



MONASH
YOUTH POLICY
AND EDUCATION
PRACTICE

POLICY ROUNDTABLE

SHAPING THE FUTURE: A NEW APPROACH TO POLICY THAT WORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



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CANBERRA AND ONLINE



SHAPING THE FUTURE: A NEW APPROACH TO POLICY THAT WORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia together with the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice convened a policy roundtable to bring together senior government officials, young people and youth sector organisations with some of Australia's leading social scientists for an in-depth discussion on Shaping the Future: A new approach to policy that works for young people.

The full day event, held at Old Parliament House in Canberra, comprised of two parts: (1) *Structural*: consideration of how young people are positioned in public governance processes and international leading practice and (2) *Thematic*: panel discussions on three prominent frames in the youth studies literature which reflect the cross-cutting and interconnected nature of policy for young people: security, wellbeing and belonging.

The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer was launched on the day and provided a key resource to underpin the discussion. Now in its third year, the report sheds light on the evolving challenges faced by young Australians and indicates critical relationship links across security, wellbeing and belonging.

Research findings were grounded in practice and young people's lived experience in a unique discussion which brought diverse perspectives and potential future directions to the table. Ultimately, the roundtable laid the foundation for continued collaboration among participants. This summary highlights the key insights that emerged from the day, which was chaired by **Professor Ariadne Vromen FASSA**.



SHAPING THE FUTURE: A NEW APPROACH TO POLICY THAT WORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



Graphics reflect key points of the conversation captured by visual scribe Rachel Dight at Swivel Creative.

PART 1: *Structural: Youth policy in Australia and international best practice*

The opening session included presentations from **Professor Lucas Walsh** and **Moritz Ader**.

This is not a stop and start process, we need an ongoing commitment

Participant

Public governance is important. The laws, policies, institutional capacities and the way governments make decisions and allocate resources have significant consequences for young people. In line with global trends, young Australian's report lower levels of trust in government than older age groups. Participants discussed the importance of recalibrating the relationship between young people and public institutions, which is critical to the effective operation of a democracy and ensuring public policy reflects their aspirations for the future.

In 2022, for the first time in almost a decade, the Australian Government re-established the federal Office for Youth. Participants reflected on the history of national youth policy within the context of Australian federalism and how changing political priorities have negatively impacted policy coordination and consistency over time. Over the same period, countries around the world have been innovating their approaches, which provides important lessons and potential future directions for Australia.

While there is no global framework or standards for youth policy design, there is international consensus on leading practice principles. Eight principles, which are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, are described in *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit For All Generations?*. Participants discussed several of these in detail, including how they are applied in practice across varying international contexts. Three main themes emerged from the discussion:

Entrenched stereotypes and passive consultation in Australian youth policy has led young people to become disillusioned and disempowered in public governance processes

Research has identified consistent themes on how young people have been positioned within the youth policy in Australia. They are frequently understood in terms of:

- being at risk and risky to others and as problems that require 'fixing'.
- future citizens navigating an unknown future, young people tend to be valued in terms of their future capacity rather than their present-day concerns and challenges.

Young people want to be more engaged in political life, however, there are varied interpretations of what 'youth voice' might look like in policy development, how young people participate and how their contributions are utilised. Engagement has previously been passive as opposed to providing a meaningful role in the policy development process, leading young people to feel their voices are not heard in public debate and that their inclusion is tokenistic. Young people often do not have an active role in shaping the platforms of engagement, nor do they contribute to the types of topics selected.

Leading practice approaches have a high-level political commitment and leverage public budgets and regulatory processes

International approaches to policy for young people vary across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. National youth strategies are a common tool for government-wide planning and priority setting, but adopting a strategy alone is not sufficient. It should encourage participation across the policy cycle, be appropriately budgeted, monitored and evaluated.

The location of the youth portfolio within government can have implications for their specific functions, resourcing and scope of influence across and between governments. Across the OECD it is common for the youth portfolio to sit within the Ministry of Education, however countries where the portfolio is located within the Centre of Government (e.g., Offices of the Prime Minister), find it less challenging to secure resources and to coordinate and implement youth policies. However, they are more vulnerable to changing political leadership and priorities.

Regulatory processes can be leveraged to generate youth-responsive policy outcomes. Participants discussed the use of ‘youth checks’ which is an emerging area of practice and significant interest internationally to incorporate the considerations of young people more systematically in policymaking and legislation. Canada, Belgium, Austria, France and Germany have all implemented youth checks in some form, many of which are mandatory and integrated into existing Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIA).

Budgeting processes are another powerful tool, and while there is limited international evidence of youth-sensitive budgeting practices, many OECD countries have applied this thinking to achieve cross-cutting priorities for different population groups. The *Women’s Budget Statement* and Office for Women guidance on *Gender Responsive Budgeting* is one example from Australia of how this thinking can be applied in practice. Australia’s introduction of the annual wellbeing budgeting process *Measuring What Matters* presents another opportunity.

Policies should be evidence-based, monitored and evaluated. This relies on the availability of age-disaggregated data and participants discussed the importance of improving data about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse (LGBTIQ+) community. Accountability and integrity can be fostered in the policy process through independent data collection and evaluation by institutions such as the central statistics office and academic institutes.

[1] 2023 Australian Youth Barometer

Effective engagement continues throughout the policy cycle and finds ‘missing voices’

Young people are a significant proportion of the population. Yet, research shows engagement with young people for policy development up until 2021 often positions them as ‘data sources’, providing limited opportunities to engage in substantive terms or act as an initiating force.

Participants discussed several opportunities to improve engagement practices across the policy cycle—development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This included the need to build capability and skills across the public sector to listen to young people and ‘close the feedback loop’ to report back on actions taken in response to identified priorities.

Attempts at youth representation can skew towards those most likely to self-nominate and often, it is the ‘missing voices’ that need to be heard the most. Voices from disadvantaged backgrounds can be particularly absent. Further research is needed to better understand the ways in which young people’s participate in society and how it is changing over time. Public governance process should reflect and support these forms of engagement to ensure young people feel valued and heard.

Participants discussed four critical youth participation mechanics needed:

1. Ongoing engagement, at scale, that creates diverse opportunities to participate
2. Evidence co-generation
3. Igniting intergenerational conversations and action
4. Scrutinising institutional readiness for engagement.

Participants highlighted the importance of government connecting with, and appropriately funding, local level trust networks to facilitate engagement, including the national and state and territory youth peak organisations.

CASE STUDY: Jugendcheck (Youth Check) - Austria

One example highlighted by participants was Austria’s *Jugendcheck* (youth check) which came into effect in 2013. *Jugendcheck* is a mandatory process, integrated into the RIA-system and applies to all federal regulatory projects and projects of eminent financial relevance. This instrument makes it easier for youth organisations, particularly the National Youth Council, to become involved in the legislative process.

PART 2: Thematic: Security, Wellbeing and Belonging

SECURITY

'Security' describes the extent to which young people feel safe, secure and free from harm. Economic, sociology, anthropology and youth sector perspectives came together in this session to reveal how current policy settings are shaping security and identify a path forward.

This session included presentations from **Professor Robert Breunig FASSA, A/Professor Steven Threadgold** and **Dr Julia Cook** and provocations from **Tom Walker, CEO, Think Forward**.

Entire generations are struggling to get by week to week

Participant

Although security encompasses a range of issues, including personal safety, this session focused specifically on financial security, based on the *2023 Australia Youth Barometer* key finding that the cost of living is a salient issue which has disproportionate and severe impacts on young people. Presenters outlined research findings across highly interconnected areas of the tax and transfer system, employment, education, housing affordability and young people's debt and consumer credit.

During this session Think Forward shared findings from their report *Bridging the Generational Gap: Perspectives on Tax Reform from Gen Z and Millennials*. The report highlights that younger generations aren't looking for tax cuts or handouts, just an even playing field and their survey identified over 100 policy responses governments could take to support them. Three main themes emerged from the discussion:

Australia's intergenerational contract is fraying and needs renewal

Most tax and transfer systems around the world incorporate some kind of intergenerational contract which is based on the premise that:

- when people are young, they are net recipients of services and pay relatively little in taxes
- during their working age, people pay more in taxes than they receive in services
- after retirement, people typically receive more in government benefits and services, such as age pension, aged care and health care, than they pay in taxes.

An intergenerational contract presents no problem provided that each working generation supports the old and young to a similar extent. Participants discussed the ways in which Australia's intergeneration contract has become more generous over time for older Australians. House and asset price inflation are two key forces that have driven substantial increases in the wealth and income for people over 65 years since the 1990s.

Participants acknowledged that increasing or maintaining living standards for future generations can no longer be guaranteed with the current policy settings. If returns to asset are more modest in the future, then it is likely that younger generations will never achieve the level of wealth currently possessed by older generations of Australians.

Participants canvassed a range of priority areas for genuine tax reform, including better taxing superannuation and owner occupier housing, means testing aged care, trust reform and viewing housing as a right, not an asset.

Young people have specific financial needs and challenges

While COVID-19 brought to light the precarious employment conditions for a significant proportion of young people, these issues precede the pandemic (see [Borland 2020](#), [Borland and Coelli 2021](#) and [Cuervo et al 2023](#)).

Increasingly non-linear pathways from school to study, competitive and uncertain labour markets and the rapid rise of digital financial services such as 'buy now, pay later' (BNPL) schemes are contributing to profound changes to the financial landscape for young Australians. The *2023 Australian Youth Barometer* highlighted that 90 per cent of young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point during the past year, with 32 per cent reporting they did so often or very often.

WELLBEING

'Wellbeing' relates to how we live well and how we live well together. Psychology, sociology, health, education and youth sector perspectives came together in this session to reveal how current policy settings are shaping wellbeing and identify a path forward.

The session included presentations from **Professor Patrick McGorry AO FASSA**, **Professor Amanda Third** and **Professor Juanita Sherwood** and provocations from **Maia Giordano, Executive Director, Australian Association of Adolescent Health**.

We have relied on champions to advocate for change as opposed to systemic change...we need a revolution

Participant

Young adulthood is a critical life stage that lays the foundation for future health and wellbeing. This stage is characterised by dramatic social, biological, psychological and neuro-cognitive change.

Research highlights that 97 per cent of young Australians have experienced at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism in the last 12 months.³

It is common for young people to feel like they are missing out on being young, be worried about their ability to live a happy and healthy life and cope with everyday tasks in the future or to feel like they had 'lost' a year of their lives due to the COVID 19 pandemic.⁴

Participants discussed several intersecting crises impacting on the wellbeing of young people including, the cost of living, inequality, geopolitical conflict, mental health, inequality and discrimination and climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these issues. Three main themes emerged from the discussion:

Wellbeing is complex and requires cross-portfolio and interdisciplinary collaboration

The drivers of wellbeing are complex and best conceptualised within a socio-ecological model which recognises interpersonal, community, systemic and planetary factors. This framing enables consideration of the range of strategies available to promote wellbeing and recognises that its social determinants often fall outside the health portfolio, broaching areas including education, climate change, housing and homelessness, justice and more.

To create change in these areas, governments and researchers need to view wellbeing more holistically and promote interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Soaring rates of mental ill-health among young Australians is a worsening public health crisis

More than 75 percent of mental health disorders develop before the age of 25. The proportion of young people experiencing mental ill-health is increasing, exacerbated by the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent data highlights the prevalence of mental disorders in young people in Australia aged 16 to 24 has increased by 50 per cent since 2007 and is almost double the rate of mental ill-health in the general population. Participants discussed the need for further research to understand a particularly concerning increase for young women.

Similar trends have been identified in other high-income countries around the world, with data from Denmark, the United States of America and the United Kingdom all pointing in the same direction.

Complex and multiple factors are likely contributing to the decline in youth mental health, including social media exposure, increased concerns about climate change, financial stress, pressure to achieve and rising inequality.

[3] 2023 Australian Youth Barometer

[4] 2023 Australian Youth Barometer

BELONGING

'Belonging' is a fundamental need for young people. It is a multifaceted and dynamic process encompassing concepts of citizenship, place and identity along with mobility and transitions. Education, sociology and youth sector perspectives came together in this session to reveal how current policy settings are shaping belonging and identify a path forward.

The session included presentations from **Professor Anita Harris FASSA** and **Professor Hernan Cuervo** and provocations from **Zahra Al-Hilaly, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Oaktree.**

Belonging is not a given, it is practiced, constructed and shaped through connections, people and policies

Participant

People have a natural need to connect and belong. Belonging plays a key role in shaping young people's senses of identity and connection to community or groups, formed through friendships, clubs, sports teams, schools, online communities and other relationships. Participants discussed the concept of belonging, which shapes a range of health, social and economic outcomes, and can be thought of in the following terms:

- identification, attachment, and acceptance by communities, groups, people and places
- membership, rights and duties
- emotional and social bonds that come from being part of a larger whole.

Young people express a much lower sense of belonging in Australia compared with older people and their sense of national belonging has been rapidly declining, falling from 60 per cent in 2009 to 34 per cent in 2022.⁶

Participants considered where young people belong in a fragmented, uncertain and mobile world and how young people must do the work of belonging in these conditions without the norms and support structures of the past. Two main themes emerged from the discussion:

Belonging is a dynamic construct—it is not a place to arrive or something to be achieved

Belonging captures the nuances of young people's experiences at a local level, while also accounting for the global and institutional processes and structures that shape young people's lives. Belonging is not a given, it is practiced and constructed, and feelings of belonging or un-belonging may only be temporary and can change at any time.

Participants considered the importance of belonging being contextualised based on where people live and the possibilities. Research evidence on belonging highlights that local is where young people are more likely to feel connected and have capacity to act. The discussion focused on young people in rural settings (see [Hernan and Wyn, 2021](#)), who often strive to remain connected to the people and places that matter to them, despite being seen as stereotypically disadvantaged or 'other' to urban youth.

Belonging needs to be humanised, not politicised

Participants discussed the impact of public debate that politicises and racialises belonging, particularly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. For example, the Voice to Parliament referendum debate strongly affirm feelings of non-belonging for First Nations peoples. During these times, CALD people can increase engagement with global and digital communities to feel like they belong.

Participants also considered who controls the space of belonging and emphasised the onus should not just be on young people to do the work of belonging. Communities and institutions all have a role to play in creating safe environments and fostering a sense of belonging. Participants specifically considered cultural safety at universities, and the development and implementation of anti-racism strategies which was considered inadequate.

[6] 2023 Australian Youth Barometer

