Building Social Cohesion WITH Young People

A Call for Dialogue and Action

2025

Dr Dean Farquhar, Kirsty Kain & Nellie Wotherspoon

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About AYAC

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's national peak body representing the needs and interests of young people aged 12-25 years, and the wider youth sector. AYAC is committed to Australia being a nation where young people are respected and have the power to lead change for a better world.

AYAC's work involves policy development, advocacy, research, consultation, information dissemination and capability building. Our approach is informed by the insights of our members – including young people, academics, state and territory youth peaks, and youth-led organisations – ensuring that policymakers and the community understand the impacts of how policies and decision-making affect young people and the youth sector.

Report authors:

Dr Dean Farquhar, National Youth Engagement Lead, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
Kirsty Kain, National Policy and Advocacy Lead, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
Nellie Wotherspoon, Policy Officer, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Authorised by: Joanna Rostami, CEO, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
Contact: info@ayac.org.au

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture. This report was prepared on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

As the national peak body for young people, we acknowledge First Nations young people as the future custodians of this land. We recognise the urgent need to actively engage in the essential work toward reconciliation and provide platforms for First Nations young people to lead positive change. AYAC remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart and stays true to its values of supporting the leadership and self-determination of First Nations young people.

Always was, always will be.

Executive Summary

Building social cohesion with young people should be viewed as a means of furthering their inclusion and active participation in social life. However, this requires moving beyond a narrow concern for social order often associated with the pursuit of a more cohesive society. Engaging young people in dialogue – allowing them to share their concerns and collaboratively identify and overcome barriers to opportunity and belonging – fosters more meaningful engagement and deeper insights for policymakers. This report presents evidence and recommendations that strengthen the foundations for sustaining such dialogue.

Acknowledging that social cohesion is a contested concept, the report does not advance a fixed idea of *the* cohesive society, nor does it argue for the assimilation of young people into the prevailing social order. Rather, it views social cohesion as an organising concept for a never-ending process of dialogue and action whereby citizens come together to manage differences of opinion and find an optimal set of social arrangements. Recognising that young people have a right to participate such discussions, the report sets out a roadmap for optimising the conditions for them to shape the terms of the debate.

The report sets out a series of indicators around which a meaningful dialogue on social cohesion can take place. These indicators are thematised according to how they relate to cultural, economic and political matters. Using the indicators, the report provides a synthesis of evidence that contextualises the experiences and perspectives of young people.

In relation to cultural matters, the report sets out how young people believe that building a more cohesive Australia requires due recognition of diversity and the practice of mutual respect between individuals and groups. It further draws out certain nuances in youth perspectives on multiculturalism. Young people are shown more positively oriented to multiculturalism than older people in Australia. Evidence is provided indicating that although young people recognise that they tend to be favourably disposed to inter-group contact as a group, they are more sceptical regarding the extent to which Australia cultivates a shared sense of belonging more generally. The evidence examined reveals that this reflects a view among young people that building a cohesive, inclusive Australia remains an unfinished project. Participants in the study felt more can be done to address discrimination against migrants, refugees and First Nations Australians. They further expressed hope that progress towards a more cohesive Australia can be achieved, signalling a need for youth work in furthering opportunities for valuable inter-cultural dialogue.

With regards to economic matters, the report explains how recent cost-of-living pressures have complicated already challenging transitions to adulthood in Australia. It argues that experiences of frustration emerging from a sense of precarious adulthood must be monitored and addressed to avoid an accumulation of tensions among the young. The evidence presented shows that young people are concerned about unfairness in education, employment and housing. Participants tended to believe that more can be done to create a level playing field across the education system so that all have an equal opportunity to succeed. In terms of employment, they tended to stress the pitfalls of a competitive labour market on wellbeing and feelings of togetherness, with some suggesting that inequalities in conditions lead to inequalities in outcomes in employment. However, the evidence suggests that a sense of precarious adulthood is most keenly felt in relation to affordable housing. Many felt locked out of affordable housing, with some suggesting that they are not being offered the same opportunities as their parents' generation to live independently. Yet, participants were not without hope that conditions might improve. Taking their concerns seriously and deepening dialogue aimed at growing equality of opportunity will better embed their hopes for a fairer, more cohesive Australia.

On political matters, the report identifies a need to provide young people with support to develop the necessary skills and confidence to channel their energies through the democratic process, as well as acknowledge and address their dissatisfaction with aspects of party politics. The evidence provided indicates that more can be done to build young people's trust in political institutions by ensuring that these are more receptive and responsive to their various needs and interests. It further suggests that encouraging participation among groups least likely to engage politically necessitates drawing on a diverse repertoire of youth engagement techniques and adequately valuing informal approaches. Essentially, the report argues that encouraging and sustaining youth engagement in building social cohesion through the democratic process requires a multifaceted conception of dialogue that is equipped to meet young people where they are at.

From the forgoing analysis, the report offers the following set of recommendations across 4 key policy areas:

1. **Embed rights-based policy across all levels of government through Youth Impact Assessments to ensure that young people can shape decisions around the type of society that they wish to live.**
    - ⇒ Youth Impact Assessments offer governments clear advice on how they can empower young people as rights-holders and meet their obligations to them under the terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2. **Value youth work and engage the expertise of the sector to build social cohesion with young people.**
    - ⇒ Youth work is a rights-based, strengths-focused and relational practice that has appropriate engagement techniques that have proven effective in engaging young people through informal learning and dialogue across a range of areas relevant to building social cohesion.
    - ⇒ When done well, youth workers build young people's skills and confidence; promote intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and mutual respect; support young people's empowerment through civic and political engagements; provide training and support that enables them to (re)connect with formal education and (re)enter the labour market.
    - ⇒ Doing youth work well requires sustainable funding to maintain expertise in the sector, as well as giving youth workers and young people a role in shaping the intended outcomes of work aiming to build social cohesion.

3. **Implement the commitment to better and fairer schools to ensure that all young people are given opportunities to succeed and actively contribute to economic, political and cultural life in Australia.**
    - ⇒ Ensuring adequate funding for schools, enhancing early years support and working towards improved educational outcomes should be viewed as one way of building a more cohesive society where everyone feels they have a fair go to succeed.

4. **Raise the rate of income support**
    - ⇒ Ensuring that all young people in receipt of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance or Commonwealth Rent Assistance are at least able to live above the Henderson poverty line is imperative to removing barriers to their active participation in economic, political and cultural life. A more cohesive Australia cannot be meaningfully built with young people while egregious inequalities in opportunity persist.

It is recognised that this list is far from exhaustive. Building social cohesion with young people will be a cross-governments mission that will involve a whole host of policies working together to create the conditions for a more inclusive social compact to emerge. However, the list derives its strength from drawing on the specific competencies of AYAC. Each recommendation draws on AYAC's youth engagement expertise and policy work. Only by responding positively to the call for dialogue and action issued in the report will new ground be broken and social cohesion effectively built with young people.

Introduction

Looking out at the world today, there is ample evidence of dislocation, polarisation and conflict. Tensions around identity sit alongside concerns regarding the cost of living in many states, challenging the legitimacy of established political institutions and eroding the bonds of solidarity that bind communities together (Hay & Hunt, 2018; Fraser, 2019; Carothers & Press, 2022). Young people in Australia are growing up in an uncertain world. At this critical juncture, this report explores what their experiences tell us about life in Australia and the policy interventions that might promote a greater sense of togetherness and social cohesion.

Research by the Scanlon Foundation notes that while Australia performs well on many measures of social cohesion when compared internationally, there are reasons to be concerned regarding the cohesiveness of Australian society. For instance, O'Donnell et al. (2024) point to evidence showing falling trust in government, growing cost of living pressures and a declining sense of national pride and belonging.[1]

Yet, as O'Donnell et al. (2024) make clear, most Australians are positively disposed to multiculturalism and intergroup contact. Their research shows that the vast majority of Australians like getting to know people from ethnic and cultural groups other than their own. Additionally, the regrettable outcome of the Voice referendum in 2023 notwithstanding, evidence presented by O'Donnell (2023) indicates that most Australians value indigenous histories and cultures. It would therefore seem that there are foundations from which to build a stronger social compact in Australia.

Picking up on this theme following the recent Federal Election, Prime Minister Albanese has spoken about the need to push back against the tide of polarisation evidenced elsewhere in the world by embedding a commitment to diversity and inclusion in Australia:

> *We can be a microcosm for the world. That says that we're enriched by our diversity, that we have respect for people of different faith, that we try to bring people together…*

To Albanese, this commitment to inclusion can form the basis of a 'progressive patriotism' that can enable greater cohesiveness within Australian society (Patton, 2025).

This report argues for the importance of recognising that concepts like 'progressive patriotism' and 'social cohesion' are contested, as is the role of the state in promoting them. Commentators have noted concerns around how such language may be being used in Australia to curb freedom of expression and advance practices of cultural assimilation and erasure (Jakubowicz, 2025; Rachwani, 2025). The report argues that if social cohesion is to be a useful concept and such concerns mitigated, its political dimensions must be accounted for. This requires setting out a view of how politics in Australia works.

[1] O'Donnell et al. (2024) note that trust in the Federal Government has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, though remains marginally higher than levels recorded in the 2010s. An average of 29 per cent of adults believed the Federal Government could be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time between 2010 and 2018. This proportion increased substantially in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching as high as 56 per cent in November 2020. The proportion has since declined to 33 per cent in 2024.

The view of politics underpinning this report recognises that the state is no mere moral arbiter tasked with establishing the conditions for a cohesive society, nor is it simply an organising committee mechanically set to reproduce existing inequalities. Rather, it views the state as a collection of fields of social interaction that are open to change through dialogue and action between members of the public, civic society groups, officials and elected representatives (Bourdieu, 2014). From this view of politics, the report outlines the merits of using social cohesion as an organising concept that provides a series of indicators around which meaningful dialogue and actions aimed at establishing an optimal set of social arrangements can take place.

Accordingly, the report does not advance a fixed idea of *the* cohesive society to be aimed at, nor does it argue for a continuation of the status quo. Rather, it sets out a roadmap for optimising the conditions for young people to shape the terms of the debate. After all, if young people are to be involved in a meaningful dialogue on social cohesion, they must be able to influence its outcome through deliberation.

The report yields insights into young people's understanding of social cohesion and points to areas where young people believe progress might be achieved. We find that while young Australians are optimistic and value diversity, many feel excluded from national conversations and disconnected from political processes. Concerns around discrimination; economic inequality; unaffordable housing and intergenerational unfairness; and a lack of genuine youth engagement were recurring themes. The evidence presented nonetheless suggests that young people are eager to be engaged on these issues and play their part in building a more inclusive, fairer and cohesive Australia.

In centring the perspectives and experiences of young Australians, it is hoped that the evidence provided in the report strengthens the efforts across all levels of government to advance the commitments outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). AYAC strongly believes that in all efforts to build social cohesion with young people, they should be treated with dignity, able to express themselves freely and have their views on matters affecting them considered in the formation of policy.

The report begins by setting out the methodology deployed. Attention then turns to building up a conceptual understanding of social cohesion. Social cohesion will be defined and its importance to the lives of young people elaborated. Special consideration will also be afforded to delineating how dialogue on social cohesion can be conducted. An examination of evidence pertaining to youth perceptions of social cohesion in Australia will then be undertaken. From this analysis, relevant policy interventions conducive to improving social cohesion and outcomes for young people are identified.

Methodology

The report deploys a mixed-methods approach, combining desktop research with quantitative and qualitative data capture and analysis. The total number of young people engaged through different methods and approaches was 1,186: Student Edge survey (951), Youth Insight Poll (227) and youth focus groups (8). The rationale of each component is outlined below.

Literature Review

Following an environmental scan of the literature relating to social cohesion, a literature review was undertaken. Analysing key ideas from Durkheim to the present day, the review traced the sociological evolution of the concept of social cohesion. This allowed for relevant literature from youth studies to be identified and situated in an appropriate context. Suitable lines of enquiry were opened by the literature review.

Compilation of Statistics

Equipped with a more sophisticated understanding of social cohesion, a compilation of statistics was formed from existing sources. Measures indicative of social cohesion for the whole Australian population were considered alongside those addressing young people specifically. The statistics were primarily drawn from government sources and robust survey research. This provided a baseline of sound knowledge regarding social cohesion that the research builds upon.

Student Edge Survey

A series of three questions was presented to a weighted sample of young people via Student Edge. In total, 951 young people aged 12-25 years completed the short survey. The gender breakdown of respondents was 51 per cent young women, 48 per cent young men and 1 per cent non-binary.

The breakdown of respondents' place of residence by state/territory is: New South Wales - 45.5 per cent; Victoria – 23.0 per cent; Western Australia – 16.5 per cent; Queensland – 7.2 per cent; South Australia – 6.3 per cent; Australian Capital Territory – 0.9 per cent; Tasmania - 0.4 per cent; and Northern Territory – 0.3 per cent.

Youth Insight Poll

To complement the body of statistics drawn from existing sources and the Student Edge survey, a youth insight poll was conducted by AYAC. Using its networks, AYAC invited young people aged 12-25 from around Australia to complete an online survey on social cohesion.

Cognisant of the limitations to such sampling procedures, these findings are not presented as representative of young people in general (see Huff, 1991). Rather, they are used to provide insights into how some young people are relating to the issues under study.

The survey contained questions on a variety of economic, political and cultural issues relating to social cohesion. Situated alongside existing statistics and the results from the Student Edge surveys, these insights support the further exploration of the perspectives and experiences of young people.

The survey was open from late October to mid-November 2024. In total, 237 survey responses were received. The gender breakdown of respondents was 57 per cent young women, 30 per cent young men, 9 per cent non-binary, 3 per cent self-described and 2 percent preferred not to say. In addition, 28 per cent of survey respondents were disabled young people; 40 per cent were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background; 18 percent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; and 52 per cent identified as LGBTQIA+.

The breakdown of respondents' place of residence by state/territory is: New South Wales – 21 per cent; Victoria – 22per cent; Western Australia – 11 per cent; Queensland – 16 per cent; South Australia – 16 per cent; Australian Capital Territory – 8 per cent; Tasmania - 5 per cent; and Northern Territory – 2 per cent.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were undertaken to provide narrative evidence to contextualise the referenced statistics. The more open-ended nature of the focus groups allowed participants opportunities to provide a rich account of their views and clarify any ambiguities in partnership with the researchers (O'Toole, 2003; Barbour, 2008).

Taking the advice of Marsh et al. (2007), the researchers embraced a flexible and reflexive approach that avoided imposing a narrow definition of the issues under study. Consistent with the approach advocated by O'Toole et al. (2003), the researchers sought to limit the formality of the focus groups and involve participants in a partnership where they could more freely explore and elaborate what social cohesion means to them. This proved effective as participants shared openly on core themes concerning social cohesion.

Following recruitment through its networks, AYAC held 2 focus groups in November 2024. In total, 8 young people aged 12-25 participated in the focus groups.[2] The groups consisted of four young women, three young men, and one young person who preferred not to share their gender identity. Participants were drawn from the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. Their contributions go some way towards providing a series of narratives through which the data presented in the report might be contextualised and understood.

[2] Analysis of focus group research by Guest et al (2016) reveals that that more than 80% of all themes were discoverable within two to three focus groups. The narrative evidence captured is therefore useful for the intended purpose of exploring themes and providing possible explanatory frames for the data, even if a more extensive capture of evidence is possible.

Social Cohesion: What it is and Why it Matters to Young People

Social cohesion has animated sociological debate since the founding of the discipline. In the seminal study, *Division of Labour,* Durkheim (2013) provides insights into the implications of the transition to modernity for social cohesion. For Durkheim, cohesive societies are a product of norms and institutions effectively integrating different social groups by imbuing them with a shared sense of purpose. Durkheim contends that the transition to modernity marked a shift in social relations toward deeper interdependence and a more fluid, contractual regulation of behaviour. By expanding the scope for the exercise of autonomy and individualism, Durkheim argues, this shift increased the likelihood of social dislocation and feelings of normlessness. A central feature of Durkheim's work is his concern with identifying the institutions and processes that mitigate these impacts and strengthen social cohesion. Unpacking Durkheim's thinking in this regard can help us better grasp the relevance of more contemporary work on social cohesion.

Marks (1974) provides a useful overview of Durkheim's thought that signals the importance of democracy and education. In Durkheim's view, the reciprocal interaction of the state and civil society in democracies forms a nexus of social relations through which a shared understanding of the world can be elaborated and communicated. In essence, a diffusion of perspectives is given greater coherence as the aspects of social life are worked and reworked into a discernible pattern through the ceaseless deliberation of democratic processes. Durkheim further argues that educators can complement this process by acting as moral agents in the socialisation of young people and promoting responsible citizenship.

However, Durkheim's views on these matters must be considered in relation to prevailing inequalities. In modern societies, wealth and status stratify access to state power and the organs of opinion formation (Miliband, 1973; Panitch, 1994; Harvey, 2005; Althusser, 2008; Bourdieu, 2014). This means that democratic institutions and the education system can become involved in reproducing the social inequalities that serve as a basis for dissatisfaction with social life (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron; 1990; Willis, 2000).

In effect, the pursuit of a more cohesive society can become an assimilationist project whereby young people are encouraged to accept the prevailing social order regardless of any misgivings (see Hurley & Treacy, 1993; Cooper & White, 1994; Cooper, 2012). However, it would be a mistake to suggest the state is a mere instrument wielded by the powerful at the expense of others. As Bourdieu (2014) convincingly argues, the state is a collection of decision-making fields that are marked by past struggles for social justice and open to structural transformation.[3] Viewed from this angle, the enduring relevance of some of Durkheim's ideas concerning democracy and education become clear.

Efforts to build social cohesion with young people can be conceived as a means of deepening their commitment to the ongoing dialogue of democracy through which they are permitted to contest and construct the social order. Following this rationale, educators seeking to build social cohesion with young people need not be viewed as agents of assimilation, but they might be seen as playing a

[3] "The bureaucratic field, as a field in which norms are produced for other fields, is itself a field of struggle, in which can be found traces of all previous struggle." (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 367–368)

supportive role in helping them develop skills and confidence to explore a range of policy options and harness their collective energy through meaningful involvement in the democratic process.

Sustaining these points requires delving deeper into more contemporary work on social cohesion. This work points to the merits of considering social cohesion as an ongoing process of dialogue and action. To illustrate this point it is useful to unpack the following definition of social cohesion offered by the OECD (2011):

> *A society is 'cohesive' if it works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upwards social mobility.*

While this definition contains admirable sentiments, it does not explain how consensus on the criteria outlined is to be sought or what form of consensus is possible. That we do not agree on the ideal set of social arrangements is central to the practice of democratic politics.

Acknowledging the contested nature of social life, the Council of Europe (2004) offers the following view of social cohesion:

> *No society is fully cohesive. Social cohesion is an ideal to be striven for rather than a goal capable of being fully achieved. It constantly needs to be nurtured, improved and adapted. Each generation has to find afresh a manageable equilibrium of forces. This is a constantly shifting equilibrium which has to adapt to changes in the social and economic environment, in technology and in national and international political systems.*

In other words, social cohesion is a concept that should serve to evoke a process of ongoing dialogue and action aimed at discovering and realising the society that we wish to live.

The work of Jenson (1998; 2010) and Bernard (1999) is especially useful in providing a set of frames for furthering a meaningful dialogue on social cohesion (also see Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023). Acknowledging the political dynamics of social cohesion, these researchers identify a series of dimensions and indicators around which meaningful dialogue on social cohesion can be structured. These dimensions and indicators cover economic, cultural and political matters. A distinction is further drawn between formal and substantial dimensions. Formal dimensions refer to more basic forms of inclusion and participation, whereas substantial dimensions seek to gauge more sustained involvement in economic, political, and cultural matters.

The formal dimensions of social cohesion identified are:

- ***Insertion/Exclusion (Economic):*** Cohesive societies rely on limiting economic exclusion. Relevant measures gauge the extent to which individuals can participate in economic life through the labour market.
- ***Legitimacy/Illegitimacy (Political)***: Cohesive societies rely on public and private institutions being recognised as legitimate. Relevant measures gauge trust in established institutions.
- ***Recognition/Rejection (Cultural)***: Cohesive societies rely on a recognition of a plurality of perspectives. Relevant measures gauge individuals' tolerance of different perspectives and cultural traditions.

The substantial dimensions of social cohesion outlined by Bernard are:

- ***Equality/Inequality (Economic)*:** Cohesive societies are enhanced by social justice and equity. Relevant measures gauge the extent of equality of opportunity and equality of outcome.
- ***Participation/Passivity (Political)***: Cohesive societies are enhanced when individuals can actively participate in civic and political life. Relevant measure gauge engagement in a variety of modes of participation.
- ***Belonging/Isolation (Cultural)***: Cohesive societies are enhanced when individuals gain a sense of belonging to a society that permits dialogue on the nature of its shared values. Relevant measures gauge shared values and sense of belonging.

Each dimension corresponds with a variety of indicators:

- ***Economic Indicators:*** Rate of unemployment. Income distribution and poverty rates. Distribution of wealth. Access to housing. Educational attainment and opportunities. Spread of precarious employment.
- ***Political Indicators:*** Trust in government. Perceived political efficacy (internal and external). Intensity of political participation (election turnout, party membership, petitions, protests, boycotts etc.)
- ***Cultural Indicators:*** Diversity of a country measured by number of culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Attitudes to multiculturalism and inter-group contact. Attitudes towards belonging. Evidence relating to hate crime and discrimination.

Recognising that these issues fundamentally influence young people's everyday lives, this report uses the identified dimensions and indicators outlined above as a framework to involve young people as partners in a process of dialogue and action aimed at building social cohesion. Participants regularly made contributions that touched upon the salience of each dimension and indicator. To give these contributions greater coherence, we focus on the themes of:

1. Culture, Connection and Belonging
2. Spreading Economic Opportunity in Precarious Time
3. Youth Voice and Political Influence.

Culture, Connection and Belonging

Context

Australia is a diverse, multicultural society. Today, over half of those living in Australia were born overseas or have parents who were born overseas (MYAN, 2022a). Census statistics show that there are over 300 languages spoken in Australia, with around 22 per cent using a language other than English when at home (ABS, 2017; 2022a). The census further notes a twin-track process of growing secularisation and religious diversification in Australia (ABS, 2022b). Research by the Scanlon Foundation suggests that most Australians welcome and celebrate this diversity.

Evidence presented by O'Donnell et al. (2024) indicates:

- ⇒ 85 per cent agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia.
- ⇒ 86 per cent agree that they like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic and cultural groups other than their own.
- ⇒ 82 per cent agree migrants are good for the economy.
- ⇒ 78 per cent have at least 2 friends from a different national, ethnic or religious background.

This suggests that Australians are largely positively disposed to inclusion and inter-group contact. However, concerns around the prevalence of discrimination and exclusion in Australia endure. O'Donnell et al. (2024) highlight that 63 per cent of Australians believe that racism is a very big or fairly big problem in Australia. As O'Donnell et al. argue, this most likely reflects an acknowledgement of the persistence of racism and an understanding that more must be done to embed inclusion and an acceptance of diversity.

Supporting this view, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) outlines the ongoing, pervasive and systemic nature of discrimination against First Nations Australians. Similarly, MYAN (2022b; 2023) details the discrimination that young people from migrant and refugee communities confront in their everyday lives. In addition, the Australia Institute of Family Studies, Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (2021) reported the prevalence of racial discrimination was high among Indigenous teens (34 percent), those who spoke a language other than English at home (31 percent) and those with one or both parents born overseas (25 percent). In another report undertaken by the ACT Human Rights Commission, 11 out of 12 Aboriginal young people that were surveyed reported they had experienced racism (Burnside, 2023). There is also the issue of online racism and dissemination of misinformation which is perhaps even more pervasive and insidious (see eSafety Commissioner, 2024).

Although Australians may embrace a generally positive view of multiculturalism, progress towards a more inclusive, cohesive society remains possible. Engaging meaningfully with the experiences and perspectives of young people can point in the direction of how such progress might be achieved.

Young people in Australia have been shown more positively oriented to multiculturalism than older people. Markus (2017) indicates that young people are more likely than older people to believe that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and that immigrants from different countries make Australia stronger. More recently, O'Donnell (2022) has provided evidence indicating that acceptance of multiculturalism is stronger among the young. This report builds on these findings by unpacking certain nuances around young people's view on culture, connectedness and belonging.

Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Mutual Respect as Ingredients for a More Cohesive Society

The importance of inter-cultural dialogue and mutual respect to developing feelings of connection and belonging cannot be understated. Through meaningful inter-cultural dialogue and the practice of mutual respect a coexistence of people in communities despite differences is possible. Participants in this study favoured greater collaboration and togetherness across all groups Australia. They wished to build a society were all can feel they belong, and nobody experiences racism and discrimination.

Areas for Progress

Findings from this research point to certain nuances concerning respondents' views on inclusion and multiculturalism. The youth insight poll reveals that most respondents believed that their peers are accepting of different cultures and perspectives, with just 16 per cent noting disagreement.[4] Yet, when asked whether Australia is a place where everyone is accepted and made to feel welcome, 50 per cent of respondents disagreed. Only 32 per cent of respondents believed that Australia is accepting and welcoming to everyone, with 28 per cent declining to take a definitive position on the issue.[5]

These findings indicate that although young people may tend to believe that they are mostly positively disposed to recognising different cultures and perspectives as a group, this coexists with concerns regarding the extent to which the conditions for developing a shared sense of belonging are cultivated in Australia more generally.

This sense that not all are valued in Australia was reflected in Student Edge survey. The survey shows that although most respondents felt that young people are valued members of society, almost 1 in 5 felt that young people are not valued, while 28 per cent did not express a definitive position on the issue.[6] This suggests that the concerns of a significant number of young Australians around inclusion are inflected through a sense that young people are generally not an especially valued group. The narrative evidence from the focus groups provides frames for better understanding these findings.

When asked how inclusive they believed Australian society to be in the focus groups, it wasn't uncommon for participants to feel the need to pause, seek clarifications and provide caveats. This tended to reflect a sense that creating an inclusive, cohesive society remains and unfinished project in Australia:

"I'd say that Australia is a 7/10 on inclusion. There's definitely a lot of people making attempts to make Australia a very inclusive country, but I've noticed that there are some things that we are trying to do right that can be a bit tokenistic. Like we're trying to show we're being inclusive, rather than making an honest effort to have an inclusive Australia."

"I feel like it's a 6/10. I feel like we are pretty average. We're better than many places, but we rely on that too much…When you look at it, that just means that with all the atrocious things that are going on in the world, we're just a bit better."

[4] See Appendix 2: Table 1
[5] See Appendix 2: Table 2
[6] Appendix 1: Table 1

"I think it's sort of hard to describe overall inclusivity because how included you feel really depends on the spaces that you have access to in the communities that you are part of."

"Yeah, I feel like inclusivity fluctuates depending on things like age, socio-economic factors and geographical location."

Participants tended to recognise that Australia is an inclusive society when compared with other places. However, they most often stressed that feelings of inclusion and belonging varies considerably across Australia. For them, a more cohesive Australia where feelings of inclusion and belonging are more evenly shared is possible.

Focus group participants shared the concerns of the wider population in relation to racism. The importance of addressing racial discrimination to further a meaningful sense of togetherness and belonging for all was a common theme:

"I think there is racism against First Nations people. It's been going on for, yeah, generations. And I think we do a very good job of kind of sweeping it under the carpet and making it look all nice on the outside. But just from going to school and other, groups around town, it's definitely still present."

"I think immigrants and refugees get it tough – even though we rely on them a lot in this country. I don't think they get 'the fair go' that everyone talks about in this country… It's a bit like we cling on to the idea we're not as racist as we could be and there's people worse than us. And it's like that stops us improving… It's that mentality of if it's not broke, don't fix it. But it is broke – it's just not crushed."

There was a strong sense among participants that more can be done to create mutual respect and a greater shared sense of belonging in Australia.

These contributions shine some light on the data shared above by showing how young people can recognise Australia's relatively strong performance on multiculturalism, while being reluctant to overstate its successes in creating a shared sense of belonging. Their reluctance in this regard can be read as a commitment to creating the conditions for enhancing a shared sense of belonging and more cohesive society.

Participants remained hopeful that such progress could be achieved, signalling their support for enhancing youth engagement opportunities that offer them safe spaces to make new friends, hear different perspectives and collaborate in building a more inclusive, cohesive society:

"I think we absolutely need to bring young people with different perspectives and from different backgrounds together where they live… You know, as with anyone I guess, there is a tendency to stick with people who you know and share the same values as you. So, I think it would be incredibly valuable to have those opportunities [available] where young people go in their daily lives. It would be good for people to branch out with that."

However, it is worth bearing in mind that some participants were concerned that existing youth engagement work providing opportunities for inter-cultural dialogue among peers are not reaching enough people:

"I think the biggest problem with promoting inclusion is that often events promoting inclusion aren't actually reaching those that might need it the most or just aren't in those spaces or don't have the money or time to take part."

For this reason, we emphasise spreading opportunities for young people to participate in youth engagement opportunities that enable them to make friends, learn new things and experience a diverse range of cultures and ideas.

Overview

Young people believed that cohesive societies require due recognition of diversity and the practice of mutual respect between individuals and groups. They are more positively oriented to multi-culturalism than older people in Australia. However, there are certain nuances in their perspectives on such issues. The evidence presented above indicates that although young people tend to acknowledge that they are positively disposed to inter-group contact as a group, they are more sceptical regarding the extent to which Australia cultivates the conditions for developing a shared sense of identity more generally. It is argued that this reflects a view among young people that building a cohesive, inclusive Australia remains an unfinished project. Participants felt that more can be done to address discrimination against migrants, refugees and First Nations Australians. They further expressed hope that progress towards a more cohesive Australia can be achieved, signalling a need for youth work in furthering opportunities for valuable inter-cultural dialogue.

Spreading Economic Opportunity in Precarious Times

Context

Australia is often referred to as the 'land of the fair go'. This evokes the idea of a place where all have an equal opportunity to succeed. However, it *can* be difficult to reconcile this idea with the distribution of resources within Australia. The OECD (2022) ranks Australia 9th in a list of 38 countries for GDP per capita. Yet, Australia was placed 20th in a list of 35 countries using the Gini index of income inequality (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Moreover, Australia has been shown to have the 15th highest poverty rate of 32 countries (ACOSS, 2024).[7] Currently, over 3 million people live in poverty, while 605,800 are unemployed and around 122,500 people are homeless (Davidson et al., 2023; ABS, 2024; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). Material inequalities mark Australian society.

Recent research stresses the impact of cost-of-living pressures on social life. Inflation, increases in interest rates, and sluggish economic growth have contributed to declining living standards (Hannam, 2024). Reflecting the consternation that this has given rise to among the public, O'Donnell et al. (2024) show that the economy and housing affordability are the 2 most important issues for Australians. They further indicate that 40 per cent of Australians are dissatisfied with their finances, with financial stress most common among those in rented accommodation. Young people are growing up in an unfavourable economic climate. This has complicated how they perceive and negotiate already challenging transitions to adulthood.

Transitions to adulthood have become increasingly prolonged, complex and reversible in societies like Australia (Walther, 2006; Cuervo & Wyn, 2011). It is now more common for people to get married and settle down later in life. This reflects shifting cultural expectations around relationships, as well as how a growth in precarious forms of employment and an inhospitable housing market remove lifestyle choices from young people (Furlong, 2016; Arnett 2024; Standing, 2021; Dye, 2024). It is not unusual for young people in their twenties today to struggle to find stable employment, pay rent and afford to move out of the family home. This trend has been labelled delayed adulthood, emerging adulthood and new adulthood (Wyn & Woodman, 2006; Blatterer, 2010; Fahmy, 2016; Hill & Redding, 2021; Arnett, 2024). This report deploys the term precarious adulthood to capture the sense of uncertainty characteristic of this period of the life course.

Standing (2012) explains how some experience the transition to adulthood as downward social mobility. Standing reasons that feeling that they have not been afforded the same opportunities as past generations can lead to a sense of status frustration among the young. Standing suggests that if left unaddressed such frustrations might turn into simmering tensions whereby some are unable to identify a stake in the societies that they live. Cost-of-living pressures have the potential to stir such tensions among the young.

Research indicates that young people are acutely aware of cost-of-living pressures. Walsh et al. (2022) show that most young Australian's disclose experiencing some form of financial difficulty, with many believing that although financial security is possible, it is not something they feel is achievable in the immediate future. Evidence further suggests that youth experiences of the cost-of-living crisis are variable, with young people experiencing poverty and unemployment more acutely affected and experiencing worse outcomes (AYAC & Orygen, 2023). Our research suggests this distribution of life chances shapes youth perspectives on the fairness of life in Australia.

[7] Both the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and ACOSS reference OECD date.

Equality of Opportunity and Fairness as Ingredients for a More Cohesive Society

Equality of opportunity and fairness can be neglected aspects of the social cohesion debate where the focus can often be on forms of cultural expression and dialogue. However, the findings of this research show that these concepts are vital to linking young people's everyday lived experiences to efforts aimed at building social cohesion. Issues around education, employment and housing animate debate among young people, enabling the sharing of concerns and hopes for what a fairer, more cohesive society might look like.

Areas for Progress

This research suggests that young people are keenly aware of inequalities, but they believe that these can be addressed. The youth insight poll shows that 71 per cent of respondents did not believe that wealth is shared fairly in Australia.[8] Just 10 per cent of respondents thought that securing well-paid, stable employment is easy for young people in Australia.[9] A sizable 83 per cent felt that housing is unaffordable.[10] Moreover, only 21 per cent of respondents felt that higher education is affordable.[11] However, when asked whether they believe they would be better off than their parents in Student Edge survey , a plurality of 44 per cent answered in the affirmative.[12] This suggests that young people are not without hope for their future even as they acknowledge significant challenges to economic opportunity and security. Focus group evidence shines some light on why this might be the case.

Focus group participants regularly cited the everyday impact of cost-of-living pressures:

"I feel the main thing that makes people in my area very concerned about the future is the increasing cost of living and lack of security."

"It's got completely out of hand. Even with like just groceries and stuff – it's so expensive."

Participants further expressed frustrations around what they perceived to be a lack of fairness in education, employment and housing.

When speaking about their experiences of education, participants alluded to the idea that the quality of education varies by socio-economic status. Schools in 'low socio-economic areas' were seen to offer less opportunities and perform worse than those in 'higher socio-economic areas', leading some to reflect that some students can be considered 'highly privileged' when compared with others. For participants, building a more cohesive society requires addressing these inequalities.

[8] See Appendix 2: Table 3
[9] See Appendix 2: Table 4
[10] See Appendix 2: Table 5
[11] See Appendix 2: Table 6
[12] See Appendix 1: Table 2

A sense of inequality of opportunity within education was also expressed by those that have attended university:

"I moved from Brisbane to Canberra to do my studies. I was very fortunate to make that move. I supported myself and got a job down there to pay my own rent. But I didn't meet a single other person in my 4 years down in Canberra who was on youth allowance, or who worked to pay their own rent. This made me realise that a lot of other people had opportunities to just focus on their studies entirely and get a great GPA. They could do unpaid internships and get that experience, get those connections that I simply didn't have access to because I had to work to pay my own rent. So, I think that's a good example of how socioeconomics impacts inclusivity in society and impacts your opportunities."

Participants tended to believe that more can be done to create a level playing field across the education system to further equality of opportunity within Australia. They are also not alone in this regard, with Lamb et al. (2020) making much the same case in their comprehensive report on educational opportunities in Australia.

Scepticism concerning equality of opportunity was also expressed in relation to labour market access:

"I think it's really detrimental for young people who don't have a support system on hand to be able to access employment. So, for example, if there's a young person, you know, getting their first job, but they don't have like a supportive family who can help write a resume or help suggest even like the simplest things like what to wear to their first shift or something, and then I guess, that carries on into young adulthood. Because, you know, obviously, if you don't have a good starting position then your end position is gonna be affected."

That inequalities in conditions can lead to inequality of opportunity and outcome was thought an unfair aspect of social life by some participants.

The impact of struggling to gain employment on wellbeing was also raised by participants:

"I was actively looking for employment for like 5 months this year and couldn't find anything, until someone finally gave me the chance to have an interview. I got the job. Thank God! The point is, I was looking actively for months, and no one was hiring me, and that really affected like my self-esteem and my self-worth. I felt worthless. I felt like, I'm not good enough. I'm not employable. What's wrong with me?"

Struggling to gain employment can have a negative impact on young people's mental health by encouraging them to feel like undervalued members of society (also see AYAC & Orygen, 2023). Some participants further argued that competition between young people in the labour market is undermining a sense of togetherness:

"Something that concerns me is the fact that I feel so much pressure and competition among young people. Like how we can feel like we have to do better than others. That puts like a sidewards pressure on us. Like we have pressure from family, pressure from society and there is even that pressure from among ourselves to get that internship and get that job. We're all fighting like crazy over just a few positions. It's crazy. All of us feel that pressure."

Labour market competition can to some extent undermine the development of supporting relationships among young people. Participants tended to believe that more can be done to spread opportunities in the labour market to build a more cohesive society where young people are better able to support each other in claiming a meaningful stake in social life.

Participants further argued that building a more cohesive society requires making housing more accessible to young people. A sense of precarious adulthood was most keenly felt by participants in relation to housing:

"I strongly believe that I will never own a house, or, like, have any sort of property and secure living arrangement. Like prices are just so high… It's not even on my list of ideas for the future."

"Now it's crazy - I feel like I should be an adult, but I don't because I don't have my own place… I just feel like adulting hasn't really happened to me yet, even though I've been technically doing it for 4 years. And I feel like I'm not going to feel like an adult for a very long time, until I get a place of my own. I think that is probably the benchmark for that feeling."

Feeling like they are locked out of affordable housing, some participants expressed frustration around not feeling like they are being given the same opportunities that were afforded to their parents' generation:

"Personally, I feel very sad about the gap in intergenerational wealth in Australia, and how it's just getting worse and worse over the decades. For example, I think millennials are the first generation in Australia's history to be worse off than their parents, and then that gap is just exacerbated with Gen Z. Which is our generation. And it's so evident when you compare the stories that your parents tell you about when they were in their twenties, and how they already had a house. They were already paying a mortgage. They already had a car. They were looking at having a kid. I compare that to what I'm doing now, which is renting in a 5-bedroom apartment, paying twice as much as they did comparatively when looking at the rates from the eighties compared to now."

Ensuring that young people have access to affordable housing that allows them to live as independent adults would be one way to help alleviate such frustrations among young people and promote greater solidarity between the generations.

Although participants found much to be critical about regarding the economic climate, they tended to make a strong, if at times wry, case for remaining hopeful:

"I think seeing as what we are living in now is probably the worst conditions that have occurred for 50 years – there is only room for improvement."

Overview

Young people in Australia today experience prolonged, complex transitions to adulthood that are increasingly marked by reversibility. Recent cost-of-living pressures complicate these already challenging transitions. For some, precarious adulthood is experienced as downwards social mobility and gives rise to a sense of status frustration. Preventing these frustrations becoming simmering tensions is imperative to building a more cohesive Australia. The evidence presented above shows that young people are concerned about unfairness in education, employment and housing. Participants tended to believe that more can be done to create a level playing field across the education system so that all have an equal opportunity to succeed. On matters concerning employment, they tended to stress the pitfalls of a competitive labour market on wellbeing and feelings of togetherness, with some suggesting that inequalities in conditions lead to inequalities of outcomes in employment. However, the evidence presented suggest that a sense of precarious adulthood is most keenly felt in relation to affordable housing. Many felt locked out of affordable housing, with some suggesting that they are not being offered the same opportunities as their parents' generation in terms of independent living. Yet, participants were not without hope that conditions might improve. Taking their concerns seriously and deepening dialogue aimed at growing equality of opportunity will better embed their hopes for a fairer, more cohesive Australia.

Youth Voice and Political Influence

Context

Australia has not experienced the levels of political polarisation, dislocation and conflict evidenced elsewhere in the world in recent years. The OECD (2024) shows that 46 per cent of Australians have high or moderate trust in the Federal Government, making it one of the highest scoring countries out of the 30 surveyed. However, O'Donnell et al. (2024) identify a trend of falling trust in government following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the number of those trusting the federal government to do the right thing most or all the time falling from a high of 56 per cent in 2020 to 33 per cent in 2024.[13] More can be done to strengthen faith in the democratic process in Australia.

Efforts aimed at strengthening democracy are most effective when they push beyond lazy stereotypes of young people. Concerns regarding the health of democracy have often served to misrepresent the participatory habits of the young (Sloam & Henn, 2019; Fu et al., 2021). Low levels of perceived political interest and involvement in party politics[14] has led some to posit the problem of 'apathetic youth' (Oliver, 2013; Wattenberg, 2016; Grasso, 2018). However, such arguments often operationalise a narrow conceptualisation of political engagement and fail to adequately capture the impact of wider social shifts on young people's consumption and practice of politics (Marsh et al., 2007; Farthing, 2010; Chowdhury, 2021). When more expansive repertoires of engagement are considered and young people are more directly involved in dialogue around political issues through the research process, more positive stories around youth political engagement emerge where young people are seen to be favourably disposed to democratic values and more informal modes of engagement, with an engaged scepticism of party politics being offered to explain certain limits to their participation (Henn et al., 2002; 2005; Henn & Foard, 2014; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015; Collin & McCormack 2020).

However, a tendency to frame youth political engagement in binary terms is problematic.[15] Farquhar (2024) shows that there are those for whom the labels apathetic and engaged sceptic are inappropriate. Some young people are interested in a range of political issues and experience dissatisfaction with aspects of social life, but struggle to link their concerns to party politics and pass judgement on the effectiveness of politicians. Farquhar details how these young people 'tune out' from party politics and feel they need more support to have the confidence to engage in such affairs. Farquhar contends that this reluctance to engage with party politics limits these young people's political voice and deprives policymakers of valuable insights into a range of salient political issues. This suggests that democratic renewal must be sought by attending to the reasons for engaged scepticism of party politics among the young, as well as providing them with the support they need to confidently channel their existing interests through more formal avenues of participation.[16]

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[13] O'Donnell et al. (2024) note that trust in the Federal Government has declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, though remains marginally higher than levels recorded in the 2010s. An average of 29 per cent of adults believed the Federal Government could be trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people all or most of the time between 2010 and 2018. This proportion increased substantially in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching as high as 56 per cent in November 2020. The proportion has since declined to 33 per cent in 2024.

[14] By party politics, we are referring to appraisals and practices concerning elections and political parties.

[15] For a different take on the pitfalls of the binary framing of youth political engagement see Farthing (2010).

[16] We are aware of the critique of narrow conceptualisations of politics that privilege party politics. We accept some young people that 'tune out' from party politics may be considered engaged sceptics of aspect of social life. However, it is only by accounting for the more specific form of engaged scepticism of party politics that nuances in youth engagement become apparent. These nuances highlight a need to address perceived knowledge and

Research on youth political engagement in Australia points to the merits of this twin-pronged approach. Markus (2017) provides evidence showing that most young Australians believe that democracy is the best form of government.[17] However, Markus further reveals that perceived levels of political interest are lower among the young when compared with older Australians, with over 1 in 3 young Australians stating they are not interested in politics. Yet, evidence by Collin and McCormack (2020) shows how a disinclination towards party politics sits alongside an interest in inherently political issues and commitment to alternative forms of engagement. Although this disinclination can be channelled into oppositional modes of engaged scepticism, evidence indicates that it can also be a product of a lack of confidence to engage with party politics arising from perceived knowledge deficits (Collin & McCormack, 2020; Ghazarian et al., 2020). Drawing on these findings, AYAC (2024) points to a need to enhance the delivery of civics education and improve the responsiveness of political institutions to encourage and sustain youth involvement in the democratic process (Kain, 2024).

Youth Voice and Political Influence as Ingredients for a More Cohesive Society

Youth voice and political influence are not merely ingredients for a more cohesive society – they are rights that young people have. Under Article 12 of the CRC all young people have the right to have their views given due weight on matter affecting them by policy makers. Ensuring these obligations are fulfilled by the government was thought vital to enhancing social cohesion in this study. Participants believed their right to have a say and be heard by decision-makers is important to advancing social cohesion.

Areas for Progress

The findings from the youth insight poll echoed the wider literature concerning young people's appraisals of party politics. Just 20 per cent of respondents in the Youth Insight Poll believed that politicians take the views of young people into account when making decisions, while a mere 18 per cent felt they could trust politicians to act in the best interest of young people in Australia.[18] There was also a sense among some young people that opportunities to engage in the democratic process are unevenly spread. Evidence from Student Edge survey indicates that just 42 per cent believe that young people in Australia have equal access to the resources to support their full participation in social life.[19] Again, the narrative evidence from the focus groups throws light on how these findings might be understood.

When explaining their experiences of political participation, focus group participants noted a need to overcome stereotypes to better enable youth political agency. Explaining their frustrations, participants identified 3 key stereotypes that inhibit youth perspectives being taken seriously. The first stereotype positions young people as too 'woke' for their own good and in need of some perspective. The second utilises ideas concerning 'dangerous youth' to stigmatise and discredit young people as responsible

confidence deficits to amplify youth voice. As such, there are relevant practical implications that would otherwise be missed if engaged scepticism was defined in relation to social life generally.

[17] Markus (2017) notes that 85.2 per cent of those aged 18-24 and 82.2 per cent of those aged 25-35 agree that democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.

[18] See Appendix 2: Tables 7 & 8

[19] See Appendix 1: Table 3

citizens. The final stereotype relies on characterising young people as lazy and unwilling to step up to their civic responsibilities.

Waite et al. (2024) signal the persistence of ideas associated with youth stereotypes in policy documents concerning young people in Australia. They show how young people tend to be positioned as figures of risk or uncritically as figures of hope. As Waite et al. argue, 'limited engagement of young people, combined with overreliance on simplified youth 'figures', precludes genuine inclusion of youth experience in matters of central concern to them, and risks poor policy outcomes.' Simply put, persistent stereotyping not only worsen the conditions for young people to identify the merits of engaging in the democratic process, but in doing so it weakens policy outcomes.

A sense among the young that politicians are not representative of people like them or understand their challenges was also expressed by some participants:

"As a young person it can be difficult to see yourself in many of the prominent figures in the public… People in the public like Elon Musk or Bezos or Trump are all quite rich…. It's just, I guess, as a young person it's hard to see yourself… The kind of political landscape feels very tilted. It certainly doesn't make it feel accessible to know that politicians have multiple houses. They own multiple properties. They get large donations. They have huge businesses. You feel like your interests are just sidetracked."

Participants concern around representativeness coexisted with a sense that politicians and political institutions are not especially responsive to the needs and interests of the young:

"It can feel like we don't have a seat at the table and the only way we can make that seat [available] is to drag a chair up."

"I feel like young people are kind of celebrated for what they could be in the future when they mature and get a get a career as against what they are now… We're just not given the opportunity until we, you know, finish high school, possibly finish university, and then actually start to begin our career as an adult."

"I think a lot of my peers feel like it's not really that democratic at all… It just feels inaccessible and kind of outside a young person's realm."

As alluded to above, young people's disinclination towards party politics can reflect and engaged scepticism concerning the representativeness and responsiveness of politicians and political institutions.

Participants were also concerned that existing youth leadership programs aimed at involving young people in policymaking processes fail to adequately include those who do not have a pre-existing interest in party politics and might need more support to engage in such matters:

"I think they're [leadership programs involving advisory roles] only for the select few. As much as there are opportunities to advocate and talk about these issues, they're not open to everyone... I think if we

really want social cohesion to occur and to be present in our communities, it [the opportunities] needs to be something that is more widely accessible to all young people."

Some participants suggested that more young people might be encouraged to participate in such programs by enhancing respectful dialogue whereby a tendency for young people to be 'talked at' is replaced by a concerted effort to 'talk to' them and establish more horizontal relationships between young people and adults. For them, this required encompassing approaches that are more informal and accessible to young people:

"Most kids go to school from, you know, 8:30 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon, and they're not really listened to. They're told what to do, how to get a good grade, how to progress their life forward and aren't really ask for their perspective much at all. I think if we really want to make successful events and things which will really engage young people, it needs to be something which really steers clear of anything which resembles school where they kind of get lectured on what to do rather than them having the opportunity to tell other people what they think."

These respondents believed that opening up welcoming, informal spaces for young people to engage in dialogue and feel their way into political debate can incentivise youth political engagement by giving young people greater scope to engage and develop skills on their terms.

Overview

Building social cohesion with young people requires providing them with support to develop the necessary skills and confidence to channel their energies through the democratic process, as well as acknowledging and addressing their dissatisfaction with aspects of party politics. The evidence provided above indicates that more can be done to build young people's trust in political institutions by ensuring that these are more receptive and responsive to their various needs and interests. It further suggests that encouraging participation among groups least likely to engage politically necessitates drawing on a diverse repertoire of youth engagement techniques and adequately valuing informal approaches. Essentially, encouraging and sustaining youth engagement in building social cohesion through the democratic process requires a multifaceted conception of dialogue that is equipped to meet young people where they are at.

Recommendations

Building social cohesion with young people is a cross-governments mission that will involve a whole host of policies working together to create the conditions for a more inclusive social compact to emerge. An exhaustive list of policy recommendations is therefore beyond the scope of this report. To maximise the report's utility to policymakers, it focuses on 4 policy areas that draw on the expertise of AYAC.

1 – Embed rights-based policy through Youth Impact Assessments to ensure that young people can shape decisions around the type of society that they wish to live.

Youth Impact Assessments (YIAs) offer a means of embedding rights-based youth engagement by ensuring that young people are offered opportunities to have a meaningful say over the direction of policy. YIAs are a tool to evaluate the potential of proposed policies, programs and legislation on young people. Sometimes referred to as 'youth checks', these instruments aim to ensure that the needs, perspectives and rights of young people are systematically considered in the policymaking process – including through direct engagement and consultation with young people – and that the resulting policy is more effective, appropriate, and fit for purpose (OECD, 2020; Payne, 2019).
The Australian Human Rights Commission (2023) provides a YIA template for policymakers. Kain (2024) further provides the following guidance for effective implementation of YIAs:

- Have a clear mandate for YIAs and sustained support for their use at senior levels of government.
- Integrate YIAs into the entire policy cycle from conception to implementation, issuing clear guidance on how YIAs relate to other impact assessments.
- Provide comprehensive guidance, training and toolkits on YIA use.
- Ensure the provision of up-to-date, comprehensive and reliable data to ensure robustness of YIAs
- Publish and disseminate YIAs to aid transparency and youth buy-in to the policymaking process.

By drawing on these resources, policymakers can better embed YIAs and further rights-based policy. However, it is important that government departments and agencies consider the merits of various models of engagement that support substantive work with young people. As Farthing (2011) points out, a failure to adequately consider such models can lead to 'thin' right-based approaches to youth engagement. This can lead to well-intentioned rhetoric around rights being deployed in the absence of considered repertoires of engagement that are necessary to supporting young people claim those rights. This brings us to our next policy area regarding the importance of valuing youth work.

2 – Value youth and engage the expertise of the sector to build social cohesion with young people.

'Youth work works' and 'youth work matters' are common phrases within the youth sector. Their use over many years speaks to a persistent sense among practitioners that youth work is undervalued as a policy tool. AYAC believes that ensuring youth work is adequately valued is instrumental to realising the contribution it can make to building social cohesion with young people.

Youth workers have knowledge and expertise across a wide range of topics relevant to the advancement of social cohesion. Life skills, emotional resilience, RSE, political literacy education, advocacy, employability, inter-cultural and inter-generational dialogue – many youth workers have experience in all these areas of practice. More than that, they approach such work with a set of values and processes that are distinctive to their profession (see Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Cooper 2018; Davies, 2021; Farquhar, 2024b).

Youth work is a relationship building process that centres the needs and interests of young people and seeks to support them in claiming their rights (AYAC, 2013). Its emphasis on working with young people in their context and maximising voluntary engagement separates it from formal education, while its greater focus on strengthening connectedness through informal learning in group settings distinguishes it from social work (Cooper et al., 2023; Corney et al. 2024a). Youth work can make a particular contribution to the lives of young people that compliments the work done by teachers, social workers and others.

Participants in this study are not alone in seeing the value of meaningful youth work to building social cohesion with young people. A strong case for the unique contribution that youth work can make was also provided by panellists at AYAC's National Youth Practitioners' Network (NYPN) roundtable on social cohesion in November 2024 (see AYAC, 2024b)

In his contribution, Kano Ravlji shared the ways youth work positively impacted him as a young migrant from India. Describing youth work as a 'third space' beyond school and family, where young people can engage voluntarily and on their own terms, Kano outlined how involvement in youth work programs can provide a sense of social connection and belonging. However, Kano was keen to point out that although cultivating connection and belonging were important, his experience of youth work went beyond this. Kano emphasised how youth work provided him with opportunities for civic participation and informal learning that ultimately led to the formation of his youth-led non-profit organisation, Third Culture. For Kano, the importance of adequately funded youth work to supporting young people cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose cannot be understated. This sentiment was shared by all contributors at the roundtable.

Kano's points around youth work's role of facilitating civic participation among young people were echoed by fellow panellist and CEO of Youth Action NSW, Andrew Johnson. Andrew shared insights from a recent piece of research on social cohesion conducted by Youth Action which consulted over 150 young people in NSW. The young people engaged expressed that they did not feel like they were afforded enough opportunities to engage in intercultural dialogue aimed at building social cohesion and felt that the youth work opportunity helped them come together to learn and express themselves. This mirrors the success of similar initiatives in other jurisdictions (see Hume Foundation, 2023; Shared Island Youth Forum, 2024). When done well, youth work can remove barriers to participation, promote mutual understanding, build civic skills and amplify youth voice (see AYAC, 2024a; Kain & Wotherspoon, 2024). Complementing the contributions of Kano and Andrew, Professor Robyn Broadbent emphasised the educative potential of youth work. Much like participants in this study, Robyn expressed concern around educational inequalities in Australia, arguing that building a cohesive society means busting the myth that all young people cannot be provided with a robust education. Robyn suggested that youth workers can make valuable contributions to improving outcomes in formal education, noting the important work done by youth workers in alternative education schools.

Supporting the case outline by Professor Broadbent, Corney et al. (2024b) argue youth workers involved in the formal education system improve outcomes for vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged young people by better connecting them with a range of support services and deepening collaborative working across their support networks. A similar case is made in the UK, with the National Youth Agency (2023) providing evidence to suggest that investing in youth work can provide a continuum of support that can have a transformational impact on young people's lives inside and outside of schools. However, youth workers have long noted certain tensions when working in schools, with the more rigid structure of formal educational settings impinging on their informal, relational learning approaches (Harland et al., 2005; Corney, 2006). Efforts to tackle educational inequality through youth work must therefore be accompanied by a commitment to breaking down silos and promoting mutual understanding between teachers and youth workers.

Maximizing the contribution that youth work can make to building social cohesion with young people requires that organisations are funded on a sustainable basis to promote the retention of expertise and accumulation of institutional knowledge (see Corney et al. 2021; Blueprint Expert Group, 2024). It also requires drawing lessons from the substantial international literature on youth work concerning the measurement of outcomes (see Jeffs & Smith 2008; Davies; 2011; McMahon, 2018; Farquhar, 2024b; de St Croix & Doherty, 2024). This literature suggests that more can be done to draw on the expertise of youth workers and experiences of young people when determining outcomes and communicating the impact of projects. Enhancing the co-design of evaluation frameworks offers opportunities to boost outcomes for young people and better capture the benefits of youth work.

3 – Implement the commitment to Better and Fairer Schools to ensure that all young people are given opportunities to succeed and actively contribute to economic, political and cultural life in Australia.

Policymakers share the concerns around educational inequalities outlined in this report, with the Albanese government launching a 10-year plan to create better and fairer schools (see Savage & Broom 2023; Savage 2024). A response to critical appraisals of the National School Reform Agreement (2018), the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2024) aims to:

- Ensure 'full funding' under the schooling research standard by 2029.
- Enhance early years support through phonics and numeracy checks aimed at identifying additional need.
- Improve resources and support for student wellbeing and mental health
- Further initiatives to attract and retain teachers and school leaders, especially in schools need additional support.
- Promote evidence-based teaching and access to professional learning and curriculum learning for teachers and school leaders.

The following targets have also been identified:

- Increase the proportion of students leaving school with a Year 12 certificate to 83.8 per cent, up from 76.3 per cent in 2022.
- Increase the proportion of First Nations Australians aged 20-24 attaining a Year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent by 2031.

- Reduce the proportion of students in the 'needs additional support' NAPLAN category for reading and numeracy by 10 per cent and increasing those in the 'strong' and 'exceeding' categories by 10 per cent be 2030.
- Raise the attendance rate to pre-Covid levels of 91.4 per cent, up from 88.6 per cent in 2023.

As Savage (2024) argues, realising these objectives will require significant and sustained collaboration across all levels of government and the education system. If successfully implemented, the commitment to creating better and fairer schools would go some way to reducing the educational inequalities objected to in this report.

4 – Raise the rate of income support[20]

Over the past 30 years, socio-economic policy has eroded Australia's social welfare system. Today, payments for Youth Allowance and JobSeeker are $270 and $220 per week below the Henderson poverty line respectively (Davidson et al., 2023).[21] Alongside stagnant rates of pay, social support payments have become increasingly conditional and burdensome with the introduction of mutual-obligation-based programs and paternalistic mechanisms like compulsory income management (see Roche et al., 2021).[22] Increases to Youth Allowance and JobSeeker through the Australian Government's 2024 budget, while welcome, fail to match the estimated weekly expenditure of $544 required for a single unemployed person under 35 living in shared accommodation to cover essentials such as rent, food, energy, and transport (Anglicare Australia, 2024). The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) show that Australia's income support payments remain among the lowest in the OECD (ACOSS, 2024; Davidson et al., 2023).

Currently, Youth Allowance is paid at $45 a day, while JobSeeker payments as at September 2024 is $56 a day (ACOSS, 2024a). In addition to this, if a person rents privately, they may be entitled to Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), which is approximately $105 a week for a single person living alone or $70 per week for a single person in shared accommodation. Youth Allowance payments are means tested and start to decrease if a person earns over $528 a fortnight (Services Australia, 2024). A single young person living in shared accommodation in receipt of the maximum rate of pay for Youth Allowance and CRA currently receives 59.32% of the Aged Pension with CRA. Limits to this support exacerbate the concerns raised by participants in this study around equality of opportunity.

Filia et al. (2024) reveal that young people faced with financial insecurity are three times more likely to report poor personal wellbeing, including lowered mental health outcomes and a negative outlook on the future. Their work further reveals how some of the pressures alluded to by participants can be alleviated by raising income support.

Reflecting the concerns voiced by participants in relation to fairness in education, Filia et al. (2024) draw attention to the impact of financial stability on study, noting how young people who work while studying experience more stress than those who do not. The adverse effects of working while studying are also

[20] More could be written about the impact of welfare to work programs in supporting young people manage the concerns raised around youth experiences of the labour market in this study, however, this was beyond the scope of this report. Given constraints of space, we have decided to postpone our consideration of these programs for future policy work.
[21] Students aged-16-24 are eligible for Youth Allowance. Unemployed people aged 22-66 are eligible for JobSeeker.
[22] For examples, see Work for the Dole, Cashless Credit Card and Basic Card.

flagged in the Australian Government's Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024). Noting shortcomings in Youth Allowance, the report notes the adverse effects of working while undertaking full-time study on academic outcomes. The report emphasises that increasing income payments are an important mechanism to enhancing equity and inclusion for students, enabling young people experiencing marginalisation to successfully participate in higher education. Removing barriers to full participation, such as insufficient rates of income support payments, will advance the greater equality of opportunity in education desired by participants in this study (Department of Education, 2024).

Filia et al. (2024, p.26) further signals how raising income support can help alleviate some of the pressures participants noted around affordable independent living. They highlight how adjusting the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) program to keep pace with rent increases across Australia would further support young people living independently. As they point out, CRA provides crucial financial assistance to tenants with low incomes, but currently only provides a maximum of $94 a week for a single person (as at March 2024), which fails to reflect current rent levels and still leaves low-income earners in housing stress. Increasing the maximum rent threshold by 60% would more than double recipients' CRA payments, substantially reducing rental stress.

The arguments outlined above align with AYAC's (2024c) joint pre-budget submission with youth peak bodies across Australia, which called for income support payments to be increased to $88 per day to allow young people to meet their basic needs and surpass the Henderson Poverty line of $87.32 per day (also see AYAC 2024d; 2024e; 2024f). Expanding the scope and value of social support payments would further strengthen social cohesion in Australia by promoting equality of opportunity and better enabling all young people to participate fully in social life.

A Final Call for Dialogue and Action

This report issues a call to dialogue and action to advance building social cohesion with young people. In exploring a variety of indicators around which meaningful dialogue on social cohesion can take place, it offers insights into youth experiences and perspectives on economic, political and cultural matters. These insights show young people wish to be involved in building a more inclusive, fairer and cohesive Australia. The recommendations outlined in the report seek to deepen the dialogue on social cohesion to maximise young people's capacity to pursue this objective and shape the society in which they live. It is accepted that the insights and recommendations provided are not exhaustive and relevant areas may not be covered in the report. However, it is only by responding positively to the call for dialogue and action issued in the report that new ground will be broken and social cohesion effectively built with young people.

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Appendix 1 – Student Edge Survey Findings

Table 1: Young people are valued members of Australian society	
Strongly agree	11.7%
Agree	43.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	27.9%
Disagree	13.0%
Strongly disagree	4.3%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *sense of belonging* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 2: I believe that, overall, I will be better off in life than my parents	
Strongly agree	10.8%
Agree	31.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	38.6%
Disagree	13.4%
Strongly disagree	6.1%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *equality of opportunity* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 3: Young people in Australia have equal access to the resources they need to support their full participation in society	
Strongly agree	9.0%
Agree	32.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	32.9%
Disagree	19.8%
Strongly disagree	5.5%

Aim – To gauge participants view of the impact of *equality of opportunity* on *participation* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Appendix 2 – Youth Insight Poll Findings

Table 1: Young Australians are accepting of different cultures and perspectives	
Strongly agree	19.4%
Agree	42.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	21.9%
Disagree	11.0%
Strongly disagree	5.1%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *inclusion* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 2: Australia is place where everyone is accepted and made to feel welcome	
Strongly agree	10.5%
Agree	21.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	28.7%
Disagree	27.0%
Strongly disagree	12.7%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *sense of belonging* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 3: Wealth is shared fairly in Australia	
Strongly agree	1.3%
Agree	7.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.7%
Disagree	32.5%
Strongly disagree	38.0%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *equality of opportunity* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 4: Securing well paid, stable employment is easy for young people in Australia	
Strongly agree	1.3%
Agree	8.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	27.8%
Disagree	40.9%
Strongly disagree	21.5%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *insertion* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 5: Housing is affordable for young people in Australia	
Strongly agree	1.7%
Agree	7.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	8.4%
Disagree	27.4%
Strongly disagree	55.3%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *equality of opportunity* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 6: Access to higher education is affordable for young people in Australia	
Strongly agree	3.4%
Agree	17.3%
Neither agree nor disagree	21.5%
Disagree	28.3%
Strongly disagree	29.5%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *equality of opportunity* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 7: Politicians take the views of young people into account when making decisions	
Strongly agree	7.2%
Agree	12.7%
Neither agree nor disagree	18.1%
Disagree	32.1%
Strongly disagree	30.0%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *legitimacy* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Table 8: I trust politicians to act in the interests of young Australians	
Strongly agree	6.8%
Agree	11.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.0%
Disagree	29.1%
Strongly disagree	37.1%

Aim – To gauge participants views on *legitimacy* (See Bernard, 1999; Jenson, 1998; 2010; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; UNECE, 2023)

Appendix 3 – Focus Group Session Outline

Welcome
Welcome!

[AYAC intros]

Acknowledgement of Country.

Very quick ice breaker

In case you're not familiar with AYAC (the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition), we are the national peak body representing the interests of young people aged 12-25 years, and the wider youth sector. One of the key things we do is provide information and advice to decision-makers to make sure they know what issues young people care about, and that they understand how the decisions they make and the policies they set are likely to affect young people. That's why we're excited to be talking with you today.

We will use your feedback from today's discussion, along with the results from the online survey that I think you have all completed, to help us write a report about social cohesion, which we will share with the Australian Government and other organisations. This may include using direct quotes. Please be assured that your name will not be used in the report.

In today's session, we will ask about your experiences as a young person in Australia. Now, just to set out some guidelines around how we will be having a respectful discussion.

Feel free to use the 'raise hand' function, or just unmute your mic and jump in when you have something to say. However, we'd really like to make sure everyone has a chance to participate, so we ask for your co-operation in being considerate about making space for others. We may also call on you directly – but feel free to pass if you don't have anything to say. And just a reminder to please be respectful of other people's opinions and experiences.

We've also set up Google Slides that you can add to. Just click on the Tt symbol in the toolbar at the top, then click into the slide, then start typing. Anything added to the slides is anonymous.

If, at any time, you're uncomfortable with what's being discussed, please feel free to take a break and come back when you're feeling ready to. You can also leave the session at any time. We'll follow up with you if this happens, to make sure you're okay and that you have the support you need.

We also want to make sure that everyone is aware that we are recording this session and using an AI assistant to help with notetaking. This is just to help us make sure we don't miss anything from the discussion. We'll use the video and transcript to check that our notes are accurate, and these won't be seen by anyone outside AYAC.

Before we start, does anyone have any questions or concerns?

Question Frame
This question frame is flexible and seeks to give young people as much scope as possible to engage in the debate on their terms. The key consideration in delivery will be giving the participants as much scope as possible to talk about cultural, economic and political matters. This will provide insights into the various dimensions and indicators of social cohesion uncovered in the literature review.

- When we think about social cohesion, some of the words that comes up a lot are inclusivity, togetherness and participation. Making sure that everybody feels welcome within the society

and community that they live, but also that they're able to actively participate in the life of that community. So, I just wanted to throw out a very broad opening question, and then we'll maybe work our way down into some more specifics. Do you think that Australia is an inclusive society?
  - This questions aims to open up discussion on social cohesion by giving participants an accessible set of terms to understand the concept, so that they can feel the way into the discussion on their own terms.
- Are there any groups that you think maybe aren't as included or face additional barriers?
  - This will allow young people to introduce inequalities and discrimination into the discussion on their terms.
  - Follow up prompts to gauge views on the groups sense of cultural inclusion and sense of belonging.
  - Follow up prompts to gauge views on equality of opportunity and socio-economic participation.
- Do you feel that young people always feel valued within their communities or the spaces that they are in?
  - This will allow us to probe deeper into participants sense of belonging and the factors that they believe support them develop a stake in social life.
- What are your views on politics?
  - This will allow us to gain an understanding of participant sense of political trust and participation.

Wrap up

Thank you and wrap up. Any questions or concerns – hang back for a chat.

Appendix 4 – Ethics Statement

AYAC did not seek formal ethics approval for this report. However, AYAC did put in place the following ethical safeguards.

Informed Consent
Information was provided explaining the aims and scope of the work to participants before they agreed to participate. Participants were also informed that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
It was explained that all contributions would be fully anonymised by the researchers by removing any references that might lead to the identification of participants.

Mitigation of Potential Harms
All research gauging youth perspectives on potentially emotive political issues ppresents the risk that some may find the questions posed or contributions made upsetting. To minimise this risk, AYAC:

- Employed an experienced youth worker that holds a PhD in youth political engagement to oversee the research.
- Ensured that all research was conducted in line with its Child Safe Policy.
- Set out some discussion guidelines at the beginning of focus groups to promote respectful dialogue.
- Emphasized the voluntary nature of participation so that participants did not feel obligated to answer questions.
- Prioritised an open dialogue that gave participants scope to speak to their issues.
- Ensured participants were offered the opportunity to contribute anonymously on a Google Doc should they not wish to share directly in the group.
- Informed participants that they could reach out to AYAC for support through the chat or via email if they found aspects of the research upsetting.

A Rights-Based Approach
AYAC prioritised a rights-based approach in relation to its determination of risk of potential harms, recognising the importance of providing young people with opportunities to speak out on issues the issues covered in the research to empowering them as rights-holders.

Methodological Rigour
The methodology deployed and its limitations have been clearly and transparently communicated within the report.

Data Minimisation
Only relevant data was collected to ensure a diverse sample of participants and key indicators of social cohesion identified from existing literature tested.

Data Security
Personal data was held securely and was only accessible to the AYAC team.