

Australian Youth Forum Outreach Report

Devonport, Tasmania event on
20 May 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 is a summary of the comprehensive report on the discussions and other information collected, that has been provided by the professional facilitator for the event.

The event was held on Wednesday 20 May from 9.30am to 11.30am.

The Devonport event was attended by approximately 69 young people from diverse cultural, language and life experiences. The majority of young people attending the event came from local and regional school communities in both the Devonport and the North West area of Tasmania.

The Hon Kate Ellis MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare and Youth, attended the event and provided context for the discussion. The event was also attended by the Hon Sid Sidebottom MP, Federal Member for Braddon, who provided an introduction to Devonport/North West Tasmania.

The two topics discussed were:

- Youth employment and jobs; and
- Public safety.

The discussions centered on the participants' local experience of these topics.

A natural focus for the group was on education based work experience and careers planning rather than employment. Many young people acknowledged that their family's and friends' employment is being affected by the economic downturn. Many young people are experiencing reduced part-time working hours and almost all young people were not confident about their prospects of finding local or regional employment at the end of their education.

In relation to public safety, young people made a direct connection between public safety and employment. While some young people focused on the need for increased security and police presence. An overwhelming number of young people focused on a combination of creating safe spaces, social education and support for people who are under social and economic pressure as ways to increase public safety.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

All participants took up this topic enthusiastically. It is clear that young people place high value on employment and their ability to receive training and opportunities for work.

Significant discussion centered on support programs and strategies in schools for young people to have improved access to work experience placements. The participants stressed the need for these placements to be relevant and well supported with sufficient time to get a real feel for the work. Some young people raised the issue of receiving payment for work placements and regarded rates of pay for young people as poor.

The participants expressed a high level of uncertainty about their prospects of finding employment in Devonport. The conversation and the ideas put forward were both diverse and extensive.

What is working?

- The **Traineeship and Apprenticeship Placement Program (TAPPS)**.
- School based career programs such as the **Pathway Planning** program provides good outcomes and needs to be supported¹. The state government has however announced that this program will be 'dumped' and this has caused dismay and confusion among the students.
- Work experience placements should be better supported with increased incentives for employers to take on young people.
- Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses.
- The local government training program in Devonport was highlighted as an example of a careers pathway for young people.

The role that schools play in preparing and supporting young people was seen as important:

- to enter the workforce, with many respondents noting that there needs to be improvement in the relationship between schools, vocational training and the workforce; and
- for further study at university, with suggestions that better orientation and a greater selection of courses is needed together with the issue of 'streaming' curricula and course work.

What is not working and needs changing? Ideas to improve education and employment.

- Youth people suggested work experience placements can be strengthened with greater integration between education in schools and work training.

¹ Tatham P, Johnston J (2007). Pathway Planning: "Informing learning, building connections, strengthening transitions" Final Report and Review. University of Tasmania, Department of Education Tasmania

- Work training (and work experience) could be better with a range of associated skills taught to students to prepare them for transition into the workforce. This should begin in schools with more specialised teachers enabling the maximisation of opportunities offered by employers, and followed through into the employment environment with “high quality instructors” and mentors.
- Paid work experience was raised as a means of attracting young people into work experience and a recognition of the reciprocal value provided to prospective employers around having young people in the workplace.
- More incentives for employers to take on work experience placements and ultimately young workers was raised. Young people see that not having prior experience is a barrier to their ability to get jobs.
- Young people see that there is a lack of job opportunities, and more needs to be done to address this although they recognise that this can be associated with the economic downturn and living in regional areas.
- While there is a low recognition of the proposed Youth Compact and the “Earn or Learn” commitment by the Australian Government, young people recognise the need to have relevant, high quality training to enable them to participate in the workforce and that there is a pathway from training and education to stable employment.
- Proposed changes to higher education student support payments were raised as being of concern for some students making transition from school to university. The biggest concern and the majority of questions asked were related to a wish to clarify the impact of changes to the rules affecting ‘independence’, and the potential impact on students relying on the informal gap year as a way to secure support payments.
- There was support for the idea to counter the shortage of employment opportunities for young people in gap year by crediting volunteer and work experience towards achieving the requirements for ‘independence’.
- Some young people raised the broader issue of the assumption that parents with the financial capacity to support students will actually do so. This was raised both in the context of higher education and learner driving.
- Suggestions around improving access and duration of scholarships were made, as well as improving access to and widening the selection of courses available to students at university. Affordable student accommodation that is close to the training centre was also identified along with managing the associated costs with study including transport, parking, study materials, course and HECS fees.
- Youth enterprise was discussed including support to start businesses for young people by young people. Again issues were raised relating to training, support and mentoring; support for local business and keeping jobs in Australia and not outsourcing to cheaper overseas markets; and automated functions in the workplace were seen as reducing the demand for human input.
- In the context of creating a better economic climate for business and therefore employment opportunities, it was suggested that more shops, a university in Devonport and improved infrastructure would create more opportunities for employment and education for young people.

- Improved facilities, sports, arts, music and cultural events, better public transport and affordable housing would encourage young people to continue to live and find work in regional areas creating some sustainability.

Other specific ideas and suggestions included:

- more community forums; and
- youth run restoration of a building to be used as a holistic youth centre.

Education and Training

- Making education a basic right - learn from other countries.
- More emphasis on responsibilities rather than rights.
- More opportunities for training for young people.
- Policy shouldn't assume parental support is always available – in relation to study, university, driver training, and other general living away from home expenses.
- Need to have cheaper quality education e.g. more affordable HECS fees and provide financial assistance for all students living away from home / for further education, (means testing for payments for people over 18) / for post graduate students / extend Commonwealth learning scholarships from 4 to 5 years to assist regional and rural students to complete 5 year degrees.
- More alternatives to traditional schooling.
- Help people with learning and other disabilities.
- What about Youth Allowance? Why 22? [There is to be a reduction in the age of independence from 25 years in 2009 to 22 years in 2012, commencing with 24 years in 2010.]

Employment, Career Advice and Services

- Jobs wanting previous experience.
- Employers should be providing more training for college leavers.
- There should be a range of opportunities for young people to try different things to see what they like and that this could take the form of practical careers advice, activities and mentoring. It was also felt that young people could be given greater responsibility and be doing more in their work placements.
- Help to get jobs.
- Try and create local businesses eg local companies using local products.
- A scheme to encourage companies to employ people under 25, like the apprenticeship scheme, to keep young people on the North West Coast.
- Youth policy changed; raise the minimum pay rate for youth; more training and preparation for post high school studies and work.



(Photo: Young people participating in the discussions lead by the facilitator at the Devonport AYF Outreach event)

VIOLENCE AND SAFETY IN THE COMMUNITY

The focus of this part of the forum was finding out what young people think about:

- violence and the safety of themselves and others in their communities;
- what they believe will build a safe community for young people to live in;
- what is currently working in relation to improving public safety;
- what a vision for a safe community might look like, how it would feel and how we can achieve it.

What does a safe community look like? What are its features?

There was a sense across the discussions that safe communities have welcoming public spaces where young people are valued, can socialise and have fun. They are also characterised by a mix of adult and police presence to provide supervision and safety.

Elements of a safe space

Young people noted the following elements created a feeling or sense that a space was safe when:

- it included the presence of other people including family, friends, community members;
- the public spaces have activities that interest people, including festivals, concerts and sports;
- there are dedicated and monitored youth spaces; the age limit of youth spaces monitored is by Police Beat; there are youth liaison officers with specific training;
- there are more things to do that bring people together;
- there is more youth involvement and a greater youth voice, better media representation, and a youth section in Advocate newspaper;
- people are friendly and look after each other;
- there is greater support for youth with disabilities (blind, disabled – mentally/physically);
- there are underage events that are supervised;
- safe public transport contributes to young people's independence in allowing freedom of movement;
- there are places to go after school with structures activities, skate lessons, learning how to dance - hip hop classes, and music opportunities.

Increased support of youth activities (including safe night time events) and youth services was raised and the provision of a range of interests including sport, music, culture and art. Good lighting at night and safe, affordable public transport are key features, as well as a supportive and friendly police presence. Mention was also made of the apparent disappearance of Safety Houses from the community.

The young people participating in the Devonport event were predominantly from secondary schools including an early school leaving age group.

Correspondingly the point of view of the participants related more to making the connections between what they experience as safety concerns for them and the role the wider community and government. These included providing solutions which would deal with the spectrum of other concerns they had, of which safety was one. It is clear that the young people believe the issues of education and employment should not be excluded from a discussion about public safety.

What needs changing and what is not working? Ideas to improve public safety

- Education about violence and safety strategies.
- Curfews in venues with no leave passes.
- Hub Space centre that includes connections to underage spaces, skills training and free short courses support services, coffee and safe places to wait for transport or pick ups.
- Communication is important with young people needing to be able to be informed about what is happening and have access to the media through youth participation in newspapers for instance.
- Young people see tolerance and friendliness between groups of people as important. Cultural events, festivals and the better use of public space to encourage and support usage by young people can support this.
- The issue of alcohol and violence drew some responses but did not dominate the discussions as it did in the national AYF forums earlier this year. Young people seem to support in equal measure both the banning of alcohol and the value/benefits of education and support of moderate and safe usage.
- Public transport that is safe, affordable, accessible and regular after dark relates directly to young people's mobility and sense of independence.
- Many young people rely on public transport to get to and from school, work, university and recreational activities. They hold concerns for their personal safety when using public transport, either in waiting for a bus or train, actually on the bus or train or when the service stops running leaving young people stranded and having to find an alternative means of getting home. Some suggestions included free public transport for young people and improvements in public transport infrastructure.



(Photo: In an open question time, Minister Ellis answered questions around Youth Allowance, education fees, transport, the alcopop tax, requirements for learning to drive and a personal question on how Ms Ellis became a Minister)