

POWER **TO THE (YOUNG) PEOPLE:**

EMBEDDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S
NEEDS AND PRIORITIES
IN PUBLIC POLICY



ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN YOUTH AFFAIRS COALITION (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 policy-makers and the community understand the impacts of how policies and decision-making affect young people and the youth sector.

Report authors:

Kirsty Kain, National Policy and Advocacy Lead,
and Nellie Wotherspoon, Policy Officer, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Visual scribing graphics:

Rachel Dight, Swivel Creative

Authorised by:

Joanna Rostami, CEO, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Contact: info@ayac.org.au

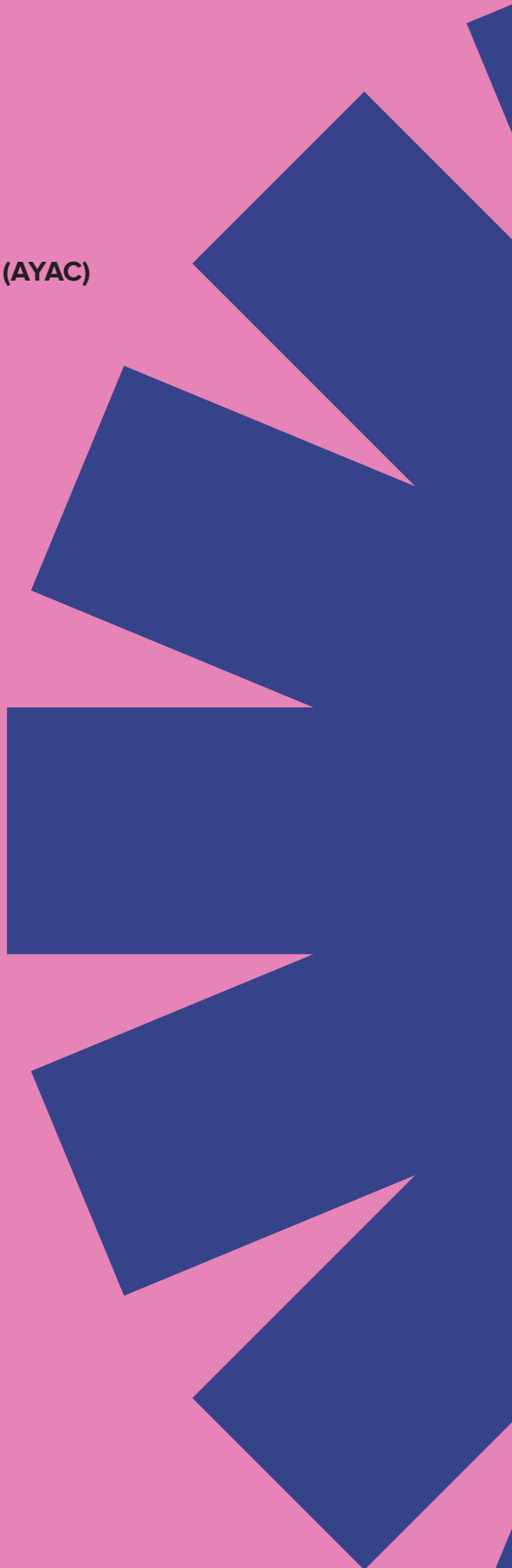
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Appreciation, as always, goes to AYAC's members for their support – including our ever-growing network of young members.

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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

Recent developments in Australian youth policy have seen the promotion of young people's meaningful involvement in government policy-making. The launch of *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make* (Office for Youth, 2024) indicates a positive turn in the way young people are valued and responded to at the highest levels of government. Despite this, entrenched systemic barriers and attitudes that limit young people's genuine participation persist, with recent research indicating that 86 per cent of Australian young people feel as if their perspectives and values are not represented by the federal government, and 80 per cent feeling overlooked by their federal member (Stephenson et al., 2024). Young people play an essential yet undervalued role in democracy. Actively involving young people in high-level decision-making will support them to fully realise their rights, and will ensure that the government is representative of and responsive to all citizens, thereby contributing to the health of Australia's democracy.

The aim of this report is to present a range of policy options that reinforce and build on existing youth strategies, which would improve the quality and responsiveness of public policy to young people, and ultimately strengthen the relationship between young people and government. This report considers a range of policy options and examples from Australia and internationally, including national youth strategies, youth impact assessments, national youth parliaments, and youth quotas.

National youth strategies provide a structured framework that creates a coordinated and inclusive approach to youth policy and builds cohesion between sectors and governmental efforts. By developing a holistic, united approach amongst stakeholders that is informed by youth voice, young people's specific needs and interests can be systematically addressed across policy areas, and progress towards strategic goals can be tracked. As of 2020, 76 per cent of countries within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have developed a multi-year youth strategy, with successful implementations seen in countries such as Estonia and New Zealand (OECD, 2020).



Youth impact assessments (YIAs) are a tool used to review the anticipated effects and outcomes of programs, policies, and legislation on young people. YIAs are utilised to ensure young people's needs, rights, and views are systematically included in policy-making, and that public policy is relevant and responsive to young people. Benefits of a government-wide implementation of YIAs include assisting in creating a streamlined approach to address systemic inequities by embedding consideration of young people's best interests across all levels and areas of government; enabling the prospective evaluation of government action, leading to more efficacious policy and economical use of public resources; and promoting young people's rights through the introduction of mandates for consulting young people on identified policies, programs, and legislation (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; Payne, 2019; *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989).

National youth parliaments are youth organisations that consist of either elected or selected young people who represent the views of young people in their area to government. Youth parliament programs are used to promote young people's civic engagement, build a connection between young people and government, and provide a space for young people to challenge existing policies and develop their own reform agenda. The introduction of an Australian National Youth Parliament could mirror the success seen in the United Kingdom's Youth Parliament, which has helped to bridge the gap between young people and government through creating meaningful opportunities to influence policy- and law-making at the highest levels of government (Moulds, 2022).

Youth quotas are a percentage of positions within a parliament and/or political party that are reserved for young people. Youth quotas are intended to address a lack of youth representation in government to improve the quality and scope of policy-making to ensure that government is responsive to young people's interests. List order requirements, reserved seats, and legislated

party quotas will ensure that youth quotas are effective in their objectives. Youth quotas have seen success in Peru, where their introduction resulted in a doubling of the percentage of young candidates standing for election (Azelton et al., 2019).

Alongside the proposed policy options, this report outlines several critical elements that are required to support their successful implementation. These include a strong authorising environment, consisting of high-level political support and use of appropriate coordination mechanisms; access to robust data that delineates age and other social identities; adequate resourcing; and the use of systematic monitoring and evaluation.

With the Australian Government's renewed commitment to the inclusion of young people in the civic and political life of this country, we are presented with a valuable opportunity to further embed young people's needs and priorities within all government policy, initiatives, and programs. This report has identified that a whole-of-government approach is required to improve outcomes for young people and ensure they are adequately represented and heard in government decision-making and policy-making processes. Implemented in combination, the proposed policy options would create a comprehensive framework to strengthen Australia's approach to youth policy.

Introduction

In the last few years, Australia has taken significant strides in youth policy. Notable initiatives include the establishment of the Australian Government's Youth Steering Committee and Youth Advisory Groups, alongside the development of the federal government's new youth engagement strategy, *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make* (Office for Youth, 2024). This renewed focus on listening to young Australians represents a pivotal moment in upholding their rights and ensuring their voices are heard.

The *Engage!* strategy marks a meaningful step forward in youth participation, aligning closely with recommendations from international research (see e.g. Ader & Igrioglu, 2018; Australian Youth Affairs Coalition [AYAC], 2010; Chaskin et al., 2018; Moulds, 2022). Key aspects of the strategy include:

- Continued collaboration with the Youth Steering Committee and Youth Advisory Groups, and regular community-based consultations, representing an important commitment to ongoing facilitation of young people's participation in government decision-making processes.

- Large-scale data collection through the annual National Youth Survey, a vital means of enhancing the government's understanding of young people's needs and informing policy development.
- A critical commitment to focused effort on improving the government's ability to work effectively with young people.
- Embedded monitoring and evaluation to ensure the strategy remains effective and responsive.

These commitments are an important affirmation of young people's right to have input into decisions that impact them – as set out in Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) – and a nod to some of the “critical youth participation mechanics” identified at the joint Australian Youth Affairs Coalition/Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia/ Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice policy roundtable held in November 2023 (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024, p.3).

Despite these advancements, however, challenges remain. Many young people feel their perspectives are overlooked or disregarded by decision-makers (Oto, 2023), and there is a widespread perception that the federal government does not represent their values or address their concerns effectively (Stephenson et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2023).



Studies show that trust in the federal government is low among young Australians, with feelings of disillusionment and abandonment prevalent (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; Chowdury, 2021; Fu et al., 2021; Moulds, 2022; Stephenson et al., 2024). Government resistance to youth policy input also presents a significant obstacle to realising the full potential of youth engagement (Moulds, 2022).

If we fail to build on current youth engagement efforts, therefore, we risk further erosion of young people's trust in government and democracy, and continued deterioration in young people's sense of national belonging (Walsh et al., 2023). We would be withholding additional chances for young people to practise active citizenship and democracy (Corney et al., 2022) and we would be neglecting our duty to ensure that "government is representative, and policies are effective, inclusive and address the needs of diverse communities" (Stephenson et al., 2024, p. 3). We would be overlooking a valuable opportunity to further enable the realisation of young people's rights to participate in decisions that affect them, and for public policy to truly reflect their best interests – rights that are enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), of which Australia is a signatory. We also risk falling further behind other countries that have introduced innovative approaches to youth policy (European Youth Forum, 2023a).

It is crucial, therefore, to consider the broader systems and structures needed to fully embed young people's voices, as well as genuine consideration of their specific needs, in public policy. As Chaskin et al. (2018) observe, "there may be fundamental limitations to policies seeking to promote youth civic and political engagement that need to be addressed beyond the boundaries of participatory schemes that engage them" (p. 53).

Reflecting on the question "How can we maximise young people's impact on public policy?", posed a decade ago in an Australian Youth Affairs Coalition report entitled *Where are you going with that?* (AYAC,

2010), it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure young people's rights are upheld and their needs and concerns are consistently addressed. Accordingly, the current report explores additional policy options and international best practices to build on the foundation established by the Australian Government and enhance youth participation in public policy.

Given that "changing political priorities have negatively impacted policy coordination and consistency over time" (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024, p. 2), there is a particular need to look to whole-of-government mechanisms to address the issues identified above. The report therefore begins with an exploration of national youth strategies and youth impact assessments, before moving on to direct participation methods, including youth parliaments and youth quotas.

It should be noted that there are several emerging and promising approaches that are outside the scope of this report, which should also be considered. These include lowering the voting age (see *Make It 16*, 2023; Moulds, 2022), youth-sensitive budgeting and youth participatory budgeting (see Ader & Igriglu, 2018; The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020), social accountability mechanisms such as scorecards (see Australian Child Rights Taskforce [ACRT], 2024; Clear Impact, 2019; European Youth Forum, 2023b), and the use of digital participation tools for inclusive policy development (see Moulds, 2022; Think Forward, 2024). We would encourage readers to consult additional sources for further information on these policy options.

Meanwhile, the current report aims to provide a rudimentary roadmap for strategic planning and action by government, in partnership with civil society, to improve outcomes for young people and ensure they are adequately represented and heard in the decision-making processes that determine their present circumstances and shape their future possibilities.

Policy options

Whole-of-government approaches



National youth strategies

A national youth strategy is a key management tool used by governments to support holistic, government-wide planning and priority-setting related to youth policy (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; OECD, 2020). The broad purpose of this type of instrument is to unite key stakeholders behind a shared vision and mobilise action towards agreed strategic goals (Azelton et al., 2019; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2004). More specifically, a national youth strategy provides a framework for structured, cohesive, and inclusive youth policy-making, and aligns governmental efforts across various sectors (Azelton et al., 2019; OECD, 2020). This is crucial to effective policy-making, given that “[y]oung people have specific needs and interests across all policy and service areas including in employment, education, health, justice, housing, transportation, sports, gender equality and environment, among others” (OECD, 2020, p. 30). By applying a youth lens across the full spectrum of relevant policy areas, a national youth strategy ensures that the needs and interests of young people are systematically addressed.

As a key strategic document, a national youth strategy generally sets out government objectives in youth policy, the rationale underpinning these objectives, specific actions to achieve the objectives, and measurable outcomes and targets (OECD, 2020). It may also include – either within the strategy itself or in supplementary documentation – information to support implementation and evaluation, such as timeframes, allocation of resources, organisational responsibilities, outcome indicators, and benchmarks (OECD, 2020). National youth strategies are prevalent within the OECD, with 76 per cent of member countries having an operational multi-year youth strategy in place as of April 2020 (OECD, 2020). This indicates that there is a broad political and social mandate for the use of this type of policy instrument.

To support the “challenging, but indispensable task” (UNESCO, 2004, p.35) of developing and implementing a high-quality national youth strategy, UNESCO has provided advice to help governments navigate the process. Now two decades old, *Empowering youth through national policies* (UNESCO, 2004) provides extensive guidance in the areas of both policy formulation and implementation that is still relevant today. Fundamentally, UNESCO asserts that a national youth policy should be a long-term strategic instrument, providing guidance over successive governments; it should be consensus-based, that is, developed through consultation with all key stakeholders, including young people; it should be integrated, coordinating actions both



horizontally and vertically, with responsibilities clearly delegated across both national and sub-national agencies, and NGOs; and it should be cross-sectoral, covering the full range of issues that impact young people (Azelton et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2004).

In development of a national youth strategy, consideration must also be given to the positive positioning of young people within the document, to ensure it fulfils its role as an instrument of youth empowerment (ACRT, 2024; Chaskin et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2004). For example, a strong and successful strategy needs to acknowledge young people's "status and potential today, not just in the future" (Chaskin et al., 2018, p. 21), ensure young people are perceived as "genuine stakeholders and members of society" (UNESCO, 2004, p.16), and recognise all young people's fundamental rights to participation (Chaskin et al., 2018). A high-quality strategy must also "actively promote social inclusion and equality by facilitating the participation of young people with fewer opportunities" (Kantar Public et al., 2024, p.10).

A strong national youth strategy should be broad in scope, "taking all areas of youth policy within its orbit" (Hofmann-van de Poll & Williamson, 2022, p. 27) to ensure young people's needs and priorities are integrated into the broader national policy agenda (Azelton et al., 2019). While it is considered appropriate for high-level strategic goals to be set by government, specific priority areas should be based on a nuanced understanding of the needs, perceptions, attitudes, aspirations, and concerns of young people across the full spectrum of social identities and geographic locations, and informed by their direct input (Azelton et al., 2019; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2004).

Countries with high-quality national youth strategies tend to see improved trust in government, higher interest in formal politics, and increased levels of active citizenship among young people.

Benefits of national youth strategies

There are numerous benefits to having a national youth strategy – for young people, for the wider community, and for government and democracy.

A national youth strategy can enhance the efficacy of youth policy, by fostering a collaborative environment and exchange of knowledge between key stakeholders (Kantar Public et al., 2024). It can also act as a catalyst to raise awareness of existing gaps in evidence and understanding of young people's needs across different policy areas, and encourage 'mainstreaming' of youth issues (Kantar Public et al., 2024; OECD, 2020). This results in policies, programs, and services that are more responsive to young people's needs, which, in turn, gives rise to increased satisfaction with policy outcomes among young people, especially when they are directly involved in the strategy's development and review (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2004).

A national youth strategy can also lead to more effective use of Commonwealth resources, by ensuring that those resources are directed towards the achievement of considered, strategic priorities, and guiding the work of government over time (OECD, 2020). Stronger coordination and coherence of youth policy across different governmental institutions (both horizontal and vertical), and between government and the youth sector under a national youth strategy also contributes to this outcome (Kantar Public et al., 2024; OECD, 2020). Further, a national youth strategy can support and amplify other key government priorities – for example, it can underpin a society-wide focus on wellbeing (ACRT, 2024), and, if gender-responsive, can support a broader gender equality agenda (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, national youth strategies act to enhance youth engagement and political participation. Countries with high-quality national youth strategies tend to see improved trust in government, higher interest in formal politics, and increased levels of active citizenship among young people (Kantar Public et al., 2024; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2004). Strong national youth strategies also improve the social inclusion of young people, particularly those facing disadvantage (Kantar Public et al., 2024). Further, participatory approaches to the development of national youth strategies facilitate learning experiences

in social policy formulation and empower young people to actively influence and shape the political agenda (UNESCO, 2004).

Broader impacts on society and democracy are also observed in countries with national youth strategies. Application of a youth lens to policy design can reduce inequalities between different age cohorts, leading to higher levels of life satisfaction and improved intergenerational relationships (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2004). The higher levels of government inclusiveness and accountability that tend to be associated with national youth strategies also contribute to the legitimacy of government action, an important consideration in upholding democratic principles (OECD, 2020).

Last but not least, several beneficial outcomes for young people and the youth sector have been identified. Participatory processes employed in the development of quality national youth strategies support young people to realise their human rights, enhance their personal and collective self-esteem, and result in measurable improvements in quality of life – as a result of both the tangible impacts of better policy, and the significance of being heard and valued at the level of national government (ACRT, 2024; *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989; UNESCO, 2004). National youth strategies also benefit the youth sector, by supporting quality practice, and boosting recognition of the important work done by the sector (Kantar Public et al., 2024).

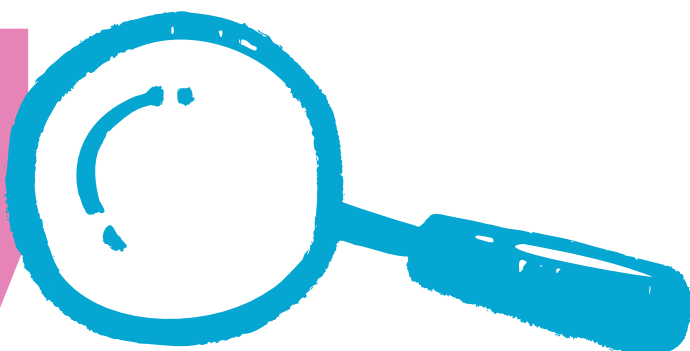
Examples from other jurisdictions

Two successful examples of national youth strategies that can serve as models for other countries aiming to develop high quality national youth policy instruments are those implemented by Estonia and New Zealand.

Estonia's national youth strategy is renowned for its high quality and effectiveness. The country's approach was participatory, involving young people and other key stakeholders in the development of the strategy (OECD, 2020). This inclusive process helped ensure that the strategy is relevant and responsive to the needs of young people. Estonia's strategy includes a dedicated implementation budget linked to specific goals and timeframes, which enhances accountability and ensures that the necessary resources are available for achieving the set objectives (OECD, 2020). Estonia conducts annual evidence-based monitoring and assessment, publishing the results online (OECD, 2020). This transparency builds trust and allows for continuous improvement of the strategy.

New Zealand's national youth strategy is considered to be another exemplary model. It is characterised by strong leadership from a central government organisation, clear responsibilities across different departments, and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (OECD, 2020). Like Estonia, New Zealand reports annually on progress made against key outcome indicators, enhancing transparency and public trust (OECD, 2020). Data is disaggregated by important social identity markers, which helps in understanding the specific needs of different youth demographics and identifies persistent inequities that need targeted interventions (OECD, 2020).

Application of a youth lens to policy design can reduce inequalities between different age cohorts, leading to higher levels of life satisfaction and improved intergenerational relationships.



Considerations for successful implementation of an Australian national youth strategy

It is essential to recognise that merely adopting a national youth strategy is not sufficient (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024). Ongoing commitment, allocation of adequate human and financial resources, the use of participatory processes, and robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation are critical for the successful implementation of such strategies (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; ACRT, 2024; Azelton et al., 2019; OECD, 2020). To this end, the OECD has developed a framework to guide policy makers through the youth policy cycle, which builds on the earlier work of UNESCO. The OECD Assessment Framework for National Youth Strategies establishes eight quality standards, specifying that national youth strategies should be “evidence-based; participatory; resourced; transparent and accessible; monitored, evaluated and accountable; cross-sectoral; gender-responsive; and supported by high-level political commitment” (OECD, 2020, p. 34). In tandem, the UNESCO and OECD guidance documents provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap for the development of effective and integrated national youth strategies, and could be used to guide Australia’s work in this space.

In addition to the quality standards set out in the OECD Assessment Framework for National Youth Strategies, several other elements have been identified that support the successful implementation of such instruments. These should also be taken into consideration in the design of a national youth strategy for Australia.

1. **The existence of a National Youth Act:** This supports effective implementation of a national youth strategy by establishing a clear legislative mandate and providing an incentive for different government departments to coordinate their work (OECD, 2020). Some of the national youth laws in both OECD member and non-member countries also guarantee ongoing funding for national youth organisations (OECD, 2020). This helps further ensure that young people’s policy needs are consistently represented, regardless of the prevailing political milieu.
2. **The youth portfolio is located at the centre of government** (e.g. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet): This clearly signals that matters concerning young people are considered to be “a priority to the national interest” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, n.d.), and leverages centre of government convening power to secure both political commitment and adequate resourcing. Indeed, OECD research indicates that countries with a youth portfolio located at the centre of government experience more effective and efficient implementation, coordination, and monitoring of youth policy, programs, and services, both horizontally (across ministries) and vertically (with sub-national authorities) (OECD, 2020). This is particularly important for federated nations like Australia.
3. **There is a ministry dedicated to youth affairs, and the youth minister has a Cabinet position:** This enables advocacy around youth issues to take place at the highest political level and supports integration across all government portfolios (Moulds, 2022; OECD, 2020). OECD research findings demonstrate that dedicated ministries for youth are able to “secure more human and financial resources compared to departments or units inside ministries of education or combined portfolios” (OECD, 2020, p.47) and “are also least likely to identify the lack of capacities as a challenge when coordinating youth policies across the government” (OECD, 2020, p. 47) – thus reducing or removing significant barriers to effective implementation.
4. **The use of strong governance tools and mechanisms:** This can help overcome challenges around coordinating inter-ministerial cooperation, and lack of capacity in both central youth entities and line ministries, by affirming high level political buy-in and formalising cross-sectoral institutional arrangements (OECD, 2020). Such mechanisms may take the form of inter-ministerial or inter-departmental coordination bodies, composed of ministries with a responsibility to implement specific commitments of the national youth policy; working groups, which may be established on an ad hoc basis to address specific issues or topics,

and may be led by the line ministry with expertise in that area; 'focal points', appointed to oversee the work on youth affairs within line ministries and coordinate with the entity in charge of youth affairs; and financial incentives or collective performance targets to promote cooperation across ministries on joint actions relating to youth affairs (OECD, 2020). Evidence indicates that a combination of both incentives and institutional mechanisms tends to optimise chances for smooth and successful implementation (OECD, 2020).

There is a strong impetus for Australia to develop a national youth strategy. The OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People* (2022) advises Adherents (of which Australia is one), to consider "the elaboration of youth strategies, at the appropriate level(s) of government, including national...and ensure these provide a comprehensive and integrated approach to improve social and economic outcomes as well as civic and public participation" (Section VI.2.b.). In 2022, Australia's state and territory youth peaks issued a call to the federal government to establish a national youth strategy (Youth Affairs Council Victoria et al., 2022). The Australian Child Rights Taskforce, the peak body for child rights in Australia consisting of over 100 organisations, has produced a blueprint for a national children's plan (ACRT, 2024). These alliances of expert organisations stand ready to partner with the Australian Government in the development and implementation of a national strategy for children and young people.

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Youth impact assessments

While the specific focus may vary, impact assessments of different types have become a common and accepted feature of the political landscape (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014; Payne, 2019). Impact assessments often include considerations for specific groups that have historically faced disadvantage or discrimination; this highlights the importance of extending such assessments to young people, given their exclusion from the civic and political sphere and general disregard for their needs and aspirations in the policy space (Stephenson et al., 2024; Stockemer & Sundström, 2018; Walsh et al., 2024). Youth impact assessments (YIAs) are a relatively new but growing practice in the realm of policy development and regulatory processes, and have evolved in recognition that "whether intended or not, every policy positively or negatively affects the lives of children [and young people]" (Payne, 2019, p. 408).

YIAs are used as a tool to evaluate the potential effects on young people of proposed policies, programs, and legislation. 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 policy-making 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).

YIAs in one form or another have been implemented or piloted in several countries, with one third of OECD member nations utilising an instrument of this kind (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014; OECD, 2020; Payne, 2019). The exact nature of YIAs differs between countries, and can vary across several dimensions. For example, they may be narrow in focus, concentrating on a policy's compliance with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), or have

a broader focus on the policy's impact on rights, wellbeing, economic and political participation, and so on; they may be restricted to children (defined as under the age of 18) or inclusive of young people (e.g. up to the age of 25); they may be mandatory or voluntary; they may be implemented at a national or sub-national level; they may be undertaken by government, or by children's and young people's commissioners or ombuds offices; and they may be conducted as standalone *ex ante* youth checks or integrated into broader regulatory impact assessments (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014; OECD, 2020; Payne, 2019).

Benefits of youth impact assessments

When designed and implemented well, YIAs have numerous benefits for key stakeholders in this space.

Firstly, the use of YIAs leads to better policy, with both the government and young people being primary beneficiaries of this. As a systematic, evidence-based framework for policy-making, youth impact assessments help identify the ways in which policy may differentially impact young people, and ensure that their specific needs are considered and addressed proactively. By applying an intersectional approach – that is, considering gender, race, sexuality, disability, and so on, along with age – policy-makers can better understand the needs of *all* young people, enabling them to consistently create more inclusive and equitable policies that are more responsive to young people's diverse needs (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; OECD, 2020). YIAs promote a holistic approach to policy development by considering the interdependence of young people's needs (which sit across multiple government portfolios) and indivisibility of their rights as enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), while also drawing attention to measures that may have far-reaching consequences for young people that may have otherwise been overlooked (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014; Payne, 2019). The prospective evaluation provided by YIAs also ensures that policy is fit for purpose ahead of implementation, resulting in more effective use of Commonwealth resources (Lonean, 2020).

The use of youth impact assessments leads to better policy, with both the government and young people being primary beneficiaries of this.

YIAs can also contribute to public sector competence and increased support for government policy (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; AYAC, 2010). Embedding YIAs across all government departments builds capability within the public sector, leading to the creation of a public service that “has genuine insights into people's lives” (Moulds, 2022, p. 41). By making explicit the anticipated impacts of policy measures on young people, government transparency and accountability is enhanced, and this draws higher levels of public approval for new policies (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014).

Further, YIAs strengthen the international standing of countries that utilise them. YIAs support state entities to keep pace with international best practices and standards, and to meet their international human rights treaty obligations by embedding direct youth engagement and consideration of young people's best interests in the policy-making process across all levels and areas of government (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; Payne, 2019; *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989).

Examples from other jurisdictions

International examples provide valuable insights and best practices that can be adapted and implemented in the Australian context. Wales, for example, has been at the forefront of implementing YIAs, in the form of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs). Although the exclusive focus on child rights establishes a narrower scope than what AYAC would recommend, one of the strengths of the CRIA process in Wales is that it covers a broad range of policy instruments, including

policies, legislation, regulations, strategies, projects, and programs (Payne, 2019). This comprehensive approach ensures that almost all government functions are included in the CRIA ambit. Training is mandatory for government officials, exemplar impact assessments are available, and access to specialist advice and support from the Children's Branch of government is provided (Payne, 2019). This has had the important outcome of building capability within the government to effectively carry out CRIAs. The substantial number of impact assessments produced (around 250 between 2012 and 2017) demonstrates that CRIAs have become a standard part of policy development in Wales, supported by the legislative duty incumbent on Welsh ministers to have 'due regard' to children's rights in the exercise of their functions (Payne, 2019). Wales has also paid due heed to the important role of evaluation in the policy cycle, having undertaken an appraisal of its CRIA model in 2016, which led to key recommendations being integrated back into the CRIA process (Payne, 2019).

Considerations for effective implementation of youth impact assessments at a national level

It should be noted that as YIAs are still relatively new, there is not yet a robust evidence base to demonstrate whether or not they are effective in achieving their primary goal – that is, in “mainstreaming youth concerns in policy making” (Ader & Igriglu, 2018, p.32). To maximise the chances of YIAs being successfully implemented and achieving this goal, essential components of good practice have been identified. Payne (2019) summarises these as follows:

1. **There must be a clear mandate for YIAs and sustained support at senior levels of government:** This encourages wide buy-in across government, and helps ensure a consistent focus on the rights and needs of young people “even when individual champions move on and political priorities shift focus” (Payne, 2019, p.416).
2. **A strong policy environment and integration of YIAs into the policy cycle is key:** Ensuring that YIAs are integrated into the entire policy cycle – from initial idea through to implementation and review – enables them to genuinely inform decision-making and embeds consideration of young people's needs as a fundamental aspect of policy formulation and execution. Clear guidelines around how YIAs are to be coordinated with other impact assessments helps reduce confusion and duplication of work. Explicit definition of the circumstances that trigger YIAs, and their expected scope, can further aid in balancing the increased administrative burden (both perceived and actual) placed on public sector staff with the need to ensure YIAs are undertaken on critical policies, and reduces the risk of accidental or wilful ‘misinterpretation’ of parameters and requirements (Ader & Igriglu, 2018). Allocation of adequate government funding also supports consistent, quality implementation of YIAs, with the National Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland recommending that one per cent of project budgets should be set aside for YIAs (Payne, 2019, p. 417).
3. **Comprehensive YIA guidance, training, and toolkits are essential:** Provision of toolkits, templates, and guidance documents, as well as ongoing training and access to additional expert advice and support (both internal and external) strengthens the quality of impact assessment practice. This type of resourcing promotes understanding of the obligations, principles, and process of YIAs; stimulates insight into the value of YIAs; and builds capability and confidence in conducting YIAs. It ensures that YIAs are completed with sufficient scope and depth, and supports consistent application of the YIA process across departments and over time. It can also support identification of knowledge gaps (e.g. lack of disaggregated data) and improves the ability to address these (Payne, 2019).
4. **Access to up-to-date, comprehensive, and reliable data is integral to the YIA process:** This may include quantitative and qualitative data, obtained from various sources including government databases, academic research, grey literature, or other sources; and data should be disaggregated to identify disparities in outcomes both *between* adults and young people, and *among* different groups of young people. Consultation with young people is crucial

here, and civil society groups can support this process, especially where public sector staff may be lacking in “confidence, time and resources to undertake child- [and youth-] focused participation work” (Payne, 2019, p.419). The use of robust data in the YIA process can strengthen the validity and suitability of policy recommendations made, and this, in turn, can promote trust in government policy positions (Desmet & Op De Beeck, 2014; Moulds, 2022; *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People*, 2022).

- 5. The YIA report has an important function and should be published and disseminated:** This provides an important record of the thinking that has taken place during the development of the policy including any assumptions made, an overview of the evidence that has been utilised, how the potential impact on young people has been assessed, and how final recommendations have been arrived at (Payne, 2019). Making this information publicly available “makes the government more accountable to children [and young people]” (Payne, 2019, p. 419), and can help build trust in government through increased transparency of the policy-making process. Publishing of YIA reports can also be used to support public engagement and feedback, particularly when strategically timed; and, importantly, helps build the evidence base for the impact of YIAs (see, for example, the [Gender Impact Assessment case studies](#) section of the Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector’s website for an example of an emerging impact assessment evidence base [Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, n.d.]).

To ensure YIAs are successful and effective, a number of other key considerations must be taken into account. Firstly, acknowledging that there may be resistance – for multiple reasons – to the introduction of YIAs within both government and the public service (AYAC, 2010; Moulds, 2022; Payne, 2019), there needs to be a robust change management approach in place to support smooth implementation. For full impact, YIAs need “to be given sufficient time to bed in to the strategic policy environment” (Payne, 2019, p.420). Secondly, there needs to be a clear accountability mechanism

put in place to manage situations where evidence-based recommendations developed through the YIA process are not acted upon (Payne, 2019), as well as consideration given to establishing a YIA quality control body (Ader & Igrioglu, 2018). And thirdly, *ex post* evaluation practice must be developed to monitor the actual impact of policies that have been developed through the YIA process, and to utilise these learnings to inform future policy development and iteration (Payne, 2019).

Notably, youth impact assessments were one of the mechanisms presented as an example of international best practice at the joint Australian Youth Affairs Coalition/Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia/ Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice policy roundtable held in November 2023 (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024). The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has also recommended the use of impact assessments (AHRC, 2024) – albeit with a narrower scope than what AYAC would propose – and the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People* (2022) urges Adherents to utilise impact assessments “to address inequalities across age groups and with regard to future generations” (Section VI.3.b.). YIAs directly align with the vision, priorities, and actions delineated in the *Engage!* strategy (Office for Youth, 2024), and the element of direct youth engagement and consultation embedded in the YIA process would be a natural extension of the work already being done with the Australian Government’s Youth Steering Committee and Youth Advisory Groups, and through the National Youth Forum. All of these threads establish an environment conducive to the introduction of youth impact assessments in Australia.

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Direct participation approaches



National youth parliaments

Youth parliament programs are a common youth engagement method aimed at improving young people's engagement with democracy, building a connection between young people and parliamentarians, and providing a space for young people to challenge existing policies and to identify and execute their own reform agendas (Moulds, 2022; Matthieu et al., 2020). Youth parliaments consist of a group of young people, either elected or selected, who debate and vote on policies and areas of interest that impact young people. Youth parliament programs can sometimes act as an ancillary parliamentary body with varying levels of power and influence; however, they are generally designed to provide opportunities for young people to be heard by the highest levels of government. Depending on the particular format, this is usually done through the young participants working together to draft bills which are then handed to relevant ministers to be debated and discussed in parliament.

Benefits of youth parliaments

Youth parliaments have been implemented in various configurations across Europe, and at a state level across Australia, with positive outcomes for both young people and governments (The Y Victoria, 2023; Moulds, 2022).

Youth parliaments can strengthen democracy by improving the relationship between governments and young people. Engaging cohorts with high levels of disengagement from formal politics – such as young people – reflects a commitment to delivering on democratic promises to address issues and concerns impacting them (Moulds, 2022). By providing active, impactful participation opportunities that demonstrate to young people that they are being heard and their concerns are responded to, their faith in democratic institutions can be rebuilt (OECD, 2020).

Youth parliaments also improve the political participation of young people. Providing young people with experiential and contextualised learning experiences has been shown to be one of the most effective methods of developing political knowledge, whilst also promoting future political engagement (Ballard et al., 2021). Youth parliaments are also associated with higher levels of volunteering and conventional forms of civic engagement among young participants (Matthieu et al., 2020).



Importantly, youth parliaments are also a way to uphold young people's human rights. Youth parliaments are underpinned by a human rights framework, which not only enhances standards of youth engagement with law- and policy-making, but also improves Australia's performance on international human rights indicators – most notably Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), which enshrines the right for young people under the age of 18 to express their views on matters affecting them (Moulds, 2022). In turn, the rights-based approach and elevation of youth voice to the highest levels of government afforded by youth parliaments can boost young people's approval of public policy, with research demonstrating a positive association between young people's systematic engagement in policy-making and their satisfaction with policy outcomes (OECD, 2020).

Examples from Australia

One example of a successful youth parliament program is the Young Mayors program, established by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), which has already connected with 90 councils across Australia (Victorian Electoral Commission, n.d.). The Young Mayors program has had particular success in its pilot program run in Mackay, where a democratically elected council, consisting of young people aged 11 to 17, was elected from 1,464 votes cast by young constituents (FYA, 2024). Prior to the election, young candidates presented their policy platforms at a town hall meeting, where they outlined their key focus areas and challenges for their region. This allowed young voters to assess each candidate and identify which one best represented them and their interests (FYA, 2024). The democratic principles embedded in this model enable young people to develop skills to critically assess political candidates and participate in elections, promoting the political literacy of both candidates and voters (Run For It, 2024).

Another successful Australian youth parliament model is the one operated by The Y. This state-based program runs once a year with around 400 young participants attending. Participants spend time developing bills in committees across each state, and young parliamentarians then attend a week-long camp that

The rights-based approach and elevation of youth voice to the highest levels of government afforded by youth parliaments can boost young people's approval of public policy.

is held during a state parliamentary sitting week. Bills that are successfully passed in the youth parliament are handed to the state government and opposition for consideration (The Y, n.d.).

One of the strengths of this model is that, in addition to building leadership and public speaking skills and offering “a great personal and professional development opportunity” (The Y, n.d.), it replicates the formal parliamentary process, thereby providing participants “with an insight into the way the Australian political system works and how they can utilise the democratic process to further their vision” (Kemp, 1999). Most importantly, however, this model offers opportunities to be heard and make meaningful legislative change at a state government level, and demonstrates genuine youth participation with tangible impact. The youth parliament program actively supports young people to generate policies for consideration by executive decision-makers (AYAC, 2010), and an impressive 68 bills originating from the Victorian Youth Parliament have been turned into legislation over the program's 37 years (The Y Victoria, 2023).

Examples from other jurisdictions

The UK is another jurisdiction that also has successful youth parliaments. The UK Youth Parliament consists of around 395 members aged 11 to 18, elected by their peers in a non-compulsory election held every two years. Polling booths that mimic those found at regular elections are provided for youth parliament elections, simulating the voting experience for the 500,000+ young people who participate, and promoting learning about voting systems and processes (National Youth Agency, 2024).

Once elected, Youth MPs meet regularly throughout the year to hold debates and plan campaigns, providing a consistent platform that spotlights issues currently impacting young people (National Youth Agency, 2024). Youth MPs are also able to form Youth Select Committees, which are responsible for investigating policy issues of interest to their constituents. Like their official parliamentary counterparts, Youth Select Committees are empowered to call for submissions and examine witnesses, and are provided with access to research services, resources and information from government departments, rooms within the UK Parliament building to hold committee meetings, and Hansard and parliamentary broadcasting services (National Youth Agency, 2024). This resourcing supports the legitimacy and efficacy of youth parliament actions.

Youth MPs have a positive track record of influencing policy at a local level as well as within programs and services run by government departments (Moulds, 2022). Inquiries and reports on issues such as education, transport, mental health, and housing have been responded to, including in the recent example of the 2023 Youth Select Committee Inquiry into Cost of Living. In the absence of an official Minister for Youth residing in the Cabinet, Youth MPs also play a central role in ensuring youth voice is integrated into policy- and law-making processes (National Youth Agency, 2024).

Considerations for an Australian national youth parliament

One consideration to keep in mind in establishing a national youth parliament is that different models prioritise different objectives, and potentially have differing levels of sway over government policy. One common format of youth parliaments is described as “learning schools for democracy”, which simulate parliamentary processes to support young people’s political socialisation, through equipping them with knowledge and skills to become active and engaged citizens (see Matthieu et al., 2020). Others argue that the primary objective of youth parliaments should be centred on promoting issues young people care about, as opposed to focusing on educative experiences and outcomes for the select group of young people who participate in these programs (see Moulds, 2022).

Moulds (2022) outlines some further key considerations to support best practice in youth parliaments:

1. **Representativeness:** Youth parliaments should be comprised of young people from a range of diverse backgrounds beyond “achiever-type future leaders” that only represent a small minority of young people. Harder-to-reach young people can be engaged through youth workers who are already connected to communities.
2. **Access to legitimate democratic mandates:** Youth parliaments should be able to implement direct elections with young people and be empowered to require witnesses to appear before inquiries.
3. **Tangible influence:** Youth parliaments should be able to exert political influence to achieve substantive change and policy reform.

In addition to these considerations, it should be noted that effective implementation of youth parliament programs can be supported by the existence of an overarching framework such as a national youth strategy. This enables a clear rationale and priorities for the youth parliament to be delineated and contextualised within a broader strategic program of youth affairs, and for sufficient funding to be provided to meet proposed outcomes and strategic objectives (OECD, 2020). Further, embedding regular, formal, systematic monitoring and evaluation in the program structure and delivery is crucial to ensure a youth parliament program is achieving its objectives, and is accountable and transparent in its use of resources and funding (OECD, 2020). It is also helpful in assessing young people’s and other stakeholders’ feedback and experiences with the program to provide ongoing improvement in the program design and delivery.

Establishing a national youth parliament could increase young people’s influence over federal-level policy and legislation through meaningful participation, and improve the representation of young people’s needs in Australian public policy. Both the UK and current Australian state-based youth parliaments provide a valuable reference point for developing a national model for Australia.



Youth quotas

Increasing diversity in national parliaments through youth quotas is a relatively new concept. Youth quotas are designed to address discrepancies in parliamentary representation where young citizens constitute a large portion of the population while holding negligible power and standing in parliaments (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018). This is relevant in the Australian context where only 2.1 per cent of MPs are under the age of 30, despite young people aged zero to 34 making up 44.4 per cent of the population (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU] 2023; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Although young people can legally run for parliament at 18, the average age at which a parliamentarian is first elected or appointed is 44, which has been a consistent trend since federation (Gill, 2023). Youth quotas could be a way to improve the relationship between young people and formal democratic institutions, and address issues such as the risk of gerontocracy – wherein a country's leaders are significantly older than most of the adult population (Wikipedia, n.d.) – which can result in further marginalisation of young people's interests (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022).

Despite minimal exploration and evaluation of youth quotas, there is clear evidence that supports the effectiveness of *gender* quotas, which work in a similar

In the Australian context [...] only 2.1 per cent of MPs are under the age of 30, despite young people aged zero to 34 making up 44.4 per cent of the population.

way (Tremmel et al., 2015; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Gender quotas refer to a percentage of positions within a system that are reserved specifically for people of a particular gender (usually women). Similarly, youth quotas are a percentage of positions within a system that are reserved for young people.

According to Azelton et al. (2019), youth quotas usually take one of three forms:

- ✦ Reserved seats: Parliamentary seats legally set aside for a specific number of young people in parliament.
- ✦ Legislated candidate quotas: Legal requirement for political parties to nominate a particular number of young people among their candidates, usually as part of party lists.
- ✦ Voluntary political party quotas: Individual parties adopt their own quotas voluntarily for young candidates, without any legal requirement.

It is estimated that 21 countries across the world have some form of youth quota (Azelton et al., 2019), with quotas ranging from 1.3 per cent to 15 per cent of seats (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Currently only four countries reserve seats for young people, and another five countries have a legislated party quota (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022).



To strengthen the trust of young people in government and their engagement with civic institutions, the Australian government could investigate increasing age diversity in parliamentary and executive bodies through regulated youth quotas and legislated youth targets in political party lists (*Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People*, 2022, Section V.1.c.). This approach is increasingly gaining attention internationally as a way to strengthen democracy and address political disengagement amongst young people (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022).

Benefits of youth quotas

Youth quotas offer an opportunity to break the 'vicious cycle' of young people's disengagement from the sphere of formal politics (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018). Adequate parliamentary representation could allow younger cohorts to bring attention to issues of concern for young people, which could in turn encourage young people's interest and participation in formal political processes (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018). Indeed, a report published by the OECD found that countries whose parliaments had more young MPs had higher rates of political engagement amongst young people (OECD, 2020).

Youth quotas can also reinforce the health of democracy through allowing for more effective agenda-setting and policy-making that caters to all groups. Experts have argued that "we cannot rely upon parliaments to adequately represent youth interests in the absence of the young" (Bidadanure, 2021, p. 217), with evidence suggesting that older leaders often fail to value and consider the perspectives and experiences of younger generations (IPU, 2023). Youth quotas can therefore improve the age diversity of parliaments, enabling intergenerational gaps and injustices in policy-making to be addressed, and reducing the risk of marginalisation and political apathy amongst young people (Bidadanure, 2021; IPU, 2023).

Examples from other jurisdictions

Peru's 20 per cent sub-national youth quota for those aged 30 and under has been highly successful in promoting a greater number of youth candidates to run in municipal elections, and in the actual election of young candidates (Azelton et al., 2019). The introduction of this quota has resulted in the percentage of young candidates standing for election to double, with the average age of candidates recorded as 39.6 years in Peru's 2022 municipal elections (Americas Quarterly, 2022). Since the introduction of the quota in 2006, the number of young people elected has increased by 60.5 per cent and has remained consistent since. Some limitations to Peru's quota are that it does not specify details around electoral list order and young candidates are frequently placed low in party lists. Despite this, an increased number of young people are still being elected in Peru, with 33.33 per cent of MPs under the age of 45 (Azelton et al., 2019).

Youth quotas offer an opportunity to break the 'vicious cycle' of young people's disengagement from the sphere of formal politics.

Considerations for introducing youth quotas in the Australian parliament

It is important to differentiate between hard quotas and soft quotas to assess the efficacy and impact that youth quotas can have (Tremmel et al., 2015). Hard quotas (mentioned earlier as legislated candidate quotas) are understood to be a legislated quota that requires an equal distribution of relevant groups through reserved seats. These seats remain empty if they cannot be filled by a young candidate. Soft quotas are more flexible in that they allow for other candidates to occupy these seats if there are no applications from young candidates (Tremmel et al., 2015). Having reserved seats for young people increases the possibility of empowering young

parliamentarians through strengthening the voice of the elected group and in creating more cohesive collective demands (Paredes & Došek, 2020). As with gender quotas, youth quotas will be more effective if there are list order requirements, enforcement mechanisms where non-compliance occurs, and include positions that are explicitly intended for young people, rather than only combined with other marginalised groups that will not necessarily increase youth representation (Azelton et al., 2019).

Obstacles that currently deter young people from pursuing a career in politics must also be addressed to support the successful implementation of a youth quota. Stephenson et al. (2024) have identified four key barriers that dissuade young people from running for office:

1. A lack of workplace safety such as an unsustainable work/life balance, and facing sexism and racism within politics and from the media (36 per cent).
2. A lack of diverse representation, particularly for LGBTQIA+ and First Nations young people and women (33 per cent).
3. A lack of confidence in the possibility of being able to make positive change if elected (19 per cent).
4. A lack of access to funding and resources to support an election campaign (12 per cent).

To attract enough young people to politics to fulfil youth quotas, and to ensure sufficient diversity in this group, steps would need to be taken to address these barriers. As a starting point, youth quotas should be

accompanied by sufficient opportunities to become involved in politics from an early age. Improving civics and citizenship education so that all young Australians have access to political knowledge is crucial to ensure that there is diversity amongst young candidates. Youth quotas must also occur alongside strategies that ensure young parliamentarians receive adequate and sustained support during their term so they can participate meaningfully and do not face continued marginalisation once elected (AYAC, 2010; Azelton et al., 2019). Without such measures being introduced in tandem with youth quotas, along with additional action to stimulate the necessary cultural change to address the other issues identified above, there is a risk that youth quotas may not be successful in increasing the number of young parliamentarians, or may end up merely reproducing other imbalances in the makeup of the national parliament.

Another detail to take into consideration is the fact that even when young candidates do (currently) stand for election, they are rarely elected. Contributing factors that have been identified include a lack of political record and lack of name recognition; and, in particular (and echoing the fourth point above), a lack of financial stability and/or support to run a successful political campaign (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). To partially address these concerns, advocates suggest that limitations should be placed on election donations and spending to create a more equitable playing field for all candidates and remove financial barriers for young people seeking a career in politics (Run For It, 2024; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). This will be required to support the successful implementation of youth quotas.



A brief word on monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are crucial elements of the policy cycle (Australian Public Service Academy, n.d.), serving as the backbone for assessing the “relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact of policies” (Lonean, 2020, p.5). By embedding these processes into the government policy cycle, evidence is systematically gathered to create a feedback loop that supports learning and improvement, informs future policy directions (including across sectors and jurisdictions), helps mitigate any unforeseen or unintended consequences, addresses bottlenecks in policy implementation, legitimises the use of public funds and resources, and provides benchmarks for tracking progress over time (Ader & Igriglu, 2018; Lonean, 2020; OECD, 2020). Moreover, there is evidence that the process of M&E itself can actually increase the effectiveness of policies, especially when results are publicly reported (Ader & Igriglu, 2018; Ringold et al., 2012).

In addition to these practical benefits, M&E optimises accountability and transparency – a particularly critical function in the context of youth policy (Ader & Igriglu, 2018; OECD, 2020). As Moulds (2022) observes, in order to rebuild trust, “[m]eaningful engagement between young people and parliament has to deliver actual change that is visible to both sides” (p.29). Governments must therefore ensure that M&E results are shared publicly, and that this information is made available in plain language and on youth-friendly platforms (OECD, 2020).

Despite the benefits of M&E, empirical research on the effectiveness of youth policies in achieving their stated objectives – including enhancing youth engagement and participation – remains sparse, with much of the current evidence obtained from grey literature (Azeltou et al., 2019; Walther et al., 2021). To optimise the effectiveness of M&E in the youth affairs sector, certain recommendations should be heeded. For example, the World Bank has identified some challenges that are commonly encountered in the evaluation of policies and programs that address complex social issues, and provided a set of guidelines for how to improve

evaluations and overcome these limitations (Ringold et al., 2012). These guidelines could be adapted for use in the youth affairs sector. In evaluating any social policy, there is also a need to differentiate between process outcomes, outputs, and impacts; to clearly identify how each will be measured and monitored; and to delineate “the expected relationship between policy frameworks, specific strategies, and outcome expectations” (Chaskin et al., 2018, p.52). Additionally, independent oversight institutions – such as independent commissions, ombuds offices, central statistics offices, and academic institutes – play a vital role in strengthening the accountability and integrity of government policy and the evaluation process itself (Academy of Social Sciences in Australia et al., 2024; OECD, 2020); and involving young people in the monitoring and evaluation of youth policies is considered to be “an important exercise in transparency, good governance and democracy” (Lonean, 2020, p.9).

When devising evaluation plans for any of the policy options explored in this report, attention should be paid to such advice. It is imperative to ensure that we can accurately ascertain whether any given policy is effective, so as to minimise the risk of de-funding youth-focused policies and programs that are working, or that could work with some amendments (Ringold et al., 2012); or of funding policies and programs that do not serve the interests and needs of young people.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the need for greater consideration of young people's needs in public policy. We are at a pivotal juncture in Australian youth policy, with momentous opportunities afforded by the renewed commitment of the Australian Government to youth engagement and the wide-ranging benefits already being realised from this. Now is an opportune time to capitalise on this valuable investment by further embedding youth concerns across the whole of government. Doing so would contribute significantly to improved practice across the entire spectrum of public policy; would support Australia to meet our international human rights treaty obligations; and, crucially, would aid in rebuilding the relationship between young people and the government, and enable young people to fully realise their rights.

Various mechanisms to achieve these goals have been explored in this report, including national youth strategies, youth impact assessments, national youth parliaments, and youth quotas. Each of these options carries significant potential to strengthen Australia's approach to youth policy. However, these policy options should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, many of these mechanisms operate in a reciprocally reinforcing manner; implemented in combination, they would create a robust framework for cohesive youth policy in Australia.

Strategic partnerships between government and youth organisations – including those organisations representing 'hardly reached' communities – are essential to strong youth policy development and implementation (Moulds, 2022). Significantly, research shows that

there are higher levels of satisfaction with government performance across a range of public service areas – including health, housing, employment, and transport – where youth organisations have been involved across the policy cycle (OECD, 2020). Moving forward, sustaining and consolidating government/civil society relationships, and guaranteeing adequate funding for key youth organisations, will therefore remain key (Chaskin et al., 2018; OECD, 2020).

Lastly, this report has identified several critical elements that are required for the successful implementation of any of the identified youth policy instruments. These fundamentals include a strong authorising environment, including high-level political support and use of appropriate coordination mechanisms; access to accurate, robust data that is disaggregated by age and other social identities; adequate resourcing; and the use of systematic monitoring and evaluation. The absence of any of these elements can potentially "undermine the achievement of youth policy objectives" (OECD, 2020, p. 57), so they must be incorporated into all youth policy planning.

Ultimately, augmenting our national approach to youth policy will support the shared goal of ensuring that young people in Australia are "safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included" (Payne, 2019, p.413), and will yield results that are beneficial for the country and for young people – both now, and into the future.



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