;
2. two students involved in local government youth leadership programs – FReeZA and Glenelg Shire Council Youth Advisory Group (YAG) – conducted in a meeting room at Council, where young people regularly meet to organise events, etc. [NB: we were originally expecting 6-8 participants for this session but, unfortunately, a number of young people cancelled at short notice].

Each focus group was facilitated by Kate Wilde of The Human Development Workshop, on behalf of YACVic.

Materials used

- Flash Cards
- Butchers Paper/textas
- Continuum Cards (Agree/disagree)
- Discussion sheets (Listing one point from each of the draft objectives)

Format

Focus group participants were presented with cards listing the issues identified by young people as important to them (i.e. education, mental health, etc.). Groups were also presented with two blank cards. The facilitator went through each issue with the groups, ensuring they understood its meaning and answering questions. The facilitator then asked young people to physically represent how important/relevant they felt each issue was by placing the cards on the floor between two signs at either end of the room, labelled 'very important' and 'not important'. The facilitator also invited participants to use the blank cards to write down any other issues they felt were important but not included in the existing issues cards.

Support and engagement strategies used

A guiding principle of the focus groups was that they should be engaging and reciprocal and that participants should feel their time and input was valued and the experience was worthwhile and positive. As the goal of focus groups was to ascertain young people's feedback, views and ideas about the direction of the government youth policy, it was also essential to ensure the language with which ideas were presented was appropriate for participants, taking into account their age, experiences and literacy levels.

With these principles in mind, the facilitator employed the following strategies to support young people in the consultation process and maintain their interest and engagement:

- Personal interest – 'story telling' and sharing. The facilitator was proactive in getting young people to share information about themselves, their interests and lives prior to starting the more formal consultation process. In this way young people were able to build some rapport with the facilitator and also speak about issues which they knew well and were confident to discuss. The facilitator reciprocated the process, sharing some basic information about herself and her experiences in Portland.
- Providing participants with flashcards, continuum cards and discussion sheets that were in 'youth-friendly' language so they felt confident about the information being presented. Using these different methods to present information also broke sessions up and maintained energy levels
- Creating an informal, fun and friendly environment where young people could eat, take breaks, share serious ideas - as well as joke around, and speak their mind publically as well as privately about the issues being presented.
- Letting participants know that their input and ideas were valued. This was

expressed verbally as well as demonstrated materially with each participant receiving a \$20 Coles/Myer gift card at the conclusion of the session.

List of questions used

Questions used in focus groups were based on those provided in the Non-Government Consultation Guide – Young People document, under ‘issues’, ‘draft objectives and ‘co-design.’ These questions were paraphrased to make them less formal/more conversational and simple follow up questions were used to explore young people’s answers further (i.e. the facilitator asked for examples).

Demographic information

Focus Groups	Total number participants	Age range	Gender	Cultural background	location
2	8	14 – 16 yrs	6 - F 2 - M	7 – Australian Born 1 – Indigenous	RR - 8

Outcomes – Key findings

Generally, young people felt all issues raised in the What’s Important to YOUth? consultations were important. However, both focus groups chose the issue of alcohol and drugs as most important to them.

Alcohol and drugs

Focus groups participants named alcohol, marijuana and ‘ice’ (methamphetamine) as drugs of concern in their community. All respondents agreed that binge drinking at parties was common among young people and often led to risk-taking behaviours such as unwanted/unplanned sex, ‘pranks’ (such as jumping off roofs, vandalism, etc.) and violence. Binge drinking at parties was seen as socially acceptable. Most young people obtained their alcohol through older friends or siblings.

Most young people had direct experiences or knowledge of other young people binge drinking and/or using marijuana. Marijuana was also seen as a socially acceptable drug at parties. However, focus group members indicated that, in contrast to alcohol, some young people used marijuana on a daily basis and outside of social settings. Participants saw this to be problematic marijuana, leading to addiction and lack of motivation, which in turn led to other issues such as non-attendance at school.

While most focus group participants mentioned ‘ice’ as a concern, follow up questions indicated that their experiences around ‘ice’ were largely second-hand or hearsay. Some participants mentioned that drug use in the community created secondary issues of feeling unsafe and/or gave their town a bad reputation.

Employment

Employment also ranked as an important issue with focus group participants, particularly the young people who attended the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement Program. Participants felt it was extremely difficult for young people to find work locally as employers want people with ‘experience’, but it was impossible to gain this experience without a job. Participants also expressed that wages and conditions for young people were poor and that some young people leave existing jobs for this reason.

Mental Health

Young people in the FReeZA/YAG focus group felt mental health was an important issue for their community and that there was a lack of information and services locally. Specifically, participants mentioned depression as the most common mental health concern among their peers. Young people felt that there was little education about this in their schools.

Other Issues

Focus groups were provided with two blank cards to write down other issues they felt were important that were not included in the original list.

Between the two groups, three issues were written down:

- **Bullying**

Both groups of young people wrote a 'bullying' card and related this to poor mental health outcomes and early school leaving. Young people at the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement Program expressed surprise that this was not one of the issues already listed in the What's Important to YOUth? consultation framework, and indicated that young people's use of social media to 'cyber bully' others was a big problem for them and their peers. When the facilitator asked follow-up questions about what they thought could be done/any successful programs or interventions they knew of, the group was pessimistic about the possibility of change and expressed that they felt: "It's not going to get any better". Bullying was also prioritised in participants' feedback on the What's Important to YOUth? draft objectives (please see below).

- **Sexual Health**

Young people at the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement focus group identified sexual health as a concern, but were generally reluctant to talk about why this was a priority issue. Some discussion ensued around young people not practising safe sex, the risk of teenage pregnancy (which was identified as more of a concern than contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI's), young people having sex at a younger age and the lack of good education in schools around sexuality and sexual health.

- **Community Safety**

Young people at the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement focus group asked for an additional blank card and added the issue 'Community Safety'. All of the focus group participants agreed that they felt unsafe walking around Portland in the evening or at night. Two young men stated they felt particularly vulnerable to attack ("getting rolled"). Linked to this issue was the fact that they felt there were no safe youth spaces in their community where young people could go to hang out or enjoy free/cheap activities, which meant young people ended up hanging out on the streets.

Focus group participants' feedback on draft objectives

Objective 1:

- Government should use social media better (particularly Facebook) to engage with more young people.
- Government should find better ways to get young people interested, e.g. incentivize input through more rewards, competitions, etc.
- Create a direct connection, via a real person, between young people and the government. Young people at the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement focus group used the focus group as an example, reflecting they had never participated in anything like this before and that it "feels good to have someone ask our ideas and opinions".
- The FReeZA/YAG group suggested "something with women" – further discussion revealed that they felt they mainly see men in politics and this made them "switch off".
- Government could do a better job of using existing groups (such as student representative councils) to communicate with them.

Objective 2:

- Government should create more 'real world' opportunities to experience different types of jobs while young people are still at school.
- 'One Stop Shops' – the government should create programs or centres specifically for young people where they can learn about jobs and get 'hands on' experience in a range of areas at the same time.

- Government should make it easier for young people to volunteer from an earlier age and saw this would be one solution to gaining work experience.

Objective 3:

- Focus groups felt that the key to young people getting support early was to have people they could relate to and trust from an early age. Participants expressed that often there were not enough wellbeing staff at their school and/or that these staff were not the type of people they felt comfortable disclosing difficulties to. One group suggested a solution would be to have youth workers in all schools, including primary schools.
- More education around difficult issues such as mental health, family violence, etc. from a younger age to reduce stigma experience with these difficulties. Participants reflected that the current discussion about family violence in the community and from politicians was a good start but more needed to be done
- An additional suggestion was to establish community wellbeing centres in schools that would also be available to young people after they leave school. Participants felt that keeping connected with school during transition, or even after early leaving would help keep young people safe and linked in with their community.

Objective 4:

- Focus group participants felt young people were not encouraged to participate in their communities or have a say. Participants expressed that if young people were encouraged to be more involved this would also improve outcomes for their wellbeing and sense of belonging and safety as they would feel more valued within their towns.
- Government should fund more and varied groups for young people, especially in the country. These groups should provide a range of opportunities for young people to be active in some way in their towns and be run by youth workers. Participants felt the provision of these groups would not only help young people be more involved locally, but also link them in with a supportive adult they could talk to if they were facing problems.
- More community events held in their towns to bring people together, celebrating young people's abilities and/or providing them with opportunities to participate in a meaningful and fun way.
- Government (at all levels) should reach out to young people to make them more interested in civics and feel as though their participation is valued. Again, this required contact with a real person (rather than online) who they could identify as being able to link them to decision makers and who in turn would demonstrate the government's interest in their viewpoints.

Objective 5:

- Funding should be available to create more equal opportunities for young people who live in the country. Priority areas were: better educational opportunities (more subject choice, more resources in schools, etc.) and better youth services and facilities. Participants stressed that they felt particularly disadvantaged when it came to education and had less opportunities, school facilities, subject choices, etc. than teenagers they knew who lived in urban/metro areas.
- Participants revisited bullying as an issue when asked to discuss this objective as they felt that bullying based on race, sexuality, disability, etc. made young people who were victims of this behaviour less likely to feel confident in themselves. Participants felt that this in turn would lead to them having less life success, particularly in education and employment.
- Government should teach young people to 'speak up' if they are being bullied or see someone else being bullied or discriminated against. They felt this type of program should be implemented in all schools and from a very early age to create communities where people are treated equally and everyone knows that discrimination and bullying are "not okay".
- Young people at the Portland Secondary College Re-engagement focus group also wanted the government to introduce more significant penalties for bullying so

	<p>young people see it as a crime. They felt that racism, homophobia, etc. are considered crimes in the workforce but often overlooked at school.</p> <p>Co-design</p> <p>Around a quarter of young people were open to the idea of working alongside government to tackle the issues raised in group discussions.</p> <p>The areas they felt willing to participate in were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participating on advisory groups; • working with community groups; • taking action at school (if supported to do so). <p>The facilitator passed to the Glenelg Shire Council Youth Development Officer the ccontact details of participants interested in further government contact/involvement.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>These focus groups have demonstrated that young people are willing and enthusiastic about sharing their ideas, thoughts and concerns with government – including those young people who are marginalised or are considered ‘disengaged’. It is worth noting that the majority of participants had no prior experience of their opinions being sought by decision makers and their experience of civic engagement was minimal or non-existent.</p> <p>When discussing issues they felt were most relevant to themselves and their peers, drugs and alcohol were the priority for a range of reasons which included risk-taking and addiction but also secondary issues such as community safety and pride. Generally, young people were pessimistic about efforts to address the prevalence of local youth alcohol and drug use, although increased alcohol and drug education at an earlier age was suggested as being helpful.</p> <p>Young people’s identification of sexual health and teenage pregnancy as a concern, but reluctance to discuss this in depth, suggests a level of embarrassment and/or stigma around this topic. This raises questions about young people’s confidence to address the issue of sexual health in their own lives or seek help and/or information.</p> <p>Bullying was raised by both groups as a separate issue to discrimination and seen as widespread amongst their peers and endemic in social media. Again, participants seemed to accept the status quo in this area and felt little could be done to change young people’s behaviour or tackle this issue. The strategies suggested were more education at an earlier age, but also teaching children and young people to stand up for themselves and others.</p> <p>Rural isolation and lack of opportunities for young people in Portland or similar rural areas were other common themes in the consultations.</p>