

Australian Youth Forum Outreach Report

Bankstown, New South Wales event
on 10 June 2009



The Australian Youth Forum

The Australian Youth Forum (AYF) is run by the Australian Government as a communication channel between the Government, youth people (aged 15-24) and the organizations that work with, for and on behalf of young people (also known as the youth sector). It is about engaging young people and the youth sector in on-going public debate and getting their input on important issues and practical solutions that affect young people's lives now and in the future.

The AYF engages young people through its website, and also in person at forums and community activities. It brings young people, the youth sector and the Australian Government closer together, and gives them an opportunity to be heard.

Overview

This report is a summary of the comprehensive report on the discussions and other information capture that was undertaken by the professional facilitator Michael O'Meara and his team from MOHOW.

This event was held on Wednesday 10 June 2009 from 12.00 noon to 3.00pm.

The Bankstown event was attended by approximately 95 young people from very diverse cultures, bringing a broad range of perspectives to the discussions. A recurring feature of the discussion was the pride that the young people had in the diversity of their community and the way they were able to come together and respect their differences. There was also a strong desire to change negative stereotypes with a call for people to listen to, and understand, the complex context that young people from diverse cultures experience on the journey to adulthood in Australia.

The Hon Kate Ellis MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare and Youth, attended the event and provided content for the discussion. The event was also attended by Bankstown Mayor Councillor Tania Mihailuk, Deputy Mayor Councillor Khal Asfour and the Hon Darryl Melham MP, Federal Member for Banks.

Guest speakers provided introductory comments to each of the discussion sessions. They included Ms Sophie Weldon, AYF Steering Committee representative, Chris Varney, the 2009 Australian UN youth representative; Nina Funnell, activist against violence and Nathan Elhosni from the Bankstown Youth Advisory Committee. These young speakers also provided support to the small group discussions.

The topics discussed were:

- Education and employment;
- Improving our community (local and Australia);
- Public safety;
- Open question and answer session.

The discussions were centred on the participant's local experience on these topics.

Many young people in Bankstown are uncertain about their employment and career future, and called for access to more information about options and opportunities to gain employment experiences, while studying.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT



(Photo: Some of the young people who participated in the Bankstown AYF Outreach event discussions.)

The majority of the participants were high school students and they reflected concerns about study pressure and some confusion over choosing between higher education and other training pathways.

The young people also reflected a sense of being discriminated against in the workplace with examples including age-based wage scales and inability to find employment without previous experience. A common request was for greater emphasis on work experience opportunities while still in school.

The participants identified strongly the link between education and training and finding employment, however there was concern that there was a decrease in the availability of jobs together with higher competition to access employment.

Common themes were:

- the difficulty in balancing competing demands between work, study, family and social life;
- the recession;
- increased costs including transportation.

Changes to Youth Allowance were not clearly understood, however it was felt that there needed to be improvements made around access to Youth Allowance as well as a measure of flexibility around young people's obligations and the amount of money available to them.

There is a view that young people are disadvantaged by their relative inexperience, lack of qualifications and that workplaces are insufficiently

flexible to meet the differing needs of young people. This is compounded by the relatively poor wage structures for young people and the affordability of higher education where, more often than not, young people need to work to sustain their study.

Some participants noted that it was difficult to remain motivated to seek employment and that the high emphasis placed on achieving a good HSC result was not borne out by improved opportunities. The lack of guaranteed employment post study was seen as a barrier to young people making choices about what area of study they can enter.

There was a feeling that increased pressure was being placed on young people not only to perform well at school and in higher education but also to find and retain employment. This is a source of frustration for young people. Discrimination, language barriers and lack of confidence contribute to this feeling of frustration.

Suggestions included greater preparation for vocational options in schools with more information made available to assist students in selecting a vocational and educational pathway. This goes along with improved work experience programs and incentives for employers to take on young people without experience. Similarly there is a view that school and higher education courses should contain practical, vocational components. Participants also identified the need to get teachers and employers to understand student obligations and the sometimes competing demands being made of them.



(Photo: The facilitator led the discussions about education and employment, with key ideas being captured on notes around the walls.)

OUR COMMUNITY



(Photo: Minister Kate Ellis inviting the young people to identify what they are proud of in their community.)

Young people have pride in the diversity of Bankstown. A constant message of a desire for unity between cultures and an interest in sharing and experiencing different cultures presented a positive and optimistic view of the local Bankstown world in which young people currently live. This was coupled by a strong desire to listen to each other and a willingness to communicate honestly about the internal identity forming challenges that exist for young people growing up in traditional families and living in contemporary Australia.

Diversity and multiculturalism featured as key strengths for a number of people. There was appreciation for opportunities available and the upholding of rights.

Ideas for improvements were diverse and included more celebration of diverse cultures, a focus on addressing negative perceptions and stereotypes especially through the media, more information distributed about opportunities and events especially through the internet, and helping young people to participate in Australia's democracy through civics education and lowering the voting age.

What we love about living in Bankstown

- Multicultural diversity – enriches us all as youth, we have different stories to share, learn about other religions cultures and the way they live -- more acceptance.
- Get to see Indian people – views – western 50 out of 100's of kids – underrepresented.
- Very talented young people live in the region.
- Different ideas.

- In Bankstown there are opportunities for people to speak and meet – programs are in place; there are social activities, community centres, lots of free events that all provide opportunities to meet others.
- Pride in community – pride in the diversity, that at the end of the day, unites people.
- Convenient locations and access - buses, trains, trains to city, shops – one stop shop kind of thing.
- Groceries – food.
- Education after high school – lots of TAFEs around.

Young people would like to be involved in things that not only improve the image of youth but that are interesting. This includes youth events, youth media, volunteering and being asked to participate in discussions and forums where their views are heard and acknowledged.

Suggestions to improve the Bankstown and surrounding community included:

- having more things for young people to do that are safe, and are promoted so they are known about (perhaps through networks such as schools) that are family friendly, so parents support young people attending them;
- meeting other schools – show other communities who we are – changing perceptions about community;
- promoting the successes and the good news stories, through local papers and maybe the internet;
- having family events to help bridge the gulf between youth of different backgrounds and between youth and parents to make a better place – bridge mainstream culture that we are part of and culture of our parents;
- developing ways to get young people to know about what other young people have done – more widespread ideas and learn more about other cultures – learning about rest of world – understand everyone’s cultures, but this needs to start in the primary schools and flow through to the older groups;
- building on and expand the idea of the Multicultural week and the Multicultural Flag Day that attracts the media – schools and councils could play a bigger role in getting people together to work with and promote diversity and bring them into our area;
- people taking into account global issues, including focus on local issues;
- providing better access to youth services and facilities to enable young people with disabilities to participate;
- consider publishing a newspaper that is dedicated to youth, about youth events, achievements etc;
- more health funding in areas for primary care.

Messages to the Prime Minister from the young people of Bankstown - what we would do to make a difference in Australia

The good things about Australia include: multicultural; there is more understanding of people's religion; freedom of speech; more independent than other nations; acceptance; opportunities; lots of women's rights; education; environmentally aware; good international relations; sport and the AYF.

Things that would make it better include:

- less focus in the media on stereotypes; goals to promote positive images and success stories about multicultural communities and youth; promote a stronger sense of belonging and place;
- a curriculum that includes more Indigenous studies, civics education, cultural education; Australian history; electoral processes and voting and lowering the voting age;
- healthier communities through young people being more active; more health funding for rural and remote areas; leisure and recreational opportunities, anti-binge drinking campaigns; safe events;
- work with councils to learn about multiculturalism and youth participation in local government and where local race issues can be discussed; and creating designated places and centres for youth and art.

Participants were asked for suggestions about how to improve communication with government and with the Prime Minister.

Suggestions included:

- using a website as a clear communication channel;
- having a 'Speak Out day';
- having less formal settings for dialogue;
- making it clearer about how to get involved, and providing encouragement to expressing ideas that are respected as ours and not just criticised because we are young;
- the council holding more forums with broader topics;
- making sure there is follow up on idea put to council and government – accountability otherwise we will step back and not contribute again;
- seeking ways to help us not only expand our involvement in the community but show other parts of Australia as well as government that we want to be taken seriously;
- holding more of these forums to get the points across, but also ensure that there is a report back on what has happened post the events.

SAFETY AND VIOLENCE

When asked to identify the features of a safe public space, young people focused on security and police presence, lighting, good public transport services, harmonious relationships amongst the whole community, and tough laws backed by effective enforcement.

Issues such as improved education around violence and different types of violence in a variety of settings including parental workshops, schools and workplaces were suggested.

Cultural perspectives received attention with an acknowledgement that differing values and experiences presented challenges for the community. There was a feeling that a greater sense of community responsibility including neighbourhood watch, family related events, community education, and acceptance of diversity would contribute to improved safety. Resources such as safe houses, youth centres, youth friendly spaces and public areas, improved policing and safe public transport is also seen to be good ways to improve community safety.

Some other suggestions included people taking personal responsibility for safety by self defence and safety awareness programs in schools and the workplace. These could also address cyber bullying, mobile phone use and domestic violence.

Features of a safe community/public space

- There is a positive image and positive media about the community.
- Safe transport and facilities.
- Family friendly communities and good relationships with neighbours neighbourhood watch services and family.
- Ensuring that the rules and laws are enforced properly.
- Location – well lit, good security (security alarms, security guards and police presence).
- Safe Houses are available.
- Having peace of mind and being confident that you will be safe while walking down the road.
- Alcohol restrictions.
- More community spaces and places that allow people to congregate openly and safely - halls, public centres, libraries, areas for youths.
- Easy accessibility to ensure that everyone can participate.
- People knowing what to do if something happens – plans in place.
- Education programs are in place about rights and responsibilities/personal safety/consequences of drug and alcohol taking/ sex education.

Ideas for creating safer communities/public spaces

In order to achieve safe communities, young people suggested ideas ranging from education campaigns to self-defence training. A number of specific suggestions were provided.

- Holding more family related events/alcohol restrictions at events and in public spaces.
- Targeting vandalism and generally cleaning up the area.

- Providing a range of school, workplace and community education programs to address issues in these environments – bullying, exploitation, domestic violence, Rock and Water for anger management, safer mobile phone use/cyber bullying, etc.
- Greater acceptance and openness to diversity and changing cultural norms.
- Promoting the positives and successes on the community to improve its image.
- More frequent transport services.
- Harsher punishment for offenders as well as offering intervention help programs and counselling to find out why offenders are the way they are.
- More security services and better response by police.
- Dedicated services and support for victims of crime.
- Drug and Alcohol free zones and events in communities.
- Self-defence and safety awareness programs happening in high schools.
- More funding on effective measures such as neighbourhood watch and involve whole community especially youth.



(Photo: Ms Nina Funnell, an activist against violence, in conversation with other young women from the Bankstown community)

FINAL DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS TO MINISTER ELLIS

The Bankstown event concluded with a discussion around seeking a way forward and young people's advice in relation to achieving the best from cultural diversity in Bankstown.

Ways suggested included:

- enhancing cultural education - more practical not theoretical like the Bankstown food expo days, stalls in the park;
- doing more interagency things with different schools – sports, cultural, other things;
- focusing on one culture at a time and learn about it;
- uniting cultures through activities such as the Peace Train ride to Cronulla;
- building in Harmony Day that is big in schools;
- working on changing stereotypes about young people by maybe making a short film to show the nation about the positives, by including everyday people (as we are the majority) and helping us to get the positive message out there;
- getting media to spend time with us and see our life – need to stop racially profiling crime and stereotyping young people generally and from this community;
- recognising the personal challenges faced by individuals from families with particular cultural expectations as they are growing up in the Australian community with different expectations for individuals and their relationships with others. The conversation highlighted the honesty and hope for real dialogue about things that really matter to young people.

Further discussion emphasised:

- the importance of challenges facing young people in relation to career choice. 'Still a big thing – what I do – what do I do at uni – will I enjoy it?'
- young people are often unable to join/volunteer for organisations like SES due to being under 18 so suggested such organisations should be encouraged to have cadets who can train and assist off the field in support roles.

Minister Ellis led a final discussion and responded to questions on a diverse range of topics.

- Why don't we become a republic?
- What is known about the youth compact? (There was little apparent knowledge about the Compact amongst the participants.)
- Climate change.
- Full-time single parents and their struggle to support kids – from school uniforms to fees; low income and home ownership.
- Making young people ready for the future at school, including need to expose cultural / religious specific schools and students to other schools. There was a high desire expressed in the room to bring together different cultures for learning and sharing.